

Working for the State

"In and Against the State" is one of the latest pamphlets aimed at finding a strategy to fight against the crisis of the Welfare State. It's produced by the slightly mysterious sounding London to Edinburgh Weekend Return group of the CSE (Conference of Socialist Economists). It's a boppy, optimistic pamphlet with a strong desire for theoretical clarity as well as material advance in the class struggle.

Their project is to understand the ways in which the state has penetrated our everyday lives and the way in which it perpetuates capitalist relations between people. Their aim in doing this is to both show the need for a socialist perspective in the fight against the cuts, and also point to ways in which that perspective might be formed. It's an ambitious project and so the pamphlet is not an easy read, although they have kept the language very simple.

CONTRADICTIONS

The pamphlet is divided into three parts. The first section is a series of interviews with people in different relations to the state — as recipients of welfare, as state employees, as local councillors. They begin this way because of their fundamental belief that strategy in the class war has to begin with people's experience. What they find is that the Welfare State is ambiguous and contradictory. Although it gives material benefits to people, it does so in a way that they don't like. The state imposes certain relations on people, and keeps them isolated from each other, as individuals and as units of the nuclear family.

The second section, the most complex, moves from describing the contradictions of the Welfare State to analysing its structure and what purpose it serves. I can't really do justice to this section in a brief review, but it's a comprehensive historical analysis of the way in which the state has acted as a mechanism of social control. (Now, however, capitalism is in crisis, not just an economic crisis, but a crisis of the entire social structure. In order to make capitalist society profitable again, capitalism has to get the working class to accept new conditions of production, mass redundancies, unemployment. "...the state has been remarkably effective in maintaining social stability. At the same time, however, this has been at the cost of delaying the restructuring of social relations, which is vital for the future of British capital.")

OPPOSITION

All of which leads to their final section on new forms of opposition. This section is very good and full of useful examples. Their main conclusion is that "effective socialist opposition to Tory policies must involve helping

people grasp what socialist forms of organisation might be like."

What is new about this pamphlet is that the authors refer to the struggles of sections of the state that flourished in the '60's and early '70's; that is community workers, law centre workers, community health councils, as well as the larger institutions like hospitals and schools. The basis of their optimism is their belief that class struggle is present in every moment of our lives. If we don't fight back against the divisive relations of capitalism, we are overwhelmed by them.

UNDER-ESTIMATION

The authors describe from experience the difficulties of organising within the state particularly in terms of the effect this often has on other sections of the working class. But they clearly believe that, with some audacity and imagination, we can build a collective response to the Tory shift from state concession to state repression. However, they emphasise the importance of concrete activity, not just institutional links between different sections of the working-class. They also see as necessary the struggle against privatised family in order to develop a consciousness of working class interests as a whole. I think they under-estimate the work needed to build the political culture in Britain for such a socialist opposition to the Tories, and they have also only made passing references to the contribution of anti-racist struggles. But these criticisms aside, the authors have done some hard graft in producing this pamphlet and it's well worth a read.

"In and Against the State" costs £1.25 from all progressive bookshops or from CSE State Group, Dept. of Politics, 31 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh.



Nott An Asset

AS THE new Tory Housing Bill threatens to make council housing almost a thing of the past, Nottingham, Alternative Publications have produced an important contribution to the struggle for decent housing for all. "Where have all the assets gone?"* is the best researched pamphlet yet on council housing sales. The authors had to threaten to go to the High Court to make Nottingham's Chief Executive release figures that normally it is the right of every citizen to see.

INVALUABLE

What will make this pamphlet invaluable to tenants, direct labour workers and others in fighting for council housing, is that it knocks flat on its back the Tory (and Labour) claim that council house sales are of financial benefit to the community. They are not.

FINANCIAL DISASTER

Tory spokesmen have used Nottingham time and time again as evidence in their arguments. Secretary of State, Heseltine, claimed (19.4.79) that sales produced "a substantial surplus to the community". He said "selling council houses saves public money. Since 1976 Nottingham's Conservative Council have sold £40 million worth of council houses and made a profit of £18 million over the cost of building them."

The pamphlet shows that this kind of claim is simply untrue. It fails to consider the long term financial aspects of sales and in the long term such sales are a financial

disaster. "Assets" also provides a very useful introduction to the complexities of housing finance.

Further it shows how council house sales are as much a part of the Labour Party's schemes as the Tories'. And that's because owner occupation divides tenant from owner, and owner from owner; part of the decomposition of the working class or what the Tories call "a more stable society."

NORTH SEA OIL

And what will the government's council house sales plans do? They will cause an ultimate loss of £1,200 million for every 100,000 houses sold. And this is more than Britain's net yearly contribution to the EEC or equivalent to selling off North Sea oil.

While the authors do not pretend that the council house system is flawless they argue that "not a single council house should be sold" since costs are shared through the system of rent pooling and housing needs take priority over ability to pay.

Big Flamé urges tenants, direct labour and other groups to invite the authors of this pamphlet to speak at meetings.

Big Flamé interviewed Roger Nigel, two of the authors of "Where have all the Assets Gone?"

BF: Why did you publish "Assets"?
 Roger: Simply to nail the financial argument that council house sales are an asset to the community.
 BF: What response have you had?
 Roger: We've sold out completely and had to reprint. We haven't the response we would have liked from tenants and community groups, yet, Labour Groups, like Birmingham, have been able to use it to weaken any support for council house sales among their own members. Nigel: There are several top level reports being written at the moment on the finances of council house sales. Heseltine, Sec State for the Environment, has just published one report—but he has deliberately fiddled the figures to make it look as though there will be gains at the end of the century. There's this usual asset-stripper's trick. By the 1990's council tenants will be having to pay more because of sales.

* Nottingham Alternative Publications, 83 Beauvale Rd., The Notts, Nottingham.
 — 50p (add 15p postage) available from this address.

Understanding the State

DESPITE THE frequent references to the cuts by the left there has been until recently very little attempt to analyse what is going on. Things are beginning to change. The CSE 'State Group's' *Struggle Over the State* closely follows Ian Gough's *Political Economy of the Welfare State* and the London-Edinburgh Group's *In and Against the State* (also reviewed here).

The great value of *Struggle Over the State* is that it combines theoretical analysis with empirical work on the changes in expenditure in a number of sectors. In particular, I would recommend the chapters on Personal Social Services, Health, Housing and Regional Policy. The method of approach is similar to that of *In and Against the State*, reflecting the overlap and membership between the two groups and the fact that both have been considerably influenced by long standing debates and collaboration within the CSE (Conference of Socialist Economists).

Like any book there are also problems. There is a division within the CSE State Group between supporters of the Labour Left's Alternative Economic Strategy and those who belong to the

this mean that there are important differences of approach between some of the sectoral studies, but also the introduction and conclusion tend at times to be very vague and unspecific. Also, while an attempt has been made to make the book accessible to a wider audience, it has not been quite as successful as the authors claim in the preface. Finally, although the political conclusions are fine so far as they go (they argue the need to go beyond defensive struggles, to campaign for socialist alternatives, for collectivity and democracy in all struggles, for creating links between state workers and consumers of state services and so on), what is said is still too abstract to be easily applied.

All in all this book deserves to be widely read. There are no comparable books or pamphlets which combine theoretical discussion with detailed empirical analysis. More work needs to be done to develop the positions outlined in the book further, but it is an extremely useful starting point.

CSE State Group *Struggle Over the State: Cuts and Restructuring in Contemporary Britain*. (CSE Books, £2.50). Available from bookshops or CSE Books, 55 Mount Pleasant, London WC1.