

the★commune

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new leader for ruling class in
united states of america:

barack obama is lipstick on a pig!



Ernie Haberkern gives a view from
the USA on the Obama presidency

"You can put lipstick on a pig..It's still a pig. You can wrap an old fish in a piece of paper called change. It's still gonna stink. We've had enough of the same old thing."
Barack Obama on the Republican campaign

Obama's attack on McCain/Palin (or was it Palin/McCain?) was intended to expose the hollowness of their attempt to coopt his "the change we need" slogan. There is no question that the Republican Party's attempt to present itself, rather than Obama, as the anti-Bush party - which is what the "change" slogan meant - was laughable. But Obama inadvertently highlighted what was the real meaning of his use of the "change" slogan.

The fact of the matter is that Obama's own slogan is nothing more than an attempt to put lipstick on the pig that is American domestic and foreign policy. That he is the first black president of the country is itself part of this charade. There is no question that his election is one more nail in the coffin of slavery and segregation. But that only makes Obama a more effective salesman for the American government's criminal foreign and domestic politics. In addition to being black, Obama is an intelligent, articulate, suave salesman. A sharp contrast to the mentally challenged George W. Bush and the crazed Dick Cheney.

I myself have been surprised at Obama's behaviour. How quickly he has betrayed, not only his slogan, but his supporters.

The first blow was his choice of Rick Warren, a fundamentalist preacher notorious for his homophobia and his

support for the anti-gay referendum in California, as the man to give the invocation at his inauguration. Gays were among Obama's most enthusiastic supporters and the victory of Proposition 8 which outlawed gay marriage in the state is arguably due to the fact that most gay activists were completely absorbed in his presidential campaign and had no time to spare for their own program.

But it is not just a question of "life style" issues. On the most fundamental questions of foreign and domestic politics Obama has chosen as his principle advisors former Clinton administration officials. Chief among them, of course, Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State. What has been buried by the stupidity and arrogance of the Bush/Cheney (Cheney/Bush?) administration is that the Clinton team, and the Clinton administration was as much a dual presidency as the second Bush administration, were pioneers in the new aggressive foreign policy of the United States in the post-Cold-War period. It was the Clinton administration that pushed for the expansion of NATO into the former Russian satellite states - right up to Russia's borders. This aggressive imperialist policy was denounced in the New York Times and London Times by none other than George F. Kennan, the principle architect of America's post-WWII foreign policy. A man not previously known for ultra-leftist views. This culminated in the intervention in the former Yugoslavia by NATO and the US. The breakup of the nation that was the co-founder of the non-aligned block was the task assigned Richard Holbrooke. Using the services of Military Professional Resources, Inc., a private firm staffed by retired US military officers—Blackhawk's model— Holbrooke organized the Croatian assault that drove over 100,000 Serbs from the Krajina where they had lived for several hundred years. It was the largest ethnic cleansing of the war. Richard Holbrooke is, in effect, second in command

to Hillary Clinton in Obama's foreign policy team of advisors.

As the war in the Middle East heated up who did Obama choose as his chief of staff? None other than Ralph Emmanuel. The son of a former Irgun fighter, Emmanuel was an ardent and uncritical supporter of Israel in the congress. Obama's uncritical support of Israel's recent actions in Gaza are another indication of his determination to present himself as a safe, reliable, defender of American imperialism at the same time as he pushes for "change."

When it comes to domestic policy, especially economic policy, Obama has done the same. Robert Rubin, Bill Clinton's secretary of the treasury, is his principal economic advisor and his choices for various position have been old Clintonistas. This is especially important now since Clinton and his economic staff came out of the Democratic Leadership Conference. This think tank was, and is, the American equivalent of "New Labour." That is, its aim was, and is, to wean the Democratic Party away from a platform based on union and liberal economic programs and turn it towards the kind of "free market" neoliberalism that has led to the current economic collapse. Just in the last couple of days Obama has begun to talk about "reforming" Social Security (the American state pension fund) and Medicare (the federal health program for the elderly). This was the agenda Bush tried, and failed, to sell to the American people.

With the exception of his appointment of Hilda Solis, a strongly pro-labor congresswoman from a union family background, Obama has chosen his administration from the extreme right of the Democratic Party. Apparently, he thinks he is all the lipstick the pig needs.

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civil service pay dispute: defeat or victory?

by Steve Ryan, Wrexham PCS

Public and Commercial Services union members were surprised at the sudden calling off of the planned strike on 10th November. The strike was pulled at the very last minute on the Friday before the 10th, leaving activists frantically trying to contact members. The National Executive Committee claimed the cancellation was due to a "major breakthrough" in the dispute.

Surprise turned to bafflement and in many areas anger when the "breakthrough" turned out to be a letter from O'Donnell - head of the civil service - rather than the hard cash members were expecting!

The NEC claim the letter is significant in that it confirms there is no 2% cap in pay negotiations and allows for efficiency savings to be "recycled" into pay. No other union has been given this concession. NEC were also adamant that the campaign continues, that there will be further talks and that action will not be ruled out if the letter proves to be a con.

The early signs are not good. A close examination of the letter shows that the 2% will only NOT apply in very special circumstances. No claim settled or imposed for 2008 is to be reopened. It also appear to bind the PCS to tacit acceptance of the efficiencies. It is unclear where the efficiencies to be released for pay will come from. NEC claim that reducing use of consultants would go some way towards this but as pay negotiations are still dele-



*pcs general secretary mark serwotka:
where's the strategy to win?*

gated many departments will be offering savings made from job losses and office closures - totally unacceptable for any union let alone a "left" union like PCS.

The first big test was in HMRC, where there is an unsettled dispute. Straight away the letter failed as pay offer

for 2008 was quietly imposed, without any protest from the Group executive. Again there are promises of open talks for 2009/10. Members, however, cannot pay the bills on promises!

Indeed the HMRC experience indicates that the campaign may be a defeat. Members expected action or a significant pay increase - in the event they have neither. This has led to further anger with the union.

The key will be whether the dispute is allowed to wither away. Activists must now pressure the NEC to ensure that:

- ★ There are no further below inflation settlements - flat rate rises for those who lose by % rises
- ★ That all departments open the books to members to identify the savings
- ★ No savings from job losses to be used for pay - instead mount a national campaign against job losses and actualisation
- ★ End performance related pay
- ★ Progressions to rate for the job to be paid separately, as elsewhere in the public sector

These demands would need to be backed up by coordinated and innovative industrial action beyond the one day strikes - members' confidence will also need to be rebuilt.

Politically there also needs to be an open and frank debate about where the allegedly most left wing union in the TUC is heading. The preparatory ground for a Rank and File is already there.

class struggle on the london underground

interview with Vaughan Thomas,
RMT London region chair (LUL)

For many trade unionists outside of the rail industry the situation of trade unions in the London Underground/Transport for London has been considered a positive example of a different approach to organising, campaigning and representation. Is this reputation deserved and why is it so different?

At the anti-fascist rally in Denby last year RMT General Secretary Bob Crow was given a hero's welcome by trade unionists. As he made his speech a number of activists from Unison and Unite were begging permission to join the RMT! I realise that this may have been comradely banter, but similar requests are being made formally and informally from people in many different industries. In London our core rail membership is being boosted by bus workers who are spontaneously joining on-line having become disenchanted with the Unite Bus Section. We are also being approached by car park attendants, lorry drivers, airport workers, riverboat operatives and even bar staff. Workers seem to like the militant approach of the RMT leadership who make it absolutely clear that they are 100% on the side of their members and have no interest in backroom deals with employers.

Unlike many other sectors, union membership density in the rail industry has remained very high. There are a number of reasons for this - not least the need for legal cover in a job where we are constantly under scrutiny by the public as well as managers, and a mistake may well result in not just a disciplinary hearing but also prosecution. We are amongst the highest spenders proportionately in the TU movement on legal assistance for our members. But there also exists a great deal of loyalty to the RMT for consistently fighting for improved wages and conditions. The tactic used by Bob Crow of maintaining a high profile by pursuing a militant industrial strategy has paid off with the RMT becoming the fastest growing union in the country.

Tory Mayor Boris Johnson has declared he wants to change the industrial relations, there is rumours of a new 'Company Plan' and of the use of anti-union consultants. Combined with the wider problem of the recession do you think you are facing a major threat?

There is undoubtedly a major battle coming up, but it is not just as a result of Johnson's election. Under previous mayor Livingstone the move started to introduce an American system of employee relations. Bob Kiley, (the famous union-buster hand-picked by Livingstone) and

Tim O'Toole are just the tip of an iceberg of consultants whose sole aim is to undermine the collective bargaining power of the trade unions. Livingstone infamously, despite wearing his rather threadbare leftwing credentials on his sleeve, urged workers to cross an official picket line during a dispute a few years back.

They are currently spending millions on a "Valuing Time" initiative to persuade rail workers that managers are their friends and that only by working together will LUL thrive as an organisation. They are also recruiting heavily from outside the rail industry in the hope that such people will not be "polluted" by trade unionism. Fortunately the vast majority of the new staff, including middle managers, sign up to the union within a few days of arriving. It doesn't take them long to realise that the conditions and wages that attracted them in the first place are only there because they have been fought for over decades, but could disappear overnight if the unions are weakened.

What do you think needs to be done to meet these challenges?

We need to carry on recruiting new staff into the RMT, educating them in the importance of collective bargaining and the efficacy of militant trade unionism. We need to rebuild a degree of class consciousness that has disappeared to a certain extent as workers become sectionalised. And we need to persuade our comrades in the other unions, in particular Aslef and TSSA, that united we will be far greater than the sum of our parts. We should unite in one transport union to improve our conditions; we are currently pushing for a 4 day week, it would be so much easier to achieve if we spoke with one voice. We should never be complacent about our achievements; with the recession opening up like a chasm in front of us, the employers may well attempt to seize the opportunity for an all-out assault and remove the benefits for which we have fought so hard. Petty rivalries between sections of workers cannot allow this to happen.

One complaint amongst reps that there is that there a real problem of bureaucracy, lack of communication and separation of the union leadership from the activists on the ground. Do you agree? What then should be done?

I don't accept this as a fair criticism and am frankly surprised that such a comment is made about the RMT. I sometimes think that the RMT is *too* democratic, with the constant electoral processes taking up valuable time that could be spent on campaigning and education! All our Regional Organisers are elected by the membership and have to resubmit themselves for election to those same members every 5 years; if they are too aloof from the membership they will be kicked out. Similarly our Council

of Executives serve a 3 year term of office and then have to return to the tools for a minimum of a year before standing again for re-election. The activists in my union regard the General Secretary as a friend as well as a leader, his mobile phone number is freely available and he regularly attends branch meetings across the country.

As for a lack of communication, I believe that this has now been effectively addressed. The London Transport region of the RMT has its own website which is regularly updated by a large number of contributors and which includes an interactive section for members to add their own comments. We may have been dragged kicking and screaming, but we have very definitely joined the information super-highway.

Both RMT and Aslef backed John McDonnell MP for leader of the Labour Party, since then the problem of working class political representation has grown worse. What do you think your union should be doing?

The RMT has been at the forefront of organising conferences trying to address this very question of working class representation; but it's going to be a very difficult process. There are many first rate MPs like John McDonnell still in the Labour Party, the RMT Parliamentary Group for example, work tirelessly for policies to support the transport industry and its workers. But it seems as if the Party itself is beyond redemption, in thrall as it is to neo-liberalism and international capital. The Party I knew as a young man is dead in the water and I see no point in trying to resuscitate it. It was a good thing that we were expelled from the Labour Party when we were; maybe it's time for the RMT to help form a new party in the way our predecessors helped to set up Labour over a hundred years ago. We certainly can't rely on Labour to defend workers, nor should we allow those workers betrayed by Labour to be wooed by the BNP. A viable alternative has to be set up: trade unions have the resources so let's do it.

As for the TUC, I personally think that it is no longer fit for purpose; with the exception of the education department it has no relevance for me. The formation of the super-unions has virtually disenfranchised the smaller unions such as the RMT. It's time for a new organisation to represent workers' interests; unions such as ours, the PCS the FBU and any other union that believes in democratic accountability and militancy should look at a way of seceding from the TUC to set up an alternative. We may be too late to save the Labour Party, but we still have time to save trade unions.

the commune

editorial: the people's charter - a charter for change?

Pick up any paper, listen to any news bulletin, and you will find reference to yet another redundancy announcement. Unemployment is predicted to rise to two million by spring and three million in another year: indicators put it as the worse recession since 1980. Due to the rising cost of living and growing unemployment, arrears are mounting, repossessions are expected to rise to at least 75,000.

The unelected Business Secretary Lord Mandelson says that after the recession there will emerge "a renaissance in UK manufacturing and the expansion of the UK's knowledge-based industries". This promise of jam tomorrow is no more comforting than Brown's job creation schemes, a drop in the ocean of the jobs cull underway. The talk of how things will look after the recession is made even more ridiculous by the fact that things could get worse: much worse. Having poured £37 billion into the banks in October 2008, it never worked and has required another rescue package of up to £300 billion to shore up the financial system just three months later.

Capitalism is the problem

New Labour politicians who for decades gave the City a free reign now blame the banks for the ongoing crisis, when it's not the banks: it is the global economy. The real cause arises from the capitalist system of production for profit. This tiny capitalist-class that owns and controls the economy simply decides when such methods as squeezing down costs such as wages can no longer restore the rate of profit for the capitalists: they simply begin shedding workers in an effort to increase their profit margin. Over the years various shades of politicians have tried and failed to prevent the recurring cycle of crises and all have failed because they believed in the system and sought to perpetuate capitalism. Similarly today we cannot rely on the schemes of Brown or Obama to solve these problems.

The TUC and the captive bureaucrats

The employers and the government fully realise the scale of their predicament and are prepared to take drastic measures – in the interests of capital. The official labour movement however, as opposed to responding in kind, is too closely tied to the government and this system to put up even token resistance. The TUC, which is meant to represent the working class, has responded with an 'emergency ten point plan to tackle unemployment' but in the entire document there is not one word on stopping the job cuts. For the career bureaucrats at the TUC it is neither possible nor desirable to stand in the way of the employers' efforts. Instead they call for "further interventions in the banking and financial systems" to get credit flowing, as series of ameliorative palliatives, extending 'Train to Gain', which the TUC benefits from, utilising union reps' skills not to fight but as career advisors, increase redundancy pay and more job clubs. The TUC has a lot to say about training but very little about trade

unionism.

The more radical trade unions have not yet mounted resistance to the recession on the industrial front on any substantial scale. The agreements made at the TUC for co-ordinated action ended ignominiously. In Royal Mail instead of the necessary industrial action in response to privatisation the CWU leadership is keeping the campaign within the parameters of a 'political' campaign, aimed at generating a backbench rebellion. There is however within the labour movement a major initiative in response to the recession arising from around the rail workers' union RMT and the Fire Brigades Union.

The People's Charter

The new People's Charter was drawn up by a commission comprising leaders of the RMT, FBU, John McDonnell MP, representatives of Respect and the Communist Party of Britain along with prominent left individuals and community activists. There is no doubt the 'People Charter - A Charter for Change' has garnered significant forces for its launch, but this does not diminish the serious problem with the manner it has been constructed. Today's initiative has taken its name from the original People's Charter of the 19th century which was initiated by the London Workingmen's Association: its aim, initially, was electoral reform for the disenfranchised working class. The 1839 Charter was built on the back of mass meetings which elected delegates to The General Convention of the Industrious Classes to oversee the struggle. The initiators of the 21st century People's Charter have organised through invitation-only meetings with virtually no discussion in the ranks of the organisations represented. This is not unusual on the left or the labour movement, it is almost habitual – it is also the cause of many a failed project, no matter what the initiators' original intentions.

One surprising feature of the new People's Charter is the complete absence of even the words 'capitalism' or 'working class'. No doubt the intention of this omission is that it will widen the charter's appeal... but in fact poll after poll has confirmed the majority of people actually consider themselves to be working class! Furthermore any movement should also aim to educate as well as agitate and mobilise, to develop consciousness. Similarly at a time when the entire media openly talks of a crisis of capitalism the reluctance to name the cause of crisis clearly – capitalism itself – is self-defeating. Class politics are implicit in the new People's Charter, which sets out an array of reforms which would ameliorate the conditions of the working class in the current crisis. This ranges from protecting and creating jobs, restoring "union rights to allow them the freedom to fight the crisis and to protect workers", protecting housing and increasing provision, to stopping current wars and the re-allocation of resources.

But in many ways the new People's Charter is at a lower level of politics than that reached by the Chartists of the 1840s. The new Charter calls for a "fair economy for a

fairer Britain": so does New Labour and the TUC, this can mean all things to all men. But in the Charter it translates to the financial sector being put "fully into democratic public ownership run for the benefit of all." Whilst it may well be possible to redistribute wealth in the interests of workers, as is argued by the call for restructuring the tax system, in a class divided society it is simply impossible to run an economic entity "for the benefit of all". Nor is it clear what democratic public ownership means: in the case of the demand to "Regain control of the Bank of England" it can only mean ownership and control by the state, which is who ran it before and is certainly not accountable to the people who will sign the petition.

"Every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programmes", argued Karl Marx in support of socialists uniting around an "agreement for action against the common enemy" without compromising principles. Getting even that level of unity has proved extremely difficult amongst the fragmented left in Britain today: the People's Charter which has the support of several national unions, the Labour Representation Committee and a wide milieu of the traditional left could possibly amount to a real movement in the context of our own dire situation. In contrast to those plans put forward by sectarian socialism purely for their own ends, this initiative could potentially coalesce significant forces around it into a movement with the potential for something new to emerge.

As such activists should not remain aloof from such a movement, but seek to develop it into one which is not only about mass mobilisations but also mass participation. The new chartists aim to get one million signatures to "show we mean business". This was done in the 19th century not only by gathering signatures but by building a movement: the real question became what to do after it was rejected by Parliament. In that situation, if it ever happens, for the 21st century charter to succeed it will have to move beyond the confines of its current ideas. That is from a petition for change to recognising that in order to defend and advance the interests of the working class, there is no alternative to fighting the system. This was clear to the original chartists: criticising 'Inadequate Remedies for Social Evils', Chartist leader Julian Harney wrote:

"It is not the any amelioration of the condition of the most miserable that will satisfy us, it is justice to all we demand. It is not the mere improvement of social life of our class that we seek, but the abolition of all classes and the destruction of those wicked distinctions which have divided the human race into princes and paupers, landlords and labourers, masters and slaves. It is not any patching and cobbling of the system we aspire to accomplish; but the annihilation of that system, and the substitution in its stead of an order of things in which all shall labour and all enjoy and the happiness of each guarantee the welfare of the entire community."

so what's going on in the usa?

(continued from p.1)

In part, this is a specifically American problem. The constitution, especially in the case of the Presidency, favors a plebiscitarian politics in which the electorate chooses between candidates who are put forward by wealthy backers who are, in most cases, unknown to the general public. The enormous expense involved in contemporary campaigns adds to the problem. It is a classic illustration of Engels' crack that in bourgeois republics the working class decides periodically which capitalist candidate will represent them.

But I think something more is going on. Even in England with its parliamentary system the Prime Minister has taken on more and more "presidential" authority. He or

she runs parliament rather than the other way around. Blair's "New Labour" campaign may have raised this to a new height but Blair didn't invent the phenomenon.

I think what is going on is part of the "bureaucratic collectivisation" of capitalism. Increasingly, an unelected state bureaucracy makes the real decisions. The capitalist class has increasingly become dependent on this bureaucratic class. It might be better to say that they are merging. Both Robert Rubin and Bush's Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Paulson, came from the same banking firm. Elections become a side show meant to distract the public. In a sense all elected officials are just lipstick on the pig. Unlike classic Stalinism, where dissent and opposition are suppressed, modern politics simply renders them meaningless.

So, where do we go from here? I think it would be a mistake to simply ignore electoral politics. Especially in a country like England, where local constituencies still mean something, electoral politics offers the working classes a possibility to intervene. It is a way to raise issues, to put pressure on the ruling classes, to make it more difficult for them to get away with their crimes. The mistake, so clearly illustrated by the "New Labour" fiasco, is to think that "we" can "take power" by parliamentary means (if only we are willing to make a few compromises). Elections are one way, not the only way, for labour and other popular movements to make their influence felt. "Change" has to come from below, not from media events like the Obama campaign.

militancy and mobilisation

We reproduce here an article posted on our website after the 10th January Gaza demo, the largest anti-war protest since the eve of the Iraq war.

On Tuesday 6th January, the Israeli army shelled a school designated as a refuge from its assault, killing 42 and injuring scores more. Two days later, thirty more civilians were killed as a second refuge was shelled. By the Saturday, the number of dead from the past fortnight stood at over 800, a little under a quarter of them children. Later that day in West London, cold as it was, and with frost on the ground, around 70,000 people marched against the massacre in Gaza.

Clashes between police and protesters erupted on a scale not seen for a decade in this country. This is a report by eye-witnesses associated with The Commune, who also attended many of the daily demonstrations outside the Israeli Embassy. We also reflect on the significance of the day's events.

March, hope and pacify

The generation that rioted that night was the generation that witnessed the abject failure of the strategy adopted by the Stop the War Coalition leadership – i.e. the Socialist Workers Party. That strategy is the same one proposed by the Palestine Solidarity Campaign. In a nutshell, hold peaceful A to B marches, do as you are told by the police, go home and write to your MP. A few public meetings aside, that is the limit and extent of their vision. Direct action was condemned as 'elitist' by SWP grandee Lindsey German, and when a mass invasion of the Fairford airforce base was announced, Stop the War rapidly called a march in London on the same day. The same approach was taken around the country, with local SWP groups distancing themselves from direct action and militant activity.

This approach has been seen to be inadequate by a whole generation. Interestingly, some leadership figures such as George Galloway have recognised this, saying "I think we're reaching the stage where this form is no longer sufficient ... we're going to have to discover new ways of protesting" (<http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=4cSDimvFYVU>), though this recognition is purely formal: they still run an organisation which discourages any sort of independent or militant action.

Young British Asians and young Muslims have found this failure especially bitter. There is a very sincere identification with the sufferings of other Muslims around the world. The spirit of international solidarity, structured by religion though it is, is nonetheless stronger than that held by any other component of British society. Their rejection of compromise with imperial war is more complete; and their willingness to take risks in action is consequently greater. They are used to police harassment as a matter of every day life.

Perhaps recognising this, the march organisers prepared steadfastly to keep control. A group of anti-capitalist activists organising around the Gaza demonstrations sent a 'delegate' to the official stewards' meeting. They reported that stewards were being organised to isolate any attempts to stage a sit down. A 'crack team' of stewards, which was closed to new volunteers, was to move marchers on near the embassy.

From demonstration to resistance

We started out from Hyde Park corner. If anything, the crowd was remarkably placid and quiet, and our contingent was therefore surprised to come across several demonstrators on top of a gate which lead to Kensington Palace Gardens. A large crowd had gathered round, and began to burn flags. A small number of police in ordinary uniforms attempted to enter to restore order, but were pushed out in a ruck. The crowd preceded to knock down one of the gates (heavy wrought iron, and about ten feet high). Just before people could decide whether to make their way through and confront the vast numbers of riot police in Kensington Palace Gardens, a squad of armoured police charged in from one side, and proceeded to baton charge the crowd several times. This stand off lasted for some time. Our contingent decided to continue to the embassy.

On our way, there were indications, of what was to come. The window of a Starbucks was cracked (the company is held to be supportive of Israel), with police inexplicably guarding a Pizza Hut a few doors down. Files of five to ten young, mostly Asian, men wearing masks filed through the crowd quietly, and with determination. They knew what was going on ahead.

By the time we got to the embassy, the fearsome physical defences which we had seen that morning were gone. Rows of metal barriers had been torn up, and were being thrown at police, along with sticks and other projectiles. A very small number of police were in front of the gates to Kensington Palace Gardens, skirmishing with the crowd. Paint bombs had been thrown, and two police had lost their long riot shields. They were not in control. One protester was seen being carried, unconscious, back from police lines. He was later seen being carried unconscious, back from police lines again – having returned to the fight. So much for the 'crack team' of stewards. One of us heard one of this team talk about how they tried to stand in between police and rioters. To little effect.



Their response was predictably reckless. Police baton charged from two sides (the gates, and the road from the West), crushing the crowd against barriers on the south side of Kensington Road. Police and some stewards initially tried to keep the crowd in, before the crowd turned the barrier over and spilled onto the pavement, many people falling and trapping limbs. According to a report on Indymedia, at least two people left in neck braces. [<http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2009/01/417820.html>].

The crowds thoroughly trashed another Starbucks, and distributed smoothies and sandwiches to the crowd, continuing to fight the police with projectiles and hand to hand. The police strategy from here on in was to push the crowd East along Kensington Palace Road, continually bringing reinforcements from the East to draw lines across the road and surround groups of demonstrators. The first contingent of police to attempt this was very hard pressed, and at least one fully armoured riot cop was carried away by colleagues, completely prone.

The second contingent arrived in three vans. The crowd reacted quickly, surrounding the vans with barriers. The drivers clearly panicked and attempted to reverse and leave while more barriers were heaved at the van windows, but found it impossible. No one was prepared to get out to remove the barriers until a squad of riot cops charged to their rescue.

By this time the official rally (which was apparently predictably boring and pointless) was well over, and those of us who were able to get away did so, just as another large squad of riot police charged up from the East, and began to charge West. It should be said that a relative minority of demonstrators participated in the riot, with many being completely oblivious that it was taking place at all.

The presence of young Muslim women, and their physical bravery, will probably be downplayed. In fact, along with many non-Muslim women, most resisted the calls of men to move to the back. "We're the same as the boys", shouted one. Another group were seen preparing to re-enter the fray, despite at least one having been seriously hurt, and denouncing a group of boys retreating as "cowards". Sexism manifested itself in other ways. Unfortunately, some men were unwilling to link arms with women in the crowd; dismissing their willingness to fight. The most blatant however, was the cynical chant of the stewards: "please move on, women and children are being crushed". Clearly this reflects an assumption that women are essentially vulnerable, and incapable of making the choice to confront the police physically. This attitude was reflected in the 17th January "women and children only" protest at Downing Street.

Stewards should reject the role of movement police. They can let people make up their own minds about what level to engage on (some people wish to protest peacefully, this is a legitimate choice), facilitate, spread information and record police violence. They should be accountable to the movement, or not in it at all.

What just happened?

The day showed that many anti-war activists, radical young Muslims in particular, are dissatisfied with the march-and-hope policy of the STWC, SWP and PSC. This generation, angry and sad beyond belief about the murders of imperial war, has exploded onto the streets of Europe during the conflict. Oslo has seen its biggest riots in decades (<http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2009/01/417629.html>), and the following report, from a correspondent in Paris on the demonstration of 3rd January, suggests points of similarity between the composition and message of the mobilisations.

The demo yesterday was startling. police have revised their original claim of 6,000 to 21,000, but i swear there must've been twice that. surprising lack of police presence throughout was explained when we reached place Saint-Augustin, where a quick left would've taken us to the Israeli embassy...police fucking everywhere, they'd cut off every road and blocked the entire protest into the place - a ludicrous idea considering the size of the cortege. so now you have around 3,000 disaffected youth already there with at least another 20,000 arriving behind them and police in riot gear everywhere...it kicked off. cars were burned, they smashed up the shops (this is the most affluent, bourgeois part of Paris - Les Galleries Lafayette and all that) and lots of burning of Israeli flags from the top of bus shelters. police moved in ... some sort of gas was fired...none of this has made the papers really, just claims that 20 people were arrested after vandalising some cars. I was about the only white person in this parade ... [one chant was] "Regarde Francaises, comprennent la vérité"..."look Frenchies, understand the truth".

As well as opportunities in the form of militancy, there are also risks in the form of religious and ethnic sectarianism. We need to make sure that the young (largely Muslim) people confronting the police are not left to do so alone, and that the movement is built as far as is possible on an internationalist secular basis. We can only do that if we are part of it.

Secondly, the events show that the British police's 'containment' model (as opposed to the 'dispersal' model of European police), is not invincible if enough people are prepared to be militant enough. The Metropolitan police has limited resources, and is generally very cautious in making deployments that may put officers at risk.

Conclusions

What is the significance of militant street mobilisations in social movements? It is primarily this: that they are the expression and the birthplace of a defiant, collective spirit; that they constitute a movement on a whole different set of terms to those laid down by the movement bureaucracy. They are the incubator of a spirit that can grow, and spread.

Sometimes, riots themselves are beneficial. For example, the 1981 Brixton riots led to the Scarman report, and researchers of the depression era in the US found that increase in the locally-set rates of income support were greater when there had been riots in the town in question (c.f. Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*, p274).

Street mobilisations are nonetheless limited and insufficient – particularly in dealing with international issues. We need to make the argument that Israel's murders in Gaza implicate directly the social relations of global capitalism, and expose the limits of the state as a solution to that. In consequence, we should say, the movement needs to aspire to mass action, such as strikes at school and work, and occupations of university and public buildings. We do not say these things for ritual effect, or because we expect a 'call' on our part to have any great resonance. We say them because they are an accurate reflection of the real dynamics of the world; and we want those social processes to be as widely understood as possible.

(In order to avoid abstraction, it should be noted that the most militant demonstrators are probably less likely than most people to have access to opportunities for significant institutional disruption: steady jobs, university places, nationally significant institutions that rely on them. As Piven and Cloward put it (p25), they participate so little that the main "contribution" they can withhold is that of quiescence in civil life: they can riot". The position is not therefore hopeless, but it is difficult.)

Our immediate task is solidarity with those arrested already; and the many more who will no doubt be arrested over the coming months, as police trawl through hours of footage and acres of still photographs.

The anti-war movement continues. The militant demonstrators drew a line in the gravel, as well in their own hearts. We know which side of that line we are on.

the mindset of israelis in the gaza conflict

by Solomon Anker

The most dramatic event within Israeli society in the war has been the amazing lack of compassion for Palestinians. It is not true that Israelis are calling for "Death to the Arabs": this is a very marginal phenomenon and outside the mainstream. However, in general people do not care about the almost 1,000 people of Gaza who have died so far.

Israeli television is giving off some soft war propaganda which does a good job of curing Liberal Israelis' guilt for the crimes in Gaza, plus going a bit over the top about the effect which the Hamas rockets have. Nevertheless the media is telling people most of the truth about what goes on in Gaza and in fact the newspapers in Israel which tend to be left-wing (especially *Haaretz*) tell of all the war crimes that have taken place.

There is a group of people known famously as "the Left." This stereo-type refers to the mainly middle-class German and Polish Jews of North Tel-Aviv. They are always suspicious of the Israeli government and are big opponents of the Religious and Nationalist parties: however anti-war activity has been low so far, with maybe 5,000 people at demonstrations (while 100,000s attended in the 1990s peace demos). Meretz, a Zionist left-wing party has a membership of 30,000 and non-Zionists and other Leftist activists are another 10-20,000. What has happened is that these people have not been brainwashed to believe this war is good, but rather because so few Jewish people (i.e. their family and friends) have died, they have not become politically active and joined anti-war action. The death of so many Palestinians has not created enough compassion and anti-war sentiment that people would take to the streets and oppose the war outside their living room.

For non-political Israelis, they have little compassion for the Gaza population and although here and there they may start to feel some feelings, quickly this compassion fades. A thousand Gazans dead - they cry almost never, yet they cry in the deepest possible way for the 8 soldiers whom have been killed. This mainstream have become a bit more patriotic during the war (especially those in the South), with flags appearing more than previously, however they are not talking like war-hungry fascists and they are not calling for any kind of genocide on the Arabs. Instead, the general attitude towards the people of Gaza in the Israeli mainstream is "nothingness-ism." Whereas such emotions appear on such high levels for the 19 year old Israeli-boys in combat, attitudes towards normal Gazan civilians is not one of hate, but just one of nothingness.

For the right-wing, especially the ideological right-wing, it is simple - "Let the IDF win" - This is a classic phrase and an almost religious attitude (even among secularists) towards the army is held by rightists. Not among politicians or educated peoples, but on the right-wing "street-talk", calls for "Lets kill more Arabs" is common, and calls for a mass slaughter are common semi-serious jokes. For the Religious-Zionists (religious settler movement and their supporters) who live way out of the mainstream, after they campaigned 2.5 years ago in a passionate ways against withdrawing settlements from Gaza, they are saying "We told you that the Arab would start a war like this" and some are even calling to rebuild settlements in Gaza.

Not just Jewish citizens of Israel lack compassion, but also Arab-Israelis and Arabs in the West Bank. For the 11 Jews killed, these lives are seen as totally irrelevant amongst the mainstream of Arabic society. In the history of the State of Israel, Arabs tend to have as much compassion for Jews, as Jews have towards Arabs. In the same way the right-wing Jews are cheering the military while they kill and kill, the equivalent of the right-wing among the Arabic population is cheering the rockets into southern Israel and happy and hoping more Jews to be killed.



israeli fire rains down on a playground in gaza

anti-semitism and the war

by Aled Thomas

Criticism of Israel is not anti-Semitic, and the vast majority of our movement is not anti-Semitic, but it is a terrible reality that some anti-Semitism has been pulled along in its wake[1]. Therefore, we have a duty to acknowledge and oppose this. In fact, if we do not, we renounce the right to say we are true fighters against the brutality in Gaza.

There have been countless placards equating the Star of David to the Nazi swastika. (Some of the people doing this may intend nothing bad by it; but its real meaning is still distasteful, the Star of David is a symbol of the Jewish people, not the state of Israel[2]). I have a Jewish friend who has been beaten, and many others have experienced violence, insults and spitting. On the demonstration of Saturday 10th January, to my disgust, I heard one shout of 'death to all Jews' - although the surrounding crowd immediately booed in response.

We should support the Gazans against Israel's murderous assault, not because they are of any particular faith or background, but because they are people. For the same reason, we must condemn those who few who want to turn a movement against a massacre into a movement for a massacre, or even low-level thuggery. Assaults on Jewish people, Zionists or not, bring disrepute on our movement (just as the assaults by right wing Zionist activists on pro-Palestinian demonstrators have brought shame on the other side). Assaults and insults have nothing to do with liberating Palestine. All they do is harden the sense of isolation experienced by British Jews, and spur the conviction that they must defend themselves at home, and Israel abroad.

Only those who oppose anti-Semitism really support the Palestinians as real, living people, rather than the 'Palestinians' as an abstract idea with which to beat Israel, or Jews. Those who really support the Palestinians acknowledge and respect what is human in them; that is the same thing which is human in all of us. And those who see this cannot hate any ethnic group.

There are Israeli citizens who would go to prison rather than serve in the occupation forces of Israel, and others who have been shot by the Israeli army protesting with Palestinians. Some of the best propagandists on behalf of the Palestinian people are Jewish, including Avi Shlaim, Noam Chomsky, Uri Avnery, Adam Keller and Norman Finkelstein - although we may disagree with some of their views. There were many Jews - and at least one Jewish Israeli citizen - in the crowds besieging the embassy gates. There would have been more if our movement did not contain a real strain of anti-Jewish hatred.

It is real. It is not simply a myth dreamt up by Zionist propagandists, this strain is real. I have seen it, and though it is a minority trend, it is sickening. It is cowardice to ignore it.

There are grey areas. I do not personally think that everyone who waves a Hizbullah flag is necessarily anti-Semitic, because the people who hold these banners do not generally understand, or have not fully considered, the implications of what they are saying. They may take any number of different positions on what the politics of Hizbullah in fact are. When people chant 'from the river, to the sea', they could mean many things. Are they, like Hizb ut-Tahrir, in favour of the invading Arab armies crushing Israel? Or are they in favour of a one state settlement based on democratic rights for all? In fact, most people are probably not that sure. There is an ongoing contest for the grounds on which these ideas will be understood. As socialists, I argue we should contend in that.

Many people seem to feel a certain hesitation in speaking out against or confronting anti-Semitism (right there and then, when it is heard or seen), partly because that accusation has been over used by Israeli chauvinists and partly because they are almost shocked into silence. But we must have courage in our convictions. Jews, Israelis, all people, must be part of our movement, but there is no place for racism of any kind. We must offer our solidarity, physical if appropriate, to all Jewish people targeted because of their background; and should continue to argue for a movement based on the international unity of all those under attack by capitalism, nationalism, and war. In Isaac Babel's words, we should struggle for "the international of good people", not only in defence of Gaza, but in defence of us all.

On this basis, we must continue to involve ourselves in the movement against occupation and massacre in Gaza.

[1]Technically, Palestinians are 'Semitic' too: but 'anti-Semitism' is commonly understood to mean hatred of Jewish people, and I use that conventional understanding here.

[2] In any case, the comparison is wrong. In terms of scale, the Nazis killed hundreds of times as many more people. Furthermore, while Jewish Israelis are under the influence of the sort of nationalist chauvinism which is common to most wars, including those fought by this country, they are not, in general, tacitly or otherwise, in support of the extermination of an entire people. To be sure, in a very real way, the Palestinians are dehumanised by many Israelis; and on some level all nationalisms have features in common (including those of Britain, Russia, etc.). But Palestinians have not been dehumanised in an equivalent way to the Jews in Nazi Germany; there is no broad acceptance of a programme for extermination. These are real, and important differences. Slogans such as "Zionism = Nazism", or similar, are hysterical, absurd, and prevent us reaching out to everyone who is fond of neither hysteria nor absurdity.

unemployment

unemployment - a view from the front line

by Christine Hulme, PCS DWP

In 2009 many people are beginning to experience the reality of unemployment in Britain for the first time in their working lives. This will be a massive shock for those who have not had to claim benefits before. It will be the shock of the complexity and inaccessibility of the benefit system, the low rates of benefits, or the lack of jobs and training opportunities available to find other types of work. This is the reality of the reformed welfare state. But for many more, particularly those in insecure jobs, and who have been in and out of work over the last few years, the current recession, means it will be harder than ever, not just to get a job, but to find a job which is permanent, relatively secure and pays above the minimum wage.

Despite the current economic climate, New Labour continues with its plans for welfare 'reform' and expansion of the private sector in the delivery of 'programmes' designed to help the unemployed return to work. The government's flagship New Deal programme, set up in the early years of this government to assist the 'hardest to help' get back to work is being repackaged and renamed as the Flexible New Deal. With the repackaging comes a massive business opportunity for the private and voluntary sector to secure lucrative 5 year contracts to deliver programmes for the jobless. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) already pays over £1 billion a year to private and voluntary sector organisations to deliver these programmes, but with over 35000 job cuts during the past four years, and more than 200 office closures, there is no longer the capacity to deliver the work in house. Even though ministers admit there is very little difference in the performance of the private sector compared to the public sector in getting people back to work.

And the privatisation agenda does not just stop with programmes for the unemployed. In December the government announced its intention to privatise the delivery of the Social Fund. They want to take the responsibility for emergency payments to the very poor away from the state and hand this to Credit Unions and other financial institutions that would also 'assist' the poor and the desperate to manage their finances more responsibly. Perhaps the Labour leadership could explain how people receiving £60.50 a week on benefits, (less if they are under 25 years old); manage to be financially more responsible.

But these reforms will also add to the growing army of reserve labour by requiring lone parents whose youngest child is 7 and those signed off as unfit for work by their G.P.s to be expected to find work, or minimally, ensure that they 'become closer to the labour market.' And for those who are deemed to have been unemployed for too long, they will have to work for their benefits. Additionally, if the latest reserve army don't comply with the reforms, they face benefit sanctions.

As the recession deepens and with some predicting that the claimant count could reach 3 million, the New Labour mantra of work for those who can, and help for those who cannot is looking utterly stupid. We know there is not enough work for 'those who can' even before the economic slow down. Whilst the government were, and still are, quick to point out the number of job vacancies in the labour market, there never was or is, a clear picture of where the jobs are, the skills required or importantly the rates of pay. Despite the introduction of the minimum wage and in work benefits in the form of tax credits, many people who have returned to work in the last 10 years entered jobs that are low paid, insecure and temporary. For those who are single and without children, many were earning not much more than they did on benefits. The opening of shopping malls, coffee shops and call centres

has certainly assisted in reducing the claimant count in many urban areas up until the credit crunch. But as we see daily on the news, retail and the service sector is shedding jobs by the thousands as sectors reliant upon consumer spending supported by massive personal debt start to crumble.

So why is New Labour continuing with these reforms in the current economic climate? Put simply they are ideologically wedded to them. They have no other vision than to spend billions propping up the banks, yet shy away from investing in infrastructure projects that will benefit people and create sustainable skilled employment. They would rather have the DWP policing the unemployed than properly helping them.

The DWP job cuts and office closure programme is being exposed as a shambles. Even at this early stage in the recession new staff are being recruited in job centres, (in areas of the country where they still exist) and into benefit centres that process benefit claims. Many offices are working permanent overtime on Saturday and Sunday to cope with the influx of people losing their jobs. Management are even trying to rope in private sector call centres to handle the growing number of calls as the in house centres are not able to handle the volumes. It is planned to bring in new staff, to work on twilight shifts as regular staff finish work. In addition to this the management are increasingly using 'lean working techniques' as a means of increasing productivity regardless of the impact on the quality of service and advice to claimants. So much for the department's efficiency savings ordered by Gordon Brown when he was at the treasury and the short sightedness of government and the senior civil service, who collectively believed there would never be another recession, and used this belief to justify the cuts.

Unfortunately, in the face of this meltdown, the response from the PCS union has been worryingly slow and even more worryingly quiet. Whilst there has been some breakthrough in stopping some of the Jobcentre closures, this has been as a result of local campaigning rather than an effective national strategy. Indeed the entire labour movement seems to be in a state of paralysis in the face of the onslaught against the welfare state on the one hand and the crisis in the economy on the other.

There are some immediate issues that we need to campaign around starting with a halt to blaming the unemployed for unemployment rather than the capitalist system, an increase in benefit rates and state pensions. No to workfare. The building of an effective claimants movement, money for proper skills training for all those out of work regardless of benefit 'status' or length of unemployment. Job creation, in sectors desperate for government investment such as social housing and transport. A properly staffed and accessible welfare state service based on need, rather than an increasing selection of private companies who are in it for profit. Clearly this is not a full solution to the crisis; but we need to begin somewhere.



"whilst there has been some breakthrough in stopping some of the jobcentre closures, this has been as a result of local campaigning rather than an effective national strategy."

welfare 'reform', the brown premiership and recession

by Chris Grover, Lancaster University

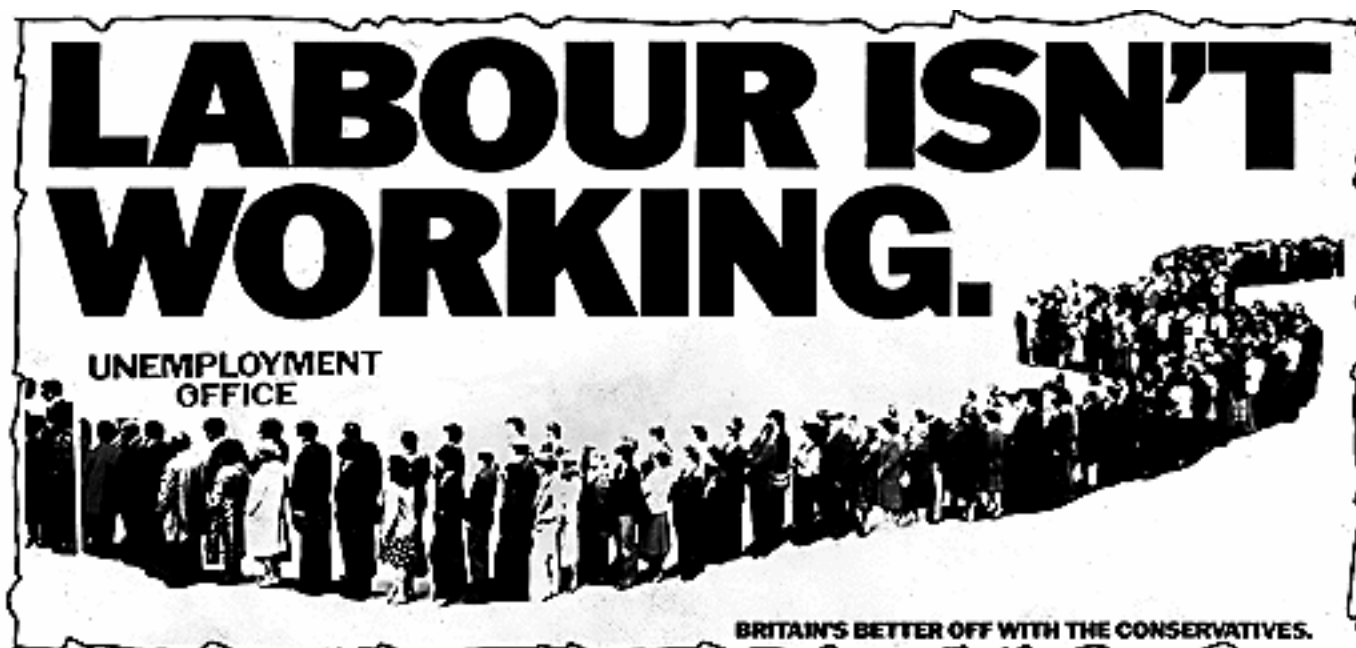
Introduction

Since being elected over a decade ago New Labour has been almost continually involved in a process of welfare 'reform'. The 'old' system of social security is deemed by New Labour to have been too passive, leaving non-employed to flounder for too long on out-of-work benefits. New Labour's approach has been to make the welfare state more proactive, to break what it describes as the 'something for nothing society' or the 'something for nothing culture'.

New Labour's approach to welfare 'reform' has, as its underpinnings, quite laudable aims: a desire to tackle trenchant economic and social problems that have blighted Britain for many years: high levels of worklessness, child poverty and the social problems, such as crime and disorder, that are associated with such phenomena. However, there has been an arrogance in New Labour's arguments, especially those forwarded by Gordon Brown, that through social welfare and economic measures capitalism could be tamed. Brown's proclamation that there would be no more 'boom and bust' under New Labour now rings particularly hollow. These observations raise the issue of what direction welfare 'reform' are taking in what many economists are predicting will be a long and deep recession?

The main themes of welfare 'reform' since Brown took over as Prime Minister are marked by continuity with the preceding 10 years. This should not be surprising as Brown oversaw welfare 'reform' when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer and his control of it does not seem to have diminished. While some moves – such as the recent nationalisation of the Northern Rock building society – might suggest to the contrary, there can be little doubt that Brown believes in free markets as being the only economic configuration that can deliver Britain from recession. In this context, he lays the blame for recession in Britain in global economic phenomenon, particularly sub-prime mortgage default in the USA. His argument is essentially that there is nothing wrong with British capitalism, but because of external shocks it needs state inter-

and recession



thirty years ago the conservatives won a landslide election victory, with maurice saatchi's tory advertising campaign pointing to soaring unemployment under the labour government. could the same happen again?

vention to manage the depth and length of the recession it currently faces.

Welfare 'reform' is central to such interventions because social welfare policies are important elements in the governance of the economy. So, for example, in introducing the Green Paper, *No One Written Off* (DWP, 2008a, p. 5), Brown noted that:

"...in a globalised world, we simply cannot afford the high price of large numbers of people on benefits. Instead, we need people in work, making the best use of their talents and helping us to compete...we will only create lasting prosperity by ensuring that the talents of our country are fully employed..."

In this context, the aim of recent proposals outlined in *No One Written Off* and the White Paper, *Raising expectations and increasing support: reforming welfare for the future* (DWP, 2008b) are to reach an employment rate of 80 per cent as the means of tackling child poverty and meeting the financial costs of an ageing population (see DWP, 2005). In pursuit of this aim the proposals include:

★A simplified system that is likely to eventually involve just one income replacement benefit for working age people. The first development towards this will be the abolition of Income Support (except for carers), leaving working age able-bodied claimants to claim Jobseekers Allowance (JSA), while those deemed sick and/or disabled enough will have to claim the new Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). This means that lone parents will have to claim JSA, although it is currently suggested that there should be a modified version of it for those with children under the age of seven. It was already policy that from 2010 lone parents will have to submit to the full JSA regime when their youngest child is aged seven (until 2008 when it was reduced to age 12, it was 16 or 18 if their child(ren) were in full time employment).

★A move towards 'personalised conditionality'. Following Gregg's (2008) review of conditionality it is proposed that there will be a 'clear bargain that almost everyone on benefits [will] be expected to take active steps towards to work, but where those expectations are based on individual's needs and circumstances' (DWP: 13). In this regard, there will be moves towards identifying three groups of claimants:

1. A 'work ready group' who will be governed by a tougher JSA conditionality regime (discussed below). This group will include all able-bodied workless people (except lone parents with children under the age of seven).
2. A 'progression to work group' who are not job-ready because of their health and/or impairment, or their caring responsibilities for lone parents and partners of workless people with children under the age of seven. This group will be required to make plans for getting into paid employment, but will not have to seek it.
3. A 'no conditionality group' of claimants where there is no expectation of engagement with work-related activity. This will be the smallest group, including those receiving the support element of ESA, carers, and lone parents and partners

of workless people with very young children (under the age of one).

★A tougher sanctioning regime for those JSA claimants deemed to be failing in their search for work and/or refusing to take employment, and the piloting of a 'work for your benefit' scheme for those JSA claimants who are workless for more than two years.

What themes can be drawn from these proposals? First, there is a clear swelling in the size of the reserve army of labour. The emphasis is upon people who until recently were seen as having legitimate reasons (sickness/impairment and/or the care of children) for being outside of paid employment upon making preparations for paid work and competing for it

earlier stage of worklessness. As we saw in the words of Brown above an economic case for such developments is made. However, a paternalistic argument is also made; that work is good for the well-being of people (DWP, 2008a). While there is some evidence to suggest that this is the case, the literature is hedged with caveats that suggest the positive effects that paid work has on well-being is closely related to the quality of the work that they do. In brief, work *per se* is not good for well-being. It is contingent upon the type of work being done (Grover, 2007).

Second, and related, there is clear evidence in the proposals that what is described by Peck and Theodore (1999) as the 'supply-side fundamentalism' of New Labour continues, for there is little in them that suggests the demand for labour is problematic. In contrast, the predominate discourse that frames the proposals is that worklessness is the consequence of the character or characteristics of people not in work: they do not have the right attitude to work; they do have the right skills; they are sick and/or disabled. This is reflected in the shift to 'personalised' employment services that is also outlined in the proposals. 'Personalised' employment services are described by Brown as 'services tailored to individual needs' (DWP, 2008a: 5). However, what personalisation actually means is that barriers to employment are explained by reference to the individual, rather than to economic and social structures, such as a lack of demand for workers and the attitudes of employers.

Third, the proposals can be located in a tradition in social welfare policy that suggests that working class people will only work on the threat of poverty. This can be seen in the proposed extension of benefit conditionality and was made clear in the Gregg (2008: 4) review of conditionality that argued:

"The Review believes an effective sanctions regime is one that drives behaviour to increase the chances of finding work, and penalises non-compliance without creating excessive hardship."

The important part of this quote is: 'without creating excessive hardship'. The view of Gregg – the findings of which were incorporated into *Raising expectations and increasing support* (DWP, 2008b) – was that the commitment of workless people to paid work must be maintained by the threat and imposition of benefit sanctions that are perfectly accept-

able if they cause hardship, as long as it is not 'excessive'. This is merely a restatement of the classic political economic argument that it is the threat of poverty that provides the spur to paid work.

So far the argument has been that the focus of recent welfare 'reform' has been on the supply side. However, with talk of a return to Keynesianism, there has been a shorter-term focus, particularly in the 2008 pre-budget report (see HM Treasury, 2008), upon measures that might stimulate demand. These measures include adjustments to the tax/benefit system, most notably a cut in the higher rate of Valued Added Tax (VAT); making permanent and increasing the increase in income tax personal allowances announced in May 2008; bringing forward increases in various state benefits for children and retirement pensioners, and increasing many means-tested benefits at a rate above the relevant measure of inflation (6.2% compared to 5%). In addition, £3 billion of capital spending is to be brought forward from 2010-11 financial year.

However, such changes are economically and politically expedient, rather than being concerned with the well-being of poorer people. VAT is a regressive tax, but its reduction is small and temporary. Changes to personal taxation were the consequence of the abolition of the 10 pence tax band, and, even after the pre-budget report proposals, do not compensate all those lower paid workers who economically suffered from its abolition, and the above-inflation increase in benefits merely acts to expose their scandalously low level. A single person under the age of 25 will still only get JSA, provided they are not sanctioned, of £50.65 per week from April 2009, well short of the amount (£112 per week, after housing costs) required to meet the government's own measure of poverty (60 per cent of the median income). In addition, in the wider context, particularly the eye-watering amount of financial assistance that has been made available to the banks, such developments are embarrassingly modest for a government that, even before the current economic crisis, was failing to meet its own targets on reducing child poverty, fuel poverty and who had apparently given little consideration to the poverty of single adults and childless couples.

Conclusion

The British government is of the opinion that in a period of economic recession it needs to continue with its plans for welfare 'reform'. While predictions suggest that, on average, 20,000 people per week will be made redundant in Britain over the forthcoming year, the government is trapped in an analysis that suggests that worklessness is the consequence supply-side factors. Time and again the same argument is rolled out; that there are hundreds of thousands of jobs available if only people were willing to do them. What is not acknowledged is that worklessness and poverty (both in and out of work) are consequences of the operation of capitalism. They are the lubricant of capitalist economic growth, and the proposals for welfare 'reform' under Brown are likely to reproduce poverty and inequality in the hope of tacking worklessness, something that the current recession tells us is not possible under capitalism.

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what does 'socialism or barbarism' mean today?

Here follows a section of François Chesnais's essay *Thinking through the meaning of communism and socialism in the conditions of today*. The whole document, produced for French and Swiss comrades associated with *A Contre-Courant*, *Carré Rouge*, *L'Émancipation Sociale*, and *A l'Encontre*, is now available in pamphlet form for £1: see contact details on page 12.

The Present Forms of the Question 'Socialism or Barbarism?'

Rosa Luxemburg and other revolutionaries formulated this slogan almost a century ago, warning that these were the alternatives. By doing so, they brought a radical change to the understanding of the fight for social emancipation, which was already at the time becoming a battle *against terrible dangers* quite as well as a fight for bringing about the potentialities of social and human progress. The invention by Stalinism and its understudies of slogans such as 'building socialism', and 'humanity marching towards progress', prevented this warning from being fully understood. Others have done their best to separate our understanding of Auschwitz from that of the course of capitalism and its convulsions. Others still have tried to convince us that the military and nuclear superiority of the United States is the guarantee of 'liberty' and 'democracy'. Today we have to give its full value to the expression, to proclaim loudly, 'Socialism or Barbarism', because it is more than ever justified by decades of chronic international economic crisis in capitalist society, because the threat of Barbarism is becoming ever more menacing. It is like the giant snake of classical legend that grew new heads each time Heracles cut one from its body.

Capital has managed to create the conditions for terrible competition between workers living in different countries, while in the heart of each national economy it develops competition among workers in their struggle for 'a job', so that they can sell their labour power. Competition of this kind is the vector of a pandemic that is destroying the lives of workers and what people have been calling 'the world of work'. Competition for work affects people by impoverishing them. It makes them lose their place in society; and it does this only to satisfy the unquenchable thirst of capital for limitless increases in surplus value.

What has become absolutely central to militant activity is 'the unity of workers' at all levels and in every possible way. Only unity can repel the dangers and find lasting solutions. We have the feeling that this unity could be built by bringing together the self-activity of the dispossessed and exploited deployed in almost every country over the world, generally in individual villages, working-class neighbourhoods and cities.

The gap between the majority of the population on the one hand, and, on the other, the upper reaches of the possessing and ruling classes and the 'political élite' they produce, has again become immeasurably wide. Parasitic amounts of finance capital find expression in both the form and content of hyper-privatisations, a way of extending as rapidly as possible the riches acquired from the work people do and from the plundering of the world's 'natural resources' of all kinds. There are deep changes in the way cities are organised. There are administrative districts with area segregation; and phenomena of a new kind such as the creation of what are in effect ghettos reserved for different social groups. The gulf between the classes goes along with a kind of *de facto* denial of the right of the poorest to exist, for instance in Africa. Entire populations are simply *forgotten*. By the expedient of the genetically modified breeding and the ownership by trans-national corporations (TNCs) of seed patents, peasant producers are being deprived of the rights they have always enjoyed of using their own saved seed for



the embers of hiroshima: but environmental catastrophe could bring far more destruction

the next crop. This is another example of the continued practical relevance, touching on people's *very existence*, of the separation of the producers from the means of production and their means of living. It is characteristic of the organisations concerned with economic mechanisms and of those who work for them (IMF, World Bank, WTO, OECD, etc.) that they live completely separately from the conditions of life of people they barely recognise as living on the same planet.

This is the context of our work: we have to identify and express the decadence of the bourgeois state in many countries, including those on the margins of survival, and to show how those institutions, described as 'representative' and 'democratic' in the imperialist countries, have lost credibility and legitimacy. International law is rapidly disappearing and being replaced by a system known as 'arbitration' that is controlled by the big private firms. Arbitration suspends the 'rules of governance', which, we have always been taught, are the basis of how states (or countries becoming states) should be organised.

What Is at Stake in the 'Ecology Question?'

The most obvious feature of twenty-first century humanity is that there is a world ecological crisis of exceptional gravity. Every serious observer warns that it will be a major factor behind the danger of intensified militarism, which could go as far as launching so-called 'easy-use', 'miniaturised' or 'tactical' nuclear weapons. The perpetuation of the control of our planet by the owners of finance capital leads those who claim to be the heirs of modern civilisation (which was formed in a contradictory way under the rule of the bourgeoisie) to behave in ways that brutally destroy human beings and the social and natural resources that were developed by that civilisation in its particular way. In the twenty-first century the alternative may well be between Communism and hitherto undreamed of forms of social annihilation.

Approached as a worldwide phenomenon, the 'ecological question' cannot be separated from the 'social question'. What is at stake, behind the expressions 'ecology' and 'environment', is nothing less than that, in a nearer and nearer future, the very basis of the conditions required for the social reproduction of certain classes and social groups, certain peoples and even whole countries, will be seriously threatened. We human beings occupy a space on a planet called Earth, and the planet has a very fragile

ecosystem, though for a long time it appeared to get along by itself. Ever since the Renaissance, and particularly since the Enlightenment, there has been a general idea that the relationship between man and nature was sometimes heroic, but always ambiguous. This relationship has quickly given place to one that is completely 'utilitarian' and short-sighted, invented by nineteenth century bourgeois positivism. 'Man' – the word 'man' in this context means 'capitalism' – can exploit the planet as 'he' wishes. This approach later received the support of the ideology and practice of the Stalinist brand of scientism (the regime simply got rid of the very well-versed theoretical critics working in this area). Neither has the question of man's relationship with nature been carefully considered by revolutionary thought – which has also failed to make as acute a criticism of issues related to this political-social matter as it has of the exploitation of the proletariat or the oppression of colonial peoples. Revolutionary thought has long delayed taking up a fight against the complete indifference to questions related to the ecosystem of our planet, which was shared by the managers of finance capital and the 'state planners' of 'actually existing socialism', whose only concern was 'development' – a process that supported bureaucratic social layers of society and helped them to control and exploit the workers.

For almost twenty years, at least from the beginning of the 1990s, scientists have been giving warnings about gas emissions, particularly of CO₂, and climate change. The warnings have not been heard. The cause lies in the anarchy of capitalist production, in the fact that realising profit implies the necessity of selling 'goods and services' and so of squandering resources in a frantic way. This has been accentuated by the imperative of increasing the value of capital invested in those industries that are the mainstay of the stock exchanges, of bringing to China and India the 'civilisation of the automobile', of planning cities in ways that force people to use cars however devastating the effects are for the process of global warming. All this has brought about a situation characterised by a total loss of government control. In other areas of the environment, we see countless examples of the consequences of political systems that are run openly in the name of the reproduction of world domination by finance capital. Increasingly rapidly, balance in society and in the resources necessary for life is being destroyed. Global warming and a crisis of water supply have come together inextricably in east Africa and the countries of the Andes.

All the studies warn that the people affected are the most destitute and the most vulnerable, and that it is they who suffer first.

Theoretical and political responses to issues that involve the natural world and the resistance of the exploited people have been belated and inadequate on the part of political currents that claim to be revolutionary and socialist. They shy back as if they are afraid to respond, as if this was not one of the main questions today. The idea of communism and why it is necessary must be thought through in ways that ensure that these questions are tackled. Before it is too late, we must think about our planet as being the *common home of all humanity*. If our priority is to ensure that three-quarters of the inhabitants of Earth do not go on living in conditions that resemble Hell, or that their lives are not threatened by ecological disaster brought on by modes of production and consumption based on private property and mercantile fetishism, what steps should we take? What actions should we take in response? Knowing that would mean that working men and women, the vast social bloc that can potentially be seen in many different struggles of resistance - including counter-attacks bearing on the ownership of national resources as has happened in Ecuador, Bolivia and Peru - succeed in setting up by their self-activity adequate rules and measures before implementing these themselves directly or through strict controls.

The Competition between Workers Unleashed by Globalised Capital

In every country without exception the 'proletariat' in the sense that Marx gave to the word - people who are forced to sell their labour-power and 'find a job' so that they can live and bring up their children - are being subjected to the ever more brutal effects of the political process of liberalisation and deregulation of direct international investment, trade and capital flows. Liberalisation and deregulation are being imposed simultaneously in all parts of the world on an unprecedented scale. Wage earners in countries with insurance schemes or stock-market pension systems of various varieties (the United States and the United Kingdom in the North, Chile or Argentina in the South) are under quite as much pressure as other wage earners. In these countries capital shows no respect towards those whose 'savings' feed the stock markets. Indeed 'the market' threatens them perhaps even more than elsewhere.

In the eyes of those who draw their wealth and power from it, the present process of liberalisation and privatisation has not yet gone far enough. However, it is well advanced. The newest, most dramatic consequence is to allow capital to create direct competition between wage earners, that is, proletarians who sell their labour power and produce surplus capital, on a continental or sub-continental scale. It is already the case for the area, of which the European Union is the heart, but which reaches east to the Ukraine and south to the Mediterranean countries. A similar area covers all America north of the Panama Canal, with Central America and South America as hinterland. In Asian countries where a growing part of industrial capacity has been transferred, workers are forced to wage a fierce competition one with another. This competition is used at the same time as a weapon against the level of wages and working conditions of workers almost everywhere in the world. The means capital uses are the de-localisation of industry through direct investment abroad; and the multiple, very sophisticated ways it subcontracts work in the countries where wages are lowest and job protection is weakest.

This process of increasing direct competition, on a planetary scale, between workers experiencing very different relationships with capital and the state, has benefited from the re-integration into the world market of the 'Soviet bloc' and the countries that were part of the former USSR. Direct competition has witnessed a qualitative leap since the complete passage of the bourgeois-capitalist elite of China to world capitalism and the entry of China into the WTO. The big industrial groups, helped by the most powerful governments, have deliberately focused on the development of information and communication technologies, because they have given capital the technical conditions for optimising productivity and profit, on a basis of dispersal of production (outsourcing etc.), labour flexibility, the precariousness of jobs and lack of protection for workers. As the position of the workers in the class struggle gets weaker, capital increases its leeway for concealing the social character of production, dismantling the working conditions it set up itself in an earlier stage of capitalism, and increasing the rate of exploitation. Working hours are getting longer; and physical wear and tear has been increased so much by the pace of work that it has been explicitly noticed by organisations

such as the International Labour Office. These are two expressions of super-exploitation, which link the nineteenth century with the twenty-first.

There is also the question of the screening of immigrants by the police and the special laws that have been imposed (Sarkozy in France talks about 'selective immigration'); to which we may add 'illegal immigration' known by the police but benefiting employers tremendously. Immigration laws are a further general instrument to bring wages and social security in the countries, which are also the sources of outward investment, down to the level prevailing in the countries the immigrants have left. Hundreds of corpses have been found floating on the waters of the Mediterranean; many have died in the frontier zone between Mexico and the United States: they are material examples and a symbol of the barbarity of a globalised market in work, structured by the existent laws of combined and unequal development. The foreign worker is seen not as competition but as the enemy. Defending the slogan: 'Workers of all countries, unite!' in present conditions implies the need to come up with responses to these problems, starting with the sort of words that can be understood by wage-earners threatened by unemployment and by the general precariousness of life.

“The struggles of women who are taking part in self-activities in many forms not only lead towards collective self-emancipation; they are also a central component of these. Inequalities and oppression do not exist separately from each other.”

'Capitalism contains war within itself as a storm cloud holds the storm.'

For the last hundred years war has been one of the main expressions of barbarism, the central theme of those fighting for the alternative, socialism. The sentence quoted above remains as true as when Jean Jaurès first pronounced it. Wage earners and the youth recognise the dangers and unacceptable character of war. The demonstrations of 15th February 2003 against the invasion of Iraq by the United States, the United Kingdom and their allies were the high point of the anti-globalisation movement that began in the World Social Forum at the Seattle conference of 1999. The work of thinking what communism means at the beginning of the twenty-first century implies a specific stress and specific work on this issue. We cannot behave as if the question of war was settled theoretically.

Today one finds that the question is posed mainly in relation to the imperialists' need to control the sources of primary production, energy, water, arable land and the 'reservoirs' of living matter that can be used for genetic modification. Our understanding of the relationship between such phenomena, and inter-imperialist rivalry generated by the way capitalism functions, has gone backwards. Because of the necessity of thwarting the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, made more urgent by the domination of financial investment, US capital, like that of the EU and Japan, has been impelled to allow, and indeed help, the Chinese bureaucratic-capitalist elite to implement the ongoing capitalist transformation of China in the space of ten years. On their own it would have taken the Chinese several decades, even assisted by Taiwan and Chinese people who have emigrated and are living all over the world. By putting a powerful rival into the saddle, United States capital has recreated the conditions for one of the most classic causes of inter-imperialist conflict.

The nuclear arms race has begun again in two forms: the manufacture of miniature or tactical weapons and the spread of nuclear weapons to more countries. The Japanese bourgeoisie is thinking about becoming a nuclear power despite memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Ecologically produced catastrophes may arise affecting whole peoples. The governments most concerned with preserving the social and political order of the world, founded as it is on the private ownership of the means of production, may decide to respond by war. They will do so with hesitation. Meanwhile the possessing classes of the world are perfecting day-by-day systematic and permanent forms of control to repress those who are already exploited and oppressed.

The decision by the civilised powers to privatise and sub-contract war and violence and making torture commonplace is another terrible aspect of barbarity. 'Local wars' are yet another. Wherever so-called ancient hatreds and resentments exist into the present (the bourgeoisie likes to speak of 'ancestral hatreds'); wherever there are massive levies on the local economy by foreigner capital; wherever petroleum and mineral producing areas are transformed into closed, closely controlled, enclaves, the collapse of former cohesive relationships will take place, and the exploited and dispossessed will be encouraged to transfer their frustration and hatred against those who are weaker than themselves. The excuse they will be supplied with is a form of: 'they are different from us'. The exploited and dispossessed will not understand the real causes of their problems, since these are carefully hidden from them. You can see where this has already been happening in Africa. The germs of violence may have been there, but it is in the context of the globalisation of capitalist activity, and on account of the forms this takes, that it bursts out.

The Emancipation of Women is Central to Social Emancipation

Since ancient times, women have suffered a status of inferiority, presented as a natural state of affairs. It has been accompanied by various forms of social humiliation and violence. And women are still being ignored in all matters concerning power structures. There have been many attempts to make a breach in male privilege, but they are thwarted by the manipulation of social understanding. More or less cunning arrangements have been made concerning the importance of obedience and general submission of women and new versions are still being invented.

Capitalist globalisation requires a renewal and restructuring of society in order to keep things the same as they were, because that suits the needs of maximum return on capital; it explains why archaic as well as modern forms of oppression and exploitation of the vast majority of women are needed. Most of the female population of the world know the conditions of life which are implied: extreme poverty; exploitation; being confined to factories where they make goods to be sold in the metropolitan countries; daily violence; laws against migration for those whose land and everything else has been taken away; and, for some, conditions of semi-slavery or even slavery itself. We must treat this as an urgent issue: women must be emancipated from patriarchal as well as class domination. However difficult both forms of domination are to tackle, they must be confronted. Individual and collective emancipation, that is, opposing all forms of oppression and domination, are written into the commitment to the universal right to live as free human beings.

At present women are going into the paid workforce in huge numbers. They do so with a dual status - as wage earners, and as reproducers of life in a private area, the family, established by the evolution of the capitalist system with the dominant male at its centre. It means that women's working time has to include paid time at work, everything to do with looking after small children and a husband, and according to their country, they may have to look after a very widely extended family. There is twice as much unpaid work at home as there is paid work, and the woman's working time is limited only by her home. Nowadays, in the oldest capitalist countries, where some progress has been made in reducing this state of dependence, there are once again threats to close certain institutions such as nurseries for small children (or not to finance them according to elementary needs). Attacking the social wage, in all of its dimensions, is one of the main objects of the attempt to rehabilitate conservative social, economic and individual attitudes. Another area of attack is the threat against abortion rights, another is the attempt to lower the status of certain professions, and yet another is the material devaluing of what are called 'personal services'.

All over the world, the struggles of women who are taking part in self-activities in many forms not only lead towards collective self-emancipation; they are also a central component of these. Inequalities and oppression do not exist separately from each other. They translate into concrete realities the way in which this mode of production, capitalism, functions. In order for capital to reproduce itself, it has to create misery and oppression. The rulers of the world constantly attempt to present individual inequality, injustice and oppression as multiple and ultimately unavoidable. It is one means they use to prop up their power. The various movements of struggle for the emancipation of women belong, in the strictest sense, with the battles for survival of part of humanity; and for a future, which is socialism.

call centres: the workers' enquiry

Jack Staunton reviews *Hotlines: Call centre – Inquiry – Communism*

When we pick up a left wing paper or magazine and scan its contents we can be fairly sure that its editors will not have failed to offer a piece on shifts in the world's stock markets, analysis of the businesses felled by the recession, and a take on the latest wheeling and dealing by the world's statesmen. Whether dry, rational and down-to-earth commentary, or grandiose predictions of the final crisis of capitalism and vast forces of chaos sweeping across the globe, we can be sure enough that developments in the activities of the ruling class will be recounted in some detail.

But ours is not a movement which limits itself to attacking the dominant system: it is a movement for the self-emancipation of the working class. No-one simply wants capitalism to 'collapse' chaotically in a heap of bankruptcies and mass redundancies: the unravelling of the irrationalities of capitalism will not in itself create a better society. Rather, we have a better vision for humanity: to displace those who control the levers of political and economic power and re-organise society from below on an egalitarian, collectivist and democratic basis.

So surely it should follow that we ought to privilege understanding the state of our own class – the people who are actually going to revolutionise society. This is all the more the case since although no-one would deny the existence of capitalism, for the last two decades it has been a commonplace assertion of much of academia and the media that the working class no longer exists. For such 'commentators', the term 'working class' is merely a label for a narrow cultural stereotype: for example, in March 2008 the BBC's *White Season* featured a documentary *Last Orders*, detailing the lives of white working-class pensioners in northern working men's clubs, proclaiming with surprise that a few of this "endangered species", the working class, do in fact still exist.

Back on Earth, the majority of the world population, and the vast majority in the most developed countries, are working class, and are not about to disappear into the annals of history. Let us be quite clear: anyone whose livelihood relies on their selling their capacity to work to an employer is working class, and the entire basis for the capitalist system is the exploitation of this class. Capital, along with money, the stock exchange, 'the market' etc. did not descend from heaven and thus create means of investment and 'wealth creation': they are themselves the product of human labour and the value exploited from working class people, and have no independent or autonomous existence. The point is, however, that human labour changes, and so the conditions and make-up of the working class as a whole develop, not only in workplace relations but also as regards the community, the state apparatus, people in other countries and even the natural environment. It is impossible to project a vision of our class revolutionising society unless we properly understand the developments our own class's composition in the here and now.

One central development has been the rise of casualisation: less job stability and less rights. This is not simply a product of



the decline of manufacturing, mining etc. and the fact that far fewer people keep the same job for their whole life than in decades past, but also that allied to such changes in the economy under Thatcher there came a massive onslaught on working-class organization and our rights in the workplace. This is most obvious when we look at the 750,000 people working in the UK's call centres, a workplace and job role which covers different sectors of the economy – sales of a wide range of products; customer service for retailers, electronic goods suppliers, etc.; market research both of consumers and of businesses; charity cold-calling; to name but a few. In these workplaces there tends to be a very high level of staff turnover, with most employees only lasting a few weeks or months; pay, although better than sitting on a till, is low; employment rights are scarce; and unionization is close to nil.

"Because of their rapid development call centers are a good example for the relation between changing composition of capital (new technologies, new work organisation, new regional focus) and proletarian behaviour and demands. Call centers themselves emerged as a new concentration of work force which proletarianised the 'white-collar-workers', washed away strong-holds of bank-branches and the working standards of office work. Within a few years call centers mushroomed in deprived ex-industrial areas of Europe, the USA and elsewhere. During this boom-time some of us undertook a collective workers' inquiry in some call centers, trying to understand how these new conditions of work are being turned into subversive conditions of struggle." [1]

But casualisation does not just mean shorter hours or an increased likelihood of losing your job, but also impacts on relations within the workplace: indeed in the call centre setting it means close regulation and surveillance, including timing of the time spent off the phone and listening in on your calls, and a clamp down on saying anything not written in the industrial-strength script on your screen. The worker is used as an automaton... but one with the ability to resist. The objective of the German activist network Prol Position was to study the composition of this workforce (across Europe and North America) and so facilitate the organization of this workforce to resist their employers, and in 2002 they published *Hotlines: Call centre – Inquiry – Communism*.

"In the summer of 1999 we decided to start working in call centres in order to meet people who work there and understand what's going on. We wanted to com-



bine our rage against the daily exploitation with the desire and search for the struggles that can overcome it. Therefore we had to understand the class reality at this point, be part of the conflicts and intervene."

Consciously drawing on similar research by the *Quaderni Rossi* group in northern Italy's car plants in the 1960s, the book is an extremely detailed look at the hierarchies and relations in different call centres [2]. There appear to be three main areas of study here: (i) the conditions of employment, including but not limited to the control of work by the employer, such as phones which relentlessly and automatically dial, having to read out scripts off a computer screen to the person on the other end of the phone, and strict quotas for the workers' productivity and time-keeping; (ii) the employees' day to day methods of evading these means of control – "workers think of ways to take breaks, oases of quiet that let them breathe" – such as meddling with equipment to break up the rhythms of work, wasting time on calls, or a group of workers endlessly passing round calls until they die in the system; (iii) the possibility of organizing more effective and long-term resistance to the employers such as strikes, and the barriers presented by trade union and works' council [3] bureaucracy, as well as the threat that the employer will simply up and leave at the first sign of trouble and move the call centre elsewhere, in the process getting rid of the entire workforce.

As a worker in a market research call centre, one thing which struck me in particular was that the degree of control the workforce were able to exert over their time in the call centres where Prol Position activists intervened was far greater than in my own experience, such as the example of people working on a computer company's customer service line setting up an application that allowed them to 'chat' with one another online during working time. Most of the forms of 'sabotage' and 'resisting work' recommended in the *Hotlines* book, which largely involve time-wasting, would be impossible to implement in 'my' market research call centre where one's right to get shifts week-to-week is reliant on making a high number of calls (the gaps between calls are timed) and completing as many surveys as possible. In fact, since the call centre I work in has far more employees registered than it does available shifts, even when at full capacity, the workers are basically competing with one another to get shifts, and even long-standing employees often call in to book their hours and are told to try again some other week, as if in our unpaid "time off"

we could put our food, bills and rent on hold.

So while endlessly making cups of coffee and chatting with the person in the two-foot-wide booth on either side of you is necessary to relieve the drudgery of reading out the same script again and again to hundreds of people (and indeed, as the *Hotlines* book mentions, the employer is well aware that employees who do not have such pressure valves will be less productive), a worker forced to compete with her/his employees and who is subject to constant surveillance is in a far weaker position to 'sabotage' than someone fielding incoming calls who is permitted more freedom to operate and control their working rhythms. Indeed, reading about the experience of workers who could get away with 'sabotage' brought to mind a comment by a participant in The Commune's 'uncaptive minds' forum on workers' control, who said that "workers' control is the extent to which the workers know what's going on and management don't."

I can't help but feel that such means of day-to-day resistance are less relevant to my own workplace than more conventional means of organizing the workforce, even though the fact that the workforce is unstable and dozens of people come and go each month through the doors of a ninety-booth call centre creates similar problems for efforts at unionization. Although the book has a mass of raw data and quotes from different workers, and details the minutiae of the aims and methods of the workers' enquiry itself, there are few practical lessons about organizing strikes. The industrial actions reported in the book, such as the 1999 British Telecom strike or the 2000 stoppage by 86,000 call centre workers and technicians for Verizon in the USA, presuppose a high level of organization which is hardly second nature to the young people coming into call centre jobs. Of course, precisely the problem is that there are no blueprints and it is difficult to abstract generalized lessons from specific struggles in other call centres: a weakness of this book.

Indeed, the Prol Position activists are constantly guarding against being seen to "represent" workers, and instead want to "promote" self-organisation, and so their leaflets and materials are of a largely descriptive character, while also making sharp criticisms of trade unions and pointing to the limits of different forms of struggle. They furthermore take part in activist initiatives set up with the aim of 'supporting' working class struggles, for example the Call Centre Offensive outlined in the book. The chapter on trade unions, 'base unions', petitions and strikes has much of interest on the different means of resistance employed by workers, such as in the 1999 BT strike, "Large amounts of overseas phone calls were reportedly made, apparently totaling over £15,000. One call was claimed to have been made to the speaking clock in Zimbabwe with the receiver left off the hook overnight; as well as this, top of the range stock was sent out to householders with faulty BT equipment".

But this part of the study seems to have a somewhat artificial character: the Marxists get jobs in a call centre in order to find out what is going on and relay it back to the workforce, but stop short of giving any practical advice for how to advance struggles.

To a limited extent, this seems to recreate a mirror image of the crude “Leninist” form of “intervening” in a workplace from the outside and giving lectures on the lessons of history: i.e. the revolutionaries see themselves as separate from the workforce and with different objectives, using their enquiry to inform their own theories, understand how the working class resists work and to help them(selves) reflect on the world, but not actually doing much to test the water of organizing tactics which could actually succeed. It is no surprise that they report that their materials about working conditions often meet with the response “OK, so what? We know that already. What can we do?”

Indeed, the chapter on organizing initiatives concludes with the questions “how can we relate to strikes and conflicts and thus support some kind of learning process? What kind of means do we need to be able to hear about the important developments? What can we learn within strikes and other struggles? How can we participate in the discussions of the workers?...”, the Prol Position activists presenting themselves as outsiders. They hope to promote the values of self-organisation (solidarity, democracy, serious focus on the workers’ own most pressing concerns) within the class, but in fact the book tends towards merely discerning in what ways resistance is taking place already.

Nevertheless, the Prol Position activists are right to privilege self-organisation and avoid lecturing the workforce, and the workers’ enquiry - understanding the concerns most important for the workers - helps to avoid substitutionism or giving the lead in a crude manner. This reflects the reality that organizing this workforce is extremely difficult and even significant actions are often isolated and fail, such as by causing the employer to out-source. The lesson is surely that strike action as such should not be fetishised or placed as the central objective of workplace organizing: the very process of slow, patient (and rarely open) building of a trade union may itself do far more to improve workers’ position by increasing their confidence to stand up to overbearing supervisors; time waste and sabotage; and know their rights and resist moves such as unfair dismissals.

The workers’ enquiry could well be a useful tool in the early stages of such organizing work. Whether by deliberate “intervention” or not being able to get a better job, a worker who goes into a call centre already an activist ought to understand his/her colleagues’ mentality. But this is only a means to an end. The working class understanding itself not merely in terms of the work and conditions to which it is subject, but rather as an agent of transformative change looking at its force and rights all the better to change them. We need workers’ self-inquiry, not a sociological inquiry about workers.

You can read the whole of the Hotlines book for free at
http://nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/lebuk/e_lebuk.htm

[1] <http://www.prol-position.net/nl/2005/03/editorial/>

[2] See ‘Quaderni Rossi and the Workers’ Enquiry’, chapter 2 of Steve Wright’s *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*, Pluto Press, London, 2002. Perhaps the original such ‘Workers’ Enquiry’ was that organised by Karl Marx in 1880, a list of a hundred questions about a worker’s pay and conditions, for example “Is your work permanent or casual?”; “What conditions are laid down regarding dismissal?”; “Do any resistance associations exist in your trade, and how are they led? Send us their rules and regulations”. See <http://marxists.kgprog.com/history//etol/newspape/ni/vol04/no12/marx.htm>

[3] In several European countries, all workers in workplaces of a given size are (by law) represented in collective bargaining by works councils composed of trade union delegates, whether or not the workers are themselves trade union members.

ukraine’s ‘new left’ and the russian ‘gas war’

‘New Left’ activist Milan Lelich reports from Kyiv on the gas dispute and current struggles in Ukraine.

The gas conflict between Russia and Ukraine attracted more attention to the latter country than it had received since the time of the so called ‘Orange Revolution’. Despite a great number of various interpretations of what has happened, both in the Ukrainian and European media, the main reason for the conflict seems to be quite clear: Russia’s attempt to take political control of Ukraine using economic methods.

One must recognise that the conditions for Russian imperialism’s intrusion turned out to be very auspicious. The Ukrainian financial system is highly dependent on foreign investment and is now going through difficult times because of the world economic crisis. The rate of the Ukrainian stock market’s fall is one of the highest in the world – about 75%. Industrial production started to decline rapidly. The greater part of Ukrainian exports – metallurgical complexes’ output – shortened up to 50%. Chemical plants (the second important export line) had to stop because of the lack of natural gas (about 80% of the costs). As a result there were about 1.5 million unemployed people in the country at the end of 2008 and this number keeps on increasing. Ukraine has already come very close to mass unemployment.

This lower level of financial and industrial capital concentration makes the Ukrainian economy vulnerable to the highly developed Russian big capitalism. In Russia the process of amalgamation of different corporate elites into a united ruling class is already complete, and this class acts as a single whole in its aspiration for economic and consequently political expansion. The goal of the expansion consists in undermining the viable branches of the Ukrainian economy which compete with Russian ones (in the case of the gas conflict – chemical and metallurgical plants).

Political factors are important as well. The so-called Ukrainian political ‘elites’ are very fragmented and unable to rule the country in an efficient way, which suits the Russian capitalists well. Some of the representatives of Ukrainian big capital tried to use the gas conflict in their own political and economic interests, leading to its further aggravation.

In this difficult situation the ruling class started a full-scale offensive on the rights of the working class. A bill for a new Labour Code was put to the parliament. In fact it turns an employer into a virtual slaveholder, allowing him to increase considerably the length of the working day, cut down or even not pay wages, extremely easily fire employees and so on. The bill was unanimously approved at the first stage by almost the whole second chamber (no wonder – the Ukrainian parliament is totally controlled by big capital). Only the recurrent political crisis in fact prevented the project from final approval, but still there is no guarantee it will not happen in the future.

Under difficult economic conditions, unstable national currency, mass dismissals the demand for left ideas in Ukrainian society has a potential to increase. But paradoxically the only left political power represented in the parliament is the Communist Party of Ukraine (actually the successor of the USSR Communist party) where it has the second minor fraction. But even this party is communist only by word of mouth; its real character is as much bourgeois as the political system of the country in general. More ready-to-act left organizations are currently at the margin of public attention. There are several reasons for this situation. They are: the almost official state policy for superficial discrediting of communist ideology, a mass of political technological left projects aimed at blowing up faith in the left worldview, and especially the



new labour code: legalised slavery

use of populist mottos and leftward rhetoric by different national-liberal parties that disorganize the workers and transform them into their electorate.

It is logical to suppose that such actions of the ruling class face serious resistance from the trade unions. But once again we meet a paradox. The leaders of the biggest and semi-official trade union organization are among the authors of the aforementioned new Labour Code that greatly reduced workers’ rights. So instead of defending the interests of the working people, the major trade unions are accomplices of the big capital. But new independent trade unions (like ‘Direct Action’ or ‘Labour Protection’) that are just starting to gain own importance, are the exception to the rule. In particular these trade unions took a very active part in the struggle against the new Labour Code.

The real vanguard of the working class in Ukraine nowadays is the ‘New Left’ movement. It not very numerous yet, but the interest in left ideas is increasing, especially amongst young people. The ‘New Left’ includes the representatives of various social initiatives, trade union activists, Marxists and anarchists. Several campaigns against the offensive against workers’ rights were held by the ‘New Left’ in cooperation with friendly organizations, like the Revolutionary Confederation of Anarcho-Syndicalists. Among them: a rock concert and some manifestations against the new Law Codex, a protest action against the four-fold increase in fares for public transport in Kyiv (by the way, this action was brutally attacked by the militia, several activists were beaten and arrested). The ‘New Left’ also takes part in trade union struggles, closely cooperating with independent trade unions.

The ‘New Left’ enjoys the confidence of Ukrainian workers and has great prospects of becoming a powerful centre of the left movement in Ukraine. Now most activists are focused on preparing for the expected mass demonstrations of the Ukrainian working class in spring.

bolivia: class struggle and social crisis

In September 2008 the Bolivian oligarchy used fascist militias to seize control of half of Bolivia. And yet the soft-left indigenous government led by Evo Morales, which has used police to break up miners’ strikes, feebly sat on its hands. It was up to workers, indigenous people and the urban poor to defend themselves.

This pamphlet explains the fighting between the government and the oligarchy in recent months as well as documenting the struggles of the Bolivian working class. It costs £1 + p&p.

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the socialist movement in iran

by Sam Parsa

I met up with Behrouz Karimizadeh, a prominent member of the socialist 'Freedom and Equality Seeking Students' of Iran, to ask him about the current situation of activism and trade unionism in Iran as well as his thoughts on internationalism and solidarity with comrades across the borders.

Behrouz tells me that he has been a student activist since high school, and he has been arrested several times by the Iranian security services for organising student and worker activist committees and being the editor of a number of publications. Last time he was arrested he spent five months in section 209 of Tehran's Evin prison, a wing designated for political activists.

Referring to organised activism, Behrouz says "it must be very difficult for you to imagine, but unless you are organising something through the government, or want to organise something on Islam, you are bound to have difficulties."

"Non-governmental organisations are largely illegal, semi-governmental unions and student bodies are the only ones that are allowed to openly advertise their events without fear of prosecution."

The Freedom and Equality Seeking Students, the group which Behrouz belongs to, is the only independent student activist body that challenges university management and the government. The group has faced major problems after many of its members were imprisoned and/or expelled from their universities.

The situation of the workers is not much better, as one can imagine. In fact, no independent union is tolerated, says Behrouz: "there are many workers and social activists who have attempted to organise unions in Iran but they have all been imprisoned." However there are also glimpses of hope, as there are a number of organisations or those who seek to establish soviets and syndicalist unions.

"Two of the major unions are syndicalist unions: the Tehran bus drivers' union (Hamlonaghl), and the union of Neishekar Haftabbeh, organised by the workers of a sugar production plant.

The government views them as illegal but the workers are well involved. There are currently two trade unionists,



"free behrouz": a poster produced by the freedom and equality seeking students during behrouz's five months of imprisonment

Mansour Ossanlou and Ebrahim Madadi from the Tehran bus workers' union, and also a number of Neishekar activists, currently awaiting trial."

When I asked him what the aims of the current student and worker activists are, he said "Activists have various aims, many of which are definitely socialist and fight for these ideals. Some are liberals and fight for a secular republic. One thing that they all fight for is their right to organise and publish and promotion of their ideals."

It is not a surprise that many activists in Iran want a liberal government but when I asked him about his thoughts on the matter, Behrouz said that liberal capitalism has no place in the third world and it cannot be fairly, ethically and properly implemented there: "A good example of this can be seen in Turkey. It is secular, has seen 80 years of peace and has been both liberal capitalist and pro-America, but its history includes the genocide of Armenians, torture and the repression of workers: it is something half Islamic and half dictatorship. This is all

that is achievable in the form of liberal capitalism in Iran."

Behrouz views the reform movement in Iran dead: "they have already lost their war", he claims. "Eight years of Khatami [the former reformist president] did not achieve anything, as they don't have a proper political or economic plan. Reform in Iran has no future, and their victory in any elections won't achieve anything."

Finally, I asked Behrouz what he thinks of internationalism by socialists in Britain, and how some of them turn their backs to Iranian activists in the name of anti-imperialism.

". I think in the new era of capitalism where it has become globalised, seeks wealth in international terms, and realises its interests in a globalised way, we as socialists must view our issues and interests in the same globalised manner.

"We should follow what Marx said and focus on internationalism in our activism. The European left must seek to re-organise itself and make socialism a strong and powerful force to include and influence the rest of the world. They must be radical and must have straight and hardy views, being strong not only on the question of imperialism but also with regards to other issues such as backwardness, dictatorship, theocracy, execution and the harassment of worker and student activists and others."

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political platform of the commune

We are communists: we fight for a new self-managed society based on collective ownership of the means of production and distribution and an economy organised not for value production but for the well-being of humanity and in harmony with our natural environment. Communism will abolish the system of wage-labour so that our ability to work will cease to be a commodity to be sold to an employer; it will be a truly classless society; there will be no state, no managers or organisations superior to those of workers' self-management.

We are internationalists: we seek the greatest possible collaboration with communists in other countries; we build solidarity with workers' movements around the world; we are opposed to all borders and immigration controls; and we unconditionally support the right of nations to self-determination.

We know that communism can only come from below, through the organisations of the workers themselves. This conception of communism has nothing in common with the fake "socialisms" of the Stalinist state planning of the former USSR, of the sweatshops of China, and social-democratic "humane" capitalism. No nation in the world today is communist, nowhere is the economy managed by the workers. These models of "socialism" have

all proven to be complete failures, maintaining and in many cases aggravating the working class's lack of self-determination. There is no particular connection between socialism and nationalisation by the state, which merely replaces one set of managers with another; alongside fighting day-to-day battles we advocate a struggle for vestiges of workers' control in the here and now as preparatory steps towards real workers' self-management and collective ownership.

We are the most consistent advocates of social liberation in all its forms. We fight sexual repression, sexism and homophobia and advocate sexual liberation; we champion anti-racist and anti-fascist struggles; we oppose all limits to freedom of speech and free cultural expression. These struggles are not just some adjunct to working-class struggle but are the cornerstone of democracy and human freedom.

We know that it is impossible for the working class to fight for and create a communist society if it is unable to control its own organisations: we support rank and file movements against the bureaucrats who lord it over the unions and parties of the left; we are for openness and democracy in the workers' movement.

We have no gods, not even revolutionary ones. We reject the practice of using the works of this or that socialist of decades past as sacred texts from which "revealed truths" can be read off as gospel. The "traditions" to which the traditional left groups appeal are universally ahistorical and anachronistic, used for the sake of feigning historical legitimacy rather than to critically examine and draw lessons from the past.

We believe that the defeats of the workers' movement in the last three decades; the decay of the left and the absolute poverty of its ideas and slogans; its abandonment of class politics; and the sectarianism of the groups vying for supremacy with their own front campaigns and so-called unity projects; are all evidence of the need for ground-up rethinking of the left's project and the re-composition of the workers' movement.

For more information on our group, its meetings and its publications, email uncaptiveminds@gmail.com

Send correspondence, donations and other publications to The Commune, 2nd Floor, 145-157 St John Street, London EC1V 4PY.

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