

Socialist Appeal

March 2006 issue 140

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3 Years Of Occupation

**TROOPS OUT
OF IRAQ
NOW!**



INSIDE:
Labour movement
rejects Blair's
attacks on Chavez



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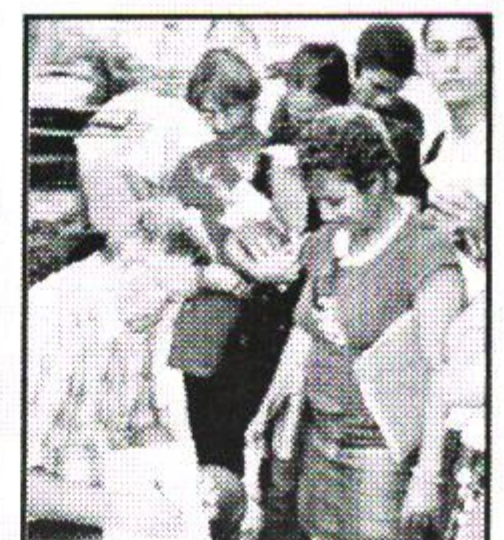
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- Hands Off Venezuela and Venezuela Solidarity Campaign protest against Blair's attacks
- British Parliament to discuss solidarity with Venezuela
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(pages 18-20)



Contact us in Scotland, PO BOX 17299, Edinburgh, EH12 1WS, Tel: 07951140380

The Deadline for Issue 141 is March 16

The result of three years of imperialist occupation of Iraq is countless thousands dead and descent into civil war

Last month the 100th British soldier died in Iraq. Over 2000 US troops are now dead, and as many as 6000 have suffered brain damage in the fighting. In the House of Commons, Blair, Cameron et al expressed their sincere condolences and wept their crocodile tears for the families of the dead. Yet British parliamentary hypocrisy - the cant for which it is famous - was clear for all to see when barely two dozen MPs bothered to turn up to listen to the Defence Secretary commit a further 3800 British soldiers to fight in Afghanistan.

This is Blair's legacy, a procession of bodybags bringing home the dead. At least the British and American troops are counted. No-one knows how many Iraqis have been killed. Even conservative estimates put the total at more than 100,000 since the invasion of Iraq began in March 2003. To the imperialists the Iraqis do not count as human beings when they are alive, they certainly do not bother to count them when they are dead.

Most of the deaths in Iraq are not recorded, but many images of the inhuman degradation and sickening abuse of Iraqis are. Scenes of torture from Iraq, Guantanamo Bay and elsewhere, have become all too familiar on our television screens and in the newspapers. The horrific pictures from Abu Ghraib last year have now been supplemented by further photographic evidence of imperialism's crimes.

The British media have long tried to distance British troops from this kind of behaviour, claiming that our army is 'more civilised' than that of the US. The whole history of British imperialism's crimes around the world should testify against this nonsense. The 'home video' footage of unarmed young Iraqis dragged from the streets to be beaten senseless by British soldiers and left unconscious in pools of their own blood provides graphic evidence of the criminal role being played by British imperialism too. All this is having a traumatic impact on the outlook of soldiers, British and American; the population here and in the US; and, of course, on the Iraqi people themselves.

Bush and Blair claim to be liberating Iraqis, introducing democracy and rebuilding the shattered economy, yet the truth is that life in Iraq is worse

now than it was even under Saddam's monstrous dictatorship. As the country spirals toward civil war, death lies around every corner either from British or American troops, or from sectarian violence.

To make matters still worse the imperialist occupation has another face. As well as its military uniform, it brings with it the suited bankers of the IMF. The International Monetary Fund insisted as a condition for its \$685 million loan to the Iraqi government that it cut subsidies, and expand the private sector.

The combined impact of these bombers and bankers is mass unemployment and poverty. Oil production and electricity supplies remain below their pre-war levels. Much of the country's infrastructure remains in ruins, with the majority of reconstruction aid paying for 'security'. Meanwhile corrupt officials are siphoning off billions of dollars. Now the US administration has announced that they are not going to spend any more on rebuilding the country they destroyed!

All this is compounded by the wanton profiteering of US firms like Haliburton making a mint from government contracts and picking the remains from the carcass of the Iraqi economy.

The result has been a five-fold increase in fuel prices so that, in a country with the second largest oil reserves in the world, most people can only get petrol or heating and cooking fuel by queuing for hours or on the black market. So much for all the promises to rebuild the country and its economy.

What about their claims to have brought freedom and democracy to the people of Iraq? We know by now the real attitude of these people towards democracy. They have demonstrated it again recently in relation to the victory of Hamas in the Palestinian elections. According to the International Herald Tribune (14/2/06): "The US and Israel are discussing a strategy aimed at destabilising a new Hamas government in the Palestinian Authority," by starving the PA of funds.

According to Blair the democrat, British troops will only leave when asked to do so by the (puppet) Iraqi administration. Yet already the Basra authority refuses to co-operate with

British troops following the broadcast of footage showing the beatings they handed out to young Iraqis. Opinion polls in Iraq all call for the troops to get out, the latest by a margin of four to one. Surveys here and in the US have consistently shown the same result.

The majority elected in the recent poll in Iraq demand that the armies of foreign occupation should leave. The results from the parliamentary 'election' also show the country is dividing between the Shia, Sunni and Kurdish regions.

The Independent, analysing the election results in Iraq, explained what now seems obvious to everyone except Blair and co. "Religious fundamentalists now have the upper hand... The election marks the final shipwreck of American and British hopes of establishing a pro-Western secular democracy in a united Iraq." (21/12/05).

Iraq is now rushing headlong towards civil war. The recent bombing of the golden-domed mosque in the city of Samarra, one of Shia Islam's most revered sites, no matter who was responsible, has already resulted in reprisals and tit-for-tat killing that threatens to spiral out of control. Sooner or later British and US troops will be forced to leave with their tails between their legs. Whatever new regime then emerges in Iraq it will certainly not be a friend of the US.

The occupation of Iraq has proved far more difficult than the initial invasion. Three years on it has failed to create any sort of stability either for a stooge government in Baghdad or for the region as a whole. Neither Bush nor Blair will survive their war, politically fatally wounded by Iraq. This will be of little consolation to the families of all those who have died in Iraq. The only way to bring an abrupt end to this tragedy and prevent its repetition is to build the international struggle for the socialist transformation of society.

- Demonstrate on 18 March.
- End the brutal occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan.
- Withdraw all imperialist troops.
- Stop the attacks being prepared on Iran.
- Close the Guantanamo camps.

Blairites rocked by election defeat in Scotland...

Feature by Rob Sewell and Kenny McGuigan

Despite the brave face being put on by Tony Blair at Labour's spring conference over the weekend, the Blair leadership received a bloody nose from the by-election defeat in the parliamentary seat of Dunfermline and West Fife. Not only was he faced with this humiliation; Blair was also forced to postpone the publication of the education bill, again fearing a further defeat in the House of Commons. If anyone had any doubts that the Blairite project is coming apart at the seams, these two facts should help them to think.

Thursday night's election debacle in Scotland was a further nail in Blair's coffin. Labour's vote in this safe seat fell from 20,100 votes in the general election to 10,591, a swing to the Liberal Democrats of 16.2%. Despite the sex and alcohol scandals faced by the Liberals over the past few weeks, they managed to capitalize upon the disillusionment with the Blair government. It was the first time Labour had lost a Westminster by-election in Scotland since the SNP took Govan in 1988, and the first time Labour had lost to the Liberals in a Scottish by-election since 1945!

Not only was it a shattering blow to Tony Blair's leadership, but it was also a devastating defeat for Gordon Brown, the Chancellor, the heir apparent when Blair goes. Brown had played a leading role in the by-election campaign, a parliamentary constituency next to his own. His appeal as a potential Prime Minister will certainly now be questioned by many in the party. If he could not deliver the safe seat of Dunfermline, what chance would there be in a general election? To allay the fears of big business, Brown has gone out of his way to identify himself with the Blair legacy, which has proved to be the kiss of death for him. Brown along with Blair has become an election loser.

The Labour candidate Catherine Stihler, a member of the European Parliament, was a typical Blairite with no appeal for working people. The attempt by the Tories to realign them-

selves under David Cameron has also failed to impress the voters, whose candidate trailed far behind with only 2,700 votes and whose share of the vote had gone down by 2.5%. Again the Scottish National Party was also left floundering and their call for Scottish independence found little echo.

Despite rows over the tolls on the Forth Road Bridge and the announced loss of 700 local jobs at Lexmark, the Nationalists faced an uphill struggle. Alex Salmond, the SNP leader, completely failed to take advantage of Labour's plight and will certainly upset their plans for success in the forthcoming elections to the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood. The SNP remain stalled in third place.

Embarrassing

According to Professor John Curtice, of the politics department at Strathclyde University, the result was "extremely embarrassing for Gordon Brown." The 16.2% swing from Labour to the Liberal Democrats epitomized the government's difficulties in the loss of ground since the Iraq war.

"It could also mean that Mr. Blair goes sooner rather than later. It's a salutary reminder to Labour of how badly they did in last year's general election when they got just over 36%."

"It is also the worst SNP result in a by-election since 1982 on the change in

share of the votes. The SNP's potential as the natural repository for protest votes is now undermined", said Curtice.

This snapshot is further evidence that the support for nationalism has waned. It flies in the face of all those who panicked at the SNP revival in the past, especially those on the left, who abandoned all principles and class analysis and buckled before nationalism. Many of these people who were swept way by nationalist feeling ended up in the leadership of the Scottish Socialist Party. They had the great illusion that they were going to cut across nationalism by offering a left variety of Scottish nationalism. But they have been proved wrong.

The SSP stood in the by-election with John McAllion as their candidate. McAllion was a Labour MP but was sidelined by the Blairites. He had a great reputation as a left-winger and fighter in the local area. If anyone could make headway for the SSP it was McAllion. However, it is clear that such credentials are insufficient in and of themselves to defeat the Blairites. He managed to gain only 537 votes and came within the same range as candidates from 'Abolish Forth Bridge Tolls' (374) and the 'Scottish Christians' (411). It is a very disappointing result for the party. The SSP is going nowhere fast and on this current performance would lose all its members in the Scottish Parliament at the next Holyrood election.

The result, however, will further embolden the anti-Blair rebels within the Parliamentary Party. Blair will be faced with parliamentary revolt after parliamentary revolt in the weeks and months that lie ahead. The attempt to placate the Labour opposition with concessions over the education bill is an example of weakness not strength. Blair's authority is rapidly crumbling away. He has less and less support as each day passes. His programme of so-called reforms (i.e. counter-reforms) is provoking widespread opposition within the party and beyond. It is creating a massive backlash, as was witnessed in



... Lessons need to be learned

Dunfermline.

This result will provide the Lib Dems with a short reprieve. In the coming period, if they try to win disaffected Tory voters they will have to shift to the right, thereby losing their appeal to disillusioned Labour voters. They are a party based upon protest votes and that is their grave weakness.

The ruling class, which has been relying upon Blair to do its dirty work, is also not confident of giving the reigns to Brown. He cannot be fully trusted to hold the line with the mounting pressure from the trade unions. That is why they are trying to once again play up the Tory Party, their traditional 'first eleven'. In the process the Lib-Dems will be ground between two millstones.

If Blair is forced to retire early, it is not a foregone conclusion that Brown will now get the leadership. The pressures are mounting up within the trade unions and the Labour movement generally. But even if Brown gets it, he will not have the same room for manoeuvre as Blair, who was cushioned by the world boom.

The economy is heading downwards, unemployment is rising and the housing market is about to take a dive. We are in a period of sharp and sudden changes internationally and in Britain. A new convulsive period is opening up between the classes. This in turn will transform the Labour movement from top to bottom. The process of a shift to the left is already taking place now within the trade unions. This process will inevitably affect the Labour Party at some stage. The small splits and divisions of today will turn into open chasms in the future. The right wing, which is politically on the ropes, will be spewed out and the way will be opened up for class politics and a socialist programme. The Marxist tendency represented by Socialist Appeal will play its full role in this struggle to rearm the Labour movement and prepare the way for the struggle for a socialist Britain. □

Cabinet ministers, including Gordon Brown had been out in force during the run-up to the poll with Brown seemingly staking his own political credibility on the result. New Labour supporting tabloid the Daily Record ran articles all week up to the by-election about Brown being a family man, interviews with his wife, etc. New Labour's candidate, Cathy Stihler, a prototype New Labour MEP, was also heavily featured.

In a 49% turn-out, the electorate used the occasion to register their concerns about local and national issues and sent a strong message to Blair and Brown over Iraq, the Council Tax, the NHS, job losses at Lexmark and proposed toll rises on the Forth Road Bridge. Turn-out was down by 11% from the General Election of last May and the defeat is a blow for Brown's designs to take power from Blair. Labour's vote was down by 16%, exactly the same as the swing to the Liberals. The SNP will be disappointed they couldn't capitalise on the anger at New Labour and the leadership calamities currently befuddling the Liberals. Their vote was down 2% from last time while the Tory vote was also down 2% since May. In electoral terms it was a sensation.

Meanwhile, they are in coalition with the Holyrood New Labour who are feeling the backlash over high council tax rises, fury over fishing quota's and it now seems likely that the Scottish Executive will have to scrap free personal care for pensioners because of financial constraints (a Liberal demand for coalition). The Scottish Socialist

Party crisis continues. They fielded John McCallion, ex Labour MP and MSP of considerable standing who joined the SSP in October last year. The SSP polled just 537 votes, and 1.6% of the vote. It was down on their showing in May. The result confirms that the SSP are now well past their sell-by date. In an election situation where the Tories are not seen as a credible force, the Liberals engulfed in one sleazy revelation after another and currently without a national leader, and the voters obviously determined to give New Labour a bloody nose - the SSP are now seen as irrelevant. McCallion has moved at exactly the wrong time! But while the electorate of Fife may feel the need to sound a wake up call to Blair and Brown, the SNP must surely be the biggest losers. Widely thought to be serious contenders given the prevailing attitude in the area, Salmond is presiding over a shambolic nationalist movement who may now only be viewed seriously by voters with regard to Holyrood elections. The SSP cannot claim the same. The coming period will be decisive. Some sections of the SSP may very well throw in their lot with the SNP in an attempt to force the independence issue. □

RESULT:

Liberal:	12,391	35.8%	+15.6%
Labour:	10,591	30.6%	-16.8%
SNP:	7,261	21%	+2%
Tory:	2,702	7.8%	-2%
SSP:	537	1.5%	-0.1%

Broad Victory for Left in T&G Executive Council Elections

Overall the elections were good for the left, but with some disappointments such as where union convenor, Dave Williams lost to Tony Lewington by 3,948 to 3,411 out of approx 75,000. A large number didn't vote. Teresa Mackay and Roger Dillon failed to get re-elected in Region 1 (SE England). Roger was the sitting GEC member who is known as a good

union activist at Ford's. The Right mobilised against him and they won 7,411 to 6,589.

One hopeful sign showing that the Geordie Landles- John Aitkin camp is in retreat was that their former supporter Eddie McDermott, full time Regional Secretary of Region 1, lost his post. This occurred when Eddie heard that the Broad Left secured an overall majority on the GEC, and both Aitkin and Landles were defeated.

**by Rachael Webb, Secretary,
1/888 Branch T&G**

Stop Blair's Attack on Schools

by Ewan Gibbs, Edinburgh School Students Union

In its most recent proposal to reform education the government's plans to sell off the education system seem to have come a step closer. The outcry from Labour's backbenchers has forced Tony Blair to stage a partial retreat. Nevertheless, the bill as amended is far from satisfactory.

Under the new plans, schools can be given "trust" status. With this status, schools will practically become private businesses; they will be able to set teachers' pay, sell land and even use public money to invest in shares! A trust school will have few obligations to the Local Education Authority (LEA). It appears in fact the LEAs will not even be able to ensure that trust schools keep up with education standards or the national curriculum. The plan will also mean that the LEA has little say in how trusts fund themselves or manage their finances.

Under these proposals, it seems very likely that a new two-tier system of schools will emerge. High quality, good schools, most likely in affluent areas for gifted children as well as those with well-off parents, and another lower tier of dumping grounds for the average student in a working-class area. Although to an extent this already happens in our increasingly privatised, under-funded comprehensive system, these proposals will allow a two-tier system to come into force far more quickly than we could imagine. Is it right that we, the majority, should suffer so that a minority of children should benefit?

Now you may be thinking, "Who will run these trust schools? The government?" NO! This is probably the worst thing in the bill. A large range of organisations, if they can afford to do so, will be allowed to run these new schools. These range from churches to charities. Now, what difference will this make, as they have to teach a set curriculum right anyhow? Well this is not how it will work. Churches could theoretically teach creationism as fact, or another organisation could turn modern studies into a propaganda session.

Also proposed in the bill is the continued harassment of teachers, especially those in poorer areas. Under the

proposal, schools will have to constantly publish figures of how well their students and staff are performing. Then schools that are judged to be "failing" will be given one year to recover, if they do not then new "providers" will be parachuted in. This will speed up the privatisation of education. So-called "failing" schools are often full of staff doing a good job in bad circumstances. Is the ability of children in each school taken into account?

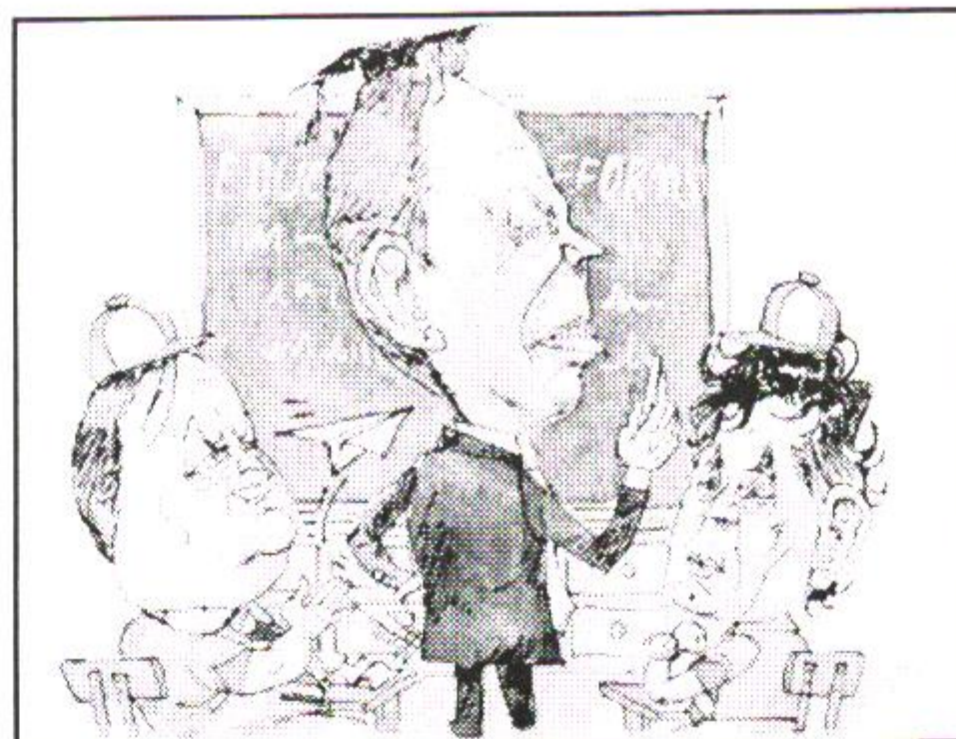
It is also worth noting that "failing" schools are often those that receive the least funds and constant pressure. Why would staff possibly want to work at such an institution, never mind with the pressures of knowing that their jobs could be on the line due to the "brightness" of a year group. I personally attend what would probably be judged as a failing school and do not see the benefits of putting in new management with an agenda that may be compromised by an organisations' interest. Our future is at stake. We must ensure that school students fully understand what is being proposed. We need to get organised to fight these Tory plans. □

We must:

Oppose any measures to privatise education!

Build the Edinburgh Students!

To visit the Edinburgh Student Union site, visit www.edinburgh-ssu.tk



Army preys on working class economic conscripts

A comrade in Lanarkshire recently noticed that on school buses, rented out by the school from a private company there were recruitment posters for the Ministry Of Defence.

This is a shocking but not altogether unsurprising discovery. As the imperialist ventures of the ruling class continue, the army is struggling to find more recruits to go and die in wars for oil and spheres of influence abroad. The conflicts are costing huge amounts and need a ready supply of foot soldiers from either side.

As this shows, the MOD is getting desperate, but is still going for the usual target of

working-class areas for its new intake. Since young people in these areas suffer from a complete lack of opportunity that may be available elsewhere, most of the MOD's recruitment comes from these areas.

Of course these posters will never present an honest look at army life: people losing limbs, being under fire and killing people in imperialist conflicts in foreign lands. They instead prefer to show an image of army life that involves training in skills and skiing in Norway. There appears no real chance of getting hurt in their glossy images.

As the ruling class's hunger for more soldiers to throw into the meat grinder increases, we must be prepared to oppose and counter them at every opportunity.

As one school student said: "This is a disgusting way to take advantage of the naivety of some young people." □

Manchester Evening News Dispute

by Rachel Broady, NUJ MoC Manchester Evening News, personal capacity

BOSSSES at Guardian Media Group - owned by the Guardian newspaper - are cutting staff by 22% despite making record profits of £32.6m last year.

The decision - inspired by training courses for managers in the US - will see:

- 27 journalists made redundant - including all photographers
- 8 clerical staff made redundant - including scanners, secretaries, librarians and messengers
- The remaining workers forced to work changed shifts - from 6am until 11pm
- The news and features subbing operation merged creating more work for fewer staff
- Cutting the canteen to serve just one hot meal a day - when asking staff to work longer hours.

The cuts will increase workloads, dramatically change terms and conditions and force staff to spend more money on meals simply to get through the working day.

Regional chief executive Mark Dodson has said he has been inspired by management training in America and decided to follow the route - the route of bosses who cut staff, reduce quality and chase advertising in an attempt to make vast profits.

But Guardian Media Group is owned by the Scott Trust with values supposedly at the heart of all its publications and workplace decisions.

The Manchester Guardian was founded in 1821 as a weekly newspaper "in the liberal interest". The newspaper became a plc in 1907 and in 1924 the owner's son, C P Scott bought the Manchester Evening News bringing both newspapers under the same ownership and with the same values.

Today the Scott Trust says: "We aim to maintain the standards of excellence which have been set throughout our history and to continue them in our new businesses.

"We strive to sustain the values established by CP Scott keeping GMG in profit but doing so on decent principles."

A reliance on freelance and casual photographers will cut costs for managers who intend to pay less - and it will affect the quality the Manchester Evening News.

Losing experienced reporters, sports writers, feature writers, subs and design-

ers will cut costs because the remaining staff will be working more and paid less - but it will affect the quality of the newspaper.

And having staff hungry all day and working unsociable hours will affect quality too - because they'll all be exhausted.

Still Guardian Media Group board chairman Paul Myners says: "We do not do it simply for the profit. We do it for the privilege of serving the public interest."

Now the workers who see through the Trust's well-chosen words are balloting for industrial action.

The Manchester Evening News chapel voted unanimously to pass the following motion:

"We condemn utterly the proposed programme of redundancies, cuts and resulting decline in quality and editorial content.

"The inevitable worsening of the terms and conditions for the remaining staff are completely unacceptable.

"The proposal to axe the staff photographers, leaving a major regional newspaper reliant on casuals and freelances makes neither economic nor editorial sense.

"This chapel has absolutely no confidence in and feels betrayed by the board, the editor and editorial managers.

"We condemn the incompetent and insensitive way management have announced, organised and acted upon the review. Refusing to give us the data on which decisions have been based shows contempt for staff, for the business, for the paper and for the readers.

"Therefore, this chapel has decided to instruct national officers to organise a campaign against the cuts including a ballot for industrial action."

Please support their action

Send your words of support to the Manchester Evening News Chapel by logging on to: www.menchapel.org.uk or to MoC Rachel Broady:

rachelbroady@yahoo.co.uk

Send your words of protest to:

Scott Trust chair Liz Forgan -

liz.forgan@virgin.net and GMG regional chief executive -

mark.dodson@men-news.co.uk and

Guardian editor -

alan.rusbridger@guardian.co.uk

Northumberland SOS campaign continues

Over 150 care home residents, workers and supporters took to the street to raise their objections to these threats of closure by the Blairite led County Council. The mood of the march was defiant but friendly gaining tremendous support from the town's folk and plenty of toots on the car horns of passing motorists. Represented on the march were banners from Unison the GMB, Natfhe and the FBU with representatives from the Northumberland Trades Councils. Since the march there have been three lobbies of various council meetings and further attempts by SOS (Save Our Services) to bring together the different sections of the trade union movement in the local area and this will continue. SOS has learned of moves to privatise key services in different parts of the northern region and are trying to put pressure on the Regional trades unions to link up these fights into an all out campaign to defeat this Tory agenda which is unfortunately spreading. UNISON are giving some kind of recognition to the campaign by giving SOS an award for it's campaigning work and organisation methods. This is a message that should be carried up and down the whole movement.

SOS now has its own web site www.sosnorthumberland.org.uk Let's get networking for a founding conference in defense of our public services. If the leaders won't do it then we have to do it ourselves.

- Please send messages of support!
- No to closures!
- No to Privatisation!

by Steve Brown,
Wansbeck and Castle Morpeth
Trades Council. Personal
capacity and SOS.

What lies behind the government's claims about "protecting us"?

by Kenny McGuigan: Additional material by Steve Jones

We live in dangerous times. We are told that unseen and anonymous evil-doers are lurking in the shadows, planning acts of great atrocity. Countries populated by individuals with dark skins and sinister beards are busy building "weapons of mass destruction" at this very moment, ready - we are "informed" - to unleash on our green and pleasant land. OK, we found none in Iraq but, hey, they are out there somewhere. "Security" is the potent buzzword of the British and American political elite. Blair and Bush are in a media comfort zone when they speak to the press of the need for "security". Security is newsworthy because it is sensational; it is exciting. It gives the public the impression that reporters know more than they are allowed to tell us when they speak of such important matters. In the US scarcely a week goes by without some new "state of alert" or "potentially foiled plot" being announced by the Bush administration - none of which ever seems to come to anything but which serves to keep the "we are under attack" mood going. For Bush and Blair the lesson is clear: Fear is the key.

Of course, no socialist would seek to justify or condone the atrocities of 9/11 or the bombings in London last July, or Madrid or anywhere else for that matter. The pages of Socialist Appeal have explained repeatedly that nothing will ever be gained by individual terrorism. Acts of terrorism are always used by the state to justify the introduction of draconian laws which push back the modest reforms and rights of the working class. Far from achieving their aims, the acts of terrorists - seeking to put themselves forward as replacements for a power which does frighten the ruling class, namely that of organised labour - serves to push those aims further away from being achieved. Instead the state is able to take cynical advantage of the mood of fear and anger which inevitably rises up, especially when it is ordinary people who end up shedding blood.

Many are now prepared to swallow

the line that the present laws are not strong enough, that emergency measures are required to keep us safe from the evil doers and so on. The reactionary politicians tell us in all sincerity: "The circumstances demand that we suspend the normal democratic procedures. We need to stop individuals from going about their lawful business. We must detain and commit 'suspects' to prison without allowing them to seek legal advice or undergoing any judicial process. In difficult circumstances we shall shoot people if we feel we have good grounds, even if they are electricians on their way to work."

Scapegoats

In modern times there is hardly a generation that hasn't been carried along on a great wave of moral panic, because it is an area where there is always an issue and usually a scapegoat. In the early part of the twentieth century it was the Germans, followed by the Bolsheviks, then after World War 2, the ambiguous Cold War threat of communism reaching its climax in the McCarthy era. Thatcher and Reagan raised it again, enjoying a mild revival in the 1980s. Now Bush and Blair blame Islamic fundamentalism and seek to link terrorism by a million threads to immigration and Asian communities, while rags like the Daily Express ubiquitously claim that Muslim terrorists threaten the very fabric of that elusive entity that is "western civilisation".

And, as anyone who follows the news knows, this constant creation of a climate of fear produces a collective sense of national insecurity, expertly fostered by the powerful individuals who run the show, which in turn demands collusion and compliance by large sections of the population with regard to measures they would not normally entertain. Branches of the security services with mysterious titles are formed, temporarily, we are told, before that body grows arms and legs of its own and survives into the next generation, and the next; usually

answerable to no-one!

When you speak to people in the street or in the pub, they will tell you that Britain and America are democracies. Some will say we have a "free press", "free speech", an "independent judicial system", and that an accused person is "innocent until proved guilty after a fair trial". After all, this is what they have been told all their lives unless reality intervenes to provide a glimpse of the truth. And this is the crux of the matter. It is becoming clear that on closer examination of our "democracy" we see major contradictions being revealed. Initially, the contradiction seems superficial. People might say, "Well, these are special times requiring emergency measures. If you haven't done anything wrong you have nothing to fear". But a more sinister contradiction lies underneath and is not so easily explained.

It is the professional politicians and the judges, the leaders of the armed forces, the Chief Constables, the religious leaders, the directors of the banks and their hired mouthpieces and the proprietors of the "free press" who all shout from the rooftops that we live in a "democracy". Yet it is these very same people who now tell us that to defeat the menace of global terrorism then the "democracy" they praise is of no use and must be "revised". Marxists have always sought to explain that whilst, in the modern world, capitalism and their political representatives usually argue that bourgeois parliamentary democracy is the best system for us all to have, complete with "independent" justices systems, etc., for them this is not a golden rule. Capitalism likes this set-up because it gives the impression that we control our own lives whilst keeping real power nice and safe in the hands of the ruling class. In effect we rubber-stamp our own exploitation and the maintenance of class rule. Yet when it becomes necessary to protect their privileges and power, they will be quite prepared to abandon some or all of these so-called rights like so much waste paper. The contradiction which they are prepared to argue is that to

defend our rights, they must be taken away!

The government has therefore been hard at work eroding our rights, supposedly in our best interests. Most notably, we have seen the latest step in the approval of measures to bring in ID cards following the February vote in the House of Commons which has rejected the amendments from the Lords and sent the bill back for reconsideration in March. As things now stand not only will ID cards come in, but by tying them to passport renewals they will be, in reality, compulsory for up to 90% of the population within a decade of introduction. Charles Clarke has made it very plain: "We have always been clear that the identity cards scheme is being designed and is intended, eventually, to become a compulsory scheme for all UK residents." Full compulsion could be enacted at a later stage by the government without any further reference to Parliament using the Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill now being debated which would enable the 1539 Statute of Proclamations to be used for this purpose. ID cards will be linked to the even more sinister national database which will contain all manner of information about us. For good measure the whole scheme will be subject to part privatisation which will create massive profits for firms at our expense - because, yes, we will have to pay for the honour of having these cards both directly and through taxes.

And for what? There are extreme doubts that the national database will actually work as a means of monitoring crime or terrorism. None of the computer systems needed to make such aims viable are up and running yet and many experts have already hinted that the technical problems may be difficult to overcome in the short or even medium term. It is also worth noting that everytime governments have gone to the private sector to bring in a new major computer system there have been major problems and delays. Not a good track record there!

The government have also been



NEW LABOUR UNVEILS ITS LATEST 'WE LEARE TO WORK' INITIATIVE!

less than clear as to how having ID cards will actually stop terrorist acts taking place. There is no evidence of terrorism being curtailed in those countries that already have a system of ID cards. In fact terrorists in recent times have been quite keen to ensure that they carry sufficient ID with them to ensure that people know who they were. In truth the government know that ID cards will do little to combat terrorism, simply serving to give the impression that something is being done. The real benefits for them having little to do with terrorism or even combating normal crime for that matter.

Using the fear

Over the years, successive governments have sought to find ways of sneaking ID cards for all onto the statute books. In the 1980s Thatcher wanted to introduce ID cards for those attending football matches, which would have opened the doors for a later national scheme. However the conclusions of the official inquiry into the Hillsborough disaster knocked that plan on the head. Now New Labour, using the fear of fundamentalist bombers, is trying again.

They know that an ID card system will provide new ways of curtailing our liberties, controlling information and generally keeping a firm grip on people. In effect we could end up with

being forced to carry a government version of a Nectar Card! It will increasingly be the norm to see people being stopped by police to "show their papers" and, if it suits their purpose, being whisked away on the grounds that they are "not in order". Many on the fringes of society, unable to get a legitimate card, will disappear into the Grey Economy to be exploited at will, totally without protection. Some in the government have already stopped talking about tackling terrorism and now talk about cutting back on benefit costs. Ironically some IT experts now think the whole scheme will be "hackable" and subject to fraud and deception.

We are also seeing attempts to bring into law an offence against "glorifying" terrorism. Quite sensible some might think, except that the government do not seem very keen to tighten up their definitions in a way which might make it reasonable to get a conviction in a court of law. As things stand it would be very difficult for anyone not to be "glorifying" terrorism in one form or another, so wide ranging is the possible interpretation of the proposed law. The suspicion is that this law will be used as a "catch-all" means of threatening people and derailing supposedly legitimate protest. After all ASBOs have been used against protestors and campaigners and, going further back in time, the Prevention of Terrorism Act in the 1970s was used against trade unionists.

At present the government is continuing to bank on a climate of fear to maintain support for these measures. But this will start to unravel, especially as the true purpose and costs become clearer (something the government seems to be at great pains to avoid), and opposition will grow. A Labour movement campaign must be organised against these attacks. After all it was the trade unions and their political representatives which first led the way in establishing many of the rights we have until recently taken for so much for granted and are now seeing under threat in the interests of profit. ■

Time-bomb ticking

by Michael Roberts

Last summer, we wrote about the property time bomb that threatened to drive the advanced capitalist economies of North America and Europe into economic recession (see *The Property Time Bomb*, 15 June 2006). What we said then was that there were two strong forces that were keeping world capitalism motoring along: US household spending and Chinese manufacturing production. If one of these should falter, then world capitalism would slip into slump.

The capitalist economists remain very optimistic that neither of these things will happen or that they will not make any difference. And the latest economic data coming out of the US would suggest that all is well.

As one American economist put it: "January was not only hot in the statistical sense but it was literally the hottest January on record insofar as US climactic conditions are concerned". US housebuilders increased their number of new housing starts by nearly 7% in one month. Sales in American shops and malls jumped 30% in January relative to December.

As a result, the economists are now forecasting the US economy will grow at a 5% annual rate in the three months to the end of March. That compares to a very poor expansion of just 1.5% in the last quarter of 2005.

But, as one that skeptical American economists put it: "Which outcome is closer to the true state of the US economy -- the energy-shocked, consumer-led slowdown of late 2005 or the apparent heat-seeking burst of activity in early 2006? Financial markets have voted for the latter.

My advice is don't play with statistical fire. There may have been more truth to the weakness of the economy in late 2005 than most are willing to accept. The case for a post-housing-bubble capitulation of the American consumer remains a very real threat in 2006."

National house prices are now rising at a 12% annual rate, unheard of in all previous US housing booms. This unprecedented rise in housing wealth has enabled Americans to refinance their debt at low rates and then use the cash they've borrowed to spend, confident in the belief that when they sell their properties they will have risen so much in value that they can pay off the debt comfortably. But this is a house of cards.

Recent data on US property transactions and prices show that the downturn in the US housing market has now started. Existing house sales (roughly 80% of the market) have been edging down since last June. The number of unsold homes is now at its highest level since spring 1986.

House builders are scaling back forecasts for next year. Toll Brothers, the largest builder of luxury homes in America, recently reduced its sales projections for 2006 by 4-7%. The National Association of Home Builders index portends a further deterioration in new home starts.

Mortgage applications have also drifted south since the summer.

Housing affordability, particularly in the coastal cities, is stretched to its limits. America's households are leveraged up to their eyeballs and now rely on rising house prices to supplement their incomes. Home equity withdrawal (cash generated from the rising value of homes) accounts for a record share of their disposable income.

So even just a slowdown in house price rises would hit consumption. A recent survey of homeowners in 13 areas of sharpest home price rises found that one in four would have to curb spending if house prices simply stopped rising. Now home price increases are beginning to slow from previously breakneck levels. Indeed, prices of new homes just built are falling.

All this will sound familiar to British homeowners. The collapse of the house price boom in the UK (and in Australia) last year is the future for US homeowners. House prices don't have to fall, just the increase in prices to slow down to cause a big headache for many households.

Even though the UK and Australia did not experience outright nominal house price falls; in real terms, they did. The fall in real house prices deducted something like 2-3% points from real spending growth in those economies.

Weakest rate

UK retail sales are now growing at their weakest rate for 20 years and recorded the worst figures for the January sales since 1945! The Chancellor, Gordon Brown, has been forced to halve his economic growth projections for 2006. In Australia, real retail sales are growing just 1% a year and business confidence is at a three-year low. For the first time since New Labour came into office, unemployment is steadily rising.

America has a new chairman of its central bank, the Federal Reserve. Ben Bernanke's first statement to the US Congress was to raise the question of a housing bust. Naturally, he was not too worried when he argued that "a levelling out or a modest softening in housing activity seems more likely than a sharp contraction." But a so-called soft landing in housing could still translate into a hard landing for the economy.

The house price boom in the UK, Australia and the US has been driven by an accumulation of debt. At the end of 1999, UK, Australian and US household debt levels were similar at 69-73% of GDP. Over the previous ten years, debt had risen just over 1% of GDP a year. But in the last five years, these countries accumulated debt more than five times faster.

Amazingly, on many measures, Americans would suffer more from a housing bust than Australians or Brits. Household debt to GDP may be higher in Australia and the UK, but only 30% of Australian homeowners have any mortgage at all, while 45% of Americans do. And when mortgage debt is measured against assets, Australians



have only 21% of the home value mortgaged, while Americans have double that. As a result, it costs Americans around 18% of their household disposable income to service their housing debt, but just 12% for Australians and 10% in the UK.

Moreover, the US financial system has become heavily linked to property. Commercial banks have more than half their assets in real estate.

While property prices rose, households felt confident to borrow even more at favourable interest rates. And banks were happy to provide credit since the risk was spread against the consumer's main asset, which was rising in value.

Have no doubt. The US economy depends on this low interest-rate housing boom like no other. The big US banks have made huge profits in the last few years from lending on real estate. Now 45% of all the profits made by the top 500 companies in the US come from the financial sector.

If the housing market collapses, that will make a huge hit on the profits of big business.

Even more serious, most US mortgages are sold on by the banks to semi-government agencies, called Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. Because they are backed by the US government, it is assumed these agencies cannot go bankrupt. But they have been engaged in many financial contracts; using the mortgages they hold as collateral. If Americans start defaulting on their mortgages in a big way, it could mean that mortgage agencies will be in trouble and require taxpayers to bail them out. That will slow the economy even more. Worse, the trouble could spread through the financial sector like a disease, bringing down a swathe of banks.

At the moment, residential mortgage delinquencies are near record lows at just over 4% of total loans, but should house price rises stop, defaults will become more commonplace.

At their peak, UK and Australian citizens sucked out the equivalent of 8% of household disposable income in borrowing on the rising value of their homes. In a recent report, erstwhile Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan calculated that US households had extracted much the same amount from their homes in 2004. This extra boost to incomes was key in driving the consumer-led boom in the UK, Australia and the US.

The end of the UK and Australian housing boom occurred when the BoE and RBA raised interest rates. That caused house prices to stop rising and there was an abrupt drop in equity extraction. This provided a big shock to consumer income in those countries. While mortgage rates in the UK and Australia are directly linked to the movement of short-term rates set by their central banks, this is not the case in the US. They do not determine mortgage rates. Indeed, only one-third of all US mortgages are financed on variable rates, while over 70%

are in the UK and Australia. Even so, in the last few months there have been signs of an upturn in mortgage rates.

It won't take much of a rise in mortgage rates to kill off the current US house price boom. That's because, according to the National Association of Realtors (NAR), US house prices are at their highest relative to average income for 15 years. So just a small rise in mortgage rates would make most US homes 'unaffordable' and home prices would have to fall. As US mortgage rates rise, mortgage equity withdrawal in the US will fall, just as it did in the UK and Australia.

US property bubble

In the last two years, the US property bubble has meant that housing and related sectors have contributed 1.5% pts to average real GDP growth of 3.75%. Similarly, housing-related job growth has been twice as fast as other sectors of the economy and has contributed nearly one-quarter of all net new jobs in the last two years.

If annual house prices only slow to half the current rate of 12%, housing's contribution to private consumption growth will disappear. So the US real growth rate would fall towards recession levels.

Most important, unlike the other Anglo-Saxon economies, a property bust in the States would have a significant impact on the world capitalist economy. Should the current US house price growth of 12% yoy in Q3'05 halve in 2006, that would cut global output growth by 1% pt at least.

The dynamic impact of a housing slowdown on the US economy is likely to be much worse. Foreign investors won't recycle their capital into the US fixed income assets at current yields if US growth slumps. This will force up US interest rates. Rising mortgage rates will then compound the misery for households and encourage them to save more and spend less.

So, by the end of this year, one of the legs holding up the world capitalist economy may have well and truly buckled. □

Amicus 'left' moves to the right!

by Espe Espigares, Amicus London Regional Council (Personal capacity)

The current Amicus General Secretary Derek Simpson was elected as a left candidate four years ago in the former AEEU section of Amicus in an historic victory that overthrew the right winger Sir Ken Jackson. But Simpson is now the driving force behind an attempt to split the left, which will allow him to abandon his commitments to lay democracy and control on which he was elected. Simpson has given a free hand to attempts to set up a rival organisation to the broad left organisation, Amicus Unity Gazette, called ATU network, that aims to 'abolish the past' and set up as a 'centre left' organisation. Another part of Simpson's attack has been to remove the long-standing leadership of the Gazette who has stuck to the Gazette programme. Pro-Simpson supporters at a 'packed' Gazette meeting held in Preston last month, very narrowly defeated both the Chair and Editor of the Gazette, Jimmy Warne and Des Heemskerck. They are both currently still suspended from their jobs in Amicus after over five months as well as Cathie Willis, who is also a prominent Gazette supporter and are now facing false disciplinary charges. These suspensions are part of a political attack by Simpson to lean on Gazette supporting officers in the union, to make them more compliant to his plans but also to isolate and discredit the former leadership of the Gazette with lies and distortions against the suspended. The newly elected Gazette Chair is Simpson loyal-

ist Steve Davison who is also the chair of the Amicus National Executive Committee. With elections for the Executive due this year Simpson's supporters on the Executive wanted to change the rules to extend their period of office. But this required a two-third majority and was therefore unlikely to succeed, so instead the Executive agreed to conduct an unprecedented postal ballot of the NEC members not in attendance in order to force through this rule change. Davison supported this move using the old arguments of Sir Ken Jackson of continuity during a merger process and cost savings. He also moved a motion at a Gazette meeting last July that proposed the abandonment of the rule on election of official's which was narrowly defeated by two votes. Afterwards four prominent Gazette supporters, including two who are on the Amicus NEC, were expelled by the pro-Simpson NW Gazette region for refusing to accept the regions mandate to vote to abandon this rule at the meeting. The control of the Gazette may have temporarily fallen into the hands of Simpson's supporters through this manoeuvring. But issues such as Simpson's disgraceful attempt to organise scabbing during the Wembley construction workers dispute or his support for Blair's plans for the building of 20 new nuclear reactors will lead to a falling away of his support and the re-emergence of the genuine left in Amicus. □

Industrial action continues in the civil service

On the 26th and 27th January 70,000 workers in the Department for Work and Pensions went out on strike over job and service cuts. The action was very well supported by the members of the PCS civil service union, with 85% of the members throughout the country involved in the strike action.

The campaign against the governments 'efficiency challenge' (job cuts) continues in the DWP with members refusing to work overtime and withdrawing the goodwill management have long relied on to get jobs done. Members are doing their own jobs and nothing more. The backlog on processing claims to benefit is now reaching twelve weeks in places and where the government target of seeing someone to discuss their benefit claim is three days from the first contact this is reaching eight days in many areas of the country.

The campaign is ongoing and if talks which the management have offered come to nothing members are prepared to take more days of strike action.

**By Rachel Heemskerck
Regional Chair, PCS DWP
East of England
(Personal capacity)**

Successful Venezuela meeting in Lancaster

On Wednesday 15th of February, following a visible on-campus campaign, around 30 people attended a Hands Off Venezuela event at Lancaster University. Pablo Sanchez was invited by Lancaster University Labour Club to give a talk on the current situation in Venezuela and the importance of building solidarity between the British and Venezuelan labour movements.

Pablo began the evening by discussing the history of the Bolivarian movement in Venezuela, then going on to outline key recent events in the history of Venezuela, including the

US sponsored 2002 coup attempt and the PDVSA bosses lockout. Events that many of those present had not heard discussed in detail previously.

There then followed an account of the progress currently being made in Venezuela, including access to health care for all, the eradication of illiteracy and the experiences of workers' management.

The evening ended with an open debate. Topics raised included the nationalisation of industry and the effects of US imperialism in other South American countries. After the success of the evening there are plans for further events to be held at Lancaster University, with a film showing to be held in the near future. □

by Calvin Jones,
Lancaster University Labour Club

Blair sides with bosses in attacking Venezuela

After more than a week of intense sabre-rattling by Washington against Hugo Chavez in which diplomats have been expelled, Pat Robertson, the notorious American Christian fundamentalist, has renewed his call for Chavez's assassination and Rumsfeld has compared Chavez to Adolf Hitler, now Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister and lapdog of US imperialism, has joined the affray.

Late on Wednesday in the House of Commons Colin Burgon, a Labour MP representing Elmet, asked the following question: "I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister shares the satisfaction that is felt by many on the Labour Benches about the shift to the left that has taken place in Latin America. To use a phrase, this is bringing Governments into power who will be in the interests of the many and not the few. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that it would be bad news for all concerned if we allowed our policy towards those countries, especially Venezuela, to be shaped by a really right-wing US Republican agenda?"

As usual, the Prime Minister used the occasion not to welcome "the shift to the left" in Latin America, which is abhorrent to George W Bush and the reactionary clique that controls the White House, but to attack President Chavez. Adopting a high moral tone, Blair, like some pompous second-rate school master, proceeded to lecture the naughty Mr Chavez on his bad behaviour for daring to stand up for the Venezuelan people against the dictates of US imperialism. "Up to a point", stated the PM. "It is rather important that the Government of Venezuela realise that if they want to be respected members of the international community, they should abide by the rules of the international community." In other words, Venezuela must learn to buckle down and accept the wishes of American imperialism and its great leader and moralist, George W Bush.

Then Blair went for the throat, in the nicest possible way, as is the cant of the British House of Commons. "I say

with the greatest respect to the President of Venezuela", said Blair meaning the reverse, "that when he forms an alliance with Cuba, I would prefer to see Cuba a proper functioning democracy." Here Blair, smiling like a Cheshire cat, fully supports Bush's line over Cuba. In other words, he favours the overthrow of Castro, the restoration of the Miami gangsters and the introduction of capitalism into Cuba, all under the "principles of democracy". They want to transform Cuba, as well as the rest of Latin America, into a colony of the United States and are grinding their teeth at the warm relations between Caracas and Havana.

These "democratic" principles, so highly praised by the imperialists, were used to invade Iraq and subjugate Afghanistan. They are used as a cover for imperialist aggression around the world.

In response, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has accused Tony Blair of opening up a European front in his attacks on Venezuela. He correctly described Blair as "a pawn of imperialism, trying now to attack us from Europe", and "the main ally of Hitler", a clear reference to George Bush.

Relations between Venezuela and the US worsened last week when both countries expelled one another's diplomats, after Venezuela accused the US embassy in Caracas of spying. Afterwards US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld compared the Venezuelan president with Adolf Hitler. Chavez hit back saying: "The imperialist, genocidal, fascist attitude of the US president has no limits. I think Hitler would be like a suckling baby next to George W Bush."

Chavez then turned to Britain in the latest twist of events, and retorted: "Stay in your place, Mr Blair, you do not have the morality to call on anyone to respect the rules of the international community."

"You are precisely the one who has flouted international law the most... siding with Mr Danger [Bush] to trample the people in Iraq."

"Venezuela is a free nation. Do you believe we're still in times of imperialism and colonialism?"

Chavez noted the statement came shortly after Bush had called for increased funding for a US radio station broadcasting pro-American messages in Latin America. "This is not a coincidence, this a part of the imperial aggression," he said.

The ranks of the British Labour and Trade Union movement look with great sympathy on the Chavez government. They instinctively understand what is at stake. That explains why so many trade unions and trade unionists have given their support to the Hands Off Venezuela campaign. They compare the genuine reforms, in education, healthcare, help for the poor, they see the expropriations of several companies that have been placed under workers' control in Venezuela and they compare this to what we have in Britain, i.e. cuts in education, healthcare, privatisation of almost everything that could be privatised. They know which side they are on.

Blair also sees these things but his reaction is different, in fact it is the complete opposite. He sees the reforms in Venezuela as a threat, a threat to the profits of his masters. He sees Venezuela as a dangerous example that is infecting the whole of Latin America and also getting an echo around the world. He sides with Bush against the workers and poor people of Venezuela. We side with the Venezuelan masses against imperialism. □



Hands Off Venezuela

Hands Off Venezuela and Venezuela Solidarity Campaign protest against Blair's attacks

Hands off Venezuela (HOV) and Venezuela Solidarity Campaign (VSC) supporters gathered outside the Venezuelan consulate on February 15th, to express solidarity with the Venezuelan Revolution and to oppose the attacks made on Venezuela by Prime Minister Tony Blair last week in the House of Commons.

The Venezuela solidarity movement found Blair's remarks about how Chavez should "abide by the rules of the international community" absolutely ridiculous. The British Prime Minister telling the leader of any country that they should abide by the rules of the international community is laughable, especially when, as Chavez himself explained, Blair is the one who flouted international law the most when he sided with Bush to invade Iraq.

Blair's comments come at a time when Washington is intensifying pressure against Chavez. There is a lot of talk in Washington about Chavez being a "dictator". The truth of the matter is that Venezuela has one of the most democratic constitutions in the world in which article 72 gives the Venezuelan people the right to recall any MP, councillor, civil servant – anybody elected by the people, including the president himself – at the half-way through their term.

The opposition in Venezuela tried to use this clause in the Constitution as a means to overthrow Chavez. However, they were unable to do so as Chavez's support is enormous. 90% of the eligible population voted in this recall referendum. This level of participation shows that in Venezuela people do not feel that "all politicians are the same". The people knew what was at stake and they went out to exercise their rights and vote, sometimes waiting in queues at polling station for 10 hours. Chavez received around 63% of the votes in the recall referendum while the opposition received 36%.

This was not by any means the only chance that the Venezuelan people have had to express through electoral means what they think. In the last 7 years Chavez and his policies have been ratified in 11 different electoral processes. Even more important than that is the fact that the Venezuelan

Revolution has been tremendously effective in involving people in the everyday aspects of political life.

Now Tony Blair comes along to "show Venezuelans what democracy is all about". We do not believe that Chavez can learn anything about democracy from Blair. On the other hand we think that Blair could learn a lot about "education, education, education" from Chavez. Since he was elected President in 1998 illiteracy has been completely eradicated from the country. One million children have been brought into the education system, 657 new schools have been created, eight new universities have been established and 36,000 additional teachers have been hired – and these are just some of the advances made in the field of education, not to mention the advances in healthcare and other social programmes!

The ranks of the British labour and trade union movement look on the Chavez government with great sympathy. They instinctively understand what is at stake. This explains why so many trade unions and trade unionists have given their support to our solidarity work. They compare the genuine reforms in education, healthcare, social assistance for the poor, and the nationalisation of several companies, which have been placed under workers' control, and they compare this to what we have in Britain, i.e. cuts in education, healthcare, and the privatisation of almost everything that could be privatised. They know which side they are on.

At the Consulate the Venezuelan Ambassador to the UK, Alfredo Toro Hardy, welcomed representatives from Hands Off Venezuela and the Venezuela Solidarity Campaign and thanked both campaigns for their support.

Andy Goodall, on behalf of VSC read a letter addressed to the Ambassador and Espe Espigares, on behalf of HOV read a letter addressed to Tony Blair protesting against his declarations.

This letter has already been signed by Jeremy Dear (General Secretary, NUJ), John McDonnell MP, Jeremy Corbyn MP and Tony Benn amongst others. We urge all supporters to sign this appeal. □

British Parliament to discuss solidarity with Venezuela

EDM 1644

DEVELOPMENTS IN VENEZUELA
14.02.2006

Burgon, Colin

That this House recognises the progress that is being made by the democratically-elected government of Venezuela in expanding the provision of education, healthcare, housing, land, food and micro-credit facilities for those previously marginalised and excluded from economic and political opportunities in the country; notes that these important policy initiatives are an important step in reducing the searing inequalities that characterise Venezuelan society; further notes that the social policies of the Venezuelan government enhance the country's prospects of meeting its millennium development goals; and calls upon the UK Government to acknowledge the benefits of the Venezuelan social development model for other developing countries, to support the democratically-elected administration of President Hugo Chavez in the face of unconstitutional and illegal threats from both internal and external opponents and to work to strengthen the ties between the UK and Venezuela. □



HOV and VSC supporters gathered outside the Venezuelan consulate to express solidarity

Protest letter to Blair

In light of the recent attacks on Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez by Prime Minister Tony Blair, the Hands Off Venezuela campaign has issued a protest letter addressed to Tony Blair. Several key trade union leaders have already signed the letter but we urge all our readers to also add their signatures.

Prime Minister Rt. Hon. Tony Blair
10 Downing Street,
London

Dear Prime Minister,

We the undersigned were very concerned and alarmed by the remarks you made in the House of Commons on Wednesday 8th February concerning Venezuela. The criticisms you leveled at the Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and the need for him to mend his ways and "abide by the rules of the international community" were very wide of the mark.

Recently, as you are no doubt aware, there has been an avalanche of attacks on the Venezuelan government emanating from the White House. The US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has even gone so far as to compare Chavez to Adolf Hitler. Similar noises were made before the invasion of Iraq and are nothing more than preparation for an unprovoked attack against Venezuela, including on the life of its president.

We feel that your intervention last Wednesday, coupled with your criticism of Venezuela's friendship with Cuba, only add to this Cold War rhetoric and escalation of hostilities against Venezuela.

Hugo Chavez and his government have handsomely won no fewer than nine democratic elections, far more than the "friends" of the United States such as Saudi Arabia, or the regimes that were previously propped up by the United States throughout Latin America.

As you are no doubt aware Prime Minister, the Chavez government has enormous public support arising from the progressive policies introduced since 1998 to benefit the most downtrodden sections of society.

President Chavez has managed to eradicate illiteracy with the help of Cuba, has brought one million children into the education system, created 657 new schools, established eight new universities and hired 36,000 additional teachers. For someone who prides himself on education, one would have thought you would have whole-heartedly welcomed such progressive steps.

The Chavez government has tried to eliminate the class-ridden latifundia by distributing 2.2m. hectares (5.5m. acres) to 116,000 landless families, and have been organised into co-operatives. Furthermore, the new Bolivarian constitution guarantees the public ownership of Venezuelan oil and the distribution of this wealth to all its citizens, the many and not the few. Other reforms have been introduced providing housing and cheap food to the poorest, mostly indigenous people.

On the international front, President Chavez swiftly offered material assistance to the victims of hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and has also provided cheap fuel oil to the poorest families of the United States to keep them from freezing this winter. We could go on.

We strongly feel, and hope that you would agree Prime Minister, that it is our responsibility to bring out the facts concerning Venezuela and to give support to genuinely progressive measures in the interests of the majority of the people.

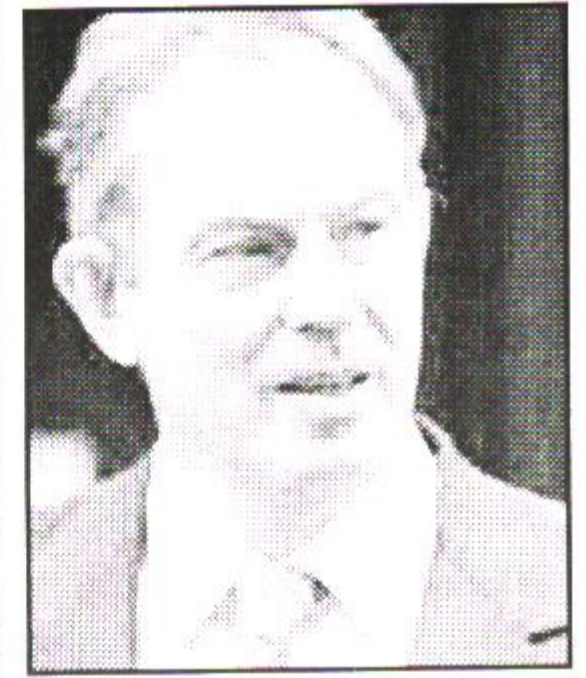
Yours sincerely,

.....

What You Can Do

- Send a letter of protest to Blair (please also send us a copy to britain@handsoffvenezuela.org or sign our letter online at www.handsoffvenezuela.org
- Write to your local MP, or get your union to pressure its sponsored MPs, to support EDM 1644.
- Join Hands Off Venezuela!

President Chavez has managed to eradicate illiteracy with the help of Cuba, has brought one million children into the education system, created 657 new schools, established eight



new universities and hired 36,000 additional teachers. For someone who prides himself on education, one would have thought you would have whole-heartedly welcomed such progressive steps. □

Mexico and British Imperialism

By Leon Trotsky

Lazaro Cardenas was president of Mexico between 1934 and 1940. His administration introduced measures of land reform, industrial modernisation, curbs on the power of the Roman Catholic Church, and in 1938, nationalised the foreign-owned (mainly British) oil companies. Cardenas' Mexico was the only country in the world that was prepared to grant asylum to Leon Trotsky.

Following the expropriations, there was an international campaign against Mexico orchestrated in London and Washington, including a boycott of Mexican oil by Britain. The imperialists went as far as to back an attempted coup by General Cedillo against President Cardenas.

In June 1938 Trotsky wrote the following article in defence of the Mexican Revolution, expressly stating: "The cause of Mexico, like the cause of Spain, like the cause of China, is the cause of the international working class." It was essential for workers, especially in Britain, "to take an irreconcilable position against the imperialist robbers, their diplomacy, their press, and their fascist hirelings."

Clearly, there are parallels with today and the attacks of imperialism on the unfolding Venezuelan Revolution. However, unlike Cardenas, Hugo Chavez has gone further in some ways, not only in his stand against imperialism, but his stand in favour of world socialism. We are therefore making this piece by Trotsky available once again to a British audience. - editor

The international campaign which imperialist circles are waging over the expropriation of Mexican oil enterprises by the Mexican government has been distinguished by all the features of imperialism's propagandistic bacchanalias-combining impudence, deceitfulness, speculation in ignorance, with cocksureness in its own impunity.

The signal for this campaign was given by the British government when it declared a boycott of Mexican oil. Boycott, as is known, always involves self-boycott, and is therefore accompanied by great sacrifices on the part of the boycotter. Great Britain was until recently the largest consumer of Mexican oil; naturally not out of sympathy for the Mexican people, but out of consideration for her own advantage.

Heaviest consumer of oil in Great Britain itself is the state, with its gigantic navy and rapidly growing air force. A boycott of Mexican oil by the British government signifies, therefore, a simultaneous boycott not only of British industry but also of national defence. Mr. Chamberlain's government has shown with unusual frankness that the profits of Britain's capitalist robbers loom above state interests themselves.

Oppressed classes and oppressed peoples must thoroughly learn this fundamental conclusion.

Both chronologically and logically the uprising of General Cedillo grew out of Chamberlain's policy. The Monroe Doctrine prevents the British admiralty from applying a military-naval blockade of the Mexican coast. They must act through internal agents, who, it is true, do not openly fly the British flag, yet serve the same interests as Chamberlain - the interests of a clique of oil magnates. In the White Book issued by British diplomacy just a few days ago we may be sure that the negotiations of its agents with General Cedillo are not included. Imperialist diplomacy carries on its major business under cover of secrecy.

Ignorance and Deceit

In order to compromise the expropriation in the eyes of bourgeois public opinion, they represent it as a "Communist" measure. Historical ignorance combines here with conscious deceit. Semi-colonial Mexico is fighting for its national independence, political and economic. This is the basic mean-



ing of the Mexican revolution at this stage. The oil magnates are not rank-and-file capitalists, not ordinary bourgeoisie. Having seized the richest natural resources of a foreign country, standing on their billions and supported by the military and diplomatic forces of their metropolis, they strive to establish in the subjugated country a regime of imperialistic feudalism, subordinating to themselves legislation, jurisprudence, and administration. Under these conditions expropriation is the only effective means of safeguarding national independence and the elementary conditions of democracy.

What direction the further economic development of Mexico may take depends decisively upon factors of an international character. But this is a question of the future. The Mexican revolution is now carrying out the same work as, for instance, the United States of America accomplished in three-quarters of a century, beginning with the Revolutionary War for independence and finishing with the Civil War for the abolition of slavery and for national unification. The British government not only did everything at the end of the eighteenth century to retain the United

States under the status of a colony, but later, in the years of the Civil War, supported the slaveholders of the South against the abolitionists of the North, striving for the sake of its imperialist interests to thrust the young republic into a state of economic backwardness and national disunity.

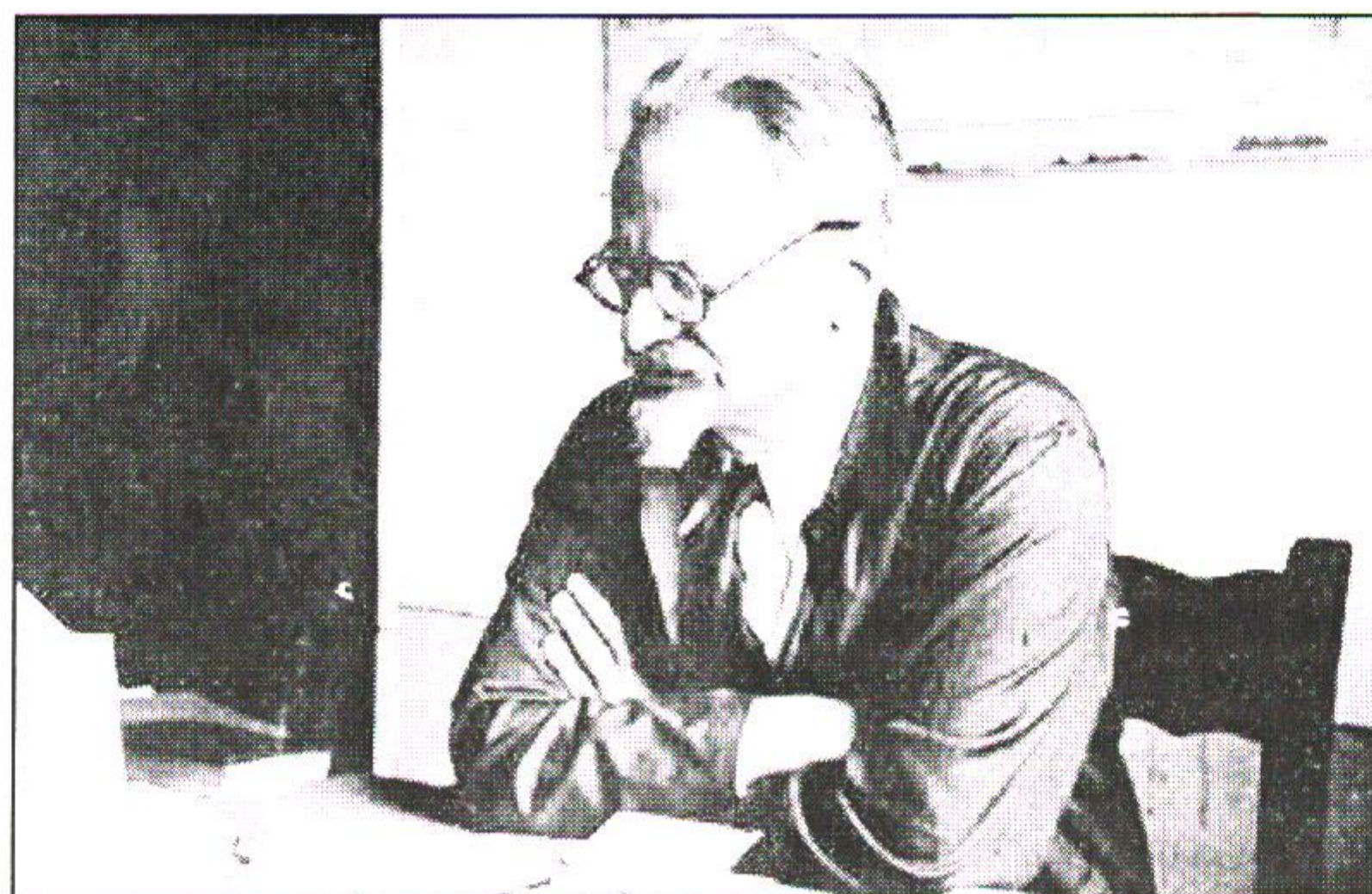
Britain and Slavery

To the Chamberlains of that time, too, the expropriation of the slaveholders seemed a diabolical "Bolshevik" measure. In reality the historic task of the Northerners consisted in clearing the arena for the independent democratic development of bourgeois society. Precisely this task is being solved at this stage by the government of Mexico. General Cardenas stands among those statesmen of his country who have been fulfilling work comparable to that of Washington, Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and General Grant. And, of course, it is not accidental that the British government, in this case, too, finds itself on the other side of the historic trench.

The world press, in particular the French, preposterous as it may seem, continues to drag my name into the question of the expropriation of the oil industry. If I have already refuted this nonsense once it is not at all because I fear "responsibility," as was insinuated by one talkative agent of the GPU. On the contrary, I would consider it an honour to carry even a part of the responsibility for this courageous and progressive measure of the Mexican government. But I do not have the least basis for it. I first learned of the decree of expropriation from the newspapers. But, naturally, this is not the question.

Two Aims Pursued

Two aims are pursued in interjecting my name. First, the organizers of the campaign wish to impart to the expropriation a "Bolshevik" coloration. Second, they are attempting to strike a blow at the national self-respect of Mexico. The imperialists are endeavouring to represent the affair as if Mexico's statesmen were incapable of determin-



ing their own road. A wretched and ignoble hereditary slaveholders' psychology! Precisely because Mexico today still belongs to those backward nations which are only now impelled to fight for their independence, greater audacity of thought is engendered among its statesmen than is granted to the conservative dregs of a great past. We have witnessed similar phenomena in history more than once!

The French weekly *Marianne*, a notorious organ of the French People's Front, even asserts that on the oil question the government of General Cardenas acted not only as one with Trotsky but also . . . in the interests of Hitler. It is a question, you see, of depriving the great-hearted "democracies" of oil in case of war and, contrariwise, of supplying Germany and other fascist nations. This is not one whit more clever than the Moscow trials. Humanity learns, not without amazement, that Great Britain is being deprived of Mexican oil because of the ill-will of General Cardenas and not because of Chamberlain's self-boycott. But then the "democracies" possess a simple way of paralysing this "fascist" plot: let them buy Mexican oil, once more Mexican oil, and again Mexican oil! To every honest and sensible person it is now beyond all doubt that if Mexico should find itself forced to sell liquid gold to fascist countries, the responsibility for this act would fall fully and completely upon the governments of the imperialist "democracies."

Prompting from Moscow

Behind the back of *Marianne* and its ilk stand the Moscow prompters. At first glance this seems preposterous, since other prompters of the same school

use diametrically opposed librettos. But the whole secret consists in the fact that the friends of the GPU adapt their views to geographic gradations of latitude and longitude. If some of them promise support to Mexico, others picture General Cardenas as an ally of Hitler. From the latter point of view, Cedillo's oil rebellion should be viewed, it would seem, as a struggle in the interests of world democracy. Let us, how-

ever, leave the clowns and intriguers to their own fate. We do not have them in mind, but the class-conscious workers of the entire world. Without succumbing to illusions and without fear of slander, the advanced workers will completely support the Mexican people in their struggle against the imperialists. The expropriation of oil is neither socialism nor communism. But it is a highly progressive measure of national self-defence. Marx did not, of course, consider Abraham Lincoln a communist; this did not, however, prevent Marx from entertaining the deepest sympathy for the struggle that Lincoln headed. The First International sent the Civil War president a message of greeting, and Lincoln in his answer greatly appreciated this moral support.

Workers, Support Mexico

The international proletariat has no reason to identify its program with the program of the Mexican government. Revolutionists have no need of changing colour, adapting themselves, and rendering flattery in the manner of the GPU school of courtiers, who in a moment of danger will sell out and betray the weaker side. Without giving up its own identity, every honest working class organization of the entire world, and first of all in Great Britain, is duty-bound to take an irreconcilable position against the imperialist robbers, their diplomacy, their press, and their fascist hirelings. The cause of Mexico, like the cause of Spain, like the cause of China, is the cause of the international working class. The struggle over Mexican oil is only one of the advance-line skirmishes of future battles between the oppressors and the oppressed. □

Launch of Cuban edition of *Reason in Revolt*

More than 75 people packed the Fernando Ortiz meeting room at the 15th Havana International Book Fair for the launch of the first Cuban edition of *Reason in Revolt* yesterday, February 8. More would have attended if it had not been because the room was already full with people standing at the back. The book has been published by Ciencias Sociales and 2,000 copies have been printed in time to be sold at the Book Fair.

The book launch meeting was introduced by Hiram Hernandez, who has been crucial in getting the book published in Cuba as part of the Ciencias Sociales publishing house. After thanking the Spanish Marxist publishing house F Engels Foundation and the book authors Alan Woods and Ted Grant for donating all authors' and translator's rights so that the book would be available to the Cuban public he introduced Venezuelan ambassador to Cuba, Adan Chavez who presented the book.

He started by saying that "for me it is a great honour and a commitment with Alan and with the comrades of the F Engels Foundation, to present this book here". Adan Chavez is a committed revolutionary but also a physicist by profession as he himself explained. He told the audience how *Reason in Revolt* has become one of those books that are known in Venezuela as "Chavez's books", the books president Chavez mentions and recommends in his speeches and TV programmes. "In this book, comrades Alan and Ted show how dialectical materialism is a method which is very relevant today in order to know what has been, what is and what will happen, and I would strongly recommend it to all".

He then praised the chapter on physics in the book, which he said "is really fabulous" and proved how "in order to understand the development of science, and the laws of nature, one must have a non-linear way of thinking, apply a comprehensive non-

dogmatic and non-deterministic method, which at the end of the day is what dialectical materialism is". He added that this could be extended to all fields of science. "Each day that goes by, the need to apply dialectical materialism, in all fields of science, is proven more emphatically", he said.

Adan Chavez also said that in "the same way that those who thought Newtonian mechanics explained all were mistaken, one can also prove using a scientific method, that those who after the fall of the Soviet Union talked about the end of socialism, the end of Communism and the end of history [were also wrong]".

After Adan's intervention which was received enthusiastically by the audience, Alan Woods, one of the authors of the work, explained how the book was a modest attempt to bring Engels' *Dialectics of Nature* up to date, in order to disprove those who said that Engels' hypotheses were old science or had become a relic. He gave a number of examples (punctuated equilibrium in evolution, Gibbs energy in chemistry and volcanic eruptions) to demonstrate that nature operates in a dialectical way, far from the Newtonian conception of movement coming from external forces.

He said that when he started work on the book he was convinced that dialectics were corroborated by modern science but that he never thought that this could even be expressed in a mathematical formula, as was the case with the power law of ubiquity. Ubiquity, he explained, "is a new development of chaos theory, and can be

applied to a wide range of phenomena, from stock exchange crashes, to forest fires, and from avalanches to cardiac arrests".

Alan Woods also made another important point about the fact that the crisis in science was at bottom a manifestation of the general crisis in society, culture and politics which flowed from the crisis of capitalism. "In the first decade of the 21st century, with the current development of science and technology, there is no justification why 8 million people a year should be dying of starvation". But he added that "it is not enough to point out the symptoms, as has been done in other meetings here this week, but it is necessary to identify the cause and offer a cure". "One would be a very bad doctor if one were to point out the symptoms to a patient and then cry and lament over those, as reformists and pacifists do". The root cause of these problems is the crisis of the capitalist system and the solution is the struggle for socialism, Alan said.

This revolutionary struggle, he pointed out, is more advanced in Latin America, but is part of the same process of general strikes and intensification of the class struggle that is taking place in Europe. What is needed is the "building of a revolutionary leadership", and for this we must use the ideas of Marxism, which are "today more relevant than ever". "There is no need to reinvent the wheel, as many academics and intellectuals try to do. The wheel has already been invented and it works well as it is, so why try to invent a triangular or squared one which will not work". Once again, the audience received Alan's words with an ovation and there was a mood of genuine enthusiasm.

A representative of the F Engels Foundation explained how pleased they were to be able to launch *Reason in Revolt* in Cuba and he added that they were putting the authors' and other rights they had at the disposal of Ciencias Sociales for future



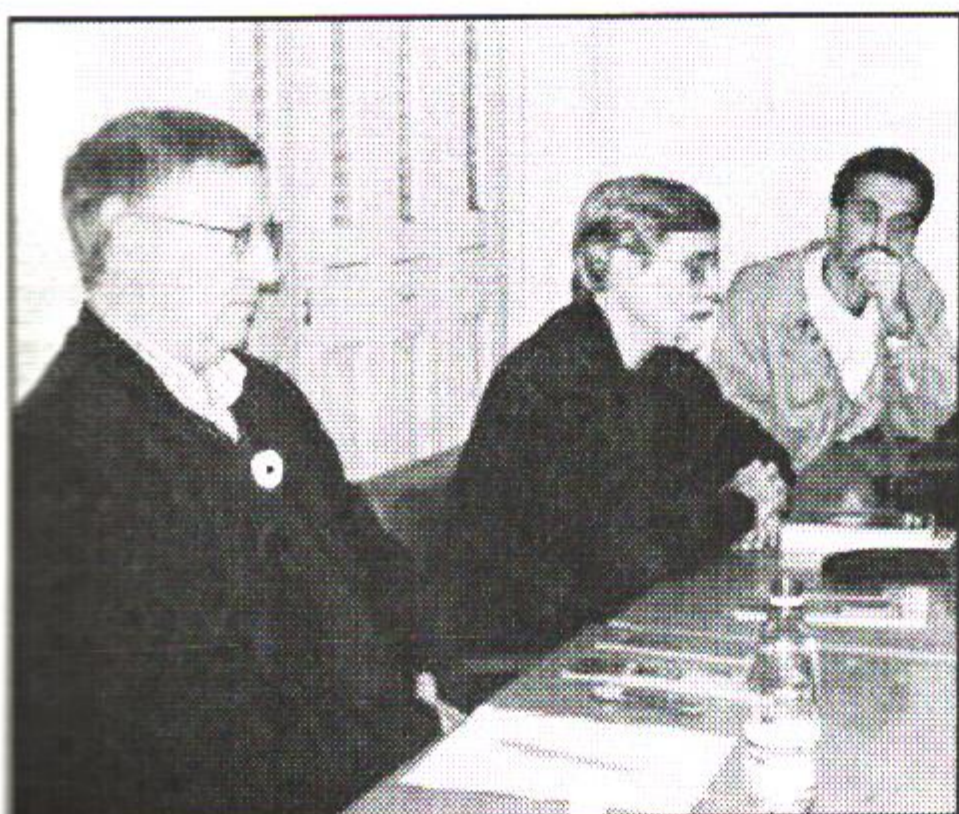


publication of other titles. He also recommended the Foundation's other two recent books, Alan Woods' "Venezuelan Revolution - a Marxist analysis" and the collection of Celia Hart's articles "Revolutionary Notebook". Celia Hart, who is also a physicist and who presented Reason in Revolt at the Book Fair last year, before the Cuban edition had been published, was also in the audience.

A representative of Editorial Científico-Técnica, the twin publishing house of Ciencias Sociales, and also a physicist explained how necessary a book of this character was. He said there was a vacuum of Marxist books dealing with science and how those attempts that had been made in the USSR after the death of Lenin, had been tainted with the stultifying and bureaucratic nature of Stalinism and how far from offering some guidance had been a hindrance to the development of a progressive philosophical outlook on science.

Also present in the audience were Ydalberto and Juan Leon Ferrera, two veteran Cuban revolutionaries and Trotskyist militants who had participated actively in the revolutionary war and worked closely with Che Guevara in the Ministry of Industry.

This was without doubt, one of the meetings with the highest political content in the book fair, and the audience was thrilled. □



Another successful launch meeting in Cuba

More than 65 people gathered on Monday, February 13th at the Casa Don Fernando Ortiz of the Havana University for the second launch of Reason in Revolt in Havana. The launch had been jointly organised by the Spanish Marxist publishing house F. Engels Foundation and the Cuban Ciencias Sociales, which have jointly printed the first Cuban edition of the book.

The first to speak to the full capacity meeting room was Dr Jorge Luis Acanda, a renowned Cuban Marxist philosopher and University professor. He pointed out that a book like Reason in Revolt was "part of a tradition of dialectical materialism as an ontology". But he also warned the potential readers against the use that had been made in the past of Marxism as a straightjacket for natural sciences, as had been the case with DiaMat.

He told the audience, composed mainly of university professors and students, not to confuse this book with that precedent, because "this is not what Alan Woods and Ted Grant intend". On the contrary, he said, "the book tries to show how the development of science today can be understood on the basis of dialectical materialism, but that is different from the dogmatic version of Marxism which we suffered in the past".

After that Alan Woods spoke at length about the book. He stressed that despite all the propaganda of the ruling class to the contrary, what had died after the collapse of the USSR was not Marxism, but "a bureaucratic caricature, what I would call Stalinism". He added that a "system of nationalised planned economy cannot work on the basis of bureaucracy, bureaucracy is its death". He went on to give a number of examples from science which demonstrate the dialectical point of view developed by Engels in his Dialectics of Nature.

Alejandro Jimenez, one of the editors of Editorial Científico-Técnica, the twin publishing house to Ciencias Sociales, spoke of the great vacuum there is for books of this kind, that attempt to develop a Marxist understanding of modern science.

A representative of the F Engels Foundation then spoke to thank Dr

Acanda for agreeing to present the book and all those at the Ciencias Sociales for undertaking its publication in Cuba. He added that he hoped this would be the beginning of further collaboration and that the authors' rights of publications of the Foundation, particularly of Alan Woods and Ted Grant, were at the disposal of Ciencias Sociales for their publication in Cuba.

Then there were a number of questions from the audience, including one from Oscar Arés, one of Cuba's most outstanding physicists, who at the same time as praising the book, called for a dialogue between philosophers and scientists which would allow them to advance even further, and introduce any updates needed in Reason in Revolt.

Amongst the audience there were a number of university professors and intellectuals, including Fernando Martinez Heredia, from the Cátedra Antonio Gramsci.

Alan Woods, in summing up, explained how there is a ferment among the left internationally, that comrades from different traditions had started a dialogue, and that through an amicable confrontation of ideas we would be able to go forward.

He also explained the enormous collapse of the economy, living standards, culture and science that had been brought on by the restoration of capitalism in Russia, and warned that worse was in store for Cuba if ever the capitalists came back into the island. He appealed to the youth to defend the nationalised planned economy, as part of the world struggle for socialism, which was in the last instance the only way to save the Cuban revolution.

The mood in the meeting was genuinely enthusiastic and nearly 30 books were sold at the end, despite the fact that many had already bought it at the book fair. Sales of the first print run of 2,000 copies have been quite high and the president of the publishing house said they were already considering a second edition soon.

On the same day of the meeting, the daily Granma published an excellent interview with Alan Woods under the title "Wars and Terrorism: symptoms of the failure of capitalism." □

Cuban researchers meet Alan Woods

On Thursday, February 9th, Alan Woods was invited to speak at the Centre of European Studies (CEE) in Havana. The meeting was attended by some 25 people, researchers from the CEE, journalists and members of the Cuban Institute for Friendship with the Peoples (Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos, ICAP).



The main theme of the discussion, which lasted for nearly three hours, was the state of the class struggle in Europe. Though we cannot give a detailed account of everything that was said, one of Alan Woods' main points was to explain how the long period of economic upswing that followed World War II had enormously strengthened the basis for reformism within the labour movement and its organisations in Europe, and how the leadership of the Communist Parties had become completely adapted to this. This reformist degeneration of the leading layers within the workers' organisations was the main cause for the failure of a series of revolutionary and pre-revolutionary situations that many European countries experienced between 1968 and 1979, and which in turn led to a widespread demoralisation of a whole layer of worker activists that had seen power slip through their fingers. In the 1980s a new period of counter-reforms and attacks on living standards followed, on the basis of this political defeat.

But Alan also explained how in the last few years the situation in Europe had started to change. The relentless pressure of the ruling class against the living and working conditions, which the labour movement had won in previous decades, has started to provoke a backlash. He mentioned a number of general strikes and generalised movements of the working class in Europe which showed precisely this point, including the recent general strikes in Italy, Greece and Belgium.

Alan insisted that the symptoms were clear to many: wars, cuts in living standards, rising unemployment and inequality, etc. But he added that in different meetings at the Book Fair, the speakers had limited themselves to pointing these out and expressing their outrage, like a bad doctor that outlines the symptoms to the patient and then simply offers sympathy, but no remedy. It is necessary to identify the root cause of the illness, the capitalist system itself, and say clearly that the only alternative is the struggle for the socialist transformation of society.

He criticised those who hide behind new words, in the manner of Orwell's "newspeak" in 1984. They talk of "neoliberalism", as if there was a different, better, model under capitalism; of "globalisation" instead of imperialism, etc.

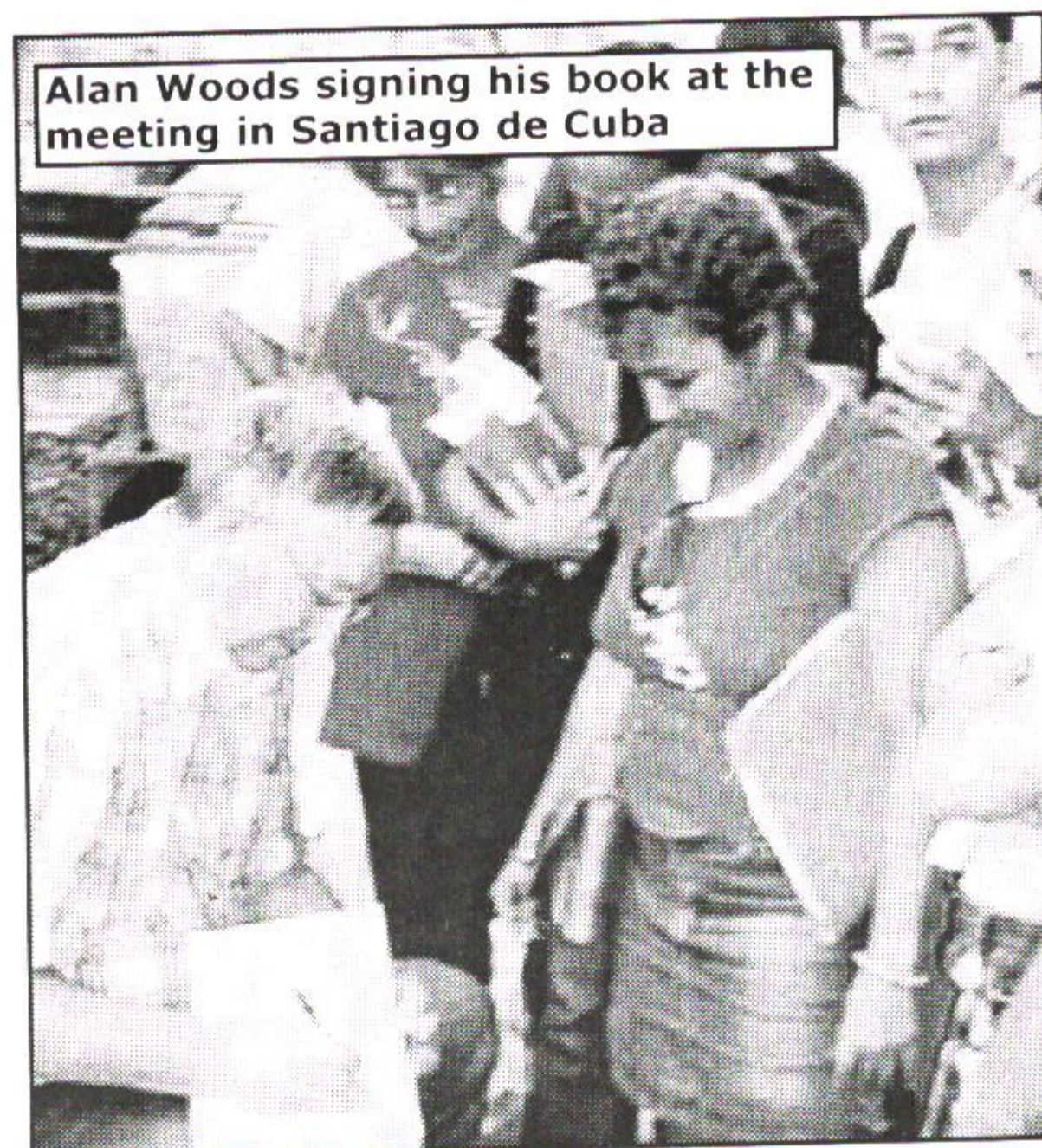
Once again, Alan said, the question of leadership is

being posed. What is being posed is the need to build a revolutionary leadership, firmly based on the ideas of Marxism, which remain today as relevant as ever. He finally pointed out that in this task, comrades from different traditions are now meeting and opening up a dialogue, which he said was very positive and should be encouraged.

The debate was lively and there were many

questions, many more than could be answered, about the perspectives for the Italian elections and the role of the communists there, for the British Labour Party and trade unions, the developments in Northern Ireland, etc. The mood was one of a genuine exchange of ideas, and there was no disagreement with what Alan Woods had said in his opening remarks. All those present were very pleased with the meeting and Francisco Brown told Alan that he should make this a permanent fixture in his future trips to Cuba.

This meeting is just a small indication of the kind of debates that have been taking place in certain quarters in Cuba since the fall of the Soviet Union, an event that hit the island's economy very hard. At the end of the day an understanding of the reasons for the fall of Stalinism is necessary for revolutionary socialists anywhere in the world, but the lessons are even more important for those who still defend the genuine revolutionary ideas of Marxism in Cuba. □



Islamic world up in arms

Sowing the wind and reaping the whirlwind

by Maarten Vanheeuverswyn

Last week, the growing turbulence in the Middle East came to a head as protests erupted over the publication of some cartoons picturing a caricature of the prophet Mohammed. Like an earthquake the protests soon spread out from the Middle East, where tens of thousands of angry protesters were demonstrating, to Asian countries like Afghanistan, where protests turned violent and several people were killed, and India, where the riot police fired tear gas to disperse hundreds of student protesters who burned Danish flags. In Kashmir there was even a one-day general strike protesting the caricatures and also in Indonesia police had to stop protesters from entering the Danish embassy. They were unable to do the same in Beirut, where protesters set fire to the embassy. Even in London, militant demonstrations took place where Islamists were shouting reactionary slogans glorifying the July 7 bombings.

It would be tempting to look for a single explanation for these events, in this case, the publication of a drawing showing Mohammed wearing a turban shaped as a bomb or portraying him holding a sword, his eyes covered by a black rectangle. We should note, however, that the riots erupted five months after the actual publication in a Danish right wing newspaper which printed twelve caricatures of Mohammed back in September last year. It is only after these caricatures were reprinted last week in various European newspapers that this controversy was picked up and events snowballed.

It should be clear for all with eyes to see that the actual publication was only the spark that lit the fuse. You cannot explain the present conflagration without looking at the underlying frustrations of the millions of Muslims all around the world. As was the case with the riots in France, where the immediate cause of the revolt was the tragic electrocution of two young people who took refuge in

an electrical installation for fear of a police raid. It is necessary to look beyond the scope of immediate incidents. Only then can you explain the extraordinary resilience of this movement which can only be seen in the context of the effects of decades of unemployment, poverty and humiliation under Western imperialist domination in particular.

Even from a materialist and consequently atheist perspective it is clear that the publication of cartoons depicting Mohammed, the spiritual leader of Muslims worldwide, as a terrorist, shows how low bourgeois newspapers are prepared to go these days. A lot of noise was made about the need for "freedom of speech" - and some papers even saw it as their journalistic duty to reprint the cartoons to support just that excuse - but the fact of the matter is that cartoons like these have a clearly racist character in that they equate all Muslims with terrorist fanatics. Needless to say, religions have been upheld for centuries in order to justify wars, and whether that is done by reactionary imams in mosques in the name of Allah or by George W. Bush in his State of the Union in the name of God does not make any difference. While we as Marxists believe in no God whatsoever and strive to seek for a scientific explanation of events in material terms (i.e. the concrete circumstances of empirically verifiable facts around us), it is clear that insinuating that Islam in itself is historically a fanatical

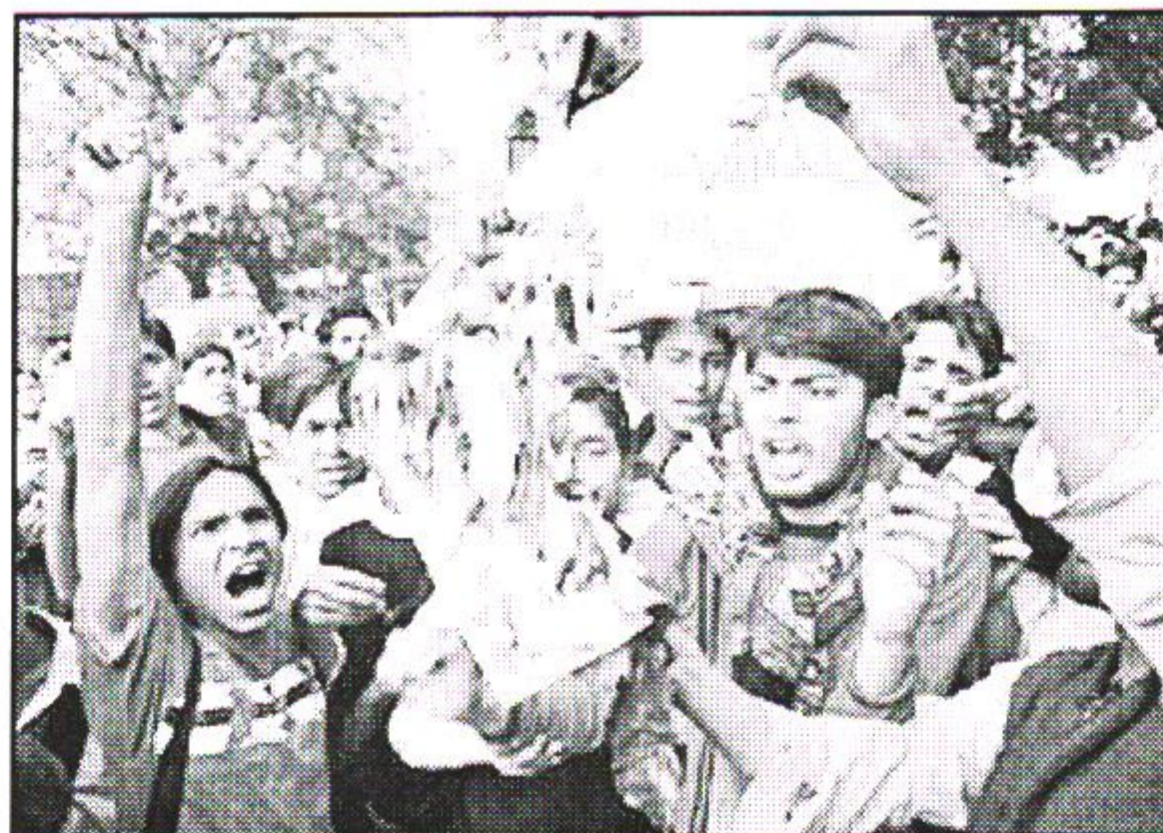
religion can only be considered a provocation by the gutter press.

On this, it is worth quoting Lal Khan's article Islam and America... Friends or Foes?:

"If we analyse Islamic history we find, on the one hand, so many military victories during the 8th, 9th and 10th centuries, and on the other hand we witness a colossal extension and development in the fields of science, culture, politics and many other fields. The centres of knowledge and learning like Cordoba, Baghdad, Cairo, Damascus and many others did open up new vistas in the development of human knowledge and intellect.

"What is nowadays called Islamic 'civilization' went into decline because the conquerors had refused to learn and adapt to the conquered areas and regions. It had been the synthesis of the rich and ancient civilizations such as Syria and Iran together with Spain and others, which had rendered vastness and grandeur to this Islamic advancement in the first place. The relations between different religions were also not the same as are propagated today. In 1099, when after the siege of 40 days, the Christian militias as part of the Crusades occupied Jerusalem, the larger part of the population, including women and children, were killed. For two days blood flowed through the streets, but the Muslims and the Jews had fought side by side against the crusaders."

"Similarly the right of open discussion and the right to dissent on all matters, including religion, were an important factor in the development of this civilization, which flourished during the last century of the last millennium. If we analyse the writings of the religious scholars (that were taught across the old world) of the 8th, 9th and 10th centuries AD, they are far more modern, mature and on a much higher level than most of the trash coming out of the present day Islamic scholars. The irony is that if those scholars of



those times were alive today, they would have been sentenced to death under the draconian Islamic laws prevalent in different countries today.

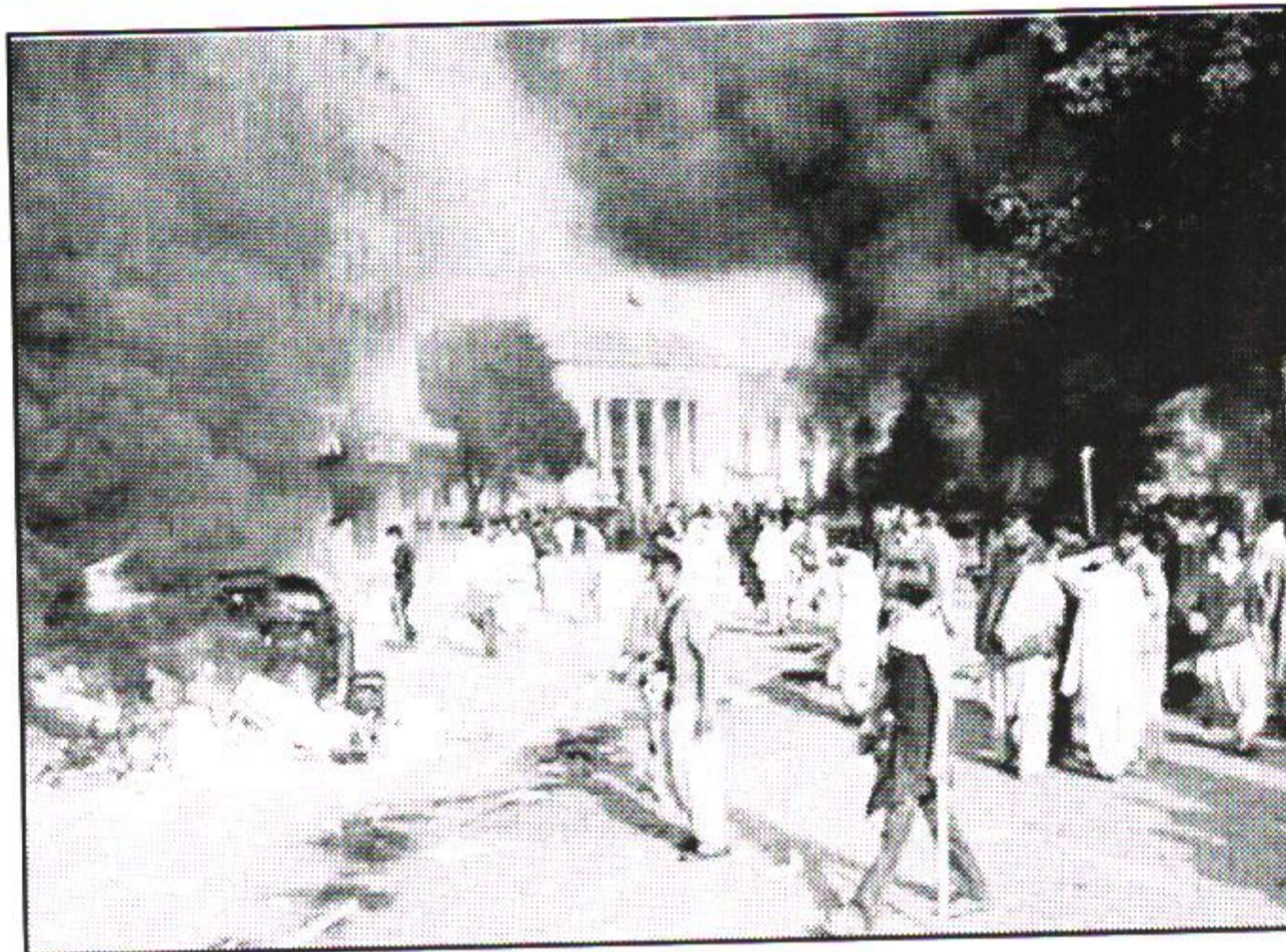
This decline has caused not only the collapse of a whole civilization but has also retribed minds with religious shackles, narrowed thoughts and turned societies into stagnant pools.

Reaction feeds reaction

If the purpose of these cartoons was to open the debate on Islam or secularism versus religion in general, they certainly missed their point. Instead of debate and a rational discussion we have insults and appeals to the basest impulses that can hardly be described as satire. We can only imagine the indignant response from the "civilized" West had a paper dared to make a caricature of a Jewish rabbi with a bomb on top of his cap. Not without reason. That would be seen as anti-Semitism and a chorus of condemnations from respected ladies and gentlemen would have descended on the damned. Not so here, since after all isn't Islam the religion of those dark hordes coming from the East?

It is no coincidence that this whole episode takes place at a time when US imperialism is trapped in the Iraqi quagmire, when Palestinians are openly reprimanded for voting Hamas into power, when Iran flexes its muscles over its nuclear policy and openly threatens to annihilate Israel, an enemy that is so openly reactionary itself. The vast majority of the mullahs and imams play no progressive role whatsoever - which comes in handy for the West who can justify its rapacious conduct by pointing in to blame these clerics who hold control over the minds of their people. Which sane person does not want to see the removal of these theocratic leaders?

There is only one small problem here: it was the so-called democratic West that installed the bulk of the corrupt Islamic regimes in the Middle East in the first place. Saddam Hussein, the Taliban, and Osama bin Laden all used to be good friends of American imperialism, even if the dogs later bit their former master. Without a doubt many Arabs would welcome more freedom and democracy for their societies but



they know all too well these words are mere hollow phrases in the mouths of the likes of George W. Bush and Tony Blair, who after all illegally invaded and still occupy an oil-rich country in the heart of the Middle East, and whose troops have contributed to the death of tens of thousands of ordinary Iraqi citizens.

In the Islamic world there is a great collective consciousness that has not forgotten about the dozens of foreign invasions by imperialist countries looking to dominate markets and expand their spheres of influence. British imperialism carved up the Middle East as far back as 1920 and since then its American successor has continued to play the game of divide and rule. The Islamic world has not forgotten about the American rockets destroying Palestinian houses and schools over the years, just as it has not forgotten about US sponsored Lebanese militias hacking their way through a refugee camp in Shabra and Satila in 1982, thereby raping and murdering more than 17,000 Muslims. It will never reconcile itself with Israel's occupation of Palestinian land, the expropriation of Palestinians, the constant bombings and shootings and state sponsored executions. These are only a few of the scars that have been left on the minds of millions of Muslims worldwide.

The whole of the Middle East is a pressure cooker waiting to explode - and the scenes we are seeing now are just the beginning so long as the underlying contradictions remain unresolved. It is all the more scandalous that this "why" question is hardly ever posed in the Western world even if without the historical and political context of the region nothing sensible can be said about it.

As Robert Fisk wrote in *The*

Independent:

"In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood won 20 per cent of the seats in the recent parliamentary elections. Now we have Hamas in charge of 'Palestine'. There's a message here, isn't there? That America's policies 'regime change' in the Middle East, are not achieving their ends. Millions of voters prefer Islam to the corrupt regimes which the West we imposes on them." (February 4, 2006)

The tragedy of all this is that the Middle East has not got a step further with these recent provocations. Through lack of any alternative and out of total desperation, it has become an undeniable fact that more and more Muslims turn towards Islamic sects that falsely uphold martyrdom for them as a solution to their misery.

And here we see what reactionary effects provocation and counter-provocation are having. Just as a ban on the scarf in France has had a counter-productive effect because young women were driven straight into the arms of backward religious leaders, so have these pathetic cartoons had their poisonous effect. The result is only a bigger divide between different communities. Instead of uniting communities and fighting against the common oppressor, i.e. the capitalist class that sucks its wealth out of the labour of ordinary working people and the corrupt leaders in the Middle East sitting on their oil without using it for their own people, we only have more scapegoats for common problems that are in reality rooted mainly in the economic and political sphere. Ignorant racists in the West blame Muslims for "wanting to destroy our democracy" while reactionary imams openly call for the killing of any Westerners entering their country without making any distinction between ordinary working class people in Europe and America and their respective governments.

Lack of leadership

In reality, the highly inflammable situation in the Middle East is an expression of the immense turbulence worldwide. Everywhere - even in European countries until recently generally known for their relative stability - there is the feeling that things cannot go on like this.

In Latin America this feeling of discontent takes on revolutionary forms with the election of left-wing leaders as a result, but in the Middle East the colossal amount of anger has, so far, not been directed towards a genuine alternative that can emancipate the masses craving for a real change. Instead, conservative tendencies have taken the upper hand turning society towards reactionary Islamism is a tragic expression of the lack of any socialist alternative.

Victory of Hamas

This, however, is no inevitability at all, and all too often the Islamic fundamentalists are credited with more power than they actually have. As we explained in other articles the victory of Hamas is not necessarily to be seen as a move to the right but rather an expression of the fact that the Palestinian masses are fed up with their corrupt Fatah leaders and consequently vote for any party that is able to fill the political vacuum by promising reforms and making rhetorical statements about fighting for social justice. Or take for example the general strike in Kashmir over these cartoons a few days ago. This was a strike mainly organised by the fundamentalists, who can indeed capitalize on the anti-imperialist lean-

ings of the Pakistani masses. What nobody mentioned, however, was that on the very same day there was another general strike against the Pakistani government over its inability to deal with the aftermath of the earthquake. This had nothing to do with Islam but was over clear social and political issues.

"Wrath of God"

In Pakistan, which is also a Muslim country, the line of the fundamentalists initially was that the earthquake was the "wrath of God" and the people were to blame for their own sins. But here we see what difference proper leadership can make. The Pakistan Trade Union Defence Campaign soon organised solidarity brigades to help the victims and set up their own relief camps. While carrying out relief work they also did political work among the masses and firmly put the blame for the excessive death toll on the rotten Musharraf dictatorship, which has been unable to provide its people with decent housing. Very soon this got a big echo and the Islamic fundamentalists were forced to change their line and preach in their mosques that the government was also to blame. This was a genuine rallying cry for unity of the myriad of different ethnicities and

religions and proved in practice the superiority of collective solidarity as long as this struggle for concrete material improvements is combined with the perspective of transforming the world on a socialist basis.

All the experience of the last few years shows that the masses in the Middle East are more than willing to overthrow their own rotten regimes. What is urgently needed is an internationalist programme around which to organise all the downtrodden layers in society, to channel this colossal amount of frustration into a revolutionary way out. As Trotsky said in his remarkable phrase: "Without guiding organisation, the energy of the masses would dissipate like steam not enclosed in a piston box. But nevertheless, what moves things is not the piston or the box, but the steam."

The extremely volatile situation worldwide implies all kinds of unpredictable outcomes. Let us build the forces to make that outcome one that can unite all nationalities in order to get rid of this terminally ill capitalist system spewing out vicious wars. A system which can guarantee enjoyable work for all and enough free time to emancipate the human mind from medieval obscurantism. That is what international socialism is all about. □

Bolivia victory for the left, but what is next?

by Pablo Sanchez

Events in Latin America are so fast that sometimes you can lose track. In early January Evo Morales, leader of the MAS (Movement Towards Socialism), won the Presidential elections in Bolivia with 53% support, with a turnout of an amazing 85%. This victory is the direct result of the revolutionary struggles that the Bolivian proletariat have been involved in over in the past months. The election of Morales reflects the aspirations of the millions of Bolivians that took part in the mass movement. He clearly represents another headache for US imperialism in the region.

Morales won the election with a programme of reforms, promising social improvements and the nationalisation of the natural resources (gas and oil). After taking office, marked by a very colourful ceremony led by a contingent of miners and indigenous people, he made the point that he was the leader of the people and was the country's first indigenous President.

Morales has been under a lot of pressure from the masses to deliver the nationalisation of gas and oil as well as increased living standards. However, he has also been under pressure from imperialism not to go "overboard" with his reforms. As a result, he has come out with a compromise: the idea of an "Andean capitalism", which was supposed to represent a "third way".

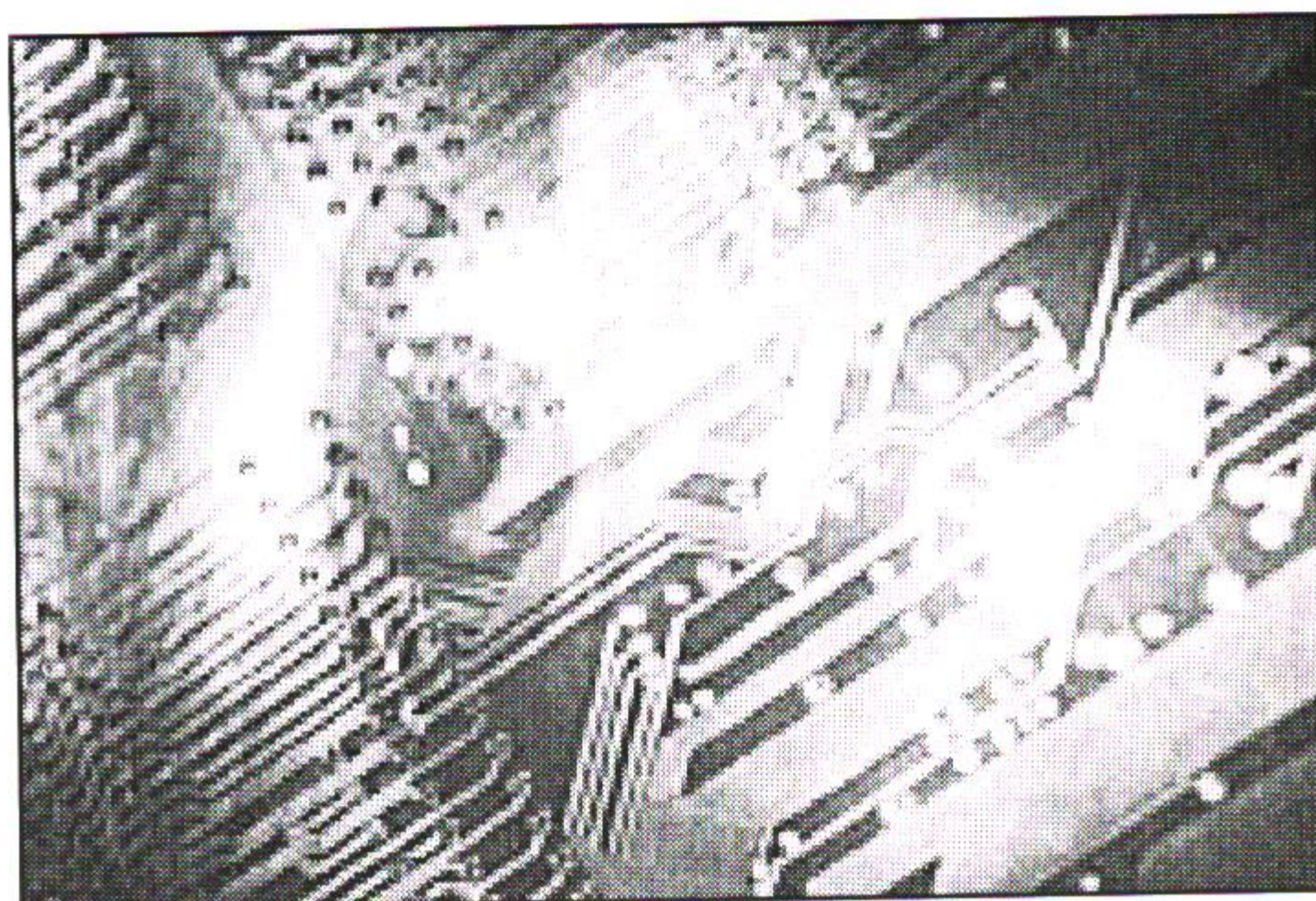
What is clear is that Morales cannot serve two masters: either he sides with the workers and poor peasants of the shantytowns like El Alto, or with the multinationals that own the gas and oil. It is a stark choice.

So far it seems that he has chosen to stay within the framework of capitalism. During the Presidential campaign he promised to increase the minimum wage by \$130. But now elected, he has only granted a measly \$6 increase (econoticiasbolivia.com February 8). This will provoke the mass movement which has high expectations. Morales has to decide whether he is with the workers or with the bosses, there is no third way.

For a full review of the elections and updates on Bolivia check out www.marxist.com/bolivia.asp

Capitalism and the Internet

by Mick Brooks



"As much as three-quarters of the value of publicly traded companies in America comes from intangible assets, up from around 40% in the early 1980s. 'The economic product of the United States,' says Alan Greenspan, the chairman of America's Federal Reserve, has become 'predominantly conceptual.'" (According to the Economist survey. A market for ideas: a survey of patents and technology. October 22nd 2005)

What are these 'intangible', 'conceptual' assets that make some people very rich and are such a large part of corporate wealth? Much of this wealth is called intellectual property - property in ideas. The main forms of intellectual property are trade marks, patents and copyright.

By some measures Microsoft is the biggest firm in the world. Bill Gates is certainly the world's richest man. Yet Microsoft is not valued principally in physical capital assets, as was the case with big corporations in the past. What Microsoft claims to own is ideas, ideas that we all need to run factories and offices and to communicate with each other.

In a previous article (Intellectual property rights - the modern day enclosure of the commons) we dealt with what is unique in the production of ideas for the capitalist system. Ideas are not rival in consumption. As Thomas Jefferson put it, passing light on to another candle does not diminish the light from your own. Jefferson thought this was a good enough reason why ideas should not be treated like coal, candles and other commodities, but should be allowed to circulate freely for the common good.

Capitalists on the other hand would like to trap light in a box so as to sell it to people, if they could. They want to

make money out of ideas as well. Otherwise, they argue, nobody would bother to think things up! To some extent they can commodify ideas, for instance by renting them out on a database or putting them on a DVD or selling them in a book or journal.

Still they come up against two important sticking points. First, people invent things and come up with new ideas because it is in their nature to do so, though it is true that capitalists will try to make money out of the inventiveness of others. And secondly inventive people want to share their ideas as widely as possible. Not only that, it is precisely by sparking our ideas off against the ideas of others that progress takes place.

Ideas are naturally part of the common heritage of humanity. In that respect they are like the commons of old - land for grazing, fishing and fuel that was regarded as common property for hundreds of years. The coming of capitalism, the process that Marx called primitive accumulation, was in large part the expropriation and enclosure of this common property by the rising capitalist class. This made the common people dependent on working for the rich to scrape a living, having been deprived of the resources necessary to work on their own account.

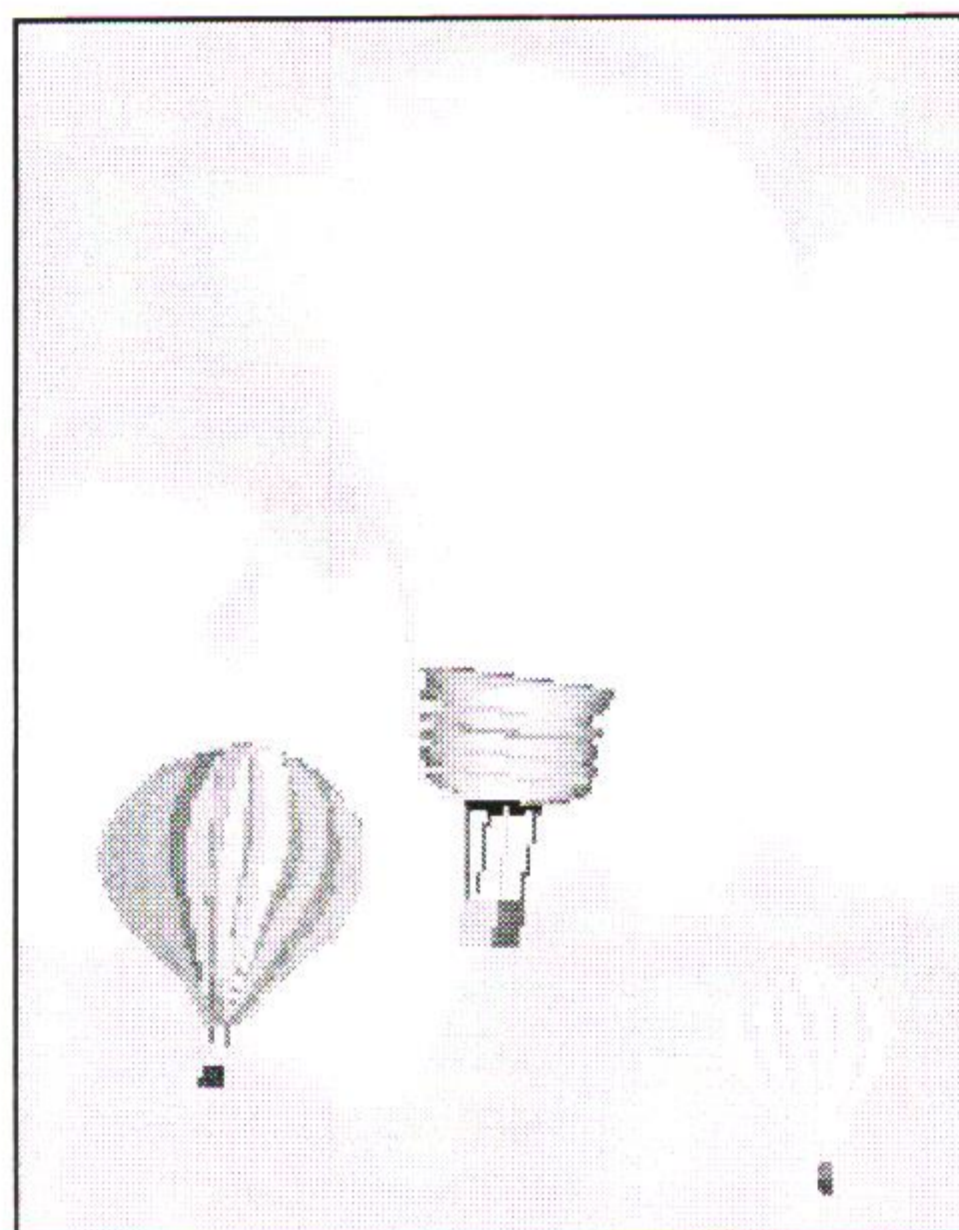
We are witnessing what could be a second wave of enclosures, the expropriation of our creative commons. Marx pointed out in his coverage of the bloody and catastrophic process of the first enclosure movement (theft) that was first carried out in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by 'individual acts of violence' against the law. "The advance made by the eighteenth century shows itself in this, that the law itself becomes the instrument by which the people's land is stolen." (Capital volume I page

885)

The historian E.P. Thompson discussed the role of law in Britain in the eighteenth century, during the first enclosure movement, in his book 'Whigs and hunters.' He concluded, "As the century advanced the law became a superb instrument by which these rulers were able to impose new definitions of property to their even greater advantage...on the other hand law mediated these class relations through legal forms." (Whigs and hunters page 264) This is what is happening again. Law is once more an important lever for the capitalist class to steal what we have always regarded as ours.

Trade marks

The first form of intellectual property is the trade mark. The justification is that it is supposed to be a mark of origin. In one famous legal case Bollingers, the champagne people, took Babycham to court for advertising their drink as 'champagne perry' (it is pear cider). Champagne, it was decided, refers to the sparkling wines of the champagne region in France. This seems fair enough, though you'd have to be pretty daft not to notice the difference from drinking Babycham. Firms are very protective of their trade marks. Warner Brothers tried to sue the Marx brothers because their film 'A night in Casablanca' was too similar in title to the Warner Brothers' quite different film 'Casablanca'. Groucho Marx replied, "You claim that you own Casablanca and that no one else can use that name without permission. What about 'Warner Brothers?' You probably have the right to use the name Warner, but what about the name Brothers? Professionally we were brothers long before you were." But trade mark law



is a minor irritant compared with the way patent and copyright law is being used to enclose the creative commons by big business.

Copyright

Copyright law was developed primarily to protect publishers from piracy - not authors. The law was hated by the common people, who saw that it made books a luxury item by awarding publishers a monopoly. There were limits to copyright in books. First copyright lasted for a defined time. Secondly, if I buy a novel and pay a bit more than if the work is in the public domain (like these Dickens books you can buy for £1) because the publisher has been granted a monopoly, when I pass it on to a friend or take it down the Oxfam shop the book is now beyond the reach of the publisher. This is called the rule of first sale. Thirdly copyright, as it applies to the printed word, is subject to the right of fair dealing (called fair use in the USA), such as quoting part of a book or article in a critique or review, or copying for research purposes.

Think how different the case is with databases. If a firm or library pays for access to a database, they are renting. They never get to own the material. They have to keep paying every year to continue having access to the archive. Unlike the 'fair dealing' restriction on copyright for books, digitally held information cannot be quoted and may be kept out of the public domain for ever. Usually if you access a database, the first thing you'll usually encounter is an end user licence agreement, claiming that you are signing away all rights to the content. The legal status of these agreements is doubtful, but the intention - to intimidate you - is quite clear.

The period of copyright has also

undergone continuous extension. In the USA it currently lasts for seventy years after the death of the author. In terms of modern technology, that is for ever. The US Digital Millennium Copyright Act makes it a criminal offence, punishable by ten years in prison, to remove the copyright protection mechanisms by which big business protects its intellectual property 'rights' from us.

The DMCA was passed in 1998 as part of the 'harmonisation' of intellectual property laws, which is part of the World Trade Organisation negotiations. As an agent of big business, the WTO is trying to make intellectual property laws stricter all over the world.

Patents

Patents are another form of intellectual property that has undergone extraordinary extension as part of the attempted enclosure of the creative commons. Patents are regarded as a reward for inventiveness. For a limited period, the inventor can charge people for using his invention. Fair enough? In the first place people do not necessarily invent things to make money. They invent things because it is in their nature. The internet is testimony to the inexhaustible enterprise of human beings, and overwhelmingly the content has all been provided free. As a testimony to human inventiveness being a more important motivation than greed, most inventors have died in poverty.

Patents are owned by firms. No firm has ever invented anything - people invent. Bill Gates is not an inventor. He

is an entrepreneur. He buys other people's ideas. If you get a job with Microsoft, you sign an agreement that passes over anything you invent to Microsoft's ownership. Bill Gates uses the law to preserve his monopoly in ideas. Microsoft spends \$100 million every year in lawyers' fees.

We associate patents with inventions, such as drugs. The concept has been extended grotesquely in recent years to cover plant breeders' rights and even human life - about 20% of our DNA has been patented - is owned! The bio-pirates RiceTec even claim to own basmati rice, which has actually been around for centuries.

The patent system gives big companies the power over life and death. In such cases they cannot even be compelled to license a drug that does the same job as the branded product to another firm. (This is called a generic.) Swiss firm Roche owns the rights to Tamiflu, probably the only cure against avian flu. We are repeatedly warned that an avian flu pandemic could kill tens of thousands of people, yet there's not enough Tamiflu to go round. Michael Bailey of Oxfam comments, "The situation is absurd. A government will have to make a move because Roche seemingly can't deliver. It is a classic case of intellectual property law not working. It seems Roche is holding on as long as possible before allowing generic companies the right to produce, so it can make as much cash as possible."

Patents have also been extended to computer software. Software is written in code. That is the language computers talk to each other in. Claiming ownership of a code is equivalent to claiming ownership of the English language. In any case it seems absurd that anyone can own a row of ones and zeros



Commentators have noted that the patent system is ridiculous and swallows up huge resources in research and development. First an advance in knowledge is captured by a firm as their private property. Next they have to find and patent anything else that will do the same job. Rival companies devote the time of their research team in turn to busting the first's patent protection, not trying to find a cure for cancer. In the case of computer software, innovation is inevitably sparked by the co-operation involved in using and improving a programme - not by concealing it from the competition.

Bill Gates rants against critics that they are - 'new, modern-day sort of communists...(who)...don't think that those (intellectual property) incentives should exist.' He's a multi-billionaire. How much more of an incentive does the man need? He was formerly of a different opinion. "If people had understood how patents would be granted when most of today's ideas were invented and had taken out patents, the industry would be at a complete standstill today...A future start-up with no patents of its own will be forced to pay whatever price the giants choose to impose."

Straight from the horse's mouth! In 1991 Bill Gates was able to spell out how capitalist property relations, in the form of intellectual property law, were a fetter on the development of the productive

forces. What has changed? Now Gates is on top of the heap instead of being a young challenger and uses legal bullying to preserve his monopoly. (Both quotes are from the Economist survey mentioned at the beginning of the article)

Enclosing the internet?

Anyone who has used the internet over the past decade or so will notice how it has become much more commercialised in recent years. Pop-ups, adverts, commercial sites and sales over the net have become standard.

Do a search on scholar Google and you will find you have to pay to access a lot of the material. And how does the Google search engine make money? Mainly from advertising revenue. Those irritating adverts are in fact sponsored links.

It was not always thus. The internet was welcomed as a common carrier of ideas, as a site of the free exchange of ideas and a site of free enquiry. As our article 'Intellectual property rights - the modern day enclosure of the commons' shows, the internet is a classic example of a common - an area that we enjoy and use in common. One characteristic of a common is that it exhibits a network effect, a sort of scale economy. The more people join in, the better it works for each of us.

It may be argued that the internet is full of stuff from cranks and obsessives. This is not just a feature of the internet. If you go down the local pub you are quite likely to bump into cranks and obsessives too. What is new about the net is that www.marxist.com gets equal air time, a chance to put a point of view and for ideas to be seen and discussed on equal terms with the ruling ideas of the capitalist class. By contrast, when did you last see a copy of Socialist Appeal on sale at WH Smiths? Sellers of left wing papers have to hang around on the pavement trying to catch people's eye and risk

being moved on by the Old Bill.

There is now a battle on for the future of the internet. For the past twenty years capitalists have been looking at the phenomenon and wondering how they can make money out of it. Although commercialisation has crept in, it remains marginal. The basic principle is one of free access, and millions of us have got very comfortable with being able to access a vast library of ideas every time we go into our back room and turn on a switch.

Can the big corporations enclose the commons that is the internet? If so, how? The jemmy they want to use to break in to the internet commons is intellectual property law. An internet site or an item on a site is a message on a software package. Some big firms provide proprietary software for use on the internet - that is they claim to own the software and won't let anyone else use it

Bill Gates was actually slow to pick up on the significance of the web early in his career. But he managed to haul himself from behind by deploying the monopoly power of Microsoft. Now he has Internet Explorer as standard in the Microsoft office. It's not great, but you probably use it because it's there on your desktop. All Microsoft applications use proprietary software. They are patent protected. That means that very highly paid lawyers threaten to sue you to within an inch of your life if you try to use any of 'their' ideas. All Bill Gates' ideas were bought or stolen from someone else. But, as we explained above, the software package is in code, in effect the language in which ideas are communicated. And Bill Gates claims to own that language!

All this is radically at odds with the original ethos of the internet, an ethos energetically defended by some of the most creative individuals working in this area. That is the tradition of free or open access software. Inventors saw themselves as giving a gift to the rest of the world, just like the peasants who actually developed the basmati rice strain.

The point about open access software is that anyone can see how it works, they can modify it to

their own needs and they can share it with others. A second advantage is that, since people can see how the package works, they can suggest improvements. So it's likely to work better. This is equivalent to the peer review process by which the contributions to scholarly journals are assessed. Intellectual peers survey the article. This should be a badge of quality. It doesn't always work as academe is a cliquey place. (Don't even bother trying to get a Marxist economics article in an orthodox economic journal.) It's more likely to work on the internet, which is not cliquey. But any article, including this one, and any piece of software, benefits from a once over from someone else.

The defenders of freedom on the internet are divided into those who advocate free access and the people who want open access via a general public licence. The latter is not communism - the general public licence provides that anyone can take up the technology provided they pass it on to the next user - but it taps in to the well-spring of creativity we see with the new technology. This in effect means that the software is someone's property but they'll let you use it as long as you play by the rules of the open access game. The open access argument is that the bad guys will use the argument of the landed gentry that, 'since this common land doesn't belong to anybody, I'll have it'. They would no doubt approve the quote from Lenin, who said, 'If you live among wolves, you must howl like a wolf.' And it is true that Microsoft has appropriated, modified and patented some bits of free software.

Entertainment and big business

We have seen the rise of multimedia conglomerates. The merger of Time Warner with AOL a few years ago was a classic example (though it was a catastrophic failure for the capitalists involved). A company whose main wealth consisted of ownership of films and



music sought to ally with a firm with internet expertise. It is no coincidence as a handful of giant firms come to dominate the media business, intellectual property legislation is drafted in their interests.

One of the most aggressive defenders of 'their' intellectual property is the RIAA (Recording Industry Association of America) bullying music filesharers on behalf of the big four recording companies (EMI, Universal, Warner and Sony BMG). The record companies have no doubt won themselves a new army of fans with front page pictures of weeping thirteen year olds fined thousands of dollars for the 'crime' of downloading music. Their victims are well aware that CDs can be manufactured for pennies - in other words the record companies are ripping us off.

The reaction of the recording companies is, in any case, absurd. People want to hear music before they buy. If the stuff they are putting out is any good, people will pay for a permanent copy. The film industry fought Video Cassette Recorders through the courts for years as 'an infringement of their copyright' in film. After they were finally forced to admit defeat, they worked out that VCRs actually increased the profit from their film archive.

Just as with the original enclosure movement, the new privatisation of ideas has provoked widespread indignation and sense of

injustice, and not just among the socialist left. And, just as enclosure produced poaching as a reaction to stealing the commons, so the big boys are going to have to eat up time and resources protecting their ill-gotten gains. Time Warner look after their film archive like dragon's gold as a prime asset. The irony is that they and the rest of the film industry only located to California to escape Edison's patents on film projectors and production studios in the first place. In the USA now copyright now extends for seventy

years beyond the life of the author. This is said to be an incentive to creativity. It is not obvious how someone who has been dead for sixty nine years can be creative. Yet in the nineteenth century America became the leading economic power by shamelessly stealing ideas from Europe. Now they complain China is doing the same to them.

The Economist survey spells out how tight control over intellectual property rights can actually slow down innovation. In other words capitalists like Bill Gates can be bad for capitalism. Gates sells closed software systems. His attitude is, take it or leave it. One problem of buying in closed system software is what the Economist survey identifies as 'interoperability'. In other words the PCs in the workplace should be able to talk to each other and operate as a system. But Gates refuses to licence the 'protocols' to others to interact with his software. Open systems like Linux allow the user to modify the programme to their own needs. Their superiority shows how the new technology has transcended the standard capitalist business model. We need to get rid of capitalism in order to unchain human creativity. The internet shows us a glimpse of what is possible under socialism. Don't let them take it away from us! ■

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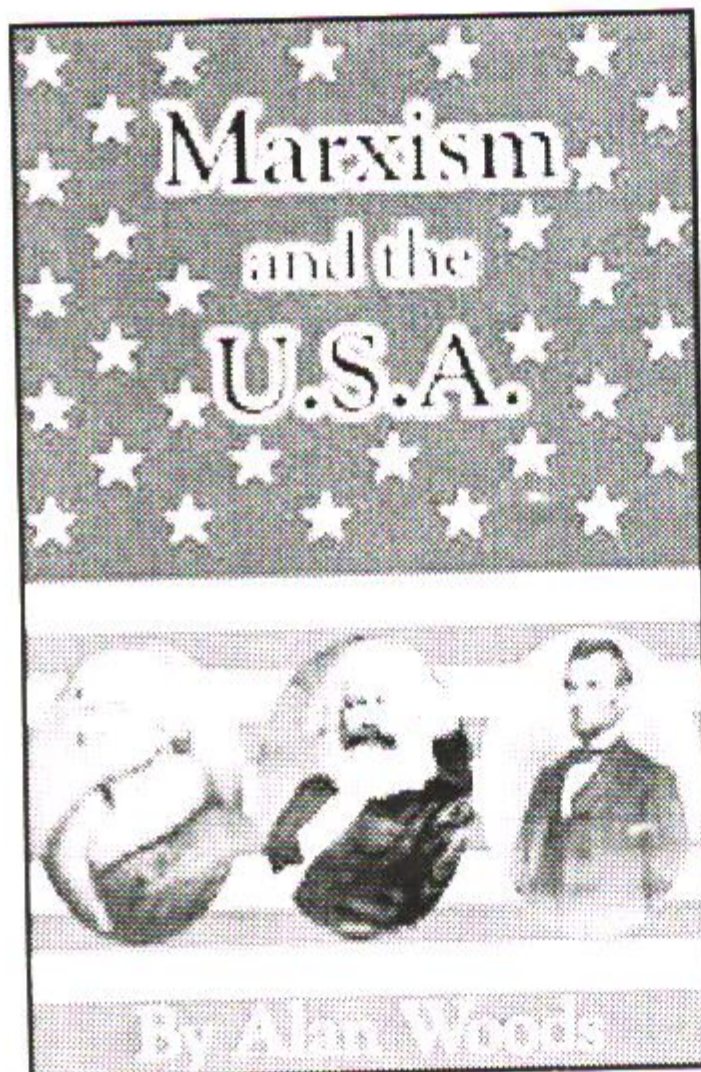
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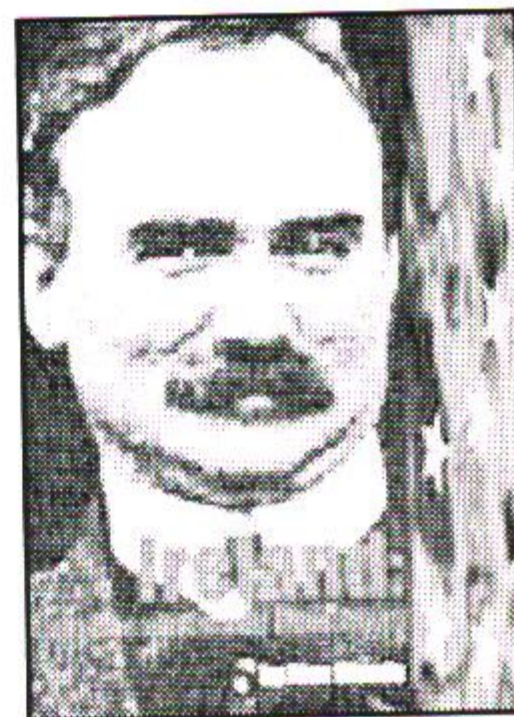
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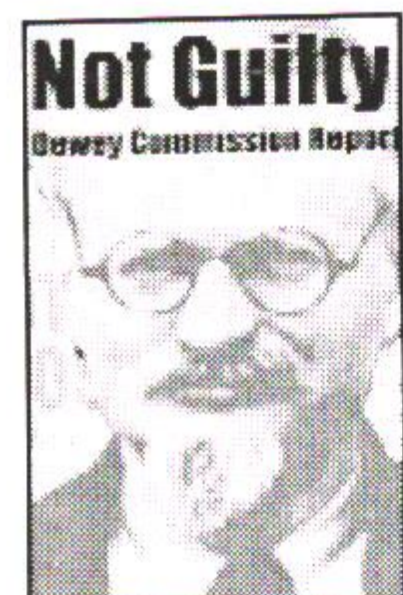
Today Latin America is in the vanguard of world revolutionary developments and, within the Latin American continent, Venezuela stands out sharply as the country most affected by this process. It would be no exaggeration to say

that Venezuela is now the key to the international situation. It therefore follows that the class-conscious workers and youth in Britain and elsewhere must closely follow the events in Venezuela and assist the revolution with every means possible.

Alan Woods has been a consistent champion of the Venezuelan Revolution since its inception. He helped initiate the Hands Off Venezuela Campaign. He has held personal discussions with President Hugo Chávez, which are recounted in this book.

The author concludes that the Venezuelan Revolution cannot stop half-way and holds up the perspective of a victorious socialist transformation. Only by expropriating the power of the oligarchy can it succeed and spread to the rest of the Continent. This is no foreign idea, but in essence is the vision of Simon Bolivar in the context of the 21st century, of the creation of a democratic Socialist Federation of Latin America.

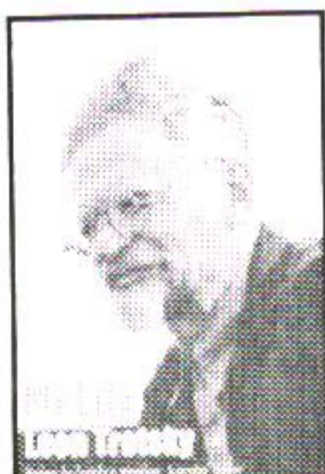
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SSP at the Crossroads

by Brian Conlon in Edinburgh

The SSP is the only left political group to have had some electoral success in recent times. They have based their electoral victories mainly on campaigning and local issues. However, as past history has shown, this is not sufficient to build a real socialist organisation.

The SSP unfortunately abandoned the task of building of a Marxist organisation right from its inception. This followed their mistaken line that New Labour had destroyed the links between the Labour party and the working class, and therefore the SSP was going to become the new mass party, with the unions affiliating one after the other. On the electoral front they advanced from one MSP to six, and this would, they believed, continue. Then with an alliance with the Greens and SNP they would secure a referendum on Scottish independence. These were their perspectives.

Electoral binge

Their abandonment of revolutionary politics meant a sharp turn to electoral politics. For Marxists elections are a barometer or snapshot of the political situation but not a main platform. In a recent edition of the SSP weekly paper there is an article about the Dunfermline by-election, which states "voters were determined to give New Labour a kick - and the main question in most people's minds was which was the best boot to use." (Scottish Socialist Voice, Friday 17th February). This hides the role and significance of the SSP. What is the purpose of an organisation that claims to be the only real working class representative in Scotland if they are unable to rally behind the thousands of working class people discontent with New Labour?

The problem is not just that the by-election result was bad, or the earlier Coatbridge Council by-election was bad (around 30 votes in a solid working class area around Glasgow), but that their latest solution is now to allow the SNP to use "their" votes to build an



alliance. "The SSP are set to avoid fielding first-past-the-post candidates at the next year's Holyrood elections", states the Herald. "Party chiefs have drawn up plans to focus exclusively on the regional vote offered to electors in Scottish parliament polls. They could also back SNP candidates as a way of helping defeat Labour MSP's in constituencies across Scotland" (Sunday Herald 5th February).

This news is a reflection of the weakness of the SSP and a further step down the road of Scottish nationalism. It looks like the SSP's bad results are forcing some of their leading lights to start building bridges to nationalism for a future jump into the SNP.

Over the last two years, the argument of the SSP for their weak performance was that by-elections traditionally have low turnouts and that elections to Westminster seats were not their natural terrain. To change from standing in every single seat in 2003 to a move to support the SNP and only field the list candidates, is a huge recognition that there is a crisis within the SSP.

Of course, after the Dunfermline by-election the press has savaged the SSP for its poor electoral performance. Colin Fox, National Convener and MSP, had to write a letter to the Scotsman (especially virulent in its attacks) saying that the party was not in decline, quoting Keir Hardie that the Liberals did not give a damn about working people, and that they (the SSP) are on the way

back. (The Scotsman, Friday 17th February).

What about the programme?

Even if the SSP had every single seat in Holyrood, they have still abandoned a socialist programme or perspective for nationalism. The SSP leaders will dismiss such criticism, arguing that socialism is in the name of the organisation. The reality is that they have watered down their programme to look more respectable. If we look at the economic programme we find

the following: "Renationalising an industry like North Sea Oil would be hugely expensive. Were we to do it without awarding compensation, we could face horrendous embargoes. But even if we did compensate, that one-off cost would be offset by future profits". "Plus, a 51% controlling share of all new oil fields and new taxation system to deliver greater revenue to the nation" (SSV, Friday 17th February).

Whatever happened to the nationalisation of the major monopolies under workers' control?

Now the model for the SSP is Norway, and not a socialist society.

Socialism is good for Sunday speeches and political youth schools, but not for the everyday programme. This is the kiss of death for any organisation that claims to fight to change society. What they are now arguing is to manage society (a capitalist society in reality) in a nicer way. This is the old reformist argument of the 1960s, although then it was Sweden and Germany they used as their models.

The SSP is in a severe crisis. To deny this fact would be foolish. The first act of any good doctor is to find out the root of the problem, and not to deny it. The SSP has never intended to be a real revolutionary alternative and that is their main problem. As long as they continue on this path they will face a continual decline, which will only serve to demoralise good honest left wingers. □

fighting fund

KEEP THE CASH COMING

Anyone who has attended a meeting over the last ten years will have, at some point, heard a mention about poor old Francis Fukuyama and his 'end of history' theory. This US thinker and economist, with close links to the establishment, came up with the theory that following the collapse of the Stalinist Bloc, the Cold War was over, capitalism had won and the norm from now on would be capitalist 'liberal' democracies - forever. All other regimes would fade away and as such history had ended. Although this is a crude summary of what he actually said, which was a lot more subtly put, the neo-con thinkers (surely a contradiction in terms) jumped on this as the theoretical basis for their various projects.

Of course as crisis followed crisis, Fukuyama backtracked and revised this analysis, since it was clear that history was far from over. Now, in a new book called 'Neocons: America at the Crossroads' Fukuyama has given up on the right wing saying "Neoconservatism, as a political symbol and a body of thought, has evolved into something I can no longer support." Mind you, he still thinks that these people were idealists who really believed in democracy whereas in fact we know the reverse: they have no interest in democracy except when it serves their interests. The reality has always been to smash opposition (hence their hatred of all things Venezuelan, Cuban, etc. etc.) and establish stooge regimes where possible. The belief that the US would use "it's power in instances where others could not because it was more virtuous than other

countries", what he called "benevolent hegemony" now comes across as more than a little naive, especially following the Iraqi fiasco.

Of course, one presumes, that Fukuyama - like most bourgeois 'experts' - still thinks that socialism is off the agenda. And here we must disagree with him. If we have learnt anything from the last decade it is that capitalism, far from having the answers is not even capable of forming the questions. They sit, surrounded by chaos, unable to see a way forward even for themselves. On the other hand millions of workers and youth are now demanding a better and alternative society. Often these ideals are posed in the forms of demands to end world poverty and debt, tackle global warming, fight oppression and repression, oppose globalisation and the ravages of the IMF and the other weapons of imperialism. Above all, there seems to be an instinctive hatred of capitalism.

However we should be warned. The bosses have all the resources of the City of London and so on to finance their propaganda. We depend on the donations from readers and sellers of this journal to ensure our voice is heard. Last year we raised over £12,000 - which is good but not nearly good enough (even allowing for the splendid summer international appeal and last October's appeal from the PTUDC for the affected workers of Pakistan) and a special effort must now be made to get the donations - small and large - in.

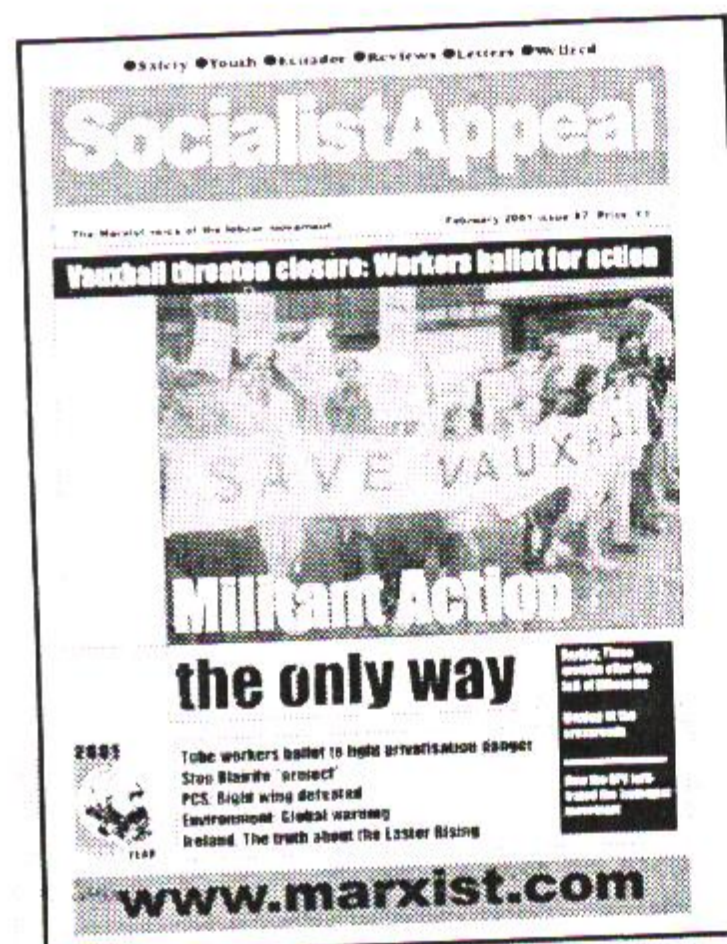
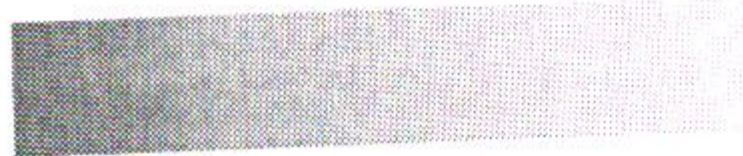
Donations can be made in a number of ways. By cheque

to us at PO Box 2626, London E14 6WG (made payable to Socialist Appeal SC). Cheques and cash can also be paid in over the counter at any branch of Abbey National quoting account number K2018479SOC. Trancash payments can also be made at any Post Office into Alliance and Leicester account number

562528601, sort code 72 00 00, reference BBC. Every little helps - we did well last year with the big donations, what we need to see are a lot more small ones to go alongside them.

Keep it up!

Steve Jones



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National anti-war demonstration

**Troops Home from Iraq!
Don't attack Iran!**

**Saturday 18th March 2006
Assemble 12 noon Parliament Square**

Glasgow Public Meeting

Scotland's part in the fight for
socialism around the World

Wednesday 29th March
7.15pm to 9.00pm

The Meeting House, Elmbank Crescent,
Glasgow G2 (left out of Charing Cross station)

www.socialist.net www.marxist.com
socialist_appeal_scotland@hotmail.co.uk

Edinburgh Public Meeting

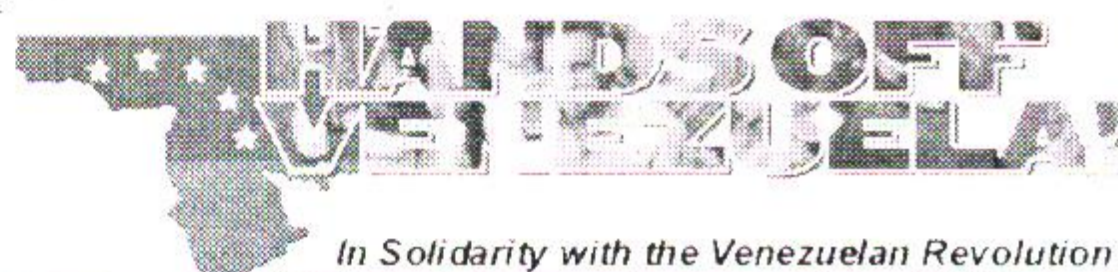
Scotland's part in the fight for
socialism around the World

Tuesday 28th March
7.00 pm

Posties Club

Brunswick Street (Off Leith Walk)

**For more
Socialist Appeal
activities visit
www.socialist.net**



notice

March 2006

"Hands Off Venezuela! Many thanks to all you fighters of the world who are backing this campaign for the freedom not only of Venezuela but the whole of the world."

President Hugo Chavez

Join Hands Off Venezuela!

Send us your details with a cheque payable to "Hands off Venezuela" for £7.50 or £5 unwaged (suggested fee) to HOV, 100 Armadale Close, London, N17 9PL

www.handsoffvenezuela.org / britain@handsoffvenezuela.org

Socialist Appeal Stands for:

✚ **No to Blairism! For a Labour government with a bold socialist programme!** Labour must break with big business and Tory economic policies. Vote Labour and fight to reclaim the party.

✚ **A national minimum wage of at least two-thirds of the average wage.** £8.00 an hour as a step toward this goal, with no exemptions.

✚ **Full employment!** No redundancies. The right to a job or decent benefits. For a 32 hour week without loss of pay. No compulsory overtime. For voluntary retirement at 55 with a decent full pension for all.

✚ **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

Strike to defend pensions

Over three-quarters of a million members of the local government and health union, unison, are currently balloting on a proposal to take joint industrial action with 11 other unions in defence of the local government pension scheme (LGPS).

With a result due on March 10th, we could be seeing united strike action by the end of the month. If this goes ahead then it will be one of the biggest industrial challenges to a UK government for many years, with potentially up to 1.5 million public sector workers involved.

The importance of the issue cannot be under-estimated. The government's intention is to whittle away the conditions of the current LGPS pension scheme, not least by getting rid of the so-called 'rule of 85.' This is the provision by which local government workers can retire at 60 with a full pension if they have worked 25 years. They want all workers in the scheme to now work through to 65 or leave at 60 but on a reduced pension. Bearing in mind how low pensions are for most local authority staff under the existing arrangements, this new proposal

would hit many, especially low-paid workers, very hard. They should be getting a better deal not a worse one.

This dispute is not just about public sector staff, it affects everybody in work. A successful attack on this pension scheme would open the flood-gates for a general attack on all pensions. We are already seeing firms arbitrarily winding up final salary schemes in favour of cheaper aggregate schemes with lower pension payouts. The government should immediately outlaw such scams and ensure that schemes cannot be changed to suit profit returns - but, to date, they have shown no interest in this, not

least because they have similar ambitions themselves. Not for the pensions of police officers, judges and - naturally - MPs of course, but certainly for low paid workers in the public sector. New Labour are also quite keen on raising the pension age to 67, forcing us all to work an extra couple of years so that we pay more in and have less time to get the return.

So the public sector workers must not be left to stand alone. The TUC should take a lead for once and organise support action around the country including a national demonstration in defence of pensions and in support of those who take action. Activists in the

unions taking action must also strive to ensure that, once the ballot results are known, there are no attempts from the top of the movement to cave in and accept a worse deal than exists at present., in particular by negotiating away the final pension scheme in some way or form. Everybody involved must stand firm and united. Let's get the biggest Yes vote possible in the ballots and then show the government that they will not be allowed to get away with these attacks.



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