

Socialist Appeal

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New intrigues of US imperialism

Labour movement must demand

- ▶ **Hands OFF Venezuela!**
- ▶ **Hands OFF Cuba!**

TROOPS OUT OF IRAQ!



Down with imperialist Aggression!

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The Bell Tolls for Blair

JOHN DONNE'S words - famously quoted by Ernest Hemmingway - "Ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee", implied that the death of any individual diminishes us all, because we are part of a society. In this sense the continuing slaughter in Iraq exposes the threat posed by imperialism to society. They have already done their utmost to destroy one ancient and proud civilization in Iraq.

Usually, however, this quote is altered by inserting someone's name to imply that their days are numbered. Today, Hemmingway's funeral bell tolls not only literally for thousands in Iraq, but also metaphorically for Tony Blair.

The occupation of Iraq has proven disastrous for imperialism, and has done irreparable damage to Blair. As the deadline for returning sovereignty to Iraq approaches, British troops are not being withdrawn, on the contrary, still more are being deployed, bringing the total to 8,900 at a cost of more than £1.5 billion per year.

"The transfer of sovereignty has to be real and genuine. Let me make it 100% clear, after June 30 there will be a full transfer of sovereignty to the Iraqi government", stated Blair.

However, no-one believes anything this prime minister says any more. He sold us the lie that it was vital to go to war because Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction that could be deployed against us in just 45 minutes. They have searched in vain for twelve months.

It was Blair who claimed that 'regime change' would bring peace and prosperity to the people of Iraq. Half

the country is unemployed, and water and power supplies still have not been fully restored. It must be unprecedented, too, that there have been more deaths since the end of the war, than there were during the invasion.

Blair promised that war would bring 'democracy' to Iraq. Yet there will be no elections and an unpopular puppet government is being imposed on the Iraqi people, who are not fooled by the imperialists' empty promises.. "The Americans won't give us real sovereignty," states 20-year old Mohamed Nadim. "Their troops are here and they will stay."

The June deadline will not be the first time that Iraqis will have faced a hand-over of "sovereignty". Britain returned authority to the Iraqi monarchy to run its own affairs in 1932, but British imperialism remained the real power behind the throne. British 'advisers' remained at their posts; a British military mission continued to train the army; British companies were involved in the main sectors of the economy; the Royal Air Force retained two military bases.

US imperialism would like to imitate this British model. Their troops will remain in Iraq after the "transfer" of power and the US will retain significant influence over the country's affairs. US imperialism is trying to play the role British imperialism played in the past, but is finding it far more difficult today than was the case a century and more ago.

Whatever happens on June 30, clearly the people of Iraq will be left out of the equation. Sovereignty will prove to be as elusive as the mythical weapons of mass

destruction. The American administration will continue to rule the roost, until they are finally booted out.

In reality, US imperialism is preparing an historic defeat in Iraq, in the shape of the uprisings of the Iraqi people and the changing mood back home. The boots of soldiers sent so cheaply to their deaths, are spread out on the lawn of Capitol Hill, 800 pairs of them placed there by anti-war protestors to symbolize the American dead in Iraq.

For all its military and economic might, US imperialism is far from omnipotent. It can be defeated once the masses move decisively. Meanwhile, the decline of British imperialism has fitted it for the role of cheerleader to its big American brother. The foreign policy of the Blair government, a slavish submission to the White House, is only a continuation of its policy at home where it prostrates itself before the City of London.

For all the Whitewash of Hutton and the use of mirrors (the Daily Mirror, anyway) to divert attention from the lies and obscenities of the Iraq war, Blair has been mortally wounded by his allegiance to US imperialism and the disastrous occupation of Iraq. While the people of Iraq are denied a vote, June's elections here will be, in part, a referendum on the war. Many workers and youth will stay away from the polling stations in protest. They will be protesting too against the failures of Blair's policies at home. Wedded to the market, the Labour leaders have been unable to tackle any of the problems facing working class people.

Two years ago we pointed to a new wave of industrial

militancy exemplified by the strikes of local government workers and firefighters. Now, after an interlude - the time necessary to learn that the deals they were sold were useless - precisely these same workers are preparing a hot summer for Blair. It is no accident that in the intervening interlude, many workers took the opportunity to elect new, more militant leaderships in their trade unions.

Those who took the relative calm of recent months to mean that the struggle was over, fail to understand that workers cannot be on strike everyday. There are always ebbs and flows, depending on what deals are done and what role the union leaders play, amongst other factors. But the tide which had ebbed a little of late is set to turn in the coming months.

On the industrial, electoral and military front Blair now faces one problem after another. On the political front, too, a new left emerging inside the Labour Party, led by the unions, means there is nowhere for Blair to run and nowhere to hide. The spectre of electoral defeat will alarm the backbenches into yet more opposition. Blair could still be removed before a general election. Whether he lasts to see in a third term or not, the bell is tolling more loudly for Blair with each passing day. However, to replace Blair with Brown would be minor cosmetic surgery at best. Labour and trade union activists must set their sights higher than this. The downfall of Blair must be the beginning of a new struggle for socialist policies, at home and abroad, as part of the struggle for the socialist transformation of society. □

Sick pay under attack

by Steve Jones

IT'S FOR your own benefit. With the sort of cheek that only management can truly muster, this was how new proposals on sick leave were cheerfully presented by the bosses at Tesco. They are to introduce, as 'an experiment' in certain sites, plans to stop paying sick leave for the first three days whenever anybody goes off ill. The aim, so they claim, is to reduce the numbers of people who are going sick when they are, in fact, perfectly OK.

Management added that this was not aimed at those who were genuinely ill - and who presumably will be quite happy to not only be feeling like death warmed up but also see their meagre wage packet being slashed to boot. That should perk them up no end! As if by magic Tesco have now been joined by fellow supermarket giants Sainsbury, and the airline company British Airways in attempting to bring such new 'reforms' in. All these firms have a number of things in common: a) they employ large numbers of low paid workers, b) the work is long and boring, and - most importantly - c) many of their staff work odd hours and weekends and bank holidays. They have also all been feeling the financial squeeze recently - and are looking for any way possible to push profits up again.

The temptation is to believe that these firms are using the fact that many workers take the odd day off here and there as sick leave as an excuse to get some cash back. But who can blame staff given the way they are treated - none of these firms are noted for being very helpful when it comes to getting time off work when needed. Why should they feel any great loyalty to these firms? Sainsburys have also been hard at work cutting bonuses, etc. to the workforce to punish them for the firm's drop in profits. Needless

to say the bosses at the top are excused such tribulations.

Unions like USDAW have been somewhat complacent over these plans - they must be resisted not ignored. If these three firms can get away with it then others will surely follow. There is disgracefully no legal obligation to pay sick pay for the first three days anyway and many small employers already don't bother. The joint plan of these firms is very much about testing the water. In the UK we already work longer hours with less holidays for lower wages than many workers elsewhere. If the bosses were really interested in addressing the question of absenteeism they would look at providing better pay and conditions and holiday leave with more flexible arrangements for staff working odd hours. Plans to reward staff who take no sick leave with a little bonus after 12 months are just pathetic. As things stand if this goes ahead as planned staff will simply end up saying "if I'm going to be docked pay for taking a day off I may as well complete a self certificate and take a whole week off!" More seriously we could see staff who should not be in work coming in because they simply cannot afford to lose any pay. The consequences for those with poor health could be most unfortunate. Such an attack must be defeated before it becomes established as another means of getting as much money off the workforce as possible. These plans would inevitably be linked to job cuts - the real reason for pushing down absenteeism - and an ongoing eroding of working conditions. The whole movements needs to take a stand on this so that the bosses realise now rather than later that this is a bridge too far and that far from testing the water they will end up sinking in it. □

Fight banking job cuts

THE FINANCE industry, that even until recent years was regarded as a safe career choice, has announced another round of job cuts.

American Express, which employs about 4,000 people in West Sussex, are shedding 350 jobs at its offices in Burgess Hill. Most of the jobs that are being axed will be moved to offices in India where staff can be paid a lot less. Finance union Amicus has said that staff have not been consulted over the decision, and they are concerned about the future of other staff at the Burgess Hill site, and those in nearby Brighton. It might come as some consolation to those staff affect that "this decisions was only taken after careful consideration" - though we think not.

Meanwhile, high street bank Abbey National is considering moving its mortgage operations to India with the loss of 600 jobs. Abbey has 50 sites connected with mortgage activity and thinks that it can do without 45 of these, keeping only Sheffield, Bradford, Glasgow, Milton Keynes, and London.

Abbey already transferred 400 jobs to India this year when it closed its call centres in Derby and Warrington, and employs a further 100 people in Bangalore as part of its life assurance business.

The finance industry has seen a whole wave of sackings over the past year - or to give it the appropriate modern language 'off-shoring' which means transferring work out of the country to low wage countries overseas.

Up to now the unions have been little more than concerned observers, this must change. Under the new left leaderships the unions must fight tooth and nail to save jobs without any sacrifices. We cannot accept any further job losses. The unions must force the Labour government to take action to nationalise any company threatening to sack staff or close offices or plant. □

Support Belfast Telegraph workers

by an NUJ member

NUJ MEMBERS at the *Belfast Telegraph*, the *Community Telegraph* and *Sunday Life* have voted overwhelmingly to follow up last month's strikes with further action, as we go to press the details are yet to be announced.

Members at the titles were on strike last month after rejecting the company's 3% pay offer. Nearly all of the 100 members at the title voted in favour of the action, the aim of which is to achieve a commitment from the company to make significant moves towards pay-parity with the groups titles in Dublin and London.

The 48 hour stoppage began at 3 am on Friday 7th of May and staff at the paper adhered to it 100%. Despite the inevitable bravado of the management the action had a big effect. *The Telegraph* was only able to print a very limited version of the paper with the stories bought in from agencies.

Our members at the paper have been losing their patience with the foot-dragging approach of the employers, pay talks have been going on since October. This month's strikes took place after talks between the union and employers at the Labour Relations Agency broke down. The rejected pay deal offered 70% of staff no more than 3%, with other additional upgrades designed to address extremely low pay for the remaining 30%.

Before the NUJ achieved recognition *Belfast Telegraph* reporters were being paid as little as £12,000, even now the average annual salary for an experienced journalist at the title is £21,500 a mere £500 above the average graduate starting salary in the UK.

The *Belfast Telegraph*, part of Sir Anthony O'Reilly's Independent News and Media (INM) group, is the best selling daily paper in Northern Ireland. The Belfast division of the group announced profits of £21m last year.

NUJ General Secretary, Jeremy

Dear, commented on the dispute saying:

"Local management have treated the staff with arrogance and contempt during this dispute and have attempted to undermine the NUJ chapel by bullying and intimidation. It is time that Sir Anthony O'Reilly intervened to ensure that workers in Northern Ireland are accorded the respect that is accorded to INM colleagues elsewhere within this highly profitable company."

He added: "Our members at the *Belfast Telegraph* are resolute and strong. For years they have had to tolerate unjust treatment but they are now saying enough is enough."

Send messages of support to union rep Bob Miller at

rjmiller@btinternet.com

Any simple message helps to boost morale.

Donations to the strike fund should be made payable to *Belfast Telegraph* NUJ chapel and sent c/o NUJ Manchester, Arthur House, Chorlton Street, Manchester, M1 3FH, or NUJ Dublin, Liberty Hall, Dublin 1.

The NUJ members at the Johnston Press-owned *Blackpool Evening Gazette* are starting a ballot for industrial action over pay. They have rejected an offer which would leave senior journalists with all their professional qualifications on £17,600 - or even lower on the group's weekly titles.

Johnston Press made more than £100 million last year.

Messages of support to union rep Andrew Moore at

andy@amoore25.fsnet.co.uk

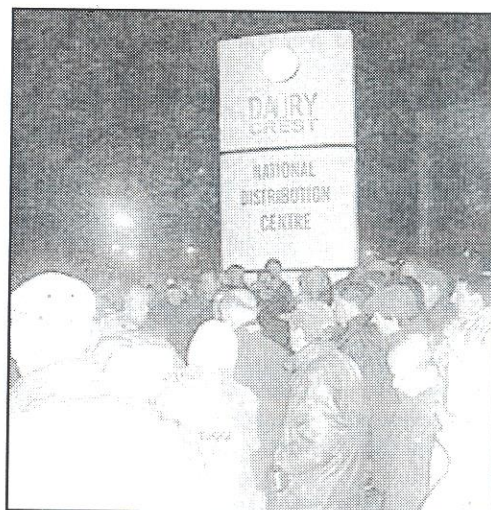
DAIRY CREST WORKERS REJECT 3.1% PAY OFFER

by Ian Woodland

WORKERS IN Dairy Crest have voted against accepting a 3.1% pay rise from this year proposed by the company. In a move that took the company and many of the activists by surprise around 1000 employees voted just over 2:1 against accepting the employers offer.

The main unions that organise Dairy Crest workers, the TGWU and USDAW, are now going back to negotiations with the company in a strong position to ask for a substantially better offer. The company have been surprised by the rejection and they know that if they do not improve the offer they will face industrial action.

Milk distribution workers are in a strong position as far as industrial action is concerned. If they strike not only will thousands of pounds worth of milk be ruined, but many of the major supermarkets which are supplied by Dairy Crest will be without milk. □



**For further information
on the developing situation
in Dairy Crest please
consult our website:**

www.socialist.net

Rail bosses cut corners on pay...

by our industrial correspondent

MEMBERS OF the Rail Maritime and Transport Union (RMT) are preparing to take action against Network Rail, the railway operator in what promises to be the biggest national strike on the railways for a decade. At the same time, London Underground staff are being balloted for industrial action over pay.

The dispute of signal workers and maintenance staff against Network Rail centres on pay, pensions and staff travel facilities. On a turnout of 68%, rail workers voted 2947 in favour of industrial action, with 2246 voting against, that is 58% in favour. The ballot was called because talks between the union and Network Rail have broken down.

In addition to asking for a substantial improvement to its 3% pay offer, the union is demanding that the company reinstate the final salary pension scheme that they have recently closed to new entrants. This has meant that new starts are now given an inferior Money Purchase Scheme which RMT General Secretary, Bob Crow, has described as nothing more than "glorified saving scheme". Those who remain in the scheme will have to continually increase their contributions in order to make up for the shortfall in the scheme, which will come about as members begin to retire. Those transferring back from employment by private contractors to Network Rail will also have to up their contributions by 40%. Contributions are higher in the Network Rail scheme because the fund is in deficit.

Staff travel concessions are another part of the package that has been eroded over the last period. Those who joined before April 1st 1996 get a 75% discount on rail travel, 20 free journeys a year and free travel of up to 40 miles to work. Those who joined after

April 1996 get nothing!

Network Rail has unleashed the normal barrage of attacks, criticism and two-faced claim that they want talks while refusing to enter discussions and rubbishing the union in public. They have been busily questioning the RMT legitimacy, they have said that only 1 in 5 of their employees are in the RMT. They have even pointed to a very narrow vote in favour from the signalling staff to try to question the majority in favour.

They have accused the RMT of threatening to undermine progress that has been made on train punctuality. They say that each strike day will cost the company £12 million and therefore union members are wasting the money which will pay for their demands. If this truly is the case then Network Rail better stop mucking about

and settle the dispute.

The union has repeatedly said that it does not want to take action, and that it is ready at any time to enter meaningful discussions. But Network Rail is putting on its best fighting face and have announced that it can maintain a basic skeleton service using the signal and area managers who they have secretly been training up to take on the role of signal workers in an emergency. How can they accuse the union of causing disruption and endangering the public when they are planning to use untrained and barely trained staff?

The strike dates have yet to be announced but it is thought that they might be coordinated with action on the Underground which is being balloted as we go to press, and is due to be announced June 2nd.

RMT members are being balloted in all 4 of the tube operating companies. London

Underground Limited has made an offer of 3% tied to changes in working practices; Tube Lines have tied productivity increases to their offer, while the two Metronet firms have yet to make an offer!

The RMT is demanding a substantial pay rise, a minimum salary of £22,000 up from £19,000 for station assistants, a 4-day 32-hour week, and restoration of paid meal breaks that were taken away in 1996.

All these demands are worth fighting for. Militant action by railworkers can win, and deserves the support of the whole movement. Winnign this dispute would be an important victory, but ultimately only the renationalisation of rail - under workers control and management can secure a safe railway and decent wages and conditions. For that to be achieved the RMT must take it fight into the Labour Party as well. □

... and on safety

YET ANOTHER train derailed on the London Underground last month causing part of the Central Line to be closed and massive delays on the network. That brings the number to 4 in the last 16 months. The derailment took place just before lunchtime on May 11th. Luckily the train involved, carrying 150 people, was only travelling at 15 mph because of speed restrictions on the line so nobody was injured.

Metronet the private contractor dealing with maintenance on the Central Line knew about the faulty points on that section of the line since last October but have obviously not repaired them and merely slapped a speed restriction on that stretch of track.

These were one of 42 sets of points that were identified as dangerous in the track inspections following the October derailment in Camden Town. They were to be replaced because they are on an unusual curve in the track, and were to be inspected every 24 hours. Let's hope that the other privateers charged with maintaining the track have been a shade more responsible - some hope!

The rail workers union, the RMT, has said that their safety reps have asked for detailed information about each set of points, including the exact locations on the track, and are

demanding extreme-caution restrictions be applied immediately to all of them. Once again we see that we cannot rely on the employers to perform basic tasks like staff and passenger safety, and these fall to the workers.

The privateers have already taken over a chunk of the maintenance on the London Underground and are no doubt looking around the network with watering mouths to see what else they can get. They have no interest in running an efficient service, no interest in running a railway; they have one motive - get the job done as cheaply and quickly as possible.

Privatisation of the Underground will inevitably prove to be the same disaster as it has been on the national rail services because you cannot run public services on the basis of private profit.

The Labour government must intervene to renationalise national rail services and the London Underground, bring ALL maintenance back 'in-house', and place these services under workers' control (rail workers have repeatedly demonstrated that they are the only people we can trust with our safety). At the same time they must launch a massive programme of genuine investment in Britain's transport infrastructure paid for by the expropriation of the profits of the privateers. □

Left victory strengthens pay claim

by Rachel Heemskerk, PCS member

THE PUBLIC and Commercial Services Union (PCS) have just unveiled a new pay claim which is being presented to the Civil Service management for discussion. Over a period of years workers in the Civil Service, which used to have a reputation for good wages and conditions, have been forced back with the management blaming declining budgets. Over the past ten years there has been little pay increase in real terms, and a decline in working conditions.

In its pay claim for 2004 the union is arguing that no member of full-time staff should be earning less than £13,500, and that part-time staff should get the equivalent salary for the hours they work. They are demanding a substantial rise in the minimum and maximum salary for each grade of staff to bring them up to the level comparable with workers in the private sector. The average increase in minimum salary is roughly £3,500, and the average rise in the top rate of salary is about £2833.

On the agenda is also a raft of changes in conditions to make work in the civil service more easy to balance with family life including a 35 hour working week, 30 Days annual leave as standard for all staff, 15 Days paid maternity support leave, 13 weeks paid paternity leave, and paid special leave to deal with domestic emergencies.

The claim is based on the large disparities in pay between civil servants working for different agencies but who effectively do the same job, and the extremely low pay levels which plague workers in the civil service.

Pay Disparities Within the Service

Civil servants doing the same or very similar work now receive very different pay. In spite of the fact that they all use the same grading system each different department has its own rates of pay, these discrepancies are leading to unfairness and equal pay problems. There are very large disparities in pay between minimum and maximum rates for each grade.

People in different Civil Service departments are doing virtually the same jobs while all working for the same employer but are paid vastly different rates. Those in the DWP are the worst paid, with the lowest grade 'AA' earning an average of £10,588, where as those on the same

grade in the DfT/ODPM will earn on average £13,614 which is a 28.6% differential. This is replicated right up the entire scale across the whole service. And these problems are carried over into retirement where peoples pensions vary greatly depending on which department they worked for.

Low Pay

Within the service as a whole there are a very large number of low paid staff. The Civil Service is a low pay employer, with a far greater percentage of low paid workers than the UK non-manual workforce as a whole. Civil Service statistics show that, in 2002, 14,980 full-time civil servants were earning less than £10,000, 35% were on less than £15,000, 61% earned less than £20,000, and 80% earn less than £25,000.

This chronic low pay that people coming into the service face is absolutely catastrophic for morale, it means that older more experienced staff are leaving when they get the chance. On the other hand newer staff are coming in, they get all the training they need to do the job; they barely get time to find out how things work before they are demoralised and thinking of leaving again.

The civil service has faced years of spending restraints which has meant cuts in wages and conditions, and as staff have left the service burned out it has increasing relied on temporary staff to plug the gap. Employing legions of temporary staff is a massive waste of resources and ends up costing more than permanent staff, however on the other hand it suits the employers because they can hire and fire as easily as they wish without consulting the union or facing much opposition.

The Union is asking for an across the board increase for all staff to bring their salaries up to the level of private sector non-manual workers doing comparable jobs and increased rate for workers in London. They want central London rates to be set at least £4,000, and outer London to be £3,000 above the national rates, and that this should apply to all grades.

According to research by the Halifax the average house price in Greater London is £233,000 close to double the price in the rest of the country and going up by 8.6% a year, rents are 70% more than the rest of the country, basic bills 35%

higher, and child care costs 10-15% higher.

The new claim if it is met will mean a big improvement for all workers in the Civil Service, not only in terms of pay but also in terms of working conditions. It will go some way towards rolling back the decline that has taken place over the last period at the hands of the former rightwing leadership of our union.

The claim will now go forward to the management for discussion. We do not regard the claim as unreasonable, it is only asking for what our members deserve. If the government and management really value the staff and the service we provide they should be prepared to pay us what we deserve.

We should not accept compromise on our demands. For too long the government has expected a first class system while paying us third class wages, and a third class level of resources. We are demanding that this situation is reversed! If they are not prepared to meet our demands we should be looking at national industrial action which should be linked to the industrial action that is taking place over the 2003 pay claim within the DWP, Office of National Statistics, Driving Standards Agency and the Crown Prosecution Service.

Our message to both members and management is clear. The 2003 pay dispute carries on. The essential issues of low pay, no progression and below inflation increases remain the same. However, given the proximity of the 2004 settlement date, plus the National PCS pay campaign, it clearly makes sense to merge our outstanding demands for pay 2003 into pay 2004. The DWP Executive have agreed to a five-day strike across all DWP to coincide with the 2004 settlement date 1st July. The NEC is also considering the setting up of branch hardship funds. All branches should be setting up hardship funds and be actively trying to raise funds from the wider movement.

The victory of the Broad Left in the Executive Committee elections, where the right wing were heavily defeated for the second year running, will allow the members to receive proper backing for a campaign to restore national pay bargaining. We now have the chance for a real victory in defeating low pay. □

Firefighters: The struggle resumes

by Kris Lawrie

THE ANGER and resentment that has been building up among the ranks of the firefighters exploded last month in a series of unofficial local disputes that quickly spread to cover the whole country. In Manchester on the 17th of May 19 firefighters were suspended for refusing to use new 'anti-terrorist' equipment which is part of the new duties that they are due to take on following the June 2003 pay settlement.

Barry Nixon the County Fire Officer for Greater Manchester in a statement to the press said of the suspended workers, they will be allowed to return to work when they are prepared to "undertake the normal duties of a firefighter". In this lies the problem - what are the "normal" duties of a firefighter? Barry Nixon clearly has strong ideas about what the normal duties of a firefighter should be. Likewise firefighters across Britain have a pride in the service they provide and strong ideas also about how it should be run.

The current dispute in Manchester follows months of tension which has been building up across the service. There was a wave of unofficial action last November after the latest 3.5% increase tied to changes in working practices was not paid. Anger has clearly been building up since then and eyes and minds were focused on the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) conference on the 11th of May which was due to discuss the possibility of a national ballot over the governments foot dragging. Even in the run up to the conference action was beginning to flare up in anticipation, the conference demanded the implementation of the second stage of the pay deal and called a recall conference to take place in June to discuss the question

of industrial action.

The day after conference Welsh firefighters refused to operate the new anti-terrorist equipment, this was followed up on May 17th by crews in Norfolk and Kent who were answering 999 calls only and those in Manchester who also refused to use the equipment. The employers in Manchester stepped up their attack and five days later 135 firefighters had been suspended and were vowing to stay out till the pay dispute is settled. The sacking of these workers acted as a focal point for a new and increased wave of unofficial actions right across the country. Firefighters who have been discontented about the situation have found a way to express their frustration. The situation is pushing in the direction of national action.

The union is calling for the immediate implementation of the 3.5% which they say was promised by the government under the June 2003 pay settlement. This settlement caused great friction and strong disagreements within the FBU itself, but in the end it was recommended by the Executive and accepted by a recall conference after bitter debate. The pay rise that the deal delivered was a long way

short of the 30K they were asking for at the start of the dispute. However the deal did promise a payrise from around £21,000 to £25,000 which is what they will be earning if they get the 3.5% backdated to November and the further pay rise due in June. This was seen as a fairly decent rise so many accepted it.

Too many strings not enough pay

The problem with the June 2003 deal was that it came with more strings than the London Philamonic, these included the total reorganisation of the shift/watch system, new duties, such as basic medical duties, the use of anti-terrorist equipment etc. Except for the initial payment of 3.5% which was given immediately the whole pay package was totally dependent on the firefighters selling their working conditions and taking on more duties. Therefore as painful as it may be to admit what the employers are now giving them is more or less what the union leaders advised them to accept. They are being blackmailed - 'pay rise and changes in working practises or the status quo with no pay rise.'

But that doesn't mean that they should accept the situation. The dispute the firefighters are now facing is the same one as they were originally facing in 2002/3. A national ballot on industrial action will follow the June recall conference. The firefighters should fight for a better deal than the one they have got. Of course they are not going to oppose any genuine reform or improvement, but why should they have to sell their conditions and compromise the professionalism of the service just to get a halfway decent payrise?

The firefighters should reopen their dispute with a better deal on the agenda. If they are going to take any industrial action why fight for implementation of the last shoddy deal? They must put a more ambitious target up as a demand.

The Labour government has been attacking the workers mercilessly since they got into power, this has created a lot of disillusionment among layers of workers. So much so that some activists mainly in the RMT and the FBU are calling for the links with Labour to be broken.

But this is precisely the time to strengthen the links, as we have seen the Blair government is looking for a fight and they will not back down easily in a dispute. Neither should we! If a group of workers like the firefighters take concerted action it would be possible to force even this Labour government to cave in. Militant action on the industrial front is the only way to defend the fire service and secure firefighters a decent standard of living. This must be combined with effective political action, a campaign against the Blairites within the Labour Party itself. □



Students' walkout in support of victimised teacher

by Ray Smith

ON MAY 17th a comprehensive was forced to close for the day when pupils walked out in support of a teacher threatened with disciplinary action for telling them they were being denied a proper education. The students action started when Malcolm Walker, who teaches history at Headlands school in Swindon, sent a letter to his tutor group about the management in the school. The letter explained how in the last period permanent teachers had been treated without respect and pupils had been neglected. When the students became aware of the management threats against Mr Walker a hundred of them walked out of lessons taking advantage of the morning break. Outside the gates some waved placards while others shouted. Almost 50 pupils refused to go back in forcing the managers to shut the school at 1 pm. One Headlands teacher told the Swindon Evening Advertiser: "It was anarchy. After period three the kids refused to come back into class. Hundreds of them took part in a sit down protest in the field and half of them ran out the school grounds".

On May 18th only two years of the five years at that school were able to carry on with lessons. Faced with this unprecedented situation in Swindon, the council was forced to intervene. The contribution of the council has not helped at all. The council criticised the action of the students describing them as "jumping on the bandwagon" and said it was "disappointed" by Mr Walker's actions. However, the statements of the pupils show the opposite: "We are protesting at the new management" said a 15 year old pupil. They are pretty angry that Malcolm Walker is leaving and are outraged at the new management. They are seeing the consequences of the lack of investment in education. This lack of resources affects both teachers and pupils. This is the actual reason for the "anarchy" provoked by the rage of the students. The teachers and their trade unions should back the pupils dispute and expose the lack of resources that the teachers are suffering every day in the classrooms. Only the united fight of teachers and pupils can improve the current situation of state education.

Needless to say the walkout in Headlands School is not an accident. This is the natural consequence of the poor condition of state education. The famous words of Tony Blair "Education, education, education" are actually proved to be empty and false and they have the cheek to say that "The Blair Generation will be the best educated in History" (*The Guardian*, May 20). Nevertheless, this situation is radicalising a new layer of young people and specially school students. The role that the school students played during the Anti-war struggle is a good example of this growing radicalisation amongst the youth. Another example of this militant mood amongst the students was the election of the left-wing candidate Kat Fletcher in the NUS conference less than two months ago. To date we have only seen isolated actions of the youth. We, the youth must organise ourselves and fight alongside the labour movement against the attacks on our schools, colleges and jobs. ■



Hands off Venezuela on tour: Newcastle

by Jack Duggan

THIS TUESDAY (May 25), as part of an ongoing campaign to heighten awareness of the current and developing situation in Venezuela, a meeting was held at Newcastle College. Essential issues were raised in the opening speech and discussed in detail afterwards.

The mounting tension between Chavez's government and the opposing reactionaries was a particular point of discussion and how this is leading Chavez to make vital decisions as to which political direction to choose for the future of the country.

This choice is between either continuing a gradual series of reforms, or a rapid shift in policy swinging the political landscape abruptly to the socialist left carrying the Bolivarian Revolution to a socialist conclusion. The former is perceived by some as a more lenient option, but there are treacherous pathways to be crossed and the factor of time and its possible consequences - allowing reaction time to organise its intrigues - is important. In any case capitalism cannot allow reforms in the interests of the masses at their expense.

As such the thought of a swift and decisive move towards a total socialist transformation of Venezuela was also debated at length and given much thought, although here questions were raised as to whether Chavez's actual intentions stretch to such an extent or not. The key here is what actions Chavez's government has taken to move the situation to this stage, and the part the masses have played in driving the process forward to its present state.

In all the meeting proved to be a success, despite a low attendance. The collection gathered near on £40, and those who attended were interested in organizing a date to watch the video "the revolution will not be televised". ■

Edinburgh and Midlothian parents fight school closures

Heather Scott, Labour Party member, personal capacity

FEELINGS ARE running high across Scotland as parents unite to protest against local government proposals to close five primary schools in rural Midlothian, and to shut down five more in the city of Edinburgh (mainly in deprived areas), merging them with other schools.

The reason for the closures put forward by Edinburgh's Labour controlled council is that falling school rolls mean that the children would get a better education in larger merged schools. The parents, however, believe it is a cost cutting exercise, with the underlying motive of freeing land for lucrative land deals.

Parents and pupils in the schools affected have organised poster campaigns, held public meetings, and collected thousands of signatures opposing the closures. The Midlothian parents have organised a protest march through Dalkeith and handed in petitions to the Midlothian council headquarters and also to the Scottish Parliament.

Parents in Edinburgh are joining forces to organise a mass demonstration in Edinburgh's Royal Mile. The plan is to hand in petitions and to lobby both Edinburgh City Council and the Parliament.

Although the rural areas and the city areas are very different, the implications of the closures and the objections to them are the same. The children will have much longer and more hazardous journeys to school, crossing dangerous roads (providing

school buses does not solve the problem - what about the nursery classes and after-school clubs?); the quality of education will inevitably be affected as the children will be thrust into larger classes - a factor particularly relevant to children from deprived areas who currently benefit from smaller classes and more individual attention. When a school closes the whole area is affected adversely - shops lose trade and people move away. The local school is often the focus of many activities which bind a community together and perform an important social function.

Parents in Edinburgh feel particularly bitter. 'We voted in a Labour council to represent us, and now they are letting us down. It is the Labour council that wants to rip the heart out of our community and put our children at risk.' many say they will never vote Labour again if this goes through. Meanwhile, rank and file members of the Labour Party locally are also fighting to keep the schools open, but the Labour council seems to have forgotten its election promises to support the working class people of Edinburgh. □

Hands Off Venezuela! Mayday meeting in solidarity with the Venezuelan Workers

by Ray Smith

TWO YEARS ago the Venezuelan reaction with the help of US imperialism organised the first threat against the Bolivarian Revolution through a coup d'état. Since then the businessmen, the old Trade Union bureaucracy (CTV), the owners of the media and the US embassy in Caracas have been carrying through frenetic activity against the Venezuelan Revolution. We, Hands Off Venezuela! have also been working restlessly against the reactionary plots of the Venezuelan oligarchy.

On May 1, taking advantage of the International Day of the Working Class, Hands Off Venezuela! held a public meeting after the May Day Demonstration in Central London.

Alan Woods, editor of Marxist.com, eyewitness of the Venezuelan Revolution and one of the speakers of II International Solidarity Gathering in Venezuela, gave us a really inspiring talk on what the real current situation is.

In a room full of trade unionists, students, and leftwing activists (most of them linked to Solidarity movements with Latin America) Alan Woods also spoke on the current threats the Venezuelan Revolution is facing. One of the most serious threats comes from the Colombian border. US imperialism is using this country, by increasing tensions along the border with Venezuela, to justify a foreign intervention. He explained that the only way forward for the Venezuelan people is to break with capitalism as the only way to defend the achievements of the Revolution. However, this idea is becoming more and more popular amongst the masses that have seen three serious attempts to smash the Bolivarian Movement by the Venezuelan oligarchy.

On the other hand, another threat to the Revolution is represented by the moderate tendencies within the same Movement. The Marxist writer explained how these tendencies had led other revolutionary movements to defeat, like in Chile 1973. He finished his speech linking the struggle of the Venezuelan urban poor, workers, fishermen, peasants and students with the international struggle of the labour movement against capitalism.

After that, the audience held a really interesting debate about the current tasks of the Venezuelan Revolution and how the British working class can help their class brothers and sisters in Venezuela. Despite the fact that only 45 people were there the Hands Off Venezuela! Campaign collected £65. This money will be used to extend the fight against the media blackout and to spread solidarity with the Bolivarian Revolution all over the world. These actions are very important. We must support the Venezuelan Revolution as part of our daily struggle against capitalism in Britain. □

Labour Representation Committee:

Take the struggle for socialist policies into Labour

By Rob Walsh, Ealing North CLP, personal capacity

THE LABOUR Representation Committee founding conference to be held on 3 July offers an important opportunity for trade unionists and labour activists to thrash out an alternative manifesto and to begin to organise the practical work of reclaiming the Labour Party for real Labour values. Socialist Appeal supporters will be participating, to unite with those who want to defeat Blair and Blairism, and also to raise the ideas of socialism.

This launch comes at an auspicious moment with relations between the organisations of the labour movement, and their respective leaderships, riven with contradictions. Blair and co are already on the ropes. However, the prospect of Brown taking over is little alternative. Getting rid of Blair is not enough, we must fight for a socialist programme capable of transforming peoples lives. The trade unions have a central role to play in that struggle, and are at the heart of the Labour Representation Committee.

A series of unions affiliated to labour are currently balloting for industrial action. The new militant mood in the unions and workplaces must be taken into the party.

Taking part in these industrial struggles will be thousands of ordinary workers who have learned from experience to despise the leaders of this government, because of their actions in office. Labour Party activists who want to pull the rug from under the Blair clique should seize the opportunity to win the allegiance of these rank-and-file union members by organising actions to support them in their disputes. This could range from inviting

local firefighters and railworkers to speak at meetings to explain their case, going to the picket lines to offer support, raising cash for hardship funds etc. However the credibility of anyone "from the Labour Party" is at low tide at the present time, and understandably so. Therefore, we should emphasise that we are fighting against Blair and co, and for socialist policies. In this way we could get the union branch interested in joining the LRC, and we can also sell our journal.

In numerous ways the banner of Labour has been dragged through the dirt by "New Labour" and its acolytes. Who can forget that Tony Blair's government bombed Serbia, bombed Afghanistan, starved the children of Iraq through sanctions, and then bombed and invaded that country, where "we" are now assisting the USA in carrying out a brutal occupation? All this after being promised an "ethical foreign policy" in the 1997 election campaign!

Internationalism and socialism are old brothers in arms and we will be raising the need for solidarity with workers struggling around the world.

Closer to home, workers continue to feel the brunt of attacks on their working conditions by profit-hungry bosses, while Blair boasts abroad that under his government British labour laws would remain 'the most restrictive on Trade Unions in the Western world'. The struggle for shorter working hours without loss of pay, or for that matter just to defend current conditions from yet more attacks, goes hand in hand with the struggle to abolish the Tories anti-union laws, clung onto by Blair and co. in

government.

On education, supposedly New Labour's number one priority, the government stands guilty of plunging thousands of students into long-term debt (by introducing tuition fees), creating an elitist higher education system (by introducing top-up fees) and drowning primary and secondary teachers in bureaucracy instead of enabling them to get on with the job of teaching children.

Socialist Programme

Labour has just had two landslide general election victories on the trot, yet the turnout in the 1997 election was the lowest for 63 years and the 2001 election turnout 10% lower still - the lowest since 1918. Turnout was especially low among young voters aged 18-24.

Labour can hold no attraction to the new layer of youth who became active in the movement against the war. The LRC with a bold socialist programme could begin to give a new generation a vision of transforming the labour movement into a vehicle for socialist change. Fighting for a new independent youth section inside the movement would be an important element in the struggle to attract young people.

An aroused and confident working class movement is more than capable of cleansing its organisations of careerists and carpet-baggers. Alongside trade union struggles against each new attack we face, it will be necessary to sharpen all our tools, not only by transforming our trade union organisations, but also by cleaning up Labour.

Whilst understandable in the circumstances, frustration and disappointment are not a good guide to action: the only reliable guide to action is sound theory, in other words a consistent theoretical explanation based on historical experience. Now is not the time for trade unionists to turn away from Labour, but on the contrary this is just the moment to get stuck in.

Inside Labour is the place to hit Blair where it hurts - and the affiliated Trade Unions have the muscle to do it.

What about the party membership? The apparent lack of opposition to the government and the Blair project from the constituency labour parties, and the apparent ease with which internal democracy has been ditched in favour of policy forums which rubber-stamp the leader's policies, seems to be a contradiction if the rank and file are overwhelmingly opposed to Blair.

Yet when Londoners had an opportunity to vote against Blair without letting in a Tory, in the last mayoral election, the expelled Ken Livingstone won easily. For fear of humiliating defeat, Blair - supposedly in complete control of the party - was forced to back down and readmit Livingstone. In the whole episode around Livingstone we see the need for a focal point around which opposition in the party rank and file can be mobilised. The Labour Representation Committee must now seek to become such a focal point. Armed with a socialist programme for changing society it can play a decisive role in taking our movement back from the careerists who have hijacked it. □

Torture and barbarism in Iraq

Imperialism is preparing a historic defeat

By Phil Mitchinson

IN GEORGE Orwell's 1984, the most frightening place on earth was the Ministry of Love. Within its walls unspeakable acts of physical abuse, humiliation and psychological torment were carried out. This image has been conjured up of late - casting Saddam in the role of Big Brother - to justify the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Once the myths and legends of weapons of mass destruction had evaporated, Bush and Blair claimed instead that this was a war to liberate the Iraqi people - to overthrow an unpopular and tyrannical regime and bestow all the blessings of civilization and democracy on the people of Iraq.

That Saddam was a tyrant is beyond doubt. However, the systematic torture of Iraqi prisoners - now exposed for all to see - by the imperialist forces of occupation has shocked the world, and demolished the lie that this was a war for the human rights of the Iraqi people. The shame-faced excuses of British and US government officials that these are the criminal acts of 'rogue elements' or a few bad apples will cut no ice. Each new appalling photograph published demonstrates just how widespread this abuse is. In fact, these are not isolated crimes, but part and parcel of imperialist policy, they are acts of torture.

These atrocities will have a profound impact. They will stiffen the resolve

of the people of Iraq in the struggle to free their country from foreign occupation. They will affect the morale of the troops, and public opinion in the west, above all in the US, where opinion is already changing thanks to the sight of coffins draped in the stars and stripes returning home in increasing numbers. It is on these fronts that the struggle against US imperialism now unfolds, a struggle for national liberation in Iraq; divisions within the foreign armies of occupation; and growing opposition to the occupation in the US itself.

Daily mirror

In Britain the propaganda machine worked overtime to question the authenticity of photographs showing British soldiers engaged in torture, published in the *Daily Mirror*. This was an appalling smokescreen. It is quite obvious that the techniques used by the US military are also known to the British military. Instead of discussing this, we had endless articles and TV and radio commentary on whether the photographs published by the British *Daily Mirror* were fakes or not. In the end the *Mirror's* editor Piers Morgan got the sack. The purpose of all this was to secure a Huttonesque whitewash, turning attention from the very real atrocities in Iraq, to the authenticity of one set of photographs. Having sacked the *Mirror's* editor,

the whole affair is now deemed to be at an end - thus avoiding having to discuss the real issues.

In the US faced with overwhelming evidence - evidence it has now emerged that was known to Bush and his administration for months - the line is that this is the work of a few bad apples, this is abuse carried out by sadists. That they are sadistic acts is beyond question. These obscene beatings and humiliation are organised. Torture is an official method being implemented by the forces of occupation.

The truth is that this torture is not at all rare and is not confined to Iraq. US imperialism has created what is in effect a gulag. It stretches from prisons in Afghanistan to Iraq, from Guantánamo to secret CIA prisons around the world. There are perhaps 10,000 people being held in Iraq, 1,000 in Afghanistan and almost 700 in Guantánamo. The law as it applies to them is whatever the US deems necessary.

On paper US imperialism agrees with the Geneva convention. But the Bush administration has designated those at Guantánamo, for example, as "enemy combatants". Rumsfeld extended this system - "a legal black hole", according to Human Rights Watch - to Afghanistan and then Iraq, openly rejecting all international conventions. As always where these pieces of paper stand in the way of the interests

of US imperialism they are rudely trampled underfoot.

The arrogance of these people is truly staggering. How did Bush explain all this when he appeared on TV? "In a democracy everything is not perfect - mistakes are made."

Every day, new details are emerging of yet more 'isolated cases' of abuse by US troops. Pentagon officials are investigating 35 possible instances of abuse by US personnel, and the Los Angeles Times reported that 25 Iraqi and Afghan prisoners had died in US custody in the last 17 months. The phrase "isolated incidents" usually suggests one or two episodes. Surely by the time you get to 35 these incidents are no longer isolated, but part and parcel of policy.

Last September, General Miller (the new man in charge of Iraq's prisoners, a post to which he brings his experience as the man in charge of Guantanamo Bay), visited Iraq to offer (as the Washington Post puts it) "suggestions on how to make interrogations more efficient and effective". The basic aim, he recommended, was that military detention centres in Iraq should serve as an "enabler for interrogation" and that the prison guards should "set the conditions for successful exploitation of the internees". And that is what they proceeded to do.

Torture is seen as a very effective "enabler for interrogation". It is an inevitable

consequence too of 'dehumanising' the occupied people. The military occupation is making a prison of the whole of Iraq and making the troops its turnkeys.

As shocking as all these revelations are - and they are shocking enough to send a shiver down one's spine - in reality, they are exposing something we have seen many times before. It is the normal conduct of a brutal occupying power that seeks to perpetuate its control by a policy of murder and terror. It is state terrorism.

The imperialist powers, and US imperialism chief amongst them, respect no civilization, religion or culture other than their own. They are puffed up with the arrogance of imperial power and hold all other countries with barely concealed contempt. They consider it their God-given right to interfere in the affairs of any country they choose. This is no exaggeration, as Bush himself has explained, "I also have this belief, strong belief that freedom is not this country's gift to the world. Freedom is the Almighty's gift to every man and woman in this world. And as the greatest power on the face of the earth we have an obligation to help the spread of freedom." This is the Bush Doctrine.

Underlying the ideology of every imperialism is the notion of their own national and racial superiority. The occupying forces regard the Iraqis as inferior beings. This sense of superiority can be variously expressed. In an extreme form it is seen in the torture of defenceless prisoners. Their captors do not even regard them as human beings, so why bother to respect their human dignity.

What will happen now? A handful of sadistic officers will receive a little slap on the wrist. Some soldiers will face jail sentences. The President and his merry men will profess horror. That will probably be the end of it as far as "justice" is concerned. If the crisis gets worse, as now looks likely,

one or two politicians and military officials will probably face the sack. How many and how high up depends on what Bush and co can get away with. However, this is far from the end of the affair for the Iraqi people, US and British troops and public opinion in the US and Britain. Scandals and outrages of this magnitude can even bring down governments. The mass movement in Spain forced the withdrawal of Spanish troops, a movement on the same scale in the US and Britain could have a profound impact.

Such a movement in the US is entirely possible. It is wrong to think that all Americans are like George Bush. Not all American soldiers think or behave like these thugs in uniform. The present investigation began, after all, when a US soldier from the prison reported the torture and handed over the photographs, which eventually found their way to CBS. This soldier had a conscience and he showed great personal courage. He is not alone. There is a history of both torture and abuse in the US military, and also of acts of courage in opposing them.

The US army, like all armies, is a reflection of society as a whole. Within the ranks of any army we find a small minority of thugs and psychopaths. At the other extreme there is another minority that is open to revolutionary ideas and is prepared to speak out. In between these two extremes there is the big majority who are neither one thing nor the other, but whose mood and opinions are moulded by circumstances, by experience, and can go one way or another depending on which is the stronger force.

What we have seen in Iraq is evidence of systematic torture. It is not isolated cases of abuse by a few "bad apples". Undoubtedly the most sadistic elements have been given free reign to exercise their personal perversions. However, these acts of barbarism, this kind of

inhumanity, once exposed will inevitably have a profound impact on the outlook of many of the ordinary troops. Already there are reports of US soldiers in Iraq calling for Rumsfeld and co to be sacked and for the troops to be withdrawn. This unprecedented dissent can intensify in the weeks ahead.

There is compelling evidence that the numbers of conscientious objectors and deserters are growing. The Pentagon is loath to publicise desertion figures, but the Marine Corps alone registered 1,113 cases of desertion in 2003, and 384 instances so far this year, according to statistics obtained by The Guardian newspaper. The army recorded a total of 2,731 desertions last year. By the Pentagon's own admission, meanwhile, morale among forces serving in Iraq is perilously low, with three-quarters of troops believing that their superior officers have little concern for their well-being. Meanwhile, US soldiers - like their fellow Americans - are increasingly admitting to grave doubts about the morality of the war.

Changing mood

The mood in the USA is changing. The latest polls show that a majority now believe that troops should be withdrawn. This will have a major impact on the forthcoming Presidential election in the US. However, it is not even clear that a change of President will be enough to get the troops out. The war will grind on its merciless, blood-soaked way. More "excesses" will follow, as night follows day. As was the case in Vietnam, a mass movement in the United States is needed and not just a Presidential election in order to get the troops out. In the more recent case of Spain, it was the millions of people who took to the streets that was decisive in putting pressure on the new government to withdraw the Spanish contingent.

Likewise, Blair and co will be considering sending in thousands more troops to replace those that have been withdrawn. This must be met with a mass movement in Britain, to oppose the sending of those troops and to demand that the occupation of Iraq is brought to an end.

In Iraq US and British troops are facing uprisings on the part of the entire people. The only response of Bush is to pour in yet more American troops: yet more poor, working class black kids will be sent into the meat grinder; yet more American and Iraqi lives will be shattered. More coffins will be sent home draped in the Stars and Stripes.

The war in Iraq is having a radicalising effect on the workers and youth of the whole world, just as the Vietnam war did in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The war, with all its atrocities, and the growing resistance of the Iraqi people, will combine with the effects of the general crisis of capitalism, to change the whole mood of the working class, especially in the United States. Already a majority of Americans now believe the war was a mistake. That majority will continue to grow. Bush and Blair will eventually be swept away.

The careers of these individuals, whether they stay or go, does not alter things fundamentally. The horrific scenes we have witnessed in Iraq are not the result of this or that politician being in office, but of the barbarous approach of imperialism to the masses of the world in a new period of history. There will be more of this to come. As Marx rightly foresaw 150 years ago the choice before humanity is between socialism and barbarism. The struggle for socialism is the struggle for the future of the human race. ■

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Guardian journalist Sibylla Brodzinsky misreporting on Venezuela

by Jorge Martin, International Secretary, Hands off Venezuela Campaign

SIBYLLA BRODZINSKY'S article on Venezuela ("Leftwing dictator or saviour of the poor: Chavez faces new challenge to his rule" fits in the pattern of half truths and open lies that characterises the media coverage of the Bolivarian revolution, something we expected from *The Economist* (which openly calls for "regime change") but not from the *Guardian*.

When we saw the article we could not believe our eyes and immediately sent a letter to the *Guardian* (published on Thursday, May 25. But, because this comes from a paper seen as "progressive" by many, it might be worth analysing the article in detail.

To start with she affirms that a recall referendum against Chavez is "the last chance to remove the president constitutionally", something that seems to imply that otherwise the opposition will have no alternative than to remove him by unconstitutional means. Has she considered the possibility of the opposition removing the president by waiting until the next presidential elections? Also unnamed "experts" affirm "it may also be the last chance to avoid a civil war". So far, the only ones provoking a civil war have the opposition which carried out the April 11 2002 coup, openly discusses the violent overthrow of the democratically elected government and calls on its supporters to rise against it.

Trying to paint the opposition as innocent victims of an undemocratic president ("a former paratroop commander"), she says "the opposition used street demonstrations to try and force his resignation and last year staged a two month general strike". What about the military coup organised by the opposition in April 2002? Oh, but that is described by Brodzinsky as Chavez being "ousted briefly by a military rebellion, but returned to power two days later"! Who organised the coup? The opposition. Who returned Chavez to power, a mass movement of the people and a rebellion of military officers and troops loyal to the democratically elected president.

"Dozens of people have died in clashes between pro- and anti-Chavez groups during the past several years" Brodzinsky tells us. What she forgets to

say is that most of those killed were Chavez supporters. Some 50 people were killed in the two brief days that the opposition coup lasted in April 2002 and nearly 100 peasant and trade union activists have been killed since Chavez won the presidential election in 1998. Most of those have been killed on orders from landowners and bosses to "solve" conflicts over the land reform and industrial disputes.

"The latest deaths came in February, when at least 14 people died in opposition demonstrations and as many as 200 were wounded". First of all the most recent case of a politically motivated murder is that of the of Giandomenico Puliti, Bolivarian leader and mayoral candidate of the Movement Fifth Republic in Tovar, Merida, assassinated on May 7th. Secondly in February the opposition called for an uprising against the democratically elected government when the National Electoral Council ruled hundreds of thousands of signatures collected for the recall referendum as invalid. The same Amnesty International report that Brodzinsky quotes only selectively clearly describes the situation: "groups of opposition supporters using barricades, stones, Molotov cocktails and firework rockets. There were also several reports of protesters using firearms. In this context, there were clearly legitimate public security concerns, which the authorities had a duty to respond to."

Opposition Violence

The opposition clearly wanted to provoke a response by the government and the National Guard that would justify their theory that in Venezuela there is a dictatorship. If the opposition organises violent demonstrations using Molotov cocktails and firearms, violence will inevitably take place. However, in the last 5 years there have been dozens, probably hundreds of opposition demonstrations (some quite large, recently smaller in size) with no violence at all. In fact, after the violent incidents provoked by the opposition at the end of February, there was a peaceful (though small in numbers) opposition

demonstration on March 6th (and there have been a few after that).

"Many fear that his friendship with Fidel Castro could herald a Cuban-style socialist system for Venezuela, and worry about his apparent sympathy with neighbouring Colombia's leftwing rebels", Brodzinsky informs us, without telling us exactly who these worried "many" are. There is also a straight lie dress as a truth in the sentence when she talks about "apparent" sympathy for the FARC guerrillas on the part of Chavez. We publicly challenge Brodzinsky to provide any proof (a quote would suffice) to demonstrate this. The only thing she would have found out if she had carried out her journalistic duties is that Chavez offered to mediate between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas, at a time when the two parts were engaged in peace talks. This is not just a small detail or an unimportant oversight. A major part of the US administration and Venezuelan opposition campaign to oust Chavez is to brand his government as being "supportive of terrorism". Since the FARC guerrillas are considered by Washington to be "narco-terrorists" the intention in associating Chavez with the FARC becomes clear. In a world dominated by Bush's "war on terror", this is a very serious accusation to make. Not only does Brodzinsky not provide a proof for this opposition allegation, but also she tries to cover herself by saying that this "sympathy" is "apparent". This is convenient because it removes the need to provide any proof, but it is also appalling journalism.

She then, quoting again unnamed "analysts" ("and even some opposition members!") says that "the cards are so stacked against them that the likelihood of a referendum is low". To back up this claim she quotes from Michael Rowan whom she describes as an American political strategist who has lived in Venezuela for more than 30 years. This bland and professional description is meant to give Mr Rowan an air of respectability (you see, he is not a "former paratroop commander"). However Brodzinsky conveniently forgets to say that Mr Rowan has a weekly column in

one of the most rabidly anti-Chavez dailies, *El Universal*, where he makes his opposition views abundantly clear. In a recent edition of his column, comparing Chavez to Hitler and Mussolini he says: "Venezuela is starting to resemble Italy or Germany in the 1930s. As an elected leader with charismatic force and a radical worldview rose like a Phoenix to dominate the country... Consumed or appalled by the power and glory of the new leader's insane hatreds, every conversation turned on questions about him: Could he last, how can he be stopped, can he be recalled, how can I get away from this madness? This is exactly as the tyrant wants it." (the full article can be found in the opposition and coup supporting site Vcrisis and we recommend all our reads to read it in full to get a clearer picture of the kind of political thinking of people like Mr Rowan, an "American political strategist".

The truth of the matter is that chances of a recall referendum being called are low because the opposition never collected the necessary number of signatures. Out of the 3.4 million signatures the opposition claimed it had collected only 1.8 million were declared valid by the National Electoral Commission (CNE), some 700,000 were declared invalid (where names did not correspond with national ID numbers, deceased or under aged people had "signed", etc) and 800,000 were declared doubtful and subject to a verification process (this was in the case where data in full sheets had been filled with the same handwriting). All the opposition needs to do in the verification period next week is *to proof that at least 75% of those signatures are valid and then a recall referendum would be triggered (whether they can*

win such a referendum or not is another matter).

Fair and Free Process

All Brodzinsky tells us about the National Electoral Commission is what the opposition thinks of it (that it is controlled by government supporters and that Chavez is manipulating the process). She does not even quote the government's position on this (which would be good journalistic practice). Even worse, she completely ignores the fact that the Carter Centre, the Organisation of American States and the European Union observers, all certified that the signature collection and verification process were fair and free. These are hardly "Cuban-style" institutions, or have "apparent sympathies" for the FARC guerrillas!

The Carter Centre for instance, when the CNE publicised its decision on the number of valid and invalid signatures

and those which had to be re-verified, declared that: "In this process, in particular, we find sufficient controls, including security paper for the petitions, full identification of the citizen with signature and thumbprint, summary forms (actas) listing the petition (planillas) serial numbers during the collection process, party witnesses, personnel trained and designated by the CNE, verification of each petition form and a cross-check with the summary forms, a cross-check of the names with the voters list, and a mechanism for appeal and correction." And although the Centre declared that they would have been more lenient regarding the sheets filled with the same handwriting, it also made clear its support for the process of re-verification of those. Brodzinsky conveniently ignores these statements since they would contradict the image she is trying to paint of a process manipulated by the government where the opposition

does not stand a chance of getting enough valid signatures.

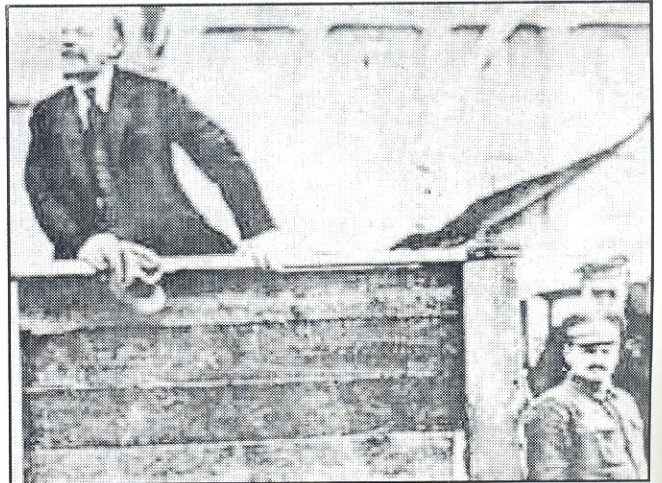
One of the funniest parts in Brodzinsky's article is when she says that: "For all his vitriolic rhetoric against the US and George Bush, Washington has so far failed to engage Mr Chávez directly in the fight. However, the US Congress has funded some opposition groups through a non-governmental organisation." This implies that Chávez has provoking Bush for a fight, but Bush (that great moderate) has restrained himself from engaging him directly. The truth, as so often with journalistic articles on Venezuela, is precisely the opposite. Despite Washington's constant provocations against the democratically elected Venezuelan government and its constant interference with the sovereign affairs of Venezuela, the Venezuelan government has been very restrained in its response, and only more recently has started to reply directly to these constant provocations. As for the US not engaging Chavez directly, if what Brodzinsky means is that Bush has not yet ordered the invasion of the country, then that is true. But really, short of that, the US administration has used all other means at their disposal, open and covert, to undermine and overthrow the democratically elected government of Venezuela, one that in reality has more claim to democratic legitimacy than Bush's.

We ask ourselves how an article by Sibylla Brodzinsky, who to our knowledge has never written for the Guardian before, but who is a regular collaborator of the right wing Miami Herald, made it into the pages of the *Guardian*. □



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VLADIMIR ILYICH LENIN



80th Anniversary of his death

On the National Question

By Rob Sewell

As part of our commemoration of the centenary of Lenin's death, we are publishing a series of articles about his life and ideas. Lenin not only led the first successful socialist revolution, but he also made an enormous contribution to Marxist theory. The present article deals with the important contribution he made on the national question, and how such a correct stand on this issue guaranteed the success of the Bolshevik Party in October 1917.

THE EXISTENCE of nations, nation states, and national consciousness, is a characteristic feature of the capitalist epoch. Before the advent of capitalism, there was no genuine national consciousness in the modern sense. Feudal society was dominated by particularism, where peoples identified themselves as members of villages, towns, localities, regions, and principalities. It took the development of capitalism, an economic revolution, to bring about the home market and the assimilation of peoples into nations. The gathering together of the productive forces into one nation state was a progressive historical task of the bourgeoisie. On this material basis, in the period particularly from 1789 onwards in Europe, the epoch of bourgeois national-democratic revolution, we see the emergence of nations and national consciousness.

"For the complete victory of commodity production", states Lenin, "the bourgeoisie must capture the home market, and there must be politically united territories whose population

speak a single language... Therein is the economic foundation of national movements...

"The tendency of every national movement is towards the formation of national states, under which these requirements of modern capitalism are best satisfied." (*The Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, Progress Publishers, pp.8-9)

Therefore, a nation is a historically evolved entity, which emerged under conditions of war, invasion, upheaval and the dissolution of old frontiers and the emergence of new ones. In the general sense, from the viewpoint of Marxism, the nation state arises from a developed stable community of language, territory, economy and culture. There are, however, given the laws of uneven and combined development, exceptions to the rule, where nation states are composed of different nationalities (as in Britain) and different languages (as in Belgium). Nations can be created where none existed before. The last 100 years have been

littered with such examples, most notably in the Balkans and the Middle East.

On the basis of capitalism and its drive for markets, power and spheres of influence stronger powers dominated weaker powers. In the epoch of imperialism, this tendency of national oppression took an extreme form, coupled with the oppression of national minorities within states. As Lenin explained in his book *'Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism'*: "Capitalism has grown into a world system of colonial oppression and of the financial strangulation of the overwhelming majority of the population of the world by a handful of 'advanced' countries."

A Colossal Brake

Capitalism, rather than resolving the national question, has in its decline exacerbated the problems worldwide. The productive forces created by capitalism have now outstripped national markets. Together with private property, the nation state has become a colossal brake on the further development of society. As a consequence, nationalism has raised its head in the present epoch, with explosive repercussions, from Europe to the Balkans, from the Indian subcontinent to the Middle East. The Colonial Revolution brought national liberation to the fore, bringing millions to their feet

from the African continent to the continent of Asia.

The re-emergence of the national question reflects the profound impasse of capitalism on a world scale and the failure of the leaders of the workers' organisations to offer a way out. There can no longer be any solution of the national question on a capitalist basis.

Following on from Marx, Lenin took up the national question as a means of arming the revolutionary social democracy in Russia and uniting the oppressed nationalities under the banner of the working class. In answer to national oppression, the Russian Marxists (in the famous Clause 9 of the Russian Social Democratic Party) called for the right of nations to self-determination - that is, to complete separation as states.

This was particularly relevant to tsarist Russia, whose empire constituted a "prison house of nationalities". Such was the make-up of the empire that the Great Russians, the ruling nationality, only constituted 48% of the whole. Those under Russian domination (Poles, Lithuanians, Estonians, Finns, Letts, Ukrainians, and so on), deprived of their rights, were systematically oppressed by tsarism. It was this that gave the national question in Russia such an explosive force.

To win over the oppressed nationalities, Lenin came out against the forcible incorporation of a nationality within the boundaries of a general state. In this, the Bolsheviks were not "evangelists of separation". On the contrary, all this meant was that they were obliged to fight implacably against every form of national oppression. "To accuse those who support freedom of self-determination, i.e., freedom to secede, of encouraging separation, is foolish and hypocritical as accusing those who advocate freedom of divorce of encouraging the destruction of family ties", stated Lenin. (*The Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, p.83)

The demand of the right to self-determination was however to give rise to a heated controversy within the Russian Party, with opposition from Rosa Luxemburg, Bukharin, Pyatakof, and others. The essence of their opposition was that under capitalism, self-determination was utopian, while under socialism it was reactionary. However, the argument is completely false as it ignores the epoch of the socialist revolution and its tasks. Clearly, under the domination of



imperialism, the existence of stable independent small states is impossible. Also under socialism, with the progressive withering away of the state, the question of national boundaries will fall away. However, in the intervening period, the forces have to be educated and mobilised to overthrow capitalism and a correct dialectical approach to the national question would facilitate this task.

Working Class Unity

Above all, the slogan of the right to self-determination was a powerful weapon in undermining bourgeois nationalism and winning the confidence of the workers of the oppressed nation. The possibility of separation facilitated a free unification of peoples. In order to convince the more politically backward workers, who had nationalist prejudices, it was necessary to stress that the working class had no interest in coercing any national minority. At the same time, we must argue for the unity of the working class under one banner, with implacable hostility to the poison of the small nation mentality and the poison of chauvinism.

"The sectarian simply ignores the fact that the national struggle", states Trotsky, "one of the most labyrinthine and complex but at the same time extremely important forms of class struggle, cannot be suspended by bare references to the future world revolution."

Of course, the demand of the right of nations to self-determination cannot be used willy-nilly, but must proceed from the facts and not ideal

norms. It could only apply to nationalities and not simply to groups, religious castes, or other such minorities.

Above all, Lenin regarded the right of self-determination as subordinate to the interests of the working class. "The bourgeoisie always places its national demands in the forefront, and does so in categorical fashion. With the proletariat, however, these demands are subordinated to the interests of the class struggle." (*Ibid*, p.21) And again, "While recognising equality and equal rights to a national state, it values above all and places foremost the alliance of the proletarians of all nations, and assesses any national demand, any national separation, from the angle of the workers' class struggle." After all, the right to national self-determination is a bourgeois-democratic demand, not a socialist one.

Lenin also repeatedly explained that the Marxist programme on the national question is essentially a negative one: against national oppression, against the suppression of national culture, etc.

Today, various sectarians in confronting national problems proclaim self-determination at every turn, without any regard to the concrete situation or consequences. They see self-determination as a panacea, universally applicable under all circumstances. Such "Leninists", who simply pay lip service to Lenin and have no idea of his method, invariably end up in a shameful mess. That is why it is necessary to develop the theory of Marxism and apply it to the concrete conditions, and not simply repeat like parrots some of the phrases of Lenin

or Trotsky.

When it came to Yugoslavia, they were evangelists of the break-up of the country, which prepared the way for reactionary wars and the nightmare that followed. They had no concern for the bloody consequences or the "interests of the class struggle". Their capitulation to petty bourgeois nationalism made them cheerleaders for ethnic cleansing and chauvinist madness. Rather than "independence" for Croatia, Slovenia, Kosovo or Bosnia, and the Balkanisation of the region, the only way forward for the peoples of the Balkans was a socialist federation. There was not an atom of progressive content in the break-up of the former Yugoslavia. Once again, the fate of small peoples was cynically exploited by the imperialist powers for its own ends.

This shows the fundamental difference between Leninism and petty bourgeois nationalism. Lenin supported the right of self-determination exclusively from the point of view of the class struggle, of the unity of the working class.

Even the old pre-war Social Democracy in the Balkans put forward the slogan of the democratic Balkan federation as a way out of the madhouse created by the separate national statelets. Even the word "Balkanisation" became synonymous with the patchwork of squabbling states.

Today, this federation cannot be realised on a capitalist basis, and therefore we call for a Balkan socialist federation as a solution to the problems peoples of the peninsula. Such a federation, as with former Yugoslavia, would be made up of autonomous republics within a common frontier. This would overcome the "Balkanisation" of the region. Those who advocate a Balkan "confederation" (socialist or otherwise) simply reinforce this reactionary "Balkanisation" through a

loose alliance of separate independent Balkan states. In the disputes over this question prior to the First World War, the internationalists decisively came out against such a confederation and for a Balkan federation, later partially realised under Tito, when the Yugoslav Federation was formed.

In the Middle East, there can be no solution to the "Palestinian problem" on a capitalist basis. While the Marxists opposed the partition of Palestine in 1948, and the expulsion of the Palestinians, Israel now exists with a people living there. The question now is how to guarantee a homeland to the Palestinians and put an end to their national oppression.

Revolutionary Programme

The national oppression of the Palestinian masses by the Israeli state expresses itself in the desire for their own homeland. How can this

aspiration be realised? The policy and methods of the PLO, of individual terrorism and fawning towards the reactionary Arab regimes for a period of decades, have proved to be completely bankrupt. Only a revolutionary programme can serve to appeal to the Israeli workers and the Arab masses. Only a socialist revolution in Israel and similarly in all the surrounding Arab states can bring about a socialist federal state of Israel/Palestine, with its capital in Jerusalem, linked to a socialist federation of the Middle East.

Truth is always concrete. There is no cookbook with a recipe for every national problem. In reality, it is the Marxist method, of dialectical materialism and a class analysis, which allow us to draw the correct conclusions, as the Bolsheviks did in 1917.

In Lenin's writings, there is a sharp difference between the national question before and after 1917.

Prior to the October Revolution, Lenin envisaged that the national question could be resolved on a capitalist basis. However, on the basis of October, the resolution of the national question is tied to the fate of the working class and the overthrow of capitalism. Events since that time graphically confirm this prognosis.

The Russian Revolution gave an enormous impetus to the colonial revolution. This movement reached new heights following the Second World War and the victory of the Chinese revolution of 1944-9. Lenin himself had recognised two stages in the national-democratic revolution; the first phase lasting from 1879 to 1871, where the modern European states were created, and the second from 1905 onwards, encompassing Eastern Europe and Asia. In 1920, at the Second Congress of the Communist International, Lenin explained that the only solution to the national question was through the proletarian revolution. The bourgeoisie was no longer capable of leading the struggle as it was tied hand and foot to imperialism, and was in the camp of counter-revolution.

Communist international

"The cornerstone of the whole policy of the Communist International on the national and colonial questions", stated Lenin, "must be closer union of the proletarians and working masses generally of all nations and countries for a joint revolutionary struggle to overthrow the landlords and the bourgeoisie; for this alone will guarantee victory over capitalism, without which the abolition of national oppression and inequality is impossible." (*Preliminary Draft of Theses on the National and Colonial Questions*, 5th June 1920)

It was at this Congress that a decision was taken to substitute the term "national-



revolutionary" for the term "bourgeois-democratic", to emphasis the Marxist support only for genuinely revolutionary liberation movements. Lenin went on: "In all the colonies and backward countries, not only should we build independent contingents of fighters, party organisations, not only should we launch immediate propaganda for the organisation of

peasants' soviets and strive to adapt them to pre-capitalist conditions, but the Communist International should advance and theoretically substantiate the proposition that with the aid of the proletariat of the advanced countries, the backward countries can pass over to the Soviet system and, through definite stages of development, to communism, without going through the capitalist stage." (*The Report of the Commission on The National and Colonial Questions*, 26th July 1920)

This is none other than the theory of the Permanent Revolution put forward by Leon Trotsky. Here Trotsky explains that the colonial bourgeoisie have come onto the historical scene too late. They could not play the same revolutionary role of carrying through the bourgeois-democratic revolution as did their counterparts of the 18th and 19th centuries. The colonial bourgeoisie were tied to the landed interests and imperialism, which now placed them on the side of counterrevolution. Therefore the unfinished tasks now fell to the new revolutionary class, the proletariat. However, the working class would come to power and not stop with the bourgeois tasks, including the national question, but would



immediately proceed to the socialist tasks of expropriating the landlords and capitalists. The revolution would transcend national boundaries, and lay claim to the world revolution.

In other words, the national question, which is a leftover from the past, can only be solved by the coming to power of the working class. This is the case in relation to all the national-democratic tasks wherever these have not been accomplished. The only way out for the peoples of the Indian subcontinent, of the Middle East, Latin America, Africa, or Europe is through the socialist federation of their region as part of a world federation of socialist states. In regard to Ireland, where the living body of the country was divided by British imperialism, only the coming to power of the working class in the 32 counties, can resolve the problem. On a capitalist basis, there can be no solution.

Capitalist crisis

The re-emergence of nationalism in countries where the issue was regarded as long dead, is a product of the deepening crisis of capitalism on a world scale. The national question is not confined to the former colonial coun-

tries, but has now affected the advanced countries. At bottom, this crisis reflects the fundamental contradiction of the constrictions imposed on the productive forces by the nation state and private property. The crisis has served to re-ignite all the old poisons of nationalism. In the epoch of capitalist decline, of imperialist crisis, the national question is once again raising its head everywhere, with the most tragic and sanguine consequences. It rests with the working class to come to the head of the nation and offer the masses a way out of this nightmare. At bottom, explained Lenin, the national question is about bread.

Without a correct stance on the national question, the October Revolution would not have taken place. A component part of this outlook was, from 1903 onwards, the need to maintain the sacred unity of the working class and its organisations, free from distinctions of nationality, religion or language. "The policy of Bolshevism in the national sphere had also another side, apparently contradictory to the first but in reality supplementing it", explained Trotsky. "Within the framework of the party, and of the workers' organisations in general,

Bolshevism insisted upon a rigid centralism, implacably warring against every taint of nationalism which might set the workers one against the other or disunite them. While flatly refusing to the bourgeois states the right to impose compulsory citizenship, or even a state language, upon a national minority, Bolshevism at the same time made it

a verily sacred task to unite as closely as possible, by means of voluntary class discipline, the workers of different nationalities. Thus it flatly rejected the national-federation principle in building the party. A revolutionary organisation is not the prototype of the future state, but merely the instrument for its creation. An instrument ought to be adapted to fashioning the product; it ought not to include the product. Thus a centralised organisation can guarantee the success of a revolutionary struggle - even where the task is to destroy the centralised oppression of nationalities."

Lenin

As can be seen, Lenin made a unique dialectical and dynamic contribution to the national question, which will find its place among the theoretical treasure-houses of the workers' movement. The national borders created by capitalism have long ago become fetters on the development of society. Our task remains the expropriation of the monopolies, the elimination of borders and the free association of peoples. In that way will the national question be finally resolved. ■

Washington and the opposition are behind the terrorist plot against Chavez

Colombian paramilitaries arrested in Venezuela

By Alan Woods

The arrests near Caracas on Sunday of up to 80 Colombian paramilitaries linked to the political opposition confirm suspicions that the counterrevolution is resorting to ever more desperate and violent measures to overthrow the government of Hugo Chavez. Reports from Caracas state that the Colombians had been arrested in a dawn raid on a farm, on the outskirts of the capital, Caracas, belonging to a Cuban exile.

During his weekly radio and TV broadcast, Hello President, Mr Chavez said that 53 paramilitary fighters were arrested at the farm early on Sunday and another 24 were picked up after fleeing into the countryside. Officials say that 90 people have been detained altogether, although some arrests may have been made later. Another 40 people are still being sought.

The country's security forces were uncovering additional clues and searching for more suspects, he said, adding that the arrests were proof of a conspiracy against his government involving Cuban and Venezuelan exiles in Florida and neighbouring Colombia. President Chavez stated that the plot was backed by Venezuela's mostly pro-opposition news media and said that the raids had "eliminated the seed of a terrorist group".

"Now they are import-

ing terrorists," Chavez said of his opponents, adding that the farm - in the municipality of El Hatillo - was owned by Roberto Alonso, a Cuban exile with links to Venezuelan and Cuban exiles.

For some time there has been evidence that Colombian death squads were active on Venezuelan soil. Now this is proved beyond all doubt. There can be no question that these paramilitary thugs were plotting to strike against the government in Caracas.

Opposition leaders tried to dismiss the claim, calling the raids on a farm less than 10 miles from the capital a manoeuvre to divert attention from their efforts to oust Chavez in a recall vote. They immediately attempted to play down the significance of

the arrests, after it was revealed that the only weapon found in the raid was a single handgun.

"They didn't even have a nail clipper, their boots were all polished and their uniforms were ironed," opposition leader Antonia Ledezma told the Associated Press news agency.

Opposition provocations

The fact that the paramilitaries were not found in possession of more serious weaponry does not prove that they were not on a serious mission. It only indicates that we are in the presence of a very well organised conspiracy with a wide network of support and a military infrastructure inside Venezuela itself. The arms for the paramilitaries will be situated else-

where - probably in some safe house in Caracas. This would make it safer for them to move around the country without the risk of arrest for the illegal possession of arms.

It is public knowledge that the right wing opposition has continuously conspired to overthrow his government with US backing. In April 2002 they organised a military coup to establish a "democratic dictatorship". That coup was defeated by the movement of the masses. Later they organised a so-called "strike" - really a bosses' lockout that did serious damage to the economy but was defeated by a movement of the workers.

The latest attempt to provoke a coup was the so-called referendum campaign, when the opposition resorted to massive fraud, including the signatures of dead people, children and people who deny ever having signed. It is their complete failure to win a majority in Venezuela that has impelled them onto the road of terrorist acts.

The heated denials of the opposition do not carry the least weight. They offer no explanation for the presence of Colombian paramilitaries on Venezuelan soil. What were they doing there? Evidently, these individuals were on holiday, or for the good of their health! However, whether this little visit would have been healthy for other people is

Mass demonstration against opposition



another matter!

The truth is self-evident: The captured men were being trained by the opposition to stage a coup. Daniel Fonseca, a neighbour living near the farm where the paramilitaries were caught, said the men had been at the farm for about 15 days.

"I saw them twice when riding [my] horses," Mr Fonseca told the Associated Press. "They were dressed as civilians and I saw some of them with 9mm pistols."

The farm was equipped with abundant quantities of food, provisions, clothes and about a hundred mattresses. Venezuelan Defence Minister Jorge Garcia told Reuters news agency there was clear evidence of a conspiracy. "You don't think these are killers?" he said. "Whatever they came here for, it wasn't to play marbles or to plant yucca."

Venezuela's defence minister, General Jorge Garcia Carneiro, said investigators believe the alleged conspiracy was led by former General Felipe Rodriguez, who led the 2002 rebellion against President Chavez in 2002. General Rodriguez's whereabouts are not known.

The Colombian president, Alvaro Uribe, praised Venezuela for the arrests and the Colombian government has promised full support in the investigation. "It is unacceptable for any Colombian to be committing crimes in that country," Foreign Minister Carolina Barco was quoted as saying.

But nobody will be fooled by this. Uribe cannot publicly admit the involvement of his government or armed forces in such a blatant act of interference in a neighbouring state. But the relations between the Colombian armed forces and the CIA with the fascist paramilitaries is an open secret.



Banner reads:
"Paramilitaries, invaders and terrorists shall not pass (no pasaran)"

Salvatore Mancuso, a senior commander in the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), an umbrella group for the country's paramilitary factions, denied his forces were involved. "We deny the accusations against us by Venezuelan leaders," Mr Mancuso told Colombia's RCN television, countering that Chávez was working with Colombia's two largest rebel groups.

Washington's denial

For its part, Washington also denies any involvement - of course. US state department spokesman Richard Boucher rejected accusations of US involvement as "baseless and irresponsible".

So there we have it. Nobody is responsible. A gang of professional assassins and right wing terrorists turns up in the vicinity of Caracas, but nobody knows anything about it. Such an operation requires serious organisation and generous funding. But nobody is responsible.

The facts speak for themselves. The hand of Washington is clearly behind the latest plot - and all the others. "There are

people in the United States who keep thinking how to start a war in Venezuela so that they can justify an invasion," Chavez said.

This assertion is confirmed by the facts. Washington has been systematically building up the Colombian armed forces under the pretext of the infamous Colombia Plan. The USA has poured in money, arms and men and this has completely transformed the regional balance of forces.

As we have already pointed out, before he was ejected by the Spanish people, Aznar sent a large shipment of tanks to Colombia. This was supposed to be part of the anti-drugs, anti-guerrilla war, but tanks are of no use in jungles and mountains. They are only of use in a conventional war against another state. And that state is called Venezuela.

Both the government of Bogota and Washington are involved up to their necks in conspiracies and armed provocations against Venezuela. The abject failure of all the CIA's plots to overthrow Chavez by relying on internal forces obliges them to

look towards external intervention. That means war. Recently the Colombian Senate passed a resolution calling on the Organisation of American States (OAS) to intervene against Venezuela.

A few weeks ago an American general stated publicly that Venezuela was now a threat to the interests of the USA in South America. It is quite extraordinary that such a statement should be made by a military figure at all. But if we bear in mind that the general in question, General James Hill, is the head of the US Army Southern Command, we immediately see the seriousness of the implications.

The attitude of Washington towards the Venezuelan Revolution is well known and extensively documented. Therefore its denials are worthless. US imperialism wants to get its hands on Venezuela's oil. But there is an even more pressing reason for its desire to overthrow Chavez.

The Venezuelan Revolution is acting as a beacon and a point of reference to the poor and downtrodden millions throughout Latin America. Washington cannot afford this. Bush has said publicly that he will not rest until Chavez is removed from power. The US military intervention in Haiti was a preparation for an intervention against Venezuela. And if US imperialism succeeds in Venezuela, the way will be open for further mercilese pressure on Cuba.

Imperialism is preparing

Everything points to a systematic preparation for armed intervention against the Venezuelan Revolution. But there is one small problem here. US imperialism is embroiled in a military quagmire in Iraq that

is draining its resources and causing growing unrest at home. Bush cannot afford to involve the US army in another military adventure in the immediate future.

This, however, does not mean that there will be no military action against Venezuela. The CIA is infinitely resourceful and has many irons in many fires. It will not use US military personnel (except as "advisers" and for logistical support - that is to plan the operations, and to arm and finance them). But it will make use of foreign mercenaries - hired cutthroats and fascists who have unofficially been on the CIA's payroll for years - to do the dirty work.

These gangsters are conveniently located in Colombia. They can cross the border with Venezuela at any time, slipping in and out to do their murderous work. They are dressed in civilian clothes and speak Spanish with a local accent. They receive support, hiding places and finance from the Venezuelan oligarchy and the right wing opposition. Best of all, they do not officially work for the Colombian government or anyone else. If they are found they will deny everything. Nobody is responsible for them. What more can one ask?

Venezuelan state television has been showing pictures of armed police guarding groups of young men dressed in green camouflage. The farm has been turned into a camp complete with sleeping quarters and cooking facilities. The men were using the camp to plan an attack on a military installation in Caracas. This is connected with a broader plan to destabilise Venezuela and create the conditions for a provocation that could drag it into a war with Colombia. This is textbook CIA procedure.

The studied denials from Washington, Bogota and the Venezuelan opposition will fool nobody. In a murder inquiry the first question that must be asked is: who gains? In this case, the question answers itself. The people who ardently desire the elimination of Hugo Chavez and the overthrow of his progressive government are



Banner reads:
"Against imperialist aggression, for the unity and struggle of the people"

George Bush and the Venezuelan oligarchy.

The CIA and the Venezuelan opposition have collaborated on three occasions to overthrow the legally elected government and have failed. They have not abandoned their plans but only modified them to take account of the unfavourable balance of forces inside Venezuela. The present events could have been foreseen, and they were foreseen. It was never a question of "if", but only "when and how."

The recent events confirm what we have said many times: the Venezuelan Revolution is in danger. The immediate task of the Marxists is to denounce the plans of the US imperialists, to expose them before the public opinion of the world and to mobilise the international labour movement in defence of the Venezuelan Revolution.

A really pernicious role is being played by the mass media in the West. The newspapers and television companies are in the hands of the millionaires and the enemies of socialism and the working class. Masquerading under the false banner of "press freedom" they spread the most disgraceful lies and slanders about what is happening in Venezuela.

Disinformation

Incredibly, some elements in the labour movement have allowed

themselves to be deceived by this black propaganda and are playing a despicable role, repeating the lies and slanders put in circulation by the CIA and the right wing Venezuelan opposition in order to confuse and disorient public opinion. They try to hide behind the right wing leaders of the CTV, whose links with the CIA are public knowledge, and who actively backed the coup of 2002.

In addition to launching a campaign of systematic disinformation, the millionaire press has organised a conspiracy of silence so that the working people of Europe and the USA do not know what is happening. It is vital that this curtain of

silence is torn down and that the international labour movement is made aware of the intrigues of US imperialism against Venezuela.

The imperialists always act like thieves in the night, under the cover of darkness. It is necessary to shine a bright light on their secretive and murderous activities. It is time to organise a massive protest movement to denounce the counterrevolutionary intrigues of Washington and its agents in Venezuela, and also the despicable role of the hired press that is a willing servant and an active accomplice of imperialism.

There is no time to lose!

Organise protests and pickets outside the US and Colombian embassies. Send letters of protest to the governments of both countries. Pass resolutions of support for Venezuela in every trade union branch and other labour movement organisation. Let them know that the eyes of the world are on them and that they will not escape condemnation but stand exposed as the common criminals they are. □

□ **Down with imperialism!**
□ **Defend the Venezuelan Revolution!**
□ **Hands off Venezuela!**

The targets are Venezuela and Cuba

New Intrigues of US imperialism

By Alan Woods in Mexico City

ON MAY 1, Fidel Castro denounced the United States before a million marchers in Havana. The Cuban leader also denounced the European Union as a mafia allied with Washington, and went on to criticise some Latin American governments, namely Mexico and Peru. Castro accused the two countries of joining the herd of hypocrites who voted to condemn Cuba at last month's meeting of the United Nations Human Rights Commission. Mexico was, he declared, now a mere pawn of the United States, its "prestige and influence gained in Latin America and the world... turned to ashes".

These comments were no more than the truth. Under the government of Vicente Fox, Mexico has become completely dependent on Washington, and a loyal ally for its foreign policy. Following Washington's dictates, Fox joined in the noisy chorus of condemnation of Cuba over "human rights". Mexico's relations with Cuba have therefore been tense since Fox's election victory in 2000.

These condemnations, coinciding as they do with the exposure of the systematic abuse of human rights by the US forces in Iraq, cut very little ice with most people here in Mexico, who are broadly sympathetic to Cuba and bitterly hostile to US imperialism. So when Fox demanded the recall of the Mexican ambassador from Havana and ordered the Cuban diplomats to leave, the response of the masses was anything but favourable. The diplomatic crisis between Mexico and Cuba has deepened the political crisis in Mexico and further

undermined Fox and his right wing PAN government.

In 2002, the rift between the Fox government and Cuba became public when Castro walked out of a summit hosted by the Mexican president in Monterrey. Castro then released an audiotape of a phone call in which his host told him in no uncertain terms that he must leave early so as not to embarrass George Bush. The famous telephone conversation has become universally known in Mexico by Fox's graphic (and not terribly diplomatic) phrase "Come, y te vas" (You eat, then you leave).

Corruption Scandal

However, the tensions between Mexico and Cuba are more complicated than this. For many weeks the political life of Mexico has been rocked by a scandal in which the present mayor of Mexico City, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, has been accused of involvement in a corruption scandal. News of the scandal every day fills the columns of the newspapers and the television screens, and is now at the very centre of the politics of this country.

The PAN government and its friends in the mass media accuse associates of López Obrador of receiving sizeable bribes from Carlos Ahumada, a Mexican businessman. Ahumada, a very shady character, apparently filmed himself paying these bribes to functionaries of the PRD (the centre-left party to which López Obrador belongs). However, the accusations have not got much of an echo among the people of Mexico,

who are accustomed to believe (not without reason) that all Mexican politicians are corrupt and take bribes as a matter of course. The question is therefore why only the opposition PRD has been singled out for exposure.

The answer is not hard to understand and most Mexicans understand it very well. It is clearly part of a carefully worked-out strategy by Fox to bring discredit on the PRD and blacken the name of the popular mayor of Mexico City. The reason is that the popularity of Fox and the right wing PAN has plummeted. The old PRI party that governed Mexico for many decades, is split and in crisis. Therefore it is quite possible that the PRD could win power in the Presidential elections in 2006.

This has implications that go far beyond the borders of Mexico. The prospect of a PRD government would be most unwelcome in Washington, which is attempting to eliminate all governments in Latin America and the Caribbean that do not blindly obey its commands. The removal of Aristide in Haiti through the direct military intervention of the US army was one indication of this aggressive policy. The attempts to overthrow Hugo Chávez in Venezuela are another. The increased pressure on Cuba is yet another.

The infamous Colombia Plan is calculated not only to increase the stranglehold of the USA on Colombia but on the whole of Latin America. Finally, the so-called Free Trade Agreement for the Americas (ALCA) is an attempt to get complete control of all

the natural wealth, minerals and oil of the continent, and to conquer a monopoly of its huge market, free from competition from the European capitalists.

Imperialist Terrified

The fall of the Fox government would be a serious blow to these plans of US imperialism. The PRD is seen as a threat in Washington. Despite all the attempts of the PRD leaders to adopt a moderate stand and renounce radical policies, the US imperialists do not trust it. They fear the masses who stand behind the PRD - and in this they are not mistaken. They are terrified of a new version of Chávez on their frontiers. The hand of Washington is therefore clearly behind the recent scandal and the ever more strident attacks on the PRD.

For reasons known only to himself, Ahumada fled to Cuba immediately after the exposure of the corruption scandal in February. Cuba involved itself in Mexico's explosive political scandal when it deported him back to Mexico last week. Before deporting him, Cuban officials said that Ahumada had confessed to them that he was part of a conspiracy by Fox's people to bring the mayor down.

Mexico's government countered by accusing two Cuban Communist Party officials of spying during a recent visit to Mexico. Fox ordered the recall of the Mexican ambassador from Havana and the expulsion from Mexico of a number of Cuban diplomats and Communist Party members accused of

Venezuela and Cuba

carrying out "activities incompatible with their status". Peru also announced that it was withdrawing its ambassador from Havana.

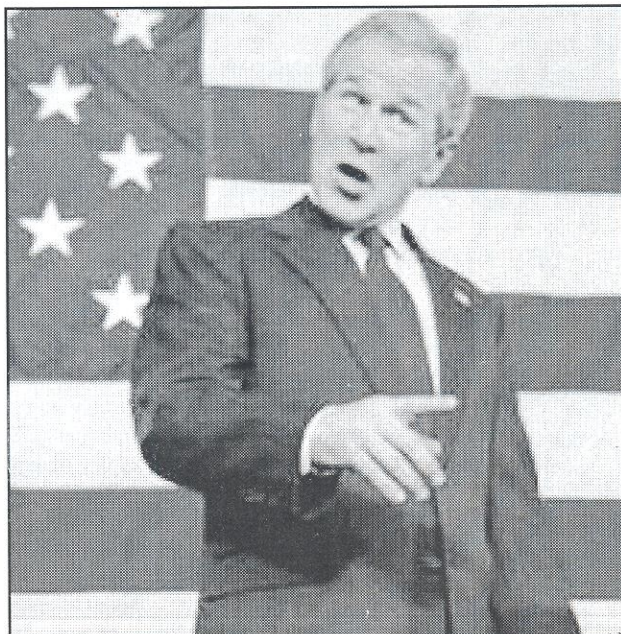
This action is without precedent in the history of relations between Mexico and Cuba. Diplomatic relations between the two countries still exist, but only on a minimal level. Hitherto, relations were generally good. It is an unprecedented diplomatic crisis.

On May 6th the US State Department released a 500-page report, the outcome of a six-month policy review, on ways to step up American pressure against Cuba. Its proposals include restricting visits by Cuban Americans and cutting their remittances home by half; curbs on spending by Americans who travel legally to Cuba; and boosting support for anti-Castro elements and for propaganda broadcasts aimed at the island.

President Bush said the United States would also spend \$59m (£33m) over the next two years to promote the goal of "a democratic Cuba" (read a capitalist Cuba), including US\$18m to counter Cuba's jamming of anti-Castro broadcasts.

This latest attempt at bullying will not succeed. It has infuriated the Cuban people who staged a massive demonstration on the streets of Havana. About one million marched along the Malecón, Havana's harbour boulevard, in the protest. Posters portrayed George Bush wearing a Hitler moustache alongside a Nazi swastika, while others carried pictures of Iraqi prisoners abused by US soldiers, with the slogan: "This would never happen in Cuba."

Fidel Castro said the



march was "an act of indignant protest, and a denunciation of the brutal, merciless and cruel measures" announced by Bush. The Cuban leader denounced and ridiculed the US President, George Bush, saying he was a fraudulently elected leader trying to impose "world tyranny". He vowed that Cuba would never become a neo-colony of the United States.

He went on to accuse the United States of fighting "wars of conquest to seize the markets and resources of the world", while Cuba was sending abroad thousands of doctors to save lives. He insisted that Bush had "neither morality nor any right at all to speak of liberty, democracy and human rights". [For the full speech see:

<http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/2004/ing/f140504i.html>]

The lies of the Fox government and the new measures taken by US imperialism against Cuba have served to infuriate the Mexican public that is already tired of its anti-working class policies of neo-liberalism, downsizing and precarious jobs.

Thousands of Mexicans spontaneously demonstrated at the Cuban Embassy this week. They understand clearly that their government is being shamelessly manipulated by US imperialism in the furtherance of its own reactionary policies and interests.

This is a fact. All these intrigues have been organised and orchestrated by the US State Department. It is very clear that all these events are interconnected and form part of a general plan of US imperialism to increase its domination of Latin America, silence all criticism and overthrow governments that refuse to bend the knee to George W Bush.

The latest attempt to bully and isolate Cuba is partly -but not totally - dictated by electoral considerations. George Bush's hold on power gets shakier by the day. He needs to secure Florida in the Presidential election. This means adopting measures that will please the Cuban Mafia in Miami and other right wing groups. Several prominent members of the Cuban-American Mafia have top jobs in the Bush

administration (although one, Otto Reich resigned this week as the special envoy to Latin America).

This miserable gang of mafiosi, thieves, drug dealers, cutthroats and pimps masquerading as respected businessmen and "democrats" are waiting in the wings for their return to Cuba where they hope to resume their crooked activities under the protection of the government of Washington, as in the "good old days" before the Cuban revolution. As an insurance policy for their future well-being they pay millions into the coffers of the Republican party. They naturally expect some kind of downpayment on their investment, and their good friend in the White House has just obliged them.

Colossal arrogance

The recent intrigues are dictated by considerations that go far deeper than mere electoral tactics. After the fall of the USSR US imperialism has achieved a virtual monopoly of power in the world. Colossal power brings colossal arrogance. Drunk with power, the most reactionary circles of the US establishment are determined to impose American domination throughout the entire world.

This fact expresses itself most clearly in the policies of George Bush and the neo Conservative faction that until recently controlled his actions. Despite the defeat that is staring it in the face in Iraq, the right wing clique that has seized control in the White House is already preparing new adventures and new explosions.

The right wing of the Bush administration and its friends in the Pentagon would probably like to

prepare the ground for an invasion to secure "regime change" in Havana. They have learned nothing from Iraq and are probably calculating that with the attention of the world focused on the Middle East, a couple of little adventures in Latin America will not be noticed.

These people are really quite unbalanced. They would be prepared for anything, but they no longer have the influence they enjoyed before the debacle in Iraq. The neo Conservative wing are losing ground. The war in Iraq that they planned and encouraged is ending in a complete debacle for the United States. The revelations of brutality and torture have completely demolished the last excuse for the invasion. Rumsfeld is fighting for his political life. Probably the neo Conservatives will be made a scapegoat for George Bush's disastrous miscalculation in Iraq.

Does this mean that new adventures by US imperialism in Latin America are ruled out? Not at all. The politics of US imperialism in fundamentals are not decided by who is in the White House but by the interests of the imperialists and the big US corporations that they defend. Latin America is the backyard of US imperialism. Washington cannot afford to allow Cuba and Venezuela to live peacefully because they represent points of reference for millions of poor people, unemployed workers and landless peasants throughout Latin America.

Nor will a Democratic victory in the Presidential elections necessarily signify a fundamental change of course, as some people foolishly imagine. The declarations of Kerry about Venezuela are even more rabidly reactionary than those of Bush. His attempt to enlist the Republican John McCain as candidate for Vice President has exposed his real political agenda. There is no fundamental difference between him and the Republicans. Nothing whatsoever can be expected from this quarter.

The only way to expose and defeat the reactionary and aggressive plans of US imperialism is by mobilising the might of the world labour movement. The movement against imperialism and capitalism must be strengthened. Protests must be organised. Pressure must be applied. The lessons must be learned. Let us raise a universal cry that will be heard everywhere:

- Hands off Cuba!
- Hands off Venezuela!
- Down with imperialism!

Five lies of the Venezuelan opposition

1) **Chavez does not want to call a recall referendum** - In fact the recall referendum is an instrument introduced by the new Bolivarian constitution. In order to trigger it a certain number of signatures must be collected. In this particular case (the recall of the President of the Republic) 2,4 millions signatures are necessary. In December 2003 the opposition said it had collected 3,6 millions signatures. In February the National Electoral Council declared that 800,000 of these signatures were invalid. Moreover 700,000 were declared as unclear and needed to go through a verification process. This demonstrates how massive the fraud was. This decision was ratified by the Carter Center and observers of the Organization of American States (which certainly can not be considered as two revolutionary organisations). If the opposition manages to reconfirm 50% of the doubtful signatures, it would have enough to be able to call for the referendum. The Government declared it was prepared to follow the decision of the National Electoral Council.

2) **Chavez uses repression against the opposition** - In Venezuela there have been hundreds of peaceful opposition demonstrations and never has there been political repression of any kind (the opposite of what used to happen during the 40 years of rule of the parties now in opposition). In February 2004 the opposition refused to recognize the decision of the National Electoral Council, called for civil and military disobedience and for the building of barricades in the streets of Caracas. It confronted the National Guard with Molotov cocktails and rifles. The National Guard responded in a moderate way and cleared out the barricades from the streets. After these disturbances organized by the "democratic opposition" there have been other peaceful demonstrations of the opposition, although poorly attended.

3) **Chavez uses repression against the media** - In the last five years the private media (which is 90% dominated by the opposition) has launched a systematic campaign of insults towards the democratic President, as well as deliberate lies and open calls for a military coup and for the overthrow of the democratic government by violent means. However there has been no censorship of the press whatsoever

(unlike what used to happen during the 40 years of rule of the parties which now form the opposition). Only two TV channels have been closed during these five years: Channel 8 (which is the state owned broadcaster), closed by the opposition during the military coup of April 2002; and CatiaTV, a local community TV station from a neighborhood in Caracas, which was closed by a local government controlled by the "democratic" opposition.

4) **In Venezuela there is a dictatorship** - In Venezuela all democratic rights are respected. The only people who tried to install a dictatorship in Venezuela were those from the "democratic" opposition who organized the military coup of April 11, suspended the Constitution, the National Assembly (the Parliament) and all democratic powers. None of those responsible for the coup are today in jail. The majority of them walk free in the streets of Caracas while preparing new conspiracies to overthrow the government. The others are in a very comfortable exile in Miami from where they move the threads of the conspiracy.

5) **Chavez supports terrorism** - the opposition has never presented any proof for its ridiculous accusations (as for example the supposed existence of an Al-Qaeda training camp in Isla Margarita). Last Saturday 56 Colombian paramilitaries were arrested. They were training in order to organize terrorist actions against the democratic government on a plot of land of a well-known opposition leader in El Hatillo.

In Venezuela there is a revolutionary process which has been overwhelmingly supported by the population in seven successive elections during the last 5 years. The "democratic" opposition represents the interests of an oligarchy which for decades has controlled the natural resources of the country and does not want to renounce its privileges. This is why we support the Venezuelan revolution.

Jorge Martin
International Secretary,
Hands Off Venezuela Campaign
www.handsoffvenezuela.org

Imperialist oppression is rocking the Middle East

By Yossi Schwartz

IN THE last few days the masses in many parts of the Middle East have been pouring out onto the streets in protest against the ongoing murder of civilians in Iraq and Gaza. The masses have been coming out emboldened by the feeling that the killing machine of the occupying armies in Iraq and Gaza can be defeated.

The fact that the armies of occupation in Iraq cannot defeat the armed resistance in Najaf and Karbala is well understood by the masses. Similarly the Israeli army's claim that the troops are withdrawing from Gaza after its mission was successfully completed does not fool many. The Israeli army entered Gaza with the purpose of terrorising the people of Gaza into accepting Sharon's plan, but it failed.

The reports about the Israeli army in Gaza have been reports of soldiers fearful for their lives who do not dare to show their heads outside their armoured vehicles or the houses they had occupied and were hiding in. Only two years ago the Israeli army used to patrol Gaza on foot!

Of course the Israeli army, like the imperialist armies in Iraq, is strong in terms of numbers and weaponry, but in the face of mounting mass opposition they are facing political defeat and this is the most important aspect of the whole situation. In Algeria the French army was stronger than the FLN but when the masses of workers and peasants came out, both in Algeria and in France, against the imperialist war, France had to leave

Algeria. The same happened in Vietnam. The US army was stronger than the Vietcong, but when the working class in the US came out against the war the rulers of the US had to leave Vietnam. And now the masses are coming out in the Arab states and in Israel.

Last Friday at least 200,000 people demonstrated in Beirut against the United States. Smaller groups also rallied in other Middle Eastern countries, with protesters in Bahrain clashing with the police. Wearing white shrouds symbolizing their readiness to die in defence of the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala in Iraq, more than 200,000 protesters marched through Beirut's suburbs. Many chanted "death to America,

death to Israel."

Hezbollah leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah accused the US forces of desecrating holy shrines in Iraq, and called on Muslims to fight to the death for the two Iraqi cities. Nasrallah said, "Let the Americans understand that those who wore shrouds today, including clerics, men, women, children and adults, did not come to show off. We will not abandon our religious duty. Today's march is a step on the road to defending the holy sites."

Shiite Muslim communities in Lebanon, Iran and Bahrain have been outraged by continued fighting in Karbala and Najaf, which are home to shrines that are among the most sacred in Shia Islam. The US military has said it is doing its best to

avoid damage to the shrines in Iraq, however in the fighting last week, the Imam Ali mosque received four holes in its golden dome. The mosque is the burial place of the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, who is revered by Shiites.

In Manama, Bahrain, a nearly two-mile march had been approved by security authorities, but the police tried to stop the demonstrators halfway along the route. In spite of this, the protesters kept on moving and turned over an empty police car and set it on fire. The police fired tear gas to disperse the demonstrators, but the angry crowd broke through the police blockade and continued its march to protest against the fighting in Karbala and Najaf, shouting, "Death to America!"

In Tehran, Iran, the police pushed back an advancing crowd, beating them with sticks, as about 200 protesters outside the British Embassy threw stones and firecrackers, demanding the embassy be closed and the ambassador expelled. "Down with Israel, UK, USA," read a banner.

In Amman, Jordan, around 1,000 worshippers held a one-hour sit-in in front of the al-Husseini Mosque to protest at Arab silence on Israel's recent incursion into the Gaza Strip that has left many Palestinians dead.

In Israel, following the mass demonstration in Tel-Aviv, smaller demonstrations continued during the week. Last Friday 1000 people marched on the Kissufim crossing between the Gaza Strip and Israel to protest



against the Israeli army operation in Rafah, in which, according even to Israeli news, 40 Palestinians have been killed, many of them school children.

The demonstration was supposed to take place at the Sufa crossing, which is closer to Rafah, but the protesters decided on Kissufim instead after being blocked by the police at the Sufa crossing. The demonstration was organized by left leaning liberals, like Tayush, and the Peace Bloc that issued a statement on Friday saying, "None of us can sit at home at a time like this. None of us can say, 'We didn't know!'"

On Thursday, about 500 people demonstrated for the second consecutive day in front of the Defence Ministry in Tel Aviv. The demonstration was organized by Peace Now and attended by members of refusenik organizations, the Yahad Knesset faction, the Yahad youth movement, and leftist student groups.

This mass movement in the Middle East is causing the imperialists and their local servants some real fear. In reaction to this, they moved immediately to make some empty statements and fire some hated politicians in a desperate attempt to placate the masses.

In Tunis, Arab foreign ministers worked Friday on building consensus among the Arab rulers for resolutions on Iraq and Gaza. Arab officials scared by the growing anger of the masses were begging the US to save them by taking a harder line on Israel. They declared that they were encouraged by a US decision to allow passage of a UN resolution this week criticizing Israel, and that they hope this signalled a tougher line by Israel's closest ally against Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

"This is a summit that is very well prepared," said Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher of Egypt, the most populous Arab country. He told AP that the foreign ministers have finalized all the documents, which will be submitted to the leaders for approval. Not by chance Lebanese President Emile Lahoud, facing at the moment the stronger opposition to the imperialist war in Iraq, was the first Arab leader to arrive in Tunis on Friday. He said the summit offers the Arabs an opportunity to act together and any failure to come up with a united stand would hand a "free service" to the Arabs' enemies". By this of course he meant the masses.

Collaborators

As the bourgeois politicians flew into the Tunisian capital for their annual gathering, scuttled two months ago over sharp differences, it was clear that this meeting of the collaborators with the US imperialists will not fare any better. Already Sudan's president has become the eighth Arab leader to stay away, apparently in protest at a report critical of his government's human rights abuses in Darfur. Four leaders have excused themselves because of their health conditions and three others, including the de facto leader of heavyweight Saudi Arabia, apparently for political reasons.

The US rulers know full well what is the real value of this summit. Therefore they are seeking now to placate the masses by throwing some bones to them, in the form of the removal of some hated local corrupt politicians.

In Iraq, the Iraqi police, backed by US forces, raided the

home and office of Governing Council member Ahmad Chalabi - the same man who had promised the US and Britain that the invasion would have been welcome by the majority of the Iraqis who were fed up with Saddam's bloody regime. Instead the oppression of the Iraqis following the war has united the Iraqis against the imperialists. In spite of this little game, this trick, Chalabi is not improving his standing among the Iraqi masses.

As Aljazeera reported (Saturday, 22 May, 2004): "A day after an enraged Chalabi decried the raid and renounced his relations with the US-led occupying authority, Sunni and Shia Iraqis were indifferent and scornful towards Washington's former political 'darling'.

"Chalabi represents nothing for Iraqis. He only thinks of himself and seeks to secure himself a good political position. Everything that happens to him serves him right," said driver Mahmud Ali. "It is the same for other members of the Governing Council. They only work for the interests of the USA and foreigners," he said.

"Ahmed Chalabi is only one among others," said Ali al-Mayahi, a 35-year-old worker who considers the whole of the Iraqi executive "completely cut off from the Iraqi population."

The chequered past of the Iraqi National Congress president - he was sentenced in 1992 by a Jordanian military tribunal to 22 years in prison for fraud - does not speak in his favour. "This guy deserves what is happening to him, he is a thief," said Qussai al-Obaidi. Another resident, Riad Jamil, wondered why Chalabi was outraged over the raid and pointed out that "this is the Iraqis' daily life."

In Bahrain king Sheik Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa fired his interior minister, saying the march should have been allowed to go on. A royal decree replaced Interior Minister Sheik Mohammed bin Khalifa Al-Khalifa with General Rashed bin Abdallah bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa.

"What happened between the police and the protesters didn't please us," the royal statement said. It said citizens had the right to protest against "the violation of the holy cities and what happened in Iraqi prisons" - a reference to the physical and sexual abuse of Iraqi detainees.

And in Israel a split is opening up inside the ruling class and a large section is beginning to have a second thoughts about Sharon's government. The "Haaretz", the mouthpiece of Israeli industrial and finance capital wrote a very interesting piece last Friday under the title: "We're in bad hands." It gives a very good idea of the misgivings of an important section of the Israeli ruling class and it is worth quoting from at length:

"Many humble non-combatants have discreetly asked themselves this week what the point is of the operation in Rafah. How could it possibly succeed? How could something not go wrong?"

"The defence minister and the chief of staff added to these misgivings with their insipid, worried remarks. Dangerous tunnels, terrorist infrastructure, wanted men, plans to advance slowly this time - and raze hundreds of buildings. And just as they said these things, Operation Rainbow turned into one of the Israel Defence Forces' most embarrassing campaigns yet. The troops may have moved slowly, but failure

came fast. And over it fluttered a black flag of violated international law.

"We are looking at the classic case of an army with unreasonable objectives marching into a predictable ambush. The IDF was sent in to restore the momentum and reputation which had been damaged so badly last week. It will be returning from Rafah very soon with these two components of military might sadly diminished. Shaul Mofaz and Moshe Ya'alon have shown such poor judgment that if they were running a corporation, they'd be out on the doorstep: The stocks have hit rock bottom; the goals are unachievable and the world market has responded with a thumbs down. The board of directors would send them packing with a golden parachute. The trouble is that the army's board of directors is the government, which is guilty of strange behavior itself and headed by a leader who is losing altitude.

"This combination of a government that has no path and an army that has lost its way because of it, has been harming national interests for years...

"So we are in bad hands no matter where you look. These hands have pushed Israel into the abyss of misguided thinking. What happened in Rafah this week is the same kind of sudden dramatic reversal that caused France to pull out of Algeria. After their defeat in the casbahs and the tunnels, the Algerians began to march en masse toward the gun barrels pointed at them. Here, too, Palestinian despair confronted Israeli military resolve. A crowd of 1,500 demonstrators, including women and children, armed themselves this week with a secret weapon that has no match: the knowledge that they have nothing to lose.

"Just as the army has lost

its bearings, so Israeli politics is no longer worthy of the name. It has become a bastion of partisan gangs operating in total chaos, blackmailing Sharon and one another...

"Even the recovery of Labor and Yahad is the result of being shoved forward by what is going on rather than leading it. Shimon Peres thinks that life begins at 80, as Churchill ironically put it, and is still crawling toward the government. If Shinui represents anything today, it is the public's bewilderment...

"We're in bad hands. Sometimes they're not clean. Even when they're holding the gun, they have started shaking. But it's a poor man's comfort when the hands of your government tremble in times of crisis, rocking the boat even harder."

Leadership and Programme

The masses who want to put an end to the nightmare, find no working class revolutionary leadership able and willing to unite all the workers and peasants throughout the region with the perspective of workers' and peasants' governments. The green flags of Islam do not mean a perspective of a new progressive society. They stand for an idea of a glorified past of the Islamic empires of the middle ages. In reality, as Iran shows, they mean an oppressive regime based on

capitalism and the same imperialist world order.

The left Zionists stand for the same. The more radical protest is led by the left liberals of the Peace Bloc of Uri Avneri and by Tayush. Neither of them have any programme for social change. While the Peace Bloc openly declare its support for two capitalist states and against the right of return of the refugees, Tayush is a coalition basically of left liberals with very confused ideas, reflecting their social composition as a layer of the lower middle class.

As long as the working class does come forward, and push the more left radicals to join the struggle of the working class, the activists of the left liberals - who support capitalism but want to remove some of its very ugly features - will continue to dominate this movement. However, lacking a programme and a revolutionary perspective and tactics, the leadership of Tayush in spite of its pacifist phraseology, tends to act as adventurers without taking into account the relationship of forces on the ground, not even in a given tactical situation.

We can give a concrete example of this. Yesterday (May 21) in the Kissufim protest, the army and the police were under orders not to clash with the demonstrators, in spite of the fact that the leadership of the protest was seeking consciously to

clash with the Army and the police. This happens almost in every demonstration led by Tayush.

Yesterday they created a potentially very dangerous situation where the protesters were encircled by the army and the police at the front and on the left, and by right wing settlers on the right. Because of their tactics, six people were held for questioning during the march, after some scuffles with the police, three of whom were released a short time later, and the three remaining detainees were also later released. Had it not been for the orders of the army not to clash with the demonstration, very bad and unnecessary things could have happened to the protesters.

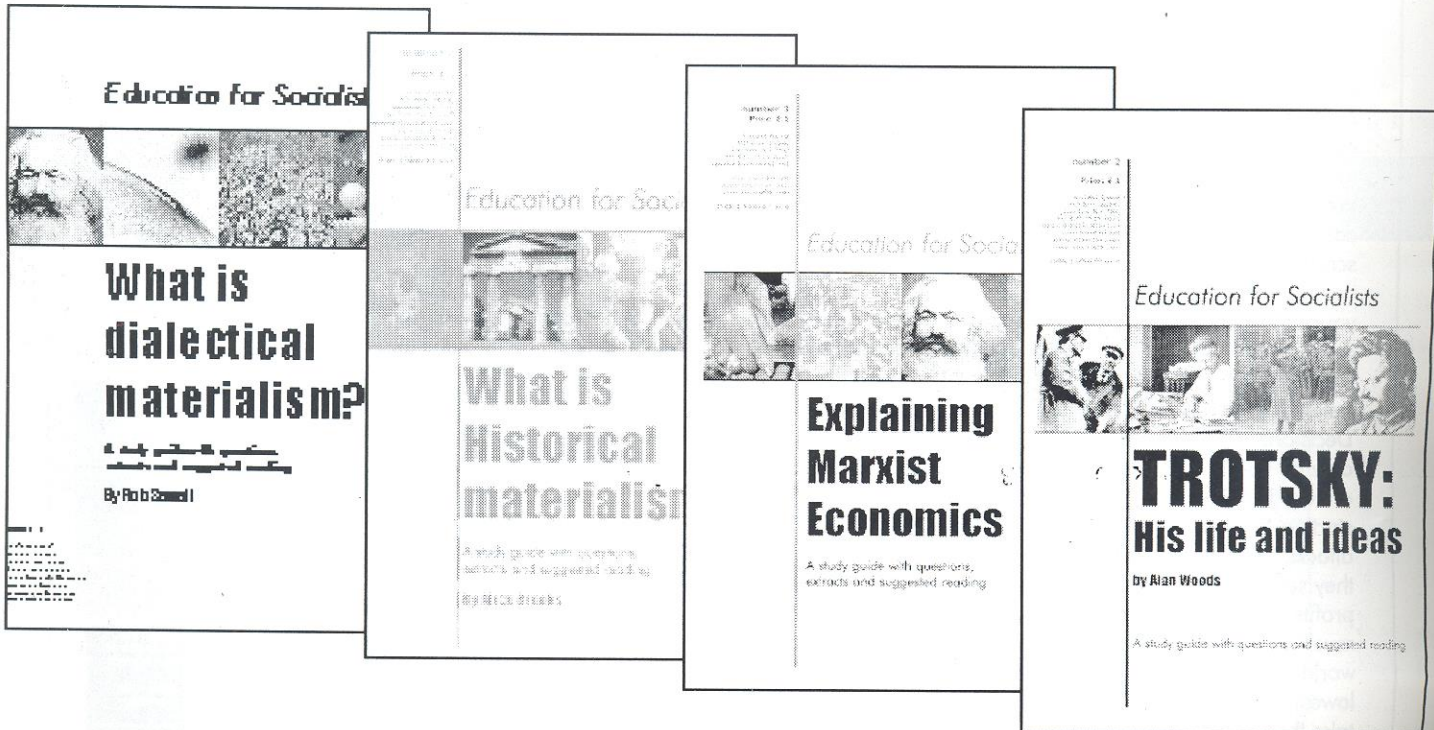
These kinds of tactics for the sake of publicity in the bourgeois press sooner or later will bring some real harm. As one old timer remarked to me in my ears, "there is not much of a difference between these liberals and the anarchists". The similarity was also clear in their approach to the rank and file of the army. While the comrades of the Marxist circles spoke with the soldiers explaining to them that the demonstration was against the high command and the government who use the rank and file soldiers to oppress the Palestinians against their own interests, some of the left liberals shouted at the soldiers that they are ignorant war criminals with whom it is impossible to argue as long they have not read some serious books!

This arrogance of the liberals - a trait they share with the anarchists - who blame the workers for the crimes of the ruling class, instead of winning them over, took on even a symbolic character, as the only flags the leaders of Tayush allowed on the demonstration were black flags as a symbol of mourning the dead. □



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SUPPORT THE STRUGGLE

FIRST OF all a warm welcome as ever to all readers picking up this issue of *Socialist Appeal* at the various trade union conferences taking place during June. We hope that you enjoy this copy and will consider subscribing to get all future editions. As representatives of your memberships at these conferences, yours is an important role in the defence of our movement. Decisions passed must not only be voted on but acted on too. Every union is now starting to face renewed attacks from the bosses as they seek to defend their profits by clawing back as much as they can from the workforce. As usual it is the lowest paid who have to take the brunt of all this and it is to the union that they must turn as the last and only line of defence. The so-called moderates in the trade union movement have been proved wanting in this struggle. Their line of class collaboration, of fudged deals which promise little and deliver less, has not worked in our interests but has simply aided management. New realism has joined The Third Way in the dustbin of dubious ideas. What is needed is a fighting and united trade union movement armed not only with good intentions and determination at all levels but also a socialist programme. Central to this is the need to take the fight onto the political front. Next month's national launch conference of the Labour Representation Committee provides a good opportunity to establish a serious struggle against Blairism and for a Labour Party committed to socialism. But this opportunity must be fought for and

every member of the Labour movement must play their part.

Socialist Appeal is proud to stand for socialism and internationalism. We believe that these ideas should be the property of the whole movement. All the polls indicate that Labour is set to do not so well in the June elections. Given the calibre of the Tory opposition - rejects from the Hammer House of Horror - such a result is disgraceful. So much for Blair being a vote winner! Were Labour to be fighting these elections, and the general election to come, behind a socialist banner, rather than trying to be a Republican Party second eleven, then things would be very different.

So we call on all readers to help us in the fight for socialist ideas and for the international solidarity of the working class. This means cash. Our fighting fund has been established to help us to keep the red banner flying high. During the first three weeks of May we have raised £787 in donations including a splendid £500 from an Andover seller and £150 from Merseyside readers, including £20 from John Moorhouse in Elsmere Port. This is good but needs to be matched by other parts of the country. This cash is needed - don't let us down. Donations should be made payable to *Socialist Appeal* and sent to us at PO Box 2626, London, N1 7SQ.

Thank you in advance

Steve Jones

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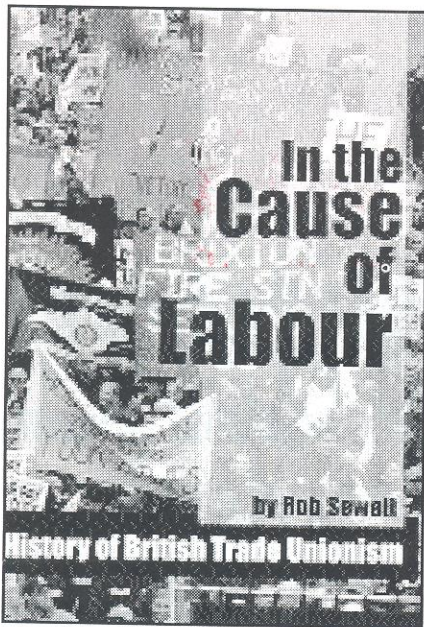
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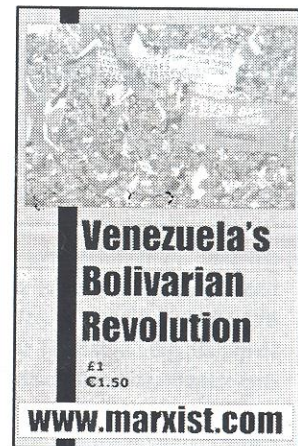
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- ✚ **No more sell offs.** Reverse the Tories privatisation scandal. Renationalise all the privatised industries and utilities under democratic workers control and management. No compensation for the fat cats, only those in genuine need.
- ✚ **The repeal of all Tory anti-union laws.** Full employment rights for all from day one. For the right to strike, the right to union representation and collective bargaining. Election of all trade union officials with the right of recall. No official to receive more than the wage of a skilled worker.
- ✚ **Action to protect our environment.** Only public ownership of the land, and major industries, petro-chemical enterprises, food companies, energy and transport, can form the basis of a genuine socialist approach to the environment.
- ✚ **A fully funded and fully comprehensive education system under local democratic control.** Keep big business out of our schools and colleges. Free access for all to further and higher education. Scrap tuition fees. No to student loans. For a living grant for all over 16 in education or training.
- ✚ **The outlawing of all forms of discrimination.** Equal pay

- for equal work. Invest in quality childcare facilities available to all. Scrap all racist immigration and asylum controls. Abolish the Criminal Justice Act.
- ✚ **The reversal of the Tories' cuts in the health service.** Abolish private health care. For a National Health Service, free to all at the point of need, based on the nationalisation of the big drug companies that squeeze their profits out of the health of working people.
- ✚ **Reclaim the Labour Party!** Defeat Blairism! Fight for Party democracy and socialist policies. For workers' MPs on workers' wages.
- ✚ **The abolition of the monarchy and the House of Lords.** Full economic powers for the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, enabling them to introduce socialist measures in the interests of working people.
- ✚ **No to sectarianism.** For a Socialist United Ireland linked by a voluntary federation to a Socialist Britain.
- ✚ **Break with the anarchy of the capitalist free market.** Labour to immediately take over the "commanding heights of the economy." Nationalise the big monopolies, banks and financial institutions that dominate our lives. Compensation to be paid only on the basis of need. All nationalised enterprises to be run under workers control and management and integrated through a democratic socialist plan of production.
- ✚ **Socialist internationalism.** No to the bosses European Union. Yes to a socialist united states of Europe, as part of a world socialist federation.



Socialist Appeal

Marxist voice of the labour movement

Time to Punch Our Weight

UNISON

AS PUBLIC sector UNISON meets in Bournemouth for its 2004 Annual Conference, delegates will be looking for a lead on the many threats currently facing members. In particular lay activists will be wanting to vent their anger against the increasing attacks on public sector workers in the guise of 'modernisation', ie. Private sector involvement. Little wonder that the CBI report that sick leave is on the increase, and is particularly high in public services, when workers suffer staff cutbacks and increased workloads, increased threat of violence at work from the public and constant erosion of pay, terms and conditions. Pensions provision is high on the agenda since the 4th richest economy in the world claims it cannot afford to treat its' senior citizens with dignity and respect, and allow them a decent standard of living. Changes to local government pensions mean that people taking early retirement will have to wait until they are 55 before they can access their(reduced) pension. Motions calling for decent state pensions and a genuine fight to defeat government proposals are crucial to defend the next generation.

But the National Executive complains in one motion, that 'a

snapshot of UNISON density in local government reveals densities as low as 25 per cent, with an average of 35 per cent', and that union density 'in the public services as a whole is at its lowest level since the end of the second world war'. Why should that be?

Members are frustrated that UNISON appears ineffectual in combating the onslaught of cuts in jobs, has failed to protect hard won conditions. In the health service, the 'Agenda For Change' which has been peddled (rather like the Single Status Agreement) by the leadership, is resulting in erosion of conditions and real cuts in take home pay for some members, which will add to the pressure at the conference. But, as we go to press, there is no motion on the big issue of the moment - the 2004 Local Government Pay Claim.

No doubt emergency motions will be landing on the doorstep in Mabledon Place, to ensure that the Pay Claim is discussed at the Local Government Conference. This claim, ludicrously low at 4%, has resulted in the employers, 'with tacit support from central government' going on the offensive with a very poor 3 year 'offer' and a raft of attacks on basic conditions within the National Agreement.

They have offered only 7% over 3 years, with the 3rd year's rise being used to pay for an equal pay audit'. In other words, we'll have to pay for their part of the 1996 agreement! And in addition to that lose our guarantee on sick pay, car mileage allowances and shift, weekend working and overtime payments. Something for everyone to lose!

The Summer of 2002 saw the largest public sector strike in Britain, over local government pay, closely followed by the fire-fighters, only, in both cases, to be let down by the leadership's eagerness to settle for poor deals. This new mood of militancy hasn't gone away, and local government workers will be ready to fight to retain their conditions and gain a decent rise. During the 2002 dispute and immediately afterwards, there was a massive increase in membership. That is the answer to the leadership's question on union membership - a fighting union!

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Mark Turner
Cardiff County Branch Secretary
(Personal Capacity)

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