



weekly worker

- Iraqis tortured
- FBU witch-hunt
- US elections
- Socialist Alliance

Galloway opposes a key womens' freedom: does he speak for Respect?

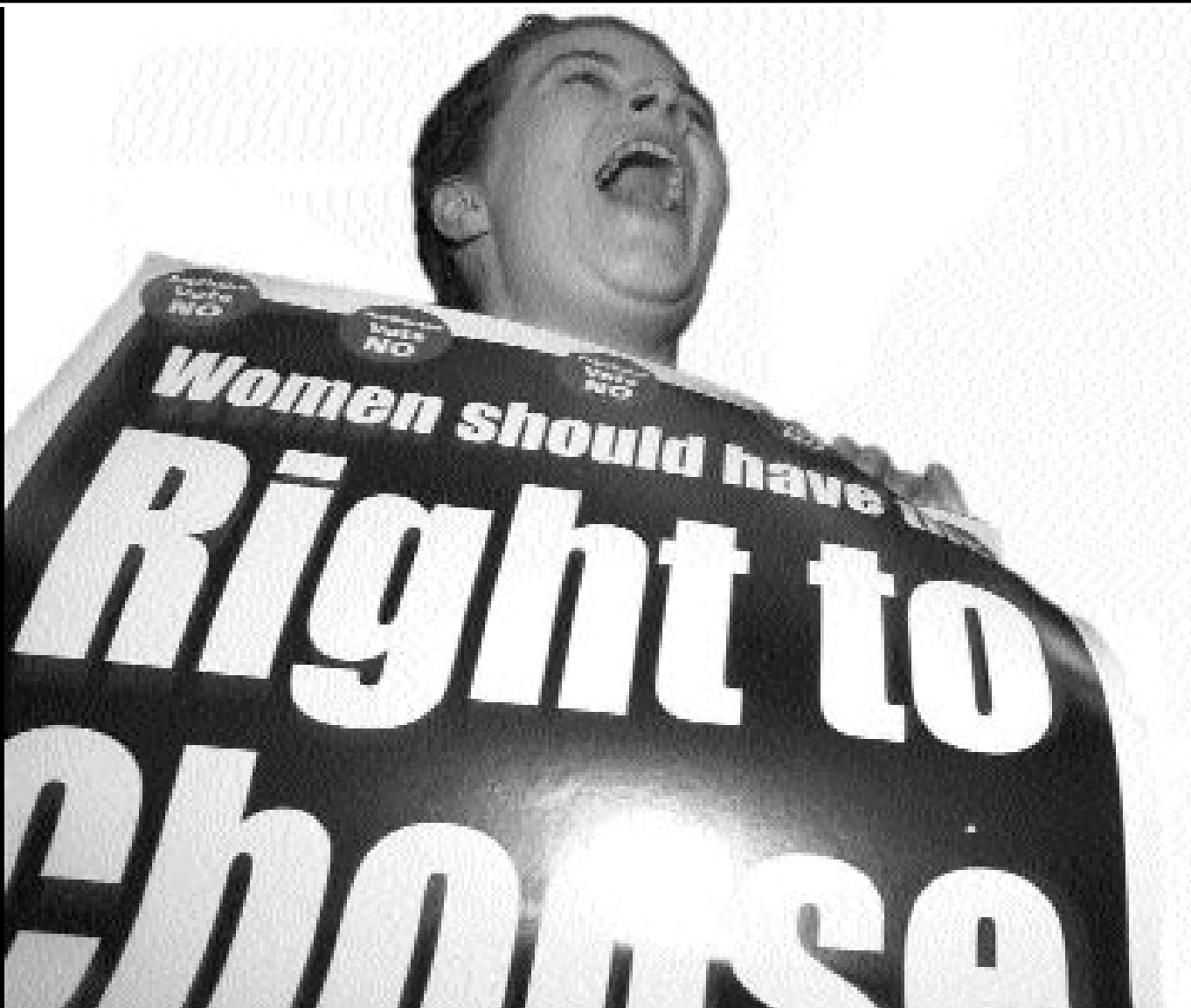
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Abortion: make the position clear

An open letter to the Respect executive committee

Comrades

I am writing to you on behalf of the Communist Party of Great Britain to seek clarification from Respect's leadership. Specifically, we are concerned about the political obligations of coalition candidates during campaigning for the forthcoming elections and the duties of any comrades we get elected.

These concerns are prompted by the recent comments of comrade George Galloway on the question of abortion - but they have far wider political implications for Respect, the role of the executive committee and the coalition's possible future as a party.

Our organisation is committed to working for the biggest possible vote for Respect on June 10 and welcomes the support it has gained from trade unions, leftwingers and faith-based organisations. And similarly, despite our political differences with the comrade, we regard it as a strength that George Galloway - an outstanding spokesperson for the mass anti-war movement - is prominent in this coalition. However, his religious views - and the

backward social attitudes they sometimes prompt - are not simply a personal issue and are certainly the concern of Respect as a political collective.

Speaking to *The Independent on Sunday*, Galloway said that he is "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 4). In a certain sense this is not really news, of course. When he was in the Labour Party Galloway had a consistent record of opposition to a woman's right to choose. The website of the reactionary campaigning organisation, the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child, characterises him as a "courageous fighter" for his stance on this and related questions (www.spuc.org.uk).

But he is no longer a Labour Party backbencher. George Galloway is the leading figure in Respect - he also heads our London list for the EU elections. With that there comes *collective* responsibility. Otherwise the danger is that what George

Galloway says will be equated in the public mind with what Respect thinks.

For example, MAB's press release "welcomed" his "statements on faith and god" and concluded that British muslims will now "see Respect as a real alternative to the main political parties" (April 24). This use of George Galloway's reactionary views - crucially on abortion - to justify support for Respect *obliges* its executive to immediately make its position absolutely clear. The suggestion of waiting till after the June 10 elections for an autumn conference is a nonsense - there can be no fudging on this issue: people have the right to know what they are voting for.

Respect's founding declaration is for "the right for self-determination for every individual in relation to their religious (or non-religious) beliefs, as well as sexual choices". Most in and around Respect would have regarded this as a fairly routine defence of basic democratic rights, not least those relating to a women's control over her own fertility. Yet after comrade Galloway's interview

and its subsequent welcome by MAB it is clear that this formulation needs clarification.

As a matter of urgency we would ask Respect's executive to:

1. Make it absolutely clear that comrade Galloway, when he was speaking to *The Independent on Sunday*, was wrong to oppose abortion.
2. Pledge that it will campaign to defend and improve abortion rights. Neither doctors, politicians, the church nor the mosque should decide a woman's fate. Women themselves should be able to freely decide whether or not to have an abortion - as early as possible, as late as necessary. This should be unambiguously promoted in election material.
3. State clearly that any candidates elected under Respect's banner - whatever their personal opinions - will, if elected, be expected to abide by this position when voting in local councils, the London assembly or the European parliament.

Yours in solidarity

Mark Fischer
National organiser, CPGB

LETTERS



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

Respect abortion

It seems that the national executive of Respect cannot bring itself even timidly to object to George Galloway's clear bid to push for his own reactionary politics on women's rights.

They do, however, want to hide it. Looking at the Respect website you would never know he had even done an interview with *The Independent on Sunday*. The website press section contains a long list of articles about issues and individuals connected with Respect. All, it seems, except the one on April 4, where George put forward his opposition to abortion in strong and unambiguous terms.

And speaking to Nick Wrack, chair of Respect, at the London May Day demo, it was clear that he is hoping the whole embarrassing incident will just go away. I asked him what was going to happen to correct the problem and he said we have a conference in the autumn where these things could be resolved. That is, several months after the election which could see George elected to the European parliament with a pro-life position - on a Respect platform. In a parliament with representatives from a significant number of countries with very reactionary legislation on abortion - not least of all Ireland. In Ireland a woman is only permitted to have an abortion if giving birth would result in her certain death.

Presumably George is in agreement with the catholic patriarchs and their allies across Europe that this position should be generalised.

Anne Mc Shane
email

Respect tact

In viewing the discussion in the *Weekly Worker* on Respect and the abortion question, I am reminded of a passage in an article by Trotsky on how socialists can best deal with conservative attitudes among workers influenced by religion or monarchism:

"At a gathering of workers who are monarchists or catholics, I would deal cautiously with the altar and the throne. But in the programme of my party and in all its policies, its relation to religion and monarchy must be formulated with absolute exactness But even at a particular meeting, while using all the tact necessary in approaching a given group, one must not forget that among them are workers on different levels and that, while it may be necessary to adapt oneself to the backward ones in the method of exposition, it is impermissible to adapt one's political position to them" (*Writings of Leon Trotsky 1933-34*, New York, pp203-4).

I think there is much wisdom in this passage which is still relevant today. The Iraq war has brought into political action a substantial layer of both the pacifist christian CND types and the Asian muslim population. Many of them agree with the far left on the nature of the war and imperialism. It would be criminally irresponsible not to try and engage with this layer politically. And, of course, when it does so, the far left immediately encounters conservative attitudes stemming from their cultural/religious background.

Opposition to abortion by the catholic Galloway and some muslims is one such issue. The white far left (and there is no escaping the fact that it is overwhelmingly white) faces a choice. It can either retreat into its Simon-pure telephone box or it can risk getting its hands dirty drawing in the wider anti-war movement to a political alternative. That is, it can attempt to wrestle with the issues inevitably encountered when reaching out to broader forces brought into action by the war.

Some of your readers appear to reject the advice about "dealing cautiously with

the altar and the throne" - given, incidentally, by the person who led a successful struggle to rid the Soviet Union of both. Instead of participating in the Respect project and arguing intelligently with its membership, in the course of a joint struggle to build a credible alternative, they prefer to stick out their tongues and pull faces from the sidelines. Instead of seeking to employ "the tact necessary in approaching a given group", these people resort to ultimatums and denunciations that will persuade no one and build nothing.

Gary Williams
email

Respect MAB

I was astonished and angered to read that some of your supporters were opposed to voting for members of the Muslim Association of Britain who stand as Respect candidates. No such blanket opposition was proposed in the case of non-MAB candidates. It looks to me like a straightforward case of barely-concealed racism.

The CPGB minority should be thoroughly ashamed of themselves: islamophobia is one thing, but this is outrageous. If MAB members stand on the Respect platform they must be treated in exactly the same way as other Respect candidates.

It is actually an incredible development that the majority of the leadership of a British muslim organisation has chosen to openly align itself with the British far left in an election. It opens up all sorts of opportunities to engage Asian militants in political dialogue and thus begin to bring to an end the abysmal lily-white composition of the British far left.

The CPGB minority cannot see the wood for the trees.

John Davis
email

Lucy absent

So Lucy Anderson doesn't think that there are any differences between her and most Respect supporters in Camden (*Weekly Worker* April 29).

In a way it's hard to find a difference - because no-one has heard a peep out of her on any of the issues which have arisen in Camden since she became a councillor at the last election. There was the campaign against the closure of a local community centre, which led to a former mayor leaving the Labour Party and standing as an independent (she is now a member of Respect); council dirty tricks and libels and an occupation by local people. What did Lucy Anderson have to say? Nothing.

There was the splendid (and successful) campaign against a proposed 'arm's-length management organisation' (ALMO), which the council spent over £500,000 trying to sell to tenants. Did Lucy Anderson speak up in public against the ALMO and in support of the local tenants? Nope.

Then there was the war, of which Lucy is such a committed opponent. Camden has a very active Stop the War Coalition group, which meets regularly. Lucy Anderson has never been to one meeting or activity organised by the anti-war movement in Camden. She didn't even bother to attend a public meeting against the war at Camden town hall, addressed by Tony Benn, to which she received a personal invitation from the local STWC. Her record of opposition to the war appears to add up to a statement in her election address to members of local Labour Parties who were already vocally against the war. Gosh, I bet that took some guts.

Does she support one of our local MPs, Frank Dobson, in his opposition to the creeping privatisation of the health service? Does she support our other MP, Glenda Jackson, in her call for Blair's resignation? Your guess is as good as mine.

Call me an old cynic, but a trade union apparatchik who gets elected to the local

council, sits there not making any trouble for a year or two and then starts to flash his (or her) 'leftwing' conscience in order to win a parliamentary (or GLA) candidature is a familiar sight in Camden. She may well not be yet another carpetbagging careerist, but, if it walks like a duck ...

In contrast to Lucy Anderson, Liz Wheatley, the Respect candidate, is a Unison shop steward, was very active in the campaign against the ALMO and is the convenor of Camden STWC (OK, she's not perfect, she's in the Socialist Workers Party). Since you support Respect, why not interview her?

Sean Thompson
email

Imagined Jesus

Jack Conrad argues that the "real Jesus" was a revolutionary communist and leader of messianic party, suspiciously reminiscent of the kind of sect to which he, Jack Conrad, is ideological guru (*Weekly Worker* April 22).

JC (Jesus Christ), according to JC (Jack Conrad), was seeking to gain power, in order to institute the "kingdom of god". He had support from the masses, but failed to get the divine support he expected. Consequently, his bid for assuming the title of king failed.

Jack Conrad doesn't entertain the possibility, but christianity may not have been a mystified account of a real revolutionary leader, but mystification from the start. An alternative to revolutionary zealotry, in which the promise of resurrection depended equally on charity and turning the other cheek to the oppressor. As such, it never represented any practical threat to the status quo. That messianic and revolutionary ideas were current in 1st century Judea is without doubt. Whereas 19th century writers could only rely on the bible, Josephus and Philo for their evidence, the discovery of texts such as the Dead Sea scrolls and Nag Hammadi manuscripts has added a new depth of understanding to the background of christianity, to which Marxist writers like Kautsky and Engels never had access.

Leaving aside the question of the authenticity of the gospels, does Conrad's account of the early christians as a revolutionary movement fit the facts? According to Acts, Paul, a ringleader of the nazarenes, is summoned to appear before the Roman governor, Festus, and king Agrippa, to answer charges of spreading religious discord and profaning the temple, brought against him by the high priest and elders. Paul mounts his defence based solely on the doctrine of resurrection. A doctrine opposed by the saducee priesthood which controlled the temple, but believed in by the pharisees (who Paul allegedly trained with). When Paul explains his case to the rulers of the country, king Agrippa says: "This man is doing nothing that deserves death or imprisonment." It is only because he has appealed to the emperor as a Roman citizen that he is taken under arrest to Rome. Here, he is given a lengthy hearing by the Jews of the city, but gets little support from them.

Disillusioned by this frosty reception, he decides to focus on the Roman gentiles. Clearly his message is not seen as much of a threat by the Roman authorities since, despite being technically 'under arrest', he stays on for "two full years at his own expense", teaching the "facts" about Jesus Christ "quite openly and without hindrance" and proclaiming the "kingdom of god".

It's a gross exaggeration to portray christianity as a movement from below, which won over the Roman empire, even if Engels, later in his life misguidedly used such a metaphor to compare its evolution to that of 19th century social democracy. Christianity was persecuted no more severely than any other dissident cult. It never achieved a mass following amongst the poor and christians probably made up

no more than two percent of Roman citizens prior to Constantine's 'conversion'. Since the proletariat of the Roman empire were incapable of taking power, christianity became the perfect ideology for weak central government as the empire feudalised. The churches and monasteries became a form of social glue holding together a phantom Roman empire, consisting of a patchwork of Romanising tribes, with its own Pontifex Maximus in the form of the Pope.

Only with its adoption as a state religion did christianity gain a mass congregation. Once that happened, real, practical christianity not only persecuted all rival religions, but its own internal heretics, and censored and helped to suppress what was progressive in classical civilisation for a thousand years! Authentic communists ought to be reminding people of this.

Alex Nichols
email

Soccer racism

I agree with the broad thrust of Eddie Ford's piece on Ron Atkinson's outburst (*Weekly Worker* April 29).

However, I think he is mistaken in suggesting that racism might be more common on the terraces than in the boardrooms. At Aston Villa (and various other Premiership grounds I have visited recently) racist abuse from supporters is rare. This is partly due to black players becoming ever more common and successful (what Arsenal fan is seriously going to racially abuse Thierry Henry?) but also because of the dire retribution that clubs threaten against anyone found guilty of racist abuse.

And therein lies the rub: efforts to rid grounds of racism have become tied up with a general assault on the democratic expression of supporters. For example, there have been constant attempts over the past few years on Aston Villa's Holte End to make supporters 'remain seated at all times', leading to a number of incidents of ejection and clashes with stewards. In fact, all the vast majority of these 'criminal' fans want to do is get behind the team.

When 'anti-racism' in football is tied up with such anti-democratic nonsense it is not hard to see how utterly counterproductive this whole process is.

Lyndon White
email

ESF translation

Tina Becker's otherwise excellent report of the ESF European preparatory assembly in Istanbul was only marred by its failure to acknowledge the decisions taken in respect of Babels, the international network of interpreters and translators (*Weekly Worker* April 22).

The Babels network was responsible for bringing over 300 interpreters to the 2002 ESF in Florence at very short notice and for bringing around 1,000 interpreters to last year's ESF in Paris. Babels expects to bring around 600-700 interpreters to London for this year's ESF.

Babels organised interpretation for the 2004 World Social Forum in Mumbai, and is also working on the Mediterranean Social Forum, due to take place in Barcelona in 2005. Recently, Babels was accepted as a full member of the international council of the WSF and is now working on the next WSF, due to take place in Porto Alegre only three months after this year's ESF, in January 2005.

Babels asked the Istanbul assembly to agree to six points that would enable it to provide for the interpretation and translation needs of the 2004 ESF; the assembly agreed to Babels' request. These points are, in summary:

1. Babels will mobilise 100% volunteer interpreters; there should be no discrimination between professional and non-professionals and no use of the commercial sector.

2. The ESF, through Babels, expresses its commitment to language diversity, with a

special effort to use interpretation as a tool for the involvement of eastern and central Europe social movements.

3. Babels becomes an officially affiliated member of the 2004 ESF process. This is important, as it means that the ESF has officially recognised the strength of the role that Babels can play in the ESF process.

4. Babels' volunteers will be reimbursed their food, transport and accommodation costs through the ESF process.

5. Babels should be provided with the financial means to participate actively in the ESF preparation process. This will enable Babels coordinators to attend meetings such as the EPA in Istanbul and the next EPA in Berlin and other meetings that will ensure that language needs are in the forefront of ESF-related discussions.

6. Babels should be involved in the choice of interpretation equipment. We are currently pushing to explore non-commercial, open-source software solutions for the technical aspect of interpretation.

Finally, if any of the readers of the *Weekly Worker* want to volunteer as an interpreter or translator at the 2004 ESF, they can do so by visiting the Babels website at www.babels.org. Or to find out more about the activities of Babels, please email babels-uk@babels.org.

Babels UK
London

NUM kettles

Non-miners will have some difficulty perhaps understanding much of Chris Skidmore's criticism (Letters, April 29) of my recent article on attitudes to 'the scabs' (*Weekly Worker* April 8). They may have as much difficulty with this reply, for which I am sorry, but without writing an ABC of the National Union of Mineworkers internal political struggles I don't know how I can get around it.

He takes issue with the last paragraph of my article, which refers to a delegate who was removed from office, and who, incidentally, in the process was accused of having scabbed. This then laid those who thought the deselection wrong and motivated by the power struggle within the Yorkshire area open to being slagged off as 'scab lovers'. It was and is a smoke-screen to hide the true issues behind the dispute.

The point about the alleged scab delegate (Mr Cader) was that it wasn't an issue until he carried a nomination mandate for Jeff Stubbs, a candidate for chair of the Yorkshire area. Mr Stubbs is not one of Arthur's disciples. Once it was known he would line up 'with the opposition', as it were, the 'scab' tag was suddenly applied. Had he carried a vote against Jeff Stubbs I have no doubt whatever that the allegation would never have been brought up. I do not know if Mr Cader scabbed or not: what I do know is that he won a branch election to represent the men at Wistow, and they didn't deem that allegation important enough to debar him or vote him down.

The whole bitter division in the important Yorkshire area has been over who shall occupy the positions of secretary and chairman. This in turn is related to the internal political direction the union will move. More than a year ago, when the elections were due, it was quite clear Mr Stubbs would be elected by a majority of the Yorkshire area delegates as chair. The only way to prevent this was to invent a new 'Area Office branch', which would host all the hundreds of men claiming compensation but who no longer worked in the industry. This included those who had died, and miners' widows, together with those who had never worked in the coal industry. The 'votes' of these men and women would then be cast, without their knowledge or approval, against Mr Stubbs. This Area Office branch would then outvote many of the miners branches and mandates of the working miners.

We in the opposition refused to allow this to happen and claimed it to be unethical and unlawful. The area officials then summoned the advice of a leading QC as to whether they could use these limited members' votes in this way. For 12 months nobody would let us see the advice and the elections were put into permanent suspension. It was clear, however, the QC had told the officials they could not proceed in this way. A second QC's advice was then sought, and again we were not allowed to see his legal opinion and neither was the NEC of the union. After 12 months it was announced that limited members' votes could not be used.

However, in the intervening period branch representatives oddly were removed from their positions and replaced by individuals who would not be voting for Mr Stubbs. The man who had been doing the area chairman's job, Kev Malloy, could not also be the delegate from Riccall (his pit), so another official had been standing in for him. This other official had a mandate to vote for Mr Stubbs. One week before the area election Mr Malloy resigns from being chair and reoccupies his position as delegate - he would not be voting for Mr Stubbs.

In the case of Wistow, because of the run-down of that pit, Mr Cader was deployed to work at another colliery, but was still employed at Wistow (most of us have seen a letter written by Wistow management confirming this). Three branch officials used the opportunity to deselect Mr Cader and reappoint the man he had defeated in the previous branch election. This man would not be voting for Mr Stubbs. Incidentally that man didn't work at the pit either, and neither, so far as I can tell, do the other officials of that branch. So it's a case of the kettle calling the frying pan.

Finally it only required Kellingly to switch its support from Stubbs, and in the process gain the vice-presidency, to complete the game of musical chairs. Stubbs was defeated.

There is nothing wrong with my memory and in addition I also have the advantage of not having my perception damaged by a thirst for positions in the bureaucracy.
David Douglass
Doncaster

Spart hell

Looking through your archives, I enjoyed your 'Sad but true' article very much (*Weekly Worker* April 8 1999). As an ex-Spartacist League member, I no longer subscribe to *Workers Hammer* or *Workers Vanguard* purely out of blind terror that I'll get sucked back into the world of hell I was in when I was with them. I'm sure others can relate.

I really only wanted to email to let you know that the decision to use the word 'slimy', which is how the SL/Britain described the CPGB in their polemic, had probably taken them at least three meetings of the entire British section and a long, in-depth conversation with the American section, including numerous emails and a central committee meeting, before they were given the go-ahead.

It's nice to think they went to so much trouble for that little playground insult, isn't it?
Lisa Mount
email

SWP vote down womens' rights



George Galloway: statement

In the light of the George Galloway's statement on abortion in an interview in *The Independent on Sunday* I put an emergency motion to the April 26 organising meeting of Islington Respect. This read: "Islington Respect opposes any attempt to further restrict the rights of women to abortion and contraception, and therefore resolves to call upon the national committee to mandate Respect's elected representatives, now and in the future, not to support proposals for any such restrictions."

The resolution was fiercely opposed by the Socialist Workers Party, whose members suggested that the motion would exclude catholics from Respect. It was argued that this was a matter of conscience and that George Galloway was not, after all, organising against abortion rights. The SWP proposed that the whole question be remitted to the executive.

The comrades have forgotten that in 1979 the TUC led a demonstration against the Corrie Bill. Did the TUC exclude catholics? Is Respect unable to go as far as the TUC? They seem also to forget the role that they have played in pushing Galloway forward as the personification of Respect.

Comrades from the International Socialist Group took a principled position. They had no hesitation in supporting the first part of our motion, but moved an amendment to the second to the effect that instead of a mandate the NC organises a discussion in Respect over the issue with a view to a policy debate at the next conference. Comrades were not unreasonably concerned about the democratic implications of a decision like this being left to the NC.

The problem with the ISG position is that things can move very quickly on the ground. Already the Muslim Association of Britain has issued a press release supporting Galloway's anti-abortion beliefs and one of MAB's leading members heads the Yorkshire and Humberside Euro list. What if a private members anti-abortion bill went before parliament before the next Respect conference. Would Respect's only MP go into the 'yes' lobby?

In the end the only vote taken at the Islington meeting was the one backed by the SWP and my motion was duly remitted to the executive. Hopefully they will not fudge over this issue. Something needs to be done now to ensure that the world knows that the majority of Respect support women's reproductive rights and that our colours are not nailed on the anti-abortion mast ●

Dave Landau

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 the **Unity Political Fund**.

I wish to join the Respect Unity Coalition

Name	
Address 1	
Address 2	
Town/city	Postcode
Phone	Email



London Communist Forums

Sunday May 7, 5pm - 'Social antagonisms and methodological disputes', using István Mészáros's *The power of ideology* as a study guide.
Diorama Arts Centre, 34 Osnaburgh Street, London NW1 (nearest tubes: Regents Park, Great Portland Street).

Respect events

Crawley: Fundraising stall - Saturday May 8, 10.30am to 4.30pm, the Bandstand, Queen's Square.

Croydon: Stall - Saturday May 8, 12 noon, Croydon High Street, in front of Virgin.

Willesden: Leafleting - Saturday May 8, 12.30pm, Church Road market.

Birmingham: Film showing - *Persons of interest*, Sunday May 9, 7pm, Norton Hall, Alum Rock.

Brent and Harrow: Fundraising meal - Sunday May 9, 7pm, Saravanas restaurant, 79 Dudden Hill Lane, Dollis Hill.

Sutton: Stall - Sunday May 9, 12 noon, High Street, in front of Marks and Spencers.

Harrow: Street theatre, Sunday May 9, 2pm, Katy's statue, pedestrian precinct.

Saltley: Film showing - *Persons of interest*, Sunday May 9, 5pm, Norton Hall.

Bridlington: Fire Brigades Union conference fringe - 'The political fund and the alternative to New Labour', Tuesday May 11, 5pm, Southcliff Hotel, South Marine Drive.

Croydon: Campaign meeting, Tuesday May 11, 7pm, Spice Café, Surrey Street.

Brent and Harrow: Organising meeting, Tuesday May 11, 7.30pm, Café Grafenola, 83 Dudden Hill Lane, Dollis Hill.

Oxford: Campaign meeting, Tuesday May 11, 7.30pm, town hall, St Aldates.

High Wycombe: Launch meeting, Wednesday May 12, 8pm, Reggie Groves Centre, near Swan theatre, town centre.

Halifax: Public meeting, Wednesday May 12, 7.30pm, Young Men's Christian Association.

Portsmouth: Meeting, Wednesday May 12, 8pm, Fratton Community Centre.

Berwick-upon-Tweed: Public meeting, Saturday May 15, 1pm, Ravensholme Hotel, Ravensdowne.

Fratton: Spanish evening fundraiser, Saturday May 15, 8pm, 48 Sandringham Road.

Birmingham: Video showing - *Stop the war*, introduced by John Rees, Sunday May 16, 2pm, Midlands Arts Centre, Cannon Hill Park, Edgbaston.

Labour CND

Conference, Saturday May 8, 10.30am to 4pm, Palm Room, University of London Union, Malet Street, London WC1. Speakers include: Jeremy Corbyn MP; Kate Hudson, CND Chair; Carol Turner, Labour CND.

Individuals: Waged £8, concessions £4. Organisations £12 per delegate. info@labourcnd.org.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

Solidarity with Palestine

National day of action, Saturday May 15: 'The wall must fall'.

1.30pm: Speakers and music in Trafalgar Square.

3.30pm: Demonstration to Downing Street.

Speakers include: Jamal Jumaa, director Stop the Wall, Palestine; Afif Safieh, PLO; Jeremy Corbyn MP, Richard Burden MP, Jenny Tonge MP, Caroline Lucas MEP, Keith Sonnet, Unison, Jeremy Hardy.

Called by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: 020 7700 6192

Proxy wars in Africa

Day school, Saturday May 15, 2pm to 6pm, Dalston Methodist Centre, Richmond Road, London E8 (Dalston Kingsland, North London line). Speakers include Jeremy Corbyn MP.

Organised by African Liberation Support Campaign Network and Hackney Stop the War Coalition.

George Galloway

In conversation with Yvonne Ridley, Monday May 17, 6:30pm, Bookmarks, 1 Bloomsbury Street, London WC1. Launch of new book, *I'm not the only one*.

Questions from the audience. Tickets £3: 020-7637 1848; galloway@bookmarks.uk.com

Carnival against racism

Sunday May 23, 1pm to 6pm, Ponders End recreation ground, Southbury (five minutes from M25). Bus routes: 149, 279. Music, poets' corner, dancing, speakers, stalls, children's activities.

Organised by Unite Against Fascism.

NCADC

National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns annual general meeting, Saturday June 5, 12 noon to 5pm, Carrs Lane Church, Carrs Lane, Birmingham.

Lunch provided, crèche available. Reasonable transport costs for anti-deportation campaigns reimbursed.

To attend contact 0121-554 6947; ncadc@ncadc.org.uk

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.

ABORTION

Respect -
www.respectcoalition.com

How embarrassing

No doubt stung by criticisms of its gaudy quality, and the amateurish rightwing spoof of the previous Respect website (see *Weekly Worker* February 19), the powers-that-be at the unity coalition have chosen to revamp their internet presence. Unfortunately someone forgot to tell the design team that Soviet bloc chic is not the flavour of the month, because if anything the site's aesthetic is even duller than its predecessor. Not an auspicious beginning.

The website starts off with mayoral candidate Lindsey German's "vision for London", a vision that I did not find particularly inspiring, it being little more than an economic menu around housing, transport and pay. Sadly for comrade German, a leading member of the Socialist Workers Party, the need for her to put out a statement quickly has meant the cutting of some policy corners. For example, "Buses are £1 ... but they should be cheaper and there should be concessions for unemployed and disabled people." However, as Barry Buitekant has pointed out on the UK Left Network discussion list, disabled travellers have for several years been able to use London buses for free! How embarrassing. Perhaps the comrade ought to check the rest of the policies she is standing on, lest she look a complete arse in front of the bourgeois media.

Another telling feature is the attempt to cash in on the Livingstone bandwagon: "One of the good things about these elections is that you can vote me number one for mayor, and vote Ken Livingstone for number two," enthused comrade German. It would be interesting to see the extent to which this line is pushed over the coming weeks.

Accompanying this is a new addition, comrade German's web log. Again, like her mayor manifesto, this online journal reads like a rush job. And, to be honest, I do not see the point in the whole endeavour either. Instead of using the opportunity to vividly convey the experience of being a 'radical' candidate, the comrade wastes it on vague references to what she has read in *The Independent* and brief snippets of never-ending "brilliant" campaign meetings (she does announce her resignation from *Socialist Review* though). Also, over the course of her accounts she only sees fit to mention two "normal" people, who will of course be voting Respect. I'm afraid Respect activists will have to find guidance and inspiration elsewhere.

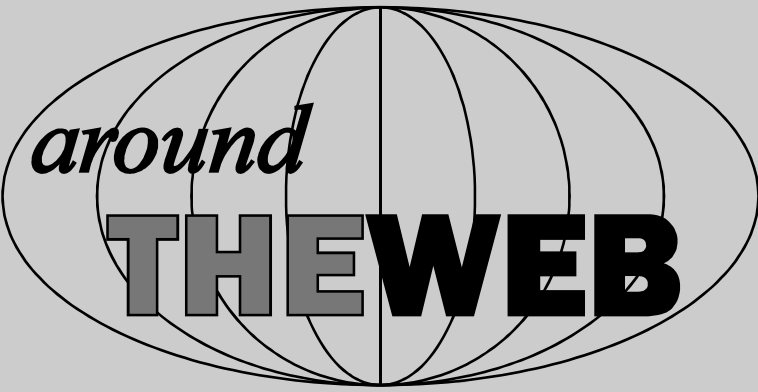
The next item is a sales pitch for comrade Galloway's new book *I'm not the only one*. It claims the armed services hack, Adam Ingram, spent £25,000 trying to prevent this tome from being published. Why? Though we are told in no uncertain terms to buy the book to find out the lies Galloway exposes, I for one found this use of the hard-sell tactic strangely out of place when compared to the suggestive soft sell of German's mayoral statement.

The next item is the pitifully short manifesto for the European elections. Compared to the documents put out by the mainstream parties, the Greens and the fascists, it looks very poor and is hardly indicative of a serious organisation. The content, however, is not as bad as I feared it would be. Of course, much is made of opposing the European Union on economic grounds, and the way in which it addresses the institutionalised democratic deficit at the heart of the EU has little-England overtones. But what I found interesting was how its policy toward the euro depended on the meeting of Respect's five political tests: around neoliberalism, democracy, welfare, racism and class. Could this suggest the beginning of a realistic engagement with the EU's political implications, instead of outright rejection? We will have to see.

The rest of the Respect site remains the same old diet of pious sermonising and liberal platitudes. I did find the write-up of the 'audience with Galloway' fundraising dinner quite interesting, though I think the irony of having Dr Mohammad Naseem pontificating about the wealth gap at an exclusive £30 a head dinner was lost on the comrade responsible for the piece. And of course there is the much derided news release (April 21) in which Respect (in the person of Salma Yaqoob and John Rees) call on the home secretary and the West Midlands police chief to ban Jean-Marie Le Pen from the British National Party's fundraiser.

That John Rees as a self-described Marxist indulges in this statist nonsense just goes to show the depths to which he and the SWP are prepared to sink to grab the 'progressive' vote •

Phil Hamilton



Unprincipled compromise

The publicity recently given to George Galloway's reactionary views on abortion has once again drawn attention to the method that the Socialist Workers Party uses in putting together so-called united fronts and other coalitions as vehicles for building its own organisation.

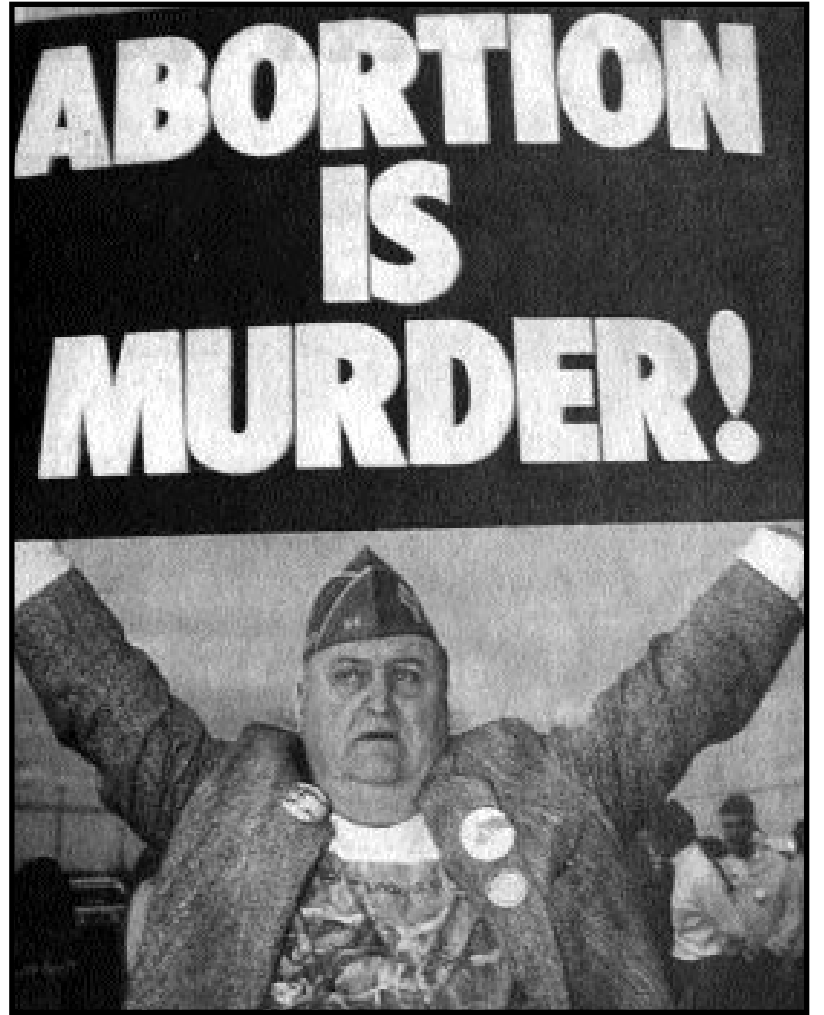
Instead of a fight for political clarity, and thus for clear policies based on the actual views of participants and reached by majority decision, the SWP is in the habit of playing down principled questions in pursuit of the lowest common denominator. Sometimes the approach leads to such inconsistencies as to produce laughable results. But it is hardly a laughing matter if, because of the combination of comrade Galloway's political weakness (on this question he is an unreconstructed catholic) and the SWP's opportunism, Respect appears by default to have a position that is flatly counterposed to the interests of the female half of the population. That will not earn us 'respect' at all.

What should happen, of course, is that the Respect executive, without doubt having a pro-choice majority, should issue a statement making clear the policy of the organisation. In the process, they should pay the closest attention to the views of the trade union branches that have voted to support Respect. After all, the fact that such branches are able to take such steps is a product of a policy decision taken by the RMT to allow support to non-Labour Party working class candidates. The RMT has a national policy on abortion that is pro-choice - along with the overwhelming bulk of the trade union movement that Respect seeks to win over. And that undoubtedly is the position of the majority of Respect's actual and potential audience. Comrade Galloway, and anyone else who shares his views of whatever creed, have a right to their views, but not to make Respect policy. A statement to this effect should be issued post haste.

However, giving a veto to those with the most rightwing positions in any putative bloc or alliance is the very essence of the SWP's approach. As a result, the actual work the organisation does normally has little connection with the 'revolutionary' positions contained in *Socialist Worker's* 'Where we stand' column. Thus, for example, in the Socialist Alliance, the SWP supported the former Labour Party freelancer, Mike Marqusee, when he argued against including the demand to 'disarm the police'. Thanks to the SWP bloc vote it was not included in *People before profit*, the SA's 2001 general election manifesto.

In the context this amounted to a significant concession to reformism regarding the question of the state. However, the complexities that have since been thrown up by the war, with the anti-war radicalisation of many from the muslim community, who instead of being drawn into the destructive dead-end of jihadism, are looking to alliances with the secular left, poses some more complex problems and makes this method of operation much more damaging.

Socialists should welcome the opportunity to work with these brothers and sisters. But we must not allow this alliance with new forces - whose militancy on issues directly relating to the war is considerable, but whose understanding of other questions may still be determined by traditional, reactionary social values - to lead us to the right. We must, on the contrary, fight to raise newly radicalised elements to the political level of what is best in the labour movement, not allow our-



Reactionary views

selves to be dragged backwards by unprincipled deals on questions involving women's rights or similar issues. We must not allow such things to be treated as expendable, to be dismissed as an unwanted "shibboleth", as the SWP's Lindsey German publicly mused last summer.

At the Respect conference on January 25, SWP comrades voted down the demand for opposition to all immigration controls, in favour of one of merely 'defending the rights' of asylum-seekers and refugees. In doing so, it is not clear who they thought they were appeasing by putting in place a policy that depends on picking holes in particular deportation cases, instead of a blanket position in favour of freedom of movement. They do not seem to have been appeasing comrade Galloway on this occasion; he has made clear he is in favour of defending economic migrants who are not refugees against deportation. Nor were they appeasing any putative muslim bloc: Anas Altikriti, Yorkshire and Humberside Respect candidate and former president of the Muslim Association of Britain, has made clear his approval for the demand for open borders (*Weekly Worker* April 29).

No, it appears the SWP comrades were appeasing something in their own heads, a caricature of 'old Labour', when they voted down their own cherished position on this issue. In reality, no matter how good your intentions, without a clear position on the rights of all migrants - ie, the abolition of all restrictions on those rights - it is not possible to consistently defend asylum-seekers and refugees.

Regarding abortion rights, and the pre-history of Respect, it is notable that the original draft of the Monbiot-Yaqoob statement included in it a significant phrase calling for "the self-determination of every individual in relation to their religious (or non-religious) beliefs, as well as sexual and reproductive choices" (my emphasis). George Monbiot made clear

right at the beginning that he had played effectively no role in drafting this statement, which thus appears to have been drafted by an *apparently* pro-choice Salma Yaqoob. A redraft was produced shortly afterwards - it is rumoured by the SWP's Alex Callinicos - in which the phrase "sexual and reproductive choices" was replaced with "lifestyle choices". This semantic change is barely noticeable, but is now clearly revealed to have been a fudge - of course "lifestyle choices" *could* include "sexual and reproductive choices", but it ain't necessarily so. One is driven to suspect that this alteration was agreed to by the SWP - not only because of comrade Galloway's beliefs, but in order to win over MAB and the so-called muslim community.

One thing comrade Galloway will be very aware of from his 35-year membership of the Labour Party is that his position is that of a distinct minority in the workers' movement. Within Labour he and others with similar views were allowed a certain amount of latitude in the form of free votes on such 'issues of individual conscience'. However, he must certainly be aware that in an organisation whose centre of gravity is considerably to the left of Labour, such latitude for a *leading* figure would be much less likely to be granted. Rightly so - after all, on issues like abortion that are fundamentally about basic freedoms of working class people, such flabby excuses as 'individual conscience' are simply unacceptable.

Representatives must be accountable to the base that puts them where they are, and particularly on questions like this, where basic women's rights are at stake. That is one good reason why we need genuine democracy, and accountability of elected representatives, so that the overall progressive majority does indeed determine what is done in its name. •

Ian Donovan

Fight for abortion rights

Communists fight to transform the working class from a slave class into the universal class that abolishes classes. Logically, and inescapably, this means that the working class - and its party - needs to take the lead on *all* social-political and democratic issues. By doing so the working class progressively elevates itself to the point where it becomes the hegemonic force in society and is ready and able to overthrow the bourgeoisie and begin the transition towards classlessness and general freedom.

Obviously, the abortion question is no exception - quite the opposite. It is not something that should be left to women or feminists alone. The working class must take the lead in defending and advancing abortion rights. Naturally, therefore, in the CPGB's *Draft programme* the fight for free abortion on demand is united with our fight for secularism, open borders, republicanism, workers' representatives on a workers' wage, etc.

For Respect to backtrack on the struggle for women's rights would be nothing short of a disaster. Abortion is a litmus test. Sheer numbers alone should demonstrate the political immensity of this issue. It is a commonly quoted statistic that one in four women will have an abortion during their lifetime. In fact, according to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, that is an underestimate. At least *a third* of British women will have a pregnancy terminated by the age of 45. In 2001, there were 186,000 legal abortions carried out in England and Wales (17 per 1,000 women aged 15-44). That figure remains fairly constant from year to year, although there was a peak in 1996, coinciding with a health scare over the pill. What is Respect going to say to these women?

When we look seriously at today's United Kingdom, it is plain that the battle for free abortion on demand has yet to be fully won - whatever various reactionary anti-abortionist groups might say. It would be criminal complacency to believe that even the cramped abortion rights we have now - achieved in the face of fierce resistance - cannot be rolled back. Reactionary forces, most notably christian fundamentalists, are fanatically determined to enforce their 'pro-life' agenda upon society - by any means necessary, including at times terrorism.

History tells us that abortion has been practised almost since the beginning of human civilisation - contrary to much of the propaganda of christian 'pro-lifers', who would prefer us to believe that abortion is a modern sin invented by atheists, feminists, liberals, socialists ... and of course the devil. Abortion may be as old as sin, but for communists and rationalists in general it is no sin.

In this context, it is worth a quick look at the pioneering work of French social anthropologist, George Devereux. During the 1950s his work demonstrated that abortion has been practised in almost all human communities from the earliest times. In fact, argued Devereux, the patterns of abortion use, in hundreds of societies around the world since before recorded history, have been strikingly similar. In his definitive *A study of abortion in primitive societies* (1976), Devereux showed that women faced with unwanted pregnancies have always turned to abortion, regardless of the religious or legal sanctions - and often at considerable risk to life and safety. As a device, or measure, to deal and cope with upheavals in personal, family, and community life, abortion is "a fundamental aspect of human behaviour", to use the words of Devereux (p3).

In primitive tribal societies, abortions were induced by using poisonous herbs, sharp sticks, or by sheer pressure on the abdomen until vaginal bleeding

occurred. Various techniques are described in the oldest known medical texts. The ancient Chinese and Egyptians had their methods and recipes too, and Greek and Roman civilisations considered abortion an integral part of maintaining a stable population. Ancient implements, such as the ones found at Pompeii and Herculaneum, were much like modern surgical instruments. The Greeks and Romans also had various poisons administered in various ways, including through tampons. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were all known to suggest abortion. Even Hippocrates, who spoke against it because he feared injury to the woman, recommended violent exercises to induce a termination on occasion. As for the Romans they had no moral or social stigma against abortion.

The christian church's attitude on abortion was never fixed and has certainly evolved over time - being subject to constant toing and froing and 'amendment', depending on the social and political vicissitudes of the day. Certainly, the founders and sages of the early church were less dogmatic than their modern-day epigones. This relatively tolerant approach, which prevailed in the Roman catholic church for centuries, ended in 1869, when Pope Pius IX officially eliminated the distinction between a developed foetus, said to be 'ensouled', and a non-animated one. He prescribed excommunication for the induction of an abortion at any stage of pregnancy.

What accounted for this relatively dramatic 'line change'? It has been seen by some as a means of countering the increased effectiveness of birth control, especially in France, with its declining catholic population. In Italy, during the years 1848 to 1870, the papal states shrank from almost one-third of the country to what is now Vatican City. It has been argued that the pope's restriction on abortion was motivated by a need to strengthen the church's spiritual control over its followers in the face of this declining political power. Countering the rise of liberatory ideas, socialism and the working class was surely another factor.

When we look at Britain itself we see an analogous history - with the law becoming increasingly repressive. In 1803, a criminal abortion law was codified by Lord Ellenborough - this made the abortion of a foetus whose movements could be detected in the womb a capital offence, while abortions performed prior to 'quickening' incurred lesser penalties. An article in the 1832 *London Legal Examiner* justified the new laws on the grounds of protecting women from the dangerous abortion techniques which were practised at the time: "The reason assigned for the punishment of abortion is not that thereby an embryo human being is destroyed, but that it rarely or ever can be effected with drugs without sacrifice of the mother's life."

In the United States, similar legislative initiatives began in the 1820s and proceeded state by state, as the American frontier moved westward. In 1858, the New Jersey Supreme Court, pronouncing upon the state's new abortion law, said: "The design of the statute was not to prevent the procuring of abortions, so much as to guard the health and life of the mother against consequences of such attempts." Naturally, the great and the good only had the best of intentions - to 'protect' women from the consequences of their own (foolish) actions. Men know best, after all, especially if they are from the ruling class.

During the 19th century, legal barriers to abortion were erected throughout the western world. In 1869 the Canadian parliament enacted a criminal law which prohibited abortion and punished it with a penalty of life imprisonment. This law mirrored those of a number of provinces in

pre-Confederation Canada; all of these statutes were more or less modelled on the English legislation of Lord Ellenborough.

It is vital to realise that this pressure for further restrictions on abortion rights was not coming from the masses. The American historian, James Mohr, makes the point that from an historical perspective, the 19th century's wave of restrictive laws can be seen as a deviation from the norm - a period of interruption in the historically tolerant attitude towards abortion. In other words, the consolidation of capitalism and bourgeois 'family values' dictated the necessity for a crackdown on abortion rights.

What did this mean for women? Illegal and often highly dangerous abortions and, typically, after marriage one pregnancy after another and the burden of huge families. Queen Victoria bore nine surviving children; others many more. Monarchs, aristocrats and the wives of capitalists and top professional could, of course, afford wet nurses, nannies, private tutors and countless servants. Not the working class. An ordinary woman faced a life not of domestic bliss, but servitude. A slave of a slave. She had little or no time to develop herself or engage with wider social issues.

In Britain the 1803 law was not modified until the Bourne case of 1938. Dr Alec Bourne, a gynaecologist, aborted the foetus of a 14-year-old girl who had been raped by soldiers. He then turned himself over to the authorities in order to provoke a test case and was acquitted.

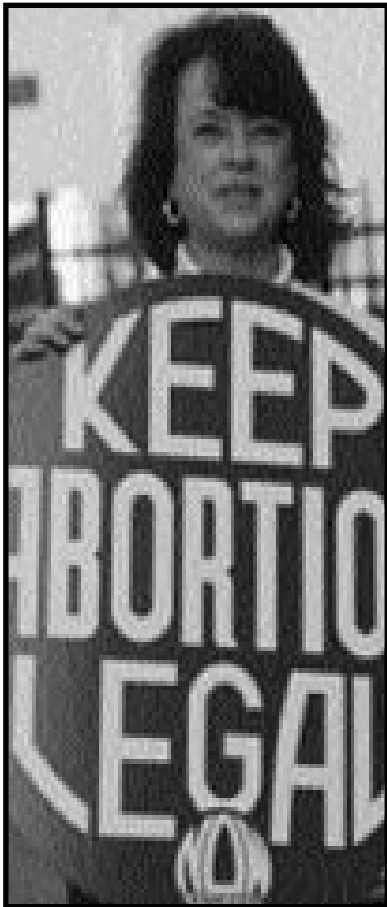
However, the main force for change undoubtedly came from women themselves - and their supporters in the labour movement. There were well-off women, such as Marie Stopes, who with the help of her husband's money opened Britain's first birth control clinic shortly after World War I. But her main concern was eugenics. Working class women were outbreeding their superiors and thereby undermining the fitness of the species. Despite her ghastly philosophy less privileged women increasingly used 'modern methods' to limit the size of their families, not least so that they could enjoy a fuller and less stressed life.

In 1961 there was another turning point. Despite the obscurantist objections of the catholic church the contraceptive pill became available on the NHS. This technological development greatly helped women - biologically, socially and sexually - and with that freedom came the demand for still more freedom.

During the 1960s an increasingly influential women's movement came into being and its most powerful element was found in the working class. Women workers, most famously at Fords, successfully campaigned around the slogan 'Equal pay for equal work'. To begin with, the trade unions were hostile or simply passive on the issue. Then they were evasive and divided. Only after much agitation and a lot of education did they begin to act. There were strikes, demonstrations and finally legislation. Women began to achieve formal equality in the workplace.

This coincided with the much fragmented women's liberation movement, mainly based on women who had gained access to higher education, who demanded full social equality with men. Eg, an end to sexist language and the humiliation of married women not being able to sign contracts on their own behalf, and perhaps crucially the right of women to determine their own fertility. The demand was for the NHS to provide free contraception and abortion on demand.

In 1967, the Abortion Act was passed. Terminations were finally legalised - but only where *two doctors* decide, in all their mighty wisdom, that the continuation of a pregnancy poses a risk to the woman's life, to her physical and mental health or to any



Women: main force for change

existing children "greater than if the pregnancy were terminated", and in cases where there was "substantial risk" of the foetus suffering from an anomaly. The woman's individual wishes and desires do not come into the equation - the power to decide was placed in the hands of the medical profession.

In actual practice of course, many doctors now interpret the law liberally - but that does not detract from the invidious fact that they are nonetheless able to block access to abortion services on the basis of 'moral' opposition.

A survey conducted by Marie Stopes International (MSI) in 1999 found that 18% of GPs were opposed to abortion, overwhelmingly on religious grounds. Yet, outrageously, they do not have to declare this objection to patients, nor offer any explanation for their decision. According to Alice Richardson, chairwoman of the National Abortion Campaign, women report numerous incidents of "notes lost, decisions delayed and confidentiality broken" by doctors. Many women prefer to be referred to a specialist abortion provider, such as the British Pregnancy Advisory Service or MSI - both of which are charities. If seeking an NHS abortion, however, a woman initially has to go through her surgery or family planning clinic. So if your GP happens to be a fervent catholic or muslim ...

She may then face a second hurdle. Since 1967 of course the NHS has provided abortion services free of charge, but in practice such free procedures are largely unavailable. NHS provision for abortions is patchy, resulting in what Richardson describes as "abortion by postcode". The amount of funding made available for terminations varies widely from authority to authority: in 2001, for example, 96% of abortions in North Cumbria were NHS-funded; in Dorset, the figure was 61%; in Kingston and Richmond, in Surrey, meanwhile, only 50%. Health authorities set different time ceilings on abortions - in some areas, they are refused to women who are more than 11 weeks pregnant. Waiting lists - even for an initial appointment - are commonplace.

Parliamentary debates and legislation manifestly reveal the unfinished nature of the fight to fully legalise abortion. In April 1990, the House of Commons voted with one hand to cut the legal time limit for

abortions from 28 to 24 weeks of pregnancy, but with the other it also removed the upper limit of 28 weeks in cases of foetal handicap or "grave permanent injury to the physical and mental health of the pregnant woman". This was a rejection of attempts by anti-abortion campaigners to reduce the limit to 22 weeks. It was the first change in the abortion law since 1967. In 1991, RU 486 (the so-called French 'abortion pill') was approved for use in Britain for pregnancies of up to nine weeks.

We are still a *long* way from the vision outlined in 1931 by pro-abortion activist FW Stella Browne: "Abortion must be a key to a new world to women, not a bulwark for things as they are, economically or biologically. Abortion should not be either a perquisite of the legal wife only, nor merely as a last remedy against illegitimacy. It should be available for any woman, without insolent inquisitions, nor ruinous financial charges, nor tangles of red tape. For our bodies are our own?"

Apparently not. We should not forget in a hurry the words of Tory health spokesman Liam Fox. A devout catholic, he caused a storm in January 2001 by saying he wanted to see abortion banned. He backed off in an instant, admitted it was "unrealistic", and instead declared a commitment to reducing the time limit governing at what stage of pregnancy a woman can have an abortion. This is a favourite tactic of anti-abortionists - to use the emotive 'horrors' of late terminations as a political Trojan Horse aimed against *all* abortion rights.

This is exactly, of course, what has occurred in the United States. Indeed, by any standards the US provides an unsettling vision of what *might* happen if progressives, socialists and communists are not vigilant. Born-again fundamentalist George W Bush has mounted a series of vicious assaults on abortion rights - happy in the knowledge that he has 40 million or so other christian fundamentalists in the US cheering him on.

One of the first acts of the Bush presidency was to stop funds to international family-planning groups that offer abortion and abortion counselling. This action reversed the Clinton administration's stance. Previous to Clinton, US funds to international groups that support abortion had been blocked by former presidents Reagan and Bush (senior), in what became known as the 'Mexico City policy' (it was announced there by Reagan at a 1984 population conference).

Far more significantly, the Bush administration has already succeeded in passing the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act. In the wake of this act, John Ashcroft ordered the justice department's civil rights division to go after doctors performing partial birth late-term abortions, a move that is clearly meant to endow the foetus with civil and democratic rights. Slowly but surely, the 'pro-lifers' in the United States are getting their way.

You can be sure that this is just the beginning. Almost as you read this article, the Bush administration and the Republican-controlled Congress are laying the political and legislative groundwork for further assaults on abortion rights. Their strenuous efforts to ban *all* late-term abortions (and to legally redefine how late is late) is a direct warning - or threat - to the working class, both in the US and in this country.

There is a certain irony to all this, of course. Respect's George Galloway is an implacable and indefatigable enemy of US imperialism - of that there can be no doubt. Yet, when it comes to his 'pro-life' anti-abortionist beliefs, he has found an extraordinarily unlikely ally - in the distinctly ungorged shape of president Bush. **Eddie Ford**

ABORTION



seeing red

Regular column of the RED Platform of the CPGB.
For Republicanism, Equality and Democracy!
web: www.cpgb.org.uk/red
email: red@cpgb.org.uk

MAB, abortion and the CPGB

The present controversy surrounding Respect's non-position on abortion has, once again, highlighted the fundamental programmatic weaknesses of the unity coalition. With George Galloway and the Muslim Association of Britain now proudly parading their anti-abortion credentials, it also confirms the analysis of the Red Platform that the CPGB's blanket support for Respect's candidates in the forthcoming elections is seriously mistaken.

For it appears that leading members of the CPGB have been somewhat shocked that such views on abortion have been so publicly aired by leading components of Respect. Indeed already some of the majority are now zig-zagging on the matter.

Take Marcus Ström. Two weeks ago in 'Party notes', Marcus wrote: "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" (*Weekly Worker* April 22).

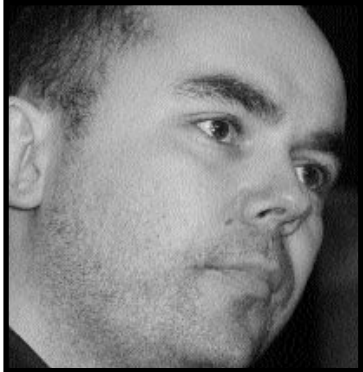
One might take from such a statement that even if Respect were to actually adopt an anti-abortion stance, it would still be permissible to vote for it, since its success would give a bloody nose to New Labour. Sounds rather like standard SWP fare.

To his credit Marcus adopts a far more militant approach to the question in last week's paper. Yet he still lets Respect off the hook when he writes that "Respect's founding declaration gives the impression of being in favour of a woman's right to choose: 'self-determination of every individual in relation to their religious or non-religious beliefs, as well as sexual choices.' Sounds good, but now we can see that it carefully skirts around the issue of 'abortion'" (*Weekly Worker* April 29).

Not quite true. In fact, there were some of us in the CPGB who did not need MAB's statement to already know that Respect was, to put it politely, 'skirting around' the issue. In fact it had already been highlighted in Mike Macnair's article on the weaknesses of the Yaqoob-Monbiot document (*Weekly Worker* October 23 2003).

Mike noted that the first draft of their document stated that "We support the right to self-determination of every individual in relation to their religious (or non-religious) beliefs, as well as sexual and reproductive choices." A vague but welcome recognition of a woman's right to choose.

Yet Mike noted: "In the second draft 'sexual and reproductive choices' have become 'lifestyle choices'. An important and controversial principle - women's right of access to contraception, abortion and new reproductive technologies - has been erased into an empty phrase. With this stripped out we are left with an illusory proposition." Herein then lay the roots of Respect's awful non-position on abortion. The revolutionary socialists of the



Marcus Ström: a mistake

SWP should be thoroughly ashamed that in its courting of the mosque it consented to such a change.

However, the CPGB leadership has some questions to answer. In its attempt to portray Respect as somehow progressive, it failed to highlight such unprincipled positions. Indeed, in acting as left attorney for Respect, the CPGB has now compounded its problems by calling on the left to support MAB candidates standing on the unity coalition platform.

Some other people have short memories. This is what Jack Conrad wrote about MAB in early 2003: "What of MAB and islam? There is no need to debate whether or not MAB in particular and islam in general is reactionary. Like all religions it is. Indeed the form of neo-traditional islam promoted by MAB, and its Muslim Brotherhood progenitors, is alien to the elementary principles of democracy, secularism and equality we adhere to" (*Weekly Worker* February 6 2003). Excellent stuff.

And there's more. Writing in 'Party notes' last summer, Jack recognised that "There is no possibility whatsoever that the programme of any such bloc would be based on working class socialism and consistent democracy. To say that is not islamophobia: it is a simple statement of fact. Neither church, chapel, temple nor mosque organise workers as a class. Such institutions might contain many workers in their congregations. However, they are typically dominated by middle class professionals, owners of small businesses and traditional intellectuals" (*Weekly Worker* July 10 2003).

So what has changed? Were we wrong in labelling MAB as reactionaries? If so, the leadership should make an apology to MAB. Yet, if we were right then - as Red Platform believes - we should not give any backing to candidates from MAB, now the 'external faction' of Respect.

Indeed we need to go back to our correct position of last summer, when we rightly slammed Peace and Justice, which was nothing other than Respect in embryo. In writing that "the SWP has been forced to shelve its popular frontist turn", Marcus made only one error - that Peace and Justice had been discarded (*Weekly Worker* August 21 2003).

Let's hope Marcus and rest of the CPGB leadership now return to what was fundamentally correct about that statement: that the SWP's lash-up with reactionary, non-working class forces like MAB is the politics of the popular front ●

On abortion and

It is conventional in British mainstream politics to treat abortion law as an issue of 'conscience' on which MPs get a free vote. The same principle of 'conscience' allows anti-abortionist doctors to refuse to perform terminations, but continue working in jobs where they might be called to do so.

The question could become an even bigger issue for the Respect unity coalition in the unlikely event that George Galloway is elected as an MEP; indeed, he is currently listed as a Respect MP and will no doubt 'vote his conscience' on abortion if the issue comes up in parliament between now and the next general election. As things stand, of course, Respect does not have a position on the abortion question, merely vague diplomatic sentiments about "self-determination" in sexual matters. But we have already argued that Respect *should* take a position on the abortion question: that of fighting for a woman's right to choose - the position shared by communists, the Socialist Workers Party and most of the left in Britain. If we win, what then happens about 'conscience'?

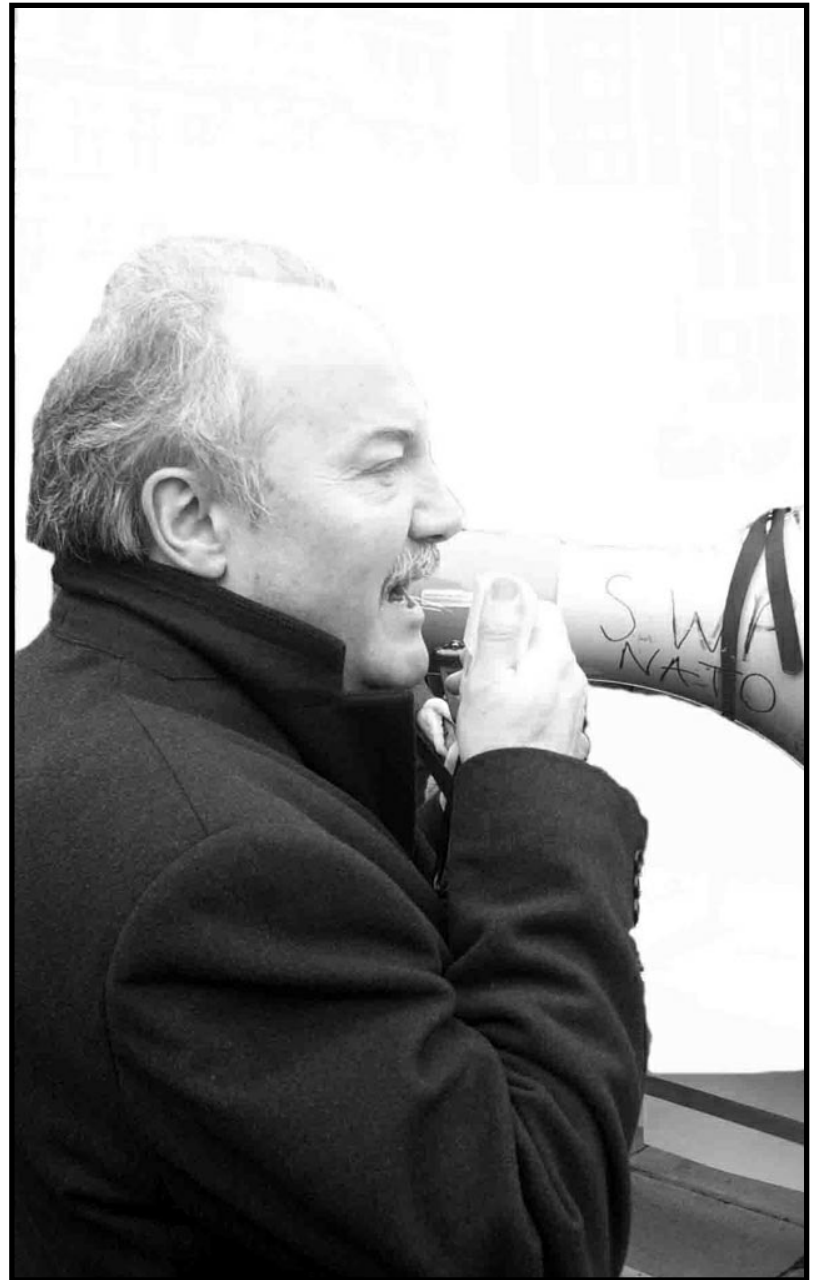
In fact, anti-abortionism is *not* a matter of freedom of conscience, for two reasons. The first is about law, power over others and the duties of elected representatives (and doctors), as distinct from private individuals. The second is that modern anti-abortionism is *not* mandated either by christianity or islam. It is merely a political position which has been adopted by religious organisations recently - since the 19th century. It is, like classical anti-semitism, an aspect of the resistance of the clergy and the petty proprietors to capitalist modernity. In this light, following anti-abortionist themes is not much different politically from borrowing the tsarist police forgery *The protocols of the elders of Zion* to attack the 'Jewish conspiracy'.

Conscience, law and democracy

The idea of 'freedom of conscience' is that people should not be penalised by the state for their religious ideas or religious practices, so long as their practices keep within the general law. It poses complicated questions about what general laws should be adopted and how far there should be exemptions for religious belief. One example, to take a live issue today, is whether religious organisations should be exempted from laws prohibiting discrimination against lesbians and gay men, and if so, to what extent. But these questions are not relevant to the present issue. Anti-abortionists do not propose that there should be laws which say that churches should be entitled to impose religious sanctions (excommunication, penance) on women who have abortions or doctors who perform them. They propose that there should be general laws affecting everyone - whether they are catholics, protestants, jews, muslims, hindus, buddhists, pagans or atheists - which prohibit or sharply limit the availability of abortion.

In this context the demand that elected representatives should be free from party discipline on the abortion question is *not* a demand for freedom of conscience. It is a demand for freedom to impose the representative's religious views on electors who may have voted for the representative in the belief that they were voting for a pro-choice, not an anti-abortion, party. It is, in other words, directly opposed both to liberty of conscience and to political democracy.

Very similar arguments apply to doctors who refuses to perform abortions. No one is compelling them to work in a post that requires them to do so. It is their choice. But the patient is not so lucky. The availability of doctors to perform abortions



George Galloway and his conscience: what will he be shouting through his SWP megaphone?

is dependent on NHS resources. If anti-abortionist doctors take medical training at public expense, take up such posts and then refuse to perform lawful abortions, they may - if there are enough of them - deny the patients their legal rights. This was certainly the case in some NHS areas in the 1970s. The doctor's freedom of conscience does not consist in refusing to perform abortions: it consists in deciding not to work in a post in which he or she might be required to perform them. Once they take up the post, liberty of conscience implies that they should not impose their religious views on patients.

Religion and politics

Religion is about the relationship between humans and god, or gods. It overlaps with politics to the extent that god, or the gods, are taken by adherents of many religions to have laid down rules by which humans are to live and which directly affect their relationship with other humans. Rules affecting forms of worship, and 'purity' regulations like the prohibition of alcohol to muslims, do not pose problems for the idea of freedom of conscience. Rules for the subordination of women and children to husbands and fathers, found in both christianity and islam, do pose such problems.

When we encounter rules of this type, an unavoidable question is raised by the idea of freedom of conscience. This is whether, at one extreme, they are actually *necessary* parts of the religion - that is, rules without which christianity would cease to be christianity or islam to be islam; or whether, at the other extreme, they are merely rules which have been adapted to contemporaneous politics or adopted by clerical castes in defence of

their claims to social superiority and to exploit their 'communities' through alms or tithe. A classical example of adaptation to the politics of the times is the claim that only divine-right monarchy is a legitimate form of government. This claim was made both by christian and muslim writers in medieval times, but has been marginalised more recently. Medieval examples of defence of caste interest can be found in the old catholic canon law rule that a bishop can only be convicted on the evidence of 72 eye-witnesses (Gratian *Decretum* 2 q 4 cc 2, 3) and the claim by some sunni scholars of the same period that allah forgives up to 70 sins committed by a cleric but not one committed by a layman (Crone *Medieval islamic political thought* 2004, p336).

In general, freedom of conscience means that we suspend judgement, for official purposes, as to whether particular religious beliefs are true or false. At the border of religion and politics described in the last two paragraphs we cannot do so. We must form both a judgement as to what the state should and should not coerce - what should be the law - independent of religious grounds, *and* a judgement as to whether the convictions of religious believers should be taken into account in this decision. This latter judgement cannot avoid taking into account both the claimed grounds for their belief and the whole history of their religions as they affect the matter.

Both islam and christianity claim that there is a single creator god, who made the world and everything in it. Both also claim that there are books of revelation which lay down the rules by which humans ought to live: for christians the canonical Bible, for muslims the Koran

politics of conscience

and the *hadith*, which transmit the statements of the prophet. In both cases, the revelations are both incomplete and - as all words are - in need of interpretation. Logically, if god made the world, including the capacity to reason, human understanding of the nature of the world and the human species can aid the interpretation of the revelations. This has been a disputed issue within both christianity and islam since the beginnings of both religions. But the use of reason about the creation in interpretation is unavoidable to the task of judgement at the borders of religion and politics, because without it we are left only with the personal authority of the imam or pope as to the meaning of religion; and, as a result, cannot possibly defend freedom of conscience.

Biology and history

The human population, like that of other animals, episodically presses on the limits of the natural resources on which we live, giving rise to famine. War and politics can also create famine. Famine conditions in turn affect pregnancy. In general between 15% and 20% of all pregnancies end with spontaneous abortion (miscarriage) or stillbirth. Under famine conditions, however, these figures rise: in the famines caused by the Chinese Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, spontaneous abortions rose by 30%-50% (Yong Cai and Feng Wang *Misfortune before birth: intrauterine mortality in China 1955-1987*). These are acts of ‘nature’ rather than of human will. But assuming that a creator-god made us, he made us such that starvation leads the pregnant woman, quite irrespective of her will, to spontaneously abort the embryo or foetus. If the embryo is a separate life from the moment of conception, *human biological nature* nonetheless sacrifices this life to preserve the life of the mother.

If spontaneous abortion is part of our biological nature, the need for birth control to avoid creating famine conditions is equally so. For the overwhelming bulk of human societies that have been studied by history and anthropology, the primary method of birth control has been infanticide and infant abandonment. Pre-christian, pre-islamic and pre-buddhist societies in their large majority have had strong social rules, some of them religious, *requiring infanticide* or infant abandonment in certain circumstances. Christianity, islam and buddhism all condemn infanticide, islam most clearly (Koran 17:31: “Kill not your children for fear of want; we shall provide sustenance for them as well as for you”; the same point at 6:151). However, buddhism has made little practical impact on the practice, and neither christianity nor islam succeeded in eliminating child abandonment, instead creating charitable institutions to handle it (see John Boswell *The kindness of strangers* (1988), on the christian middle ages; Jamila Bargach, *Orphans of islam: family, abandonment and secret adoption in Morocco* (2002) on a modern islamic society).

The underlying truth is that the Koranic claim that “we shall provide sustenance for them as well as for you” is as unrealistic, taken literally, as is Jesus’ suggestion that his followers should imitate “the lilies of the field [who] toil not, neither do they spin” (Matthew 6:28; the whole passage at 6:25-34). Human societies need to control their fertility. If contraception is unavailable or fails, this means abortion; if abortion is unavailable or fails, it means infanticide and infant abandonment. Contraception is undoubtedly preferable to abortion and abortion to infanticide. But the availability of relatively safe abortion, and of relatively effective contraception, is the product of modern high technology; we may yet find ourselves (hopefully temporarily) returned by

war or economic dislocation to a world in which these kinder options are unavailable.

‘Thou shalt not kill’

The general prohibition of killing other humans is common to the revelations of christianity and islam: “Thou shalt not kill” in Exodus 20:13; “Take not life, which god hath made sacred, except by way of justice and law” in K 6:151 and K 17:33. The first precept of Buddhism is more extensive: “I undertake to abstain from harming living beings” is taken to mandate vegetarianism by a narrow interpretation of ‘life’ which supposes that plants are not alive. All these prohibitions form the core of religious arguments against abortion. Since the idea that we ought not in general to kill other humans is much more broadly common ground, they are the most powerful arguments used by anti-abortionists.

The question these arguments inevitably seem to pose is: when does the embryo/foetus become ‘alive’ or ‘human’? Even for the buddhists this is a problem, discussed by Michael G Barnhart in *Buddhism and the morality of abortion*. In christian doctrine, from Augustine of Hippo (354-430) the foetus was only taken to be alive when it ‘quickened’: ie, could be felt to move within the woman’s womb. The modern christian doctrine that “life begins at conception” was adopted by pope Pius IX in 1869. Traditional sharia scholars down to the modern period took the same approach, though many fixed an arbitrary time of seven weeks for ‘quickening’ on the basis of readings in the *hadith*. Again, it is only in the last century that some have extended ‘life’ to conception or to the implantation of the embryo in the wall of the womb. Jewish law, in contrast, starting from the prohibition of killing in Exodus, held life to begin at birth: hence infanticide was killing, but not abortion.

Accepting the terms of these arguments leads into technical arguments about time limits. In these anti-abortionists have, over the last 30 years, tried to use advances in the treatment of babies born prematurely to whittle away at existing legal rights to abortion.

On the other hand, the philosopher Michael Tooley has argued that newborn infants are not yet fully human, or at least cannot be the subjects of rights (*Abortion and infanticide* 1983) so that neither infanticide nor abortion amounts to murder. This understanding is closer to historical practice. A similar view may have been reflected in jurors’ gut instincts which made it hard to obtain murder convictions in infanticide cases in England in the early part of the 20th century, leading to the passage of the 1922 Infanticide Act, which gave a defence to women who killed infants while “the balance of their mind was disturbed”.

But the terms of the argument are themselves suspect.

Killing and taking life

The plausibility of modern religious claims that the rule against taking life implies that abortion is wrong is greatly reduced by the ambiguity and complexity of religious rules about killing in other contexts. A very clear example is the history of religious support for war. The Bible contains both prohibitions on killing and glorification of the Israelites’ military endeavours, and christianity produced crusades against infidels and heretics. The Koran contains both prohibitions on killing and calls to *jihad* against infidels, carried on by muslims in their conquests down to the 16th century. In recent times, the Russian orthodox, Polish catholic and Ukrainian uniate churches have promoted pogroms against Jews, the catholic church had what can at best be described as an ambiguous relationship to the

German Nazi regime, zen buddhism was a significant element in the ideology of Japanese militarist aggression in the 1930s and 1940s, and *jihadi* islamist groups have carried on terrorism against islamic as well as non-islamic civilians. How can killing be so absolutely condemned when it takes the form of abortion, yet so much potentially justifiable when it takes the form of war?

An additional problem is that there are a great many decisions routinely made which we now know, if they do not amount to direct decisions to kill, do amount to decisions that some people must die. “Thou shalt not kill; but need’st not strive/ Officiously to keep alive,” wrote AH Clough (1819-62) in his satirical poem ‘The latest decalogue’. When the IMF decides that there “must” be a ‘structural adjustment programme’ in country A which, it is known, will lead to x people starving and to a y probability of civil war, this is a little more than not ‘striving to keep alive’. When Railtrack decides on safety measures, the decision-making process explicitly involves the assumption that human lives can be costed. These decisions seem to many people to be objectionable. But what about decisions about the allocation of resources in hospitals, assuming a limited budget? Or the ‘triage’ of casualties in war or disaster, which decides who is to be treated on the basis of chances of survival?

The decision for or against infanticide or abortion in any individual case is the same sort of decision. It weighs potential human life against available resources. The refusal of anti-abortionists to recognise this, when their religions *do* recognise the complexity of decision-making about human life in other areas, indicates that something is going on other than pure religious reasoning.

Doctrine and practice

The early religious doctrine on abortion was genuine interpretation of the rule against killing in the revelation texts. But by the time we get to medieval christian and islamic doctrine on the subject, it was startlingly underdeveloped and black and white by comparison to the religious doctrine about killing in the context of war, self-defence, capital punishment and other overriding necessity (eg, isolation of plague victims). Why? One explanation is simple gender bias. Abortion decisions are ultimately made by women and their consequences are felt by women. Priests and islamic scholars, in contrast, were all or mostly men.

Behind this, however, was a larger

fact. Pre-capitalist societies in the main have strong ‘separate spheres’ ideas. Pregnancy, childbirth and the earliest stages of child-rearing were ‘women’s work’, in a stronger sense than the sense in which these remain so today. The ulama and canonists were not merely confronted with the ethical dilemmas which actually confront women in relation to their fertility. They also had very little knowledge of what was actually going on. The possibility of these authorities actually detecting abortion or infanticide, let alone doing anything about it, was low. Religious doctrine was thus not confronted with a body of cases to complicate its relatively simple views on the issue. The doctrine could remain simple because it was both unenforceable and no serious attempt was made to enforce it.

Abortion doctrine is by no means unique in this respect. Medieval canon law and sharia both show vast masses of legal doctrine, produced by limited doctrinal reflection by scholars, which was in practice unenforced and unenforceable: on aspects of deviant sexuality, on the finer points of dietary regulations, on the boundaries of usury, and so on. The irrationalism of much of this law did not matter as long as the scholars were merely exploring abstract possibilities.

From religious doctrine to political campaign

In the transition to capitalism all this changes. Capitalist development and the growth of the proletariat undermines the position of the petty proprietors and the traditional clerisy alike. It undermines the traditional gender hierarchy which allows the exploitation of family labour by petty proprietors, and which the clerisy express in ideology. For capitalists the growth of the proletariat also poses problems of ‘labour discipline’, which make capitalists episodic allies of the clerisy’s and petty proprietors’ struggle against the emancipatory effects of urbanisation and proletarianisation.

It is in this context that we begin to see the emergence of political campaigns against a series of figures who can represent the disorderly effects of capitalist modernity, without directly identifying capitalism as the source of these effects. The Jew, the homosexual, the ‘loose woman’, the alien immigrant, the abortionist: all these were targeted by the English Tory Party in its struggle against democracy, before the French and German artisans or the papacy had even begun to

feel threatened by capitalism and change. In the 19th century the poisonous elements of the ideas of the Party of Order appeared in continental Europe, responding to capitalist development there, and found a powerful agency in the papacy. It is at this moment that *selected* elements of religious law became mobilising agencies for the Party of Order. The *selective* character of the use of religious law makes it plain that this is politics, not religious conscience. Over the course of the 20th century the phenomenon has spread beyond the boundaries of Europe and the US, and we have seen the emergence of islamic, Confucian, hindu, Stalinist and other nationalist forms of the Party of Order.

At the same time, the technical development set free by capitalist development enables the development of much stronger and more intrusive states. The doctors and other ‘scientists’ become a new clerisy with more powerful instruments at their command to detect abortion and infanticide. Abortion laws can become more rigorous and be more vigorously enforced. But at the same time market development means that the technologies of abortion and contraception reappear as illegal markets. As with many of the Party of Order’s other moral campaigns - contraception, drugs, homosexuality - the contradictions thrown up undermine the legitimacy of the law in general.

The episodic prosecutions appeared arbitrary; the widespread availability of illegal abortion meant that the laws were seen merely as condemning women to the risks of illegality. It is this dynamic which produced abortion legalisation in England, the US and elsewhere. After this clear *failure* of abortion prohibition schemes, the revival of anti-abortionism (started in the Nixon election campaigns in the US in 1968 and 1972) is even more clearly a political campaign of the Party of Order.

A woman’s right to choose

At this point we can return to liberty of conscience. It should be clear that the only approach to abortion consistent with the idea of liberty of conscience is *a woman’s right to choose*. The idea that abortion is equivalent to murder is indefensible: it is a much more complex problem. It is women who bear the risks of pregnancy and childbirth and who, at present, still bear the major burden of child-rearing. Illegalising abortion is - precisely - a denial of women’s right to liberty of conscience ●

Mike Macnair

Guildford Respect defends a woman’s right to choose

I must record my thanks to John Molyneux, South East Respect regional organiser, who called me late last week to suggest I contact friends and comrades in the anti-war movement and start a local branch of Respect, and offered a great deal of useful advice. Armed with this, I spent a couple of hours on the phone, and had soon assembled a small core of members willing to support Guildford Respect, including two new recruits to Respect nationally.

I was elected secretary, and my fellow CPGBer and also fellow Red Platform member, Jem Jones, was elected chair. We suspect we may be unique in being the only branch in the UK with a CPGB/Red sympathising majority. We also suspect that comrade Molyneux may not have been aware of our local support when he called me - though, as a good democrat, I am sure he welcomes the diversity we bring.

We discussed recruitment plans, took membership fees and a modest collection, and moved to political discussion: a vital part of any Respect member’s contribution to their organisation. Comrade Rae Trumble expressed concern at

George Galloway’s recent expression of opposition to woman’s right to choose, and the reactionary echo this had received from the Muslim Association of Britain. She proposed the following resolution:

“Respect confirms its respect for a woman’s ownership of her own body, and her absolute right to free abortion on demand, complete with medical advice and professional physical and psychological support for both her and her partner.”

This resolution was passed unanimously and with acclaim, and is currently on its way to Respect’s regional and national offices. We look forward to their response, and the information we also requested about putting this motion to Respect’s next national gathering. We call on all Respect branches to respect every woman’s right to choose, and on George Galloway to respect and represent the views of the members he represents, which he well knows to be predominantly pro-choice, rather than his own private opinions ●

Manny Neira
Secretary, Guildford Respect

SOCIALIST ALLIANCE

Damaged credibility

Open Letter to the Communist Party of Great Britain from the Socialist Alliance Democracy Platform

Dear comrades

We are writing to invite you to rejoin the Socialist Alliance Democracy Platform (SADP). The Socialist Alliance (SA) has been the major initiative on the left for socialist unity over the last few years. Despite the weaknesses of the SA, it represented a positive gain for the socialist movement in terms of programme and open and inclusive democracy.

At our last general meeting on April 3 2004 the SADP confirmed the fight for the gains of the Socialist Alliance will continue. We reaffirmed our decisions:

1 “to reach out to other socialists and organisations of socialists, in order to build unity”;

1 “to develop the SA programme, *People before profit*;

1 “to take forward the project of socialist unity in the context of building a new working class party”;

1 “to organise to secure a majority supporting [these] aims and objectives at the SA conference later this year”.

The decision of the March 2004 special conference to effectively close down the SA in favour of the Respect Unity Coalition (RUC) has created a real divide between the Socialist Workers Party-International Socialist Group majority and the minority organised around the Democracy Platform. Whether the RUC will gain significantly more votes than the SA remains to be seen. What cannot be denied is that the RUC is inferior to the SA in terms of its programme and democratic constitution. This is why we are determined to continue activity and resist any retreat from the SA programme and its open and inclusive democracy.

Many of us were disappointed and dismayed when you left the SADP two weeks prior to the SA special conference. This weakened opposition to the SWP-ISG line by highlighting our internal differences in a dramatic way. The issue that led to your walkout was the decision to allow non-members of the SA to join the SADP. It is worth noting that, like you, a number of other comrades were also opposed to that decision, but, given the crisis in the SA, they recognised that the unity of the SADP was more important.

However, since the decisions of the SA special conference to abandon SA

activity, this is no longer something that should divide us. It would be unreasonable to make it a condition that those who want to join the SADP must pay subscriptions to the SA nationally when it has ceased activity.

Many comrades think the real motive for the CPGB’s exit from the SADP was that it was abandoning the fight for the SA project, its programme and constitution, for Respect. The issue of membership conditions for the SADP was therefore a convenient excuse and the beginning of a CPGB move to realign itself with the SWP-ISG bloc.

Some would argue that the resignation of Marcus Ström as SA nominating officer gives credence to this theory. Given that some SA branches were determined to stand SA candidates in local elections, the support of the nominating officer would have been helpful, even if the SWP had eventually forced Marcus out. By resigning without a fight, the CPGB undermined these candidates and saved the SWP from some difficulty or embarrassment.

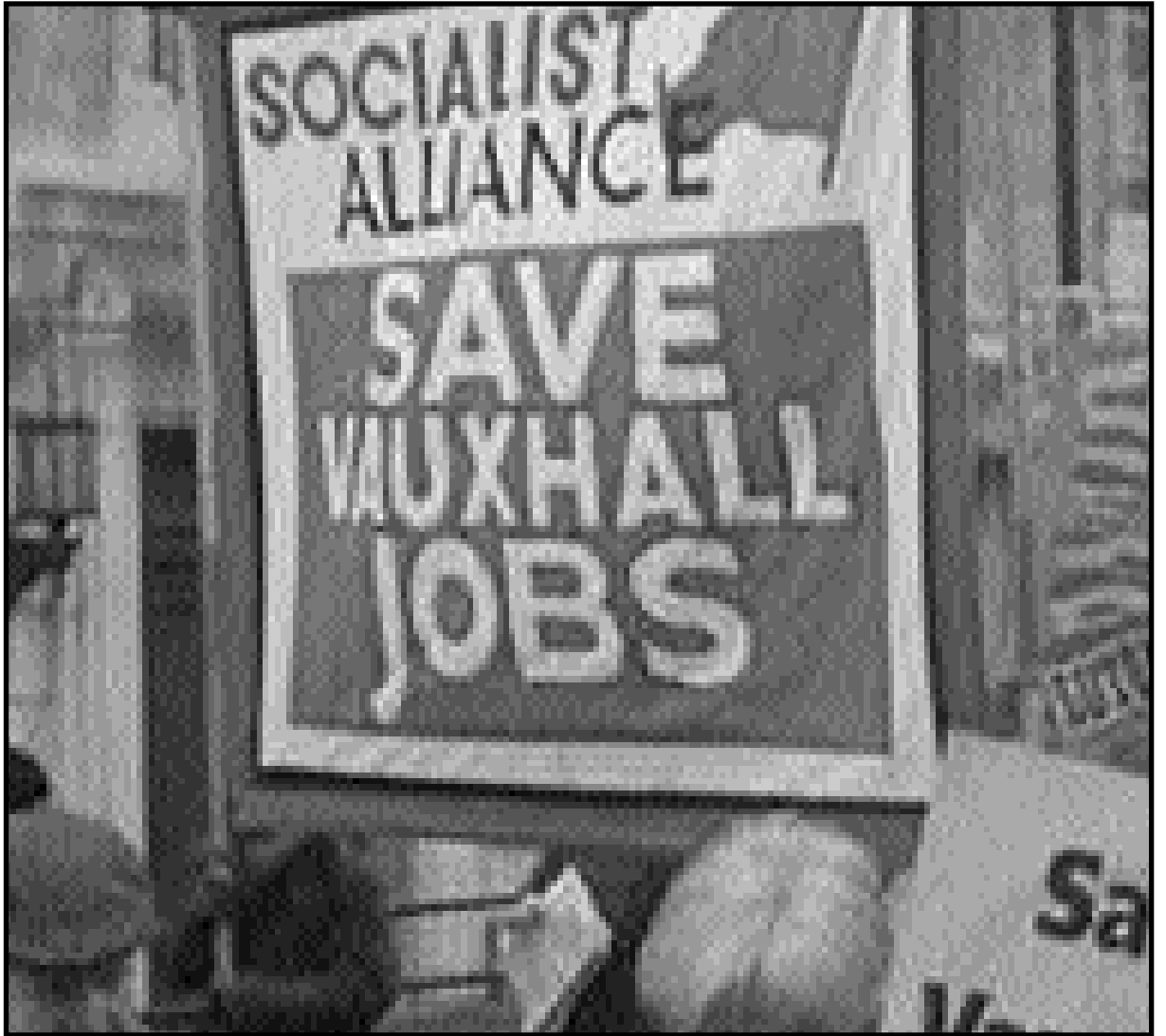
The actions of the CPGB therefore weakened those fighting for a workers’ party and opposing the liquidation of the SA. It could be said that your actions damaged the credibility of the CPGB as a revolutionary organisation. Nevertheless despite the disagreements and criticisms previously outlined, we believe it is absolutely necessary to continue to fight for unity.

We are therefore ready to set aside the disagreements we have outlined here as ‘water under the bridge’. You played an active role in setting up the SADP. Although the SADP, as an organisation, has not joined the RUC, we have a range of views on Respect, including comrades who are active members of it (eg, our convenor is also secretary of Rugby Respect). Your involvement in Respect is not a problem and should add to our collective experience.

We are therefore calling on you to rejoin the SADP and work closely with us as comrades and allies. We request that you meet us as soon as possible to discuss this.

Yours in comradeship

Pete McLaren
convenor



Socialist Alliance: positive gain

Sectarian delusions

Peter Manson replies

Thank you for your invitation to rejoin the Socialist Alliance Democracy Platform. While the CPGB will certainly cooperate with the SADP comrades whenever the occasion arises, we must nevertheless decline your invitation to rejoin.

As you point out, the CPGB “played an active role in setting up the SADP”. We did so because, as the most partisan of the principal supporting groups, we sought to further our aim of transforming the Socialist Alliance into the core of a working class party. To that end it was vital to secure democracy - the space to fight for that objective, including against the SWP-led majority which was bent on restricting the alliance to the role of an on-off electoral front.

We agree that the SA “represented a positive gain for the socialist movement” - not just because the left was organising together, but because the very logic of uniting under a common manifesto pointed towards a democratic centralist party. When we fought for the “SA project, its programme and constitution”, we did so not for its own sake, but only inasmuch as the SA could be regarded as a step towards such a party. Left unity is not just a nice idea. It is a process that must continuously be deepened and strengthened, a process that culminates organisationally in a Communist Party, armed with a revolutionary programme.

We recognise that many comrades, including within the SADP, have never shared our partyist vision. For some the SA was an end in itself - a loose network was all that was needed. For others a federal structure, one that deliberately held back from closer unity, was sufficient. Yet others, not least the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty, saw the SA as just ‘another area of work’. The AWL, now the largest grouping within the SADP, likes to pose as the most intransigent champion of the SA, but its attitude has been, at the very best, one of ambivalence, even when the prospects were far more favourable than now.

Thanks to the actions of the SWP, the

Socialist Alliance is now effectively dead. Those who pretend otherwise are deluding themselves. The mere act of observing and recognising this liquidation certainly does not make us liquidationists. In this context, we have downgraded SA work - call that “abandoning the fight for the SA project” if you like. Suffice to say, the fight for a working class party that we conducted in the Socialist Alliance and that we are now conducting elsewhere is one we shall never abandon.

The *main* site for this struggle is at present within Respect. To say this is not to deny that Respect is “inferior to the SA in terms of its programme and democratic constitution”. However, it is superior to the SA in one vital sense: it is not dead. Respect, not the SA cadaver, is the main left force contesting the European and Greater London Authority elections. Whatever we think of the SWP for its strangling of the Socialist Alliance, for its junking of the SA’s programmatic gains in favour of the platitudes of Respect, that is a simple statement of fact.

For all our criticisms of Respect’s platform, it is the only force widely contesting the EU and GLA elections on the basis of defending elementary working class interests - in however inadequate a way. That is why it has attracted some measure of trade union support - various RMT branches, Mark Serwotka, the FBU’s Linda Smith, etc. The SADP’s decision “not to join or support Respect” is thus sectarian. No doubt it is based on understandable anger and frustration at the SWP’s unprincipled retreat, but sectarian it is nevertheless.

Comrade McLaren says that the “issue that led to [the CPGB’s] walkout” from the Democracy Platform was “the decision to allow non-members of the SA to join the SADP”. That was indeed the occasion, but there was nothing minor or petty about it. That decision marked the transformation of the SADP from an internal opposition, united on a very limited set of tactics and politics, into an exter-

nal ‘party’. A ‘party’ with all the localist, economistic and reformist limitations of the SA, yet with none of its weight ... second time farce. We note that the SADP has registered itself as a political party in order to contest the June 10 elections in a handful of council wards. We wish the candidates well, but the SADP is not, and cannot, substitute itself for the Socialist Alliance - which primarily had significance to the extent it united Britain’s main left groups.

Comrade McLaren alleges that our refusal to go along with this transformation of the SADP into a ‘party’ was, in reality, “the beginning of a CPGB move to realign itself with the SWP-ISG bloc”. Perhaps he no longer reads our press - but even a cursory glance at the *Weekly Worker* would surely be enough to convince him that we are hardly trying to curry favour with the SWP-ISG leadership. It is a strange ‘realignment’ that, week after week, manifests itself in a thorough exposure of the watering down and abandonment of one working class principle after another.

Finally, comrade McLaren claims that by resigning as SA nominating officer the CPGB’s Marcus Ström “undermined” the efforts of SA branches wishing to stand candidates and “saved the SWP some difficulty or embarrassment”. This is really scraping the barrel. Comrade Ström *publicly* resigned during the afternoon session of SA’s March 13 special conference - which the majority of the SADP boycotted - in protest against the SWP’s closure of the SA. Had he remained in post, that would not have resulted in a single official SA candidate - something comrade McLaren knows full well. Comrade Ström would immediately have been replaced if he had defied what was, after all, the democratic decision of the conference.

The CPGB will continue to fight for the unity of all socialists in a single working class party. We will do so in Respect, in the Labour Party and in whatever other arena life itself throws up •

Fighting fund

Committed leftwingers

After April’s surplus - albeit a small one - this month’s £500 fighting fund has begun somewhat slowly. We have in hand a total of £53. That thanks to a £20 postal order from our comrade AJ in Cheshire, £10 each from comrades SW in Norway and GE in Portsmouth and, on top of that, we got £13 in extras collected by our sellers on this year’s May Day demonstration in London.

Though the turnout was once again low and consisted overwhelmingly of committed leftwingers, the *Weekly Worker* was well received. Of course, the left is our main target audience, so I am not really in the least surprised that over 100 papers were sold, nor that quite a few of them were

to comrades who said, “Keep the change for the fighting fund”.

Many tell us that they normally read us on the web - 8,864 of you last week. And, while we appreciate the occasional 50p or £1.50 extra when we see you face to face, we definitely need far more substantial donations if we are to regularly exceed our £500 target. Use Royal Mail or our PayPal facility on the web.

As I stressed last week, we urgently need to purchase new computer and other such related equipment. What we have to make do with is now quite old, not to say positively antique. So dig deep and help us get technically up to date •

Robbie Rix

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

IRAQ

Tip of the iceberg

The US-UK-led invasion of Iraq, dubbed Operation Iraqi Freedom by the publicity-conscious US military, was billed as a war of liberation. Of course there was that tricky business with those weapons of mass destruction, but that was retrospectively downplayed and has now been quietly swept under the carpet. Instead advocates of military action attempted to portray the invasion in humanitarian terms: the war would liberate the people of Iraq from the oppressive yoke of the brutal and murderous dictator, Saddam Hussein. Much was made of the need to win the ‘hearts and minds’ of the Iraqi people, demonstrating that the coalition had come to free them and to usher in a new golden age of liberal democracy under the benign tutelage of imperialism.

The attempt to transform Iraq into a subservient neo-colonial state, grateful to those heroic forces of liberation, has suffered a series of setbacks. Most pertinently, military resistance to the occupation has increased, leading to bloody reprisals by coalition forces. Away from the war-torn and rubble-strewn streets of Iraq’s cities, however, a new front has opened up in the battle for ‘hearts and minds’. Over the last week a series of photographs have been released depicting Iraqi captives being tortured and humiliated by their US and UK captors.

Allegations of human rights abuses perpetrated by the occupation forces have been made throughout the conflict. However, while previous reports have gone largely unnoticed, the shocking impact of the pictures has had a profound effect. The controversy began on April 29, when a US television channel, CBS News, broadcast photographs taken by soldiers at Abu Ghraib military prison in Baghdad, used by the former regime to

‘disappear’ troublesome citizens. The images show laughing US soldiers posing for the camera while Iraqi prisoners who have been hooded, bound and stripped are humiliated and abused. Other photographs show a prisoner standing on a box with electrodes attached to his genitals; two detainees being forced to simulate oral sex; and a tangle of naked prisoners in a heap while smug soldiers stand nearby. The photographs came to light as a result of a military inquiry completed in February and dealing with incidents from the end of last year. Seventeen soldiers were suspended, six of whom now face court martial.

The outrage in the US was echoed over here on May 1, when the *Daily Mirror* printed photographs showing British soldiers torturing and humiliating an Iraqi captive. They are pointing a rifle at his head, kicking him and urinating on him. However, although there is no doubt cast on the authenticity of the photographs from Abu Ghraib prison, various military ‘experts’ have alleged that the *Mirror* photographs are fakes. They claim inconsistencies, suggest that the soldiers are wearing the wrong kind of hat, using the wrong rifle, the boots are laced incorrectly, the uniforms look too pristine, and so on. The *Mirror*, and its anonymous sources, two soldiers in the Queens Lancashire Regiment, remain adamant that the photographs are genuine.

On both sides of the Atlantic the official response to the alleged abuse of prisoners has been remarkably similar. Politicians, military spokespeople and journalists have all expressed their horror and outrage, and then very quickly stressed that any crimes that have taken place were committed by a rogue element within the armed forces and that these reprehensible individuals would be swiftly dealt with.

George Bush has promised that all who are responsible “will be taken care of”. The UK armed forces minister, Adam Ingram, said the “appalling” photographs “besmirch the good name of the armed forces”, and Roger Goodwin, speaking on behalf of the Queens Lancashire Regiment, declared: “There is no place in our regiment for individuals capable of such appalling and sickening behaviour.” The *Mirror* itself blustered: “We can be proud of the job the army is doing in Iraq. It must not be spoiled by a few rogue soldiers.” These responses are no doubt calculated to reduce anger both at home and abroad but, while they may persuade many in Britain and America of the moral fibre of the military, they will have a harder task to dampen the already incendiary sense of anti-imperialist hostility in the Middle East.

Unfortunately for the powers-that-be, further allegations are surfacing, suggesting that the abuse cannot merely be attributed to the actions of “a few rogue soldiers”, but rather that it is indicative of an endemic system of brutality on the part of the army of occupation. Brigadier General Janice Karpinski, one of the 17 soldiers suspended as a result of the investigation into Abu Ghraib, and formerly in charge of US prisons in Iraq, has claimed that the guards being blamed for the atrocities were under the direct control of CIA operatives. The initial report on Abu Ghraib also apportioned blame to US intelligence operatives, and yet the only soldiers who face court martial are reservist military police. One of those, Staff Sergeant Chip Frederick, supports Karpinski’s claim. Frederick has said that military intelligence told him that he was doing a “great job” in helping them to get the prisoners “to talk”. The US army’s own report found that military intelligence used the guards to “soft-



Brutal occupying force

Genuine or fake, images of reality nevertheless



en up” prisoners mentally and physically prior to interrogation.

Amnesty International has claimed that Abu Ghraib is not an isolated incident and that it has received accounts of similar brutality taking place elsewhere in Iraq. Chillingly in that context, Amnesty also states that 13,000 Iraqi men, women and children have been imprisoned by the coalition in 16 prisons across the country. An investigation into the death of a Ba’ath Party official in custody in Nassiriya in June 2003 heard from a US marine reservist that “it was common practice to kick and punch prisoners who did not cooperate and even some who did”.

It must not be imagined that British soldiers are innocent of similar crimes, despite national chauvinist claims that they are more disciplined and behave more humanely than the Americans. *The Guardian* revealed that 10 British soldiers are under internal investigation for abusing Iraqi prisoners, and frankly that is likely to be the tip of the iceberg, with many more incidents quietly hushed up. Because photographs of these particular incidents have been widely released, they cannot be ignored, but there are likely to be many, many more incidents that have not come to the public’s attention, nor are they likely to. The fact is that, certainly in the case of Abu Ghraib, US soldiers took these photographs because they were complacent about their actions and had no thought of being punished; otherwise there would have been no question of photographic evidence of their crimes. In fact, the *Mirror* has also alleged that photographs of similar abuses are regularly swapped amongst service personnel.

Although the US and UK authorities present such atrocities as aberrations carried out by an undisciplined minority, the responsibility for them goes much higher.

Politicians and the secret services in Washington and London wanted to see results in Iraq; they wanted to capture Saddam Hussein and his ruling coterie, they wanted weapons of mass destruction and they wanted information on ‘terrorists’. In emphasising how important it was that the armed forces got results, they are demonstrating their willingness to turn a blind eye to how such results are obtained. While they are more than happy to congratulate themselves on the valuable information that has been wrung out of prisoners, they are quick to disavow responsibility when the actual methods are revealed.

Prior to the invasion of Iraq the US and UK armed forces were assured that they would be welcomed with open arms by the grateful Iraqi population. Instead they found themselves in a foreign country where sizeable elements of the population are hostile to the occupation, and resisting it with force. Undoubtedly this has led to many among the coalition forces feeling bewildered and betrayed. As a family friend of Lynndie England, who appeared in the photographs of Abu Ghraib, said of the Iraqis, “We went out there to help the jackasses and they start blowing us up.”

Of course, coalition soldiers were lied to when they were told they were going to help the population. Their sense of betrayal has led to at least some of them lashing out at the Iraqi people around them, people they now fear and hate. This bloody imperialist war has cost too many lives and has dehumanised too many of those involved in it. If there was ever any doubt of it, these atrocities confirm that imperialism’s battle for the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people has been lost, and that the occupation must be immediately ended ●

Jem Jones

US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

God, Mammon, and the American way

Manny Neira attempts to extract some real politics from a US 2004 presidential race designed to exclude them

Following a US presidential election is weirder than Hunter S Thompson, and cheaper than drugs. If you could exclude from your mind the bitter realities which hang in the balance, it might provide hours of harmless, or at least only faintly mentally damaging, entertainment. You would certainly not be in danger of learning the gravity of the human issues at stake from the superficial US election coverage.

On November 2, president George W Bush of the Republican Party will seek a second term in office. His challenger is Democratic Party candidate John Kerry, and Kerry seems to be making a game of it. Recent polls put his national support at 48% to Dubya's 43%. Mental arithmetic which even *I* can handle reveals that no other candidate has a chance of success. In fact, not since the maverick challenge of computer magnate Ross Perot in 1992 has a 'third' candidate been taken seriously.

Not that there is any shortage of 'third' candidates prepared to be taken lightly. (Note that in US election-speak, candidates other than those fielded by the Republicans or the Democrats are all, somewhat illogically, 'third' candidates.) They will be discussed later, but come Christmas, either president Bush will remain, or president Kerry will have become, the most powerful single man on the face of the earth.

This two-party system suggests parallels with British politics, but such parallels can be stretched too far. The Republicans stand politically to the right of the Democrats, as the Conservatives stand to the right of Labour, but any comparison of the Democratic and Labour parties is misleading. Labour remains a

bourgeois workers' party. The defining feature of US politics is the *absence* of a workers' party of any kind.

The two US political giants are more akin to the Liberals and Conservatives before the formation of Labour. As the Liberals once did in Britain, the Democrats claim some trade union support, but, if anything, they can be regarded as perhaps marginally preferable bourgeois patrons, rather than defenders of the working class. Interestingly, the New Labour 'project' was heavily influenced by the success of the Democrats under Bill Clinton. It is an attempt to wrest Labour from the working class, and bring it closer to the status of the Democrats.

Iraq

A year after Bush declared "mission accomplished" in Iraq, the US occupation is not merely facing resistance, but has suffered an actual defeat in Fallujah. There can be no question that this has shocked both government and people. A recent *New York Times* poll revealed that the majority support Bush once enjoyed for this imperialist adventure has largely evaporated. When asked, "Looking back, do you think the US did the right thing in taking military action against Iraq, or should it have stayed out?", only 47% still support the invasion, and 46% oppose it.

Bush is now desperate to somehow politically ease an increasingly difficult military occupation, but *without* damaging his imperialist project. His prospects of achieving this seem small. Continuing unrest and US casualties from an Iraqi intifada may yet become an overpowering electoral liability. Bush has a long, hot summer in Iraq to worry about before vot-

ing day. The fate of the Spanish government of José Maria Aznar, unexpectedly rejected by the Spanish people for its part in the war, will lay heavy on Bush's mind.

While a defeat for Bush would undoubtedly be welcome, we can expect little of a future president Kerry. His position on Iraq, in as far as he has one, is barely distinguishable from that of his rival. He seems to be playing a careful electoral game. As any anti-war vote will go against Bush anyway, he need not alienate conservative voters by adopting an anti-occupation stance. His strategy is to place himself one millimetre to the left of Bush on the issue. This is sufficient to attract the liberals (what alternative do they have?), while not threatening to the conservatives. His electoral website offers the following analysis:

"As complicated as Iraq seems, we've got three basic options: one, we can continue to do this largely by ourselves and hope more of the same works; two, we can conclude it's not doable, pull out and hope against hope that the worst doesn't happen in Iraq; or three, we can get the Iraqi people and the world's major powers invested with us in building Iraq's future."

This has a level of all-encompassing vagueness normally only found in a Respect declaration of principle.

9/11

Bush, of course, is presenting his occupation of Iraq as part of the 'war on terror'. On this issue alone, polls show him to have a substantially better reputation than his opponent. *USA Today* asked: "Which candidate would be capable of doing a good job at handling terrorism if elected?" 41% answered, "only Bush", compared to 20% for "only Kerry", while 34% who did not differentiate between them.

This attitude reflects the political gift the damnable attack on the World Trade Center of '9/11' gave George W Bush. He has taken full and bloody advantage of it. He has waged war first on Afghanistan, then on Iraq, and stiffened political support for Israeli government oppression of the Palestinians: all in the name of fighting 'terrorism'.

Those on the left who celebrated these attacks might do well to reflect on their cost. They killed workers in New York, and accelerated the murderous march of US imperialism. Bush was not persuaded to act by the attacks, of course. His administration had laid its plans long before, and even published them through the *New American Century* project. He merely took advantage of the propaganda opportunity the events of 9/11 afforded him to rush these actions past a shocked American people. This is the price of trying to bypass the working class as the force which will finally change society.

In the same way that Vietnam made it more difficult to win the support of the American people for further imperialist actions, the events of 9/11 made it *easier*.

Vietnam

In fact, Vietnam has been an issue in every presidential election since that abortive imperialist adventure blew up in the US government's face. Now that American soldiers find themselves in the firing line again, it is doubly so. In the past, the *Weekly Worker* has pointed out the error of comparing Iraq too closely to Vietnam, but here we are comparing not the objective situations, but their effects on the consciousness of the American people. To put it simply, they are more worried about Iraq because they remember Vietnam. The issue of Vietnam will not go away.

What the candidates have to say about Vietnam, though, is not the focus of attention. The issue manifests itself in a far more personal and less analytic way. In recent elections, for instance, presidential

candidates have been of an age which might have obliged them to *serve* in Vietnam, and so their military records have become crucial campaigning material.

Here, John Kerry scores heavily. He was a Vietnam 'war hero', sent home heaving with medals. From the earliest stages of the selection process for the Democratic candidacy, Kerry was the man Bush seemed to fear most, and largely for this reason. This is particularly so as Bush himself never went to war. His family's connections won him a stint in the 'Texas air national guard' instead. As the Mexicans refrained from invading that year, the boy Bush faced no danger. Millions of others did.

A bizarre row is nevertheless being thrashed out concerning the fate of Kerry's medals. It has been alleged that either he threw them away, in some gesture of protest, or (even more weirdly) that he *claimed* to have thrown them away in a bid for the support of ex-anti-Vietnam-war protestors, while actually *keeping* them. His explanation? He threw away the medals of two *other* veterans, and only the *ribbons* of his own medals.

Issues like this are called 'gates'. After Watergate brought Nixon down, the meaningless suffix 'gate' was appended to every political embarrassment, usually by journalists desperate to be the next Woodward and Bernstein. *Irangate* was important, but did not topple Reagan. *Monicagate* most certainly was not, and seems if anything to have ensured Clinton's immortality. As yet, there has been no mention of *medalgate*, so I shall make my bid for journalistic fame, and coin it here.

Reading page after page of reports on issues like *medalgate* becomes hypnotic. If you are not careful, you lose your sense of proportion, and indeed reality. The fate of the world, and the role of the US within it, vanishes into the background, as the battle of *medalgate* expands to fill your consciousness. Will the ribbons be found? Can Kerry produce the medals? Has he offended Vietnam vets who *kept* their ribbons? Welcome to the mindset of the US presidential campaign.

God

Another threat to mental equilibrium is the attempt to understand the extent to which christian religious fundamentalism is a force in American politics.

George Bush senior, Dubya's daddy, once commented, on walking into a room which was full of fundagelists (the unpronounceable American neologism for 'fundamentalist evangelist'), "Gee! I'm the only person here that's only been born once." Not so his son, who was definitely 'born again' - as were cabinet members Condoleeza Rice, John Ashcroft and Don Evans.

US foreign policy may be *driven* by the needs of American capital, but it is *justified* in some American politicians' minds by religious beliefs so extreme that the cry of 'islamic jihad' seems relatively moderate by comparison. We do not always realise how strange these politicians really are, as they wear ordinary suits and not turquoise robes, but this is mere cultural bias. They hold to a dangerous fantasy, and have the power to implement it. This is not to demean individual christians, any more than exposing the aims of political islam is an attack on individual muslims. The problem lies not in the exercise of the right to individual belief, but in the twisting of those beliefs to sanction inhumanity which the faiths they are nominally derived from would doubtless condemn.

Some christian fundamentalists believe, for instance, that the second coming of christ depends on the re-establishment of Israel throughout a region they believe is defined in the old testament.

Worryingly, this region covers most of the Middle East. More worryingly, some American voters and politicians feel motivated to bring this prophecy about, because they want to experience 'the rapture'. During the rapture (and I am not making this up) the clothes of the faithful fall from their bodies, and they float to heaven (see George Monbiot *Guardian Online*). What happens to the rest of us is even less pleasant than gazing up the bottoms of rightwing US religious bigots as they drift away.

It follows that the politicians who virulently oppose a woman's right to control her own body and to terminate an unwanted pregnancy, or wish to see genesis-style 'creationism' taught as fact in American schools, or continue to support laws which discriminate against and persecute gays, are also a major force behind US support for the most violent Israeli oppression of the Palestinians, and for the same religious reasons.

John Kerry, a liberal catholic, is already being attacked by his church for being pro-choice, for supporting civil unions (though not marriage) for gay couples, and even for taking communion in a non-catholic church. Bush, surer of his godly credentials, is making electoral capital from these sinful failings. In a society in which some 15% of the population are thought to hold fundamentalist christian views, this strategy is effective.

Economy

But let us return from the celestial to the terrestrial. Films and imported television series tend to present a particular image of American life: usually of carefree, middle class characters in a secure economy. This image has become a cultural norm - part of our national consciousness. We do not generally consider the problem of poverty in the US.

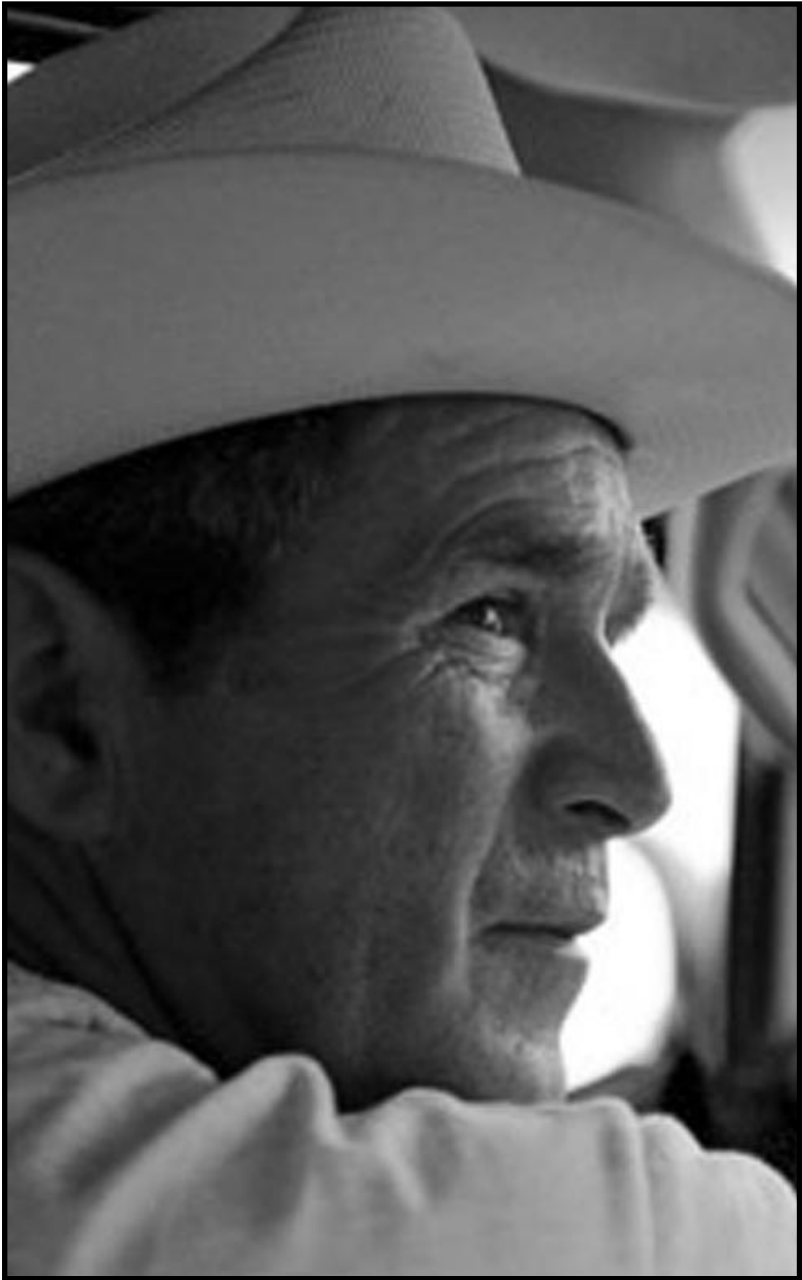
Unemployment runs at around 6% but, being unevenly distributed, is much higher in some states. Welfare and particularly free healthcare provision are poor compared to most of western Europe. The net result is that poverty is as real in the US as it is here. For every secure middle class New Yorker in *Friends*, there is an unemployed blue collar worker in Arkansas unable to afford medical treatment for their family, and who is unlikely to have a sitcom based on their life.

In as far as there is a debate about the economic fate of such citizens, though, it is about tax. The Republicans accuse the Democrats of wishing to overtax, and the Democrats deny it. The real issues remain largely untouched.

One of those real issues, the sheer degeneracy of corporate America, was amply demonstrated by the failure of Enron. This huge energy company survived an extraordinarily long time without adequate revenues simply by rolling over its debts (that is, continually borrowing to pay off old debts plus interest), and manipulating its accounts to report substantial profits until, quite simply, it ran out of cash.

World capital markets run, to an enormous extent, on the Tinkerbell principle. In the panto Peter Pan, the children are asked to shout 'yes' if they believe in fairies. As they do, Tinkerbell, the fairy in the story, becomes more animated. She needs people to *believe* in her to be well. Similarly, because Enron was *believed* to be sound, it could borrow the money which made it *appear* sound. The episode led to a brief flurry of demands for accounting puritanism from bourgeois politicians around the world, but incredibly the matter seems to have been largely left behind. This demonstration of the fragility of the corporate economy has not been a major issue in this election.

This is particularly disturbing, as



Bush’s vice president, Dick Cheney, had plans ready to deregulate energy markets throughout the US, on the model of California where Enron operated. Only the company’s collapse caused these plans to be quietly filed away. An investigation into the Enron affair (*Enrongate?*) later revealed that the company had deliberately manipulated the energy market in a desperate attempt to increase its revenue: creating, for instance, artificial shortages to push up prices. Why no serious campaigning on these issues? Well, in a show of admirable political balance, Enron made huge donations to *both* the Republican *and* the Democratic parties, and was doubtless not the only company to do so. Neither party can afford to break faith with corporate America, as corporate America pays their bills.

Money

This brings us to the fuel driving the electoral process: money. During his 2000 campaign, George Bush raised \$100 million: though he is thought to have \$180 million to spend between now and November promoting his re-election. Kerry, for a Democrat and a challenger, is doing surprisingly well. He has already raised \$100 million.

This money comes largely from corporations and ‘special interests’ or lobby groups. Many, like Enron, donate to both major parties, insuring themselves against backing a loser. However, the process seems wasteful: why do American corporations allow the cost of these elections to spiral upwards as they do? Don’t huge donations to both sides simply cancel each other out?

The Republicans and the Democrats can both afford to run intensive campaigns, with full programmes of newspaper and (above all) television advertising. The real purpose of this level of campaign funding is to *exclude other parties*. Though big business is generally thought to favour Republican presidents, the truth is that it can do business with Democrats - much as British big business feels comfortable with New Labour. Both the US parties are known quantities, dependent on their corporate backers for their place in the race, and therefore unlikely to rock the boat. Third parties, who are an unknown quantity, are priced out of serious contention.

Nader

One such ‘third’ candidate this year is Ralph Nader. Indeed, he is the only one whose name is known across America. He is standing in his fourth presidential election. In 1996 and 2000 he stood as a Green candidate, but this year he is contesting as an independent.

His candidacy is extremely controversial. This is partly because his views, which amount to a mild bourgeois liberalism, are considered dangerously leftist by the political establishment. He is therefore unloved by the right. However, he is even less popular with the left, as he may deprive Kerry of enough votes to allow Bush to be returned to office. In 2000, he won 2.7% of the national vote. Many Democrat voters accuse him of costing Al Gore victory over Bush.

So sensitive is he to this criticism, he devotes nearly half his electoral site’s ‘frequently asked questions’ page to answering it: “Did Ralph cost Al Gore the election in 2000? No. Al Gore won the election in 2000. George W Bush cost Al Gore the election ...”, and so on.

Nader has picked up enthusiastic support from an interesting source: an organisation called Socialist Alternative. It is part of the Committee for a Workers’ International, and therefore a sister party to Peter Taaffe’s Socialist Party in England and Wales. Socialist Alternative argues: “We firmly believe Nader’s campaign will be the best way in the 2004 elections to forward the interests of workers, young people, women, people of colour, LGBT people, the environment, and the anti-war movement. Nader is challenging the war in Iraq and corporate domination over our society. He is exposing the Democrats and Republicans for taking hundreds of mil-



John Kerry: one millimetre to the left

lions of dollars from big business and ignoring the concerns of millions of ordinary people.”

The fact remains that, while Socialist Alternative demands, “End the occupation”, Ralph Nader is calling merely for the replacement of US troops by UN troops: in other words, substituting one group of occupiers by another.

The tactics of Socialist Alternative seem extraordinary: it has decided to endorse, in an extremely enthusiastic and uncritical way, a candidate who *neither* represents their basic demands, *nor* stands any hope of election as a (relatively) progressive alternative to Bush. It offers an interesting comparison with the CWI’s attitude towards Respect in Britain. In the US, it seems set on engagement with Nader without criticism, while in the UK, it is determined to criticise Respect without engagement. There is at least a consistency in their inconsistency.

Socialists

Three parties with names beginning ‘Socialist ...’ are standing candidates of their own. Their histories are a depressingly familiar tale of faction, split and gradual evaporation. The story of the left in the US is, in this sense, no more inspiring than the story of our movement in Britain.

The Socialist Party USA is one of the heirs of the Socialist Party of America whose candidate, Eugene V Debs, secured votes approaching one million in the elections between 1900 and 1920. Along the way it went through innumerable mergers and splits (amongst which were two splinters which finally merged into the now Stalinist Communist Party USA). In 2000 its candidate, David McReynolds, secured less than 6,000 votes. Its presidential candidate this year is Walt Brown.

The Socialist Equality Party (US) is a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and sister party to the Socialist Equality Party in Britain: one of the myriad groups formed after the implosion of the Workers Revolutionary Party in the 80s. Its presidential candidate is Bill Van Auken.

Finally, the Socialist Workers Party is the rump of the group formed by James Cannon in 1938 and which was to become one of the strongest groups within Leon Trotsky’s fourth international. In 2000 its candidate, James Harris, secured around 7,000 votes. This year it is standing Martin Koppel.

Koppel’s candidacy is particularly telling. Born in Australia, *he is ineligible to assume the office of president*. In some states this may mean he is omitted from the ballot paper altogether. Is this a gesture of defiance by the American SWP, or merely the realistic acceptance that it makes little difference?

Workers’ party

A defeat for Bush based on the growing domestic opposition to the occupation of Iraq would clearly be progressive: it would represent a political, electoral defeat for imperialist policy. However, it would not actually reverse that policy, because it is driven not by the evil intentions of one or two men (as the British SWP would sometimes have us believe of Bush and Blair), but the needs of American capital. President Kerry may change the nuance of the policy, seeking to involve the UN and toning down the rhetoric of the ‘war against terror’, but American imperialism will continue to represent American capital’s interests abroad.

The pressing need is for an American mass party of labour. While resistance forces in Iraq may be able to give US imperialism a bloody nose abroad, the only force which can ultimately defeat it is the US working class. This is not without organisation in the country: trade unions are well established, but lacking in political leadership, and largely tied to the bourgeois Democratic Party. The 2004 presidential election will change less than some imagine, even if Bush is defeated. The task of the left is to use it to raise the demand for independent working class representation in America, and solidarity with workers throughout the world.

If that fails, see you at the rapture: bottoms up ●

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.

Become a Communist Party supporter

Name.....

Address.....

Town/city.....

Postcode.....

Telephone.....

Email.....

Age.....

Date.....

Return to: Membership, CPGB, BCM Box 928, London WC1N 3XX

Pre-emptive strike against rank and file organisation

Gilchrist launches witch-hunt

On the eve of the Fire Brigades Union annual conference, the leadership has announced a witch-hunt of the union left wing - in particular the leaders of the rank and file grouping, Grassroots FBU.

The executive council, meeting on April 28, decided, on the recommendation of general secretary Andy Gilchrist, to set up a committee of enquiry into alleged "serious misconduct" on the part of a "hard left faction", alleging they are involved in what amounts to a "union within a union". It is thought various militants will be charged under the catch-all clause of the FBU constitution referring to "action prejudicial to the interests of the union".

Under the normal disciplinary procedure local executive council members are responsible for investigating and if necessary bringing charges against those in their region alleged to have committed an offence, but on this occasion the leadership, clearly not trusting all EC members to deliver the goods, is bypassing the normal procedure and asking the committee of enquiry to make disciplinary recommendations. This committee is to be composed of assistant general secretary Mike Fordham and two other EC members, both supporters of Gilchrist's own 'Left Group' or 'Left Caucus' (its unofficial and undeclared nature leaves some doubt as to what it should be called).

According to press briefings, "dozens" of local FBU officials face suspension from office. It seems clear that Gilchrist, whose authority and popularity plummeted as a result of his bureaucratic and disastrous misleadership of the 2002-03 pay strike, is attempting to remove potential rivals prior to the 2005 elections, when he intends to seek a renewed mandate from the membership. His supporters are also facing challenges in forthcoming ballots for individual positions and it seems Gilchrist has some of their key opponents in his sights. Up to now disgust with the leadership has not translated into coordinated opposition and it is clear that he now realises that, with the establishment of Grassroots FBU at the beginning of the year, that could be about to change.

However, Gilchrist is taking a big gamble in making his move in the week before the May 11-14 Bridlington conference. This will allow the left to organise and attempt to mobilise support amongst delegates against this disgraceful attack on members' rights. The leadership could, for example, have to deal with an emergency motion exposing their hypocrisy in seeking to disband an internal union grouping while simultaneously organising as a fraction themselves.

It is not beyond the bureaucracy to attempt to rule emergency motions out of order - dozens of motions and amendments (around a third in all) already submitted to conference have been treated in this way, with left-led regions particularly targeted. This is a sign of weakness, not strength - the actions of a leadership under the greatest of pressure. Gilchrist, a supporter of the 'reclaim Labour' Campaign Group of MPs, is having to fend off strong moves to weaken the link with the Labour Party or even break it altogether.

His rearguard action consists of adopting himself the very position he so vehemently opposed at the last conference two

years ago (the 2003 gathering was cancelled because of the ongoing industrial dispute). The EC issued a statement earlier this year which takes up the main thrust of the 2003 London motion, opening the way for support for non-Labour candidates in elections. However, whereas London wanted regional committees - which have their own political fund - to have the right to take such a decision, the EC, after having at first toyed with this, is now proposing that applications to support non-Labour candidates would have to be referred to itself for a final decision.

Up to now the leadership has opposed democratisation of the political fund by claiming that it would automatically lead to disaffiliation, but, in its desperation to defeat surviving motions proposing just that, the EC has had to retreat significantly. Even though it has ruled disaffiliation motions from the big guns of Merseyside and Manchester out of order, it has felt obliged to let three others - from Northern Ireland, Strathclyde and Berkshire - remain on the agenda. However, even if its own motion wins the day, in the current EC's hands it is quite possible that democratisation would be in name only, as Gilchrist would not permit any regional autonomy and would almost certainly reject requests to back candidates to the left of Labour.

There are several amendments to the EC motion, including one which gives regional committees the right to take such decisions, and another which calls for the setting up of a union parliamentary group (not necessarily of Labour MPs only), based on support for several key issues of FBU policy. There is an alternative democratisation motion to be moved by Kent.

The EC motion signifies a retreat in another sense - it is recommending a reduction in the union's affiliation payment to the Labour Party to £20,000 - a somewhat arbitrary figure, but the idea of paying even a penny to Labour provokes anger amongst large sections of the membership after the government's full-scale assault on their working conditions. The union has received large numbers of requests from members wishing to withdraw from the political fund altogether. However, the EC has ruled out of order an amendment from London calling for an affirmative ballot of all political fund members to determine the size of the payment to Labour.

Hopefully this ruling can be overturned, as it surely points the way ahead - giving members some control over the use of their contributions and drawing them more directly into the debate in a clearly democratic manner. This would also seem to be the best way to prevent outright disaffiliation, which would, in the absence of any serious working class alternative, open the way to depoliticisation and cut the union off from the vital battles still to be had within Labour.

But there is a big danger that the leadership's anti-democratic manoeuvres will backfire, with delegates opting for disaffiliation rather than placing their trust in 'reclaim Labour' loyalists like Gilchrist to allow any applications at all to support non-Labour candidates. There are noises coming from some quarters - those normally associated with democratisation - that if the EC's motion is revealed at conference to be a device to actually prevent change, they would rather vote for break-

ing the link altogether. If disaffiliation is voted through, there may be some kind of emergency motion, attempting to map out a political strategy for the union. There is talk of trying to join forces with the RMT with the aim of sponsoring a new political formation.

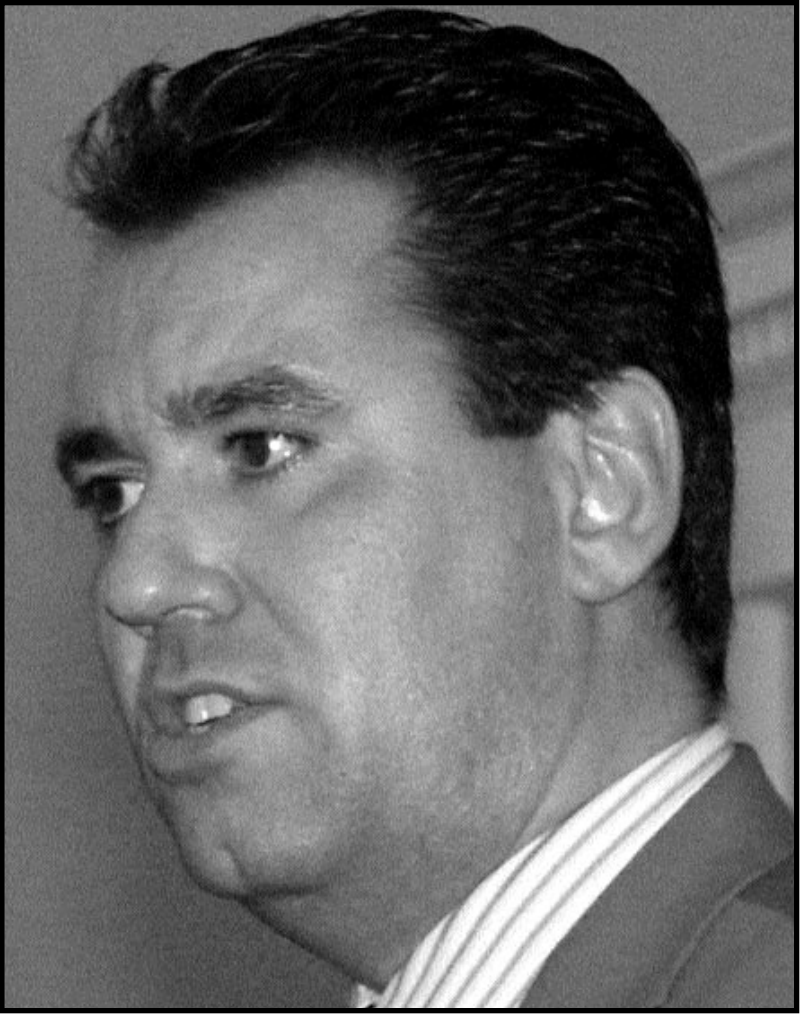
If the EC's or Kent's motion is passed, however, there may be moves in some regions to use the new (at least theoretical) freedom to back non-Labour candidates. For example, Respect's Linda Smith, the FBU regional treasurer, looks set to win the backing of London, while the Scottish Socialist Party could be the beneficiary north of the border.

The fallout from the pay settlement is still rumbling on and will also feature at Bridlington. The deal sold to the members included a staged rise of 7%, but only 3.5% has been delivered. As a supposed quid pro quo for the payment of the second phase, the EC implicitly recommended members should support changes to the firefighters' national conditions in a consultative ballot. These changes involved accepting reduced pay for overtime, the ending of double time payments for two holidays, cuts in subsistence payments and so on. But on the very day the 'yes' vote was announced, the employers issued a statement declaring that their terms for fulfilling the second phase 3.5% had still not been met and they continue to insist it will not be paid.

Another conditional increase, this time for 4.2%, is due in July and a conference motion calls for the launch of a campaign for renewed strike action should this not be paid. How realistic this is after the 2002-03 debacle - particularly as the misleaders of that dispute are still in place - is another question.

A big problem within the union is the lack of accountability of the powerful regional officials. While branch and brigade officers are to a greater or lesser extent under pressure from the rank and file, that is not the case in many regional offices. This means that the anger on the ground is not reflected in the actions of regional officials, who are often seen as part of the bureaucratic machine, delivering votes on behalf of the leadership.

This is something that Grassroots FBU has started to challenge. While the organisation has the backing of some regional officers, it is mainly the branch and brigade representatives, the rank and



Andy Gilchrist: conference manoeuvres

file militants, who make up its support base, which at present stands at around 200 union members.

Unfortunately, attempts to unite rank and file groupings into one body have so far been unsuccessful. The Socialist Workers Party's *Red Watch* was involved in talks with Grassroots FBU in January, but declined all proposals for a merger on the grounds that their supporters had not been consulted. There has as yet been no sign of any attempt to organise such 'consultation'.

In reality, *Red Watch* consists of little beyond the handful of SWP members, although the ability to produce a publication, which also features articles from non-SWPs, has its advantages. In all likelihood it is the reluctance to relinquish control in favour of a common organisation with its own publication that causes SWP

comrades to shy away. At present Grassroots, which has had three conferences since its founding, has only an email bulletin, although a printed journal is now under active consideration.

SWP comrades seem in general to take a softer line against the Gilchrist left leadership than Grassroots ('The leadership's not the issue; we've got to build rank and file organisation'). As a result, for the moment at least *Red Watch* supporters do not seem to have been earmarked as subjects for Gilchrist's committee of enquiry.

In the current witch-hunting atmosphere it will be interesting to see how many delegates attend the Grassroots fringe meeting on May 12. Respect is organising its own fringe meeting on the evening of May 11 •

Alan Fox

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