



weekly **worker**

**SWP's John Rees: no to
SA openness, inclusivity
and awkward minorities**

- Euro versus pound
- Morning Star's CPB
- Sex Offences Bill
- AWL open letter

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Towards a new workers' party

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South Africa: workers' leaders not class lackeys

**Peter Manson questions the
neoliberal policies of the South
African Communist Party - pp 4-5**

SACP general
secretary Blade
Nzimande



Euro, sterling and class politics

Gordon Brown's "not yet" speech in the House of Commons on the euro showed all the tell-tale signs of haggling and compromise between No10 and No11 Downing Street. Prime minister Tony Blair sat there on the government's front bench like a worried author reading from the precious text, as Brown went through his carefully choreographed performance. It was as if Blair was checking in case his old friend and rival strayed from the script.

Not that the cabinet is split into pro- and anti-euro factions. The divisions are subtler. The point of tension lies over timing. Both Blair and Brown favour entry into the euro zone - the former as soon as feasible, the latter as soon as prudent. Of course, this is not simply about the ambitions, temperaments and antagonisms of two bourgeois politicians. It reflects the fact that, of all the countries in the European Union, Britain is the most intermeshed with, and subordinated to, finance capital - capital at its most abstract, fluid and vulnerable.

Brown's speech marks a small, but significant shift. The government is committed to positively move Britain in the direction of euro entry. The treasury has published a new, 30-month changeover plan, which would be triggered by a 'yes' referendum vote. Nevertheless there is little or no chance of a referendum in this parliament. Brown not only wants Britain to converge with the euro zone, but reform within the euro zone itself, including relaxation of the growth and stability pact. Without that Britain risks the labour unrest which is sweeping Austria, Germany and France.

The British bourgeoisie and the political establishment has long been deeply divided over Europe. Now it is deeply divided over the euro. Broadly, those favouring entry come from the most competitive, most international sections of British capital. Those opposing the euro tend to be more dependent on the national market and doubt the long term viability of the euro zone.

Having finally junked the ideology of state capitalism at Blair's prompting, the Labour Party has remodelled itself as a neoliberal workers' party which seeks to simultaneously put Britain at the "heart of Europe" and promote the "special relationship" with the US. Whatever the hesitations and glaring contradictions, New Labour therefore speaks on behalf of the pro-euro wing of British capitalism all the while seeking to bolster the capitalist metabolism in Britain as a whole. The Tories, by contrast, have retreated into being a capitalist party of fear.

Nowadays the Tories find electoral support from flag worshipping nationalists, professions who dread losing a tenuous independence, tax-hating small capitalists, the embittered middle classes, subsidy-addicted farmers and Europhobes. Bipartisanship over Europe is now a faded memory. Iain Duncan Smith, for example, makes it a point of the highest principle to keep the pound in perpetuity.

How should the workers' movement respond? Marxism has always insisted that when it comes to such

an issue - which has cleaved big business and the political establishment - the key is class independence. Workers must go beyond the easy but sterile politics of automatically saying 'no' every time the government says 'yes'. Unfortunately though, thus far in the euro debate what we have witnessed is a mere variation on that theme. Our trade union leaders and political factions have simply lined up behind one or other side of the bourgeoisie.

Brendan Barber, the new secretary of the TUC, favours entry into the euro zone. As did his predecessor, John Monks. Others who support voting 'yes' in a euro referendum include the GMB's Kevin Curren, Roger Lyons of Amicus and the Socialist Alliance's most prominent trade union leader, Mark Serwotka. Ken Livingstone is another well known Europhile. To all intents and purposes this wing of the labour movement argues that workers will be better off exploited by Euro-capitalism. In justification they cite the boost in trade and economic activity that is expected to accompany the euro and the EU's liberal legislation on workers' rights.

The anti-euro camp has grown substantially, as more and more left reformists are elected to top trade union positions. Most of the so-called awkward squad fervently believe that the EU is a bosses' club and that Britain should keep its distance or even get out.

Tony Woodley, Dave Prentis, Bob Crow, Mick Rix, Billy Hayes and Derek Simpson have no sympathy for the Tory Party. However, when it comes to saving the pound, they are quite prepared to meekly echo those who say British workers are better off exploited by British capitalists. With every justification they point an accusing collective finger at the undemocratic European Central Bank (ECB) and its remit to set punishing interest rates in the euro zone. Meanwhile they seem to forget entirely about the undemocratic Bank of England and the higher interest rates that apply in Britain at the moment. Their lopsided reasoning finds expression in the 'official communist' *Morning Star* and the Labour left *Tribune*.

In both the anti- and the pro-euro camps the bourgeois pole is dominant, the proletarian pole subordinate. That undoubted fact casts real doubt over the solemn commitments to shun xenophobes and chauvinists made at last year's Socialist Alliance conference on the euro. The unrequited enthusiasm of the Socialist Workers Party/*Resistance* majority to join with the *Morning Star*'s Communist Party of Britain over Europe presents the real possibility that what passes for the revolutionary left will simply end up being subsumed in the 'no' campaign run by the IDS Tories and the press empires of Rupert Murdoch and Conrad Black.

Of course, such a popular front represents no conundrum for the CPB. As a defining moment it harks back to World War II and the alliance of the USSR, the USA and the British empire. Brooking no exception, Stalin ordered the 'official communist' parties to replicate this collaboration with the impe-

rialist bourgeoisie in the form of productivity drives, no-strike deals and even governments. France and Italy saw brief and ill-fated post-war governments which included 'official communist' ministers.

In Britain that popular frontism meant aggressively arguing *against* a Labour government. In 1945 the 'official communists' sought the continuation of the national government, headed till then by Winston Churchill. Presumably CPGB general secretary Harry Pollitt hoped for a ministerial position or two as a reward. Instead Labour won a landslide.

Nowadays the CPB's triumvirate of Robert Griffiths, John Haylett and Andrew Murray are wedded to the same disastrous strategy. They defend what they call Britain's "sovereignty" from the threat of an EU superstate. Britain is pictured as endangered by a "massively centralised bureaucracy", which lies outside the possibility of any "democratic control". Though IDS is no Churchill, an alliance which stretches from the trade union left to the far right - not only the Tory little Brits but the UK Independence Party - is enthusiastically welcomed because of its broadness. The imagined community of the nation, not class, comes first with the CPB.

They are only being true to their programme. Following Stalin, the CPB considers that socialism can be achieved and brought to dazzling perfection on the national terrain. Of course, what it understands by socialism is nationalisation and state exploitation of the workers. Put another way, national socialism. That is why the CPB claims that the EU is antithetical to socialism and that Stalin's monocracy was the living embodiment of socialism and that today socialism continues in China and North Korea.

Communists - authentic communists, that is - take a rather different view. We seek to bring about the closest voluntary unity of peoples and into the largest possible states at that. All the better to conduct the struggle of class against class and prepare the wide ground needed for socialism. Hence the formulation, "To the extent the EU becomes a state, then that necessitates EU-wide trade unions and a Communist Party of the EU" (*Weekly Worker* 'What we fight for'). That also explains why authentic communists argue for the working class to be organised in an international party. As a global system capitalism can only be superseded globally. Anything less invites defeat.

Socialism is not the nationalisation of the means of production. It is the self-liberation movement of the working class, as it breaks out of the shell of capitalist relations and limits. Hence under capitalism communists fight for extreme democracy in all spheres of society and view democracy not as an optional extra under socialism, but as essential.

Socialism represents victory in the battle for democracy. It is the direct rule of the majority - ie, the working class. Socialism is either democratic or, as with Stalin's USSR, it turns into its opposite - anti-socialism ●

Jack Conrad

LETTERS



Letters may have been shortened because of space. Some names may have been changed

Naive SA chair

As with Steve Godward, so with most independent Socialist Alliance members, "socialism is not a hobby of ours, but something we believe in" ('Aim for socialist working class party' *Weekly Worker* June 5). We all joined the Socialist Alliance because we, too, hoped it would "give people a real leftwing alternative to the Labour Party". Surely that wasn't too much to ask?

Steve's article raises so many questions. How could the chair of the conference himself be kept unaware of what was going on in front of him? Was it really just a matter of "acoustics"? Why were there no Socialist Alliance speakers on Stop the War Coalition platforms - just Liberal Democrats and imams instead? Was this really just "a great mistake"? Steve got a "shock" when John Rees came to Birmingham and cut the Socialist Alliance out of his negotiations with other forces. Was this really just because Rees "had not thought" to invite the local SA? Why is the Socialist Alliance the only organisation that "does not have its own paper"? Did all this really happen because we have "lost our way"?

Steve's own predecessor as chair of the SA has told us that its representatives at anti-globalisation and Stop the War meetings deliberately suppressed all mention of the Socialist Alliance. We also have documentary evidence that Socialist Workers Party members were told not to promote the SA on the STWC marches. What more evidence does Steve need that the SWP does not want the Socialist Alliance to develop, for fear that it would supplant the SWP itself?

The SWP has "committed so many people and so many resources" to the new executive - a hand-picked slate bureaucratically imposed on the conference by tricks that would have shamed any Labour or Stalinist conference in the past - precisely so as to stunt the SA's development.

"Let's give them a chance"? Sorry, Steve, but yes, you are being "naive".

Roger Silverman
email

No trust

Articles, announcements and comments generated by those at the helm of the Socialist Alliance never cease to raise a smile in our workplace, even from a 'good sort' like Steve Godward.

Steve opened his article by stating: "It was not until about an hour afterwards that it sank in what had happened at the Socialist Alliance conference. Chairing means you are concentrating on quite technical questions."

OK, we'll accept this as an excuse for being party to a shambles, but it appears that it has taken almost a month since conference for yet another member of the national executive to attempt to distance himself from the ruling clique without actually upsetting them.

It did not take comrade Tess McMahon that long. Within a week of conference she was explaining her reservations about the conduct of conference to the 'internet indies'. The skulduggery was initiated by the Socialist Workers Party with political cover supplied by *Resistance* supporters culminating in just *one* slate being presented to the membership, excluding extremely able but outspoken comrades like John Bridge and Phil Pope, and almost excluding Martin Thomas - no doubt hoping this would cause the Alliance for Workers' Liberty to follow on the heels of the Socialist Party!

Comrade Godward goes on to explain that he had to read the *Weekly Worker's* report on conference to find out what had taken place and, like the majority of

the SA membership, he had no idea that John Rees (the SA's *real* leader) had been holding talks with various groups (who no doubt included more religious groups whom the SWP see as the new natural allies of truth, democracy and human liberation).

It was whispered long ago, before the 'Liz Davies fiasco' that Liz would ask a question of our national secretary, but her answer would be via a phone call from John Rees - showing exactly where the decisions are made regarding the strategy and day-to-day running of the alliance.

It is also interesting to note how many comrades had to see their motions thrown out to allow John Rees to have air time under the pretence of getting the SA to support the STWC (as if it wasn't doing this already to the exclusion of everything else). But, as we found out, it was just an excuse for a bit of 'tub-thumping' and 'spin-peddling' to the SWP troops, who on cue gave rapturous applause, just like a real party conference.

Steve Godward goes on to explain that "we lost our way" and points out things that have been said in this paper over and over and over again. This is awfully tedious: to read the same dialogue dished up by a plethora of SA members either making excuses for the SWP executive or for their own association with them.

The comrade finishes by reminding us that "trust would be a good first step" - has Steve been asleep like Rip Van Winkle? Has he just awoken? This phrase was the one most of us were saying when we voted one person, one vote in December 2001 - how wrong we were.

Jim Mills
email

Sleeping better

Comrade Power writes of the commitment to politics that the CPGB seems to demand (Letters, June 5). In my time amongst them I would affirm that the comrades are an intense bunch to be around - many of them have sacrificed a great deal for the sake of communism.

But it is a great disservice and indeed quite shameful of the comrade to lambast them for this. Every communist must ask themselves what they will do, and those who answer that at the expense of bourgeois careers, semi-detached houses in Surrey and 'normal' family relations deserve better than comrade Power's derision.

I faced up to those questions and felt that I could not commit so heavily to a political movement that seemed so hopeless in the 90s. I have a great respect for the CPGB hard core, and I sleep better knowing that there are people of firmer conviction than I. I believe that the CPGB are probably the only folks in this thing because they believe it.

The SWP and other organisations have become institutions for the paying of mortgages for central committee members, whilst they churn out dull and insightful books, and avoid that great tragedy of actually having to get a job.

I burnt out quickly on communism, the SWP and all that jazz; but, as the song says, "It's better to burn out than to fade away".

Roger Clarke
email

Socialist SF

Contrary to what Phil Kent writes, Sinn Féin *does* have a working class programme and platform ('Worse than Galway?', June 5). Its base is working class. Its support is on both sides of border.

SF calls for a united Ireland. It continues in the revolutionary tradition of Irish republicanism. The Social Democratic and Labour Party (who?) have faded away. Living Sinn Féin is the voice of Irish unity, nationalism and socialism.

John McDonnell's remarks at the Connolly meeting were sharp and uncompromising. He called for nationalists to have

democracy, for the unionists to participate in democracy. But, most unlike New Labour, he called for the concepts of “class, capitalism, solidarity and imperialism” to be regained in the Irish working class movement. The CPGB would agree that any party which says it speaks for labour must have these concepts at the heart of its political ideology. New Labour has claimed the end of class consciousness. So that we can all become middle class!

Lila Patel
email

Smoke and mirrors

Your article, ‘Yes, we have no WMDs’, was excellent (*Weekly Worker* June 5). Thank you.

I’m a citizen and resident of the United States. What you describe in the article should have been obvious to anyone who took the time to analyse what our government was feeding us: see past the clumsy smoke and mirrors, and recognise it for the deliberate lies and propaganda that it was.

Well, ‘should’ doesn’t happen over here too often. I can’t speak about life in the United Kingdom, but in the US, it’s ‘life among the nitwits’ and ‘hail to the creep’.

David Conners
USA

Twisted reality

I should think many of us have seen the film *The running man*, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. The time is *this* century, the good of US of A is a totalitarian society and the Schwarzenegger character is a cop.

He flies his own helicopter gunship and is ordered to fire on citizens who are rioting for food. Refusing to fire on innocent civilians, he is knocked unconscious, jailed, accused of false charges and assigned to a penal colony. Meanwhile, life goes on in the ‘land of the free’, which is numbed by a steady diet of fabricated news. Then one day Schwarzenegger and some friends escape from the penal colony, and TV footage of their escape catches the eye of national TV’s top gameshow superstar.

The ratings for his show appear to be of mega proportions (it is beamed on screens the size of billboards to the desperate millions too poor to live indoors). The gameshow host wants them higher still, and as he sees Schwarzenegger es-

caping from his guards, he decides that this convict is the ideal guest for the programme, which consists of criminals who are given a chance of freedom if they can defeat the heavily armed killers who are guest stars on the show. This gives Army his chance to tell the gameshow host, “I’ll be back”, and the former to reply, “Only in a rerun”.

Maybe I personally liked this film because it was a bit *1984*-ish; and it appears to have prophesised the sick but popular interest in ‘reality TV’ programmes. Although not something that I personally get a kick out of, according to the ratings, millions of my fellow citizens actually tune in to shows such as *Big Brother* and *I’m a celebrity get me out of here* for many, many hours - even when the subjects are asleep!

But I think what I have just read in *The Guardian* is going a bit too far and is, let’s say, a tad insensitive, even for a politically incorrect animal such as myself (Saturday May 31). Apparently ‘aunty’ is considering a reality gameshow format that will ask the public to vote on whether individual asylum-seekers should be thrown out of the country. It must be further on than the simple ‘idea’ stage at the BBC, as it is reported that the proposed show has been given the working title of *You, the immigration officer*, and understandably has drawn fire from angry MPs and refugee groups. They actually sent out emails to asylum organisations seeking suitable candidates to appear in the hour-long show - unbelievable!

We can only hope that it comes from someone’s twisted humour and the BBC will quickly put our minds at rest - but the BBC is continually coming under the shadow of commercialisation and reform, so don’t hold your breath.

I would like to point out to comrades that to complain, comment and give feedback to the BBC you can go to <http://www.bbc.co.uk/feedback/> or fill in a ‘serious complaints’ form at http://www.bbc.co.uk/info/contactus/serious_form.shtml

Mervyn Davies
Colchester

Absent SWP

I note that the SWP have been congratulating themselves on almost having stopped the war. Personally I find this astonishing claim indicative of the height of self-delusion that the organisation is capable of.

With such success behind them, does this now mean that their involvement

with the anti-war movement is at an end? I raise this issue because the anti-war groups based in Surrey recently held a conference with the intention of bringing together all those who have been active in the anti-war movement. There were approximately 70 delegates, representing some 15 groups that took part in protest activity at the May 31 conference, called by the Surrey Stop the War Coalition (where, unusually, the SWP does not play a leading role).

The diversity of the delegates was a testament to the broad alliance that the STWC sought to build. There were Labour Party supporters, Liberals, Greens and even a Conservative. There were anglicans, catholics, quakers, a muslim and a pagan. The CPGB were also in attendance, as were members of the Communist Party of Britain and the New Communist Party, and a significant number of ex-members of the ‘official’ CPGB.

One group, however, was notable by their absence: there were no SWP members. What has happened? The numerically largest left group certainly has members in Surrey - some have been at the very forefront of the anti-war movement. So where were they? Is Surrey an anomaly or have the SWP now decided that they have bigger and better campaigns to wage elsewhere?

Jeremy Butler
Guildford

Stay divided II

On June 5, you published most of a letter from me concerning the recent split in the International Socialist Organisation in Australia and the importance of that regrettable development for revolutionaries here in Britain (‘Stay divided’).

Unfortunately you saw fit to cut the final two paragraphs of that letter for reasons of space and, while I acknowledge that the letter was of some length, I must assert that the reason for this cut was political and against your own avowed principle of openness. The cut was political and therefore censorious in that it was only in the final paragraph that I was able to hint at an alternative course of action for revolutionaries to the sectarian Socialist Alliance strategy which you propose in your columns.

Mike Pearn
email

Editor’s note: readers wishing to look at the full text of comrade Pearn’s letter can do so at www.cpgb.org.uk/worker/484/letters.html#mpearn

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ACTION

London Communist Forum

Sunday June 15, 5pm - ‘1945, climax of Labourism, part 2’, using Ralph Miliband’s *Parliamentary socialism* as a study guide.
Phone 07950 416922 for details.

Cardiff Communist Forum

Friday June 13, 7.45pm - ‘Israel/Palestine: which way forward for unity?’
Clwb Ivor Bach, Womanby Street, Cardiff.

Stop war on asylum-seekers

Demonstration, Saturday June 14, Manchester. Assemble 1pm, All Saints Park, Oxford Road. March to rally in Peace Gardens (side of town hall). Sponsors include: Socialist Alliance, Stop the War Coalition, International Federation of Iraqi Refugees, National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns, Public and Commercial Services Union.

Defend Iraqi refugees

Picket home office, Tuesday June 17, 12 noon, 50 Queen Anne’s Gate, London SW1 (nearest tube: St James Park). No deportations, full refugee status for Iraqi asylum-seekers.
Called by International Federation of Iraqi Refugees: 07734 704742; d.jamal@ukonline.co.uk

Jews Against Zionism

Public meeting: ‘Zionism against Arabs and Jews’. Wednesday June 18, 7.30pm, University of London Union, Malet Street, London WC1. Speakers: Lenni Brenner, Marxist author of *Zionism in the age of the dictators*, *Jews in America today*, and *51 documents: Zionist collaboration with the Nazis*; Haim Bresheeth, film-maker and co-author of *The Gulf War and the new world order* and *Introduction to the holocaust*.
info@jewsagainstzionism.org

International Refugee Day

Vigil for asylum rights, Thursday June 19, 4.30pm to 6pm, home office, Queen Anne’s Gate (nearest tube: St James’s Park). Organised by Speak Out Against Racism - Defend Asylum Seekers, Asylum Rights Campaign, Student Action for Refugees. Supported by Unison, NUS, Afghan Refugees Support Committee, International Federation of Iraqi Refugees, International Federation of Iranian Refugees and others.
info@naar.org.uk; 020 7247 9907.

Stop the War Coalition

Activists’ conference, Saturday June 21, Hammersmith Town Hall, King Street, London W6. Entrance: £5. Open to all.
020 7053 2153-6; www.stopwar.org.uk

North-East Social Forum

Durham University, June 20-23. Panels on anti-discrimination, the environment, anti-oppression, international cooperation, people over profit and education; plus seminars by various groups and individuals. The hosting of seminars and workshops and the nomination of speakers is encouraged. £10 waged, £5 unwaged and students. Accommodation arranged. Organised by Durham University Social Forum - www.dur.ac.uk/durham.socialforum/NESF/

NCADC AGM

National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns annual general meeting, Saturday June 21, 12 noon to 5pm, Carrs Lane Church, Carrs Lane, Birmingham. Open to all anti-deportation campaigns (reasonable travel expenses paid) and their supporters. Crêche and lunch provided. Confirm attendance to nearest NCADC coordinator: London and South East England - Allison Bennett, ncadc-london@ncadc.org.uk
North East England and Scotland - Kath Sainsbury, ncadc-ne@ncadc.org.uk
North West England and Greater Manchester - Tony Openshaw, ncadc-nw@ncadc.org.uk
NCADC, 110 Hamstead Road, Birmingham B20 2QS, 0121-554 6947; ncadc@ncadc.org.uk; <http://www.ncadc.org.uk>

No detention

Demonstration, Sunday June 22, 4pm, Haslar removal/detention prison, Dolphin Way, Gosport, Portsmouth. Assemble car park.
Called by Brighton No Borders group: nooneisillegal2002@yahoo.co.uk

One state or two?

Public forum: ‘Zionism and anti-semitism: the origins of the state of Israel’. Tuesday June 24, 7.30pm, Leeds Civic Hall. Speaker: Lenni Brenner. Sponsored by Leeds Socialist Alliance and Leeds Alliance for Green Socialism.

Unity demonstrations

Rally against the BNP. Saturday June 28, Burnley, Tipton, Halifax, Broomfield.
Anti-Nazi League, PO Box 2566, London N4 1WJ; unity@anl.org.uk

Party wills

The CPGB has forms available for you to include the Party and the struggle for communism in your will. Write for details.

RDG

To contact the Revolutionary Democratic Group, email rdgroup@yahoo.com.

www.cpgb.org.uk/action

SOUTH AFRICA

Communist Party of Britain -
www.communist-party.org.uk

Active and dynamic?

This weekend sees the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain hold its own version of Communist University, having been "refounded" for the fresh generation of workers being drawn to politics. It is therefore unsurprising to see the website dominated by the event and the outline programme lists an array of speakers drawn from the stable of 'official communism', together with union bureaucrats, academics and peaceniks.

The 'star draw' has to be Blade Nzimande, general secretary of the South African Communist Party. Speaking on the "imperialist agenda of global capitalist domination", it will be interesting to see how he squares this with the SACP's active support for the ANC's capitulation to neoliberalism. It is also interesting that the SWP's Lindsey German appears on the speakers list (in her capacity as the Stop the War Coalition chair, of course). The online presentation suggests this could be an interesting event. I just hope it lives up to its given theme: 'Question everything'.

The other striking feature is the site header. The Communist Party of Britain legend occupies a minute space in the top left corner of the screen, almost as if it is afraid to be seen. The best part of the banner alternates between the *Morning Star*, Cardiff's Rebecca Books, Glasgow's Unity Books, CU, and a James Connolly Society pamphlet. On logging on, you could mistakenly think you were visiting the site of whichever of these happens to be showing, as opposed to the CPB's.

Immediately beneath the sheepish logo is the 'Our history' link, which tells the CPB's version of 'official' communism in Britain. 'A short history of the Communist Party' is an anaemic hack job that does little to shed light on the CPGB's tortuous history. That said, it does show how the CPB is the party of the paper, rather than the *Morning Star* being the paper of the party. The Harry Pollitt feature is taken from the hagiographical obituary that appeared in the *Daily Worker*. 'The battle of Cable Street' offers contemporary accounts from the bourgeois and communist press, (Searchlight-sourced) interviews with anti-fascist participants, and profiles of the "players" involved. Given that the page is still under construction, more material is likely to appear, but whether it will be of better quality remains to be seen.

Returning to the home page and scrolling down the screen, we are treated to a series of

press releases, articles (culled from the *Morning Star*) and political reports. It seems that items are added on a regular basis, and the frequency of party media releases gives the (false) impression of an active and dynamic organisation. Each item has its own hits counter as well as print-out and forwarding facilities. The right-hand side bar carries older articles with an archive going back to February.

Turning to the navigation menu, the first up is 'About us' - a relatively brief guide to the CPB, littered with the clichés of British 'official' communism, such as "anti-monopoly alliance", *British road to socialism*, "alternative economic and political strategy", etc. It goes into some depth about internal democracy (determined to exorcise Stalin's ghost, are we?), and emphasises how cheap it is to "join the party". 'Propaganda' is a list of pamphlets and publications available to buy. Unfortunately, out of the two dozen or so on offer only one A5 leaflet can be viewed online - not even the tri-annual *Communist Review* can be read here.

'Congress' offers general secretary Robert Griffith's political report and resolutions passed at the June 2002 gathering. Though there are articles listed to act as congress primers, there is no report on the debates and arguments: not even an anodyne postage-stamp-sized piece. 'Stories' is a redundant link, taking us back to the home page, while 'International' is a short, chest-beating article on the CPB's diplomatic relations with other 'official communists' around the world. 'Labour movement' is a series of themed articles and 'Theory and discussion' is a misnamed introduction to Marxism without any debating facilities. Bringing up the rear is an online edition of the *BRS* programme.

The resources section offers downloads, a site search engine, and more news archives. The links section is not particularly inspired, listing current and former 'official communist' parties, endorsed leftwing media and various solidarity campaigns. And finally at the bottom of the navigation bar is a prominent *Morning Star* link.

The website is by no means the worst I have seen, but is in need of a lot of work. The CPB may be the party of the *Morning Star*, but at present there is very little danger that the organisation will become the party of the website ●

Phil Hamilton

South Africa is one of 'official' communism's few success stories. A light amid the gloom of collapse and disintegration. With its six cabinet seats, the South African Communist Party is pursuing its own particular version of the national road to 'socialism', artificial stages and all. With the SACP as guide, the so-called 'national democratic revolution' which replaced apartheid is in safe hands and, as sure as day follows night, the South African working class will advance, taking careful, reformist steps, further and further along the road towards a glorious future.

Well, not quite. Far from the SACP opening up the way to working class power, it has played a key part in attempting to ensure that the post-apartheid transformation has been carried through in a way that leads to an outcome favourable to the interests of capital: ie, a stable bourgeois regime with a duped, easily exploited working class.

Before examining the SACP's role let us briefly look at the social conditions that the South African masses are forced to endure. For, as we shall see, in the nine years since the first African National Congress government of Nelson Mandela, they have actually worsened.

Unequal

South Africa is the world's third most unequal society, after Brazil and Guatemala, according to UN figures. How has this situation changed since 1994? For the answer we can turn to the SACP's own newspaper:

"The average family became poorer between October 1995 and October 2000. The income share of the poorest 20% dropped from a miserly 1.9% in 1995 to an even more shocking 1.6% in 2000. Even more sobering is the fact that, while the average white household improved its income by 15%, the average African household suffered a 19% fall" (*Umsebenzi* November 2002).

What does this actually mean in real terms? About 45% of South Africans live in households officially recognised as "poor" - ie, families whose adults bring in on average a pitiful 352.53 rand (£28.20) per month. Partly this is due to the sharp rise in unemployment - in 1994 it was 24%; now it stand at somewhere between 29% and 40%, depending on whose figures you believe.

Meanwhile, double-figure inflation continues to wreak havoc with the spending power of the impoverished masses. For example, the price of maize meal - the staple diet of millions - more than doubled between June 2001 and October 2002. The government's own statistics show that two million households reported members going hungry, with a steady increase in child malnourishment since 1996.

According to official figures, three million people do not have a proper roof over their head. The South African Human Rights Commission talks of a "mushrooming of more than 1,088 informal settlements throughout the country". Almost 30% of the population do not have "formal housing": ie, they inhabit shacks.

Over seven million people lack access to running water and 18-21 million are without sanitation - a statistic which says a lot about the standard even of "formal housing". Only two percent of land has been redistributed. Eighty percent is still owned by white commercial farmers and between 13 and 14 million rural inhabitants are landless.

Then there is the Aids epidemic - between four and five million are infected by HIV. Not surprisingly life expectancy has dropped markedly. The opposition Democratic Alliance claims that, whereas in 1994 it was well over 60, today it is down to just 52.

Of course, the ANC can hardly be blamed for introducing Aids, although the complacency of president Thabo Mbeki is well known when it comes to prevention. But much of the deterioration noted above can be laid at the door of the government - including its six SACP cabinet members.

Politically

The South African Communist Party's Blade Nzimande is the Communist Party of Britain's main attraction at its weekend school. **Peter Manson** examines the SACP's role

For example, the period 1996-2000 was one of swingeing, across-the-board budget cuts, while many price rises - including those of maize meal - resulted from deregulation and removal of market controls. According to the People's Budget Coalition, the slashing of welfare in the late 90s means that, "At the current rate we will only return to 1996 levels of spending per person around 2005". In fact welfare spending is "expected to grow at best at the rate of inflation in the coming year, and no faster than the population over the whole medium-term period" (*ibid*). Not much chance of any improvement then.

It is truly remarkable that, despite publishing such details itself, the SACP can persuade itself that, on balance, the 'national democratic revolution' is on course. Overall, "... we have had a tangible transformational impact on the apartheid socio-economic legacy". What is more, there are "heartening indications" of better access to resources such as water, electricity and healthcare (*Umsebenzi* September 2002).

On healthcare, for example, the government's information department paints a picture of steady improvement. In 1995 only 67.8% of households had access to public healthcare; by 1998 this had increased to ... 69.4%. At this rate of improvement every South African might have a chance of seeing a doctor by the year 2055.

To sum up the last nine years, let me quote radical commentators Sean Jacobs and Jonathan Faull: "Since 1994 the size of the African elite has expanded rapidly, but that has not made a dent in the disparity between white and African disposable income, resulting in even greater disparity among black people ...

"In pursuing broadly neoliberal macroeconomic policies, the ANC has failed to deal with the structural legacy of the apartheid economy. Consequently the transition from apartheid to post-apartheid is characterised, in economic and geographical terms, by continuity rather than transformation" (Johannesburg *Sunday Times* April 27).

In both the 1994 and 1999 election campaigns the ANC promised "a better life for all". In reality it has delivered a better life for a tiny minority.

SACP in government

On April 15 of this year *Business Report* featured two government ministers on an inside page. Trade and industry minister Alec Erwin's reply to the debate on the 2003-04 budget was extensively and approvingly quoted for his rejection of any measures leading to the stimulation of demand and his commitment to "promote existing competitive industries".

A separate article reported the promise of public enterprise minister Jeff Radebe to push ahead with "vigorous restructuring activity": ie, further large-scale privatisations. "There is a high level of interest from the business community in the opportunities that this programme presents," said Radebe. I bet there is.

As you might have guessed, Erwin and Radebe are both members of the South African Communist Party (many ordinary SACP members simply refuse to believe this). Erwin, the grey-suited, softly-spoken white man, has played a reassuring role that this image is meant to promote for capital and middle class whites. Equally despicable is Radebe,

whose department has overseen no fewer than 27 big privatisation ventures since 1997, bringing in a total of 35.5 billion rand (£2.84 billion) to the government's coffers. Every one of them has led to thousands of job losses and have been fiercely resisted by the unions.

Until July 2002 both 'comrades' were members of the SACP central committee, but, in an inchoate rebellion by rank and file delegates, Radebe was unceremoniously booted off the leadership, against the wishes of general secretary Blade Nzimande. For reasons that escape me, Erwin was not targeted by the rebels.

Officially the SACP is against privatisation. But it places its commitment to the ANC-led tripartite alliance (which is, after all, pursuing the 'national democratic revolution' with a vengeance) way above the interests of the working class. This is how it described the government's decision to attempt to raise R40 billion (£3.2 billion) from privatisation sales over three years from 2001:

"This was not an irrational decision, or a sell-out, or a betrayal of the ... objectives that hold us together. It was a prioritisation that was based on the conviction that there were no other feasible options ... rational but inappropriate economic policy choices have been made" (my emphasis *African Communist* 1st quarter, 2002).

But Cosatu, the main trade union centre, did not quite see it that way - it was its members' jobs that were at stake. The unions - many of them led by SACP members - organised a series of protest strikes last October. The SACP congress was gathering in July, just as preparations for the industrial action were being finalised. Faced with an insoluble conflict of interest, with its own members fronting opposite sides of the class battle lines, the SACP leadership took the only sensible course: compromise and conciliation.

It proposed a motion to congress that meekly asked the government to call a moratorium on the "restructuring of public enterprises that impact negatively on the working class", and suggested an "alliance task team" to facilitate discussion "in a way that makes the proposed general strike unnecessary". In this way it hoped to be able to maintain its anti-privatisation face for the benefit of its mass base, while dampening down working class militancy. This plan was spoiled by a successful amendment, tagged on to the end of the motion, which simply read: "That the SACP throws its weight behind the strike".

Fronting privatisation

In the aftermath of the strikes and yet another deterioration in ANC-SACP relations they provoked, the leadership set about trying to repair the damage. It tried to pretend that the workers' actions were entirely unconnected to any antipathy toward the government. The central committee declared: "The defensive activities of the unions are misguidedly portrayed as 'offensive' strategies designed to 'attack government or the ANC'. Obviously, we need to assess to what extent particular forms of mobilisation or even agitation might contribute to this false portrayal" (SACP CC statement, November 2002). The CC called on both SACP and ANC members "not to be provoked into mutually destructive activities".

For the SACP leadership, then, the

around
THE WEB

correct Thatcherites

neoliberal assault on workers, fronted by leading party members, is merely “inappropriate”. But calling strikes to ward off such attacks is “destructive”. It warned that it was impossible to “manage the alliance in such a reckless way ... only the enemies of the national democratic revolution would benefit” (*African Communist* 2nd-3rd quarter, 2002).

The same edition of the SACP’s increasingly infrequent ‘quarterly’ (there were only two issues last year, as there were for the ‘monthly’ *Umsebenzi*) noted that: “... all alliance partners have ... agreed that, at least on paper, there are no fundamental, principled disagreements on our approach to restructuring state assets”. Both the SACP and Cosatu are, it seems, “comfortable with the ANC and government’s more open-ended ‘balance of evidence’, ‘case by case’ approach”.

What? Cosatu is happy with the “restructuring” it had just tried to block through mass strikes? It turns out that “restructuring” *per se* is fine, since “the ANC reaffirmed its perspective that restructuring should not simply be equated with privatisation. Restructuring could involve extending the scope of public ownership, the setting up of new public entities, nationalisation, and partial or total privatisation.”

Yes, it “could” mean any of those things, but in practice it has involved only the latter (except in one or two cases, when the government has been forced to buy back its former assets after failed privatisation attempts).

In the November issue of *Umsebenzi* another SACP member of the govern-

ment, water and forestry affairs minister Ronnie Kasrils, was given space to openly argue against the Cosatu anti-privatisation strike. In view of the fact that he had himself overseen the partial privatisation of water, it was something of a self-justification exercise, Sounding exactly like a New Labour Blairite, Kasrils wrote: “It is the inescapable duty of government to ensure that all our people have access to safe and affordable water. However, there are a number of tools that can be used to achieve this mandate. The partial involvement of the private sector is one tool. If it delivers the results, we should be flexible enough to use it.” (*Umsebenzi* November 2002).

Black ‘empowerment’

While the initials and practice of PPP are just as common in Thabo Mbeki’s South Africa as they are in Tony Blair’s Britain, in Cape Town and Johannesburg they go hand in hand with another widely employed abbreviation: BEE, or ‘black economic empowerment’.

In view of what has been discussed so far, you might be forgiven for assuming that very little ‘empowerment’ has come the way of the black majority. You would be right. The term is a euphemism for the creation of a black bourgeoisie and the enrichment of a whole swathe of middle class blacks.

Targets are set for the employment and promotion of the “historically disadvantaged communities” - ie, blacks, women and the disabled (at least the ANC’s Thatcherism is politically correct) in all companies over a certain size. Despite government complaints that companies

are not doing enough and threats to impose fines of up to 500,000 rands (£40,000), by July 2002, 25% of top managers were black, compared to 13% a year earlier.

When it comes to purchasers of privatised assets and applicants for government contracts, companies are judged on BEE according to a points system relating to ownership as well as employment. During a recent visit, I met a white businessman who was confident of winning a lucrative contract with Ronnie Kasrils’ ministry. The chair of his company was a former leader of the MK guerrillas, who had persuaded the MK veterans’ association to take out a good number of shares. When another shareholding in the name of his black wife was added, that easily exceeded 50% ownership for the “disadvantaged”!

Earlier this year the state-owned transport company, Transnet, South Africa’s largest consumer of petroleum products, announced that 60% of its fuel needs would be supplied by seven ‘black empowerment’ companies for the next three years. The names of these companies? BP South Africa, Shell SA/Tepco, Exel Petroleum, Caltex Oil, Calulo Investments, KZN Oils and Engen/Afric Oil.

Take BP. According to *Business Report* (April 24), it “ceded 25% equity to empowerment partners in August 2001” - 17.5% had been sold off to the trade union-owned Mineworkers’ Investment Company and a further 7.5% to the Women’s Development Bank (founded by Zanele Mbeki, wife of Thabo). This 25% was enough to qualify for the ‘empowerment’ tag.

So it is with all the other transnational. Frequently such companies are little more than subsidiaries of established white-owned firms or are funded by loans from established finance houses.

Clearly such partnerships are considered perfectly splendid by all involved, although some people had their doubts about the Transnet contracts: “When asked about the concern that many of the beneficiaries of the deal were foreign firms that would repatriate profits”, Colin McClelland, director of the SA Petroleum Industry Association, said: “... the profit will go to both their foreign and empowerment shareholders” (*Business Report* April 24).

As with its recognition that inequality has *increased* since apartheid, the SACP is disarmingly open about the true meaning of ‘empowerment’, especially when viewed alongside the headlong rush to privatisation: “... the emerging or aspiring black bourgeoisie ... has little capital, and privatisation involving a designated percentage for the ‘historically disadvantaged’ is increasingly a major means to securing capital (by plundering public resources).”

“The fact that this emergent stratum is close to, even within, our movement impacts very directly on policy-making processes. There are often strong ideological and even personal links between this stratum and a senior layer of government and parastatal managers, and this can blur the boundary between perhaps problematic but still legal behaviour and plain corruption” (*African Communist* 2nd-3rd quarter, 2002).

The obvious question then is, what on earth is the SACP doing in a “movement” that not only tolerates, but encourages the sometimes corrupt self-aggrandisement of a section of the bourgeoisie? Similarly with the SACP central committee statement of August 2002: “... eight years into our new democratic dispensation, we have notched up enormous gains. However, our country remains on an accumulation path that is, fundamentally, unfavourable to the poor.” So why does the SACP continue doggedly on that path?

The party has theorised itself into a neoliberal corner. The ‘national democratic revolution’ (NDR) is, according to the SACP, a process of post-apartheid democratisation and deracialisation that must of necessity go on for some considerable time. It is openly class-collaborationist:

“The NDR requires the broad unity of a multi-class popular bloc of forces, rooted among the historically oppressed [ie, blacks] ... Amongst other things, it is the responsibility of the SACP to convince working class and socialist forces of the centrality of the NDR and of its necessary multi-class character” (*African Communist* 1st quarter, 2002).

Socialists would then position themselves as left critics of the ANC” (input to ANC-Cosatu bilateral, February 2002).

The SACP rushed to reassure the senior alliance partner that it did not really mean it. The slogan “is not a call to make a socialist transition now - such a transition lies in the future” (*African Communist* 1st quarter, 2002). The very distant future, obviously. For, right now, “Key strategic preconditions ... for an effective and sustainable socialist advance are, generally, not present.” Phew!

Of course the SACP’s understanding of socialism, shared in just about every last detail with the *Morning Star*’s Communist Party of Britain, is of course of the national variety and would be more accurately described as a cross between social democracy and state capitalism. According to *African Communist*, “Socialism is, we believe, characterised by a mixed economy, in which social ownership is, both in strategic capacity and in actual GDP terms, the preponderant (but not exclusive) form of economic ownership ...” (1st quarter, 2002). The phrase, “with political power in the hands of the working class”, is added on as an afterthought.

The definition continues: “The socialist sector [sic] will engage with privately owned capital on the market, in joint ventures, and in a variety of other ways”. Well, under SACP-type mixed economy ‘socialism’ capital may retain a central role, but, the anonymous author notes, “Speculative and short-term profit-seeking behaviour” would be “reduced” (*ibid*).

In the meantime comrade Blade Nzimande exhorts SACP cadre to continue the task of “building people’s power through mass mobilisation ... our most crucial weapon in deepening and consolidating the national democratic revolution” (*Umsebenzi* September 2002). In the same issue of the paper his central committee specifically listed “community policing forums, ward committees, school governing bodies, strengthening party branches and districts, etc” as examples of “building people’s power”.

Conclusion

The SACP has played a crucial role in delivering a stable, post-apartheid South Africa, where conditions for the extraction of surplus value have admirably consolidated (last year, while the masses remained mired in poverty, the value of remuneration packages for company directors increased by no less than 40%). Its role is largely hidden, often unspoken - cabinet ministers such as Erwin, Radebe and Kasrils are much more likely to have their affiliation publicly described as ANC than SACP (they are members of both, of course). Nevertheless, SACP presence is visible in the townships - complete with red flags, hammer and sickles and revolutionary songs.

The South African Communist Party is a living contradiction, as demonstrated by last year’s anti-privatisation debacle. Like the Labour Party in Britain, it can accurately be described as a bourgeois workers’ party - with one significant difference. The SACP’s base is considerably to the left of New Labour’s. Just as in Britain the central strategic task for communists is to win Labour’s working class base away from Labourism, so in South Africa genuine communists must seek to split the SACP.

The rebellion at the 2002 congress, when arch-privatiser Radebe was kicked off the leadership, clearly demonstrated that much of the raw material for a revolutionary workers’ party is to be found among the SACP base.

As for the likes of Nzimande, his current course is untenable: he must take sides in the class struggle - with Radebe and Erwin or with the working class ●

Communist University Wales

Day 1 - Saturday June 28

Session 1::11am-1.30pm
The New American Century and its opponents
Tina Becker looks at the politics of the new American imperialism, reactionary anti-imperialism and the anti-war movement. Was it ever in the position to stop the war? What role can a united left across Europe play?

Session 2::2.30pm-5pm
Lessons of the Scottish Socialist Party & the failures of the Socialist Alliance
The recent electoral success of the SSP is there for everyone to see. But what about the SA in England and Wales? Should we fight to transform it into a democratic and effective party - or is its current manifestation as a loose electoral alliance good enough?

Session 3::5.30pm-7pm
The myth of the Celts
Scottish and Welsh nationalists find historic justification in the idea of the Celtic peoples as the dispossessed inhabitants of Britain. Is this fact or fiction? Do the Celts survive in Scotland, Wales and Ireland or was the idea of a Celtic Britain an 18th century invention?

Day 2 - Sunday June 29

Session 4::11am-1.30pm
When was Wales a nation?
Wales is often said to be an ancient nation. Plaid Cymru says it is an oppressed nation. Wales is undoubtedly a geographical expression. But its people have been traditionally divided. Between north and south, between Welsh-speakers and English-speakers, between protestants and catholics, between rich and poor. Bob Paul leads the discussion.

Session 5::2.30pm-5pm
Society of the future
Karl Marx did not leave us a ready-made blueprint for a post-revolutionary world. While we cannot plan every detail of a future society, we can, however, make provisions on how to get there - and influence the future. Mark Fischer looks at the debates around ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, the question of the ‘withering away’ of the state and the role of communists to achieve this.

Details
Weekend: £20/£10 :: One day: £10/£5 :: Session: £5/£2.
Clwb Ivor Bach, Womanby Street, Cardiff (five minutes walk from Cardiff Central rail station).

DEBATES FOR THE SERIOUS LEFT

SOCIALIST ALLIANCE

May 3 Committee statement

An ad hoc committee has been set up by Socialist Alliance members to press the case for a workers' party. The committee takes its name and composition from a meeting of SA members held before the 2003 SA conference to discuss the need for a workers' party. The meeting, with representatives from the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, Communist Party of Great Britain, Revolutionary Democratic Group, Bedfordshire SA Democratic and Republican Platform and a number of pro-party SA independents, was able to produce the following composite motion for conference and organise a meeting after conference to assess what progress had been made.

"Conference notes the development of parties such as the Scottish Socialist Party and Rifondazione Comunista, which have established themselves as serious political forces through a unity of purpose towards making the party the focus of public work, and a consistent approach of raising the profile of their parties in working class communities and amongst young people in particular. The SSP now consistently polls seven to eight percent support in Scotland, has just won six seats in the Scottish parliament, and is expanding beyond the traditional areas of strength for the left in the central belt of the country.

"The SA resolves to play a leading role in the struggle for a new workers' party by taking the following steps:

1. Seek to set up a 'Campaign for a new workers' party' jointly with other socialist and trade union organisations and activists committed to that goal, and to seek liaison and cooperation with that campaign on elections and other political issues.
2. The SA adopts the aim of a workers' party in its constitution.
3. The SA includes arguments for a new workers' party as part of its campaigning propaganda."

The motion secured about a third of the conference votes. It was a step forward which led to the establishment of the new committee. One of the first decisions of the new committee has been to agree the following terms of reference. These are: "To co-ordinate discussion and activities of those campaigning for a workers' party, with a view to eventually organising a meeting/conference to set up an SA platform/campaign. The May 3 Committee will hand over to those elected at any founding conference of such a campaign."

It is important to stress that the May 3 Committee is a provisional and representative, but not an elected body. Our role is to prepare for a future founding conference of an SA platform/campaign and look toward a conference later in the year ●

Forget SWP, forget Communist Party

Jean Kysow explains why we should prioritise the SA in the fight for a workers' party

There were many issues that I thought should have been priorities which the May conference did not address. The first one was finances. At present some members pay their subscriptions nationally and some locally, and the lack of communication between the two means that local alliances are sometimes not informed about their members' payments or do not receive the money for months, if at all. Every penny counts for small branches, but there is no way of knowing how much they are entitled to. Whether they can or cannot stand candidates and what activities they can undertake is largely dependent on what money they have available. That was something that really needed to be sorted out, but I do not think it even got a mention.

Secondly, I was not happy at all with the main resolution on the future of the SA. The majority of the people out there, Joe Public, think we are a party - that is why we are standing in elections. As far as everybody but ourselves are concerned, we *are* a party. So what is the problem? Would it be such a big leap to go from what we are now to a party? But people think that would be too much of a commitment, because they are still prioritising their own groups. They have not thought through to their own satisfaction what would be the effect on their own organisations. They feel scared of each other and are apprehensive about which way an SA party would go. As I said at the conference, they are still fighting about who gets the cherry on the cake. I am beginning to despair of whether they ever will prioritise the Socialist Alliance.

But there are a lot of disenchanted people

... they are still fighting about who gets the cherry on the cake. I despair of whether they ever will prioritise the Alliance

out there. For example, I stood in the Downham by-election for Lewisham council earlier this year. Despite being a well known activist, having campaigned in the area for 40 years, I managed to get just 40-odd votes - I could not believe it. It is a very unusual ward, in that it is the only one where the Liberal Democrats have had any success, winning eventually three seats, but the British National Party picked up nearly 1,000 votes.

Part of where we failed is that we do not have full-timers who work exclusively for the Socialist Alliance, even if we have to pay them. At present, the same people are doing Socialist Alliance work, Stop the War Coalition work, Socialist Workers Party work, trade union work and there is only so much a person can do. I know some people who have literally given over their lives to the cause - travelling all over the country, going without sleep. For example, just two or three people have saved literally hundreds of thousands of council properties by organising people in Defend Council Housing. But the Socialist Alliance is coming a poor second with a lot of parties.

The executive committee is not working exclusively for the SA, but if we are going to make a workers' party, this has to be given priority. We need a dedicated committee to vet candidates. We seem to be desperate to win recruits, but we can come a cropper. For instance, we had one candidate in Lewisham who seemed to have an excellent activist and trade union background, but, once we got to know him, we found he was a virulent racist, who had to be asked to leave.

We need people who can do research and analyse what makes people vote for certain candidates, for instance. Why did they vote for the BNP in Downham? What really pushed up their vote was the fact that this was one of the largest estates, where politics had always been decided on housing issues. In the old days black people were never put in the 'best' end of the borough, but after years of campaigning, that was changed. Of course there was resentment. Traditionally your sons and daughters automatically got a house, but now there is a housing shortage, all that is gone. There is no longer a community vote - people vote as individuals. The crucial factor was the placing of Kosovan refugees, which has caused absolute mayhem. That is why the BNP vote was so high. So people do not vote the way we think they ought to.

Sometimes being too upfront about who you are puts people off. After years in the wilderness, when I first joined the Socialist Alliance, I went to a lobby of the Labour Party conference in Brighton. On the way there, during the march and on the way back, I must have been asked 20 or 30 times if I wanted to

join the SWP. The other thing that is really off-putting is when a lot of local people fight really hard for a campaign and then suddenly the socialists latch onto it. They organise a meeting and for two streets before you get there, there are 20 people selling newspapers.

We have failed to get across the message that the SA is a broad group. People say the Socialist Alliance is 'just a load of commies' or 'just another front for the SWP'. But, quite honestly, I do not think our hearts are in that, because we are *not* a broad group. For example, in my local alliance there are comrades from the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, SWP and independents. Sometimes I can agree with the AWL, sometimes with the *Resistance* paper, sometimes with the SWP and I do so as an individual. But some of these party hard-liners frighten the life out of me. I often think, 'God, if we ever put them in power ...' They behave almost as though they are cloned. If you speak to one, you know you will get the same from most of them. That is another reason why we need people running the Socialist Alliance who are working exclusively for it.

We ought to be far more inclusive, except for racists. We must get really involved with local issues - in your trade union, standing on picket lines. If you are going to recruit to the Socialist Alliance, you need to cater more for people like me. I went along to the SWP's Marxism conference for two or three days a couple of years ago, but I found a lot of what was discussed was way above my head. I was absolutely lost. The general public need to be introduced to what the Socialist Alliance is all about *gently*.

I may not know my Marx from my Trotsky, but I do know for sure we ought to be a party. And we need an SA paper. The AWL did start putting in a couple of pages in each issue of *Solidarity* on the Socialist Alliance, which is better than nothing, but some SWP members were not happy about that. It seems that they do not even buy each other's papers. All that restricts me is the price. On my pension I can afford one paper a week, yet we do not have a Socialist Alliance paper.

At the SA conference I did not have a clue about the names that were displayed for the slate that was elected. It would have helped if we had been told if they were independents or SWP or whatever. I had no idea what I was voting for. I am still trying to sort out the different parties - it is so totally confusing. I just get angry and think, 'I wish to god they'd just get rid of all these bloody parties'. I know you all have a history and tradition behind you, but we largely agree on the important issues. So forget the SWP, forget the CPGB - why can't we concentrate on getting a workers' party? ●

Join the Socialist Alliance

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**debating
the way
forward**

Jean Kysow: paper

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Pro-party independent **James White** looks back at the SA's May 10 conference and the prospects splits in the Socialist Workers Party

Left unity: start making friends

Last month's conference was roughly as I expected, although I was perhaps even more disappointed with it than I thought I would be.

What has changed in particular since the December 2001 conference is the attitude of the Socialist Workers Party. Now that the SWP is in the driving seat, it is very much more bullish, with a contemptuous attitude towards everyone else. Eighteen months ago, when its position was not so secure, it was treading much more carefully, but on May 10 we saw the sectarian arrogance for which the organisation is renowned, and has been for 20-30 years. The breast-beating from John Rees and the ranting and raving from Julie Waterson were the clearest signs of that.

It seems that the SWP is thinking of submerging the alliance into some sort of 'peace and justice' popular front arrangement and increasingly looking beyond the SA itself. The motion that was passed laid down that there should be no preconditions as to what any new formation might look like - except, I think, that the mover, Alan Thornett, said it must be "explicitly socialist". Speakers on our side of the conference were perhaps not clear enough that we are not actually opposed to a regroupment, realignment or coalition: we must certainly talk to whoever wants to talk to us - about, for example, joint slates in the European elections. However, I personally am sceptical about where exactly these forces are that are going to coalesce around the alliance in this 'regroupment'.

It is actually quite unlikely that the Communist Party of Britain would sign on the dotted line for such an arrangement. I know the Socialist Party pretty well, having been a member for 12 years, and I would consider a deal with the SP rather remote. As for the Socialist Labour Party, it would be a complete non-starter - and I do not think we would want to join forces with them in any case, given the Stalinist rump that is left in many areas. What remains is the Labour left and, to be honest, if you have not left the Labour Party by now, you probably are not going to do so. The Labour left would not be prepared to stand candidates against their own party, so in terms of elections it would be meaningless.

If, however, the forces for a broader alliance are not coming from the labour movement, or groups that orientate around it, then who *will* sign up for something that is "explicitly socialist"? So I just cannot picture what this thing would look like. Maybe people more in the know could explain how it might be a runner, in which case fine: I am not opposed to the discussions. But to completely subordinate everything to this vague possibility, whose chances of actually working are not big, is crazy. The latest bulletin from the SA office, following last weekend's executive meeting, contains a series of advertisements for other campaigns, which SA members are urged to support - the campaign to Defend Council Housing, defend Galloway, etc, but nothing about any initiatives the SA is taking itself. It seems we will be back to the SA being assigned a supporting role to the SWP's other 'united fronts' until election time comes around again.

We, the pro-party elements, have to look beyond the alliance as well - but in a different way. I am increasingly sceptical as to whether the SA does have any prospects itself. This is still an open question - I would not completely write it off yet, but we must now look at a perspective of building support for a campaign for a workers' party within the movement itself rather than just within the confines of the SA.



James White: opportunities

The CPGB has made the point that a party cannot be achieved without first having it adopted as an aim and what strikes me about the current political situation is the absence of the subjective factor. A party is not going to just happen by accident - it has to be adopted as a perspective and worked towards. Clearly, as the conference showed, the obstacle is that the SWP think that they are it and there is no way that they will countenance anything that gainsays that.

The SWP very much likes to keep things simple for its membership. If the leadership were to start talking about some sort of transitional formation and the different tactics that socialists might have to adopt in order to achieve the ideal situation of establishing a mass revolutionary party, many of the members' eyes would glaze over - they are mostly not theoretically trained so as to be able to engage in that kind of discussion. So it is a question of 'Keep it simple; build the SWP', and the leadership is clearly not going to depart from that perspective.

A campaign for a workers' party would need to have a much stronger union orientation than has been the case up to now. At the moment it would largely be a case of propaganda - raising the idea, perhaps through developing a newsletter or bulletin; holding meetings wherever possible; looking to get motions through union branches, and so on.

The failure to organise Socialist Alliance fringe meetings at the trade union conferences over the summer represents another squandered opportunity. As a minimum these could have been used just to explain what the SA is, but ideally could have provided a forum to debate the question of a new party. Instead, as I understand it, the SA will be cheer-leading for George Galloway. Such missed opportunities will continue to arise until we start to act independently of the alliance itself, if necessary.

The biggest audience would be people like Fire Brigades Union strikers - there is certain evidence, within some unions at least, of a radicalising layer - and people involved in the anti-war and anti-capitalist movements. They would largely be people who had never heard

of the Socialist Alliance.

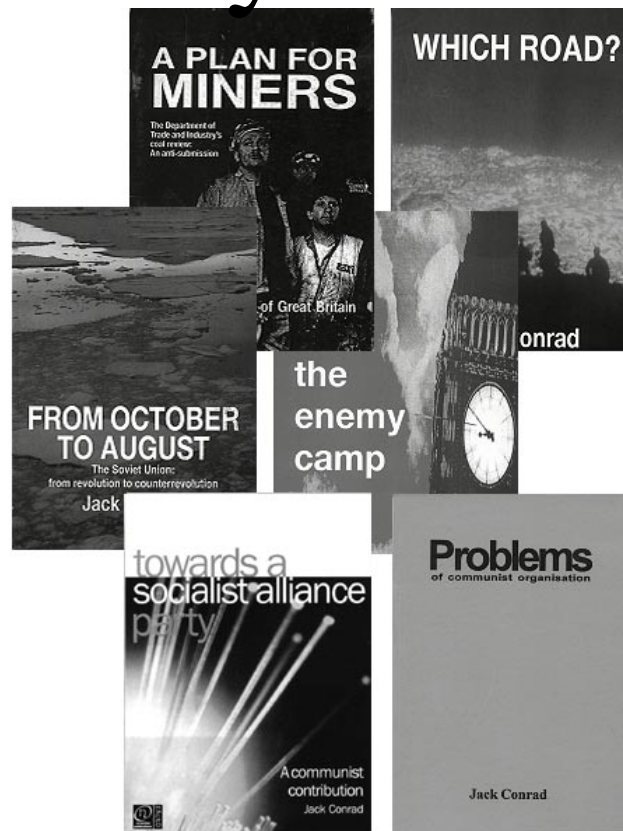
There are some people - particularly within the *Socialist Resistance* group - who are constantly fantasising about splits and divisions within the SWP: they talk about appealing to the SWP's middle cadre. This demonstrates the paucity of political ambition that exists on the left at the moment and I just do not buy a word of it. The SWP is a hegemonic organisation, similar to the position the Communist Party occupied in, say, the 1930s or 40s, and there are several satellite groupings who largely direct their propaganda at that organisation's membership rather than anybody else. There is also a small group of fellow-travellers developing, who are rewarded for their loyalty, at least on the big issues, with places on this or that campaign or committee, which allows them to maintain a personal political profile they could not otherwise have.

I would not write off completely the possibility that the SWP could split, but I would like to see some evidence that something like this is happening, and I see none whatsoever, at least in England. It would of course be much simpler if the largest group on the left actually started to sort itself out and do what we want it to do, but an awful lot of energy is directed into trying to achieve that rather than looking to the class itself.

First of all we need to set a date for a conference. We need to thrash out a draft position, which should be open to amendments, and put it to whatever groups and individuals turn up. I do not think this is rocket science. That was more or less what was done when we agreed the motion that went to the SA conference. There needs to be an initiative taken before the end of the year.

It is easy to swim in the murky left milieu - trying to engage with SWP full-timers and sell them papers or whatever, but really this is sectarianism. Perhaps it is my training in the Militant Tendency/Socialist Party, which was very dismissive of all the other groups. Nevertheless, there is a danger that you can take your eye off the ball and spend all your time talking to each other and not to the class. We need to start making some friends - that is as good a way of putting it as anything ●

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SOCIALIST ALLIANCE

SA 'awkward squad' under

New executive, new dynamic. The first meeting of the newly elected executive committee of the Socialist Alliance in England and Wales had been awaited with interest. Given the opaque nature of the process that resulted in the NEC's election at annual conference, the move of the Socialist Workers Party to greatly increase its presence (from three to 13) and rumours flying about of behind-the-scenes negotiations over the future of the alliance, this executive meeting indicated the pace, culture and direction for developments to come.

Discussions centred on the future direction of the SA. What is going on in the anti-war movement? Where is New Labour going? What of the European elections? What is our overall strategy? How is the alliance placed for debates on the political fund and the unions' links to Labour? These were all touched upon and quite rightly so. In a positive shift, most of our discussion was of a decidedly political nature. Technical matters were delegated to officers and committees.

Yet questions about the SWP's negotiations with the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain, Salma Yaqoob and the Birmingham central mosque were kicked into touch by an increasingly arrogant John Rees of the SWP. Talks with the CPB were "bilateral" and thus "confidential", he said. The sensitivity of them meant they could not be reported publicly. Why ever not? Doesn't the SA membership, its executive and the working class movement require transparency and accountability on these matters? Obviously the content of the discussions would be of some concern to *British road to socialism* loyal members of the CPB, for whom voting Labour is the alpha and omega of their political strategy.

Comrade Rees said that there was no secret regarding his talks with Salma Yaqoob in Birmingham, but he nevertheless kept shtoom about their outcome. My written questions to the executive on this matter remain unanswered (see below). Neither has there yet been a response to Birmingham Socialist Alliance's written request for clarification.

The outcome of the executive was mixed. Not unexpectedly, the SWP pushed forward its drive for political dominance. There is no problem with the fact that the SWP constitutes a majority either on the executive or in the alliance as a whole. But, using this majority to go behind the backs of the executive and the membership, entering into secret negotiations with non-SA forces and displaying increasing intolerance for the SA 'awkward squad' is not acceptable.

Despite its show of charm, the SWP could not resist its usual knee-jerk resort to control-freakery. Minority voices on the future of the alliance are to be salami-sliced out of the picture. Following his article in last week's *Weekly Worker*, Steve Godward, vice-chair of the previous executive, was unceremoniously dumped from his post for having a minority position unacceptable to the current executive. In the words of secretary Rob Hoveman (SWP), comrade Godward was deemed to have a vision inappropriate for a public figure of the executive. While I have my own

... this was not the end of the SWP's attempts to remove from influence some of those who dare to express their differences

differences with comrade Godward's views, nevertheless I regard them as coming from an SA partisan and perfectly healthy in terms of the overall project - we are not a confessional sect. It was disappointing that only five executive members voted for there to be three vice-chairs (with four abstentions), as proposed by John Fisher, which would have allowed comrade Godward to retain his post.

Gagging

Yet this was not the end of the SWP's attempts to remove from influence some of those who dare to express their differences. I had put myself forward for re-election as SA nominating officer - a post which parties standing candidates are legally obliged to appoint. Rob Hoveman nominated Simon Joyce, an SWP member from Camden Socialist Alliance, as an alternative to me. This was a step too far for the executive. John Fisher and Lesley Mahmood (both non-aligned) and Mark Hoskisson (Workers Power) all spoke against the SWP carving out 'troublesome' executive members from officer positions. In his speech against my re-election, comrade Hoveman graciously admitted that I had done a good job, but that my "minority position" on the future of the alliance made it unacceptable for me to hold an officer's post. He argued that the alliance required a "coherent set of officers" and that minority positions were not appropriate.

Lesley Mahmood, having just been elected as a vice-chair, was put out by this. Didn't she have a minority position herself? Of course she does, but it seems some minority positions are more tolerated than others.

I pointed out that after the other motions had been defeated I voted for the main resolution moved by Alan Thornett (International Socialist Group) at annual conference. Comrade Rees of the SWP accepted this, but said that I did not really mean it. My vote was made redundant by comrade Rees's pronouncement, it seems - what it must be

to have such power. I said that to remove officers on this basis would be to send all the wrong messages about the direction our alliance was taking.

Comrade John Fisher's support for my re-election was most welcome. He openly called on SWP members of the executive to seriously con-

sider the negative effect on the alliance if I was not re-elected. His call was heeded by five SWP members. Only six of the 11 SWP members present could bring themselves to vote for their own candidate. I received 14 votes and was re-elected.

Some will jump on this to 'prove' the independence of the executive from the SWP. While the non-aligned comrades taken as a whole are hardly creatures of the SWP, this misses the point: the SWP is definitely set on a course of remoulding the SA in its own image and of course we are all, as individuals, there only inasmuch as the SWP is prepared to tolerate us. It wants to send out all the *right* images as far as it is concerned - it is in control.

Throughout discussions about the future electoral direction of the alliance, supporters of the SWP/International Socialist Group bloc kept referring to the conference resolution on 'a new initiative for the left'. In part, that resolution states: "We also want to discuss with those on the left who are not currently inside the alliance and argue for their participation in a new initiative. We are not simply appealing to people to join the alliance as it is, although we are keen to recruit.

"We have an open mind on the organisational form that could emerge from such discussions. It could be the alliance as it is, a relaunched alliance or a new organisation entirely. We would insist only that it is open, inclusive, democratic and of course socialist."

Already the SWP is looking to worm out of such formulations. How are attempts to remove 'awkward' executive members for officer posts reflective of an "inclusive" alliance? How is the refusal to report back on negotiations with the CPB and other forces "open"?

There are other questions about the drive to "broaden our alliance". I wholeheartedly support broadening the alliance. However, not at any cost. Our resolution says we will "insist" that our new initiative is democratic and socialist. Has John Rees been doing this in discussions with religious forces?

John Rees reached the height of disingenuousness in this discussion. In an attempt to defend his refusal to report back he said that these talks had been bilateral discussions. He was not wearing his SA hat at the time. Why? Because it was "regrettable that the SA didn't make its presence more forceful in the Stop the War Coalition", so approaches were made directly by the SWP to the CPB and others. What double-talk! Does not the comrade realise he is a member of the SA executive committee? It was the political choice of his own organisation, the SWP, not to take part in the STWC as the alliance, but rather as a self-promoting sect.

There is also a worrying trend from some SWP members of the executive to consider the Labour Party vote to be "crumbling away". Sure, there is a crisis of representation, but for

comrades such as Andy Newman from Swindon to suggest that Labour's vote is in danger of collapsing is fantasy. He went further into political self-delusion by saying that the Scottish Socialist Party's success was based on "proportional representation and luck". After all, the comrade pointed out, they only have two sitting councillors to our one. What myopic self-satisfaction.

John Fisher provided some sober realism. He said that in most places the SA barely exists. He pointed to a dramatic shift in the SWP's strategy to build the SA. Up until the debacle of Liz Davies's resignation as chair, the SWP concentrated on "building up the number of independents". He asked what had happened to this approach.

He pointed to the problems of what he dubbed the "hattism" of the largest component: wherever the SWP was, it had to wear a different hat - Globalise Resistance in Evian, Socialist Alliance at the town hall, and so on. This was seriously stretching the SWP activists, as well as the credibility of their involvement. Comrade Fisher concluded his contribution by saying that "organisations need to give stronger support [to the SA] or we will just stagger on". Quite right.

Accountability

Comrade Godward emphasised the need for transparency, democracy and accountability in all we do. Mark Hoskisson questioned the political basis for our 'new initiative'. Will it be an electoral arrangement or a new organisation? Will it involve non-working class political forces? Failure to report back is just making "peppercorns for the rumour mill". He emphasised the class differentiation within the muslim community and warned against talking about this section of society as an undifferentiated bloc. Comrade Hoskisson called for clarity and the development of political 'bottom lines' in our negotiations. None were set.

To oversee future discussions and negotiations to achieve our 'new initiative' a taskforce was elected by the executive. Let us hope its deliberations are more transparent and democratic than they have been up to now. The taskforce is: John Rees (SWP), Nick Wrack (pro-SWP 'independent'), Rob Hoveman (SWP), Lesley Mahmood (non-aligned), Cecilia Prosper (SWP) and Will McMahon (pro-SWP 'independent').

Although the size of the executive makes it somewhat cumbersome, the addition of leading activists from across the country has added to the content of discussions. Michael Lavalette (SWP), our Preston councillor, is able to bring his experiences to the executive. Others, such as those from Gordon Rowntree, Jim Jepps and Heather Cox, are also useful in helping the executive consider our direction.

Nick Wrack was elected chair, with Lesley Mahmood and Cecilia Prosper (SWP) vice-

Unanswered

Questions and items for June 7 Socialist Alliance executive committee presented by Marcus Ström

1. At what stage and scope are negotiations with the Communist Party of Britain (*Morning Star*) regarding next year's European and GLA elections? On whose behalf have these discussions been undertaken? Are there any other issues being discussed with the CPB (*Morning Star*) on behalf of the SA? If so, what are these issues?
2. A number of questions are being raised on various e-lists and in

- personal conversations about the prospects of a 'peace and justice' candidate in Birmingham for the European elections. Conjecture is running wild about a 'peace and justice' party being established and so on.
3. Is there a grain of truth to this speculation which centres on alleged negotiations between the SWP and anti-war activists from Birmingham central mosque? If so, what is the nature of these discussions? If such a candidate is in the offing, is it being proposed the SA support such a campaign and, if so, what is the political platform for the 'peace and justice' campaign? ●



John Rees: arrogance

threat

chairs. A proposal from comrade Mahmood for there to be two co-chairs (herself and comrade Wrack) received seven votes with 16 against.

Reports

The executive heard reports from comrade Rees on the Stop the War Coalition and from comrade Hoskisson on the campaign on the union's political fund. It was agreed that Rob Hoveman and Alan Thornett (ISG) should represent the SA at the 'European conference of the anti-capitalist left', which was held in Athens on June 9-10. They will report back on the important discussions there in writing. At stake is a European-wide socialist ticket in the European elections.

Taken earlier in the meeting was a resolution from Sheffield Socialist Alliance calling for the cooption of Phil Pope to the executive. This received five votes (including mine). Two motions passed by Coventry and Warwickshire Socialist Alliance (Cawsa) were 'noted'. The first called on the executive to avoid clashes between socialist and green candidates at the European elections. The second wanted a recalled national conference to discuss the nature of discussions being undertaken by leading SA figures (ie, John Rees). It states: "The main concern of Cawsa members was that such discussions were taking place without the knowledge of the membership. Rumours were circulating which may or may not be accurate - openness was felt to be vital, as was the need for the full and democratic involvement of the membership."

Finally, Greg Tucker (International Socialist Group) spoke to the executive about the appeals committee. It is my understanding he did so without consulting any other member of the new appeals committee. He said that it will pursue the only matter before it: that of the proposal by the SWP-dominated Bedfordshire Socialist Alliance to expel Danny Thompson and Jane Clarke from the SA. Given that this had run into the ground, I would have thought natural justice would mean the new appeals committee would throw this ludicrous attempt at expulsion 'out of court'.

There will be an SA national council meeting in Birmingham on July 19 ●

Marcus Ström

New officers

Chair: Nick Wrack (pro-SWP 'independent')
Vice-chairs: Cecilia Prosper (SWP), Lesley Mahmood (non-aligned)
Secretary: Rob Hoveman (SWP)
Treasurer: Shelley Margetson (non-aligned)
Membership: Glyn Robbins (non-aligned)
Trade unions: Alan Thornett (ISG)
Women: Margaret Manning (non-aligned), Lesley Mahmood, Lyn Hubbard (SWP)
Youth: Heather Cox (non-aligned), Mandy Baker (Resistance-SSN)
Anti-racism: Weyman Bennett (SWP), Amin Hadi (SWP)
Press and publications: John Rees (SWP), Will McMahon (pro-SWP 'independent')
Nominations: Marcus Ström (CPGB)
Campaigns officer: Rob Hoveman (SWP)
Office secretariat: Rob Hoveman, Mandy Baker, Will McMahon, Nick Wrack

Wales Nationalist rival?

The south Wales town of Merthyr Tydfil provided the venue for a debate on 'the future of the Welsh left' on June 7. Called by *Seren* (socialist, environmental and republican news), Cymru Goch's newly launched left nationalist paper, the meeting was advertised as being "for those people interested in building an SSP-type party in Wales".

Around 30 people attended - made up, of course, of those who look to the divisive separatism of the Scottish Socialist Party as an example to follow, with members from Cymru Goch and Plaid Cymru constituting over a third of the total. Two current Welsh Socialist Alliance members were present - myself and an independent from Merthyr.

Chairing, Tim Richards (Cymru Goch) stated that the discussion was to be exploratory on the way forward, given the "bruising effect of the WSA". What really rankles with so many of those present is not so much the Socialist Workers Party's bureaucracy or the Socialist Party's sectarianism prior to its departure, but the recent WSA decision to join forces with the Socialist Alliance in England. From the outset, there was always going to be a difference of opinion over the type of organisation needed. Some argued for an "activist organisation", orientated around "community issues", whilst others (myself included) argued the need for an all-Britain party which could take up the big, global issues and not simply those on a community level. Unsurprisingly, Cymru Goch argued for a socialist party of Wales, organised separately from working class activists in Scotland and England. Supporters of *Seren* stated they were trying to arrange a public meeting with the SSP in August to discuss the possibility of building an SSP-type party in Wales.

I understand that some want a Welsh Socialist Party which, while claiming to be "inclusive and democratic", will set out to exclude the "Brit sects". Whether this nationalist rival will be able to take off where the WSA has so far stalled is another matter ●

Bob Davies

Open letter to members of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty Abandon sectarian doctrine

Comrades

"A more united left would impact far more forcefully on the working class and its movement, and on the capitalist world around us. It could hope to grow much more quickly than the left does now. It would also be forced by the conditions of its existence to talk about its own political divisions and disputes as a united left, and thus evolve a civilised and democratic party regime."

I write with a simple aim: to convey my sincere and passionate support of these words, which appeared in the *Workers' Liberty* magazine special *Unity!* in January 1999, and to see them translated into action.

Let us lift our eyes from the squabbles which have occupied so much of our energy over recent months to the events of the world.

The people of Iraq have had a murderous Ba'athist regime, originally sponsored by western imperialism, replaced through a bloody war by direct occupation by those imperialists themselves. US soldiers now fire on their demonstrations, while in Washington plans are laid for the theft of their resources and the imposition of a puppet government.

Palestinians still face the chaos, poverty, fear and death visited on them by the Israeli state, while Israeli workers face both exploitation by domestic capitalism and the hatred of the Arab peoples around them. US-backed imperialism in the region has left neither of these peoples knowing security or freedom.

French workers are striking to prevent their pensions being stolen from them by their government to subsidise the failure of French capitalism. Syria, Iran and Cuba have all received thinly veiled threats from US imperialism. Chinese workers are still being imprisoned for organising workers' action. The people of Zimbabwe continue to suffer the privations of their nation's paralysis, as Mugabe's dictatorship clings to power.

At home, the denial of democracy to the British people has been thrown into sharp relief by Blair's support of the invasion of Iraq in the teeth of mass opposition. Asylum-seekers are being scapegoated for our economic problems. The BNP continues to gain minor but still significant electoral successes. The firefighters were threatened with action to declare their strike illegal. The collapse in share prices has left millions without adequate pensions. Worsening poverty and debt face millions.

Everywhere we see the struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie, between the defence of inhuman privilege and the courageous fight for freedom and democracy.

The struggle is often confused. Young people turn to 'anti-capitalism' and anarchist 'direct action'. Millions protest against the war, only to hear platform speakers place their hopes in the United Nations or international law. Betrayed by a Labour Party hijacked by one of the most reactionary leaderships we have ever seen, some place their hopes in syndicalism: 'left' leaders are elected in the hope that unions will defend workers' interests. Militancy and class consciousness are being raised, but where is the *political* leadership?

We are not anarchists or syndicalists. We believe that a *party* - not outside but *of* the working class - must be built if freedom is to be won. And yet, at precisely the moment when real political leadership is most needed, the left remains hopelessly and foolishly divided. As MI5 pores through our periodicals and our email discussions, they must be laughing at us.

Our first step out of this morass is clear: we need a campaign for a workers' party, and the campaign needs a paper. At the recent Socialist Alliance conference, substantial minorities voted for both of these measures, and I wish to see them made realities. They would not be built around any compromise programme. I would not have the AWL abandon a particle of its politics except through argument. We would publish a multi-faction paper, honestly taking up the debates, but demonstrating unity in action. As the *Workers' Liberty* quote I opened this letter with correctly stated, it is precisely through the



AWL patriarch: Sean Matgamna

conditions of existence of such a paper that its supporters would be forced to discuss their political differences and thus begin to lay down the basis of a genuinely democratic centralist party.

I am not going to contribute to the exchange of insults which continues between us. I publicly opposed the description of the AWL as "not liking Arabs", which appeared in the *Weekly Worker*. I am similarly saddened by descriptions of the "so-called" CPGB as "fake left" and "crazies", which have appeared in *Solidarity*. These are the politics of the nursery. Even with an independent workers' party built to lead a conscious working class, we will still face the massed arms and intelligence services of the British state. Anyone, CPGB or AWL, who does not experience a moment's fear when facing this prospect has not understood our historic task, and is playing a mere factional game. If we cannot organise ourselves to achieve even a monthly paper to argue the case for an independent working class party, what hope do we have when the real struggle begins?

At present, the issue of George Galloway is being presented as a fundamental reason why our groups cannot work together. *Solidarity* recently argued: "Socialists, or even half-decent liberals, who do not feel embarrassed by the things George Galloway admits to ... have lost the plot. To call them socialists without some qualifying adjective like 'fake' is now an abuse of language."

If you accept this, I suppose any words written by this particular fake socialist will carry little weight. But I am not embarrassed. The CPGB defends Galloway because he is being attacked for sticking his head over the trenches and daring to shout that the war was wrong and soldiers should have refused their orders. *The Daily Telegraph* and the traitorous leadership of the Labour Party are not attacking him for accepting the hospitality of a dictator, but for an entirely correct stand against the war. I cannot stand by and see him crucified for this while saying, 'It doesn't matter: he's guilty of other things anyway'.

By all means be critical of those other things, but we must defend him on the grounds on which he is being attacked. Once the passion and rhetoric has been cut away from the AWL's argument, is it really so different? Could we not still unite around the principle of *critical* defence?

But if we cannot, it still need not stand in our way. I do not even ask you to agree with this argument - merely to extend the dignity of being 'wrong' to me if you disagree, rather than calling me a 'fake socialist'. Consider: as almost everyone outside the AWL has adopted a similar line, or even lines of uncritical defence, are you really comfortable with the argument that the AWL contains the *only* genuine socialists left in Britain?

There is a real appetite both within and without the Socialist Alliance to campaign for a workers' party. The AWL and the CPGB have an opportunity to play a role of impor-

tance well beyond that suggested by the tiny memberships of both our groups. We, along with the Revolutionary Democratic Group and the majority of SA independents who are increasingly cohering into a pro-party group, can provide a nucleus for that campaign. On February 15 the left failed, miserably and completely, to provide leadership to the millions who protested. Where were the rows of Socialist Alliance banners? The SA stalls? The recruiters collecting membership applications hand over fist? The candidates scoring win after win around the country, as people made their anger at the democratic deficit clear? We must not fail again.

At the fringe meeting which followed the SA conference, attendance was higher than anyone expected: there was barely room to move. The anger of the indies which greeted some of your speakers was not because they disagreed over Galloway, but because they genuinely wanted to talk about a workers' party. The CPGB intervened to prevent the outrageous move by the Socialist Workers Party to exclude the AWL from the SA executive, but it seemed that the AWL could not hear even the voices of its friends at this second meeting, which otherwise would have been fiercely united behind a workers' party campaign.

If you had said simply that you opposed deals based around the politics of supporting Arab dictatorships, as we all suspected the SWP might be seeking with Galloway and the *Morning Star* group, and moved on to commit the AWL to such a campaign, you would have won our support and, I believe, that of almost all present. Why this determination to present the AWL as the *only* group supporting independent working class politics?

In case you should think that my aim is to score some partisan point over the AWL, if you have time please read the first letter I ever wrote to *Solidarity* and the *Weekly Worker*. I was then an 'indie' myself, who recognised the substantial areas of political agreement that the AWL and the CPGB enjoyed and who was bewildered and depressed that a foolish dispute (then over the 'Leeds' incident) had interfered with the process of rapprochement between them. The *Weekly Worker* printed this letter, and it is still available via the CPGB website: <http://www.cpgb.org.uk/worker/467/letters.html>. Four months on, and I find myself arguing the same case for unity. Must we repeat our folly?

The doctrine of the 'fake left' puts you on an isolationist course which becomes harder to correct with each passing day. Unlike comrade Martyn Hudson in his letter to us, I do not call on you to change your politics, or to leave your organisation for ours: merely to fight with us to build the party which our class needs, the class whose interests we all claim to represent.

Whatever our differences, I remain committed to the cause of real socialist unity: not ignoring the debates between our groups, but recognising comradeship and ultimately applying the principles of democratic centralism, within a single revolutionary party, to resolve them in the tradition of our movement.

If you feel the same, I would ask you to:

1. Stay in the AWL and fight for principled, socialist unity.
 2. Oppose the withdrawal of the AWL from the SA if it is proposed, unless it is part of a joint strategy with us and others to form something stronger.
 3. Resist the tendency to sectarian polemics which inflate political differences into criteria for abandoning cooperation with your comrades in the CPGB.
 4. Write to *Solidarity*, the *Weekly Worker*, and within our email groups in defence of unity and the workers' party: make yourself heard.
 5. Demand unity with the CPGB, the RDG, and the SA indies behind a campaign for an independent workers' party, and a paper supporting that campaign.
- Workers of the world, unite!
Comradely
Manny Neira

SEXUALITY

SUMMER
OFFENSIVEKick
in the
shins

Clive Power (Letters, June 5) seems to take real exception to my article introducing this year's Summer Offensive, the CPGB's annual fundraising drive (Weekly Worker May 30). Despite my assurances to readers that it is not a "gruesome" ordeal for people, Clive sees it as evidence of the sect practice of "periods of manic activity" that leave burned-out shells of comrades in their wake.

I'm not sure what particular sect chewed Clive up in the past, but it is instructive for our purpose that he cites the example of a "slightly deranged socialist" of his acquaintance in the 1980s who was active (very active, it seems) in the Workers Revolutionary Party.

A good example, Clive. It illustrates my point perfectly. The levels of activity of the old WRP were indeed "manic" - precisely because the perspectives of this nasty little sect were *maniac* perspectives. From the mid-1970s onwards, the WRP decided that there was a revolutionary situation in Britain. Its poor, pulverised dolts of members were kept at fever pitch with talk of imminent military coups, the dark machinations of MI5 in their ranks and a campaign for the TUC to call the general strike - a full-blown assault on power. WRPers slept with their boots on - when they slept at all.

In order to keep these mad ideas intact internally, a regime was required that entailed systematic abuse and intimidation. A member of ours recalls once seeing the leader of the WRP - the nauseating bully, Gerry Healy - publicly kicking some underling who had displeased him.

I don't think even Clive would suggest that our practice is remotely similar. Yes, we do ask for a level of commitment from comrades that compares well with other sections of the left. But its intensity must be linked to societal realities, not to the sect fantasies of madmen.

This week, comrades and friends of the Communist Party have raised £1,495, taking our total up to £2,247 - an excellent figure for this early stage of the campaign. And all without the threat of a military clamp-down or a kick in the shins, comrade Power will be pleased to hear ●

Mark Fischer

Outlawing consent

Commenting on the new Sexual Offences Bill, home office minister Hilary Benn announced that "we need laws for the current century". Under David Blunkett, however, the home office has not exactly been a model of enlightenment. Proposals on all manner of issues have been as draconian as they were under the infamous Tory home secretary, Michael Howard.

The new bill, making steady progress on its way to becoming enshrined in law, is no different. Blunkett has yet again given the home office motto of building a "safe, just and tolerant society" his own inimitable twist. The bill is insidious in its ramifications. If it becomes law it will criminalise huge swathes of sexual activity. Part of the new law will repeal legislation dating back to the Victorian era; however, what is proposed is fully in keeping with the values of official Victorian society.

The moralising and self-righteous reactionary media have been championing the stance the government has taken. Ever willing to declare themselves the defenders of virtue and innocence, the rightwing press has already dedicated countless column-inches to the moral panic over paedophilia. These self-same, self-appointed guardians of decency have heralded the Sexual Offences Bill as the answer to this problem.

With the government being all too willing to pander to the moral minority, the bill certainly metes out harsh punishment to those found guilty of sexually abusing children. A notable change is that all under 13 will be deemed *absolutely* incapable of giving consent to sexual activity (even more so than under-16s, it seems, who of course are deemed not to have attained the 'age of consent' themselves). Consequently any sexual intercourse with anyone under 13 will be classed as rape, with a maximum term of life imprisonment. The legislation also pays particular attention to 'grooming', whereby an adult is committing an offence if they are deemed to be attempting to befriending a child with the intention of luring them into sex.

In announcing these proposals Blunkett declared that the "protection of children and the most vulnerable is a priority for government". Furthermore, it was stated that the issue of consent was at the core of the draft law.

No one would disagree that everyone deserves protection from abuse or exploitation, be that sexual or otherwise. Indeed revolutionary socialists and communists have been the most consistent proponents of such fundamental rights. Equally consent must be the prerequisite for any relationship - again whether that be a sexual relationship or any other. The rights of an individual in determining what happens to their own body should be paramount.

However, the proposed legislation not only fails to adequately protect children and the vulnerable: it also outlaws certain consensual sexual activities. What the legislation does do is allow the government to intrude on people's private lives, make sweeping judgements as to what is acceptable and what is not, and criminalising those who choose to engage in acts it disapproves of. In fact the Sexual Offences Bill denies the freedoms it purportedly exists to protect.

While consent must be freely given, just as important is that such consent be informed; that any person entering into a relationship should understand what it entails. The government, however, has deemed that certain people in our society are incapable of either understanding or consenting - and not just those below a certain age.

For example, the Sexual Offences Bill enshrines in law the 'fact' that people with learning disabilities or mental illness are unable to give consent. As a consequence the sexual partner of someone with a learning disability or mental health issues are having non-consensual sex, and are therefore committing a criminal offence. The government has been quick to protest that this proposal is intended to protect vulnerable adults from sexual exploitation. This is not what the bill says, however. What it does say is that if one partner knows or could "reasonably be expected to know"



Blunkett: Victorian values

that the other has a learning disability or a mental "disorder," and that the other partner lacks "sufficient understanding of the nature ... or consequences", then the former is committing an offence.

Sex and sexuality help define us as individuals. But clearly people with learning disability or mental illness should not be regarded as individuals at all. What the legislation does is tell such people that they are incapable of making a decision about their lives and their bodies. This legislation is crass, misinformed, and frankly what you might have expected in the days of institutions for the mentally 'enfeebled.' Yes, Mr Benn, this is the 21st century. People with learning disability or a mental illness are capable of living independent and fulfilling lives.

Furthermore it is mind-boggling that the two categories are grouped together in so arbitrary a fashion without differentiation. It is estimated that one third of the population will suffer from some form of mental health problem during their lives, mainly depression. Does this then mean that their sexual partners are committing an offence? As for learning disability, again, this covers such a wide spectrum that it is meaningless to pass such a judgement. Dyslexia is a learning disability. Are dyslexics incapable of giving informed consent? Should others be deemed incapable of making up their own minds purely because of the nature of their disability?

What the proposed legislation fails to take into account is that people with learning disability or mental illness are sexual human beings. They have drives and impulses just as much as anyone else. People who have severe learning disability or mental health issues are still equal sexual citizens.

The Sexual Offences Bill, however, denies this by including the offence of incitement. It is an offence for care workers to 'incite' or 'cause' someone in their care to engage in sexual activity. Care workers often play a vital role in educating their clients as to safe and responsible sexual activity, enabling them to go on to have fulfilling and reciprocal sexual relationships. David Congdon, the head of public affairs for the learning disability charity Mencap, warns that the law may lead to care workers being worried about breaking the law, and as a consequence could hamper the task of sexual education.

Thus the bill, with its ambiguous use of language and damning judgement on people's cognitive abilities, could well lead to *increased* vulnerability - care workers need to be able to discuss sex and sexuality openly with their clients in order to enable them to understand the meaning and consequences of their own actions and the actions of others towards them, not just pretend they *have* no sexuality.

This last issue is perhaps the most dangerous inclusion. Not only is it an offence to 'in-

cite' someone to engage in sexual activity if that person has learning disability or mental illness: it also applies if that person is under 16. What does 'incitement' mean? Again government spokespersons have insisted that the law would only apply to those who seek to exploit young people for their own gain. Such assurances do not engender much confidence. Remember Section 28? The homophobic statute enacted by the last Tory administration prevented the "promotion" of homosexuality in school sex education lessons. Consequently teachers were wary of discussing homosexuality for fear that they may be deemed to be promoting it.

Already publishers of 'agony aunt' columns and the advice helpline Childline have raised concerns that this clause may prevent them offering advice to under 16s. There is an exemption allowing for advice to be given about sexually transmitted viruses and contraception, but the government have rejected pleas for an exemption on giving emotional advice.

As sexual beings we know that sex is about far more than getting pregnant or contracting a virus. Sex should be an enjoyable activity between consenting people. This legislation denies that under-16s need to really know about sex. The fact of the matter is that under-16s *do* have sex. Britain has one of the highest incidence rates of teenage pregnancies in Europe and, as announced in a government report this week, infection rates of sexually transmitted viruses amongst teenagers are on the increase.

This would indicate that young people need not only to know more about the purely biological side: they also need to be able to make informed decisions as to whether they are emotionally prepared. They need to be able to understand the significance and meaning of sex. For the government simply to say that underage sex is illegal, and for those under 13 non-consensual, denies the social reality. Young people are sexual beings too. Young people have sex. They need to be able to have frank and open discussions about sex in order to inform their decisions.

If it becomes law the new Sexual Offences Bill will criminalise people for having sex, or for helping to educate others about sex. This bill purports to protect people from abuse and exploitation, but the greatest protection from abuse and exploitation is knowledge. In order to be able to give consent people need to be informed, to be able to make choices. Yet the proposed law denies people who are at risk access to knowledge.

The issue of consent needs to be at the very heart of any legislation governing sexual behaviour. It must take precedence over arbitrary and sweeping judgements about the cognitive capacity or level of maturity of entire sections within society. People mature at different rates; people have different levels of comprehension. What any legislation on sexual behaviour should do is respect this, and respect people's rights to make their own choices. Greater openness about sex should be encouraged, enabling people access to the information that they need to be able to make *informed* decisions.

At present the arbitrary nature of the law as regards consent means that the day before a young person's 16th birthday they are deemed to be too immature for sex, and the following day they are suddenly mature enough. The responsible action to take would be to dispose of arbitrary and sweeping generalisations, such as the age of consent, and judgements about mental faculty, and instead enshrine the right of each individual to be able to choose what happens to their own bodies.

Everyone should be entitled to the right of personal self-determination, and they can be helped to make informed decisions by encouraging a more open and honest attitude towards sex. All people should be able to feel that they are in control of their own bodies and are able to make decisions about what is acceptable to them and what is not. Such an attitude must form the basis upon which vulnerable members of society can be genuinely protected from abuse ●

Jeremy Butler

Target: £25,000

UNISON

Conference issues

On June 9 *The Times* ran the sensationalist front page headline, “Public sector union prepares the ground for general strike”. To further agitate its bulldog-breed readers, the sub-heading warned: “Unison to adopt *French tactics*” (my emphasis).

The substance of the article seems to be mainly based on next week’s Unison conference agenda, which shows definite signs of activist pressure for a more fighting approach. This conference has now acquired a new significance following the addition of the Transport and General Workers Union into the ranks of ‘awkward squad’ unions with the victory of Tony Woodley. Developments in Unison, the country’s biggest union, are a worry to the ruling class because, as *The Times* says, “The upsurge in activity from a union seen as relatively friendly towards the government is certain to be copied by other unions which have recently elected a wave of far-left leaders.”

So what is it exactly that causes such worry?

Firstly, that Unison will create and maintain through regular contributions a substantial permanent strike fund. It is galling enough to the bosses that unions should have the audacity to make financial provision for winning a strike. However, this Unison proposal indicates both an expectation of more actions and a more systematic preparation for them.

Secondly, that Unison will coordinate pay claims (and thus disputes) across different areas of the public sector. This represents, says *The Times*, “continental” tactics to “bypass laws banning secondary action”. This is akin to fighting a man who has his arms and legs tied and complaining if he manages to bite you. Britain has the most repressive anti-union laws in Europe. They are designed to isolate, delay, constrain, prevent and undermine effective union action, whilst leaving almost complete tactical freedom to the employer. Employers are perfectly free to combine against their workers, and of course they as a matter of course utilise the state, its courts and the whole barrage of moneyed media to isolate and attack strikers. On the other hand a

picket exceeding six, a sympathy or ‘unofficial’ strike can all lead to legal action against the relevant union.

The bosses’ restrictive practices have to go - but that will require building up sufficient strength to force a change in the law or render it redundant. Meanwhile, we must be as flexible as possible - finding loopholes and coordinating struggles for maximum effect. Thatcher may have knocked the British working class onto its knees; Blair may have kept them there; but now it is getting up.

The third issue that worries *The Times* is that Unison may establish an additional (third) political fund that could be used to support other parties, including the “far-left Socialist Alliance” - a move that could cause “the biggest upset yet in the unions’ relations with the Labour Party.

This is a very complex issue, but the ruling class are well aware of the vital role the Labour Party (or at least its leadership) has always played on their behalf at vital stages in the class struggle. Losing the hold the Labour Party has been able to exercise over the working class would be a setback for our rulers. Worse would be the rise of a new *independent workers’* party.

But it is not all cut and dried. The conference has not happened yet. There is clearly a flood of motions from activists that seek to push Unison left. It is also easy to discern the various devices in use by the union’s national executive to deflect, water down and constrain this upwards pressure - on the strike fund, for example, the NEC is supporting the lowest contribution rate of one percent and an amendment limiting the fund to £15 million.

There has been a host of resolutions about relations with the Labour Party and democratising the political fund. The NEC is against democratisation. It is also against a third fund,

as supporting non-Labour Party candidates would contravene affiliation rules. This is characterised as disaffiliation through the back door. However, rather than fight this out, the NEC is attempting to constrain debate and avoid votes on controversial motions. Many have been ruled out of order. The NEC is supporting a very tame ‘stay as we are but push for more influence’ motion. As for the others making it on to the agenda on this question, the NEC recommends deferring all such decisions. The NEC is obviously acutely sensitive to a substantial anti-Labour mood.

The branch officials and local activists who are exerting this upwards pressure are obviously tapping into a mood amongst ordinary workers. However, they largely ‘do the business’ out of sight of a still very passive membership. This is the easy road - at present you seem to get further, quicker than if you take the more difficult route of educating and organising the rank and file.

The firefighters’ dispute offers a lesson here. A vicious government counterattack panicked the national leadership, disorientated the rank and file and left activists desperately leaving them to organise defensive positions.

You can see an element of ‘easy-road’ opportunism in the proposals for a huge strike fund. It is so much easier to get workers out on strike if you pay them - but there is nothing so passive as being paid to stay home. The principle of a strike fund is great - especially when so many have mortgages and all sorts of other commitments. But what is missing is a long-term strategy to equip the working class with the organisational and ideological tools they need to *win*.

This can only be achieved in a process of *active struggle* ●

Alan Stevens

... rather than fight this out, the NEC is attempting to constrain debate and avoid votes on controversial motions

STOP THE WAR

Hackney

Real discussion needed

Stop the War Coalition in Hackney held a teach-in on Saturday June 7 to discuss the situation in Iraq and the way forward for the coalition. Unfortunately, but unsurprisingly, there was in fact little discussion on anything at all.

The meeting began with a welcome from a representative of Halkevi, the community centre which hosted the event, run by the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party). Then there were five speakers from the platform, mostly from human rights organisations. The most interesting was Abdul-Hadi Jiad, a long-standing journalist on the BBC Arabic service, who was summarily sacked along with another colleague on February 19, just before the war began.

There was no reason given for the dismissal and it appears to be entirely politically motivated. An Iraqi who fled Saddam’s regime in 1989, Jiad was clearly not trusted to put the official BBC line on Iraq. Therefore he had to be dumped.

He spoke about the ‘embedded’ journalists used to fight the propaganda war - stating that they were a concept developed in the US in 1996. These “weapons of mass deception” meant that the independent media was under threat in all aspects. In fact proportionally more independent journalists - including, most notoriously, those employed by Al Jazeera - were killed in Iraq than in any

previous conflict. The National Union of Journalists is backing Jiad and details of his campaign for reinstatement can be found at www.ujstbbc.co.uk.

Another interesting speaker was Sabah Jawad, secretary of Iraqi Democrats Against the War. He spoke passionately against the invasion, while at the same time condemning the previous regime. He said that secular opposition forces were also growing in strength, with the Iraqi Communist Party undergoing a revival. This is welcome, if accurate - from all we see it appears that religious groups are in the ascendancy in Iraq.

There was only time for a few short interventions from the floor before the break and the second part of the meeting. This was easily the duller part. Instead of directing their remarks to the subject, the speakers spent the majority of their contributions talking about the evils of Bush and Blair. An exception was Mustafa Kandemir, representing the Day-Mer Turkish and Kurdish Centre, who addressed the need for joint-community initiatives to bring together the anti-war forces in Hackney.

Leading Socialist Workers Party member Chris Nineham, speaking on behalf of the steering committee, reminded the meeting several times of how we “came very close to stopping the war”. Blair had been on the verge of resigning and the US would not

have wanted to go it alone. This fantasy is clearly the official line of the SWP, as can be evidenced from a cursory reading of any of their recent publications.

As well as being clearly wrong (Blair was never in danger of losing the vote and the US would certainly have gone on their own in any event), it has the (almost certainly desired) effect of stifling any criticism of the STWC. Two local non-aligned members tried to raise some criticisms of the campaign during the 30 minutes given over to the floor. Heckling, led by the local SWP full-timer, brought their contributions to a halt, with the chair insisting there were too many speakers.

The two were accused of being demoralising. They were jeered. They were treated in the most undemocratic way. No criticism could be allowed. Everything the coalition had done was beyond reproach.

The battle for democracy within the coalition must nevertheless go on. The fact that about a quarter of the meeting was made up of new forces shows the continuing political opposition to Blair on this question. It shows the potential for real political regroupment. Another teach-in will take place later this month on Palestine. Hopefully this will be not be another rally-type event. Real discussion is needed ●

Anne Mc Shane

What we fight for

■ **Our central aim is the organisation of communists, revolutionary socialists, anti-capitalists and all politically advanced workers into a Communist Party. Without organisation the working class is nothing; with the highest form of organisation it is everything.**

■ **The Provisional Central Committee organises members of the Communists Party, but there exists no real Communist Party today. There are many so-called ‘parties’ on the left. In reality they are confessional sects. Members who disagree with the prescribed ‘line’ are expected to gag themselves in public. Either that or face expulsion.**

■ **Communists operate according to the principles of democratic centralism. Through ongoing debate we seek to achieve unity in action and a common world outlook. As long as they support agreed actions, members have the right to speak openly and form temporary or permanent factions.**

■ **Communists oppose the neo-conservative war plans of the Project for the New American Century and all imperialist wars but constantly strive to bring to the fore the fundamental question - ending war is bound up with ending capitalism.**

■ **Communists are internationalists. Everywhere we strive for the closest unity and agreement of working class and progressive parties of all countries. We oppose every manifestation of national sectionalism. It is an internationalist duty to uphold the principle, ‘One state, one party’. To the extent that the European Union becomes a state then that necessitates EU-wide trade unions and a Communist Party of the EU.**

■ **The working class must be organised globally. Without a global Communist Party, a Communist International, the struggle against capital is weakened and lacks coordination.**

■ **Communists have no interest apart from the working class as a whole. They differ only in recognising the importance of Marxism as a guide to practice. That theory is no dogma, but must be constantly added to and enriched.**

■ **Capitalism in its ceaseless search for profit puts the future of humanity at risk. Capitalism is synonymous with war, pollution, exploitation and crisis. As a global system capitalism can only be superseded globally. All forms of nationalist socialism are reactionary and anti-working class.**

■ **The capitalist class will never willingly allow their wealth and power to be taken away by a parliamentary vote. They will resist using every means at their disposal. Communists favour using parliament and winning the biggest possible working class representation. But workers must be readied to make revolution - peacefully if we can, forcibly if we must.**

■ **Communists fight for extreme democracy in all spheres of society. Democracy must be given a social content.**

■ **We will use the most militant methods objective circumstances allow to achieve a federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales, a united, federal Ireland and a United States of Europe.**

■ **Communists favour industrial unions. Bureaucracy and class compromise must be fought and the trade unions transformed into schools for communism.**

■ **Communists are champions of the oppressed. Women’s oppression, combating racism and chauvinism, and the struggle for peace and ecological sustainability are just as much working class questions as pay, trade union rights and demands for high-quality health, housing and education.**

■ **Socialism represents victory in the battle for democracy. It is the rule of the working class. Socialism is either democratic or, as with Stalin’s Soviet Union, it turns into its opposite.**

■ **Socialism is the first stage of the worldwide transition to communism - a system which knows neither wars, exploitation, money, classes, states nor nations. Communism is general freedom and the real beginning of human history.**

■ **All who accept these principles are urged to join the Communist Party.**

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**For a free
and fully
funded NHS**

Democratise the health service

What is the National Health Service *for*? To provide free, prompt and effective healthcare as of right to everyone, whoever they might be, whatever their income.

That, in essence, was what the Attlee Labour government, wretched reformist warts and all, promised in the 1945 election and, with Nye Bevan at the forefront, was forced to try and deliver by the post-war expectations of the working class. It was a real gain to be celebrated. Imagine being able to go to the doctor or call one in without first having to count the shillings, without having to choose between buying food for the family or medical help for your loved ones. To our younger comrades and readers this must sound Dickensian. It was reality for millions of working class people. Some of them are still around. Talk to them.

The birth of the NHS in July 1948 followed a difficult pregnancy. Like the capitalist owners of the coal and railway industries, for example, the medical profession had to be dragged kicking and screaming into nationalisation; again, like the coal and steel bosses, despite or because of all their squeals, they got a bloody good deal, thank you very much - crucially including the right to continue giving private treatment to those privileged patients who had the money to jump the queue.

Against a post-war background of virtual state bankruptcy, continued rationing of many basic commodities and a climate of austerity, balancing supply with demand was a critical problem from the outset. Bevan memorably warned that "we shall never have all we need". Fair enough. Healthcare is definitionally a bottomless vessel. There is always more that can and should be done.

The notion of a contributory scheme - funded by employers and workers alike in the form of national insurance, money specifically set aside by government for this purpose - was appealing. There was supposedly a huge coffer in the treasury devoted entirely to the NHS (and pensions - but that is another story). In reality, national insurance was even then and, of course, remains now, just another tax. Some of the bombs that killed innocent Iraqi civilians just a few weeks ago were doubtless paid for by money you might have thought was going to the NHS.

The rot set in early. By the spring of 1951, the government began the retreat from a free service. Prescription charges and fees for spectacles and dental treatment were introduced. A furious Bevan resigned from the cabinet. The idea of a free NHS had lasted about three years, and succeeding decades would see governments of both major parties wrestling with the problem of how to balance their other commitments with funding



Medical workers will be lured to the private sector

the NHS without 'overtaxing' capital - which brings us to today. The problem remains the same. The supposed solutions vary.

Everyone knows that the state of public services like health and education will play a pivotal role in the outcome of the next election. What are the mainstream parties saying?

Let us start with the Tories' latest brainwave - the 'patient passport', trumpeted by Thatcherite shadow health secretary Liam Fox as the secret weapon that will win the next election for the Conservative Party. The idea is that, having gone to your GP and been referred, when you *finally* get to see a consultant who recommends an operation, you will be given a 'passport' or voucher. Rather than waiting months or years for your surgery, this bit of paper graciously allows you to opt for treatment in the private sector. But the wheeze is that the NHS will pay part of the bill and you will pay the rest, either out of your cash assets or through private medical insurance. NHS waiting lists will shrink as if by magic, 'freeing up resources' for other patients.

After six years in opposition, is this really the best that the Tories could come up with? It is a pathetically transparent attempt to shift public money (yours and mine) into the private sector, to consolidate and extend the existing two-tier system of healthcare, creating very 'healthy' profits and dividends for shareholders.

It is the archetypal Thatcherite case of 'devil take the hindmost': if you do not have the cash or the insurance to exercise your 'passport', then bugger you. It is your own fault. Spending your hard earned money on beer, fags and foreign holidays; being disabled, a single parent, jobless, or just working in a shit job for shit money - your own fault. Whatever your circumstances, the onus was on you to scrimp and save. That

their being debarred from further NHS medical attention.

If the contracts are meant to be legally binding, then how long before David Blunkett's civil servants get on the bandwagon and suggest prison sentences for anyone over 15 stone? After all, building and staffing prisons, contracted out to the private sector, is one of the few growth industries in the British economy right now.

The sheer idiocy of these proposals makes further comment superfluous. It reminds you of another time when Tony took his eye off the ball and listened to some of the more lunatic advisers employed by Labour. Remember the idea of frog-marching drunken louts to cash-points, where they would pay instant fines? Quickly forgotten, thanks to the PR machine.

Visit the NHS website (www.nhs.uk) and you will find a superficially more cogent approach - one not informed by the day to day rantings of febrile policy advisers. But, believe it or not, the NHS has outdone Stalin. Five-year plans? Trivial. On the site we see a 10-year plan of "radical action" to "put patients and people at the heart of the health service". We are promised "more power and information for patients; more hospitals and beds; more doctors and nurses; shorter waiting times" - in fact more of everything. On the basis of what? More rhetoric and more empty promises. Neither this government nor any foreseeable bourgeois administration will deliver on these or any similar promises with regard to healthcare.

Why not? First, the ideological commitment both parties hold - not just to

maintaining, but to extending the private sector. Who is the Tory now, Tony or Iain? The parties vie with each other to produce plans attractive to the parasites who make millions out of the health sector.

Let us be clear. The existence of 'private' healthcare within the NHS is an obscenity. Permit me a brief anecdote. An aged uncle goes to the consultant with a hernia. The consultant says five years. Uncle says, what if I go private? Consultant: that will be £5,000, and how does next Tuesday suit you? Same NHS doctor, same NHS facilities, leased out for a pittance; just the small matter of five grand. The uncle did not have the money. He died anyway of an industrial disease, for which, needless to say, he received no compensation.

As with private education, the very existence of private healthcare means that people, skills and resources are denied to the majority, who must either wait (sometimes indefinitely), settle for second best or both. Inevitably the most talented, best trained medical workers will be lured to the private sector, where the minority who can afford it will benefit from the quality treatment which should be the right of all - not least those who produce the wealth upon which it is based, the working class.

We hear plenty - all of it true - about the bureaucracy, inefficiency and waste, especially the waste, that is endemic in the NHS. Only one thing can change that. Real democratic control by those who work in and benefit from a totally free and fully funded health service ●

Ernie Shenton

Neither this government nor any foreseeable bourgeois administration will deliver on these or any similar promises with regard to healthcare

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