

weekly **Worker**



**Ken Livingstone and GLA
tighten bureaucratic grip
over London ESF**

- Hijab ban: pro and anti
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Towards a new workers' party

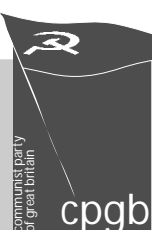
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2003: Millions of marchers



2004: Millions of voters?



PARTYnotes

Respect and opportunism

Sunday January 25 sees the national Convention of the Left and the formal launch of Respect (a rather tortured acronym standing for 'respect', 'equality', 'socialism', 'peace', 'environmentalism', 'community' and 'trade unionism'). Naturally communists not only wish Respect well, but seek active involvement at all levels. Respect says it is determined to overcome the "crisis of representation" and tackle the "democratic deficit" which exists "at the heart of politics in Britain".

Such ends - if they are to be achieved - necessitate definite means. We shall therefore argue for democratic structures, transparency, inclusivity and replacing vague formulations with concrete political demands. For example, having lambasted Britain's "democratic deficit", we are surely obliged to unite around the only coherent alternative - the 'r' in Respect should stand for republicanism: ie, abolition of the monarchy and the House of Lords, and for a federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales and a united Ireland.

Respect also requires a culture of civilised debate. Allowing the floor just a few pinched hours to decide upon the array of motions and amendments that have been submitted is a worrying sign. Those who hold minority viewpoints must be given their due respect - that means sufficient time to explain themselves, argue and reply.

Equally worrying is the underhand determination of the Socialist Workers Party to exclude the Socialist Party in England and Wales and all critical voices to its left: Alex Callinicos specifically targeted the CPGB and the "poisonous" *Weekly Worker*. Fortunately an approach not necessarily shared by Galloway - he finally agreed to meet SPEW's reps on January 23.

So far all discussions, negotiations and deals have been done in secret, almost conspiratorially. No minutes have been issued. Decisions have been taken by a self-selected elite - consisting of George Galloway, the dissident MP; Ken Loach, the leftwing filmmaker; *Guardian* columnist George Monbiot; Salma Yaqoob of Birmingham Stop the War Coalition; SWP leader John Rees; Nick Wrack, chair of the Socialist Alliance; Linda Smith of London FBU; Mark Serwotka, PCS general secretary; and Bob Crow, general secretary of RMT. Disappointingly comrades Serwotka and Crow have subsequently backed away from full involvement. Hence the trade union input is much diminished.

Where does that leave Respect? Frankly, it all depends on who you ask. Understandably George Galloway has no desire to ruin his chances of triumphantly following Ken Livingstone back to the bosom of the Labour Party. George Monbiot too views Respect as a short-term project - one designed to punish Tony Blair and bring the Labour Party to its senses. As a left muslim, Salma Yaqoob presumably considers Respect some kind of contribution towards the universal caliphate. Meanwhile the SWP talks in terms of working class representation and envisages Respect having a life after the June 10 'super Thursday' elections for the European parliament and Greater London Assembly.

Yet, though heralded as a unique opportunity to harness the anti-war movement and "reshape politics", the

truth is that, as presently constituted, Respect unites little more than what the Socialist Alliance achieved at its rather modest best. The interim committee is the rump Socialist Alliance plus George Galloway, plus George Monbiot, plus Salma Yaqoob. Not only is the trade union awkward squad noticeably absent; so too are representatives of the Labour left. No CLPs. No Labour councillors. Even the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain finally balked at the prospect.

And in order to take this "momentous step forward" the SWP has been prepared to pay a price: seemingly any price. The Socialist Alliance's programme has been watered down to a minimalist, essentially petty bourgeois wish list. Many points are unobjectionable, a few eminently supportable. Nevertheless, there appears to be a ruling belief that platitudes are preferable to principles and that less always equals more: ie, the less Respect has to say, the more it will attract partners and in due course votes. Marxism has a term for this - opportunism.

Though often transparently sincere, opportunism is a well trod road to disaster, and has recently had SWPers mournfully citing the Muslim Association of Britain and its unwillingness to join us (reportedly it will lend support from the sidelines). Apparently the paper you are now reading is to blame.

MAB vehemently objects to Respect's pledge to uphold the "right to self-determination of every individual in relation to their ... sexual choices". And, of course, this formulation was introduced in the aftermath of our polemical broadsides against Lindsey German. She notoriously announced at Marxism 2003, the SWP's annual educational event, that women's and gay right should not be treated as "shibboleths" (*Weekly Worker* July 10 2003). A clause four moment. At the time, the motivating idea of comrades German and Rees was to cement an electoral pact with Birmingham's central mosque ... and naturally that meant 'respecting' islam's traditional attitude towards women and homosexuals. Women are viewed as inherently inferior and homosexual acts are deemed an abomination in the sight of god.

Our protests against this blatant attempt to lay the ground for trading away elementary democratic principles were answered by SWP national secretary Chris Bambery. He unleashed his goons. CPGB members leafleting outside Marxism 2003 were not only harangued but physically assaulted - something which still to this day has not resulted in any calls for disciplinary action inside the SA nor even an apology from a contrite SWP central committee.

Not surprisingly though, there was much consternation amongst honest SWPers. And thankfully there are many of them. Doubtless to calm their fears and assuage outraged leftwing allies the SWP grudgingly agreed to include a few words on women's and gay rights. Remember, initiative in the SWP emanates solely from above, so it is revealing that SWP cadre now sorrowfully refer to this as mistaken. The implication is crystal clear: principles are a burden; anything can be sacrificed in the interests of "building the movement" (not only women's

and gay rights, but, as shown by the SA's January 17 national council, a workers' representative on a worker's wage, opposition to immigration controls, republican opposition to the UK's monarchical constitution, proletarian socialism, etc).

The foolish notion is that Respect can be all things to all people. In other words only by moving further and further to the right can the left get votes - a caricature of what the SWP used to say about the sorry course plied by successive generations of Labourites. Historically this is false: eg, the Bolsheviks stayed true to their principles and still won election after election. Moreover such an attitude treats the electorate - ie, the working class - with utter contempt. Elections become not about making propaganda and enhancing class combativity, but rather saying what you think people want to hear in a desperate bid to get elected - almost for its own sake.

Unless we equip ourselves with a fully rounded programme - one firmly based upon the Marxist world outlook - the chances of success are slim indeed. If Respect is viewed as any kind of a threat to the existing order the pro-capitalist parties, media, educational establishment and think tanks, will interrogate not only what it says, but what it leaves unsaid. Every diplomatic silence, every gaping hole, every contradictory statement, every shortcoming will be minutely probed, dissected and pored over and mercilessly highlighted by their well oiled publicity machines. Under such circumstances lack of a programme becomes a fatal weakness.

Hence we have to ask ourselves whether or not Respect is really an advance on the SA. For all its faults and limitations *People before profit* represented at least two steps forward. Firstly, by accepting it as the basis of common action we achieved a virtually unprecedented degree of organisational and programmatic unity. Secondly, in practice most of the SA's principal supporting organisations shifted significantly to the left - from auto-Labourism or passive abstentionism to actually presenting their own alternative.

Had the SWP encouraged "all its members and supporters to throw themselves into building" the SA, rather than waiting till Respect before making such a bold call, then surely we would have been well placed to engage with and recruit many of those who were mobilised by the anti-war movement - crucially leading sections of the organised working class. Instead, before, during and after the Iraq invasion, the SWP ensured that the SA was kept as an on-off united front. Mostly off. The result - demoralisation, decline in members, derisory votes and now virtual death. What might have been can surely be glimpsed from the Scottish Socialist Party's altogether better record - left nationalist and parochial though the organisation is.

People tend to join and vote for parties which over a sustained period of time have established a known presence and record of activity and stand on a comprehensive and testable programme. Put another way, despite the failure of the SA the party question has not gone away: it is simply posed anew in the more difficult subjective conditions of Respect ●

Jack Conrad

LETTERS



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

Headscarves

Having heard of Lutte Ouvrière's position on the wearing of the Islamic scarf by schoolgirls, I was not entirely surprised by the facts described in Peter Manson's article - though I'm grateful to him for bringing out the details of the Lévy sisters' case, and the nasty implications of supporting Chirac's legislation (*Weekly Worker* January 8).

For the French imperialist state to lay down the law on what pupils can wear, and teachers should enforce, and this to be greeted as a step to "freedom", is surely Orwellian! If Lutte Ouvrière members in the teaching profession are really welcoming and implementing such bans, then calling them Chirac's "police-men" is no more than fair comment.

But what's this? Lutte Ouvrière says it has been misrepresented, that the article's "tone" is "insulting", and that it is full of "factual mistakes" (Letters, January 15). Well, not taking everything I read in the *Weekly Worker* as holy writ (!), I'd have been grateful for them putting the record straight. But apparently they 'have not got time', because they are preparing for elections. (I hope they will find time to answer questions from voters in the *banlieues*, or will they leave it to their left partners?) What's more - it seems their UK franchise, Workers Fight, has not got time either. Rather than take the opportunity to discuss what attitude socialists should take on this issue, Anna Hunt says we should not concern ourselves with events abroad, when the Socialist Workers Party is trying to pursue ties with "political islam". This is the old discredited game of avoiding a serious issue by pointing at something else.

The issue of what attitude socialists should take to religion and the state is a bit bigger, and rightly interests far more people, than what this or that leftwing group is up to. It concerns us in Britain or Ireland as much as in Israel, France or Iraq. And, believe it or not, we are quite capable of opposing Islamic, or any other variety of reaction, without trusting 'liberation' to the bourgeois state, or abandoning the defence of minorities and against state repression and racism.

It is ridiculous for the SWP to tail behind the Muslim Association of Britain, even reputedly urging its own members to don the headscarf; but it would be a shame if the defence of minority rights and youngsters like the Lévy sisters was left to religious leaders, who want to use the issue to defend not freedom, but their own authority. For 'revolutionaries' to accept, let alone uphold, repressive bans can only hand young Muslims (and other communities affected) back to religious leaders - and it also raises suspicions about the left's own accommodation to prejudices. I imagine a young woman looking in anguish from religious tyranny to state oppression, and asking, 'Is that all there is?' Surely socialism must be able to offer an alternative - one of truly human freedom.

We should oppose the French government's ban and the adoption of sharia law in Iraq. There's no contradiction there: only consistency. Some women comrades have recalled a past and still valid slogan, 'Not the church and not the state! Women must decide their fate!'

Charlie Pottins
email

Authoritarian

In his fire-and-brimstone article supporting Jacques Chirac's proposed ban on the wearing of "ostentatious" religious symbols, comrade Terry Liddle manifests a disquietingly authoritarian irreligiosity ('Secular support for ban' *Weekly Worker* January 15).

According to Terry, by proposing a state crackdown on what school students are allowed to wear, the current citizen number one, Chirac, is placing himself "in the French republican tradition" - even if, regrettably, he is "no Robespierre". Inspired by France, it seems, comrade Liddle fervently looks forward to the day when "the hijab, the skullcap and the cross, and all symbols of religious oppression, are consigned to the flames" and all the great religious texts and scriptures are "consigned to the attentions of worms and mice".

This is not the right approach. Leaving aside the lurking philistinism and reductionist atheology of such comments, comrade Liddle displays a woeful misunderstanding of secularism. Yet from the standpoint of Marxism this is a relatively straightforward issue - at least from the general theoretical-philosophical point of view.

Secularism, for democrats, means the strict separation of church and state - that is, the state and its *institutions* must not be permitted to promote, privilege or favour any religious faith or doctrine - thus, obviously, any form of religious worship or instruction is prohibited, and school and college buildings are not allowed to display religious symbols, "ostentatious" or otherwise (though it goes without saying that the overall question of religion - its historical origins, cultural significance, etc - will, and indeed must be, rigorously examined and discussed, without fear of censure, pedagogical disapproval or offending 'multicultural' sensibilities). However, what the individuals who attend these institutions choose to wear, for whatever reason, is entirely up to them - or should be.

For me this is just 'classical' or 'orthodox' Marxism - hardly rocket science. But for comrade Liddle, and presumably the comrades from Lutte Ouvrière (and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire?), it is 'spurious libertarianism' and must be combated.

So what is Terry's non-spurious approach? Well, like any vigilant state bureaucrat, or high priest, Terry knows what is best for you - and what is really, really *bad*. Hence the hijab, skullcap and cross (sikh turban? buddhist robe?) are "symbols of oppression" - pure and simple. No namby-pamby stuff from Terry about the complexities of human nature, with all its conflicting and overlapping cultural identities and mediations. Comrade Liddle will *force* you to be free. Therefore, "Anything which weakens the influence of religion in society and the power of the clergy over their flocks is to be welcomed" (my emphasis).

Given Terry's opening remarks, we have to assume that "anything" includes the banning of the hijab, etc, by a rightwing and corrupt monarchical French president, which would turn all French teachers into part-time gendarmes whose function is to police the classroom and decide which pupil is wearing "ostentatious" religious clothing/artefacts and which is not - and what happens to those who have the cheek to actually *voice* "ostentatious" religious beliefs and values? Watch this space.

In this context, it is informative that comrade Liddle singles out the Society (or League) of Militant Godless, founded in April 1925 in the Soviet Union, for special praise - on the grounds, as Terry puts it, that it "sought to free the minds of the Soviet masses from the feudal ideological grip of orthodox christianity". Oh yes? In his comprehensive study of the League of Militant Godless (or Atheists), Daniel Peris notes that the League ultimately became little more than an ancillary weapon in the broader battle for enforced collectivisation and industrialisation, a bureaucratic channel for the Stalinite dictatorship, with the result that "by the mid-1930s there was, in effect, little that was atheistic in Soviet anti-religion" (D Peris *Storming the heavens: the Soviet League of the Mili-*

tant Godless New York 1998, p115).

Is Terry really serious in looking towards the League of Militant Godless, maybe even the Soviet Union itself, as a 'secular' role model for socialists and communists in the 21st century? Or perhaps he would prefer an Enver Hoxha-style atheocracy - which saw the Albanian masses 'officially' liberated from the influence of religion. Luckily, comrade Liddle can still avail himself of the opportunity to visit North Korea, where I am sure that there is not a hijab, skullcap or cross in sight and all superstition is surely banished - so the masses there must be happy and free, if we are to follow Terry's idealised logic.

In his polemics against Bakunin on the peasantry, Marx warned against treating "atheism as dogma". Unfortunately, comrade Liddle has not heeded this advice - you get the impression that he is a materialist because he is an atheist, not an atheist because he is a materialist.

Means determine ends and ends determine means, as Marx consistently stressed throughout his political life. It can never be said too often: socialism is the winning of the battle for democracy, not how many 'atheist drives' you can launch or the passing of anti-democratic pseudo-secular laws.

Eddie Ford
Cornwall

John the martyr

Manny Neira makes a compelling case for the democratic aspects of democratic centralism (*Weekly Worker* January 15). But he does not apply his valid points to the expulsion of John Pearson from the CPGB. The political context was the development of the 'peace and justice'/ Respect unity coalition by the Socialist Workers Party and the CPGB attitude towards it.

What should have happened according to Manny's stress on the democratic pole is this. The CPGB Provisional Central Committee meets to discuss the new political turn by the SWP. It's a new, significant development which has no previous membership mandate, so the PCC, as the political leadership, discusses/ debates the issues and publishes its political deliberations or minutes to the membership. It makes a recommendation or shows a political lead by asking for approval of a course of action. The membership is then able to look at the leaders' views and their differences of shading and emphasis.

Now, since the membership of the CPGB is small and mainly based in London, it can be easily called together for an aggregate of the full membership. The aggregate can agree or vote for an alternative position, or go for an amended line. The minor differences between the leaders can be noted and a view taken on those so the leaders are not blindly trusted but accountable to the members. We would then have a majority collective view after full or maximum opportunity for debate and dissent.

Any focus, significant development would bring the same democratic centralist response. Minutes of the PCC and the aggregate would clearly record the reasons for majority decisions and the argument of any minority or dissenter. Members would be able to reassess the politics after been kept fully informed.

But what actually happened was that there were no aggregates called for some weeks as the initiative unfolded. Nor was there any record or minutes of the political discussion among the trusted leaders of the PCC, according to Manny. It was all top-down centralism. There was no consistent attitude from the leaders and it was difficult to know who represented the collective view of the PCC, let alone the membership.

John Pearson was expelled in an aggregate called to retrospectively authorise the CPGB leaders' course of action by a membership which was not actively involved in the SA or a dialogue with the leaders in an open and transparent process. The motion for expulsion was put by Jack Conrad, the leader who wanted

John expelled. There was no right of appeal to this decision.

When John and I were voided by Scargill in the Socialist Labour Party without the right to appeal, the CPGB described this as undemocratic. Democratic centralism should require a disciplinary committee composed of comrades not on the PCC and the right of appeal should be built into the rules. **Barry Biddulph**
Chair, Stockport SA

Repeated

John Pearson has used this forum (Letters, January 15) to take issue with my defence of the CPGB's decision to expel him from the party (Letters, December 18). He accuses me of "inventing previous form" when I described his "repeated refusal" to accept the legitimacy of party decisions and said that he had "repeatedly let down his comrades".

The *Collins concise dictionary* defines the word 'repeat' as: "to do or experience (something) again, once or several times". As comrade Pearson broke party discipline by voting against our agreed line on three separate occasions at the inaugural conference of the Democracy Platform of the Socialist Alliance, it seems to me that my use of this term is accurate.

Moreover, during the month between these incidents and the party aggregate on December 8, John was asked many times by various comrades if he would undertake to abide by the rules of the party. During numerous email exchanges he refused to give such an undertaking, a stance he *repeated* verbally at the aggregate itself, much to the disappointment of all who were present.

If the comrade does not have access to a dictionary at home, I suggest he tries using one of the many excellent online reference resources.

Steve Cooke
Stockton-on-Tees

Not selective

Comrade Roger Harper suggests that the expulsion of John Pearson exposes the CPGB's discipline as "selective" (Letters, January 15).

As evidence, he cites the decision of a Party aggregate in early 2003 to send a letter to members who did not attend the massive February 15 anti-war demo in London. He asserts that this was never done. Therefore, comrades who failed to show on this "biggest class action for over 20 years" were never confronted.

This is incorrect. Subsequent to this aggregate decision, comrades who did not get themselves to such key mass actions *were* written to and asked for an explanation. This resulted in us eventually parting ways with four comrades, with varying degrees of amicability. Roger was not a member during this period, so his take on these events is a little imprecise. I can assure him, however, that both the aggregate and the leadership of the Party regarded it an extremely serious matter that a mass upsurge could propel the likes of Kylie Minogue onto the streets, but not comrades who classified themselves as *members*.

Roger's last point concerning the expulsion of comrade Pearson himself does not make sense. He calls the expulsion "a mistake". But then he suggests that "more in line" with the nature of comrade Pearson's 'crime' would have been "a return to candidate membership or supporter status". Yet John Pearson made it plain throughout the aggregate that he had no intention of voluntarily relinquishing Party membership and becoming a supporter.

An aggregate can hardly *impose* supporter status on a comrade who does not want it. It can only deprive a comrade of membership - it is up to that individual to decide their future relationship with the organisation. Comrade Pearson has made it clear in practice since he left our ranks that he has no intention of being regarded as a supporter of the Communist Party.

So, effectively, Roger supports the expulsion. Good. In this, he is fully in line with the vast majority of CPGB comrades. **Ian Mahoney**
London

Questioning

At the January 20 'British politics at the crossroads' meeting in Cardiff, I had the pleasure of questioning John Rees.

I asked him why the chairperson had failed to introduce him as a member of the SWP. Furthermore, all reference to the revolutionary politics the working class needs in order to transform society was absent from his opening remarks. I was disturbed by his response. Quite openly, he informed the audience that he had withheld this information because he wanted people to join Respect and not be put off.

There are a number of concerns here. Not only are his remarks both patronising and fundamentally dishonest, but they reveal little understanding of the role parties play in engaging with the new coalition. Presumably, comrade Rees plans to introduce revolutionary politics little by little to the wider movement and hopes to see the SWP grow as a result. However, is it not the case, comrade Rees, that in order to change society the prevailing ideas must be challenged?

All transformation starts with a pole of opposition. If it does not, then you will find that you have not changed society, but it has changed you.

Ethan Grech
Cardiff

Respect

I attended the first launch meeting of the Respect unity coalition in Liverpool - more out of interest than any genuine enthusiasm for the project. As custom dictates, a veritable feast of lefty papersellers flanked the entrance to the meeting - held at the Gladstone Hotel.

Michael Lavalette, the country's sole Socialist Alliance councillor, oversaw proceedings. Journalist Yvonne Ridley and director Alex Cox (of *Sid and Nancy* fame and supporter of the woollier-than-thou Green Party) were the first to lend their support to the coalition.

However, John Rees, to his credit, mentioned the working class at least four or five times in his speech. Unfortunately most of his audience was middle class - and there's nothing worse than middle class do-gooders telling the working class what's best for them. Comrade Rees regurgitated the same abstract ideas that the Socialist Alliance failed to win over the class with, but he did get the middle class radicals in the hall quite excited.

The star attraction was the Great Leader Galloway, his oratory as stirring as ever. Galloway's motivations behind Respect were clear. He informed us that he didn't want his 40 years of political activism to have been in vain. In other words, now he could no longer make a name for himself in the Labour Party, he would make do with his budding new band of acolytes.

The RUC represents no great improvement on previous efforts. Maybe the Independent Working Class Association is the way forward, as other readers have suggested. Maybe we need a Convention of the Working Class, free from dogma and delusions of grandeur. Either way, I've swallowed as much of this stuff as I can take.

Joe Brunton
email

No association

I was intrigued by comrade Harris's assertion (January 15) that the letter from Mick O'Conaill (January 8), in which he announces his intention to join the IWCA, shows that the CPGB "is now losing even its close supporters".

Who is Mick O'Conaill? As far as I am aware, this person has had no association with the CPGB whatsoever.

Mark Fischer
London

ACTION

London Communist Forum

Sunday January 25 - no forum

Sunday February 1, 5pm: 'Marx-Engels versus de Tocqueville', part two, using August Nimtz's *Marx and Engels - their contribution to the democratic breakthrough* as a study guide.

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

Europe-wide action for migrants

Against detention and for migrant rights, called by European Social Forum.

Public meeting: Tuesday January 27, 6.30pm - 'Oppose Asylum and Immigration Bill'. Grand Committee Room, House of Commons. Speakers include Neil Gerrard MP.

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: 07949 282445; dikeka@onetel.com

Noise demonstration: Close down Lindholme - Saturday January 31, Lindholme removal/detention centre. Meet 12 noon, Tyrham Hall Hotel, South Yorkshire (on the A614, south of Hatfield Woodhouse).

Sumac Centre: 0845 458 9595; lindholme@veggies.org.uk

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

CPGB history

People's History Museum, Pump House, 1 Bridge Street, Manchester M3.

Conference: The CPGB and its history, Saturday February 2

Exhibition: The story of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Open until Sunday April 25, Tuesday-Sunday, 11am to 4.30pm. Entrance: £1; children and concessions: free. First Friday of the month: 'Bluffer's guide' tour. 0161-839 6061; karenm@peopleshistorymuseum.org.uk

Labour democracy

Campaign for Labour Party Democracy annual general meeting, Saturday February 21, 11am-4pm, Conway Hall. Speakers include Billy Hayes, general secretary CWU, and Alice Mahon MP.

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.

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

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; Billy Hayes, general secretary CWU; 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

RESPECT

Labour Start -
<http://www.labourstart.org>

Web breakfast

At home, breakfast telly has become as an essential part of my morning routine, alongside my cup of tea and bowl of cereal. Usually I tend to go for the BBC or, if I am feeling particularly masochistic, Murdoch's Orwellian channel, Fox 'News'.

Both offer variations on a theme. Fox and the BBC only feature news items that they define as important, such as mainstream party politics, international issues, economic news, etc. Such mouthpieces of the ruling class exist to produce news for themselves; therefore it is pretty uncontroversial to say that Marxists should view the bourgeois media through a critical lens. That is, not only do the media distort what is reported, but also leave a lot of things unsaid. Out of sight, out of mind.

Therefore the comrades responsible for the Labour Start website are to be congratulated for putting together a genuinely useful tool. Whereas most left groups use the internet in a strictly instrumental fashion (ie, just sticking up a website carrying their party's partisan positions and contact details), Labour Start brings together hundreds of stories every week culled from little-circulated union releases, as well as obscure corners of the bourgeois media. It is pretty similar to a cyberspace version of *Socialist Worker's* 'News and reports' feature, with a bit more detail and the occasional imprimatur of 'respectable' news organisations.

These items occupy the main field under the heading, 'This week's top stories', and link to reports by the media outlets concerned. For example, leaders at the time of writing concern the three-month-old Californian grocery worker's strike (*LA Times*), more Enron-style disclosures from unions representing Parmalat's workforce (*New York Times*), and the formation of Bahrain's federation of unions (*Gulf News*). This is followed by a special section on the Sars virus (which appears to be broken), before a (very large) round-up of today's news from the international frontline of the class struggle. There is no mistaking its impressive scope, but no items from the left press get a look in. Do Labour Start comrades believe such reports to be crude position pieces, or are the left's questionable journalistic standards to blame?

An investigation of the navigation panel turns up a lot of interesting additional material. It is headed with January's 'Job of the month' - an organiser vacancy for Teamsters for a Democratic Union in Detroit, USA. This is followed by the site search engine, which covers recently featured stories plus an archive stretching back five years. Next follows a number of urgent stories asking the viewer to act - usually by sending a standard email of protest helpfully provided by these pages. Following yet another search engine (allowing for a search of the archives for stories particular to individual countries) we have the option to vote for the labour website of 2003. Naturally the Labour Start web team fancy the accolade, but unfortunately the voting link does not work! Still, at least you can take a look at the previous winners.

The option to show appreciation financially is available via its donation pages. This can be done online through PayPal or by snail mail, care of a London address. The jobs page rounds up some union vacancies ranging from regional organiser for the PCSU to a part-time clerical position at Usdaw. As might be expected, the overwhelming majority of vacancies are concentrated in the US-UK-Australia axis. The newswire page is aimed at those with their own websites and contains the techie info needed to set up a Labour Start feed (it was so simple, even I could follow it). The 'About' page offers a quick guide to the project, including links to its network of volunteers, mailing list, and frequently asked questions. The forums link offers a variety of boards of varying degrees of participation on a number of topics. Most seem union-specific (even down to branch level), and therefore strictly on-topic, and appear well behaved. The war on terror forums describe themselves as "a place to exchange news and information - not to shout at each other". It is a pity that too few internet-using socialists take heed of this advice.

There is a lot more to Labour Start than this brief overview has covered, and is well worth exploring in more depth. Comrades visiting the site should take the home page legend seriously. It reads: "Where trade unionists start their day on the net". A pity Labour Start does not do breakfast TV. It would be just the tonic to relieve my BBC-induced indignation ●

around
THEWEB

Fight for a party

The Convention of the Left promises to found an alternative to New Labour this Sunday at Friends Meeting House in central London. In an attempt to unite those mobilised by the anti-war movement with trade unionists, socialists, environmentalists and "faith communities", it promises to be all things to all left-minded people.

Communists will work within it to shape it into something of value to our class. If the Respect coalition can cohere into a socialist organisation, superseding the modest gains of the Socialist Alliance, and sink roots throughout British society, then it can play a central role in the fight for the main political task facing our movement - the formation of a working class party prepared to challenge for political power. To this end, communists critically engage with its formation, coming as it does out of an anti-war movement that produced an upsurge of anti-imperialist sentiment among wide sections of the population.

It is, however, a contradictory development. Highly positive in the attempt to channel the anti-war upsurge into a democratic movement for political change. However, it also reflects the failure of the Socialist Alliance to emerge from the mass protests as the consistent democratic and socialist voice capable of carrying this through. Its birth is a recognition that the SA failed the test of the war.

In order to keep a disparate political alliance together, the Socialist Workers Party, which will surely make up the bulk of the convention, and its allies are junking principle after principle to launch Respect. Open borders and opposition to immigration controls? No thanks. "Too advanced," says Alan Thornett of the International Socialist Group, an SWP ally. Our elected representatives taking a worker's wage? Not for us. Might scare Campaign Group MPs away, says Rob Hoveman, the SWP secretary of the Socialist Alliance. Democratic and transparent selection of candidates? Not today, says the SWP. Let's try to get the Muslim Association of Britain on board instead.

The SWP is definitely taking steps backwards, as it gambles on highly risky and unlikely organisational gains for itself. The optimist in me wishes the convention the best of luck, but I fear that if the Respect ship sinks, the small advance that the Socialist Alliance represents may be dashed against the opportunistic rocks.

As we go to print, there is no agenda available. From what I know there are a handful of 'delete all and insert' motions

for the convention declaration. The Revolutionary Democratic Group, backed by the SA Democracy Platform, is moving one: 'Britain at the crossroads' (see p9). Workers Power is moving another. Both are improvements on the draft. I have been told these will be taken first, with the successful substantive motion then open to the amendments received.

I do not know what amendments will emerge on the day. But I do know those being supported by the Democracy Platform (SADP) and they all deserve communist support. On the day, the SWP and its ISG ally will act as political policeman. They will speak left, vote right. We were told at the SA national council that these amendments were acceptable - in the right circumstances, but not this Sunday. Nick Wrack, SA chair and member of the Unity Coalition interim committee, has said that he may support some of these, come the autumn reconvening of the Unity Coalition, but now is not the right time.

Motions supported by the SADP (most of which are drawn directly from *People before profit*) include: for working class representation on a workers' wage; for open borders and opposition to immigration controls; what we mean by socialism; for democratic selection of candidates; for republicanism. I understand there is also a motion amending opposition to the euro and calling for an active boycott to any referendum on it. The Communist Party will be moving an amendment for the 'r' in Respect to stand for republicanism.

The SA itself is moving three amendments in one to the draft: for a minimum wage of £7.40 an hour, for taxing the rich and freedom for Palestine. While all are supportable, they would not alter the essentially left populist character of the declaration.

Workers Power is also putting forward a motion calling for the formation of a working class party. I see no harm in voting for it, although it is the concrete success or otherwise of the coalition that will place this on the political agenda rather than such a motion at this stage. Its likely defeat could well see WP walk out, as it did from the SA.

The Socialist Party in England and Wales will be attending on Sunday, though I am told it will not move any amendments. Cut out from the initial organisation of the convention, SP representatives were due to attend an 11th-hour meeting with the Unity Coalition interim committee in Coventry on January 23. My soundings suggest that the SP will critically support the Respect coalition from the outside. The Muslim



Galloway: blows

Association of Britain has said it will support the coalition in a similar way.

It seems that there may be less organisational support for the coalition than currently exists for the Socialist Alliance - it is certainly a blow to Galloway that the Communist Party of Britain is staying out, along with, less unpredictably, the Green Party. So just who will be in the coalition? How viable is it? Will it just be the SA plus a few more?

The SWP has been very exercised and excited about the size of the 'Britain at the crossroads' meetings held around England and Wales. It is true they have been excellent. But we ought to keep things in perspective. There was much wider interest and enthusiasm around the launch of the Socialist Labour Party than we are now witnessing. The meetings featuring Scargill were generally bigger than what the current road show is attracting.

There are no guarantees in politics. No predetermined outcomes. Those who are adopting an 'I couldn't possibly join Respect' pose are not engaging with reality as it develops. Communists would not have proposed this coalition, but, given its appearance, we will engage with it to continue the fight for the reformed Communist Party our class needs. Respect is obviously not the only site where we carry out that struggle. Those who take their eyes off developments in the trade unions and foolishly dismiss the Labour left as merely an *obstacle* will be making a big mistake ●

Marcus Ström

Convention of the left

Sunday January 25, 10am,
Friends Meeting House,
Euston Road, London

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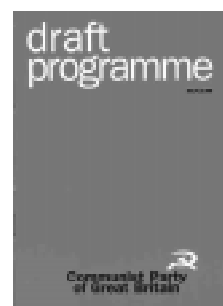
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SA NATIONAL COUNCIL

Left facing both ways

Despite the previous insistence that the Socialist Alliance would only enter an electoral alliance that was "open, democratic and, of course, socialist", and that it would fight for any new coalition to adopt a socialist and working class platform, the SA national council, meeting on January 17, rejected attempts to make these promises a reality when it comes to next weekend's national convention of Respect.

The council voted overwhelmingly to engage with the unity coalition, and "seek to influence the development of Respect along the lines of the decisions of the AGM and subsequent EC and NC meetings". But comrades then proceeded to vote down by a margin of around three to one a series of motions, put forward by the Democracy Platform of the Socialist Alliance, which were aimed at strengthening the coalition's draft declaration along working class and socialist lines. It seems that such "influence" is for the indeterminate future.

There were 70 or so delegates and executive members at Friends House, London for the national council. This attendance, bigger than for recent NC meetings, largely resulted from increased mobilisation by the Socialist Workers Party. In a circular to SWP members Rob Hoveman referred to the January 3 meeting of the SA national executive, where the SWP and allies "almost lost three vital votes", and stressed the need not to "take our eye off the ball" (January 9). Comrade Hoveman urged SWPers to ensure that, one way or another, "good delegates" were at Friends House in order to avoid what he termed "sectarian accidents" - ie, votes in favour of working class principle.

And so it turned out. The SWP and co voted down motions that sought to commit coalition election candidates to be "workers' representatives on a worker's wage"; to make freedom of movement and open borders coalition policy; to define socialism according to *People before profit*, the SA's 2001 general election manifesto; and to accept republicanism - again defined as in *People before profit* - as an aim.

Delegates even rejected a motion calling for next weekend's convention to be organised in an "open, democratic and transparent" way, with "space for debate" for "different views, declarations and amendments"; and another which proposed that coalition candidates be similarly selected according to an "open, democratic and transparent" process.

Speaker after speaker from the SWP and its allies condemned these proposals as "ultimatums", despite the fact that Democracy Platform supporters made it clear that they were putting them forward as policies to be supported by the alliance within Respect. There was no question of walking away from the coalition if they were rejected on January 25.

SA chair Nick Wrack, in making the case for the executive majority, claimed that none of the Democracy Platform motions were aimed at engaging positively with the coalition. Rather they were aimed at stopping it. Comrade Hoveman alleged that their proponents had a dismissive attitude to broader forces and were only interested in "putting conditions".

Alan Thornett of the International Socialist Group said that the SA majority wanted to "engage with Respect and take it where we want to go", whereas the minority was "trying to obstruct" the process. It was important only to put amendments "within the general framework" of the declaration, not those that seek to "change it into something different" (ie, more explicit and clear). In that sense the Democracy Platform's "ultima-

tums" were just "disruptive", he said.

Comrade Thornett did not satisfactorily explain why his own motion - to include in the Unity Coalition statement demands for taxing the rich, raising the minimum wage to £7.40 an hour and freedom for Palestine - were neither "ultimatums" nor "disruptive". This motion was carried with no votes against.

According to Simon Joyce, what was needed was not only the "right politics" (which, needless to say, Respect already had), but a "big organisation". He was confident that large numbers of "youngsters" from the anti-war movement would flood into the coalition. But would they "like what we say"? Would they think, "I'll have bloody more of that"? Not if we go beyond platitudes, it seems.

The next SWP wanted to know, why all the fuss about programme and politics? After all, 'Land, bread and peace' was enough for the Bolsheviks. Brian Butterworth agreed. These amendments calling for socialism were just "nit-picking". What mattered most was achieving a "breakthrough" - politics are secondary, obviously.

Another SWP comrade reported that people from her union who would "never come to the Socialist Alliance" were "very enthusiastic" about Respect. "Don't scare people by being sectarian" (ie, pursuing class politics), she implored. Yet another thought we should "get among the people first, then build the argument".

The SWP comrades were forced to resort to sophistry and demagoguery in the absence of any convincing argument. As I pointed out, on the one hand they tell us that the Respect declaration is socialist to the core, while on the other arguing that we must not put forward socialist arguments within it.

For example, Sarah Cox, was sure that now "we are mainstream. Now we express the feelings of millions". Leaving aside the wishful thinking, the implication was that the posing of a clear working class alternative would reduce us to the margins once again. John Rees, by contrast, pretended that Respect's draft declaration already posed that alternative. He declared in his usual bombastic style that we had "all stood on this programme" already: "It is identical, identical, to material the Socialist Alliance has put out".

Funny, that - especially since the greens also want to claim the declaration, sent to them by comrade Wrack, as their own. According to Hugo Charlton, Green Party chair in England and Wales, "Clearly the policy statement distributed by the 'unity coalition' is very close to Green Party policies - the policies that we have campaigned on in the past and those that we will take into next year's elections. While part of the statement is in the very long tradition of social justice policies, to which the Greens also subscribe, much of it is clearly based on existing Green Party policies.

"This has prompted us to wonder why people who evidently support our policies didn't simply decide to support the Green Party, which already has MEPs, MPs, London assembly members and councillors with a proven track record in terms of the policies the organisers of Respect want to promote" ('Why the greens won't be joining' *Morning Star* January 20).

Compare this to what comrade Wrack had to say on January 17: "The declaration is extremely good - every socialist can and should support it. It is implicitly socialist, expressing opposition to imperialism and neoliberalism. Its demands are in essence a précis, or pared down version, of *People before profit*, and a lot further to the left than people anticipated. It calls for a 'world based on need, not

on profit'. It has socialism and trade unions in its title ... We've got the majority of *People before profit* there."

Declan O'Neill, a supporter of the Democracy Platform, wondered why we could not propose "workers' representatives on a worker's wage" to the coalition. "Are people worried we might actually win it?" At this, while SWPers snorted in derision, comrade Thornett was nodding vigorously.

That was the point, comrade Thornett later told the meeting: "We don't want to put amendments that would rupture the process. They would probably win and do damage - that would be ultra-left." That was why he also opposed the inclusion of the demand for open borders: "That's one of the most contentious issues. For example, the Socialist Party wouldn't back it."

Comrade Thornett's idea was to "work on a long-term basis. We'll be voting today *not* to support things we actively agree with", such as workers' MPs on a worker's wage, which he "absolutely" supported. At least comrade Thornett is honest about his opportunism - in contrast to the SWP, whose line is completely incoherent as a result of trying to face both ways.

The CPGB's Marcus Ström was one of several comrades to deny that the Democracy Platform was in the business of putting ultimatums. But he reminded comrades of the wording of the resolution we had agreed at annual conference. The SA would "insist" (an ultimatum?) only that any new coalition was "open, democratic and, of course, socialist". Since neither George Galloway, nor George Monbiot, nor the Muslim Association of Britain (invited to join by comrades Galloway and Rees) thinks the declaration is socialist, Democracy Platform comrades were simply aiming to spell out what comrade Wrack said was implicit - make it *explicit*, in other words. He urged council not to "keep our own politics under wraps. Let's not be scared of our own shadows."

Dave Church said that it was simply a question of putting our socialism to the vote. If we were the majority we would win. If not, we would lose. But of course the SWP knows full well that it will in all probability be able to win the vote. Unlike comrade Thornett, however, it cannot admit that it *wants* the coalition to adopt some woolly platform that is broadly leftwing - but definitely not based on working class socialism. Since the left reformist politics upon which the SA contested elections have not brought the desired results, perhaps moving to the right will do the trick. Electoralism, anyone?

As I say, the SWP cannot admit this. So it hides behind absurd claims such as Sean Doherty's. Respect's statement, he said, was "radical and socialist" (while at the same time it would "rally all those opposed to New Labour"). A good vote for Respect would apparently "help break the grip of reformism on the working class".

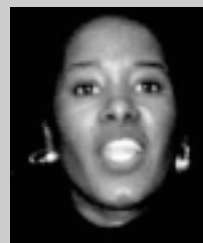
SWPers continually accused Democracy Platform supporters of not being sufficiently *enthusiastic* about Respect. A comrade from Birmingham said that the national council meeting was not at all inspiring. As a 22-year-old, she was speaking for young people, who wanted to be "going out on the streets, not arguing this, that or the other." Engaging and shaping was much more important. "If I thought this meeting was what socialism was about, I wouldn't be in it." Long debates "just put everybody off", she said to loud applause from her comrades.

This brought a

Comrade remembered

In a moving moment at the beginning of national council, comrades paid tribute to Cecilia Prosper, who died on January 8. SWP member and SA candidate in local, Greater London and general elections, Cecilia was, said John Rees, somebody who was "admired and envied". There was "no-one more convincing when talking to ordinary people".

That conviction came from her own experience as a single mother, militant trade unionist and committed fighter for her class ●



rebuke from Matthew Caygill: "Your enthusiasm sounds more like revivalism," he remarked. He pointed to the "real problems" ahead. Would it be possible to keep SA branches going at the same time as running Respect? He suspected that the alliance would once again be put in the "deep freezer".

Comrade Ström commented that the denunciation of everybody who was insufficiently enthusiastic and who raised constructive criticisms was "deeply anti-democratic. This is not a rally. It is a serious decision-making body." Pete McLaren said he had been "saddened" by the level of debate and reaction to Democracy Platform motions, when all we had been trying to do was "keep the socialist strand going". Declan O'Neill referred to the SWP's "single transferable speech".

It is certainly easy to become depressed when faced with SWP philistinism. But it is important not to lose sight of the bigger picture. Despite that organisation's tendency to gush (at the expense of both honest analysis and principle), Respect does indeed present us with an opportunity of engaging with broader forces, including those drawn into politics by last year's anti-war upsurge. The opportunity will be wasted if we do not use it to fight for what is needed - crucially a working class party.

Comrade Wrack reported that he was due to meet Socialist Party comrades to discuss their attitude to the new coalition. He further stated that the Muslim Association of Britain had declined the invitation to become involved. Although it agreed with much of the declaration's contents, it could not support its "commitment to gender rights". Nevertheless, according to comrade Wrack, the MAB would support the coalition "from the outside" (like they supported the Liberal Democrats at the Brent East by-election?).

Comrade Rees taunted those who had claimed the SWP was prepared to ditch gay and women's rights in order to attract the MAB to a 'peace and justice' coalition: "You were wrong.

You were scaremongering." He made great play of the fact that it was a practising muslim, Salma Yaqoob, who wrote that section of the declaration.

I must say, I found this less than convincing. As Steve Godward pointed out, it was comrade Rees's partner, Lindsey German, who had declared at the SWP's Marxism summer school that gay and women's rights should not be regarded as "shibboleths". And, as comrade Ström pointed out, if the SWP was prepared to drop issues like open borders and a worker's wage in order to pull in 'broad support', then why not "gender rights" too?

The main contribution of Martin Thomas of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty was to move a motion calling on the coalition to "break its links with George Galloway MP". It won four votes. However, this did show that accusations about the moving of motions aimed at disrupting Respect were not entirely without foundation.

After the main debate, national council briefly discussed methods of election to the executive. A motion proposed by comrade Thornett and supported by the SWP, calling for the continuation of the slate system, but with nominations published in advance, was adopted as a recommendation to be put to the March 13 special conference. An amendment from comrade Ström was accepted by the mover and will also go forward as a recommendation. This called for the conference to elect an elections preparation committee to oversee balloting and ensure proportionality in accordance with the SA constitution.

A motion from Mandy Baker and Will McMahon, calling for the replacement of the council tax by an income-based service tax was withdrawn for redrafting after some of its details were queried.

Finally, motions from Martin Thomas (solidarity with former inhabitants of Diego Garcia) and John Pearson (defence of refugees and asylum-seekers) were passed unopposed ●

Peter Manson



Alan Thornett: vote against what you support

SECULARISM

Hijab: the protests ...

On Saturday January 17, a bewildering series of political contradictions were played out outside the French embassy in London.

The setting was chosen by the Muslim Association of Britain, which had organised a protest against the proposed French ban on students displaying symbols of religious or political affiliation while at school. Nominally, the ban is designed to defend the principle of secular education, and applies equally to the kipa (or yarmulka or skullcap) worn by jews, the christian cross, and all other ideologically distinguishing clothing. The greatest immediate effect, though, will be felt by the large French muslim population: and the French government seems content that the suppression of the hijab, or veil worn by muslim women, is seen as their main target. President Chirac's aim is simple populism: gathering support through the demonisation of a minority, and all in the name of freedom.

From 11am, therefore, perhaps 1,000 protestors assembled across the road from the French tricolour. The Communist Party of Great Britain was one of a handful of left groups represented, along with the International Socialist Group, the Socialist Workers Party, and the Alliance for Workers' Liberty (though the AWL leaflet did not take a position for or against the ban being protested). However, MAB banners dominated, and their speakers and slogans characterised the event.

The justice of the protest seemed to me then, as it does now, clear. Communists are secularists: we believe that no state, bourgeois or socialist, should promote religion or have connections with any church. We consider religious belief a matter for the individual, and defend the right to hold or practise a faith, providing it does not infringe the rights of others.

We also defend the rights of the young, who face particular oppression by both their families and the state. Progression from helpless infancy to adulthood is a classic dialectical process, of quantitative change punctuated by qualitative leaps, but at *no* point in their lives is a human being without rights. The proper desire to protect the young must not become an excuse for oppression, and indeed the best protection they can acquire is a confidence in their own minds and the ownership of their own lives and bodies. My teenage self,

wearing the hammer and sickle on my school uniform and asserting my views against the opposition and catholicism of both my family and my school, bristled at the idea that I would have been forced to remove such a symbol under the French law.

The main speaker was George Galloway. In a short address, he called upon people to oppose the ban, "whatever their religion, whatever their political views". He made no call on the Labour movement, or even for political organisation through Respect, but simply stood in solidarity with "the muslims of Britain, of France, and around the world".

However just their nominal cause, there was no question that the methods and aims of the MAB were deeply reactionary. They began by segregating their protestors by sex. I and other CPGB comrades had to argue with male MAB stewards who attempted to prevent us approaching female protestors. Slogans like "protect our modesty" chanted by women covered so completely that only their eyes were visible eloquently testified to a dark and unhealthy attitude to women and femininity. We were there to protest against an undemocratic law, and to talk with individual muslims, but the MAB was afraid.

At 2pm a march organised by Hizb ut-Tahrir from Marble Arch reached the embassy. This group describes itself explicitly as a political party based on the ideology of islam, and campaigns to abolish democracy and secular society and re-establish the caliphate. Banners carrying the slogan 'Secularism has failed' represented the politics being offered to those young muslims the left fails to reach.

In fact, some of our friends and comrades were across the road, staging a counter-demonstration. The Organisation of Women's Liberation for Iran and the Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq had assembled a small group (including members of the Worker-communist Party of Iraq), of perhaps 50, in what they saw as a defence of secularism.

I crossed the road to speak with them, and talked to Sohaila Sharifi. She was keen to emphasise the true nature of the hijab: "The headscarf is not just an item of clothing: it is a religious and political symbol of the oppression of women. Political islam is already oppressing women in the Middle East, and is now seeking to do so in Europe."

But, while we opposed political islam,



Who's 'left', and who's right?

should we not also defend the freedom of young people to make up their own minds? "Even now, you can't just wear what you want at school. You couldn't go in dressed, for instance, in a bikini: there have to be rules. We are talking about children: we must protect them from propaganda." Should this protection extend to banning political symbols, like my old communist badges? "Yes. Or conservative ones, or liberal. Adults can wear what they like, but these things have no place in school."

The theme of the protection of children was continued at a press conference called by the OFWI later that afternoon. Speaking were Nadia Mahmood and Houzan Mahmoud. I asked if school students should not enjoy the right to dress as they wished. Nadia replied: "Religion is a private matter. We think people should be free to practise their religion. But political islam is not just a religion. France has been a secular state for 100 years and political islam is trying to impose itself against secularism. The French are talking about the schools, but we are not: we are against the veil being imposed on girls anywhere. It stops them living freely. It stops them having a normal life. They are being abused by their families who force them to wear the veil."

Though the OFWI demonstration had been prompted by that of the MAB, the comrades were keen that the press conference should not be dominated by discussion of the French ban. Houzan

acknowledged that the subject was important, but asked us to focus on the question of the imposition of sharia law, and the oppression of women, in Iraq.

They explained that with the complicity of the US occupiers, political islamists had been quick to seize the opportunity afforded by the defeat of Saddam Hussein, and his dictatorial but largely secular regime, to drag the country into fundamentalism. Women were already being denied access to schools and universities if they did not wear the hijab. The rape of women who were either ex-Ba'athists or seen as collaborators with the US occupiers was widespread: male collaborators, said Nadia, rarely faced sanctions. Most dreadfully of all, women raped in this way then faced the danger of being murdered by their own families in 'honour killings', as suffering the crime committed against them was taken as a sign of shame.

The brutality of the war being fought for the future of Iraq was never clearer. Secular and democratic forces face a vicious, daily battle with political islam, not only to shape the country in the future, but to defend human rights *now*. The passion with which Nadia and Houzan spoke was clear and understandable. They were not soft on the occupation, but they believed that by blindly chanting 'anti-imperialism' the British left was going soft on political islam. We were warned not to forget that while the islamists might oppose the US and the occupa-

tion, they also despised socialists and human freedom. This thought was echoed by a number of other speakers.

It became clear that the attitude of some to the 'left' was actually a response to the politics of the Socialist Workers Party. Given the relative size of the SWP within the left, this was perhaps understandable, but only Houzan made the distinction between them and other socialists, saying: "The SWP is a different matter. They are gone, out of control. They are not on the left any more."

The SWP leadership has certainly been unprincipled in its attempts to accommodate the politics of the MAB, both in the abortive 'peace and justice' project, and through Respect. Their call not to treat the rights of women and gays as "shibboleths", but rather to allow them to be glossed over in order to permit alliance with political islam, warrants the suspicion with which they are now viewed. My own feeling is that the SWP contains many sincere socialists who will also be extremely uncomfortable with their leadership's opportunist manoeuvres, and with whom we must therefore engage through Respect. But our aim must be criticism, not complicity.

In fact, both the OFWI and the SWP may be falling into the same trap: believing that their enemy's enemy is their friend.

Rather than being a blow against political islam, the ban on the hijab is a gift to groups like the MAB and Hizb ut-Tahrir, who will organise enthusiastically against it and undoubtedly gather some support in the process. However, even if it has angered some islamist patriarchs, that does not mean we should support it. Freedom is not won through state bans on ideologies we find reactionary, but through struggle and solidarity. The French student who wears her veil because she is forced to by her family does not become free when she removes it because she is forced to by the state - and we stand with her against either compulsion.

But the OFWI is right to point out that the British left, largely through the politics of the SWP and George Galloway, is falling into the same trap. We are enemies of US imperialism, and so are the political islamists. However, that does not make them our friends, and should not lead us into political alliance and compromise with them.

Though we are critical, the OFWI still deserves the support of all socialists for its political opposition to the oppression of women through the imposition of sharia law in Iraq ●

Manny Neira

■ **Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq: 020 7263 1027, www.equalityiniraq.com**

In their own words



Doaa Al-Rani (19) took a leading role in the protests. Though not an MAB member, she led the chanting, rallying a group of women around her

Why are you here today?

Banning the hijab is a blatant breach of our human rights. Everybody in the world should be allowed to wear what they like. Especially a civilised country should be able to accept differences. Where is our freedom of choice? I do not ask of them to ban miniskirts, so why can I not wear what I chose?

Many people see the hijab as a symbol of women's oppression, a sign that she is worth less than a man.

The hijab for me is not just a symbol: it is an obligation. It is not a sign of women's oppression: it is a sign of liberation. It is my choice to wear it. My whole family wears it, but we have all decided to do so through our own free will.

What if your little sister decided not to wear the hijab?

I would see to it that she is convinced to want to wear the scarf. I am sure she would do it in the end. Of course I cannot force her in that sense, but I would try everything to persuade her ●



Saema Javaid (24) was with a group of women, some not wearing the scarf. They all pushed her forward to speak. She is also not a member of the MAB

The French government says it wants to defend secularism.

This ban is of course not just against islam, but against all other religions, and political symbols as well. It is not really about secularism in my opinion, because the state is not staying out of the issue of religion. It is telling people they cannot wear certain symbols that are based on beliefs, be they religious or political. That is not secularism. I think it is a tactic to divide the people of France. I am in favour of a real secular state, where the government does not tell people what to think or what not to think.

What does the hijab mean to you?

It shows my identity as a muslim person. I have worn it since I chose to do so 10 years ago. Nobody else in my family wears it, because none of them is religious. They do relate to islam as a religion, as our foundation in life, but they do not feel it as strongly as I do. And my family simply accepts that I wear this symbol ●

... and the debate

The contentious subject of 'Headscarves, secularism and the battle of democracy' produced a lively debate at the first CPGB London forum of 2004. The forum was held the day after the protests organised by the Muslim Association of Britain and the Muslim Women Association against the hijab ban in France, and the counterdemonstration called by the Organisation of Women's Liberation-Iraq and the Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq.

It was a well attended meeting and an important subject for communists. Introducing the speakers, Mark Fischer said for too long democratic questions have been undervalued by the left. In our view the working class becomes a class for itself by winning the battle of democracy.

Opening for the CPGB, Peter Manson, editor of the *Weekly Worker*, spoke about three interlinked themes raised by the ban proposed by president Jacques Chirac: secularism, women's rights, and freedom of expression. It is a mistake to think the ban promotes secularism. To us secularism means the complete separation of religion and state. It does not mean trying to ban religion. An example of this misunderstanding of secularism by sections of the left was the Socialist Workers Party's opposition to the motion jointly sponsored by the CPGB calling for the Stop the War Coalition to support "secularism everywhere". The SWP stated that this might deter christians and muslims from joining!

But, said comrade Manson, secularism aims for *equality* between believers and non-believers, not the setting of one against the other. We want believers to speak and demonstrate alongside us as equals, but certainly not to have any special role in the movement. Secularism involves protecting individuals from having religion imposed on them by the state, but it also means defending their right to religious freedom. He quoted Mehdi Kia, co-editor of *Iran Bulletin-Middle East Forum*, who stated that the enforced wearing of the hijab in countries like Iran and enforced 'de-hijabing' are "two sides of the same reactionary and undemocratic coin" (*Weekly Worker* January 15).

On freedom of expression, comrade Manson said communists are in favour of the right of individuals, including school students, to express their religious and other views. He emphasised the distinction between the state imposing symbols of religion, which we oppose, and the right of individuals to express their ideas. The ban is impractical, as well as being unjust. How far should it go? Should food preferences based on religion also be banned, or the wearing of polo jumpers concealing the neck?

Arguments about women's and young people's rights show the ban is also counterproductive. We are not in favour of women being veiled, but want to make it clear to them that the right to wear the hijab is a right that can be taken up or not. It should be their choice. The French Trotskyist group, Lutte Ouvrière, says the law will be a "point of support" for young women who want to resist family pressure to wear the hijab. This may be so in some cases, conceded comrade Manson. But in many more cases it is more likely to drive them into the arms of the islamic fundamentalists. Firstly, it would probably provoke the wearing of the headscarf as an act of solidarity and, secondly, girls would be removed from state schools and segregated in religious institutions, where they are closed off from contact with forces which might encourage them to overcome backward ideas.

Even reactionary ideas should be out

in the open, where we can best fight them, said comrade Manson. Our ideas of democracy and the strength of the working class are more powerful than the ideas of religious leaders and other reactionaries. Nor are we afraid of fundamentalists. If we can speak to their rank and file followers, we can win them to our politics. We cannot wait for people to shed reactionary illusions before we work with them - they overcome backward ideas in the course of struggle.

Comrade Manson looked at Chirac's motives for the new law. It is not, as Chirac claims, a matter of defending secularism and promoting women's rights. The purpose of the ban is to rally patriotic France by scapegoating the muslim minority and posing as the defender of French values against interlopers who seek to challenge them. He is claiming once again to speak for the 80% who voted for him in last year's presidential election.

Terry Liddle of the Socialist Secular Association spoke in favour of the ban from the point of view of an intransigent militant socialist atheist, using the same arguments as put forward in his *Weekly Worker* article (January 15). He called for the ban on ostentatious religious symbols in schools to be understood in the context of French history. He described socialism as materialist science which demands an intransigent and unyielding struggle against superstition, obscurantism and idealism. Socialists should support anything which weakens the influence of religion in society as something to be welcomed, not opposed on the basis of a "spurious libertarianism".

CPGB comrades taking part in the debate characterised the position of comrade Liddle, a supporter of the Revolutionary Democratic Group, as Blanquist. His vision of a socialist state is one which would ban minority customs. We advocate banning only those religious practices which are harmful, cruel or infringe the rights of others: stonings, forced marriages, female circumcision and the like. Comrades also described Liddle's views as disastrously mistaken. The history of the 20th century proves that attacks on religion actually strengthen it. Those who conduct a war on religion not only do not succeed: they change themselves, inevitably becoming the tyrants of a new, secular religion.

Comrade Steve Freeman of the RDG agreed that religion cannot be defeated by bans: it will wither away naturally when the working class overcomes the conditions which constantly regenerate it - that is, class society. Comrade Liddle wants to get rid of god in order to change society: in fact we have to change society to get rid of god.

Comrade John Bridge of the CPGB said that as well as being a means of oppression religion is a heart in a heartless world. We communists should never seek to ban religion, nor its manifestations in terms of traditional dress, diet and other such customs. All we demand is the right to put forward our materialist explanation of the world. The key, however, is unity of believers and non-believers in the class struggle. Comrade Liddle rejected this idea. He invited CPGB comrades to put themselves in the position of Bolsheviks confronted with muslims conducting a protracted guerrilla war against Soviet power in central Asia 80 years ago, and asked: "What would you have done - handed them a leaflet? Hopefully you would have shot them."

The third speaker was Houzan Mahmoud of the Worker-communist Party of Iraq and the Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq. She began by describing what the hijab means to women in the Middle East. It is not an item of dress like any other, but a form of control over



Terry Liddle and Houzan Mahmoud for the ban

women. It is an islamic uniform imposed on all girls from the age of three or four years, which separates them from the rest of society and symbolises their inferior status. The veil is emotional and physical violence against girls and women, controlling their sexuality and marking them as the property of their husbands rather than as persons.

She said she was not interested in Chirac's motives - only in the objective result. The ban will save children from physical and emotional abuse, and give them the chance to experience a different way of life, as equal to other children rather than segregated and marked as inferior. Islamists who claim the ban infringes their personal freedom or human rights are hypocrites, since islamic states have the worst record on human rights in the world, especially in the way they treat women.

While agreeing with the French government's proposed ban on hijabs and other religious and political symbols in schools, she criticised the French and other European states for funding political islam and for not doing enough to protect migrant women and children. Most women forced to wear veils on the street are unhappy about it, but the state gives them no support because it says that is their culture. The same multiculturalist excuse is used to ignore violence against women, the sending of young girls to the Middle East to be mutilated and married against their will or even killed for bringing 'dishonour' on their family for entering into relationships of which they disapprove. Political islam imposes its brutal and bloody practices wherever it gets into power, and seeks to spread its influence in the world, including by brainwashing youngsters who want to fight imperialism.

Her most severe criticism was directed at the European left for failing to provide an alternative anti-imperialist focus. The left gives support to islamic groups because they have anti-imperialist slogans. They fail to see that political islam is a reactionary pole menacing the earth. We must fight it and wipe it out. She warned comrades that, as soon as the islamists gain power, the first people they kill will be the communists.

There were 20 contributions from the floor, with roughly equal numbers of Iraqi comrades who supported and developed comrade Houzan's position, and CPGB members who opposed the ban. As always there were among the CPGB contributions a number of disagreements with details of the speech given by the CPGB representative on the platform. Comrade Anne Mc Shane said she does not agree with the ban because it does not solve the problem of women's oppression. It will not undermine the hold of the family over young women, but could make it worse by increasing their isolation. But she criticised comrade Manson for not stressing enough our revulsion against women being made

the property of men, and being forced to cover themselves. He should have emphasised more that we are against the ban and also against the veil, and not "trivialised" the issue by equating the hijab with religious dietary laws. Because so many women and girls are compelled to wear this symbol of oppression, the hijab is a complex question which has caused great confusion among the French left.

Comrade John Bridge denied that deciding our position on Chirac's ban on the hijab was in any way a complicated question. As democrats we stand foursquare with any oppressed group whose rights are threatened by a state, against that state. He disagreed with comrade Manson on Chirac's motives. The people he is appealing to are not so much the majority who voted for him, but the 20% who voted against him. He criticised WCPI comrades for being blind to the fact that the far right is a rather bigger threat to the working class in western Europe than political islam - and the hijab ban they support can only but legitimise the agenda of groups like the Front National.

There were also a few speakers not aligned with either group. A practising muslim who had moved from France to Britain made the point that since September 11 2001 people are afraid of islam, and to ban the hijab will impede dialogue between muslims and others. She made it clear that the decision to wear a headscarf was hers alone and, far from having it imposed by male members of her family, her brother is a member of Lutte Ouvrière who wants her to abandon it.

She said secularism should mean the right to wear or not to wear what you chose. She said that those who propose bans only expose their own weakness. To the WCPI comrades she said she expected them to have more faith in their own ideas than their support for the ban revealed. She also asked comrades to distinguish between islam itself and the oppressive traditions that reactionaries try to pass off as central to islam, such as forced marriages, which are actually foreign to it.

Speakers from the WCPI argued that, since our main point should be to focus on the right of the person, religion should have no rights over human beings. They did not agree with comrade Manson's argument that forcing people to discard the headscarf is as bad as forcing them to wear it. If it is just an item of clothing, why is compelling women to wear the hijab the first act of political islam wherever it gains power? It is a good thing for any government to deny families the right to oppress their children. We accept that the state has the right to impose many things on people, why is this not a good thing?

The headscarf ban is part of the fight between imperialism and political islam and, somewhat contradictorily, the comrades argued that the left should not take

sides in this fight but should seek to become a third force in the world, a progressive point of attraction in opposition to the two reactionary poles. Political islam is the greatest enemy our movement faces, and the hijab is its symbol. WCPI comrades said that instead of concentrating on a few thousand young women who choose to wear the veil and face expulsion from school if they do not take it off, the left should throw its energy into defending the many millions of women in islamic countries who are forced to wear it against their will and risk being stoned to death if they dare take it off.

In her reply to the debate, comrade Houzan said it was unrealistic to call on people to argue with the oppressors. In Iraq political islam murders its opponents, and it seeks to impose sharia law in Europe and elsewhere. Already it terrorises the migrant community, with the passive collusion of the French and other states. The Organisation of Women's Freedom has reports of cases in which women in Bangladesh, India, Iraq and even Europe have been killed for rebelling against islam. She called on the British left to join the campaign against violations of migrant women's rights.

CPGB comrades put forward several arguments in response to these points. Comrade Marcus Ström and others accepted the criticism that the British left has been unable to establish a socialist pole independently of islam. But the CPGB would never be soft on political islam. We were actually barred from the steering committee of the Stop the War Coalition for upholding secularism and refusing to kowtow to the Muslim Association of Britain, as the SWP did. Comrade Manny Neira said the CPGB does not hold the view that every enemy of imperialism deserves our support. Several CPGBers felt that WCPI comrades were actually arguing against the SWP position "by proxy", putting their case to the CPGB because the SWP itself refuses to talk to them.

More importantly, CPGB comrades argued that the hijab ban will have exactly the opposite effect to what the WCPI hopes, strengthening reactionary religious leaders by handing them the democratic mantle. In comrade Tina Becker's words, the ban drives people into the arms of those who we want to win them away from: the fundamentalists who secretly welcome the ban because it lets them pose as opponents of the oppressive state. Anything becomes more attractive and glamorous when it is banned, especially to the young. Liberation cannot be imposed, comrade Mark Fischer pointed out: it must result from the people's own self-activity. Throwing off the veil and the oppression it represents has to be a self-liberatory act, it cannot be imposed by a socialist state, let alone a capitalist one.

On a more fundamental level, CPGB comrades disputed the WCPI position that political islam is the worst threat to the working class. Comrade Ian Donovan said the WCPI has analysed the role of political islam in the world, and produces excellent polemics. But its failure to look at the whole picture and recognise imperialism as the main enemy leads it to some erroneous positions. One is the belief that the French or any other imperialist state could ever deliver a solution to the problem of women's oppression; another is the WCPI view of the potentially progressive role of the United Nations in Iraq.

Comrade Manson summed up the CPGB view in his final remarks. We want women to join with the working class in order to free *themselves*. If you try to impose 'emancipation', you are making a terrible mistake ●

Mary Godwin

POLEMIC

Socialism, reform and

In the 100th edition of *International Socialism*, the Socialist Workers Party's theoretical journal, John Rees, the editor, and executive committee member of the Socialist Alliance, wrote a key-note article, 'Socialism in the 21st century' (all quotes unless otherwise stated are from *ISJ* 100, autumn 2003). This is both an intervention in an ongoing debate between the SWP and the Scottish Socialist Party within the UK and a summary of the current thinking of the SWP with regard to some of the central issues of class politics, argued in relation to the question of reform or revolution (see John Rees, Murray Smith and Nick McKerrel *ISJ* 97, winter 2002; and John Rees and Murray Smith *ISJ* 100).

This short article takes issue with John Rees's analysis from the perspective of the Democratic Platform of the Socialist Alliance, and in particular the viewpoint of the Revolutionary Democratic Group, and only deals with Murray Smith's arguments in passing.

John Rees begins by setting out what he takes to be the Labour and social democratic tradition. His claim is that socialism, for many in this tradition, means 'reformed capitalism' and that "The institutions of existing society must be the means by which such reforms are achieved" (p3).

Rees then associates this view with a history stretching back to the Chartists and their distinction between physical and moral force. He puts his particular view on the split between reformist socialism and revolution into an either-or polarity found in all times and across every continent. The general question is then reformulated in this way: "Should we merely work to pressurise the existing state, to reform it, and eventually take positions within it? Or should we seek to overthrow it with institutions, often workers' councils, arising directly out of the struggle itself?" (p4).

At first sight this may seem an entirely conventional setting out of the position of revolutionary socialists with regard to reform, but I want to point out some slippery elements to this formulation, as they come to assume greater significance later. Firstly John Rees narrows the definition of reform to an extreme point, reducing the reformist position to that of political reform. Reformist socialism is not always reformed capitalism: its origins lie in an alternative gradualist path to socialism rather than a clear difference in aims.

John Rees's reduction does not help us to confront actual reformists who have always had much more subtle arguments. Take, for example, Ramsay MacDonald, the classic formulator of reformist socialism: "Socialist change must be gradual and must proceed in stages, just as the evolution of an organism does. Society will resist too violent readjustment. Kings can be

Chris Jones of the Revolutionary Democratic Group looks at the role of class struggle in shaping the politics of the 21st century

removed and a republic established by revolutions. But in establishing socialism we change organic relationships, not superficial forms of government" (quoted in B Barker [ed] *Ramsay MacDonald's political writings* London 1972, p158).

In this formulation MacDonald separates social and economic reform from "superficial forms of government". Reformist socialism is thus both about gradualism, in so far as it concerns social and economic change, and perhaps just as importantly a separation between political forms and social change. MacDonald was a reformist in terms of both politics and society and claimed that the state was not an instrument of class rule: rather it was an organ of society in general.

State and society

In John Rees's formulations the possibility of a separation between the approach to socialism and the form of the state is missing. This blurring of the distinction between state and society has important practical consequences. In the 1930s a series of writers - famously Richard Tawney, but also Stafford Cripps - retained a reformist socialism alongside an increasing radicalism in relation to the state. They were not convinced that socialism could be achieved through existing parliamentary mechanisms. Reformist social and economic change can be associated with radical and even revolutionary approaches to the state.

Despite some exceptions Labourism was generally characterised by a variety of approaches to socialism - both in terms of what it might entail and how it might be achieved - but a near unanimity in relation to the state and parliamen-

tary forms. In Ralph Miliband's famous summary: "Of political parties claiming socialism to be their aim, the Labour Party has always been one of the most dogmatic - not about socialism, but about the parliamentary system" (R Miliband *The state in capitalist society* London 1964, p13).

Reform then has two forms that are loosely linked: reformist socialism that argues for gradual reform to introduce socialism; and reformist politics of a liberal and radical tradition that argues for change within existing political and institutional arrangements. These two types of reform were fused in classic Labourism, but are analytically distinct and at times uneasy bedfellows.

A second and related issue arises early in John Rees's argument. He argues that the divide between reform and revolution arises directly out of a fundamental aspect of working class experience in capitalism: "Working for an employer gives workers a dual consciousness. Firstly there is an unavoidable subordination to a hierarchy that begins with the supervisor and the manager and runs to the top of society. Secondly there is the sense that the people who do the work have the right to control that work and, at least potentially, the numbers to enforce their views" (p4).

Rees simplifies and blurs some key distinctions in relation to class in this account of working class experience. Who are these managers and supervisors in this system and to what class do they belong? This is a central issue in late capitalism, as these sections of society have grown in absolute size and social weight and are described both as a new middle class and as a new working class. For John Rees the working class is not differentiated, yet to get to grips with Labourism and social democracy it is necessary to understand not just bureaucracy in general, but how this social layer affects the working class in the form of a distinct caste of labour bureaucrats. Reformism does not simply reflect a dual aspect of working class experience: it is articulated and mobilised through definite social layers that have a changing weight in society and form a specific layer within the organised working class. In the UK Labour is the party of this layer - the trade union and labour bureaucracy.

It could be argued that I am placing too much weight on introductory statements intended to provide a simple and clear basis for the argument. However, I contend that the failure to make some basic distinctions leads to deep and fundamental problems with overall approach. For example, John underestimates the role of class struggle beyond the workplace. He is happy to talk about the limits of capitalist control over the work process and argues that working class consciousness is never wholly pro-capitalist or wholly anti-capitalist as a result. What is under-

developed in his argument is the place of political struggle between classes and within classes. In John Rees's portrayal a homogenised working class has a permanent schizophrenia - a contradictory consciousness. The role of revolutionaries must then be to build the confidence of the class and emphasise one aspect of this contradiction in order to release a latent revolutionary potential:

"The knack of advancing the struggle for socialism, and of understanding the balance of the argument between reform and revolution, lies in defining exactly what proportions good sense and common sense are combined in the consciousness of workers at any given time. Do we live in a time of storm and stress or of passivity and quietude? If we can determine the balance of this contradiction, then we can see how best to act to strengthen good sense and marginalise those notions that will ultimately reconcile workers with the system." (p7).

This abstract and idealist formulation ignores the foundation of reformism in struggle within the working class and through its organised forms - in trade unions and political parties, in social and political struggle. Workers are not self-organising in John's view: they have to be called into battle by more experienced and theoretically equipped generals who have the "knack" of reading the signs of the times and manipulating the mood - like the SWP no doubt.

For Rees the key to reformism is that it seeks to continue within the existing system: "Reformism raises the prospect of a better life for working class people without the necessity of transforming the whole system" (p7).

As noted earlier, this formulation ignores the tradition of reformist socialism that aims to replace capitalism and cannot conceive of a vigorous mass reformism seeking fundamental change. The socialism of the Fabians and Ramsay MacDonald was as fully expounded as many revolutionary conceptions. The way John Rees summarises the emergence of the welfare state illustrates the underestimation of reformism: "... economic expansion allowed a welfare state consensus to emerge among the various parties after the Second World War" (p27).

For John the expansion of the welfare state and economic growth from 1945 until the mid-1970s were causally linked. There are some simple historical problems with this. The welfare state began with Liberal reforms in the early 1900s and the expansion of welfare state predates the economic boom and emerges as a political outcome of World War II. The measures that produced the expanded welfare state were part of an emergent consensus. The Tory, Rab Butler, designed the educational reforms, the Liberal, William Beveridge, the welfare reforms and the socialist, Nye Bevan, the NHS. The welfare state was in this sense both the product of the power of the working class and a recognition of this in terms of a political compromise by the bourgeois parties. The ruling class accepted the welfare state as a price to be paid for the acceptance by workers of the strictures of the war.

The welfare state was an historic compromise between the different social classes, as they were represented through the political parties. For this reason we prefer to call this period the social monarchy, indicating the

political form this compromise took. The welfare state was also the product of years of struggle within the working class to develop a viable form of political expression. It marked the ascendancy of Labourism, a particular and local form of social democracy. The welfare state was not simply *allowed* by economic conditions: it was *won* by the working class and *conceded* by the ruling class in what became an historic compromise.

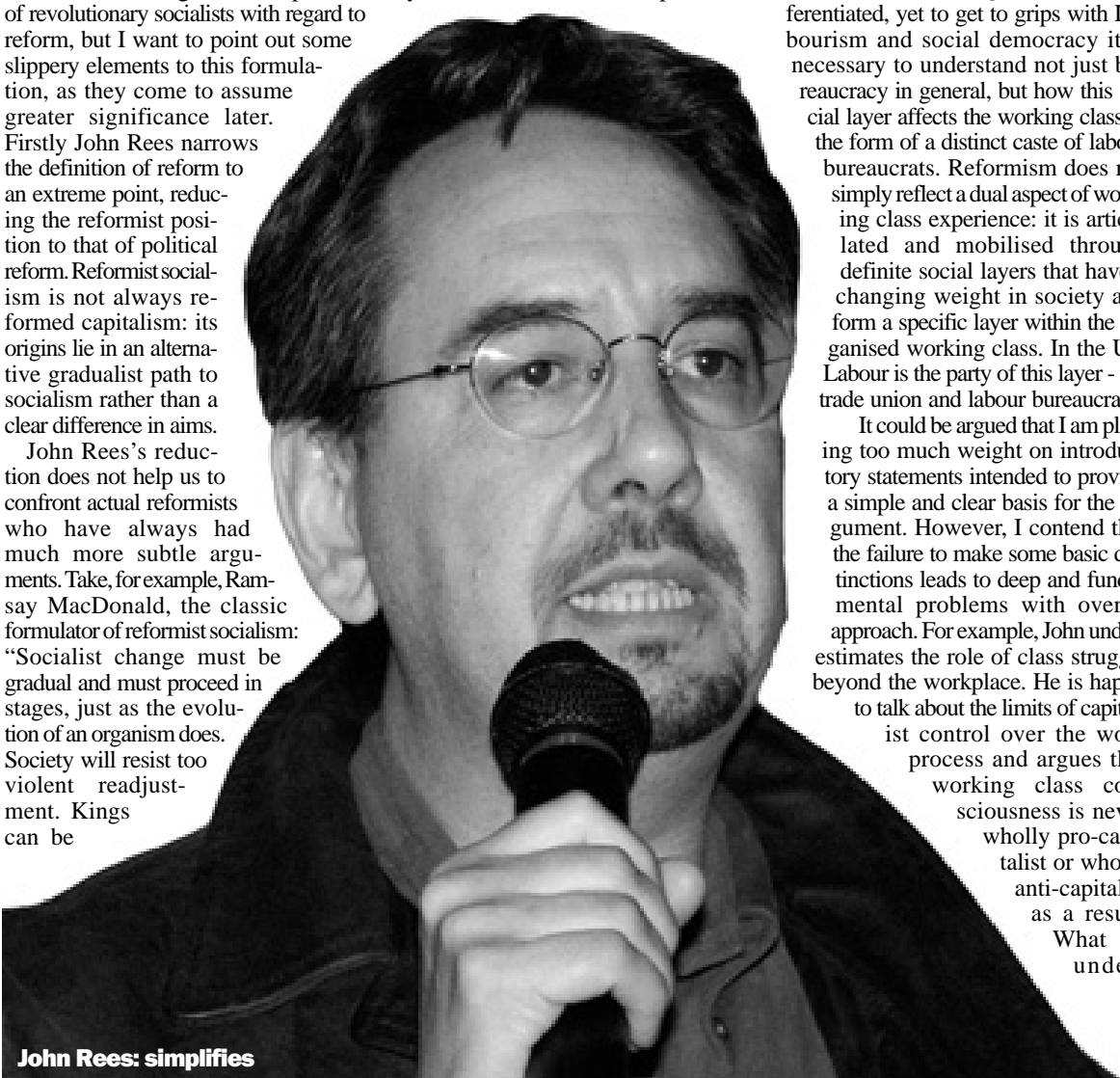
These distinctions are not minor questions, as John Rees analyses the changes in the welfare state as a background to making comments about current political questions. Here his arguments are part of a response to the SSP's Murray Smith and they concern the political space left by the failure of Labour to deliver reforms. In the 1970s Rees argues that the favourable economic conditions that produced the welfare state were reversed and this led to political as well as social and economic changes: "The adaptation of the British state to the work of promoting a deregulated economy required a considerable alteration in its structures" (p20).

Rees correctly points out that the state has centralised and restricted its already limited democratic aspects, summarising the change as "this transformation in the state's inner constitution" (p21). The question for him is that, if the development of neoliberalism required the transformation of the inner constitution of the state, what were the origins and forms of the political state that accompanied the welfare reforms of the 40s and 50s? The description of the post-1945 state as a social monarchy captures the political form that accompanied the welfare state: the popularised image of a new Elizabethan age. In current conditions the degeneration of the social monarchy has been accompanied by crises of government and a series of crises in the monarchy.

By narrowing and blurring his definition of reformism, John Rees has excluded the possibility that political reform could *lead* social and economic change rather than simply following it. A full understanding of class struggle as encompassing all spheres of society would note that democracy and the form of the state has become the political focus both for ruling class attacks and for working class resistance. This is why the Democracy Platform is not simply concerned with the inner democracy of the Socialist Alliance. It is a platform based on the full version of *People before profit*, a republican and democratic programme for change in the UK state.

For John Rees the loss of the welfare state, just like its origin, depends only upon economic change, not class struggle mediated through political and social action. Just as the development of the welfare state signalled a compromise by the various political parties and the state, so the withdrawal of this compromise was a result of political struggle in the late 1970s and 1980s. The struggle over the ownership of the mines signalled the political rise and fall of Labour with nationalisation in 1948 and the defeat of the miners' strike and privatisation in the period after the mid-1980s.

The changes in the state and the loss of the political and social space conceded to Labour were not automatic. They were marked by sharp struggles within the Labour Party, between the government and several major unions - notably in the steel and coal industry - and by struggles in the wider political and social arena. Examples were London with the Greater London Council, Liverpool with the Militant-led city council and on the streets and in the courts over the poll tax. Simply listing these strug-



John Rees: simplifies

revolution

gles points to the central role of political leadership and class organisation. These different battles were not spontaneous outbursts of class anger: they were products of leadership and organisation.

In this way my argument coincides with Murray Smith who notes: "... we are no longer in a period of reformism without reforms. We are more than 25 years into an offensive of the capitalist class internationally. The aim of this offensive is to take back everything that was gained by the working class after 1945" (p67).

Reformism, whilst restricted by economic constraints, is by no means incapable of delivering reform at times of recession. Murray Smith has noted correctly that in those circumstances reforms can still be conceded in the face of mass movements. More than that, the claim made by Rees that economic conditions militate against concessions to the working class fails to note that reforms are political events and that they do not start and end with economics.

His argument would imply that good economic conditions would allow for deep reforms. This is not borne out by the recent history of the UK. The welfare state was born in the austerity of war and its aftermath, whereas the affluence of the long boom saw Labour governments signally ineffective. The Labour governments of the 1960s and 70s, viewed in retrospect, are marked not by their economic reforms, but by social measures, such as legislation on race and women's rights.

New Labour gloss

More recently still, the New Labour politics of the 1990s were marked by political reforms that had only a marginal economic cost, such as the devolution of powers to Scotland and Wales and the ending of hereditary peers. These are not centrally class issues, but they allowed the New Labour administrations to gloss their politics with an appearance of reform. Reformism without reforms is a consequence of political action and the hegemony of New Labour and the third way was not an inevitable outcome of economics.

Murray Smith and John Rees disagree over the type of political party needed by the working class. Murray Smith argues against a revolutionary party and for a broad party of a new type, exemplified by the SSP and Rifondazione Comunista. Fundamentally Rees and Smith disagree on the political space left by the demise of traditional Labour and social democratic politics. John Rees claims to stand in the tradition of revolutionary politics, preserving the SWP as the revolutionary party, whilst engaged in a series of united fronts that aim to fill a vacuum on the left. In contrast Murray Smith calls for a broad socialist party with the aim of occupying the whole political territory abandoned by New Labour.

The issue is posed by John Rees as whether to build a revolutionary party or a broad party. Murray Smith in contrast claims to retain the strategic aim of a revolutionary party whilst rejecting the methods and tactics of the SWP: "Building a broad socialist party today may in fact be the best way to advance towards a mass revolutionary party tomorrow" (p73). Smith rejects relying on a left split from Labour or the linear growth of the SWP and argues for a party with a mass character.

In general I believe that the Democracy Platform agrees with Murray Smith that a broad party with a mass character is necessary. He argues that the main divide is between anti-capitalists and pro-capitalists, not between reform and revolution. We would agree that the di-

vide between reform and revolution is not as John Rees portrays it, for in his hands reformism loses all content and becomes simply liberal capitalism. However, we remain convinced that the divide between reform and revolution remains central to the building of a mass workers party.

This has led some to take the line that the Socialist Alliance must transform itself into a revolutionary party. The RDG believes this is a mistake. We have advanced the position that the broad party advocated by Murray Smith would be a communist-Labour alliance. We have argued that these two historic political trends can unite in a principled manner in a republican socialist party. Republicanism can provide the political focus for joint action and the growth of a common political culture. We agree with Murray Smith that such a party must be pluralist, allowing factional rights and tendencies. However, we differ with him, in that we argue for a clear and open revolutionary wing in such a party - one which may well become the dominant trend.

The line that John Rees has elaborated leads directly to the Respect unity coalition. The key is to find the "knack" of connecting to the discontent with New Labour. Political struggle and open disagreement are to be avoided, as the weathermen of the SWP discern which way the wind is blowing. The role of the party is simply to act on decisions arrived at by the leadership.

This may also account for one of the more bizarre claims that John Rees makes in relation to the war and the left. He claims to identify three positions: a pro-war left: a left that supported the Stop the War Coalition; and a third position, identified with "a small number of left sects and individuals, some of whom were in the Socialist Alliance," who took no "active part" in or actually "opposed the founding" of the STWC. The oddness of this claim lies in this alleged third camp. There may indeed be such sects and individuals, but John Rees knows only too well that the serious opposition within the Socialist Alliance has come from the groups and individuals now organised in the Democracy Platform. These groups supported the Stop the War Coalition and have no objection to working with muslims. Indeed they have a strong track record of working with both religious muslims and communists originating from islamic societies.

The identification of only a select group of acknowledged supporters of the Stop the War Coalition is in fact an attempt to justify the SWP's line of identifying those it wishes to work with and excluding others. It seems that the new Respect coalition is only to be addressed by the SWP and its allies and that those groups that have different ideas are to be ignored and besmirched by insinuation and rumour.

The SWP has set up a false dichotomy that pitches reform against revolution in simplistic terms, justifying a crude practice that downplays the realignment of the left. The Democracy Platform agrees that we need to engage with the new coalition and any supporters that it draws, but begins from the standpoint of an open struggle for political ideas. Revolutionary politics will be central to the building of a broad socialist party out of the ashes of Labourism and 'official communism'.

However, anti-capitalism and broad coalitions are not enough. The place for this struggle is not in a united front or a broad coalition with indeterminate aims. It lies in the building of a broad republican socialist party with a powerful revolutionary wing ●

Britain at the crossroads

The Democracy Platform of the Socialist Alliance has issued an alternative declaration for Respect

A crisis of representation

The mass opposition to the war in Iraq was a watershed in British politics. The Labour government took the country into an illegal war on false pretences. The real cost of this ill-considered adventure continues to mount up. Not only has there been a tragic loss of human life on all sides, and a massive waste of tax revenues, but the government has put the British people in the front line as a terrorist target.

One of the casualties of this war has been the credibility of parliament. Britain's long-standing alliance with US imperialism, and Blair's secret commitment to Bush's plans for regime change in the Middle East, meant that war was inevitable long before it began. Parliament failed to represent the majority opposed to war, and failed to expose Blair's deception and manipulation of public opinion.

The opposition to the war led to a crisis for the government and the resignation of cabinet ministers. The biggest mass demonstration in our history reflected the fact that a majority were opposed to war. Yet this majority was unable to exercise any effective democratic accountability or democratic control over the government, civil service, security and armed forces. This has destroyed the illusions that many people had that Britain has a democratic system of government.

There is a crisis of representation at the heart of politics in Britain. The last general election saw the lowest turnout since universal suffrage was introduced. The war served to highlight this by drawing attention to the growing chasm between ordinary working people and the political establishment. A continuation of this situation provides opportunities for the far right and brings the danger of a more authoritarian state and a threat to civil liberties.

A new direction for Britain

We will continue down the same disastrous path unless and until the people take matters into their own hands. A failed parliamentary system and failed politicians offer no solution. The people themselves must decide the future direction of the country. This requires the kind of mass movement that was mobilised against the war, but which addresses the major democratic and social questions.

Democracy

The first major question is whether the present weak and failing democracy will continue or whether the country can take a new, progressive, democratic direction. This would require us to establish a democratic, secular and republican system of government, in which power is in the hands of the people, and government is elected, accountable and subject to recall.

Equality

The second question concerns the inequalities and discrimination that keep the people of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales divided by nationality, race, sex, sexuality, or religion. The struggle for democracy and equality is about overcoming these divisions and creating greater unity and solidarity among the people of Britain. A new democratic constitution will help to secure our democratic freedoms and civil liberties and establish full equality for all citizens and the right of nations to self-determination.

Europe

The third major issue is the question of Britain's relationship with Europe and America, made transparent by the war. Britain is dominated by US foreign policy, its security and military interests and its multinational corporations. The present European Union bureaucracy does not provide an alternative. A democratic future for Britain is connected to the need to end the 'special relationship' with US imperialism and unite with the peoples of Europe to create a fully democratic and federal state.

Social justice

The fourth major issue concerns the social conditions in which people live their lives. A redistribution of wealth is necessary to tackle the issues of poverty, housing, pensions, education and health. A more democratic system of government, an expanded public sector, along with the strengthening of trade union organisation, will greatly assist working people in tackling these problems.

Towards socialism

As members of the Socialist Alliance we believe that the problems of war, peace, poverty and injustice require the abolition of global capitalism by socialism. The struggle for democracy is an integral part of the struggle for socialism. The defence and extension of democracy is therefore of fundamental importance in advancing the interests of the working class.

In the 2001 general election our candidates stood on the manifesto *People before Profit* for election as workers' MPs on a worker's wage. This programme combines demands for a democratic republic, for social change and internationalism. Whilst we do not think this programme answers all the problems, we believe that any genuine debate and decision-making to establish the Respect Unity Coalition must address all the demands of this programme.

For a democratic republic

- Abolish the monarchy, the House of Lords, the privy council and crown powers.
- Establish fixed-term, democratic elections, based on proportional representation, and accountability of all elected officials and all MPs to their constituents.
- Disestablish the churches of England and Scotland - for the complete separation of church and state, and the freedom

to worship, or not, as we choose.

- Self-determination to Scotland and Wales.
- Self determination for the people of Ireland.
- Abolish the lord chancellor's office - all judges to be elected and accountable. For a free national legal service to ensure equal and effective access to justice for everyone. Establish the right to sue any official before a jury.
- Disband special branch, the secret services and all surveillance agencies and operations.

For social change

- Stop privatisation - renationalise the railways.
- Tax the rich and big business to rebuild the welfare state.
- For the right to work - 35-hour week now.
- End discrimination - against racism, sexism and homophobia.
- Repeal the anti-union laws.
- Stop the sell-off of council homes - end homelessness.
- Raise pensions and restore the link with earnings.
- For a fully funded NHS - end privatisation and cuts.
- Fully funded comprehensive education - no selection.
- Raise the minimum wage to £7.40 an hour - the European decency threshold.
- Scrap student tuition fees.
- Free abortion and contraception on demand.
- Stop the onslaught on civil rights.

For internationalism

- Save the planet - for tough action on pollution and food safety.
- Cancel Third world debt.
- Defend asylum-seekers and oppose all immigration controls.
- British troops out of the Balkans, the Gulf and Ireland.
- For workers' and socialist unity across Europe.
- For a democratic and federal Europe based on working class solidarity and cooperation.
- We neither advocate the euro nor defend the pound.

In order to build a society in which need comes before greed, we believe our economy must be reorganised on a radically democratic basis. By socialism we mean nothing like the old Stalinist Soviet Union, with its repression and bureaucracy. For us, socialism is about making solidarity the guiding principle of society. We mean the working class organising to liberate itself from the rule of profit and create its own democracy, abolishing the privileges of managers and officials. Every major industry should be reorganised on the lines of social provision for need - publicly owned, and democratically controlled by workers and the community. No rich and no poor, no profits and no wage-slavery, no palaces and no homeless, no jobless and no overworked!●

ESF 2004

Bureaucratic grip tightens

The London Mayor is in control of preparations for the European Social Forum. **Tina Becker** reports

Mayor Ken Livingstone and his political appointees in the Greater London Authority have firmed up their grip on the European Social Forum, which is due to take place in Britain in 2004. Via his policy director for public affairs and transport, Redmond O'Neill, Livingstone has unfortunately been able to keep information about preparations for the ESF restricted to a charmed circle, including a few trusted NGOs and trade union officials. Sadly, but not exactly surprisingly, the Socialist Workers Party has allowed itself to be used as Ken's obedient foot soldiers.

The SWP has simply ignored instructions from the last ESF European assembly, apparently following 'requests' made by the GLA. The result: the official structures of the ESF have been paralysed for the last four weeks.

Readers of the *Weekly Worker* will be aware of the numerous other problems. For months reps of the SWP, the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain and certain GLA officials (some of whom belong or used to belong to Socialist Action) have been meeting in private. Requests to open up the process and involve others have gone unanswered. Proposals for democratic structures have likewise been brushed aside. However, things have got even worse since the European assembly in December.

This weekend will see our first UK assembly to prepare for the ESF. The intention had been for this gathering to decide on a structure for the preparatory process: how often we meet, the role of the working groups, the venues for the ESF assemblies, etc. Also, we were supposed to decide on the role and composition of a facilitating committee/organising group, the important question of affiliation fees (should poorer organisations be exempt?) and there were to have been report-backs from the various working groups that have started to meet just before Christmas.

The European ESF assembly, the highest body of the ESF process which met on December 13-14 in London, decided that a 'volunteers group' was to come together which would make all the necessary preparations for our UK assembly. This group was also supposed to help iron out the different ideas on structure and affiliation fees which have been put forward. For example, while Chris Nineham (SWP/Globalise Resistance) called for a facilitating committee com-

"The ESF must be about the broad mass of London's population"

posed of "as many trade union representatives, NGOs and groups like the Muslim Association of Britain as possible", others have emphasised the need for a *working* group, which would bring together those organisations and individuals actually prepared to put in the necessary work - rather than sport the correct name tag.

Last but not least, the volunteers group was asked to make sure that as many organisations and individuals as possible were informed that the ESF will be coming to Britain. As RMT representative Alex Gordon put it, we were supposed "to launch an active campaign to spread the word". This was of crucial importance, as things have so far taken place mainly in secret and many organisations are still not even aware that the ESF will be coming to Britain.

About 40 people wanted to help prepare the UK assembly and left their contact details with the chair of the last session, Claire Williams (Unison/SWP). Most people expected that the first meeting of the volunteers group would take place before Christmas, and, when no information was forthcoming, it was then assumed that it would convene at the beginning of January. Unfortunately, silence was all we got from Claire. Numerous people emailed her and left messages, while I offered to take the job off her hands if she was too busy. But no response from her, or any other SWP member, was forthcoming.

At a meeting of the practicalities working group on January 8, the only SWP member present, Guy Taylor, said he was "sure that Claire is sorting it out". We then delegated Natfhe's president Maureen O'Mara to contact Claire (via Claire's partner, Kenny Bell, who is Unison branch secretary in Newcastle, but not a member of the SWP). All Maureen could report back was that she understood comrade Williams to be dealing with the email list "so that the next meeting can be organised".

To cut a long story short, the volun-

teers group has not met. Instead, when more and more people posted angry emails on the ESF UK list, Dave Holland (GLA manager for European and international affairs) simply sent out a short notice on January 16, informing people that the UK assembly would take place in the City Hall, but not how it was that he ended up doing the inviting. He also announced that the meeting would only last four hours - nowhere near enough to sort out all the problems. But maybe that is exactly the point.

More light was shed on this by a follow-up email posted by Kenny Bell a day later. He disingenuously stated that, "As the body which was to plan the meeting on January 24 has not been able to meet, the GLA was asked to provide meeting rooms, which it has done." His email also contained a proposed agenda. However, it did not mention either who put the agenda together or who it was that "asked the GLA to provide meeting rooms".

Apparently, Claire and Kenny have been "given to understand" that the GLA would prefer that the volunteers group should not meet, which explains why they have been sitting on the contact details. To be fair, it has also been reported that both were "very unhappy" with this situation. There is no question that Claire would have received her instructions from SWP centre. Why Kenny did not rebel against this undemocratic manoeuvre is another question.

Some people around the London Social Forum have mused that what we were seeing followed on from Livingstone's readmission into the Labour Party. He did not need the ESF any more, they thought, and the silence and absence of organisation meant that the GLA (with the SWP in tow) have dropped the ESF ball. But that is certainly not the case.

A few further incidents shed more light on what exactly is going on. Our practicalities group delegated comrade John Street (a member of the Green Party, although not its representative) to get in touch with Redmond O'Neill's office to try and improve communication regarding the various venues that could be used during the ESF. At the European assembly O'Neill had given a lengthy report in which he outlined that he had contacted dozens of venues and had been given prices and conditions for their hire. As no GLA representative attended the two meetings of the practicalities group, it proved rather difficult to proceed on this particular question. Which venues had already been contacted? What prices had been given? Surely, the GLA would have been quoted preferential prices, which we would need to know about.

John got in touch with Dave Holland who referred him to his sidekick, Madeleine Kingston. Only after John repeatedly pressed for an answer did she reply in writing: "Sorry, I am not able to respond to your email at present." When he phoned her up, she advised him to speak to "other ESF people about this". She had obviously been instructed not to pass on any information and ignore any decisions or requests of the ESF working groups.

As a result, the practicalities working group has lapsed into inactivity. Suggestions to set up task-orientated email lists were dropped, because "this group does not really have the authority to do that", as Guy Taylor said. Neither did it have the authority to open a bank account or make any other firm arrangements. In effect, the 50 or so eager people who have attended meetings of the practicalities group at one stage or another were left in limbo.



Ken Livingstone: wants left cred

For example, we do not know if any trade union branches have been successfully approached for funds (the volunteers group was supposed to organise this), although we have only five weeks left to meet the GLA-imposed deadline of March 1 to find a sum in the region of one million pounds (see *Weekly Worker* December 18). Apparently though, the London regional branch of Unison will be asked at its next meeting to support the ESF and donate £50,000. The international committee of Unison will discuss a motion to "match-fund" whatever the London committee has pledged. This would be great news - if it was officially confirmed.

It has since transpired that, far from having dropped the project, the GLA has staged a number of meetings with trade union officials over the Christmas period and the beginning of January. Undoubtedly though, we have not seen the end of ESF meetings behind closed doors. In fact, they are set to increase as time goes on. A secretive structure, controlled by the GLA and defended by the SWP, suits them far better than the laborious, semi-democratic structures the ESF has been operating under for the last three years.

In this, the consensus 'principle' has actually played into the hands of those who want to carry on organising in a secretive manner. As our European assembly could not reach consensus on many items, these were referred back to the volunteers group. But this group itself was supposed to be an interim solution, only existing because people could not agree on a proper structure. By simply sidelining the volunteers group, the organisations 'in the know' have been able to carry on their negotiations behind closed doors, while claiming a degree of legitimacy. After all, things must get organised, mustn't they? By the time we actually get a facilitating committee together, the most important decisions will almost certainly have already been taken.

All democratic forces must pull together at Saturday's short UK assembly to make sure the ESF can be rescued from the clutches of the GLA and Ken Livingstone. He undoubtedly expects this

huge European-wide event to substantially boost his leftwing credentials and allow him to promote himself as the Labour alternative to Tony Blair and New Labour.

The CPGB will again be critically supporting the 'Proposals for a democratic ESF preparatory process', despite its unfortunate insistence on the consensus principle and the reference to the World Social Forum's 'Charter of principles'. We support it because it actually lays down detailed guidelines for role of the ESF assembly, the UK assembly and the working groups. Crucially, it makes the case for all these structures to "meet in public, publish their agendas and discussion documents" and "make available full minutes".

But at the end of the day no one should put their trust in guidelines, constitutions or charters. The London ESF will be a success to the degree that it ceases to be the property of GLA officials, trade union bureaucrats and even leftwing activists. The ESF must be about the broad mass of London's population. Hence we look to self-activity. Trade union branches, shop stewards committees, constituency and ward Labour parties, borough-wide social forums, tenant groups, campaigning organisations, school and college students, artists, musicians, migrant organisations, squatters, women's groups, etc, etc, each can be won to plan what they want to do for the ESF. Let there be an explosion of creativity and imagination from below. It is to such a London that we want to invite thousands upon thousands of anti-capitalists from across the whole of Europe. We have much to learn from each other, we will surely organise together more closely ... and certainly together we shall celebrate our common striving for a better world ●

Fighting fund

Visiting card

A batch of standing order donations has come to our rescue, as we approach the last week of our £500 monthly fighting fund.

Regular gifts from MM, DW, DO, KG, PC and our comrades in the Revolutionary Democratic Group have boosted January's total by £230 and, when you add this to cheques received from LP (£25), BV (£20) and JP (£2), you can see that we have taken a big step towards our target. We have exactly £395 in the kitty.

Nothing from our web readers again this week though. A pity, because it is actually quick and easy to make a donation using our PayPal facility. As I have said over and over again, making a cash transfer over the

internet is surely an excellent way to show your solidarity and appreciation if you are one of the thousands who log onto us rather than subscribing or buying from this or that progressive bookshop.

Last week, for example, we had 8,010 hits, with 18,670 pages accessed. If we are to pick up the extra £100 we need to take us over the top for January, we need just a few more of you web readers to leave behind your visiting card ●

Robbie Rix

**Ask for a bankers order form,
or send cheques, payable to
Weekly Worker**

First ESF UK assembly

1pm to 5pm, GLA City Hall,
Queen's Walk, London SE12

REVIEW

Face up to the fight

Tariq Mehmood **While there is light** Manchester, 2003, Comma Press, pp220, £7.95

The travails of those who fight imperialism are long and brutal. Families torn asunder, friendships stretched and broken, lives crushed against the bars of prisons and the kicks of cops.

Tariq Mehmood's novel mixes clarity of reflection with bittersweet agonies and a pained lament for loss. The loss is not only consequent upon the cruel conditions of an updated and as yet unfinished Raj - though the ways the legacy of colonialism plays out on the workings of northern England and north Punjab are not simply contemporary - and the lament is not just for the family, but for the stalled and failing political movements that would be a possible resistance.

Against the several significant historical backgrounds that shape the (so-called) post-colonial condition, *Where there is light* recounts the tale of Saleem Choudry returning to his parental village in north Punjab. The novel utilises three texts to tell its multi-sited tale - the first: a letter the disgruntled labour-migrated worker son writes to his mother, but which she cannot read; the second: the cassette tape recording the heart-torn and weary mother prepares for her son as she faces death, to which he cannot listen; and the third: the police-violence-extracted 'confession' which identifies Saleem as the ringleader of the Youth League fighting racist skinheads in Bradford in the early 1980s.

In these contexts, characters recount - more or less lyrically - various predicaments. The legacy of the partition violence with which England left a parting gift of train-filled bodies, hacked to death in sectarian frenzy, is one memory. An unrelated consequence is the position of disaffected youth, whose heritage could be the anti-colonial and workers' movement but who, through seduction and distraction, are disconnected from their romantic and revolutionary roots. In place of the movements they try to build are the old religious

hypocrisies that are but the first cry of an oppressed mass, misled by a self-interested leadership with thought only for comfort.

Saleem is arrested as a 'terrorist'. This is a fictionalised account of what came to be known as the case of the Bradford 12, when Asian youths were charged with conspiracy after the discovery of petrol bombs. Saleem, out on bail, is flying back to Punjab to see his mother. A letter he had posted in a drunken rage the day before follows him through the post. He arrives too late to meet his mother (hospitals full of shit while the government builds atomic bombs). Scenes of lament and a difficult homecoming to a place that is no longer home are punctuated by a harrowing account of the arrest scene in Bradford and the interrogation, with full English police-style beatings, in the lockup before the trial.

The story works in these multiple places and concurrent times, along the way providing a meditation - angry, not passive - on a range of difficulties that are the lot of the 'returnee' to the site of colonial extraction. Saleem was sent to England as a boy to earn money for the family, from that country where the streets were paved with gold (but they were not). Returning to Pakistan, the sex scene in the movie *The saint* is censored, the passport and customs officers impose their delays and extract their percentage cut, the dilemma that values the life of a fly but not of kin relations is matched by the alacrity with which friends, and devout community leaders, pursue the duty-free booty with which Saleem returns. A well read tourist might recognise this lot, but not likely.

Self-mocking mockery of mock pieties, perhaps the portrayal of the whisky running business scam is the most blatant example of a hostility to religious hypocrisy that must be replaced by a more organised resistance. There are positive portrayals: the old mates

from school who have not forgotten the one who left - even as they make merry with the desire to go themselves. In one sequence the contract that requires one both to give and take is considered fair trade for the prize of entry to Valaiti (Britain), despite full knowledge of what the prospective migrant will be forced to endure. Foreign, Vailaiti poison (cigarettes) is even better than local lung-rasping pleasures.

The one who inducts Saleem into the subtleties of communist solidarities - poignantly a white father who rescues him from a beating at the hands of his fascist son - is clear and insightful in his analysis of the mill workers and who profits most from those who labour under capital. Payara Singh tells of the heroes of the Punjab: of Uddam Singh and Baghat Singh, who fought the colonials with no thought for their own gain - a history that Saleem has to struggle to preserve - if you do not understand your past, how can you have hope for your future? The *Manifesto* is quoted, thought the words are mislaid.

Solidarities become a major theme. In the end those interrogated in the youth movement betray each other under duress, but we know the wider campaign mobilised a larger alliance and won the case for the Bradford 12, establishing self-defence as a legal defence in law. This is particularly important to remember today, as alleged 'terrorists' are routinely detained in the UK, profiled again as the enemy by the jihadis, Bush and Blair. By the end of the novel Valaiti has become England, Saleem is not a Trot but he reads, the cops know they are not going to win the case (but they make the charges in any case) and the movement continues.

Saleem does not know all that yet, but his personal resolution - he plays his mother's tape, reads the letter, signs the forms - mean a realisation: that his history is one that requires him to face up to the fight (while there is light). He will return to struggle again ●

John Hutnyk

Galloway's nationalist gaffe

Cameron Richards reports on the Cardiff meeting of the unity coalition

About 200 people from across Wales attended the meeting of Respect in Cardiff on January 20. The main speakers on the platform were George Galloway, John Rees and John Marek, the independent assembly member for Wrexham and leader of Forward Wales.

By recent standards in Wales this was a big meeting. The three main speakers made generally well received opening speeches, all emphasising what they had in common with each other. Indeed to the untrained eye it would have been difficult to spot who was the revolutionary socialist on the platform and who was the former Kinnock and Smith loyalist on Labour's front bench (Marek).

Things only began to go awry when the debate was opened up to the floor. It quickly became apparent that the chair had been told not to accept contributions from certain organisations. Consequently the only contribution made by a representative of the non-Socialist Workers Party far left was from CPGB comrade Ethan Grech and this was only taken because the chair seemed to think he was still a member of the SWP.

Thus, when John Rees whispered in the chair's ear that it was time for the platform to make their summation speeches, it appeared that the stage management of the event had been brought off splendidly. Yet he did not know what was going to happen next.

About to make his closing remarks, Rees was faced with a young and nervous comrade from the Socialist Party in England and Wales, who said that she wanted to speak to the audience. Her request was ignored, but she stayed by his side.

Thus, when Rees completed his speech (and promptly left to return to London), the brave comrade asked again. This time, supported by sections of the audience, her request was accepted and she proceeded to ask whether the coalition saw itself as being part of the process towards a new workers' party. Typical SP fare, but quite pertinent in the context.

Indeed such a question was especially relevant, as in his opening Galloway had seemed to rule out the prospect of Respect ever becoming a movement that might lead to a new party. He seemed to think that all the groups treated their programmes as 'holy grails' which would forever preclude them from uniting. Yet, if this is the case, what is Respect for? Is it simply a vote-winning exercise for one set of elections which might just lead to Galloway himself being elected to the European parliament?

However, there was one 'respectable' trend of opinion that George admitted would find no room in his coalition. No, not the SP or the CPGB, but Welsh nationalists. After a fairly sympathetic question from left nationalist and Plaid Cymru AM Leanne Wood, who noted that the declaration said nothing about Wales or Scotland, Galloway rounded on Plaid - not even conceding that Wales should have the right of self-determination.

Now, of course, if Respect had a coherent political programme, aimed at taking on the British state and not separating from it, George would have had a good point. Yet it precisely does not and it seeks to unite a motley crew of Trotskyists, Stalinists, reformists and greens. Indeed Gal-

loway would still like the Muslim Association of Britain to jump on board. So why shun left nationalists? Indeed what gives him alone the right to say what the coalition will stand for anyway?

This soon became clear. Amidst heckling from some sections of the audience, Galloway then rounded on the Scottish Socialist Party, because they too were nationalist. This was a major gaffe, because it now became clear why Respect will not be standing in Scotland. Not because Galloway wants the electorate there to vote SSP, as is sometimes assumed, but because he does not want to face electoral annihilation by the SSP in his own backyard. Otherwise, why not take on the SSP?

To his credit, George did manage to rescue himself by reaching out to others in the audience. In the final few minutes of his closing speech, recognising the event had been badly handled, he said he looked forward to his meeting with SP leaders in Coventry this Friday, remarked how much he enjoyed the *Weekly Worker* and was not afraid of the open criticism and honest debate he finds in its pages. In fact, on his recent return to Britain he felt motivated to read six issues back to back. Later he told a CPGB member that he looked forward to various tendencies having platform rights within Respect.

A footnote. What was Robert Griffiths, the beleaguered general secretary of the Communist Party of Britain, doing at the meeting? After last weekend's CPB special congress rejected support for the coalition, is he about to jump ship from the CPB and give open support for Respect? We shall see●

What we fight for

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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weekly Worker

Paper of the Communist Party of Great Britain

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Respect rejected by CPB's special congress

Party and paper split

By 60% to 40% the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain voted at its January 17 special congress to reject any engagement with the new Respect coalition. So the CPB will stick to auto-Labourism and the sterile verities of its reformist *British road to socialism* programme.

Narrow though this margin is, the decision comes as a major rebuff for the Robert Griffiths-John Haylett duumvirate, who have recently fallen for the seductive overtures of George Galloway. Doubtless comrade Galloway will be disappointed, as he was hoping that the CPB and *Morning Star* would act as a kind of counterweight to the Socialist Workers Party in Respect.

However, the CPB's traditionalist wing - composed of the likes of John Foster, the CPB's international secretary and top man in Scotland, industrial organiser Kevin Halpin and Anita Halpin, national chairwoman and leading National Union of Journalists apparatchik - won the day. At least, for the time being.

The rift over Respect is, of course, symptomatic of far deeper fault lines that cleave the CPB from top to bottom. And, far from easing the factional stresses, the special congress - particularly given the closeness of the vote - *exacerbates* the crisis in its ranks and threatens to blow it apart. Between now and the next, regular, biannual congress expect a full-scale factional war.

The innovators around part-time general secretary Griffiths now stand thoroughly discredited in the eyes of many activists. Neither he nor *Morning Star* editor John Haylett are trusted any longer. Indeed there has been a nasty email campaign conducted against Griffiths: his opponents have dredged up his past associations with the Welsh Republican Socialist Party, his trial for terrorism and his later diatribes against the *British road to socialism* (see *Weekly Worker* March 26 1998).

Privately in email whispers, and then openly from the speaker's rostrum at the special congress, both Griffiths and Haylett were not only dubbed naive, but branded revisionists and turncoats. Indeed Andrew Murray, a close ally of the ruling duumvirate, is criticised for having gone completely soft on the Trots - namely the SWP; and that despite his defensive references to JV Stalin, nostalgic fondness for the 1930s purges and undoubted prestige as national chair of the Stop the War Coalition.

Apart from the growing mistrust of those in charge, what gave the traditionalists their majority over the twinned apparatus of Griffiths's Camden Road CPB HQ and Haylett's Beachy Road *Star* offices were four main factors.

- Firstly, continued loyalty to the *British road to socialism* programme - with auto-Labourism at its core. The idea of abandoning a tradition going back to at least 1943 (especially given the growing number of 'reclaim Labour' union general secretaries) has no particular appeal for those in the CPB's ranks who have dedicated themselves to achieving promotion in the trade union bureaucracy.

- Secondly, relations in the CPB are highly personalised and parochial. The organisation is a patchwork of petty fiefdoms, overlorded by often warring political 'nobles'. Wales - where comrade Griffiths

still insists on living and working as a college lecturer - therefore voted almost as a bloc for the Respect turn. By contrast Scotland, under John Foster, voted against.

- Thirdly, Respect is seen as untested and high-risk: at best "a diversion", if it has a limited shelf life, and at worst positively "dangerous", if it establishes itself as a more permanent feature of the political landscape (Anita Halpin *Morning Star* January 12).

- Fourthly, there is fear: fear of being slowly absorbed by SWP osmosis; or fear of being ideologically torn apart by carnivorous predators such as the *Weekly Worker*.

Comrade Foster, together with the Halpins, skilfully wrought this combination of history, inertia and apprehension into a winning majority.

The Respect crisis will surely increase the confusion, bunker mentality and frustration amongst the CPB's increasingly elderly membership. Not least because here is an organisation characterised by lack of transparency and a congenital aversion to *open* political struggle. It was established in 1988 on the basis of running away from the political battles in the 'official' CPGB.

Tellingly the special congress rated only the briefest of mentions in the *Morning Star* (January 19) ... and that as an aside in a report of the CPB's executive committee meeting. Looming over that insultingly short item was a generously large photo of George Galloway, pushing a Respect rally in Oxford that evening. Coincidence? Perhaps, but in the murky world of these Stalinites, it is often necessary to interpret nuances of language - or even layout - to get some kind of idea of what is *really* being said, what they *actually* think.

We know that Haylett has been bombarded with protests. Not to carry an extensive report of an official congress is surely unprecedented. It smacks less of Joseph Stalin's USSR and more of Kim Jong-Il's North Korea. Of course, Haylett has an interest not only in keeping the truth under wraps (he has, after all, been shamed by the congress defeat), but in goading his factional opponents into a precipitative split.

The Gordian knot for these comrades was in 1988 when they broke from the 'official' CPGB by setting up the Communist Campaign Group and then "re-establishing" the CPB. Loyalty to the CPB - despite its laughable attempts to present itself as the uninterrupted political and organisational continuation of the party founded in July-August 1920 - is tenuous and easily discarded. Like the Maoists before them splitting may become habitual for some of these people.

So with this in mind, where next for the innovators? When he argued for engagement with Respect, John Haylett suggested that his opponents had a totally passive attitude towards political developments. That the CPB had to be pulled - forcibly dragged if necessary - out of the doldrums. Following the huge upsurge against the Iraq war in 2003 the CPB leadership expect growth. They did not get it. Despite Andrew Murray's

high profile and the winning of Kate Hudson of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, things have, if anything, continued to go downhill.

Respect held out a straw to the drowning man. Haylett's article - tellingly headlined 'We can't just wish and hope' - counterposed the potential of Respect to the traditionalists' "alternative ... of soldiering on under a prime minister who ... actively glories in spurning all labour movement concepts" (*Morning Star* December 20).

The duumvirate will therefore hit back and hit back hard. They are driven both by their need to survive as office holders and by political ambition. Having overthrown the original leadership of Mike Hicks and Mary Rosser, they know how to manoeuvre and fight dirty too. Haylett led a successful *Morning Star* strike against them. After some vicious legal and political battles Hicks, Rosser and their supporters were driven out of the CPB and into the wilderness.

The obvious temptation is to use the *Star* as a factional bludgeon. This would be to rerun the 'official' CPGB's last years as farce. The leading ranks of today's CPB are composed of those who in the 1980s fought against the Eurocommunists of the *Marxism Today* clique - people like Martin Jacques, Nina Temple and David Aaronovitch - on the terrain of the formally independent cooperative that owns the *Morning Star*, the Peoples' Press Printing Society.

Morning Star editor Tony Chater - a right opportunist and utterly grey bureaucrat - became alarmed by the attempts of the Eurocommunists to get their claws into 'his' paper. He rebelled against them and the elected executive committee and turned to the centrists - the pro-Soviet left in the 'official' CPGB - for support and, crucially, votes at PPPS AGMs. The *Morning Star* was subsequently wielded to great effect.

The inner-Party battle was thus fought with the aid of many *Morning Star* readers, Tony Benn and other Labour Party members included. They too loathed everything the Eurocommunists stood for. Through a double whammy - force of numbers and shameless manipulation of the PPPS rule book - the Euro-



John Haylett: rebuffed

communists were kept at bay. They took their revenge by launching a full-scale purge of oppositionists. Hundreds were expelled.

The *Morning Star's* cooperative ownership structure allows this or that established factional group to turn it into a bureaucratic fortress. Thus comrade Haylett is in a very powerful position as editor - like Chater before him - and it is clear that, despite defeat at the special congress, he unlikely to resign himself to just 'soldiering on'.

History does not make carbon copies, however. We are not likely to see the SWP playing the role of the 1980s centrists and left Labourites in the PPPS - although it could certainly numerically swamp anything the CPB traditionalists could mobilise. However, the *Star* has a presence, a

history and a reach in the labour movement that dwarfs the influence of the atrophied CPB sect. Haylett has turned the finances of the paper around, making it less dependent than ever on 'outsiders' to keep it afloat. So the temptation of doing another UDI is certainly there.

The post-congress CPB is still more deeply fractured. Contradictions that characterised it throughout its existence are becoming ever more impossible to contain. Blairism and the delabourisation of Labour threw much of the revolutionary left into crisis. It has taken Blairism *plus* the addition of the anti-war movement, which took to the streets in its millions and which finds some sort of political expression in Respect to achieve a similar effect on the CPB ●

Alan Rees

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