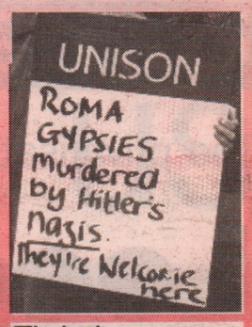


Socialist

A monthly marxist review. No 33. April 2000. 50p

OUTLOOK

INSIDE



Fighting state racism p6-7



The fight for Rover and Ford centre pages



Vote Ken, Vote LSA! Editorial & p5

OCCUPY Longbridge!



Car workers have fought back before – and they can fight back again!

The government and the TUC who have lectured us incessantly about the value of "partnership" with big business now have egg on their faces.

BMW, which last summer was set to screw over £120m from the government as a bribe to keep production at Rover's Longbridge plant have decided to tear up all the agreements they have signed with ministers and with unions and to pull out – axing tens of thousands of jobs.

Their decision makes perfect sense from the point of view of the free market economy which Tony Blair and co love so much. But the job losses – and similar cuts threatened by Ford mean devastation for the lives of workers.

Pleading will not change their minds: only action by trade unions – firm action, designed to prevent them carrying through their asset-stripping operation – can prevent these cuts.

That's why we say Longbridge and other threatened plants must be occupied – with the demand that they be nationalised, without compensation.

Feature: centre pages

Nationalise Rover & Ford!

The privatisation of a city

Leeds for sale!

Bob Wood

Over the last few weeks, Private Finance Initiative (PFI) schemes worth more than £200 million have been announced in just one city - Leeds.

As Leeds is in a similar position to most other areas of the country, the lessons of developments here are important for us all. Bob Wood looks at the details and the mounting local campaign against the proposals.

The investment of private capital in education, health and housing is expanding at a surprisingly fast rate.

As far as education is concerned, Leeds city council has announced that a new school is to be built under PFI in the south of the city in Morley, and two high schools are to be either rebuilt or completely refurbished. An additional four primary schools will be replaced under the scheme.

Which construction firm will benefit from this £35 million programme will not finally be decided until the summer, but it will be either Leeds-based John Mowlem or London firm Laing Hyder.

An earlier scheme involving a new building for Cardinal Heenan High School, costed at £12 m, is due for completion by September. In this case the company benefiting from the development is Jarvis.

In the housing sector, the council is planning a £40-45 m PFI scheme involving the repair and improvement of the Swarcliffe estate in east Leeds.

These council-based schemes are dwarfed by proposals, unveiled in late March by Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust for the city's health services, amounting to a staggering £140 million.

Almost £100 million of this will be private finance. A new cancer centre at St James's Hospital (£58 million), and a new children's hospital at Leeds General Infirmary (£19 million) are proposed.

Other aspects of the scheme include the revamp of two wings at St James's, and the updating of two hospitals in outlying areas as "locality hospitals".

Bed losses

Although new facilities would be welcome in the city this should not be at the cost of the inevitable bed losses that PFI entails.

It is the repercussions of the recent Ofsted report on Leeds Education Authority which has produced the biggest outcry. Following Ofsted's highly critical, and almost certainly politically motivated report, an unusual alliance of councillors, Labour Party activists and trade unionists has united in opposing the possible hiving off of all or part of the LEA

to the private sector.

The awful example of Islington, where from this April education support services will be supplied by a Cambridge-based private company for the next seven years, is uppermost in most people's minds.

The campaign against privatisation in Leeds really got under way in early February at a well-attended public meeting called by an alliance of public sector trade unions, mainly UNISON local government and health branches.

Labour MP for Leeds North-west, Harold Best, spoke about his experiences as an apprentice electrician working for a private firm ripping off a public sector contract, and made clear his complete opposition to the government's privatisation agenda.

He was joined on the platform by Bob Crowe of the RMT and Candy Udwin of UNISON. This successful

meeting laid the groundwork for a strong campaign in the city.

The possibility of gaining significant support from local Labour Parties is real. At the March meeting of the normally supine Leeds District Labour Party, where any motions critical of new Labour have been monotonously ruled out of order, opposition to privatisation was strongly argued.

Resistance

One motion called for the city council to resist the privatisation of education services by all means possible while another opposed any reduction in bed numbers as a result of PFI in the health service.

These and other anti-privatisation motions were passed without dissent after a debate which made the link between the threat to the LEA and the incursion of private finance into schools, hospitals and even Air

Traffic Control.

The deep unpopularity of the government's drive to privatisation is evident from every opinion poll on the subject.

No respite

And yet the momentum is maintained without respite. Why are Blair and his team so determined to open up public services, especially health and education, to the private sector?

To those who like to divide the world up into tidy compartments - local, national and international, the answer must come as a bit of a surprise. For strangely enough, the beginnings of the answer can be found in Seattle.

The US agenda for the World Trade Organisation - and the United States is as usual backed to the hilt by its British fawn - is to open up across the world investment opportunities in services for American capital.

Potential markets in health and education are in the forefront of this drive to open up markets for profit across the globe.

The ultimate aim is to reduce our schools and hospitals to no more than local branches of Education UK plc or Health Inc, with headquarters in New York or Chicago.

In Leeds the next step in the campaign against this international project will be the annual May Day rally and march through the city centre on Saturday 29th April.

This year the Trades Council is organising the rally, together with the Leeds Campaign Against Privatisation, with the slogans - Free Education, Free Health and Free Welfare - No to Privatisation!

Perhaps it will be the beginning of a successful campaign to defend the welfare state.



Vote for new leadership in civil service

PCS national elections: vote Left Unity!

Darren Williams

Balloting will begin in ? for the election of the National Executive Committee of the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS). PCS' 258,000 members work mainly in the civil service, and have faced massive attacks on jobs, pay and conditions, under New Labour as under the Tories.

The forthcoming elections, and the conference that will follow in May, are only the second chance to hold their leadership to account since the union was established in March 1998, with a constitution that stripped away many of the democratic rights that members enjoyed under its predecessor unions, CPSA and PTC.

Members elect a National Executive Committee consisting of a president, four vice-presidents and 40 ordinary members.

The last elections, two years ago, delivered a majority for a coalition

of two right-wing groups, the (ex-CPSA) Moderates and (ex-PTC) Membership First.

These groups had presided over a long series of defeats for civil servants under the Tories, with 250,000 jobs lost through cut-backs or privatisation, the introduction of performance-related pay and new management techniques and the break-up of national collective bargaining on pay and conditions.

New Labour has stuck rigidly to the Tories' agenda - privatising thousands of jobs in areas like the Passport Agency and the Department of National Savings, and refusing to abandon performance pay or to restore civil service-wide pay and conditions.

The only difference is that its policies have been given a sugar-coating of ideological mystification, in the form of the supposed 'partnership' between the Government

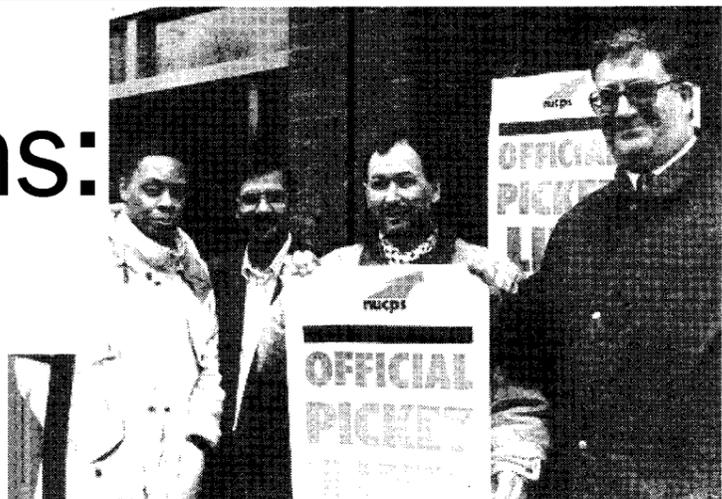
and departments on one side and staff and their unions on the other.

The PCS leadership has enthusiastically endorsed this approach. Whereas before 1997 its predecessors attacked Tory policies but did nothing to challenge them, now it barely makes even muted criticisms of what are essentially the same policies.

It is currently celebrating the apparent legitimisation of this approach by members, who have recently voted to endorse a national Partnership Agreement between the Government and unions.

Behind the warm words of this document is a union commitment not to challenge Government policy - whatever its impact on members.

The 20% turnout in this ballot suggests not enthusiasm for the NEC's approach, but a cynical abstentionism prompted by the



increasing divergence between members' own experiences and the pronouncements of their leaders.

It is essential to break through members' disaffection with the union's democratic processes, but this can only be done if the left demonstrates convincingly the link between a change of political leadership and the reversal of past defeats in the workplace.

The main opposition to the incumbent leadership is the Left Unity group, which brings together almost all socialist currents in the union.

It contains many fine activists who have fought determined campaigns within their own departments, but it has not yet

succeeded in reaching beyond its strongholds to provide a clear project capable of winning all those who oppose the right wing.

Two specific problems it faces are the refusal of the centre-left Unity group to agree a joint slate, and its own expulsion of activists in the Employment Service who stood their own candidates in departmental elections, in opposition to Left Unity's accommodation to government policies.

But for all its weaknesses, Left Unity is the only real alternative to the right-wing at national level: all activists who want to see the back of PCS' current misleaders should work hard, over the next month, for a Left Unity victory.

Livingstone leaves us stuck with plan B

NEW LABOUR continues to reel over Ken Livingstone's challenge to Frank Dobson and the support he is receiving. Ken still has a lead of 45% even after the initial wave of support after he announced his candidacy had subsided.

This is based on a widespread backlash against the rightward march of Blairism and Millbank manipulation. A Livingstone victory, which now seems unstoppable, will be seen as a major blow against the control freak tendency in Millbank and Blair's right-wing project.

But it is more than that. This candidacy has the potential to change the landscape of British politics and is welcomed by all those who are frustrated and disappointed by New Labour's time in office. It is a situation with huge potential for the left.

New Labour's crisis stretches far beyond London. They have abandoned their traditional supporters in favour of middle England and big business. The effects of this were felt in a series of election results over the past year where the Labour vote collapsed dramatically.

This, along with the Livingstone challenge, has created a new political situation which poses the possibility of a broad-based alternative to the left of Labour for the first time in the post-war period.

In this Ken Livingstone carries with him the aspirations of a very large number of people who are looking for change and for an alternative. This is true whether he recognises it or not. Unfortunately he seems not to recognise it, or has chosen not to do so.

It was clear that Ken had turned his back on these supporters when he called on them to stay inside the Labour Party, an appeal

which is in the direct interests of Millbank. He has the view that he will get back into the party himself at some point in the future. This seems fanciful, but again it helps to hold the line for the Blairites.

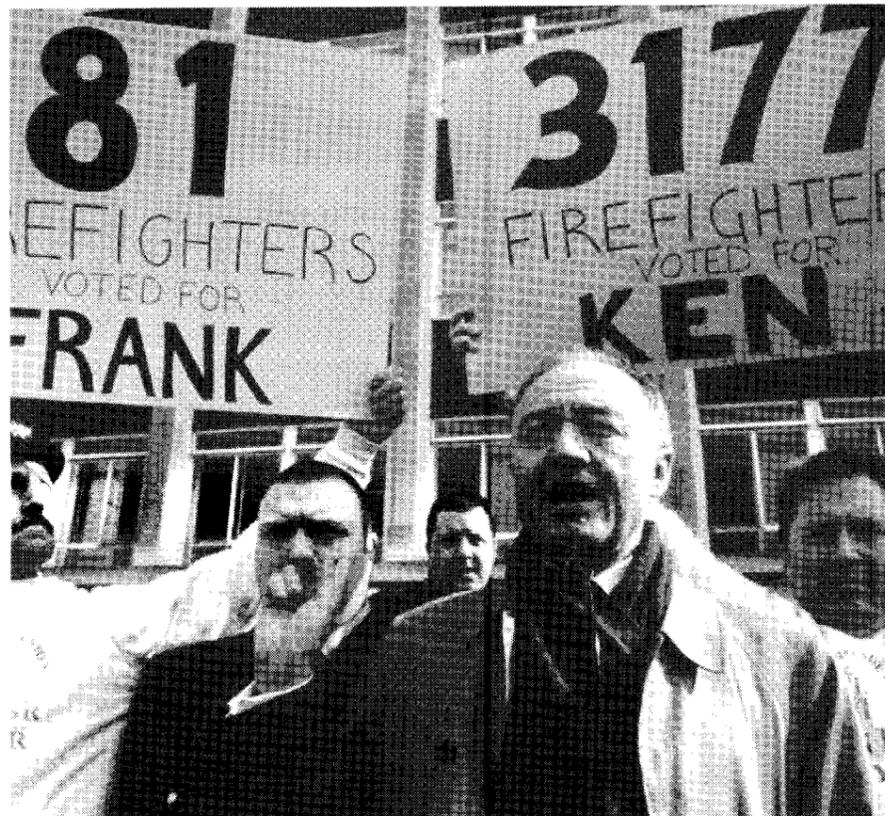
He also made it clear, as he declared his candidacy, that he will not form a new party. While launching a new party immediately would not have been the right thing to do, he is not organising his base of support at all. This wastes the enormous potential of his move as well as depriving those who want to work for him of a forum for political debate.

Instead Livingstone's response to the mass support he has received has been ever more populism. He presents himself as "the best man for the job" rather than as a political alternative to new Labour.

But for socialists, Ken Livingstone as mayor is not an end in itself. What is needed is not Ken Livingstone standing as an independent on a populist platform, but him standing on a socialist platform. He should have organised a socialist slate for the Assembly to support his campaign for Mayor.

Only by doing this and organising his supporters around a political alternative to new Labour can the full potential of the current situation be realised. And there is no doubt that if he did so, even now, the response would be huge. Not only would current Labour Party members join him, but so would others who have left in disgust at Blair's trajectory. Thousands who have voted Labour in the past would become involved.

To turn his back on such a potential is a stab in the back to all those who oppose new Labour. It deprives the workers' and social movements of the real potential of the situation. It is a major climb-down for someone



Andrew Ward

who has presented himself as a leader of the left in various incarnations for over 20 years.

Given all of this, the London Socialist Alliance (LSA) has responded very positively to the real dynamics underway. The LSA gives full support to Ken Livingstone for Mayor and is standing its own slate for the Assembly.

This it takes the anti-Blairite dynamic of the Livingstone campaign and fuses it with the socialist perspective of the LSA. On the ground, support for the LSA is broader than anyone initially expected.

The LSA has rightly continued to demand that Ken Livingstone changes his mind. He should stand on a socialist platform, with a slate based on some form of democratic selection within the left and the wider labour and trade union movement.

The LSA would give way, at any stage, to such a slate. But it seems likely now that not only will Livingstone not stand such a slate but will in fact go it alone.

But it is not just Ken Livingstone who has failed to rise to the challenge of building a socialist alternative out of this situation. The Labour left, and in particular the MPs, have been in the best position to influence him in the right direction. But they dramatically failed to do so.

They seem to have lost the plot at the point where the battle broke. Some left MPs have gone further and are actively campaigning for Dobson.

All this is creating great opportunities for the LSA, and it is responding accordingly. All those involved have a responsibility to develop its potential to the full and to ensure that the LSA continues after May 4.

But we have to be clear: positive as the LSA campaign is, it is not the preferred option for developing a fight back against Blairism.

It is sad that the person who was in the best position to develop this dynamic – which is in itself far bigger than him – has turned his back on its potential.

Who's cheering Brown?

GORDON BROWN's Budget on March 21 tried to straddle two stools, and wound up in danger of satisfying neither of the contending interest groups he wanted to keep happy.

On the one hand, he was determined to keep New Labour's big business "partners" happy by handing out even more cuts in business taxes and avoiding any increased taxes on top salaries.

On the other, he has come under pressure to funnel some of his growing war-chest of unspent tax surpluses into welfare spending, to placate growing disaffection and demoralisation among Labour's supporters and core vote.

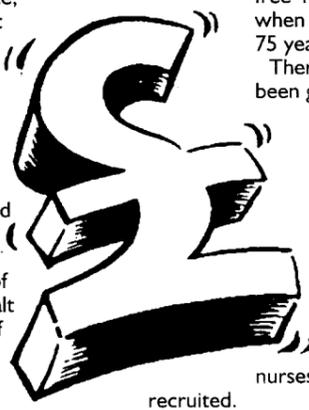
On the first objective he broadly succeeded, with further cuts in capital gains tax, cuts in road tax on lorries, and by maintaining Britain's astoundingly low levels of employer National Insurance contributions. Nor did he antagonise the fat cats by lifting the reactionary "cap" on

National Insurance, which means that those earning £100,000 a year pay no more NI than those on £22,000.

But many employers had desperately hoped for measures that would bring down the value of the pound and halt the decimation of manufacturing industry: Brown, like the ill-fated Norman Lamont, clearly believes that in his quest to squeeze out inflation a growth of unemployment is "a price worth paying".

But as a giveaway Budget it flopped for lack of sufficient goodies being given away.

Children living in the most dire levels of poverty in this new millennium are given a £4 weekly benefit, but pensioners eking out an existence on the miserable state pension have to be content with a miserly 75p increase, with a



free TV license when they get to 75 years old.

There have been great fanfares over Brown's announcement of an extra £2 billion for the NHS budget this year, and 10,000 extra

nurses to be recruited.

But on closer examination only £600m of this new money has so far been passed on to health authorities and Trusts, with the remainder tied up to be released only subject to rigorous strings: the 10,000 "extra" nurses turn out to be the same "extra" nurses as Frank Dobson (remember him?) promised to recruit last year.

On education, too, the extra £1 billion promised is to be used to ram through Labour's unpopular reforms,

with the first £300m allocated directly to schools in a deliberate snub to elected local education authorities.

For those on benefits, for the long queues waiting for affordable housing, for students and staff in higher education, and for the elderly people dependent on dwindling social services – now facing another round of cuts and increased charges – there was barely even a mention.

Few workers will feel inclined to celebrate the 1p in the pound tax cut handed to them by a tight-fisted Chancellor who is doing his bit to make Britain a meaner, harder place for the working class.

As a bid to win back Labour's core vote it was a half-hearted effort, and the coming elections in May are likely to register a vigorous thumbs down from the electorate, for whom only the ludicrous, reactionary ineptitude of the Tory opposition now acts as much of an incentive to back New Labour.

Stop Russia 2000



President Putin

As Russian Premier Putin is swept to Presidential election victory on the back of his barbarous war against Chechnya, it is possible that he will soon be visiting Britain.

On April 19-20 the Russo-British Chamber of Commerce have organised a major conference **Russia 2000** which is billed as the biggest international business conference in Britain this year. Speakers include Chubais, author of voucher privatisation, Chernomyrdin, former Prime Minister and now head of Russia's gas monopoly, Zyuganov from the Russian Communist Party, and ultra-right wing leader Zhirinovskiy.

The Campaign to Stop the War in Chechnya is calling a protest outside the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre, Westminster, from 4.30-8pm on April 19 under the slogans:

- * Stop Russia's war in Chechnya, * Stop the Market Madness, * Stop Zhirinovskiy.

Labour Left Briefing ducks the challenge

Veronica Fagan

In days when it is hard to find a single Labour Party member, never mind voter, who will even out their cross on a bit of paper for Frank Dobson, it seems at first sight strange that *Labour Left Briefing* should fail to call for a vote for Livingstone.

The current issue of the magazine contains an editorial which ducks this key issue - while it implies strong support for Livingstone it does not argue that readers should campaign or even vote for him. Inside there are pages that rightly condemn the Millbank fix but fail to draw political conclusions for the future.

Then there are a series of articles that attack Livingstone for standing against New Labour. There is a very positive article from Mike Marqusee arguing for support for the London Socialist Alliance, which we reprint on p of this paper. But Marqusee is clearly isolated in Briefing.

Chaos in action at a time when new Labour is facing the biggest crisis in its history. The roots of this lie in a series of factors.

Some involved seriously underestimate the particular nature of Blairism, seeing new Labour's betrayals as no different from that of other right-wing Labour governments.

For others it is impossible to conceive of any political alternative to the Labour Party. Still others feel that Blair has transformed the party and won't be stopped but have been thrown into confusion by Livingstone's demand that they stay in new Labour and keep their heads down.

Whether *Labour Left Briefing* will survive remains to be seen.

Trade unions backing the London Socialist Alliance

- Tower Hamlets Health Care UNISON
- East Finchley ASLEF
- Hackney Joint Borough Services Committee (TGWU, GMB, UCATT, UNISON)
- Islington NUT
- Hackney NUT
- Waterloo RMT
- Willesden RMT
- London Fire & Civil Defence Authority UNISON
- Hammersmith Metropolitan Line RMT
- Hackney & Tower Hamlets Benefits Agency PCS
- Holborn GMB
- North & North West London CWU
- Lewisham NUT

The following unions have passed resolutions supporting Livingstone:

- CWU West End Amalgamated branch
- CWU West London branch
- CWU North/North West London branch
- CWU South East London Postal
- CWU London Regional Political Committee
- Islington UNISON branch
- RMT London District Council
- RMT Hammersmith & City Line branch
- ASLEF East Finchley branch
- MSF Wembley-Hendon 640 branch
- GMB Holborn branch

If you have further information please contact Pete on 0207 624 0032 or petfirmin@gn.apc.org



RMT strike to defend Sarah Safety before profit!

RMT train crew based at Waterloo struck on Thursday 23rd March in defence of Sarah Friday, sacked by South West Trains, on trumped up charges, for campaigning over rail safety. Only a handful of scabs came to work out of the one hundred and eighty workers called out. Over twenty members joined all day picket lines outside the station. Whilst services into Waterloo ran with guards and drivers from other depots SWT was forced to cancel a significant number of services.

Another strike day has been set and the RMT is now to ballot all train crew working for SWT. If SWT refuse to reinstate Sarah they face a series of strike days which will totally shut down services.

RMT members at Waterloo are very angry at Sarah's sacking. They understand it is an attack on all their conditions. And, despite being forced to work on the strike day, train crew at other depots did what they could to support us. Many refused to work their rest days rather than cover

Waterloo jobs. A number of RMT Branches have asked to be balloted over their own grievances and we are confident that we can successfully extend the dispute.

Management have been shocked by the level of support - a five to one vote for strike action. The local manager is showing the strain. On the eve of the first strike he came into the guards mess room shouting and swearing at the workers there, only to have to return half an hour later to sheepishly apologise. Support is pouring in. As well as

sizeable donations to our strike fund from RMT Branches we have also received significant support from other union branches. MSF London Region, teachers from Ealing and various trades councils are among the thirty or so organisations who have responded in the last two weeks. The regional committee of the CGT from northern France has sent a message of support and faxed a letter of protest to SWT (French rail workers operate trains into Waterloo from Lille).

Further messages of support and donations are needed - to Sarah Friday Reinstatement Campaign c/o 3 Blades House SE11 5TW. Fax to 020 7207 3781. (Cheques made payable to "Waterloo RMT")

UNISON policy stand will make it hard for Dobbo

For the forthcoming mayoral elections in London, UNISON has taken up its own version of the old John F Kennedy quote "Ask not what your country can do for you: ask what you can do for your country."

Instead of debating which candidate they should endorse, the union's London Affiliated Political Fund has voted with no opposition to demand of candidates where they stand on UNISON's policies.

In place of the usual rubber stamping of whatever candidate the Labour Party sees fit to impose, which has led to the union donating £500 to an anti-union NHS Trust boss running on Labour's slate for the Greater London Authority, UNISON has drawn up a manifesto for public services, and is inviting

"As the leading voice for better public services in the capital, UNISON will be campaigning for: A new deal for NHS staff

UNISON is not prepared to stand by as waiting lists grow and NHS staff remain underpaid, undervalued and demoralised. We aim to make working for the NHS a more attractive proposition through the negotiation of better terms and condi-

tion and under-funding of local authority services.

tion and under-funding of local authority services. This will obviously be extremely difficult for Frank Dobson, since it contains specific opposition to the Private Finance Initiative which he implemented while Health Secretary, and the privatisation of the London tube.

But it should be no problem for Ken Livingstone, who is already on record supporting many of the key demands. Other unions have also shown interest in the UNISON proposals which offer a stark alternative to the policies of New Labour in government.

Publication of the full text has been delayed - apparently by interference from UNISON officials - so we carry the full details here.

tions of service and improvements to your safety and well-being at work.

Ending crisis management and under-funding in local government

20 years of under-funding in local government have created excessive demands on the workforce and a reliance on the goodwill of staff rather than properly funded services. London UNISON campaigns alongside many of our branches against the continued privatisa-

tion and under-funding of local authority services.

Campaigning for a living wage of £5.00 per hour

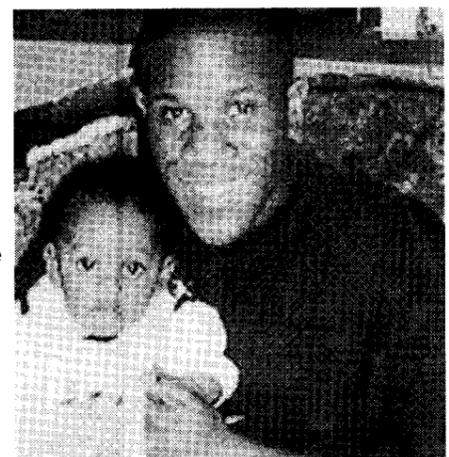
London is one of the world's most expensive cities to live in. And workers' salaries need to reflect this. To put an end to in-work poverty, UNISON is campaigning locally and nationally for a minimum wage of £5.00 per hour and a significant increase in London Weighting.

Opposing the Private Finance Initiative (PFI)

As a means of funding health-care and local government services, the PFI is proving to be a costly, profit-driven and unpopular quick fix solution, damaging job security and public services in the process. No wonder UNISON and many other organisations want to see the tube kept out of the private sector and are united in campaigning for publicly funded services and an end to PFI and Public Private Partnerships.

Tackling racism and discrimination in our services

Throughout the public services, whether it be a matter of employment or equal access to services, UNISON is solidly com-



Victim of police racism: UNISON member Roger Sylvester died in north London.

mitted to fighting institutional racism, sexism, homophobia and all forms of discrimination. With our record of support for the Stephen Lawrence, Ricky Reel and Roger Sylvester Campaigns for Justice, UNISON will continue to play a major part in ensuring fighting discrimination is a priority issue in all the capital's public services.

Affordable housing, closer to work

The overheated housing market and high rents mean that - even for those on an average salary - it is becoming impossible to live and work in the capital. UNISON is campaigning for the Mayor to carry out a commitment to build new affordable social housing which is to be made available to public sector workers - so the choice to work in London is not based solely on whether you can afford to live here.

JOHN PILGER
(writer and TV
broadcaster)

"I SUPPORT the London Socialist Alliance slate because it's critical that real socialists have our backing. We have to stop politics becoming something that is engineered by Labour Party spinners."

KEN LOACH
(film director)

"IT'S GREAT news that London Socialist Alliance candidates are standing. Blair has taken manipulation by Labour leaders to new despicable depths, dragging the wretched Dobson in his wake. Now at last there are people who will stand up for everyone who lives and works in London."

SUKHDEV**REEL, mother
of Ricky Reel**
(speaking in support of
the London Socialist
Alliance)

"I SUPPORT any cause that fights to ensure people get justice."

TARIQ ALI**(political
activist, writer
and TV broad-
caster)**

"GIVEN THE catastrophe New Labour has become I think it is important to have real socialists standing in the London election. I will be giving my full support and backing to the London Socialist Alliance."

LSA campaign**A week on the stump****As the London Socialist
Alliance election
campaign starts to hot
up we asked LSA
candidate GREG TUCKER
to give a personal view
of the campaign.****Thursday**

Off to Notting Hill. After addressing an RMT Branch a quick dash down the road to an LSA public meeting. The local candidate, Christine Blower, is taking up issues affecting the community.

Suresh Grover talks on police racism. He has just come from a meeting with Paul Boateng concerning Satpal Ram. A typical LSA meeting - as well as arranging local stalls and leafleting, plans are made to build local campaigns and take up broader issues.

Friday

No meetings this evening - we are allowed to rest occasionally. The local paper, the *South London Press*, has six separate articles favourably mentioning the LSA and our candidates.

Saturday

Out on our stall in Brixton. Every week we get a better response. People are signing up to work for the campaign - over thirty this morning.

Donations are rolling in. Whilst our stalls across London are getting a good reception we get reports that

the Labour Party just cannot get its members out to campaign at all.

Sunday

Over to Southall for another public meeting. Sukdev Reel gives a moving speech about how the police failed to deal with her son's murder. Local activists give their endorsement to the LSA. Heckled by the SLP - asking "How dare we support Ken Livingstone?" The only effect seems to be to increase the donations supporters give at the end of the meeting.

LSA**Monday**

At the last minute I am asked to speak at a meeting in Romford. There are so many LSA meetings going on, it is sometimes hard to find enough candidates to go round. Half the meeting is made up of Labour Party members. A former councillor explains how the Labour council is attacking its workforce and privatising services.

Tuesday

I have been invited to Tower Hamlets UNISON to debate with Labour. Twenty years ago I worked

there as a dustman, and was a member of the NUPE branch.

The "dust" has now been privatised - by the Labour candidate! In the end he doesn't show, and instead they send someone who turns out to be a Livingstone supporter.

His only argument is that we should hang on in the Labour Party because things might improve some day. No one is convinced. One UNISON member comes up afterwards to tell me, "I could never stand the loony left - but somewhere along the way I seem to have become one of them!"

At the LSA organising meeting that night it is clear that things are going better than we expected all across London, but we have set ourselves a massive task. In the next week we will be producing one and a half million election addresses. We have to raise the money to pay for them, and then get them delivered!

Wednesday

First a local meeting at Waterloo. Plans are made to leaflet nearby estates.

Theresa Bennett, the local candidate speaks and then rushes off to join a demonstration against council housing sell-offs in Southwark.

Mark Steel explains how he spoke at a mass meeting of Crystal Palace supporters with a positive response. His campaign in Croydon is going well - unlike Frank Dobson's.

Last week there, twenty people had turned up to an internal Labour Party meeting to organise for Dobbo: but eighteen declared they

supported Livingstone, leaving only the local MP and Party Chair! Of the eighteen most were happy to take LSA literature.

Meet up with Theresa again at a meeting to launch a Lambeth Campaign to Defend Council Housing. The Southwark demo was a success. The Lambeth meeting is packed with council tenants angry about the threats being made by Labour against their right to decent, affordable housing.

LSA**Thursday**

On strike at Waterloo. Our RMT Branch has endorsed the LSA and we are pleased when LSA supporters join our picket line to help us give out our RMT leaflets.

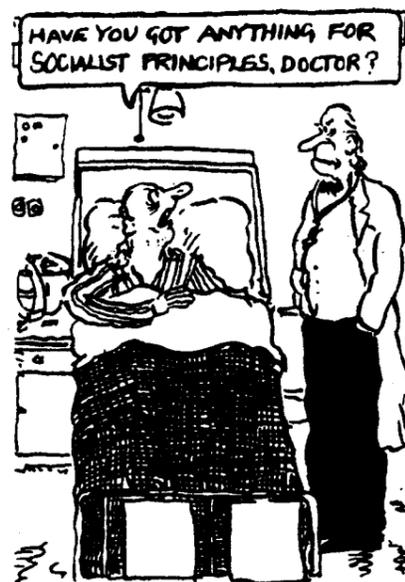
Despite having disrupted their journeys into work most commuters seem supportive. They understand that it is South West Trains that is to blame and support the LSA (and RMT) demand for re-nationalisation of the railways.

To round off a long day I get to relax at an LSA fund-raising social evening. Just wait until things get really busy when the campaign proper starts next month!

A real choice for Londoners**After twenty years
active membership
of the Labour Party
- including a stint
as editor of Labour
Left Briefing (LLB)
- Mike Marqusee
has left the Party
to campaign for
the London
Socialist Alliance.**

FOR MANY years now, LLB editorials have warned that the changes imposed on the Labour Party were creating a 'crisis of representation' in British politics. The reality of that crisis is now plain for nearly all to see, not only in the London elections, but in the record of the New Labour government.

In recent weeks this government has launched reactionary attacks on beggars in the streets, people on benefits and asylum seekers. It is actively stripping away basic democratic rights (including trial by jury), channelling wealth to the rich, extending privatisation into transport and education, and presiding over an unprecedented collapse in the NHS. Labour



governments have done many appalling things in the past, but in its scale and nature, the current regime's systematic opposition to the interests of its electoral supporters is something different, and demands a different response from socialists.

Over the last decade, while the country's political institutions, including the Labour Party, have been migrating decisively to the right, a sub-

stantial swathe of public opinion has been travelling in the opposite direction. Up till now, this sizeable current of opinion has lacked an effective means of expression at the ballot box. Hence, the popular support for Ken Livingstone, who (whether he likes it or not), represents to millions of people the possibility of a political alternative to the left of New Labour.

Of course, there is another side to the Ken groundswell: the post-ideological anti-politics of individual celebrity. Blair and his friends always saw elected big-city mayors as a means of depoliticising the electorate, and though events in London have not gone according to plan, the long-term danger remains.

In this context, the left needs to undertake two tasks simultaneously. First, it should campaign for Livingstone in

order to maximise the public expression of discontent with New Labour (something that will strengthen the left both inside and outside the party). Second, it should try to inject a left political agenda into that campaign and the London elections as a whole.

The most effective way to do that is to take part in the campaign organised by the London Socialist Alliance, which is building support for Ken and for a left slate of trades unionists, community activists, and journalists for the Greater London Assembly.

The London elections are a huge democratic exercise, in some respects unprecedented in British history. To offer no credible alternative to the New Labour-Tory consensus, to fail to send out an intelligible message to the London electorate, would be a major failure of omission on the part of socialists, and would re-enforce the crisis of representation.

If we continue to leave the electoral field to others, the beneficiaries of the reaction against New Labour will be the Lib-Dems, the SNP, Plaid Cymru and, in the end, the Tories and the far right.

Wherever electoral choice is narrowed down, as it is in Britain at the moment, the rich benefit and the poor suffer. Wherever the exercise of the franchise becomes hollow and ineffectual (as it would be in London if the likes of Ken and the LSA were absent from the ballot), apathy and cynicism flourish.

Dobson and the New Labour slate have proudly dubbed themselves the "pro-police, pro-business" choice. They are mounting a poisonous "tough on crime, tough on Ken" scare campaign, scapegoating the poor, dividing Londoners and playing on fear and prejudice. The LSA is working to oppose and expose this campaign.

With the greatest respect for those comrades who believe, for perfectly honourable reasons, that it is important to preserve their party membership, I would suggest that an abstention from this particular public contest is simply too high a price to pay.

The LSA has put together a strong list of candidates - Paul Foot, Mark Steel, Greg Tucker, Christine Blower, Jim Stanley, Ian Page, Janine Booth, among others - as well

as an impressive roster of notable supporters, including John Pilger, Mike Mansfield, Sukhdev Reel, Imran Khan, Suresh Grover, Paddy Joe Hill, Ken Loach, Jeremy Hardy and Ricky Tomlinson.

Through the media and at scores of local meetings and street stalls, it is making an impact on public perceptions of the coming elections. It is also beginning to attract trade union support, including CWU, FBU and UNISON branches.

It will be easy for comrades to catalogue the weaknesses (some real, some imagined) of the LSA, notably that the principal, but by no means the only, forces backing it are the organised left groups.

But coming from LLB readers, that would be a self-fulfilling prophecy. The doors to participation in the LSA are wide open, and the candidates' list has not been finalised.

The greater the number of Labour left-wingers who join the LSA campaign, the more likely it is to prove effective, electorally and politically, and help us all begin to resolve the crisis of representation.

(First published in *Labour Left Briefing*)

The last few weeks have seen the media effort to foment racist sentiments against asylum seekers – particularly Roma – reach unprecedented depths.

While some of the broadsheets have begun to pull back at little in response to criticism from their readership, they too participated fully in the initial phase.

Independent socialist **GRAHAM USHER** was so furious about these developments that he sent us the following article.

THE BRITISH press is at it again – attempting to whip up a crude, racist backlash with the latest in a series of desperate ravings about asylum seekers.

For example, on March 13, the Birmingham *Evening Mail* followed up its double page spread on “aggressive beggars” three days before with the headline: “Fury At Asylum Handout!”.

On the same day the *Daily Mail*, equally reliable for reactionary rantings, weighed in “with “£32,000 A Year Asylum Seeker!” whilst *The Sun* insisted that: “Britain Has Had Enough” as “Refugee Milks Us Of £32,000 Per Year!”.

These lurid headlines were all concerned with an Algerian man and his large family (eighteen), all of

Racist press gang are at it again!



New government, new Labour, same old racist hysteria

whom fled their country of origin fifteen months ago to escape a civil war-type situation. The family now has two council homes in inner Birmingham.

Anyway £32,000 split eighteen ways (£1,777 per person per year) is hardly “luxury” – any more than are mobile

phones and satellite television – another ludicrous claim by the press!

Further the situation of the man in question, Mohammed Kinewa, is a clear exception to the situation facing most asylum seekers who, in Britain, normally face virtual intern-

ment in concentration camp-type centres in Middlesex or Oxfordshire. Others await drawn-out hearings, frequently surviving on little more than £40 worth of food tokens.

Diversion

It is always an easy option to deflect attention away from social issues such as homelessness and the fact that nearly three quarters of a million homes currently stand empty and neglected in Britain.

Instead of focusing on this, or unemployment, or poverty, the media is saturated with fanciful claims that “Refugees are living in luxury and milking us dry”.

To seize on this example, as the racist tabloid press has done, and try to make it out as the norm, is as distorted as it is despicable.

It is also important to point out that, all too often, the hypocritical British capitalist system and its political rulers in the shape of Labour and Tory governments covertly (and sometimes not so covertly) supporting regimes that cause people to flee for their lives in the first place.

The same publications which now berate one Algerian family fleeing a life

threatening situation were comparatively restrained when Margaret Thatcher and other monsters were recently “taking afternoon tea” with Pinochet (a man who headed a vicious South American military dictatorship which violently overthrew a democratically elected, leftist government in 1973 and is known to have slaughtered tens of thousands of its political opponents with the direct connivance of the “democratic” USA and its shadowy CIA).

Now Labour Home Secretary Jack (“I hate aggressive beggars”) Straw has decided that the odious Pinochet is “too sick” to face extradition or a proper trial!

Owners

We should not take lectures from a press which tells us what its wealthy owners want us to hear and read, not least when *The Sun* and company also rant on about “Gypsy Spongers” and “Romanian Spongers...begging and building mansions on OUR handouts”.

This is not informed or objective journalism but grossly oversimplified, distorted and deeply xenophobic trash, as is the hysteria surrounding the supposedly

serious problem of “aggressive begging”.

Fears

It is cynically designed to home in on some of people’s most basic fears when in the streets.

Among those enlisted to help whip up openly racist sentiments among ordinary working people and is the bosses’ favourite trade unionist – Kenneth Jackson [I refuse to call him ‘Sir Ken’] general secretary of the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (*The Sun*, March 14).

This man is currently retailing the tired old chauvinistic, anti-foreigner, semi-racist rubbish so beloved of old-guard trade union bureaucrats, especially when claiming to speak for the ‘labour heartlands’.

Jackson does not object to the real scandal: that finance is free to roam the globe at will in the search for higher profits, while similar freedom of movement is denied to labour – especially when the worker has a black skin.

This is the reason for divisive and racist immigration controls: and these, like the capitalist system which breeds them, must be fought!

Sniping from the Left

By Charlie van Gelderen



From Keir Hardy to Tony Blair

When the Labour Party fought its first general election its banners proclaimed “VOTE for the LABOUR PARTY the hope of the WORKER.”

“SOCIALISM – A system of government that will make poverty impossible”

Now, 100 years after that historic meeting in Farringdon, what have we got? Not socialism but capitalism, apparently triumphant. Why is this?

Labour has been in government five times – in government, but not in power.

Despite decisive majorities in 1945 – and again in 1997, it only tinkered with the capitalist system.

To Labour’s leadership, from Ramsay MacDonald in the 1920s to Attlee, Wilson, Callaghan and Blair, what mat-

tered was the trappings of ministerial office.

MacDonald openly betrayed by not only entering but leading a so-called “national government”, which was actually a Tory government.

MacDonald held the office of Prime Minister, but it was the Tories’ iron master, Stanley Baldwin, who pulled the strings.

George V approved of MacDonald – and he enjoyed risqué joke sessions with right wing union leader Jimmy Thomas. Elizabeth II apparently gets along very well with Tony Blair.

Tony Blair has gone one better than MacDonald, transforming the Labour Party into a more efficient Conservative Party.

Someone in Millbank must have slipped up. The Centenary issue of the *New Labour* magazine quotes Robert Browning’s poem *The Lost Leader* (written against Alfred Lord Tennyson when he became Poet Laureate),



Tony Blair and Ramsay MacDonald: both fond of “partnership” with employers

which was used to attack MacDonald.

“Just for a handful of silver he left us,
“Just for a riband to stick in his coat”

Does it remind you of someone – perhaps a little more contemporary?

Banking mad

For the greater part of the century, one of the major planks in Labour’s platform was the nationalisation of the financial institutions, especially the Bank of England.

Labour’s current Chancellor of the Exchequer (what a grand name for a Finance Minister) has handed over control of the nation’s finances to the Governors of the Bank of England – not a worker amongst them!

The working class, in whose interest the Labour Party was

founded, has very little reason to celebrate its 100th birthday.

It now has to start all over again to build a party – a real socialist party – the only hope for the workers.

In black and white

In the days, no the years, when the people of South Africa were fighting against apartheid, some of us tried to explain that apartheid and capitalism were intertwined, that you could not get rid of the one without the other.

We were derided, not least by the Stalinists of the South African Communist Party (SACP) and even some who owed allegiance to the Fourth International.

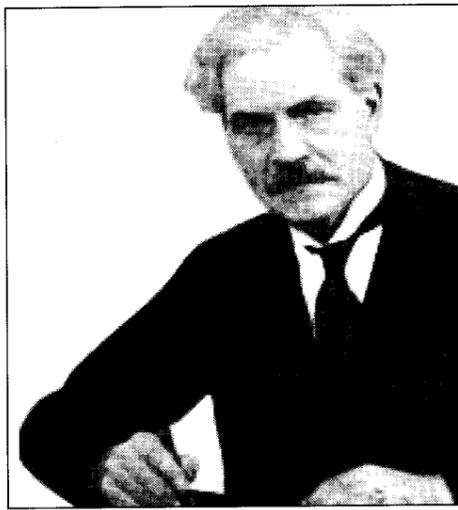
When President de Klerk proclaimed the end of

apartheid and the release of Nelson Mandela, when the ANC-led coalition was swept into power with a huge majority, they jeered – we told you so! Who was right?

Addressing a meeting of the in Queenstown, the SACP regional chairperson, John Kibi, called for parity pay for all races in South Africa, saying that blacks continued to receive poorer wages than other race groups.

“We live in a very rich and happy land,” he said, “but we know that it is a land of suffering and starvation The fascist (sic) government and its friends abroad talk about the wave of prosperity in South Africa – prosperity for whom?”

He failed to remind his audience that his party, the SACP, was an integral part of the government which serves owners, farmers, and foreign



investors.

White workers had also benefited from the boom and had been given a monopoly of skilled jobs... the masses of non-whites, especially

Africans, have not benefited at all from this so-called prosperity... the payment gaps between black and white miners were also widening... annual African income was up to 15 times less than annual white income more and more profit was being squeezed out of cheap black labour.

“The only solution was equality in pay at all levels – from management to workers.”

Sounds almost like socialism!

Tee bloody hee, David

So now we know. New Labour’s ministers are not serious politicians but just a bunch of stand-up comedians.

When David Blunkett told the Labour Party Conference “Watch my lips – no selective education under a Labour government – no selection by examination or interview” he was only joking.

When pre-1997 election Labour leaders promised a democratic Second Chamber to replace the House of Lords, or when Tony Blair promised one-person-one vote for the election of a candidate for London’s Mayor – they were only joking.

What a laugh!

Immigration detention: a growing injustice

Bill MacKeith,

There are five times more detention centre places today than in 1993. Then, there were some 200 immigration detention places in Harmondsworth detention centre (near Heathrow airport) and Haslar prison (near Portsmouth).

Then came Campsfield near Oxford (in 1993), Tinsley House (1995), and detention wings at Rochester prison (1996).

Oakington "reception centre" near Cambridge has just opened. Half of Lindholm prison near Doncaster is to be a "detention wing" (110 places); and Aldington prison near Folkestone will be converted to a detention centre as announced last July.

And they are still talking about those detention centre "floatels" (sister ships of the Herald of Free Enterprise no longer used by oil and gas rig crews).

The recent increase in the number of refugees in Oxford has led to speculation that the abandoned US Air Force base at Upper Heyford in north Oxfordshire may be next on the government's list.

Around 10,000 people are detained under the 1971 Immigration Act each year in the UK, and 700-1,000 are imprisoned at any one time in detention centres and (in breach of UN guidelines) in prisons.

To imprison someone is to criminalise them. They must have done something wrong if they're locked up, mustn't they? In other words, they must be criminals! A reasonable assumption in normal

life.

The treatment of a refugee arriving at Heathrow or Dover is anything but "normal".

On the say-so of junior immigration officers, around 15% of people claiming asylum on arrival are arbitrarily selected to be locked up in a detention centre or prison for an unlimited period (usually months, sometimes over 2 years).

This is without being charged or convicted of any crime, without written reasons being given, and without proper legal and medical support.

This is much worse than the treatment meted out to a convicted criminal.

Detention is one of the injustices meted out to refugees and asylum seekers. It goes with the (relatively new) system of vouchers - not cash benefits - for asylum seekers, vouchers that total 70% of official poverty level income; with the constant stream of racist "scandal" stories and the idea of "Britain as the soft touch" - both all too often promoted by the government itself.

This is the politics of deliberate social exclusion. It is also - as most asylum seekers are black - institutionalised racism. And it comes from a government whose ministers explicitly state that it seeks an end to both social

exclusion and institutionalised racism.

In the last few years, Britain and Germany have led the way in immigration detention in Europe, not only imprisoning more refugees and migrants at home, but urging, even paying for, the construction of prisons/camps in Poland, Romania and other states to

END STATE RACISM



the east, and in Italy to the south.

There have been many protests by detainees in the prisons/centres: verbal

Andrew Wliard



der.

Popular revulsion at the escalation in detentions has been greatest in Italy. Two years ago protesters forced the closure of a newly opened detention centre at Trieste.

Last month there were nationwide demonstrations following the burning to death of four refugees in a refugee prison in Sicily; later the closure of the new detention centre in Milan was announced (a "better" one will replace it).

There is a great deal of resistance - most of it unreported - inside the detention centres and by supporters outside.

In Britain there is a big need for more local campaigning to close Tinsley House (Gatwick airport), Rochester prison's "detention wings", and the new centres at Aldington and Lindholm, alongside the campaigns to close Campsfield, Harmondsworth and Oakington.

In Parliament MPs still cravenly support the unsupportable: barely a handful of Labour MPs voted against last year's appalling Immigration and Asylum Act.

The chair of the House of Commons Committee on Refugees said at a meeting in Oxford that his committee had never even discussed the

question of immigration detention.

But given that the developments are Europe-wide - driven by European Union member-states' interior ministers conferring at secret meetings - resistance needs to be more co-ordination on a European scale also.

The demand of the conference on immigration detentions held in Fernay Voltaire, France, in 1998, that there should be a debate on detentions in the European Parliament, has never been heeded. And the MEPs should not let the interior ministers get away with their secrecy.

An international conference to combat immigration detention is currently being planned by the Campaign to Close Campsfield. It is to be held in Oxford in September.

Useful contacts:

- Campaign to Close Campsfield 01865 558145/557282/726804
- Cambridge Against Refugee Detention 01223 462187/07957 558612
- Close Harmondsworth Campaign 0181 571 5019

Labour sets capitalist spongers onto refugees

Charlie van Gelderen

The New Labour government is planning to ship 400 asylum seekers to the former army barracks in Oakington, north of Cambridge.

Cambridge Against Refugee Detention (Cards), is organising a vigorous campaign, which has attracted good support in the local area, as well as linking up with similar campaigns elsewhere.

Nearly 500 marched in support of the campaign through the crowded streets of Cambridge city centre, on Saturday, March 3.

The centre will imprison children as well as adults behind fences and under guard. It will be run for profit by the notorious Group 4.

Blair's government is anx-



Howard's grim legacy lingers on under Jack Straw

ious to show that they can equal if not outdo the racist immigration policy of the Tories.

Once upon a time, in fact, not so very long ago, Jack

Straw, when in opposition, reminded the then Home Secretary, Michael Howard, that they were both descendants of refugees. This government also includes Peter Hain, once a refugee from the apartheid regime in South Africa.

Not satisfied with locking up people who have committed no crime, the government is giving the screw another turn. From April, asylum seekers will not be entitled to benefits in cash.

A voucher scheme is being introduced, which will of course be managed by private enterprise, the French company Sodexo Pass, who runs a similar scheme in Germany.

Every adult asylum seeker will be entitled to vouchers worth £36.54 a week, plus

a special voucher for £10 a week that can be exchanged for cash.

"Several major multiple groups have already signed up as Sodexo Pass Trading Partners - don't miss this revenue making opportunity" say promotional brochures circulated by the company".

Sainsbury's and Asda are amongst the chains who have already got involved.

Spelling out how participating firms can raise extra benefit, Sodexo informs them that "Vouchers cannot be exchanged for cash. Change should not be given.

If goods are purchased to the value of £4.50 with a £5 voucher, the 50p change should not be handed back, but you, as a Trading Partner, will receive the full value for that £5 voucher".

Nice work if you can get it?

The gutter press has now turned the spotlight on the "hordes" of women, all carrying babies, of course, begging in the London Underground. That doughty Christian defender of human rights, Ann Widdecombe, has demanded that they should be locked up before they commit any offence.

Even Chief Superintendent Hoston of British Transport Police has shown more compassion than the Tory front bench spokesperson, conceding that "it would be reasonable to assume that they (the women) are begging because they consider themselves short of money."

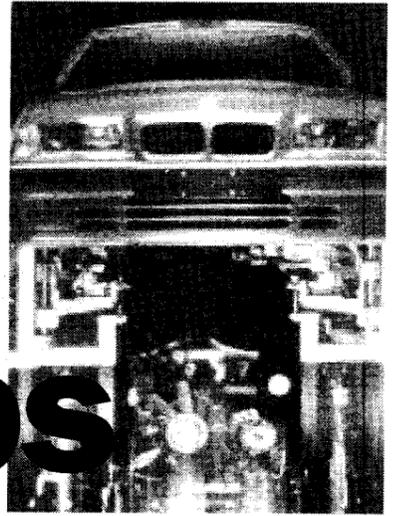
It is nonsense to adopt the racist language of Thatcher and Enoch Powell's and talk of this country being 'swamped' by 'hordes' of immigrants. Since the 1950s more people have left the UK than have come to live here.

Why are these people leaving? Presumably they are 'economic refugees', seeking improvement in their standard of living. Unlike the majority of those seeking asylum here, they are not fleeing from torture, rape, the threat of death by government agents, or people who have oppressed their relatives being massacred.

Should they all be sent back here?

Act now to challenge BMW asset-strippers

How concessions cost more car jobs



A Rover worker

On March 15, the German newspaper *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* revealed that the BMW board were about to discuss a plan to sell Rover cars to a group of venture capitalists called Alchemy.

The plan involved the Longbridge plant in Birmingham continuing to produce Rover 25s and 45s and old Minis until they ran out, and then becoming a specialist factory making MG sports cars.

At best this would involve the loss of 7,500 of the 9,000 jobs at the plant. In reality once the knock on effect on component, supplier, service and dealer networks are taken into account 50,000 jobs are likely to go.

Land Rover in Solihull would be sold to Ford. Although this would not produce immediate redundancies, Ford immediately announced that it would give them "economies of scale" in the 4x4 market - opening up scope for rationalisation, and thus job cuts.

Rover's Cowley plant in Oxford would stay with BMW.

The production lines for the new BMW-badged Mini would be moved to Cowley from Longbridge, and BMW would proceed to produce that car for itself.

Cowley would also produce the luxury class Rover 75 for Alchemy.

It immediately became quite obvious why the 75 production was not to be moved: the effect of BMW's shock announcement on the dismemberment of its British subsidiary was that sales of all Rover models stopped, as buyers wondered whether they would be able to get parts, or whether the 3-year warranty meant anything.

As we go to press, the latest news is that production of the Rover 75 is to be halted for another month after disastrous feedback from dealers, with sales at a standstill and orders cancelled after the BMW announcement. The extent to which production of this model will ever resume must be open to serious doubt.

BMW also declared that they intended to hold on to the Rover body & pressings plant in Swindon, but only while they tried to sell it to a specialist firm.

How feasible this might be, when a major part of the Swindon plant's work is for the decimated Rover range, is questionable. The most likely situation appears to be that it would soon close or be drastically cut in size.



Car workers can fight if their leaders will lead: pickets outside Land Rover, Solihull

The unions are saying that the immediate redundancies will be 9,500 in Rover, although this includes a figure of only 2,500 from Longbridge, and 500 from Cowley.

Union leaders seem to be making the assumption that some Rover cars will still be sold, over and above the enormous stocks that have built up already. But already supplier firms are shedding workers, and Rover plants have already got rid of hundreds of agency workers, who do not appear in anybody's figures.

BMW say the reason they have taken these decisions was the enormous losses that they were making: figures of up to £800 million are being quoted. It is no doubt true that they were making losses: but the important questions are what is the real figure - and why did its plans go so horribly wrong?

BMW bosses have blamed the strength of the pound, and the lack of Rover sales in the UK.

The first thing to say is that BMW brought the company for a song 6 years ago, when they took over from British Aerospace.

BAe had in turn been bought the company as Leyland cars from the Tory government, which saw a bargain-basement sale as the means of denationalising it. BAe was attracted to the possibility of slashing back production and selling off "surplus" factory sites, and had asset stripped quite extensively before they sold it on.

Once they had bought the company, BMW took all the decisions. At first they let the local management run things day to day, but all the

major decisions were made in Germany.

At that time BMW didn't have a 4x4 vehicle of their own, and the Rover deal meant they now owned Land Rover. Suddenly they built a plant in the USA producing BMW 4x4s.

They allowed the Rover models to become out of date, and took a very long time to prepare a replacement for the obsolescent 25 and 45. And although they did produce the new Rover 75, this is aimed at the luxury car market, where new models always take time to establish themselves.

Sales figures dropped when they ended production of the Rover 100 three years before its planned replacement - the new Mini, a car which conveniently fits into the BMW range - was ready.

So all the decisions that created the sales crisis were made by BMW.

But what of the figures themselves? How much of the losses were charges imposed on the Rover operation by BMW themselves, minimise any possible profit showing up in their accounts in Britain?

For example how much did BMW charge Rover for sending over managers 'on loan'? How much was charged for engineering work, or for research work? How much did Rover have to pay for their workers to be 'trained' on placements in Germany, where in fact the wound up merely working on BMW's production lines?

The biggest question of all is what proportion of the claimed losses are for the research and development of the new Mini and Rolls Royce models, from which BMW will still have the full benefit once they go into production. How much has Rover had to pay for devel-

opment of the new 4x4s, which BMW will now be able to produce in their American plant?

All of the Rover/BMW books revealing these financial details must be opened up to scrutiny by a committee of the Rover workers whose lives this decision will have decimated. This committee should also look back on the details of the BAe deal.

Far from Rover workers being to blame, they have followed their union leaders' advice, and done everything BAe and then BMW asked of them.

There was continuous concession bargaining. The "Rover Tomorrow" deal, in 1992 was a document full of commitments to "flexibility", which would supposedly be given in exchange for a commitment from the company of "jobs for life".

This was at the height of the 'Japanisation' period, introducing new management styles which were supposed to be the salvation of Rover as a car manufacturer.

When BMW took over, they agreed to continue with the 'jobs for life', but demanded more concessions to maintain it.

They gained a series of concessions from individual plants - and then in October 1998 BMW threw down a fresh ultimatum.

They threatened to close Longbridge unless workers agreed to a new "Working Time Account".

Under this scheme workers would continue to be paid if they were laid off - as they had been previously - but in future they would have to "pay back" the time when it suited the company to boost production.

BMW also achieved what was effectively a 2 year wage freeze, and the same deal also included the introduction of more extensive shift working, which meant the machinery in all the plants would be used to a greater degree.

Since then, BMW has also introduced large scale use of Agency workers, avoiding adding new staff to the company's payroll.

Though 1992 deal had been carried by a wafer-thin 51% majority of the workforce, the 3-1 majority for the 1998 deal was due to workers at Longbridge being persuaded to vote overwhelmingly in favour under the threat of closure.

In each instance the union leadership, notably Tony Woodley of the TGWU, argued that the deal on the table at the time was "the only way to save the company".

The present government, too, has played its part in the BMW-Rover fiasco, seeking to promote the New Labour notion of a "partnership" between workers and capital.

Last summer, still under the same threat from BMW that they would pull out of Longbridge, Trade Secretary Stephen Byers came up with a massive £125 million aid package to bail out the firm - a deal which almost immediately fell foul of the European Union.

Rover-BMW chair Joachim Milberg, while complaining even then of the strength of the pound, insisted that

Longbridge would be virtually rebuilt to double its capacity, in a massive investment programme.

Byers was fulsome in his praise for the deal, declaring "I wanted the Longbridge agreement to be one which heralded a new approach to government assistance to industry - a new approach which reflects a long term commitment and not a quick fix".

Nine months later the same Stephen Byers is picking his way through the wreckage, piecing together a "task force" to offer some hope of employment to the tens of thousands who stand to lose "jobs for life" with his "partner" firm in the West Midlands.

Union leaders, too, were over the moon at the way in which they appeared to have successfully prostrated themselves before the German car giant.

Tony Woodley, flagging up still more concessions that had been made to secure the deal, admitted that "the pain and loss at Rover still isn't over yet". Mr Woodley of course will not suffer the pain: he is happy to leave that to TGWU members. But he still felt able to complain that "My problems as chief negotiator are far from over - they are only beginning".

This was more true than he believed at the time.

More up-beat in his enthusiasm for the ill-starred deal was AEU leader and avid fan of "partnership", Sir Ken Jackson, who claimed the package "heralds a new era".



"We are particularly pleased about the future job security that this agreement will bring for all our members."
Roger Lyons, MSF, June 1999.



His view was echoed by fellow Blairite Roger Lyons of the white collar union MSF, who declared that "We are particularly pleased about the future job security that this agreement will bring for all our members."

This type of concession bargaining has taken place in a Dutch auction of jobs and conditions in plants all over Europe, leading to huge increases in productivity and a massive extension of anti-social shifts. Each plant has been able to produce much more - and one consequence of this is the growth of so-called "over capacity" in the car industry on a global scale. Now the chickens are coming home to roost.

The Rover-BMW fiasco is also part of a fundamental crisis facing British-based manufacturing industry.

The current strength of the pound against the Euro - itself a cornerstone in Gordon Brown's economic policy - means that British plants are the weak link in a growing drive towards the rationalisation of production across Europe, driven on by the logic of the EU single market.

Manufacturing industry within Britain sees no future remaining outside the Euro zone, and has been operating under the assumption that New Labour were keen to get into the Euro zone as soon as politically possible. The big firms thought this would be soon after the next election, following a referendum.

But things have changed. The anti-Europe xenophobia whipped up around British beef and asylum seekers, with the full support and involvement of the government itself, has increased reactionary opposition to the Euro - to a point where no one knows when Britain is likely to join the Euro zone or even whether there is to be a referendum.

Manufacturing companies, particularly in cars and car components, are not prepared to wait any longer. They either want to concentrate their production outside of Europe altogether - taking advantage of the highest levels of productivity available internationally - or they want to be inside the Euro zone.

Rover is just the first of a series of shocks to come. The Ford plant at Dagenham, which has been run down to a single model on a single shift is no longer viable under the conditions of today's car manufacture.

Urgent talks are going on between Ford and the government to try to avert closure and the loss of

thousands of jobs. But last month Ford management announced a sweeping review of its European manufacturing operations, aimed at cutting overall capacity.

The review will not be finalised until mid April, but Ford management has said that it will rule nothing out. The precarious situation of Dagenham is obvious. If Dagenham closes, the next Fiesta will be made in Cologne.

The rot does not stop there: the plight of BMW now leaves the future of Rolls-Royce Motors in the balance, and the Goodyear tyre making plant in Wolverhampton is also at risk with 2,500 jobs at stake. The plant went on short time last week and management refused to give the unions any assurances for its future. This follows cutbacks and redundancies at other tyre making plants in the Midlands.

And finally there is the question in all this as to whether a weakened and humiliated BMW will survive once it has got rid of its UK plants. The vultures are already circling.

So what are the government doing in all this? Absolutely nothing. New Labour is going all the way with today's global market. "There's nothing we can do," they say. "We are only the government: these are multi-national corporations we are dealing with."

They have to be confronted with the demand for nationalisation - which is allowable under EU rules.

What is not allowable under EU rules of course is for the government to put into these companies the money necessary to regenerate them after the ravages of their period in the private sector.

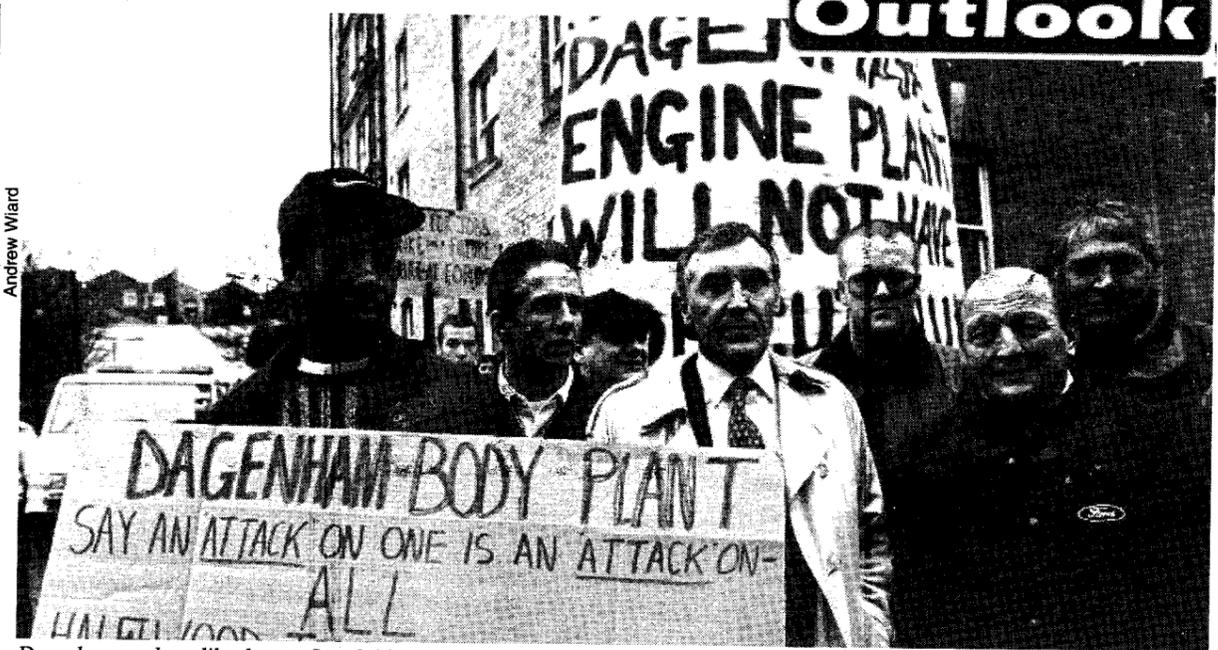
Far from saving jobs, years of concession bargaining by the unions has helped to pave the way to more plant closures.

The only answer for Rover and Ford workers faced with an increasingly aggressive employer is a fight to oppose the plans for rationalisation.

The demand must be that just as the workers have been obliged to stick to the concessions negotiated on their behalf by the unions, BMW must stick by the deal they signed promising 'jobs for life'.

This means that BMW must build a replacement for the 25 & 45 at Longbridge, and a new car at Cowley: similarly Fords should fulfil its agreement to build the new Fiesta at Dagenham.

If these companies refuse to do this, then they should be nationalised, alongside the components industry, with-out compensation.



Dagenham workers, like those at Longbridge and the rest of Rover face a determined management onslaught

No confidence in BMW or Ford Only union action can save jobs!

A Rover worker

50,000 jobs are at risk in the West Midlands motor industry, with more at stake in Swindon & Cowley. 50,000 more could face the axe in East London.

This is the greatest blow to workers in Britain since the 1992 pit closures. The huge job losses are also a massive blow to union organisation. They would leave just two General Motors plants, Chrysler's assembly plant, and the remnants of Ford as the only properly unionised car plants in the UK.

When 400 Rover shop stewards met at Gaydon last Tuesday, they rightly voted to campaign to keep the company together. This was a unanimous vote, despite the fact that in Solihull and Cowley some workers feel that their plants might have a future. It was explained that nobody could trust Ford or BMW to protect these workers' jobs.

The problem is that although there appears to be a 6 week leeway before the changes are made, this has not proven to be the case. Workers are already being laid off, and plans are being worked up to implement the job losses.

The unions have correctly called a national demonstration in Birmingham. But apart from this and desperate appeals to BMW, and other employers, they have made no call for action.

The TGWU chief negotiator Tony Woodley from the platform at Gaydon echoed the views of most shop floor speakers, calling for Rover to be nationalised - but even this demand is not being pushed with any form of action.

Longbridge should have been the immediate focus of action. Occupation of that plant would not only stop BMW's plan being implemented, but it would also encourage component workers whose jobs are at risk to take similar action, and give other threatened workers a

Dead Woodley

Tony Woodley now appears to have given up on any future for Rover. Despite a 'left' speech in favour of nationalisation at the Rover stewards' meeting, his main line of approach has always been to seek another car firm to buy the business.

This scenario has collapsed, and he is quoted in the *Observer* (26.3.00) saying "There is no outside manufacturer looking to purchase the whole of Rover. Tens of thousands of people are going to be sacked. The chances of having an ongoing, credible car business ... are nil."

So where do we go from here, Tony? What was that damn about nationalisation? If you won't lead, stand aside for those who will.

focus for supporting action. It would also point the way forward for Dagenham workers.

Of course it is difficult for Tony Woodley to argue for this. He has consistently shied away from any fight with BMW. At every moment of crisis, he has argued for workers to make more concessions.

This is also one of the reasons why respect is not high for him on the shop floor. But if he and other union officers don't act soon, then the car industry will go the way of the coal mines.

The first step must be action by the workforce: and then, on the basis of this fightback there should be an appeal to the BMW unions.

Some questions certainly need to be asked about the way the lionk with BMW has worked. The Rover workers come under the same European Works Council: what has happened to this?

Why weren't Rover workers told what was happening by the IG Metall representatives who sit on the BMW board?

Obviously Rover workers can't expect much support from these union bureaucrats, but what about in the BMW plants themselves?

After all if BMW can do this to Longbridge why not Munich?

At the time of the takeover, BMW said that they needed Rover for the

they have done is criticise the company for the way it carried out its decision. Now they are best of friends again.

The next demonstration should be outside Downing Street demanding the company is nationalised.

The TUC, too, has done little other than talk about changing the law so that workers cannot be sacked so quickly. No major company is going to fear this type of response.

Only if the unions fight back - hard - will the employers be forced to think twice.

Both the government and the TUC have been peddling the need for greater flexibility, and concession bargaining. This devastation is the result.

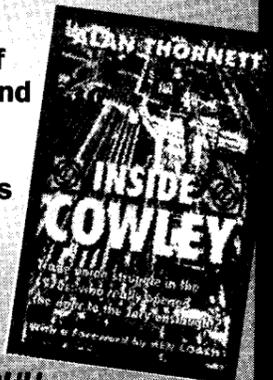
Greater productivity, and antisocial hours mean greater use of machinery - and speed up factory closures.

We cannot wait. Inactivity only allows the media to lull workers in to believing they have no choice.

End Concession bargaining! Fight to defend jobs! Occupy Longbridge now! Nationalise Rover and Ford

Have YOU read it yet?

ALAN THORNETT's gripping account of the fight for jobs and conditions in the Cowley car plant, from the mid 1970s to the 1990s. £10 plus £1.50 post and packing from Socialist Outlook, PO Box 1109, London N4 2UU



Power of a service even Thatcher couldn't kill

WHILE snipers on the left are right to be suspicious, there is no doubt that an extra £2 billion in the coming financial year is a major change of policy from the government – and as such a victory for campaigners and the wider public.

Indeed after years in which sloppy rhetoric from ill-informed leftists has increasingly dismissed the NHS as having already been “privatised” or already “collapsed”, Gordon Brown’s announcement is a testimony to its resilience – and the political strength of a tax-funded service, free at point of use.

The service which survived even Margaret Thatcher – who conducted a “review” in 1988 at her peak of power, but decided against any substantial privatisation, and failed to generate significant support for private medical insurance – now appears to have beaten back the more radical of New Labour’s “modernisers”.

Both Blair and Brown have felt forced to endorse the decidedly “old Labour” model of the NHS.

Blair’s responses to William Hague interestingly dropped his usual polite use of the term “Conservatives”, as he reminded MPs that “The Tories opposed the formation of the health service, and now they oppose the plan to modernise and reform it.” And Blair sounded even more old Labour in his rejection of private insurance as any solution and his conclusion that:

“What [Hague] has done today is put himself outside the consensus in the country that recognises that, yes, the health service needs more money, but it also needs to reform and change. We, the party that created the health service, will now work with people in the health service to rebuild it.”

By finding the extra cash to pump into its revival, Gordon Brown has also refuted those on the right who claimed it could only be afforded through massive increases in income tax.

Ministers were clearly becoming increasingly isolated in their ridiculous claims that the NHS had been given sufficient resources to cope, and eventually on the Frost programme in January Blair himself was the first to go “off message”.

He admitted publicly that the health service was under-funded, and declared a commitment to increase levels of spending towards the European average.



“You can't have a second opinion – I'm the only doctor left!”

Costly option

NEWS THAT 160,000 people last year paid privately from their savings for operations to escape NHS waiting lists is testimony not only to the length of queues, but the weakness of private medicine.

Still only one person in eight has any private medical insurance, most of those through workplace schemes. Those least likely to be able to afford insurance are the old and chronic sick who are most likely to need costly treatment.

The boss of Western Provident, one of the key private insurers, recently admitted that soaring private premiums – rising by as much as 60% this year – are driving even more people away.

Private medicine without insurance is ruinously expensive – as 160,000 know to their cost. The tax-funded NHS is still the best – and cheapest – way of sharing risk.



£2 billion extra for NHS

Just what the doctors ordered?

AFTER two years of frustration among health workers and campaigners seeking in vain for the “extra” £21 billion promised in 1998 by Gordon Brown, this time the new money is real. But there are strings attached, and many questions still to be answered on how it will be spent, reports JOHN LISTER.

Mr Brown has ripped up his discredited comprehensive spending review, with its plans to squeeze NHS spending for another year, and brought in a series of above-inflation increases in spending that will significantly raise the share of national wealth allocated to health, from around 6.9% now to 7.6% in 2003/4.

New Labour’s credibility among front-line NHS staff had plummeted as it became clear that the “£21 billion” increase – coming as it did after two years of Tory cash limits upheld by Brown – was a deliberately misleading statistical concoction. They knew it bore no relation to the actual provision of cash resources for health care.

Over the five year period, spending was set to replicate the levels of increase achieved under the Tories.

Health workers have also had to endure a winter crisis in which neither the relatively mild weather nor the largely routine level of flu and viruses were sufficient to explain away the dire shortage of beds to treat emergency medical admissions.

The right wing press had a field day. The *Daily Mail*, the *Times* and *Telegraph* predictably used the opportunity to press their case for increased reliance of private medical insurance – a call taken up by the hapless William Hague even as his party’s health spokesman admitted what poor value private cover represents.

More worryingly for Blair’s

team, the grim experience of a drubbing at the hands of the press has served to focus their attention on the dangers of allowing this to happen again next winter, in what they have hoped would be the run-up to the next general election.

Despite Blair’s efforts to refocus attention onto other issues, not least “education, education, education”, the NHS has remained voters’ number one preoccupation – even in the coming elections for London Mayor. Something had to be done.

Clearly £2 billion, on top of the increase already pencilled in for health authorities from April 1, to be followed with around £2 billion above inflation for another three years, is a very substantial something. Few campaigners had asked for as much, and nobody – not even the BMA – had asked for more.

Indeed the “Rescue Plan” drawn up in 1998 by London Health Emergency called for NHS annual spending to rise by half of one percent of GDP – £4 billion – above inflation, a figure which Gordon Brown seems set to exceed.

The key issue now to be resolved is how the money is to be spent: the LHE Rescue Plan itemised key areas where investment should be targeted for maximum effect.

It urged the opening of an extra 5000 beds across the country in a sustained effort to treat additional patients and eliminate the waiting list over a 5-year period – at a cost of £500m a year.

It called for an extra £500m a year to be spent on mental health services, along with £500m in capital over 2-3 years to set up new units of 24-hour nursed accommodation for people with long-term severe mental illness.

It urged the NHS to resume responsibility for the nursing care of frail elderly patients currently paying their own fees as a result of the Tory “community care reforms” – a policy largely echoed by the Royal Commission on care of the elderly. This would cost over £1 billion a year, although these costs could be reduced in time if the NHS stopped closing down its beds for the elderly and instead began to

develop NHS nursing homes.

LHE has also urged a major investment in staff, to ensure the NHS can recruit, train and retain the teams of professionals and support staff it needs to keep services going: the Rescue Plan suggested an extra £1 billion – equivalent to £1,000 extra per year for each NHS employee.

While services have been squeezed by revenue cash limits, the NHS is set to haemorrhage millions over the next 30-60 years in lease payments to private consortia of banks and building firms who are building most of the new wave of hospitals under the Private Finance Initiative. The LHE Rescue Plan called for PFI to be scrapped, and instead for the pool of NHS capital to be increased, alongside a boost for investment in maintenance of NHS buildings.

All this, and the abolition of prescription charges and charges for eye and dental checks could all be afforded for around £4 billion extra on the NHS budget.

Under Gordon Brown’s new settlement this would still leave plenty of scope for additional investment in extra consultants and specialists, new technology, concerted drives to tackle coronary heart disease, cancer, kidney failure and other major killers, improved drugs for mental illness and other conditions, improved premises for primary care in the inner cities.

But this is where the problems are likely to start.

The government has been described as being “hooked on targets”, and Tony Blair’s pledge to take personal charge of a new “modernisation” process in the NHS will strike a chill into the hearts of many health workers.

The last thing the NHS needs now is a new proliferation of “task forces”, targets and hit-squads to add to the plethora of vol-au-vent guzzling talking shops that have been launched at local and national level since 1997.

Hospital staff will know from years of grim experience that the setting of “targets” invariably means piling more pressure onto them and their colleagues in community health Trusts, especially now that the government has put GPs and primary care “in the driving seat” of the “New NHS”.

Now, according to Blair’s statement – sidelining Health Secretary Alan Milburn – the NHS must answer “five challenges”

The “partnership challenge”, requiring all parts of the health system – hospitals, primary care groups, social services and community health services – to work together to provide the right level of beds and services.

The “performance challenge”, to ensure that, “using information, incentives and inspection, all trusts and primary

care groups come up to the standard of the best.”

A “challenge for the professions” to strip out what Blair calls “unnecessary demarcations”, and introduce “more flexible training and working practices”.

The “patient care challenge” to hospitals and primary care groups to ensure that no one has to wait too long for an operation that they need.

And the “challenge on prevention”, to “persuade more people to play their part in achieving better health by adopting a more healthy life style”.

Blair referred to one new quango already established, the Commission for Health Improvement, as “an Ofsted for the NHS”.

We are warned that Ofsted-style “hit squads” will crack down on “failing hospitals”.

But as with schools, the variations in performance between hospitals tends to reflect varying catchments, social pressures and levels of resources.

At national level, too there will be a new group of task forces, one for each of the five challenge areas. And Blair himself will take charge: “a new Cabinet committee chaired by me will be established”.

As if this gathering horde of top-level interference were not worrying enough for health workers, Blair went out of his way to sour the pill of the extra cash with a warning of nasty times ahead.

“It will take tough, often painful decisions about change in order to make progress.”

For over 20 years hospital staff have been under pressure to work harder and more “flexibly”, bearing the brunt of every cash squeeze and “efficiency” measure.

They now have good reason to fear that even as new money is injected, they will once again be the fall guys for a government “modernisation” drive whose main objective seems to be to hang tough in the eyes of the right wing press.

The “partnership” proposal significantly leaves out the views and interests of health workers and health unions.

Nor indeed will service users get a look in, as the growing army of quangos attempt to force-march the NHS even more rapidly into reforms which are only vaguely understood, and which significantly tip the balance of power towards the least accountable of all NHS professionals – GPs.

The socialist answer to Labour’s new line on the NHS should be a genuine welcome for the new cash, but to step up the pressure to ensure that it is directed towards front-line care and not transformed into yet another demoralising set of targets to be foisted on an exhausted and under-valued workforce.

Scottish Socialist Party Conference 2000

At last: a socialist answer to council tax!

Gordon Morgan

Around 150 members were joined by many observers and fraternal visitors from other countries at the SSP's first annual conference at the end of February.

It achieved positive press coverage and was generally seen as a success by those attending.

The SSP was founded in February 1999 in the run up to the Scottish Parliamentary Elections. Since then it has grown rapidly.

This growth has forced a reorganisation of the structures and apparatus of the party and one of the key issues for the conference was to agree appropriate organisational structures which would allow effective organisation whilst ensuring policies were democratically agreed.

The two day conference agenda was packed with detailed policy resolutions - the conference papers ran to 121 pages covering over 30 topics excluding constitutional change. This meant that major topics such as the NHS and Housing were scheduled for 10 minutes each. Controversial issues were allocated greater time.

This therefore was an unusual, perhaps a transitional conference, reflecting the growing size and influence of the SSP.

When the Scottish Socialist Alliances were formed out of the Scottish Socialist Movement, Scottish Militant and the Scottish Communist Party, two months were spent thrashing out a constitution and basic principles, which worked for an organisation of around 400.

On policy it was agreed to produce an Action Programme mixing democratic and transitional demands.

The new party adopted the existing constitution of the SSA and a shortened 16 point version of the Action Programme for use in the Election Campaign.

With the massive explosion of the SSP from 400 to 2,000 members in a year, the

organisation has become involved in depth with all the problems facing the working class.

With members involved in the NHS, detailed policies have been developed for trade union and political intervention. Fights against the Public Private Partnership and involvement with tenants have evolved policies for Housing. Opposing Labour's policies on local government has led to development of alternatives to the Council Tax.

This conference was the first opportunity to endorse these more detailed policies and to present them to the wider public. The most interesting policy innovation agreed by conference was the proposal for a Scottish Service Tax.

The Scottish Service Tax would replace Council Tax. It is essentially a graduated top up income tax, with no payment on incomes below £10,000 and 12.6% on incomes over £80,000

This would replace Council Tax and is essentially a graduated top up income tax, with no payment on incomes below £10,000 and 12.6% on incomes over £80,000. This has had significant coverage by the media and will be the subject of a Bill to be introduced by Tommy Sherridan in the Scottish Parliament.

Legal advice is that such a bill will be deemed within the powers of the Parliament, which will surprise many in the SNP.

Most issues were agreed without dissent: but some controversial issues such as drugs and animal rights were remitted due to lack of time. On Europe, a holding position was adopted on our attitude to a single currency referendum, but the SSP is very likely to oppose joining.

On Ireland there was some controversy, but the adopted position "For a Socialist Ireland" criticises the Good Friday Agreement, and calls for the repeal of the PTA,

release of all political prisoners, and immediate demilitarisation by the British government (aka Troops Out).

On international issues a resolution to defend Cuba against aggression and sanctions was adopted nem con. However, in the presence of an Embassy official delegates made widespread and severe criticism of the Cuban regime's attitude to gay rights and free Trade Unions were made.

The SSP agreed to support International forums such as Sao Paulo and around the Zapatistas, to work internationally to oppose the WTO, to forge links with other organisations using the Internet, and to support and where practical participate in international initiatives against capitalist globalisation.

The conference was addressed by delegates from socialist organisations in Norway, Denmark, France, Ireland, Australia, Portugal.

Most controversy was at the end, over proposals to move to a delegate-based conference. The executive sought to have 4000 members by next year and argued that democracy required a 1 in 5 delegate conference. As there were only 150 out of 2000 at this conference, their argument was weakened, and the opposition motion to continue with all member conferences was passed.

These debates showed that there is no controlling current within the SSP, as most platforms split on these issues.

Overall the Conference highlighted the strengths of the SSP: for over half the members this was their first conference, discussions were lively, and policies reflected considerable prior debate.

There was great innovation, and a focus outwards to build on our gains. The weaknesses of the apparatus were also reflected, hence initiatives to build branches and establish organisers and party spokespersons at local and national level.

In many ways the SSP is a party with too few chiefs.



Making a dent in Labour's vote: SSP candidate James Stewart

Ayr sees Labour's support collapse

Campbell McGregor, Glasgow Kelvin SSP

The first ever by-election for the new Scottish Parliament on March 16 saw Labour pushed into third place, as voters stayed at home in droves.

The episode is a reminder of the Blairite nightmare scenario in which a limp Tory opposition wins no extra votes, but eats into New Labour's majority as the core vote collapses.

Ayr is a genteel seaside town with many retired people, but some working class areas. The Tories held it for a century until Labour won it in 1997; at the 1999 Scottish election Labour only beat the Tories by 25 votes.

This time the Tories won the by-election, but theirs was hardly a famous victory; their vote was down on 1999 and even their share of the vote only increased by 1.3%.

Considering that they were always the favourites, they fought a rather low-key campaign, as if they knew themselves that they could get out their traditional voters but their chances of winning depended on the what happened to the non-Tory vote, which was outside their control.

They won because the Labour vote collapsed. Some of it shifted to the SNP but most of it stayed at home.

Labour looked weak and demoralised, even making allowances for the fact that this was going to be a difficult seat to defend, and they seemed to have thrown in the towel a few weeks

before the poll. Their candidate was the council leader responsible for flogging off the local pensioners' centre to make way for a shopping mall, and exuding all the charisma of a dead fish.

The SNP had the most dynamic campaign of the major parties, but were lacking in serious political content; they vacillated on where they stood on Section 28, and for the last 2 weeks concentrated on portraying themselves as the party most likely to beat the Tories.

They came second, with 1,945 more votes than last year, but it is not clear that they are heading for a dramatic breakthrough.

The Scottish Socialist Party was not under any illusions that this was going to be an easy seat to fight, but it did already have a branch in Ayr which worked very hard, and dozens of activists descended on the town from Glasgow and further afield.

When I canvassed for the SSP in a better-off working class area I realised that the it was getting significant support, but I was surprised at the antipathy to all parties from many people. I had never known this before.

The SSP candidate was James Stewart, a popular shop steward in the local bakery. It was the only party to hold any public meetings, campaigning around the closure of facilities for senior citizens by Labour-controlled South Ayrshire Council, the privatisation of air traffic control at Prestwick which is within the constituency, and support for a strike by drivers at the Ayr garage of Stagecoach.

It won a respectable 1,345 votes (4.2%) beating the Liberal Democrats for 4th place, and recruited over 40 new members in the constituency.

At the 1999 European election, Labour effectively deselected Alex Smith, Euro-MP for Scotland South, by putting him bottom of its list of candidates. He had been in the running for the Labour nomination at this by-election, but was excluded from the shortlist by Labour's Scottish executive.

He went on to speak on SSP election platforms, as did Henry McCubbin, former Labour Euro-MP for Scotland North-East who lives in Ayr.

For the past few months there has been a very nasty campaign in Scotland to retain Section 28, financed by Brian Soutar, the millionaire owner of the Stagecoach bus company who has previously made large donations to the SNP, and backed by the normally Labour-supporting Daily Record (Scotland's most popular tabloid).

However, most observers felt that this did not have a major impact on the by-election result: while there remains a strong streak of homophobia in Scottish society, most people are not swayed that easily by a campaign of hysteria which obviously depends on one individual with a large bankroll.

Labour's attempts to blame this factor for their humiliating defeat are not only exaggerated but divert from the hard lessons they have yet to learn about the demoralisation of their electoral base.

**The Global Gamble:
Washington's Faustian
Bid for World
Dominance, by Peter
Gowan. Verso £13.**

**Reviewed by Andy
Kilmister**

Readers of journals such as *Labour Focus* on *Eastern Europe* and *New Left Review* will be familiar with Peter Gowan's writings on relations between Eastern and Western Europe over the last decade.

In particular, issue 62 of *Labour Focus* was devoted to a detailed account by Gowan of the background to the NATO war against Yugoslavia which drew heavily both on a theoretical framework and on empirical studies developed over a number of years.

The Global Gamble sets out that framework in its first half, and uses it to analyse the global strategy of the United States government under the Reagan, Bush and Clinton presidencies. The second half of the book reprints a number of previously published articles which reinforce and apply the approach developed earlier. The emphasis here is predominantly on Eastern Europe, though there is also a critique of the analysis provided of the Gulf War and of modern Iraq by Western liberals.

Gowan's account is wide-ranging and draws on a great deal of empirical evidence. However, the core of his argument is quite simple and very powerful. It is that the central political and economic driving force behind what is euphemistically termed 'globalisation' over the last twenty-five years has been a single minded attempt by the United States to regain and entrench its global hegemony.

This hegemony was dramatically threatened by the events leading up to the devaluation of the dollar and the breakdown of the 1944 Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates between 1971 and 1973.

Faced with challenges at this point from both European capitalism, especially West Germany, and from Japan, and later from East and South East Asia, the United States has responded by inaugurating a distinctive international financial regime, termed by Gowan the 'Dollar-Wall Street Regime' (DWSR).

This has provided the basis for a reassertion of United States economic power, based crucially on using the opportunities provided by floating exchange rates to push down the value of the dollar and on opening up global financial markets in order to provide flows of money which have financed the American government budget deficit and balance of payments deficit.

The most detailed description of this process deals with the sophisticated and aggressive international economic strategy developed by the Clinton administration, and in particular with the response of the USA to the Asian economic crisis of 1997, focusing on South Korea.

Gowan's work joins a number of recent accounts written from the left which have reasserted the importance of inter-state competition as fundamental to explaining current social upheavals. Notable here are Robert Brenner's analysis published by *New Left Review* last year (Brenner 1998). This sees the long period of global economic stagnation after 1973 as resulting primarily from such competition.

A series of writings by Robert Wade and Frank Veneroso have highlighted the role of what they refer to as the 'Wall Street-Treasury-IMF Complex' in exacerbating the economic crisis in Asia

How far does the US control the world's economy?



Clinton: is he working to a plan for US domination?

(Wade and Veneroso 1998).

From a more mainstream perspective, the most thorough recent study of the exchange rate between the yen and the dollar sees the rise as the yen both as caused mainly by mercantile pressure from the USA and as the central reason for the problems of the Japanese economy in the 1990s (McKinnon and Ohno 1997).

This book should thus be seen in the context of a growing interest in the relations between international economic competition and political strategies. However, it is also distinctive in a number of ways. Gowan brings to his analysis an exceptionally sharp sense of the political intricacies of relationships between states.

He is also very good at highlighting the central importance of particular key crises – the Gulf war, the currency crisis in South Korea, the war over Kosovo – in concentrating the various tendencies which he has identified and resolving the terms on which they will be man-

aged following a crisis.

His specific knowledge of Eastern Europe enables him to show in great detail how the general strategies and conflicts he identifies work themselves out in a particular case. Last but not least, the book is written with real passion and this in turn makes it gripping for the reader.

There are however a number of issues relating to Gowan's argument which require further investigation. Three closely linked questions appear especially important. They concern the degree to which the United States has been successful in establishing hegemony, the extent to which its strategy for doing so has been consciously planned and the relation of inter-state competition to other social conflicts, particular that between capital and labour. I shall look at these in turn.

A key issue in analysing global inter-capitalist competition is that of the extent to which the 'Dollar-Wall Street Regime' (DWSR) has actually succeeded in re-establishing US economic power.

Gowan's introduction of the concept tends to stress the control over the world economy which the USA has achieved:

"Since the 1970s, the arrangements set in motion by the Nixon administration have developed into a patterned international regime which has constantly reproduced itself, has had very far-reaching effects on transnational economic, political and social life and which has been available for use by successive American administrations as an enormously powerful instrument of their economic statecraft." (p.5)

Further, when discussing the deregulation of international financial markets in the 1970s, he writes "we shall see below how these processes actually worked to strengthen the political power and economic policy freedom of the US" (p.23).

Yet later in the analysis Gowan highlights the continuing threats faced by the USA despite the temporary successes of the DWSR, notably the "financial-monetary challenge" posed by the development of the euro and the "new pro-

ductive centre threat" posed by possible integration between the Japanese and other East and South East Asian economies (pp. 73-6).

He shows vividly how Japanese attempts to take the lead in dealing with the Thai economic crisis through an Asian Monetary Fund were headed off by the USA and the European Union and details the aggressive attempts by the United States to use the crisis in South Korea to reshape the Korean economy.

But, as Gowan points out, these attempts were to a considerable degree unsuccessful. Faced with a dramatic fall in the value of the Indonesian rupiah and the threat of a default by South Korea on its private sector debt, the US Treasury and the IMF were forced to agree to release stabilisation funds to South Korea without the domestic policy changes which they wanted: "The US Treasury's climb down was, in fact, a stunning defeat" (p.113).

It is of course true, as Gowan says, that US companies have been able to buy up South Korean companies cheaply as a result of the crisis, but so have Japanese companies, thereby intensifying possible future rivalries between the US and Japan.

The DWSR has also, according to Gowan, had detrimental effects on the domestic United States economy: "the DWSR had offered a way out from the hard, domestic task of raising productivity levels and reorganising the linkages between savings and productive investment in the US economy" (p.118).

As a result "by 1998 the US economy was inflated by very large and socially all-pervasive speculative distortions: the stock exchange, despite the falls in 1998, remains the central inflated bubble" (p.119). This bubble is fuelled by an unprecedented expansion of personal and household debt, so that "the entire US economy is now locked into the bubble" (p.119).

It is clear then, that if the DWSR has worked to strengthen US hegemony, this is a very particular kind of hegemony, which remains immensely vulnerable, at least in terms of its economic basis.

More fundamentally, it is not entirely clear just how the DWSR works to entrench this hegemony. The DWSR appears to have three main components, according to Gowan – floating exchange rates, an international role for the dollar and deregulated international financial markets. The second of these already existed under the preceding Bretton Woods system.

Gowan lays some stress on "dollar seigniorage" (pp.25-6), the ability of the USA to evade any constraint on the amount it can import as a result of the acceptability of the dollar as an international currency. Yet this held equally for the Bretton Woods system, with the added

problem for America's trading partners that, with fixed exchange rates, if the USA printed dollars to pay for imports this simply "exported" inflation to them.

With floating exchange rates, any attempt to exploit seigniorage to finance an import boom will either drive the value of the dollar down by increasing its supply, or will require a corresponding increase in foreign lending to the USA to soak up the newly created dollars. A constantly depreciating currency or a rising level of foreign debt are both surely an expression of US economic weakness rather than strength.

It is here that the other two elements of the DWSR come into play. While for Brenner it is the ability of the US to push down the value of the dollar, in order to compete with Germany and Japan, which is crucial, for Gowan the key effect of floating exchange rates is increased volatility.

It is this volatility which has led to the massive growth of the international financial markets and of Wall Street, particularly in the area of derivatives.

Coupled with international financial deregulation, such volatility has led to a succession of financial crises across the globe which in turn have further entrenched US financial dominance as capital flows back to America:

"One of the paradoxes of the DWSR is that such financial crises in the South do not weaken the regime: they actually strengthen it. In the first place, in the crises, funds tend to flee from private wealth-holders in the state concerned into Wall Street" (p.35).

They also entrench US political dominance by enhancing the role of the IMF in reshaping social relations in the countries concerned.

This argument has considerable force. Yet exchange rate volatility has also brought considerable problems for the USA. The long-term downward trend in the dollar relative to the yen and the mark has, after all, reduced the wealth of the USA compared to its main economic rivals, though it has also made American exports more competitive.

The sharp rise in the dollar, however, in the early 1980s, based in part on high US interest rates, did, as Gowan points out, fundamentally increase the dependence of the Latin American economies on the North, through the mechanism of debt. However, it also had a dramatic effect on domestic US industrial competitiveness, leading to the opening up of a balance of payments deficit which persists to this day.

There is some uncertainty in Gowan's account as to the extent to which the developments which he outlines have actually been planned by the USA. There is no doubt, as

he shows very well, that the USA has developed, especially under Clinton, a very clear strategy based on economic competition against Japan, East and South East Asia.

However, he goes on to imply a much stronger claim – that the USA consciously acted to provoke the Asian crisis of 1997, both by driving up the value of the dollar against the yen from 1995 onwards, and by stimulating flows of “hot money” into the region, which were then withdrawn by hedge funds during the crisis.

He writes that “the question, of course, arises as to whether the Clinton administration was consciously using the DWSR as an instrument of economic statecraft against the East and South-East Asian economies. What is certain is that the dollar-yen exchange rate is in the policy gift of the US Treasury and Federal Reserve. Summers [the US Treasury Under Secretary, now Treasury Secretary] was deliberately organising a strong dollar against the yen and was fully committed to it” (p.93).

Gowan argues that this could hardly have been because the US wanted to encourage Japanese exports, or to discourage the formation of a yen-zone in which the Japanese had shown no real interest.

Consequently, “we are thus left with a mystery over the source of Summers’ policy, unless he was interested in squeezing Japan’s dollar-linked hinterland economies in the region. Everything that we know about the Clinton administration’s obsession with the challenge of the region also points in this direction” (p.93).

There are a number of problems with this argument. Firstly, it is not clear, given Japan’s trade surplus with the USA and its role as America’s largest creditor, that the dollar-yen exchange rate is as much within US control as Gowan suggests.

Secondly, with Japan’s economy slumping and the consequent risk of the repatriation of Japanese capital back home from the US, there were good reasons for the US to acquiesce in attempts to bring the yen down despite the problems involved in an increase of Japanese exports. A strong dollar had important anti-inflationary benefits for the USA domestically.

Thirdly, it could be argued that the significance Gowan gives to the rise in the dollar in causing the Asian crisis is too great. The dollar did not, after all, rise as far against a number of other currencies, such as sterling, as it did against the yen. Consequently, there was not such a great global loss of competitiveness for East and South East Asia as might appear from concentrating on the dollar-yen rate. Even in 1995-97 the yen remained at a high level in historical terms.

Fourthly, the impact of the high dollar was problematic both for US companies located at home and in Asia, while Gowan himself points out the severe problems caused by the Asian crisis for the big US investment banks (p.115).

None of this means that it is impossible to say that the USA deliberately tried to undermine the Asian economies. However, while Gowan does not claim that it is proven that such a strategy was followed, he does write “there is, as yet, no conclusive evidence that the Clinton administration acted strategically from 1995 to use the dollar price rise, pressure to dismantle controls on the capital account, inflows of hot money and financial warfare by the US hedge funds to bring countries in East and South-East Asia to their knees.



Andrew Ward

Debts and dependency also help secure US domination

of financial relationships. This has a number of consequences for the shape of his argument.

Firstly, there is a tendency to downplay the contradictions and problems in those economies subject to competitive pressure from the US, particularly the Asian economies, with the implication that problems there result almost entirely

line rates of growth in China. In addition, Chinese growth actually constitutes one of the background factors leading to the crises elsewhere in Asia in 1997.

Gowan does not deal in any detail with relations between capital and labour. Yet surely the rise of tensions in this area in South Korea since 1987, and in particular the success of Korean workers in resisting austerity plans in the winter of 1996-7, are as important as US economic strategy in explaining the development of the crisis there.

reorganising the relationship between states and regions, particularly Eastern and Western Europe.

At this point Gowan rightly recognises the interdependence of financial and productive relations and that the financial sector will not be brought under control without a strategy for economic growth.

This strategy, in his view, is to be centred on the provision of massive financial resources for Eastern European development, which will in turn allow for a virtuous cycle of growth in Western Europe.

This vision is compelling and inspiring. However, it does not analyse the extent to which economic stagnation in Western Europe is caused not simply by a lack of demand but by a determined strategy on the part of European capital to break the relative social and economic power of labour. I would argue that this gap in Gowan’s account is closely linked to his central stress on interstate competition at the expense of other social conflicts.

For Gowan, attempts to break up the European social model result primarily from an American initiative, backed by Britain, to impose an Anglo-Saxon system of capitalism on the continent. The interests of European capitalists are recognised but allotted a subordinate place in this process.

Yet it could also be argued that the line of causation runs the other way. It is the project of European capital to reverse the gains achieved by labour which has led both to slow growth and the ascendancy of finance rather than the power of finance imposing a social strategy on Europe.

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■ This is a slightly edited version of a review which was initially published in *Labour Focus on Eastern Europe*

There is much circumstantial evidence to suggest strategic planning. But the question remains open’ (p.128).

This carries a very strong implication that, at least in some measure, the crisis was consciously planned. In my view this overstates the degree of control exercised by the US and consequently overlooks the extent to which the crisis emerged as a result of US weakness rather than strength – in particular the legacy of reckless investment in Asia by Western productive and financial capital as a result of weak accumulation and scarce profit opportunities at home.

This raises the third general question about Gowan’s analysis, that of its relation to social conflicts other than inter-state competition. This can be posed more specifically in terms of the links between Gowan’s work and other Marxist analyses of international economic crisis.

One of the attractive features of Gowan’s book is the very clear foundation given to his account by his demystification of orthodox accounts of financial markets and his attempt to ground his work in a Marxist understanding of the role of finance within capitalism (chapter 2).

Yet there is a possible tension here in that, until the final section of the first half of his book, which deals with alternatives, Gowan presents no explicit analysis of the productive sector to parallel his study

from international factors rather than from internal contradictions.

Gowan makes the valid point that China, Vietnam, India and Taiwan were protected from the financial crises which struck elsewhere in Asia through retaining a structure of capital controls. He also argues correctly that Anglo-American commentators are unjustified in claiming that the Asian crisis proves the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon model of capitalism over the East Asian one.

Yet these points do not mean either that capital controls can indefinitely avert economic crises, or that the East Asian model is crisis free.

China and Vietnam, for example, continue to face very severe economic problems despite high head-

Gowan’s concentration on the financial sector tends to make him underestimate the importance of renewed US strength in production. It is true, as he points out, that the boom in information technology in the USA has not significantly raised productivity growth there, and that it has led to a dangerous speculative bubble in the stock market.

However, it is also surely the case that in a number of key industries which appear central to capitalist accumulation over the next two decades – telecommunications, computer software, biotechnology – US capital has managed to be more innovative and successful in the 1990s than either Japanese or German capital.

Possible reasons for this, for example open immigration policies, the nature of the financial system, spin-offs from military production, have been hotly disputed. But inasmuch as the USA has reasserted economic leadership in the capitalist world over the last decade it is surely based on developments in production as well as financial leverage.

Another attractive fact about Gowan’s book is his willingness to suggest concrete policy measures to deal with the international instability which he diagnoses. His prescriptions (pages 131-8) revolve centrally around two pivots – taming the power of financial markets and

Euro fuels EU bosses' offensive

Alan Thornett

Tony Blair claims that the recent Lisbon EU summit, was the most united and successful for some time. This is probably because he felt he had more impact in shaping the key discussions than at previous meetings.

This summit focused on what is, at the end of the day, the key issue – shaping up the European Union to compete effectively with its global economic competitors: the United States, and the Asian Pacific region.

Within this, Europe's key rival is the USA, which seized the advantage from Japan during the 1990s. Today the US economy is far more de-regulated than any inside the EU, with Britain the closest to it.

Blair claims that the summit marked "a sea change in EU economic thinking". The EU he said was taking a "new direction, away from the social regulation of the 1980s towards enterprise, innovation, competitiveness and employment".

He is partly right. The summit took another step towards the Thatcherite neo-liberal agenda he has been championing so proudly. Blair has argued that the only future for the EU is the adoption of British standards of labour flexibility and British levels of privatisation.

The claim that they will "create 20 million jobs within a decade", however, is a smoke screen. In fact if their proposals are successfully carried through, millions of jobs would be destroyed in the drive for higher productivity and further deregulation.

The summit agreed a series of sweeping reforms aimed at redressing the huge gap in information technology which has opened up between the USA and Europe, and more crucially, at redressing the gap in the level of exploitation of labour – by further deregulating the labour market, moving towards the British (or 'Anglo Saxon') model.

The summit agreed a specifically to speed up 'liberalisation' in the gas, electricity and transport sectors across Europe. This was initially opposed by France's Lionel Jospin, since he faces different and more difficult political conditions in doing it in France: but in the end he accepted the proposals as a necessary part of the package.

But there is another reason why Tony Blair has been keen to present this summit as reflecting a new and positive mood within the EU, which is rooted in domestic British politics.

One of the issues at the

core of the current crisis facing British manufacturing industry – especially the car industry – is Britain's non-membership of the Euro zone.

From point of view of manufacturing employers, whilst Britain remains a part of the EU, there is no future for manufacturing industry outside of the Euro zone where they would be protected from exchange rate fluctuations within what is overwhelmingly their main market.

The current strength of the pound has highlighted the problem, not created it.

And the Euro zone is expanding, with Greece applying to join (having got its neo-liberal house in order, after being initially refused for not meeting the criteria). Denmark, too, is moving towards a referendum on it. This increases the pressure on British manufacturers..

British manufacturing industry expected that since new Labour were keen to get into the Euro zone as soon as politically possible, they would go ahead with a referendum soon after the next election. It was just a case on hanging on until then.

But things didn't go according to plan. The whipping up of British xenophobia, particularly aimed at the French and Germans around BSE, has increased reactionary opposition to the Euro.

While the government fully supported this, it is now completely unclear whether it could win an early referendum to take Britain into the Euro..

Manufacturing companies, particularly cars and car components, under further pressure from the strength of the pound, are not prepared to wait. They are relocating production inside the Euro zone.

The government therefore have a major problem in obtaining their strategic objectives – even if this problem was created by their own reactionary policies and attitudes.

However positively new Labour presents the outcome of Lisbon, they will need to do more if they are to win the referendum to enter the Euro.

The warnings we have consistently raised in *Socialist Outlook* and in the Euro March campaigns are being vindicated: the advent of the single currency, coupled with the application and extension of the neo-liberal austerity measures in the Maastricht Treaty are set to bring new misery to the working people of Europe.

Pakistan military steps up repression

Solidarity needed!

Terry Conway

General Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan has been painted in the Western media as a "good" military ruler, especially during President Clinton's recent visit to the country.

After all, we are told, he has announced the date for local elections and indicated that he will soon state when the next General Election will be held. The reality is – perhaps not surprisingly rather different.

On March 19, the government, which came to power in a coup on October 12 1999, announced a ban on political parties and strikes – hardly a sign of democratic intentions. The Labour Party Pakistan (LPP) decided to go ahead with its planned protest against Clinton's visit outside the American Consulate in Lahore, though a previous sponsor of the initiative, withdrew because of the fear of police repression.

In India there were hundreds of protests during Clinton's visit. Even in Bangladesh, there were militant demos by students. But in Pakistan there was no other voice for the great

hatred among the masses against US imperialism apart from the LPP action. While police presence was high on the demonstration itself, no arrests were made because of the presence of the international press.

That evening however the police and army raided the houses and the offices of Labour Party leaders. The police were trying to arrest Farooq Tariq, Shoaib Bhatti and Zafar Awan, the three main leaders of LPP.

They were fortunate enough to avoid the arrests and have since gone underground. During the raid on Farooq Tariq's house, hundreds of military men and police encircled the whole area.

They entered the house forcefully to search for Farooq despite protest from his partner Shahnaz Iqbal, who was alone with her 6 year old daughter.

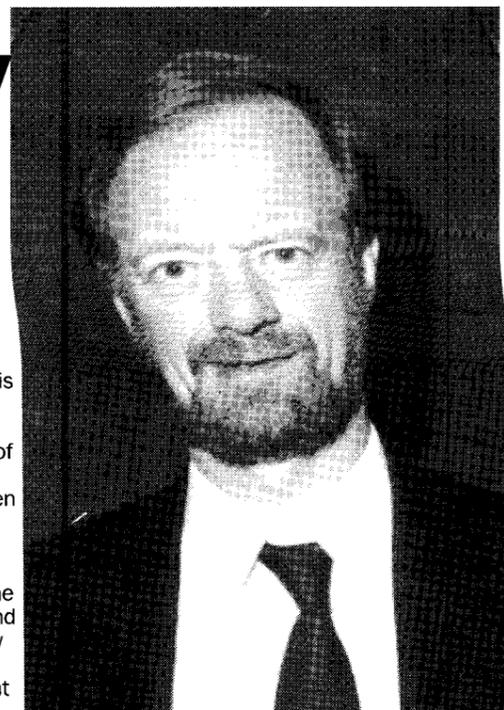
They then took a neighbour, Hamayun Rashid, into custody and forced him to point out the houses of all the Labour party members in the area. Rashid was then arrested for some hours and was released at 2 am that morning after several national newspapers

made inquiries about his arrest.

The offices of the PLP had been raided several times since the coup and are now under constant police surveillance. It is still unclear whether PLP leaders will be charged with some spurious offence.

There has been widespread condemnation of this repressive action in a number of mass circulation newspapers and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has unanimously opposed these attacks on civil rights.

Protests have also taken place in Britain against the military regime: a picket of the Pakistan embassy on March 23 called by Aaj Kay Naam' (In Today's Name) and supported by the LPP heard about the raids.



Would Cook's "ethics" allow him to back Pakistan's Labour Party against the military crackdown?

It is clear that solidarity is desperately needed. Send messages of protest to

■ Chief Executive General Pervez Musharraf ce@pak.gov.pk
■ Federal Interior Minister Lt.Gen. (R) Moin -ud-Din Haider, Fax number 92 51 9202642

■ Governor of Punjab, Lt. Gen. (R) Muhammed Safdar, Fax Number 92 42 9200077

■ Please send a copy of the protest to LPP Email: lpp@lpp.lhr.sdnpc.org or to PO Box 1109, London N4 2UU.

Step forward for Samar & Jawad

Roland Rance

The campaign for the release of Samar and Jawad has gained an important success with the decision to end their Category A status.

Samar Alami and Jawad Botmeh were jailed for twenty years five years ago for supposed involvement in the bombing of the Israeli embassy – a complete fabrication.

This welcome decision to reduce their status followed soon after the presentation to the Prime Minister on February 17 of a petition signed by over 200,000 people from Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon – the largest representation from overseas on any issue for many years.

Later that day, a packed meeting at the House of Commons heard a moving tape from Jawad, describing his struggle even to gain access to the evidence against him.

Tony Benn noted, although Samar and Jawad were not even charged with carrying out the actual bombings, the police have made no effort to discover who really planted the bombs – a fact that, in itself, throws doubts on the



Home Secretary Jack Straw freed dictator Pinochet on much more flimsy evidence ...

prosecution.

The previous day, the European Court of Human Rights, ruling in favour of a suit brought by Michael Davis and Raphael Rowe (two of the M25 Three), stated that "the prosecution's failure to lay evidence before a trial judge so as to permit him to on the question of disclosure deprived applicants of a fair trial".

This is precisely the issue in Samar and Jawad's case, and establishes that their trial, too, was unfair and their convictions unsafe.

Several months after the

trial, former MI5 agent David Shayler revealed that a warning had been received before the 1994 bombings of the Israeli Embassy and Zionist HQ.

This undermines the evidence of the head of the Anti-Terrorism Branch that the police were operating in "an intelligence vacuum". Shayler later told Paul Foot that a senior MI6 officer had written a memo arguing that Israel had *itself* bombed the Embassy, in order to put pressure on Britain to allow Israel more responsibility for security.

This was not revealed to the defence, nor to the judge, in the original trial. If it had been, defence lawyers could have used it, together with evidence of removal by Israeli agents of forensic evidence, and the unexplained disappearance of the closed circuit TV tapes, to cast serious doubt on the involvement of Samar and Jawad, or indeed of any Palestinian, in the bombings.

Although MI5 originally dismissed Shayler's statements as fantasy, other evidence has now corroborated his claim of British intelligence involvement in a plot

to murder Libyan President Mu'ammarr Gadafi.

It is vital that pressure continues both for disclosure of all evidence in this case covered by a Public Interest Immunity certificate, and for an independent investigation into David Shayler's claims.

Meanwhile, Samar and Jawad remain in prison, with deportation orders hanging over them. Although they were granted the right to appeal last May, they are still waiting for the courts to set a date for the hearing.

They are political prisoners, hostages of the so-called "peace process". Israeli involvement in the bombings has not been established; but their suppression of evidence, interference in the trial, and subsequent pressure regarding Samar and Jawad's prison conditions are well attested.

It is an outrage that the British courts, the CPS and the Home Office continue to connive in this act of state terrorism.

More information from FJSJ, BM FOSA, London WC1N 3XX.

www.freesaj.org.uk

The Manics: "the entryists of pop music"



The Manic Street Preachers are undoubtedly a phenomenon. Their success has shown that music and left-wing politics can be mixed, and appeal to a broad youth audience.

The band saw in the new year with a sell-out concert in Cardiff's new Millennium Stadium, at which they performed their latest single 'Masses Against The Classes' flanked by two enormous Cuban flags.

Their work has inspired both plays and exhibitions, in which the marketed commodity is not simply image but also a political message. 'Anti-marketing' marketing, in fact.

ZOË THOMAS looks at the background and politics of this unique band.

"We just want to mix politics and sex and look brilliant onstage." Clad in leopard skin, eyeliner, white drainpipes and women's blouses, in 1991 the Manics burst onto a bemused British music scene. They were set apart instantly. After all, this was the era of Baggy and the laddish party sound of the Manchester scene. The difference wasn't just in the dress code however; the Manics arrived spitting bile in the tradition of their punk heroes, The Clash, and spread trademark slogans of political rebellion, boredom, alienation and despair.

And the Manics were Welsh. Welsh when the terms 'Welsh' and 'cool' were regarded as mutually exclusive and the notion of a Welsh rock and roll band was regarded as frankly laughable. In early gigs they were heckled with 'baa' noises and in the music press they were bombarded with slogans ridiculing them for being Welsh -

headlines like 'Meet the naff Taffs', 'Meek Leek Manifesto', 'The boys are back in town' and 'This is Spinal Taff'. The NME even reported that a record shop in Edinburgh refused to stock their single because "they're crap, they're Welsh and they wear eyeliner." James Dean Bradfield, Nicky Wire, Richey Edwards and Sean Moore met in Primary school and grew up together in the small South Wales mining town of Blackwood.

They were profoundly affected by the defeat of the miners in the 1984-5 strike and the subsequent closure of the mines. In the Blackwood area alone twelve pits were shut down, making this a mining town without any mines.

Feeling themselves to be culturally isolated in Blackwood and alienated from the macho environment of small town life, the

four working class boys turned inwards and educated

themselves on art, literature and politics. They have described how books were just as interesting to them as music and they became avid readers of authors such as Marx, Lenin, Camus, Sartre, Burroughs, Kesey and Kerouac. These books and many others were to find their way into the Manics work via quotations which accompany all their singles and albums.

Initially the band gained a small but dedicated cult following, set against a background of much more widespread contempt. Their single 'You Love Us' was an ironic comment on the vilification they received in the letters of the music press.

Stitches

In the now infamous '4 Real' incident Richey slashed his arm with a razor blade in response to a journalist who questioned the band's integrity. The wound required seventeen stitches and Richey's luminous expression as he holds his bleeding arm out for inspection has become an iconic image of 20th century rock and roll. A recent NME poll placed it at no 1 of the 100 greatest events of rock.

It soon became apparent however that Richey Edwards, the leader and lyricist of the band, was suffering mental health problems - including depression, an eating disorder, bouts of binge drinking and further self harm.

During the making of their third album 'The Holy Bible', the band's manager died of cancer and the tragedy worsened Richey's ongoing depression. For the first time he took complete control of the lyrics and artwork of a Manics album.

Despair

The result has been described as one of the most despairing albums in rock music, dealing with issues such as the Holocaust, prostitution, and anorexia. Shortly after the production of the album Richey was admitted to a psychiatric hospital in Cardiff.

The following year, in February 1995, Richey disappeared on the eve of a promotional trip to the USA and his car was found abandoned in the Severn Bridge motorway services. Rumours

abound as to his whereabouts, some speculating that he leapt to his death from the Severn Bridge, others that he elaborately engineered his own disappearance and is now living abroad. There have been sightings as far apart as Goa and Fuerteventura. What is certain is that Richey did not stay in the band long enough to share in the phenomenal success of the Manics.

For several months after Richey's disappearance the future of the band was in grave doubt. Eventually the remaining members decided to carry on as a threesome and came back with the single 'A Design For Life' - an anthem about working class pride and the demise of the welfare state.

Awards

The album 'Everything Must Go', from which it was taken, swept the board at music award ceremonies throughout 1996. It was the first time the Manics had achieved any measure of public recognition.

The outstanding success of 'Everything Must Go' meant that it was always going to be a hard act to follow. In 1998 the Manics released 'This Is My Truth Tell Me Yours' - its title a quote from Aneurin Bevan.

The album was widely criticised by fans for its softer ballad driven sound and there were accusations that the band had 'sold out' by leaving behind their punk rock roots and eschewing the leopard skin and eyeliner in favour of leisurewear and beards.

Perhaps there was always going to be a backlash given that this was the first Manics album which had no lyrical input by Richey. Nicky Wire, who wrote the lyrics on the new album, explained that he inevitably has a different approach to Richey and described himself as being more of a 'social historian' in terms of his writing.

'Ready For Drowning' concerns the drowning of the Welsh village of Tryweryn in order to create a reservoir to supply Liverpool. 'SYMM' con-

cerns the Hillsborough Stadium Disaster.

The band gained their first number one with 'If You Tolerate This Your Children Will Be Next', a song about the Spanish Civil War which has its title taken from a poster used by the Republicans.

Towards the close of 1999 'Unconvention', an art exhibition inspired by the political and cultural interests of the Manics, was held in Cardiff.

Cultural event

The exhibition was significant not just because it brought together the disparate concerns of the band, but because in so doing it created a cultural and political event which went beyond the boundaries of an ordinary art exhibition.

There was involvement by community and political activists, the display of artefacts related to past political struggles as well as more mainstream art.

On the opening weekend, stalls were laid out by a variety of organisations who represent the beliefs of the Manics, including Amnesty international, The Campaign Against the Arms Trade and Reclaim Our Rights.

Arthur Scargill gave the opening address for the exhibition which, alongside works by Picasso, Munch, Warhol and Pollock, contained artwork, posters and pamphlets from the Situationist International; photographs, letters, and posters and from the Spanish Civil War; photo-journalism of the Vietnam war; and of Rwanda.

Guevara

The catalogue was inscribed with a quote from Che Guevara - 'A true revolutionary is motivated by great feelings of love'.

From the outset the Manics stated that they wanted to be more than just a band, especially as they came from Wales. The band's biographer Simon Jones has described the band as 'entryists' of the rock scene - sneaking radical ideas into people's heads through the medium of a band.

Abstentions grow as Spain lurches right

Jim Padmore

The Spanish General Elections, in early March, resulted in the biggest electoral victory for the right since the death of Franco.

Since 1996, Aznar's Partido Popular (PP) party has sustained a minority government only with the support of the Catalan nationalist CiU.

Now, the PP has a large parliamentary majority (183 seats out of a total of 350), having increased their vote in all areas of Spain.

Key to this about-turn was that two months earlier a pact was signed between the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and the United Left (IU). (see SO 32)

The idea of this was to form a government of the "plural left" as in France. The contents of this agreement have been widely condemned within the IU for, amongst other reasons, its

commitment to the EU, to NATO, its failure to defend the right to self determination and its ambiguity on the demand for the 35 hour week.

The IU leaders argued that the deal with PSOE was necessary for electoral reasons.

Even from this point of view it has been a total failure. Its only result has been to alienate sectors of IU's base.

In the 1996 elections the rate of abstention was 22.7%, this time it was 30.1% - an increase of almost three million people.

In the Basque country, abstention increased from 29% four years ago to 36%. Amongst under-25s the abstention rate was 45%.

In addition there were a record number of spoilt ballots, especially in the Basque country where more than 3% of those who voted

spoilt their papers.

And it is clear that this increase in abstention is almost entirely amongst people who, in 1996, voted for either PSOE or the IU. In 1996, the combined vote of PSOE and IU was more than twelve million, on March 12 they notched up only nine million.

Of those twelve million four years ago more than one in five (2.7m) abstained this time.

It's clear that neither the leaders of the PSOE or the IU have offered their base any kind of solution to the problems we face. The results are there to be seen - four more years of the PP in government.

There's not the political space for two reformist parties in Spain. If the IU cannot show itself to be a political alternative to PSOE, its days are numbered.

A true Revolutionary is motivated by great feelings of Love!

'Mae gwir Chwyldrowr yn cael ei ysgogi gan Gariad mawr'

A true Revolutionary is motivated by great feelings of Love!

'Mae gwir Chwyldrowr yn cael ei ysgogi gan Gariad mawr'

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