

# the★commune

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post strike put on hold (pages 2, 4): so are we ready for...

## a winter of discontent?

by Sheila Cohen

NUJ Book Branch

Rulers are often more afraid of the political implications of worker activity than workers are aware of them. To take an extreme example, when the police went on strike in 1919 Lloyd George famously intoned, "The country was nearer to Bolshevism that day than any time since". How many of the high-helmeted bobbies packing Whitehall would have seen it like that?

So, coming down to earth a bit, when the *Financial Times* once again evokes that tired old phrase "Winter of Discontent", perhaps we should take it seriously.

In fact, the headline was "Union discontent set to rise this winter" (26th October, p.2), but the implication is obvious; strike incidence has risen enough to attract notice despite the *FT*'s realistic conclusion that "...even if the postal strikes continue, the national annual tally of [strike days] is likely to remain far below the levels of the 1980s and earlier."

As we now know, the postal strikes are not, for the time being at least, "continuing" — to the fury of many postal workers. But the *FT* also includes in its list BA cabin crew, FirstGroup train drivers, Swissport baggage handlers and London underground staff. While the Leeds refuse and street cleaning workers, now in the tenth week of their all-out, cross-union strike, are also included, the *FT* notes that most groups now in dispute "are in the communications and transport sector." This, and indeed the Leeds action, undermines the "manufacturing versus service" argument which focusses on the decline of the allegedly more powerful manufacturing sector — though manufacturing and other manual workers certainly played their part in the three major outbreaks of industrial unrest earlier this year (Visteon, Vestas and engineering construction).

So are we at the dawn of an upsurge? It seems unlikely. But if we look back almost one hundred years ago to the day, i.e. the turn of the year 1909-10, things were hotting up in Britain after a long period of weakness and membership loss in the trade union movement very similar to our own long-lasting malaise. As one history recounts, "Trade union membership grew only very slowly in the 1890s and 1900s, and [there was] a marked reduction in worker successes during strikes...From the 1890s there was a clear trend amongst the...unions to accept institutionalised collective bargaining with employers...and to oppose militant direct action..."

Sound familiar? But look at what comes next: "As the economy improved after the deep 1908-9 depression workers increasingly took unofficial action..." . And then, of course, along came the explosion of militancy which has been labelled the "Great Unrest" of 1910-1914. While no one is saying that the current recession is anything like over, the issues which prompted workers into action in the pre-Great Unrest period were very similar to those confronting workers today — acute labour intensification, wage freezes or reductions, and in general an employer agenda of almost sadistic aggression.

Thus, in a syndrome sometimes despised by the intellectual left, workers were forced into struggle by the actions of employers, rather than forming any kind of conscious "political" agenda of resistance. The now-postponed postal strike is an example of this. Faced with an employer agenda of low and static pay, literally heavier workloads, unilateral breakage of agreements and massive bullying and intimidation, postal workers in some areas pre-empted the national strike with a series of guerrilla actions born out of anger and despair at the actions of management. As one rep put it, "There's a war going on...We're in a war with Royal Mail."

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# post strike: this is no deal

by Joe Thorne

At the top of the CWU-Royal Mail agreement is a header. "Final Draft — 5 November 2009 — 1.10AM". This innocuous line is emblematic of the CWU negotiating team's strategy: it indicates that the text was agreed more than 7 hours after the strikes were called off. What sort of negotiation strategy is this — to abandon the bargaining power represented in industrial action, on the promise of a deal yet to be finalised?

At every step along the way, it has been clear that elements of the CWU leadership were looking to do whatever they could to avoid members taking industrial action: we hear that Billy Hayes was arguing internally for the action to be called off after the first national strike day a fortnight ago. Members have been much more impressed with Dave Ward, but this deal is no deal.

As the *Financial Times* puts it, "In the interim deal, the two sides agreed to suspend strikes and further changes to working practices until a final agreement on modernisation and job security is reached by the end of December." On "local issues" — a category which, particularly in London, represents a large part of the reasons behind the strike — the parties agreed to "engage in genuine negotiations to reach local agreement." This, in other words, is an agreement to seek agreement at some point in the future, with the help of an as yet unspecified "agreed independent person".

Elections for the CWU's Postal Executive Committee are in February. Will there be any backlash? Perhaps, if this works out badly, and members fully understand what has been done. But any such backlash may be too late. The next two months, the run up to Christmas, are the time of postal workers' greatest power: this is the window for the most effective action. It is often said that reaching final, detailed agreement on the full range of issues will take up to four weeks of intensive negotiation. This may be so, but it should be seen as Royal Mail's problem if they don't begin to negotiate seriously, soon enough. And there are plenty of 'red lines' which could and should have been included as the basis for negotiations. The union's position is that strikes will resume if negotiations falter: CWU members need to argue that this option be taken if Royal Mail does not immediately make final concessions on core issues. The real and present danger is that agreement on a final deal could be strung along until it is too late.

Post workers have a tradition of militancy, and spreading unofficial action. There have been real changes which make this harder than before: not least, in many areas, a higher turnover of workforce (and hence fewer experienced militants) than there once were. Historically, the CWU postal section has not had an independent rank and file movement: action, official or unofficial has more or less been organised through and mediated by the formal structures of the union, and in many areas, at branch and regional level, unofficial action is understood as a tactical option, rather than a horror to be avoided at all costs. In the 2007 and 2009 strikes, the base of the union appears to have become more susceptible to the direction of the official national leadership, perhaps partly — some have speculated — due to the fact that Hayes et al. represent a "left" leadership: removing some of the sense of antagonism between militants and the official union. If the pattern of the 2007 strikes are repeated, the deal reached will be far short of what members need. If this pattern continues, postal workers and the CWU will be ground down.

In the next two months, things could go one of three ways. The workers may be sold out passively, rank and file pressure may generate further official action, or spreading unofficial action may develop. It is in the grasp of workers to avoid the first possibility, and maximise the chances of the other two being effective. CWU members should push inside the union for the action to be resumed, insisting on the most democratic forms of rank and file control. But they cannot rely on this strategy being successful. Therefore, they should also be prepared, should it be necessary, to take, support and spread unofficial action, from office to office, from one end of the country to the other. The tradition of not handling work from striking offices needs to be resurrected: it is the breakdown of this tradition which allowed London to remain all but isolated for nearly four months of one-day-a-week strike action.

Postal workers *are* strong. They are particularly strong *now*. Solidarity with this dispute should not drift away; the deal reached thus far is no deal at all. Press for a return to action, action for a real deal.

★ See page 4 for an interview with a communist post worker and a report on student solidarity with the strike.

# underground pay deadlock

by Vaughan Thomas

RMT London regional president (LUL)

It's early November and the view from the 23rd floor offices of Euston Tower must be one of the best in London. Low clouds obscure the top of the adjacent Post Office Tower but the "belly of the beast" — the City of London — is clearly visible in the distance; a constant reminder of the reason we are here at ACAS, deadlocked over pay.

The global financial crisis has had enormous repercussions for working people in all walks of life, in both the private and public sectors. Even the Underground, which in recent years has tended to be insulated from the worst problems due to massive government investment, is feeling the pinch. And it's the workers at the bottom who are being pinched hardest. This time, more than any other, it's important that the transport unions stick together to fight management.

Productivity on the Underground has been increasing constantly for years: more passengers carried year on year with revenue exceeding expectation and staff working harder for no extra money. Twice in recent years Underground Lines have won the Railway Operator of the Year Award. But there has been no financial reward for the people on the front line — in fact this round of pay talks has resulted in an offer of just 1.5% for this year and 0.5% for next and redundancies are on the horizon.

A campaign by the RMT earlier this year prevented London Underground Ltd implementing a programme of compulsory redundancies but other trade unions on the Underground were noticeable by their absence. Aslef, "the train drivers' union", instructed their members to cross our picket lines though to their credit many of their members refused to do so. Nevertheless, some of their shop stewards and branch officials not only scabbed but encouraged their colleagues to scab as well. Now all unions have been invited to ACAS for last gasp talks and the RMT, locked in a separate room, are wondering whether Aslef will continue their unscrupulous, sectional behaviour.

Three hours into the talks and the signs aren't good; Aslef's sucking up to management is already paying dividends. Hilariously, their lunch consists of a sumptuous spread of baguettes, rolls, sandwiches and chocolate cake; the RMT has to make do with a tray of sandwiches and a plastic cup of grapes. Is someone, somewhere, high up in Employment Relations trying to tell us something?

The answer arrives shortly when we are informed that Aslef has already done a deal with management. Without



*tube pay talks have reached a standstill*

even inviting the other unions in to the negotiating room, despite the fact that the RMT represents more than 50% of drivers on the Underground, LUL have signed off a deal with Aslef which will benefit drivers to the exclusion of other staff. The TSSA delegates are so incensed that, despite already having voted to accept the pay offer, they now walk out of the building declaring themselves in dispute. This is the first time in the history of ACAS that a trade union has arrived at Euston Tower with a deal, but left without one.

This year's wage talks have been incredibly convoluted; the RMT submitted its comprehensive claim in November of last year which included a substantial wage increase and a guaranteed job offer for members of staff who become unfit for safety critical work. Other unions submitted less detailed claims, but historically all settlements have been across the board, for the benefit of all staff. We had no reason to think this year would be any different, but 12 months down the line the old order lies in tatters as sectionalism replaces solidarity. Aslef have stolen our clothes by achieving a guaranteed job offer — but for drivers only. "Workers of the World Unite" has been replaced by "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" above the door at Aslef's head office.

What now for working class solidarity on the Underground? Is Aslef, with its proud history of militancy and industrial struggle, now morally as well as financially bankrupt? Will their membership continue to decline as their surviving militants get fed up with yellow trade unionism? The RMT membership in the London Transport Region continues to grow as people realise that we are the only union prepared to fight for decent wages and conditions for all grades. Can we successfully take on and beat the Underground, the Government and Aslef? We'll certainly have a damned good go at it.

Watch this space...

# what is the union bureaucracy?

by Alberto Durango

★ Alberto is a Colombian cleaner activist whose involvement in militant organising initiatives has earned him the wrath of sub-contractor cleaning companies and the Unite union bureaucracy alike.

There are very few means by which the working class can arm itself with a political tool which educates the class and helps it fight the crooks who, disguised as its defenders, betray it, sell it out and make deals over its interests with the bosses. With this tribune I want to contribute something, so that those workers who come across this information might use it as a starting point for directing a discussion about the trade union bureaucracy, this great enemy of the working class, so that they can organise to combat it. First of all therefore we have to understand what characterises the trade union bureaucracy.

The trade union bureaucracy does not practice democracy among the workers. It does not consult the workers affiliated to the union, or those being represented, on its actions, attitudes and decisions, but always reaches deals with the bosses on the backs of the workers. The union bureaucracy conducts its discussions with the bosses and collective agreements without witnesses in flash restaurants: or for less important problems, in the bosses' offices, behind closed doors. They sign deals and contracts without workers' participation.

The trade union bureaucracy terrorises union members. When workers criticise them they are hounded, threatened and intimidated, and subjected to psychological terrorism: or else they make sure they are put out of work. The bureaucracy is the enemy of workers' assemblies and participation on the part of the workers.

The trade union bureaucracy does not itself organise, nor does it allow the workers to fight, and when it does allow



*unite union bosses derek simpson and tony woodley with trade union congress mandarin brendan barber*

an action on the part of the workers it is because it feels pressured. When the demands are sufficiently justified and it fears the workers will supersede it, then it acts as a strait-jacket. In other cases when the bureaucracy allows an action on the part of the workers it is simply to exact pressure on the boss so that the latter caves to the bureaucracy's own desires. The bureaucracy always seeks to contain workers' struggles, telling the workers not to fight and to maintain an atmosphere of peace and harmony, accepting the norms and conditions imposed by the bosses.

The trade union bureaucracy is demagogic, always offering things to the workers it never delivers on. It sells out the workers, as it is bought-off and corrupted by the privileges and bribes it receives in return. They also participate in labour inspectorates. If your union leaders behave in any way like this, well, that is bureaucracy for you. The first task we as workers have is to fight them and kick them out of our unions. With this statement, we take sides with all workers ready to begin a fight to kick these parasites out of our unions.



# occupation and state building in the new afghanistan

by Emma Gallwey

"It is true that the Taliban are the first threat but an illegitimate government would be the second." *Abdullah Abdullah*

The deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan over the last eighteen months has seen the gradual reassertion of the Taliban's territorial presence. The widespread fraud, vote rigging, and ballot stuffing of August's presidential election led to a run off in early November between Hamid Karzai the incumbent and the other main candidate Abdullah Abdullah. This process was a total flop, an embarrassment for the occupying American forces as Abdullah, disputing the possibility of a fair result devoid of fraud, refused to participate further. Hilary Clinton spoke of Abdullah's decision as "not affecting in any way the legitimacy" of the process: instead Karzai's second term in office would supposedly further buttress the strength of the constitutional order of Afghanistan in guiding the Afghan people to a 'brighter future'.

The recent upsurge in violence and deaths of UK and US soldiers have led the governments of the occupying powers to further justify their military deployments amid increasing public opposition to troop presence in Afghanistan. Their well-rehearsed arguments explain the need to pursue and eliminate both the Taliban and Al-Qaeda as a key front in the West's counter terrorism strategy. Most recently Gordon Brown has spoken of the need to suppress the training camps and terrorist plots being mounted against Britain from the area, whilst Obama in solemn tones has warned that if "the Afghan government falls to the Taliban — or allows al-Qaeda to go unchallenged — that country will again be a base for terrorists who want to kill as many of our people as they possibly can". The aim therefore must be "to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future".

This description of the aims of the US and its allies' military presence in the country is accompanied by a grandiose and hyperbolic description of state-building for Afghanistan. The solution to Afghanistan's woes is a pathway to legitimate government and sovereign statehood. In describing these holy-grail like goals the US and its allies have exercised a whole lexicon of terms intended to describe and articulate principles of legitimate political rule. The establishment of a constitution, a political process of representational democracy and political parties, a justice system, and economic development and prosperity were all essential, we are continually told, to the Afghan people's future. Added to this is,



*karzai's election triumph showed the superficial character of afghanistan's democratic set-up*

of course, the need for an unspecified period of military presence and occupation by the US and its allies.

In the midst of this heady mix of counter terrorism and counter insurgency is the process of state building in which Afghans are encouraged to go to the polls to elect leaders to rule over them. This bestowal by the West of the great gift of democracy is the humanitarian and benevolent side of the Obama's administration's new foreign policy, but it is of course not remotely new and has been the rhetorical substance of American foreign policy for decades.

If the reconstruction of an Afghan state and the defeat of terrorism within that country are inseparable goals, the emphasis on development as well demolition is becoming increasingly shrill, and more and more absurd. At an empirical level such exhortations of democratic and economic 'progress' are highly delusional given the minimal level of public participation in the recent elections — under 10 percent in Helmand — the level of corruption in the political and bureaucratic institutions of Afghan politics relating to the narcotics trade, and increasing evidence that the Taliban have established governmental and judicial structures and makeshift courts in rural areas. Commenting on the electoral process both Brown and Obama have identified the endemic corruption of the Afghan government but this commentary

given a 30-second spot in which they said, as so many have before them: "It's come to a point where we've got to make a stand — enough is enough." And — stop press — teachers in an East London school have just gone on strike against the proposal to turn it into a "Trust", while First Capital Connect train drivers who were refusing to carry out Sunday overtime on reduced rates have now extended their action to weekdays.

## "The company was the union's best organiser"

What to make of it all? The main point about this spate of disputes is that, although nothing new in itself, it speaks yet again to the unflinching power of capital to mobilise workers and of workers to demonstrate over and over again the "old-fashioned" virtues of solidarity, self-activity, direct democracy and just sheer class resistance. In other words, it represents — yet again — a reiteration of the truths that we as socialists hold self-evident: that yes, there are such things as class, class struggle and working-class potential to challenge and, in some cases, seriously worry our apparently omnipotent rulers.

Enough said? No, not quite. If "we" — i.e., the left in some form — continue with business as usual, viz each group selling its papers and waving its own particular banners on the picket line, things won't change. As a postal worker rep said to me recently when asked for his views on political action: "In 2007 we had all the little groups round here selling their papers. Two years later we've got the same little groups selling their papers." He was not impressed.

Is there another way? Yes, as shown in historical examples good, bad and frustrating. The Great Unrest, as readers will know, was followed by the splendid might of the First World War Shop Stewards' Movement, which displayed some of the most magnificent examples of solidarity and sheer cross-working-class power yet seen under capitalism. Why didn't it lead to a British revolution, despite the ruling class shaking in its boots at the threat? Lack of unity was one reason, an over-developed trust in trade union leaderships another. Fast-forward to the last major upsurge in Britain, 1968-74. There were two relatively "non-sectarian" attempts to consolidate and unite working-class struggle: the Liaison Committee for the Defence of the Trade Unions (LCDTU), run by the Communist Party, and the International Socialists' Rank-

seems intended only to bolster the moral validity of their political visions for the country.

The delusions of the US state in this area extend far and wide. A cursory investigation into various departments of US government charged with the economic development of Afghanistan yields gems such as the Department of Commerce's Afghanistan 'Investment and Reconstruction Task Force'. The task force describes itself as providing information and counselling to companies pursuing business opportunities in Afghanistan'. The accompanying pdf document, *Doing Business in Afghanistan: 2009 Country Commercial Guide for U.S. Companies*, downloadable from its website, describes a whole host of lucrative business opportunities in a country ravaged by conflict and dependent on foreign aid.

The real question is: what is this state building process really intended to achieve? Afghanistan is surrounded by an eclectic mix of states, ranging from Islamic theocracies to secular dictatorships and pseudo-democracies. Right wing foreign policy blogs and media websites in America describe the Afghan project as a long haul and one in which military presence in the country is intended to be enduring if not permanent. The process of state building in Afghanistan will take many years with civil and political institutions being built from very low levels. Meanwhile the total number of Western forces in Afghanistan now number 100,000, including 68,000 US troops. The deployment of more troops is likely and the US has set itself the job of training and equipping an Afghan army whose strength and capacity will depend upon further US investment in the country and the awarding of contracts for US military companies.

The absurdity of the US's strategy to implant representative democracy in a country which in many areas is devoid of even basic amenities and facing increasingly intense and widespread warfare, is clearly part of a long term strategy to present a media friendly tale of state building and progress towards democracy and self-governance, whilst allowing the US and its allies to establish an enduring military presence. State building as a process of colonial rule obviously contains a rich and complex history. In recent times the Middle East has been the locus of such efforts by the US and allies. However, processes in South America have seen the pattern of events unfold in a similar way, where countries came to be dominated by very small ruling classes with heavy ties to the US and very weak political and civil societies. It is clear Afghanistan is in the process of being transformed into a regime of a similar character.

## new (mini) upsurge: are we ready?

>>> continued from page 1

But it isn't, of course, just the postal workers. At the time of writing this, new examples of workplace-based conflict seem to be coming in droves. The nine-week strike by bin workers in Leeds over "single status" has just been mirrored by their workmates in Brighton with all-out action sparked by the prospect of pay cuts of up to £8,000 per worker under the loony logic of, um, equal pay. Their branch secretary commented, "I've never seen such a solid group of workers." Fujitsu workers — high-tech professionals who aren't supposed to do things like taking strike action — will be walking out this week (12th, 13th and 16th November) after an overwhelming vote for industrial action over the company's announcement of a pay freeze, 1,200 redundancies and the closure of a final salary pension scheme to new staff. A comrade from the NUJ emails us about "a strike you may not have heard about" — workers at a huge Superdrug warehouse close to the now defunct Frickley Colliery in West Yorkshire came out on indefinite strike on 4th November against the company's imposition of drastic changes to pay and working conditions including the abolition of shift payments, changes to shift patterns without notice, lowered pension entitlement and reduced sick pay. Also from the NUJ comes news of a wave of disputes in the Sheffield area signalled by a cartoon in the local paper headed — you've guessed it — "Looks like we're in for an early Winter of Discontent this year!" The cartoon figures are surrounded by snowballs bearing the words "Strike".

The *Evening Standard* of 2nd November reported the British Airways dispute in terms of "a revolt of middle England" in which workers at a mass meeting spoke of their "anger and frustration" at management's imposition of new contracts on top of thousands of job cuts and a pay freeze. The paper quotes a worker as saying "We are not militant trade unionists looking for a confrontation..." On the news the same night, airline workers complained that the company "just would not listen" — "They'll impose this on you, and you accept it, and they'll just do the same and the same..." "This is a fundamental fight." A week later, a strike by East London bus workers over a pay freeze was also on the news — covered not sympathetically (surprise), but the workers were

and-File Movement. Both collapsed, or at least faded away — the LCDTU because the CP decided that chasing after the coat-tails of left-wing MPs and trade union leaders was more important than mobilising the rank and file, and the IS initiative because its leadership wanted to turn the "group" into a Party.

These crude assessments will probably be challenged, though believe me there's evidence for them. But what about now? This is only a "mini-upsurge", but the same truths remain. We desperately need, in this country, a non-sectarian network which can link activists together *without* an agenda of joining this or that — simply one of building on the *existing* strength of workers in the workplace, the *existing* level of anger and revolt amongst strikers and activists, rather than waving manifestos and preaching Party programmes. The working class has enormous potential to build towards socialism on the basis of its own experience. That potential has very rarely been acknowledged or welcomed by the left. The Leninists among us can take comfort in the thought that Lenin himself was one of the strongest advocates of simply learning from what workers can tell us.

Where to go with all this? Well, we should count ourselves lucky — there *is* an organisation potentially of that nature existing in Britain today. It's called the National Shop Stewards' Network. The NSSN could begin this task now — the task of building a cross-movement network of activists. After all, there's the material to build on. The most recent research shows that the number of shop stewards, though much reduced, can still be estimated at around 200,000. Even if only one per cent of these existing activists were brought together to build a network based on the simple principles of cross-sectoral organisation and workplace trade union democracy, it would be more than a start — the potential would be enormous. This time, let's be ready for the next upsurge with a leadership rooted and built *within* the trade union movement rather than brought in from outside, embodied in a working-class network based on explicit principles of independence from management propaganda and direct trade union democracy which would be more than equal to combat the diversions and confusions undermining the potential of previous groundswells of working-class struggle.

★ For more information on the NSSN, see their website at [www.shopstewards.net](http://www.shopstewards.net).



# mixed reactions to cwu-royal mail deal

★ Interview with a communist post worker

## How strong was the national post strike?

At a national level I would say the strike was very strong. It is hard to say the whole picture from the one location where I work, but judging by Royal Mail Chat [a web forum] — even if the people on there are more militant than average — there were no signs that it was losing momentum. In London there was perhaps a certain tiredness after eighteen weeks of strike action but not such that it was close to exhaustion. At no time did the union claim that they were calling off the action because they were losing people — Royal Mail management claimed that 25% of people were not on strike, but those were fiddled figures given that in that number they included managers and people on holiday, rest day or sick..

## Do you think it would have been possible to mobilise people for more ongoing strikes?

In London we had a long series of one-day strikes, and in the ballot the union never raised the question of an overtime ban. People working overtime did in a sense weaken the effectiveness of the strike, but also it allowed less strong people to make up for losing a day. Certainly, however, I found agreement from others when I suggested that one day a week was not enough to defeat management, and indeed there is the question of what people had already invested in the strike: the amount of days' pay they lost over the course of the dispute meant that they needed to get something worthwhile from it.

Indeed, towards the end of the dispute the union planned to have two days effectively in a row on strike — a Friday and then the following Monday — which did represent some level of escalation. But that was never put to the test.

## What were the motivations behind the deal?

There has been a lot of talk of 'betrayal' and 'sell-out', but if you look at what the union said it wanted to do, it was always to accept modernisation but to negotiate the terms. In the union's own "realistic" perspectives, the main objective was to get back to negotiation, and they will be happy to do so. Of course, although we were indeed told that that was what we were striking for, that's not what people really thought it was about: when you're on strike you naturally want to gain something from it.

The London Divisional reps are perhaps not so happy with what the national strike has done for us, and that is one of the reasons behind the measure in the deal allowing for a review, every two weeks, of the postponement of the strike, dependent on the good faith of Royal Mail in negotiations and them not bossing people about too much at work. London reps might have been unhappy with the deal otherwise, and indeed the interim deal was not released to them in advance, only the section referring to the review. When we went back to work on the Friday that was the one thing they



## long-term attacks underlie the dispute

could tell us — they said whatever we'd seen in the media the strike was not over and the ballot is still live.

However I would be sceptical of there being any further strikes before Christmas, management will seek to avoid too much provocation and it would be a big loss of face for Dave Ward [CWU deputy general secretary] to announce a deal then take us out on strike again. I think the review element is to make themselves feel better about it, but the deal looks bad because Royal Mail were not defeated: right until the end they were very aggressive, calling on us to scab and publishing an open letter claiming the union couldn't say what the strike was about. That reflected the reality that it was vague, on the terrain of 'what kind of modernisation?' rather than standing up for members' terms and conditions.

## Could it be said that the deal is a success in that the union has gained a stay of execution from a management determined to break it?

That's a hard one to tell. The union often portrayed this strike as management out to force the union out of the workplace rather than just forcing it to accept different terms and conditions, and they wanted to preserve the requirement that management should have to discuss any changes with the union. There's two ways to look at it: this could be sold as a compromise, even if management might have got all they wanted to get anyway, but in a certain sense the union has succeeded. It remains to be seen what comes from the talks.

## How do you perceive workers' level of satisfaction with the deal, and what is the likely consequence of that?

There is a great deal of dissatisfaction, expressed on Royal Mail Chat and the office where I work, but the real question is whether this is just anger or whether anything will come of it. As I say, negotiations are what the union had said they were fighting for, and there does not seem to be any push from the lower levels of the union itself, nor the union at local level, to continue with unofficial actions. The advantage for the leadership is that they can get reports in from across the

country and gauge the level of support for continuing action — we cannot be sure how they use that information, but given they have that kind of overview it would be quite a daring move to be seen to go beyond the union in that way and I do not see any moves in that direction. One way in which anger expresses itself is that some people said that, after the 2007 strike, if the same thing happened again this time then they would leave the union. But leaving is only a very individualistic way of reacting to the outcome.

## The left often talks of the need for the rank and file to take control of the strike: but to what extent does a rank and file versus bureaucracy dynamic really exist?

Firstly there is the question of what you mean by rank-and-file, since it could just mean the lower levels of the union and the shop stewards, or else the 'ordinary' workers, among whom there are also different layers of militancy and involvement in the union. There are also stronger areas, including London. But what you don't see at the moment is any rank-and-file which is properly constituted as such and calls itself that.

In the past there has been discontent at right-wing leaderships but even when that did exist it did not show itself at the level of a rank-and-file movement. There have been unofficial strikes and criticism of right-wing leaders, including those who start off on the left, and their displacement, but this then leads to the election of another left leader, and the same process repeats itself again...

## Are further strikes likely after Christmas, and will Royal Mail attacks continue?

There will be further attacks by Royal Mail, as they have already said they are going to do, but the question is whether the union can come to an agreement with it over those attacks and its own role. For sure, having organised and then called off a national strike, the union will be humiliated if it has to admit that its strategy failed and we have to go back to strike action again — people will ask, 'what the fuck did they call it off for?'

Also, the outcome of the dispute is not seen as a defeat by the membership, and that is perhaps something Royal Mail need to carry out their plans. It depends on what level of modernisation they really need: if they're out to smash both our legs and only get one, they may be content with that.

There is also the matter of the next government in 2010, with the Conservatives giving every indication that it is their intention to privatise Royal Mail entirely. The demands of capital to casualise and sell off the service may be to such an extent that the union has no choice but to react and preserve itself and then we will see further strikes: even if at the current time from the workers' point of view we can say the union is failing to adopt the right strategy to defend jobs and the service, from the union's perspective it also makes sense to do what it can to defend itself.

# manchester students build solidarity with post workers

by Mark Harrison

In Manchester the postal workers' strike was backed by a student campaign involving members of The Commune, Anarchist Federation, Communist Students, the SWP, AWL and individual leftist students.

Members of the 'Manchester Students Support the Postal Strike' group visited picket lines to stand alongside workers on strike. For many this has been their first time on a picket line and it has been a good opportunity to learn from the Royal Mail workers about the bullying practices of their management. Despite the right wing press demonising the CWU a ComRes survey for the BBC found that 50% of people sympathise most with the postal workers and only 25 per cent with the management. This was demonstrated by those passing by on their way to work, and even Tony Lloyd, the Labour MP for Manchester Central, came down to show his support (ironically he has been a supporter of plans for postal service privatisation).

For me personally it has been refreshing to see collaboration between different left groups on campus, and as one comrade put it, "It is a miracle that we have even managed to hand out the same flyer". I find it frustrating that comrades are divided from working together, (sometimes bitterly) due to which Trot sect they may have joined at freshers' fair.

There has been much publicity surrounding the 30,000 strike breakers brought in to undermine the strike, and in an attempt to avoid a repeat of the Liverpool postal strike in 2007 where students were used to undermine the strike, we pushed the 'Students Won't Be Scabs!' slogan.



## standing up to the threat of students scabbing

The culmination of the group's work so far was a 'day of action' on October 27th. Four hours were spent on a stall and £50 raised for the strike fund as we tried to spread support for the strike and publicise our public solidarity meeting in the evening which 40 people attended.

Bruce Davenport of the CWU and a RM worker for 30 years was the first to speak. He said that despite paying the contribution to his pension every week he has seen its value decrease, an example of workers being made to 'work longer, for less'. He helped to dispel the message found in the mainstream media that the dispute is simply due to modernising management and a dinosaur of a union.

Furthermore he commented that despite the strike being strong one scab had been bragging on Facebook that she has been able to afford a new tattoo due to crossing a picket line. He also spoke about how CWU members are fed up

with paying money to the Labour Party for the shit they get in return: recently 96% of CWU members in London voted to withdraw funding for Labour in a consultative ballot, although it is yet to be seen what result a national ballot would produce.

Finally, he mentioned the stupidity of management's decision to set up a strikebreaking operation in a Yorkshire examining town. A former RM worker made a contribution from the floor and told us how the public's image of the cheery postie couldn't be further from the truth: she has never worked in such a hostile workplace in all her life and the bullying was so bad that she had to escort a worker across the shop floor to his counsellor as he was so afraid of the management.

Next to speak was Peter Grant of ASLEF, the train drivers' union. He explained how railway workers have fought against privatisation which has resulted in ASLEF and the RMT becoming the strongest trade unions in the country. He informed the group that the train drivers are behind the postal workers and that his union may be preparing to strike as well due to the unfair sacking of a driver in Blackpool. Needless to say we made clear we would fully support him and his comrades in such a case. He ended his speech by replying to a contribution from a member of the Campaign for a New Workers Party (a Socialist Party-led initiative) that 'we do not want another labour party'.

The final speaker was Geoff Brown, secretary of the Manchester Trades Council and member of the SWP. In his speech he bemoaned that sympathy is 'like honey on your elbow' and said that this sympathy must be turned into solidarity, something which has been absent from Britain since the miners' strike.



# honduras: democracy has not been restored

★An article by Socialismo o Barbarie's Honduran section on the peace accord signed by centre-left president Manuel "Mel" Zelaya with the régime established by Roberto Micheletti after a military coup against Zelaya four months ago.

Unfortunately, what we predicted has played out: Mel Zelaya, the bourgeois politician, has proven his remarkable cowardice. Kneeling down at the feet of his US masters, he has signed a deal which not only abandons each and every one of the demands of the people's struggle (first and foremost, a Constituent Assembly) but it even appears that he has obtained not even a purely formal re-instatement of his powers.

The meaning of this is that Zelaya has given everything in exchange for nothing, in an act of utter subordination to the demands of his masters: licking the boots of imperialism. Both sides – pro-Micheletti and Zelayista – have given Congress the task of deciding whether "it makes sense or not to return Zelaya to government".

But now those in charge of Congress are saying – to those who want to listen – that "reinstating Zelaya would mean recognising that everything that went before was illegal". Obviously, what this parliamentary "high authority" means is that reinstating Zelaya would be "impracticable" and that "the Courts would surely recommend that reinstatement is inappropriate".

In these conditions we are faced with a blatant national and international political tricks campaign designed to save the fraudulent 29th November elections. This is a real scandal when, in fact, the Obama government did not lift a finger except to ensure that Zelaya would shamefully capitulate down the line, supporting the elections of 29th November, even if Zelaya does not manage to secure reinstatement...

In any case, Zelaya could be reinstated for a few hours after the elections themselves take place, and that only to then hand over the presidential band to he who seems like the real winner out of this whole hypocritical game: Porfirio Pepe Lobo, presidential candidate of the right-wing Partido Nacional.



*zelaya in his presidential regalia: but as we went to press it looked likely that november's elections would take place under the coup régime*

Lobo is a bosses' representative complicit in the coup who has demanded Zelaya's reinstatement for some short while purely so that he can hand over his presidential band and thus guarantee him legitimacy for his mandate. The truth is that there has been organised an international political-media show to smokescreen what is really happening, meaning the complete and utter validation of the coup.

Simply put, what we are seeing is the use of the whole political weight of Obama's imperial hegemony to ensure the elections represent the end of the crisis and avoiding any overflowing of the situation in Honduras, as well as validating the coup d'état.

That is why his envoy Tom Shannon lauded Obama's "pragmatism" in finding a political solution... Pragmatism which really means that Zelaya will not be reinstated for even five minutes... leaving by the wayside his political chief's so-called "attachment to the principles of democracy..."

We repeat, it must be clear that the Obama government acted only to rescue the 29th November elections, when the time came and it looked possible that they might be side-

tracked and de-legitimised by the popular resistance and mobilisation. The accords found the resistance at a clear low-point, given that its sell-out Zelayista leadership, with Zelaya's return, consciously and repeatedly worked to demobilise it with the rhetoric of "reconciliation". The movement was subordinated to passive hopes in a deal-from-above to "resolve" the situation.

For over a month the resistance did not manage to lead anything worthy of its name, given that what had gone before was a process of heroic struggle without precedent in reaction to a military coup. But now the shameful cowardice of Zelaya, threatens to throw overboard a movement which really represented an advance in the political tradition of the country, making waves in Latin America and across the world.

However, the exploited and oppressed are no fools: already voices are emerging questioning the "betrayal" that "Micheletti continues and Zelaya is not coming back" and demanding explanation.

The immediate task for the comrades of the Honduran Socialist Workers' Party is to go out and denounce with all our forces this scandalous fraud, which does not even appear to secure a formal reinstatement of Zelaya, at the same time as calling for the building of a political pole independent of Zelaya, the Democratic Unification Party and other collaborationist forces.

Similarly our tasks relate to the independent candidacy of trade unionist Carlos H. Reyes, who has just reiterated his promise that with the continuation-in-power of the coup régime and without a formal reinstatement of Mel Zelaya before the elections on the 29th, he will not stand and will call for an active boycott and formal refusal to recognise them.

★On 9th November at a drinks' workers union meeting Carlos H. Reyes announced that he was pulling out of the presidential election. He rejected an election he considered "illegitimate, spurious and with a strong stench of fraud on the part of the de facto régime, which continues in power unwilling to restore a constitutional order in Honduras".

# month-long strike in france: 'papers for all!'

★As it completed its first month, the strike by migrant workers in Paris demanding regularisation which broke out on October 12th had spread to over forty workplaces, involving nearly 5,000 strikers. The latest headline-catching turn in the dispute has been the occupation of part of the French capital's Pompidou arts centre by restaurant staff.

As *The Commune* went to press the flash sixth floor restaurant had been occupied for over two weeks with forty people staying day and night "to show that even behind the decor of chic Parisian restaurants, undocumented workers are running things behind the scenes". Below appears an interview with Seni cleaners about the issues underlying the strike wave in the city.

## How do you explain the growth of the struggle?

The struggle begun with those currently under contract with Seni, but we have among our number comrades laid off after short-term contracts in the past. On our picket line some people are not currently employed by Seni. Some were laid off as long as five years ago. Some among us are on course for regularisation. The police prefectures give no response for six months or more: they obviously block applications, in particular in Val-de-Marne and Seine-Saint-Denis. Seni management claims to have seen the dossiers and have even shown us the documents which are supposed to prove it. However, when comrades turn up at the prefecture they are told that their application was never filed. Management and the police are stringing us along, and we want management to put an end to this. Until that happens, we are staying put: we are determined to win.

## The movement is demanding a regularisation bill...

If a bill is passed we hope it will be in our favour, recognising undocumented workers who live and work here and pay their taxes: but without discrimination, even those who have not even worked for one year. We are not on strike just for ourselves, we want papers for all workers, including those working illegally.

## What do you expect from the support committees?

We want them to help us resolve the situation, by signing petitions, collecting solidarity funds and coming in large numbers to our demonstrations. Some of us are parents of



*cgt poster in restaurant window: they work here, they live here, they're staying here!*

students, so we are counting on the support of RESF (Education Without Borders Network) which can mobilise other parents and teachers.

## Why is regularisation a trade union demand?

Yesterday, with the CGT, we established a Seni workers' union, including those with and without papers, and elected reps. The central fight is currently the struggle for papers. From that base we want to advance our right to housing, better wages, the right to retirement, respect for our need for free time, the right to sick pay and recognition of work accidents... All things that the bosses refuse to undocumented workers. We want everyone to be able to live with dignity in this land of 'human rights'.

**Sadio Dianka** is 41. He came from Mali in 2000 and worked in public works. With one of his cousins' papers he was employed by the Paris tram construction company Suburbaine, who knew of his immigration status.

"I have been involved since the start of the movement, and so I will be until the end. Since going on strike I am no longer afraid, and I am fighting for my rights and my future. The

involvement of the unions and supporters has given us confidence. Even if we were kicked out, we would be determined to occupy somewhere else! The bosses need us. One of them called five employment agencies without being able to find labour to hire. But we, the strikers, refuse to work precariously like we did before. Now, enough, we want regularisation.

"It is important to establish contact with other pickets, as unity makes us stronger. Equally we must discuss with our comrades from the Ministry of Regularisation [a campaign group demanding papers for all] which in its own way is fighting for the same thing, living here with respect and dignity. We must support each other and help each other out."

★The Où va la CGT? (Where is the CGT going?) blog expresses some of the concerns of anti-borders activists at the conservative role of the unions and their demands.

[The unions and campaigns] are advancing their stated objective of a "ministerial bill to allow the regularisation of all undocumented workers". This is the second act of the great 2008 movement, which only achieved very limited results.

In a few weeks, over some 47 sites across the Paris region, 4592 workers have joined the strike: but, we are told, not to secure their own regularisation, but rather to secure a bill to regularise all migrant workers, comprising all categories, those working on the black market, as agency staff, household maids, and unemployed undocumented workers living in the shadows.

So without saying so much the CGT confirms that in fact it never won such an agreement at the end of the 2008 strike, as it always claimed in order to suppress the first strike waves.

This "bill" affair tells us a lot about the role the CGT always wants to play: not to launch a general movement to force the government to cave, but to pressure it to achieve a "harmonious and calm" management of immigration according to the demands of the capitalist economy (which as we all know, is in rude health...)

Our undocumented comrades are not embarrassed by such subtleties. What they want is papers, regularisation, full stop! With or without any bill, regularisation!



# communism twenty year

★November marks twenty years since the fall of the Berlin wall. This event represented one of the high points of a great mass struggle against the tyrannical order in the Eastern Bloc, and led to the downfall of the Soviet Union. But with the defeats of movements opposed to both these statist régimes and the free market, the popular movements of 1989 are now used to prove there is no alternative to capitalism.

Here we present sections of a series of interviews with communists from the former Eastern Bloc focussing on the struggles of the time, what system really existed in the “communist” countries and what has happened to the working class over the last twenty years.

**How do you evaluate the events of 1989-1991 in the USSR and Eastern Europe in light of the aspirations of the time?**

**Goran Markovic, Workers' Communist Party of Bosnia (GM):** These were revolutions against the corrupt system of the Soviet Union and its satellites which saw itself collapse because of its economic inefficiency and the inability of its ruling class to adapt to people's needs and aspirations. The revolutions fought for more human rights, especially in the political sphere, and for better living conditions. Unfortunately, in many people's minds, these revolutions were understood as anti-communist revolutions, which they objectively were not. They caused great damage to the communist idea, that is for sure, but they were not revolutions against a communist or socialist society, which never existed in Eastern Europe. However, it is quite sure that people who were drawn into these revolutions didn't expect to achieve what happened later and what is still going on — crude neo-liberal capitalism.

**Roman, Vpered, Ukraine (RV):** As far as 'aspirations' are concerned, I would not misrepresent facts and feelings if I said that people had been expecting a lot from independence and the 'market economy'. They were enthusiastic and though it was a victory. They couldn't imagine capitalism was so horrific. Many believe that the capitalism we have in Ukraine is 'false', 'deformed', and there is a 'right', 'true' capitalism awaiting us out there, which 'we will build' some lucky day. The financial crisis, economic depression and capitalism's inability to make it good ought to sober them up.

**Marxist Labour Party, Russia (MLP):** It was an objective historical process, and, as this often happens, a dialectically contradictory one. It led to the destruction of much of the productive forces of the USSR, to the impoverishment of a large segment of the population of the country. At the same time, it destroyed the “Iron Curtain” and thus provided the inclusion of Russian and other post-Soviet economies into the mechanism of global productive forces. The events in the USSR of the late 80s and early 90s of the last century, up to the liquidation of the Soviet Union itself, signified the completion of the Russian bourgeois revolution “in the broad sense”. This revolution lasted for almost 100 years – 1905-1991/93.

**Volodymyr Ischenko, co-editor of Commons, Ukraine (VI):** Was revolutionary action necessary or was it possible to push the Soviet nomenklatura to some progressive reforms? The answer to this question largely determines our attitude to the 1989 protests. With hindsight we can say that the 1990s neoliberal reforms were disastrous for the Ukrainian economy, culture and society in general. But should we consider the 1989 mass protests as just legitimating cover for privatising property by the part of the old Soviet elite? I would say no. Many people in Ukraine and in the USSR in general genuinely aspired towards some kind of democratic socialism with a “human face”, some even for a self-governing, libertarian socialism.

The Confederation of Anarcho-syndicalists was not a small organisation in the late 1980s and the first title of the People's Movement of Ukraine (Narodnyi Rukh Ukrainy) was People's Movement of Ukraine for *Perestroika* [restructuring]. It was a strategic mistake by this popular wing of the 1989 events that they were closely allied with the so called “democratic” part of the split *nomenklatura*.

But many — even great — revolutions were defeated because of the lack of independent revolutionary organisations and we cannot disdain them for this. 1989 was a victory and a defeat at the same time: the victory of the emerging elite of a peripheral capitalist society and a defeat of the movement for genuine socialism. It would be absurd to call what we have now in Ukraine “western-style capitalism”. It is not “western-style” but it is becoming more and more similar to colonial-style, Third World capitalism with huge inequalities, the predominance of low surplus-value export production and mass migration from impoverished regions to wealthier



*eastern europe has been pulled into the western fold: but the results of the free market have been mixed*

countries. But we should also understand that the basis for this was laid down much earlier in the Brezhnev period when the USSR integrated to the world economy primarily as a supplier of natural resources.

**How would you characterise the society that existed before 1989-91, and is there any continuity between then and today?**

**MLP:** In the USSR there existed a catch-up model of state capitalism. The temporarily nationalised property allowed the Soviet Union (Russia) and many other countries of the “socialist camp” to successfully overtake the developed countries, as well as to quickly eliminate vestiges of feudalism. Indeed, in the USSR there existed commodity-money relations, wage labour, classes and other attributes characteristic of the capitalist mode of production. The classics of Marxism maintained: where there is hired labour, it generates capital.

These notions are inseparably linked. The “socialist state” making investments in certain sectors of the national economy, like other capitalist countries, was in fact a capitalist society, in which the functions of private capitalists were performed by the bureaucratic bourgeoisie. This wasn't, of course, a traditional capitalist society in the superstructure, but its basis was certainly a capitalist one.

It should be noted that Marx and Engels criticised the petty-bourgeois, bourgeois, state, etc. “socialisms”, which had no relation to the Marxist socialism. For all this the “state socialism” is a state capitalism in its essence. Today there exists in Russia a “normal” private-ownership capitalism, and Russia itself is an imperialist country of, so to speak, second order in contrast with the leading imperialist powers.

The continuity between the USSR and modern Russia is, first of all, in an enormous influence of the state bureaucracy on society, and in the absence of traditions of organised class struggle among Russian workers. The point is that in the Soviet Union this struggle, on the one hand, was forestalled by a wide range of social benefits and guarantees, and, on the other hand, if it occurred, it was severely suppressed by the repressive organs. The continuity also shows itself in the personal composition of the elite of society: many of the former party functionaries now occupy prominent positions in business and in the government bureaucracy.

**Valeriy Predtechenskiy, Russia, (VP):** Following the victory of Soviet Russia in the Civil War Lenin himself practically organised, and Stalin subsequently totalised, under the name of “socialism”, a state-capitalist phase in Russian capitalist development.

A society with domination of state monopoly of the material means of production, the Soviet Union, represented the highest level of capitalist concentration of public material means of production in hands of the state – the state as a unitary capitalist, represented by the Politburo. There was a unitary system of forming the productive forces. All the sectors of the national economy were subordinated to a

unitary state management. The population of the country was universally proletarianised in a unitary system of wage-labour.

When the USSR collapsed, the mode of production sharply fell down to small-scale commodity capitalism. Predatory types quickly embarked on looting, selling out and squandering the material wealth accumulated over the whole Soviet period.

At present, Russia is struggling to raise itself to the level of “civilised” sectoral monopolism (imperialism). However, this “rise” is again due to squandering its mineral wealth and in no way due to the development of the means of production. So Russia's oligarchs, the richest billionaires are not a patch, as the saying goes, on their Western competitors as regards productivity levels.

**Do you think the events of twenty years ago represent the historic triumph of capitalism and the defeat of communism?**

**GM:** The events of twenty years ago cannot represent the historic defeat of communism because communism or socialism did not exist as a society in Eastern and Central Europe. It could be said that it was a historic defeat of bureaucratic collectivism in its Stalinist variant. On the other hand, these events were not the historic triumph of capitalism because one social system does not triumph if it overbears its alternative but if it is unable to solve contradictions on its own terrain. Capitalism proved unable to do that and that is why it cannot be seen as eternal social system.

**Myroslav, Vpered, Ukraine (MV):** Absolutely, There's no doubt about it. We don't think that the Soviet Union was communist but at the same there's no doubt that the path we chose twenty years ago has turned out the worst social and economic scenario. The so-called ‘civilised world’ doesn't need us. Our role is to be a buffer zone between Russia and the West, to supply cheap labour force and brains, and to be a sump for migrants. That's it.

**Borys Chervonyy, Ukrainian Left Party (BC):** Surely, no. It was a defeat; but it was the defeat of Stalinism and the dictatorial system represented by it. It was a triumph, but it was a triumph of one part of the world capitalist system over the other.

**What do you think the legacy of official and dissident communism is?**

**GM:** Experiences of so-called communist regimes, on the one hand, and of communist movements which tended to liberate themselves from so-called official communism, on the other hand, give us plenty of useful conclusions. First of all, socialism cannot rest on the state, but on self-organised workers and citizens who govern the economy and the state by themselves, directly and through democratically elected delegates. Secondly, as each society, even a socialist one, is divided into different groups, with different interests and opinions, ideas of human rights, especially political liberties and political pluralism, are inseparably connected to social-



# s after the berlin wall fell

ism. Thirdly, there is no one group, even the communist party, that could claim to have a historic or any other right to be an a priori avant-garde and to have a special or privileged position in process of decision-making. The communist party is only one of many political and social organisations which is trying to persuade people in the correctness of its ideology, proposals and ultimate goals. Fourthly, the struggle for new, socialist society is in the first place struggle against the bourgeoisie and against the bureaucracy that has already been formed in the framework of the workers' movement while still in opposition. There are two main means against the bureaucratisation of the workers' movement and hence of socialist society: new forms of organisation and reliance on extra-parliamentary forms of activity

**MLP:** In the USSR this tradition was practically destroyed or it existed in the deep underground with no real influence upon social processes. Today there exist in Russia radical-communist organisations. But they have no serious influence due to the fact that the historical stage the country is experiencing is still far from the struggle for communism. Russia's society is too consumer-bourgeois; there are almost no more or less large-scale sprouts of communist relations. Accordingly, there is no "demand" for communist activities...

**VP:** The legacy of official "communism" manifests itself in the propaganda for returning to the socialist system of the USSR. This is the common sin of all the present "communist" parties headed by the openly pro-bourgeois Communist Party of the Russian Federation. Dissident communists (of the left) define the socialist system of the USSR as a bourgeois one, state capitalism. However, there prevails the view of "backward state capitalism". This opinion accentuates the fact that the USSR state monopolism used feudal forms of governing agriculture (restricting the possibility of persons to move) as well as the fact that the total state-capitalist neglected to provide the population with domestic appliances. I, personally, treat the USSR as an advanced state capitalism. After all, despite adverse natural conditions, it competed with the sectoral monopolies of the West, having been able to entirely control all branches of industry with the state. Even Hitler had never dreamt of that in Nazi Germany. And with us it was implemented relatively easily in the course of Stalinisation merely due to people's hopes for the communism later to come. Today's sectoral monopolism could not hope to generate such expectations.



*much of the post-eastern bloc left is against the western powers but supports the russian state's efforts to assert itself as the dominant force in the region*

**Since the collapse of the USSR some in the left view America as the main imperialist power to be opposed, but do you think Russia is also imperialist?**

**GM:** Russia is trying to recuperate from heavy economic, political and military blows it received during capitalist restoration. That is why it still cannot play the role of imperialist state it would like to. However, it is an imperialist state in its intentions and goals and therefore communists should not have any hopes in its role in international relations.

**VI:** Of course, instances of anti-American and "patriotic" rhetoric should not deceive the left. Definitely Putin's Russia cannot be viewed as any kind of progressive or anti-imperialist regime even of the Chávez or Morales type. The Russian oligarchic elite is quite well embedded in transnational ruling class networks whilst revenues from natural

resources export are not spent on education, public health or any kind of social infrastructure. Instead, Putin continued with neoliberal reforms reducing labour rights in the new Labour Code, privatising housing and the public sector. But at the same time Russia should not be demonised. In the same way as nationalist rhetoric is used in Russia for ruling class legitimacy, an opposing nationalist rhetoric is used in Ukraine shifting responsibility for all problems to Russia's hostile policies and its "fifth column" in Ukraine. Appeals to Russian imperialism as the most dangerous threat for the Ukrainian nation has become a common way to justify even neofascist movements. It became clear when ultra-right activist Maksim Chaika was killed in Odessa this spring. Many mainstream journalists and even president Yushchenko himself presented him just as a "patriot". Antifascists at the same time were deceitfully presented as "pro-Russian paramilitaries"

**What is the current situation of the working class?**

**MLP:** In general, the Russian workers are not yet organised into a class. The class's trade unions are being created, but this is the exception rather than the rule. There is an understanding of their oppressed position. But the struggle against capitalists is mostly led spontaneously and individually — through courts, changing places of employment, primitive forms of sabotage. As for prospects for a way ahead, we see them in the interaction of the organised Russian workers, first of all, with the organised Western proletarians.

**MV:** The situation in Ukraine is extremely difficult. Firstly, the working class is not extant as a political subject. It can be explained by the fact that it exists as a 'class in itself'. Secondly, the existent division of labour erodes the term and makes it uneconomic to organisationally revitalise it in the future. Thirdly, the mass media propaganda promoted by the ruling class (mostly by oligarchs) leaves no chance to produce an acceptable image of a worker, a producer who stands up to defend their rights. The consumer has taken over, a subject whose sense of life is determined by their ability to consume various goods of status, services, etc. Workers' sporadic attempts to self-organise around trade unions and actions of disobedience return no results. The labour movement is not even in a preparatory stage.

**How do you think genuine communists should organise and operate?**

**MLP:** We hold that the development of the left is directly connected with the development of the proletarian movement. They are like a political superstructure over this movement. Accordingly, a reliable basis for the organisation of communists can be only in proletarian class organisations. And their formation and growth occur in the real class struggle, in which communists must occupy an important place as well. As for the organisation of the current work of communists, we believe that one must proceed from the real present-day situation. Today we are in need of an all-left information network based on the new advanced technologies, as well as joint actions. We try to work in these directions.

**MV:** The Communist Party of Ukraine represents the Ukrainian post-Stalinist left today. Chinese-type state capi-

talism is their ideological orientation point. That is why Stalinist views are nothing but part of their history and aesthetics. In fact, they try to follow the line of revisionists such as Deng Xiaoping.

It seems to me that most important is to revitalise class and ecological discourse in all forms, first of all in organisational forms. We must build an organisation that could start the holy class war. And there is an enemy: according to the statistics, 2% of the population own 90% of the national wealth in Ukraine. So it is pointless to talk consensus, rapport, national solidarity and other bourgeois lies. We have two options: the closing of channels of vertical mobility and solidification of the existing asymmetric social structure, similarly to what they have done in Latin America, or the gradual building of class muscles for the struggle in the future.

**VI:** We can take some important insights from Ukrainian Marxists about the past but we cannot copy their analysis, rhetoric and action if we are striking for mass working class support not limited to certain regions and subcultures.

This is true not only for the Ukrainian Marxist tradition but for other more internationally recognised left-wing schools of thought. The left has to reconstruct and develop its theory in close connection with emerging grassroots movements: working-class, urban, environmental... The left's theory should be once again re-connected to practical mass struggle. The problems of grassroots movements' strategy, organisation and mobilisation should be the primary issues for the left. Only in discussing and solving practical problems of progressive social change can we develop our theory further, making it more adequate to the task of changing objective reality. Another problem is that the Ukrainian left should be more aware and connected to debates and struggles in global anticapitalist movements, learning its lessons and taking on inspiring examples and models of organisation.

**What do you think real communism means today?**

**GM:** For most people, communism means concentration camps, lack of democracy, inefficient economy, ideological indoctrination, even hunger, like in North Korea, etc. However, real communism does not have anything to do with these features and with societies where these things happened. Real communism means an end of economic exploitation and political domination. It means an end to the division of society into elite and masses. It means self-organisation and self-activity of all members of society who wish to be active participants of processes of decision-making, with almost limitless pluralism of organisations, opinions and activities of different subjects who do not oppress each other. It is a society based on social ownership and self-management, economically self-sustainable so that it guarantees free and universal health care, education, access to culture, without unemployment and with possibilities to its members to cultivate themselves as full persons.

**VI:** I do not dare to give exhaustive definitions of what real communism could mean today. But what is most important is that real communism now must be with the masses and for the masses. It is definitely not another subculture or chat room for a handful of freaks pretending to be a "real vanguard" just because they have read a few more 100 or 150-year-old books.

**VP:** Today the concept of "real communism" is interpreted by many as Stalinist socialism, but in a philistine manner — "with a human face". i.e. meaning state monopolism without totalitarian repression i.e. utopia. Moreover, the versions of such utopian constructions are as numerous as their authors: you cannot count them. Whereas the real (true) concept of the real (true) communism, even according to the most simple and primitive logic, should be determined as the highest scientific achievement of humanity in its social structure.

Real communism represents primitive communism, but at the highest level of social development, using all the best in the achievements of humanity. The modern, social notion of "gens" is objectively, economically represented by the work collective of an enterprise. If the ownership of the workforce and production technologies is transferred into the hands of this collective body, then we get a self-reproducing, and self-governing collectivity — a gens — of a new, civilised generation, i.e., using modern language, a commune, a production and reproduction social cell.

**BC:** I think real communism means a classless and stateless self-managed society based on the principles of collective ownership of the means of production and distribution, and an economy which is oriented not for the market, but for real human needs. Communism will abolish all forms of oppression; and will see the realisation of the idea of liberation in all its forms. Communism can come only from below, via diverse forms of workers' self organisation.



# scottish ruling class: division over union

by Allan Armstrong

The latest talk amongst Scotland's 'chattering classes' is that the SNP Scottish Government's proposed bill for a referendum on Scottish independence, announced on 3rd September, is doomed. Why? — because a closed-door debate held by the Lib-Dems, last weekend in Dunfermline, finally agreed to uphold their former UK leader, Menzies Campbell's and current Scottish leader, Tavish Scott's earlier decision to oppose any such referendum.

There had been considerable opposition amongst the ranks of the federalist Lib-Dems to this stance. The party is committed to constitutional referenda on European Union and on electoral reform in the UK, so opposition to a referendum in Scotland seems somewhat hypocritical to many party members. Furthermore, back in 2007, immediately after the Holyrood election, there had been every likelihood that the Lib-Dems could have joined a coalition government with the SNP. They could have made the inclusion of their favoured federal option for the UK, in any future referendum, a condition of their support. However, as with Labour and the Conservatives, commitment to the Union is far more important for Lib-Dem leaders than any notion of democracy.

The rise of the SNP and the threat of an independence referendum have led to a split amongst the British ruling class over how to deal with the possible threat to the UK. At the moment there is a definite majority shared consensus, held by the leaderships of all three main Unionist parties, that the best way to derail any threat to the Union is to unite to prevent any referendum. The very idea of genuine democratic debate, as opposed to elite manipulation of 'public opinion', is alien to Establishment Unionism.

When the SNP announced its 'National Conversation' public consultation exercise on their proposed referendum, Gordon Brown set up the alternative Unionist alliance's Calman Commission to look into devolution. It surprised nobody when it came up with minimal further devolutionary proposals. Armed with somewhat shallow promises of constitutional change in the future, the current Unionist alliance has concentrated its fire on using all the bureaucratic methods at the disposal of the UK state to stymie any meaningful democratic reform and prevent a referendum from being held.

Whilst the official SNP proposal to return to pre-1707 United Kingdom (they remain silent on the later Irish/Northern Irish 'addition'), with its shared monarchy, is hardly very radical in intention, for the British ruling class now is not the time to rock the Unionist boat. They need to show a united face



to her majesty's pleasure: alex salmond has set his sights on an independence-lite

whilst fighting imperial wars, particularly in Afghanistan. For, whether or not the SNP leadership like it or not, the conduct of British military policy will enter any independence debate; and not just opposition to a new generation of Trident missiles stationed on the Clyde; but also Scotland's continued participation in NATO.

However, there is a minority view held by some Unionists that a different strategy should be used to see off not just the SNP, but any meaningful threat to the Union for the foreseeable future. The disgraced former Scottish Labour leader, Wendy Alexander, famously said of the SNP's proposed referendum — "Bring it on!" The former hard line Tory Scottish Secretary of State, Michael Forsyth (now Baron of Dunleath) is also a strong advocate of holding a referendum.

You can rest assured that their stance comes from no deep-seated commitment to democracy, but from a British strategic view, that sees the management of any referendum campaign as a subordinate part of wider mobilisation of the anti-democratic forces of the UK state — the secret service, the military (even if only with hinted threats to begin with), the judiciary — along with the Right wing press and fawning academics. Manipulated referenda and elections have a long pedigree, as part of the ruling class armoury of control, from the Ulster Unionists' Northern Ireland Sovereignty Referendum of 1973, to the decorative elections recently held under US/British imperial auspices in Iraq and Afghanistan.

When Nick Griffin visited Scotland on October 28th, he said he supported a referendum on Scottish independence, but made it quite clear that the BNP would oppose any 'Yes' vote. In effect, he was signalling to the hardline Unionists that the services of the BNP were available if needed to de-

fend the Union. You only have to look 'over the water' to 'the Six Counties' to see that British governments are quite prepared to provide financial life-support to paramilitary loyalist organisations, who can be called upon by the 'secret state' when it is found necessary.

However, even the hard Right is still unsure as the best way to proceed. Ian Wilson, Grand Master of the Orange Order in Scotland, has said that the Order is prepared to back Labour in all those constituencies where it is best placed (i.e. the majority) to see off any SNP electoral challenges. The Conservatives' new alliance with the sectarian Official Unionists Party in 'the Six Counties' has yet to demonstrate its viability in the west of Scotland. Meanwhile, the fascist English/Scottish Defence League has threatened an anti-Islamic provocation in Glasgow on November 14th. Charlie Baillie, the BNP's Glasgow North East candidate, is also campaigning to 'Stop Islamic Colonisation: No More Mosques' under a Union Jack and BNP flag.

At present though, the very moderation of the SNP renders the need for the alternative harder British ruling class option less necessary. Having given their wholehearted support to the monarchy means the SNP leaders are prepared to play the political game by Westminster rules. These are designed to uphold the Union at all costs. The SNP Defence Spokesperson, Angus Robertson, recently announced that an independent Scottish government would accept English bases. He supports the war in Afghanistan, as long as it is conducted under UN auspices.

The SNP has long been committed to the global corporate order, seeking a favoured Scottish business niche market within this. Their illusions of a 'Scottish Tiger' 'neo-liberalism with a human face' were blown out of the water by the Credit Crunch — the Royal Bank of Scotland and the Bank of Scotland were at the core of the problem, and certainly no part of any solution. Whether attacking the jobs and conditions of street cleaners in Edinburgh, or suspending SSP councillor, Jim Bolland, in West Dumbartonshire, the SNP in office have now become part of the general ruling class offensive to make workers pay for the crisis.

The SNP wants to give a good lick of tartan paint to the institutions of the Union in Scotland, and to come to a new deal with US/British imperialism. Socialists in Scotland support the break-up of the UK and British Empire, along with its alliance with US imperialism. To do this we need to build an alliance based on 'internationalism from below' throughout these islands.

# obituary of chris harman, 1942-2009

by Andy Wilson

Chris Harman, revolutionary socialist author and activist and a long-time member of the Central Committee of the Socialist Workers Party, died of a heart attack on the evening of Saturday November 7th while speaking at the Socialist Days conference in Cairo.

From a working class background, Chris joined the Socialist Review Group (forerunner of the International Socialists and the SWP) in the early 60s while a student at Leeds University. He became one of the leading activists in the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign while at the London School of Economics, although he eventually abandoned his studies to become a full-time worker for the IS/SWP. Chris remained a constant among the leadership there until the day of his death.

The IS that Chris joined was distinguished from the mass of the extra-parliamentary left by its analysis of the Stalinist regimes as simply variant forms of capitalism, managed and run by the state bureaucracy. This theory of 'State Capitalism' had precursors but was first fully developed by Tony Cliff, and it allowed the IS group to define a unique position for itself, summed up by its slogan 'Neither Washington nor Moscow but International Socialism'. Cliff had originally been an orthodox Trotskyist but this definitive break with the idea that Stalinism in some sense defended the gains of the Russian Revolution, combined with demonstrating that the Stalinist countries were still ultimately driven by the rhythms of international capital accumulation, meant that the IS tradition opened itself up to various libertarian currents that gave it the potential to relate far more productively to the upsurge of militancy when it finally arrived in the late 60s and early 70s.

As a Central Committee member Chris remained largely (though not always entirely) loyal to Cliff, siding with him in factional fights from the 'turn to Democratic Centralism' and the expulsion of Jim Higgins and the IS Opposition onwards. Chris was the editor of the group's theoretical journal, the *International Socialism Journal*, and, for almost 30 years,



harman: respected even beyond swp ranks

of *Socialist Worker*. However it might have appeared from the outside, for a generation of SWP members it was Harman rather than Cliff who was considered as the group's most important theoretician.

Whatever his contributions to the leadership of the SWP it is likely that he will be remembered primarily for a series of books he wrote in support of Marxism generally and IS politics specifically, most of which managed the rare feat of combining detailed original research and analysis with a clear style and an impassioned call to action — every book was written with the intention of winning people to socialist politics in the circumstances of the time.

Whereas Cliff developed the core IS theory of State Capitalism it was Chris who applied the theory most tellingly — in *Class Struggles in Eastern Europe: 1945-83*, for instance, which detailed the (often hidden) history of the way that the Stalinist system also created working class resistance. Time and again he was key to developing core areas of IS theory, relating it to both the widest questions of history and economics but also to the issues of the day. *The Fire the Last Time: 1968 and After* was a masterly analysis of the circumstances that gave rise to the upsurge of 1968 and beyond but, more importantly, argued that the same structural flaws

in the system persisted and would lead to renewed outbursts of militancy and resistance in future, for which socialists should prepare. Works such as *The Summer of 1981: A Post-Riot Analysis* and, more recently, *The Prophet And The Proletariat: Islamic Fundamentalism, Class and Revolution* put contemporary events firmly within the framework of an internationalist, working class revolutionary perspective.

On a personal note, Chris was instrumental in my own expulsion from the SWP some 15 years ago, but in the years since then I never stopped thinking that he was probably the most outstanding Marxist of his generation, and it saddened me to have fallen out with him so thoroughly. Whatever my own disagreements with current SWP practice it always seemed likely that such shortcomings were far more likely to be overcome if Chris was involved in their solution. This thought has occurred to me increasingly often of late as the SWP has entered something of a crisis in which it is being forced to reassess its direction and its structures: in conversations with SWP activists the one assumption we have all shared, no matter what our starting point, is that Chris Harman would play an overwhelmingly positive role in any such changes. Among SWP activists he was seen not only as a mercurial intellectual but as someone with whom it was possible to speak frankly and honestly. He was also an innately modest man, to the point of seeming shy and diffident, but he took his responsibility to the IS tradition extremely seriously, never took his senior position for granted and always listened seriously to what the rank and file members of his party had to say.

Along with many others of my generation I learned much of my Marxism from Chris Harman. Anyone who has ever been encouraged and informed by him — whether through his books, his articles in various party papers and journals, or through hearing him speak at meetings and conferences — will be sad at the passing of such a tremendously inspiring figure. He was not only an organic revolutionary intellectual, but a brilliant one, who lived a life dedicated entirely to rebuilding the tradition of 'socialism from below'. We are much the worse off for his tragic, untimely death.



# interview: austrian student occupation

★ On 2nd November Nathan Coombs spoke with an activist involved in the university occupation in Vienna.

**Why did you decide to occupy? How and when did you occupy the building, and why did you choose the particular space that you did?**

After years of exhausting fights between students, teachers and the rectorate there was evidently great discontent. One of the main reasons for this was a successive undemocratisation of the academy of fine arts going along with a structural empowerment of the rector. Even the election of the rector caused significant resentment and was followed by a state ruling that Clementine Deliss, who applied for the rector's job, was sexually discriminated against, as she was not chosen although she had been the only candidate with a broad popularity amongst students, teachers and the senate.

Our goal was not to get stuck in political helplessness, which we had experienced for a long period before, but to take action and participate in political decision processes.

At October 22nd, Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen, the rector of the academy, signed the new development and financial agreement that would likely include the realisation of the Bologna process, including at this stage the institution of the bachelor-master system for the teaching department and the department of fine arts.

As a form of protest against the neoliberalisation of education there was a press conference organised by the students that led to the occupation of the main hall.

Besides the demonstration the goal of occupying was to overcome the lack of consciousness, to create a situation where information can circulate, where alternative concepts can be worked on theoretically and in every day life and to give a voice and publicity to the aims of students and teachers (who were in solidarity right from the beginning).

The main hall, which is the geographical center of the university, until then had been an underemployed space that could not be used by anybody except by enterprises having their festivities and Christmas parties. We occupied a room – or a room was taken – that was badly needed and that we did not have before.

**Have you been influenced by the Occupy California movement?**

We knew of the things happening in Santa Cruz and I can also say that they impressed us. But as the political situation — based on the politics of the last years — made this step necessary, I think we would also have occupied without knowing about the Santa Cruz movement. We have now established contact and exchange with those students.

**Are you interested in making demands? Are these limited to education? How do you see student occupation movement in relation to wider political issues?**

As our starting point was defending the contract between our university and the ministry, we regarded demands (against the implementation of Bachelor/Master, against neoliberalisation and economisation of the education system) as being necessary and important for our situation.

But we still are aware of the discussions and problems that are connected to making demands.

Our demands are not at all just university specific but are meant to show the broader social context connected with educational problems. This is not only part of our demands, but furthermore texts are being produced that deal with different social issues as for instance the kindergarten protest, the problem of wage-labour and precarious workers' conditions, the marginalisation and discrimination of people because of sex, sexual orientation, religion, ancestry... a critique of neoliberal politics, and so on. As an open space, the university radiates into society and is soaked by its outside. That is why topics of education politics can never be understood and solved without a social connection and an awareness of broader structures. And even the students themselves have experiences with discrimination concerning their identity as men, women, migrants, etc.

**In the text of the University of California Santa Cruz movement, they described their position as "communist" — how do you take this? Do you associate yourself more in the communist or anarchist traditions? What do you think of the analysis in the *Communique from an Absent Future*?**

Of course we read the *Communique from an Absent Future* and just quoted a passage today that I think perfectly

fits the point: "We demand not a free university but a free society. A free university in the midst of a capitalist society is like a reading room in a prison." But unlike them, we are not bound to a specific political tradition. Although we define ourselves as politically left wing and there are anarchist positions as well as communist ones amongst the students, we think it very important to make pluralism possible. I am personally much more connected to anarchist theory and traditions but that's my private approach and not the topic of the protests.

**What do you think of the text by the French Tarnac-9 collective's *The Coming Insurrection*?**

I think that there are people who have read that text, I myself actually have read it. I would not say I am influenced by it, but at the same time I do not want to deny. But as I tried to explain earlier we do not define ourselves as a specifically anarchist movement although some of us would call themselves anarchists.

**What has been the response to the occupation by students, staff and the mainstream press?**

There was solidarity with the protests from the teachers right from the beginning that exhibited itself, for instance, by some teachers becoming active within the occupation, compiling the programme for the occupied room where we have different things happening such as workshops, talks, concerts etc. But the reaction of the press was radically different as they tried to infantilise the protests and define the objectors as lazy, beer drinking, partying, apolitical students. By now this has kind of changed as we worked very hard at communicating our theoretical demands, opinions and where we are coming from.

**What is the future?**

An end to the occupation is neither planned nor foreseeable.

By now we are in the situation where we start to realise the problems with demanding utopias — although I think that the only things you can demand are necessarily utopian. That does not mean that there is going to be a relativisation of our theories, goals, wishes and demands but it means that there are many things left to be talked about and that there is loads of theoretical work to be done still.

## question time row: did the straw man really slay the griffin?

by Adam Ford

Viewers of the BBC's Question Time were confronted by many truly repellent outbursts from the platform on 22nd October. The screening — which had generated massive controversy due to the debut appearance of British National Party chairman Nick Griffin — often broke out into shouting and boos as the audience expressed their disgust with Griffin's barely disguised racism and homophobia. But a significant early comment by another panellist went almost unnoticed amidst all the fury: Jack Straw claimed that Labour and the other 'mainstream' parties have a "moral compass". In this article I will examine that claim, look at the ideological role of Question Time, and criticise the tactics of Unite Against Fascism and the Socialist Workers Party.

Since it began in 1979, Question Time has been a centrepiece of the BBC's political coverage. During that time, it has played a significant role in framing the national policy debate, in determining which views are (and which are not) acceptable as 'mainstream'. When the programme began, in the early days of Margaret Thatcher's first Conservative government, there were four panellists — one each from Conservatives, Labour and the Liberals (as the third party were known at the time). The fourth panellist would be a prominent 'talking head', often from the fields of academia, the media or religion. In 1999, the panel was expanded to five guests, and the show experimented with 'outsider' figures, such as comedians, but this was quickly ditched.

The 'mainstream' of British politics has travelled far to the right since Question Time first hit the screens, as a result of accelerating globalisation and the ever-widening chasm between the richest and everyone else. Over that period, Question Time's panels have marched in lockstep. For that reason alone, Griffin's appearance during a time of economic collapse marks a deeply worrying lowpoint. Though the fourth and fifth guests can't be from one of the three main parties, their views are normally broadly in line with the 'mainstream' consensus. On the rare occasions when a panellist's views are outside the boundaries of ruling class respectability — either to the left or to the right — they can expect to be taken to task by the presenter. This serves to solidify the current boundaries in the public consciousness.

This is what happened. Nick Griffin — the representative of a racist political party which has recently had electoral success at the expense of the hated 'mainstream' — was



*jack straw: no ally for migrants against the bnp*

hailed over the coals by David Dimbleby, who had the disrespectful air of a public school teacher reprimanding a wayward pupil. At one point, Dimbleby even asked Griffin "why are you smiling?" — a question that would never be asked of a politician from one of the three established parties.

Nowhere was this beating of the bounds more noticeable than in the section dealing with the BNP's attempt to claim Winston Churchill — that cuddly totem of British imperialism — as one of their own. While it's hard to imagine quotes such as "I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes" going down badly at fascist meetings, Churchill has become a cherished icon of the British ruling class, thanks mainly to the fact that he was in charge for most of World War Two, he made some speeches, and Britain didn't lose. In the mythology, this virulently anti-working class aristocratic eugenicist — and not the workers who fought Franco for example — is portrayed as having 'defended freedom' from Hitler's Nazis. The BNP's attempted appropriation of all this imagery is therefore their ultimate challenge to the 'mainstream'.

While leading MPs had called on the BBC not to allow Griffin a platform, Labour's 'Justice Secretary' Jack Straw, Baroness Warsi of the Conservatives and Chris Huhne of the Lib Dems took the opportunity to appear relatively reasonable and progressive. This at a time when all three are backing calls for massive attacks on working class living standards as a remedy for the unfolding historic crisis of the capitalist system. However, it was often hard to tell Griffin's

'concerned citizen' act from Warsi — the Yorkshire-born daughter of Pakistani parents — who claimed that a Conservative government would set a cap on the numbers coming in. Huhne also complained that Labour had "lost control" of the borders.

But the prize for hypocrisy must surely go to Straw, whose "moral compass" always seems to guide him towards his own self interest as a spokesman for the UK capitalist elite. This is a man who, as Foreign Secretary, deceived the country in the build-up to the Iraq invasion — aimed at winning control over the country's oilfields — which has cost hundreds of thousands of lives. As Home Secretary, he pushed through draconian attacks on civil liberties, and was in charge of the fortress conditions that saw fifty-eight Chinese migrants die as they were smuggled into the UK. And in 2006 he launched his own anti-Islam provocation, when he denounced women who choose to wear the niqab veil.

It is a healthy sign that so many people opposed Griffin having such a public platform for his views, and the protesters who invaded Television Centre acted bravely. But in the run-up to the appearance, the Socialist Workers Party-led Unite Against Fascism showed its reformist colours by appealing to the powers that be. *Socialist Worker* even claimed that Griffin's invite "...flies in the face of [the BBC's] responsibilities as a public service broadcaster."

This painting of the BBC in 'neutral' colours misleads and disarms the working class. Day after day, it propagandises in favour of the elite, whether dealing with cuts and repression at home, or the state's imperialist adventures abroad. It is less than a year since the Corporation — in the name of "neutrality" — refused to screen an emergency appeal for the Gazan victims of Israeli aggression. Question Time plays a key role in this whole process. What's more, a party with more than fifty elected representatives could legitimately (in the purely legal sense of that term) demand significant airtime from a "public service broadcaster" following the norms of capitalist 'democracy'.

It is certainly a terrible shame that BBC viewers were faced with Nick Griffin last night, but anyone calling for 'mainstream' politicians or establishment figures to step in and prevent certain political views being expressed should not be surprised when working class perspectives are also excluded. It is precisely that working class which must become conscious of itself as the capitalist crisis deepens, and make its own independent decisions about who gets airtime.



# communist recomposition and workers' representation

by Chris Ford

We are in a time of transition: New Labour is on the way out with the almost certain ascendancy of the Tories to government in June 2010. Many certainties from the period of New Labour are also passing, and the whole working class has a right to be anxious about what to expect from a Tory Party which is sharpening the knives.

This should not be a time for *business as usual* thinking amongst activists. This should be a time of critical reflection over what has taken place over the last thirteen years. Why have the trade unions failed to reinvigorate during the period of partial recovery in the economy? Why has the response to the crisis of working class political representation staggered from one failure to another? There is a third rarely discussed question which should be important, at least for a minority of the most militant section of our movement: a crisis of communism.

The last few years in particular should have been favourable for revival and growth of the communist movement. Capitalism is stricken by a deep structural crisis of war, unemployment, mass poverty and looming environmental catastrophe. Millions are disillusioned and discontent with capitalism. Yet the communist movement has not revived and grown! It is to those genuine communists who want to see a revival of our movement and to remove the obstacles to such a revival that this article is addressed.

## Workers' representation on ice

Whether or not there is a left electoral alliance at the General Election won't solve the crisis of working class representation. As the New Labour era draws to its close, it is not so much that the labour movement is at a crossroads, but that an historical phase has run its course. It is surely a time for re-evaluation.

Part of the problem has been the manner in which the entire question has been framed by the traditional left. It has been seen as one arising from the transformation of the Labour Party not as an issue of the labour *movement* as a whole. The Tories don't see things with such tunnel vision — one of their major policy studies is entitled *Labour and the Trade Unions: an Analysis of a Symbiotic Relationship* — which aims to restrict the ability of organised labour to engage in any political activity.

Historically this symbiotic relationship has failed. Part of the roots of the derailment can be traced to the division of the labour movement into a "political arm" and an "industrial arm". It was thought that the "political arm" — which cohered into the Labour Party — would legislate in the interests of the working class. But instead of strengthening the fighting force of labour in its struggles with capital, the 'political arm' confined the unions to 'trade disputes'. What was supposed to be the 'political voice of labour', engaged in 'gradual change' ended up imposing capital's interests. The Labour Party was largely the political reflex of leaders, who accepted the ideas of moderate trade unionism, the spirit of compromise, translated into middle-class Parliamentary activity.

This reformist model, that of the industrial-political divide, was reinforced during the years of the post-war boom with workers securing significant social reforms. Indeed the working class went on an offensive which began to break out of the old constraints and ways of thinking. But with the onset of the structural crisis of capital around 1974, and the ensuing capitalist counter-offensive everything changed. We saw neo-liberal restructuring, working class defeats and retrogression. As Istvan Meszaros explains: "Once, however, the historical phase of capital's expansionary concessions is left behind, the total capitulation of reformist labour we witnessed in the last few decades accompanies it." Essentially the rug was pulled out from under the labour movement, dominated as it was by reformist Labourites and Stalinist communists.

If we accept this analysis of the depth of the changes that have occurred then we can also see the past initiatives to solve the crisis of workers' representation as self-defeating by their own limitations. It makes no sense to re-create a pure and simple electoral party which will reconstitute the debilitating industrial and political division. In the changed conditions of 21st century capitalism we need a more radical process of rethinking and *recomposition* of the workers' movement.

## Communists and workers' representation

The lack of progress on workers' representation has seen two responses which appear to be polar opposite positions but in fact have much in common. On the one hand the remnants of the Labour left and even some who claim to be Marxists believe new opportunities will arise in the Labour



*no answer: yet many on the left think we should reclaim, or else recreate, the labour party*

Party in the period following its coming electoral defeat. There is however little evidence either from the existing state of New Labour or other such parties abroad who adapted to neo-liberalism, that there is scope for such a scenario. On the other hand one wing of the Communist Party of Britain and others cut from that cloth, contend that the Labour Party is essentially unchanged and as such there no political space for a broad left type party. This schema is essentially sectarian. They do not start from the needs of the working class, but rather their own organisations.

Rejecting the *status quo* of labourism, the many failed initiatives and sectarianism does not mean communists should abandon addressing the problem of working-class representation. We need to start a discussion on the wider agenda of recomposition of the movement and how that relates to our activities today. There is a need to recognise workers' representation is not just about elections: the first national workers' movement, the Chartists besieged the ruling class for a decade with next to no access to Parliament. So successful were the neo-liberals in clearing our class from the terrain of politics that there is no choice to be had today, despite our right to vote. But we do not have to settle for lesser evil capitalist alternatives at elections for workers to be represented.

The concept of workers' representation committees, open and democratic bodies based on the principle of the united workers' front was a positive idea for a way forward. The RMT adopted and failed to implement this policy. Nevertheless the idea remains valid: whilst it would be wrong to fetishise any particular form of organisation communists should strive to develop this concept. That is, representative bodies which can overcome the political and industrial division perpetuated by the existing movement. Communists can't create such bodies for workers themselves, but we should seek to stimulate their creation through existing *workers'* organisations and struggles. The solution to workers' representation is not something which will be solved through superimposed solutions or coalitions stitched up behind closed doors. It is something which will arise through the *praxis* of the class struggle itself.

## Revolutionary rust

To talk of communists raising slogans and advancing ideas sounds very grandiose, but in reality tiny few workers will have a clue about them. This is because communists are absolutely tiny in numbers and influence. There exist organisations which describe themselves as a 'Communist Party' but these are names carried over from a past history. These bodies are obscure sects or in the case of the Communist Party of Britain, far from being communist. The CPB is a very conservative body, committed to the reformist *British Road to Socialism*. The members may be nostalgically attached to an idea of communism but it cannot be renewed inside rusting structures that see the state, not the self-activity of workers, as the mechanism for achieving liberation. Unlike some other Communist Parties the CPB is not engaged in any radical rethinking of the failure of state-socialism in the Eastern Bloc. It has made no effort at renewal or being a catalyst of re-composition such as the Partito della Rifondazione Comunista in Italy or the CPs in Bosnia or New Zealand who broke from Stalinism.

## the global commune

saturday 16th january, edinburgh

Day school hosted by the Republican Communist Network and supported by The Commune. All welcome.

Venue: Out of the Blue Centre, Dalmeny Street (off Leith Walk), Edinburgh.

1. Opening session — 11.00-13.00 — Platform speakers — maximum 15 minutes each. One from the RCN, 1 from The Commune and Goran Markovic from the Workers' Communist Party of Bosnia. This will be followed by an open session with questions and contributions from the floor.

2. Lunchtime — 13.00-14.00.

3. Workshops — 14.00-14.45 — 5 minute intros followed by open discussion. If those opening the workshop (or anybody else) would like to submit a piece beforehand, this will be circulated by e-mail to all those who have signed up.

i) The Legacy of Official and Dissident Communism — or What Communism Isn't

ii) How Do Communists organise and operate?

iii) What Would Real Communism Look Like?

4. Break — 15 minutes.

5. Workshops repeated — 15.00-15.45.

(Participants can choose any two workshops over the afternoon)

6. Report Back and Plenary Session — 15.45-16.45.

7. Platform speakers, summing up — 16.45-17.00 on what they have got from the day — 5 minutes each.

In the wider Marxist milieu the situation is one of fragmentation into a myriad of groups, who seem to hate each other more than capitalism. What is most striking is that many who consider themselves Marxists in particular see no need for either renewal of a vision of communist society or our forces. This is either because they have no perspective for the movement beyond their own organisation, or look to form a wider non-communist organisation as the way forward, i.e. a new Labour Party. What we have is essentially the abandonment of remaking communism for sectarian isolation or else remoulded social-democracy.

## For communist recomposition

Many who consider themselves genuine communists, in the spirit of Marx's vision of human liberation, are disillusioned by the current situation. Some reject any form of organisation. The question we face is: do we need a communist organisation and, if so, can we develop one free of the poison of the traditional left?

Whilst we have a difficult legacy to overcome, on both counts this is possible and necessary. In a small and unpretentious way, the communist network initiated by The Commune is laying the ground for a new beginning for both long-standing activists and young communists. The first steps are to build a functioning network of committees which puts into practice *actual open unity in diversity*, without all the falsity of hidden factions, enforced discipline and fake loyalties. Within The Commune there is no pre-determined outcome in terms of an organisational form. It is not that there are not historical experiences we can draw on, but that past forms should be critically examined on their own terms in their own historical context. We need to learn to shape and form an organisation for today's needs, not superimpose such concepts of an *eternal party*, where theory is simply an affirmation of something already decided.

A key aspect to creating a new organisation is the consideration of its relationship to our goal. Communism is not a party — it is a society. A self-managing society is one which as such cannot be created by organisations which are not based on these principles. Our aim cannot be to substitute a ruling Communist Party for workers' own self-organisation, but to actively assist in developing class consciousness, self-organisation and the welding of the working class into a force to transform society. We should aim to create a body in which the structure and process of adopting decisions must grow from below: organisation and coordination does not negate independent activity and self-initiative. Such an organisation must be as transparent as possible and based on the principle of *self-association* and *communist pluralism*.

The experience of the Eastern Bloc has pointed towards the creation of a league of communists as opposed to a sectarian party as the form of organisation most suited to self-management. Such a league should unite communists around common principles and a collective effort towards the renewal of our vision of communist society, and as such will foster a culture of freedom of discussion. How long will this take? The more there are of us, the sooner we can bring about new unity and the re-composition of communism and shake off the curse of sectarianism.



# 'full and democratic debate' on post-no2eu project: ok, when?

by David Broder

London's Camden Centre was packed to the rafters on Saturday 7th November for the RMT union-hosted conference on working-class political representation. The enthusiasm of its participants was, lamentably, much at odds with the dire initiative likely to be spawned by the event.

While RMT has conference policy to convene workers' representation committees across the country to select candidates, this event, like a similar one in January, was a mere rally for the follow-up to its No2EU European election campaign. There were no resolutions or votes; there was minimal debate and no-one who had opposed or criticised No2EU was allowed to speak. As with the June election's initiative, it seems that a small clique in the union around Bob Crow and Pat Sikorski, along with allies in the leadership of the *Morning Star*/Communist Party of Britain and the Socialist Party, will set the agenda for a General Election coalition.

The purpose of the conference was apparently, to persuade the RMT to commit to supporting this campaign, on which all speakers except Jeremy Corbyn MP and Susan Press from the Labour Representation Committee were agreed: there were however differences in focus and tensions brought out in some of the speeches.

## Love Labour's lost

The Socialist Party's Dave Nellist opened his remarks by commenting that there were not three mainstream parties, merely one pro-privatisation and cuts parties split into three wings. He said given the cynicism about the political class we ought not "leave it to the Esther Rantzens" to represent an alternative, but rather a new working class party.

Despite the apparent shoddiness of the No2EU lash-up, launched just a few months before the European election, Nellist said that he had a "serious strategy: a serious attempt to start something new" and appeared to mean it. The plan is to bring more unions on board, such as the PCS civil service union and the Prison Officers' Association, and build a new broad party based on trade union affiliations. For this reason, given the constitutional hurdles that had to be surmounted in PCS before it could take such an initiative, Nellist said we would not see "the launch of a new party with a full democratic structure before the election".

He then went on to explain how the formation of the "original" Labour Party had taken some forty years and the process of union affiliations had been difficult before, but he hoped this initiative would be rather faster paced. These remarks were surprising in their frankness as to the fact that the party the Socialist Party wants to create is a Labour Party Mark II: a parliamentary wing subcontracting the political campaigning of the existing trade union movement. Nellist explains the party would stand for "renationalisation of public services and reducing the gap between rich and poor", but he "personally hoped there would be a strong socialist strand within it".

Similarly, the RMT's assistant general secretary Pat Sikorski had said we should not be ashamed to run on a "social-democratic" platform because today that "cuts against the logic of capitalism". It cuts against the current plans of the ruling class, yes: but heating up the leftovers of Labourism once again is hardly likely to imbue working people that an alternative is possible, and standing on politics other than our own for electoral viability's sake does little to challenge the idea that we should vote for the least-worst 'alternative' able to beat the Tories, which means Labour.

## No2EU, no to the causes of the EU?

The CPB's John Foster, lead No2EU candidate in Scotland, hailed the great successes of June's European Election initiative. Drawing on this experience, Foster advocated a similar coalition for the general election: he had less of a 'big picture' vision of strategy than Nellist, with his own group divided over whether to make a firm break with the Labour Party, historically defined by the Stalinists' *British Road to Socialism* as the principal agent of socialist transformation.

The *Morning Star* speaker ladled lashings of anti-EUism onto his comments, and also appeared somewhat keener to use the People's Charter as the basis of an electoral platform than the Socialist Party. Foster hailed it as a programme of "economic and social democracy in the fullest sense of the words" which "could not be fulfilled within the framework of the Lisbon Treaty" and thus could help "build resistance to the EU". Britain could supposedly then nationalise its banking and insurance sectors and rebuild its manufacturing base. He of course said nothing about the capitalist state, why the EU is something special and separate from the capitalism of its member states, or quite why statification of finance is meant to be socialist.

And never mind the cynics who will tell you that the British state is the most direct agent and advocate of neo-liberalism in Europe; never mind the fact that British 'self determina-



bob crow has backed the 'child of no2eu'

tion' from the EU amounts exclusively to fighting for opt-outs on working-time-directives and the like; our beloved comrade knew that if only the British state could cut the umbilical cord to the Brussels sprouts, it could enact socialist utopia on behalf of the working masses, no doubt with a mural of John Foster on every public building in homage to his strategic nous.

## Hanged or stabbed?

RMT General Secretary Bob Crow's intervention was rather sharper in many regards than those of the Socialist Party and CPB, although his criticisms of the EU and call for nationalisations were equally flat-footed.

Commenting that the working class has no political voice, he explained that this disenfranchisement was "not just at the level of parties but also in the trade union movement". While he sidestepped giving his thoughts on the CWU-Royal Mail deal, he slammed the TUC's failure "even to send me a letter or email asking what we can do to support the strike" and pointed to the lack of democracy in the workplace given harsh anti-union laws.

The central message of Crow's speech was directed against those who repeat the "same old drivel" that socialists should keep silent for fear of letting the Tories defeat Labour: in fact it would only be Labour who had themselves to blame, and we have to organise whoever is in government. Crow mocked the constant call to 'keep your head down so Labour stay in', only to be followed by years of 'keep your head down so we can get the Tories out', the self-defeating demand on the workers' movement to silence itself in the interests of Labour's electoral fortunes. He wittily explained the difference between the two parties: "You know your enemy when you're coming home at night and they beat you up. This lot Labour buy you drinks all evening and then beat you up!", and explained their cuts packages as "being asked whether you want to be hanged or stabbed to death."

Crow also addressed the question of 'letting the BNP in', an accusation levelled against No2EU after it was perceived as dividing the 'left' vote and allowing Nick Griffin to claim a slim advantage over the Greens in the North West England region this June. Crow argued that it was the collapse in Labour's vote and its abandonment of its core support which had in fact allowed Griffin to win a European Parliament seat.

Other speakers had commented that No2EU was the only party apart from the BNP which had really been 'on the ground' before the election: a noble sentiment and an important task, if indeed it were true, but one of the other characteristics of the BNP and why it has been able to win ex-Labour votes is that it plugs away with consistent door-to-door leafleting work, over a number of years, under the same name, while No2EU surfaced as a new organisation with no profile just a few months before the election, after years of left coalitions under a variety of names. It looks like the general election initiative will also be a fresh start at short notice.

## Diversity and debate

Much is still to be settled, with Crow repeatedly referring to the electoral initiative as an 'alliance' but also saying that there should "at least be a pact not to stand against each other", and was unsure what his union would approve for the election. Given the CPB's half-in, half-out attitude to the Labour Party the conference was unlikely to result in anything comparable to SPers Dave Hill and Rob Williams' call for the immediate establishment of a new party.

Some Socialist Party members had aggressively denounced those socialists "safely ensconced in Parliament" and called on them and others to ditch the Labour Party, one asking "If Crow can endorse [the election coalition], why not Tony Benn, John McDonnell and Jeremy Corbyn?". But Crow marked what appeared to be the general consensus that the left ought to support those two MPs, hailing their work in the RMT Parliamentary Group and saying he would campaign for them.

While some quite hostile and impatient comments were made towards Corbyn, in general political differences were papered over with the constant invocation of the idea that the most important thing is unity in action, never mind if the political framework is wrong; or else, in Rob Williams' words, "yes, we can debate programme and the name but let's launch the electoral platform here today". Matt Wrack said that he appreciated that some felt the People's Charter was not what we should be saying "but the most important thing is that we're out there saying it". Irish Socialist MEP Joe Higgins was sure that the RMT would decide what to do "after a full and democratic debate" and we heard many speeches in favour of an "open and democratic" organisation: of course, the debate was for every time but right now, the democracy for everyone except the people who had already come to this conference; the openness merely the fudging over of never-spoken disagreements.

The CPB and Socialist Party do not take criticisms on board: they merely patronisingly tolerated the idea that some people might have concerns (which should be kept private) and no-one cared to explain why the programme for the election or the People's Charter had to be written up behind closed doors *before* any debate or discussion in the wider movement: or even why the mass of RMT members were not involved in the elaboration of the union's election campaign. Gerry Byrne's very mildly worded concern at the coalition's position on migrant workers was simply slapped down by another speaker who claimed they were "against the exploitation of migrant workers": but in reality, uneasily silent on immigration rather than standing up for no borders.

## Propaganda of the deed

John Foster had claimed that the No2EU election campaign in June was "propagandistic, rather than electoral", implying that it had not sought to win seats but to stand up for socialist principle. A criticism often made of the SWP in Respect was that they voted against their own principles, on issues such as no borders, republicanism and women's and LGBT rights, in order to court votes. Part of the problem with relating to the SP or CPB is that this initiative is an 'honest' meshing of their politics: they *really do* have a reformist and statist vision of socialism, and *really do* want a Labour Party Mark II if not the Labour Party itself.

In that sense the current initiative appears as the worst of a long run of left electoral fronts over the past decade, from the Socialist Alliance to the Scottish Socialist Party to Respect, with ever-worse politics and ever-poorer electoral results as well. Small communist groups like our own are politically very, very far from the leaders of the initiative, and the nature of the project is such that there are no channels (local committees, conferences with resolutions, publications with open debate) by which we could get a hearing or significantly alter its course. The democratic deficit is in our own movement, not just in bourgeois society.

The initiative is an electoral front rather than any form of working-class party. We do not believe that electoral politics are necessarily of primary importance for communists, for the left, or the labour movement as a whole, and are a poor substitute for building real resistance in workplaces and communities. What most of those speaking at the conference took as their starting point is the idea that the workers' movement is suffering because it has been abandoned by the Labour Party, so therefore we need to try and create the same thing again. In truth, from the general strike to the miners' strike, the workers' movement was never reliant on support 'from above' by the party it funded.

The speakers also avoided explanation of the problem that the movement in general is very weak; why most large unions are still hand-in-glove with Labour and explicitly support the social partnership agenda; and that the original Labour Party did not end up where it is today just because of a few bad leaders, but because of the defeats of our movement and the convincing of a wide layer of the class that there is no alternative. All election campaigning will fail on that basis alone if resistance to the recession on the industrial plane does not take off.

The argument to be made, therefore, is in the RMT, which is making efforts towards the recomposition of the movement on an industrial level — not only its general militancy, but also its moves to incorporate migrant worker cleaners, for example — but also to make some effort at political representation for the working class. The case needs to be made that these initiatives are really a dead end for the union unless they pull in wider layers of working-class activists; they do not contribute to its industrial strategy but rather flatter the egos of the left group leaders, desperate to catch the wind of some 'real' labour movement support; and that the union should fulfil its conference policy of convening workers' representation committees open to free and open discussion of policies, areas of collaboration and, if it is so desired, election candidates.



# building from below: the work of paulo freire

by Dave Spencer

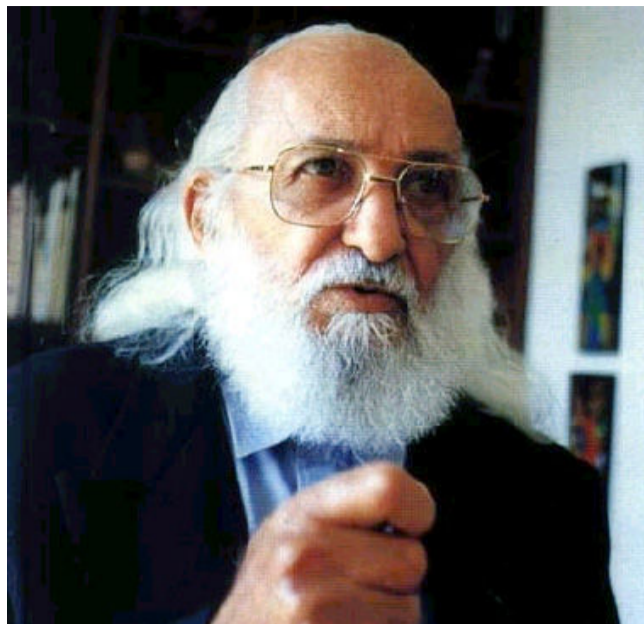
The Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire (1921-1997) is regarded internationally as the guru of adult education. Since we are concerned as communists with educating ourselves and with "raising consciousness" among the working class, then it would seem useful to look at Freire's ideas.

As luck would have it Freire's classic textbook *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) is not only a statement of the principles on which to practise adult education, it is also a handbook on how to build a revolutionary party. There are many references to liberation and revolutionary leadership throughout the book. One of the reasons for this is that in the 1960s in Brazil when Freire was organising Adult Literacy classes on a mass scale, his activity was very radical because only literate people could vote in Brazil. In 1964 after the coup Freire was jailed and then exiled for his efforts. He went to Chile and then to UNESCO where he influenced Literacy programmes throughout the Third World.

One might wonder why Freire is not better known on the left. The reason is that his educational principles contradict entirely the practice and the theory of the left groups. Freire stresses the vital importance of educating and organising from below. The life experience of the students must be the starting point of the dialogue and the mutual respect and trust between tutors and students – between the working class and the revolutionary leadership if you will. The "leaders" should go to the working class to engage in discussion and to be prepared to learn, not to impart ready-made gobbets of "truth" or the party line. "The revolutionary's role is to be liberated with the people, not to win them over", says Freire.

Freire calls the top-down method, used by left groups, as well as the state, "banking" education. Charles Dickens criticised this Gradgrind "give me the facts" or "the line" method of education in his novel *Hard Times* because of its lack of humanism. To Freire there is no neutral form of education – it is either encouraging critical thinking and therefore liberating – or it is uncritical and undemocratic and therefore "domesticating", i.e. encouraging acceptance of the status quo.

Contrast this to the approach of the left groups. For example, Sean Matgamna of the Trotskyist group AWL wrote an article "The class struggle is the thing" epitomising this approach. He argues that with the demise of Stalinism and the movement to the right of social democracy internationally, the way is clear for real socialism to show itself at last. His advice is to go to the working class and to the working class movement – *not* to learn anything, *not* to listen, *not* to engage in dialogue, but "to organise it, to re-organise it, to plant the seeds of unfalsified socialism". Exactly the opposite of the principles advocated by Paulo Freire! Nothing personal against Sean, but he is arguing for a top down, "banking" approach where the truths have already been decided upon by an elite and it is just a matter of convincing the masses. This is clearly an idealist position, not a dialectical one and is typical of left groups. Freire sees the class struggle as a process in which revolutionaries play the role not of lecturers on the rostrum dishing out pre-existing truths to the workers but of organisers and facilitators of a dialogue in which the day to day experiences of the working class in struggle play a key part. The class struggle is a dynamic process during which lessons are learned through discussion and practice, not by some formulae from Party HQ.



"To simply think *about* the people, as the dominators do, without any self-giving in that thought, to fail to think *with* the people, is a sure way to cease being *revolutionary* leaders."

Freire's principles are consistent with other approaches to broader education based generally on a cognitive approach to psychology. These contrast with more dominant psychological approaches used by the state, like ideas of inherited genetic intelligence and behaviourist notions of changing the environment to change behaviour. The cognitive approaches to child development of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky stress the importance of practical experience in the form of play, active stimulation and problem solving for young children, as against rote learning. As I understand it, these are the principles behind the "Scandinavian methods" used in nursery and infant education. For older children and adults, writers like Michael Apple, H. Giroux and J. Mezirow encourage the development of critical thinking in the classroom as against the regurgitation of facts.

A recent example from my own experience may explain the basic issues involved. I was teaching at the local university and one of the modules I was teaching was "Mental Ill Health". The new administrator approached me one day for a word and said that he wanted me to break down my 10 week module into parts – quarter of an hour by quarter of an hour in the form of PowerPoint presentations. If I were ill one week this would mean some other tutor could take over. Assessments of the students' knowledge would take place in week 3, week 6 and week 9. As I understand it, this is very much what Freire would call the "banking" approach to education! I pointed out that I did not believe in teaching this way. I explained that among the students in my evening class at that time were a young man under medication diagnosed with schizophrenia, two paramedics who were used to sectioning people, a woman whose son had autism and a man whose mother was in the first stages of dementia. I said I thought the life experiences of these students were more important to listen to, to understand and to discuss than me giving a load of "facts" on a slide – not that there are many "facts" in this subject, there are conflicting explanations. Our dialogue would lead to critical thinking and personal development – which of course could be assessed. The administrator did not understand what I was talking about. I think Paulo Freire would have done.

Freire starts with the oppressed and their "culture of silence", "fear of freedom", lack of self-confidence and their fatalism – but also with their wealth of life experience and culture within their communities. The tutors or revolutionary leaders, using their book knowledge, create a dialogue with the oppressed which leads to praxis – that is to informed and agreed action against oppression. Without this democratic dialogue there can be no genuine revolution. Freire is quite definite on these points:

"Manipulation, sloganising, "depositing", regimentation and prescription cannot be components of revolutionary praxis, precisely because they are components of the praxis of domination..."

"Revolutionary leaders who do not act dialogically in their relations with the people either have retained characteristics of the dominator and are not truly revolutionary – or they are totally misguided in their conception of their role and, being prisoners of their own sectarianism, they are equally non-revolutionary. They may even reach power. But the validity of any revolution resulting from anti-dialogical action is thoroughly doubtful."

This is quite clear and uncompromising and I can think of many examples on the British left where these principles could be applied. The behaviours within left groups are not quirky characteristics of left leaders, as for example described amusingly by Jim Higgins in his book on the SWP or by John Sullivan in his pamphlet *Go Fourth and Multiply*, they are unfortunately consistent with the behaviours of the ruling class and can be judged as such.

I have dealt here with the basic principles of Freire's work. I have argued with Freire that any revolutionary movement can only be built from below, starting with the life experiences of the working class, not from the top down using theory used in a biblical fashion. The question of how Freire's principles can be implemented in a British context is more complex, requiring further discussion.

## the commune's activities

★ London: The Commune are at most major demonstrations in the capital and are also running a series of reading groups on workplace organising all winter, as well as our monthly forums. Join our email announcements list at <https://lists.riseup.net/www/info/thecommunelondon>. Phone David on 07595 245494 for more info

★ Bristol: we are planning a reading group series: email [uncaptiveminds@gmail.com](mailto:uncaptiveminds@gmail.com) to join mailing list

★ West Midlands: If you are interest in a meeting on local organising or our group call Dave on 02476 450027

★ Wrexham: we are planning a series of meetings around the title "Storming the heavens-alternatives to capitalism". Paper sales will also be launched in and around the town centre

★ North-West: in September we held our first public forum in Manchester and are planning more events shortly: contact Mark on 07976 386737

★ South Yorkshire-based activists interested in The Commune should get in touch with Barry in Sheffield on 07543 652629

★ Our facebook group is at <http://facebook.com/home.php?#/group.php?gid=100975860952>

★ See our website at [www.thecommmune.co.uk](http://www.thecommmune.co.uk)

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