



Ken Livingstone, once Blair's 'disaster for London', back in Labour

- Iranian earthquake
- French headscarves
- British royal honours
- CPB and Respect

No 510

Thursday January 8 2004

Towards a new workers' party

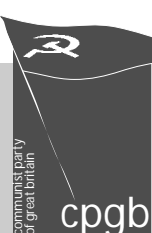
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Howard: 'I believe the people should be big. That the state should be small'



So do we!



PARTYnotes

Big people and the small state

Michael Howard's 15-point "I believe" political credo - run as an advert in *The Times* on January 2 at a cost of £57,000 - is a Saatchi and Saatchi mix of Dr Martin Luther King and Margaret Thatcher. Half bland platitudes, half future threat.

Alike Tory grandees and constituency loyalists are revelling in their party's new-found popularity. The sloth of despair lifts; once again high ambitions stir. A recent Populus survey showed that with the ignominious departure of Iain Duncan Smith and Howard's unopposed coronation the Tories have substantially boosted their ratings: support has risen by two points for the second month running and now stands at 35% - five points behind the Labour Party. Silly predictions - including by leftwing commentators and sages - of the imminent demise of the Conservative Party have proven somewhat premature. It is the Liberal Democrats who have successively lost ground.

Apart from vacuously announcing himself in favour of freedom; of health, wealth and happiness; of equality of opportunity and of good education; and of security for the old, Howard declares: "I believe the people should be big. That the state should be small." This is a sentiment that authentic Marxists would wholeheartedly concur with. In Howard's credo, of course, big people/small state is nothing but a codeword for a full-blooded continuation of the Thatcherite counterreformation. What Howard champions is not the empowerment of the people: rather it is the freedom of capital - freedom from taxation, freedom from responsibility and freedom to exploit and plunder untrammelled.

Yet the fact of the matter is that there exists a systemic mismatch between capital and its state. Capital - as historically the most alienated of human relationships - relies on constant self-expansion, accumulation of profit without limit and production for its own sake. That is why unparalleled wealth exists side by side with grinding poverty, chronic unemployment, endemic overwork and the danger of ecological catastrophe.

Unless individual capitalists - the personification of capital - subordinate themselves to this unique expansionist determination, they will be ruthlessly punished: by loss of market, shareholder revolt and ultimately by being squeezed out of business. Put another way, capitalists do not control capital; they are controlled by capital.

For its part the state stands as the final guarantor against any rebellion - passive or active - by the producers. The state also defends and promotes its capitals against the capitals of other countries. There are few, if any, multinational companies. Despite the claims of Tony Negri and Michael Hardt capital is not stateless. Nor is it just about to become so. Big capitalist firms operate internationally, but inescapably rely on a national base and a corresponding state - they are *transnationals*. Paradoxical though it may appear, the capitalist state must impose definite national restraints. The state acts on behalf of the collective interests of its national capitals. Without measures that curb or ameliorate exploitation and the tendency to monopoly by the particular parts

of the state itself would succumb to rivals, dwindle into impotency and in all probability fall to political revolution.

But capital has definite, innate limits: eg, decline in the rate of profit, overproduction, underconsumption and disproportionality. These limits are again and again overcome ... but only by successively compounding internal contradictions. Capitalism moves to complex forms of decline. The law of value continues, but increasingly relies on organisation. Under these transitional conditions of an increasingly impossible capitalism and an as yet still unobtainable communism, the state machine grows to hypertrophic proportions. Hence the peaceful struggle for markets inexorably becomes a struggle between states. Since 1914 capitalism has survived only through massive state intervention. Supervision of production, quotas, subsidies and caps on profits, government loans and spending on armies and armaments allowed capital to hang on and temporarily put off communism - though at enormous human cost.

Following the horrors of World War II capitalism faced a deeply disenchanted and often militant working class. Neither fascism nor mass unemployment could be used to impose discipline over labour. Indeed - especially in western Europe - capital conceded a kind of social tribute: full employment, council housing, universal secondary education, national health service, pensions and other social security measures. That was the price capital paid to prevent the working class making revolution.

Naturally these negative anticipations of communism were administered in a thoroughly bureaucratic and off-putting fashion. Being compelled to have the same coloured front door as everyone else; cramped, box-like housing; waiting long, agonising months or years for basic medical treatment; the factory-like comprehensive schools; and the humiliations involved in making benefit claims were the direct opposite to socialism and could easily be exploited by the hypocritical Tories. Nevertheless the social tribute extracted from capital represented a substantial gain made by the working class ... and this is what Thatcher and now Howard really mean by the big state.

Howard's Tory Party has no intention whatsoever of attacking or even paring down what we consider to be the big state: the armed forces, the police, MI5, MI6, the civil service, the courts, prisons, state export guarantees, subsidies for capital opening up in so-called development areas, etc. Nor can they reintroduce Adam Smith's blind hand of the market: gas, electricity, telephones, water, trains, etc all operate in pseudo-market conditions and are necessarily overseen by state quangos which fix profits, prices and minimum service requirements.

What of us Marxists? There are those on the left who fondly look back upon the social democratic state. The Socialist Alliance majority often talk as if there was some kind of 1950s and 60s golden age. Others, such as the left Labourites and the *Morning Star's* 'official communists', actually wish to further strengthen the capitalist state as the means to bring about socialism. Capital is either nationalised or negatively abolished. Even when that involves an armed uprising - such as in

China, Vietnam or Cuba - the result is not proletarian socialism, but the dead end of bureaucratic socialism. Bureaucratic socialism - based on the model of Stalin's Soviet Union - proves to be an ectopic social formation, not the blunt instrument which ushers in the communist dawn.

There must necessarily be a dialectical link between means and ends. Communism is stateless and marks the real beginning of generalised human freedom. Such an end cannot possibly be arrived at by way of the strong state. Those who attempt to do so with their patriotic defence of the pound and British sovereignty, alternative economic strategies, immigration and import controls, nationalisations, etc unintentionally work towards not the liberation of the working class - rather a new form of slavery.

Both under capitalism and during the short socialist transitional period Marxists genuinely stand for the big people/small state principle. Via mass political struggle we aim to progressively disempower the capitalist state to the point where it can easily - if possible peacefully - be overthrown and replaced by the empowered people. Organs of working class struggle thereby become organs of the working class semi-state. In short, extreme democracy is the state form of the rule of the working class - the overwhelming majority of the population.

Therefore our immediate, minimum, programme - the programme we advocate under the socio-economic conditions of capitalism - envisages replacing the standing armed forces, the police included, with a people's militia. Revealingly the Socialist Workers Party employed its full voting weight to ensure that this elementary democratic demand was kept out of the SA's *People before profit*. Evidently John Rees and co are fiery revolutionaries in the pages of *Socialist Worker*, but timid reformists when they stand in elections.

Indeed in all spheres of life we communists outline a programme of democratisation and active involvement, whereby the people - specifically the working class - exert an ever increasing degree of control. That is the social content we give to our demand for the present-day United Kingdom monarchy system to be abolished and replaced by a federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales.

Everywhere - workplaces, local communities, schools, universities, trade unions, national administration, foreign affairs - communists fight for the maximisation of democracy. Hence, while we are committed to removing the commanding heights of the economy away from the clutches of capital, our main emphasis - before and after the overthrow of the existing state - lies in realising workers' control. The aim of our programme in this respect being the full socialisation of production.

That necessarily demands internationalism. National socialism is the road to certain ruin. Because capital operates globally, it can only be superseded through a global revolution. So, while the fight begins on the national terrain, it must be completed through the ever closer cooperation and coordination of the workers of all countries ●

Jack Conrad

LETTERS



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

Win back Labour

It was refreshing to get a thorough-going political response from Nick Rogers, although I must point out that I did not accuse Hugh Kerr of lying, but of reporting inaccuracies by claiming that John McAllion was going to join the Scottish Socialist Party (Letters, December 11).

Nick's more substantial points are central to the debate about the future of the left in Scotland and Britain. He is quite right to say that being on the left in New Labour does mean dealing with constraints, but to a large extent the effectiveness of those constraints depends on the success or otherwise of building opposition to the neoliberal leadership.

Personally I have never felt the need to rein in anything that I have said or written or campaigned for. And in that context I should point out to Nick that members of the Campaign for Socialism were heavily involved in the anti-stock transfer campaign. That includes prominent councillors like Jim MacKechnie and Aileen Colleran, as well as Elaine Smith MSP and the Scottish TUC coordinator of the campaign, Mike McNichol, in addition to constituency and community activists like Dave Moxham and John Craig. Similarly, members like Rozanne Foyer and Robina Qureshi have made significant contributions to the asylum campaign.

I applaud the SSP's work on warrant sales, but I think Nick will acknowledge that without the support of a significant number of Labour MSPs that advance would not have taken place and that the SSP is still not in a position to take progressive legislation to a successful conclusion under its own steam, nor will be for some time.

At the centre of the argument between the SSP and the CFS is really whether it is possible to reclaim the Labour Party for a radical politics. Ultimately there are only two options if you reject seeking to win back the Labour Party as it is: you can seek to reinvent the Labour-trade union alliance with no credible argument as to how it is likely to be more successful than first time round, or you can seek to take socialist ideas directly to the working class.

The early socialists did not form the Labour Party for nothing. They were only too well aware, as we ought to be, of the difficulties in challenging a culture saturated with centuries of imperialism, racism, commercialism and individualism. It takes a very powerful social movement indeed to shake that. And if, as Nick is arguing, that it is possible to build such a movement with all the difficulties that entails, why does he think the comparatively more simple task of winning back the Labour Party is impossible?

Vince Mills
email

Work through unions

So comrade Dougie Kinnear's answer to fighting for socialism seems to be the passing of resolutions (Letters, December 18).

You suggest comrade McLean should go to his next Labour Party ward meeting and do this. I'm afraid you don't really answer any of his points and completely forget the nature of the Labour Party. Labour is a party based on the trade unions. This is a fact, whether we like it or not. It is

dominated by a rightwing, pro-capitalist clique carrying on the work of the pre-1997 Tories. While as a trade unionist I welcome some of the reforms, I take the line that it is clearly not enough. I feel the correct method is to work through the trade unions to challenge Blairism.

The union branch can use its affiliation and delegation rights. It is far easier to do this than setting up separate socialist parties every other year and getting low votes against the Labour Party election machine. In Scotland the SSP is an alternative, at the moment, but on the whole many workers tend to steer clear of electoral politics - thus the low turnouts at council and general elections. The recent shifts in the leaderships of the various unions leftwards mark an important development to seriously work amongst the class on the shop floor, instead of folding leaflets for the next election that comes along.

Good luck with your venture with the SSP. But I am going to stick with putting pressure on the Labour Party through my union delegation, and building on the modest victories we got at last year's Labour conference. At the same time I will be fighting to raise political awareness amongst my fellow workers, many young and new to trade unionism, in my branch.

Ian Woodland
TGWU

CPGB tails SWP

At the CPGB aggregate on December 7, the leadership decision to join the Socialist Workers Party's Respect coalition was retrospectively rubber-stamped.

Marcus Ström encouraged the members to have trust in wishful thinking. He argued that the Respect coalition represented the success of the anti-war movement - unlike the Socialist Labour Party, which was a product of defeat. But, as Peter Manson observed in the *Weekly Worker* (October 16), it was the political failure of the SWP to recruit during the anti-war movement that compelled it to attempt to reproduce the movement on the electoral stage. Respect, like the 'Peace and Justice' initiative that preceded it, was a result of political failure: that is, the failure of the SWP to promote the Socialist Alliance and a socialist programme.

This failure was illustrated by the defeat of SA candidate Brian Butterworth in Brent East, as the votes went to the party of Charles Kennedy. The latter had, of course, been given a platform by the SWP during the great demo on February 15.

The Respect coalition expresses the lack of confidence of the SWP in socialism from below. It is moving in an opposite direction to what the class needs - a mass workers' party. At least, Scargill had put a party and a programme as the solution to the crisis of working class representation. In this he was correct. It was in his bureaucratic, top-down and anti-democratic methods that he destroyed the prospects of the Socialist Labour Party becoming such a party.

In contrast, it has been a precondition laid down by the self-appointed committee of Respect that it will not be a party. The SWP leaders think they are already the party. Galloway hopes to return to the Labour Party in the manner of Ken Livingstone. And Monbiot and Yaqoob are not in favour of working class parties. This is no surprise, as they are not working class politicians. Galloway is clearly the anointed leader of Respect, but, unlike Scargill, he is a maverick without a labour movement following. Galloway's support for Saddam Hussein was not shared by the millions march-

ing against the war. As Kit Robinson pointed out in the *Weekly Worker* (July 3), Galloway was in a bloc with reactionary, repressive Arab governments - hardly a fact to inspire the anti-war millions.

Respect, as another SWP ‘united front of a special kind’, is not likely to make an electoral impact. In Jack Conrad’s words, “People vote for parties which, over a sustained period of time, have established a known presence and record of activity and stand on a fully rounded, testable programme” (*Weekly Worker* November 27). Yet, Jack, in the same piece, dismisses programme in relation to Respect as a sterile precondition.

Galloway’s precondition for the coalition is anti-European politics, as expressed in the European clause in the draft declaration of the Respect committee, which Jack Conrad admits plays into the hands of the anti-European xenophobic right wing (*Weekly Worker* December 11). The SWP hand-raisers will, of course, vote for the acceptance of this clause, despite Conrad’s wishful thinking that this anti-European position can be changed.

At the CPGB aggregate, the wishful thinking was taken to absurd lengths by Ian Donovan, who argued that a refusal to join Respect would be to make the same mistake as the Social Democratic Federation when they left the Labour Party during its formation. The comparison reflects a determination by the CPGB leadership to paint Respect in working class colours. The Labour Party was formed by trade union leaders in the TUC. They were the bureaucratic representatives of millions of organised workers. It was a step towards the political independence of the working class. Donovan’s lack of political proportion is symptomatic of the uncertainty of the CPGB’s approach to the coalition.

The oft used phrase about “critically engaging the coalition” is a smokescreen to cover their joining Respect. You don’t have to join it to critically engage. Marcus explains what the phrase means: “It does not commit the alliance to the coalition. What it does commit us to is a fight within the coalition for it to adopt a working class and socialist platform” (*Weekly Worker* November 27). But being within the coalition is joining Respect without democratic party mechanisms to change the ‘draft declaration’.

However, to return to Conrad’s point about programme as precondition being sterile, gesture politics. For Conrad, it’s “life” that counts. Life has spontaneously presented us with the Respect coalition to participate in. What a travesty of Leninism this is! This approach has more in common with the old Stalinist CPGB’s attitude to programme during the popular front period. Then, programme was placed on one side in favour of opportunist electoral pacts.

To the contrary, the working class has learned political lessons, usually the hard way, and these lessons have been retained in the collective memory of the class - hence parties and programmes.

There is a consistency in this. *Weekly Worker* readers will recall that, in 2000, Jack Conrad dismissed as doctrinaire those comrades who argued that support for Ken Livingstone for mayor of London should be conditional upon him standing on a socialist or a democratic programme. The CPGB voted for Livingstone, who had openly proclaimed his intention to form a cross-class coalition administration, including Liberals and Tories, which he did. As with the Respect coalition, the support for Livingstone was based on the fantasy that Livingstone, like Galloway now, could become leader of a mass workers’ party.

But Livingstone did not have the

politics or programme to forge an alternative to the Labour Party. He was a celebrity politician, a maverick like Galloway - albeit one who was and is massively more popular than Galloway. To follow Galloway will lead to the same political dead end as following Livingstone.

Of course, the CPGB is not so much following Galloway as following the SWP leadership. Behind the sound and fury of the polemics of the CPGB leadership is the fear of being cut off from Rees and Hoveman and friends. The CPGB leaders have lost the confidence in carving out a socialist future on the basis of party and programme.

Barry Biddulph (chair)
John Pearson (secretary)
Stockport Socialist Alliance

Respect for IWCA

Does anybody seriously believe that Respect, this wet-lettuce coalition of middle class lefties, can win over the hearts and minds of working class people?

I’m sure many Trots are almost orgasmic at the prospect of flogging more newspapers and recruiting people to a new organisation, but it just goes to show how out of touch they are with the class. We don’t need celebrities and over-sized egos, like Mr Galloway, peddling their fast-track path to salvation at us. We need a working class organisation that can encourage self-awareness, confidence and solidarity within the class.

After much deliberation, I’ve decided to join the Independent Working Class Association, who seem much more realistically placed to further the interests of my class. They won’t satisfy the needs of the Marxist intellectuals and armchair ideologues, but they’ll certainly please those who want to make a difference to the lives and consciousness of people in working class communities.

Mick O’Conaill
email

Trust Galloway

In spite of your blunders and dim-wittedness, I thank you for the Galloway interview (*Weekly Worker* December 4).

However, comparing George Galloway to Father Gapon is intellectually dim. Father Gapon was barely political - more humanitarian. Fine. But George Galloway, although undoubtedly a sincere humanitarian, is someone from a working class background with an uncompromising anti-imperialist and socialist outlook.

George Galloway is different from Arthur Scargill in that Arthur lacked the intellectual quality necessary for a proto-Marxist organisation. Arthur was too busy being leader of the National Union of Mineworkers to find time to do all that intellectually demanding and time-consuming Marxist stuff. Had Arthur acquired a thorough grounding of Leninism, I am sure things would have turned out differently.

Arthur was influenced by the Communist Party. Unfortunately, those people didn’t bother teaching the classics to their people. There are many ex-CPers who haven’t even read the *Communist manifesto*.

George Galloway has proven that not only can he help build and influence a movement, but that he has the intellectual and political tools to take on British imperialism. That is definitely a huge asset for our class, and for the worldwide anti-imperialist movement. That is why *The Daily Telegraph* and New Labour were so desperate to undermine the credibility of Mr Galloway. Thankfully, he has seen off that challenge with a healthy gusto.

The GG phenomenon hasn’t happened in a long time. Working class

leaders of this nation traditionally looked to the Soviet Union to do their thinking for them, or at least allow themselves to be heavily influenced by Soviet policies.

I can trust Mr Galloway not to make a major or even minor blunder in the struggles against all sections of our ruling class. The weakness of leadership, that has so often dogged the proletarian movement of this country, seems to be in the process of being rectified.

Father Gapon could never deliver a successful revolution. Mr Galloway, given the opportunity, will make sure that we don’t mess up our chances.

Lila Patel
email

Hangover

In reviewing the website of the Campaign for Real Ale, Phil Hamilton suggests that the concept of a Camra youth section might be a “hangover” from organiser Roger Protz’s days in the SWP (‘Political small beer’, December 18).

While it is true that Roger was the editor of *Socialist Worker* in the late 60s and early 70s, to my knowledge the SWP has always been opposed to youth sections, women’s sections, black sections or any other minorities getting together. After all they may develop policies which clash with those of the central committee, and that would never do in the SWP!

A more likely explanation of any hangover (an unfortunate term with regard to Camra, but perhaps apt with regard to left groups!) is Roger Protz’s experience in the Healyite Socialist Labour League in the early 1960s, when he was editor of *Keep Left*, the highly successful youth paper of the SLL in the Labour Party Young Socialists. The SLL attracted a following amongst working class youth by organising weekly discos in council housing estates. In 1964 *Keep Left* and the SLL were expelled from the Labour Party and set off on a sectarian trajectory, which included them refusing to march on the mass anti-Vietnam war demos of 1967 and 1968. This lost them a large proportion of their membership and support.

At that point Tony Cliff made a conscious effort to recruit ex-members of *Keep Left* and the SLL in order, as he put it, to “harden up” his own organisation, the International Socialists/SWP. He promised openness, democracy and faction rights. This veneer of liberalism lasted about three years before bureaucratic methods and witch-hunting became the norm. Many comrades left or were expelled

from the IS/SWP, Roger Protz being one of them.

Phil Hamilton calls Camra “political small beer”, but I am sure Roger Protz would argue that his time has been spent more productively in organising Camra than in slogging it out for 40 years on the left. If Phil claims that socialist politics are ‘big beer’, then I’m sure that prosecutions in the bourgeois courts are due on the grounds of both quantity and quality.

I mention all this not because of nostalgia but because history has a habit of repeating itself. This month with Respect we are once again promised openness and democratic rights. Comrades will no doubt remember similar feelings of warmth and optimism with the start of the Socialist Alliance and with Arthur Scargill’s SLP, as many of us did with Tony Cliff in 1968. The lessons are - get involved certainly, but get organised on the basis of openness and democracy, because these are key requirements in a workers’ party. We must not take them for granted or assume the leadership mean what they say.

I notice from your report that the SA Democracy Platform stresses these two issues in its programmatic document. For me the platform needs to go further: to draw up democratic demands for the working class internationally, on the national state, within workplaces and trade unions and within our own socialist organisations. Democracy is not an optional extra or a bolt-on policy, but the oxygen by which the working class become involved and leaders are made accountable.

In such a democratic movement, a capable organiser like Roger Protz might find a role.

Dave Spencer
Coventry

Do us a favour

“Camra could well achieve its limited objectives, but this consumerist strategy has little to offer socialist politics”.

Well thank god that Phil Hamilton took the time to go online and write this article! Imagine if socialists had gone to Camra’s website and thought that they could find all the answers there - anarchy would prevail on the left, as beards, pipes and ale took over from meaningful campaigns for the betterment of the working class.

Do us a favour, Phil - you’ve clearly run out of ‘left’ websites to review, so drop the reviews of meaningless sites and do some real work.

Hutch Hampton
email

Good wishes

An Afghani and an Algerian asylum-seeker escaped from Haslar removal/detention centre at 2.30am on Wednesday December 31. The National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns would just like to wish the escapees well. May they find health, wealth and happiness in the United Kingdom and may the dark forces of the immigration and nationality department never cross their paths.

We should add the same good wishes for all those in the UK and the rest of the world without status, whether economic or political refugees. May 2004 bring you that little piece of paper that allows you and your family to reside in whichever country you have decided to make your home.

John O
NCADC

Corrections

It was a surprise to see that my rather rambling thoughts at Communist University 2003 merited being reproduced in the *Weekly Worker*, but I am happy that you felt they were worth wider circulation and hope they provoke thought and discussion (‘Radical christianity and social resistance’, December 18).

Just a couple of things in response. Firstly, I have long ago given up on the Socialist Alliance and have not been a paid up member for nearly a year. Secondly, to correct a major typo, I did not say that Galilee was the centre of political and religious power, but Judea and Jerusalem in particular, I think that is obvious in what I say elsewhere in the talk.

Ray Gaston
Leeds

Al Richardson

I was taught by Mr Richardson in the 80s at Forest Hill Boys School and am very sad to hear of his passing.

He was an inspirational and passionate teacher, of the type that we need more of in these troubled days. He taught his pupils that not taking what you are told at face value and that to question those in positions of power was your duty as a member of society - and he did this without enforcing his own beliefs on our young minds.

He left a big impression on this pupil and I’m sure many others.

My condolences go out to his partner and his family.

Mathew Alden
email

Join the Respect Unity Coalition Support the ‘Convention of the Left’

The **Respect Unity Coalition** will be hosting a **Convention of the Left**
at **Friends Meeting House, Euston Road, London**
on **Sunday January 25, 10am**
Nearest tubes are: **Euston, Euston Square**

To attend the convention, or join the coalition, fill in this slip and send it to:

National Convention
10 Woburn Walk
London WC1H 0JL

Include £10 registration fee if attending the convention, £10 if joining the coalition, or £20 if doing both, made out to **Unity Political Fund.**

- ☐ I shall be attending the convention on January 25.
☐ I wish to join the Respect Unity Coalition.

Name_____

Address_____

Town/city_____

Postcode_____Phone_____

Email_____

Health Emergency -
www.healthemergency.org.uk

Antidote to Blairite lies and deceit

The issue of health is one of those battlegrounds that Blair could easily become unstuck over in the next few years. Even though the widely discredited private finance initiative has rightly been seen as yet another way for capital to make the NHS into more of a cash cow, you will not find any mention of this on Labour's website.

For example, its online propaganda for NHS foundation trusts misleadingly emphasises decentralisation and community accountability. Likewise, another health page presents a slew of statistics which may lead the unwary to think hospitals are hunky dory under Labour. However, like Stalin's five-year plans, these serve to conceal more than they reveal.

The website of the London Health Emergency pressure group is the ideal antidote for the headache of Labour's deceit. Its home page is divided into eight sections. The first is a short guide to the organisation, such as giving the number of affiliates, and introducing its quarterly paper *Health Emergency*. The latest issue (autumn 2003) of the 12-page journal is downloadable in pdf, but is well worth the wait. Passionately advocating the NHS being free at the point of need, it is an excellent guide to the threats posed by Blairite 'modernisation'. This is followed by links to subjects further down the page.

The next section, 'For all health unions', is for publicising a pamphlet on a struggle by workers at Carlisle Cumberland Infirmary. Not only was Unison's court action successful in overturning decades of institutionalised sexism, but has major implications for the pay of all public sector staff. This is followed by another leaflet, replying to Labour's "bold vision" for NHS trusts. Finally a piece titled 'Under pressure' surveys the problems and issues facing the new strategic health authority in south-west London.

'Union branch newspapers' offers a selection of tabloids designed for affiliated branches of unions. At the moment only 13 papers are available, including Peterborough Unison's *Public Eye* and the *Cardiff and Vale Informer*, but Health Emergency does offer assistance to those members wishing to set up local bulletins.

'Research work' outlines the type of studies LHE performs and for whom (councils, union bodies, some NHS trusts). Samples from recent research can be downloaded, but unfortunately material stretching back to its 1983 foundation has yet to be added to the archive pages, which are currently undergoing construction. The media release page carries a few press statements from the last five or so years, but from the evidence presented here it does not appear to be the most active press department in the labour movement.

The next three sections are policy-focused and set out where LHE stands. The first, 'Battle over policy', cites a number of detailed critiques produced in the struggle for "adequate, local and accessible hospital services". 'Challenging the fraud of community care' looks at the impact of creeping privatisation on the care of the old and mentally ill. The points touched on here are deepened by the dedicated piece on privatisation, which sketches out the path the NHS has taken from the initial Tory attacks in the 80s to today's PFI and public-private partnerships. Concluding this policy area is a Unison pamphlet by the LHE's John Lister. The PFI experience interviews staff in nine PFI hospitals across the country, and is available to download.

Returning to the top of the page, the navigation bar begins with 'Latest updates' - a selection of leaflets, releases and documents going back to March. I was interested in the '20th anniversary meeting' link, but was greeted by a flyer instead of a report. The profile page entitled 'LHE 2002: a potted history' is what it is: a general overview of its activities since its foundation. The 'Join us' page outlines subscription rates for individuals and groups, and costs for bulk orders of *Health Emergency*. A big selling point is that these rates have not been changed since 1984! The 'Other publications' page is another under construction. The links page is quite interesting, divided up into a number of themes such as 'The other side' (official health websites), 'The labour movement' and a variety of other health campaigning links.

Health Emergency does offer a good, independent resource for activists, but could do with a few tweaks. A secure online donation facility could bring in extra resources, a more complete archive could help activists map the health struggles over the last 20 years, and perhaps a moderated on-topic forum could enhance the site's worth by facilitating contact between those engaged in this area. All socialists should take a look ●

Phil Hamilton

around
THEWEB

Healthcare and moral hysteria

New Labour is proposing to charge failed asylum-seekers for healthcare. There is more to this move than budget trimming, argues **Jem Jones**

Proposed legislation to charge non-UK residents for healthcare is undoubtedly part of the government's ongoing drive to scapegoat asylum-seekers. Within the next few weeks the health minister, John Hutton, will unveil new plans, under which 'aliens' - not least people whose application for asylum has been rejected - will be issued with a demand to pay up front for any treatment they receive from the national health service.

The proposals are likely to be in place by April 2004. It is clear that, as a result, the well-being of tens of thousands of people will be exposed to unnecessary risks. In addition to those directly threatened by the proposals, the fact that immunisation against communicable diseases will be similarly priced out of reach could well result in an increased health risk to the population as a whole. The net result is yet another dangerous and inhuman assault on the liberties of a victimised section of society.

The proposals, drawn up jointly by the department of health and the home office, claim to serve two purposes. The publicised intent is to reduce costs to the NHS. No reliable information exists as to how much money is spent on medical treatment for asylum-seekers; the government claims that the bill is £200 million a year, although healthcare providers dispute this figure. In any case, this is hardly a monumental amount for the NHS, whose annual budget is £42 billion. So £200 million would represent less than 0.5% of the total, or the equivalent of £3.33 per member of the population each year (as opposed to £700 per capita for the NHS as a whole).

Clearly then, the proposals have very little to do with saving money. Their purpose, first and foremost, is to feed the illusion that asylum-seek-

ers are largely made up of scroungers aiming to take us all for a ride. Therefore we British must forget the divisions of class and unite in opposition to these unscrupulous fraudsters who fully deserve to be treated like social pariahs and denied basic human rights. There is a moral hysteria - enthusiastically engendered by the rightwing press - gripping the tiny minds of the national chauvinist sections of society, trying to persuade us that the country and its national identity are in danger of being overwhelmed by foreign hordes.

These draconian proposals have been met with applause from reactionary politicians of all parties, and the only serious objections within parliament emanate from a minority of Labour backbenchers. The Conservatives have long used asylum-seekers as their favourite punch bag, while the opportunistic Liberal Democrats are unlikely to do more than bleat their 'concern' that more deserving cases might accidentally be caught in the net. However, human rights organisations like Amnesty International and the National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns are already voicing their opposition. Healthcare providers have also criticised the proposals.

In order to placate those of us who think that healthcare is a right, not a privilege, the government has thrown a few crumbs. People who have applied for asylum can still receive free medical care while their claims are being processed. Those who have started treatment while their application is being dealt with will be allowed to complete the course. The 90% of applicants who are refused asylum, some of whom on mere technicalities, will still be eligible for casualty and urgent psychiatric treatment while awaiting appeal or deportation. In all other cases, even in an emergency, peo-

ple will be forced to pay for medical treatment or go without. It is apparent that, except in the most unlikely of circumstances, asylum-seekers who require health treatment will be presented (in advance) with a bill that they have no way of paying for.

Asylum-seekers are already treated as inferior beings, considered unworthy of basic rights. An adult currently receives £37.77 a week in state welfare payments - just 70% of even the pittance that a UK citizen is entitled to - and is prevented from working. In addition the government is currently fighting a legal battle, which, if successful, will deny even this paltry sum to the 50% of asylum-seekers who apply once they are in the country.

This year will also see the government's Immigration and Asylum Bill 2004 become law. The bill, which has just received its second reading in the House of Commons, will, amongst other things, withdraw benefits from people whose applica-

“When people voice concerns about the state of the health service, the government does not have to accept any responsibility: it is all down to those unscrupulous asylum-seekers.”

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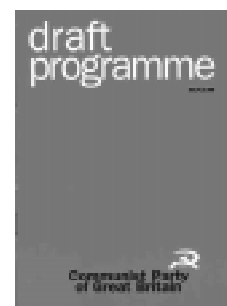
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Blunkett: adopting the policies of the far right

tion has been refused, and proposes the introduction of identity cards and electronic tagging of asylum-seekers. These proposals are merely the latest in the government's series of concerted attacks on civil liberties, ostensibly aimed at specific minorities, but in reality hitting at the rights of all.

Home secretary David Blunkett has played a prominent role in all this. In a confused and contradictory article in *The Observer* he attempted to defend the government's policies by highlighting the dangers of racism (December 14). Modest man that he is, however, he does not accept any responsibility for increasing ethnic identification and tension. Rather, he obliquely refers to a sense of injustice felt by working class families. The danger, he asserts, is that if New Labour is complacent about such dissatisfaction, then it could open the door to the right or even the far right. Fortunately, Blunkett has the answer. By adopting the policies of the far right, no one will have any reason to vote for them.

The government's official anti-racism is used as a cover for the consistent victimisation of new migrants, in particular asylum-seekers. Existing citizens, of whatever ethnicity or country of origin, are urged to stand together against the outsider. Using migrants as a scapegoat thus performs a valuable service. When people voice concerns about the state of the education system or the health service, or any other public

institution, the government does not have to accept any responsibility: it is all down to those unscrupulous asylum-seekers. Blunkett's anti-racism is of the divisive, national chauvinist variety.

We communists take a very different stand. Leaving aside the obvious lie about the United Kingdom being 'swamped', it is a key point of communist principle to defend the right of people to live and work wherever they want, in any country of the world. If capital and its products can move freely across borders, then labour must enjoy the same right.

The proposed new legislation not only further victimises asylum-seekers: it puts at risk their health and even their lives. Already they receive inadequate standards of healthcare. Not just because of conditions in their country of origin or the often harrowing journey to the UK, but also because of the substandard living conditions and diet made available to them once they have arrived here.

Free and promptly delivered healthcare is a universal right that could easily be provided today in every advanced capitalist country, including Britain. It should not be luxury or a privilege granted only to a select few. To remove access to such a necessity is an assault on the rights and dignity of asylum-seekers, and is likely to foretell further attacks on the rights and dignity of us all ●

Jem Jones

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ACTION

London Communist Forum

Sunday January 11, 5pm - 'Capital's logic of consumption and destruction', using István Mészáros's *The power of ideology* as a study guide.

Diorama Arts Centre, 34 Osnaburgh Street, London NW1 (nearest tube: Regents Park, Great Portland Street).

Sunday January 18, 6pm. Debate: 'Should socialists support the ban of the hijab?'. Speakers: Peter Manson (editor *Weekly Worker*), Houzan Mahmoud (Communist Worker Party of Iraq), Terry Liddle (Socialist Secular Society, personal capacity).

Diorama Arts Centre, Skylight Studio, 34 Osnaburgh Street, London NW1

(nearest tube: Regents Park, Great Portland Street).

Politics in crisis

Public meeting: 'What can the green left do?' Saturday January 10, 3pm, St Giles Centre (opposite St Giles church), Camberwell Church Street, London SE5 (buses: 436, 171, 12). Speakers from Alliance for Green Socialism, Green Party, Socialist Alliance Democracy Platform.

Organised by South London AGS: 020 8850 4187.

Remember John Sullivan

Memorial meeting, Saturday January 17, 2.30pm, Brockway room, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1.

John Sullivan, 1932-2003: socialist and scholar.

British politics at the crossroads

Cardiff: Tuesday January 20, 7.30pm, Shandon Lecture theatre, main building, Cardiff University, Park Place (opposite student union). Speakers include George Galloway, John Rees (Socialist Alliance).

Southall: Dominion Centre, Sunday February 8, 4pm (open planning meeting: Monday January 12, 7pm, upstairs in Drayton Court Hotel, The Avenue, West Ealing).

Support Iraq workers

Public meeting, Wednesday January 21, 7.30pm, Friends Meeting House, Manchester. 0161-882 0188.

Called by Iraq Solidarity Campaign.

Bread and Roses

Film showing, followed by question and answer session with Ken Loach, 6.30pm, Thursday January 22, the Other Cinema, 11 Rupert Street, Soho, London W1. Tickets: £8 from cinema; 020 7734 1506 (1pm to 9pm); www.picturehouses.co.uk

Organised by No Sweat and CAT (Mexican sweatshop workers' organisation).

Convention of the Left

Sunday January 25, 10am, Friends Meeting House, Euston Road, London (nearest tube: Euston, Euston Square). Send £10 registration, plus £10 to join new coalition, payable to 'Unity Political Fund', to National Convention, 10 Woburn Walk, London WC1H 0JL. Give name, address, phone, email and details of union membership. nationalconvention2004@yahoo.co.uk

Stop migrant detention

Protest outside parliament, Friday January 30, 11am, St Stephens Gate. Release all detainees. For an unconditional 'Blunkett amnesty' for all asylum-seekers and migrants without status.

Organised by Save Our Souls Immigration Discrimination (Sosisd) in support of European-wide day of action against detention and for migrant rights called by European Social Forum.

Sosid: 07949 282445; dikeka@onetel.com

Stop the BNP

Open discussion meeting to develop a strategy to counter anti-working class politics of BNP. Open University Conference Centre, 344-354 Grays Inn Road (next to Lloyds bank), Kings Cross, London, Thursday February 5, 7pm. Speakers include Mark Metcalf (Revolutions Per Minute). Organised by London Corresponding Committee, BCM 3514, London WC1N 3XX.

Peace, not war

Musical festival, Thursday February 12 to Sunday February 15 2004, to mark anniversary of 2003 global anti-war protests. The Hackney Ocean, Mare Street, London E8 (opposite Hackney town hall). Two stages, visuals, films and workshops. Dozens of top performers confirmed.

Thursday February 12: rock, punk, indie; Friday February 13: hip hop, r and b, reggae; Saturday February 14: dance; Sunday February 15: acoustic, folk, jazz. £17.50 per night, plus booking fee. All proceeds to peace campaigns. Wheelchair access. Peace Not War, PO Box 44212, London E3 4WB; 020 7515 4702; <http://www.peace-not-war.org>

Stop The War Coalition

Annual conference, Saturday February 28, 10am (registration from 9am), Camden Centre, London (opposite Kings Cross station).

Up to four delegates from each local group, two from affiliates. National individual members may attend as observers. Register with STWC office no later than Saturday February 14. £10 per delegate/observer.

CPGB exhibition

The story of the Communist Party of Great Britain from the People's History Museum. Open now; ends Sunday April 25 2004. Tuesday-Sunday, 11am to 4.30pm, the Pump House, 1 Bridge Street, Manchester M3. Entrance: £1; children and concessions: free. First Friday of the month: 'Bluffer's guide to CPGB' tour.

0161-839 6061; karenm@peopleshistorymuseum.org.uk

No more WMD

London to Aldermaston march, Easter 2004. Starts with rally, Trafalgar Square, Friday April 9; march via Southall, Slough and Reading; ends bank holiday Monday, April 12 with demonstration at Aldermaston atomic weapons establishment, Berkshire.

Aldermaston 2004, c/o AWPC, 18 Greenway Road, Bristol BS6 6SG; www.aldermaston2004.net; info@aldermaston2004.net

Called by Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Aldermaston Women's Peace Camp and other local groups.

RDG

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

Socialist Alliance

Creative House, 82-90 Queensland Road, London N7 7AS; 020-7609 2999; office@socialistalliance.net

Democracy Platform

Open committee meeting, Saturday January 10, 11.30am to 4pm, United Services Club, Gough Street, Birmingham.

SA and Respect

Discussion open to SA members in West Midlands area, Wednesday January 14, 7.30pm, Carrs Lane Church Centre (lower foyer). Five minutes from New Street station. Speaker: Alan Thornett.

National council

Saturday January 17, 12 noon to 5pm, Friends Meeting House, Euston, London. Deadline for motions: 12 noon, Wednesday January 14. Each SA can send two delegates: one woman, one man. Pooled fare: £2 per delegate.

Convention of the Trade Union Left

Saturday February 7 2004, 11am to 5pm (registration from 10am), Friends Meeting House, Euston, London (nearest tubes: Euston, Euston Road). Union sponsors include: London region Unison; London region FBU; London Transport region RMT; London region GMB; Essex committee FBU; Cambridge and District Trade Union Council; Natfhe Western Region; Yorkshire and District Natfhe. Speakers include Bob Crow, general secretary RMT; Mark Serwotka, general secretary PCSU; Paul Mackney, general secretary Natfhe.

Organised by Socialist Alliance, tu-convention@yahoo.co.uk

National conference

Saturday March 13, London. details to be announced.

Building a socialist alternative

SA pamphlet by Alan Thornett, £2 each; discounts for bulk orders.

www.cpgb.org.uk/action

SOCIALIST ALLIANCE

Keep quiet about the 's' word

The Socialist Alliance executive has reneged on the decision taken in December to engage with the Respect Unity Coalition on the basis of fighting "for it to adopt a working class and socialist platform".

At its January 3 meeting the executive passed a motion which sees the draft declaration of the Unity Convention as a "good basis for the public launch of Respect". In deciding against moving any amendments which would place it on a firm socialist and working class footing, the NEC is acting not only against the decision taken at the December executive, but in contravention of the resolution on left unity agreed at the annual conference last May.

Our conference decision states that any new organisation the Socialist Alliance enters and supports will be "open, inclusive, democratic and, of course, socialist". Alan Thornett, the author of that resolution, has repeated this formula many times since. He has, for example, written that the Socialist Alliance "proposes to keep 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. The alliance would insist only that any new formation is open, inclusive, democratic and, of course, socialist" (*International Viewpoint* June 2003). There is no "of course" about it now.

In order to square this circle the majority on the executive committee, led by SA chair Nick Wrack, secretary Rob Hoveman and comrade Thornett himself, are having to pretend that the draft declaration of the Unity

Coalition is, in fact, socialist. Not surprisingly, there is defensiveness all round. Comrade Wrack represents the SA on the interim Unity Coalition committee. He did not return any of my calls this week seeking information after its meeting on Sunday January 4. It is not hard to fathom why.

At the January 3 executive meeting, comrade Wrack (non-aligned, but in close orbit around the SWP) declared the draft document to be "implicitly" socialist. For his part comrade Thornett (International Socialist Group) thought it was "essentially" socialist. While the Socialist Workers Party's Rob Hoveman insisted it was "absolutely" socialist. However, though voting for the Thornett motion, comrade Will McMahon (non-aligned, but again close to the SWP) at least had the honesty to admit that the draft document was merely "leftwing", not socialist.

The document to be put before the January 25 founding convention of the Unity Coalition contains many demands and formulations that socialists can support and which are even inspired by socialist thinking. Nick Wrack is particularly proud of his own addition to the end of the document which reads: "We want a world in which the democratic demands of the people are carried out; a world based on need, not profit; a world where solidarity rather than self-interest is the spirit of the age."

While admirable, such sentiments are far too vague to be clearly identifiable as socialist, let alone of the genuine, working class, variety. There is no role for our class in carrying out any of the demands put forward. And there is no explicit call for a different social

"Conference decision states any new organisation the SA supports will be 'open, democratic and, of course, socialist'. There is no 'of course' about it now"

and political system. At the same time, such formulations are no worse than the original politics of the Network of Socialist Alliances (forerunner of the SA) prior to the adoption of *People before profit*. But we are, however, being pushed backwards politically. Will this lead to the flooding in of the masses, as the SWP hopes? Clearly comrades Hoveman *et al* intend keeping the SA on ice during the latest turn as a fall-back option.

Feebly, comrade Hoveman said that many people had trouble with the word 'socialist'. Comrade Wrack said that the content of the declaration was not as important as "getting it off the ground and getting a success in June". When asked to describe what he meant by success, comrade Wrack mused that George Galloway's election to the European parliament could be one benchmark. Pursuit of electoral success at the expense of political principle has a name in our collective Marxist tradition: parliamentary cretinism.

A number of motions moved by the newly formed Democracy Platform of the Socialist Alliance fell or were defeated.

A motion calling for the Unity Coalition to be a "working class alternative to New Labour" and stating that elected representatives of the coalition would only accept a skilled worker's wage fell with seven votes for (Marcus Ström, Lesley Mahmood, Steve Godward, Martin Thomas, John Fisher, Mandy Baker, Glynn Robbins), with nine voting against and two abstentions (Jim Jepps and Heather Cox). Comrade Hoveman asked what we would do if leading Socialist Campaign MPs wanted to join but were not prepared to accept a workers' wage. Clearly, for him there would be no problem. For working class partisans there is a problem.

The Democracy Platform motion committing the coalition to fight for open borders and an end to immigration laws fell on a tied vote of seven each with four abstentions. Likewise, a motion calling for a democratic selection of electoral lists and candidates fell on a tied vote.

A motion which said that the SA and its representatives to the interim committee would insist that the formation of the coalition would be "open, democratic and transparent" was defeated, since it was argued this was current practice (four votes for: Marcus Ström, Lesley Mahmood, Steve Godward, Martin Thomas; 10 votes against and four abstentions).

The final proposals from the Democracy Platform fell with four votes for and 13 against. These were: a motion to be put to the convention describing what we mean by socialism - ie, the "working class organising to liberate itself from the rule of profit and create its own democracy"; and an amended version of the draft declaration which would have inserted the key demands of *People before profit*, including a change in the initials of Respect, with R standing for 'republicanism'. All these defeated motions put by the Democracy Platform were drawn from existing Socialist Alliance policy.

Comrade Rob Hoveman more than once raised a straw man. His argument that we should not put ultimatums to the Unity Convention and that we should not walk away if it did not accept the politics of *People before profit* missed their target. The Democracy Platform is not putting forward ultimatums. There is no intention of walking away from Respect if our socialist and working class principles are not accepted. To the extent that the Unity Coalition organises and speaks for that element of the anti-war movement that wants to challenge New Labour, then socialists want to be with it and engage with it constructively. However, we must be open with our politics.

Comrade Hoveman stated that only amendments that added to the declaration should be supported. Presumably, amendments calling for no immigration controls and representatives on a workers' wage detract from the document for the Socialist Workers Party. It has now emerged that there will be one amendment allowed per organisation at the January 25 convention.

During the debate, comrade John Fisher, at times close to the SWP, made the point that having George Galloway as the figurehead

of the coalition was problematic, as not everyone was comfortable working with him. Further, he asked just who the people on the interim committee represented. Given that Bob Crow, general secretary of the RMT, and Mark Serwotka, general secretary of the PCS civil servants' union, had not put their names to the declaration, comrade Fisher said that the coalition was severely weakened, as these were the people he was most interested in getting on board. He warned against the frustration that was natural, given that the entire left had failed to grow out of the anti-war movement.

Comrades from the SWP, including Rob Hoveman, Jeanie Robinson and Simon Joyce, argued against any direct affiliation of the Socialist Alliance to Respect. Comrade Hoveman said that the SA "did not have enough coherence to act inside the coalition". Whereas comrade Will McMahon wants the SA to be the "socialist current" within the "left coalition", the SWP clearly has other ideas.

It fell to Simon Joyce to play the part of SWP member provided by central casting. He said how very excited he was about the prospects of the coalition, predicting that for every member of a small left group there will be 100 other people who will join. He added that our biggest danger was isolation. However, in that context, he was "worried about reading bits of paper" (like motions and amendments submitted by the SA's Democracy Platform). They are off-putting. Not that he objects to reading, oh no: he assured us that he had lots of books at home.

Frustrated with the political direction of the Socialist Alliance, comrade Steve Godward acted impulsively at times, moving an ill-advised no confidence motion against Nick Wrack as SA chair. It only received the support of Martin Thomas of the AWL.

Alan Thornett said during debate that the "name of the game" was how to build upon the sentiment and passion of the anti-war movement and channel it into a political organisation. I could not agree more. However, junking socialist principles in a desperate bid for parliamentary advantage is a well-worn path to disaster.

At the last minute, comrade Thornett discovered three bullet points from *People before profit* he wanted to add to the declaration: for a minimum wage of £7.40 an hour; for a 35-hour working week; and for taxing the rich. These were deferred to the national council on January 17, as these self-same amendments had just been defeated in the Democracy Platform motions.

It now falls upon the Democracy Platform to take principled socialist and working class amendments to the national council and to the Unity Convention on January 25.

In other business, the SA voted to convey its congratulations to Chris Flood, newly elected Socialist Party councillor in Lewisham, London. It agreed the agenda for the SA national council that takes place on January 17 in London. This will be: Unity Coalition, methods of election to the SA executive and campaigning against the council tax.

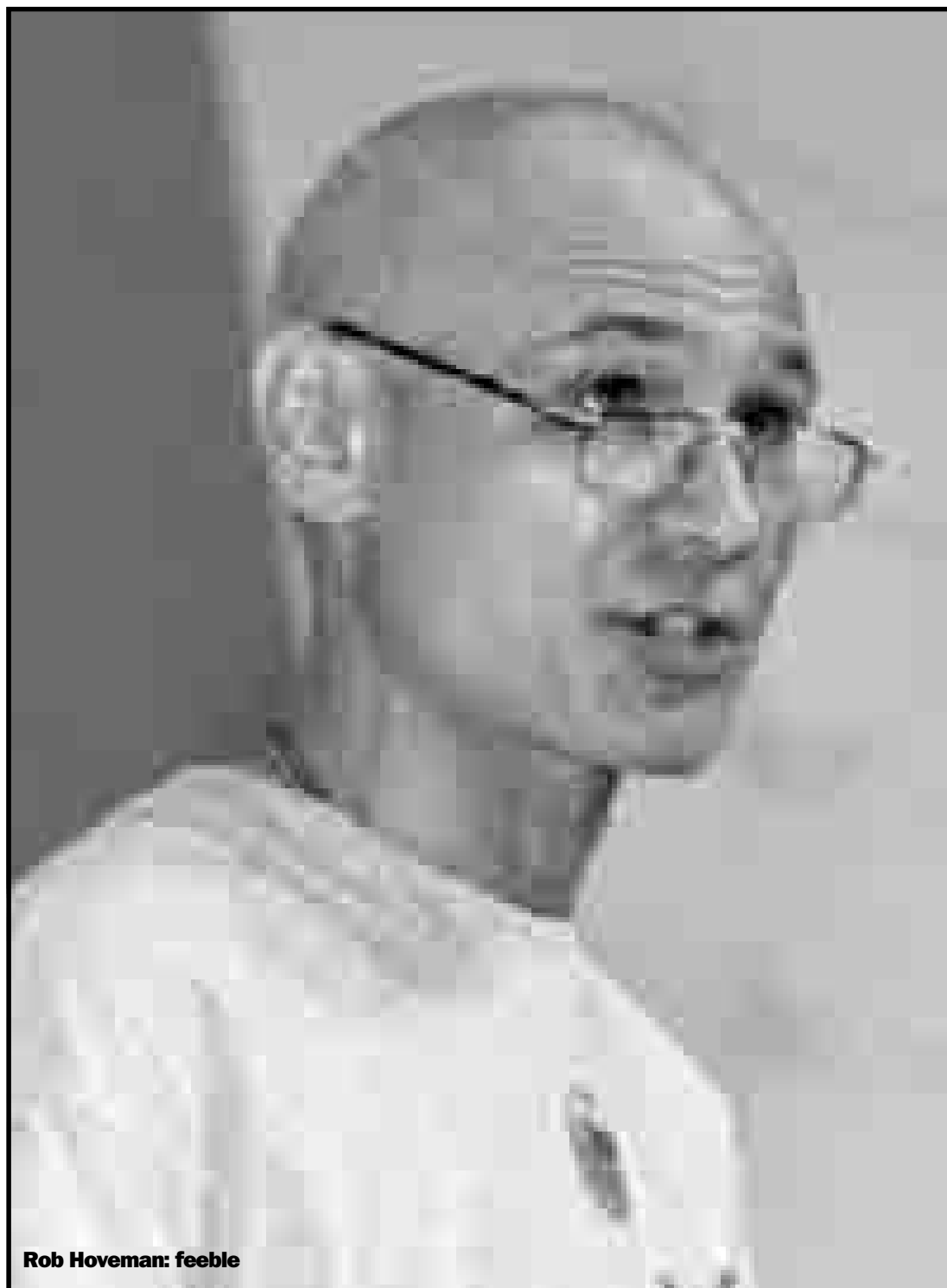
It was agreed that Stuart Richardson get the go-ahead to establish a Socialist Alliance education policy group and a media development proposal from Will McMahon and Mandy Baker also got the green light.

A proposal from comrades McMahon and Baker to commit the SA to campaign against council tax and for an income-related service tax was noted and agreed that it be decided upon at the national council. The campaign is based upon a similar one launched by the Scottish Socialist Party.

The deadline for motions to the SA annual conference is February 13. Amendments must be in by March 1.

Finally, the report of the appeals committee on the request to expel Danny Thompson and Jane Clarke was noted. The appeals committee has said that the two should not be expelled, there should be no formal hearing and the Bedfordshire Socialist Alliance branch need to be relaunched. There was no opposition to these findings ●

Marcus Ström



Rob Hoveman: feeble

IRAN

Crumbling like powder



No act of god

Mehdi Kia, co-editor of *Iran Bulletin - Middle East Forum*, on the Iranian earthquake and the fate of the islamic regime

The death or injury of almost half the population of Bam, and the total destruction of this city, one of the most beautiful in Iran, fills one with a deep, deep sadness. And a rising anger at the needless loss of life. The earthquake itself may have been beyond human control, but the collapsing roofs and walls are witness to a regime criminally incompetent and negligent. This was one more example, if an example were

needed, of the corruption of a regime that came out of a revolution but totally betrayed its every wish.

Only a few days earlier, another 'act of god' of similar magnitude in a populated area of California caused three deaths. Yet in Bam, a city two millennia old, ten thousand times as many lost their lives. Why this discrepancy? The roofs and walls of Bam just crumbled - not just in the old city and citadel, but

houses built by the regime of mullahs to accommodate some of the millions who had deserted the countryside with its vanishing jobs for the urban centres.

In a city straddling one of the world's most active faults, even the puny municipal legislation for more robust architecture was ignored: "On my last trip to Iran," says professor Mohsen Aboutorabi of the University of Central England, "I banged two bricks together

and they became like powder" (*The Guardian* December 27). The entire expansion of the town was built by the so-called 'build and sell' merchants - for a pittance. Anyone living in Iran knows that nothing can be done without municipal permits. Greasing palm after palm is the name of the game in a regime that has made the shah's plunder look like petty theft. Yet we are talking about a country with the third largest oil deposits in the world and with a regime that at one time had the trust of a vast section of the population.

But it is not just the sickening architectural wasteland that evokes anger. This is a country criss-crossed with fault lines, where earthquakes are a way of life. And this is a regime which has enough technology to eavesdrop on most telephone conversations, to keep the airwaves clear of opposition radio transmissions and to build a nuclear warhead, but had to beg in the international marketplace for equipment to detect life buried beneath the rubble it was responsible for in the first place. To watch this incompetence in a country that has witnessed three major earthquakes in the last decade is nauseating. And what do you make of a state that sits on the world's largest gas reserve and yet insist on building an atomic reactor in Bushehr, not far from the Bam earthquake?

I believe this calamity will add to the rage of the vast majority of the people of the country for whom the regime has lost even the last vestiges of legitimacy. They showed their disgust with the entire re-

gime - reformists and all - when they almost completely boycotted the municipal elections earlier this year. It is clear that they will do so again in the elections to the parliament (majles) next summer.

The reformists are panicking at the thought, almost begging the people to give them another chance. The people of Iran, however, have in recent years used the reformists as a shield behind which they have been formulating their own demands - political freedom, democracy, the right to assembly, the right to self-determination for the nationalities, and the separation of state and religion being high on the list. Now that the reformists have conquered all that is conquerable through the ballot box with little result, the people have discarded that shield and are beginning to take on the entire regime. They have initiated the first and largest mass movement for a secular state in any islamic country in history.

In 1978 the mullahs ruling Iran today were able to use another 'act of god' - the huge earthquake which flattened the desert town of Tabas - to increase their credibility with the revolutionary masses and take over the leadership of the revolution. Soon after that Khomeini's face was, to use a popular expression, "visible on the moon" and the rest, as they say, is history.

Well, history has a way of repeating itself - in this case another tragedy giving rise to another historic twist. The people of Iran will soon 'bang' the two parts of this regime together and watch it 'become like powder' - just like the bricks in Bam ●

No expulsions

Anne Mc Shane of the Socialist Alliance appeals committee welcomes the long overdue dropping of all charges against the Bedfordshire two

Finally a decision has been made. Danny Thompson and Jane Clarke are not to be expelled. There is to be no formal hearing and the Bedfordshire Socialist Alliance, after over a year of inactivity, is to be democratically relaunched.

In December 2002 a request was made to the then appeals committee by the Socialist Workers Party-dominated officers group in BSA that Danny and Jane be expelled. This was because of allegations that they had made physical threats. Examples were given of various incidents that occurred during meetings. It was said that these incidents were not isolated and the behaviour of Danny and Jane had frightened and intimidated the members and officers of BSA to the point that the branch was no longer able to function with them present. Danny and Jane flatly denied all the allegations and insisted that they were politically motivated.

The old appeals committee, primarily in the honest form of James White (but also consisting of Mike Marqusee, Greg Tucker and Candy Udwin), began to investigate the matter and approached various witnesses for testimonies of what had occurred. There was a marked contrast in the responses received. It appeared to depend on the specific political allegiance of those present where the incidents were said to have occurred. Non-aligned observers simply

described acrimonious and bitter arguments and meetings that got out of control due to the behaviour of all sides. They certainly did not support the allegations made by the officers.

Unfortunately the previous appeals committee, first elected in December 2001, never managed to meet even once and therefore no decision was taken. Things remained unresolved. The BSA was frozen too. The branch was closed down by the SWP officers. Opportunities to stand in the local elections in 2003 were thereby lost and many members drifted away, totally demoralised by the situation. And, of course, Danny and Jane were left with serious allegations hanging over them for an oppressively long period of time.

When the current appeals committee was elected in May 2003, the only matter we had to attend to was Bedfordshire. Although we did manage to meet on one occasion in July, we need to be very self-critical that it has taken us seven months to finally recommended to the executive committee that all charges be dropped. This was after email reports and numerous such exchanges.

There were meetings with both Danny and Jane and with Keith Woods, who represented the BSA officers. I also made a careful study of all the documents, before drafting a full report to the appeals committee. It was clear to me that the allegations could not be separated

from the political affiliations of those involved. Danny is an active members of the Revolutionary Democratic Group and both he and Jane are ex-members of the SWP. Political arguments and tensions dominated the branch throughout 2002, culminating in elections at one typically acrimonious meeting where Danny and Jane were ousted as officers. The political leadership of BSA switched from one based on inclusivity to one where the SWP's factional opponents were excluded.

It was also clear from all the documents received that there had been uncomradely and unnecessarily personalised behaviour on all sides. Instead of political arguments being had out and then followed by unity in action, branch meetings became battlegrounds. Some BSA members who supported Danny and Jane were very unhappy at what they said was hypocritical behaviour on the part of the SWP. They believed that they had simply wanted to exclude all opposition and were making allegations in order to achieve that end. Many of these comrades have now left, as have others supporting the officers.

However, it is good that we have finally reached a decision that there was no conduct on the part of Danny and Jane that warranted expulsion. Moreover, it would have been totally against the interests of natural justice for matters to be reopened and witnesses called after such a delay.

Clearly bridges must be rebuilt and the branch needs to be relaunched in such a way that all factions are included and a spirit of tolerance prevails. Proposals are now being drawn up by the appeals committee. They will be presented at a meeting to be held hopefully later this month. BSA has now got an opportunity to go forward once more. This should be grasped with both hands by all those concerned.

Finally I should add that the views expressed here are my own. There will be other views on the appeals committee as

to responsibility for the breakdown within the branch. However, we are as one on the central decision.

Committee statement

After careful consideration of all the documents in the long-running dispute in Bedfordshire Socialist Alliance, including a meeting with a representative of the officers, Keith Woods, and a meeting with Danny Thompson and Jane Clarke, we have agreed the following:

(a) Danny Thompson and Jane Clarke should not be expelled.

(b) A formal hearing should not be convened.

(c) The branch needs to be relaunched as a matter of urgency.

The Appeals Committee propose a branch meeting be held early in the latter part of January at which representatives of the appeals committee and the executive will attend in order to facilitate the process of relaunching the branch ●

Fighting fund

Not good enough

Our last fund in December ended disappointingly. Though we got a couple of good donations - £20 from CE and £10 from WT - this still left us £55 short of our monthly £500 target. Here's hoping that together we can do better in 2004.

January's fund has though started slowly, almost at a trickle. NP, who is an avid web reader, sent a magnificent £40 cheque and PM from the Midlands a very welcome £5 note. But that was all we got from you. Nothing from abroad, nothing through our PayPal facility via the CPGB website. So, already in the second week of January, we only have a total of £45 towards our fighting fund. Obviously, not good enough.

Readers might be interested in our web ratings for 2003. Last year we registered 414,914 individual sessions - 1,032,350 pages viewed. This represents a 39% increase in traffic, compared with 2002. According to Alexa, our site is consistently ahead of all left-of-Labour organisations in the United Kingdom.

Statistics for the last issue were not bad either. We notched up a total of 20,744 hits on the web and, adding that to our guesstimate of the number of print readers this sent our total circulation soaring to a record high.

Of course, the last few weeks have not been normal - Christmas, new year and all that. Nevertheless over 2003 we can report a steadily, albeit slowly, growing readership ●

Robbie Rix

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REPUBLICANISM

Away with gongs and titles

The British honours system is more than a laughable anachronism: it sheds light on the nature of our society and the royalist traditions that underpin it. **Dave Craig** of the Revolutionary Democratic Group believes that the recent spate of honours refuseniks heralds the birth of a republican socialist party

A strange but familiar ritual took place recently in the Australian outback. Broadcaster Tony Robinson, well known to Blackadder fans as 'Baldrick', knelt in the sand. He was duly dubbed "Sir Tony" with an appropriately sized twig in the hands of King Michael of England. It was a truly 'egalitarian' moment in which any citizen could become a knight merely for the asking.

So who is King Michael I? Documents recently uncovered by Dr Mike Jones in Rouen cathedral prove that Edward IV, born in 1442, was not a legitimate heir to the throne. His mother had a fling with an English archer, while his royal 'father', the Duke of York was away on a long military campaign. According to de Brets, the authority on matters of royal lineage, a real monarch must be from the royal blood line and born in wedlock. Edward was therefore a bastard-pretender. A popular rumour concerning this at the time is referred to in Shakespeare's play about Richard III and is now confirmed by the new evidence.

The implications go right down the family tree. It means that Henry Tudor, who became Henry VII, and all subsequent monarchs, no longer have a legitimate claim to the throne. The royal blood line descends from Edward IV's brother, George. Following this Plantagenet line would have given us a Margaret I, and for example a Henry X and until recently a Barbara I. So it has come to pass that the legitimate, if uncrowned, king of England is currently Michael Hastings-Plantagenet. Tony Robinson found King Michael alive and well and living like an ordinary Aussie bloke with his family in New South Wales. King Michael loves Australia so much that he voted for a republic in their referendum!

None of this matters very much to republicans. It is not the person of the monarch, but the institution of the crown and all the political, bureaucratic and military powers expropriated by the ruling class in its name. Communists are militant republicans who seek to eradicate all forms of monarchism as part of the struggle to democratise the institutions of state. We must not lose sight of this when looking at the distribution of royal titles and awards.

As usual, the new year's honours list sparked some discussion in the capitalist press about the merits of royal honours. The controversy was fuelled by the refusal of Benjamin Zephaniah to accept an empire medal and the claim that Prince Charles had intervened to prevent professor Colin Blakemore, head of the Medical Research Council, from getting his knighthood.

In contrast to King Michael's simple ceremony, Britain has a highly secretive honours system in which "Mrs Queen", as a poetic Benjamin Zephaniah named her, hands out the social rankings of lords pompous and knights farcical. Nevertheless the honours fiasco is worth more than a cursory glance, because it illustrates important aspects of our political culture and system of government. We might begin our criticism by asking whether we need any kind of honours system at all.

As communists, I do not think we should be opposed in principle to the symbolic recognition of social merit. The CPGB itself gives recognition each year to the comrades with the best record of selfless devotion to fundraising, during the annual summer offensive. I see no

reason why a socialist society might not give recognition to citizens who have saved lives or have made some outstanding contribution to the welfare of the community.

Such awards would of necessity be decided by working class people in an open, democratic process. Perhaps, in the transition to a classless communist society, symbolic recognition of the best examples of voluntary labour will become more important, as money and paid labour progressively disappear. Having said that, I do not necessarily believe that socialism needs a system of social recognition, but I would not rule it out.

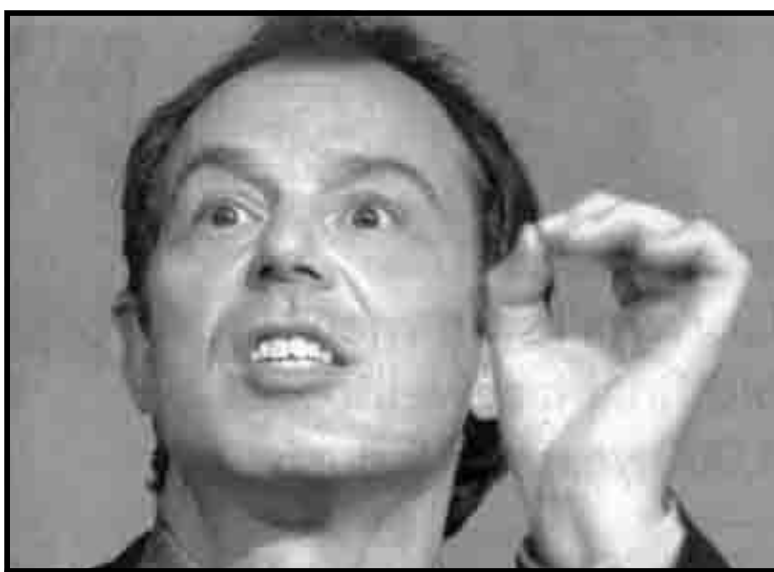
In a capitalist society an honours system has a different role. It is primarily to reward and give recognition to the achievements of the rich and powerful, who have served the state or made the greatest contribution to profit-making. Giving awards to dinner ladies and road sweepers provides a spurious egalitarian cover story. Today the *nouveaux riches* like David Beckham or Mick Jagger, who have made millions from professional sport or the global music business, are added to the top civil servants and trade union leaders, whose contribution to capitalist profits may have been selling off state assets or selling out their members' wages and conditions. Every socialist feels a natural loathing for such a system.

Lloyd George, liberal prime minister in the early part of the last century, adopted the method of selling honours to the highest bidder. Letting market forces decide who gets what is surely the most appropriate way for capitalism to hand out the plaudits. Those with the most money should naturally outbid everybody else and accumulate many more honours to go with their piles of cash. Workers would get nothing, but that would be a fair representation of their position in capitalist society.

We would certainly have had a Lord Murdoch of Wapping by now if market principles had prevailed. But Lloyd George ruined the emerging market for honours by siphoning off the revenues to finance his political campaigns. Selling honours was seen as another example of the kind of corruption and cronyism that has been central to the distribution of honours since the days of Charles I.

The United States has what might be called a republican-capitalist honours system. There is a very limited range of awards, such as the Congressional Medal of Honour. A few weeks ago president Bush gave Lord George Robertson the US Presidential Medal because of his work for Nato, serving the interests of US imperialism. However, the US republican-capitalist honours system rejects anything that seems to confer social status on its holder. Some medals may be handed out, but there is only one class of citizen. The constitution declares that "no title of nobility shall be granted by the United States".

The United Kingdom has a royal-capitalist honours system. It recognises and rewards the achievements of the rich and powerful in business and the state. Yet the British system combines this with peculiar features of royal-feudalism. Its origins are in the honours feudal monarchs bestowed on their courtiers and ministers. Its gongs, sashes and titles are ancient, or archaic. Its lordships, knight-hoods and royal garters now seem comi-



Blair: pinning on 'people's' honours?

cally Ruritanian. The various hierarchical orders of the British empire (OBE, MBE and CBE) are outdated and offensive in a multi-racial society.

The whole thing is a national embarrassment, because it reminds us of a certain truth about the kind of society we are and of our collective failure to change it. The honours system is a mirror of the class system. The British class system is bound up with royal culture and its absurd hierarchy of hereditary privilege, snobbery, sycophancy and deference. Anybody who receives an honour or medal in the UK must be prepared to bow or curtsy before a billionaire because of her (bogus) blood line.

The royal honours system both reflects and reinforces the British class hierarchy. Working class people brought up in this society have been imbued with a monarchist culture. Many still have a sense that someone who is a lord or a duke is in some way special. Many automatically feel a certain deference in their presence. The language and accent used by the upper classes reinforce those deeper feelings of social superiority and class inferiority, which continues to disable some of the most intelligent and productive people in our society.

The honours system tells us more about our society than simply its peculiar royalist class culture. The way awards are handed out tells us a great deal about how the British system of government actually works. There is nothing democratic in the distribution of honours and everything that is bureaucratic and secretive. Channels Four's investigation into the 'Secrets of the honours system' makes this clear (see Jon Snow *The Independent on Sunday* December 28).

The system is so secretive that it is impossible to check the claims that Prince Charles had intervened to block the professor's knighthood. Certainly Charles Windsor and Mrs Queen have a direct line to the prime minister. But exactly who said what to whom is a closely guarded state secret. Snow and his team were never able to talk to anybody in the process, and could only gather their evidence from those who had some link in the past. Like much of the constitutional monarchist state, the honours system is shrouded in a blanket of secrecy.

Certainly the Whitehall mandarins have a central role in the distribution of awards. The honours-bureaucracy op-

erates from its offices in Monck Street in central London. Civil servants sift through the submissions from her majesty's humble subjects, whilst giving due weight and attention to the politically motivated proposals from the prime minister, monarchy and other senior civil servants. Blair exercises considerable patronage over the process by adding or subtracting from the list. This year he handed out 20 peerages to his Labour Party cronies. Iain Duncan Smith, as Tory leader, also had the right to put forward recommendations and this year provided the names of a number of prominent donors to the Tory Party.

Not surprisingly, as Jon Snow confirms, civil servants are themselves the main beneficiaries of the system. In the 2002 list they collected five times as many awards as, for example, teachers, whilst businessmen are three times as likely to be recipients than the police. Twenty-four arms traders were honoured, no doubt for their success in selling weapons round the world.

The honours process therefore mirrors the real distribution of power within the state, in which the Whitehall mandarins, the prime minister and the monarchy all have their say. The secrecy surrounding this process excludes any effective scrutiny by MPs in parliament or by the people. This mirrors the concentration of power in the state and the effective sidelining of parliament by the 'elected dictatorship' - whether handing out honours or making decisions about going to war in Iraq.

Since the 1980s the post-war Elizabethan welfare state has been progressively dismantled, evolving into a crisis-prone, degenerate social monarchy. The royal honours system is following the same path. Like the social monarchy as a whole, the honours system is discredited and in crisis. Jon Snow says that, "unless a more egalitarian, streamlined system is introduced, 'Sir', 'Dame', 'Commander' and the rest will fast complete their journey into ridicule" (*The Independent on Sunday* December 28).

He is not alone in this view. Editorials in the capitalist press are calling for reform. The editorial in *The Independent* says that "our current arrangement for honours grew out of an age of deference - that will no longer do. Honours should be bestowed on behalf of the nation as a whole rather than by individuals, no matter how exalted their social standing" (December 31).

Another aspect of this crisis is a growing list of republican or semi-republican refuseniks. Such people include JG Ballard, Nigella Lawson, Michael Frayn, Dawn French, Benjamin Zephaniah and Jon Snow himself. The more the monarchy is questioned and the corrupt honours system exposed, the more shameful it will become to accept an award and the more honourable to decline one. Benjamin Zephaniah's recent refusal did not make him a social pariah, but on the contrary made him a hero.

When author JG Ballard was asked why he had refused, he explained that "as a republican, I can't accept an honour awarded by a monarch - all that bowing and scraping. The whole system of hereditary privileged and rank should be swept away" (*The Independent on Sunday* December 28). The real politics of accepting honours was summed up by Penny Junor, Prince Charles's biographer. When asked what her position was, she explained she would accept an honour because "I believe in the monarchy and I think it's disrespectful if you refuse."

Zephaniah caused a stir before Christmas when he refused an OBE. Usually those who would refuse such honours are weeded out before they get the chance to turn it down. Zephaniah cited "the empire, the monarchy, the government, the war in Iraq" as reasons for his refusal to accept. When he was interviewed on the BBC's *Newsnight* he told viewers of the support and congratulations he received from ordinary people on the streets.

New Labour is now searching for a modernised 'people's monarchy' and 'people's honours system'. The calls for a radical overhaul will come to nought. John Major promised to reform the system to make it more egalitarian in the face of growing political embarrassment. The system is thoroughly conservative and resistant to change, except of the most cosmetic kind. Real change requires a movement from below, a popular democratic revolution led by the working class.

Meanwhile Blair will produce another cosmetic exercise. Sir Hayden Phillips, the permanent secretary at the department of constitutional affairs, has been asked to make proposals. The top civil servants remain in charge of organising the system from which they are the principal beneficiaries. It will be a classic fudge, designed to fool the public, whilst maintain the status quo in all essentials.

About a third of the country are soft republicans, who think we do not have an effective democracy. About the same proportion thinks the honours system stinks. That many again, showing their mistrust for our ruling class, think it at least conceivable that Diana Spencer was murdered by the dark forces of the state.

There is surely a political party in there somewhere waiting to be born - a party which would put forward a serious republican policy for the abolition of the monarchy, and along with it the archaic royal honours system and all royal titles, lordships and knight-hoods. Let us see if Respect has the courage to grasp the democratic nettle, which the liberal republicans who dominate the Marxist movement and the Socialist Workers Party have so far failed to do.

We will soon see whether 'R' is for republicanism or for giving 'Respect' to the politics of the SWP ●

'OFFICIAL COMMUNISM'

Divided four ways

There are deep divisions in the leadership of the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain over what attitude to adopt towards the new Respect coalition. Can its forthcoming special congress resolve the contradictions? **Alan Rees** investigates

Towards the end of last year, we briefly referred to the differences in the leadership of the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain over the Respect Unity Coalition (*Weekly Worker* December 4). For example, we reported how its executive committee was split 11-11 on the issue. Half the committee were for an engagement with the new initiative; the rest were bent on upholding the old 'official communist' *British road to socialism* programme, with its hopeless aim of 'reclaiming' Labour for socialism. However, it now appears that the CPB executive is not only evenly split between so-called innovators and traditionalists, but each of these factions is itself split. In other words there is a four-way division.

November's CPB executive saw a frustratingly inconclusive clash of positions. On behalf of the innovators, who have abandoned all hope in Tony Blair's party, Emily Mann argued for the straightforward perspective of quickly investigating the hows and wherefores of CPB engagement with the new coalition. Naturally this was too much for John Foster from Glasgow, who stands unmovingly for the established policy of auto-Labourism. Along with industrial organiser Kevin Halpin, he heads the CPB's traditionalist wing.

Between these two hard poles are the softs. On the one hand the CPB's part-time general secretary, Robert Griffiths, and on the other Martin Levy, the CPB's district secretary in the North East. Comrade Griffiths wants any approach to Respect to be ring-fenced with a number of important qualifications - the coalition must not oppose Labour candidates *en bloc*, Respect must not call for a vote for the Scottish Socialist Party or other non-Labour left candidates, etc. Comrade Levy's proposal runs along similar lines. He demands that any cooperation with Galloway and Respect must be conditional on a shared commitment to "reclaiming the Labour Party" - given the political forces involved in Respect, this looks well nigh impossible, of course.

When none of these four proposals won anything like an overall majority, it was reluctantly agreed to opt for a special congress, supposedly in an attempt to amicably resolve the matter. It is to be held on Saturday January 17, although how wise this move actually is remains to be seen. The CPB is no more united at rank and file level than it is at the top. Passing the buck to a special congress could therefore make matters far worse for the leadership, not better.

Naturally, none of this is reported openly in that staid and thoroughly boring paper, the *Morning Star*. Its standard fare consists of dull-as-dishwater pieces by trade union officials, friendly reports highlighting North Korea's latest diplomatic manoeuvres and putting a leftish slant on the daily news carried by the mainstream wire services and media. Not that there has been a total absence of debate on Respect. No, one side has granted itself full publicity rights (although, by *Star* standards, a flurry of short letters on the subject have been published - from all viewpoints).

Writing in his paper of December 20, editor John Haylett outlines - in typically obscure and unspecific terms - three lines of opinion "within the labour movement" that have been "excited" into "a level of discussion" by the Unity Coalition call. For all the clumsiness of this formulation, Haylett is clearly alluding to divisions that exist inside the CPB itself, not simply "within the labour movement".

How does he describe the lines of factional demarcation?

First, he has "some people" who see Respect simply as "a divisive move that is in



John Haylett (right) : obscure

conflict with the efforts of those still in the Labour Party, including the affiliated trade unions, to reclaim the party" (ie, Messrs Foster, Halpin and Levy). Second, Haylett refers to those elements who have "enthusiastically welcomed Galloway's proposal" as a "fresh opportunity to build an embryonic replacement for the Labour Party" (by implication, comrade Emily Mann). However, comrade Haylett makes clear his faction's attitude to this assessment when he sternly reminds his readers of the "already failed" attempts to achieve this in the Socialist Labour Party, the Socialist Alliance and the Socialist Party's Socialist Alternative.

The third line - obviously favoured by the *Morning Star* editor himself - consists of those "supportive of the unity coalition", while at the same time "remaining committed to the strategic goal of taking back the Labour Party from the New Labour cuckoos". The intention is to open up, "from a progressive standpoint, an election front against New Labour". By that same logic, "the *Morning Star* opposes so-called 'democratisation' of the unions' political levy". Instead, the union movement "should affiliate to the limit and, most crucially, should punch its weight within the party".

Qualified support for Respect is an option only because of the weakness of communist forces compared to "a few decades ago", Haylett sadly tells his readers. Back whenever, he would have argued for standing "a significant number" of candidates - "not with the intent of damaging a Labour government's re-election", but in order to put forward "a coherent policy alternative that would be taken up in the movement and contribute to reversing the government's drift to the right".

This is no longer possible, but comrade Haylett reassures the traditionalists that Respect's politics on "imperialist wars, opposition to the euro and an EU constitution, defence of the public services, the manufacturing sector and jobs and rejection of privatisation and environmental vandalism are indistinguishable" from those of the CPB.

Like his part-time general secretary, Haylett clearly leans towards possible engagement with Respect. But, given the nature of the political forces that will be numerically dominant within it, and attempts to square such a move with the CPB's continued fidel-

ity to the increasing bizarre *British road to socialism* programme - which put all its eggs in the Labour Party basket - this smacks more and more of a descent into utter political incoherence.

The CPB leadership's inability to agree a unified approach to Respect is hardly unexpected. Here is an organisation of no more than a couple of hundred disorientated die-hards that has doggedly inhabited a political bunker since the collapse of the USSR over a decade ago now. Far from questioning everything, it steadfastly refuses to seriously examine and honestly deal with its own past. Stalinism and its appalling consequences is excused - not condemned and rigorously analysed. Hence any attempt to engage with the real world beyond the standard left reformist certainties of economic strikes, anti-Americanism and opposition to all things European Union must trigger profound divisions and carry the distinct threat of disintegration.

At the time of its Communist University over the weekend of June 14-15 last year, we noted the "programmatic time bomb" ticking away in the CPB's ranks. During the final session, 'The forward march of Labour resumed', Andrew Murray (chair of the Stop the War Coalition, who is widely viewed as having 'gone native' - effectively becoming an SWP sympathiser in CPB ranks) warned against illusions in old Labour even while we fight New Labour. Blair's party could not be "ignored", but - tantalisingly - he mused: "Can we build a left alternative?"

A stinging rebuke came from leading traditionalist Kevin Halpin. As we reported at the time, "To loud cheers from the floor, he denounced any attempts to build a left electoral alternative to Labour as 'diversions'. Warning to his theme, he expressed his political solidarity with GMB leader John Edmunds, who had spoken of the need to 'reclaim' Labour - only 'pessimists' want to build outside Blair's party, Halpin warned" (*Weekly Worker* June 19 2003).

Given that the CPB is an organised combination of nostalgia for an unspeakable past and a still workable system for moving up the lower rungs of trade union power structure, it is impossible to predict how much longer it can survive. The one thing one can say with certainty, however, is that it richly deserves to die ●

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LIVINGSTONE

Back in Labour's fold

Ken Livingstone's reinstatement into the Labour Party is at one level a significant defeat for Tony Blair. It represents a climbdown and loss of face for the prime minister, who in early 2000 resorted to a combination of denunciation and ballot-rigging of the most blatant type to ensure that Livingstone was defeated in the selection for mayoral candidate. Indeed, Livingstone was considered so inimical to the New Labour project that Blair equated him with such other Labour left bogeymen as Tony Benn and Arthur Scargill and expressed the view that a Livingstone mayoralty would be a "disaster" for London.

It was this kind of perception of Livingstone's Bennite past that explained the class polarisation in the London labour movement over Livingstone's candidacy in the first place. A series of what amounted to rank-and-file rebellions on the electoral level took place within London's trade unions; this accounted for much of the momentum behind Livingstone's campaign. Conversely, it was the blatantly undemocratic delivery of the AEEU's vote to Livingstone's opponent, Frank Dobson, by the ultra-Blairite bureaucratic clique around Sir Ken Jackson which was the major factor in ensuring the failure of Livingstone to secure the nomination within the official structures.

It was a crude stitch-up, involving the effective disenfranchisement of large battalions of London workers to bring it off. Given both Livingstone's left reputation and the concrete major issue that divided the two sides in the conflict - whether or not the projected upgrading of the London tube should take place through privatisation or through Livingstone's plan to borrow through issuing municipal bonds and raise funds for an upgraded municipalised (ie, state-owned) tube - there was a clear class difference between the appeal of the candidates. This was the case despite Livingstone's rhetorical playing down of the differences between himself and Blair on many other questions, as well as his 'tactical' manoeuvres as an independent in seeking to 'make use' of individuals from all parties in running his administration (in practice, this was largely a dead letter).

Livingstone always was, despite his expulsion from the party itself, an organic part of the then-battered and isolated Labour left, and his candidacy, however flawed, was an act of rebellion by forces organic to that left wing of a bourgeois workers' party. Therefore it was a legitimate *tactic* for the revolutionary left to give critical support to his candidacy in 2000 - and indeed it could be argued that it would be a legitimate tactic today. Whether it would be a wise tactic today is quite another question, however: this article will attempt to address this question.

Livingstone's record in office as mayor has certainly rubbed a lot of the antagonism off the relationship with the Blairites that existed at the beginning of his term. Given the massive support he enjoyed within the trade unions for his electoral position against tube privatisation, it was not beyond the bounds of possibility that he could - launching with the aid of the RMT, Aslef, etc a union-centred campaign using industrial action as a weapon - have made the part-privatisation of the network impossible to carry out. Though he continued to fight in his own way against the government's plans, his method of doing so was a complete loser. From appointing a hot-shot American boss, Bob Kiley, as his underground superno-in-waiting to his repeated impotent legal challenges, his means of fighting the government on this

question consciously sought to remain within the bounds of the most pathetic, self-defeating, rightwing social democratic respectability.

Livingstone could quite easily have made up for his lack of formal, legal powers over the tube network by such an alliance in action with the unions; indeed, in view of the overwhelming popular support for the mayor in the aftermath of his election, and the equally overwhelming popular opposition to tube privatisation, it would have been extremely politically difficult for the Blairites to use the anti-union laws against such a strike-centred political campaign. But it was not to be: instead of placing himself at the head of the real, if sometimes sporadic, militancy that has developed on the underground, and delivering what could easily have been a massive blow both at the government and the enforceability of the anti-union laws, he in effect chose to act as a safety-valve - a means for the population to harmlessly blow off steam.

A recent indication of his relationship with the trade unions was his condemnation of an RMT strike in defence of a tubeworker who was accused by management and the bourgeois press of taking unjustified sick leave - in an industry whose onerous working conditions and shift patterns are themselves a major cause of ill health among its workers.

Then there is transport more generally, and in particular the congestion charge. This is Livingstone's big success; understandably, given the horrendous situation in central London that pertained before the measure was introduced, it has, despite some of its regressive features as a flat-rate tax, achieved a wide popular acceptance as an environmentally rational measure that has had a real impact in curtailing some of the wilder extremes of socially damaging traffic overload in London. It really is *the* measure that has, barring some freak occurrence, produced the situation where his re-election looks a near certainty. In conjunction with noticeable improvements in London buses, overseen by the mayor, it contrasts sharply with the already deteriorating London Underground - part-privatised, as everyone knows, against the will of the mayor by a central government that pointedly ignored Livingstone's 2000 election in what amounted to an informal referendum on tube privatisation. All these things make it hardly surprising that Ken has benefited enormously from his clashes with the government over trans-

"It was a legitimate tactic for the revolutionary left to give critical support to his candidacy in 2000 - and it could be legitimate today. Whether it would be a wise tactic today is quite another question"



Livingstone: New Labour bogeyman

port in London.

On these kinds of questions, as well as with such things as his opposition to the Iraq war, Livingstone has managed at least partly to maintain his left image. But something of the gloss has rubbed off as well; before his election he supported imperialist military action in the former Yugoslavia; so he can hardly be called a consistent opponent of imperialist wars (few reformists are, of course: there is always the odd 'anti-fascist' war that can seduce the best of them). More damning of him as a putative left is his courtship of business - hardly as ostentatious as the Blairites', but nevertheless a key part of his strategy. What with his proud boasts about increased police staffing, Livingstone today really bears a certain resemblance to the Roy Hattersleys of this world: in a situation where official Labour can sometimes be criticised from the left even by Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard, it really does not take much to appear more left than Blair and co.

In reality, it is highly doubtful that many in the Labour movement regard Livingstone these days as any kind of hardline leftwing socialist. Obviously, he has considerable political ambitions, but the fact that Blair, who considered him a "disaster" in 2000, took the lead in pushing for his readmission to Labour, is not simply a result of Livingstone's electoral threat. The Blairites have good reason to believe that they will be able to coopt him in some way - his 'leftism' has in reality proved much less politically harmful to them than they once feared. Even though Ken is still highly ambitious, the Blairites may reason, his is an ambition that can be contained within the broadest parameters of Labour as it is today: ie, a party politically dominated by the politics of neoliberalism.

No doubt he will be allowed something of a free rein - Blair really has no choice on the matter and Livingstone himself has already indicated, despite romping through the so-called 'loyalty test' of Labour's national executive, that he will continue to operate as a loose cannon. For example, in order to maintain his left image, in or out of Labour, Livingstone is unlikely to back down on the holding of the European Social Forum in London later this year. Certainly, if Livingstone was still regarded by the Labour hierarchy as some sort of representative of red-blooded socialism, he would have been much less likely to be

readmitted.

So for Blair, taking Livingstone back into the party is something of a gamble, albeit for him a reasonable one. How exactly he will interact with the slowly reviving Labour left (as expressed by developments over the Iraq war, the rise of the 'awkward squad' in the trade unions, etc) remains to be seen.

In terms of dealing with a slippery character like Livingstone, with a less than fully deserved left reputation, but a real following among class-conscious sections of the working class, complex tactical questions are often posed for socialists. It was self-evident that the rebellion and polarisation among Labour's working class base in London over the Livingstone candidacy in 2000 meant that socialists needed to give Livingstone's candidacy critical support,

despite his many obvious failings, as a means of exploiting and intersecting this antagonism.

Today, however, things are rather different. His readmission, notwithstanding the electoral gun being held to Blair's head this June, is also in part a product of Livingstone's own new respectability. Standing on the official Labour ticket, in no sense will Livingstone be giving expression to any rank-and-file rebellion against Blairism in these elections. It is highly doubtful that, given his tepid and barely left record since 2000, whether it would be appropriate to call for a vote to him, even were he still standing as an independent against the Blairites. His candidacy made it pointless and tactically inept to stand a Socialist Alliance candidacy for mayor in 2000 - but a certain political space has opened up since then that today makes a leftwing challenge to him a much more feasible proposition.

Which is why it is doubly unfortunate that the Socialist Alliance itself has retreated from the relative high point that it reached in 2000 and 2001 over the Greater London Authority elections, leading up to the general election. The problematic emergence of the Respect coalition may well offer a possibility of running a candidate against Livingstone, but if that happens it is likely to be on a political basis that is a good deal inferior to the bold but still (by omission) left-reformist programme adopted by the SA.

Given the apparent political reality that the SA has been subordinated by the Socialist Workers Party-led majority to this new formation, revolutionary socialists and communists must fight for Respect itself to take on this task - the task of waging an independent working class campaign, tapping into the anti-war movement that has shaken Blair's Britain. We must fight for such a candidacy to be based on a platform of working class socialism, seeking a rounded and progressive alternative to neoliberalism and capitalism as a system ●

Ian Donovan

Thirteen questions

Catherine Hardwicke (director),
Thirteen general release

This film catalogues the four-month descent into hell of 13-year-old Tracy (Rachel Wood), as she makes a successful bid to become friends with Evie (Nikki Reed), 'the coolest girl in school', to the horror of Tracy's mother Mel (Holly Hunter).

From its blistering beginning to its quietly melancholic end, this ghost-train ride of a film never lets up. The opening tableau encapsulates the teen hunger to *feel* amidst a sea of new and confusing emotions: Tracy and Evie punch each other repeatedly in the face, whilst sniffing an aerosol, to test the potency of the numbing drug. And its ending: Tracy's single Munch-like scream neatly leads us

back to this young girl's confusion in the face of feeling. And the in-between is not at all in-between, taking us down the dark and twisted alleys of self-harm, drug and alcohol abuse, promiscuity and the sheer hell of growing up.

Thirteen has provoked a battery of questions, chiefly on the grounds of taste and decency. Ought we to be watching 13-year-olds experiencing such extreme emotions and situations, portrayed so graphically? It has also been criticised for setting such dark things against the backdrop of the MTV aesthetic and, finally, dismissed as melodramatic.

The first is easy to counter, as *Thirteen* is based on Reed's own experiences, and any intelligent, sensitive viewer does

REVIEW

Fair trade or socialism?

George Monbiot, *The age of consent*
Harper Collins, 2003, pp274, £15.99

This is the latest of a number of publications by the now famous *Guardian* columnist. George Monbiot's connection with and influence on the embryonic Respect coalition makes this book, which appears to signify a distinct shift to the left in the author's political thinking, worthy of study. For communists seeking critical engagement with the proposed coalition, in order to exert as much pressure on its programme as possible, this book and its themes must be analysed.

In itself, the book is a good read, and Monbiot devotes much space to an examination of the impoverishment of the 'third world'; the role of the IMF and World Bank; and the globalised nature of nearly everything in today's society. He concludes, contrary to the opinion of localists, that the job of the movement is to "capture" globalisation, and harness its potential in order to provide for the good of humanity. While for readers of the *Weekly Worker* this is an encouraging position, there is nevertheless much with which to take issue.

It would be wrong to conclude that the ideas outlined in *The age of consent* have anything to do with Marxist analysis. The term 'class' is used fleetingly here and there in a way which strikes me as posing left, but there is no class analysis of society. The title of chapter four, "We the peoples", highlights this, echoing the vacuity of universal declarations of human rights and liberal platitudes. Unsurprisingly, the word 'socialism' does not appear at all, and if one is still of the view that Monbiot is quite sympathetic to Marxism, one only need look at chapter two to be disabused of the notion. Marxism, it is claimed, is by its very nature distrustful of the "faceless" proletariat, requiring despotic leadership akin to "the guardian philosophers of Plato's dicta-

torships" (p 28).

So what are we dealing with? One of the main weaknesses of this book is that it is ideologically incoherent, with a variety of ideas cohabiting eclectically alongside each other. Monbiot's take on human nature is a classic example of this incoherence. Apparently deep within our nature is a built-in mechanism that makes us greedy and violent, which means that no fundamental change to society - presumably not even the "metaphysical mutation" proposed by Monbiot himself - could ever "alter any of the basic human instincts which make us the flawed and dangerous creatures we are". Faced with the insuperability of such negative characteristics, one could be forgiven for supposing that his "global justice movement" would be irreparably disfigured by the very nature of its human adherents.

Monbiot admits that he "keeps returning" to anarchism, despite how much he "rejects it intellectually" (p 30). Yet this still is not helpful in defining the politics of *The age of consent*. As the title implies, Monbiot is aware of the current democratic deficit - not only nationally, but worldwide. However, what he seems to propose is a lottery-funded world parliament which is there to "review" the decisions of the international institutions of western imperialism like the IMF. If these are found to be unjust and unfair, then this parliament and its supporters should exert their "moral authority" on these institutions in the hope that one day the most "equitable exchange" between nations in terms of commerce can be achieved (p 86).

This is nothing more than utopian rhetoric for two reasons. Firstly, although Monbiot is correct to highlight a democratic deficit, he seems to portray imperialism's carving up of the globe as a policy which can be turned on



and off, given certain "moral" pressure, whereas of course the imperialistic expansion of capital is a self-perpetuating necessity. Secondly, he would vainly seek to reverse the tendency of capital towards monopolistic domination, arguing that his proposed Fair Trade Organisation would not allow any company "to dominate the market" (p 233). Monbiot is lost in a maze of numerous solutions and methods, but time and time again finds himself back at the starting point - how to overcome the atrocities and injustices of the market. This is where communists need to intervene to locate the emancipatory path of working class socialism.

Rather confusingly, after giving us page after page of plans and ideas, George finally admits his failure. As elaborate and detailed as his ideas are, he finds himself forced to admit: "None of the measures proposed in this book are sufficient, however, to address a far bigger question, that of the world-eating and mathematically impossible system we call capitalism" (p 238).

I am not one for clichés, but it does seem as if Monbiot cannot really see the wood for the trees. He begins by rejecting the positive supersession of capitalism that only Marxism can provide, arguing instead that one must aim to bring about "fair trade" within capitalism - only then to return to the initial question and admit that he has not quite solved it.

This circular argumentation does make the book rather confusing to read, but it is nonetheless interesting for anyone wishing to know more about the IMF and the World Bank, which Monbiot has taken a lot of time to analyse. Indeed, Monbiot's analysis is in some ways superior to the economism often spewed out by the left. He rightly highlights the need for a global democratic alternative to the current system, rather than simply demanding the removal of this or that leader of imperialism, which will get the working class nowhere (eg, "Get out, Blair, and take your fees with you" *Socialist Worker* December 13).

In terms of political conclusions, however, this book amounts to little. The programme seems to point to a cross-class umbrella, under which two million demonstrators will gather to forge an electoral breakthrough.

This is why we must be both sceptical and hopeful in our approach to the Respect coalition. Monbiot is, and probably would even admit, that he is on the turn politically. Moreover, he is quick to assert that his answers are not panaceas for the "movement" but hopes that they will "contribute to the debate". That is why we must be there with our Marxist politics, emphasising that socialism is the victory of democracy for the working class - in the workplace and at an international level of influence.

Linked to this is the struggle to reforge a working class, internationalist party as the only route to the alternative world for which Monbiot is unquestionably convinced of the objective need. We must reject the abstentionist leftism of the 'purists' who take one look at his utopianism (or the company kept by George Galloway) and would have us abandon the field before the battle has even begun. Only time will tell how things develop, but Marxist politics must be there ●

Ben Lewis

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 ready 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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not judge the truth on how unseemly it is. Moreover, there is evidence that Reed is not alone in having experienced so much, so young. It is estimated that one in eight American students self-harms, a habit usually begun in adolescence, and in the UK that children as young as 11 have developed heroin addictions.

The question *Thirteen* provoked me to ask was, "What took you so long?" I came to adolescence during the height of Grunge, a movement inspired by the darkest, most dangerous emotions, said to convey 'the full ugliness of unhappiness', so I find the film world laggardly in tackling these aspects of the human condition.

As for the MTV jibe, as a member of the so-called 'MTV generation', I never doubted that the fast cuts, dissolves and snippets of shaky, bleached out super eight could be used to great effect, conveying the unrelenting deluge of images and imagery of the post-modern era.

And, no, *Thirteen* is not melodramatic: it is superbly acted. Reed manages to be both manipulative and deeply pathetic, and the eloquent Wood-Hunter depiction of raw emotion never jars.

Ironically, *Thirteen* is ultimately successful because it casts its net beyond the adolescent experiences of Tracy and Evie; it was co-penned by Catherine Hardwicke. Mel is not only a lone parent and struggling hairdresser, but also a newly recovering alcoholic, regularly calling her AA sponsor, and intermittently entertaining her ex-junkie boyfriend. We are left with the sense that it is tough growing up, because it is a tough world, the teen angst merely mirroring the adult angst.

Go and see *Thirteen*. It is not on at a lot of cinemas, as it is not exactly fodder for the multiplex. You will feel numb afterwards, but also reassured by such an eloquent portrayal of unhappiness ●

Zoë Simon



weekly Worker

Paper of the Communist Party of Great Britain

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'Marxists' front for the oppressors

Jacques Chirac's Lutte Ouvrière policemen

Sections of the French left, confused by interlocking issues of secularism, women's rights and freedom of expression, are in disarray over president Jacques Chirac's plans to scapegoat the oppressed five-million-strong muslim minority.

Incredibly, Lutte Ouvrière, one of France's two largest Trotskyist groups, has come out in support of rightwing plans to ban the wearing or displaying of "ostensible" religious or political symbols in state schools. This is primarily aimed at the headscarf, or hijab.

However, it is presented as part of a package claiming to defend secularism and the separation of church and state, enacted in 1905 - a claim groups like Lutte Ouvrière seem to have swallowed hook, line and sinker. According to LO, the headscarf should be banned in schools "not only out of respect for secularism, but also, and especially, in defence of women's rights" ('Allow women to resist oppression' *Lutte Ouvrière* December 19).

Do the comrades really believe that Chirac is dedicated to the promotion of women's rights - any more than he is a defender of republican secularism? Surely not. Stretching credulity even further, they actually want to claim 'credit' for pressurising the establishment into launching its assault on religious and political freedom. The ban on the veil "would undoubtedly not have been possible if teachers had not refused to teach girls wearing the veil, if they had not mobilised to stop it".

Which "teachers" are they referring to? To their shame, their own members have been in the forefront of a campaign aimed at excluding school students from classes simply because their attire is not to the comrades' liking. The most notorious case occurred in Aubervilliers, where two sisters, aged 16 and 18, were banned after a long dispute, aggressively promoted by Lutte Ouvrière.

Alma and Lila Lévy suffered months of harassment and discrimination, including a ban on physical education and sport, allegedly "for reasons of hygiene" connected with the hijab they took to wearing a year ago. The school authorities exerted all kinds of pressures, proposing, for example, a 'compromise' whereby all teachers would agree to take them if only they would agree to wear the headscarf in such a way as to expose their ears and the roots of their hair!

LO justifies its disgraceful role on the grounds that it is helping young women to free themselves from the male domination, in the family and community, that is symbolised by the hijab, while at the same time striking a blow for secularism. It pretends to believe that every muslim woman who wears the veil is forced to do so and is

just waiting for the "help" of 'teacher knows best' Lutte Ouvrière members.

The case of the Aubervilliers sisters hardly bears this out. Their mother is a non-practising muslim and their father, Laurent Lévy, is an atheist of Jewish descent. He has made it clear that he does not favour the wearing of the headgear that his daughters have adopted of their own free will, but he has campaigned tirelessly for their right to dress as they choose.

According to Lutte Ouvrière, teachers facing the "problem" of young women like the Lévy's, who insist on exercising their individual right to cover their hair, neck and ears, will now be "delighted to have at their disposal a text to support their opposition to the wearing of the veil in school". The LO writer blithely admits that the proposed law, if passed, "will not by itself end the pressures felt in the family and on the estates by girls". But it will be a "point of support" for them (and "for their teachers", of course).

Some support! But Laurent Lévy has an eloquent answer to this philistinism: "The idea that certain teachers could be 'troubled' by the sight of my daughters wearing a headscarf could not justify their refusal to teach them. The 'problem' is less that of children wearing this garment than of teachers refusing to have them in their class."

Secularism (which he fully supports) "does not demand the concealment of religious convictions". In fact what his daughters are suffering, at the hands of oppressive authorities - in cahoots with the 'revolutionary Marxists' of Lutte Ouvrière - is purely and simply "discrimination because of their muslim faith".

Absolutely correct. Only the secularism of fools aims to suppress the right of religious or political expression. On the contrary, the genuine secularism championed by consistent democrats and communists aims to protect citizens from the power of the state to force religion upon them. It aims to empower them, not curtail their right to practise (or not practise) whatever religion they choose.

Genuine secularism bars the official propagation of religion and prohibits acts of religious worship as part of the school curriculum. The teaching of "the fact of religion", to use the French expression, is perfectly acceptable (although some of our topsy-turvy French comrades, while wholeheartedly backing the Chirac ban, seem to think that the teaching of religion as an academic subject somehow breaches lay principles. Absurdly, Vincent Prémey, writing in the normally sound *La Lettre de Liaisons*, claims that the exclusion from the ban of the right to wear "discreet", as opposed to "ostensible", religious symbols amounts to the back-door "institutionalisation" of



Alma and Lila Lévy: too 'troubling' to teach

religion and the erosion of secularism - December 18).

In fact what the ban will do, far from promoting secularism, is, in the words of Lévy, "call into question the necessary coming together of traditions and cultures in school, and strengthen communitarianism". Already around one eighth of school students are educated in private schools - 95% of them run by the catholic church. In such institutions, which are generously subsidised by the 'secular' French state, backward religious practices are allowed to run riot. No doubt the minority of strictly observant muslims, not to mention the islamic 'communitarian' fundamentalists, will be only too pleased to be able to attract more recruits - driven into their arms by the likes of the ultra-economistic Lutte Ouvrière!

Another left grouping which - more understandably, perhaps - has backed what it believes to be a blow against islamism is the Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq (set up by the Worker-communist Party of Iraq). Having experienced at first hand the

oppressive, anti-women practices of islamists in the Middle East, the comrades have actually written to French prime minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin to express their "great enthusiasm and pleasure" at the proposed ban on the headscarf:

"Imposing the veil on female children ... is the first violation of children's rights. We are aware that this false debate is not about the rights of girls to choose their clothes; rather it is about child abuse and part of a political agenda to spread and consolidate political islam in the world today" (December 25).

With enemies like these, islamic fundamentalists need no friends. The Chirac ban, and the support it has received from both right and left, plays into their hands. It will be used as proof of an unholy alliance aimed at suppressing islamic practices and the muslim religion itself.

It is of course true that the headscarf is often a symbol of women's oppression. But women and girls must be won to willingly embrace their own emancipation - which means the right to

wear or not wear items of dress that have repressive origins. They must be won to see that the wearing of the hijab is a *right*, not a *duty* - and the exercise of rights can be declined as well as taken up.

It is the duty of communists, while standing four-square for genuine secularism and the complete separation of church and state, to champion the democratic right of believers to practise their religion, which includes the right to publicly display religious symbols.

One of the most heartening aspects of this whole affair is the willingness of youth to act in solidarity with those whose rights are denied. It seems that the final straw that led to the exclusion of the Lévy sisters was their participation in a spontaneous demonstration of support by fellow students last year.

Those students were determined to make a stand against the oppressive authorities and the Chirac ban - ably enforced by his Lutte Ouvrière policemen ●

Peter Manson

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