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Contents

Don't Panic - We're Getting Back to Basics 4
We try to provide a context to the latest ideological barrage

Looking Backwards, Thinking Forwards 7
Ray Challinor recalls his experience of post-war activism

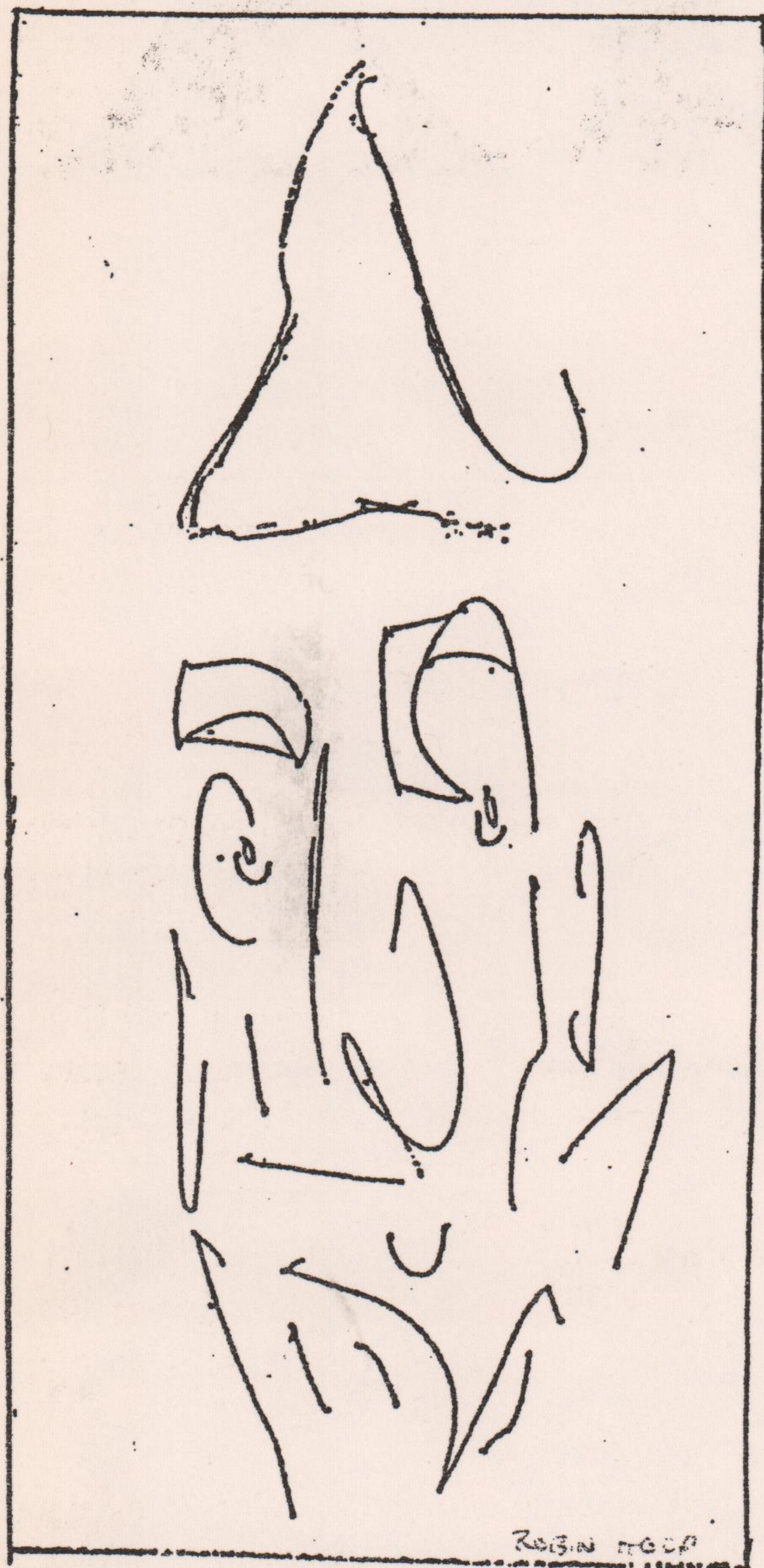
The FLUX Interview - Michael Oliver 8
A discussion with the activist and Professor of Disability Studies at University of Greenwich

Rethinking the Socialist Project 13
Terry Liddle on a new emphasis after the Cold War

Correspondence
We had none - what can we do?

Conference Reports 14
Three very different conferences are put in the limelight:
Bristol Marxist Forum
National Bisexual Conference
Welsh Community Resistance

Reviews 17
The McDonalldization of Society
Carry on Recruiting



LORD BIRD

Editorial

FLUX publishing deadlines are elastic to say the least. But here we are again throwing some ideas on the table; some more boldly than others.

In this issue Michael Oliver talks about the disabilities movement. This is made up of people who, until recently, have been seen as the ultimate welfare case: objects of professional intervention and charitable condescension. Interesting for its own sake, Oliver's description of the disability movement illustrates the bigger problem of socialist organisation and change. This is a movement of people, left voiceless and powerless by the ideological bent and structures of the system, struggling to find their own voice and demanding the space to determine their own agenda. As Michael Oliver describes it, the road to liberation is paved with hope and anger. It is also generously endowed with the pitfalls of co-option and careerism. There are plenty of reformist signposts set up to lure a potentially subversive movement into quieter, less challenging, streets.

Our challenge today is to help recreate a movement which can take account of these pitfalls and steer clear of these signposts to nowhere. The collapse of state managerialism - be it social-democratic or Stalinist - has cleared away some of the confusion. Who remembers the lucrative career structures of radical local 'democracy' or the call to defend the degenerate, deformed or otherwise flawed 'workers' state'? There are signs that revolutionaries are finding a way back to an authentic revolutionary politics - where socialism means not the 'enabling' of state management but the autonomous struggle and power of the working class.

We would suggest that this is the significance of the Bristol Marxist Forum conferences, the first of which is reported on in this issue.

For his part, Terry Liddle asks that we acknowledge struggles and issues that the left has traditionally disparaged as peripheral or (dare we even say it) petit-bourgeoisie. This is not a new idea, but it certainly needs restating. Re-making working class politics is not a project demanding uniformity.

Of course, there will always be some sectarians who are blind to the value of anything outside the revolutionary processes of the "official" Labour movement. Here we can only say 1) socialism is always unofficial and 2) it's not for us to legislate where resistance to the system breaks out. The struggle is a diverse one.

So, we welcome the tree sitting, the M11 road bloc, the squatting against homelessness, the rail strike, as signs of subversive life, potential autonomy and struggle. The role of revolutionaries here is what it has always been: to identify instances of resistance, to (critically) record, support and publicise them and to (critically) participate in the spreading of autonomous, grassroots or rank and file struggles.

Of course, the job isn't an easy one. Over the last fifteen years the government has introduced legislation controlling both the right to strike and to use public space. Taking advantage of the demoralisation (and the admittedly superficial increased affluence for some) of the working class in the 80's, the government has brought back the Combination Acts and Gagging Acts with a vengeance.

But they too are struggling (as in their own way are their loyal opposition). This is a government unable to find a coherent way out of the crisis or to off-load responsibility for the crisis onto 'enemies within' with any degree of credibility. All they've offered is the anodyne call 'Back To Basics'.

The FLUX Collective
July 1994

Don't Panic - We're Getting Back to Basics

By the beginning of the nineties, the style of political leadership epitomised by the iron rule of Margaret Thatcher was becoming a liability. Her defeat at the hands of anti-poll tax campaigners (the Trafalgar Square riot was beamed around the world) was compounded by a disastrous split over European integration. Her successor, John Major, was chosen to install leadership by stealth. A veneer of bland, consensual politics (though such a description only shows how the political language has moved rightwards), to consolidate and continue the Thatcher legacy: that is, an economic policy defined by monetarism; and a social policy of privatisation and the dismantling of the welfare state. It was hoped that John Major's diplomacy would heal the rifts without backtracking on the overall vision.

So what's gone wrong? Today, the government seems always at the precipice of completely losing control - both of its own vision and of its politically cynical electorate. The government has visibly panicked at the spectre of amoral joy-riders, ram-raiders and child murderers. 'Black Wednesday' perhaps started the rot, but when at the October 1993 Tory Party Conference, 'Back to Basics' was launched, it was seen as an ideological expedient, to rally the grassroots activists and invent a plausible scapegoat for government policy.

Many left/liberal

commentators explained the failure of 'Back to Basics' as symptomatic of a government in power too long, out of touch with ordinary people. This, however, is no more than a fatuous repetition of the Labour Party's 1992 election slogan, "It's our turn"! There are more fundamental issues at stake here.

From Keynesianism...

First, a sketchy bit of history. In Britain, the post-war 'settlement' was a trade-off between the needs of capital to restructure following the Great Depression of the 1930's, and the demands of the working class for adequate social welfare - from a living wage to the NHS.

A fragile social contract, negotiated by the state, emerged between capital and

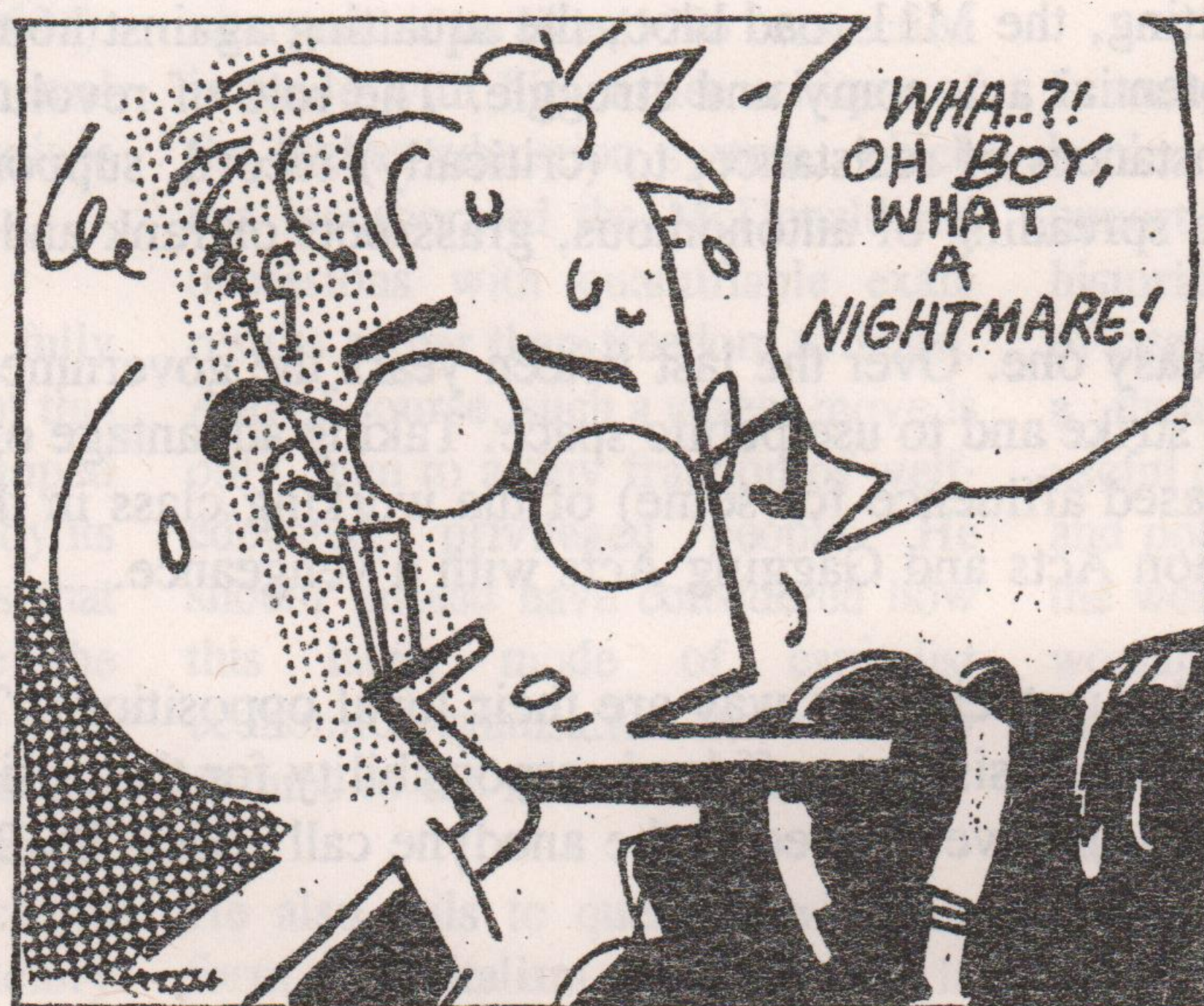
the labour bureaucracy: on the one hand, the institution of a welfare state; on the other hand, a supposedly willing workforce, supplemented by an immigration policy which attracted black people from the Commonwealth into the low paid strata.

This economic set-up is commonly described as Keynesianism. But far from being the socio-economic Solution, it was just a sticking plaster which began to fray as soon as it was applied. The economic contract was unsustainable - capitalism's need to increase profit could not indefinitely be satiated by exploiting new markets, and soon pay rises became more closely tied to productivity deals. This exposed the festering class discontent on the shop floor, which during the 1970's could not be policed by the trade union and Labour Party bureaucracies.

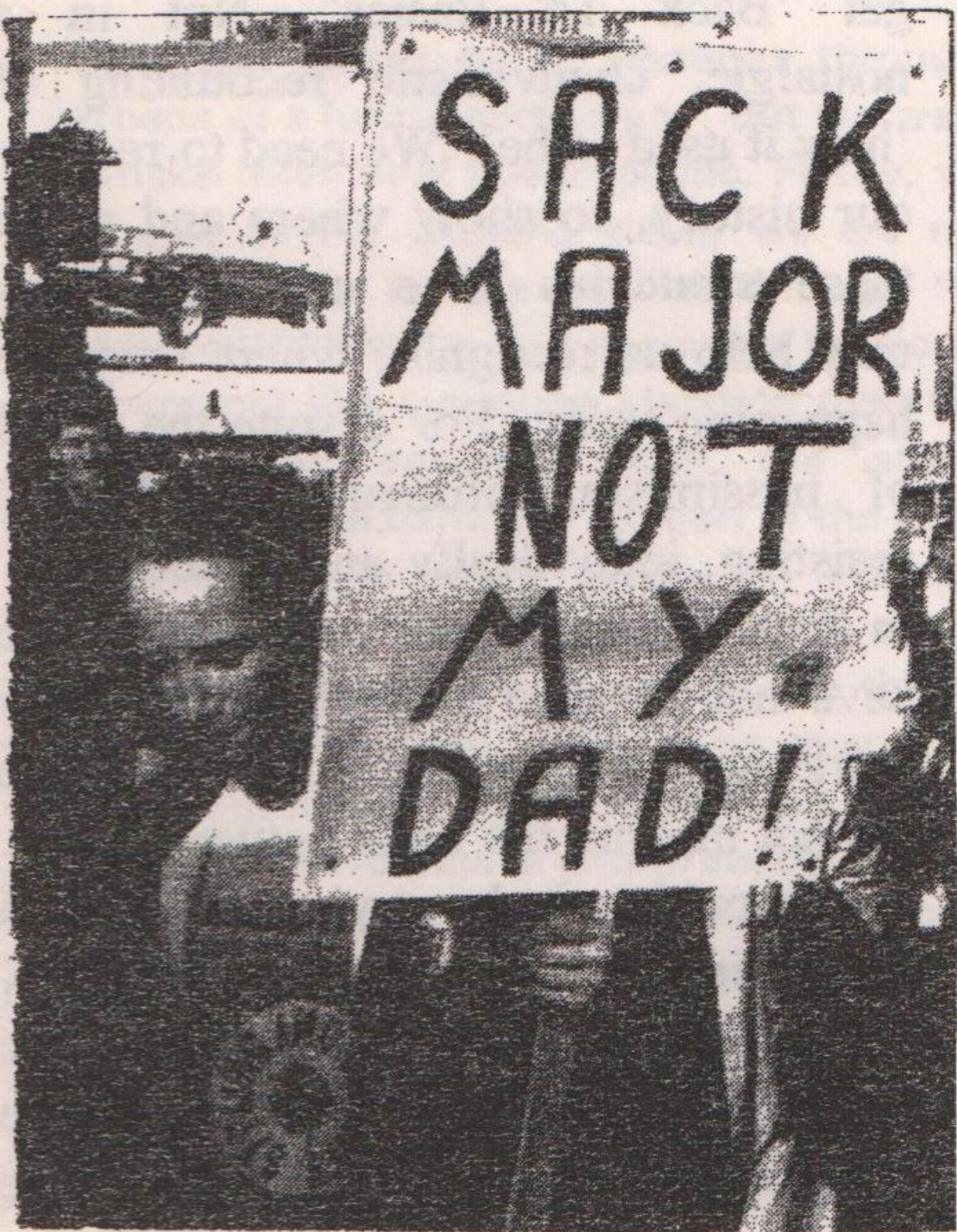
...to Monetarism

At the same time the shift to a service sector economy and technological restructuring brought a policy of permanent mass unemployment as a way of suppressing wage demands. Although this was successful in severely restricting union power, the deficit was spiralling costs to sustain the welfare state.

The major role of the state, especially since the introduction of monetarism recast economic intervention to the ever-multiplying quangos, is today the management of this welfare



system. This is not a neutral task, of course, since the function of the state within capitalism is to reproduce (culturally as well as physically) a compliant workforce. However, politicians and bureaucrats do not wield this power mechanistically - they gain social and material value from it. It is therefore not surprising that they want to keep hold of it.



Privatisation

For example, privatisation has been championed as handing back the 'wealth of the nation' (imperialistically defined) to ordinary people. But this has failed visibly. First, because although the number of shares owned by the public has increased, the proportion of shares they own has decreased. (According to 'Social Trends' 22 & 23, the ownership of shares by individuals was over 50% the total number of shares in 1963; in 1992 it has dropped to less than 20%.) With the deregulation of share markets, it is only the rich who can afford to take sufficient risks to play the futures. Second, because far from giving ordinary people direct control over state-owned services, privatisation has merely promoted the inexorable rise of quangoes controlled by government placepeople.

Privatisation has direct consequences for the welfare state. The state wants to offload day-to-day responsibility for the running of these services (with all the political costs involved), and simply to control the funding. So within the

health service, for example, the privatisation of hospitals into NHS Trusts was preceded by the hiring of management teams who would ensure that trust status was pushed locally. Once this was accomplished they were able to subject hospitals to 'crisis management' - in which procedures are 'rationalised' to the point where someone or something breaks down. The closure of hospital wards illustrates this tactic.

In practice privatisation is the opposite of 'rolling back the state'. Privatisation actually entails unprecedented centralisation and direct state control of local services. At the same time, the ramifications for ordinary people are now beginning to hit hard.

Take housing as an example. One of the planks of monetarism has been the championing of the right-to-buy scheme. Working class people became property owners, and the post-war obligation to provide social housing for those who could not afford to buy was weakened. Although a popular policy at the time, only now can people see what they lost when they bought their council houses. They lost the security of straightforward rent or housing benefit, compared to unstable mortgage rates. They lost the support of repairs and maintenance, faced with enormous bills for roof repairs, damp-proofing and so on. They lost mobility, lumbered with houses they cannot sell unless they are prepared to take on the debt of negative equity.

This is not to romanticise the quality of council housing. It is just to point out the consequences of the government's transfer of housing from a social obligation, fought for by the working class, to a private enterprise. The removal of safety nets has left even the middle classes of the Home Counties struggling with debt. Economic liberalisation has led to personal financial insecurity, which only the rich are safe from.



Individualism

The second, related tendency coming home to roost for the government, is the narrow, selfish strain of individualism they have promoted so keenly. The battle for a Thatcherite anti-society of pure self-interest could only be fully won by totally isolating everyone with a common interest, but the state has had some notable victories, sometimes aided by the left. From the Miners' Strike to the Battle of the Beanfield, the eighties has witnessed a string of defeats for working class politics, whether expressed via the union or community organisation. This has led to some creative formations of new opposition, such as the anti-poll tax movement, but generally speaking a culture of collectivism has been eroded in the wake of people asserting worth through the exercise of individual power.

It is at the sharp end of government policies, in the alienated housing estates and urban ghettos, that this nightmarish flipside to unfettered money-making and consumption is at its starkest. Some pleasure can be had in recent figures of 1.1 million people getting caught shoplifting during 1993 (how many times did we get away with it?). But many other manifestations of this individualism are far more anti-social, and only perpetuate fear and alienation rather than challenge it.

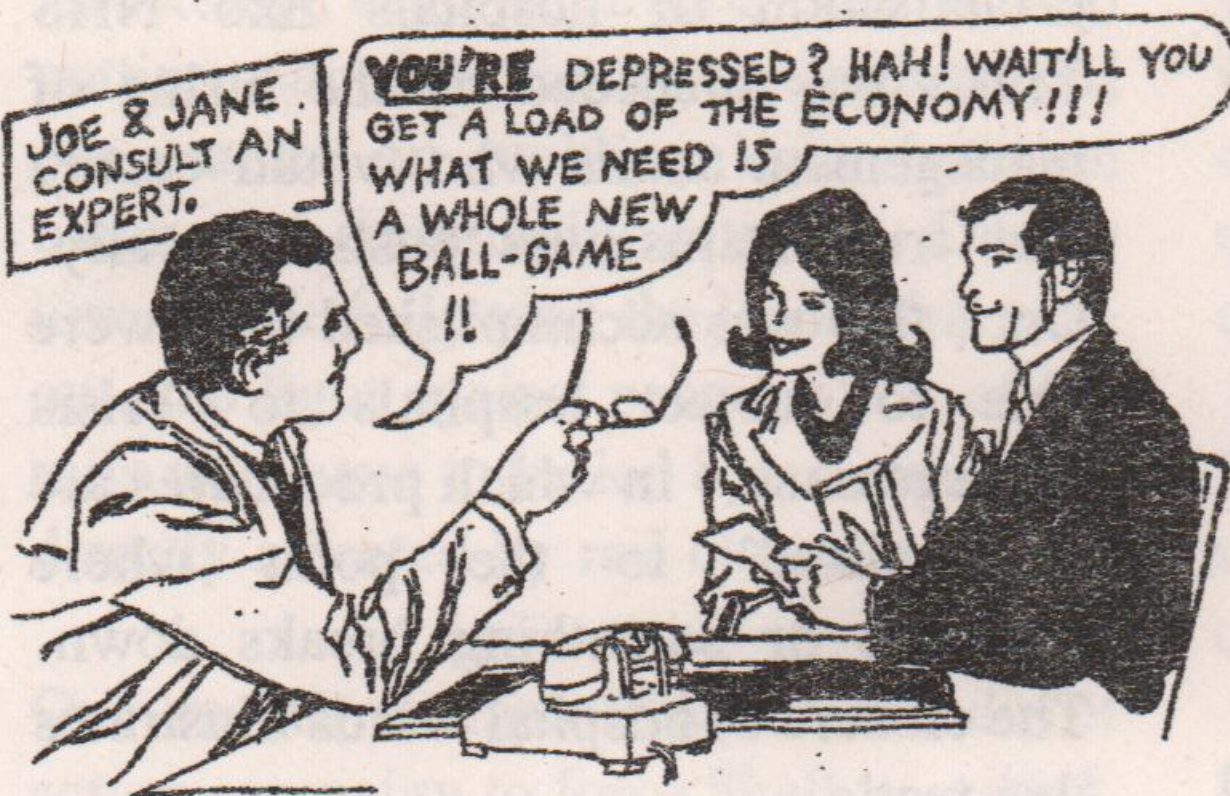
Back to Basics

John Major's much-maligned catchphrase, 'Back To Basics', emerged to widespread Tory enthusiasm. It was designed to provide more legitimacy to the ideology of welfare cutbacks, and to demand adherence to law and order and reactionary morals.

Many critics have sneeringly dismissed this as a crude diversion from more fundamental crises afflicting the government. But this sort of ideological crusading is not dreamt up in a back room by scheming politicians. On the contrary, it expresses the anxieties of a government losing confidence in its own ability to control the course of events (or perhaps realising that it never really did anyway). For in abstract terms, four crises are beginning to clamour for attention.

Four Crises for the State

First, there is a crisis of state capitalism, restructuring from Keynesianism to monetarism. Second, there is a crisis of welfarism, as the cost of the social wage, still being defended by sections of the working class, spirals out of control. Third, there is a crisis of the state's role as manager of the balance between the demands of profit and welfare. And as the state abandons welfarism, it brings on the fourth crisis, of its legitimacy amongst a population which it has abandoned.



'Back To Basics' aims to restore the state's legitimacy, but it fails spectacularly. And it fails because it expresses the basic contradiction of state monetarism: the desire to combine free market liberalisation with a highly regulated social order (designed to deliver the working class to capital). The language of social democracy ('social contract', 'realism', 'give and take') is not appropriate here. The working class have no stake in such a system. They see, correctly, a double standard: the free market for those who can afford it, and social regulation for those who can't. Unfettered individualism is the preserve of the capitalist class alone.

Left Retreat

But the problem for the left is that whilst we can record the instances of rebellion, it is difficult to generalise them into a socialist vision of a collective struggle to achieve the good things in life.

Political activity, for many people, is just a career, not an attempt to engender a different society. And in many cases their perception is correct, as socialists take the more prosperous path of social democracy. The left's retreat from the street-level of ordinary working class life is as much to blame as anything.

Perhaps, then, it is time for socialists to get 'Back To Basics'. Not in a nostalgic, chauvinistic recounting of 'how it used to be'. We need to reclaim our history, to show where and when these strategies have occurred. This may help us recognise where they are happening today. For despite the mood of pessimism, ordinary people are resisting, individually and collectively, in diverse and creative ways. As yet we have not grasped how these struggles work in a fragmented society, so we are not making the links between them. We should not be trying to squash everything into a monolithic struggle. Instead, we should welcome the diversity of opposition, recognising the potential it has of disrupting state monetarism.

We also need to reaffirm the positive values of collective action. Not only is this necessary for a socialist revolution; only by acting collectively can we create a climate of sympathy, cooperation and sharing which combined enable effective struggle against capitalism and the state.

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Looking Backwards, Thinking Forwards

I became a revolutionary socialist in 1945 when I joined the ILP. Conditions then were very different. Widespread anger at the Old Order pervaded society. No workers wanted to return to the unemployment and squalor of the 1930s.

The Brave New World promised by established politicians looked, to revolutionaries like myself, as if it would remain a mirage. The scenario, as we envisaged it, was a repeat of what happened after the First World War. Homes fit for heroes would not materialise; dole queues and wage cuts would. But this time there would be a vital difference. Not prepared to be hoodwinked on a second occasion, discontent would reach explosive proportions. The destruction of capitalism was at hand.

Our forecasts proved wrong. Instead of a slump, a prolonged boom occurred. The death agony of capitalism - forecast by Trotsky - failed to arrive. Instead, bolstered by unprecedented expenditure on arms, consumer demand expanded and with profit levels rose. An ever-rising GNP created the environment where a Labour government could bring in reforms, a surprisingly impressive number of improvements which, though keeping within the parameters of the existing system, workers nevertheless found most welcome.

The Attlee government abolished unemployment. At the labour exchange, more job vacancies existed than there were people to fill them. It also introduced the welfare state, giving security, as of right - not means tested - from the cradle to the grave. A completely free and comprehensive National Health Service began. Private capital no longer controlled 20% of the economy.

These reformist triumphs almost eliminated revolutionary organisations. workers forgot all thoughts of manning the barricades and fighting for socialism. Given the continuation of the existing system, they could always see an ever-improving future in front of them.

Only a handful of us, isolated and impotent, remained loyal to our principles. When, in October 1950, I attended the inaugural meeting of the Socialist Review Group, forerunner of the present-day SWP, the national membership was a mere 34.

But times were a-changing. The two massive boulders that prevented progress

were beginning to disintegrate. You have only to look at the Labour Party today, with 250,000 individual members at the most compared to 1,500,000 at its peak, to see the decline in commitment to reformist politics. Even those who still back Labourism believe that a Smith administration would, at best, make marginal changes.

The reason for this is not that Smith & Co. are less talented than their predecessors. Rather it is that, as international capitalist competition intensifies still further, no resources exist to finance further improvements. The state coffers are bare. Consequently, today we have reformism, albeit a dwindling political force, without reforms.

The second roadblock, of course, was Stalinism. In 1950, the Communist Party had two MPs and at the general election fought 100 seats. When Harry Pollitt lost in the Rhondda, he consoled his supporters. He told that 600 million Chinese had just joined the communist camp, which stretched in monolithic unity from the Baltic to the Pacific Ocean. The Soviet bloc, moreover, was, he claimed, making much faster economic progress than the capitalist countries. As Khrushchev was to say a few years later, the USSR would outstrip the American standard of living by 1980.

While the twin obstacles of Labourism and Stalinism have declined, so at the same time has the present economic system they protected. What this inevitably means is in the future we are going to see the re-emergence of mass discontent. New social forces, with fresh energy and new means of struggle, will enter the arena. As Michael Bakunin once pointed out, human beings are distinguished from all other animals by the ability to revolt. Exploitation and oppression can, I am sure, be vanquished.

In my old age, my personal contribution to the fight has altered. Replacing the demo and picketline, I have turned my attention to studying the past. Unless we know the errors of previous generations, we always remain in danger of repeating them. For this reason, I have written a number of books. *The Origins of British Bolshevism* strives to describe the deeds and exploits of revolutionaries in the early part of the 20th century. *A Radical Lawyer in Victorian England* is meant to cover the same ground as Edward Thompson's classic work, *The Making of the English Working Class*, but from a different angle. He sought to analyze



how working people created their own organisations and fought to improve their position. I have examined how the capitalists sought to meet this fresh challenge. It involved the imposition of factory discipline, the creation of a police force, the mass building of prisons - and the buying off of many workers' leaders. The life of W.P. Roberts, a great fighter against injustice who became known as "the People's Attorney", provided a peg, a human interest story, around which the history has been written.

If, as I believe, in the future the British ruling class relies more and more on the stick, not the carrot, then the lessons to be learnt from W.P. Roberts' experiences become more and more relevant. He exposed the way the authorities used agent provocateurs, bribed informers and saw to it that pliant judges handled crucial legal cases. He also understood his strongest argument came not in the courtroom but by speaking through the window. Exposing injustice and arousing anger in the masses, he often won battles against both the bosses and the state.

Currently, I am researching the Second World War. Besides the murky deeds that the ruling class would rather not come to light, I have unearthed many examples of heroism by our political forefathers. Naturally, respectable historians would rather these remain buried. But I am determined it will be otherwise.

Remember capitalism does not only rob us of our labour-power and the means to control our own lives, it also robs us of our past. To know of the magnificent achievements of the past would increase our self-confidence and our determination to equal or even exceed them ourselves.

Raymond Challinor

The Michael Oliver Interview

Michael Oliver is a socialist who has been active in disabled politics for many years. He is the author of *The Politics of Disablement*, which FLUX reviewed in Issue 5.

In this interview with Carolyn Willow, he discusses the relationship of disabled people with the welfare state, and the possibilities for radicalism in the future.

Carolyn - Is capitalism to blame for the oppression of disabled people.

Mike - Capitalism has produced disability in a particular form which is essentially an isolated, individualised, medicalised condition. Other social foundations have produced disability in other ways - some may have been more oppressive, others less oppressive, some may have actually been liberating. But I think central to my argument is that capitalism, because of the change in the mode of production, because of the transition to waged labour, has produced disability in a particular way. It has produced individual workers and as a consequence has had a profound effect on disabled people because it shook disabled people out of the sphere of labour market and they were therefore no longer able to produce the goods to sustain their own existence. As a consequence of that the state had to do something about it and it did that by developing an increasingly sophisticated set of segregative practices you know from the workhouse to the asylum to the colony to the village to the hospital to the residential home and that goes on, that kind of differentiation and specialisation with increasing sets of professionals spawned to look after them. Indeed the care managers are the end of the line - you know we'll keep disabled people segregated in the community and care managers will be the pivotal professionals for that. Of course you also have to have an ideology which allows that to happen, an ideology which says disability is a personal tragedy.

Carolyn - So there is no thanks for being the deserving poor rather than the undeserving because the outcome is the same. If we look at the lives of those disabled people who have to rely on public welfare today, have there been any benefits as a result of community care reforms and the creed of consumerism which is thriving within social work?

Mike - The short answer to that is no. I don't know anywhere in the history of humanity where people have given up power. Power has to be taken from people and none of the power that people have over the lives of disabled people is going to be

given up easily and the latest reforms don't actually do that. Take Mr Major's latest citizenship initiative - disability doesn't merit a mention, I think there's one footnote in the whole of the Citizen's Charter. If you're an able-bodied passenger whose train from Huntingdon is late, you can sue BR. If you are a disabled person who cannot get on the bloody train in the first place you have no kind of citizenship entitlements.

Carolyn - Have the Community Care reforms unleashed any power from the medical profession and social workers?

Mike - Community Care is totally and utterly irrelevant to the lives of disabled people. The reality is that it is still able-bodied professionals who decide where the money goes and what services disabled people get. Disabled people are still the passive recipients of services of what other people think they ought to have. People who know what services they want still do not have the means of control to acquire these services.

Carolyn - What impact has 15 years of retrenchment in social welfare had on the lives of disabled people?

Mike - For the vast majority of disabled people the issue of retrenchment is not an issue at all. Disabled people have always been on the margins, always missed out on services. It wasn't that somehow we had this wonderful infrastructure of services set in the post war settlement and then in the 70s and 80s it all fell apart.

Carolyn - So have disabled people *never* felt beneficiaries of the so called Welfare State?

Mike - Absolutely not. Look what is on offer - residential care (hospitals, geriatric wards) and day centres. Benefits are usually bribes to keep people out of the labour market rather than genuine attempts to integrate disabled people into society. All of these things can be seen as the utter failure of the

welfare state to address the concerns of disabled people - concerns which disabled people share with everyone - like getting a job, having enough money, kids going to the same school as other kids, catching a bus, going to the cinema, having your own front door, deciding when to get up etc etc.

Carolyne - Are you saying that state-provided welfare, situated within capitalism, could never provide these kinds of things?

Mike - The ideology of personal tragedy has dominated policy throughout the 1940s to the 1980s. Only now is it being challenged by what we (disabled people) call the social model. If we look at the historical evidence there is absolutely no doubt that this is true. This raises the question, as a socialist who is committed to state provided welfare, of whether or not the state, in theory, is able to provide goods. There are very few examples of where the state has delivered in terms of giving access to the level of services which disabled people want. On the other hand, I can think of lots of examples where the market can. The Independent Living Fund, for example, gives disabled people money to purchase personal assistance.

Carolyne - Are disabled people organising to say *this is what we want*?

Mike - At the heart of services that disabled people want are Centres of Integrated Living. There are 6 or 7 of these in this country. You could say that's not many - there are 110 Social Services Departments or whatever - but the problems are that they are under-resourced and there is lots of resistance to them.

Carolyne - Can you explain what these Centres are about?

Mike - Basically CIL's started in the 1960s in California. Individual disabled people got together locally saying that the services they were receiving were nonsensical and even if they were what people wanted they got them not at the times they wanted, etc. There are now about 200 CIL's throughout the world. Disabled people need a base and CIL's serve as one location, contact points to enable us to collectively organise, to pressure local authorities to shift their perceptions and services. They are not National Independent Living Centres, provided by the Department of Health or Social Services Departments and staffed by Occupational Therapists. They are resource centres run by disabled people. Some provide things like information service, peer counselling services, wheelchair services, a personal assistance scheme may well be located in the CIL and so on. The amount of money spent on CIL's is minuscule compared to the £523 million being poured into Community Care.

Carolyne - Outside of public welfare, what challenges have there been to organisations and charities such as Mencap and the Spastics Society, organisations which arguably are dinosaurs?

Mike - Well they are not dinosaurs because dinosaurs are not dangerous. These organisations are actually dangerous. I used

to think they were just irrelevant but, they're not they're dangerous. They're part of what Gramsci would have called the organisation of consent. They give the impression that society cares about disability and that disabled people are a priority and that society is actually trying to do something to address the problems and issues of disabled people. That is a lie, which is why we have to continually confront them, which is why we have to continue to ridicule their attempts to use our language and to focus on our issues. The Spastics Society can change its name and call itself whatever empowering name it wants but it will still be an organisation of consent, it will still be in the business of providing segregative education, it will still be perpetrating the ideology of conductive education and so on. These organisations aren't going to disappear - we'll actually have to get rid of them.

Carolyne - Who are the activists? How did disabled people first get this sense of community - what impact have advances in technology had upon the opportunities of disabled people to collectivise?

Mike - We have to go back to history. It is certainly true that there is a new movement which has emerged in the last 15 years. But it would be doing violence to history if we didn't acknowledge the struggles of blind and deaf people. Deaf people have struggled for about 200 years to preserve their culture and language. This has been against the fiercest of oppression you could imagine, which includes physically torturing children by forcing them to sit on their hands and giving them cochlea implants which are absolutely no use whatsoever. Blind people were on the Jarrow March in the 1930s. Blind people taking direct action is a tradition going back to the 19th century. It's important that this history doesn't get lost. Having said that, is true that from the 70's onwards there has been something different. Different struggles have been emerging, moving away from single impairment issues. Attempts have been made to form a broader coalition amongst impaired people. A number of factors are to do with this:

- 1) By the 1970's disabled people were coming to realise that 30 years of state welfare was doing nothing. Despite the supposed welfare state disabled people were increasingly becoming discontented and lacking in any control;
- 2) The influence of the civil rights movement particularly in the USA. This was a stimulus to Black people, women, gay rights. There was an interchange and cross flow of ideas between disabled people in America and Canada and here and vice versa;
- 3) The complete and utter failure of the traditional voluntary sector to represent disabled people. Organisations with their royal titles and do-gooders who eventually get their OBEs for keeping disabled people exactly where they were in the first place - which is down at the bottom, stuck in residential homes, stuck in their own homes, ferried to and from day centres;
- 4) As a socialist it is not always easy to talk about these things but there is the role of individuals which has been important. Some were escaping residential care others were people who had cut their teeth in socialist politics elsewhere, who spent their time trying to convince the Labour Party and other left

of centre groups that disability was an issue and failed. There were also people who had come from struggles in South Africa and so on.

All these came together in a melting pot of discontent.

Carolynne - Given that there have been political disabled people throughout history, what exactly do you think has prompted the growth in disability activism?

Mike - It's complicated to unpick. It is certainly true that over the years some opportunities have opened up. More and more disabled people have managed to get into higher education and get some kind of education and develop the understanding that disability is not an individual problem but a societal problem and that collective action is important. I don't want to minimise changes like our access to the built environment, technological changes eg telephones, fax machines, minicomms and so on - that has obviously been a factor but related to that is growing awareness of disability as a political issue which is not about accessing our demands within the ordinary party political system. Part of this collective realisation has also been about previously impairment specific groups beginning to get together saying ok we've had differences (well worn state tactic for keeping groups divided) in the past but let's work together now. There is a history of division, which has been partly fostered by ourselves but partly deliberate state intervention.

Carolynne - Do you think that prevailing theories within the disability movement are implicitly socialist?

Mike - I would say yes. One of things you have to understand about the disabled movement, because it's only grown over the last 15 years is we haven't had a great deal of time to do our thinking. There was an organisation called the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation which was quite clearly a leftist think tank if you like and did a lot of very important work, laying the theoretical parameters of the rest of the movement.

Carolynne - Weren't they brandished as Marxists?

Mike - Yes. Some of them were! But not all of them.

I think the issue that the movement hasn't had time to talk about is what is our goal? To integrate disabled people into society as it is? Are we quite happy with the game but all we want is the rules changed to accommodate us? Or do we want to change the nature of the game - do we want to play a new game altogether. And we haven't really had a chance to debate that. I would say -if I was pushed - that the majority

of people in the movement have limited perspectives. They see themselves as wanting to join the game and therefore want the rules changed.

Carolynne - You'd want another game?

Mike - We can't get rid of impairments. The disabling consequences of impairments could disappear. But even under socialism there are still going to be impairments so the issue then is this, if you live in a society in which people are judged by their physical prowess - whether it be prowess in terms of your ability to operate machinery or to be pasted on the front of magazines - then disabled people are always going to miss out. We can have the most wonderful cultural movement amongst disabled people which stresses and celebrates disabilities but at end of the day if society is based upon physical prowess disabled people are going to find it hard to compete.

Carolynne - If the long term strategy is to change the game, who do you see as your allies?



Mike - I had a very interesting discussion with a disabled person who is a political activist within the Labour Party only last weekend. He was saying that we are profoundly misguided and that what we ought to be doing is joining the Labour Party because we are more likely to get anti-discrimination legislation in the Labour Party than anywhere else. My response was that we might but that we'd also get a professionalised bureaucracy called a disability commission to go with it. And probably lots of key jobs for white males. The point is that if we are going to take on board issues of disability seriously then we have to

fundamentally change the political system. That goes beyond ideas about just opening up the party system and raising consciousness. It's about the nature of representation itself. At the moment politics is a game mainly played by white middle class middle aged men because of the way it is structured and organised. Even if disabled people could find parties they want to be active in, how the hell are they going to stand to be an MP, pressing the flesh and going through all the constituencies and so on? And if we're serious about having a political system which is accountable to, and which represents, a whole range of groups in society, we need fundamental change which goes beyond tinkering at the margins.

Carolynne - Personally, would you become involved in a political party if a) it was practically possible for you and b) the party represented ideas and values which you share.

Mike - My own view is that the whole system is totally

bankrupt and we shouldn't give legitimacy to it by supporting it at all. We actually have to think of forming new political organisations which reflect new forms of emerging political consciousness. They will not be political parties in my view. I'm not some kind of second rate visionary and I've got no idea of what they will be but I don't see the John Smiths and the John Majors in 2150 being in charge of two political parties who swop power amongst an elite of white men. I made a deliberate political choice in the last general election not to vote: I refuse to give legitimacy any longer.

Carolynne - You show a lot of cynicism toward the prevailing political system, and to welfare provision within the capitalist state. Is there a choice for disabled people to opt out of the system or is this a luxury that most disabled people can ill afford? Do disabled people have a compulsory relationship with the state?

Mike - The political position that I have described to you - as a Professor of Disability Studies in an academic institute - I can afford to say that. In terms of my own political understanding I can say have nothing to do with the state. But I still recognise the need to get my hands dirty and the need to get in bed with the state. I just think we have to be clear of the terms on which we are doing this. The point you make is an apt one because one of the interesting things that's happened is that many of the second generation disability activists actually have got themselves jobs in the "disability industry". You know they're equal opportunities advisers in some local authority or they have jobs with organisations controlled and run by disabled people themselves. But those in the main rely upon state funding. That is messy.

Carolynne - Do you see this as incorporation? Is, as you put it, "getting into bed with the state" always wrong? Or is it sufficient for people to keep their wits about them - take the money and run as it were?

Mike - There are dangers of incorporation all of the time. I think one of the things which is important and significant about disability is that the bedrock of disability remains. At the end of the day I am faced everyday with the issue of I don't know how I'm going to get up in the morning or go to bed at night. So even if I am incorporated I can never ignore these problems. There are black people who become incorporated into the state and become white people with black skins and there are some women who by behaving like men become incorporated into the state - the recent Prime Minister probably is the best example. I'm not saying that it is impossible for disabled people, I'm saying it is harder. There is always that issue of how to get up in the morning. If I'm going to some wonderful conference how am I going to get to the loo, is there going to be funding available for me to take a personal assistant. If I'm blind is braille available, if I'm deaf is signing, and so on.

Carolynne - Continuing with this question of incorporation, is the disability movement going down the same road as the Women's movement and black activism? We can all see how the state has shown itself adaptable to the pressures and influences of feminist and black thinking. In

teaching and social work, for example, professional activists have created niches for awareness training which is both oppositional and individualistic. Of course such training never addresses the wider context of capitalism and the danger lies in the way in which these models purport to be radical when essentially they are arguing that all you need is changed attitudes.

Mike - In one sense disabled people have been better off with some of the horrendous experiences that happened with RAT (Racism Awareness Training) and SAT (Sexism Awareness Training). It seems to me that SAT was about making men feel guilty that they weren't women and RAT was about making white people feel guilty because they weren't black. Of course there are organisations, some including disabled people, who go in for the same kind of methods. And you get all kinds of bizarre things, they're into experiential stuff like you make an able-bodied person use a wheelchair for a day or you give them a blindfold, stick cotton wool in their ears and so on. This is all experiential nonsense which makes disabled people angry.

Carolynne - Is this training predominantly for welfare organisations? If so, aren't you trying to reorientate the very professionals who have historically oppressed disabled people?

Mike - Interesting. That was a big debate around last year's Telethon because training was not provided by bona fide training organisations who were offered it but turned it down, saying that they had got into bed with them before and asked them nicely and they just used and abused them and their trust and carried out the same garbage as before. So another organisation - ironically headed by an impaired person - did provide training for their thirty pieces of silver.

Carolynne - Telethon was a big success for disabled activists, wasn't it?

Mike - Absolutely, Telethon is no more. Whatever they say about it, you know that it was outdated and the rest of it, Telethon's demise was not unrelated to the fact that 1000 people turned up outside LWT House at 7.30 that night despite the fact that there were still barricades all round the building, despite the fact that it was heavily ringed by police and by an obnoxious group of private security guards who were very aggressive and very violent.

Carolynne - That kind of activity is bread and butter stuff for most able-bodied activists. There must be so many obstacles to disabled people organising like this.

Mike - It is very difficult, it's not easy at all because of the hostile built environment, because of the fact that many disabled people live in poverty and so getting on a train from Leeds or whatever on a Saturday is not always easy. And if you can afford it trains are not always accessible. So the logistics of direct action is very difficult. If you have a 1000 disabled people on one street on one particular demo' they represent an incredible number of people

Carolynne - In terms of disseminating information is it harder for disabled people when many have been robbed of education?

Mike - Clearly there are a lot of disabled people who have not had access to education like lots of other people. Most disabled people are still educated in segregated schools. In the university sector 3 per 1,000 students are disabled, to our shame. This is appalling when probably one in ten disabled people in population.

This presents problems. For example, the main criticism made of my politics book is that it is inaccessible and some of the concepts are difficult. I understand that and I think that's a reasonable position but I think we cannot simply go down the route of where we only develop ideas and theories at the level of which the mass of people in the movement can understand because one of the dangers of doing that is to promote the idea that you do not have to do any intellectual work to understand the nature of the oppression you face in capitalist society. I would reject that out of hand. If we are ever going to liberate ourselves we have to liberate ourselves intellectually and physically. And that's not easy. That's painful, it's going to give us headaches, it's going to tire and exhaust us mentally as well as physically. We mustn't pretend that understanding the nature of capitalist society is easy and it's something everyone can do tomorrow if only we use shorter words rather than longer words.

Carolynne - Does it annoy you that socialist theory has neglected the experiences of disabled people?

Mike - Class has proved an inadequate pivot on which to add the experiences of being black, or female, or disabled or homosexual or whatever. That kind of theoretical pivot has for me proved to be inadequate. We need at some point to have a different way of looking at all that. We don't have an adequate understanding and that's a vacuum. Relating this to New Social Movements, I wouldn't want to give the impression that disabled people are organising around the idea that we are, in fact, creating a New Social Movement. In the main disabled people are organising, doing what seems to be practical or on the agenda today and then they are going ahead and doing it. Not thinking about it in any abstract or theoretical way.

Carolynne - But isn't this the same for most people?

Mike - If you look at the disability movement what's happened over the years is three things:

- 1) There has been a fundamental reconceptualisation of the world and disabled people's role in it. It is now very common for disability to be seen as a social rather than an individual medicalised problem;
- 2) There have been attempts to organise and influence around welfare;
- 3) In the area of culture the Disability Arts Movement has tried to create positive images and celebrate difference and so on.

Carolynne - Are there leaders in the disability movement?

Mike - I think the disability movement, like all political movements, has to live with the tension of trying to create a mass movement whilst being suspicious of the cult of the personality. I'm not saying that in 20 years we won't have an oligarchical movement run by six or seven men in wheelchairs. I do think that impairment makes this less likely simply because you can't distance yourself from that. It does impose itself on your consciousness.

Carolynne - It's generally accepted that New Social Movements alone are not going to transform society unless the economic base changes. Is that good enough for you?

Mike - I think it is you see. I'm not a pessimist in that sense. I have no vision of the world as it will be with the transformation to socialism but nevertheless I believe that the 21st Century will be as different from the 20th as the 20th was as different from the 19th Century. I believe that we are already seeing the seeds of two things which are going to be more powerful in the 21st Century. Firstly we are now seeing the seeds of the destruction of the existing political systems because more and more populations throughout the world realise they're bankrupt and are withdrawing their legitimacy for them by not voting, by not participating or they are going to take direct action by rioting and taking to the streets or they are going to put their energy into creating new organisations and forms for the articulation of their particular political positions. I think the second point is that New Social Movements are new in the sense that they offer the potential for different kinds of political organisation in the 21st Century. I suppose if you push me at the end of the day I still think that the old political system isn't going to die and the new one isn't going to emerge without some kind of concurrent, even prior, transformation from one particular mode of production to another.

Carolynne - I want to now look at the cultural aspects of promoting positive images of disabled people. Can you draw a parallel between the "gay is good, black is beautiful" slogans of the gay and black liberation movements?

Mike - I've had it said to me as an individual, "OK so you broke your neck, if it's so wonderful why aren't you advocating that your children or your grandchildren dive into a swimming pool and break their neck?" I mean we have to develop a position which doesn't advocate that everyone in the world should go out and impair themselves. We have to actually develop a cultural position which celebrates difference and which recognises people's rights to be what they are.

Carolynne Willow

Below are some of Mike's many publications:

The Politics of Disablement, MacMillan 1990.

Social Work: Disabled People and Disabling Environments, Kingsley Press 1991.

Disabling Barriers - Enabling Environments (with Swain and Finkelstein), Sage 1993.

Rethinking the Socialist Project

As a failure Socialism has been a spectacular success! Western social democracy has abandoned even a pretence to Socialism (the word did not appear in the last Labour Party General Election Manifesto) and in the former lands of "actually existing Socialism" in the East capitalism is back with a vengeance - there is a bitter irony to the sight of May Day demonstrators being beaten by Yeltsin's police in Red Square! Apart from the dwindling bands of the faithful who still cling to their illusions about Cuba or North Korea, Socialists have nothing to hold up as a model of a successful Socialist Society. On the other hand our opponents have all too many negative examples to prove that Socialism merely substitutes new tyrannies for old. It is time for a rethink!

First we must examine our past. For 170 years or so Socialism has described both a political philosophy and a movement. Is this experience just so much "weight of dead generations" or can anything be salvaged from it? Should we rigorously attempt to demythologise and deidealise the past, to try to discover objective truth in our own history, or do we have more important tasks? Do the ideas of the "great teachers" - Marx, Lenin, Bakunin, Kropotkin or whoever have any meaning, any use for today or are they so much ideological baggage and do we have to start from square one again? Can the existing movements - trade unions, parties, etc - be put back on a Socialist track or do we have to build new movements from the bottom up? How do we avoid repeating again and again the errors of the past? What, if any, guarantee is there that any future revolution will not suffer the "bureaucratic degeneration" of past revolutions?

Secondly, we have to look at our present. For the majority of working people, Socialism is something utterly alien to their daily lives. At most the participation in any political activity will be going out to vote every few years. Even the minority that at any moment in time may be engaged in struggle - a strike, a struggle in the community, a struggle against some form of oppression - may well not see the relevance of other struggles to their own or consider Socialism to be any solution to their problem. Indeed, very often attempts by Socialists to intervene in a struggle, particularly where this is done in a manipulative, underhanded way, are greatly resented. How then do we make Socialism relevant to the lives, thoughts, hopes and dreams of working people? How do we help those participating in struggle to go beyond the limits of their particular interest and develop an overall critique of bourgeois society? How do we do this in a non-manipulative, non-patronising, non-alienating way? Is our activity merely propagandist/educational and if not what is the proper relationship between propaganda and agitation?

Many of those in struggle see their struggle as directed against a particular form of oppression - racism, sexism, animal abuse, environmental damage, etc - not against the exploitation, the expropriation by the ruling class of the surplus

by the proletariat, that is the essence of capitalism. They therefore identify themselves as blacks, women, animal rights activists, greens, fighting oppressors - whites, men, animal abusers, polluters - not as Socialists fighting capitalism as both a social system and a mode of production. For Socialists class must remain central - if we shed the concept that the "history of ... society is the history of class struggle" then it is all too easy to do down the road of the hopeless reformism taken by the "Marxism Today" wing of the late CPGB. But this should not stop us from working out a dialectic of oppression and exploitation and implementing this in our practice. We have to encourage and support every manifestation of revolt against the existing order but we must do so in a consciously Socialist way. Our methodology must always be rigorously scientific. This necessitates a struggle against all forms of mysticism and mystification, against ideology.

Thirdly, we have to recapture a vision of the future. To be sure, Morrison's efforts to apply the theory of the Webbs to the running of the London County Council or the Fordism of Stalinist Five Year Plans fill more people with horror and revulsion rather than hope and excitement. We would perhaps do better looking at the ideas of a William Morris or a Kropotkin. But in looking to the future we can't afford to dwell in the past. The world in which we live is neither that of the Petrograd Bolsheviks of 1917 or the Spanish CNT of the 'thirties. Any attempts to apply mechanistically the experiences of the past to the present are more likely to end in tragic farce than glorious victory.

In working out a vision of the future, we have to transcend both workerism (surely, we want to abolish both social classes and alienated labour) and humanism. Our approach must be biophilic, we must recognise that we share the planet with other living creatures who have as much right to life, liberty and natural enjoyment as human beings do. Therefore, the Socialist economy of tomorrow must guarantee not only a democracy which is social and industrial as well as political but must also undo the ravages of industrialism and ensure that the satisfaction of real human needs does not damage or destroy the planet. Production must be geared to the creation of real wealth not what Ruskin call "illth". This means that many things taken for granted in bourgeois society such as the private motor car and cigarettes will have to go. Likewise the institutions which make up the political state will have to go and be replaced by mass democratic forms of self-organisation and administration such as workers' councils and neighbourhood communes. There must be a rapid and orderly transition from the dictatorship of the proletariat - the working class organised as the ruling class - to a classless, stateless society - libertarian communism. (Communism both as a word and more importantly as a theory and a movement of self-liberation must be reclaimed from those who have besmirched it with blood.) Likewise there must be a rapid transition from a system of distribution based on the socially

necessary hour of labour to a world of free access. The false antithesis between work and leisure will also be rapidly abolished: with work ceasing to be mindnumbing drudgery and becoming a joyous process of creation; and leisure ceasing to be a mindless routine of the consumption of spectacular, useless and often health-threatening commodities. To display the contempt of free men and women for the fetishism of capitalism and its worship of the dead, we really will build public toilets out of solid gold!

We have to convince the vast majority of working people that Socialism isn't the old tyranny in new clothes, that it is both practical and desirable, indeed necessary, if our species and the rest of life on Earth is to survive never mind evolve into higher forms. We have to convince them that this is something worth fighting for and that the result of fighting will not be yet more defeats and betrayals. Our politics, our practice have therefore to be open and honest. We have to say what we mean and mean what we say. All the old concepts of Jacobin/Bolshevik vanguards and leadership, of leading the class through experiences like so many sheep have to go. Either the working class as a whole frees itself or it remains enslaved under old masters or new.

No one person, no one group has all the answers or even all the questions. Nobody has the monopoly on truth or the means of discovering it. In rethinking Socialism, Socialists must first learn how to communicate with each other as friends, equals and comrades rather than as protagonists of ever multiplying rival sects. Socialism has not really failed. Rather because so doing is very hard it has not really been properly tried. But if we are to be more than history's dust, try we must.

Terry Liddle

BACK ISSUES

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CONFERENCE CORNER

Three Reports

**"On the conference on the crisis"
Bristol Marxist Conference, October 2-3 1993**

The publicity for this conference talked about the crisis of the working class and the crisis of the left. This had to be a good thing given that the traditional left has tended to deny these crises. In fact, for the traditional left nothing has really changed at all. Perhaps this reluctance to face up to change and crisis has something to do with how the issues became bogged down around Marxism Today's 'New Times' and the 'new realist' shift of the Labour movement 'leadership'. This was unfortunate because with 'New Times' and 'new realism' the ideas of change and crisis were linked to a rejection of class struggle. As such the issue became 'for or against' class struggle and, in the process, the changing context of struggle and the crisis of class struggle became lost from view.

So, we fully support the spirit of exploration that this conference represented.

Before the weekend we had expected to meet people from various activist backgrounds and thought that people would be scrambling for theory (ourselves included) and for new/er ways of understanding the world. We hoped that this scramble would be a collaborative one. At the same time we had certain reservations. We expected at least some of that old head banging, hectoring behaviour (in fact there was very little). We expected a bias towards traditional notions of class struggle, particularly towards trade union activity (which, on balance, there tended to be). We also anticipated a very male, white conference (which it was).

Almost exclusively the first day involved people a) denouncing the Leninist tradition, b) refuting past misconceptions about Lenin and attempting to outline what Lenin really stood for (which - the argument went - was neither dogma nor authoritarianism), or c) capgily whispering to one another (in our case) that "we never believed in Lenin anyway".

But it was clear that most people at the conference were from a Leninist background and the 'crisis' discussion, to a large extent, reflected this - with people working through their own political pasts and making sense of the Leninist legacy. This isn't a criticism as such - we *all* approach the issue from different directions.

Many highlighted the elitism and dogma on the Leninist left and the lack of real co-operation between socialists. Although to be fair, some disputed the equation of Leninism with authoritarian politics.

The amorality of the left - that it didn't matter how we get there as long as we got there - was also hammered. Here we'd like to make a plea for that classic libertarian insight: that the means we use, even if they don't dictate, do heavily shape the ends we achieve. So, this is no abstract moral issue.

It was asked why it had taken the left so long to wake up to the indefensibly oppressive nature of the Soviet Union and it was suggested that Trotskyism has been in effect an 'extension of the Soviet bureaucracy'. The idea that Trotskyism was *less an opposition to and more a confirmation of* an oppressive politics needs to be taken up seriously. We say this even though we accept that not all Trots 'are the same' and that the personal motivations involved are not themselves authoritarian.

It was refreshing to hear someone say that there wouldn't be another Marx or Lenin around the corner (and did someone add Bakunin?) The message here was not that we didn't lead leaders but that there weren't any leaders to be had! Instead of looking 'out there' for the answers that challenge was to look to ourselves, our collective ideas, experiences and knowledge (We are the *collective* theorist!). The point was made that this needs to be an open and exploratory process.

That a platform speaker could discuss the relevance of the Council Communists,

Pannekoek and Gorter and be given a sympathetic hearing was refreshing for us. In the past this tradition has been severely marginalised (eg everybody knows of the Council and other Left Communists through Lenin's polemic 'Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder'; but how many have even heard of Gorter's 'Reply to Comrade Lenin' or are familiar with Pannekoek's cogent critiques of orthodox Marxist theorising). Socialist debate has been artificially constrained to the issues and personalities of the Leninist tradition. "What Trotsky or Lenin said" has for too long been a substitute for rational investigation. This conference signalled a willingness to move beyond the trusted texts and to uncover a hidden but important history of theory and activism.

However, and disappointingly, the conference never really began to tackle the 'crisis of the working class' as *opposed to* the crisis of the left. This is our main criticism. In fact the impression was often given that the crisis of the left *was* the crisis of the working class: that the crisis of the working class was simply ideological - a crisis of left influence within the class.

It was clear that the traditional and too neat (Leninist and social democratic) distinction between the socialist minority ("us over here") and the working class ("them over there") was still with us. This was still the old deficit model of the working class, where the starting point is a working class lacking on socialist consciousness. In this model, our job is to supply that consciousness.

There is a distinct authoritarian potential in this view. Simply put, if we have the consciousness then regardless of what the working class wants or thinks it wants, we have the right to decide its real interests. The political implications of this view are profound, and have proven disastrous. How do we measure consciousness anyway? Books read? Party membership? A pre-recruitment screening test? Does a student newly recruited to the revolutionary party have more 'consciousness' than the older

worker who's really not that impressed by organisations or rhetoric? And introducing other areas of life into the picture certainly complicates matters. Remember, for example, Militant's explicit understanding of gay sex as a bourgeois perversion, or the SWP's closure of Women's Voice when it began to challenge the monolithic male integrity of the party. How did these hardened, theoretically honed class fighters then measure up on the consciousness scale? In reality, consciousness is not a nicely linear or easily measurable thing.

There are issues to be thought through, perhaps at a future conference. But we want to make three brief observations. Firstly, we are *part* of the working class, we are not floating above it. We all live through the same contradictions and the same tensions. We are not like surgeons standing over the social body, equipped with the steely methods of Marxism. We are part of the body we're trying to make sense of. We are revolutionaries but some modesty is called for, and the neat separation - us and them - has to go. Secondly, there is no guarantee that a 'grounding' in revolutionary theory makes you revolutionary in practice. At the very least you can get it wrong. For example the SWP issued (and then very quickly had to withdraw) a pamphlet saying that a community based poll tax campaign could not work and when the Bolsheviks first encountered the Soviets in 1905 they were hostile to them. Class struggle in real life has an awkward habit of defying the prescriptions and prophecies of revolutionary organisations. Thirdly, an anti-elitist socialist politics does not start with a view of the working class as ideologically deficient. Rather it starts with the lived contradictions of daily life (let's say, between the desire for self-determination and all the oppressive ideological and material crud of the system). It is in the contradictory nature of daily life that we find the radical potential of our class. It means accepting that the working class isn't an object of history but a creative force making history. A revolutionary perspective is less a matter of what the working class isn't, but of what it potentially, inherently, can be (and has proven itself to be).

Maybe it is easier to work out what the role of a revolutionary isn't, than to state precisely what it is! But the issue is how, when 'we build again', do we avoid the mistakes of the past. We'd suggest that we start by rethinking some of the common assumptions of the left and its relationship with the working class.

Ironically this 'us' and 'them' approach to the working class contradicted the very anti-elitist sentiments that emerged over the weekend.

Hopefully, a future conference will also begin to explore the issue of working class crisis, recognising the deep changes that have occurred over the past fifteen years. There has been a massive defeat of the working class. There is a deep political crisis, as the

political organisations that once expressed a distinct working class identity have faded. There is an economic and cultural crisis as well.

Technological change; emerging structures of (un)employment; that changing experience of work; the changes in working class communities; what it means to be young now as opposed to when we 30, 40 and 50 somethings were young; changing personal relationships: these are just some of the issues we need to address as the raw material out of which class makes itself.

It doesn't mean waving farewell to the working class to acknowledge that things aren't as they were. As Marx said "All that is solid melts into air". Nothing in capitalism stands still, including the working class. It's scary, but we need to let go of the old models and try to get to grips with the new world we live in.

At the same time a future conference should begin to consider the experiences of movements not traditionally included under the rubric of class politics. There were frequent mentions given to the Anti-Poll Tax Campaign as a salutary example of class struggle beyond the workplace. But what about the issues of gender and race. These are a fundamental part of our lives too. Gender and race politics have also gone through a crisis. What were once radical movements have arguably degenerated into well paid equal opportunities posts in local government - themselves no longer secure.

In part this means acknowledging that struggle touches all parts of our lives. It also means that we can learn from the experiences, ideas, ways of organising and ways of thinking of older movements.

This conference was a very useful starting point, and was an enjoyable couple of days. At the end of the weekend the word consensus was frequently mentioned. We'd suggest that this was more a statement of intent than a statement of fact. If the conference had moved away from discussion of theory into proposals for action the differences that were under the surface would have become very apparent. Many of the traditional areas of disagreement remained. These included our attitude to the 'leaders' of the Labour movement; the relative weight given to workplace struggle; whether we do need a vanguard party; the place, for example, ecological struggles have in socialist politics. There were others.

What this conference did do, however, was successfully point to a culture of open and friendly debate. This itself is worth pursuing.

flux

The National Bisexual Conference, Nottingham, 1-3 October 1993

The national bisexual conferences provide a major focal point for bi women and men throughout Britain and further afield. Possibly because of this, they attract a diverse range of people, and there is an unusually low level of ideological orthodoxy. Liberals, Labour-voters and therapists rub shoulders (sometimes literally) with anarchists and pagans.

Of course diversity can become an orthodoxy when it is maintained for its own sake, creating another impediment to a thorough political critique of society. This issue informed many of the discussions I had whilst at the 250 strong conference this year.

One of the questions, broadly speaking, was what direction the "movement" should take now that it is beginning to get organised and attract some media attention. For example, do we want a London-based bisexual centre, and if so, how would it be funded? Would we rely on extracting money from the HEA, therefore perpetuating our label as a health (ie HIV/AIDS) risk? I was impressed by the cynicism people had towards going down the road of grant funding. Many people recognised how this could drain and distract previously dynamic, self-propelled groups.

There was also recognition of the interconnectedness of oppressions, and strong commitment to anti-sexism and anti-racism. And people wanted to maintain the openness of the term 'bisexual', so as not to exclude people who define themselves differently.

This is still at an early stage. There is a tendency to understand all forms of oppression as identity-politics. Thus, we are encouraged not to oppress people on the basis of their 'class status/origins', but this does not extend to a class analysis of society. Similarly, there is little critique of the role of the state. At most the state is seen as a neutral tool to be used for the bi community's political ends. If only it was like that...

However, this understanding may emerge as the bi movement struggles to assert itself. What is encouraging is the level of open dialogue being undertaken. Let's hope it can be sustained.

Simon Scott

Simon Scott was one of the organisers of this year's National Bisexual Conference.

Welsh Community Resistance Conference, Aberystwyth

POSTERS opposing Welsh Water's cut-offs can be seen from flooded-out Llandudno to barrage-threatened Cardiff.

That's the direct result of the Welsh Community Resistance conference held recently in Aberystwyth, which took up Cymru Goch's water rights campaign. Activist Chris Eusby described Welsh Water as a metaphor for all that's wrong in Wales: a tiny clique of men controlling a massively profitable industry that exploits its workers and "customers". Wales, with 50% more rain than England and lowest income levels on the British mainland, has the highest bills and highest level of cut-offs in the British state (2,300 families cut off last year and 50,000 summoned this year for non-payment).

Anti-poll tax veterans have been quick to see the similarities, although there's some way to go before we can call for a mass non-payment campaign. To a certain extent, the ever-rising bills (going up by 7.5% above inflation until 1995) will increase non-payment because people just cannot afford to pay.

The posters are only the first step in helping the thousands of Welsh people unable to pay their water bills. Legal support in court and advice for activists will be available by the Welsh Water annual meeting in Cardiff.

The conference heard a variety of suggestions for (unofficially) reconnecting families who are cut off and taking the campaign directly to Welsh Water's bosses. Activists agreed that focusing on one big national campaign rather than a host of local issues was the best way for united working class resistance to a government without authority.

Teacher Gareth Kelly spoke of how the poll tax victory and miners' demonstrations had given the resistance more confidence. This had given the teachers the ability to resist testing and should now be channelled to fighting opt-outs.

RMT branch secretary Guto Davies summed up how the fightback on the

rails had been hijacked by the union leadership, echoing several calls to stop putting our faith in union leaders and concentrate on building links between union and community activists. Due to low morale following the leadership sell-out, the fight against privatisation of the rails may have to be led by communities directly affected by rail closures.

One recent example was of the direct action campaign to force Shell to rethink its decision to switch oil shipments from Ellesmere Port to Aberystwyth by road instead of rail due to BR's higher prices.

Tim Richards, of Cymru Goch's Welsh Water Rights Campaign, urged activists to turn the personal misery of not being able to pay a water bill into a political campaign.

Practical advice similar to that of the anti-poll tax campaign can be used to defeat Welsh Water in court. The

afternoon session started with a showing of Wyn Mason's pioneering anti-poll tax video "Can't Pay? Won't Pay!" (several cast members, including the much-despised bailiff, were present at the conference!).

This led to a useful discussion about the uses of videos and newsletters in community action campaigns.

Local Welsh Community Resistance groups are already meeting to link up community and trade union activists, while a regular bulletin will link up the struggles on a national level. Many speakers praise the Cymru Goch-organised meeting for uniting a wide variety of struggles in Wales and showing the common threads of resistance that unite us all.

For more details about local WCR groups contact WCR, PO Box 661, Wreccsam, LL11 1QU.

RADICAL CHAINS

No.4

'AUTONOMIST' & 'TROTSKYIST' VIEWS:
HARRY CLEAVER DEBATES HILLEL TICKTIN
THE FATE OF THE LAW OF VALUE
THE BOLSHEVIKS AGAINST THE
WORKING CLASS?

The Situationists Chris Hani
Roy Bhaskar

RADICAL CHAINS is a journal which aims to contribute to the retrieval of the revolutionary core of Marxist theory, the critique of political economy. Our starting point must be the need to understand the **prevention of communism** in all its forms, e.g. social democracy, Stalinism, fascism or national liberationism. Whatever their differences, these forms constitute real changes within bourgeois political economy by which the self-formation of the working class has been hindered. Serious theoretical work is necessary if all inherited ideologies are to be discarded and the communist perspective rediscovered as a practical need.

RADICAL CHAINS helps organise regular discussion meetings in London, along with others of differing political outlooks. Write to us at *BM Radical Chains*, London WC1N 3XX if you want to come or want copies of the journal:

RADICAL CHAINS No.1: The Prevention of Communism; No.2: Commodity Fetishism, Pannekoek; No.3: Lenin, Carl Schmitt. One issue £2.50 inc p&p, 2 for £4.50, 4 for £8 (overseas add 25%). Cheques payable to *Project Publications*.

REVIEWS

The McDonaldization of Society by George Ritzer,
Pine Forge Press £8.95 pbk
212pp.

Going by the back cover of this book, it's presumably aimed at sociology undergraduates looking for some supplemental reading to impress their tutors. But don't let this put you off, for it makes an important contribution to the "post-Fordism" debate currently exercising the left.

Ritzer's thesis is that the fast food restaurant encapsulates the economic and social organisation of work and leisure throughout the US since the 1950s. Take health care as one example. North American health provision is moving away from generic, towards particular, individualised services. So you have clinics which only do hip replacement surgery, for example. Surgeons' skills are narrowed, and the effect on patients is that they are treated like objects on a conveyor belt, who are whisked in, operated on in a completely routine manner, and whisked out afterwards. Time and costs are minimised, profits are maximised, and after-care is virtually eliminated. Such systems, or so Ritzer argues, are being replicated throughout society.

In the nineteenth century, Max Weber wrote extensively on what he called the 'rationalisation of society'. Weber argued that Western society was becoming organised like a

bureaucracy, characterised by endless rules and regulations with the aim of discovering the most rational (efficient in capitalist terms) means to achieve a given end. Kafka's nightmarish novel, *The Trial*, is a strong fictional description of this world.

Ritzer contends that this rationalization process is still continuing, but is now best epitomised by the fast-food restaurant - of which the McDonalds franchise is a prime example. So he names this form of late twentieth century rationalisation, "McDonaldization".

A crucial pre-cursor to McDonaldization was Taylorism. F W Taylor is famous for his time-and-motion studies of various workplaces, which aimed to maximise productivity. His strategy was simple: find workers who did a particular task well, and analyze their movements minutely. Break down the activity into its smallest components so that it can be taught to less efficient workers. The result is that each worker is assigned a simple and repetitive task as their only work. This extreme specialisation deskills workers, depriving them of initiative or the need to communicate with colleagues.

Taylorism is not a new phenomenon. However, the widespread use of computer technology is, and it is this that provided a key impetus to McDonaldization. Computers are very good at performing repetitive tasks. This makes them attractive to

capitalists, who can replace humans and further control those humans left in work.

There are similarities here to the analysis provided by *Marxism Today*, particularly the technological determinism of *New Times*. However, Ritzer explicitly rejects the claim that we are living in either a post-Fordist or post-modernist society. On the contrary, McDonaldization is an extension of Fordist and Taylorist principles to the service sector, which is gradually replacing manufacturing as the major occupation in advanced capitalist countries. And rather than being something to be welcomed, it is clearly a deeply exploitative system which relies on permanent unemployment to replenish the enormous staff turnover characteristic of the temporary contract, low-paid, non-unionised workplaces of the fast food restaurants.

Ritzer also describes how the customer unwittingly contributes to this system by becoming part of its assembly line. In McDonalds, for example, people queue for their meals, pay for them and take them to a table, and clear up their litter afterwards. We do not merely collude in the role of consuming the endless stream of disposable goods capitalism offers to us, but we also collude in the production processes which make it profitable enough to be viable.

The McDonaldization of Society demonstrates that the service sector is a legitimate arena for workplace

struggle. We must not consign the workplace to the dustbin of political history (as *Marxism Today* would have us do), instead we need to rethink what we mean by workplace struggle - expand our terms of reference. For though the working class may not be as neatly demarcated (either for sociological study or recruitment purposes) as it perhaps was before, it still exists in a thoroughly exploited condition. Having said this, there are a number of weaknesses to the book worth pointing out.

First, the title is misleading. The book is not about capitalist imperialist intervention throughout the southern hemisphere. A crucial factor forcing the present upheavals of capitalist organisation of work, is that today we have a global market of competing multinationals. The book does not deal, for example, with the colonisation of McDonalds throughout capitalist countries, or its penetration of developing countries such as Brazil for raw materials, cheap, exploited labour and new markets. (For a thorough analysis of the complex political and economic pressures brought to bear on Newly Industrialised Countries (NICs), see Richard Holbrook, 'Mistranslations', *Science as Culture*, Vol. 8, 1991). The effects are environmental destruction, huge financial burdens and appalling social conditions.

Because Ritzer does not fully appreciate the economic drive of this emerging form of developed capitalism, he is too impressed by its ideological effects. He assumes that most people swallow whole the McDonalds ideology, without ever really questioning it. He does not acknowledge the tight economic constraints most people are forced to live with, or the contradictory reasons why people might welcome another McDonalds - that it's easy,



predictable, comforting, and saves them from organising their leisure time when they are exhausted from the effects of alienated work (or demoralised by the humiliation of unemployment).

Consequently, Ritzer has a very superficial understanding of what constitutes resistance to the McDonaldized society. He approves of the 'caring capitalist' franchises and co-ops, oblivious to the contradictions (for example, the need for co-ops to get bank loans). There is also a bizarre chapter entitled "Coping with the McDonaldized Society". These "tips" are highly individualised and allow no room for any collective responses. For example, he considers that he has escaped the regimentation of modern life by becoming a professor, so that he can walk his dog during the afternoon if he likes!! No connection is made with his earlier critique of the higher education system, which has incorporated the McDonaldized obsessions with quantifiable exam results rather than freedom to learn. And of course, such a career move is only open to a tiny fraction of well-educated, privileged people. He should instead have considered how this latest mode of capitalist economic organisation throws a few crumbs to the middle classes.

He also fails to question why this form of capitalism was necessary in the first place. If he had, he could have started a more critical account

of the ways in which working class resistance to a previous form of capitalist exploitation helped to create the conditions for change in the mode of capitalist domination. For example, the success of workplace struggle in the 60's and 70's (wildcat strikes, work to rules, sit-ins and so on) prevented a wholesale incorporation of the working class into a

uniform work ethic. McDonaldization is an attempt to deal with this by breaking class solidarity and make each individual feel responsible for the success of their product. The trade-off is increased (albeit regulated) leisure time and greater opportunities for community struggle and class struggle in a different arena.

And this is way we have the right to remain optimistic about the possibilities of resistance. Invariably, structural changes in capital do not solve the fundamental conflicts that exist in an alienated society. People's resistance simply takes new forms, hopefully learning from the successes and failures of the past. By ignoring this possibility of collective struggle (as witnessed in the LA riots in the US), Ritzer capitulates to the individualism it promotes.

In many ways this is a disappointing book, which missed a good opportunity to provide an incisive, historical account of the development of late capitalism. Nevertheless, it is a thought-provoking read with a useful perspective on the often sterile and polarised debates about whether the working class exists. Clearly the working class does exist, though not in a neat, compartmentalised form. But just as clearly, we need new tools to understand what is going on so that we can find effective ways of opposing it.

Simon Scott

In October 1993 the Anti-Nazi League (ANL) under the tutelage of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) organised a demonstration in Welling, South London. The purpose put forward by the ANL was to "Shut the BNP". SWP placards for the day proclaimed "Smash the Racists, Smash the Nazis". Much revolutionary fervour was rained onto the heads of participants in an ARA march in Central London the same day. They were slammed for their pathetic reformism in calling for the government to close down the BNP and for drawing people away from the place where they could do something directly.. This, then, was to be the real thing.

In the event, the police closed the route and were assisted by stewards in forcing marchers away from the BNP headquarters. Those people at the front who were determined to try and shut down the BNP and fought to get through police lines were castigated by stewards and denounced by the organisers, who meekly accepted the police conditions. If the real intention of the SWP was to shut down the BNP headquarters, different tactics would have been needed: Lessons learnt from NVDA campaigns, from miners hit-squads; Guerrilla tactics. Not the trench warfare model of street politics that the SWP is stuck in. Without the will or

the imagination to launch a credible attack on the BNP, to whom was the call "Shut down the BNP" directed? The answer, of course, is that it is pure rhetoric and as vacuous as ARA's request to John Major-Smith. It is not cynical, but realistic to recognise that as far as the SWP leadership was concerned the people on the march were there to buy papers, to be recruited and to earn the SWP kudos by being able to bring thousands on to the streets with a militant demand (albeit one which they had no serious intention of pursuing). False pretences.

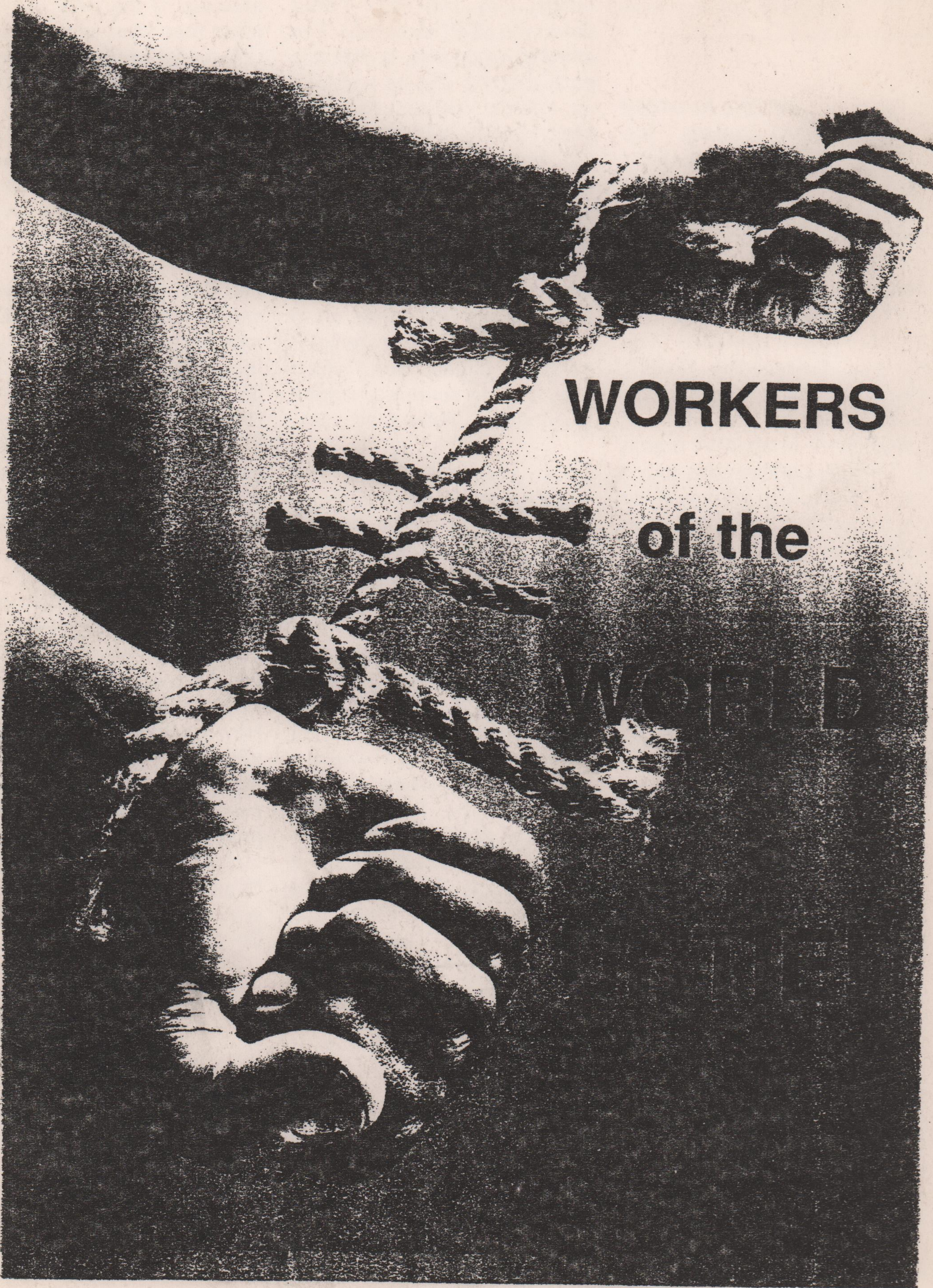
This manipulation and duplicity is by no means an isolated as is made clear in much greater detail by "Carry on Recruiting". The pamphlet looks specifically at the SWPs involvement in the anti Poll Tax campaign and in the recent struggles over pit closures. I'd agree with the authors that the text should be of interest to revolutionary militants everywhere, and it certainly puts flesh on the bones of deep distrust of the SWP and other Leninists. A deconstructionist technique is used to scrape away the rhetoric and reveal the inherently reformist nature of the SWP's relationship with the Labour Party and the TUC. The SWP's own material is used to expose its self-contradictions. And it is very readable. But to what purpose?

Heaping scorn on the SWP is all very well: it may help put the historical record straight for future generations and it may provide smug satisfaction

(I'm guilty) to revolutionary militants. But in a useful analysis of the SWP we need more than this. In a pamphlet otherwise remarkably devoid of speculation, the authors suggest that during the last Labour government what was lacking was the emergence of a movement which "could have had a powerful impact on the direction of unrest".

Perhaps a more worthwhile cause for research would be into why there was no such movement and why so many (in Left terms) join the SWP. What is really tragic about the SWP is not the opportunistic somersaults of its leadership, but those young rebels drawn to it and burnt out by paper sales, endless meetings and the need to toe the (constantly changing) party line. On leaving the party more often than not these disillusioned people are lost from revolutionary politics. How do we build a movement which is responsive to its membership and has a powerful revolutionary impact? That is the important question. In the meantime "Carry on Recruiting" provides a good critique of how not to do it.





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