

# ideas and action



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## the anarchist challenge

# SOCIALISM FROM BELOW

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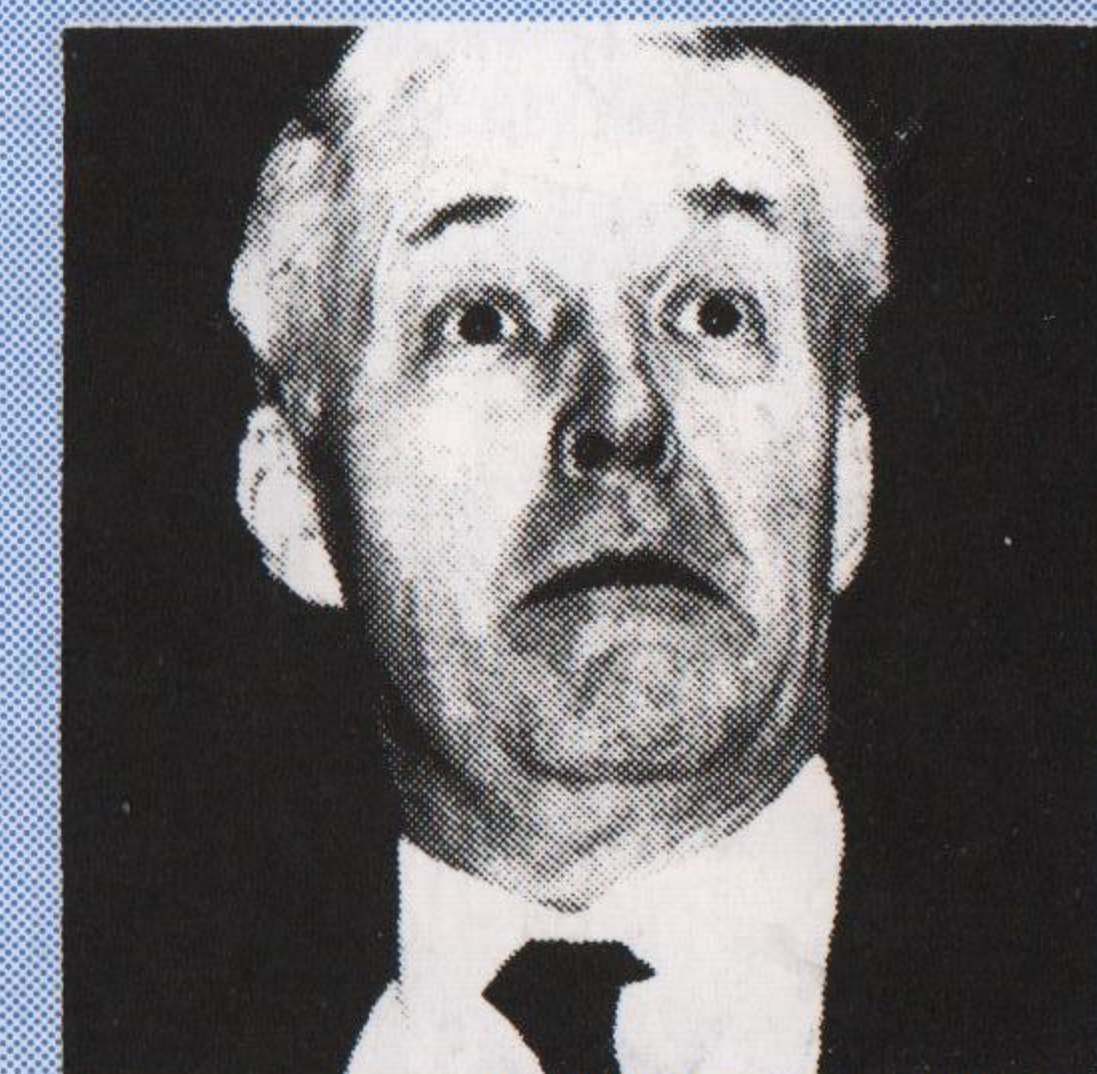
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after the peace dividend

## IT'S WAR AS USUAL

*Inside*  
**Labouring under Illusions**  
Rank-and-Fileism Restated  
Politicising Poll Tax  
Eastern Europe, and more.



## anarchist workers group



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*The third issue of SOCIALISM FROM BELOW unfortunately comes complete with rise in its cover price to 80p. We apologise for this but it is a step we have been forced to take in response to rising production costs. However, we believe the contents of the magazine more than make up for this increase.*

*Our next step is to increase the regularity of the magazine. This means we need money: we have no rich backers or secret benefactors. Instead we rely on sales returns and donations from our readers and supporters. If you think there is a need for a regular and in-depth journal of libertarian communist ideas and analysis and you like what we have been saying so far then rush in your cheques, po's and bard currency to PO BOX B20, HUDDERSFIELD HD1 1XS.*



**SOCIALISM**  
DISCUSSION FORUM OF THE ANARCHIST WORKERS GROUP

— from below —

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# editorial



photo: K. Carpenter.

## politicising poll tax

On March 31st 1990 one of the largest protest marches of the Thatcher era turned into one of Britain's biggest political riots ever. The varied responses to the riot provide us with a good insight into the problems of the 'poll tax revolt' itself.

The Establishment politicians, Labour and Tory alike, were unequivocal in their condemnations of the violence. Steve Nally and Tommy Sheridan, the leaders of the All Britain Anti-Poll Tax Federation were, however, equivocal in the extreme. They went on TV to denounce those who fought the police and threatened to 'name names'. The **Anarchist Workers Group** responded immediately by submitting a motion to Nally's local anti-poll tax group in Lambeth which demanded that the Federation leaders retract their statements and declare unconditional defence of the rioters. Although the motion was narrowly lost on the chair's casting vote, the State itself soon validated our view that there can be no fence-sitting on the question of working class violence. The Crown Prosecution Service set up a special unit to process the 500-

plus cases. The Metropolitan Police launched 'Operation Carnaby', its largest ever investigation, involving 125 officers and a subsequent series of dawn raids. An Old Bailey judge instructed TV and newspaper companies to hand over to the police all photographs and film of the riot and magistrates have been dispensing prison sentences and heavy fines for normally minor public order offences. The riot and the ruthless criminalisation of those arrested has once again exposed not only the iron fist of the British State, but also the deep-rooted labourism of the British left. As the Federation leaders unapologetically admitted, the only contingency plans in the event of violence had been made in conjunction with Scotland Yard and not in preparation for repelling a police attack. Yet in the last ten years the right to picket and demonstrate has been systematically eroded by anti-union and public order legislation. Thus it has become absolutely necessary that in any large scale political confrontation with the State, workers must be prepared to physically defend their demonstrations against an increasingly militarised police force.



Although the Militant leadership of the All-Britain Federation saw the riot as damaging to 'their' campaign, political consensus outside Britain viewed the violence as **more damaging** to the Government. In Australia the Liberal state government of New South Wales immediately ditched its own plans for a poll tax. "They would go berserk here" declared George Buckworth, a NSW Liberal politician. (1) As soon as trading commenced on the world financial markets two days after the riot, foreign investors gave their verdict. Both the value of sterling and British share prices fell immediately leading business analysts to draw the inevitable conclusion that the riot had shaken confidence in Britain's political stability.

"The pound suffered in Far Eastern trading as news of the poll tax riots was digested" announced the Independent (2) while, according to the Guardian "The fragility of the pound was underlined by the response to the clashes between police and demonstrators, which were shown on prime time television in the United States." (3)

Rather than take an uncompromising stand in defence of working class violence, the Anti-Poll Tax Federation was forced onto the defensive through its fear of alienating middle class opinion and the patronage of a few sympathetic MPs and councillors. Steve Nally may have been painting an accurate picture of British labourism when he said "wanton violence will play no part in helping ordinary families to join in" (4) but unless the workers' movement recognises the need for combative methods of class struggle, including physical force, then it will never be capable of advancing class interests.

Unfortunately, from our perspective, some of the problems of the campaign were standing on the platform in Trafalgar Square that day. Labour MP George Galloway, whose party has done so much to destroy resistance to the tax, told the rally "If the bailiffs come to my home they'd better bring the SAS and their canine friends". (5) By the end of the afternoon he had apparently altered his views: "these lunatics, anarchists and other extremists principally from the Socialist Workers Party were out for a rumble the whole time, and now they've got it, and if they didn't exist, the Tories would have to invent them." (6)

Joan Twelves, head of Lambeth Council, also spoke despite the fact that she, like every other council leader, is actually implementing the poll tax, prosecuting non-payers and making cuts in council services. A booklet sent out

with all Lambeth poll tax bills even boasts "In its efforts to keep the poll tax as low as possible Lambeth Council has reduced its budget by nearly £20 million this year through good housekeeping and efficiency savings." (7) A few days before the demo, Councillor Twelves had herself employed hundreds of riot police to protect her council's charge-setting meeting from the Lambeth community. The AWG has always argued that the campaign must draw the battle lines between council workers and working class residents on the one side and town hall bureaucrats on the other. As far as we are concerned socialism in one borough has stood discredited ever since the Militant-led Liverpool City Council delivered 30,000 redundancy notices to its own workforce in 1985. The reality of the 'fight' against ratecapping was that the Tories only had to use the 'surcharge' provisions against Lambeth and Liverpool councillors. Every other 'municipal socialist' council surrendered peacefully. Since then every 'left' council has followed the methods of Labour's Stonefrost Committee: creative accounting, selling and leasing back assets, job freezes etc. In this way they have shed jobs and eroded services without provoking any serious fightback. Our approach to Labour Councils is, therefore, quite straightforward. The requirement that councils compile and maintain the poll tax register, collect the tax, and prosecute non-payers is a **statutory obligation**. Thus Labour leftwingers cannot possibly fight the poll tax as councillors, or else they will be removed from office. The demands we make of councillors flow from this analysis. Workers must place demands on councillors as bosses, not as allies. If individual councillors are really opposed to the tax we say that they should resign. Every councillor who has complied in any way with implementation must be kicked out of the campaign. Furthermore, Labour councillors who are implementing the community charge must be made to feel as unwelcome and unsafe in working class communities as the snoopers and bailiffs they employ. Our concern, unlike that of the left, is to expose the sham autonomy of municipal councils and demonstrate that local authorities are no more use as vehicles for defending workers' interests than the central State machine itself.

The attitude of the left towards the anti-poll tax campaign has been one of cheerleading rather than political leadership. The chant of "No Poll Tax" has become more of a left-wing mantra than a political strategy. This reflects the large, almost mystical, element of

hope in the left's assessment that this struggle could be "the big one". Yet all the indications are that opposition to the poll tax contains the same combination of political problems that have beset the working class movement for the last 10-15 years: the influence of labourism; the new realism of the union bureaucrats; the myth of municipal socialism; obedience to the rule of law; and so on. Although the high levels of non-payment may well force the Tories to modify the poll tax, and eventually may contribute to a Labour election victory, this in itself does little to rectify the problems facing the working class.

At the end of the day the vast majority of non-payers will probably be "can't pay" rather than "won't pay". Their experience will not be of collective struggle but the same individual experience of poverty which forces hundreds of thousands to default on rent, rates, fuel bills and mortgage payments each year. In Lambeth alone, a 1988 report showed that out of a total of 101,994 households, there were 40,000 in rent arrears of over 4 weeks, while a further £20 million was owed in rates arrears. (8) It is estimated that mortgage default is responsible for 10% of the homelessness in the South East. In February the Department of Social Security itself estimated that 850,000 claimants would fall into serious community charge arrears.

### *The existence of an income related taxation system is perfectly compatible with cuts.*

The task of revolutionaries in such a campaign is not to make a political virtue out of an economic necessity (inability to pay) but to politicise the movement. Opposition to the poll tax is wideranging, which is why it is vital to assert the primacy of working class interests. One of the most basic political questions raised by the poll tax is "what is the alternative?" The only answer provided by the left is to "get the Tories out" and to "vote Labour". Yet most of the anti-Tory consensus on the poll tax favours some kind of "progressive taxation system". This raises a second unavoidable question: "can British capitalism provide for working class needs?" Unlike the left we take independent working class requirements as our starting point. As British capitalism began its long period of decline in the late 1960's successive

governments have been unable, whatever their taxation policies to satisfy working class needs. Thus while the poll tax hits the working class hardest; an alternative based on taxing the wealthy will inevitably face ruling class resistance in the form investment strikes, capital flight, withholding of credit and pressure from civil servants, the Bank of England, etc. Therefore as anarchists we believe that any campaign which leaves intact workers' illusions in the Labour Party, and in the neutrality of the British state, is not a successful campaign. The real danger of building what is, in effect, the unofficial wing of Labour's election campaign is that the struggle could be so easily derailed at its highest point precisely by the announcement of a general election. What must be built is a movement capable of fighting for the services we need, regardless of who holds government office and ultimately against a system incapable of guaranteeing social provision. Capitalism in crisis can survive without a poll tax, but it cannot survive without attacking working class living standards. The existence of an income related taxation system is perfectly compatible with cuts as both Tory and Labour administrations proved before the poll tax. If socialists cannot even attempt to put the anti-poll tax campaign on an anti-capitalist footing then they are demonstrating their irrelevance to the revolutionary project.

### *"Pay No Poll Tax, Vote Broad Left"*

One of the most striking characteristics of the anti-poll tax campaign has been the absence of serious attempt to organise non-implementation. Non-payment is much easier to argue for because it will tend to take place regardless of whether a campaign exists or not. Non-implementation by contrast raises the problem of the union bureaucracy and their stranglehold over most organised workers. The left has made little headway in its efforts to win NALGO and CPSA, the two main unions concerned with implementation, over to a non-cooperation standpoint. In the CPSA the Militant dominated Broad Left placed all its hopes on victory in the national executive elections, hopes which in 1990 were dashed on the rocks of another electoral disaster. To date the only Broad Left initiative on the poll tax has been a "Pay No Poll Tax: Vote Broad Left" election leaflet. Suffice to say, no attempt has been made to build an unofficial campaign since the elections.



The effects of the Community Charge on workers' jobs and conditions cannot be underestimated. However, there is a tendency on the left to treat sectional disputes against the conditions of poll tax work as virtual anti-poll tax strikes.

In October 1989 CPSA members in a number of London social security offices took strike action against the use of the form NHB10 (CC) which supplied councils with information on claimants for registration purposes. Some leftwingers, however, attempted to make the political nature of the strikes more palatable by arguing that DSS offices were too understaffed to take on the extra work. SWP members even argued that the use of the NHB10 forms was of "dubious legality". The AWG by contrast argued that it was wrong to base our opposition on technicalities, but instead we had to win workers to action on the principle of non-cooperation of the poll tax and the civil liberties issue of 'snooping'. Our analysis was again proved correct when the union leadership refused strike pay unless workers confined themselves to demanding sufficient staff for all poll tax work.

Similarly, when cashiers in Greenwich Council's Housing Department struck for more pay to collect the poll tax, 'Socialist Worker' ran the headline "Greenwich shows the way". Yet the dispute was only ever a glorified regrading strike. When management offered concessions the strikers were prepared to return to collecting the poll tax as usual. Throughout the dispute NALGO allowed strike pay on the condition that regrading rather than refusal to collect remained the objective. The problem with strikes against the effects of the poll tax is that they do not add up to 'non-collection'. Sectional disputes can be settled section by section, and thus, even a wave of disputes can be demobilised unless they

are transformed into a unified political battle against poll tax implementation itself. The very real difficulties of delivering political strike action point to the harsh reality that the labour movement in its present state is unequal to the task of advancing workers' interests. The All Britain Federation's Trade Union Conference in Liverpool on June 23rd failed abysmally to address this problem. The conference passed up the opportunity to declare itself for independent organisation and action in the workplace. It is an indication of the **weakness** of the campaign that it can mobilise 200,000 on a march but shies away from trying to mobilise unofficial strike action under its own authority. Most of the left have, in practice, given up on non-collection and instead appear to be staking everything on spontaneous disputes against wage arrestments and poll tax related cuts. On the issue of wage arrestments it is skilled manual workers who have the economic muscle to halt the flow of profits to the bosses. Yet these workers have largely followed the left's advice of including a poll tax element in their pay claims, and due to their power many have already settled. Statistically then, it comes as little surprise that skilled workers are less likely to be non-payers and therefore less concerned with wage arrestments. Equally on the question of cuts, left Labour Councils have 'post-ratecapping', become experts in softening the impact of cuts and defusing union opposition to job losses. Though their powers of creative accountancy will undoubtedly be stretched, it has to be said that while cuts and protests are inevitable an anti-poll tax strike arising from them is not.

By way of contrast to the wide-eyed euphoria of the SWP and Militant some of the left have given up altogether. The Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) is one such example. Without wishing



to overstate their negligible importance it is worth examining their views as a case study in sectarian abstentionism. The RCP have certainly gone against the grain in declaring "the poll tax is not a class issue". (9) According to their analysis, anti-poll tax sentiment is an all class phenomenon influenced by small businessmen, 'disgruntled Tory voters' and rebel conservatives like Michael Heseltine. They argue that non-payment "has nothing to do with politics" (10) and is no more of a priority than "campaigns against everything from eye-test charges to dirty drinking water" (11) and if that doesn't sound very convincing the RCP have their own 'safety net' argument to fall back on. Due to what they call the 'depoliticisation' of the working class they argue that "It is now impossible to sustain large-scale support for any left-wing goal". (12) Instead they have opted for "promoting our magazine Living Marxism" (13) and prioritising the struggle against the pernicious influence of post-modernism within society.

## *Pessimism of the intellect: pessimism of the will.*

The RCP analysis, like the SWP's 'downturn' theory is not without its elements of truth. It is true that opposition to the poll tax is quite apolitical and non-payment is of an atomised rather than a collective nature. However, in order to prove that no mass campaign can exist they are obliged to provide evidence:

*This year the only anti-poll tax events to attract a constituency outside the left's own ranks were the town hall demonstrations... and the subsequent march through London which ended in a riot on 31st March". (14)*

This is just a crude attempt to make the facts fit the theory. It ignores the packed public meetings, the well-attended local marches throughout the country, the court pickets and 'human blockades' which have stopped poindings and warrant sales in Scotland. These represent a significant increase in the level of working class mobilisation which, as Trafalgar Square demonstrated, contains an explosive mass potential. Shortly after the riot the RCP changed their tune slightly. After all a 'middle class revolt' rarely involves looting sprees in the West End and mortgage defaulters seldom fight pitched battles with police. The riot was retrospectively designated a 'class issue' by the RCP but one entirely unconnected with the poll

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tax. In fact the riot like the violence at council lobbies was a manifestation of working class anger against the tax. This fact was clear to large sections of demonstrators who cheered on rioters chanting "We Won't Pay The Poll Tax!" The connection was apparent in a Sunday Correspondent opinion poll to test public reaction to the violence which found that "32 percent thought it was understandable, given the unfairness of the poll tax." (15) The violence was testimony to the fact that any mass working class demonstration which represents a serious challenge to the state runs the risk of criminalisation and police violence. The 100, 000 strong NHS demo organised by the TUC in 1988 was not attacked by the police, unlike the **unofficial** poll tax march which advocated defiance of the law.

The reality is that the riot was **one of many** 'points of politicisation', i.e. points at which working class interests can be pushed to the fore of poll tax opposition. The AWG believes that discontent with the community charge has made people more receptive to anti-capitalist arguments. Our experience of **active involvement** in the campaign coupled with uncompromising political intervention has led us to the conclusion that there is a resonance for our arguments: that Labour is a bosses party, that Labour councils won't fight, that the law must be broken, that working class violence is justified, that we need to physically defend marches and that we need political strike action to smash the poll tax. The reason that this potential is, as yet, completely unrealised, is due to the opportunism of the mainstream left. The RCP position is little more than a self-fulfilling prophecy, which is served by their complete abstention from a political struggle **within** the All-Britain Federation.

The poll tax is clearly a taxation system in trouble. Maintaining a register is an administrative nightmare; chasing up non-payers is an expensive, labour intensive business; and initial collection rates were well below their expected targets. Working class resistance, albeit in a passive, atomised and unpoliticised form has undoubtedly been a contributory factor to the situation. The resolution of the problem in the interests of the working class requires that this fragmented resistance is transformed into politically conscious mass action. Unfortunately the All-Britain Federation believes that the existing forms of opposition are sufficient in themselves. As Steve Nally argues;

*"The poll tax will be beaten when ten million non-payers in England and Wales join the one million not paying in Scotland". (16)*

The Federation strategy is in effect to run advice stalls for non-payers and rely on defaulters 'clogging up' the magistrates courts. Non-collection, however, has not occurred spontaneously and the Federation has denounced calls for a general strike as utopian. This shows that breaking the law by ignoring a poll tax bill holds much less fear for workers than breaking the laws that prohibit strike action. Yet the Federation's formal demands of 'non-prosecution' and 'non-implementation' confront such an armoury of legal obstacles that it is more utopian to believe that anything less than mass political strike action is necessary to win. Councils are legally obliged to prosecute non-payers, employers are legally obliged to comply with attachment of earnings orders and DSS local office managers are similarly obliged to process deductions from benefits. Workers who strike to oppose any of these measures are therefore taking illegal political strike action, something which no trade union leader would ever authorise in the present climate. Should one group of workers break the impasse and go on a non-implementation strike it would be ludicrous to believe that they could win on their own. Only widespread solidarity action could prevent the isolation and defeat of such disputes. Yet it is precisely action on this scale which the anti-poll tax campaign refuses to countenance.

As the AWG has repeatedly insisted we need to fight with every weapon at the disposal of our class. This means more than non-payment and refusal to collect but also physical resistance to bailiffs, organised defence of picket lines or demonstration and ultimately generalised strike action. We need a movement which does not confine itself to demanding that Labour councillors and union bureaucrats fight but is prepared to argue for and mobilise unofficial action. Finally we need to arm the campaign politically by breaking illusions in the labour bureaucracy and by fighting not in defence of local government or the rating system but against **all capitalist austerity measures** and for the social provision we need. Our approach may appear impossible to some, while pessimistic to others. In reality it is neither because it is revolutionary in method. Such an approach must make a sober assessment of all the obstacles in our way, and outline a strategy which can overcome

those obstacles. It may prove difficult to win support for our ideas but this is a subjective, political obstacle **not** an objective impossibility. Our experience of poll tax work has regrettably led us to conclude that most of the British left now constitutes one such obstacle due to its chronic labourism, its demoralisation, its pessimism and its complete disability to equip the campaign with independent working class politics. The poll tax is massively unpopular and the struggle against it must therefore have considerable anti-capitalist potential. It would be tragic if the left succeeded in rechanneling the deep anger at the poll tax into electoral support for Kinnock's 'capital friendly' Labour Party. Tragic but unsurprising.

## **AWG Editorial Committee**

### FOOTNOTES.

1) The Times 3.4.90 2) The Independent 3.4.90 3) The Guardian 3.4.90 4) Militant 6.4.90 5) *ibid* 6) Sunday Correspondent 1.4.90 7) Lambeth Budget and Poll Tax 1990-1991 8) A profile of Lambeth: to assess the impact of the poll tax. Centre for Inner City studies at Goldsmith's College 1988 9) Living Marxism No22 August 1990 10-14) *ibid* 15) ICM poll, Sunday Correspondent 8.4.90 16) Militant.

### ERRATA

There were three typographical errors in the article "Anarchist Organisation: The Next Step" in issue 2 of SFB. On page 26 the second sentence under the paragraph heading "The Leadership of Ideas" should have read:

*"However, as we have seen, anarchists have, historically, employed a conception of leadership, and have played a leadership role in workers' struggles."*

Secondly, under the heading "Cadre Organisation" on page 28, 2nd column, 3rd paragraph the sentence which begins "political organisation is not a formal scholastic exercise..." should have read:

*"Political education is not a formal scholastic exercise..."*

Finally, also on page 28, 3rd column, 2nd paragraph the first sentence read: "Another aspect of cadre-building involves equipping members with political consciousness," whereas it should have read:

*"Another aspect of cadre-building involves equipping members with organisational and educational skills."*

The miscreant has been slapped around the head a few times and sent for typing lessons...

# rank-and-filism *restated*

When the Anarchist Workers Group was formed in 1988 it was very much a product of a debate within the anarcho-syndicalist Direct Action Movement between the 'syndicalist' and 'rank-and-filist' approaches to trade union work. Our first publication, 'In Place of Compromise', elaborated the rank-and-file tradition we located ourselves in. Our 'rank-and-filism' was however largely defined 'negatively' in opposition to rival tactics, such as electoralism or dual unionism. Equally, our study of historical rank-and-file initiatives such as the wartime shop-stewards committees revealed the political limitations of these movements. For this reason the AWG has started to put flesh on the bone of our rank-and-file tactic, and in February 1990 we agreed on a set of theses which outlined a more constructive rank-and-file programme.

Crucial to our trade union work is our critique of the ideology of 'spontaneism': the notion that workers' immediate economic struggles will automatically take on a revolutionary character. This view seriously underestimates the 'ideological' or 'subjective' factor in the historical process and consequently neglects the requirement of a conscious political struggle by the revolutionary minority. The rank-and-file tactic then is the means by which the revolutionary section of our class seeks to bridge the gulf between 'bread and butter' trade union issues and the revolutionary transformation of society. As I will explain in this article, our industrial strategy is not narrowly concerned with creating new leaders or new unions, but of reconstructing an independent working class movement which can face up to the challenges of contemporary crisis-ridden capitalism.

The AWG advocates a rank-and-file movement because of our analysis of trade unions. We see unions as contradictory social formations which exist to defend workers interests **within** the confines of capitalism; a system which cannot guarantee those interests. They are also contradictory because, although they represent the collective ability of workers to wring concessions out of the system, at the same time they reflect the capitalist division of labour between workers of different trades, industries, skills and nationalities. Within the unions there has also developed a division of labour between the rank-and-file and a specialized body of union officials. In material terms,

the union leaders have become divorced from the drudgery, the living standards and day-to-day concerns of the rank-and-file. More crucially, their role as professional intermediaries leads them to see preservation of their bargaining role and of the union machine as an end in itself.

Bureaucratization is far advanced in all British unions which have created a hierarchy of officials from the high salaried national leaders down through regional and district full-timers to branch officials and plant convenors. As the government Donovan Commission recognized in 1968, even shop-stewards displayed tendencies towards accommodation with management:

*"For the most part the steward is viewed by others and views himself as an accepted, reasonable and even moderating influence, more of a lubricant than an irritant." (1)*

Sociological attempts to determine where the bureaucracy begins and ends in terms of facility-time, status and material perks are, however, problematic. The polarization between the rank-and-file and the bureaucracy certainly contains a grey area of low level representation. This blurred distinction will only tend to disappear when a conflict between workers and union leaders tests the responsiveness and allegiance of stewards to their members. For our purposes we will define the bureaucracy as the top officials in the union machine. It is these professional negotiators who, by



and large, influence the outlook of the rest of the labour movement. The bureaucracy is a parasitic layer whose significant material privileges generate an identification of workers' interests with the general economic prosperity of capitalism, whether at the micro level (ie. the industry) or the macro level (ie. the nation). In Britain this bureaucracy created its own political arm, the Labour Party, which carries out the task of mediation between workers and bosses in the wider political arena. The British Labour Movement has therefore always been drawn towards open collaboration and support for British capitalism, its national interest, its chauvinism and its bloody imperialist conflicts.

Union bureaucrats may have a decisive material stake in the capitalist system. However, the prosperity which Britain's imperialist super-profits afforded have never been enjoyed permanently and unquestioningly by the mass of British workers. Class conflict has at various times disrupted the post-war epoch of consensus politics. Working class action has also spoiled academic attempts to prove that workers have been completely bought off by capitalist prosperity. One of the most famous studies which appeared to show the embourgeoisment of British workers was Goldthorpe's 1966 'Affluent Worker' survey, which concluded that workers were generally content to be exploited and alienated under capitalism. However, shortly afterwards the sampled group of carworkers at Vauxhall, Luton, took part in a strike during which:

*"near riot conditions developed... Two thousand workers... tried to storm the main offices. Dozens of police were brought in... 'The Red Flag' was sung and workers shouted that the directors should be 'strung up'."* (2)

As the profitability of British capitalism has declined, organized workers have successfully resisted attempts to drive down the most important element of production costs (ie. wages) via successive government incomes policies of the late sixties and seventies. One of the features of the late Thatcher era has been the failure to control wage settlements in the private sector. The episodic eruptions of class struggle which have forced our rulers to create an armoury of anti-union laws indicates quite clearly that the interests of workers cannot be permanently reconciled with the capitalist system. Thus it has been inevitable that rank-and-file workers have at various times this century acted independently and in opposition to their class collaborationist union leaders. The 'Labour Unrest' 1910-14, the World War



One shop stewards committees, the National Minority Movement, the breakaway 'blue' dockworkers union of the 1950's, the unofficial strike wave 1965-74 and the breakaway union at Pilkingtons 1970 all testify to a sometimes hidden, sometimes explicit conflict of interests between the rank-and-file and the bureaucracy. It is to this divergence of interests that the rank-and-file tactic addresses itself. More specifically, the tactic defines how we build an independent workers movement based on the rank-and file. As revolutionaries our role is to assist in the realization of the latent potential of rank-and-file organization to become transformed into organs of workers power.

Unlike the 'dual unionists' we reject the strategy of bypassing the existing union and setting up parallel 'revolutionary' unions. In our view this tactic has the danger of isolating the revolutionary

minority from the mass of reformist workers. More importantly, we believe that the reformism of the existing unions is one that cannot simply be solved by organizational means. The solution to this problem requires a struggle of ideas rather than organizational short-cuts such as creating new pure unions. This doesn't mean that we completely reject all breakaway union in the name of the false bureaucratic unity of the TUC. Breakaways are sometimes inevitable and necessary if a particular section of workers are to be able to conduct effective struggle. However, our priority is the political battle; winning the arguments for independent class politics. Tactically we choose to begin this task within the existing unions. Our tactics are determined by the specific situation in Britain, where nearly 9 million workers belong to the existing unions. To abstractly counterpose revolutionary unions or workers'

councils to the existing TUC unions is to invite political marginalization. Unions are not, as we see them, substitutes for a political organization, nor are they the ideological arms of the capitalist state as the left communists believe. Unions are the 'actually existing' workers' organizations reflecting all the divisions and political unevenness of the working class as it is today. It would be wrong to fetishize the organizational expression, ie. the union, and treat it as the problem. The problem is profound and it is fundamentally one of political consciousness. Its root is the reformist idea that workers and bosses have something in common. This is an idea so strongly implanted that it has led to workers support for two imperialist world wars and a recurrent inability on the part of the labour movement to defend workers jobs and living standards during economic slumps. The material basis of reformism is Britain's imperialist prosperity which has ensured that a stable pro-capitalist labour bureaucracy has consolidated its hegemony and policing role over the working class movement. The ideology of class collaboration has led to the organizational incorporation of the unions into a web of state-sponsored arbitration bodies, quangos and commissions. Although the Thatcher government has dispensed with much of the apparatus of corporatism in favour of a more direct form of class rule, the only concern of the union leaders is for a return to the beer-and-sandwiches of a new industrial partnership. The task then of the revolutionary minority is to disentangle the working class movement both organizationally from the apparatus of collaboration and politically from Labourism.

One of the problems of advancing the rank-and-file tactic is the popular identification of that strategy with previous left-wing initiatives, most notably the National Rank-and-file movement launched in 1974 by the International Socialists (IS), forerunners of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). We would agree with the general aims of rank-and-file as expressed in the famous Clyde Workers Committee leaflet and quoted favourably by IS theorists:

*"We will support the officials just so long as they rightly represent the workers, but we will act independently immediately they misrepresent them."* (3)

However, the actual rank-and-file organization which the IS attempted to launch falls far short of our vision of a

radical workers movement. For a start, the initial horizons of the National Rank-and-file Movement (NRFM) were conceived in a narrowly organizational way; as a network of militants.

*"A National Rank-and-file Movement needs to be based...around the unit of Trade Union organization nearest the point of production... and requires a programme of minimal demands for each industry and/or union...linking all groups of radicalized workers."* (4)

The NRFM was moreover never able to shake off the charge that it was no more than an IS front. The IS was accused of bureaucratically controlling the NRFM not only from the right-wing (ie. the Communist Party) but from the left and, as the IS leadership had to admit, "even inside IS". (5)

***The SWP in practice have no conception of how to politicise reformist workers other than by guiding them through the experience of struggle, and hoping for the best.***

More alarmingly, the IS militants who numerically dominated the NRFM conferences were instrumental in rejecting an explicitly political programme from being adopted. The first conference in March 1974 agreed a very 'minimal' programme which defended trade union rights, supported strike action to free trade unionists jailed for taking illegal industrial action, opposed incomes policies and pledged:

*"to organize rank-and-file groups inside each union to fight for militant policies, for the extension of democracy, and support candidates fighting the right-wing..."* (6)

The failure to go beyond generalized trade union militancy to an overtly political profile inevitably meant that the dominant political ideas of the labour movement, ie. reformism, were not challenged and could continue to influence the outlook of militant shop-stewards. The IS strategy is effectively a variant of 'spontaneism'. The IS leadership believed that the increasing inability of British capitalism to concede reforms meant that trade union militancy could 'spontaneously' transform itself into an anti-capitalist movement.

*"It is only in periods of economic and social crisis, when the employers and the state are forced to attack these (rank-and-file) organizations, that workers involved in them are led to generalize, and to think in class rather than sectional terms."* (7)

The IS saw their own role in the process as organizers of the movement. Somehow by leading and linking together sectional struggles around a "non-revolutionary programme of political demands" (8) workers would be won over to socialism. The SWP in practice have no conception of how to politicize reformist workers other than by guiding them through the experience of struggle, and hoping for the best.

*"Underlying most of the objections to the rank-and-file strategy was a basic propagandism, which conceived the transformation of workers' consciousness as essentially a matter of spreading socialist ideas... The shop stewards and Workers Committee Movement and then the Minority Movement represented a rejection of this sterile propagandism and an orientation instead on the struggles through which workers can be opened up to socialist ideas. The IS/SWP tradition has sought, correctly, to continue this approach. Those who have criticized its 'economism' have yet to come up with a serious alternative."* (9)

The fact is that the shop-stewards movement in particular failed because of its apoliticism. It was unable to turn the sectional struggles of engineering workers against the effects of the war on their craft privileges, into a conscious struggle against the causes of the war itself, ie. imperialist competition. The problem is that unity around a minimum programme does not entail a politically neutral movement because the labour bureaucracy will continue unrelentingly to propagate its reformist ideas. Apoliticism, in allowing labourism to go uncontested can only serve to reinforce its dominance. In the 'battle of ideas' there can be no political ceasefires.

A good illustration of the weakness of militant trade union consciousness is an episode during the 1972 Pentonville Five affair when an unofficial strike wave forced the release of jailed dockers and broke the back of the Tory Industrial Relations Act.

*"When Bernadette Devlin MP came down to support the mass demonstrations outside Pentonville Jail in July 1972 large numbers of dockers jeered at her because she was Irish and*



identified with the struggle against British imperialism and because she was a woman." (10)

The 'political' strike action which forced the release of the dockers is often cited as a high point in British working class militancy. Yet this incident shows the nature of workers' 'political' consciousness: namely militant reformism which is no less nationalist and chauvinist. Working class support for our rulers' war in Ireland is a fundamental obstacle to working class independence and internationalism. The Falklands/ Malvinas war proved how easily nationalism could be used to demobilize the labour movement in the face of economic difficulties. Working class consciousness is therefore split between its economic trade union awareness and its political, Labourist world view. As Left-wing sociologist Richard Hyman explained:

*"The hegemony of bourgeois ideology is evident in the findings of 'public opinion' surveys: the majority of trade unionists are willing to criticize the unions for economic difficulties, blame workers for most disputes, and support legal restrictions on the right to strike. Such findings follow naturally from the purely sectional consciousness of not organized workers: they are ready to accept the condemnation by press and politicians of other workers' strikes, though they are unable to accept the dominant ideology in relation to their own activity."* (11)

The ideological sway of reformism can persist long after the system has exhausted the capacity for conceding significant reforms. The 1974-9 Labour government effectively derailed working class militancy and imposed wage controls without a corresponding spontaneous defection of working class support to revolutionary politics. The limitations of trade union militancy found their ultimate expression in 1979 when a wave of public sector strikes effectively destroyed Labour's Social Contract and forced a general election. However, at the polls significant sections of skilled manufacturing workers clearly succumbed to the Tory arguments that the nations problems were due to factors such as union power, high public spending and immigration. SWP theorists attempted to explain away the decline in rank-and-file militancy, deterministically by saying that mass unemployment has created a downturn in the class struggle; and sociologically, by claiming that the shop stewards structures had become incorporated. (12) These objective conditions are undeniably determining

factors but, for us, the key reason for the crisis in the labour movement is political. The idea that workers must pay for the crisis can only be challenged by breaking from reformist politics and adopting an independent and essentially anti-capitalist standpoint. The militant stewards in the important manufacturing sectors which took the brunt of the redundancies and closures of the early eighties were not politically equipped to fight the effects of recession with their Labourist outlooks. Political independence therefore is vital to any attempt to build a rank-and-file movement; a perspective fundamentally lacking in the SWP's NFRM initiative.

Unfortunately, the SWP, due to its chronic sectarianism and economism, has discredited the rank-and-file tactic in the eyes of many radicals. For example, the Direct Action Movement (DAM) have decided that their own 'Industrial Networks' are to be the embryos of a new labour movement.

*"Initially it is conceivable that they would consist of DAM members only, but they should be open to all workers who hold our industrial perspective."* (13)

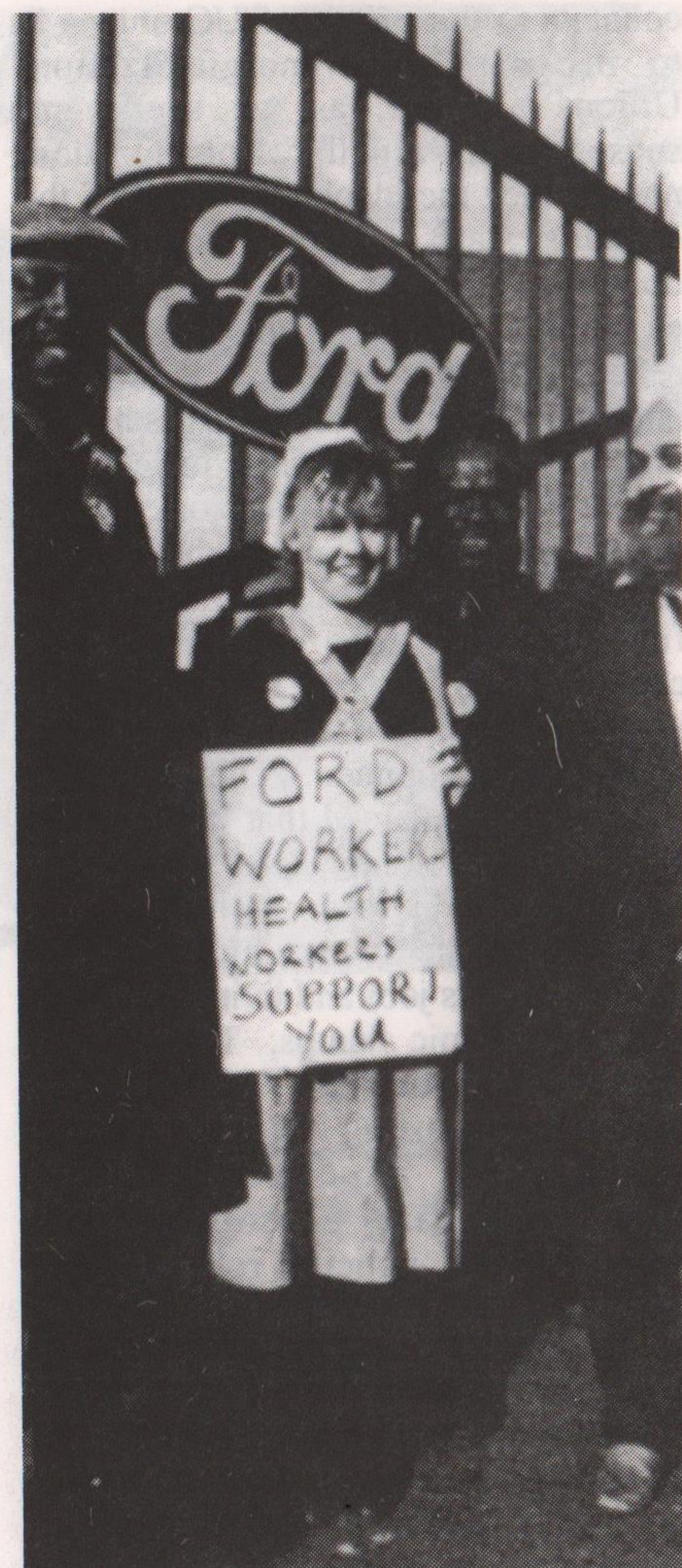
However, closer inspection shows that the DAM alternative is little more than the SWP's economism 'minus the Trots'.

*"We would recommend that industrial networks operate on a regional basis initially...where there is more than one area operating effectively...they should federate together and eventually form a national network."* (14)

Typically, syndicalists see bureaucracy as an organizational problem to be corrected by a federation of networks, rather than a political problem to be tackled with anti-capitalist arguments. If 'networking' was the solution, it begs the question: why hasn't anarcho-syndicalism taken root and grown in Britain before now? The answer can be found in DAM's own conception of the political 'content' of their 'industrial perspective'.

*"A relatively good area to get started on would be Health and Safety issues...Solidarity action and collecting money for other workers inside workplaces are also good means of raising ideas and issues."* (15)

These tactics amount to little more than militant trade unionism and as such suggest that modern day syndicalists have no clearer idea of how to politicize the class struggle than their predecessors.



As we enter the 1990's the need for a radical overhaul of working class politics is nowhere more clearly illustrated than in the campaign against the poll tax. The 'unofficial' All Britain Federation was able to mobilize a quarter of a million people on one day whilst the TUC could not even fill Westminster's 2000 capacity Central Hall a few days later. The labour bureaucracy has maintained a united front against any attempts to organize trade union non-implementation of the tax. If we examine the composition of those who have chosen to fight the poll tax we can, moreover, draw important lessons for the constitution of a new workers' movement. Thousands of demonstrators physically and courageously fought a battle with riot police in Trafalgar Square. These were not just London's homeless so-called 'underclass', sine two-thirds of those arrested were in work. A 'Sunday Correspondent' poll a week later showed that 32% of those polled thought the rioting was 'understandable' while 7% went further to agree that it was justified. An opinion poll published in the 'Independent' (10/6/90) showed a 13% hard-core who had no intention of paying the poll tax, these being predominantly young, semi-skilled and unskilled workers. These facts show

that the official labour movement has failed an entire new generation of workers, many of whom will be receptive to anti-capitalist ideas. Many of these young workers will not have experienced the defeats and setbacks of the eighties which have also demoralized the old revolutionary left. Many will be service sector workers who don't even belong to a trade union, something which the official movement must take the blame for. These young workers stand in stark contrast the the fossilized remains of the old labour movement. It is essential that today's poll tax rioters become tomorrow's rank-and-file fighters in the vanguard of a radically different workers' movement.

The left, however, still remain tied to the old methods of trade union work. The Militant Tendency and the SWP continue to operate the Broad Left tactic of working to capture union leaderships. Their electoralism is a contemporary labour of Sisyphus (16) which has done nothing to change the unions and even less to politicize workers. Left-wingers have time and again won union positions on purely economic platforms of 'wages and conditions' militancy. Countless 'model' motions are routinely passed at empty branch meetings and leftists co-opted to steward and branch positions simply because nobody else will stand. These workers they subsequently claim to represent, however, continue to vote Labour at elections and will largely support the Tory line on 'difficult' political issues, ie. Ireland, Lesbian and gay oppression, immigration controls, etc. A rank-and-file approach must literally begin from the bottom up, not just winning the arguments in the workplace but broadening the narrow scope of those arguments beyond sectional concerns.

The AWG rank-and-file tactic involves fighting for the complete political independence of the working class movement. In organizational terms we advocate the formation of rank-and-file committees which can break down the sectionalism of the official union machines. We are for using and democratizing the existing union machines as far as is possible while at the same time building a movement which has the capacity to think and act independently as and when necessary. Unofficial organization is an immediate and urgent necessity in the face of TUC grovelling before the law, which is why it is equally criminal for left-wingers to argue that the 'time isn't right' to build a rank-and-file movement. As I have stated before, a rank-and-file movement must fight for complete union independence from the state apparatus.

This involves a boycott of courts and arbitration bodies as well as withdrawal from negotiation committees, quangoes and industrial tribunals. Finally it means open defiance of all state interference in union affairs such as the Tory Employment Acts of the 1980s. The rank-and-file tactic insists on the resolution of all workers' problems, from health and safety to dealing with fascists in the workplace, through our own collective power and never by recourse to management's disciplinary powers or the capitalist courts.

***Politicisation of the workers' movement in an anti-capitalist direction is not easy but increasingly vital to ensure the success of even the most defensive of workers' struggles.***

A new rank-and-file movement must also tackle the difficult political questions which the Broad Lefts daren't touch. Every struggle and every industry will have its 'points of politicization'; where trade union concerns can and must be politicized. In private industry the question of profitability has proved a major stumbling block for traditional trade unionism, especially during an economic slump. Unions have consistently accepted the need for lay-offs, speed-ups, productivity deals; and other methods by which the bosses attempt to increase the rate of exploitation. It is vital that workers begin to fight for their independent requirements, regardless of whether the industry is profitable or loss-making.

In the public sector there are similar problems especially as public spending as being cut: job losses, increased productivity drives, the linking of pay to performance or market forces, casualization, contracting out; all are now common problems facing workers in the state sector. Workers responses to all such proposals must also be based on an assessment of their needs; and if appropriate the services they provide. However, public sector workers need to go beyond defensive struggles and begin to question the nature of some of the work they are required to do. Workers are obliged to operate immigration and passport checks, policing of the unemployed, poll tax implementation, etc, and must begin to operate a veto on such anti-working class activities.

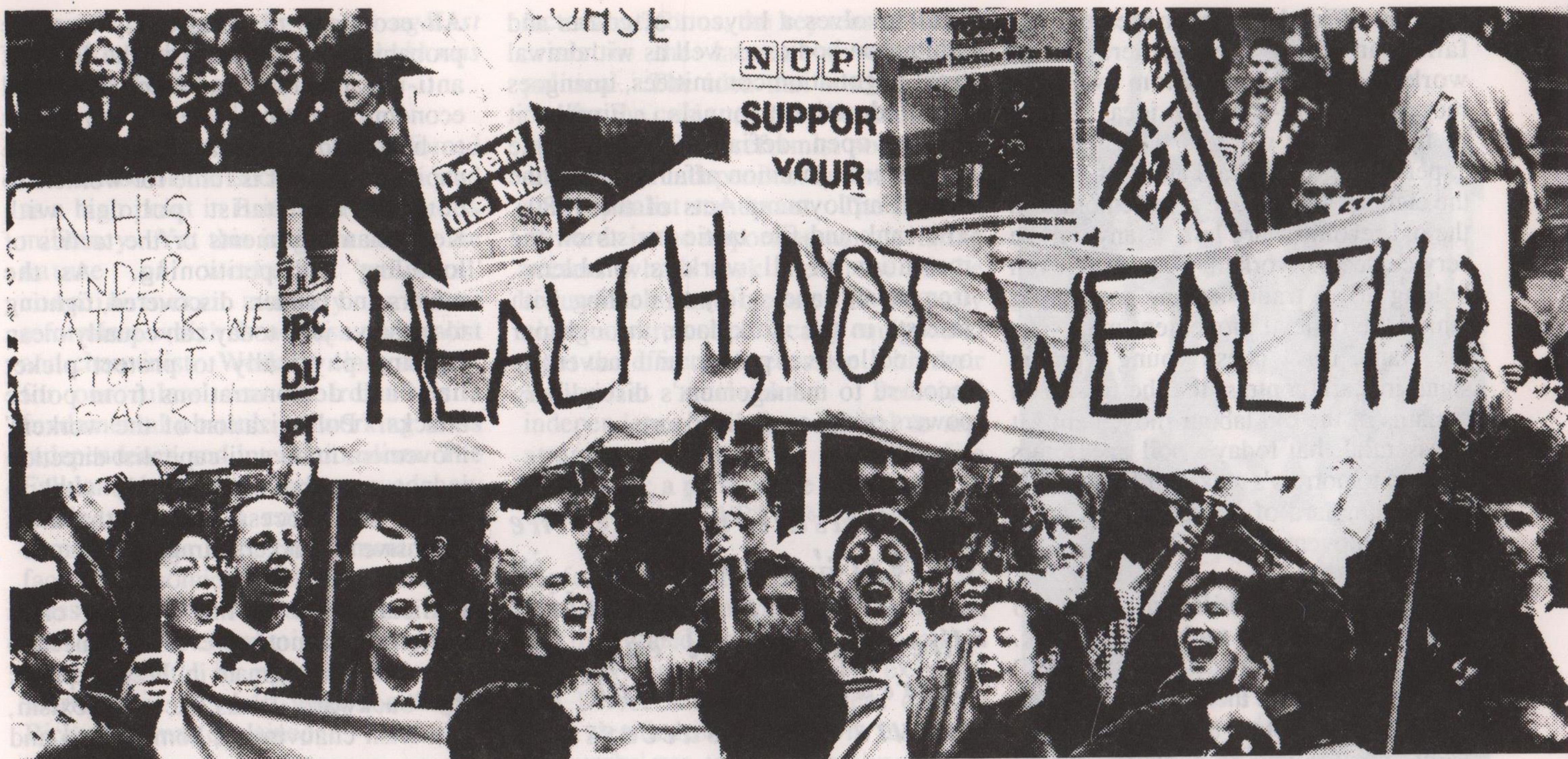
All economic disputes today face the probability of obstacles in the form of anti-union laws and the perennial economic question "where is the money to be found?". In a period of acute capitalist crisis it is futile for workers to counter monetarist policies with Keynesian arguments or the tactics of lobbying and petitioning. As the miners and printers discovered, fighting to preserve jobs today can equally mean fighting physically to protect picket lines and demonstrations from police attacks. Politicization of the workers' movement in an anti-capitalist direction is not easy but increasingly vital to ensure the success of even the most defensive of workers' struggles.

Radicalization of the working class movement cannot however be reduced to issues which originate in the workplace: the 'backward' ideas racism, sexism, anti-Irish chauvinism, homophobia and so on prevent the emergence of an independent and unified working class movement as much a sectional divisions. The erosion of some of these reactionary ideas, but by no means all, can be achieved through the experience of common struggle. However, on the whole working class support for the struggles of the oppressed must be consciously taken into the workplace. Rank-and-file politics must accord the fight against oppression as much weight as economic issues if it is to build a truly egalitarian and internationalist movement.

The final act of political independence must be the withdrawal of working class support for the Labour Party. This has proved to be by far the most 'difficult' of all political issues for the left inside and outside the Labour Party to accept. Yet the shortcomings of all previous expressions of rank-and-file militancy in this country lie precisely in their failure to break with Labourism itself. Nor, as even the highest points in the class struggle illustrate, does conflict with reformist union leaders or with a Labour government lead to a spontaneous break with Labourism. It is vital then that class-conscious disaffiliation from the Labour Party becomes axiomatic to any future rank-and-file movement.

Space does not permit the full elaboration of a rank-and-file programme here. What I want to establish is the method; the capacity to locate and uncover the political content of economic struggles; to promote rank-and-file control over struggles and the methods required to win (direct action, picketline defence, etc.). Our strategy is not simply to organize the rank-and-file as it exists, but to create the political





basis for realizing the anti-capitalist potential of rank-and-file organization. Such organizations will obviously be created in the process of struggles to meet specific sectional needs. For example, during the recent ambulance pay dispute, unofficial activists meetings were instrumental in organizing a London-wide day of action and escalating the dispute in North London. Our own support for such initiatives, or for any future attempts to launch a rank-and-file movement, is unconditional. We will, however, fight for the adoption of our political perspectives in all such militant workers' forums. We do not believe in accommodating to reformism by watering down our rank-and-file programme. We therefore see the need for political struggle not just against the labour bureaucracy, but against the ideas of labourism within a rank-and-file movement.

As the AWG has stated before:

*"We see the building of a national rank-and-file movement as inseparable from that of building a strong anarchist workers' current in the labour movement."* (17)

At present neither exists, but we are convinced that the potential for both is considerable as the poll tax revolt illustrates. Not that all anarchists share our perspective. The syndicalists of the DAM seriously underestimate the necessity of an independent anarchist political organization.

*"I would like to see Industrial Networks becoming the foremost area of activity, and with their growth the declining*

*importance of previous political forms of organization such as the DAM."* (18)

We however believe that economic based organizations, however politicized, are not sufficient, in and of themselves, for conducting the political 'battle of ideas' and ensuring that the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist state and the consolidation of working class power is accomplished successfully. What is also needed is a strong anarchist current within the working class which has at its core a well organized, coherent, political organization capable of lucid thought and decisive action. Such an organization must, in our view, play a leading, not a 'declining', role in the class struggle. It will also be crucial in initiating, sustaining and providing the leadership and political cutting edge of a

rank-and-file movement.

The precise forms which rank-and-file organizations assume will vary according to the levels of bureaucratization within different unions, and the extent to which workers can assert their needs through the existing organizations. What matters, as I have shown, is the political content. At present the AWG can only realistically contribute ideas to such a project but, as history has taught, ideas are essential components of a rank-and-file movement. If reformist ideas contributed to the failure of previous efforts, our libertarian communist ideas can guarantee success in future.

JOE WHITE

1) Donovan Report. The Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers Associations was set up in 1965 and published its report in 1968. 2) From R. Blackburn, 'The Unequal Society' cited in 'Industrial Relations in Advanced Capitalism and the Explosion of Consciousness', Michael Mann in T. Clarke and L. Clements (eds.) 'Trade Unions Under Capitalism' (1977) p.301. 3) Clyde Workers Committee first leaflet November 1915. 4) Ken Appleby, 'The Rank-and-file Movement Yesterday and Today', International Socialism, 1974. 5) Alex Callinicos, 'The Rank-and-file Movement Today', International Socialism 2:17, Autumn 1982. 6) Programme of the NRFM quoted in Steve Jefferys, 'The Challenge of the Rank-and-file', International Socialism, 1975. 7) Callinicos, op cit, p.8. 8) Callinicos, ibid, p.24. 9) Callinicos, ibid, p.25. 10) Steve Jefferys, 'Striking into the Eighties', International Socialism 25, p.24. 11) R. Hyman, 'Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unions' from T. Clarke and L. Clements op cit, p.384. 12) For an example of this type of analysis see D. Beacham, 'Updating the Downturn', International Socialism 2:14, Autumn 1981. 13) Direct Action Movement Industrial Strategy, Industrial Networks Section. 14) ibid. 15) ibid. 16) Sisyphus, mythological greek figure. He was doomed to spend eternity rolling a heavy boulder up a steep hill. When he got to the top the boulder would roll down and he would be back where he started. Anarchist Workers, best politics, best metaphors. Impress your friends and workmates! 17) Anarchist Workers Group, 'In Place of Compromise', 1988, p.27. 18) DAM Industrial Strategy, op cit.

**ANARCHIST WORKERS AND THE TRADE UNIONS.** The Rank-and-File Theses of the Anarchist Workers Group is available from the national address for 50p + 30p postage and package.

# review

**Beating The Poll Tax: An Anarchist Communist Federation (ACF) Pamphlet, March 1990.**

'Beating the Poll Tax' is a compact, easy to read pamphlet which aims to provide an anarchist analysis of the anti-poll tax campaign in Britain. However, its failure to go beyond cheering on the existing forms of resistance to present a full programme for the defeat of the Tory 'flagship' means that this work is unlikely to make much of an impact outside the infamous anarcho-activist ghetto.

The ACF declare:

*"The poll tax can be beaten. But it can only be defeated by militant, autonomous action by working class people outside the control of all unions, parties or leaders."*

If the ACF believe that their analysis is correct one would expect a bold declaration of the need for a 'leadership' of anarchist ideas within the campaign, counterposed to those of the "union, parties or leaders". However one gets the impression that the author believes that the realization that Labour leaders are our enemies is something that will spontaneously develop out of working class resistance. This has clearly not happened.

Although a political programme for an independent working class campaign is not forthcoming, there is a noticeable change of attitude towards the grass roots of the labour movement. The ACF's previous offering "The Poll Tax And How To Fight It" argued:

*"... the crucial battleground on which the fight against the poll tax will be won or lost, is going to be outside the workplace: the collective community campaign of non-payment."*

This was a sort of SWP analysis in reverse! The latest pamphlet correctly argues that non-implementation is a key element in the battle against the poll tax. Yet when they assert that council workers are "the only group of people really capable of putting a spanner in the works of the council's implementation machine..." they are failing to stress the danger of placing the burden on certain groups of workers. This could lead to their isolation and victimization. The workplace struggle must therefore be generalised. Regardless of their strategic importance, sections of workers need a mass campaign behind them; one which is prepared to take political strike action at every sign of victimization or dismissal of activists. The author seems to have a blind faith in the preparedness of working class people to defy the law unquestioningly. The truth of the matter is that those in our communities who are not paying their poll tax bills are on the whole 'can't payers' rather than won't payers'.

Workers, we are told "... need to link community and workplace struggle together... to co-ordinate and unify their struggles..." Again we are left wondering if this is something which will spontaneously occur. We in the **Anarchist Workers Group** have consistently argued that the anti-poll tax campaign must itself take responsibility for mobilizing a unified struggle. Committees of delegates from workplace and community anti-poll tax groups must be built in each locality. These must co-ordinate the action of all the forces of non-compliance **independently** of the 'stay-within-the-law' Labour leaders.

Finally we are offered abstract accusations of the 'left' that they have "nothing to offer us", and that they are motivated by "self-interest". This may or may not be true. Our concern, however, as revolutionaries should be the political crisis in the labour movement. Illusions in Labour leaders and trade union bureaucrats

continue to exercise a debilitating influence over the left and the anti-poll tax campaign, and we should concentrate our fire on these ideas. A revolutionary anarchist programme of non-compliance is necessary to win and should be at the forefront of the struggle against the poll tax. Unfortunately such a programme is not outlined in this pamphlet.

Louise Doyle.

## letters

Socialism From Below has received an article from Andy Anderson, a founder of the 70's grouping Solidarity. The article which is entitled "The Answer to a Burning Question" addresses various issues concerning the class nature of society and the language of politics and struggle. Due to considerations of space, the article is 2900 words long, we are unable to publish contributions of this length. However you can obtain a copy of his article together with our reply "Smoke without fire" by SFB's Chris Holman and Mike Gordon by sending an SAE to the national address.



# labouring under illusions



The Labour Party has reaped the rewards of Thatcher's unpopularity, particularly over the Poll Tax. But Labour's own record on this issue leaves much to be desired. Every Labour Council in the country has implemented the tax. Kinnock has told working class people to pay up, and promised that a Labour government will drag them before the capitalist courts if they don't. Following the Trafalgar Square riot, Hattersley called for "exemplary sentences" for those who fought back against the police, and Tony Benn demanded "a full and comprehensive public inquiry chaired by a High Court judge". **SOCIALISM FROM BELOW** takes a look at the Labour Party and finds that, even when it has talked 'left', it has always served the interests of the capitalist class.

*"We should treat Parliament as a representative of the enemy... we ought not to put forward palliative measures to be carried through Parliament, for that would be helping them to govern us."*  
(William Morris, 1888)

In the second half of the last century the working class was able to secure both economic and political gains, through rising wages and the granting of the vote. These were the crumbs which the ruling class was able to throw from its table, due to the imperialist super-exploitation of India and Africa. It was a situation which tended to breed stability rather than revolution within the imperialist countries. These gains convinced many in the labour movement that the state was neutral; socialism could be achieved through a working class majority in parliament.

This was not only the case in Britain. The German Social Democratic Party was set up at Gotha in 1875. In 1899 Bernstein published his 'Evolutionary Socialism', in which he argued that class antagonisms were disappearing. The better off workers, he thought, formed a 'community' with the bosses.

For the imperialised the price of imperialism was high - in 1891 the average Indian lived less than 26 years. But for the top layer of British workers, the 'labour aristocracy', the benefits were very real. It was this group of workers who formed the basis of union organization. Such unions were often used as much to defend sectional

privileges against other workers as they were against the employers. Some skilled craftsmen even hired a few other workers or sub-contracted out their work. Class collaboration was the result. The ruling class in Britain had the foresight to recognize that to bring the trade unions into the state, within strict boundaries, was preferable to open class conflict. Legal recognition was given to the unions, whilst restrictions were placed on the right to strike.

Thus the unions agreed to the automatic regulation of wages: if the sale price of the articles produced went up, wages increased - and vice versa. In this way workers wages were tied to the profitability of industry. This principle remained in the Brooklands Agreement of 1893, which made it compulsory for both workers and employers to submit to a conciliation procedure and abstain from hostilities pending the decision. In 1896, the state itself drew up model procedures for arbitration and conciliation. In 1909, 1025 disputes were settled by conciliation, as opposed to 436 which developed into strikes or lockouts. In 1910 in England alone there were 1103 collective agreements of this sort, 30 sliding scales, and 282 conciliation boards or committees. (1)

The leaders of the trade unions, therefore, actively collaborated in identifying the interests of workers with their bosses. In doing so, they acquired a special status as mediators in the class struggle - something consciously fostered by the most far-sighted bourgeois politicians.

In this way the most organized section of the class was used as a vehicle to draw the workers' movement into the state in an attempt to neutralize it. Although the 'labour aristocracy' was a privileged layer, it was subject to the ebb and flow of the class struggle. Ultimately, its dominance within the workers' movement was to be eroded by that flow (particularly during the syndicalist revolt of 1910-14). The bureaucracy, on the other hand, proved to be a permanent layer. Through them, 'representatives of labour' were brought into the state administration.

The Liberal government of Gladstone appointed trade union officials as factory inspectors and justices of the peace. By 1890 many of them looked forward to a post in the civil service after retirement. The 1912 National Insurance Act made unions into a part of the administration of health insurance as 'approved societies'. From here it was only a step to enmeshing the labour bureaucrats into a whole network of advisory and consultative bodies - methods developed particularly in the course of two world wars.

It was natural that these bureaucrats would look to parliament as a peaceful way of advancing their members' (and specifically their own) interests. This 'labour candidates; regularly stood for parliament under the auspices of the Liberal Party. Despite the establishment of the Independent Labour Party in 1893, it was only in 1900 that the bureaucrats decided to set up their own parliamentary organization, the Labour Representation Committee.

In 1901 the Taff Vale judgement established the precedent that trade unions could be sued for damages caused by the actions of their officers. As has been the case ever since, the bureaucrats chose to try to change the law rather than break it.

In 1906 the Labour Party was set up, embracing "a readiness to cooperate with any party which for the time being may

be engaged in promoting legislation in the direct interest of labour". (2) There was no contradiction in this. As Ramsay MacDonald made clear, Labour Party principles "rest upon conceptions of right and wrong common to all classes". (3)

*"To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service."*  
(Labour Party Constitution, Clause 4, part 4)

Clause Four of the Labour Party constitution is generally accepted as the basis of its commitment to socialism. Yet this constitution was drawn up by the Fabian Sidney Webb, who, as Beatrice admitted, "personally belong[ed] to the ruling class". (4) Fabian ideology, not the class war, was the Labour Party's doctrine from birth. Its core idea was that gradual evolution towards socialism was inevitable. The vehicle for this transition was to be the capitalist state, which it was recognized, had already begun to extend its influence into new spheres of society.

Such a scheme conveniently ruled out revolution, or any form of class struggle. The Fabians opposed such methods because they believed that the "myriads of deficient minds and deformed bodies" of the working class were not capable of acting constructively, only of "brutality, meanness and crime". (5) What was necessary above all, therefore, was "the gravest violations of principles of all sorts" and "compromise at every step". (6)

1918, the year of the new constitution, holds great significance. The First World War had been the Labour Party's chance to become a truly national party. In May 1915 it joined Asquith's coalition government. Its job, in conjunction with the trade union leaders, was to impose industrial discipline on the working class (a role to be repeated in World War II).

This role of the Labour bureaucracy led to a revival of unofficial organization amongst workers, especially in engineering. For the Labour Party, however, the war was the road to true integration. It emerged as a fully fledged opposition party ready to take on the running of the state. This emergence of the Labour Party as a viable party of government required fuller autonomy



from the trade union bureaucracy. A stricter separation was agreed upon. Thus, the TUC replaced its Parliamentary Committee with a General Council, whilst the first Labour government insisted that trade union leaders who became ministers must give up their union positions. But in 1918, as Lloyd George put it:

*"Europe is in a revolutionary mood. The whole of the existing social political and economic order is being called into question by the mass of people from one end of Europe to the other."* (7)

Social democracy was to be the last refuge of the bourgeoisie. In Germany, the SPD took the helm of the state in order to smash the revolution. The British Labour Party leader Henderson visited revolutionary Russia and was appalled to see "Directors and Managers in a subordinate position and the supreme control in the hands of the workpeople themselves". (8) To him, this was "disaster".

If the Labour Party was to act as a safety valve for the mood of British workers, it needed a constitution which addressed its state-capitalist aspirations in leftspeak. As Sidney Webb explained:

*"The best safeguard against 'Bolshevism' is a strong Labour Party in Parliament, voicing the discontent... If you want a Bolshevik revolution in this country, the*

*surest way to get it is to succeed in eliminating or discrediting the Labour Party."* (9)

Thus the Party's 1922 manifesto ended with the headline "Against Revolution".

If Clause Four is held up as the ideological embodiment of Labour's commitment to socialism, the 1945-51 government is seen as the high point of its practice. This government oversaw the post-war reconstruction of the British economy. This followed from the role the Party played during the war itself, when state regulation of the economy (and of labour) reached its peak.

As in the First World War, the ruling class needed the Labour leaders and union bureaucrats to pull the working class behind the imperialist war effort. One liberal historian has summed it up thus:

*"The struggle for survival dictated that the Right should recruit the Left. Hence, the introduction into the War Cabinet of Labour ministers, and the installation of the TUC virtually as a department of government in Whitehall. Hence, the dissemination of social democratic ideas over the BBC, in the army, and the information services. Hence, the new priority attaching to the morale and welfare of the working classes... Hence the new phrase on the lips of speakers: 'the people's war'."* (10)



All production and labour relations were regulated by the state through the Ministry of Labour under former union bureaucrat Ernest Bevin. Strikes and lockouts were banned, and transfers of labour from one industry to another were controlled by the Ministry. Union bureaucrats were brought onto wartime committees. In 1939 union officials were on 12 government committees, by 1948-9 they were on 60. (11) In 1958, under a Tory government, this figure had reached 850. (12)

**"We should treat parliament as a representative of the enemy... we ought not to put forward palliative measures to be carried through parliament, for that would help them to govern us" William Morris 1888.**

Although the bureaucrats had settled on collaboration, the rank-and-file was not convinced. In 1944 there were 2194 strike days. (13) All such strikes were necessarily unofficial, but continued to grow the next year. When miners went on strike in 1944 Bevin said it was "worse than if Hitler had bombed Sheffield". (14)

Such wartime collaboration by definition involved the defence of the British Empire, including the repression of the Indian independence movement. At the Party conference in 1944 Bevin defended Britain's part in the massacre of the Communist-led Greek resistance movement. (15)

*"If you do not give the people social reforms they are going to give you social revolution."* (Quintin Hogg, Tory MP) (16)

The post-war consensus was encapsulated within the Beveridge Report. It was a plan which most British employers accepted. Enormous amounts of investment would be required for capital reconstruction, and without government guarantees for credit this would be virtually impossible. If the process was to run smoothly, the cooperation of the workers was necessary. Reforms would have to be granted to a working class that had put up with six years of war.

The election of 1945 gave Labour its largest ever majority: 146 seats over all other parties and just over 50% of votes cast. This, it could be expected to

claim, was a mandate for far-reaching change. Yet Morgan Phillips, the Party's General Secretary during the 1945 election campaign was concerned to "remove at the outset any lingering impression that the Labour Party is a class party". (17) Most of the major figures of the new government held high office in the Churchill coalition. For them, the war-time controls of state-capitalism were 'socialist' in nature. Attlee said:

*"Quite naturally, in war, when the public good must take precedence over private interest, the solutions had a strong socialist flavour".* (18)

State control over private industry, therefore, was to be taken to its logical conclusion: nationalization.

Capitalist reconstruction meant above all the provision of a solid infra-structure. The government's nationalization programme was to provide this. Only those industries that were necessary to service profitable enterprise, but were too costly for individual capitalists to invest in, were nationalized. The nationalization of each industry was argued for on the basis of practical matters peculiar to it, not on the basis of socialist principles. So, for example, coal was nationalized because obsolete equipment, the prospect of a workforce in a strong bargaining position (due to the shortage of manpower) and competition from oil made it a good time for capitalists to sell out. Churchill agreed that the nationalization of the Bank of England was not "any issue of principle". (19)

In fact, nationalization was largely recommended by Conservative dominated fact finding and special investigating committees. (20) Nationalization was not new to the British ruling class. Gladstone nationalized telegraphs in 1869. The Port of London Act 1908 made the docks a public corporation. Churchill advocated nationalization of the railways in 1918. In the inter-war period the Central Electricity Generating Board, London Transport and the British Overseas Airways Corporation were set up. (21) It was the scale that had changed to meet post-war needs, not the content.

Thus, roughly 20% of industry was nationalized. 'Liability' industries were taken out of the hands of their private owners and used to strengthen the 80% left there. Relatively cheap prices were charged to private industry for the goods and services of the state sector. Operating surpluses produced by the nationalized industries were used to finance compensation for the previous



**We want a Britain where production expands year by year and the growing wealth is fairly shared throughout the nation**

owners, who re-invested this in profitable spheres.

For the workers in these industries, little changed. There was no provision for workers' control; the form taken was the old one of the public corporation. The appointment of bosses to the boards of these corporations (in many cases the same bosses as before) ensured practical control by the capitalists without investment or financial risk. In December 1949, of 131 names listed by Attlee on central nationalized boards 61 also held directorships in private companies, 23 were knights, 9 were lords and 3 were generals. (22) Former radical Stafford Cripps argued in 1946:

*"There is not yet a very large number of workers in Britain capable of taking over large enterprises.... until there has been more experience by the workers of the managerial side of industry, I think it would be almost impossible to have worker-controlled industry in Britain, even if it were on the whole desirable."* (23)

The nationalization acts laid down quite specifically that profitability was the immediate and long-term goal. Thus in one industry a Labour Minister asked a conference of workers to abandon their 44 hour week voluntarily in favour of longer hours, in order to reduce the industry's deficit. (24) Even the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy has to admit:

*"Like most large private companies, the structure of nationalized firms is unaccountable and top-heavy and totally unsuitable for the role that socialists want them to play."* (25)

Post-war reconstruction was, of course, a Europe-wide process. There was nothing peculiarly socialist about the British experience. Furthermore, European capitalism was firmly subordinated to the USA. American dollars were needed to finance reconstruction, but they came at a price. The Bretton Woods proposals swapped a US loan to Britain for the establishment of the International Monetary Fund and the International Bank, under US domination.

From 1948 the Marshall Plan provided more financial aid from the US, in order to stabilize the European economies and ensure allegiance to US capitalism. Stafford Cripps noted how the Marshall Plan appeared "to lay the whole of our financial policy open to dictation by the US government". (26)

Yet the Labour government still found it necessary to impose an austerity

programme to deal with the crisis of 1947. This policy was overseen by Cripps, who cut back such things as house building. Order 1305 which made wartime strikes illegal was continued. Attlee invoked the Emergency Powers Act for the first time since the General Strike. The Supply and Transport Organization, which had been used to help crush the General Strike, was revived. In the years 1945-51, troops were used as scabs on 18 separate occasions.

**There are no islands of socialism. To argue that we can win permanent gains within the system without overthrowing it is entirely false.**

Attlee played his full part in the Cold War. He devoted a greater proportion of GNP to defence than any other Western state. In March 1946 he became the first Prime Minister in British history to implement military conscription in peacetime. When this was cut from 18 to 12 months, military chiefs led by Lord Montgomery threatened to resign. The government duly surrendered and put it back to 18, giving proof that real power lies outside of parliament. When the Korean War broke out, military services was extended to 2 years. Only three Labour MP's voted against British troops being used in Korea. Attlee accepted the atomic bomb programme without evening consulting the Cabinet.

The 'left wing' of the Party was no better. In August 1948 'Tribune' argued that Britain should stay in Africa because "Africa offers huge natural resources which can be exploited for the benefit of Britain and the world." (27) For most working class people the experience of the 'welfare state' has been entirely alienating. Of course, in a capitalist system we all have to rely on lousy benefits, hospitals with waiting lists and drab council housing. Yet rather than fighting to fundamentally change the system, the Left continue to this day to argue that these things are somehow inherently socialist.

There are no islands of socialism. To argue that we can win permanent gains within the system without overthrowing it is entirely false. Yet this is exactly what people like Eric Heffer, so beloved of the Left, do argue. Calling himself a 'revolutionary reformist', he quotes RH Tawney's defence of bourgeois 'democracy' with approval:



"The British version of socialism, therefore, has democracy as its basis. In labouring to add new economic storeys to the house, it was no intention of destroying its political foundations." (28)

Such parliamentary cretinism fails completely to understand the essence of revolution. Revolution is not simply a collection of reforms. It is a qualitatively different phenomenon: the smashing of the bourgeois state and its replacement by the democratic power of the working class. Capitalist 'democracy' cannot be given a proletarian content, it has to be superseded by workers' councils. Those who maintain the illusion that this is not the case are preparing the ground for a replay of Chile 1973, when a military coup smashed the workers' movement. Even a left-Labour government was brought down by the establishment in Australia in 1975. Whilst the Left insist on playing by the rules, the capitalist class is quite prepared to abandon parliamentary protocol when the need arises.

There are those apologists for the Labour Party, however, who claim also to be revolutionaries. The most politically degenerate of such Trotskyist tactics is embodied in the practice of the Militant Tendency. This group has entirely accommodated itself to the Party hierarchy and the traditions of Labourism. Thus, it joined in the clamour of condemnation over those who defended the Trafalgar Square Poll Tax march against the police, threatening to hand over names to the authorities. Its supporters in the civil service union CPSA went to the capitalist courts over an election dispute.

Yet even those who claim to be more principled must keep their heads down if they are to avoid expulsion. Thus, officially, there are no Trotskyist groups in the Labour Party, only 'supporters of a newspaper'. Even the Socialist Workers Party, who are organizationally independent, joined in the 1981 campaign for Tony Benn as Deputy Leader.

Those, like the SWP, who reject the entry tactic still insist on 'critical support' for Labour during elections. We must 'put them to the test of office', elect them to expose them, and show we are 'on the side' of workers who have illusions in Labour. The result is a whole series of 'vote Labour but...' posters at election time. The 'orthodox' Trotskyist group Workers Power explains its practice towards the Labour Party thus:

"In all cases bourgeois workers' parties continue to represent that original impulse towards political independence of the working class... Despite their countless betrayals of the interests of the working class these parties remain a creation of the class. They have, nonetheless, been deformed, twisted and redirected into the very opposite of a force for class independence. They have become instruments of the bourgeoisie for ruling the working class and negating its political independence." (29)

Either the trajectory of the Labour Party is towards integration of the workers' movement within the capitalist state (and its consequent nullification), or it is towards the independence of the working class. We had thought the phenomenon of the 'bourgeois workers' party' was supposed to be contradictory, not the theory itself. You cannot have your cake and eat it, and no recourse to 'dialectics' will serve as an excuse.

Being Trotskyists, Workers Power bring in Trotsky to support their case:

"Thus, while social democracy is 'The party that leans upon the workers but serves the bourgeoisie', this same reformist party and associated unions are 'bulwarks of workers' democracy within the bourgeois state.' This is no vulgar paradox." (30)

We think it is. If the Labour Party is a double-edged sword, by far the sharpest edge faces our way. All these Labour Party election agents breed illusions of one kind or another, rather than giving a clear warning. As Bakunin wrote over a hundred years ago:

"[Marxist political theory] inevitably draws and enmeshes its partisans, under the pretext of political tactics, into ceaseless compromises with governments and political parties; that is, it pushes them towards downright reaction." (31)

There is one last argument which the Left uses to justify its tactics towards the Labour Party. Labour, they say, has 'organic links' with the working class through the unions, who created it in the first place. This is what makes it a workers' party, however capitalist its policies may be. Let us examine these 'organic' links.

A survey conducted by Labour MP Derek Fatchett in 1987 showed that local links between unions and Constituency Labour Parties were weak. Only in a small minority of cases did union delegates constitute a majority in either

general or executive committees. In 74 of the 202 constituencies surveyed, affiliated union branches were unable to fill the number of places available to them. (32) Only 31% of CLPs had a union delegate as chair, and only 23% of local secretaries were from affiliated union branches. The pattern was even stronger in terms of finance. Only 3 CLPs out of a total of 177 valid replies said they relied upon unions for more than 50% of their income. (33) 75% of CLPs received less than £500 from union resources. The average CLP, therefore, raised about 80% of its own income from sources other than the unions. This is in sharp contrast to the national picture, where unions provide just under 80% of the money raised by the Party.

**Revolution is not simply a collection of reforms. It is a qualitatively different phenomenon: the smashing of the bourgeois state and its replacement by the democratic power of the working class.**

We can see that the 'organic' links are not with the rank-and-file union members, but with the bureaucracy. The vast majority of union finance provided for the Labour Party is directed towards the centre. The bureaucrats presently dominate conference organizationally through the block vote. In contrast, less than 1% of all trade unionists are individual members of the Labour Party. 'Affiliated' members have no direct say in the policies of the Party.

The irony is that it is usually the Left who maintain (or attempt to maintain) active links between union branches and CLPs. Trotting out the phrase 'organic links' to justify an orientation towards the Labour Party therefore becomes a self-fulfilling activity.

This local activity is supplemented by arguing for unions nationally to affiliate (or maintain affiliation) to Labour. This is as true of the SWP as it is of those who operate within the Labour Party.

The mass of workers have very little input into the Labour Party. What is important is that the Party, with the help of the union bureaucracies, is the mechanism by which the working class is encouraged to look for statist solutions to its problems. The Left

plays its part in this. Hence left-winger Hilary Wainwright observes:

"In fact, the whole basis of the block vote no longer bears much relation to flesh-and-blood affiliated members, and the union leadership affiliate more on the basis of what they can afford than of actual realities. At the same time, however, Labour supporters in the unions recognize that it is more and more urgent for Party members to organize as Party members within the union, to win the political arguments against Thatcherism, if only to rebuild the Labour Vote." (35)

**If the Labour Party is a double-edged sword, by far the sharpest edge faces our way.**

It is this political influence over the working class which is at the heart of the problem. A central tenet of Labourism is the separation of politics and economics. All the fuss over the reduction in the block vote has, therefore, largely obscured the real issue. The directly organizational links with the union bureaucracy may be reduced - but this will only be an extension of the principle of the separation of the political and the economic. The union bureaucracies will continue to compromise working class struggle by diverting it into statist and parliamentary channels. The labour movements of Europe show how the unions can quite easily continue to support social democratic parties (both financially and politically), without the overt machinery of the block vote. Hence the support of some union bureaucrats for a reduced block vote.

It may be asked, then, why we continue to work in the unions. Although bureaucratized, the unions are organized where workers have power: in the workplace. Whilst their aims are limited they are not themselves organizations geared towards running the capitalist state, as is the Labour Party. Thus we fight to transcend the limits of trade unions, (which are the limits of capitalism), by building a rank-and-file movement. Rather than join in a 'United Front' with class collaborationist bureaucrats or reformist parliamentarians, we prefer to build a united front from below. We prefer to fight alongside working class people in our communities and our work places. But we will be consistent in pointing out the reactionary nature of those who would put a brake on such struggle. This means giving no political support ('critical' or otherwise) to the Labour

Party.

It will be said that we are sectarian, or that we abstain from the political arguments. Nothing could be further from the truth. We will seize every opportunity to put across revolutionary politics, including at election times. This need not entail either support for the Labour Party or the standing of our own candidates, and in no way means cutting ourselves off from the mass of 'ordinary' workers. It does entail confronting the politics and methods of Labourism head on. It is the Left who abstain by tailing these very politics and methods. By doing so, they contribute to the cancer of reformism.

The Labour Party forces workers to choose between their own action on the one hand, and state control on the other. As union bureaucrat Jimmy Thomas once argued; if workers were to take direct action, "we may as well abolish the Labour Party and the whole political machinery at once... The two things are absolutely irreconcilable." (36)

The part Labour has played in the general shift to the right in the eighties should not be underestimated. When the bureaucratic corporatism of the post-war years is presented as socialist, it is not hard to see why working class people reject it. Now the system is in such deep crisis, it is no longer in a position to make even these concessions.

Kinnock knows it - that is why he is not even making any promises this time.

A new politics is needed; one which has at its core the building of an independent working class movement. This cannot be done by clinging onto an organization that even now (through local councils, boards, etc.) is a boss to many workers. There is no better way to discredit revolutionary politics than for 'revolutionaries' to urge support for a party that attacks the working class. As Sylvia Pankhurst wrote in 1920;

"We must not dissipate our energy in adding to the strength of the Labour Party... We must concentrate on making a communist movement that will vanquish it. The Labour Party will soon be forming a government; this revolutionary opposition must make ready to attack it." (37)

Chris Holman

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after the peace dividend

# its war as usual

## understanding the gulf crisis

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2nd 1990 has provoked a military response from the Western Imperialist powers unprecedented for over 20 years. The United Nations immediately condemned the invasion and imposed economic sanctions. By October 150,000 US troops were in the Arab Peninsula preparing for war. The Western propaganda machines went onto a war footing, portraying Saddam Hussein as a new Hitler and stirring up anti-arab hysteria. Whilst Thatcher and Bush pontificate about opposing aggression and upholding the sovereignty of small nations, Pentagon officials speculate about "Surgical strikes" and "three day turkey-shoots". In this article we examine the background to the conflict and explain why our priority in Britain must be unswerving opposition to Western intervention.

The hypocrisy of the Western propagandists is so outrageous that even the press have started asking questions about why no democracy exists in any arab oil state, why the Palestinian question remains unresolved, and why the West bankrolled Saddam Hussein for so long. The United States who dumped napalm and the defoliant Agent Orange on Vietnam now piously denounce Iraq for possessing Western-supplied chemical weapons. Britain likewise has nothing to learn from Saddam about hostage-taking. Britain invented concentration camps in the Boer War; interned all German and Austrian 'aliens' during World War Two, including Jews and anti-Nazi refugees; and throughout the century internment has been used against Irish nationalists. Iraqi nerve gas attacks on Kurdish villages are now being publicised yet the Ozal dictatorship in Turkey, part of the Western NATO alliance, still wages war against its Kurdish minority. Kurds who have sought refuge in Britain have been 'interned' in immigration prisons like Harmondsworth, harassed by the Home Office and refused permission to enter Britain and join families already here.

When it comes to military aggression and propping up dictators the United States of course has no peers. For years Panama's Noriega, to name but one, was on a CIA payroll only to be ousted by the US invasion in February 1990 which claimed 8,000 lives. In Iraq itself the CIA aided the 1963 coup which brought the Ba'athist-led coalition to power in Iraq and fingered thousands of Communists to the regime. The US

again gave tacit support to Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980. Whenever Iran appeared to be getting the better of Iraq during the war the US took Iraq's side to ensure the conflict continued for as long as possible. In 1984 Iraq was removed from the US list of countries sponsoring terrorism and diplomatic links were re-established. Moreover the US provided Iraq with billions of dollars worth of trade credits. As the American magazine Newsweek pointed out:

*"Only Mexico received more guaranteed food credits than Iraq. The tremendous Iraqi grain buys created a virtual Iraq lobby among American farmers and corporations who profited from the trade."*  
(Newsweek, 20.8.90)

When an Iraqi Exocet missile hit the USS Stark killing 37 American sailors in May 1987, the US took retaliatory action against Iranian patrol boats. Britain too had its fingers in the Iraqi pie to the tune of £400 million a year in exports, while French arms sales to Iraq were worth \$16.6 billion. Saddam Hussein, like Noriega and Marcos before him is the latest Western-backed dictator to have fallen foul of his imperialist paymasters.

*"Englishman with a hat on your head, we hope you die, tonight, in your bed"*  
(Traditional Kuwaiti street song of the 1920s and 30s)

The modern history of the Middle East is the history of colonial and imperialist interference, of borders being drawn and

redrawn by Western powers, and of imperialist engineered coups and military action to ensure hegemony over the region. From 1820 onwards Britain established 'trucial' (ie. by means of enforced truces or treaties) protectorates in the Arab peninsula to secure its vital trade routes to India. These increased in strategic importance when the Suez Canal was completed in 1869. After the First World War Britain and France carved up the old Ottoman Empire and imposed their rule over Palestine, Transjordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq under a League of Nations mandate. As with the United Nations today, its predecessor provided a facade of neutrality for imperialist self-interest.

*"It is quite a mistake to suppose that under the Covenant of the League or any other instrument the gift of mandate rests with the League of Nations. It rests with the Powers who have conquered the territories, which it then falls to them to distribute."*

(Lord Curzon, British Foreign Secretary, June 1920 quoted in G.E. Kirk: *A Short History of the Middle East*, p136)

Large scale oil production began in the Gulf during the 1930s, and as oil became more important to the Western economies so too did the strategic importance of the oil rich Middle East. After the 2nd World War the US emerged as the leading imperialist power and also the dominant force in the Middle East. This hegemony was achieved by the creation of the US-backed artificial state of Israel which served as a regional policeman in the area; by the domination of US oil companies such as the conglomerate Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO); and through financial and military aid to client regimes such as Saudi Arabia. The present political set-up in the Middle East was fashioned by imperialism and is to this day guaranteed by imperialism. Thus whenever the Western powers have perceived a threat to their interests they have responded with force. In 1951 Iran nationalised its oil fields. In retaliation the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (the fore-runner of BP) initiated a British trade embargo against Iran and in 1953

the CIA staged a coup to topple the regime. In 1956 Britain, France and Israel invaded Egypt after Nasser had nationalised the Suez Canal. US opposition eventually forced their withdrawal.

Britain frequently deposed and installed sheikhs in the various gulf statelets to ensure the subjugation of its clients. However in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s Britain faced a wave of nationalist uprisings which proved more formidable than previously. In 1957 there was a major uprising in the Sultanate of Oman. Britain responded by launching RAF bomb attacks on villages and irrigation works. Between 1963 and 1967 British forces fought a guerrilla war with the South Yemeni National Liberation Front. British warfare methods were once again ruthless. There was detention and torture in purpose-built interrogation centres and terrorist bomb attacks on civilian targets and crops. However, Britain was decisively defeated and had to abandon its strategic Port of Aden. In 1971 Britain was finally forced to yield its remaining protectorates, give up its last military bases and pull all its troops out of the Gulf. As with decolonisation in Africa the withdrawal of direct political rule or 'protection' still left intact the economic domination of Western banks and corporations. The present Gulf conflict shows that the West is still prepared to protect its strategic interests in the region by force of arms.

The socio-economic nature of the Middle Eastern states reflects imperialism's need for a cheap and stable oil supply. The Gulf states are rentier economies administered by semi-feudal royal families. A rentier state derives its income not from production, but externally, from rent or revenue paid for its natural resources. Thus there is no significant independent bourgeoisie and revenue accrues directly to the state. Oil revenues which constitute the 'rent' paid to the Gulf statelets represents over 90% of their budget revenues and over 95% of their exports. The native citizens are in effect privileged rentier castes who enjoy social provision paid for not out of taxation but directly out of oil revenues. Below the citizens are large armies of migrant Asian and Arab guestworkers who enjoy none of the social privileges of the citizens.

Kuwait is an ideal example of a rentier statelet. Britain drew its borders and ruled Kuwait until 1961 when it granted formal independence under the absolute rule of the pro-Western al-Sabah family. Kuwait was the leading post-war Gulf

oil producer until 1966 and as a result its citizens enjoy the highest per-capita incomes of any country in the world. The majority of the population however are not citizens but guestworkers who comprise 85% of the workforce. While Kuwaiti citizens pay no income tax and receive free education, healthcare, social services and cheap petrol, the guestworkers by contrast have to pay. Unlike the other oil sheikhdoms Kuwait even had, until 1986, a rubber-stamp Parliament; though only 60,000 propertied male Kuwaiti citizens, comprising 4% of the population were allowed to vote. In the final analysis, Kuwait's independence is not guaranteed by its Western-equipped and trained army but by the imperialist powers themselves.

***The modern history of the Middle East is the history of colonial and imperialist interference, of borders being drawn and redrawn by western powers, and of imperialist coups and military action to ensure hegemony over the region.***

Countries like Iraq, Syria and Egypt, which are run by nationalist dictatorships, are independent capitalist states. They have enjoyed relative independence from the orbit of US imperialism in the past due to large amounts of Soviet aid. The USSR was Iraq's biggest arms supplier, and even after the annexation of Kuwait, there were still Soviet military advisers in Baghdad. Unlike the Gulf emirates, these larger Arab nations have proved much more difficult for the West to control due to their relatively large and rebellious populations. Western policy is to play one Arab state off against another to ensure that no single nation becomes dominant in the region. To its cost, the US found the danger of sponsoring regional superpowers when the pro-Western Shah of Iran was overthrown in 1979. Thus, as Iraq discovered, as soon as the Gulf War ended the credit dried up. Although Iraq does have some non-oil industrial production and an agricultural sector, oil revenues provide the country with most of its income. Oil constitutes 97% of its exports; manufactured goods comprise only 10% of its economic output; and after oil, its second most important export is dates. Thus, while the Iraqi regime is not simply a puppet regime of the West, it is still

economically dependent on imperialism for its income (ie. oil revenues). Thus we can characterise Iraq as a neo-colony which as we shall see has important implications when we formulate our position on the present conflict.

Western propaganda compares Iraq's annexation of Kuwait with Hitler's expansionism. The two are incomparable. Germany in the 1930s was a major imperialist power. Iraq in 1990 is still an impoverished Third World nation which does not export capital, only raw materials. At the end of the Gulf War Iraq found itself with an \$80 billion foreign debt and a million-strong army to maintain at a cost of \$10 billion a year. In order to restore oil production to pre-war levels, to reconstruct its war-shattered economy and feed its 18 million people Iraq needed external help. However, Western loans were not forthcoming due to Iraq's record of payment default and its oil revenue was not even sufficient to pay for its vital food and engineering goods imports (Iraq imports 80% of its food). Iraq's foreign assets are nearly exhausted and are estimated to be \$3.5 billion. In 1989 oil revenue only brought in \$16 billion while Iraq paid out \$19 billion for imports and a further \$1 billion was funnelled out of the country via guestworkers. This left a \$4 billion balance of trade deficit. Unsurprisingly, Iraq was one of the 'hawks' in the OPEC cartel who wanted to hike up the price of oil. Kuwait by contrast was an OPEC 'dove', exceeding its production quotas and helping to keep oil prices down. Saddam Hussein clearly hoped to exploit the hatred felt for the billionaire 'Emirs of oil' in order to divert attention away from a chronic internal crisis. At a stroke, annexation gave Iraq control over 20% of the world's proven oil reserves and cancelled out its \$15 billion war debts owed to Kuwait. Revelations which have received wide media coverage in the United States, though not in Britain, show that the US Ambassador in Baghdad was fully aware of Iraq's problems and intentions but provided no warning of US opposition. In a meeting with Saddam Hussein four days before the invasion the Ambassador, April Glaspie, told the Iraqi leader:

*"we have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts like your border disagreement with Kuwait."*  
(The Guardian, 12.9.90)

This indicates that sections of the US Establishment either consciously engineered the crisis, or at the very least did nothing to discourage an invasion. As we shall see, there is even a case for arguing that if the Gulf crisis didn't



exist, the US would have had to invent it.

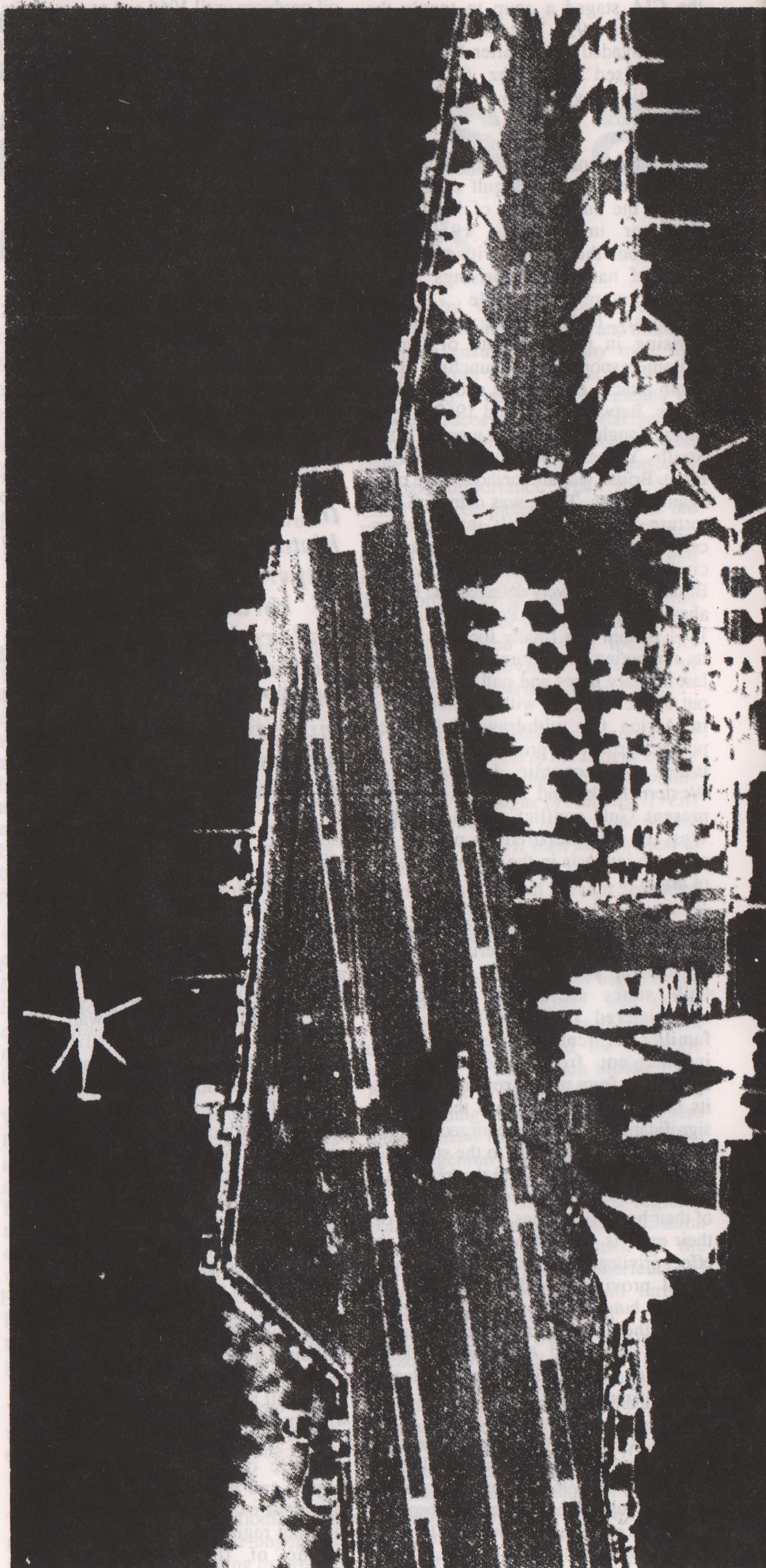
The reason for imperialist concern has little to do with 'democratic principles' and far more to do with ensuring that nothing upsets the supply of cheap oil from the region. The net effect has been to shatter liberal dreams of a 'peace dividend' and give us a glimpse of the emerging epoch of regional conflicts.

Oil explains the immense strategic importance of the Middle East which has 56% of the world's proven reserves. As one US official explained:

*"We need oil. It's nice to talk about standing up for freedom, but Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are not exactly democracies and if their principal export were oranges, a mid-level State Department official would have issued a statement and we would have closed down Washington for August."*  
(Time magazine, 20.8.90)

**Faced with this choice; a Falklands Factor or a Post-Vietnam complex our primary concern in Britain must therefore be the defeat of the imperialist forces.**

This latest threat to the stability of the oil supply has caused jitters in the world financial markets. This says far more about the underlying recessionary trends in the Western economies than it does about the actual power of Arab oil producers. In Britain, inflation topped 10% in the Autumn, compared to the European average of 4-5%, while interest rates remain high (over 14% in October). The US economy is on the brink of a recession. Growth has slowed down, corporate profits fell 12% in the first 6 months of 1990 and unemployment is rising. The recent Federal bail-out of the Savings and Loans industry which is likely to cost the government \$500 billion underlines the fragility of the economy. Economic analysts are openly discussing the return of stagflation: the combination of recession and high inflation. By waging war against Iraq, Bush may be able to blame Saddam Hussein for the coming recession. However, war in the Middle East would cause oil prices to soar and precipitate stagflation. Obviously the US is prepared to risk escalating its economic problems and wage a war it can scarcely afford to finance, because what is at stake is the struggle for hegemony in a new imperialist redivision of the globe.



As one senior Whitehouse official put it:

*"The real significance of this crisis is that it is going to define the post-Cold War world."*  
(Time magazine, 20.8.90)

Significantly, only Britain out of all the imperialist nations has responded with as much belligerence as the USA, demonstrating its decline within Europe to the status of a secondary economic power. Whilst Germany, Japan and the other EEC nations have supported sanctions due to their own dependence on the Gulf oil supply, they have been far more lukewarm in supporting the US-led war drive. Bush and Thatcher's insistence that the imperialist forces don't need UN backing for a military strike against Iraq further underlines the contradictions within the anti-Iraq imperialist alliance. Now that the Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe have collapsed and the Cold War has ended, the world is once again up for grabs, and US leadership of the west is under threat. The US knows that it is only a matter of time before the increasingly powerful Japanese and German economies are equipped with full military capabilities. Thus the US is staking its claim early and asserting itself in the role of world policeman in regional conflicts. As Will Hutton, writing in *The Guardian*, explained about US foreign policy:

*"It is happy for them (the Japanese) to be the regional power in East Asia and to recycle dollar surpluses. And it puts pressure on them to 'burden-share'. But the Americans would not want a Japanese battle fleet sailing up the Gulf insisting ...that it would remain under Japanese command. Burden-sharing is fine, as long as it is under American leadership."*  
(The Guardian, 14.8.90)

Now that Iraq controls almost as much oil production as Saudi Arabia the Western propagandists have resurrected the spectre of the 'Arab threat' to the West's oil supplies. Egypt's Colonel Nasser was the first modern Arab leader to be demonised for daring to:

*"...defy the world, and lead the Middle East, where geological demons put 65% of the world's oil."*  
(The Economist, 18.8.90)

In the 1970s it was not pan-Arabism but the OPEC cartel which aroused imperialist fears. But Western concern over price fixing cartels only serves to mask the extent of real imperialist domination over the Middle East's oilfields. Up until the 1970s most of the Gulf oilfields were directly owned and run by US and British oil companies in

return for financial concessions to the local regimes. In the 1970s OPEC Gulf states achieved participation and subsequently controlling interests in the oil production industry. The post-1973 price rises which were engineered by the cartel were simply designed to correct the oil price upwards to its proper world market level. Whilst this overall shift represented a partial redistribution of oil profits to the Arab states the actual oil supply to the West was unaffected. As the *Middle East Economic Digest* explained:

*"...the oil producers of the Middle East are on the whole a force for economic stability once their interests and their paramount importance in today's world are recognised."*  
(quoted in F.Halliday (1974), *Arabia Without Sultans*, p10)

Significantly, Western oil company profits showed large increases at the end of 1973 and much of the unspent oil revenues were re-invested back into Western banks by Arab rulers. For example Kuwait's overseas investments including those privately owned by the al-Sabahs have been estimated at \$150 billion. Moreover, as Fred Halliday explains:

*"The rise in Gulf incomes led to a rush of carpet-baggers and sharks of all kinds, hoping to siphon off the newly granted riches of the Gulf countries. The profits from oil went to construction firms, Lockheed and the British Aircraft Corporation, rather than uniquely to Shell and Standard Oil of New Jersey."*  
(F.Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans*, p413)

Therefore OPEC's actual influence within the world economy as a whole remained marginal. The 1973 oil crisis illustrated their ability to temporarily influence the price of oil but after 1973 advanced capitalist economies stockpiled reserves, reduced oil consumption by 10%, and from 1973 to 1985, increased non-OPEC production by 50%. Thus from controlling over 70% of world production in 1973, OPEC's share was reduced to 38% in 1985 and today the cartel still controls less than half the world's oil production (about 45%). OPEC has also been continually riven with divisions between 'hawks' and 'doves' which may have finally reached breaking-point with the Gulf crisis. It is not so much unilateral producer action which has threatened the oil supply because OPEC has always been dominated by imperialism's clients. Instead it is political instability which has directly disrupted production and led to the three 'oil shocks' of the last 20 years: the 1973 Yom-Kippur War, the

1979 Iranian Revolution, and now the invasion of Kuwait. The imperialists will certainly attempt to scapegoat the Arab oil producers for their own economic crises but the truth is that the problems of the Western economies are inherent in the capitalist system, while the power of Third World producers is largely mythical.

The Gulf crisis has predictably elicited a warmongering response from the British and American governments. As one senior Whitehouse aide delicately put it:

*"...we will simply flatten Iraq. And I mean flatten."*  
(Sunday Times, 19.8.90)

In Britain there has been unanimity on both sides of the House of Commons. Labour Party conference overwhelmingly endorsed a unilateral military strike by Western forces outside UN auspices. Indeed when former Tory Prime Minister Edward Heath expressed his preference for a peaceful solution it was Labour's shadow Foreign Secretary Gerald Kaufman who was first to condemn Heath for being "irresponsible". Neil Kinnock, eager to portray himself as a statesman fit to administer imperialism's interests, has been indistinguishable from the Tories on the issue:

*"Saddam Hussein has challenged the whole of the world community. His defeat must be a victory for the whole of the world community."*  
(Speech to the TUC, 4.9.90)

The consensus that Iraq must be punished extends well beyond Kinnock and embraces the anti-war left led by Tony Benn, CND, the Green Party and the Communist Party. Their Committee to Stop the War in the Gulf supports imperialist interference in the form of UN economic sanctions and concedes the right of Western troops to enforce those sanctions. The *Morning Star* perfectly articulated this 'left' imperialist position:

*"...the establishment of a properly constituted UN force under UN control. This should be the key demand raised by the left and the entire peace movement in Britain... At this moment, it is important to put all efforts into this demand and not to be side-tracked by calls for withdrawal of US forces."*  
(Morning Star, 21.8.90)

The left have long cultivated illusions in the United Nations, particularly by demanding UN sanctions against oppressive regimes such as South Africa and Israel. But the UN has never acted to prevent US aggression in Latin America or South-East Asia because without imperialist consensus it is toothless. Where the UN has acted it has merely



served as a flag of convenience for imperialist interests. The UN backed the US war in Korea largely due to the fact that the Soviet Union was boycotting it and China was excluded from it at the time. Even then the UN exercised little control over the direction of the war as a former UN Information Officer explained:

*"...we had no control or prior knowledge of press statements. All were issued by the Pentagon or General McArthur...including the politically explosive suggestion that he might consider moving against mainland China."*

(G.I. Smith, *The Guardian*, letters 29.8.90)

By and large the US has bypassed the UN and pursued its interventionist policies with impunity. For example the deployment of troops to Vietnam was never referred to the UN. The limitations of the UN were once again exposed in 1982 when the US used its veto to prevent the passage of resolutions against Israel's invasion of the Lebanon. In the present Gulf conflict to demand a UN solution therefore is to invite the exploiters and oppressors who dominate it to assert their interests.

In practise there is little to choose between starving Iraq and crippling its economy through UN sanctions on the one hand, or bombing it back to the Stone Age on the other. Both positions accept the right of the imperialists to continue their domination and exploitation of the Middle East. Furthermore by appealing to pacifism the left is simply looking for demonstration-fodder in the insignificant rump of the early-80s peace movement. Pacifism enjoys no mass working class support as is testified by the lack of workers opposition to the 21 year war in Ireland and the 1982 Malvinas/Falklands War. The real problem is nationalism: the idea that workers and bosses have something in common, and this cannot be challenged by accommodating to it but by confronting it head-on. In reality the only people who have made up the numbers on all the various anti-war marches so far have been the forces of the Trotskyist and revolutionary left. This indicates both the difficulty of building a genuine anti-imperialist current within the British working class and the political void which now exists between the Kinnockite 'new realists' and the small forces of the revolutionary left.

The **Anarchist Workers Group** stands alone on the libertarian left for concentrating our fire on Western imperialism. Most anarchist groups, inspired by either pacifist or left communist ideas, have refused to take

sides and instead raised the slogan 'No War But The Class War!'. Although superficially radical, this position falls into the trap of taking slogans out of their political and historical context and repeating them abstractly, irrespective of the specific situation. Thus, 'No War But The Class War!' was appropriate for an inter-imperialist conflict such as the First World War, but when applied to a conflict between the leading imperialist powers on the one hand and a bankrupt, debt-ridden Third World nation on the other, this position has reactionary implications.

The 'plague on both your houses' approach is based on an assessment that there is no essential difference between Iraq and the US-led imperialist forces. This unwittingly makes a major concession to Western propaganda which also asserts that there is no real difference between the imperialist expansion of Nazi Germany and the military aggression of neo-colonial Iraq. A second problematic implication of the ultra-left position is that it fails to distinguish between a victory and a defeat for Western imperialism, both being equally bad. But a victory for the West would have a number of important consequences.

Firstly, US domination of the Middle East would be strengthened possibly with a new permanent military base in the Gulf. Such a victory would have been achieved at the expense of the Iraqi people, soldiers and civilians alike, who would pay in blood. This would send a clear message to all the oppressed and exploited masses of the Middle East that any threat to imperialism's client states in the region may also be met with Western intervention. This would objectively be a set-back to the Kurdish and Palestinian struggles for self-determination, and to the prospects for a working class revolution.

Secondly, the authority of the US to intervene in other region conflicts would receive a major boost. The US capacity for military intervention was severely impaired as a result of the Vietnam experience. Washington was effectively forced to spectate as two important clients, the Shah of Iran and the Nicaraguan dictator Somoza succumbed to revolutions in 1979.

Finally, victory for the Western forces would strengthen the ability of our bosses to use nationalism to derail working class struggles. In Britain racism, aimed particularly against Arabs and Asians, will undoubtedly intensify. Already there has been an arson attack on a Birmingham mosque named after Saddam Hussein. Faced with this choice (a Falklands factor or a post-Vietnam complex) our primary concern in Britain must therefore be the defeat of the imperialist forces.

The slogans which the **Anarchist Workers Group** has taken up are based on the tactical consideration that for the British working class the main enemy is not Saddam Hussein, but our own ruling class. If Iraq is attacked, then we would defend it because it is a neo-colony in conflict with imperialism not because there is anything progressive about the Ba'athist regime. As revolutionaries in an imperialist heartland, our foremost task is to win the withdrawal of working class support for the West's war aims. Thus we are for workers' non-cooperation with economic sanctions and industrial action for the political end of sabotaging the war machine.

In the Middle East our tactics would change their emphasis, reflecting the different situation. When the original invasion of Kuwait took place we would have urged workers to support neither side. However, Western intervention showed that the class struggle in the Middle East must be waged not only against the local ruling classes but invariably against their imperialist backers. So, for Middle East workers, the enemy is at home and abroad. Thus, the class struggle is inseparable from the anti-imperialist struggle. This does not mean that if we are for the defeat of the imperialist forces then we would give any political support to the reactionary Ba'athist regime. Saddam Hussein has indeed tapped the considerable anti-imperialist sentiment throughout the Middle East. There have been mass demonstrations and tens of thousands volunteering to fight in defence of Iraq.

Nonetheless, it does not follow that Saddam Hussein is temporarily on our side and workers should suspend their struggles to defend Iraq. Saddam is by no means an anti-imperialist despite his rhetoric. He has proved willing to collaborate with imperialism in the past and cannot be trusted with leading an anti-imperialist struggle. The best defence against imperialism is for the working class of the region to assert their own interests. This means ousting all the Emirs, Sheikhs and dictators who rule over them. It means making a break with pan-Arabism and Islamic Fundamentalism in favour of working class internationalism. And it also means waging a revolutionary war to end the century and a half of Western military and economic interference in the Middle East. Our task in the West is to assist the creation of such a movement by undermining the ability of our own rulers to conduct any form of intervention in the Gulf.

**Joe White and Mike Gordon.**

# eastern europe: can anarchists meet the challenge?

Over the past year the commentators and pundits of the western propaganda machine have been rubbing their hands together in frenzied excitement about many of the changes taking place in eastern europe and the USSR. The liberalising policy of Glasnost in the USSR was introduced for one purpose and one purpose alone: as a sweetener to divert people's attention from the effects of economic restructuring. However, Glasnost has been a catalyst for an eruption of popular frustration and anger, along with a massive rise in expectations and aspirations, that has constantly put its limits to the test. This, coupled with the example of Solidarnosc in Poland, has had a knock on effect throughout eastern europe where the old stalinist regimes have begun to crack and crumble in the face of popular pressure. We have seen, as a result of this, the truly bizarre sight of western politicians praising the kind of strikes and demonstrations they would normally come to bury, and the media responding to street fighting rioters not with the usual hatchet job, but by holding them up as a shining example of a phenomenon they have chosen to call 'people power'.

The bulk of mainstream commentary on the situation has been couched in terms of encouragement of those tendencies gunning for the establishment of western style liberal democracy and free market capitalism. However, the open economic, military and political aid western governments have given to repressive regimes such as Chile, El Salvador, Iraq and the effective disenfranchisement of, for example, the nationalist community in the north of Ireland, clearly shows that liberal democracy is far from being an essential prerequisite for support from the west. The central factor for them is not any principled commitment to the notion of political pluralism, but rather the provision of cheap labour and a free market economy ripe for investment in and exploitation by western capital. And it is the potential for this, in an eastern europe economically shattered by decades of bureaucratic inefficiency, mismanagement and a long term decline in growth rate and productivity, that has the forces of big business and their house trained media poodles drooling at the mouth.

Putting aside for the moment the more symbolic ventures such as the opening of a McDonalds restaurant in Moscow, or Saatchi and Saatchi's nauseating 'first over the wall' publicity stunt, we are

beginning to see more and more examples of western capital's encroachment on eastern europe. General Electric have bought up the Tunsram light bulb factory in Hungary. The US Chamber of Commerce has opened bureaux in many eastern european capitals. Murdoch owns 50% of two of Hungary's leading newspapers and Maxwell has printing concessions across eastern europe. Daihatsu and Suzuki are negotiating opening car manufacturing plants in Poland and Hungary respectively. And so the list goes on.

The new 'democratic' parties and forums are those currently making the most mileage out of the emerging liberalisation. They espouse political pluralism and openly embrace free market strategies, promising the working class increased consumer choice and political freedom, whilst hiding the downside of their policies: the necessity for austerity, increased unemployment and poverty, and the maintainance of a situation where ordinary workers have nothing but the illusion of control over the society they live in and create the wealth for. In the east, as in the west, workers are faced with a false dichotomy where they are told they must choose between stalinist bureaucracy or market capitalism. 'There is no other choice' is the message being sent out.

In the red corner, however, spoiling this nice little stitch up, is the happy fact that liberalisation has not only provided an opportunity for the bourgeoisie to forward its interests, but it has also provided a space in which the working class has a chance to organise in pursuance of its interests. This has already been seen in, for example, the eruption of rank-and-file militancy amongst Soviet miners and the rebirth of both independent unions and specific political currents. One of these currents, re-emerging after a virtual silence of 70 years in the USSR and 45 in eastern europe, is the anarchist movement: the only 'untainted' current with the potential to offer the working class possibilities that venture beyond the limits of both capitalism and stalinism.

In the editorial of **SFB** no 2 we raised key questions in relation to eastern europe: questions about who controls society; about why workers should "extend their horizons beyond seeking to defend their interests within the new 'democratised' societies" (1); about the pressing need to build anarchist organisations capable of playing a leading role in workers struggle and explaining the case for libertarian communism. It is in the light of their ability to answer these questions, or their potential to at least, that we must examine the nascent anarchist groupings of eastern europe and the USSR. In the west, the anarchist movement has had access to, and continuity with, a long tradition of libertarian struggle that years of stalinism has denied to our comrades in the east. Drawing on that tradition and our collective experience of the class war and the battle of ideas, it is essential that we should engage the eastern european anarchist movements in political dialogue, so as to warn them against making the same mistakes and following the same deadend strategies that have beaten the movement in the west into a shambling and bloody pulp: liberalism, apoliticism, synthesisism, disorganisation, centrism and disunity.

Unfortunately, some sections of the movement in the east seem to be



developing along the same liberal trajectory as the western anarchist mainstream. From the 'libertarians' of the 1950's anti nuclear movement to the 'anarcho-punks' of the 1980's, anarchism in the west has floated off its class base to become a movement largely made up of bleeding heart countercultural social workers who dip and weave from one single issue to another, never pausing for a moment to develop a clear idea of what they are about and what they should be doing. They exist in a permanent state of oblivion to the centrality of the working class to the anarchist project. The eastern countries displaying the most disturbing parallels to this are Yugoslavia, Poland and Hungary. When it transpires that it is these countries whose nascent anarchist groupings have had the closest contacts with their opposite numbers in the west, it begs the disconcerting question of exactly what kind of crap has been foisted on them? In Yugoslavia "demonstrations with blank banners, reading the constitution accompanied by saxophone on the trams in Zagreb" (2) and other countercultural 'happenings' have been seized on as somehow meaningful activities. In Hungary and Poland, whilst things haven't got that bad, nevertheless, the familiar ragbag of green issues, pacifism and feminism that we see in our own anarchist movements seems to be the prevalent current. Of course, the struggles against women's oppression, militarism and environmental destruction should not in any way be marginalised. Yet we understand that these struggles cannot be resolved separately from the anti-capitalist project. To be fair, the context in which we must look at the development of eastern european anarchism is one where prior to the collapse of the stalinist systems, one of the few issues around which opposition was being organised was that of the environment. This means that to an extent, at least, this is the area in which the Polish and Hungarian anarchists had their political baptisms. It is hardly surprising then, that egged on by western anarchists they kept on board some the liberal baggage of green politics when they started to organise independently. And it is the case that "most anarchists are involved with other activities (sometimes not even strictly anarchist ones) like 'Peace and Freedom' ...and ecological and animal liberation movements" (3).

A crucial question for anarchists is 'how do we organise?' Throughout anarchism's history the mainstream has always favoured the 'synthesis' method. This is the idea that a whole range of sometimes contradictory ideas can co-exist in a



single organisation. This is patently nonsense. It is not possible to intervene in the class struggle with any degree of success or coherence when there is no clear idea of the basis on which the intervention is being made. In opposition to the synthesis method the **Anarchist Workers Group** reasserts the anarchism defined and refined by the Russian exiles around Arshinov and Makhno, the Spanish 'Friends of Durutti' and the French Libertarian Communists. They argued the need for a specific political organisation of class conscious anarchist workers: bound by a theoretical and tactical unity arising from a collectively developed programme for libertarian communism; practising a libertarian democracy which is about informed decision making, collective responsibility and accountability, and not an excuse to wander off and plough your own political furrow. The synthesist mainstream are vehemently opposed to this method. That is why they are doomed to a miserable failure in their attempt to realise the anarchist project. That is also why we must argue

strongly against the adoption of the synthesist method to our eastern european comrades, before they too sink into the quagmire of political dissipation.

For example, the anarcho-sindicalist KAS of the Soviet Union have agreed to open their doors to a panopoly of tendencies from anarchist communists through to those who hold dual membership with the Green Party: "The Green Party isn't in disagreement with the programme of KAS". (4) The problem with having this broad organisational base is that it inevitably leads to compromise and the fudging of important issues. The KAS themselves have experienced this as a problem. At their second congress, discussing the question of violence, they decided to "reject violence as a method of transforming society", adding that "really (this position) is as a result of compromise". (5)

The Hungarian anarchists of the Autonomia group have stated that:

*"there are many diverse tendencies within anarchism. We would like all these tendencies to tolerate each other".* (6)

The problem with this is that diverse tendencies within the same organisation can only operate in unity around a lowest common denominator of agreement. This invariably leads to a loss of direction, or more positively, to a situation where those wishing to operate around a more specific set of ideas break away to organise independently. In Poland, the Federacja Anarchistyczna (Anarchist Federation) emerged from the Miedzynicstowka Anarchistyczna (Anarchist Intercity) for precisely those reasons:

*"M.A.... was strongly connected with the subculture, so people who wanted to act 'more politically' decided to create a new federation to take up social and economic issues".* (7)

We should see this as a step in the direction of strengthening and consolidating the anarchist current in Poland. However, Polish anarchists speaking about their movement at 'East: A Freedom Workshop' (an international anarchist conference held in Trieste, Italy, in April 90) claimed that the setting up of the federation may have been a premature move, as different elements within it had widely differing political ideas and levels of consciousness: it was not inconceivable that further splits would occur before too long. Already a specifically anarchist communist grouping was operating in

Warsaw. The conclusion we can draw from this is that the Federacja Anarchistyczna is obviously still a synthesist organisation and therefore prone to all the problems inherent to an organisation of that nature. It is crucial that we support and encourage any specific libertarian communist tendencies that may begin to emerge from it.

At present all the major anarchist movements in eastern europe operate on a synthesist level, with the possible exception of the pre-war Anarchist Communist Federation of Bulgaria, which was relaunched by exiles in the Autumn of 1989, but as yet does not seem to have started operating in practice. With this one exception, where the participants obviously have some sense of continuity with their own tradition, the present organisational basis of eastern european anarchism is understandable: they are young movements, still in the process of finding their political feet. The opportunity they now have to operate is their first in many years, so it would be foolish to assume that mistakes will not be made and that all developments taking place will necessarily be positive. It is a task of libertarian communists in the west to have the arguments with our comrades in the east in favour of specific organisation and in opposition to the dead wood of synthesism. Autonomia in Hungary have said of themselves:

*"people come and go. There is no membership. Everyone who comes to our meetings is a part (of Autonomia)".* (8)

In the west we have seen the outcome of this sort of practice all too frequently. It has got us nowhere. If our comrades in the east repeat our mistake it can only lead to a tragic litany of wasted opportunities and, yet again, anarchism's inability to play a meaningful role in the class struggle.

We've said it before, but it can never be expressed strongly enough that any 'anarchism' that does not have its theory and practice firmly rooted in the class struggle not only has little to do with anarchism, but also is neither use nor ornament to anyone except perhaps those unhappy souls who are propagating it (and probably then for therapeutic reasons only). The mainstream of the movement has developed in place of a clear class analysis various rather crude 'analyses of class' where at worst they ignore the class struggle completely, declaring it dead, irrelevant or simply boring, or at best define it narrowly in terms of, for example, striking and picketing. This is glaringly wrongheaded.

In the eastern european anarchist movements there is as a wide range of responses to the question of class struggle as there is in the west. This is compounded by linguistic problems specific to those countries emerging from under the shadow of stalinism: much of the terminology of class struggle used by anarchists in the west is anathema to eastern european workers as it has been appropriated and distorted by their political bosses. For example, the Hungarian anarchists of Autonomia explained during their introductory presentation to the Trieste conference that they could not use the word 'socialism' publicly when describing their ideas because of its popular identification with stalinism. Warsaw's Rewolta group write:

*"Don't get us wrong when reading about 'communist tyranny' in some of our articles. When I talk about communism I mean the kind of totalitarian regime we had to fight with for years. Real communism is a completely different thing and I appreciate in the same way as I appreciate anarchism".* (9)

**A key concept in the libertarian communist project is that of the need for the democratic planning of society under workers' control, in any post-revolutionary society.**

During the Trieste conference the AWG and various other organisations were co-signatories to a statement read to the conference in response to the vacuous and liberal hogwash that was spouted by many of the western european and north american anarchists present. Part of it asserted:

*"We intend to act not at the margins of society but at its centre, to transform it through social movements. For us the key participants in the revolutionary process are the working class".* (10)

This statement provoked the most heated debate of the whole conference and also exposed the fact that for some of the eastern europeans present it was not merely the language of class struggle that posed problems, but rather the whole concept. The Hungarians of Autonomia argued that to talk in terms of working class activity was 'Marxist-Leninist', although in fact it was their definition of class in the narrow terms of the traditional blue collar proletariat that was problematic. Hence their

understanding of, for instance, women's oppression, was from a feminist rather than an anarchist position and they did not consider women's liberation to be a part of the class struggle. This led to their argument that whilst the working class may have a role to play, they were not the only exploited class: an analysis rooted more in sociological stratification theories than in any real understanding of the true dynamic of struggle.

The representative of the USSR's KAS who was present went a stage further, rejecting the idea of workers revolution out of hand and asserting that to talk in terms of class struggle was to discriminate against other sections of society. He spoke instead about the need for a generalised struggle against the state that should not be specific to any one class, dismissing talk of class struggle as abstract and workers as reactionary and chauvinist. Although his opinions were not strictly representative of KAS as a whole, his rejection of class struggle goes hand in hand with reformist and pacifist tendencies which exist within KAS. At their second conference it was stated that;

*'the democrats are in common struggle with us against totalitarianism... we must ask the anarcho-communists to stop their attacks on the democratic movement as a whole'.* (11)

This stands in sharp contrast to the anarchists in, for example, Poland who are organised in opposition not only to the stalinists but also to the "majority of oppositional forces which were connected to the Catholic church and nationalist organisations". (12) More recently this has come to mean opposition to the Solidarnosc government. An opposition exists to the KAS mainstream some of whom seem to be organised around AKRU (Anarchist Communist Revolutionary Union). Let us they are equipped with politics capable of challenging some of the ideas which have been developing within KAS.

There is among some elements of the Polish anarchist movement a much more acute awareness of the centrality of the working class to the anarchist project. They have the advantage of the days when Solidarnosc was a fighting rank-and-file led union rather than the "weak and bureaucratic creature" (13) it is now. At its first national congress in 1981, Solidarnosc adopted the demands of "workers control of the factories... and local self-government". (14)

Nine years on there are sections of the Federacja Anarchistyczna, notably around



the Warsaw based magazine 'Rewolta', who are arguing from an unmistakable class position. This is doubly welcome, as until now the movement in Poland has primarily been one of youth rather than workers. Writing in 'Rewolta' Piotr Rymarczyk asserts:

*"Only changes proceeding from the ranks are genuine, since all reforms from above are no more than ornaments for a cage. Nobody can give the people real freedom unless they fight for it themselves". (15)*

Here, the centrality of working class self-activity as opposed to governmental or bureaucratic manoeuvres is clearly understood. In the same article the author hits the nail on the head in his assessment of the present day role of Solidarnosc. The leadership of the union are playing the same contradictory role of mediators between labour and the bosses, which inevitably leads them to side, in practice, with the bosses like union leaders the world over. Whilst attempting to retain the loyalty of the workers they have, in return for being made legal and being given a degree of access to power "done their best to neutralise radical demands". (16)

The development of a syndicalist aspect to the anarchist movements of the east can be seen as a response to years of organisation into state controlled unions that made no secret of the fact that their role was not the defence of the interests of their members but to protect the interests of the state and to police workers to these ends. There is a pressing need throughout eastern europe to build independent workplace organisations controlled by the workers themselves. However, with the exception of Poland the form some of the anarchist movements believe such organisations should take is a tad disturbing when viewed from the libertarian communist viewpoint. In the USSR the KAS believe that one of the roles a syndicalist union should play is in the gradual progress towards the self-management of workplaces without the working class seizing the reigns of power. They argue that what is needed is "a transformation to certain market economic principles, albeit within a framework of self-management" (18) and stated at their first congress:

*"The bureaucratic system of industrial mismanagement must be dismantled. Government authorities in individual branches of production should be transformed into firms of paid management". (19)*

The AWG's critique of syndicalism

asserts that whilst unions exist to supposedly protect workers immediate interests they are insufficient vehicles for the revolutionary transformation of society. They are, however, perfectly capable of working in tandem with the government of the day in taking decisions to safeguard the national, or bosses', interest. From the collaborationist entry into government of the anarcho-syndicalist CNT in Spain 1936 to the TUC's Social Contract with the governing Labour Party in the 1970's, history has taught us this lesson time upon time again. The union the KAS appear to be talking about could well end up playing this role.

*"At the current stage of social development, financial and commodity relations are unavoidable. Attempts to suppress them will incapacitate the economy (and) lead to stagnation". (20)*

The role of anarchists should not be one of attempting to find solutions to bail out the bosses. Rather, we should always argue the necessity for the working class to push its own class needs and aspirations to the fore, regardless of the national interest, and to provide strategies whereby this can be successfully done. It is always the case that despite the orientation and constitution of any given union, there will be a need for a specific anarchist current dedicated to performing this function.

A key concept in the libertarian communist project is that of the need for the democratic planning of society under workers' control, in any post-revolutionary society. This is a concept many anarchists in the East have a hard time coming to terms with, equating it as they do with the oppressive burden of bureaucratic planning under stalinism. The Hungarian Autonomia group correctly recognise that the transition from stalinism to market capitalism will simply mean that "stalinist managers will become capitalist managers" (21) and in their presentation to the Trieste conference stated that they were opposed to the introduction of the market, arguing that it would inevitably lead to widespread unemployment and poverty. However, this position stands in contradiction to the ideas about workers' self-management they expressed. 'Self-management' without working class power must operate on a market basis. This in turn means that the conditions exist both for accumulation and exploitation, or at best, a kind of self-managed exploitation. In order for workers to run society in their own collective interests it is crucial that they are in a position

where they can plan production in their interests. In mitigation it must be said that at present the Autonomia group has no connection with and little interest in the workers movement. However, in view of their claim to have no illusions in capitalism, this situation may well change. At Trieste they argued that for them the counter-cultural arena was the one in which they chose to operate, dismissing our class analysis as simplistic, whilst conceding that class conflict may have a role to play. As the restoration of the market forces workers to fight hopefully they will start to appreciate the centrality of those "simplistic ideas" to the revolutionary project.

***There is a crucial question that remains to be answered, and faces anarchists both east and west: how to turn defensive action onto the offensive and onto the path towards libertarian communism.***

Those elements of the Polish anarchist movement around the magazine 'Rewolta' don't seem to have any such ambivalence towards the market:

*"The desperate 'jump into capitalism' has resulted in widespread poverty, which has reached proportions unknown even under communist rule... and can only lead to further disintegration of society and division into the very rich and the very poor". (22)*

The Polish anarchists have had greater first hand experience of the market than any of the other eastern european anarchist movements (with the possible exception of Hungary) and have shed any illusions they may once have had about where they stand on it and what its effects are on the working class. Importantly, they show no hesitation in talking about it in terms derived from an understanding of the class nature of capitalism:

*Instead of becoming a new Japan, Poland will end up as a very poor capitalist country - a kind of european Bolivia, with striking social inequalities, increased poverty, wild unemployment and a brutal police repressing workers' rebellions. We will soon witness a situation where the Solidarnosc government sends troops to break strikes and crush demonstrations". (23)*



Their analysis of the restoration of capitalism leads the 'Rewolta' group to an understanding of the urgent need for a working class response and the participatory and intervening role that anarchists must play in the shaping of that response. They do not share the confusion about either the language or centrality of class struggle that stalinism seems to have sown in many of the other eastern european anarchist movements by its theft and abuse of the terminology of struggle:

*"These processes... must surely result in a growth of anger amongst working class people. No doubt the question of class war will be back again". (24)*

In response to both the old and new bosses 'Rewolta' demand:

*"The only alternative is to build a rank-and-file workers movement which considers both the government and the union barons its greatest enemies". (25)*

There is a crucial question that remains to be answered, and faces anarchists both east and west: how to turn defensive action onto the offensive and onto the path of a libertarian communist society. The AWG believes that the answer lies in the building of a fighting organisation of anarchist workers, operating on the battlegrounds of the

class struggle, armed with the theory and tactics needed to win the war. Its activists must be equipped with the political understanding and agitational skills needed to win workers over to those ideas in the course of class struggle. We believe that this is needed in eastern europe too, and it is on this basis that we engage in dialogue with the anarchists in those countries.

The anarchist movements of eastern europe are new movements, still in the process of finding their political feet and testing out a wide range of ideas. They have emerged after decades of stalinism where independent political organisation has been virtually impossible. It is not our job to dismiss them out of hand or assert an arrogant superiority over them. It is, however, our responsibility to encourage the development of any libertarian communist tendencies emerging from them; to criticise with frankness and honesty any turns they are taking which our own experience leads us to believe are blind alleys and to share with them ideas and tactics that we have developed and begun to put into practice. To shirk this responsibility is to endanger the entire anarchist project.

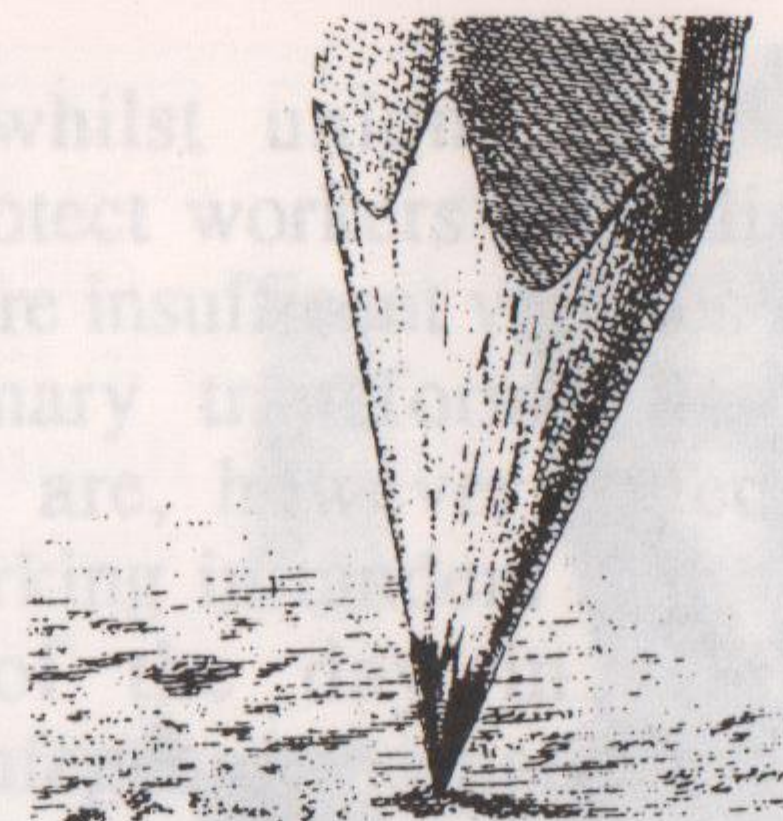
1) Editorial: Socialism From Below, Vol 1 No 2, Spring 1990. 2) Autonomia, Zagreb, Yugoslavia: written presentation to "East: A Freedom Workshop"

(international anarchist conference, Trieste, Italy, April 1990). 3) Piotr Salwowski: "The Polish Anarchist Federation" Rewolta, Warsaw, Poland, December 1989. 4) A. Shubin: "Russian Anarcho-Syndicalists: Second Congress" Freedom, Vol 51 No 9, May 1990. 5) ibid. 6) Autonomia, Budapest, Hungary: "Hungary Yesterday and Today" written presentation to "East: A Freedom Workshop". 7) Piotr Salwowski, op cit. 8) Autonomia, Budapest, op cit. 9) Piotr Tyminski: letter to AWG on behalf of Warsaw Anarchist Editors, March 1990. 10) Libertarian communist statement to "East: A Freedom Workshop." Co-signed by Anarchist Workers Group, Anarchist Communist Federation, Class Struggle Anarchist Network (UK), Union des Travailleurs Communistes Libertaires, Collectif Jeunesse Libertaire (France) and various Austrian comrades. Send S.A.E. for full text! 11) A. Shubin, op cit. 12) Piotr Salwowski, op cit. 13) Piotr Rymarczyk: "Treasure Story" Rewolta No 3, Warsaw, Dec 1989. 14) ibid. 15) ibid. 16) ibid. 17) Oops! There is no point 17... 18) Will Firth: "Anarchist Stirrings in the USSR" Presentation to "East: A Freedom Workshop". 19) Quoted in Will Firth, op cit. 20) ibid. 21) Autonomia, Budapest, op cit. 22) Piotr Tyminski: "Poland: The Dark Side of Freedom" Warsaw Anarchist Editors, March 1990. 23) Piotr Rymarczyk, op cit. 24) Piotr Tyminski "Eastern Europe: Real Revolution?" Warsaw Anarchist Editors, 1990. 25) Piotr Rymarczyk, op cit.

Nigel Fox



# letters



## SOCIALISM FROM BELOW

welcomes letters from its readers. However, if you wish your contribution to be considered for publication try and keep it to 300 words or less. Longer letters will be cut at the editor's discretion. Please mark contributions clearly "for publication".

### Letter From Poll Tax Prisoner.

I am one of a number of people who were arrested during the anti-poll tax march from Kennington Park to Trafalgar Square on the 31st March 1990. I was arrested for kicking and punching a police van and was brought to Bow Street police station, where I was told I would be charged with malicious damage to a police van. I asked to see a doctor, who came a couple of hours later! I had cuts to the palms of my hands and cuts and bruises on my face. After the doctor had looked at these I told him that I thought the big toe on my left foot was broken where the police van had rolled over it. I asked him to have a look at it but he "declined". I told him that it was very painful, which was pretty evident as I was limping, but he just gave me some painkillers. I asked him to write it down in his notes, which he said he would. But when it came to the trial he said that I never mentioned it to him, and if I had it would have been in his report.

I asked the sergeant for a solicitor and to have somebody informed of my arrest, which I was refused! So much for the right to a solicitor. The day after I was arrested I was brought out to be charged. I was charged with malicious damage, to which I made no reply, but was also charged with violent disorder, to which I replied it's a stitch up. The police just wrote down no reply and threw me back in the cell. The next day, which was the 2nd April, I was brought to Bow Street magistrate court where I finally got a solicitor. I ended up in custody for four months awaiting trial.

One week before I went to court my solicitor came to see me and told me that I wouldn't be up until September, or

maybe October. About five days later the Trafalgar Square Defendants' Campaign staged a picket outside Brixton prison, where I was being held. The picket was for people like myself who had been arrested that day. Two days after the picket I was brought to court for my case to be heard. I should not have been in court, as the TSDC were still trying to get in contact with witnesses to my arrest. I find it really weird my solicitor telling me that I wouldn't be up for a couple of months, and then exactly one week later I'm brought to court. The only way I can figure this out is that Brixton authorities got my case brought up because of the picket held two days before.

I was wearing a t-shirt with an 'OK who framed the rabbit' logo, and the judge hearing the case told me to take it off as it might influence the jury. The 'evidence' against me was about six police officers stating what I'd done, which according to them was; "led a crowd of 30 - 50 people in attacking the police van"! The police said that I ran up to the van and kicked it and tried to punch it. I find this pretty weird when they've already said the van was barely moving because the road was jammed solid with people. So therefore how could I "run" at the van "leading" 30 - 50 people?! The police said that I was of "scuffy appearance" and was dressed like "anarchist"! The trial lasted three days in all.

The prosecutor told my barrister that he knew it was a fit up, but had to do his job. When it came to the summing up, the prosecutor didn't make any statement and just sat down again. My defence did, and put the case across pretty well. Then it was the judge's turn. He summed up for about an hour and a half, then sent the jury home to come back in the morning. He summed up the next day for about 20 minutes or so, and might as well have just told the jury to find me guilty. By the time I'd said a few words to my barrister and smoked a cigarette, the jury was back with their verdict. They must have just had a smoke themselves and said that's enough time - he's guilty. I couldn't believe it. Fifteen minutes for a jury to reach their verdict. I think once the jury had heard it was from the 'poll tax riots', I was guilty. It certainly seemed that way anyway.

The judge got the prosecution to check up and see if anybody else had been brought to trial for the same thing. But it appeared that I was the first. He then told me that he was going to make an example of me, which he sure enough did. I got sentenced to two years for violent disorder, and nine months to be served concurrent, for the malicious damage charge. The prosecution then asked for £500 compensation. But the judge told me he wouldn't impose that on me, for which I told him "thanks"!!

Simon 'o' Reilly (Robert Robinson), RA 0741, HMP Camp Hill, Newport, Isle of Wight.

Letters of support are welcomed. Correspondents should note that prisoners are not able to reply to box numbers.

### Lesbian and Gay Oppression

The article in *Socialism From Below* Number 2 was common of its type on Lesbian and Gay liberation, by the papers and journals of the "left". It is an amalgam of contradictions, half-truths, insubstantiated generalisations and current "right-on" clichés, it either fails or abandons to provide a materialist approach to the question it claims to address - resulting in an article that is a cross between tail-ending and a swipe at the SWP.

The absence of any informed and cogen arguments concerning Lesbian and Gay liberation is perhaps to be expected. However it is regrettable in view of the AWG's attempts to develop a better understanding of this particular aspect of class struggle, if it were to be ignored.

The very existence of the Lesbian and Gay community is based on changing the present social/sexual set-up within this society. Implicit in that concept is the understanding that the situation can be changed, (i.e. its social origin) rather than any ideas of "natural or inevitable" origins.

The materialism of the movement constantly attempts to identify those social origins of oppression and those who benefit from such oppression; which material interests are served and satisfied by the systematic oppression of our sexuality, identity and even our existence. The task is then to devise the necessary first steps towards liberation. I believe it important the AWG identify the method they use to understand and combat Lesbian and Gay oppression if it is not a materialist method. Using whatever method of analysis it would do no harm to put a few questions.

1. What is the origin of Lesbian and Gay oppression? Has it always existed?
2. What connection(s) is there between socialist liberation and sexual liberation?
3. Why should we support Lesbian and Gay liberation? (other than the basic civil liberties position)
4. Are we really all bisexual?
5. What kind of sexuality will be promoted in a revolutionary/post-capitalist society? and why?
6. Do we support separatist lesbianism? if no/yes why?

I hope this contribution is of some use.

In solidarity,  
Ciaran McCann

There will be a reply to this letter in the form of an article in the next issue of *Socialism From Below*.

### Reply from the Anarchist Communist Federation

Dear comrades,  
Following our National Conference on the 5th/6th May 1990, where we discussed your 'Open Letter to the A.C.F.', we are writing in response to your specific proposals.

Your first proposal suggests that our organisations enter into "full discussions" on a number of issues. We do not think that this would be a fruitful discussion as our positions are so fundamentally different.

Your second proposal suggests observers from our organisations attend each others conferences, with speaking rights. Again we do not think this a worthwhile step.

Your third proposal suggests we "conduct regular reviews of each others journals". This may well happen but we do not see any reason for making it 'compulsory'.

Finally, your suggestion that we organise joint contingents on marches is a reality anyway as class struggle anarchists generally do come together on marches and we see no reason to stop doing so.

We recognise that your open letter is a "sincere contribution to the task of building a united revolutionary anarchist movement" and is not "meant as some kind of stunt or roundabout sectarian jibe!" but we do not feel there is enough political similarity between our two organisations to enter into any discussions which would be in any way positive. We will continue to follow your progress, as we are sure you will ours.

Yours for Anarchist Communism,  
Dek  
National Secretary, Anarchist Communist Federation.

### Briefly, in reply...

At a time when interest in, and prospects for, serious and coherent anarchist ideas are greater than they have been for many years; at a time when there is a pressing need to build a strong and unified libertarian communist current in the workers' movement, we find the reply to our open letter (see SFB Number 2) from the Anarchist Communist Federation (ACF) more than a little disappointing.

Since its very beginnings the ACF has time and time again declared its non-sectarian commitment to building "a united revolutionary anarchist movement". Our principled invitation to political debate has, it seems, put this commitment to the test and found it wanting. We had hoped for something better.

The ACF claims to stand in the same libertarian communist traditions as the Anarchist Workers Group (AWG). We would have thought such a situation would make discussion an urgent necessity. We recognise that there are major ideological and tactical differences between us - indeed we outline the most important in our open

letter. Since when has complete political agreement been a pre-condition for debate, especially in what passes as today's anarchist 'movement'? In the face of a workers movement dominated by reformism and leninism is such a debate between libertarian communists that problematic? The fact that the ACF shuns such principled debate points to either a serious political weakness or a rejection of a libertarian communist platform that;

*"...removes the disastrous effect of several tactics in opposition to one another, it concentrates all the forces of the movement, gives them a common direction leading to a fixed objective."*

(The Platform, P32 WSM Edition).

The Anarchist Workers Group will continue the task we have set ourselves: the building of a libertarian communist workers organisation capable of winning the battle of ideas and making our revolutionary politics a leading influence in the working class. To this end we are always willing to debate with any groups or individuals sharing those aims. Our invitation to the ACF still stands...

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