



# weekly **worker**

**Respect candidate Ken  
Loach looks towards a  
new party of the left**

▣ Jesus: man and myth  
▣ Women and Respect  
▣ ESF assembly  
▣ Aslef crisis

No 525

Thursday April 22 2004

Towards a new workers' party

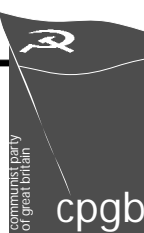
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# Fighting for liberation



**Ian Donovan on the struggles of  
the Middle East - back page**



## PARTYnotes

# Votes of conscience and women's rights

**G**eorge Galloway, Respect MP for Glasgow Kelvin, is speaking at a rally in Leeds on Monday April 26. It will be one of many hundreds he has addressed over the past two years. What is different about this meeting is that pro-abortion activists are organising a lobby (see [indymedia.org.uk/en/2004/04/289514.html](http://indymedia.org.uk/en/2004/04/289514.html)). Although the organisers have dubbed their protest a 'picket', they intend to enter the meeting to ask questions of the Respect candidates.

It is a matter of public record that comrade Galloway opposes a woman's right to choose. He is speaking alongside Anas Altikriti, Respect's lead candidate for the Yorkshire and Humberside EU constituency. Altikriti is the former president of the Muslim Association of Britain, which, as a group based on political Islam, also opposes abortion. It is quite right, I should add, that candidates should face tough questioning over their position on all manner of issues, including women's reproductive rights.

For communists, comrade Galloway's record on this is more than worrying. It puts him to the right of mainstream bourgeois thinking in the UK. In an interview in *The Independent on Sunday*, he said: "I'm strongly against abortion. I believe life begins at conception and therefore unborn babies have rights. I think abortion is immoral." He added: "I believe in god. I have to believe that the collection of cells has a soul" (April 5).

The website of Right to Life UK describes Galloway thus: "Elected to parliament in 1987, since when he has consistently opposed abortion on demand and late abortions. He has also shown himself to be a courageous fighter against the use of the human embryo for experiments and against euthanasia. In 1990 he opposed clauses aimed at legalising abortion on demand, with one doctor needed only to certify that the pregnancy has not exceeded 12 weeks. He also voted against abortion up to birth on various grounds, including handicap. He is also against the use of the human embryo for experiments and human cloning ... He is completely opposed to euthanasia by omission and euthanasia by commission."

In a democratic political party the particular positions of individuals on questions of policy and principle, while not irrelevant, are less important than the position of the party itself. When it comes to actions, any elected representative of a Communist Party would be bound by its democratic centralism on all such questions. Individualistic 'votes of conscience' are incompatible with communist organisation. Even the Socialist Alliance requires all elected representatives to uphold national policy (constitution, clause E5).

This exposes Respect's central weaknesses. The unity coalition imposes no collective discipline whatsoever. It is fighting the

European elections with the most minimalist of populist platforms, without any policy at all on a whole range of vital issues - not least abortion, contraception and reproduction. Here is what, according to our founding declaration, Respect stands for: "The right to self-determination of every individual in relation to their religious (or non-religious) beliefs, as well as sexual choices." Clear as mud then. This could be read any number of ways - and such is the aim of populism. As George Galloway himself says, "What you want, baby, we got it."

Does this mean that, if elected, comrade Galloway will be allowed "self-determination" in relation to matters of sexual and reproductive choice? Or does it mean he will be duty-bound to vote in accordance with the decisions of Respect itself? How would George Galloway MEP vote on such issues if they appeared on the order paper of the European parliament?

This needs urgent clarification. What do other members of the executive think about abortion? In our opinion the collective will must prevail over an individual's viewpoint. The recall conference of Respect in autumn will need to set out a clear partyist approach to this and all such questions. If not, Respect will become a barrier to the struggle for a working class party in Britain.

Clearly, an overwhelming majority of Respect members support a woman's right to choose whether or not to have an abortion. This should become firm policy. Elected representatives must vote as representatives of the organisation, not according to their conscience. If they cannot stomach abiding by the collective position on particular questions, they should stand down. George Galloway - along with all candidates - should tell us whether voting for a policy he disagrees with would be a fundamental problem for him.

What will John Rees say on women's reproductive rights? We should ask him. Will the SWP remain silent and once again sacrifice its principle in order to maintain an alliance with anti-abortionists? Is a woman's right to choose merely a "shibboleth" or is it a central aspect of our fight for general human freedom?

In what may be a coincidence, an article in last week's *Socialist Worker* on "genuine equality for women" by Colin Barker fails to mention the word 'abortion' (April 17). Given George Galloway's interview a week earlier, perhaps this is what philosophers call a 'significant silence'. Comrade Barker could hardly be unaware of the utterances of our leading candidate on this subject.

Within Respect, the method of the Socialist Workers Party and Alan Thornett of the International Socialist Group has been to avoid contentious issues. Workers' representatives on a worker's wage. Secularism. Republicanism. Open borders. And now abortion. To bring up such issues is to divide the movement, goes the refrain. Such an opportunist method may temporarily work, but cannot achieve anything in the long run except

disarray, collapse and demoralisation. Candidates standing for election are asked all manner of awkward questions on every conceivable issue. Voters - not to mention hostile media hacks and rival politicians - are not so stupid as to content themselves with mere empty platitudes. They will demand to know what Respect actually stands for. Would Respect vote to keep abortion legal? Or would Respect vote to make it illegal? Keeping quiet on the question will not wash.

Of course, communists fight for a world where late terminations are completely unnecessary. In the here and now, we emphasise the right to choose - as early as possible, as late as necessary. Men and women must, of course, fight for this together. It is not simply a women's question to be left to them. Free abortion on demand, like every other social and democratic issue, needs united working class leadership.

And it needs to be supported as official policy, accepted by all. Unless our candidates agree to submit themselves to agreed positions, standing together in elections becomes merely an opportunist attempt to get elected for its own sake and nothing to do with what we want to achieve. Respect certainly must not become a vehicle for promoting the backward ideas of this or that individual, no matter what outstanding role they may have played in other fields.

Should comrade Galloway's regrettable views on abortion lead us to withhold support for Respect in the June 10 elections? The CPGB thinks not. Of course there will be those who eagerly pounce on his statements around this issue to reinforce their sectarian opposition to voting for the coalition. A mistake. Any kind of electoral success for Respect will once again put the question of partyism at the top of the agenda. It will also be a blow to the Blairite war machine from the left. We should therefore vote Respect, albeit highly critically.

Amongst other things, Bob Crow, general secretary of the RMT transport union, is in favour of capital punishment. Like comrade Galloway's opinion on abortion, this is a reactionary position. Yet such individual points of view are hardly incompatible with membership of a socialist or left organisation. However, as the CPGB's Ian Donovan has pointed out in a recent email exchange, "If Galloway switched the focus of his public work to a crusade against abortion, or if Crow did the same thing with his view of the death penalty, then that would be a very different manner. But in the absence of that I am prepared to work with flawed people. The thing to do is to fight for democracy - so that positions on these matters are decided in a progressive manner - not to engage in campaigns against individuals" □

Marcus Ström

## LETTERS

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

### Popular front

In his reply to Manny Neira's article, 'No unconditional support for Respect', Ian Donovan claims Manny's piece is "riddled with inconsistencies and faulty logic" (April 8). To these sins, I feel Ian, instead, ought to plead guilty. Let me expand.

Ian sarcastically notes that "one slight saving grace" of Manny's article is that it didn't claim that Respect is a popular front. Fair enough, one would suppose, given that Ian has been the most consistent supporter of Respect in the CPGB. Yet, in the very next paragraph, Ian, our toughest fighter against 'sectarian positions', gives a little credence to the popular front nature of Respect himself.

He writes that such a notion "was not entirely unreasonable initially because of ... the possibility of dropping elementary demands for women's and gay rights as 'shibboleths'". What explains the apparent inconsistency here of Ian recognising the potential popular front thrust of Respect in its earlier incarnation, Peace and Justice? A mere slip of the pen? Or has Ian changed his mind?

None of these are likely, given, as I have already noted, that Ian's position has remained consistent throughout. He gives the game away when he adds that such notions proved to be "erroneous - no wing of the ruling class is involved in Respect, nor are there any signs of aspirations to bring in such ruling class forces". Note the inconsistency here. Ian's true position is that a popular front can only exist when a bloc is made with fully fledged bourgeois forces. For Ian it is not the programme of a bloc - for example, dropping women's and gay rights - that is crucial.

As an aside, which ruling class forces, in any case, would, have blocked with Respect had it dropped these demands? Rather Ian is playing attorney for others in the party - above all, Jack Conrad. For Ian knows full well that the leadership, during the Peace and Justice stage, more than toyed with labelling Peace and Justice a popular front.

Permit me to quote Jack Conrad at some length. Last summer Jack wrote that in "swapping auto-Labourism for auto-anti-Labourism and now an electoral alliance with a section of the mosque, the Socialist Workers Party has retreated from flawed class politics and is in danger of adopting the fatal politics of the popular front" (*Weekly Worker* July 3 2003). Indeed Jack then asks the pertinent question: "What is a popular front? It is not, as some erroneously suggest, any and all examples of cross-class cooperation, let alone marching on the same demonstration as muslims. Such brittle sectarianism is completely alien to the tradition and practice of Marxism."

He goes on: "A popular front is typically a bloc of parties in which the working class component *practically* limits itself to achieving a 'progressive', 'just' or 'peaceful' capitalism. Those not contented with the hollow promise of such a capitalist utopia become a problem to be surgically removed or brutally crushed - the logic of the popular front is counterrevolutionary." Splendid stuff. And there's more: "The *Morning Star*'s Communist Party of Britain forgets nothing and learns nothing. Robert Griffiths, John Haylett and Andrew Murray - the CPB's leadership - laud popular fronts retrospectively and yearn to see them again. Not surprisingly then, SWP and CPB tops nowadays are at pains to emphasise how much they have in common."

So there we have it. According to our leading theoretician, the SWP was heading in a popular front direction last summer with Peace and Justice. It didn't matter to Jack that there were no sections

of the ruling class involved in Respect. Above all, it was the liquidation of the SWP's cherished principles to court non-working class forces - for example, sections of the mosque - that was decisive. No wonder sections of the leadership of the CPB thought there had been no better time since the 1930s to execute its popular front strategy.

Yet it has to be noted that since last summer Jack has not taken forward this analysis of the popular front. In fact nowadays, in meetings of the CPGB, Jack is heard to echo the Ian Donovan line that a popular front must have within it the forces of the ruling class. So what went wrong?

The truth is that the party buckled at the time of the Monbiot-Yaqoob document. Having thought it had seen off the Peace and Justice project, the leadership of the CPGB were surprised when this 'new' initiative arrived. Initially, the party was armed with the analysis that it had developed in the summer. Peter Manson, the editor of *Weekly Worker*, put it bluntly: "Delegates must reject any notion of some green-liberal-pacifist coalition that will take the working class movement precisely nowhere. The irony of the Yaqoob-Monbiot-SWP 'peace and justice' hogwash is that it is likely to be ignored by voters even more than the Socialist Alliance itself was in last month's Brent East by-election" (*Weekly Worker* October 16 2003).

Yet very quickly the tone of the *Weekly Worker* changed. The most consistent advocate of the new course was Ian. He wrote: "The Monbiot-Yaqoob draft programme is a classic hodgepodge, but it is also something that communists and revolutionary socialists need to engage with, albeit critically. It is still quite feasible that this could be the basis of something that could give a positive political expression to the mass anti-war movement, whose evident political potential has so far only been expressed (as a complete travesty) by the treacherous Liberal Democrats" (October 30 2003).

Fair enough, perhaps. Only comrade John Pearson (now expelled from the CPGB) disagreed with critically engaging with Respect. Yet the popular front designation given to Peace and Justice was not applied to Respect. Apparently, the vaguely worded statement about equal rights in the Monbiot-Yaqoob document and the subsequent Respect statement of principles were sufficient to satisfy our leadership that what we were engaging with was a populist coalition of largely pro-working class forces. In this sense, then, the leadership saw something qualitatively superior in Respect over Peace and Justice. Yet a cursory glance at Jack Conrad's earlier article showed that the popular front nature of Respect was alive and well. Has the working class component of Respect - chiefly the SWP - practically limited Respect to achieving a capitalist utopia? Yes. Have those in opposition to this 'bonfire of principles' - the CPGB - become a problem to be surgically removed? In practice, yes.

Cameron Richards  
Newport

### Subjectivism

Manny Neira's latest contribution to the debate on Respect, replying to my own article 'Communist tactics or sectarian subjectivism', makes considerable use of his capacity for humorous commentary to give his argument the appearance of coherence. Unfortunately, on this occasion, it does not succeed in disguising the lack of substance.

Manny does not really come up with any new arguments as to why it amounts to "giving up" any aspiration to "win Respect to a revolutionary perspective" for the CPGB to offer critical electoral support to Respect candidates in the June elections based on their agreed electoral platform. Nor does he give any



further elaboration as to why such a tactic amounts to “electoral populism”. His claim that my arguments are meant to “confuse him to death”, and his word games with the term ‘conditional’ to imply that the CPGB leadership is in favour of support for Respect come what may, with no conditions whatsoever (even that it continues to adhere to the basic class elements in its platform that are the basis of our critical support, that it does not abandon those demands, etc) are just playing with concepts, not a serious argument.

In fact, Manny’s claim of ‘confusion’ about this, and his pretence that my formulation on the conditional nature of our electoral support is comical and meaningless, are simply the product, unfortunately, of a certain degree of cynicism and ignorance of principled communist tactics. All communist tactics involving critical support for non-communist political formations are conditional, and are capable of being withdrawn if a formation renounces the elements in its programme that are the basis of such support. That was our position, for instance, when we gave critical support to Ken Livingstone in 2000. If Livingstone had executed a complete *volte-face* before that election, and announced that after all he supported the Blair government’s privatisation of London Underground, then we would have withdrawn our critical support very sharply indeed. And we would not have been alone in doing so, indeed by such a tactic we would have found a ready audience among large numbers of disillusioned Livingstone supporters.

Manny’s latest article is mostly repetition of arguments he has already made, dressed up with journalistic witticisms. But such witticisms, however pleasing to the reader, cannot substitute for political substance, any more than can more conventional forms of spin. And the one question that Manny does not even begin to address is the simplest one of all. Why does he advocate different criteria when dealing with Respect than in all other cases of leftwing forces standing against New Labour and its Kinnockite predecessor over the last decade and a half - since Lesley Mahmood’s candidature signified the eruption of the crisis caused by the deLabourisation of Labour into the electoral field? Why in his view is it principled to vote for Militant Labour, the Socialist Labour Party, today’s Socialist Party, Ken Livingstone and even elements of the Labour left standing on a record of fighting Blairism, but not Respect? None of the former stood four-square for Manny’s holy trinity of open borders, republicanism and workers’ representatives on a worker’s wage. So why was it OK to give these people critical support, as they stood for many of the same things that are in the Respect platform, and why is it unprincipled to apply the exact same approach to Respect in elections?

**Ian Donovan**  
 South London

## Like a shot

In reply to Louise Whittle’s letter, I would like to clarify a few points (*Weekly Worker* April 8). The views of West Midlands Respect candidate Majid Khan were made in his own personal capacity. He pointed out that when he was helping to organise coaches to an anti-war demo he pushed for separate coaches for men and women, but added that he was defeated on this issue by his left co-organisers. The point of his anecdote (I think) was to illustrate that muslims and non-muslims could put their differences to one side in the spirit of unity.

It goes without saying that Khan’s views are not those of Respect. The national declaration unambiguously states its “opposition to all forms of discrimination based on race, gender, ethnicity, religious beliefs (or lack of them), sexual orientation, disabilities, national origin or citizenship” and supports “the right to self-determination of every indi-

vidual in relation to their religious (or non-religious) beliefs, as well as sexual choices”.

The CPGB would be out of Respect like a shot if it ditched these principles. We have stated week in and week out our opposition to any form of compromise with political islam. We rightly hounded the SWP’s Lindsey German when at last year’s Marxism event she hinted that gay and women’s rights could be discarded as “shibboleths”.

**Joe Wills**  
 Bristol

## Twitchy

At the risk of seeming ‘twitchy’ may I comment on two of your reports of my recent Respect meetings (*Weekly Worker* April 8). Your correspondent from Havering and Redbridge gave a full account of our rally but strangely no acknowledgement of how many attended. Could this be because it was standing room only with several hundred people present?

Equally you report that I had “a hard time” during the question and answer session at Brookes University in Oxford. It might have been more honest to say that this was so only in as much as I insisted on defending Cuba and its socialist revolution against a claue of eastern European anti-communist émigrés.

**George Galloway MP**  
 Westminster

## Foredoomed

Marcus Ström’s article, ‘Respect and Europe’, is based on the false presumption that the unity coalition may decide to adopt the CPGB’s programme on Europe.

However, the SWP-International Socialist Group bloc is trying to isolate the CPGB in Respect. The recent experiences of Anne Mc Shane are proof of this. The SWP-ISG bloc will prevent the coalition from adopting *any* CPGB policies. Therefore the tactic of critical engagement is pure moonshine.

Anyhow, Respect is foredoomed to collapse in ways similar to the Henry A Wallace-led Progressive Party, which contested the US presidential election in 1948. To paraphrase Lord Byron, ‘The best prophet of the future is the past’.

**Philip Maguire**  
 Wolverhampton

## BNP nationalism

Carl Badger says: “The German for ‘nationalist’ is Nazi.” Correction: the German for ‘nationalist’ is ‘*nationalist*’. ‘Nazi’ is an abbreviation for the National Sozialist German Workers Party (National-sozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei), which was coined by that radical middle class stalwart, George Orwell. He probably thought the full thing was a bit of a mouthful. So being the wordsmith that he was he came up with the word ‘Nazi’.

It is a pity that Orwell obscured the former because Hitler gave his Party this name in order to attract and lure large sections of the German population, particularly the working class who were traditional but disillusioned supporters of the Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party. Large sections of the European and American ruling class supported and financed the Nazi Party, thus aiding and abetting its rise to power. They saw in the Nazis an opportunity to crush the threat of Bolshevism in Germany, thus directing attention away from the crisis of capitalism by scape-goating one percent of the population, namely the Jews. From the point of view of international capital the dictatorship of the Nazis was infinitely preferable to the dictatorship of the proletariat. However, like all capitalism’s monsters this one got well out of hand.

Many things led to the rise of Nazism. There was the humiliation of Versailles and the crippling war debt that ensued, making the economic crisis in Germany even more severe than in the rest of the world. There was also the inability of the

Social Democratic Party to overcome its reformism and social chauvinism in the face of the collapse of the capitalist economy. There was also the ineffectual nature of the Communist Party which (had they been more astute in their timing) could have seized the opportunity and mounted an armed insurrection. Amongst other things the Nazi Party would have been strangled in its cradle.

As a communist I am opposed to racism and will fight it wherever I find it. Quite apart from basic human decency, communists fight racism because it creates divisions in the working class, thus enabling capitalism and imperialism to maintain hegemony. The British National Party is fuelling racism in this country and even though its membership comes from the (exclusively white) working class, it functions as an auxiliary of the capitalist state as do much of the press and media and is therefore to be considered by all genuine communists and socialists as an enemy.

I have some words of advice for our young BNP supporter: you have a lot to learn and you will learn nothing from Nick Griffin and his cronies in the BNP. They call themselves the British National Party. Even this is a lie - Britain is an island containing three nations: England, Scotland and Wales. You say you are a nationalist. Are you an English nationalist, Scottish or Welsh, or is British nationalism code for English nationalism, white and Anglo-Saxon?

**John Jones**  
 Canterbury

## Liquidationist

Dave Craig condemns the CPGB for “liquidationism”: to “preach the collapse of the Socialist Alliance is to demoralise the fight for a workers’ party” (*Weekly Worker* April 8). Is this the same Dave Craig who absented himself from the whole afternoon session of the SA’s March 13 conference? Is this the same Dave Craig to did not move his group’s conference motion (the CPGB took the initiative and presented it).

That aside, surely the SA’s “collapse” is now beyond debate. It is a simple statement of fact, and will demoralise no one except those who are easily demoralised. As for his Democracy Platform of the SA, we do not “refuse to work constructively” with it. Any serious proposals for cooperation or joint action will get a sympathetic hearing from us.

**John Bridge**  
 London

## Witch road

I agree with the CPGB’s draft programme that religion should be a private matter - I myself am a witch. But I believe it should be made clear, so as to bring more people into supporting the CPGB, as some will be religious.

I think that religion should be only for the person concerned, and should not be forced upon their children, so as to end brainwashing. I used to be a christian, but that was because of my parents. I didn’t enjoy it. So I think religion should play no governing role, nor be forced upon others.

**David Sims**  
 email

# ACTION

### London Communist Forum

Sunday April 25, 5pm - ‘Jesus, the real man, and the christian myth’. Speaker: Jack Conrad.

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

### Defend asylum-seekers

Meeting to establish united coalition in defence of asylum-seekers, Saturday April 24, 2pm, School of Oriental and African Studies, Room 116, first floor, main building (nearest tubes: Euston, Warren Street, Goodge Street). Discussion of draft Unite Against Fascism leaflet.

Organised by Committee to Defend Asylum-Seekers, BCM Box 4289, London WC1N 3XX; 07941 566183; info@defend-asylum.org

### Labour Left Briefing

Annual general meeting, Saturday April 24, 10.30am to 5.30pm, Hungerford School, Hungerford Road, London N7 (free parking; nearest tube: Caledonian Road). Speakers include: Tony Benn, John McDonnell, Jeremy Corbyn, Christine Shawcroft, Glen Rangwala, Mick Shaw (FBU), John Rogers (Unison), Jeff Slee (RMT), Vi Huddart (Amicus). 020 8985 6597; grahambash@gn.apc.org

### Labour and the unions

Public meeting, Saturday April 24, 12 noon, University of London Union, Malet Street (nearest tube: Euston Square). Speakers: Matt Wrack (London organiser, FBU), Oliver New (president, London regional RMT).

Organised by *Solidarity*.

### Stop the BNP

March, Saturday April 24. Assemble 11am, Wickford centre, Essex. Organised by Unite Against Fascism.

### Go home, Le Pen

Protest against BNP meeting with Jean-Marie Le Pen, Sunday April 25, 4pm, Victoria Square, Birmingham City centre. Organised by Unite Against Fascism.

### CPGB history

Exhibition: The story of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Tuesday-Sunday, 11am to 4.30pm. Ends Sunday April 25. Entrance: £1; children and concessions: free.

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

### Renewing dialogues

Fourth annual day seminar on Marxism and education: ‘Education and the labour process’ - Wednesday May 5, 10am to 5pm, Clarke Hall, School of Education Foundations and Policy Studies, University of London Institute of Education, 20 Bedford Way, WC1. Registration from 9.30am. Free, but places limited. To reserve a place, contact Glenn Rikowski: rikowski@tiscali.co.uk

### Stop deportations

Public meeting, Saturday May 8, 3pm, Secular Hall, Humberstone Gate, Leicester. Leicester Civil Rights Movement: 0116 253 1053; priya@hycc.ac.uk

### Long live May Day

March and rally, Saturday May 1. Assemble Clerkenwell Green, 12 noon, for march to Trafalgar Square. Speakers include Ken Livingstone, Frances O’Grady (deputy general secretary TUC), Globalise Resistance, Stop the War Coalition.

Organised by London May Day Organising Committee, c/o GFTU, Central House, Upper Woburn Place, London WC1H 0HY. Sponsors include Sertuc, Unison, TGWU, GR, STWC.

### Labour Representation Committee

Founding conference, Saturday July 3, 9am to 4pm, TUC Congress House. LRC, PO Box 44178, London SW6 4DX; 020 7736 6297.

### RDG

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

### CPGB wills

Remember the CPGB and keep the struggle going. Put our Party’s name and address, together with the amount you wish to leave, in your will. If you need further help, do not hesitate to contact us.

## Join the Respect Unity Coalition

Complete this slip and send it to:

Respect - The Unity Coalition  
Winchester House  
259-269 Old Marylebone House  
London NW1 5RA

Include a cheque for a minimum of £10, or more if you wish to make a donation, payable to Unity Political Fund.

I wish to join the Respect Unity Coalition

Name\_\_\_\_\_

Address\_\_\_\_\_

Town/city\_\_\_\_\_

Postcode\_\_\_\_\_Phone\_\_\_\_\_

Email\_\_\_\_\_

## UNIONS

Aslef -  
www.aslef.org.uk

# Behind closed doors

**T**hings are a bit fraught at the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Fireman just lately. This last week has seen beleaguered Aslef general secretary Shaun Brady lose control of the union's headquarters to the left-dominated executive. That Brady should find himself under siege in this fashion was always predictable. A quick glance over recent editions of the 'quality' press shows this is only the latest twist in a long-running saga.

The announcement of an independent inquiry into the union's murky finances came shortly after the TUC's Brendan Barber intervened in a clumsy dispute Brady initiated with the union's full-time staff. He eventually had to climb down and apologise for his scandalous threats to derecognise their GMB branch and sack those who dared challenge his diktat.

Not that you would know any of this from Aslef's website. Once again viewers are treated to a sterilised chunk of cyberspace bearing the characteristic hallmarks of corporate internet architecture. The main field is packed with features and news, starting off with a short introduction to the union. Next along is a scrolling news ticker linking to recent circulars - well, I say recent, but some items did go back to last October. Being charitable, you could say that this does have the advantage on saving those who are somewhat out the loop from having to trawl through the site for half-forgotten announcements.

Moving down the page, the first in a cluster of features links to the 'Drive down the hours' campaign. This is an attempt by Aslef to use the parliamentary machinery to set a legal limit on the hours worked by train drivers. So far just under 180 MPs have given their backing, and viewers are urged to contact their MP to try and enlist more support. Next is the Criminal Injury Compensation Scheme, a response to government attempts to remove drivers' right to claim compensation if involved in suicide or trespass. Again this campaign is focused on parliament, and urges all Aslef drivers to send union-designed postcards to their MPs, asking them to write to the minister responsible. 'National pay bargaining' looks at the splintering effects rail privatisation has had on collective bargaining, and makes the case for re-integrating it on a national basis. 'Freight on rail' conjures up the image of a pre-Christmas traffic jam to argue for the shift of freight from the roads to rail. Rather incongruously, the final feature here boasts of the 'Car offer of the century' - discounts of up to 26% on a new Rover are available to union members. The clincher has to be the £100 contribution Rover will make to the Aslef education fund for every car purchased.

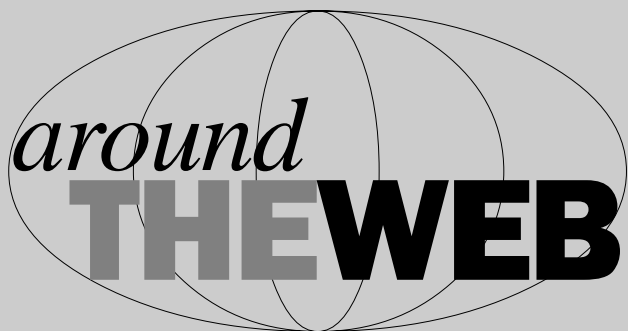
The 'News and views' section leads with Royal Mail's partial U-turn on freight, revealing that it is back in talks with a number of train operators. The next item marks the 20th anniversary of the miner's Great Strike by giving a short potted history of Aslef's involvement, and making available an anniversary badge. 'Other news' is an assortment of union and industry business, rounded off with an advert for Aslef's "unique and stunning" ballroom (!).

This material is flanked to the right by a column of more features, headed by Brady's very own sermon from the mount. In this month's article brother Brady talks about women's representation in the workplace and pays tribute to the union's women's consultative committee, as well as using the opportunity to stress his own anti-racist and anti-homophobic credentials. Viewers enamoured with Brady's work will be pleased to see a small archive has been made available, including an interesting piece from *Tribune* where he sets out his stall as a "realist" and puts distance between himself and the 'awkward squad'. The remaining features consist of miners' commemorative pages, a memorandum on the ongoing internal audit, booklets, company by company information, the *Loco Journal* publication, and the (empty) members' forum.

The 'Organisation' section of the navigation panel offers a fair introduction to Aslef, its political standpoints, and the relationship to other sections of the labour movement. I was, however, bemused when encountering an advert for last July's 'Save our party' conference, featuring photos of Clem Attlee and John Smith! Unfortunately these pages are heavily sanitised - what members really need to be informed about goes on behind closed doors.

Anyway next week I shall take a look at trueaslef.com, the website run by Brady's co-thinkers, and we will see whether or not it casts more light on Aslef's internal affairs than the decidedly uninformative official site □

Phil Hamilton



# The right to know

**O**pen warfare has broken out within Aslef, the train drivers' union. Hardly a shock for outsiders who know anything about the organisation. Ever since the surprise election last year of Shaun Brady as general secretary tensions have been building. Brady - a supporter of the Blairite wing of the Labour Party - defeated the left-wing incumbent, Mick Rix, who himself replaced Lew Adams, a close friend of Brady, in 1998.

Battle lines have been drawn between the left-dominated executive committee and the new general secretary. There is an unprecedented loathing for Brady amongst a majority on the EC, while, for his part, Brady does not hide his contempt for the EC and many of the staff who work at head office. Last year a dispute broke out at the Arkwright Road HQ when staff threatened to go on strike over conditions and Brady responded by threats to sack them, derecognise their union, the GMB, and recruit a scab workforce, using the Tory anti-trade union laws.

The latest escalation was sparked by the fallout from a report into Aslef's finances by Paul Blagbrough, a financial 'expert' and Labour Party apparatchik, brought in by Brady. His report identified bad management and questioned

the payout to Rix authorised by the EC. Their were five copies of the document, given to named individuals. Unfortunately Aslef president Martin Samways left his copy on top of his bag and it went walkabout. Its contents then turned up on the unofficial website run by Brady supporters, trueaslef.com, and was presented to the trade union-hating *Mail on Sunday*. The report was then posted back to Samways with a sarcastic 'thank you' note.

Blagbrough wrote to the EC on March 21 pointing out that the report was only a draft and could contain inaccuracies. He called the leaking a "breach of good faith" which could only "do damage to the reputation of a union, which has a long, proud and honourable history". The EC seized upon this to reject the report due to "inaccuracies" and launched its very own WMD. It called in Mathias John Kelly QC to carry out a full investigation into Aslef's affairs for the last 10 years. This would cover the Lew Adams tenure as general secretary. All officers and elected representatives, along with members, have been told to cooperate fully with this inquiry and the executive's resolution contained the following instruction: "No other communication, verbal or written, on this matter may be entered into without the authority and sanction of this EC, until the report has been completed and presented to the EC."

As a final act the executive declared itself to be in permanent session until the investigation is complete and took over direct responsibility for running head office. This effectively suspended the general secretary, who according to the union's constitution works under EC instructions, from his normal role. Brady was not amused and is reported to have briefed BBC's *Newsnight* that he had a case for "unfair dismissal" and had "less authority than the office cleaner". This comment may be deemed in breach of the EC gagging resolution and could lay the basis for disciplinary action. The EC has also moved against those it alleges are behind trueaslef.com, suspending from office a number of branch officers and local reps. Disciplinary charges are to follow, with the EC hoping this will result in members of the Brady-Adams faction being led to the wall and offered a blindfold. The June annual conference,



**Shaun Brady: not amused**

to be held in Scarborough, looks like being the most bitter for years.

Allegations of financial corruption were central to Brady's successful campaign against Rix, and the trueaslef.com website was set up to support that campaign. However, the whole affair has now gone much further than simply an internal faction fight. The involvement of Adams, who on leaving office took a job as a senior manager with Virgin Trains and was appointed to the board of the Strategic Rail Authority, points to something bigger.

Aslef has become one of the strongest unions in the country since rail privatisation, which resulted in a certain competition for the skills of drivers amongst the train operating companies. This has not stopped the TOCs attacking working conditions, however, and there is no doubt that the internal wrangling has acted as an unneeded distraction. It also has to be said that there is nothing the companies and government would like to see more than damaging allegations of financial corruption being made to stick. The charges are in some ways reminiscent of those made (with the help of state agents) against Arthur Scargill and the National Union of Mineworkers during the Great Strike 20 years ago.

Rank and file Aslef members ought to be fully informed over every aspect of union affairs. Now it the time for them to assert control over all elected officers, not permit the leadership - whether right or left reformist - to squabble over the union as if it were their private property. All elected officials should receive only the average wage of Aslef members and be instantly recallable. There should be no bar on discussing the union's business publicly or privately - in the last analysis all such bureaucratic sledgehammers play into the hands of the operating companies, the law courts and the government □

Dean Hooper

**Mick Rix: defeated**



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# Towards a party of the left

Socialist filmmaker **Ken Loach** is a Respect candidate for the European Union list in London. Peter Manson spoke to him about the coalition's prospects



Worker's wage: sound principle

**H**ow would you assess the campaign so far?

The work on the ground has been very good, including in the unions. I spoke at the London regional RMT meeting, which was very well attended, and had a warm response. There is a good rapport building amongst many active trade unionists.

The difficulty, as always, is in establishing a public presence. Obviously, everybody in Respect is working as a volunteer because they care about the issues. That gives us a huge advantage - everybody is doing it out of commitment. But that can sometimes leave gaps in what you can achieve. Our biggest problem is to become absorbed into the mainstream debate - in the press, in broadcasting. That's our biggest hurdle, because without that it's difficult to attract a large number of people to vote for us.

A lot of press releases have been issued, of course, but they haven't been taken up. The mainstream editors want to put us into a left ghetto - their instinctive response is to squeeze us out. To break that down is very difficult, but it's something we can't give up on, and there's no way around it.

At the moment I'm working on a film in Italy and I've been dividing my time between here and there, so it's been difficult to fulfil as many engagements as I'd like, but I've spoken at quite a few meetings, and there are more coming up.

**What do think are Respect's prospects, compared to the Socialist Alliance?**

Well, the circumstances are more favourable. The war has drawn a whole lot of people into a position to the left of Labour and made New Labour very unpopular, so the possibilities are much stronger for a movement of the left. In fact the vacuum is massive and obvious to everybody. The question is, though, can we be the movement that steps into the open space?

The Greens are pushing, but of course they are an anti-socialist party. They

seem to have no grasp of the mechanisms of capital and the direction it will always drive in the interests of the multinationals. So they will never fill that vacuum, but the trouble is, they might do more damage in the short term - I have been surprised at how sectarian they are in refusing any electoral agreement.

Nevertheless, the circumstances are much more positive for a broad movement of the left than when the Socialist Alliance was formed.

**You said that the Greens are an anti-socialist party, but there are non-socialists in Respect as well, aren't there?**

Yes, but I don't think they have the kind of virulent hatred of socialism that the Greens have. Clearly this is a coalition where socialists are playing a major role. But you're right - in Respect there are socialists, social democrats, environmentalists and just people who oppose the war. It's an essential step that we started as a coalition and, as the discussion develops, I would argue for socialist leadership. But we have to be more tolerant than maybe left groups have been in the past in relation to people who share our objectives, but not necessarily the means of getting there.

We have to present the arguments in an inclusive and open way. For example, the motive for the war came from the demands of the American multinationals for resources, cheap labour, economic dominance and the rest. The whole Project for a New American Century doesn't come out of nowhere - it comes out of the needs of US capital. We have to keep making that connection. If you opposed the war, you must therefore oppose the interests behind it.

**Do you think that lessons also arose out of the anti-war movement about how British society is run?**

There are probably a generation of people who joined the Labour Party thinking they might change the way society is organised. This has been the event that educated them. Many will have been shocked just by the extent to which the

Labour leadership has adopted the interests of capital - and done it so nakedly. The weakness and shallowness of the vast majority of the parliamentary Labour Party has been exposed.

Every decade we seem to learn that lesson. My age group went through it with Harold Wilson and then the next generation had the experience of Kinnock. And now another is learning that same lesson with Blair - they are left astounded by the betrayals of the Labour leadership. It's one of those constants of history since Ramsay MacDonald, but this time the betrayal has been so stunning in its totality that it's difficult to imagine anybody who wants to change society staying in the party.

**I was thinking more of the democratic deficit mentioned in Respect's founding declaration - the possibility of using the royal prerogative to go to war, the blocking powers of the second chamber, and the complete lack of accountability for elected representatives.**

That's part of the way the state has subverted universal suffrage. We may have the vote, but we have a system of government that works against the vast majority of people - a confidence trick that's been pulled really for the whole of the last century. We know of course that the rightwing parties like the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats will act on behalf of the ruling class. But part of the trick has been that the Labour Party has claimed to act on behalf of working people and yet has consistently done the opposite. So the basic democratic deficit lies in the fact that the working class doesn't have a political organisation to understand it or act on its behalf.

**I agree that that is a considerable deficit. But shouldn't Respect also highlight the failings of the constitutional monarchy and campaign for a democratic republic?**

I don't suppose anybody in Respect would oppose the idea of the abolition of the monarchy. However, given that this is an election campaign and we don't

have a 300-page treatise on the state of the nation, I don't see it as a key issue at this time. There are more pressing issues, but in the long term I can't imagine a democratic state while there is still inherited wealth and privilege, with the monarchy at the head of the constitution. If we made the abolition of the monarchy the centre of our election broadcast, rather than the war and Blair's role in it, I don't think it would be particularly successful in getting people to vote for us.

**You pointed to the broadness and brevity of our declaration. How then do you expand upon the points it contains? As a candidate do you respond to questions put to you as a socialist?**

Yes. We have a European manifesto now, but if there's an issue I'm not familiar with, I ask other members of the Respect executive what their point of view is and assimilate the different things people say. I tend not to shoot from the hip as an individual - that's not the way we should work. But on the principal issues, I think we're all fairly clear - such as on our attitude towards the European Union and other European peoples.

But you have to remember, we're not a party: we are a coalition. And it is a coalition for this election in the hope that something more specific may emerge.

**I suppose that the very act of standing in a national election - the need for answers on all issues and so on - makes us appear as a party.**

But it's a process - you have to take a broad view. Respect came from the mil-

lion and a half on the streets and the different elements within that. We have to get to know how different people operate so we can actually continue to work together.

**What do you hope will be at the end of that process?**

I would hope there would be a party of the left, which from my point of view would be firmly rooted in a class analysis of society. However, we have to recognise that we should work with people who won't go that far, but who are nevertheless principled and determined to shift the political debate to the left.

**In the Socialist Alliance all candidates committed themselves to only accepting the equivalent of an average worker's wage if they were elected, say, to the European parliament. But that is something Respect as a whole has failed to do. What is your position?**

It is very difficult for someone in my position who works in films, where wages tend to be quite good ...

**I'm not referring to income from a candidate's job, but solely their remuneration as an elected representative.**

It's a principle that is sound and one I would support. I would, though, find it difficult to be very prominent in that argument, given the industry I work in. It is not a good idea for someone in my position to wag an admonishing finger at other people ☐

## Respect events

- Bournemouth:** Leafleting - Saturday April 24, 3pm, the Square, town centre.
- Poole:** Leafleting - Saturday April 24, 11am, Poole High Street (WH Smiths).
- Yorkshire and Humber:** Meeting - Sunday April 25, 7pm, Platinum Suite, Sheffield United FC, south stand, Bramall Lane, Sheffield.
- London:** Social - Sunday April 25, 7pm, Mezze Café, 339 Harrow Road. Moroccan evening.
- Leeds:** Public meeting - Monday April 26, 7.30pm, Conference Auditorium, Leeds University.
- Salford:** Public meeting - Monday April 26, 7.30pm, Broadwalk library, Salford precinct.
- Bury and Prestwich:** Public meeting - Tuesday April 27, 7.30pm, Bury Arts and Crafts Centre, Broad Street.
- Longsight and Levenshulme:** Public meeting: Tuesday April 27, 7.30pm, Northmoor Community Centre.
- Northampton:** Meeting - Tuesday April 27, 7.30pm, NBC Social Club, Fish Street.
- Birmingham:** Fundraising dinner with George Galloway, Tuesday April 27, 7.30pm, Second City suite, 100 Sherlock Street.
- Wigan:** Public meeting - Wednesday April 28, 7.30pm, Orwell, Wigan Pier.
- Bournemouth:** Public meeting - Wednesday April 28, 7.30pm, Punshon Memorial Methodist Church, Exeter Road (opposite BIC).
- Oldham:** Public meeting - Thursday April 29, 7.30pm, Café Lahore, Union Street.
- Wandsworth:** Public meeting - Friday April 30, 6.30pm, Asian Community Centre, 57-59 Trinity Road, London SW17 (Tooting Bec tube).
- Stockport:** Public meeting - Friday April 30, 7pm, Central library.
- Bristol:** Quiz and auction fundraiser - Friday April 30, 7pm, Stag and Hounds pub, Old Market.
- Birmingham:** Film showing - *Persons of interest*, Friday April 30, 7pm, Clifton Road mosque, Clifton Road, Balsall Heath.
- York:** Public meeting - Friday April 30, 7.30pm, Denham room, Priory Street Centre.
- Wythenshawe:** Public meeting - Tuesday May 4, 7pm, Wythenshawe library.
- Aston-under-Lyne:** Public meeting - Wednesday May 5, 7pm, Tawackly, Stanford Street.
- Stretford:** Public meeting - Wednesday May 5, 7pm, St Matthews church, Chapel Lane.
- Birmingham:** Video showing - *Stop the war*, introduced by John Rees, Sunday May 16, 2pm, Midlands Arts Centre, Cannon Hill Park, Edgbaston.
- Birmingham:** Film showing - Miners' strike anniversary with Ken Loach, Monday May 24, 7pm, Midlands Arts Centre, Cannon Hill Park, Edgbaston.
- Birmingham:** Film showing - *Persons of interest*, Wednesday June 2, 7pm, Midlands Arts Centre, Cannon Hill Park, Edgbaston.



## RELIGION

# Jesus: a revolutionary

**M**el Gibson's recent film, *The passion of the christ*, has generated a lot of moral anguish and outrage, in particular amongst liberal and Jewish circles. Basically they charge him with consciously or unconsciously fanning the flames of anti-semitism by reviving the hoary old idea that the Jews bear collective responsibility for killing the man-god Jesus.

Eg, in *The Guardian* rabbi Julia Neuberger complains: "This movie could lead people taking on Gibson's simplistic, uneducated, uncritical and anti-semitic message: the Jews are the Christ-killers - the baddies; the Romans did not want to do it - they are the goodies" (March 19). A month earlier the Anti-Defamation League, based in the United States, argued along exactly the same lines. Many people will use the film "as the very basis of hatred towards Jews" (*The Independent* February 5).

Gibson undoubtedly has some very funny ideas. Like his father he belongs to a small sect of catholic dissidents. They reject the 'modernisation' brought about by Vatican II and peddle a late 19th century-type catholic anti-semitism (not that Gibson junior repeats Gibson senior's outright denial of the Nazi holocaust). Moreover, it is true that in response to accusations of anti-semitism, Gibson quietly removed the infamous "His blood be on us and on our children" lines of Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest. Apparently they did "not work" in focus screenings and might be "hurtful" and even "misused". Yet, though the English subtitles have been excoriated, the loaded words themselves, albeit in Aramaic, still come forth from Caiaphas's mouth.

Meanwhile pope John Paul II welcomed the film and dismissed critics: "It is as it was," he reportedly proclaimed. Christian fundamentalists in the US have been positively enthusiastic too. Over many years they have been urging Hollywood to make Jesus a top movie star and since the launch of *The passion* over Easter they have energetically been using it as a god-given recruiting vehicle.

Quite frankly Gibson's Jewish and liberal critics are misguided. His "message" is neither "simplistic" nor "uneducated". They also lack courage. Gibson's film more or less faithfully reproduces the Jesus story, as told in the *New testament* of the bible. Here, in this account, Jesus was a sacrificial man-god betrayed by the Jewish people - yes the "baddies" - who masochistically suffered an agonising execution at the hands of the unknowing Romans - not quite the "goodies", but nearly so - in order to redeem a sinful humanity. Gibson is maybe or maybe not an anti-semite in terms of his personal relations and inner demons (he does though happily mix and socialise with the filmocracy in Hollywood and Malibu beach which includes many Jews).

But if Gibson is judged and found guilty on the basis of his film then it is definitely a case of shooting the messenger. Christianity, in terms of its key foundational texts and historical practices, oozes anti-semitism from every pore (indeed this religious anti-semitism, which was revived in the late 19th century by catholic and orthodox church reactionaries, paved the way and provided fertile ideological conditions for the pseudo-scientific racial anti-semitism of the Nazi kind). Attacking a film director for anti-semitism is, of course, easy. Attacking a whole religion in such terms is another matter entirely. (Incidentally islam echoes the accusation that collectively the Jews tried to kill god's "messenger" - of course, in this tradition Jesus does not die but is raised directly

to heaven through divine intervention - AJ Arberry [trans] *The Koran* Oxford 1998, p95.)

My intention here is not to review Gibson's film. Rather it is to reveal Jesus, the man, and the revolutionary origins of the christian religion itself. Why bother with such an exercise? Many comrades I come across on the left adopt a crudely dismissive attitude. Christianity, along with every religious manifestation, is bunk - to paraphrase a supercilious 20th century American capitalist. But such *atheist economism* is profoundly mistaken. It owes everything to vulgar materialism and nothing to authentic Marxism, which considers religion to be a specific form of social consciousness reflecting the *alienated* human condition.

A communist like myself - whose Party was only established in 1920 and is now reviving slowly after nearly being completely destroyed from within by *Marxism Today*, *Straight Left* and *Morning Star* traitors - must respect, albeit grudgingly, the longevity of christianity and its enormous contemporary authority. There are at least a billion christians in the world today. And, whatever the proponents of multiculturalism maintain, Britain in not yet post-christian.

The official religion of the United Kingdom remains a nationalised form of christianity and, of course, Elizabeth Windsor, head of state, is also head of the established church. Yes, over the last 50 years or so regular church attendance by the mass of the population has plummeted. Nevertheless, top politicians still find it advantageous to parade their christian affiliations.

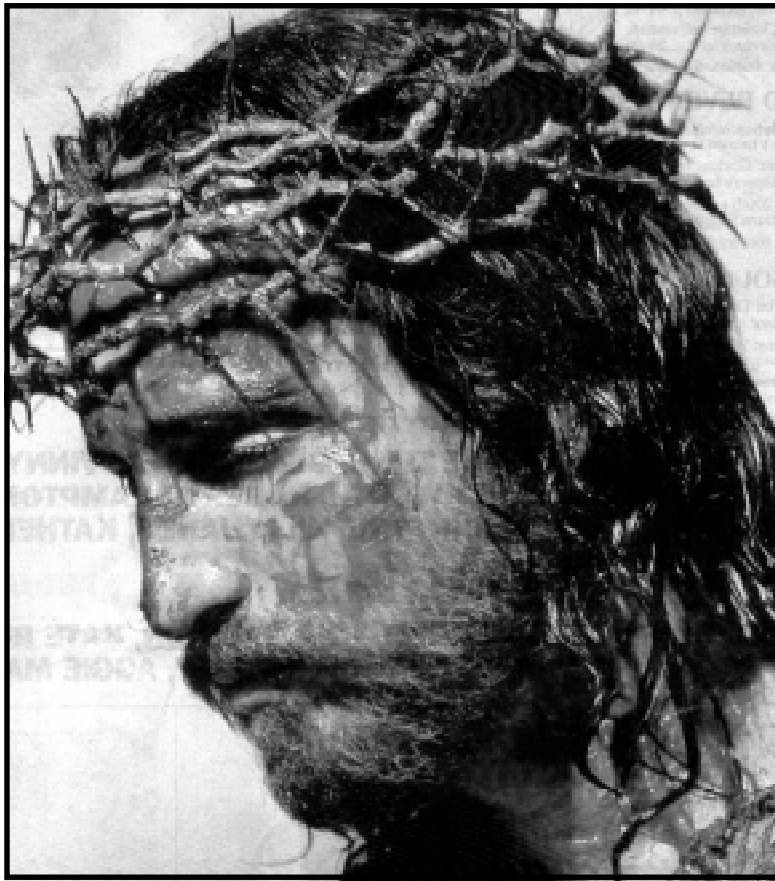
Regrettably religion is not just a high establishment affliction. The christian cult has unmistakably shaped the development of our working class movement and national social psychology. "There is no country in Europe," remarked Leon Trotsky in 1921, "where church influence in political, social and family life is so great as in Great Britain" (L Trotsky *Writings on Britain* London 1974, p19). What characterised the past still applies to the present. Prominent leftwingers, such as Tony Benn, Jimmy Reid, Arthur Scargill and George Galloway, when pushed, readily pronounce upon their christian ideals and their inspirational value.

Christianity is thereby still used as a vehicle for just about every contending viewpoint in society. We have a tough but caring New Labour christianity, which tells the socially excluded, the unemployed and single parents that they are obliged to work for miserable wages so as to benefit their souls; a Conservative christianity, urging the rich to get richer in order that they have the wherewithal for giving to charity; an old Labour christianity, preaching social justice within the cage of wage-slavery; and a Respect christianity, which bizarrely holds out the virtues of saying as little as possible in order to revive hope for those who have become disillusioned. The historic Jesus is of no concern. Nor is are real origins of the christian religion - except, it seems, for us Marxists.

## The Jews

Jesus was a Jew. To know the real man one must get to know the Jewish people and the Jewish religion.

It was only after the Babylonian exile that the Jewish religion took anything like the form we would recognise today. When the priesthood came back from their 50-year enforced absence in 538 BC, they carried with them a higher, more abstract sense of the divine - monotheism borrowed and inspired by their hosts. Being artificial, their new religion had to rely on deception and falsification. The old sacred texts were "rewritten, codified,



Mel Gibson's version

expurgated, annotated and completed" (I Halevi *A history of the Jews* London 1987, p29).

To establish ideological hegemony and acceptance of the Jewish elite, the old tribal polytheism was ruthlessly purged. Apart from the temple at Jerusalem all other centres of popular worship, along with their fetishes, were forcibly put down as pagan abominations. The bible does not deny the existence nor the power of other gods, but it demands loyalty to one god: "I am the Lord; that is my name; and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images" (Isaiah xiii, 8). The Jewish god therefore did not arise from philosophy, from the emergence of one god beyond all existing gods, but the triumph of the god of Jerusalem (who was equated with the god of Moses) over rivals. Consequently Jehovah - or more correctly Yahweh - was the god of all humanity (creation) and yet was also claimed as the ancestral and national god of the Jews.

As will be readily appreciated, that does not mean the rewritten *Old testament* was simply crude falsehood. It reflected, in no matter how distorted a manner, the class antagonism between the returning elite and the masses: ie, the domination of social forces or history over humanity. Religion is a social product. As Persian vassals, the elite had no army - only a religious police. They had to rely on remaking and then maintaining the Jews as a sect-people. Fear of god was employed to impose obedience. The evolution of Jehovah was therefore bound up with military weakness and class struggle. Those peasants who had married 'foreign women' were initially excluded from the 'assembly of Israel'. Priests formed themselves into an hereditary theocracy which extracted tribute (surplus product) through the system of compulsory pilgrimage, sacrifice and offering - the dominant social relationship. Temple taxes brought enormous wealth to Jerusalem and "kept large numbers profitably employed" (K Kautsky *Foundations of christianity* New York 1972, p271).

Hence in the god Jehovah we can gain an insight into the Jewish people and the evolution of their real life processes. The same applies to christianity and Jesus; only with the proviso that besides the

*New testament* (written in its present form between 80 and 150 AD), we have relatively abundant literary records, not least those of the Romans.

## Jesus - of his times

Jesus, in the *New testament*, is credited with supernatural powers. Even the most 'progressive' Church of England bishop believes or pretends that he worked wonders and roused the minds of millions. Suffice to say, even before the end of the 18th century, Edward Gibbon pointed out in his *Decline and fall*, with deliberate irony, that, though god "suspended the laws of nature for the service of religion" (ie, "the christian church, from the time of the apostles and their first disciples"), the philosophers of Greece and Rome "rejected and derided" all such claims (E Gibbon *The decline and fall of the Roman empire* Ware 1998, pp275, 276). And the fact of the matter is that at the time pagan or Jewish observers devoted not even *one word* either to Jesus or his miracles.

The first non-christian to mention Jesus, "the king who was never king", was said to have been Josephus Flavius, in the so-called 'Slavonic version' of the *Jewish war* and the 18th and 20th books of the *Jewish antiquities* (B Radice [ed], Josephus *The Jewish war* Harmondsworth 1981, p470). Though the words of this pro-Roman aristocratic Jew and contemporary of Jesus were much valued by christians, all serious scholars nowadays admit that they were probably a 3rd century interpolation.

One of two conclusions broadly present themselves. Either Jesus did not exist - John Allegro, fantastically in my opinion, says the whole Jesus story was a "fictional" cover for a secret drug-using cult (see JM Allegro *The sacred mushroom and the cross* London 1970). Or, as is the case, there were so many magic-making saviours or messiahs (ie, christis in the Greek tongue) that, while others were given passing reference, he did not rate a mention. Josephus rails against the countless "religious frauds and bandit chiefs" who joined forces in an attempt to win freedom from Rome.

Palestine was at the crossroads of Middle Eastern civilisations. That is what made it a land of milk and honey for the Hebrews and a strategic target for

the superpowers of the ancient world. From the 8th century BC one invasion followed another. Assyrians, Babylonians, Medes and Persians, Macedonian Greeks and finally, in the 1st century BC, the Romans.

National feelings and class interests were mediated through the prism of religious faction. The rallying slogan of the "downtrodden and disaffected" was loyalty to god and his law (H Schonfield *The pentecost revolution* London 1985, p31). Those below ranged themselves not only against the Roman conquerors, but those quislings who were prepared to cooperate with them: namely the royal Herodians - who were virtually alone in being pro-Roman - and the sadducees, the conservative priest-caste and big landowners. That is not to say the masses were united behind a single party.

Let us bring into focus the main elements which made up the spectrum of political-religious life. Josephus lists what he calls three schools of thought. Sadducees, pharisees and essenes.

Nowadays the sadducee party would be described as conservative, elitist and rightwing. The sadducees must be distinguished from the Herodian royal family and the internationalised aristocracy and its immediate clientage - who proudly aped Greek ways and served as client-state agents of exploitation. The sadducees were virtually synonymous with that caste of high priests who officiated at the temple and the traditionalist aristocracy which sided with them. Used to luxury and greedy for more, the high priests had no compunction about actually stealing the tithes allocated to other, impoverished, priests. Occasionally violence erupted. It was in general an uneven contest. High priests had temple guards, many servants and other such dependants and hangers-on and could afford to pay for additional bands of heavies.

Judaism defined itself as a religion of the book. The age of prophecy was formally closed by the Persians and the return of the exiled elite. In religious terms the theocratic priesthood thereby froze the meaning of the past from the time of creation to the building of the second temple, but simultaneously condemned itself to merely preside over a fixed ritual which inevitably lost its content. They could neither interpret text nor initiate. But life moves on and constantly creates new needs. In between the innumerable contradictions of the written word and the requirements of change stepped the pharisees. The pharisees were a religious intelligentsia. Expert in the obscure methods of scholastic debate and adapt at bending the law, the pharisees formed a party which not only rivalled the discredited priesthood, but sunk far deeper organisational roots amongst the masses.

Finally on the basic list given by Josephus we arrive at the essenes. Interestingly, where he gives the sadducees and pharisees a rather pinched treatment, the essenes are afforded considerable space. In part this is no doubt due to a desire to entertain high-class readers with their unusual monastic lifestyle - of which Josephus had first-hand experience, having spent a year as an initiate. The essenes maintained a strict discipline in their isolated, but "large" communities. They "eschew pleasure-seeking and are peculiarly attached to each other" (Josephus *The Jewish war* Harmondsworth 1984, p133). The essenes were "contemptuous of wealth" and "communists to perfection". All possessions were pooled. Members gave what they had and took what they needed (*ibid* p133). Universal suffrage was used to elect those in authority over the community.

# and a communist

Thankfully Josephus extends his list. He writes of a so-called ‘fourth philosophy’. Here we detect the real people’s party. During the final years of Herod there were numerous urban and rural rebellions. The most successful liberation fighter was Judas. He aligned himself with the dissident pharisee, Sadduck, whose allotted task was to rouse the people of Jerusalem. The zealot party was born. It would dominate popular politics till the fall of Jerusalem in 70 and the final heroic stand at the desert fortress of Massada in 74. Judas “was a rabbi” [teacher - JC], says Josephus, “with a sect of his own, and was quite unlike the others” (Josephus *The Jewish war* Harmondsworth 1984, p133). His message was republican, not monarchist. The people should have no master except god.

The Romans felt compelled to intervene and decided to establish direct rule over Judea. Resistance was crushed. There was much bloodshed. Two thousand captives were reportedly crucified and many sold into slavery. The first measure enacted by the Romans was to order a census in 6 AD. (There was no stipulation that every adult male had to register at their place of birth - a purely literary device invented by bible writers in order to move Joseph and the pregnant Mary from what was anyway a non-Roman-administered Galilee in the north to Bethlehem, the town of David, in the south. If such a stipulation had been made, the movement of people would surely have caused complete chaos.) The census had nothing to do with the provision of public services or population projections. Like the famed Domesday book of William I its purpose was quite unambiguous. Assessing a new acquisition for purposes of taxation. As such it was deeply resented and triggered another popular rebellion.

Set against the nationalist-religious ferment we have just outlined, the *New testament* Jesus is therefore a very strange person, to say the least. No-where does he challenge or even question the Roman occupation of Judea and indirect rule of Galilee (at the time of Jesus it was ruled by a pro-Roman Jewish satrap - Herod Antipas). Instead he appears to positively love the Roman tyrant. It is the pharisees who earn his ire and rebuke. Jesus even urges fellow Jews to dutifully pay Roman taxes: “Render unto Caesar ...” Frankly that would have been akin to Tommy Sheridan telling the people of Glasgow the rightness of paying the hated poll tax under Thatcher. And yet incongruously Jesus manages to gain an active, mass following among the rural and urban poor.

His birth and infancy are even harder to swallow. Even though Galileans would not have been affected and the actual census occurred six years later, Joseph, the ‘father’ of Jesus, and his heavily pregnant, but virgin, wife, trek all the way from Nazareth in the far north to Bethlehem in Judea - or so the story goes. There, guided by a wondrous star, shepherds and wise men shower the child with praise and gifts, just before king Herod, the father of Herod Antipas, orders the massacre of the innocents. But only after Joseph and Mary, having been warned by an angel, flee towards Egypt. All pure invention, as was the ability of the young Jesus to outwit the temple priests in theology when he visits Jerusalem.

Here, as with much else, we have the heavy hand of propaganda and later Greek rewriters. In general it has to be said that the gospels - written between 40 and 120 years after Jesus’ death - display profound ignorance of the elementary facts of Jewish life. Moreover, they become

progressively anti-Jewish. In John, the last of the four main gospels, Jesus is a pro-Roman Mithras-like man-god who was put to death solely due to the collective guilt of the Jewish people. In this tradition he knowingly sacrifices himself in order to atone for the sins of humanity.

Yet, by drawing on what we know of the Jews at the time and removing obvious invention, we can arrive at a much more probable version of events. Charismatic and well educated, Jesus was probably a pharisee (teacher and preacher). Gospel passages which show enmity to pharisees, such as sabbath-healing, have “clearly been inserted where the original story had ‘sadducees’” (H Maccoby *Revolution in Judea* London 1973, p139).

Moreover, he appears to have come to believe, during the course of his ministry, that he was not only a prophet but the messiah (or anointed one), who would deliver the Jewish people from Rome (and end the days of the robber empires). He therefore spoke of himself as the ‘Son of David’ or ‘Son of God’ - by which he certainly did not mean he was a man-god, a blasphemous concept for Jews. That is why two of the gospels - Matthew and Luke - are interesting in that they leave in the great lengths earlier *source* accounts had gone to in order to prove that *through Joseph* he was biologically directly related to David “14 generations” before (Matthew i, 17).

The prophet Micah had predicted that the messiah would be born in Bethlehem like the biblical David. Jesus, or his early propagandists, were proclaiming him to be the lawful king, as opposed to the Herodian upstarts. It was like some charismatic medieval peasant leader announcing themselves to be the direct heir of Harold and hence the true Saxon king of England against the Plantagenet or Angevin descendants of William of Normandy. Roman domination was initially imposed through Herodian kings, who were at most only semi-Jewish in background and religious observance.

Jesus’ claim to be ‘king of the Jews’ was political. He was proclaiming himself to be the leader of a popular revolution that would bring forth a communistic ‘kingdom of god’. This was no pie in the sky when you die. The slogan ‘kingdom of god’ was of this world and was widely used by zealot and other anti-Roman forces. It conjured up for Jews an idealised vision of the old theocratic system - which could only be realised by defeating the Romans. But in the new days it will be the poor who benefit and the rich who suffer ... “Blessed be ye poor, for yours is the kingdom of god! Woe unto ye that are rich! Woe unto ye that are full, for ye shall hunger. Woe unto ye that laugh, for ye shall mourn and weep!” (Luke). This imminent class retribution was not to be confined to Israel alone.

The Jews were god’s revolutionary vanguard. Through them Jesus’ plan was for a universal utopia. From Jerusalem a new “world theocracy”, with Jesus at its head, would redeem “all nations” (H Schonfield *The Passover plot* London 1977, p24). From then onwards peace reigns; swords would be beaten into ploughshares and the wolf lies down with the lamb.

Obviously Jesus was no zealot. He was an apocalyptic revolutionary similar to John the Baptist. He “believed in the miraculous character of the coming salvation, as described in the writings of the scriptural prophets” (H Maccoby *Revolution in Judea* London 1973, pp157-8). Jesus was not interested in military strategy or tactics. Rome would be beaten without conventional war. Nevertheless, though Jesus did not train his followers in the use of arms, five of

his 12 disciples came from the ranks of the zealots and retained guerrilla nicknames (including Peter ‘Barjonah’ (‘out-law’); Simon - the zealot; James and John - the ‘sons of thunder’; and Judas Iscariot - the ‘dagger-man’).

This is not surprising. Jesus was not a pacifist: “I come not to send peace but a sword” (Matthew x, 34). Liberation would have a military aspect; nevertheless, primarily it depended on supernatural intervention. There would be a decisive battle where a tiny army of the righteous overcome overwhelmingly superior forces. In the bible Gideon fought and won with only 300 men. So the methods of Jesus and the zealots differed, but were not entirely incompatible. The zealots were unlikely to have opposed Jesus. His mass movement would at the very least have been seen by them as an opportunity.

Jesus was therefore not isolated from Jewish life and the political turmoil around him. The notion that he was opposed to violence is a later christian invention designed to placate Roman hostility and overcome their fears that the followers of the dead man-god were dangerous subversives. Nor would Jesus ever have said, “Resist not evil.” The idea is a monstrosity, fit only for despairing appeasers. Jewish scripture is replete with countless examples of prophets fighting what they saw as evil - not least foreign oppressors. The real Jesus preached the ‘good news’ against evil within the Jewish tradition (and in all probability against personal vendettas and tit-for-tat revenge). He was determined to save every ‘lost sheep of Israel’, including social outcasts and reprobates such as the hated tax-collectors, for the coming apocalypse. Salvation depended on repentance.

After the execution of John the Baptist Jesus reveals himself to be not simply a prophetic ‘preparer of the way’, but the messiah. “Whom say ye that I am?” Jesus asks his disciples. “Though art the christ,” answers Peter. This was an extraordinary claim, but one fully within the Jewish thought-world. He was not and would not have been thought of as mad. In biblical tradition there had been prophets and even prophet-rulers (Moses and Samuel), but never a messiah-king: ie, the final king. In Jesus the spiritual and secular would be fully joined. The bold idea must have “aroused tremendous enthusiasm in his followers, and great hope in the country generally” (H Maccoby *Revolution in Judea* 1973, p163). Perhaps this explains why, after he was cruelly killed on a Roman cross, the Jesus party refused to believe he had really died. His claimed status put him, in terms of myth at least, on a par with Elijah: he would return at the appointed hour to lead them to victory.

*New testament* (re)writers are at pains to play down or deny Jesus’ assumed royal title. To do otherwise was to openly rebel against Rome. Instead they concentrate on terms like ‘messiah’ or ‘christ’, which they portray as being other-worldly. The Jews, and the disciples, are shown as not understanding this concept, though it arose from their own sacred writings and collective consciousness. Nevertheless, even in the gospels the truth occasionally juts through. Pilate, for example, has Jesus crowned with thorns and has ‘king of the Jews’ written over the top of his cross. So if we use imagination and common sense it is possible to map out the probable course of Jesus’ brief revolutionary career.

The account of the so-called transfiguration on Mount Hermon described in Mark was no mystical event but the crowning (or anointing) of King Jesus by his closest disciples, Peter, James and

John. One seems to have crowned him while the other two acted as the prophets Moses and Elijah (Mark ix, 4). Like Saul, David and Solomon, the new king was through the ceremony “turned into another man” (I Samuel x, 6).

Having been crowned, the prophet-king began a royal progress towards his capital, Jerusalem. He has 12 close disciples accompanying him - representing the so-called 12 tribes of Israel - and sends out 70 more into “every city and place” (the Jewish law-making council, the Sanhedrin, had 70 members). From Mount Hermon the royal procession makes its way through Galilee, then to the east bank of the Jordan and Peraea, before reaching Jericho. King Jesus has a big following and is greeted by enthusiastic crowds. He preaches the coming kingdom of god and with it “eternal life” (Mark x, 30). The poor are to inherit the world and unless the rich sell what they have and give to the poor they will be damned: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of god” (Mark x, 25). Jesus performs many miracles. The blind are given sight, cripples walk, etc (cities and towns were teeming with professional beggars and no doubt that included the professionally crippled and blind).

Finally he triumphantly enters Jerusalem - either during the spring Passover or more likely in the autumn festival of the Tabernacles. Timing for such apocalyptic revolutionaries is crucial. He symbolically rides upon an ass’s foal (thus fulfilling the prophesy of Zechariah ix 9). There is no doubt what the masses - many of them festival pilgrims - think. They greet Jesus with unrestrained joy and as ‘Son of David’ and ‘King of Israel’ - royal titles. Palm branches are strewn before him and, showing their defiance of Rome, they cry out, ‘Hosanna’ - ‘Save us’.

With the help of the masses Jesus and his lightly armed band force their way to the temple. The religious police are easily dispersed. There he rededicated it, drove out the moneychangers and the venal sadducee priesthood (the majority of priests carry on with their duties). They “have made it a den of robbers” (Mark xi, 17). The Romans and their agents would have viewed these events as a nuisance rather than anything else. Rebellions at festival times were not uncommon. In possession of the temple area, he and his followers were protected by the “multitude” from the poor quarter of Jerusalem. The priesthood are said to have been “afraid of the people” (Mark xi, 32). They debated theology with Jesus but could do no more.

Jesus expected a miracle. There would be a tremendous battle. On the one side, the Romans and their quislings. On the other, his followers ahead of “12 legions of angels” (Matthew xxvi, 53). The defiled temple was to be destroyed and then rebuilt in “three days” (Matthew xxvi, 62). The dead would rise and god, with Jesus at his right hand, would judge all the nations. Jesus waited seven days for the apocalyptic arrival of god’s kingdom. It was meant to come on the eighth. At the last supper he expectantly says: “I will drink no more of the fruit of the vine [juice, not alcohol - JC] until that day I drink it in the new kingdom of god”. Yet, though he prayed his heart out in Gethsemane, “the hour” did not come. A cohort of Roman soldiers (300-600 men), and officers of the Jewish high priest, did (perhaps guided by Judas, perhaps not - Kautsky says the idea that anyone in the sadducee party would not know what Jesus looked like is too fantastic).

Jesus was easily captured (a strange, naked youth narrowly escapes in Mark).

It is an unequal contest. His disciples only had “two swords”. “It is enough,” Jesus had assured them (Luke xxii, 38). There was a brief skirmish, according to the biblical account. Supposedly Jesus then says, “No more of this” and rebukes the disciple who injured a “slave of the high priest”. Jesus miraculously heals him. Jesus is thus presented as being opposed to bloodshed: “for all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matthew xxvi, 52). Evidently this is an interpolation. We have already seen Jesus promising cataclysmic violence and arming his followers, albeit with only two swords (the angels, though, would have been ready for pitched battle).

Interrogated by Caiaphas the leading high priest, Jesus was quickly handed over to the Roman governor, Pilate, as a political prisoner. Without fuss or bother Jesus was found guilty of sedition - he had proclaimed himself king of the Jews and was forbidding the payment of Caesar’s taxes. Jesus had no thought or intent of delivering himself up as a sacrificial lamb. He had expected an awesome miracle and glory, not total defeat. The gospels report his dejection and refusal to “answer, not even to a single charge” (Matthew xxvii, 14). Pilate might have been besieged by the Jerusalem mob. But they would have been crying for Jesus’ freedom, not “Away with him, crucify him” (John xv, 19). There was certainly no custom in occupied Palestine whereby the population could gain the release of any “one” condemned prisoner “whom they wanted” (Matthew xxvii, 15). Pilate did not seek to “release him”, nor did the Jews demand his execution. The notion of Pilate’s “innocence” is as absurd as the blood guilt of the Jews. Obviously yet another pro-Roman insert.

Pilate had Jesus whipped, beaten and spat upon, then thrown into prison. Then, perhaps after a number of months, had him sent to an agonising death (Pilate may well have waited till the spring Passover festival so he could make Jesus an example before as many Jews as possible). Jesus was paraded through the streets, guarded by a “whole battalion”. Pilate’s plan was to humiliate the king of the Jews and show his powerlessness. Jesus is stripped and a (royal) scarlet robe is draped over his shoulders. A “crown of thorns” is mockingly planted on his head and a “reed” placed in his right hand (Matthew xxvii, 28). He is crucified along with two other rebels and derided by the Romans and their allies. Over his head they, on Pilate’s orders, “put the charge against him”. “This is the king of the Jews” (Matthew xxvii, 37). John has the high priests objecting. That has the ring of truth.

They wanted Pilate to write, “This man said he was king of the Jews.” An arrogant Pilate has none of it. John puts these blunt words in his mouth: “What I have written I have written” (John ix, 21, 22). The last words of Jesus are heart-rendering: “Eli, eli, lama sabachthani?” (My god, my god, why hast thou forsaken me?) God had failed him. Jesus was a brave revolutionary who wrongly staked all not on the masses, but on a divine coup and supernatural intervention.

There are supposedly miraculous happenings at his moment of death. Saints rise from their graves and walk about. There are earthquakes and the curtain in the temple is torn in two. Even more fanciful, the bible has it that it is the Roman centurion and guard who are first to declare that the man they have just killed is “Truly son of god” (Matthew xxvii, 54). Actually for them it was just like any other day’s work. Executions of rebel ringleaders were a common occurrence for the Roman garrison □

**Jack Conrad**

## REVIEW

# Truer than fact

BBC2, Tuesday April 13 *Hawking*

If I mentioned *Alice in Wonderland*, which characters would spring to your mind? The chronically anxious white rabbit, the alienated petty bourgeois suffering an imposed sense of 'efficiency' so unremitting he had forgotten the point of it? Or the Mad Hatter, retired from the world into a more cheerful, psychedelic, acid-induced version? My own imagination brings up Humpty Dumpty, hiding in thought separated from its mother reality, so that when he uses a word, the word means what he *means* it to mean. He later went on to become the chief theorist of the Workers Revolutionary Party, I hear, though he had a nasty fall in the early 80s (and the pieces went *everywhere*).

One thing I would put money on, though: you are *not*, at this moment, thinking of Alice herself. Of all the surreal characters in the book, it is ironic that she should be the *least* real. Her ordinariness is so complete that it leaves no impression. She is barely human: particularly next to the all-too-human grotesques she meets. She is a device, a gimmick, a lens through whom we observe Carroll's fantasia. All that we ask of a lens is that it should be true and clear. We do not want to *see* it.

And so Carroll contrived his leading lady to be invisible. It was the right decision *artistically*: she would only have got in the way. An interesting Alice would have distorted the view of Wonderland through her own psyche, leaving us an equation with two unknowns. She did not matter: the world she moved through did. Similar is the watery Oliver in *Oliver Twist*, the plodding Winston Smith in 1984, and even the relentlessly terrestrial Arthur Dent in the *Hitch hiker's guide to the galaxy*: though his homeliness is so complete, he at least gets a few laughs as he traverses the universe looking for cups of tea.

Reality, though, is less convenient. The relationship between the characters and the story is dialectical: they are both components which not only constantly affect each other, but are simultaneously interacting with external characters and forces. The neutral point of view is a fiction, suitable for fiction. It has no part in history.

This poses a problem for the writer of a dramatised life-story, which attempts to combine fiction and history, and in which Alice *and* the wonderland she moves through are both real and both fascinating. It was with interest, therefore, that I sat down to watch *Hawking*: advertised as "the story of professor Stephen Hawking's early years told for the first time in a major drama for BBC2".

Hawking is a cosmologist, who was boosted from a high reputation within academia to mass, popular, Beckham-like celebrity by the publication of his book *A brief history of time* in 1988. This book sold nine million copies and has been translated into 30 languages, making it the most popular book about science ever written.

Its reputation is controversial. Some fellow scientists complain that it presents theories as fact (though this assumes a fixed distinction between theory and 'fact' which Hawking admirably undermines in the book's introduction). They have also complained that the book's popularity has led to Hawking being overrated. He is not, they say, in the same league as Einstein or Schrödinger: they originated; he merely manipulated their ideas.

Non-scientist critics have pointed out that the number of copies of Hawking's *Brief history* sold bears no relation to the number actually *read*. The book does not, they claim, actually succeed in con-

veying the ideas Hawking worked with: it has thrown off all but the most determined readers well before the end, and left most of the determined remainder confused.

I am not qualified to comment on the quality of the underlying scientific theory in the book, nor on its level of general acceptance in the scientific community: as a lay reader I can only record that I read it with fascination and at one, rather long, sitting. He undoubtedly cuts corners and glosses over certain arguments (how could he not?), but in the main I found the criticisms overblown. He succeeds not only in communicating the nature of the various scientific controversies: he sets them into a context of the struggle of ideas amongst the scientists, and even (to some extent) the social and above all religious forces which sway scientific beliefs.

The science itself is fascinating. Take black holes. These are collapsed stars: squashed into an incredibly dense blob which exerts such a gravitational pull that not even light can escape them: hence 'black'. Nothing comes out, and everything which goes in stays. They are the pockets in a (somewhat warped) snooker table universe.

Hawking was the first scientist to suggest that they actually *emitted* radiation: an idea so counter-intuitive it was scoffed at - and indeed one he hesitated over for a long time before publishing. How could they emit anything? His reasoning was interesting.

His first point is that only particles which get too close to a black hole are lost into it. That 'too close' represents a distance from its centre. Projecting in all directions, it defines a sphere. Anything entering the sphere does not emerge.

His second is that quantum theory predicts a certain basic level of uncertainty about the existence and behaviour of very small particles. Plain, empty space violates this uncertainty: it is too predictable. To fit the theory, pairs of particles and anti-particles must be randomly winking into existence, only to then destroy each other, all the time.

But if such pairs or particles are created near the sphere around the black hole, one may cross into it (and be lost), and the other remain outside and escape. As this is happening at every point around the sphere, particles escaping

destruction by their corresponding anti-particles must be spinning out in all directions: effectively radiation generated by the presence of the black hole. This is now known as Hawking radiation.

If you find this thumbnail sketch of a thumbnail sketch intriguing, you will enjoy *A brief history of time* and may be prompted to further reading. Marxists will also be interested in the philosophical issues raised by the physics: such as the unmistakable role of dialectics in understanding quantum mechanics. However, many, many general readers, it cannot be doubted, had their curiosity about the universe heightened by this introduction. The universe itself is the ultimate wonderland.

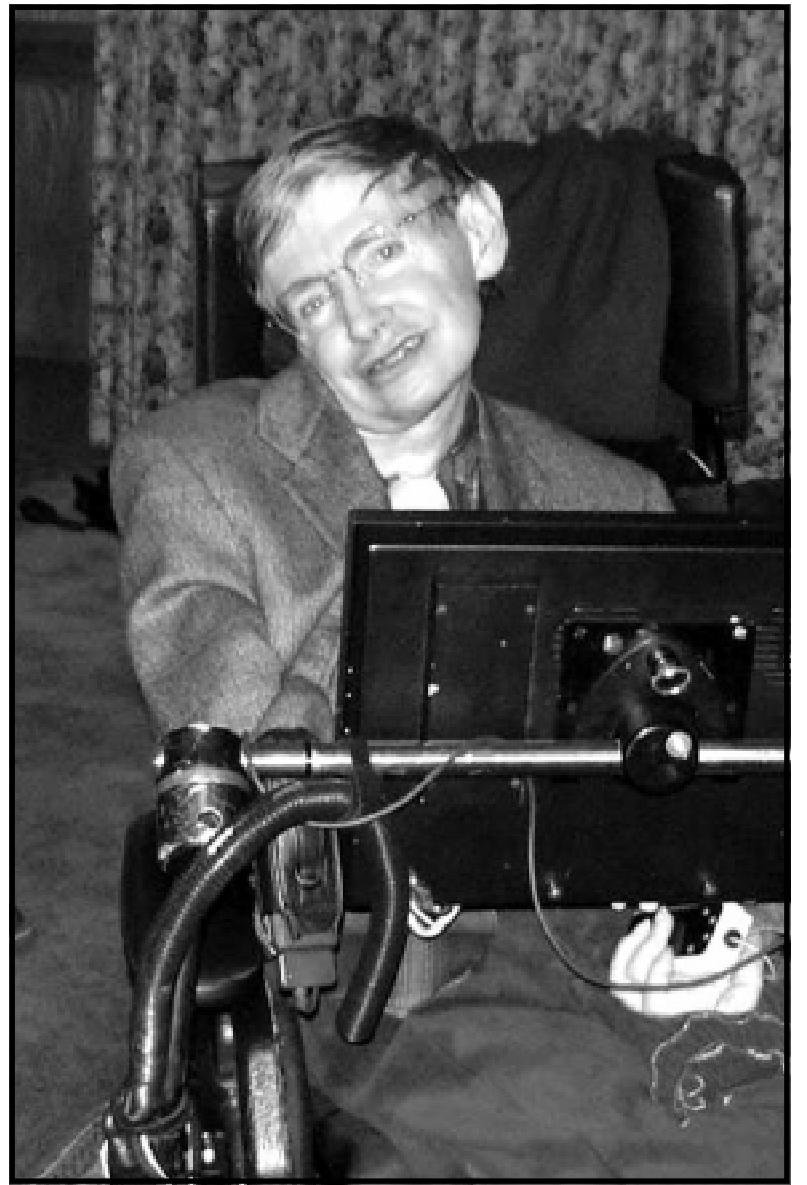
The problem for the *Hawking* programme-makers, though, was that their hero's story is also fascinating in itself. Born in 1942, he was enjoying a relatively normal, if clearly gifted, youth until he went skating with his family one day, fell and simply found he could not rise. He was diagnosed as suffering from motor neurone disease: a condition in which the brain gradually loses its ability to communicate instructions to the muscles of the body, while leaving consciousness unimpaired. Though he later explained that the diagnosis was never given to him directly, doctors expected him to live not more than another two years. For a young man about to begin a PhD and expected to be brilliant, this was the greatest possible blow.

The disease gradually reduced Hawking's ease of physical movement, and eventually his speech. Both its effects and his foreknowledge of its inevitable progress add a powerful element to the story of his life. Though the programme ended well before this point, he finished *A brief history* using a hand-held mouse responding to the motion in one finger to select words from a computer screen. Alice, in this wonderland, had problems of her own.

How would a dramatisation of his life deal with this? Would it be an American-style feel-good movie, where an intrepid hero overcomes his problems through sheer pluck and well chosen motivational backing music, with bits of cod-science thrown in to emphasise the scale and romance of his achievement? Or would highly contrived dialogue give impossibly convenient explanations of the ideas while the man having them was quietly and simply progressed from stoop to stick to wheelchair?

In the event, a genuine and not entirely unsuccessful attempt was made to present a living reality with these aspects woven into one whole. Woven, that is, but not synthesised. Scenes flicked back and forth quickly between Hawking struggling with the limits imposed on his body, and struggling with the complexity of the ideas being formed by his mind. Like a weave, the alternative threads formed a fabric, but were still separately discernible. The question of the *relationship* between his life and his ideas was not directly addressed.

The programme did better, though, in portraying the realities of academic life, and their relationship to society. When Hawking first meets Fred Hoyle, the previous leader in the field, Hoyle is quick to explain the realities. "For research, you need brains, cash and balls. Brains should be enough, but in reality you need cash, and the balls to get it." No 'purity of science' myth here: Hoyle is portrayed as a pugnacious and seasoned *player*, as well as a scientist. Originator of the steady state theory, in which the universe had no 'beginning', he criticises the theory he himself originally and slightly dubbed the 'big bang'. His



Stephen Hawking: fascinating

contempt for the theory, in this dramatisation at least, is largely due to the pope's support for it - because it mirrors the christian creation myth. "Religion," Hoyle insists, "is the enemy of science."

Hoyle's *power* is well communicated. He is an established authority. He is a fellow of the Royal Society. An assistant reading one of Hoyle's papers before it is presented to that society comments: "His work really should be reviewed first by a committee, but there isn't time." The norms of peer review are waived in view of his status. The physically shaky Hawking, who challenges his theory publicly at this presentation, is quickly condemned for rocking the boat.

The most famous social use to which modern physics has been put - nuclear weaponry - is curiously handled. It is only directly referred to once: a rather bumptious fellow student denigrates the importance of cosmology: the important science, he says, is that which went into the bomb. Hawking is affronted. Blaming Einstein for the atomic bomb, his fictional counterpart says, is like blaming Newton for air crashes because Newton discovered gravity. Actually, this argument does not work even in its own terms, as gravity operates whether we have discovered it or not: the bomb was the product of human labour. More to the point, though, it ignores Einstein's famous, and later repented, role in urging the American government to do research into nuclear weapons. Did the writer think this through so poorly *himself*, or *intend* his character to speak so?

The only other reference to this issue is made by having the on-screen Hawking wear a CND badge almost continuously during the years covered by the story. His remark about Einstein aside, he makes no comment about the politics behind this gesture, or any other social views.

The worst problem with the dramatisation, though, is its plausibility. If it were all the information you had about Hawking, its imaginative coherence would provide a seductively certain view of him. This is a problem it shares with all work of this genre.

Only once have I seen a dramatisation - in fact, two dramatisations - of the life of a man I actually knew something

about. I have always been fascinated by the life and work of CS Lewis: best known perhaps for his *Narnia* books for children, but the author of a far wider range of christian polemics, science fiction and literary criticism. I agree with almost nothing he says, and why he interests me is another subject, but suffice for now to say that I have read all his books and many about him.

The play *Shadowlands*, based on his marriage to Joy Gresham, was first filmed for television with Lewis being played by Joss Ackland. I realised, watching it, that much had been changed and simplified, but I was still impressed: Ackland's performance rang true and the writers had not been careless with fact. I later saw a film by the same name, in which Anthony Hopkins played the writer, and endured two hours of gnawing frustration. Hopkins played a gentle English academic, and not the formidable, Belfast-born, often reactionary but always sharp, intellectual street fighter Lewis had clearly been ... Well, it would be fruitless to explore that anger again now.

What motivated the anger, though, was the realisation that the internal coherence of the image presented, and its carefully constructed emotional appeal, would mislead viewers far more than any simple written collection of errors or lies. The power of a dramatisation is also its danger: it is crafted to do more than inform, and can therefore do worse than misinform. It aims to create an emotional and imaginative impression, and can therefore implant error below the level of conscious discrimination.

Without real knowledge, good coin is difficult to separate from bad: and in the case of the life of professor Stephen Hawking, I have no real knowledge. The best I can do, therefore, is warn that history and art are a potent mix, best handled with care ☐

**Manny Neira**

We are planning a London forum to discuss a communist appraisal of modern physics and cosmology. Details will appear in the *Weekly Worker* shortly.



DEBATE

# Find answers in Labour, not Respect

LABOURleftview

Graham Bash



**L**abour Left Briefing’s annual general meeting on Saturday April 24 (details, p3) will be concentrating on two key issues. First, the Labour-trade union link and the crisis of working class representation. Second, Blair’s support for Bush’s war against the world. Both are obviously very important and the anti-war section of the AGM will, I hope, provide general agreement on the main issues, but with some important fine-tuning on the question of how the labour movement makes its presence felt and helps to build the anti-war movement.

There is a danger here. To *some* extent - this is by no means the whole truth - the anti-war movement has allowed itself to be associated with Respect. Partially, it has collapsed itself into the electoral arena. This is an error. Last year, we saw the most magnificent mass anti-war movement against the establishment in British history. To reduce that huge social phenomenon to a hopeless electoral adventure, one doomed to failure, can only limit the significance of what can still be achieved.

Yes, there is no question that the millions of people on the streets must find a political expression. But it should be so much more than what Respect offers. However difficult it is to begin to transform the movement into a vehicle that can address the crisis of working class and progressive representation, that is the *key* task. And once you start to think about that, you are talking about the Labour Party because of its links with the mass organisations of the class, the trade unions.

That is addressed in the first part of Saturday’s *Briefing* AGM. What the resolution from the editorial board effectively says is that those sections of the far left that are seeking an electoral alternative have totally screwed it up. First time travesty, second time farce. It’s no

good relying on Respect to come up with the results on June 10. That is not the answer.

But the Labour left is embroiled in its own crisis. The fact is that New Labour still dominates the Labour Party, the trade unions are not punching their weight and they are actually not using their power to challenge the hold of Blairism. Gains have been made in the last year or two in the fight to re-establish the Labour Party as an organisation that can truly represent working people, but they are all very partial, very fragile.

There is no groundswell of revolt from below in the unions: if anything, it comes from above. Therefore, we are dealing with a wing of the bureaucracy - a layer that can never be totally relied on unless there is a mass movement strong enough to hold them to account. And the movement is not strong enough yet in the unions or elsewhere to find a political expression that can shape developments in the Labour Party.

The point of the resolution is therefore to say we should stop comforting ourselves by saying how useless the far left is; we have our own, extremely deep crisis to deal with. The danger is that the leadership is drowning out the genuine voice of the Labour Party and therefore the organisation cannot attract new elements. Realistically, it cannot in the near future appeal to the masses of people who were on the streets last year. Until it finds a way to do so, we will have a massive crisis of representation without the political means to solve it.

## Blair’s crisis

The practical invisibility of the left - in terms of coherent political representation, not presence on the streets - is dramatically highlighted by the depth of Blair’s crisis.

Blair is in a desperate situation over Iraq. Ultimately I cannot see any way out

**“Yes, there is no question that the millions of people on the streets must find a political expression. But it should be so much more than what Respect offers.”**

for him because of the totally false basis on which he took this country to war, his flouting of international law. This is now magnified by the significant, but lesser issue of his U-turn on the European constitution. His crisis-management approach is simply not working. He lumbered himself with a referendum that he probably cannot win. He is clearly wary of a resurgent Tory Party - although it is important not to overstate that.

The left is not setting the agenda on this question. Clearly, it must not do what it did 30 years ago and sacrifice its independent position on Europe for the sake a campaign alongside anti-European Tories and rightwing xenophobes. But I differ with the *Weekly Worker* comrades in that I would like to see that agenda consist of an internationalist and socialist case against the euro and further integration of Europe on bourgeois terms.

Another straw in the wind that underlines the problems of New Labour is the party leaflet for the upcoming Greater London Assembly elections. It is quite remarkable. On page 1 of this four-page brochure, there’s a photo of Ken Livingstone. Page 2 - another photo of Ken. *Nowhere* is there reference to Blair and only at the bottom of page 4 is there a reference to the Labour Party - and that it is the legally required statement, “Printed and published by ...”!

It really is hilarious. They have a graph showing the votes of what they dub “the three main parties”. Those parties are the Tories, Lib Dems and “Ken”! This is the

Labour Party apparatus attempting to shed its Blairite clothes and for the sake of cynical electoral expediency imply a more traditional ‘old Labour’ image, personified in the shape of Ken Livingstone. Another measure of the New Labour crisis - the Blairites have to make themselves *invisible* for Labour to win. This has been foreshadowed by their defeats in union elections, but it is a huge step forward to see the same essential phenomenon assert itself in wider society.

Blair’s crisis is positive in and of itself, but we have to take advantage of it. That means creating the only alternative to New Labour that *can* be created in this period - the Labour Party. And - despite our gains - we are only at the very early stage of that process.

## LRC

This is where the question of the Labour Representation Committee comes in. The LRC has its founding conference at the TUC on July 3. It is a step in the right direction. However, it is vital that it becomes much more than a talking shop that proclaims policies in opposition to New Labour. It has to set out a road map for the trade unions to organise to reclaim the party - constituency by constituency, ward by ward.

There is no question that, unless the trade unions take a leading role in this, it cannot happen. The New Labour leadership *repels* the type of people who could transform the situation in the party - those from the mass anti-war movement

and, above all, the best in the trade unions.

It is a very encouraging development, but I remain cautious. It has to do far more than simply exist. It must *organise* to win back the party and put the trade unions at the centre of that fight. Its first steps must be designed to activate trade unionists to ‘recolonise’ the party they set up in the first place. In turn, that would invigorate the constituency party activists to join in that long process.

Lastly, I am going to be insulting in this column to my hosts. I hope that on June 11 - after the fundamental error the *Weekly Worker* comrades are making with their support for the forlorn Respect stunt - you will re-engage with the real problems of the workers’ movement. I take no enjoyment in predicting disaster for Respect. Nor, as I think I have made clear in this column, am I contrasting Respect’s problems with the robust state of the Labour left. Nonetheless, some of the stuff I have read in the *Weekly Worker* has argued that the new coalition must be supported because the Socialist Workers Party are in there - so that is where the ‘action’ is. Hardly a Marxist analysis, in my opinion.

You have to start from what is in the broader interests of the labour and working class *movement*, not from where your paper can make the most impact. The cutting edge is to rebuild a party of labour. Without such a mass party, we are nowhere as a left. That’s where the ‘action’ is, that’s where we have got to engage, no matter how difficult it is.

On June 11 I believe you and other comrades are going to wake up to this after the latest far left electoral debacle. As I have said many times before, I hope comrades’ thoughtfulness and intelligence will start to be applied in an arena where they can actually make a difference to the world and their talents are not squandered ☐

## Plaid Cymru conference: monolithic stage show

**T**he message from Dafydd Iwan, president of Plaid Cymru, was that “every road will lead to Pontypridd” for the spring conference of the ‘Party of Wales’ on April 17. Given its poor election results last year and its recent history of in-fighting, such a daft claim was no doubt intended to rally his troops for the imminent local and European election campaigns. Around 200 attended.

This was my first visit to a Plaid conference but what I heard did not surprise me much. A quick look through the agenda indicated the control freakery and appallingly low level of politics that was planned for the day: ‘Trafodaeth/debate’ had been arranged with speakers preselected and allocated a fixed time. Looking hard for policy proposals, I came across ‘Y cynnig/the motion’. Yes, *one* motion - and that in itself was hardly contentious, reading more like a pep talk to a thoroughly demoralised membership in the run-up to elections, now a mere seven weeks away. Indeed, the naïve observer might have been fooled into believing that Plaid has solved its internal problems over the past few months - *open* disagreement was non-existent, *open* dissent was nowhere to be heard. No vote on the motion was taken anyway. Clearly, here was

Plaid putting on a bureaucratic show of monolithic unity in a crude attempt to fool the electorate.

Given press speculation about “serious differences” within the party - for example, over the Richards report on the future of Welsh devolution - you would have thought that this conference might have been an ideal opportunity to thrash out such issues and perhaps arrive at a consensus. Alas no. What about the advertised fringe meetings then? Here surely I would be able to hear an analysis of Richards, or perhaps a discussion on Plaid’s stance against US and British imperialism’s war in Iraq. No again. Three of the four meetings were put on by Age Concern, the Environment Agency, Carers Wales, and that was that.

Despite Plaid’s claimed socialist credentials - repeated on its website and in its manifesto - proceedings were completely dominated by the party’s real *raison d’être*. Getting elected and getting grubby hands onto power. Dafydd Iwan called for the Welsh assembly to become a “sovereign body”, but not with a view to deepening working class unity and bringing forward the socialist break with capitalism. Plaid’s AMs and MPs, not least their leader in the Welsh assembly, Ieuan Wyn Jones, dream of the day when they will run their own in-

dependent capitalist state and all the perks that go with it, such as an army and a seat at the UN.

To that puny end what they do is attempt to divide the British working class by splitting away its Welsh component and play the patriotic (read chauvinist) card for all its worth. Those who do not fall in behind their petty nationalist agenda - first Welsh autonomy, then full independence - cannot be properly Welsh. Plaid’s MEP, Jill Evans, took exactly this line in her attack on the assembly’s Labour first minister: “Rhodri Morgan may be able to sing the Welsh national anthem, but that doesn’t make him patriotic!”

And here is Plaid’s real, ugly, face. How on earth can you be a nationalist and a socialist? How can you square the promotion of separatism with the fight for working class rule? There is a historically constituted British nation and a historically constituted working class movement in Britain. Nor does Wales exist as a homogeneous national entity, let alone one without class contradictions. Championing Welsh separatism has nothing to do with either the interests of capital or the working class. The only people who can possibly benefit from it is are frustrated politicians eager to get their snouts in the trough of corruption.

Of course, when I spoke to Alun Cox of Plaid’s NEC he assured me that there was no contradiction between being a nationalist and fighting for socialism: “Plaid is presenting to the people of Wales a socialist programme.” He went on to claim that his “socialism is outward-looking” and that Plaid is “internationalist”. Apart from the fact that the party’s socialism is thoroughly bourgeois - wage labour is retained along with the bureaucratic state - this remains a forlorn and at the end of the day damaging perspective.

It is true that under the United Kingdom’s constitutional monarchy Wales cannot exercise the right to self-determination. That is something communists aim to change through the fight to achieve a federal republic. But surely the task of anyone living in Wales who calls themselves a socialist and an internationalist is to enhance and broaden working class unity, especially when that unity - in the form of unions, strikes, movements and parties - goes back well over 150 years.

Those who attempt to weaken or even break that unity might well be sincere left-wingers, earnest supporters of a Palestine state and oppose the Blair government over Iraq, etc. Nevertheless clearly their socialism owes more to Joseph Pilsudski, David Ben Gurion, Fi-

del Castro and Tommy Sheridan than it does to the tradition represented by Karl Marx, Fredrick Engels, Vladimir Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and William Morris. More than that, they are members of a party, though it might pose to the left of New Labour, which is in practical terms simply set on running the existing system, albeit from Cardiff, rather than Westminster.

Most speakers at Pontypridd did not even pay lip service to socialism of any kind. The only ones to talk in terms of the working class were Cox himself, Leanne Woods AM, Jon Blackwood (prospective Euro candidate) and Cardiff councillor Neil McIlvoy. All of them from Plaid’s left platform, Triban Coch. And to give him his due McIlvoy made a fine, *political* speech. His contribution defended migrants from racist attacks and demanded a fightback against imperialist war. Good stuff, especially when compared to Plaid’s mainstream speakers.

I am reliably told that Plaid’s annual conference, to be held in Llandudno in the autumn, will feature debate - perhaps even of a controversial nature. If so, it will be in marked contrast to last weekend’s stage-managed election rally ☐

Bob Davies

**ESF**

# Bad methods slammed

**H**ere is another reason for closer European integration: the Europeans. They have once again intervened to try to stop the undemocratic and bureaucratic behaviour of the Socialist Workers Party-Socialist Action axis in the preparations for the ESF.

It has become something of a routine: for two months, the SWP-SA bullies, bribes and forces through various stupid positions in the British ESF coordinating and organising committees ('If you don't accept this, there won't be an ESF').

Having no coordinated organisation of its own, the democratic opposition (which pretty much consists of everybody who is not a member of either the SWP or SA) bravely tries to prevent the most obvious abuse and fights for some basic principles - but is mostly defeated. Then, every second month, our comrades from across Europe come to the ESF assembly and basically overturn everything the SWP-SA has railroaded through in Britain.

In previous meetings, for example, they ended the right of the SWP/SA to automatically exclude people - I had been thrown out of meetings of the coordinating committee whenever it discussed finance. This time around, they again reversed some of the most obvious expressions of the control-freakery that is holding back the ESF. As a representative from the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung (linked to the Party of Democratic Socialism in Germany) put it, "This is not an English ESF with some minor European participation". He was one of many to give voice to such criticism. Stefane Bieker from Greece demanded that "our English friends really need to start to listen to us". And some others even whispered that "we made such a stupid mistake giving the ESF to London. We really thought the SWP would behave better."

The biggest British revolutionary sect has certainly not succeeded in presenting itself as a major force on the European left. The inability of the British left to influence anything apart from themselves is all too obvious. There were no trade union representatives from Britain in Istanbul and the few delegates from British NGOs were extremely critical of the SWP-SA. The serious lack of finance was also clear - though our European comrades have been told that on June 11 (the day after the European elections) money would start to pour in. Apparently, some trade unions are holding back their full support until then. Needless to say, this has never been

Over 250 people were in Istanbul for the latest assembly to prepare for the European Social Forum 2004, which will take place from October 14-17 in London. **Tina Becker** reports from a meeting which saw the Socialist Workers Party and their allies take a beating

mentioned in any meeting in Britain.

Hosted by the Istanbul Social Forum, which is run almost exclusively by the SWP's Turkish comrades, the meeting overturned almost every single decision forced through in Britain.

## Plenary sessions

Plenaries are the only centrally organised meetings and are therefore viewed as the most important part of the programme. The SWP-SA had previously insisted on having only eight (which was pushed up to 13 when a sizeable number from Britain criticised this artificial and unnecessary limit) and supplied a ready-made list of proposed titles. At the Paris ESF in 2003 there were over 50 plenary sessions.

But our European comrades were pretty outraged, to put it mildly. All of Friday afternoon was dedicated to the programme and representatives from almost every country used the opportunity to trash the proposal. "The lack of money really is not the main problem with the British proposal," Piero Bernocchi from the Italian trade union Cobas said. "It is the bad method. Yes, we should have fewer plenaries. But what is the point of limiting us now to a certain number, without having properly discussed what we want to debate in those sessions?"

Pierre Barth from the French League of the Rights of Man criticised the fact that "we have not seen this proposal in advance. Why didn't our British friends email this to us?" It was interesting - and surprising - that the SWP seems to have made no attempt to run the suggestions past the other Europeans. A crass approach, which again highlights the SWP's arrogance.

An Italian trade union representative, Alessandra Mecozzi, suggested simply throwing out the whole proposal and replacing it with another structure, almost identical to last year's: three main themes, under which the plenary ses-

sions, seminars and workshops should all be grouped. Her suggestions - the 'system of war', 'citizenship and democratic rights' and 'deregulation and privatisation' - were actually accepted in the end, with the addition of themes on racism and the environment. Following her proposal, no limit on the number of plenaries has been set, though the overwhelming majority was in favour of a lot fewer meetings with more real debate.

However, the self-appointed chairs fought tooth and nail for the original proposal. Of the six comrades presiding over the session, four of them were members of the SWP's International Socialist Tendency (three from the IST's Turkish section plus Jonathan Neale) and two were members of Socialist Action (Anne Kane and Sarah Colborne). The consensus against the proposal was so overwhelming that we could have finished the meeting after 30 minutes. However, not wanting to admit defeat, our chairs made no attempt to cut the debate short. In fact, they tried to turn it all around. Having listened to four hours of discussion, with one speaker after another criticising the proposal, comrade Kane thought it appropriate to declare it all null and void. She attempted to conclude proceedings by - falsely - declaring that "in Britain we all agree that we need to fix the number of plenaries and we really must insist on a maximum of 13". Goodnight and thanks a lot for your valuable contributions.

European comrades could hardly believe their ears and there was a minor tumult, with people complaining and shouting. In the end, the comrades gave in to the demand for a smaller, international working group which would meet in the evening to sort out the mess.

Just before going into this meeting, the SWP-SA contingent of about 15 were seen in a group hug. Their main man, Redmond O'Neill (Ken Livingstone's appointed adviser on transport and leading Socialist Action member), must have

told them to drop it, as the figure of 13 has not been heard since. In fact, they have even dropped the "absolute necessity" to fix any particular number.

They also backtracked on another, similarly bad idea. They had proposed that speakers for the plenary sessions should not be chosen by an international programme working group, as happened in previous years. Instead, they suggested that a group of "at least three organisations from at least three countries" would work on each plenary, choosing the speakers. It seems that this proposal originated from Bernard Cassen, the founder of Attac France. I am told that he is in regular contact with comrade O'Neill and that many ideas that Redmond puts forward are in truth Cassen's. While Cassen is still a leading left personality in France, he has in previous years become even more controversial - in and out of Attac. He is known as a vain and arrogant anti-democrat with expensive tastes for life's little luxuries.

Attac France's main representative in Istanbul, Pierre Khalfa (who is also a member of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire), certainly made no attempt to even bring up Cassen's proposal to disband the programme working group - quite the opposite. While there is a risk that this group could try to act like a small, unaccountable leadership, its meetings are always open and observers can at least find out what is happening.

Comrades from SWP-SA then attempted to limit the damage. Jonathan Neale insisted that there could not be more than "one or two representatives from each country" attending those meetings: "If we allow everybody to turn up who wants to, then we do not have a democratic meeting any more," he announced. Obviously, it does not take a genius to work out which two people from Britain he had in mind. Comrade Neale himself has been one of our "representatives" in previous years.

A number of British and European comrades strongly criticised him, and a consensus was reached that there will be no limit on British representation (though the figure of four or five was mentioned a few times). As the last person to be allowed to speak on this item, Redmond O'Neill used the opportunity to go with the flow and, all of a sudden, the consensus.

But in another exercise in damage limitation, he tried to convince the audience that the reason for this was that "many trade unions and NGOs support the process, but they do not come to our meetings, which are dominated by a handful of people", he said to giggles and heckles. Dominating meetings is of course exactly what he and his SWP cronies do. But no, he was not referring to his own controlling position or the undue influence of the SWP: "These people do not represent anything, but they shout at trade union leaders, who feel excluded," he said. "We need to keep places open for the unions to attend programme group meetings." But his audience did not seem convinced. I really doubt if there is anybody left at our ESF assemblies who does not know about the undemocratic shenanigans of the SWP-SA bloc.

## Seminars

These meetings are self-organised by the groups putting them on, but are equipped with simultaneous translation (workshops, on the other hand, are self-organised meetings without translation). It is likely that - as in previous years - the proposals for seminars will far outstrip the available space and an unavoidable merging process will have to take place. For this reason, the SWP-SA wanted to consider only proposals that had al-

ready been submitted, and by a minimum of three groups from at least two countries.

Many people in Britain, including myself, argued against this proposal, which favours the big, already established international networks. Instead, we should encourage organisations to voluntarily come together - and possibly form Europe-wide networks in the process. Surely, this is the main function of the ESF in any case. We must get our own act together if we are serious about building an alternative to the bosses' European Union.

Again, the rest of the European left was with us on the subject. Speaker after speaker argued against the setting up of these criteria and, at least for the time being, every organisation can propose a seminar - whether they are part of an international network or not. The only condition will be that no group can propose more than five seminars.

## Europe or the war?

Sunday morning saw a discussion on the curiously termed 'The political situation and its context'. This is a standing item in our assemblies, because the World Social Forum and the ESF suffer from the self-imposed inability to organise any activities. This ban is supposed to 'hold the different movements together' - rightwing trade unions or NGOs might walk away from the forums if they organised any controversial demonstrations or campaigns.

Rather than disengaging ourselves altogether from such unreliable rightwing 'allies', our comrades in Italy invented the 'assembly of social movements' (ASM) just before the first ESF in Florence in 2002 in order to get around the ban. Here at last, we can discuss joint activities across Europe and issue 'calls of the social movements' to mobilise for European-wide protests. The historic anti-war demonstrations on February 15 2003 and March 20 2004 were decided in by the ASM. (Redmond O'Neill, incidentally, revealed that the TUC had for a long time refused to give any support to the ESF in Britain, because last year's 'call' criticised the EU. But he is trying to convince its members that the ASM has nothing to do with the ESF.)

Pierre Khalfa opened the item with a short contribution, in which he proposed that the question of the European constitution and the EU enlargement should guide our joint activities for the coming year. He also criticised the feebleness of our action on the question so far: "We have to accept that we are going far too slowly," he said, referring to the international protests against privatisations, which took place on April 2-3 across Europe. Britain was not the only European country which really did nothing for the occasion. Comrade Khalfa urged us to be "more efficient" in order to "make more of a difference" - however, he was a little short on hard proposals, tactical or strategic.

Most comrades used the three-hour-long discussion that followed to talk about the things close to their heart. While many contributions were either eccentric or instantly forgettable, a clear division emerged. The French want to make the EU the sole focus of our common activities across the continent. The SWP-SA only want to mobilise against the war. And the Italians want a bit of both. Obviously, the latter position is the most sensible and was echoed by many speakers.

A number of contributions from Britain gave evidence of the utter ignorance and contempt with which the left treats the EU and its constitution. Because of its economism, questions of democracy and how we are ruled are seen as a diversion from the 'real issues': trade un-

**Istanbul assembly**



# Uniting our movements

Piero Bernocchi is a representative of the leftwing Italian trade union, Cobas, at the ESF



**For three years representatives of left groups, trade unions and movements from across Europe have been meeting up almost once a month to prepare for our European Social Forums. It is always stressed that the ESF is “a process, not an event”. Do you think we have made progress?**

I can see a big risk that the ESF is simply repeating itself and not really moving forward. We are spending a lot of time organising an event every year, but we have not spent enough energy on developing our networks and linking our struggles across Europe. I really hope that in London we will make a qualitative leap and in October we will set up functioning networks on the issues that most concern our movements: war, work, migration, etc.

However, if this does not happen, if we have not moved forward by October, then we will seriously need to analyse why. I think the main responsibility will lie with the movements themselves. There is a real problem of the heart of it: it is very easy for the movements to come together to protest against the war, but it is far more difficult to unite around social issues like the welfare state or labour rights. There are a lot of different opinions on these questions, as well as on the overarching issue of neoliberalism and how we should fight it.

Neoliberal parties are not just to be found on the European right: they are also on the left, amongst our movements. They might want to change this or that aspect of society, but not the whole system. One part of the ESF is connected to those parties: the Communist Party in France, the GLA in London, certain trade unions in Italy. In

fact, there are of course very many movements and groups in Italy and Europe that are not getting involved in the social forums, just because those neoliberal forces are involved.

This is why it is very difficult - maybe even impossible - to really move forward any further with the organisations involved.

**That begs the question as to why the anti-neoliberal forces across Europe do not unite on a qualitatively higher level.**

These are exactly the questions we should really discuss. How can we work together? How can we move forward? But because of the difficulties of the ESF in Britain, we are spending a lot of time sorting out the enlargement of the participation and repairing problems, and do not have time to focus on the bigger questions of how we can work together.

Our experiences of neoliberalism are very similar in most countries. For example, all over Europe, education is being privatised and commodified and our national struggles against those developments are pretty similar. However, our first two ESFs have not succeeded in setting up effective networks on these questions. Likewise on the questions of health, migration, etc - the issues that affect our movements are very similar indeed. But it is simply not enough that we organise one or two simultaneous demonstrations against these developments, especially as such events take an awful lot of time and energy to organise.

In my opinion, the biggest responsibility for this lack of coordination and the absence of united struggle lies with some of the participating trade unions, particularly the European TUC. There is a big resistance on its part to building united and effective action alongside the movements. That's why I fear

we won't be moving ahead in London.

**What other problems do you see?**

In Italy and France we were simply given the financial and administrative support from the various government bodies, without any strings attached. We were told, 'Here is the money: see you next month.' In Britain, it looks as if the main political group behind the bid is trying too hard to get a good relationship with the unions and the GLA in order to get some money from them. A number of big concessions on the question of democracy and participation have been made. In Italy or France it would have been impossible for somebody from the government to come to our meetings and demand this or that as a condition for hosting the ESF. The mayor of Paris, for example, wanted to speak at the opening ceremony and that was all.

So, although these concessions are being made, we have still not seen any money from the GLA. We are also getting the feeling that there is a distinct coolness on the part of the British trade unions. They seem to be in the background somewhere, but not really involved or interested.

Because of this situation, there seems to be a lot of hostility from the British grassroots movement and resistance against getting involved in the process. Myself and others are trying very hard at our European assemblies to explain to the British comrades that you cannot organise the ESF only top-down. In the end, you might just get enough money together to organise the event, but what good would it be if you alienate everybody in the process and nobody turns up?

ions, the NHS, public services, etc, important as these are. Debates on the state, how our rulers rule or the monarchy are “boring” and “not important”. Chris Nineham (SWP) argued that the “EU constitution simply cannot be the focus of our assembly. The central thing needs to be the fact that Britain is the backdrop to this disgusting war.”

The previous night, a smaller meeting of an international working group took place. This

group is attempting to formulate the left's opposition to the EU constitution and put forward our own constructive alternative in the shape of a 'social charter of human rights' (more about this in next week's *Weekly Worker*). During this meeting, comrade Nineham argued that “because the British establishment is split 50-50, the left is parochial on the issue. Our European comrades need to understand that the constitution is simply a

non-issue in Britain.” In the same meeting, comrade O'Neill argued that it is a very difficult issue, as the TUC is in favour of the EU and its constitution, while many individual trade unions and the Labour left are against it.

The point of both contributions was of course to argue against making the EU or the constitution a focal point of the ASM. While in Istanbul comrades Nineham and O'Neill were arguing passionately about the unimportance of the issue, in London Tony Blair was making his dramatic U-turn on a referendum. The next 18 months will show what a “non-issue” the question of the EU is. Presumably even the SWP will now have to come to a position more sophisticated than a simple ‘no’.

In general it was difficult to follow the ASM discussion, not just because of the various contributions which had little or nothing to do with the subject. The chairing was particularly badly handled by Milena Buyum from the National Assembly against Racism, who is also a member of Socialist Action. She interrupted those she did not like after two minutes (like myself), letting others speak for over five (like Chris Nineham and Redmond O'Neill). She made no attempt to steer the meeting towards a consensus position, which could easily have been reached. She just let everybody speak on whatever they wanted.

In fact she actively prevented the meeting from arriving at any kind of agreement: when comrade Khalfa tried to sum up the discussion and present a consensual proposal, she would not let him speak. “We are already 15 minutes over our time limit and the translators are getting tired.” Although the translators offered to carry on for a few minutes and people from across Europe were calling for comrade Khalfa to be allowed to speak, comrade Buyum thought it wise to close the session and with it the whole assembly. Comrades will have to wait another two months before we can decide the campaigning priorities of the European left for the coming year

# 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 Communist 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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## Fighting fund

# Hard won right

Readers might be aware that after September 30 Royal Mail is threatening to withdraw its special service for registered newspapers and periodicals: ie, publications such as the *Weekly Worker*. Under existing arrangements we pay a second class stamp and you supposedly get first class delivery time.

This has been the case since the early years of the 19th century, when the radical press, and the popular forces supporting it, succeeded in sweeping aside many government restrictions, including the hated tax on printed matter, which made newspapers prohibitively expensive for the average worker.

Royal Mail - a heavily subsidised limited company - say they make a “a loss on every item posted” and anyway people now get information in ways other than through the post. It even claims that the newspaper registration service is unfair on other users of the mail. Really, of course, this is a brazen, albeit penny-pinching, attack on a hard won democratic right and

must be resisted. That is why we fully back the National Union of Journalists' campaign to get the decision immediately rescinded.

You too should protest to Royal Mail and raise the issue with your trade union, local MP, etc. That includes those who read us via the internet (for the record, we notched up 8,189 web readers last week). Unless we get an about-turn we will either have to increase our subscription prices or you will receive the paper much later. A choice between two evils we should not be asked to make.

Anyway the flow of donations towards our £500 monthly fighting fund has slowed to something of a trickle. Where we stood at £310 last week, now we have £365. Thanks go to comrades DR, RS, TY and PM.

Robbie Rix

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



# weekly worker

**For self-determination and national rights**

## Iraq and Palestine: linked struggles for liberation

From Iraq to the West Bank to Gaza, the alliance between US imperialism and Israel, with Tony Blair's Britain in tow, is inflicting massive suffering on tens of millions of Arabs, who are subjected to imperialist and Zionist tyranny.

George Bush's speech last week, at a joint press conference with Ariel Sharon, was just another episode in the decades-long strategic collaboration between Israel and the United States. Bush welcomed the Israeli butcher's latest plan for open bantustanisation and annexation of Palestinian land, but, whether through deliberate, conscious provocation or sheer blundering ineptitude, tore away something of the veil of hypocrisy that often masks the real relations between Israel and its Washington quartermaster - he gave his approval to Sharon's annexation of large sections of the West Bank because these were "realities" that could not be changed, and self-evidently should not be.

Bush's blunt statement of US imperialist policy produced outrage across the Arab world, and some considerable disquiet among America's European imperialist 'partners'. UN secretary general Annan politely demurred; Tony Blair tried to put a brave face on it, even as the rug of the 'road map' was pulled from under his feet. However fake and duplicitous it was, he could point to this 'peace plan' as something he and Bush had 'done' for the Palestinians - a supposed gain won by Blair as a *quid pro quo* for helping Bush invade Iraq. Now this fig leaf, which promised a puppet Palestinian state with a supposedly 'viable' territory, has been yanked away.

After receiving this boost from Bush, Sharon hurried home to oversee the murder of Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi, the new leader of Hamas and successor to Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. Yassin was the founder and original spiritual leader of Hamas who was himself murdered a few weeks ago by Sharon. Another incredible provocation that will have - and indeed is consciously intended to have - predictable results with more suicide bombings in Israel. Such is the level of political closeness between the Bush administration and Sharon that it is entirely conceivable that the murder of al-Rantissi was sanctioned by the US president. The Bush administration backs to the hilt Sharon's claim that negotiations with the Palestinians are impossible because there is supposedly no-one to negotiate with.

But of course the Zionist rulers like it that way, which is why they deliberately undermined Arafat, despite his demonstrated willingness to bargain away Palestinian national aspirations in the Oslo accords of the early 1990s. Arafat's subservience before Israel, even as the growth of Zionist settlements continued to expand during the Oslo period, led that great Palestinian democrat, the late Edward W Said, to compare his Palestine Authority to the regime of Vichy, serving Israel the way that Nazi puppet regime served Hitler's occupation of France. But that does not stop Sharon's government openly threatening to mur-

der Arafat the way it murdered Yassin and Rantissi. The Zionist rulers' appetites for creating yet more Palestinian victims have more than a whiff of Hitlerism about them.

Given the increasing identification of Iraqis, who have now begun to engage in genuinely *mass* struggles against the US-UK occupation, with the Palestinian struggle as akin to their own, Bush's open endorsement of Zionist expansionism can only pour petrol on the flames of pan-Arab anger and revolt. In Palestine, the relationship of forces is not good for the Palestinians. But in Iraq the potential is evidently there for more and more powerful mass revolts to inflict major defeats on the occupying forces. If these two Middle East hot spots start to feed off each other in the way they appear to, things could get very hot indeed for US imperialism and its allies in the region.

And indeed they already are getting hot. Such is the power of the uprising, coming on top of the shock defeat of the Spanish government in March over the terrorist blowback from its invasion of Iraq, that it is gratifying to note the accelerating political disintegration of Bush's coalition. Spanish troops are now apparently to be withdrawn from Iraq within two weeks. And smaller states are beginning to sense which way the wind is blowing: already Honduras is pulling out its tiny, token force. Others are likely to follow.

The Arab masses, quite rightly, will not passively tolerate imperialist tyranny, or that of its Zionist client-state. From Sharon, this tyranny currently takes the form of a systematic attempt, by repeated provocations and massacres, and the assassination of Palestinian leaders and militants, to provoke more suicide bombings and thus deepen a cycle of Israeli atrocity and Arab counter-atrocity. With Israel holding the whip-hand militarily, the obvious point of all this is to establish the political preconditions for the creation of a Greater Israel - using the opportunity of Bush's 'war against terrorism' to push things to the point where it becomes possible for Sharon to inflict another Naqba (catastrophe) on the Palestinians of the West Bank in particular. Gaza is meanwhile to be turned into a sealed-off prison camp: Sharon proposes to evacuate Israeli settlers and withdraw his ground forces, only in order to dominate this impoverished and hellish rump territory with his air power.

Greater Israel does not necessarily require the Gaza strip, but it does need large sections of the West Bank - thus the evident drive to make Palestinian life in the remaining sections of this land, which will be chopped up like a piece of Swiss cheese, more and more unliveable. In fact, as the Zionist rulers are perfectly well aware, it is the intolerable conditions of occupation that explain why many young Palestinians are prepared to sacrifice their lives as suicide bombers. One important and conscious aim of the 'separation wall' is to exacerbate that unliveability: the Greater Israel exponents *want* more suicide bombings in Israel: they *want* to be able to crank up more and more the propaganda that simply equates 'Palestinian' with 'terrorist', in order to create a climate

of opinion internationally where they can politically get away with the mass expulsion of the Palestinians from all 'Judea and Samaria', to use the phrase of Israeli expansionists.

However, the *jihadi* ideology of Hamas, its disastrous, indefensible and counterproductive 'tactic' of suicide bombings of Israeli civilians, only helps Sharon in this endeavour. In its original manifestations, Hamas received help and encouragement from the Israeli state as a means to undermine the secular and nationalist Palestinian left. Hamas is still being manipulated by the Israelis, but in a different, more subtle and insidious way. Indeed the assassination of its leaders is the ultimate form of manipulation. Since the Israeli leadership already knows what the result of such assassinations will be, they can be viewed as something akin to lighting the blue touchpaper and retiring to watch the resulting conflagration - with Israeli civilians amongst the victims.

Hamas, politically helpless against this manipulative tactic, reacts like a puppet on a string in playing the role of Sharon's useful terrorist enemy. Thus while communists condemn and protest against the murder of Hamas's leaders, which is a monstrous example of national oppression, we also propagate the necessity of a break from the despairing ideology of *jihad* and martyrdom, which only helps lay the basis for Sharon's new Naqba.

It is worth noting, however, that despite considerable overlap in terms of consciousness between the Israel/Palestine situation and the war in Iraq, there are also some real differences, of major political importance, between them. Though the conflicts are interrelated, and the behaviour of coalition troops in Iraq is more and more reminiscent of Israeli brutality and arrogance, nevertheless the democratic questions posed are not the same.

The Palestinian national question is a complex problem involving a conflict of two nations, both now irreversibly entrenched in the region. Israel, despite its origins in a colonial-settler movement *sui*

*generis* - a persecuted people in Europe seeking a reactionary and illusory escape - is not a colonial power, but now a national formation indigenous to the Middle East, that cannot be simply defeated and driven out in a democratic struggle. The coalition occupiers of Iraq, on the other hand, can and should be driven out of the region - the only solution completely consistent with democracy.

There are national tensions in Iraq, of course. Tragically, the oppressed Kurdish population, ground down by repression and mass murder under Saddam Hussein, have for the moment seemingly largely embraced the coalition occupiers as 'liberators'. The Kurdish region of Iraq must have autonomy within any future liberated Iraq, and must also have the right of self-determination up to and including the right to a separate state. Given the history of oppression of Kurds at the hands of the Ba'athist regime, not to mention in other neighbouring states such as Ba'athist Syria and shia islamist Iran, there is little room for illusion in a democratic resolution of this national question through some sudden acceptance of Kurdish national rights by Arab nationalists or clerics. The left must therefore champion those rights - indeed in order to gain mass influence and simultaneously counter the influence of chauvinistic and reactionary elements in the movement against neo-colonial rule, the left must urgently take up precisely such democratic questions.

In the Israel-Palestine conflict, a democratic accommodation between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, including a mutual recognition of each other's national rights, must ultimately be reached. The alternative to this is a barbaric solution involving potentially the wiping out of one or the other peoples (or conceivably even both, if Israel's nuclear capacity were ever to be used). The precondition for any real solution to this national question is the breaking of the mass of Israeli workers from Zionism, something that is made all the more difficult by the 'Masada complex' the Zionists quite consciously promote among Israelis -

the idea that they are in an encircled fortress and, if they relaxed their guard, would be overrun and massacred. Such things as suicide bombings do not exactly hinder the inculcation of this consciousness among the Israeli population.

The outbreak of a genuine war of national liberation in Iraq, in a sense, opens up a wider perspective for the left regarding the Palestinian question. We are of course only at the beginning of this struggle, and at this point the influence of clerical and reactionary elements in Iraq is considerable. It does not have to stay that way, however, and in the event of the clerics losing control - conceivable if the Iraqi left could reorient itself correctly - these struggles could interlace in a creative manner. A genuinely democratic, working class solution to the Kurdish question in Iraq, a question that has enormous regional and indeed worldwide resonance as a historic struggle against oppression, could play a major role in undermining the influence of Masada-like reaction in Israel - which rests in part on a manufactured view of the Arab masses as a ferociously anti-democratic horde. Interacting with a radicalisation of the Arab workers and fellahin in a democratic (as opposed to a narrowly national or Arab-communal) direction, a revolutionary war of liberation in Iraq that wins over the Kurdish masses in such a democratic manner could have an enormous and positive impact in changing the current reactionary configuration paralysing the interlocked peoples of Israel and Palestine, and in opening up new perspectives.

Of course, these are at present only possibilities, and require major changes to the consciousness of masses of people in more than one country just to come onto the agenda. But it is in situations like this - when the masses start to move and major reactionary world powers come unstuck - that it becomes possible for communists, organised in a party with a genuinely democratic and socialist programme, to begin to win leadership □

Ian Donovan

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