



weekly **worker**

Lance corporal Joe Glenton: tip of an iceberg. Opposition to Afghan war needs organisation in armed forces

- Unite and migrants
- People's Charter
- POA strikes
- Prison doesn't work

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Towards a Communist Party of the European Union

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Defend Rees-German Left Platform against Callinicos-Smith CC



LETTERS



Letters may have been shortened because of space. Some names may have been changed

Dead-end

I find James Turlley's put-down of Gerry Downing and what would appear to be the CPGB majority's dismissive attitude towards anti-fascism and the 'no platform' tactic disturbing (Letters, November 19).

Karl Radek's praise for the fascist Schlageter, at the Communist International, of all places, demonstrates that the seeds of the German Communist Party's tragically mistaken strategy towards the Nazis and the Social Democrats had already been laid. To counterpose this to Trotsky's attack on Thalheimer and Bandler is absurd. I realise that it is easy to find a quote from Trotsky or the old masters in support of your view and I therefore hesitate to do so, but Trotsky was quite clear as to the follies of the KPD, the German party: "One of the necessary conditions for the liberation of the party from bureaucratic bondage is a general examination of the 'general line' of the German leadership, beginning with 1923, and even with the March days of 1921... The party will not rise to the height of its great tasks if it does not freely evaluate its present in the light of its past" ("The turn in the CI and the situation in Germany").

I have no doubt whatsoever that Trotsky, had he lived, would have regretted his statement about the "monstrous" exaggeration of the forces of fascism. The extermination of millions and the ravages of fascism bear witness to his complacency.

And let us remind ourselves of the KPD's record. Ruth Fischer, one of the worst Stalinists, appealed to anti-semitic students to hang Jewish capitalists from street lamps in the August 22 1923 edition of *Vorwärts*, the KPD's paper. Hermann Remmele, subsequently elected to the Reichstag and the executive committee of the Communist International, in a debate with the fascists had, according to the KPD paper, remarked: "How such anti-semitism arises I can easily understand. One merely needs to go down to the Stuttgart cattle market in order to see how the cattle dealers, most of whom belong to Jewry, buy up cattle at any price, while the Stuttgart butchers have to go home again empty-handed because they just don't have enough money to buy cattle" (*Rote Fahne* No183, August 10 1923).

The fact that not one of the KPD's Reichstag deputies from 1930 onwards was Jewish is testament to the policy of appeasement of anti-semitism that the KPD pursued as a result of the policy laid out in Moscow. This was a policy which led to the return, under the Nazi-Soviet pact, of German communists into the tender clutches of the Gestapo.

I am more interested in learning lessons from past mistakes than swapping quotes from Trotsky. One of the lessons the left should have learnt is that 'debating' with fascism is a dead-end road. There are undoubtedly times when one may well be faced with no alternative. 'No platform' is a tactic, but it is one that should not be lightly discarded. Certainly, it should not be jettisoned when the left is in a position to enforce it. That is precisely the road of the KPD and 'social fascism'.

Tony Greenstein
Brighton

Liability

It's probably no accident that the individuals who are most keen to present the British National Party as no longer being a fascist or Nazi party are those who oppose the 'no plat-

form' policy. Arguing that the BNP is neither Nazi nor fascist makes it easier to undermine that policy, dogmatically adhered to by the Socialist Workers Party and others, without any evidence that it is effective.

However, whether the BNP are open or concealed, closet Nazis (which they are trying to become under Griffin) should not be the main factor in evaluating the effectiveness of 'no platform'. Most Nazis who aspire to political power today must conceal their Nazism to some degree or even completely.

Apart from certain politically naive elements, most people on the left, by and large, are not fooled by the BNP trying to become closet Nazis. However, the 'no platform' policy has its drawbacks. Would the SWP turn down an offer to appear on *Question Time* to challenge the views of a semi-concealed Nazi like Nick Griffin in front of millions on national TV?

We need to be flexible enough not to make a dogma of 'no platform', while guarding against any illusions that debate alone can defeat the far right. We ourselves need not invite fascists to debates, but, in the age of the TV, if we turned down an invitation by a third party to challenge the views of people like Nick Griffin, would this not mean taking inflexibility to absurd limits?

At the same time, any communist who fails to understand that fascists, aiming to win support from contradictory class forces, are forced to conceal their true intentions to some degree, even from their own members, is more of a liability to the working class than an asset.

Tony Clark
London

Pissy fit

Sarah McDonald's article on the Glasgow North East by-election is the biggest bit of piss yet ('Nats and left take a beating', November 19).

The claim that the Scottish Socialist Party will not take part in left unity initiatives until Tommy Sheridan has been jailed or removed is total crap. The SSP has always been a party of left unity and it always will be. Sheridan split the left in Scotland by setting up his own party. Even though the by-election result was piss-poor for the SSP, it was a true vote of people supporting a socialist candidate rather than one carried by a media personality.

And how many votes did the CPGB candidate get? Whoops! Sorry, ye didnae stand or put any effort into getting a socialist elected.

Rikki Reid
email

Folly

Your article about Respect's conference and discussion of the points raised by Stuart Richardson in the debate on racism and fascism could give the misleading impression that Socialist Resistance does not "confront the myths about immigration promoted by the mainstream media and parties" or "fight for public services - housing, health, welfare - to meet the needs of all" ("No coalition with 'son of No2EU'", November 19).

We do all of the above - not only as active members of Respect, but through our regular activities, publications and public forums as *Socialist Resistance*. In Birmingham, over the summer, two issues of our regular local bulletin and three issues of a specific anti-fascist supplement were very explicit in this regard.

We have been absolutely clear that in order ultimately to defeat fascism - the BNP, the English Defence League, or whoever - we need to tackle head-on the sewer which allows them to breed. To this end, we call for the building of a broad socialist party that would

precisely address the issues of housing, jobs, etc, and fight for socialist solutions, whilst, at the same time, tackling the issues of racism and anti-immigrant scapegoating.

At the end of the day, an anti-fascist strategy has to be an anti-capitalist one, but, in the here and now, we must not concede an inch of terrain - ideological or physical - to the fascists. That is why when Asian youth turned out to confront the EDL socialists and anti-fascists (not just Socialist Resistance, but the SWP, individual members of Respect, Unite Against Fascism supporters and members of other groups and none) all stood shoulder-to-shoulder with them.

Not to have done so would have been criminal folly.

Brian Standish
SR, Birmingham

Crusty borders

When I was little, my mother used to scold me for leaving my crusts when there were "all those starving children in Africa".

It made me feel guilty and I resolved to try and save all of the crusts that my friends and I left so that we could send them to Africa for the starving children. Later I came across Oxfam and other charities which try to persuade us that if we send the 'too much' we've got to the third world, we can save our consciences and still live well.

Many simplistic socialist souls have long believed that, if we took all the money from the rich, aristocrats and capitalists and shared it out among the masses, we would achieve justice and wealth. Actually, it would work out at about £30 per week each more, which isn't worth fighting a revolution for.

The point, though, is that that's not what socialism is all about. It's about capturing the means of production and wealth. It's about the wealth and abundance creation potential which the capitalist class owns and squanders, and which we would employ to its full capacity for the benefit of all.

So, when we come to the 'no borders' slogan, I am reminded both of the crusts and the share-out. Surely, the point isn't that every impoverished person from the four corners of the globe should come to Britain and share what we've got. In an instant we too would have nothing. Don't say that wouldn't happen. Look around you. Millions are knocking on the door to get in. The welfare state is straining and failing under the pressure. Visit any hospital and, no matter how seriously ill you are, see how long you get to keep the bed. There are millions upon millions of unemployed people in Britain; a full quarter of all 16 to 21-year-olds are unemployed; and there are tens of thousands of utterly wretched communities, mostly those who used to produce things.

The jails are bursting apart. Pensioners are dying and most will no longer now receive a state pension, as 'we' cannot afford it. Millions are struggling to keep a roof over their heads or get on the endless council waiting list for a house. The green belt is dying and being concreted over, school playing fields and parks are being built on, roads and motorways are jam-packed to capacity, and train journeys now equal a long stand or an advance seat reservation. The population is due soon to crash through the 70 million mark.

Into this chaos, you want to introduce the slogan 'no borders' and allow anyone from anywhere just to come in. You want to take this slogan to the people in Britain who have their backs to the wall and feel utterly neglected, deprived, discriminated against and disenfranchised. You want to make this a condition for support for any parliamentary candidate?

Sorry, comrades, I think you've had a stroke of Oxfam liberalism. The answer to the problem is not to allow Africa and Asia to migrate in their millions (which they would, of course) to share the declining wealth we have, but to free the massive wealth *they* have. They need industrial revolutions and mass wealth-creation programmes; they need socialism to feed and clothes themselves and the world. We are part of that global solution, but to suggest open borders, under conditions of capitalist decay, growing poverty, anti-social crime and armed anti-western insurgency right now is simply not credible.

As a communist, I don't believe in money. Ideally, we will abolish it. But right now? We can't because we have to have an abundance of wealth. I don't believe that jails are the answer to any question and under a communist world they will not exist. But right now I have no alternative to them. Do we advocate setting everyone free regardless of their anti-social, murderous or criminal intent? We haven't reached the level of social responsibility and consciousness which would allow such a programme. But open the borders? You actually advocate this now, under conditions of capitalism, scarcity and poverty. It is utopian and deeply reactionary in terms of the current state of the class struggle.

Since wage-slavery began, the working class has sought to limit the labour market. Firstly, through collective bargaining, through protection of skills and trades, limited apprentices, or through mass labour restrictions, limiting production, opposing casual labour, stopping overtime, setting a base level of wages and conditions. Your programme of open borders throws the labour market wide open to the lowest common denominator and poverty-level wages. It puts the working class here and generally in Europe into a position of utter weakness. Trying to organise in such conditions would be virtually impossible: the 'labour market' would be a buyers' market, and the worker prepared to work for nothing will get the job. Forget unions. Under conditions of communism, yes, no borders are an achievable principle; under present-day conditions in Britain it is pious nonsense.

Willie Hunter
Berwick-upon-Tweed

Red mist

You can always rely on the Spartacist League for sheer, babbling, sectarian idiocy. So, in a recent article ('Intrusive and authoritarian', September 10), I expressed support for the main demands as outlined in an SL/Partisan Defence Committee letter (September 3). Which is that all criminal charges be dropped against the 26-year-old teacher, Helen Goddard - who was subsequently imprisoned for having purely consensual sex with a 15-year-old female pupil - and that the age of consent laws should be abolished, to be replaced and guided by the notion of "effective consent" (to use the Sparts' perfectly valid phrase).

However, I also made the surely obvious observation that "trying to establish what is 'effective consent' is complicated by the alienated social-political relations that so palpably exist under capitalism" - that is, there is the ever present danger of sexual favouritism and corruption - so communists call for "alternative legislation to cover sexual misconduct and abuse, based on both effective consent and the *empowerment of youth*" (emphasis added).

True to form, the Spart red mist descends here. So the SL's Julia Emery whips herself into a rage over the CPGB's "liberal illusions" in the capitalist state, which supposedly sees us

granting the right of the government to police our bedrooms and "regulate the sexual activity of youth and children" - making us, it seems, reactionary "guardians of morality" (Letters, November 19).

Er, no, not quite - the clue was in the original article, comrade Emery. We in the CPGB are for the abolition of the irrational and authoritarian age of consent laws as part of a whole raft of demands that we fight for in the *here and now* - precisely in order to win the battle for democracy and hence empower youth. Such as lowering the voting age to 16, democratic control over their school or college, a *real* minimum wage or grant so as to enable independence, access to decent housing, and so on. To fetishise the demand for age of consent abolition - in isolation from other programmatic demands, as the Sparts seem to do - does indeed leave you open to the accusation that your frothy r-r-revolutionary rhetoric in reality amounts to not much more than an 'abusers' charter'. Judging by comrade Emery's dismissal of the very notion of "alternative legislation", the Sparts seem to be against laws prohibiting rape and other non-consensual sexual acts.

As an aside on Roman Polanski, it is not the case, as comrade Emery alleges, that the CPGB has maintained a "studious silence". The *Weekly Worker* does not attempt to comment on every individual case that comes into the media - given our limited resources, that would be an impossible task. But the general principles upheld by the CPGB, to be applied to all similar incidents, can be gleaned from articles such as my September 10 piece.

Eddie Ford
email

Not victimless

I find it extraordinary and even bizarre that Julia Emery of the Spartacist League defends Roman Polanski's actions because the young Samantha Geimer had previously taken Quaaludes and had sexual intercourse.

It is utterly unjustifiable to claim, as Emery and the Spartacists' paper *Workers Vanguard* have done, that drugging and sexually assaulting a person against their express will is acceptable, just because the individual has used sedatives and had sexual relations. I wonder if they have thought through what their proposal would mean if carried to its logical conclusion.

Contrary to the claim of Emery, the official report transcript of the grand jury (March 24 1977) shows that Geimer did not consent in any sense and expressly rejected Polanski's advances, leaving aside the issue of whether she even could have consented in such drugged state or at her level of cognitive development. This was not a victimless crime; there was a victim and she has described herself as such.

The only possible justification for dropping the proceedings against Polanski is that the victim has said she does not want the proceedings to continue and her wishes on the matter should be respected. There is no justification that there should be some special consideration simply because Polanski is a renowned film director. And certainly there is no justification in the way expressed by Emery and the Spartacist League.

Lev Lafayette
Australia

Gratification

While I agree with the spirit of Julia Emery's letter, there are a few things that trouble me. While I agree firmly that the state has no right to intervene in consensual sexual activity, it becomes problematic when we apply this to children or very young people.

In a society that contained proper education, lacking the repression we have now, childhood sexuality would be allowed to develop in a healthy way and informed consent would be more likely. But we do not live in such a society at present, and consent that is actually informed is harder to pin down. Young people who are ill-informed are unlikely to be able to give such consent, as they may not even be aware of many of the basic facts. Consent that is made when one is ignorant is really no consent.

Take also the use of drugs or alcohol. An adult would, as long as they are not pumped with misinformation, be able to consensually accept a drink or even something not so legal. But were I to persuade a child to drink or take drugs, I would be considered at best irresponsible, at worst dangerous and abusive. When I was a child I didn't know anything about drugs and next to nothing about the effects of alcohol. I am sure that many children have a similar lack of knowledge regarding sexual activity.

And, face it, a child is as unlikely to initiate sexual activity, as they would be unlikely to initiate intoxication. Plenty of adults have initiated these activities with me but I have yet to encounter this from a child. It may not be totally unknown, but you cannot deny that it would be rare. Would you guys take me seriously if I claimed to have given a child drugs and used as my defence that not only did they consent but also enjoyed the experience? I doubt it; therefore I see no difference if it is sex.

I don't deny that Julia's position is well intended - but it seems that she and her organisation take an attitude that seems not only ill-thought-out but also a little irresponsible. She suggests no replacement for the current laws (which I don't agree with either), but, society being as it is, we need some form of protection against child abuse. If the current laws were scrapped with nothing to replace them, vulnerable children would be unprotected. Many rape cases, for example, do not result in a conviction due to the fact that one party can claim the other consented. With adults, the line on consent and non-consent is less blurred. So if it is difficult even then, what hope would there be for children? This would mean that those who are sexually inclined towards children in a predatory manner would walk free and leave children more at risk of abuse.

There is also the matter of equality: can someone who is inclined towards children deny that there is an element of power and control involved? It is one thing if children wish to experiment with each other, but an adult inclined towards children would trouble me simply due to the imbalance of power inherent in how they choose to take gratification.

Elizabeth Hoskings
email

Vulgarisation

Comrade Tony Clark is guilty of the most gross vulgarisation when he quotes Lenin's article 'On cooperation' to give credence to the theory of 'socialism in one country' (Letters, October 29).

If comrades take the time to read the article, they will see that Lenin does indeed use the hallowed phrase, "to build a complete socialist society". However, the main flow of the article is to encourage the development of co-operative societies to help redress the balance away from free enterprise and trade within the limitations of the New Economic Policy. To try and equate this with Lenin backing the idea that ultimately a socialist society could be built within the Soviet Union is totally fanciful and out of context.

With the resurgence of capitalism in the western liberal democracies, it had become clear that the Russian Revolu-

tion could no longer carry on down the road that the Bolsheviks had envisaged. Consequently, as Bolshevism withdrew into its nationalist shell, Stalin became the mouthpiece of this historical trend. He alone among the party leaders had at no time ever held any semblance of internationalist sentiment, and he quickly adopted an attitude towards the Russian Revolution of national self-centredness.

As the party slowly became affected by its environment - one of backwardness and semi-barbarity - the Stalinist leadership confirmed its acceptance of the policy of 'communist self-containment', whilst at the same time cloaking itself in the banner of the traditions of Leninist internationalism. Indeed, the only tactics or strategy that Stalin or Stalinists ever followed was one of self-aggrandisement, dressed up as a commitment to the traditions of Marxism.

It is important to distinguish Stalinism - which maintained in a most grotesque fashion aspects of Leninism (industrialisation, collectivisation, modernisation and planning), but which destroyed party democracy, leading to a quasi-autocratic style of government, tainted with hints of tsarism - from the advanced and industrially developed environments of western Europe, where traditionally Marxism had its organic roots.

Colin McGhie
Glasgow

Alternative?

Moshé Machover exposed some quirks of the single transferable vote form of proportional representation, showing that it is theoretically possible for changing a vote from a second to a first preference to make that candidate less likely to be elected (Letters, November 12). He has reminded me of discussions on electoral systems taking place on the newsgroup uk.politics.electoral that I observed many years ago. This flaw of STV had escaped my mind.

However, no electoral system is perfect. In the Scottish parliamentary elections in 2007, with half constituencies and half top-up lists for the regions to make results more proportional, Labour concentrated on constituencies where they stood a chance of election, with the SNP making gains across the whole country. Despite gaining a 5.4% higher share of the vote than Labour (as I found out by entering the data in a spreadsheet), the SNP only beat Labour by one seat!

Under the Scottish system (and similarly in Wales), you can only vote for one candidate for the proportional top-up list. Last time, this meant left voters had to choose between the Scottish Socialist Party, Solidarity, the Socialist Labour Party and, of course, the Greens. The disadvantage of such a split vote was exacerbated by many voters staying at home, unconvinced a vote for any left candidate would make the slightest difference.

Similar splits occurred with the Euro elections, making it difficult to decide where to put a single X on the ballot paper - the British National Party would have been defeated in the North West if enough voters had tactically voted Green to keep them out.

Someone once suggested that votes should be conducted with the entire country as one constituency and no threshold - a party with 0.5% of the vote would get 0.5% of the seats. This, however, would put huge power in party machines, as with all other list systems mentioned above, but to a much greater extent.

The big advantage of STV is that it eliminates the need and motivation for tactical voting. As Moshé argued, tactical voting could theoretically affect results, but there is no way to predict its impact. As is self-evident, tactical voting is an inherent feature

of the present 'first past the post' electoral system.

So let's turn to the alternative that I suspect Moshé advocates, as a Marxist. The government could be made up of representatives from workplaces/industries, plus perhaps local communities. Let's imagine there are industries with 1,000, 10,000 and 100,000 workers respectively. Would the latter have 100 times as many MPs as the former? What then about industries with 100 or 1,000,000 workers?

On top of this, the soviet model of government Marxists traditionally argue for would discriminate against unemployed people, disabled/temporarily ill people, students, pensioners and farmers/peasants. Or does someone have a realistic schema to overcome this dilemma - far more democratic than implemented in Soviet Russia in 1917.

Steve Wallis
Manchester

Arson attack

Last Friday, November 20, at 3.30am, a fascist gang made an arson attack on the home of comrade Yannis Yanatsis in Petralona, Athens. They broke down the front door of his home and threw an incendiary bomb inside. The fire engulfed the building, but, thanks to the people of the neighbourhood and firefighters, it was brought under control. The danger for comrade Yannis and his family sleeping inside was very serious, but fortunately everyone escaped unhurt.

Yannis Yanatsis is a well known member of the central committee of the Workers Revolutionary Party (EEK) and a leading figure in a very active local environmentalist movement that has fought against the privatisation of the Philopapou hill next to the Acropolis, as well as against the destruction of this historic neighbourhood by big capitalist interests. In July 2007 Yannis was viciously attacked by a group of goons with iron bars who emerged from the ranks of the police during a popular protest, and sustained serious head injuries, necessitating life-saving surgery. After this latest attack the police have refused to undertake any serious investigation.

The local population was immediately mobilised in solidarity. On Saturday November 21, a demonstration took place in Petralona and the next day a popular assembly was called. Hundreds of people gathered to discuss the criminal attack and the necessary response. Another mass demonstration has been called for Sunday November 29 and has the support of many left and local environmentalist organisations.

This attack against a leader of our party is not an isolated incident. There is an increasing level of police repression under the minister of public order of the newly elected Pasok government, as was shown by the mass arrest of three hundred 15 and 16-year-old boys and girls during a recent demonstration commemorating the student uprising of 1973 against the military dictatorship. As the first anniversary of the December 2008 revolt approaches, an economically bankrupt Greece is ripe for another social explosion. The pseudo-socialist government is readying the repressive apparatus of the capitalist state, and fascist groups operating under its protection have become very active, particularly against vanguard fighters.

We call on the international workers', youth and popular movements, which in the past have shown such solidarity with Greek revolutionaries, particularly last December, to denounce the criminal attack against comrade Yannis Yanatsis and the new wave of repression in Greece.

Samira Ahmad
EEK

ACTION

Communist Forums

London: Sunday evenings. Study topic, plus weekly political report from Provisional Central Committee. Ring 07950 416922 for details.

November 29, 4pm: Cyrus Bina: Is it the oil, stupid? Venue: university of London Union, Malet Street, WC1 (Nearest tube stations: Euston Square or Goodge Street).

December 6, 5pm: John Bellamy Foster, *The Ecological Revolution: Making Peace with the Planet*. Subject: 'The ecology of destruction'.

December 13, 5.30pm: 'Jesus and the politics of religion', Lucas Arms, 245a Grays Inn Road, London WC1 (Kings Cross tube).

Oxford: Study group, every Monday evening, studying David Harvey's *Limits to capital*.

Details: oxfordcommunists@googlemail.com.

South Wales: Call Bob for details: 07816 480679.

CPGB podcasts

Every Monday, we upload a podcast of commentary on the current political situation. In addition, the site will feature voice files of public meetings and other events: <http://cpgb.podbean.com>.

Communist Students meetings

London: Every Wednesday, 7.30pm: Introduction to Marxism series, Institute of Education, 20 Bedford Way, WC1 (Russell Square tube).

December 2: Society of the future and how we get there. ben@communiststudents.org.uk; 07792 282830.

Manchester: Every Tuesday, 7pm, University of Manchester Student Union, Oxford Road, Manchester M13.

December 1, 6pm: France 1968: ready to take power? www.communiststudents.org.uk.

Oxford: Mondays. e-mail: oxfordcommunists@googlemail.com.

Sheffield: Every Sunday, 7pm. 07730 682193; sheffield@communiststudents.org.uk

Radical Anthropology Group

Tuesdays, until December 15, 6.45pm: Evening course, 'Introduction to anthropology: the human revolution', St Martin's Community Centre, 43 Carol Street, London NW1.

December 1: 'Hobbits and "Out of Africa"'. Speaker: Chris Stringer. www.radicalanthropologygroup.org.

Historical Materialism

Friday November 27-Sunday November 29: conference, School of Oriental and African Studies, Thornhaugh Street, London WC1. Waged £50; unwaged £20.

<http://mercury.soas.ac.uk/hm/conf2009Reg.htm>.

Close Campsfield

Saturday November 28, 12 noon: 16th anniversary demonstration at Campsfield detention centre, main gates, Langford Lane, Kidlington, Oxfordshire. 2.30pm: Meeting of Barbed Wire Britain Network to End Refugee and Migrant Detention, Exeter Hall, Kidlington.

Organised by Campaign to Close Campsfield: www.closecampsfield.org.uk.

Consensus is oppression

Friday December 4, 1.30pm: Conference, meeting room 4.08, School of Business Management, Queen Mary, University of London - conflictive democracy through global movement networks.

Organised by Pluto Books: events@plutobooks.com.

Climate emergency

Saturday December 5, 10am: Bike ride, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2. 12 noon: Rally, Speakers Corner, Hyde Park, London W2.

1.30pm: March, Grosvenor Square, London W1, to surround parliament for 'The wave', 3pm. Organised by Campaign Against Climate Change: www.campaigncc.org.

Latin America 2009

Saturday December 5, 9.30am to 5pm: Conference, Congress House, Great Russell Street, London WC1. Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Colombia, Honduras, Mexico - facing the challenges.

Supported by Cuba Solidarity Campaign, Venezuela Solidarity Campaign, Unite, Sertuc: www.latinamerica2009.org.uk.

Jesus and the politics of religion

Tuesday December 8, 7pm: Public meeting, SOAS students union, 10 Thornhaugh Street, London WC1. Speaker: Jack Conrad.

Organised by Communist Students: www.communiststudents.org.uk.

Human rights day

Thursday December 10, 1.30pm. Rally, Dale Farm, St Martin's Square, Basildon - defending Britain's largest gypsy site.

Organised by No Borders: noborderslondon@lists.riseup.net.

Right to Work

Saturday January 30, 11.30am: Conference - 'Fight for every job'. Central Hall, Oldham Street, Manchester M1.

Organised by Right to Work: www.righttowork.org.uk.

CPGB wills

Remember the CPGB and keep the struggle going. Put our party's name and address, together with the amount you wish to leave, in your will. If you need further help, do not hesitate to contact us.

SWP

Defend Rees-German and the Left Platform

Peter Manson looks at the organisational moves to pre-empt a full debate, the factional war in the latest *Pre-conference Bulletin* and the ending of the silence over Jane Loftus

At last, almost three weeks after the Communication Workers Union leadership unanimously called off the postal workers' strike in an abject surrender to Royal Mail and the Labour government, the Socialist Workers Party has broken its silence on the role of Jane Loftus, CWU president and former SWP member.

Everyone knew, virtually from the moment the strike was called off, that comrade Loftus voted for the sell-out and that the SWP central committee immediately called her to account, demanding she reverse her stance and renounce the interim agreement. But the SWP leadership breathed not a word about it - presumably because it thought it more important to retain a relationship with Loftus than issue a public statement to reassure the SWP's confused ranks. Finally, however, *Socialist Worker* has published a brief statement, headed 'CWU president resigns from SWP' (November 28).

Pointing out that comrade Loftus's backing for the agreement was "in sharp contradiction with the SWP's position" and had "caused problems for our members in the union and much wider", the piece reports that members of the CC were unable to persuade her to change her mind: "She recognised that this brought her into sharp opposition to the party on a very important matter, and resigned from the SWP - although she remains keen to continue working with party members."

The authors of the central committee document, 'Industrial perspectives', which appears in the second SWP *Pre-conference Bulletin* (known as the *Internal Bulletin* or *IB*), clearly have the Loftus case in mind when they write: "We should not think that our own comrades are wholly immune to the pressures generated by holding official positions Sometimes they buckle We have to put in place better mechanisms ... to ensure as far as possible the accountability of comrades in such positions."

In fact there had been some talk in the SWP of the possibility of a return to the rank-and-file of the 1960s and 70s, and the time when members were instructed not to stand for official trade union positions, but the 'Industrial perspectives' document purportedly clears this up: "We still want to contest for union positions, but the main focus is the rank and file."

However, the central committee is continuing to stress its new perspective - which it insists is totally in opposition to that of the former leadership of John Rees and his Left Platform faction - that working class resistance to the effects of the recession is now the main question: "We cannot fight the battles of 2009 and 2010 with the methods of 2007 and 2008. We have argued for a long time that more militant tactics (occupations, all-out strikes, walkouts, etc) have a much better chance of being accepted by workers now and our job is to give a lead, not trail behind."

That is why the leadership is now going all out to build the January 30



Martin Smith, Lindsey German, Alex Callinicos, John Rees: disunited colours of SWP

2010 Right to Work conference as its most immediate campaigning priority. Comrades Rees, Lindsey German, Chris Nineham and others in the Left Platform counter by accusing the CC of playing down the role of 'united fronts' - not least the Stop the War Coalition, the stronghold of the three Left Platform leaders.

In fact Rees and co have advocated a new 'united front' which will pull in broad forces to mobilise a fightback against job losses and attacks on wages and conditions. But the CC, in another document in *IB* No2, titled 'Right to work ... the road from Brighton', write: "... in the wake of the collapse of Respect and the 'Offu cheque' [in 2007 John Rees accepted on behalf of the SWP front, Organisation For Fighting Unions, a \$10,000 donation from a Dubai businessman] many in the party believed we were not in a position to simply kick off what some saw as an 'overarching united front against the recession'."

So what then is Right to Work? While the CC admits that "It will not immediately knock aside every other campaign that is attempting to organise opposition to the recession", Right to Work "can do something that nobody else does. It can bring together a combination of the better parts of the union leaderships, key workers' struggles and the energy of young people and students. We can build a vibrant campaign that centres its activities on building 'solidarity and resistance'."

Well, perhaps I am missing something, but I really cannot see any substantive differences between the two

sides on this issue - although both do their best to manufacture them. In fact it is this rather petty faction fight that dominates *IB* No2, with all six CC documents directed at cementing the changed line and doing down the Rees faction.

However, while the differences may be petty, the bureaucratic methods used by the CC against its rival are hardly democratic. In this, Martin Smith, Alex Callinicos and co are merely employing the methods used by Rees at the time of the last split - over Respect in 2007. In the run-up to SWP conference, held every year in January, disciplinary action taken against dissidents prevents them fighting their corner and potentially spreading the contagion of debate into the conference itself.

That is why it is vital for healthy forces in the SWP to forthrightly demand an immediate reinstatement of all those who have recently been suspended or expelled and an end to so-called disciplinary action till at least the close of January's conference. Instead of the usual tame rally, the SWP is in urgent need of a full and honest political debate. If it is going to be of any real use to our movement, that must be normalised. In that sense John Rees and the Left Platform should be defended from the organisational campaign being conducted by Martin Smith and the CC. Meanwhile both sides can be politically exposed as thoroughly opportunist, economic, sectarian, elitist and anti-democratic. The bureaucratic centralist ban on the right of members to form permanent or semi-permanent fac-

tions must be ended by conference. Indeed the whole sordid debate between the CC and the Left Platform ought to be held in public. *Socialist Worker* must be available to more than one faction. That way wider forces can be engaged and educated. It would also help no end for *Socialist Worker* to open its pages to contributions from other organisations on the revolutionary left. That would strike a powerful blow for partyism and help overcome the rotten tradition of irresponsible split following irresponsible split.

Although the principal leaders of the Left Platform have not been targeted, several of their followers have been hauled before the disputes committee and three - Claire Solomon, Alex Snowdon and Tony Dowling - have so far been expelled for what appears to be nothing at all. Comrade Solomon was ejected for her role in organising what seems to be a perfectly harmless event at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and comrade Snowdon on a vague charge of "factionalising" (see 'The fight gets ugly' *Weekly Worker* November 19), while comrade Dowling from Tyneside was hauled over the coals for allegedly making a sexist joke. In the meantime *Socialist Worker* editor and CC member Chris Bambery - who, although he has not signed up to the Left Platform, was regarded as a Rees ally on the previous leadership - is also under fire (see below).

The aim of these dirty tricks appears to be to persuade comrade Rees that his position is hopeless and he might as well jump before he is

pushed. While he shows no sign of doing so right now, it seems pretty clear that he has no chance of winning the day in January.

In the meantime he is posing as a staunch defender of party democracy and free and open debate (although readers may recall that last year he thought the CC's democracy commission sop was a step too far). In 'Building the party: the perspectives of the Left Platform' - signed by all the original signatories, but surely penned by comrade Rees himself - we read: "No-one should feel nervous about putting forward their views for fear of being denounced as factional or, worse still, of facing disciplinary action. The real tradition of Leninism ... is of free and open debate ..."

United fronts

The row over what the SWP loves to call 'united fronts', centring on Right to Work and the STWC, is instructive.

Comrade Rees contends that the CC response to the crisis is both too economic (needless to say, he does not use that word) and too narrow. Referring to the likely "renewed militancy" in the coming period, he writes: "We thought that it would be thoroughly political and that it would depend for its success on revolutionaries relating to it in a political and not a syndicalist manner." However, "relating in a serial fashion to each strike as it arises will neither create a revolutionary leadership in the working class nor allow that class to solve the immediate problems of generalised unemployment, wage reductions and public sector cuts".

What is needed is "a broad, united left organisation on a national scale that can deliver solidarity to each dispute as it occurs on a far more effective level than the SWP alone is capable of doing". So isn't that what the CC's Right to Work campaign is intended to be? No, says comrade Rees, RTW has "the character of a party front, not a genuine united front". Why? Because the "call for the conference was effectively issued by the SWP CC".

However, the CC has a point when it says the SWP is "not in a position", following Respect and Offit, to launch something on the scale of the STWC (in other words, the SWP is not trusted). In any case, this is just a question of degree. All of the SWP's 'united fronts' have begun with the organisation itself - often, it is true, alongside a handful of others - making the call for their launch and then running them for the most part.

However, since when were these 'united fronts' aimed at creating "a revolutionary leadership in the working class"? Think of Respect, Stop the War, the Anti-Nazi League - which of them tried to pull the masses towards the politics of revolution? As everyone knows, the SWP has always insisted that in order to keep them as broad as possible principled socialist politics must be kept out. Its idea - shared by both sides of the current divide - is that the "revolutionary leadership" already exists in the form of "the party" and its 'united fronts' are viewed as recruiting vehicles for the SWP itself.

Rees talks about the "huge credibility" gained by the SWP from the STWC: "We took this process a step further with the wider project of Respect, which had significant success until its crisis in 2007." But the reason why even now "Building the anti-war movement has to be a central priority" is that "21st century capitalism and imperialism are intertwined", so we can expect further military adventures.

For its part, the CC does not disagree: "The Stop the War Coalition, set up eight years ago, remains a very important united front and the SWP is central to STW groups in towns and colleges up and down the country At last year's conference and since, there have been accusations from some of the party's ex-leaders, and most recently from the Left Platform faction, that the SWP is giving up on STW. This has never been true, as comrades who have been leading and building it for eight years can testify" ('Imperialism and building STW').

However, Rees alleges: "Since 2007 [when he was still the principal leader?], the SWP leadership's attitude to the anti-war movement has been equivocal". Today it is "patchy and in some places very inconsistent". So "For two of the critical weeks before the national demonstration against the war in Afghanistan the paper carried, in one issue, nothing on the war and, in the second issue, only one short article". He argues that the "very successful demonstration of 10,000-plus on October 24" happened despite the fact that "Many of our stronger areas did not mobilise large numbers of SWP members or put on their usual levels of transport", while "Party Notes in September instructed colleges to send only one comrade per university to the Stop the War conference."

Eight Tyneside supporters of the Left Platform back this up: "We have been told directly that we must not build a Stop the War group in Sunderland, and instructed not to do Stop the War activity at Sunderland University. Comrades were discouraged from going to the national demo on October 24." Their expelled comrade, Alex Snowdon, claims on his blog that Tyneside SWP has now organised an SWP anti-war public meeting on the

same evening as a Tyneside Stop the War organisational meeting (<http://luna17activist.blogspot.com>).

It does seem that the leadership has not been quite as enthusiastic as previously about mobilising for the STWC and, while this may partly be because RTW is now the priority, there can be little doubt that there is also an anti-Rees element being played out.

Comrade Rees also takes up the argument that 'united front work' has "pulled us to the right in practice". But the principled behaviour of people like himself in the STWC has "always prevented it from becoming a mere 'peace' movement", he claims: "Our speakers have always made anti-imperialist, not merely 'peace' speeches, and they have always connected the war with wider social and economic issues, as you would expect revolutionaries to do."

What a joke! You would expect "revolutionaries" to link the question of war to that of the working class struggle against capital, not spout the kind of classless anti-imperialism, linked to 'better spend the cash on the NHS' arguments, that we have become accustomed to from the likes of Rees and German. The words 'working class', 'socialism' and 'capitalism' have rarely passed their lips on STWC platforms.

As well as the six CC perspectives documents, *IB No2* also contains a leadership 'Reply to the "Left Platform"', written in the style you normally associate with Alex Callinicos. Placing quote marks around 'Left Platform', which he contends is actually a *rightwing* faction, the author notes that the Left Platform refers to united front work as a "strategy" in its document, whereas, of course, "the creation of a united front is a tactic".

This leads him to a more or less accurate definition of what a united front ought to be. Its purpose is to "work with and against the reformists and thereby to win, over time, the majority of the working class" (my emphasis). But, you may ask, when has the SWP ever behaved in this way in its 'united fronts'? Did it try to expose the reformism of George Galloway in Respect, of the union leaders and Labourites in the STWC and Unite Against Fascism?

In reality such organisations are without exception *popular* fronts (or an *unpopular* front in the case of Respect), where the SWP agrees to drop, or suspend, its revolutionism in order to attract and retain forces to its right. As John Rees himself has noted, popular fronts are defined by the fact that the right wing is allowed to set the agenda, often despite being in a minority.

But for Callinicos, all this is a side issue: "The truth is that the 'Left Platform' is led by comrades fixated on the recent past" who "refuse to acknowledge that circumstances have changed. And so they blame their own party for not trying hard enough to recreate the mass movements of a few years ago". It is a "combination of nostalgia and personal bitterness".

State of the party

The CC document 'Building the party' inadvertently exposes the disastrous shape of the SWP.

It begins by continuing the polemic against the Reesites by reminding comrades that "this is not a perspective based on 'retreating' into party-building. It is one which requires the entire party throwing itself into strengthening our united front work and building the resistance".

But for the most part this article is pretty much the same as every report on the question of organisation that the leadership has ever published. "The party" is continuing to make great strides, membership is growing and the circulation of *Socialist Worker* is still on the up ("on average 9,800

copies of *Socialist Worker* each week" are sold - an increase of 700 on a year ago - and there are "over 4,000" subscribers).

Whereas Rees and co conclude from monthly figures reported in *Party Notes* that membership has declined, the CC assures comrades that "registered membership" stands at 6,417 as at October 2009, compared to 6,155 the previous October. As we know, however, a 'registered member' is someone who says they *want* to be a member - ie, has filled in an application form - and a good number of such 'members' are never heard of again.

This is clearly revealed by the bald statement: "So far this year we have recruited 1,041 members" (which includes 225 students in the autumn term alone). A large number. But you do not have to be a Sherlock Holmes to note the discrepancy - over a thousand new recruits have only produced 260 extra members. What happened to the rest? Or did 700-800 other comrades drop out?

The truth is that very few of these "registered members" are real. For example, only about half pay any dues at all (although this does not stop the CC from boasting of the recent great improvement - the figure has gone up to 51% - "an 11% increase on three years ago"). Rather forlornly the CC pleads: "... asking comrades to pay subs is not a secondary question. We have to encourage every member to pay subs."

But it is not only dues payment that is sorely lacking. What about *any* sort of commitment? We are not told what percentage of members ever turn up to an SWP event, but the CC reminds its comrades: "Every person who joins the party should be contacted as soon as possible." What a good idea. And: "Every branch should try and encourage members to attend meetings. A text is not enough; we should phone comrades or visit them."

The Left Platform does not address the central question of membership criteria, but thinks that the situation is bad because of the CC's failure to launch a "campaign of sustained recruitment". Apparently the "areas of the party that have avoided the party-isolationist method" - those that are still "working in united fronts" - are "ones that are growing". They would say that, wouldn't they?

However, comrade Rees has a really exciting proposal to rejuvenate the branches: "The standard format of theoretical/political discussion followed by practical organising is a barrier to effective intervention." What is needed are "activist meetings", where "current priorities" are "briefly" outlined by a single speaker, and then everyone gets down to talking about *doing* things: "Routine meetings which rush through organising tasks will not appeal to new members and contacts energised by the strikes and movements."

So people will be more inspired by the prospect of handing out leaflets and staffing a stall than they will by *politics*? By a theory that arms them with the vision of a new world and the means of achieving it? But the CC actually concurs: the Left Platform's proposals for a "rearrangement that focuses on activity ... isn't a ridiculous suggestion" - although the problem is, it is unlikely to change much. Too right.

Socialist Worker

The CC seems to have held back from endorsing the proposals of national committee members John Rose and Mike Simons in *IB No1* for further dumbing down *Socialist Worker* in order to make it more attractive to 'ordinary workers' engaged in resisting attacks brought on by the recession.

In '*Socialist Worker*: a turn to the class', the leadership contends that, while there is a "need for short articles, humour, clarity and much else",

a "high emphasis on theory" ought to be retained.

Also in *IB No1* "Anne and Martin (West London)" - who, I commented, appear to be close to the CC (see 'Triumvirate's reorientation faces Left Platform rebellion' *Weekly Worker* October 29) - held forth on the poor state of SWP branches and duly apportioned the blame to the former Rees-dominated leadership. In *IB No2* they turn their attention to *Socialist Worker*.

In 2004, they write, it "became simply 'the paper of the movement'. As a result, it published uncritically a great deal of very poor stuff, some of which actually ran counter to our politics The newspaper became unreliable, unauthoritative and lightweight, and comrades were actually ashamed of the paper we had to sell every week ..."

They go on: "The cardinal sin for revolutionaries entering into united fronts ... is to forget their politics, adapt to the movement and to a degree dissolve themselves into it. But that is what the paper did and - worse than this - consciously."

However, "... five years later the paper is only still recovering". Despite the "influence and expertise of a truly excellent team of journalists", there "still remains an editorial tendency to downplay the role of informing the membership and periphery in favour of blind optimism".

There is no mistaking the object of their criticism: the editor. This is borne out by the contribution from three Left Platform comrades, including someone called "Lindsey", who complain about the "attacks on Chris Bambery, a CC member of long standing, around *SW*". A letter criticising the paper and calling for his removal as editor appears to have been orchestrated by two full-timers, Joseph Choonara and Rob Owen." Comrade Choonara has been proposed by the outgoing central committee as part of the 2010 CC slate, which also, strangely enough, contains the name of Chris Bambery.

Bizarre

As well as the factional battle and one or two old-style 'how our branch does things' offerings, *IB No2* also has other contributions of note. They include 'Stopping the BNP - do

we just contain them?' by "Andy and Doug (Birmingham)".

These comrades take issue with "Ben", who in *IB No1* reported how his local Defend Council Housing group refused to admit a *former* member of the BNP. They provide extensive quotes from Phil Piratin's *Our flag stays red* to show how the 'official' CPGB in the 1930s worked with *current* members of the British Union of Fascists, winning them away from the extreme right in the process.

Then there is "Richard (East Anglia)", who reports the allegation that it was no less than Martin Smith and Weyman Bennett who wanted to drop 'no platform' at an NC meeting, yet at the October party council comrade Bennett seconded the motion reaffirming it. Richard asks: "Did two CC members deliberately mislead one of the most important of the democratic forums in the party, to score points in what they regard as a faction fight?"

Finally there is a long contribution from "Graham (Glasgow)", which bizarrely combines support for Workers Power's call for an anti-capitalist party with strong criticism of the SWP's behaviour in Respect (they "led efforts to block essential socialist demands, such as a worker's wage ..., lesbian and gay equality - apparently so-called 'shibboleths'") and the demand for "a Scottish-based leadership with full authority to act on our national terrain".

Graham contends: "It is time for the SWP in Scotland to have become a fully-fledged party within the IST." This would, after all, be the natural corollary of the outcome of the Scottish day school on the national question, held during the summer, where the SWP in Scotland "overwhelmingly endorsed voting 'yes' in an independence referendum".

So can we look forward to the SWP following the example of Militant Labour? Will there be a split between the International Socialist Tendency (Scotland) and the Socialist Workers Party in England and Wales? Unlikely, but it does show to what extent the poison of separatism has affected the opportunist left ●

IB No2 can be read on the CPGB website at www.cpgb.org.uk/worker/794/PreconfBulletintwo2009.pdf.

Fighting fund

Best read

Another month, another target reached. Once more we have broken through the £1,000 barrier, as our November fighting fund reaches an excellent £1,249.

In my mailbox this week I found a handy £60 cheque from TR, £15 from FJ (added to his resubscription), plus an early Christmas card from comrade SB, who encloses a tenner and writes: "Thank you for a wonderful paper - it's the best read of the week."

I also received three donations via our website, totalling £80. There was a more than useful £50 from TG, £20 from LR, who thanks us for the *Weekly Worker* online, and £10 from JS, who is more specific: "Just a thank you for SWP bulletin No2." Yes, what a pity the SWP itself doesn't realise how interesting and useful their internal debates are for the whole left. These three comrades were among 14,989 visitors to our site, almost all of whom are online readers.

This figure remains impressive because our paper is not intended

to be an easy read. We treat readers seriously, as we do developments on the left. Where some light-mindedly dismiss the debates, splits and halfway house projects of the organised left as mere gossip, the *Weekly Worker* recognises that the existing left is not only part of what stops the advance of the working class to socialism, but is also part of the solution. That is why the paper not only has so many readers, but so many *partisan* readers.

Hence the third component part of this month's fighting fund total, those who have taken out standing orders of various sizes, which amounted to an excellent £265 over the last seven days. Thanks once again to SK, RP, DO and GD - and to all contributors to our fighting fund for helping us beyond our target ●

Robbie Rix

Fill in a standing order form (back page), donate via our website, or send cheques, payable to Weekly Worker

ARMED FORCES

Tip of an iceberg

We must support the rebellions of brave individuals in the military, writes **Jim Moody**. But collective organisation is the key

Lance corporal Joe Glenton was sentenced on November 18 to 28 days in prison for daring to speak out against the war in Afghanistan and for heading the Stop the War Coalition march on October 24. He faces a possible 10-year sentence if found guilty on charges of desertion and refusing to obey orders. While many in the armed forces agree with him politically, or at least have a certain sympathy for him, his stand is a rare one in modern times. For example, back in April 2006, RAF flight lieutenant Malcolm Kendall-Smith was prosecuted for refusing to go to Iraq. He was sentenced to eight months in civilian prison, fined £20,000 (his life savings), and kicked out of the RAF.

It goes without saying that every anti-war and working class activist must rally to the defence of such courageous individuals. There should be demonstrations outside the army's 'corrective training centre' in Colchester, where he is held, demanding his unconditional freedom. The top brass rightly fears that that he is just the tip of a growing iceberg in the armed forces of those who oppose the war.

However, while the brave actions of a Joe Glenton can have an exemplary effect, it is only when the state is faced with mass, collective resistance from within the armed forces that it will be forced to end the war.

Such collective resistance has a long pedigree. Over 200 years ago, in 1797, the Spithead and Nore mutinies aboard naval ships were triggered by appalling conditions, poor pay and savage discipline. Each crew elected delegates. Not a few of them sided with the French Revolution and opposed British moves to sweep away the internally fractious Jacobin regime by mounting a global naval war. Demands around pay and conditions

were overwhelmingly supported at Spithead, forcing the navy bureaucracy and government to concede. All crews were given an unconditional pardon - although the subsequent, more political demands at the Nore, including immediate peace with France and the dissolving of parliament, were rejected. The most noted leaders were executed or transported to Australia.

Immediately following World War I there were numerous mutinies and strikes in the British, Italian, French and German armies. British and empire troops staged demobilisation revolts. On the night of December 9-10 1918, soldiers of the Royal Artillery stationed at the Le Havre base in France burnt down several depots. Suffering atrocious living conditions at Kimmel Park in Wales, on March 4 1919 Canadian troops elected delegates and took over several camps; by the end of that month 30,000 men had been repatriated. But continuing demob delays led to a dozen more mutinies and riots by Canadian troops billeted in Britain in 1919.

Nor did British troops relish the prospect of being sent to quell the Russian Revolution, which the British and 13 other capitalist governments were organising to destroy. Royal Navy contingents refused to fight the Bolsheviks. There had anyway been mutinous discussions on the lower decks in summer 1918, centred on the appalling pittance paid to sailors, who had received only one pay increase (of a penny a day, in 1912) since 1852.

In 1919, mutinies broke out on minesweepers in Rosyth; Navy men prevented the First Destroyer Flotilla from returning to the war in the Baltic; 150 sailors left their ships at Port Edgar upon hearing they were expected to sail for the Baltic; marines were used to disperse sailors demanding leave on the aircraft carrier *Vindictive* in Copenhagen; minesweeper crews in the Baltic refused to 'turn to' and return to the Gulf of Finland.

In January 1919, having been lied to about being demobilised, 20,000 soldiers mutinied in Southampton, taking over the docks and refusing to obey orders.¹ By February 1919, large numbers of British soldiers were defying the command to cross the Channel.

Formed in 1919 to combat forces' unrest over slow demobilisation, the 6th Battalion of the Royal Marines was sent first to Murmansk and then to Lake Onega,

whereupon it too was hit by mutiny. Two of its companies refused duty, leading to 90 marines being court-martialled. Also in northern Russia, a mutiny in the 13th Battalion of the Yorkshire Regiment only ended when British officers called in white Russian machine gunners. Nearly 9,000 reservists were recalled to the army in 1919, but were unwilling to be used in the coal strike or in Ireland - so much so that in May 1919 several hundred skirmished with local police in Aldershot.

Political context

Of course, all such rebellions take place within a definite political context. For example, when workers begin to think as a class or feel betrayed as a class, this will inevitably find reflection in the armed forces. The great crash of 1929 derailed the Labour government and split the Labour Party. Prime minister Ramsay MacDonald and other leading ministers defected and formed a 'cuts, cuts, cuts' national government with the Tories and a section of the Liberals. Capitalism was widely perceived as having failed.

In September 1931, sailors from 10 warships moored in the Cromarty Firth off Invergordon learned of proposed pay reductions of up to 25%. Voting for a strike and singing the 'Red flag', the navy men's proposals for action gained escalating support among sailors from the fleet. There was stock exchange panic and concessions were speedily agreed. Ring leaders were, however, jailed and others discharged from the navy. Seeking a scapegoat, the police were given the go-ahead to raid the offices of the CPGB and its paper, the *Daily Worker*.

World War II again gave rise to democratic demands and political agitation in the British military. In British-occupied Egypt, the Cairo Forces' Parliament met in February 1944, constituted by delegates from army units in the vicinity chosen in 'mock elections'. The official CPGB proved increasingly influential, but in Egypt was firmly committed to the election of a Labour government. Meeting once a week, delegates voted to nationalise the banks, land, coalmines and transport. When Leo Abse, who subsequently became a Labour MP, moved a motion supporting nationalisation of the Bank of England, he was arrested and the assembly was dissolved by order.²

As World War II ended, demands for rapid demobilisation were, as at the end of World War I, backed up by action, including strikes. US military personnel in Germany and the Philippines formed soldiers' committees and demonstrated to be allowed to return home immediately. Christmas Day 1945 saw 4,000 US soldiers marching in Manila to the 21st Replacement Depot behind a banner demanding: 'We want ships!' In January 1946 several soldiers' committees were operating; the Manila committee represented 139,000 US soldiers. On January 8, thousands of GIs in Paris marched down the Champs-Élysées to a rally in front of the US embassy, where they shouted, "Get us home!" The next day in Frankfurt am Main, speakers at a GI demo declared that their commanding general was "too scared to face us here".³

British forces were affected too.

RAF servicemen went on strike in India at Cawnpore (now Kanpur) and Jodhpur. *The Times* reported that 2,000 airmen at Mauripur had begun a "stay-in strike".⁴ As one airman involved said, "There is no doubt in my mind that as a result of that strike the rate of demobilisation quickened considerably."⁵ Although some strike leaders were jailed, public pressure, including on MPs, led to early releases or reductions in sentences.

Going forward to the Vietnam war, we see how disenchantment and military failure combined with a growing politicisation. This was greatly helped by the anti-war movement across the world, including in the US itself. Thousands of conscripts exiled themselves. Others ritualistically burnt their draft cards. Defying the military hierarchy, a many-headed clandestine press grew within the armed forces. Papers were started up all over the US, as well as large US bases abroad, especially in Germany and Japan.

At the start of the Tet Offensive in early 1968 there were no more than 10 papers of the GI press. By that autumn there were twice as many, the number doubling again by the following spring. A peak of 90 or so papers was maintained from the spring of 1970 to the end of 1971. While activists in the army and marine corps dominated the GI press titles, by spring 1972 the number of titles in the airforce and navy was almost on a par.⁶

The demonstrations in uniform by soldiers and other members of the US armed forces show what can be achieved despite military discipline and the threat of jail. The generals and admirals were unable to keep 'their' men and women isolated from the movement opposing the Vietnam.

Against the lies spouted by John J Rambo (Sylvester Stallone's character) in *First blood*, there are absolutely no recorded instances of any organised opponent of the Vietnam war abusing servicemen, verbally or otherwise: it just did not happen. That was because anti-war protesters knew all about the opposition to the war from within the ranks. This has a lesson for us now.

Warmongers of all stripes recently found a heaven-sent gift in the tiny Islamist group, Ahle Sunnah al Jamah - a splinter from the banned al-Muhajiroun - whose supporters shouted "terrorists" and waved placards saying, "Anglian soldiers go to hell" and "Butchers of Basra", as 200 soldiers from the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Anglian Regiment paraded through Luton in March 2009. Yet, whatever the many shortcomings of its Lindsey German-John Rees-Andrew Murray leadership, the Stop the War Coalition has quite rightly promoted Military Families Against the War and refuses to see the rank and file in the armed forces as enemies who should come home in coffins. All serious groups in the anti-war movement recognise full well that those in uniform are in the main drawn from the ranks of the working class and need to be won over to our side if we are going to successfully force a withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan.

'Support our boys'

Many join the armed forces to learn a trade or just to escape the mind-numbing tedium of unemployment. They

are in effect economic conscripts. Our task is to give a democratic content to their discontent, frustration, anger and protests. That is why we call for trade union and political organisation in all branches of the military, for free and open debate of all questions without any strictures.

Demands to democratise the forces' command structures are likewise essential, including the election and recallability of officers. If we call for MPs and other representatives to be accountable, the same must apply to those whose decisions may mean life or death.

In addition service personnel must have the right to publicly oppose political decisions. If, as bourgeois politicians often claim, soldiers in Afghanistan reflect a cross-section of UK society, it would be strange indeed if a large swathe do not share with a clear majority of the population an outright opposition to the war. They should have the right to debate and organise politically around the demand for an immediate withdrawal.

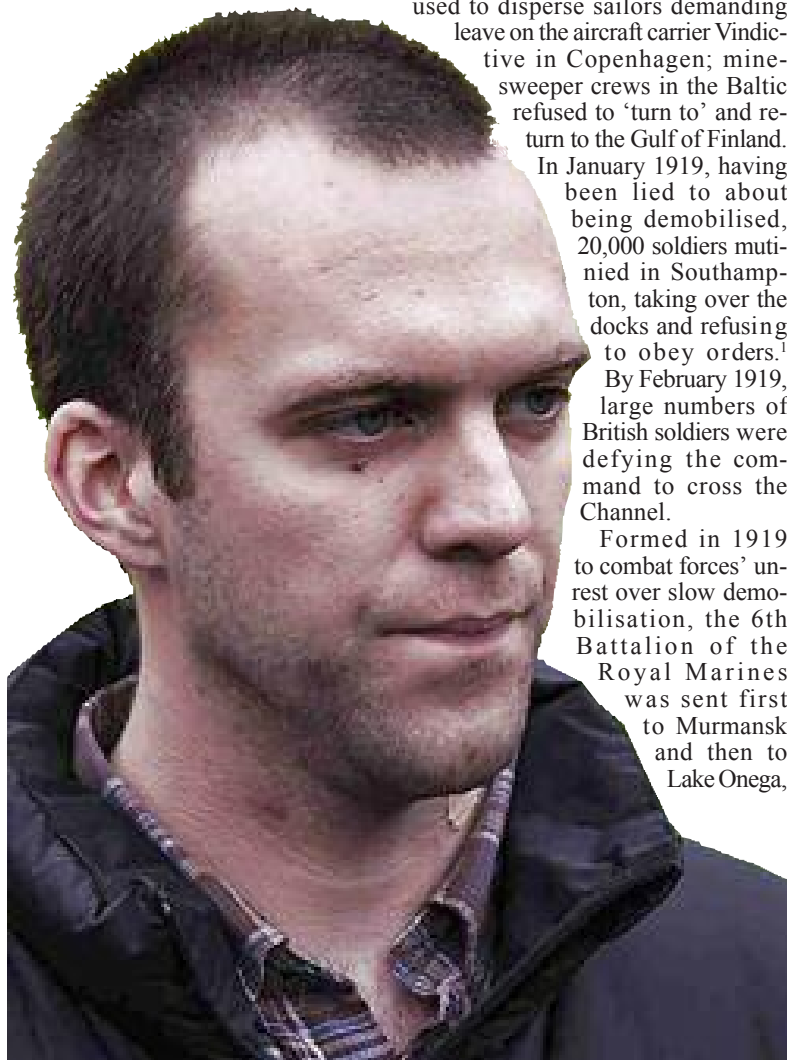
Marxists want to divide the armed forces. Those at the bottom have diametrically opposed class interests to those at the top, who overwhelmingly come from within the tiny minority that constitutes the ruling class. We want troops out of Afghanistan now because we oppose all imperialist military attacks, wars and occupations and support the right of peoples oppressed by imperialism to self-determination. US-UK imperialism, however, is not only carrying out a brutal war in Afghanistan - which does not bring democracy but rather keeps the country in the hands of the landowning tribal elite, backward imams, warlords and corrupt politicians - and has resulted in around 10,000 civilian deaths. More than a thousand coalition troops have also been killed, over 240 of them British. Many more have been dreadfully maimed. Rather than calling for helicopters and better kit and equipment, we communists want them out of harm's way.

That is why we defend Joe Glenton and others like him in the armed forces who are calling for an end to British involvement in Afghanistan. While such brave individuals are to be applauded, however, *organised* opposition to the war in Afghanistan is the key. Unity is strength in the military, as it is in the workplace.

Websites like *ARSS* and *Rum Ration* have shown that there is an appetite for debate and discussion in the ranks - going from daily grumbles to the beginnings of profound questioning. Of course, the ministry of defence and the top brass have choked off these particular forums over the last couple of years. Other ways and means will doubtless be found. Thought cannot be extinguished ●

Notes

1. See <http://libcom.org/history/1919-the-southampton-mutiny>.
2. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leo_Abse.
3. David van Vlymen at www.bbc.co.uk/worldpeopleswar/user/13/u2562513.shtml.
4. *The Times* January 24 1946.
5. David May, 'Lessons of the post-WWII soldiers' movement: the strikes of 1945-1946' (www.socialistappeal.org/uslaborhistory/lessons_of_the_postww2_soldiers.html).
6. See 'Vietnam and the US armed forces' revolt' *Weekly Worker* June 5 2008.



REFORMIST LEFT

Use it how you want

Is it a petition or a draft manifesto? Nick Rogers attended the grandiosely titled 'convention' to discuss the vagaries of the People's Charter



A couple of hundred trade unionists and members of various left groups came together in the Camden Centre near London's King's Cross on Saturday November 21 to discuss the People's Charter. The three-and-a-half hour event was the usual mix of platform speeches and interventions from the floor.

As the first speaker, John Hendy QC - the labour lawyer and co-chair of the convention - explained, the People's Charter was drafted in October 2008 and launched in March of this year. In September it was endorsed (not without a struggle) at the TUC.

The charter is deliberately intended to resonate with the original people's charter of the 1830s and 40s that demanded the franchise for working class men. So, as with the document of 170 years ago, there are six points: A fair economy for a fairer Britain; more and better jobs; decent homes for all; save and improve our services; for fairness and justice; a better future starts now.

The trouble is that these demands are nowhere near as straightforward and incisive as the six demands formulated in February 1837: equal electoral districts; abolition of the property qualification for MPs; universal manhood suffrage; annual parliaments; vote by ballot; payment of MPs.

2009's six demands could easily be supported by any political party, up to and including the Conservatives - what serious politician would oppose any of them? Indeed, an anodyne slogan such as 'A better future starts now' might easily have adorned any conference platform of the New Labour era.

So each demand is supplemented with a paragraph of explanation to give the charter real political meat. These include sentences such as: "We must own and control the main banks"; "Protect existing jobs. Make a massive investment in new jobs"; "Create three million new publicly owned homes"; "Keep the post in public ownership"; "Repeal the anti-union laws to fight poverty and inequality"; "Bring the troops home. No more billions for nuclear weapons".

Come to think of it, perhaps these quotes have the makings of a more specific and eye-catching set of demands - even if they eventually were to break the symbolic barrier of six.

A textual comparison between the content of the new multi-coloured leaflet available on Saturday (headed "A people's Britain, not a bankers' Britain") and the charter still online¹ reveals that the wording of some of the six headline demands has subtly changed: eg, "Save and improve our services" has replaced "Protect and improve our public services - no cuts". Certainly snappier - although the new version now contains no absolute opposition to cuts in public expenditure.

And some of the explanatory text

has been moved from one heading to another. For instance, the defence of pensions has been shifted from the 'For fairness and justice' section to reside under 'A fair economy for a fairer Britain'. That points to the ambiguity of the headline demands - they simply are not sharply defined.

When it came to Saturday's event, there appeared to be an equivalent lack of clarity about the purpose of the day. The convention was not a decision-making body. There were no resolutions or statements before the meeting and no votes were taken. No one was elected to anything. It emerged that individual trade unions that sign the charter (John Hendy reported that there were 21 of these, although the website only lists eight) are entitled to two representatives on the central decision-making body. It was not explained how anyone else got to be part of the leadership.

In effect the event was a rally (probably not that different from the launch meeting which I did not attend), albeit with a degree of space for audience participation and the expression of difference about the way forward.

The composition of the platform emphasised the trade union support that the charter has gathered: Mike Kirby (Unison Scotland and the Scottish TUC), Matt Wrack (FBU), Bob Crow (RMT), Bill Greenshields (Derbyshire NUT), Sean Vernell (UCU). No platform presence for the CWU and PCS, which have also backed the charter. Reference was made to the debate at the TUC, where an amendment was accepted stating that the purpose of the charter was to campaign for more progressive policies within the Labour Party.

Mike Kirby explained that, although Unison's executive was now supporting the charter (after initial resistance), the national delegate conference was still to approve it. Clearly all has not been plain sailing in winning for the charter the support of the union leaderships. Apparently it has been opposed on occasion for the bizarre reason that it 'restates union policies'. Mike Kirby made an oblique reference to trade union opposition being motivated not by the content of the charter, but by who was involved in it. One speaker from the floor suggested that the TUC had adopted the charter in order to derail it.

No best buddies

So who are the charter's principal political backers? Obviously the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain has been heavily promoting it.² There seemed to be a reasonably strong turnout from the CPB and Mary Davis of its executive chaired the session the before lunch. However, I did not spot any of the organisation's so-called big hitters.

The Socialist Party in England and Wales also supports the charter. But a leaflet distributed on the day and speakers from the floor (SPEW was

awarded no platform speakers) focused on the futility of attempting to win the Labour Party to the demands of the charter. The first speaker from SPEW criticised the platform for failing to point any way forward. It was necessary to form a new party on the basis of the charter. Glenn Kelly said that without building a political voice for workers the charter would be an "empty wish list".

CPB and SPEW members hardly seemed best buddies, despite their joint experience in No2EU and their possible collaboration in a successor organisation. In the course of the day they presented strikingly different perspectives on the future of the charter. None of the CPB's speakers made any reference to No2EU or the possibility of building a political alternative to the Labour Party.

The Labour Representation Committee had a stall to the side of the hall between those of the CPB and the Green Party. John McDonnell made a flying visit from campaigning in his Hillingdon constituency to address the meeting on the depth of the public service cuts that will be carried out whether Labour or the Conservatives are elected. He pointed out that the proposed fiscal responsibility bill will commit Labour to reducing the deficit (which John McDonnell estimated could reach £190 billion) by 50% in four years, while the Conservatives are promising a 100% cut in five years.

But otherwise the LRC was not strongly represented in contributions from the floor. The only participant to identify herself as a member was Marie Lynham, who spoke of her experience of forming a local People's Charter group in north west London, which has so far attracted only four members.

The Socialist Workers Party and Workers Power sold their newspapers in the morning outside the venue, but appeared not to enter the hall and certainly did not contribute to the debate.

The United Socialist Party had a small presence and Steve Ballard (first speaker from the floor) questioned the limited demands. He argued that it was important to call for the confiscation of the most important industries. It was all very well attempting to build the broadest possible front, but not if its politics was doomed to failure. Later Dot Gibson (also USP) spoke on behalf of the National Pensioners Convention and advertised the 'Defend the welfare state' demonstration on April 10 2010.

Steve Freeman of the Revolutionary Democratic Group pointed to the glaring absence of any demands around democracy in the contemporary People's Charter - a marked contrast with the original. Comrade Freeman is promoting a six-point 'Charter for a democratic republic'.

A number of speakers from the floor expressed alarm at what they characterised as the overly "theoretical" content of some of the early contributions: ie, the discussion of nationalisation, the need for a new workers'

party, democracy. A member of the Bectu union advocated "shopping-basket politics" that appealed to ordinary working people with "practical things to do", while someone else advised those "who want to discuss theory to go down the pub".

Stephen Hall of Socialist Resistance, Respect and the Wigan People's Alliance said it was all very well to "prattle on about a 'bold socialist programme'", but it was necessary to appeal not just to socialists and Marxists, but to those "who do not understand what those words mean".

Belle Harris of Tower Hamlets Labour Party said she had two mentors - Rosa Luxemburg because of her critique of 'democratic centralism'; and George Lansbury, because he believed in "action as well as theory".

Pauline Fraser, obviously from the pro-Labour Party wing of the CPB, thought it was ridiculous to raise the issue of a new party with the general election just a few months away. If the charter tied itself to a new party, it would lose the backing of the TUC and most individual trade unions. The demand was basically sectarian, she said.

The platform speakers outlined a vision for the People's Charter as the focus for a mass movement against neoliberalism and against the consensus view of the mainstream parties that severe cuts in public spending were needed to reduce the debt incurred fighting the financial collapse. They set a target of a million signatures.

Supporters were urged to build local groups and initiate local campaigns. John Hendy said that the leadership had "neither the intention nor the will to dictate from the top", although he did admit that there would have to be elections to the leadership body - but not yet.

General election

The immediate priority of most platform speakers was to deploy the charter in the course of the forthcoming general election. Hendy suggested that all candidates (with the exception of the British National Party) should be asked if they support the six points. He said that in 1906 the TUC had endorsed any candidate who supported an eight-point programme and whose candidature was endorsed by an individual trade union. Thirty-one Labour Party MPs had been elected as a result. He suggested that the TUC next year should adopt a similar strategy.

Yet he insisted that it was not necessary to discuss immediately the choice between revitalising the Labour Party and founding an entirely new party. The charter could be used in the case of either approach. He advised that the position would become clearer after the election, but did not explain in what way the election of a Conservative government would clarify the issue of working class political representation.

Both Matt Wrack and Bob Crow made strong speeches. They emphasised that none of the mainstream political parties (including self-evidently the Labour Party) offered any alternative to the domination of the market. Bob Crow said that people will do what they want with the People's Charter, including using it as part of any new political initiative.

Bob Crow also made a number of pertinent points about the BNP. Given the dire alternatives on display, it was hardly surprising that the BNP was able to pick up grassroots working class support. If the *Question time* panellists had been asked about the postal workers' strike it was quite likely that Nick Griffin would have been the only one to express support for the strikers. Similarly, the BNP was for renationalisation of the railways. It was important not to condemn as racist everyone who voted for them.

It strikes me that the drafters of the People's Charter were torn between the quite different requirements of a petition (short, snappy, directed at a single target) and a draft manifesto (a comprehensive programme for government). Also, while the objective of making a sharp intervention in the forthcoming general election is entirely legitimate, it seems rather odd that the proposal appears to be to approach all candidates. A charter that had any possibility of receiving support from the Conservatives or Liberal Democrats would hardly be worth the paper it was written on.

We in the CPGB are discussing raising demands of Labour MPs around the emerging cuts agenda of the Labour Party (and possibly around the war in Afghanistan) in order to identify Labour candidates who still adhere to the politics of the working class.³ We will also be supporting left candidates. Our objective will not be to identify the one candidate in each constituency who is more supportive of our demands than the others. If that were the case, we might end up supporting a Labour candidate who only wants to make cuts of, say, £20 billion a year rather than the Conservative who was proposing £35 billion: ie, the *least* anti-working class candidate. The supporters of the People's Charter need to clarify that they will not end up with this self-defeating tactic come May 2010.

As an alternative manifesto on the other hand (the declared interpretation of SPEW and quite possibly of the LRC), the charter is entirely inadequate. It is economic (the absence of democratic demands starkly demonstrates how far the ambition of the British labour movement has regressed since the mid-19th century). It lacks an internationalist perspective (beyond non-explicit opposition to the Afghan war and a nod to cancelling the debts of the third world). And it fails to offer a positive agenda that goes beyond the social democratic consensus of the post-war period (demonstrating the inability of a political strategy that shies away from socialism in the interests of 'broadness' to offer a perspective that can really enthuse potential supporters).

But ultimately no political initiative is going to succeed in advancing independent working class politics that does not recognise the urgent need for a united Communist Party. It goes without saying that the People's Charter is not intended to advance that project ●

Notes

1. The website of the People's Charter is at www.thepeoplescharter.com/index.php.
2. See P Manson, 'Towards an election coalition' *Weekly Worker* November 12 for John Foster's comments at the RMT's conference on working class political representation.
3. M Sabbagh, 'Looking to 2010' *Weekly Worker* October 29.

PRISONS

Rehabilitation, not punishment

It is a long-held maxim that you can gauge the nature of a society - measure its 'civilisation quotient' - by examining its penal system, particularly the way it treats its prisoners.

Judged by this criterion, there can be no doubt that the UK stands condemned as a barbarous society, and furthermore as one which is steadily deteriorating to ever lower standards. In danger of becoming a giant island prison camp moored off the more enlightened European continent, the UK seems addicted to an ultimately self-defeating regime of punitive and cruel incarceration - lock 'em up and make 'em suffer.

Indeed, so bad has the situation become that out of the advanced capitalist countries only the United States has a worst record - proudly topping the charts with the highest documented per capita rate of imprisonment of any country in the world. Mind-bogglingly, as of the end of 2007, in the United States 7.2 million people were either behind bars, on probation or on parole - with 2.3 million of these actually incarcerated, non-whites disproportionately accounting for 70% of the prisoner population (and 5.9% of the overall total consists of foreign, non-US citizens). Or, to put it another way, this means that at the start of 2008 more than one in 100 American adults were behind bars, with approximately one in every 18 men coming under the attention in some way of the judicial system.¹ Of course, the ongoing, utterly futile - and unwinnable - 'war on drugs' bears a large burden of responsibility for this social and economic vandalism.

By contrast to the US, the People's Republic of China seems positively liberal, coming second in the world penal league table with a rather paltry-sounding 1.5 million banged up - which, taking into fact that its population is four times that of the US, clocks in at about only 18% of the US imprisonment rate. Something for Barack Obama to be proud of, eh?

True, the UK still has some way to go before it matches the penal performance of either the US or China, but it is certainly making a determined effort to criminalise and lock up ever large numbers of the population. So we have the truly grim depiction of British society as presented in the latest report conducted by the Prison Reform Trust and summarised in *The Independent on Sunday*. A hellish picture of unbearable overcrowding, callous indifference and a consistently high rate of reoffending - amounting to a prison system that is both pitilessly ineffective and grotesquely wasteful of resources. Or, to use the words of the PRT report, a situation that is rapidly developing into a human and social "disaster area": a prison service that is "simply not fit for purpose" - assuming, that is, that the "purpose" of a judiciary system is to *rehabilitate* offenders back into society rather than vindictively wreak revenge and retribution upon them and their families.²

The prison population has grown by no less than 66% since 1995 - from the 61,100 when Labour came to power in 1997 to the point last month where it hit a new record of 84,706, ensuring that England and Wales have the highest rate of imprisonment in western Europe. There are now 154 people in jail per 100,000 of the population, which could rise to as many as 178 if the inmate size grows to 96,000 by 2014 - a figure for which the government is actively, and ghoulishly, making preparations. By contrast, in France - which has a similar population to the UK - there are just



One fifth have multiple mental health disorders

59,655 people behind bars.

Thanks to the relentless rise in inmate numbers, the prison system has been officially overcrowded since 1994, with a quarter of prisoners doubled up - sometimes even more so - in a cell originally designed for one. Though prison capacity has increased by a third since 1997, with more than 20,000 beds added, this obviously is nowhere near enough to hold the numbers that the government wants to incarcerate.

But quite monstrously - and something the tabloid press cares not to highlight, of course - in the same period outlined above there has been an actual *drop* in the number of convictions: the number of offences recorded by police in the UK fell from 5,075,000 in 1991 to 4,951,000 in 2007, and this produced a fall of 1,300 in the number of people found guilty in court.

In other words, the UK penal system - just like its American counterpart - is being used as a social dumping ground for society's 'awkward citizens', with prison a capacious net into which those betrayed by the public services are scooped up and then effectively forgotten, neither seen nor heard. Hence the vast majority of people shoved into prison test positive for class A drugs and/or have a serious drink problem. Tellingly, but depressingly, 7% of all children at some time in their school years will have undergone the distressing experience of seeing their father incarcerated - so much so that by 2006 more children were affected by the imprisonment of

a parent than by divorce in the family.

We can see this social phenomenon - prison acting as a kind of auxiliary arm of social services - most notably with regard to those who suffer from various mental health issues. Thus one-fifth of all prisoners have multiple mental health disorders, and in the first eight months of 2008 there were 15,800 recorded incidents of "self-harm" - 54% of which involved women, despite the fact that they make up just 5% cent of the total prison population. In fact, more than a third of female prisoners have attempt suicide at some time in their life, leaving the UK prison system open to the charge of institutional misogyny.

As for youth prisoners, the picture is also bleak. Almost a quarter of all young offenders are classified as having "learning difficulties" and 71% have been involved with - or have been in the care of - social services before they entered custody. Professionals in this field argue that secure homes are a more effective and humane way of dealing with youth offenders. However, due to myopic penny-pinching, such facilities are being phased out in favour of detention centres - where the bill per young person is £60,000 a year, as opposed to the £215,000 annual bill for a secure children's home.

Then there is the prison system's 'hidden army' - that is, ex-servicemen and women who upon return to civilian life are effectively abandoned. According to a new survey by the National Association of Probation Officers, the number of former serv-

ice personnel in prison or on probation/parole is more than double the total British deployment in Afghanistan. So there are an estimated 20,000 war veterans in the criminal justice system, with a staggering 8,500 behind bars: thus representing almost one in 10 of the entire prison population (many of whom were homeless prior to conviction/imprisonment). Additionally, the proportion of ex-soldiers in prison has risen by more than 30% in the last five years - predictably, the majority have chronic alcohol or drug problems, with nearly half suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or depression as a result of their experiences on active service. Everybody seems to love 'our boys and girls'... until they get home, that is.

Of course, there have been repeated warnings about the irrational, self-perpetuating nature of the UK penal system. For example, in April of this year we had the Bradley Review - which issued a clarion call for "community alternatives" to custodial sentences for offenders suffering from mental health problems and learning difficulties - only to be totally ignored by the government. The review was especially concerned by the almost 6,000 imprisoned under the Kafkaesque-sounding Indeterminate Public Protection orders - as many of these suffer from serious mental health problems. Incredibly, there has been a more than 400% rise in the number of people serving IPP sentences in the last year alone, nearly half of whom were being held beyond their original

tariff expiry date (most have no means of demonstrating that they present no 'risk to the public').

On the other end of the spectrum, so to speak, there is another grave cause for concern - as pointed out in the PRT report: the dramatic rise in the number of people serving 'fleeting' sentences - those locked away for three months or less rose by 16% between 2007 and 2008, with almost 29,000 people serving short-stay tariffs. Far from being a manifestation of a more 'liberal' approach, fleeting sentences are highly destructive - just serving to needlessly embitter and further criminalise individuals, if not semi-institutionalise them. For such offenders the reconviction rate reaches an appalling 60% - almost twice as high as among those sentenced to 'community work' instead. Women are particularly likely to serve damaging short sentences, and in the last decade the number of women in prison has risen by 44% - taking the female prison population to 4,274. In this manner, short sentences inflict a particularly heavy toll on family life, and could be regarded as a form of child abuse - with increasing numbers of children finding themselves being deprived of a mother.

The result of the generalised insanity that is the UK judiciary-penal system is that expenditure on prisons has risen from £2.8 billion in 1995 to £3.8 billion in 2008 - and the semi-feverish rate of prison building, at a cost of £170,000 per prisoner, is now set to propel the UK past most eastern European countries for prison capacity. Meanwhile reoffenders cost society at least £11 billion a year - the overall reconviction rate for released inmates has gone from 58% to 65% in the past five years. And, of course, the *real* failure rate must be even higher, because the official figures naturally only include those former inmates the police actually catch and convict. Just use your imagination and logic to work out the rest.

No, prison manifestly does *not* work - contrary to what Michael Howard, former Tory leader, once notoriously and stupidly claimed when he was home secretary. But the Brown government ploughs on regardless, creating thousands of new offences and a whole raft of mandatory minimum penalties - announcing in April that they would create five 1,500-placement jails around the country, even though all research to date shows that prisons with 400 or fewer inmates consistently perform better in terms of rehabilitation (not that this is saying much) than those with more than 800.

Self-evidently, the idea that you can rehabilitate offenders by confining them to foetid prison cells for up to 23 hours a day (because the authorities just do not have the staff to monitor them properly) is fanciful utopianism of the most wretched and reactionary sort. Communists militantly oppose the establishment's inhuman approach to crime and punishment and demand:

- Custodial sentencing only as an exception
- Workers' supervision of prisons
- Rehabilitation, not punishment, as the aim
- Worthwhile prison work and a range of cultural facilities
- No censorship of mail, free access to the internet
- Daily visiting and weekly 24-hour conjugal visits ●

Eddie Ford

Notes

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Incarceration_in_the_United_States.
2. *The Independent on Sunday* November 15.

Critical support for POA strikes

Are prison officers 'workers in uniform' or just agents of state oppression? Paul Greenaway argues for a nuanced approach and a strategy for splitting the state machine

Last week saw brief, but seemingly successful, wildcat strike action by prison officers on Merseyside. Unsurprisingly, they had had enough of being at the receiving end of "continued bullying and harassment" by the macho senior management at HMP Liverpool. So in September a Prison Officers Association member took his grievances to an employment tribunal, which resulted in a particularly sharp tongue-lashing for both the governor and deputy governor.

However, the prison bosses blithely ignored the tribunal's strictures and carried on the regime of intimidation. Indeed, so much so that on November 13 the irate deputy governor, Mark Hanson - clearly an habitual offender - discharged a vengeful communiqué declaring that the seditious prison officer in question was to be sent on "detached duty" to another establishment. Saying enough was enough, there was an impromptu walkout by disgruntled POA members, demanding an investigation into the conduct and behaviour of the governor and his deputy and a "public apology" from the management for their grossly "unfair treatment" of the staff.

The strike is illegal, given that the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act prohibits any action which could be deemed to "induce prison officers to go on strike or to take other industrial action which could put the safety of the public, prisoners or staff at risk" - and left HMP Liverpool being run by a skeleton staff of only 20 scab POA officers and 30 managers, with increased police patrols outside the building. Giving voice to their anger, the POA issued a press release on November 17, in which Brian Caton - its general secretary and now a member of the Socialist Party in England and Wales - gave a resounding call to arms: "The membership of the POA stand fully behind the Liverpool branch ... in the face of a management team who appear unable to command the respect of their staff and who have resorted to running their prison on threats and intimidation."¹

More significantly still, there were solidarity walkouts by prison staff from jails (including young offenders' institutions) in Lancashire, Cheshire and Dorset. Obviously surprised, and wrong-footed, by the sudden display of militancy, the management blinked and hurriedly agreed to a meeting with the POA - and agreed to a prompt "investigation" into the managerial practices at HMP Liverpool, as, of course, demanded by the striking prison officers. Whether triumphantly or in sorrow, it is hard to judge, the deputy general secretary of the POA, Mark Freeman, told a local newspaper that "after 25 hours" the prison service "gave us what we asked for on the very first hour of this walkout" - if they had conceded this in the first place, then "none of the other prisons would have walked out" in solidarity.²

Furthermore, there is no reason to believe that this is an isolated incident - a callous culture of intimidation and bullying pervades UK prisons - and it is clearly not just the prisoners who are liable to become victims of the system, which dehumanises both the jailed and jailers.

So what attitude should communists take towards prison officers - and specifically the POA, which is a fully constituted member of the TUC? Well, there are those who you can very broadly classify as falling into

reflex 'leftist' and 'rightist' stances. On the one hand there are those, such as SPEW and the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain, who treat prison officers purely as 'workers in uniform', and therefore just like any other section of the working class - thus the POA is to be accorded the status of a 'normal' trade union, no different from the National Union of Mineworkers or the Communication Workers Union. Then there are those who assume a moralistic, and plain stupid, stance that regards POA members as *merely* agents of the oppressive state machine - and hence shrilly denounce any show of solidarity, or political sympathy, with striking rank and file POA members as tantamount to an act of class treachery.

For a pristine example of this brittle ultra-leftist nonsense you can do no better than the International Bolshevik Tendency - a split from the Spartacist League. A recent IBT leaflet demands: "Kick the screws out of the TUC!" and, for good measure, "Throw immigration cops out of the Public and Commercial Services Union".³

But in contradistinction to the above confused and mistaken approaches, communists instead emphasise the dual nature of an organisation like the POA. We cannot simply treat it like any other trade union - because POA members *are* responsible for the direct physical oppression of the section of the working class: and a section that is regrettably - and quite monstrously - increasing in numbers with each month that goes by. That is the straightforward, honest truth and we should not be afraid to say so.

Whatever the bigoted and spiteful crap churned out by the tabloid and

rightwing media, only a tiny minority of UK prisoners are dreadful anti-social monsters (cynical murderers, serial rapists, etc) who need locking up for the protection of society. There are very few 'Mr Bigs' or criminal dons behind bars - forget it: they normally have the money, power and influence to flee the roost long in advance and securely hole themselves up far away in some considerable comfort.

No, rather the vast majority of prisoners are nothing more than the *victims* of an indifferent society, which prefers to sweep them under the carpet of a hellish UK prison system than seriously address and resolve the manifold and pressing social problems which produce such huge numbers of criminals in the first place. So, almost inevitably, the vast majority of prisoners have some form of drugs and/or alcohol dependency, while one-fifth have debilitating mental health issues and nearly a quarter of all youth offenders officially suffer from "learning difficulties" (see opposite).

Self-evidently, such offenders should not be locked up at all in prison - to further deteriorate and become effectively institutionalised. Consequently, we oppose any demands of the POA that could only come at the *expense* of prisoners - like yet longer lock-up times or additional refinements to the means of oppression (bigger and harder batons/shields, use of water cannons or tear-gas, etc). But at the same time we will *critically* support those demands - as we would for rank and file police officers - that act to cohere intra-solidarity against the senior officers/wardens and thus help to undermine and eventually split the state machine. So, yes, we are def-

initely fully in favour of prison warders and members of the police force having the right to form and join trade unions and the right to go on strike. It is logically analogous to our demand that members of the armed forces also be given such rights.

In other words, it would be utterly crass to regard prison workers as *simply* part of the state machine - any more than Russian army was by mid-1917 - by then ever larger swathes of it were 'defecting' to the Bolsheviks and the general revolutionary (anti-war) cause. As for the POA itself, it has clearly shifted to the left as an organisation, under the influence of a not insignificant tranche of former miners entering the prison service over the last 20 years or so (and let's face it, if incarcerated, who would you want in charge of you - a former NUM man or the more 'traditional' POA military type, like a down-on-his-luck, semi-sadistic ex-army sergeant?). But, whatever the exact explanation, the POA's distinct turn to the left is something we should welcome and hope to see continue.

And we should not forget that there is a long history of militancy among unionised prison officers, with the POA tracing its origins to the Prison Officers' Federation - which in 1916 affiliated to the Labour Party. Not long after its formation, the POF fused with members of the police to form the Police and Prison Officers' Union. Then we had the 1919 police strike, which so put the fear of god into the British establishment - and quite rightly - that it was made illegal for police and prison officers to join or form trade unions. It was only after two decades of vigorous campaigning that prison officers won

back the right to organise, though it still remained illegal for them to take strike action. More recently the Tories introduced legislation which was nakedly designed to smash the POA as a trade union, but eventually a 'compromise' was settled upon in the shape of the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, where industrial action remained illegal.

As for Brian Caton himself, he is undoubtedly a sincere leftwinger - indeed, he is one of the most militant and leftwing leaders we have at the moment in the essentially quiescent trade union movement. Before a fanfare-free decamping to SPEW this September after 40 years of Labour Party membership, Caton had already made plain his views on 'crime and punishment' - telling *The Socialist*: "Capitalism is wrong, it's unfair and it leads to an uncivil society. I don't want to live in an uncivil society where greed is the master and crime becomes the norm."⁴ In September, Caton informed *The Socialist* - now his publication, of course - that he had become "sick and tired of people saying that just because you're a prison officer you're rightwing" and recounted how he had told Jack Straw (former home secretary) at a POA conference what the "founder fathers" of the Labour Party "would think of him now": engaged in "fighting illegal wars and privatising prisons", for which Caton received a "standing ovation" from POA members⁵ ●

Notes

1. www.pouk.org.uk/press-release-171109.asp.
2. *Liverpool Daily Post* November 19.
3. www.bolshevik.org/1917/no30/no30-Screws_out_PCS.html.
4. *The Socialist* March 16 2006.
5. *The Socialist* September 15.

Ireland

Masses force leaders to act

Public sector workers in Ireland displayed a grim determination to resist further cuts when they turned out in their thousands on November 24.

The strike saw nearly a quarter of a million workers come out throughout the country. Many private sector workers refused to cross picket lines. The only state employees not joining in were emergency staff in areas badly hit by floods, who had decided to defer their action. Otherwise the strike was extremely solid - unsurprising given the overwhelming ballot in favour in every union.

From prison officers to nurses to clerical officers, the organised working class was out in force. The gardai, who are prohibited from striking, sent a message of support to the unions and refused to undertake many normal duties, including guarding the Dáil. They also declined to work overtime. The support for the strike and sheer strength of numbers showed the possibilities.

The main hurdle now to overcome is the cowardice and complicity of the leadership of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. While setting a second strike day on December 3, Ictu simultaneously announced a return to talks with government and employers to try to avert that action. David Begg, Peter McLoone and other union tops have openly stated their commitment

to rescuing Irish capitalism. McLoone, chair of Ictu's private sector committee, has conceded that "temporary adjustments" need to be made. He agrees that the public sector wage bill should be cut by €1.3 billion - but without reducing wages. This translates into a loss of overtime and shift premiums, unpaid holidays and job cuts. Ictu's *Better, fairer way* document sets out its alternative strategy - to extend the recovery period and implement the cuts more gently than planned by the government. Begg and others are now hoping the government has learned its lesson from the one-day strike and will be willing to play ball.

But taoiseach Brian Cowan has insisted that civil service employees *will* have their wages reduced - by at least 7%. He is "not for turning" and is adamant in his refusal to give in to pressure from the unions. His government has been warned by the International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank that €4 billion of cuts have to be made on December 9, as a precursor to even more severe attacks in 2010.

It is expected that Ictu will give ground on wages and come back with something less than a 7% cut. But trade union members are under far too much pressure, as they struggle to cope on incomes already slashed by almost 10% thanks to pension and

income levies. There was fury in March when Ictu called off a national strike of public and private sector workers in favour of new talks. They produced nothing at all and it is clear that nothing *will* be gained out of continuing 'social partnership'. The only reason the November 24 strike went ahead was because of the mass pressure from below.

The Socialist Workers Party in Ireland - which has recently seen a damaging split based around most of what remains of its Belfast membership - has made some worthwhile, if limited, proposals. It has called for the formation of strike committees and for mass meetings leading up to a national demonstration on December 3. It also argues that unemployed and private sector workers should be drawn into the struggle. The Socialist Party agrees with the need for unity of the public and private sector and says that it stands "for the establishment of a new party to fight for a left/socialist government that would end the dictatorship of the capitalist market and instead plan the economy for the needs of people, not the profits of the few".

Discussion continued between both groups and others at the SWP's Marxism event last weekend. Deep-seated tensions were evident between the main protagonists, with lit-

tle sign of agreement beyond a possible commitment to work together on the December 3 demonstration. That is welcome, but hopefully it will be the start of a meaningful process which draws in others.

The difficulties faced by the Irish working class cannot be understated. The recent freak weather conditions have added to the economic stresses, causing social dislocation and homelessness. This has severely affected the rural community. But the sight of so many thousands taking action can only but give us tremendous hope. The raw material is there for the creation of a mass working class party but what is needed is a political programme for democracy in Ireland - curb the power and influence of the church and introduce the principles of secularism, a popular militia to replace the standing army, abolition of Seanad Éireann, the upper house of parliament, fight for a united Ireland with the right of self-determination for a British-Irish territory - and a strategy that links achieving this Ireland with the perspective of working class rule throughout the European Union.

For too long the left in Ireland has either mimicked the trade union bureaucracy or the nationalist petty bourgeoisie. Now is clearly the time for the politics of Marxism and working class independence ●

Anne Mc Shane

MIGRANTS

Undocumented workers victimised by Unite

In September 2009 the union Unite ordered the **Latin American Workers Association** to vacate without notice the office it had provided within its southeast region HQ. Its comrades explain the background

The Latin American Workers Association was re-formed in 2003 by Ernesto Leal, Julio Mayor and other Latin American workers in London, many of them political exiles and trade unionists in their own countries. It was in fact the second incarnation of the association, which first existed in the 1980s. The aim was to address directly the exploitation and abuses faced by Latin American workers in London, and to link these workers to the broader working class movement.

The new LAWAS operated out of cafes and park benches and temporarily in a community centre in Dalston, before being offered a more permanent home by various organisations, including Unite (then the TGWU), whose offer was accepted in mid-2004. Thus began the partnership. LAWAS was supported by Unite with office space and volunteer expenses, but maintained an independent existence and was never part of Unite's democratic structures.

From its small room in Unite's Manor House offices LAWAS combined advice and representation by workers for workers with a huge union recruitment drive, of which Unite was the main beneficiary, with new members running into four figures, concentrated above all in contract cleaning. Word was spread through a publicity drive in the Latin American community, taking in radio, newspapers, churches, embassies, public meetings and festivals like the annual Carnival - all of which are still key points of contact with the community. Email bulletins to the ever growing list of members and supporters became and still are a key tool of communication. Some coverage was achieved in British left media, but, in the words of a Unite organiser assigned to working with LAWAS, its work was largely "under the radar" of the union. The response of the community was overwhelming, and LAWAS became known colloquially in the community as the *sindicato latino*.

At the same time the Justice for Cleaners campaign (J4C) was getting into gear and LAWAS's efforts fed into that, as a majority of the workers who approached LAWAS worked in this sector. A good working relationship was developed with individual J4C organisers and militants in activities which ranged from English classes to organising workplaces, and in general promoting J4C in the Latin American community. Indeed LAWAS's first office volunteer, José Vallejo, was recruited within a year by J4C. In 2007 the J4C branch made a sizeable donation to LAWAS in recognition of its support, especially in union recognition fights and organising the first 'papers for all' march. On the surface LAWAS was a success story which the T&G/Unite was happy to sell - and it did so, both inside and outside the union.

However, for the many Latino cleaners who joined Unite but did not work in the buildings targeted by J4C it was almost impossible to take part in their new union. LAWAS became their *de facto* branch, but this put it under an intolerable strain, as it lacked the normal facilities and the

union would often not assist when collective issues and organising opportunities presented themselves - the National Physical Laboratory and the BBC being just two examples. Where possible these workers and LAWAS did what they could alone. But without organisational back-up this was difficult. It often felt like LAWAS was just there to increase membership numbers and take the strain alone of new members with all their problems.

In these circumstances LAWAS made it a priority to educate its new union members. For a long time it was unable to get serious union support despite repeated efforts, so it organised its own English and workplace rights classes, both alone and in conjunction with the College of North East London and the London Coalition Against Poverty - activities which continue to this day. Finally, thanks to pressure from both LAWAS and key J4C organisers, Unite arranged a pilot English course. LAWAS made this possible by supplying a professional volunteer teacher and enough students to make the pilot project such a success that a large-scale programme of education in basic skills was then laid on for cleaners. This programme is now a major showpiece of Unite's educational work.

A similar process happened when a pilot immigration law course was arranged by the Migrant Rights Network for Unite activists following immigration raids. LAWAS drew on its pool of Latin American activists to provide half the students and interpreting for the Spanish speakers. Again, the success of the pilot course led to it being invested in and rolled out nationally.

Links were also forged with the hospitality and domestic workers branches of T&G/Unite; with a host of Latin American solidarity and community groups (which evolved into the Coordinadora Latinoamericana); with other unions, such as the CWU and RMT; and with TUC initiatives, such as the Vulnerable Workers Project. Joint employment tribunal work was carried out with community law centres in cases where union lawyers or officers had failed to support members - on one well known occasion because they did not grasp the legal issues facing migrant workers. This was not just an issue with Unite.

In 2008 LAWAS gave unconditional support to a number of inspiring cleaners' campaigns both inside and outside J4C. A public meeting organised by LAWAS and other groups brought together a number of these previously isolated campaigns. A grassroots reinstatement campaign for five Colombian cleaners sacked for circulating a leaflet at the National Physical Laboratory was in full swing. This was particularly significant as the first recent example of a campaign driven by Latin American workers. At a solidarity meeting those workers, as well as others from Schroders Bank and the School of Oriental and African Studies, spoke of their experiences in struggle. Some raised criticisms of the ways union officials had handled their disputes. But, as the

Bolivian UCU activist who chaired the meeting stated at the end, "Despite the criticisms we are not anti-union, because we are the union."

'Extreme groups'

The issue of immigration checks and raids was a constant theme at the meeting. They are a means by which companies and the government itself were intimidating workers who organised. Unite regional industrial organiser José Vallejo made the case for supporting the Strangers into Citizens campaign for a limited amnesty, while the majority present advocated a 'papers for all' position, which would not preclude critical support for the upcoming Strangers into Citizens march.

Shortly afterwards, in a sign of things to come, Vallejo's boss, regional secretary Steve Hart, warned one of the sacked NPL cleaners that their campaign was being backed by "extreme groups". Needless to say, Unite made no effort to support the NPL cleaners' campaign beyond the strictly and legally necessary, despite pickets taking place within walking distance of national headquarters. Was this related to the fact that one of the cleaners' main grievances before being sacked had been the use of an immigration raid to break their incipient organisation?

In 2009 official indifference turned into extreme hostility, triggered by two issues: LAWAS's support for sacked cleaners at the Willis building in the City of London, and its ongoing commitment to the full regularisation of undocumented workers.

In January 2009 a series of unofficial weekly protests by a shop steward and three workmates from the J4C campaign began, after they had been sacked by cleaning contractor Mitie at the City global insurance giant, Willis. The sackings were framed as redundancies after the company conceded the Living Wage rate, but counterattacked, as elsewhere, by drastically altering shift times, cutting personnel and smashing union organisation in the process. Union leaders argued they had done all they could and it was the workers' fault a deal was not sealed. They disowned the protests, afraid of "damaging good relations with Mitie", as one official put it. The workers felt let down and said so publicly after the union withdrew all support. But from then on they concentrated their fire on the two companies, despite legal threats. Other cleaners flocked to the protests, including other ex-Willis workers who had found work elsewhere but supported their colleagues' plight.

After four months LAWAS and Coordinadora Latinoamericana forced a meeting with the regional industrial organiser, in which the official pledged to try and open up a new space for negotiation with the employer, presumably making the most of the good union-employer relationship. At the end, as people packed up to leave, the official proposed a trade-off for the support offered, whereby the Latin American groups supporting the Willis cleaners would support the May 4 march for a limited amnesty. Suspecting there was more to this,

the groups present argued this was a separate issue and should be dealt with as such.

The offer of support was withdrawn in a letter then sent by assistant general secretary Jack Dromey to the cleaners involved, which reiterated that no backing would be given and made no mention of the aforementioned meeting. In response to this a petition with 400 signatures was circulated at union and community events and branch meetings, and publicly presented at Unite's central office in Holborn. Among the signatories were dozens of union cleaners, as well as MPs John McDonnell and Jeremy Corbyn, and film director Ken Loach.

Vicious campaign

When the petition was presented, those attending were filmed and photographed by a sidekick of the regional industrial organiser, until he was confronted and stopped from doing so. This was the first sign of a vicious organised public campaign driven from the highest reaches of Unite, initially against the Willis cleaners and ultimately against LAWAS and indeed any critical voices. Leading the attack was the regional secretary, supported by the likes of women and equalities officer Teresa Mackay (ironic for a dispute involving mainly ethnic minority women) and their internal allies, including the regional industrial organiser.

Unite officers went into overdrive to convince J4C branch committee members and the wider union, using highly confrontational language to suggest the workers involved were the main enemy: "People need to decide whose side they are on," wrote Hart in a briefing, contrasting the "mass of the cleaners" with "tiny groups seeking to undermine our united campaign". And yet, when Willis shop steward Edwin Pazmino presented himself as a candidate to the cleaners' branch committee at its first ever elections, he gained a credible 29 out of 80 votes, despite never being informed of the meeting - unlike other candidates, who were able to campaign beforehand. And if one thing characterised the Willis protests, and previous disputes led by Latin American workers, it was the solidarity of cleaners from different companies, as reported in the *Morning Star* throughout the long course of the dispute.

A leaflet was produced in the name of Justice for Cleaners and distributed by officers, despite not being approved by the new branch committee and certainly not by its Latin American cleaner members, who, along with many ordinary members, almost unanimously supported the Willis cleaners. The leaflet trumpeted J4C's successes in organising and education. This was ironic, because it was people like the Willis cleaners, and their supporters in LAWAS and elsewhere who had done so much over the years to create these successes in the first place. Instead fellow official and regional industrial organiser José Vallejo was lauded - the leaflet featured a colour photo of him, along with members of a youth group hired to wave Justice for Cleaners flags. The "four cleaners and their handful of supporters" were described as leading

a "scurrilous campaign" which did not have the support of the majority of branch members - an allegation contradicted by the support actually received.

In another incident, a Unite branch which tried to speak about the dispute was silenced at a regional meeting of the United Left faction of Unite, to the disgust of many of those present. At a public meeting later organised by the Labour Representation Committee, fellow trade unionists from Unite, Unison and RMT proposed mediation in the presence of Unite officials, and were supported by speakers John McDonnell MP and NUJ president Jeremy Dear. The proposal was ignored.

Why the ferocity of the attacks? This was not the first time union members had criticised official positions, held unofficial protests or presented a petition. The problem was that Justice for Cleaners was a flagship campaign controlled from the very top since its inception, and image meant everything. While criticisms and unofficial actions were tolerated in sections of the union with a longer history, this new campaign had to be tightly controlled, and if that meant crushing internal dissent by any means necessary, then so be it. They chose to forget the basic point that it is workers who make campaigns, not officials, and sometimes, unfortunately, workers will take their own initiative and also be critical.

The other issue which Unite could not tolerate was LAWAS's support for papers for all undocumented workers. Only two years previously LAWAS had worked closely with J4C organisers on this basis. Now, however, the official position had changed and dissenting voices again could not be tolerated. On the May 4 amnesty march organised by Strangers into Citizens, LAWAS and other groups in the Coordinadora raised the slogans of 'No-one is illegal' and 'Papers for all'. Incidentally among these other groups were the UK branch of Colombia's main opposition party (Polo Democrático) and the main Bolivian and Ecuadorian community groups mobilising diaspora support for leftwing governments in their countries (the Bolivia Solidarity Campaign and the Movimientos Ecuador en el Reino Unido). Hardly extremists!

In May LAWAS representative Miguel Puerto asked to meet the regional secretary, Steve Hart, in order to find a solution to the Willis dispute. Instead he was met in worst company management style by not one, but three officials, including Hart, who instead of entering into a positive dialogue launched an all-out attack on LAWAS for its support for the Willis cleaners and its behaviour on the amnesty march.

Worse was to follow. Around the same time LAWAS and J4C activist Alberto Durango was arrested in a trap sprung by his employer, Lancaster - a tactic used against other migrant workers previously. They were unhappy with his recent activism at the bank. But police and UK Border Agency officials also asked him about his 'employment at Willis' - despite the fact he did not work there. But Durango and the Schroders cleaners' public support for

the Willis dispute made them think he did. This raised the spectre of a blacklist among cleaning companies. Durango was released without charge. And yet when a picket was held outside the appeal against his dismissal, at which he was represented by a Unite lay representative, his union reacted by ordering an 'investigation' into him and, on Vallejo's orders, refusing him access to educational courses! Six months later there has been no result of this mysterious investigation, nor a lifting of the ban.

Vallejo then went further by claiming that the cleaners' branch committee that those involved in cross-union protests against recent immigration raids at both the Willis building and SOAS were being sponsored by the cleaning companies themselves. Apparently other unions (Unison and RMT) were "approaching and dealing with the companies before organising their members" and the "so-called Cleaners for Justice" called on members to disobey. As a consequence, he said, some were arrested and face deportation. There is "every reason to believe that the organisers of this campaign, Cleaners for Justice, are paid by the cleaning bosses to attack the cleaners".

Cross-union

It should be noted that Cleaners for Justice has never existed beyond being a slogan used by sacked Unite cleaners to express their desire for a cross-union cleaners' campaign, with the workers themselves in the driving seat. This is an ideal which LAWAS has always supported, in

place of the foolish competition which led, for example, to Unite not supporting cleaners' strikes on the underground in 2008, but then publicly claiming the credit for their success, while offering no solidarity to those victimised through immigration arrests and the like as a result.

Unite then moved to force LAWAS out of its office. At the start of the year Vallejo had presented a relative of his to LAWAS as a new office volunteer. LAWAS accepted in good faith. But it soon became clear that this relative wanted nothing to do with LAWAS and instead was there to act as Vallejo's personal secretary. LAWAS then put forward a new volunteer of its own, as has always been the custom, but was prevented from doing so by the regional secretary. Instead the family member came to work an increasing number of days in the office.

LAWAS held off from making a public statement about all of the above so as not to prejudice Juan Carlos Piedra, a LAWAS and J4C activist who after intense pressure from many quarters had succeeded in getting Unite representation after being sacked for union activity from his job at University College London. Instead LAWAS sought as always to resolve its problems with Unite by requesting another meeting with the regional secretary, but this was preempted. Firstly, Vallejo took control of the volunteer rota on the basis that LAWAS had been advising workers to join other unions. A ridiculous allegation - workers were simply advised in LAWAS's bulletins to

join the union which corresponded to their workplace or occupation, as previously instructed by Unite officials! However, LAWAS continued to publicise Unite and recruited into it far more than into any other union. A week later Steve Hart, sensing perhaps that a scandal might be on the cards, ordered LAWAS out of its office without notice. Even after that a meeting was requested to address the situation, but to no avail.

And so an era has ended. But despite the problems, the last year has been a very positive one for LAWAS. The campaigns it supported breathed new life into the organisation and won it many friends across different unions and in the Latin American community. As a result the annual assembly held in August 2009 was the largest ever and a new committee was elected which for the first time represented almost all the main Latin American nationalities resident in London.

With its new temporary premises in the National Union of Journalists, it is up to that committee and all Latin American workers to secure the future. This means fighting inside unions, including Unite, so they are led by the members, and joining with workers of all nationalities and backgrounds in doing so. It means working with those officials who are not corrupt and self-serving, and unmasking those who are. And it means recognising the achievements of struggles, but also preserving the right to criticise aspects of these and act independently when necessary ●

Hopi: fight on two fronts

This coming weekend, Hands Off the People of Iran will hold its third annual conference. In the past three years we have been pivotal in planting the flag of principled solidarity, taking the arguments for proletarian internationalism into the workers' and student movements both in Britain and, to a lesser extent, internationally.

Indeed, in spite of the confusion that has been sown about the campaign by regime apologists and social-imperialists alike, Hopi's message has been and remains unambiguous: consistently siding with the Iranian masses and the movements of workers, students, women and LGBT people must flow from two indispensable principles.

On the one hand, we must implacably oppose imperialist sanctions and war as the *worst possible outcome* for the peoples of Iran (as we have seen in Afghanistan and Iraq). For this reason, we have been on every Stop the War Coalition demonstration against imperialism's presence in the Middle East and against any future attacks. Unfortunately, the STWC still rejects our affiliation, but precisely because of our commitment to the defeat of the imperialist project we take the unity of the anti-war movement seriously and will continue to seek such affiliation.

On the other hand, we must provide unwavering support for the mass democratic movements inside Iran, especially those

led by the working class, as opposed to this or that faction of the purportedly 'anti-imperialist' regime.

If we are to truly champion the cause of the Iranian masses, then these principles cannot exist in isolation from each other. We are firmly convinced that the tumultuous events of the past year and the mass upsurge following the patently fraudulent presidential election of June 2009 have vindicated our fundamental perspectives. Approaching the question in the manner we have always done, we had no hesitation in immediately placing ourselves on the side of the Iranian masses. We also welcomed the fact that the left in Britain - with a few distinctly dishonourable exceptions such as George Galloway - also sided with the Iranian people. As a result of the inspiring events, many comrades in the movement who previously held doubts about the campaign have increasingly come over to our perspectives. This is good news.

As we have insisted, the Islamic Republic is deeply unpopular inside Iran. It is increasingly clear, however, that illusions in the green movement of Mir-Hossein Mousavi are disappearing. The only way the Iranian masses can impose their agenda on society is by building a red movement and fighting for working class rule. The actions of workers in transport, train manufacture, the sugar and oil industries are intimations of something more generalised and must be supported through prac-

tical international solidarity.

Hopi is committed to advancing the interests of the working class. This is why we resolutely oppose imperialist sanctions: they reduce the fighting capacity of the working class to a mere struggle for survival. For example, oil workers have been seriously discussing a nationwide strike (that is what tipped the balance of forces decisively against the shah in 1979), but they are concerned that such an action would be damaging to the Iranian population which faces a harsh winter and renewed talk in the Obama administration of "crippling" petroleum sanctions (about 40% of Iran's petroleum has to be imported because it lacks the necessary processing capacity).

The sanctions war has the aim of either forcing Tehran to compromise and fall in with the wishes of the US or, failing that, helping to bring to fruition plans for regime change from above. US imperialism now smells blood. With the regime deeply split and facing a huge opposition movement, administration officials are hoping for a diplomatic deal that will end Iran's pariah status as a rogue state, while safely neutralising the mass movement. Given Iran's history of revolutions in the 20th century and militant working class traditions, this is more than understandable.

In the absence of a strong international workers' movement that is capable of providing decisive material and ideological support, many pseudo-leftwingers in Iran are overtly or covertly going over to the camp of imperialism and winning a degree of support by claiming that anything must be better than the brutal and thoroughly discredited theocratic regime. However, Iraq is a living warning that imperialism brings not peace, democracy and plenty, but barbarism.

Winning the working class in the core imperialist countries away from the type of politics promoted by the International Workers Transport Federation and International Trade Union Confederation is a key question for Hopi. In March 2008 and June 2009 the ITWF and ITUC organised protests outside Iranian embassies highlighting the plight of imprisoned trade unionists but failed to mention imperialist sanctions or the threat of war (not least an Israeli strike).

In 2010 we shall continue to fight on two fronts: against the theocratic regime, against imperialist sanctions and war ●

Ben Lewis

What we fight for

■ **Our central aim is the organisation of communists, revolutionary socialists and all politically advanced workers into a Communist Party. Without organisation the working class is nothing; with the highest form of organisation it is everything.**

■ **The Provisional Central Committee organises members of the Communist Party, but there exists no real Communist Party today. There are many so-called 'parties' on the left. In reality they are confessional sects. Members who disagree with the prescribed 'line' are expected to gag themselves in public. Either that or face expulsion.**

■ **Communists operate according to the principles of democratic centralism. Through ongoing debate we seek to achieve unity in action and a common world outlook. As long as they support agreed actions, members have the right to speak openly and form temporary or permanent factions.**

■ **Communists oppose the US-UK occupation of Iraq and stand against all imperialist wars but constantly strive to bring to the fore the fundamental question - ending war is bound up with ending capitalism.**

■ **Communists are internationalists. Everywhere we strive for the closest unity and agreement of working class and progressive parties of all countries. We oppose every manifestation of national sectionalism. It is an internationalist duty to uphold the principle, 'One state, one party'. To the extent that the European Union becomes a state then that necessitates EU-wide trade unions and a Communist Party of the EU.**

■ **The working class must be organised globally. Without a global Communist Party, a Communist International, the struggle against capital is weakened and lacks coordination.**

■ **Communists have no interest apart from the working class as a whole. They differ only in recognising the importance of Marxism as a guide to practice. That theory is no dogma, but must be constantly added to and enriched.**

■ **Capitalism in its ceaseless search for profit puts the future of humanity at risk. Capitalism is synonymous with war, pollution, exploitation and crisis. As a global system capitalism can only be superseded globally. All forms of nationalist socialism are reactionary and anti-working class.**

■ **The capitalist class will never willingly allow their wealth and power to be taken away by a parliamentary vote. They will resist using every means at their disposal. Communists favour using parliament and winning the biggest possible working class representation. But workers must be ready to make revolution - peacefully if we can, forcibly if we must.**

■ **Communists fight for extreme democracy in all spheres of society. Democracy must be given a social content.**

■ **We will use the most militant methods objective circumstances allow to achieve a federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales, a united, federal Ireland and a United States of Europe.**

■ **Communists favour industrial unions. Bureaucracy and class compromise must be fought and the trade unions transformed into schools for communism.**

■ **Communists are champions of the oppressed. Women's oppression, combating racism and chauvinism, and the struggle for peace and ecological sustainability are just as much working class questions as pay, trade union rights and demands for high-quality health, housing and education.**

■ **Socialism represents victory in the battle for democracy. It is the rule of the working class. Socialism is either democratic or, as with Stalin's Soviet Union, it turns into its opposite.**

■ **Socialism is the first stage of the worldwide transition to communism - a system which knows neither wars, exploitation, money, classes, states nor nations. Communism is general freedom and the real beginning of human history.**

■ **All who accept these principles are urged to join the Communist Party.**

Become a Communist Party associate member

Name _____

Address _____

Town/city _____

Postcode _____

Telephone _____ Age _____

Email _____ Date _____

Return to: Membership, CPGB, BCM Box 928, London WC1N 3XX

weekly worker

Prepare for post-election assault

Political response needed

The electoral machines of bourgeois politics are grinding into motion, as the time remaining for Gordon Brown to name the date inexorably runs out.

And, as it has been for some time, the word on every politician's lips is 'cuts' - cuts in public expenditure in order to bring public debt 'under control'. Some use fancy euphemisms - 'efficiency savings' is a favourite of New Labour - but all promise the same menu come the next government.

David Cameron has announced that a new Tory government would rush through an 'emergency budget' within 50 days of taking power - although he has attempted to disguise his Thatcherite zeal for attacking the public sector with promises that the budget would "go for growth". The *Financial Times* speculates that this is a response to similar comments by Gordon Brown following the queen's speech (November 23).

Perhaps more significant are the latest poll returns - an Ipsos-Mori survey commissioned by *The Observer* saw the gap between the Tories and Labour drop to 6%, in line with a recent trend for Labour to slowly claw its way back.

It seems that, almost in spite of himself, Brown has managed to shift the terms of debate in his favour, with Cameron toning down the slash-and-burn, 'age of austerity' rhetoric. A hung parliament or a narrow Labour victory are - barring yet another cosmic blunder from the Brown camp - as likely outcomes at this point as an outright Tory victory.

Yet if the battle has turned slightly in Labour's favour, it is still a battle over a singularly unattractive bit of political territory - who will administer more or less the same cuts the most 'fairly', or with the most respect for 'frontline services', or with the best package for 'growth'. This is not the stuff that a stable political advantage is made of - for either party, or the Liberal Democrats for that matter.

So what can we expect? Firstly, those who believe that things are likely to improve over the next year should perhaps think twice. The global financial system remains fragile; many banks remain nationalised, or unusually dependent in other ways on direct state aid. Crucially, unemployment is high and still rising. If a new government attempts seriously to attack the public deficit through cutting public services, it will throw thousands, or even hundreds of thousands, of people onto the dole queues. The more successful a new government is in this work, the more counterproductive it will be - the result would be almost certainly another sharp downturn of the British economy.

Without the rescue of the financial sector and the willingness to incur massive public debt there would have been a crash of 1929 proportions. This, it should be emphasised, could not be allowed to happen (if it could be avoided). Bourgeois society has no appetite for a new epoch of crisis, fascism and cataclysmic war. But, while the rescue

of the financial sector is now causing fears that a sovereign meltdown might follow, with bonds being the new subprime mortgages, the size of government debt can be used as an opportunity. The welfare state can be dramatically pared down and the main burden of the crisis shifted from capital to the working class. The likely result is a sustained and wide-ranging attack on pensions, benefits and the public sector that will last 10 or perhaps even 20 years, but the attacks will have their limits.

These limits are partly internal to capital - the lingering historical memory of 1929-45 provoked George Bush to change his spots last autumn, and David Cameron would be swept along just as helplessly if another collapse was on the cards. Reaganomics and Thatcherism are dead as strategies. Financialisation ran into its limits and threatened disaster. Yet the simple fact of the matter is that with or without another financial crisis capital and its law of value are in decline and therefore increasingly dependent on the state. Though the present return to Keynesianism is likely to prove exceedingly fleeting, and will certainly not produce another boom, capital needs government expenditure if it is to maintain itself.

The more important limit, however, is provided by the action of the working class. We have already seen the first shots fired. Lindsey and other such strikes gave the workers a clear victory. The long-running Leeds rubbish collectors' strike has now ended, broadly in the workers' favour. Though it was aborted early by a sell-out deal, the Royal Mail dispute brought us to the brink of a major confrontation between an important public-sector union and an avowedly union-smashing employer - not to say a Labour government.

These developments are not likely to have been welcomed at Tory Party HQ. Yet more ominous for Cameron - and all others promising attacks - is the Irish

experience of the financial crisis. Ireland had, since the late 1980s, built its economic policies around attracting foreign finance capital. With the republic's entry into the euro came another wave of investment. When the credit crunch began in earnest, however, foreign capitalists found themselves in full retreat, trimming operations where they could (and it was always going to be more politically expedient to cut overseas operations first). Concurrently, a housing bubble similar in form to that in Britain had inflated through the 2000s and - no surprises - burst asunder with the financial crisis.

Membership in good standing of the EU has afforded Ireland at least a better fate than Iceland, which was driven to the point of bankruptcy after its banking system collapsed last year. That is about the extent of the good news. Now, the influential Irish Economic and Social Research Institute think-tank has published a report predicting that unemployment will rise to 17% during 2010, and that economic contraction over the three years from 2008-10 will amount to a staggering 14%. Ireland, too, has a substantial public debt - the legacy of George W Bush-style deficit financing of tax cuts.

When serious attacks on living conditions began in earnest, so did resistance to them - workers at the Waterford Crystal glass factory mounted an occupation when its foreign owners pulled out; other disputes sprang up, and ultimately culminated in a trade union march in Dublin that attracted over 100,000 people (a serious fraction of a population of around three million). Tens of thousands of public sector workers supported a protest strike on November 24. This is, we should note, against a background of shameful political quiescence of the labour bureaucracy over decades - but there is no working class movement so utterly neutralised that it cannot be jolted into responding to direct ruling class assaults.

This is what the winning party (or

coalition) at the British general election will face, as it attempts to move on the offensive - a sudden rise in the pitch of industrial struggle. It is, of course, impossible to see what struggles will break out when, and which ones will be strategically significant. What is clear is that a government will have to be ready for a fight.

The question is: how ready are we, the workers' movement? Our unions may not have been quite so abject before capital in the last decade as in Ireland, but there is not much in it - the sell-out CWU deal is a depressing reminder of this, and one kindly provided by one of the more militant unions in this country. The far left, meanwhile, does not seriously confront issues of political strategy, particularly where the trade unions are involved. This failure is writ large, again, in the CWU deal - the Socialist Workers Party opposed it, but somewhat farcically its highest ranking CWU member voted it through (she is now, after a quiet chat with the SWP leadership, an ex-member - and rightly so). The Socialist Party in England and Wales, meanwhile, downplays the negative aspects of the deal, inflating the (extremely) modest concessions made to the union, as part of its general attitude of quiescence to union tops.

Something is obviously wrong here with the whole approach of the far left to trade union work. It remains guided by the fetishisation of 'action' - what is needed, the argument goes, is to move the masses. The revolutionary socialists will be the most determined fighters for industrial action, and will demand it be increased in scale. The political fight against the union bureaucracy can also be won on this terrain, as leaders will be exposed as class collaborators through their lukewarm attitude.

However, this necessarily pushes the key question of serious organisation around a political *programme* - as opposed to this or that strike demand - into the background, if not over the

horizon altogether. The whole operation inexorably ceases to have any serious grounding in the objective strategic needs of the workers' movement - it becomes basically moralistic, offering up a series of 'best fighters' to union elections. When these virtuous champions of the downtrodden come under exactly the same pressure as their rightwing counterparts, without binding political pressure from a mass party, it is to be expected that they behave like Labourites, and ultimately flake out of the far left altogether. The road to Victoria Street is paved with good intentions.

The cuts agenda, on one level, has put the mainstream parties on the political terrain the far left finds most comfortable - for many years, the thrust of the SWP and SPEW press has been about championing the bread-and-butter struggles as the first steps along the road to revolution. Now these bread-and-butter issues *really are* the focal point of domestic politics. Yet the two organisations - and the legions of squabbling pretenders further down the food-chain - are unlikely to find the new conditions qualitatively more propitious than the old, because the political and economic basis for labour bureaucratic treachery is far from being liquidated - not least its ability to deliver concessions, no matter how meagre, and advertise itself as having coaxed them out of recalcitrant bosses.

The defeat of Labourism and the labour bureaucracy is in the last instance a political, not a narrowly economic, struggle. Capitalism must be replaced by socialism and that will not happen through trade unionism, no matter how militant. Socialism is the victory in the battle for democracy and in short that means the rule of the working class. This demands the organisation of a class party, a Communist Party, which alone can coordinate our actions internationally and map out a strategic plan for general human freedom ●

James Turley

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