



communist

# review

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# communist review

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*Correction and apology*

In the last issue (no.34) Richard Hart was incorrectly designated as the former Attorney General of Jamaica. He was the Attorney General of GRENADA

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## Editorial

New Labour is now settled in for its second term with a huge majority once again. Does this signify that it has won a popular mandate for its neo liberal privatisation agenda and its reactionary and bellicose foreign policy? Hardly, when one considers that the turnout in this election was the lowest since 1918. The 1918 poll can be explained by war weariness, the incomplete demobilisation of soldiers and the massive death and injury rate among them, the virulent 'flu epidemic and the only partial registration of the very first wave of women voters (women over 30). What explains the low turnout in 2001? Voter apathy is the popular and facile explanation – but it's a dangerous rationalisation, which deflects attention from the real causes.

Have voters deserted the political process, or is it the case that the modern political process has failed the electorate? The fact is that this was one of the most lack-lustre election campaigns in modern political history in which the two main political parties' agendas converged into a neo liberal sludge with very little separating them other than the degree of vitriol with which they promised to treat asylum seekers and refugees. Add to this the fact that the key marginals remained New Labour's priority. This effectively meant that there was little or no campaigning by Labour in the working class heartlands.

However, of equal importance is the fact that the 2001 election must be viewed more as a Tory defeat than a Labour victory. What we have witnessed is the spectacular disintegration of the Tory party, which can be compared in its scale and impact only to the split of 1846. It took the Conservatives almost 20 years to recover from the 1846 split (ostensibly over the Repeal of the Corn Laws, but really over the adjustment of the landed interest to the economic needs of industrial capitalism). Meanwhile the Whigs repositioned themselves as the Liberal party and gained many Tory defectors to its ranks – let us hope that history will not repeat itself in this regard. Whilst we can only hope the demise of the Tories will be permanent, political renewal will never come about merely by placing

old wine in new bottles. New Labour may be confident enough now to think that it need pay no price for deserting its traditional base of support, but this is a dangerous road – as the fascist successes in Oldham and Bolton showed.

Meanwhile this year's TUC clearly shows that the trade union movement is not going to submit to a neo-liberal agenda without a fight. The key battle is to save Britain's public services. No less than 19 motions on the pre-composited agenda deal directly with this issue and many more make reference to it. The simple message - 'public it's ours, private it's theirs' is well understood. No amount of waffle about 'partnership' or 'stakeholding' hides the simple truth that private capital will invest in public services in order to generate profit. If British manufacturing is no longer profitable (see Roger Siefert's article), then what better solution than to offer its public services as a new and profitable field for investment. This, of course, fits in nicely with the EU convergence and competitiveness agenda, providing additional reasons for opposing the Euro (see Tony Benn). Its about time the trade union movement had a proper debate on this issue rather than permitting the TUC General Council to pronounce in favour when most unions have not even discussed let alone formulated policy on the matter.

Despite reverses and set backs, we must never lose sight of the vision which continues to motivate socialists and communists. It's not a religious faith, but a confidence that there is an alternative. Sam Webb's inspirational address to the CPUSA Convention is reprinted because its analytical framework and clarity of vision provides a good example of the creative and non-dogmatic expression of marxist thought in the 21st century. The same is true of John Foster's piece arguing the case for communism. This latter will introduce a seminar to be hosted by *Communist Review* of domiciled and fraternal parties from around the world on the theme of *Socialism in the 21st Century*. The discussion will be taped and an edited version will appear in subsequent issues of *CR*.

MARY DAVIS





# Wither manufacturing. UK?

By Roger Seifert

The trade cycle is here again. The predicted downturn is upon us and the debate from the FT through Channel 4 and back to the Treasury and round to the Bank of England MPC is about where we are and where we are heading in terms of the speed and slope of recession. Manufacturing output, especially in the technology sector, is falling sharply and for the first time in thirty years the world's three largest economies, the USA, Japan and the Germany, are all in recession themselves. The message has gone from don't panic to how to panic in the last few weeks. Ex-chancellors are dug up to explain what it was like in their day, in Nigel Lawson's case all of twelve years ago, and to reassure us that boom and bust is normal and not to be feared as such. That economic miracles do not extend their cloak of obscurity to cyclical movements in capitalist economies, and that the present Chancellor will have to eat his words that his policies, along with much else since May 1997, had solved most underlying problems by the application of good government. Tony Blair's efforts to disguise politics as a practical job with technical solutions is fast becoming a shambles from London Underground's PPP to control over high bonuses for senior business leaders and reform of public services. And now for the economy writ large.

The shortcomings of apparent technical brilliance are well demonstrated by the policies and predictive models developed by the ship of fools at the Treasury and the confederacy of dunces at the USA finance department. They are silent on why the largest world economies are slowing down, they over-react to short term cuts in interest rates, and they seem to have no idea where the next sectoral collapse will occur; but they hope the banks will save them all. The endlessly feeble arguments by most decision-makers is not because they are stupid, but because they will not and cannot face up to the power realities and dimensions of class conflict, a phenomenon they witness but fail to acknowledge and control. On the one hand we

are told that these economic decision-makers are so powerful that they actually run the economy, and then we are told that they are hapless victims of world market forces who cannot prevent the disastrous outcomes about to slam into the lives of working people across the continents.

Foremost among the elements of world market forces is of course big business. These companies, whether multinational, transnational or just global, are seen as being so powerful that they are beyond the reach of mere political leaders. From the ultra-left to the complacent right such a picture leads to pessimism, defeatism and policies for compliance rather than struggle. Our government wishes to befriend these corporations by giving them what they want — a modern form of ancient sacrifice. Every few years we are required to meet the appetite of the monsters in order to appease them and win their protection, so we offer up the weakest and most vulnerable to them in the form of redundant workers, and cuts in the living standards of pensioners, the unemployed and the long-term sick. It is worthwhile, of course, since the monster leaves the rest of us unharmed. In this world the job of leaders is to negotiate the size and scale of the victims and to promise the beast even more freedom to get fat off the citizenry.

By exaggerating and mythologising the power of big companies this becomes a common feature of analysis and policy, and those unions whose members are most affected such as MSF and the AEEU have been the first to argue both the special case for leaving their members alone at the expense of others, and the general case for appeasing the companies as they grow ever more powerful. None of this provides either an explanation for events nor a set of policies to alter the balance of power. This one-sided view fails to remember that united class struggles do secure important victories, and that it is not necessary to allow the victims to suffer and the rich to get richer.

Over the last five decades this debate has been fought out within increasingly narrow limits as the UK's share of world manufacturing declines,



as the manufacturing production levels in the UK fall relative to overall UK growth, and as the numbers employed in the sector are reduced to four million, and as the sector becomes dominated by a few very large companies many of which were foreign owned multi-nationals. These factors, plus some additional statistics on relative productivity, has driven the argument about the British economic crisis and the end of manufacturing. There are several streams to this case that need brief coverage, although most start with the assertion that such absolute and relative decline is a bad thing. A recent government White Paper (*Opportunity for all in a world of change*) “sets out why a strong manufacturing sector is vital to our future prosperity. For the UK to succeed as a global economic force, our manufacturing industry must be at the leading edge of the economy, producing high value added output and world beating products”. This DTI view is shared, on paper at least, by the CBI and TUC. So the debate starts with the question how to improve and develop our manufacturing.

The three main arguments for decline are the same three for remedy (see Keith Smith’s excellent book *The British Economic Crisis*). A long running favourite is the entrepreneurial failure thesis. Key decision-makers in large companies have failed the sector because they lack enterprise and lag behind our competitors in technological and related skills. A point updated by a piece in the Economist this July (*Sliding into recession*) stating that “British firms are failing to make the most of new ‘lean manufacturing’ techniques”. Now as then it fails to ask why senior managers in firms fail to make these beneficial decisions. Because they lack skills to do so according to current research (current at any time in the last fifty years), but why do they lack skills readily available? The blame is put at the door of British capitalists and hence the import of non-British captains of industry and/or the tax cuts and huge payouts to attract real entrepreneurs. This tends to be based in the view that the heyday of British manufacturing growth was driven by ‘go getting owner-managers’ and that their descendants have failed to take up technology to improve productivity as in chemicals and textiles, that generally we are weak in engineering, and that there is a lack of risk-taking in marketing. Obviously this is in part true, and the labour movement is quite happy to join in attacks on the failings of these moguls of manufacturing – blame the bosses is a good starting point for policy formulation. But largely this story lacks conviction – why has this happened, why have we gone from clogs to clogs in three generations; and if all these failed individuals left now how would that significantly alter the situation?

The second thesis for failure and one more familiar to the labour movement is to blame the

workers and their unions. In its various forms this thesis strongly attacks the monopoly position of unions, the tendency to strike, to support overmanning, to encourage restrictive practices. All of which reduces the levels of productivity compared with our competitors and deters investment. Again this appears and re-appears from many sectors of the analysing classes. Again the Economist has the answers: Thatcherism had the beneficial effect of sweeping away restrictive practices “that had long hampered industrial performance”, but weaknesses still persist in British owned companies. How come if they were swept away? But the evidence is hardly robust, especially when we make international comparisons — rarely is like compared with like. In addition such behaviour might affect the level of productivity but not its growth, and of course it is persistent low growth that is the problem. Increasing productivity and so profits is seen as central to the problem and therefore those involved, workers and managers/owners, are blamed from one class viewpoint to another, but the adoption of new working practices and technology is frequently an inappropriate response to these problems and may mean lower productivity or much higher costs..

The third, and widely touted, argument is that of lack of investment. This takes the view that by adding to capital stock (net) that alters both productivity levels and growth. For most of the 1950s, for example, Italy and Germany had nearly double the rate of net investment of the UK, and a similar picture emerges for the 1970’s with another measure, investment per worker. But this evidence is not complete. If you take yet another measure, investment in directly productive areas such as plant and machinery, then the rates are about the same. In addition there is the question of the causal arrow: it is low growth that causes low investment, rather than low investment that causes low growth. Once more we are told that the “miserly commitment to research and development” has caused the slow down, but why is it miserly, and why are the manufacturing sectors in our main competitors (who spend more) also in recession?

All three arguments have elements of evidence based fact and all three are sufficiently popular to form the basis of some policy decisions and debates. But individually and collectively they are not conclusive and provide a partial view which lends itself to partial solutions.

In the recent case of Marconi, for example, the threat is to cut 4000 jobs of which 1500 could be in the UK. The leaders of both MSF and the TUC want a cut in interest rates and a weaker pound. They agree with most industrialists who see the over-valued pound as the central problem for their exports. So they want monetarist remedies to work alongside flexible employment practices and advantageous investment schemes to



maintain jobs. All sides want government to act: the right in the CBI and the Economist want government investment in infrastructure, skills, and incentives for innovation and R&D. The unions want the government to put up the cost to companies of sacking people, the TUC argues for a regional industrial strategy, and the AEEU for entry to the Euro. Meanwhile the government remains reluctant to systematically and openly move away from the narrow use of monetary policy with the odd fiscal twinge as the main control mechanism for economic management.

The unions, especially MSF and the AEEU, continue to push hard for cuts in interest rates. They believe, according to the conventional economic wisdom with which they are imbued, that cuts in interest rates will have a series of linked benefits for their members in manufacturing. First it will mean a fall in the value of sterling thus making it easier to export and more expensive to import substitute goods. This is rarely the case: the exchange rate, especially for the pound, is determined by a range of factors other than interest rates and therefore there is no cut in one causing a fall *pari passu* in the other. Second it will make it cheaper to borrow and therefore more people will continue with credit and buy more goods. Again this rarely happens as predicted, and even if consumer spending stays high (if only due to time lags) there is no promise that the goods purchased help UK based manufacturing. Third it is suggested that as the cost of borrowing is cheaper therefore company decision-makers will bring forward plans (*sic*) to invest in plant and machinery and thus make UK factories more productive, more competitive and therefore more likely to stay open. Once again we know this may or may not happen, and that such decisions are only partly influenced by costs of borrowing, particularly at the margin.

The reliance on interest rate movements for such important determinants of economic well being in manufacturing is relatively recent in UK policy making history. It stems in part from the neo-liberal hijacking of policy and ideas in the early 1980's. The state was seen to be an instrument for controlling inflation, and that once that was very low to zero then deregulated markets would seek out the rest. This was a grotesque over-reaction to the perceived faults in general Keynesian remedies, especially that government borrowing was a main cause of inflation. It also fitted neatly into a political culture that blamed the doers rather than the strategic policy makers in the financial sector, government and large corporations. This in turn lead to an exaggerated reliance on supply side solutions to a demand neutral system.

The peddled muddle was that at any given level of demand equilibrium could be reached with the benefits of growth with low inflation as long as the state (especially if at all democratic)

stayed out of the way of private sector profit seeking (the sole guarantor of efficient and effective economics). In this view unemployment of people was mainly caused by the unemployed — they failed to look for work and they failed to take work when available. They should get on their bikes — the neo-classical solution to labour mobility. To aid this process the state was to remove artificial barriers such as council houses which prevented people moving, high benefits which were a disincentive to work, and to encourage endless training and skills acquisition schemes. In addition those labour market organisations, such as unions, that interfered with the workings of the free labour market were to be removed or at least reduced in power and influence. In this model, then, unemployed resources of any kind exist because operational decision makers fail to allocate resources efficiently, because they do not have the incentives to do so. This was of course seen as fundamental to the public sector and could not be resolved within that sector, hence privatisation.

This raises the issue of ownership. The current Labour prime minister is on record as stating that he is indifferent as between public and private ownership (in other words it does not matter who owns what) as long as the service to the public is delivered to a high standard and at a controllable cost. This is extremely odd position since it was quite clear during the period 1979-1997 that ownership did matter and was at the heart of state politics. The Conservatives believed root and branch that private was better from their perspective than public and that ownership was the central issue. What is more they generally also subscribed to the view that big private companies were better than small ones, and that company decision makers and their backers in the City of London should be as free (from democratic accountability) as possible to merge, acquire and grow.

This raises the further question of control of private capital. The view from the top is that inward investment is a benefit because 'foreign' firms invest more, have better management, and tend to insist on flexible working. In other words the German, Japanese and American companies over here do not suffer *per se* from the three original sins of UK manufacturing. So when BMW took over Rover it was met with the usual fanfare, and the main unions were quick to negotiate partnership agreements with flexible working. When BMW pulled out and put the entire company at risk there was no obvious reason in relation to our three main fallacies. More and more examples of job loss and corporate strategy leading to plant closures appear to be founded, not in the failures of managers and workers, nor indeed in the economic climate of the UK, nor indeed on the innovative levels of technology and R&D, but on patterns of corporate structure



responding to markets, trade cycles and the interests of finance capital.

So we are left with the evidence that markets are both unstable and unreliable, and that market-led growth and company decisions therefore are likely to produce the well documented effect of over-production in the short-term which is then adjusted by cuts in output and this in turn leads to job shedding. The point remains that while this may be a worldwide aspect of all forms of global capital — the anarchy of production does not disappear just because of its scope and scale, yet while the rest of us have to live in such a world the best policy of the state and the unions is to ensure that UK based manufacturing thrives through a beggar-my-neighbour set of practices. These, *inter alia*, include competitive exchange rates, incentive based tax regimes for corporate profits and senior executives, state sponsored control over workers' organisations, subsidies for inward investors, with the state to bear the costs of education and training, favourable trade agreements (EU, WTO), favourable financial terms (IMF, World Bank), and sufficient R&D (cheaply through universities starved of funds) to maintain the *pro tem* necessary technological advantages where they make a difference. So most of the three fallacies and the cuts in interest rates demanded by the unions are all geared to make UK based capital in the sector more profitable and therefore more likely (although this is not always the case) to produce goods and employ workers at the level deemed to be required to maintain a powerful economy. If all countries using more or less the same model supplied to governments by more or less the same management consultants who attended, more or less, the same business schools, apply similar nostrums then marginal winners and losers would appear to come about through slightly better/more competent forms of decision-making. This may be true, but it hardly accounts for longer term variations in economic performance of different but similar economies given that the remedies (even down to the last point of the simulated regression) are well known.

The simultaneous equation of protectionism even within the paradox of free trade to allow UK advantage and expansionism to prevent the over-production of goods provides unions and indigenous labour movements with real policy problems when it comes to their internationalist credentials and jobs at home. The famous imperial deal done by Joseph Chamberlain with the workers of the Midlands, namely that their jobs and prospects depended on British exploitation of peoples throughout the world, remains a dilemma at the heart of a large trading nation caught within recession in the capitalist world economy. At this time, and this time is here again, calls are going out from unions, employers and some commentators for the government to do more to help as the manufacturing recession

is acknowledged in its real form. The help includes cuts in interest rates, but at current relatively low levels it is difficult to see how further cuts can help and may of course adversely affect some companies; and for advice for those made redundant. It does not involve as yet any government expenditure to prop up these modern lame ducks, nor any particular fund for regional and or sectoral support. It does include early calls for increased public expenditure (assumed to be by borrowing) in order to feed some demand into local economies and hence some targeted businesses through more buildings and building repairs for schools and hospitals (some disastrously to be financed through PFI), and it does include calls for rather vague increases in expenditure on transport and other infrastructure fittings and fixtures.

Gordon Brown in March 2001 told the House of Commons that all indicators for manufacturing were positive: in the previous year growth was 1.6%, productivity growth 4.4%, export growth 11.8%, and investment growth 2%. He therefore predicted that growth this year would be between 1.75-2%, higher than last year. Within weeks manufacturing was heading for serious recession, and even the Economist noticed that "the cyclical setback is undeniably savage". The Labour government leaders increasingly face the moment they wished to avoid: a clear decision on the direction of economic policy. Either they continue with a version of neo-liberalism inherited from the Conservatives and in favour in most of the G7 nations, or they retreat (as they would see it) into some public expenditure directed for the purpose of subsidising manufacture aligned with the resurrection of regional policy within some notional framework of indicative planning. If the P-word is too difficult and the former solutions are applied – public belt-tightening, little intervention, entry into the Euro – then both unemployment and recession will engulf the entire economy with those in manufacturing hardest hit along with those most dependent on state benefits and services. If they turn the other way then the impact of recessionary forces can be more fairly distributed, and a combination of fiscal, monetary and direct investment policies can offset the random damage done by big business as its decision-makers adjust capacity (sack workers) to market share within a stagnant worldwide level of demand. Sticking plaster solutions from government in the form of *ad hoc* short-term expenditures wherever there are closures will fuel the crisis. Only long-term commitment to direct and planned intervention will help, and only the labour movement alongside our friends from the global anti-capitalist movement can provide the political will and action needed to convince government to act to protect the people from the profit-seekers. ★





# Europe

## a challenge for the labour movement

**Tony Benn**

If we are to understand the European Union we have to look back at its history and the motives of those who are promoting it.

After the Russian Revolution the idea of a united Europe was put forward as a way of blocking the expansion of communism and in 1940 Hitler argued that when Germany had won the war and occupied Europe he need not keep German troops all over the continent because it could be better to do it by having a Central Bank which would control the economies of the nations he had defeated.

And after the war that same fear of the USSR led to the establishment of the Common Market to rebuild European Capitalism and NATO to defend European Capitalism.

From the very beginning the European Movement was seen by its founders as a political and not primarily as an economic project, and Ted Heath who took Britain into the EEC without holding a Referendum, has always seen it as the best way of avoiding another catastrophic European war.

Indeed it should be obvious to anyone that it is a political project and it is sheer nonsense to suggest that the Treasury computer will tell us when some obscure economic conditions about convergence have been met so we can transfer the powers of self government to the EU.

The Prime Minister is determined to get Britain into the European single currency as soon as he can, and although there are differences on the matter between some ministers, we must assume that a Referendum will be held before the end of this parliament and when it comes the full weight of government propaganda will be mounted to secure a YES vote.

We shall be told that it will provide us with a guarantee against currency speculation, that it will boost our trade, that it will give us greater influence in the world, that it will help us to become more independent of the United States and that if we stay out we shall suffer a loss of all these things.

We shall also be told that only a handful of backward looking nationalists who hate Europe and want to live in isolation will be opposing this supreme act of statesmanship to modernize Europe and Britain for the new century and beyond.

These arguments will be put forward by New

Labour, the Liberal-Democrats and the European wing of the Conservative party that may be re-appearing if Ken Clarke ends up as the new Tory leader, and will have the full support of the Guardian, the BBC and a number of other newspapers and commentators.

Indeed in the 1975 Referendum even Mrs Thatcher was campaigning for a YES vote and the MORNING STAR was the only newspaper arguing against.

Those of us, on the left, who want to see European cooperation but are not prepared to hand over our future to Commissioners in Brussels and the Central Bank in Frankfurt, none of whom we have elected or can remove, will see this as a democratic and not a nationalist issue and must be very careful not to link up with those whose motivation is quite different.

The Right Wing case against the European Union is, indeed, largely a nationalist one, and in part it objects to the very idea of any political intervention in the working of the international trading system, whether in London or in Brussels.

Some of the arguments used by the Right are crudely chauvinistic, as with the demand to keep the Queen's head on our bank notes and keep out foreigners who might flood into Britain.

The real arguments against the EURO are quite different and we should be considering them very carefully, especially in the context of debates on the subject in the trade union movement, whose decisions, when the Referendum comes, could be decisive inside the Labour Party.

Certain trade unionists have become attracted to the idea of joining on the grounds that it is both desirable and inevitable, and we are told that European Labour law is better than our own – forgetting that that is because the Labour Government has failed to pass the laws we need and for no other reason,

Another argument that has carried weight with some trade union leaders is that a strong European structure will give us greater power to deal with the huge multinational corporations that now dominate the Global market place.

The truth is that the Commission and the Bank are the European authorities which enforce the



laws of globalization on our continent, and enjoy legal powers in all the member states which over-ride our own parliaments.

This is where globalization comes right home because we are being forced to privatize our public services in health and education to open them up for the multinationals to make a profit, and the European Commission is demanding the same in respect of transport and postal services.

The rules on public spending laid down in the Maastricht Treaty impose strict limits on all members states in the EU, and on us, as signatories of that treaty, which prevent us from funding our public services by higher taxation or public borrowing which are the only ways of avoiding privatization.

Moreover that same treaty makes it an offence for any national government to seek to influence the members of the Frankfurt Bank in any way, including the proffering of advice about the appropriate level of interest rates, which is central to all economic, industrial or social policy.

Having served on the Council of Ministers for four years, including a six months period as President of the Energy Council I have direct experience of how that organization works and it is wholly undemocratic.

The laws made in Brussels which apply here are not made by the European Parliament, which is largely an advisory body, but by the Council of Ministers which is the real parliament and it meets in secret.

And even at the Council of Ministers most of the real power lies with the Commission all of whom are appointed with no accountability to the public, and elected ministers are not allowed to submit papers for consideration, but only to approve or disapprove of proposals made by commissioners.

Yet the laws made there automatically apply in

Britain and repeal any of our own laws which conflict with them, without our own elected parliament having any say in the matter.

It is fundamentally undemocratic and if Britain joins the EURO this country will be giving up the right of self-government which we struggled so hard to win through the extension of the vote.

Thus the Labour Party, set up by the trade unions to see that we were represented in parliament once working men and women had the vote, will also have lost its power to influence the very policies upon which our own standard of living depends.

During the last election there were many appeals to people to use their vote and Labour won with only one in four voting for us, but once it becomes clear the enormity of the power we have surrendered to Brussels it may be hard for people to see the case for voting at all and that could undermine democracy here.

Of course we want cooperation with Europe, and more widely, but it must be done through democratic institutions and at the pace of the national parliaments agreeing at each stage to all the plans that are put forward.

I strongly believe in a Commonwealth of Europe allowing for a Council of Ministers, an Assembly and a General Secretary, modelled upon the United Nations where the problems that face us can be discussed and solutions found, but with no power to impose on us policies that have never been democratically decided in an election.

That is the choice we have to make when the EURO Referendum comes to us to make a decision and trade unionists more than any other group in society have an interest in retaining democratic control of the policies which affect our lives both in parliament and our party structures – and in our links with other nations with whom we must and can work for a better world. ★

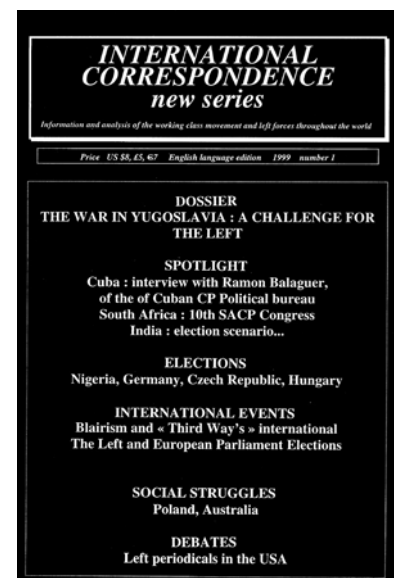
## INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE

The appearance of an English-language version of International Correspondence is a significant boost to those on the British left frustrated by the lack of information and analyses available on communist and left parties worldwide.

Established in France in the early 1990s, International Correspondence was the collective effort of a group of activists with wide-ranging and in-depth knowledge of international and regional issues who were able to put out 22 successive issues in French.

Now that an English-language version is available, it promises "Information and analysis of the working class movement and left forces throughout the world". Priced at £5, its 48 pages cover a whole range of issues from a dossier on how the left reacted to the NATO war against Yugoslavia, an interview with a Cuban CP leader, the Cyprus question, the direction of the Socialist International, and many other issues. The continuing importance of mass-based communist parties in countries such as Greece, Portugal, Cyprus and India, to name but four, is particularly interesting and is discussed in some depth. The Communist Party will be discussing issues of distribution with a representative of International Correspondence in the near future and we will keep Communist Review readers informed.

Those interested in this first issue can contact the Communist Party office (please note our new address) or International Correspondence directly at BP 95, 92153 Suresnes Cedex France. Subscriptions are £20 for four issues.



# The gender pay gap

Mary Davis

At last the truth is out – officially acknowledged and for a brief moment it caused a stir. The UK can boast that it leads all other EU countries in discriminating against women workers. The Equal Pay Task Force's report *Just Pay* commissioned and published by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC 2001) reveals that the gap between the earnings of men and women is wider in the UK than in any of the other 15 member states. (This is based in the European Structure of Earnings Survey 1995). What is worse, however, is that their research shows that despite the initial success of equal pay (1975) and equal value legislation (1984), in reducing the gender pay gap, the 1990's witnessed a reverse of this trend. Now in 2001, the gap between men's and women's earnings continues to widen.

This article will focus on the reasons why, in the 21st century, despite egalitarian rhetoric, women still fare so badly. Many of the long term and structural reasons are well analysed in both the Report and in the research findings published separately as an accompanying document. However the first point to note is that the EOC review underestimates the gravity of the problem. This is because it separates women who work full-time from those who work part-time. Full-time women workers earn 74% of the average hourly pay full-time male workers. Although this figure includes overtime, it does not account for other forms of bonus or discretionary pay (most of which favours men) and hence if we had the figure for overall take home pay on a weekly or monthly basis, we would be likely to find that the gender pay gap is much worse. Part-time women workers earn, shockingly, 52% of the male rate<sup>1</sup>. However given that 44% of women work part time, it is not unreasonable, if we are to get a truer picture of women's overall economic position, to calculate part-time and full-time women's pay together. The gender pay gap would increase significantly. Part-time pay rates in the UK are among the worse in Europe. Sweden has a similarly high proportion of women in part-time work, but this fact does not significantly worsen the gender pay ratio because part-time rates of pay for women are so much better than here.

The report argues that three main factors are responsible for the gender pay gap: -

- Pay discrimination in the form of unequal access to bonus, overtime and fringe benefits
- Occupational segregation of both 'horizontal' and "vertical" forms. The former accounts for the fact that 60% of women are employed in 10 (out of a total 70) occupational groups. Vertical discrimination segregates women into the lowest grades in all occupational groups, including the better paid professions.

- Women's higher share of family responsibilities and the unequal impact this has on their position in the labour market. This has been bolstered by social and economic measures, which have not kept pace with women's changing role in society. Indeed the Report brands the main thrust of social policy as sexist, perpetuating the myth of the male breadwinner in, for example, the National Insurance system, pension systems<sup>2</sup>

These are trenchant insights, but the main thrust of the report concentrates on the question of pay discrimination and how this can be overcome. It advocates changes in Equal Pay legislation and recommends that employers be required to conduct equal pay reviews.

The Research Review (Rubery and Grimshaw), published by the EOC at the same time as the report offers additional reasons to explain the widening pay gap. In short their argument is that the decline and fragmentation of the public sector, the decentralisation of pay bargaining and the decline in collective bargaining have adversely affected women's pay. Privatisation and the 'market forces' approach to pay, both of which are the hallmarks of the continuing neo-liberal economic policies of Conservative and New Labour Governments have removed safeguards for women workers. Unlike the main report, the Research Review does not see the National Minimum Wage as offering a replacement safeguard since it is set at too low a level to make any tangible difference. Likewise Working Families Tax Credit is not seen as a panacea since it reduces pressure on employers to update their lowest paid workers.

There is much more that these two reports do not say. The fact that they do not examine the nature of profit within capitalist society and the consequent functional super exploitation of women workers, should not detract from their otherwise thoughtful and valid insights. Nonetheless it is appropriate to locate the gender pay gap more firmly as an inequality bequeathed by class society.

Given that, according to Marx, a wage is the monetary expression of the value of labour power, the historical and present fact of low wages in general and women's unequal pay in particular can only be explained if we understand that the determination of the value of labour power lies at the very heart of the class struggle. In order for capital to maximise its profits, the tendency is to push the value of labour power to its lowest possible limit within the broad framework of what is socially necessary at any given time for labour to produce and reproduce itself. For women this poses special problems, since the long history of women's oppression in class society means that – as they don't enter the labour market on equal terms with men in



the first place -the socially determined value of their labour power mirrors their already unequal status.

Although there was a temporary halt in the growth of women's employment in the early 1980s, it is clear now that women, now 50% of the labour force, are a vital and permanent part of social production. However, the expansion of women's jobs (indeed jobs of all kinds) is based on a much narrower range of employment, reflecting the chronic decline in British manufacturing industry. So, for women and for black people- already the victims of job segregation- the expansion of the labour market in the new millennium will mean more of the same: low paid and low status jobs, the majority of which will be temporary, part-time or casual. The preponderance of such contractual arrangements is frequently justified in the name of 'flexibility' and they are commended to women as being 'family friendly'. In fact the opposite is true. Uncertainty about a regular source of income, together with poverty wages and lack of affordable childcare, increases the burden on women and perpetuates a cycle of deprivation. The establishment of a national minimum wage is welcome, but set at the rate dictated by the interests of capital, it will do nothing (as the EOC Research Review argues) to resolve the widening gap between rich and poor in Britain, a gap which has reached the highest level recorded since the Second World War, resulting in an increase in the number of workers (nearly 3 million, mostly part-time) earning less than the threshold for National Insurance contributions. Women are twice as likely to be low paid as men. It is in this context that we must view New Labour's drive to get women off benefit and into work- a policy that would be laudable were it not clear that their (as other governments before and doubtless after) intention is to maintain the status of women workers as a source of cheap labour. But we must also note that the growth of poverty pay (below the National Insurance threshold), 'has set a welfare time bomb ticking...Today's low paid workers are set to become tomorrow's pensionless elderly underclass' (TUC 'The New Divide', 1995).

In considering how to challenge this dire forecast, we must pay urgent attention to the wages struggle- a struggle which, over the decades, has failed fully to embrace the aspirations of women workers.

The TUC passed its first resolution on equal pay in 1889. Although, as the EOC report acknowledges, the law as it stands is fraught with loopholes and obstacles, the principle which it enshrines is of fundamental importance; it is this principle which has not been properly understood, let alone fought for within the trade union movement to date. The principle of equal value is of major significance and merits brief consideration.

Firstly, if applied correctly, the amendment would enable women workers to embark on a major wages offensive in their own right, particularly benefiting low paid women in 'women's jobs'. In the limited number of cases taken up to date, the pay difference between women and their male comparators was massive. Second, and perhaps more fundamentally

for the working class as a whole, women have the potential to challenge and re-determine the social value accorded to their labour power by the capitalist system. This requires the trade union movement to concentrate its energy in fighting for equal value collectively at workplace or industry level. Lobbying for changes in the law, important as this is, will never be a substitute for collective action. Indeed such action (e.g. the strike of the Ford women) has been the trigger for legislative change on the equal pay front.

Some unions are grasping the importance of equal value to a greater or lesser extent, but the majority of TUC affiliates have not considered a strategy, let alone pursued any claims. The net result is that the labour movement has an appalling record of under achievement for women workers. There is a tendency, however, to presume that the situation can be resolved by a wave of the legislative wand from Westminster or from Strasbourg. Of course, this simply will not happen. Change for women workers will only come about through the determined efforts of our own trade unions. Women will wait no longer.

In addition to very low pay and an increasingly casualised job market, women are disproportionately affected by the state's reduction in spending on social and welfare services – a feature of government policy since 1979. This was inspired initially by the muscular individualism of the Tories as expressed in their desire to roll back 'the nanny state', and is perpetuated by a continuation of market economics and the dictates of the Maastricht convergence criteria. The result has been the steady erosion of the NHS and of all social services- the latter being hit especially hard by the downward trend of local government finance. However, the caring functions formerly undertaken by these services now fall to the lot of the individual family – which in almost all cases means women. Hence in a very real sense we can speak of the 'feminisation of poverty' – a fact which is too frequently overlooked as we see the possibility for a limited number of high profile, well paid 'glass ceiling' women making it to the top in politics, the media, business and the professions. The EOC Report makes it abundantly clear that the vast majority of women remain on the concrete floor.

The history of the labour movement in this country and elsewhere has shown that the level of class consciousness at any given moment is a crucial factor in determining the extent to which women's oppression is challenged. But whilst this is a crucial factor, it is not the only determinant. Equally important is a powerful movement among women themselves as a focus for articulating our oppression. Both these two movements – a strong and class conscious labour movement and a broad-based women's movement – are essential together as the twin pillars of the challenge to women's oppression and the gender pay gap. ★

#### Notes

1. It should be noted that there is some confusion within the report itself on these figures. Elsewhere the gender pay ratio for full-timers is given as 84% for full-time women and 60% for part-timers.

2. *Just Pay* p.13



# In the Belly of the Beast

## US Communists Speak Out

The following is an edited version of the first part of the **keynote address** delivered to the **Communist Party of USA 27th National Convention** at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee on 6th July 2001 by **Sam Webb, national chair, CPUSA**

### Internationalism

While US communists have to settle accounts with our own capitalist class, we are also of the firm opinion that unity of class and people's struggles on a global level is a fundamental requirement for victory at the present political juncture.

For this reason we are participating with a new vigour and resolve in the growing interactions of the world communist movement. The new forms of interaction and unity are more than a good idea. They acquire new meaning owing to the new level of capitalist globalization and aggression on the one hand and the mounting all people's fightback on the other hand.

These interactions don't substitute for broader forms of labor and all people's unity against imperialist aggression, but, by the same token, broader forms of unity do not replace the unity of communists worldwide. The two are mutually reinforcing. The forms of interaction within the communist movement will necessarily be different from the experience of the past, and, like everything else, have to be fitted to present-day conditions and political sensibilities.

The founders of scientific socialism never viewed their theoretical innovations, immense as they were, as anything but a foundation for further analysis of a wide range of problems. They appreciated the dynamic nature of world capitalism and insisted on creatively developing and adjusting their thinking in line with a changing world. Never did they attempt to shoehorn facts to theory. In fact, they were suspicious of historical explanations that drained the historical process of variation and that resisted the modification of tactical, strategic and theoretical concepts under any circumstances. Such an approach to theory takes on a special urgency in light of the new questions facing the international working class movement.

At the same time, we should also bring our own nation's radical tradition to bear on these new questions of theory and practice. On July 4th 2001 our nation celebrated the 225th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Our revolution was on the front end of a wave of bourgeois democratic revolutions that stretched

over the full span of the next century. Lenin described our country's war of independence as a "really revolutionary war." The revolution didn't fulfil all of its promise and potential. Freedom and democratic rights were extended, but only partially and incompletely. Vast categories of people, namely native Americans, slaves, women, and the propertyless, were excluded. And even now, more than two centuries later, the fruits of the tree of liberty are not equally shared by all Americans

Nevertheless, our nation's revolution constitutes an historic milestone in the unending struggle for freedom. Its ideals enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights and subsequent amendments have inspired countless struggles for universal freedom. In fact, the past 225 years have been filled with heroic struggles of our nation's people trying, sometimes in the face of what seemed like insurmountable odds, to enlarge the boundaries of and give new meanings to freedom and liberty. It wasn't polite society, but rather what polite society called the rabble, the mob, the undeserving poor, the vulgar, the working stiffs that have been the real authors of democracy and democratic rights. We draw inspiration and political insights from these struggles, much like revolutionary movements in other countries draw from their own revolutionary and democratic past. [Here he quotes from Tom Paine, Frederick Douglass, Paul Robeson, W.E.B. Dubois, Sojourner Truth, Henry Winston, Sitting Bull, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Mother Jones, Susan B. Anthony, Mother Jones, Rosa Parks and others]

This is our culture. It's a culture that we should love and take pride in. We should neither allow this rich heritage of struggle to be demagogically appropriated by the extreme right nor permit it to be sanitized and stripped of its thunder by the ruling class.

Living in the centre of US imperialism, we have to be ever vigilant against expressions of great nation arrogance. And we are. On the other hand, we should not be dismissive of our country's democratic history and culture. There is so much that is heroic and noble in our nation's past and present that such sentiments are inappropriate and politically counterproductive.

The great revolutionary Bulgarian communist and



patriot Georgi Dimitrov once said:

“We Communists are the irreconcilable opponents, in principle, of bourgeois nationalism in all of its forms. But we are not supporters of national nihilism, and should never act as such. The task of educating workers and all working people in the spirit of proletarian internationalism is one of the fundamental tasks of every Communist Party. But anyone who thinks that this permits him, or even compels him, to sneer at all national sentiments of the broad masses of working people is far from being a genuine Bolshevik, and has understood nothing of the teaching of Lenin on the national question.” (United Front Against War and Fascism)

### **The New Economy**

It wasn't that long ago that the apologists of capitalism extolled, almost with a zeal worthy of an evangelical preacher, the good news of the “new economy.” Thanks to the revolution in information, communications, and transportation, we were told, the days of rising prices, slow growth, and cyclical downturns that plagued the US economy in earlier times were a thing of the past.

Indeed, out of the ashes of the old economy, a “new economy,” it was said, had arisen. And apparently by magic, for no one was able to offer a plausible explanation for this new phenomenon. In this “new economy,” a long-term productivity slowdown and unemployment were both vanquished, inflation was tamed, and nasty cyclical ups and downs were overcome. The soaring of stock and bond prices to unheard of levels was seen as the most obvious sign that US capitalism had entered an era of nearly limitless possibilities. Any concerns about speculative excess and bubbles on Wall Street were patronisingly dismissed as the tired views of some outworn thinker whose mindset was hopelessly stuck in an earlier period.

The only flaw with all this was that eventually reality asserted itself. The economic laws of motion of capitalist society, which Marx so brilliantly uncovered long ago, rained on the parade of the “new economy” and dot-com crowd. Boom gave way to slowdown. Investment in hi-tech and manufacturing dried up. Profit expectations dimmed. Unemployment began to creep up. And the consumer price index that measures inflation was travelling north while the stock market was plunging southward. By the time the market reached a point of unstable equilibrium a trillion dollars of value had been lost.

But this precipitous fall of stock prices is more than a passive mirror of a faltering economy. It measurably aggravates the economic crisis. Just as the debt-driven financial bubble on Wall Street was a major stimulant to the longest expansion in this century, the bursting of the bubble will considerably worsen the economy's slide on the downside of the economic cycle.

How bad will economic conditions get? We don't know exactly. But we do know that they continue to worsen as we speak. The establishment media would like us to believe that the cyclical downturn is only a momentary blip in an otherwise healthy economy. But this is an instance of the wish getting

far ahead of the reality.

A recent issue of ‘The Economist’ quotes Lawrence Summers saying that the present day economic cycle will more likely mirror the cyclical patterns of the pre- rather than the post- World War II world. In other words the downturns may well be longer and steeper. The present weakness in our economy, moreover, coincides with a slowdown in the world economy and an energy crisis. Both could worsen the economic situation in this country considerably, particularly if war breaks out in the Middle East. More and more, capitalism is an integrated world economic system, thereby bringing about a closer synchronisation of economic crises on a global level.

The unfolding economic crisis, combined with the right wing anti-democratic offensive, will bring enormous economic hardship to tens of millions, and especially working class and minority women, racially and nationally oppressed people, and immigrant workers.

Making matters worse, many forms of relief have been eliminated during the last decade. Consequently, the grimmest features of a capitalist economic crisis – homelessness, hunger, dire poverty, family crises – will reappear on a much broader scale. Elementary survival will be a daily concern of millions of people.

### **The Global Economy**

Notwithstanding the claims of its proponents, economic globalisation is accompanied by fierce exploitation, economic instability, and crises. In its wake, problems of vast dimensions have arisen – AIDS, poverty, hunger, debt bondage, labour migration, global warming, the marginalisation of whole regions and continents, and the heightening of national and racial oppression.

Consider for a moment the AIDS crisis. In Africa alone, 17 million men, women, and children have died and another 25 million are infected with the HIV virus. One would think that given the deadly and devastating impact of this killer disease that the world community would respond on an emergency basis. But that hasn't happened. So the question is why? Suffice it to say that the AIDS crisis in Africa and elsewhere is not only a health problem, but also a problem of political economy, a problem of racist oppression, a problem of capitalist globalisation, and a problem of imperialism's utter inhumanity.

The contemporary global economy is not an arena of freedom and free exchange, but rather of coercion and unequal power with a few nations and powerful transnational corporations, like General Electric, Microsoft, and Citicorp, sitting at the top, and the vast majority of nations and people occupying a subordinate status. Despite all the hype about the magic of the market, the structure of the global economy is not the outcome of some inevitable, seamless and pure economic process. Instead, it is fraught with contradictions, winners, losers, crises, and struggles, all of which have a bearing on the overall trajectory of economic globalisation.

In fact, the evolution of the global economy is as much a political process as an economic one. Capitalism follows general laws of development to be sure, but these laws operate in a particular political



and economic context and are modified to one degree or another by the particular distribution of political and economic power among competing classes. We would make a huge mistake if we neatly separated the economic substructure of the global economy from the politics of capitalist globalization. The transnational corporations, which are the main structural underpinning of the global economy, don't walk up to a line separating economics from politics and say, "We can't go any further; politics is for others." To the contrary, they control and utilize the state apparatus and supranational organisations – like the International Monetary Fund – not to mention their own economic might to structure the objective process of economic internationalization in their own selfish interests.

In fact, the pronounced tendency in the political sphere toward reaction, fiscal discipline, and violence in our country is closely connected to the needs and pressures of a global economy dominated by huge concentrations of economic power. It's not small town and rural America, but rather the most reactionary sections of capital that are the architect and driving force behind the lean and aggressive role of the state. Moreover, with the collapse of the Soviet state a decade ago, there is no counterweight to the aggressive tendencies of US imperialism. Feeling unrestrained and triumphant, US imperialism let its dogs out.

Somewhat to the surprise of the US ruling class, however, a powerful protest movement has arisen in response to this new global configuration of political and economic power. This new movement has no single centre. It is multi-layered and contains many political tendencies. Its demands and forms of struggle are wide-ranging and radical. And it is developing somewhat spontaneously, which has both positive and negative aspects to it. Nearly all the currents in this movement see the transnational corporations and supranational organizations as the main cause of the crises associated with globalization. Some go further and point to the system of capitalism itself.

There is no shortage of issues around which millions can be mobilized. Blocking the Free Trade of the Americas Agreement, making child and sweatshop labour illegal, protecting the world's rain forests and food supply, defending the land and cultural rights of indigenous peoples, abolishing the debt of the developing countries, and demilitarizing the border between Mexico and the US are a few of the issues that draw people into struggle.

We should have a very positive attitude toward this movement and find ways to raise the level of our involvement. Our experience as well as our understanding of the nature of capitalism should allow us to make an important contribution to this tremendous movement.

### **Economic Transition**

To look for a historical parallel to present-day developments, we might go back to the turn of the last century. The country at the time was going through an economic transition much like it is today. The changeover was from locally and regionally organized markets to a nationally integrated

economy.

At the centre of this process was a new economic actor – powerful corporations that were able to dominate whole lines of industry and consolidate heretofore disjointed local markets. It was the age of the robber barons, like Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Morgan. Facilitating this process were technological breakthroughs in manufacturing, communications, and transportation. Of these technologies the most notable was the railroad, which made possible the transporting of goods from distant sites to consumer markets.

This restructuring of the economy brought in its train enormous dislocation and hardship for millions of the country's working people, farmers, and other class strata. A way of life for tens of millions was forever destroyed. Out of this wrenching experience grew a powerful people's movement to challenge the growing control of the economy by these new corporate trusts.

Today, we are in another transition, from a nationally integrated economy to a globally integrated one. Like a century ago, a new economic actor – the transnational corporation – is the main economic form organizing this transition. New technologies are facilitating the process. And it is happening in an incredibly short space of time and an old way of life is disappearing. And again in response, a labor-led coalition has emerged – this time to challenge the transnational corporations and the global institutions that they control. In both instances, the transition was driven by the core characteristics and deep structures of capitalist exploitation.

At the same time, there are differences between the earlier transition and the current one. The scale of the previous transition was national while the current one is global. The corporate form structuring the transitions is different. The contemporary working class is bigger and more diverse than its predecessor of a century ago. New social movements have arisen in recent years that didn't exist one hundred years ago. And the level of development of the productive forces and productive technique is vastly different in the present transition. Thus we find both continuity and change in this historical process.

Our emphasis in studying economic processes, however, should be on what is new and changing – not to the point where we lose sight of the underlying processes from which the new emerges. But in striking a balance between continuity and change, our accent should be on what is changing. And the reason is simple. Changes in the productive forces and relations alter the terrain of the class struggle.

It is sometimes said that capitalism has always been a global system, so what's the big fuss about globalization? It's just the same old capitalism. Sure, capitalism has always been a global system, but not in the same way, not to the same degree, and not with the same effects. It changes and moves through different phases of development. And without taking into account the specific features that distinguish one period of capitalist development from another, we will be unable to project strategic



and tactical concepts of struggle.

As a reaction to the transition to a nationally integrated economy in the early 20th century, the populist and reform movements constructed a mechanism with rules, regulations, and institutions whose function was to restrain the power of the corporate beasts of that time. The anti-globalization movement is faced with a similar challenge. But in this instance, the regulatory rules and institutions to harness transnational corporate power have to be fitted to the present-day concrete circumstances. For example, can the global economy be brought under social control without reversing the pronounced trend toward financial de-regulation and liberalization? Doesn't finance capital have to be brought to its knees in order to mitigate, let alone eliminate, the harsh effects of globalization?

If the answer is yes, then social control over capital movements has to be one of the core elements of any alternative program to capitalist globalization. Of course, there will be other elements, including new forms of international working class unity. But without radically curbing the power of transnational corporations and banks, any new regulatory regime will lack teeth.

### **Political Situation**

The Bush administration and the extreme right are utilizing their domination of the federal structure to try to turn back the clock. And they are doing it at reckless speed. On the world stage, their policies are militarist, unilateralist, and interventionist. There is literally no region of the world where you can't see the particularly aggressive hand of the Bush administration. Whether it's provoking China, the Koreans and Vietnam or giving a green light to the anti-Cuban lobby in the Senate or continuing Plan Colombia or hosting murderers like Ariel Sharon in the White House or demanding the extension of NATO to the borders of Russia or manipulating the War Tribunals Court to illegally indict Slobodan Milosevic or resuming the bombing of Vieques or trying to undermine the Venezuelan government of Hugo Chavez or trashing the Kyoto protocol on global warming or twisting allies' arms to support the US abrogation of the ABM treaty, the Bush administration is pursuing a foreign policy course that is a more dangerous expression of US imperialism than its predecessor.

But the world will not be bullied. And among the American people there is unease with Bush's foreign policy. However, we should quickly note that shifting sentiments alone are not enough.

During most of the Clinton years, mass actions against US interventionist policies were rare and that continues today. We need to ask why this is so..... Our imperialism is the lone super power in the world. Therefore a special responsibility falls on the American people to curb the war drive of the Bush administration and US imperialism.

In this struggle the US peace movement must join peace forces worldwide. Even among US allies in Europe, there are points of tension that can be utilized to stay the aggressive actions of the Pentagon war machine.

### **The Domestic Front**

On the domestic front, the Bush White House lost no time in demonstrating that this administration is viciously anti-working class, anti-woman, anti-gay, anti-disabled, anti-people, anti-democratic and racist.

Its first legislative victories on taxes and the budget are going to be costly ones. The Bush tax cut radically redistributes wealth in favor of the rich and eats up the budget surplus, thereby crowding out spending for needed social programs for the indefinite future.

In the coming months, Bush is setting his sights on the privatization of Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. We should also anticipate that he will revisit the issue of private school vouchers, a cause that is close to the heart of the extreme right and a new site of immense profiteering. And his venomous hatred and assault on the labour movement, evident from the first day of his presidency, will continue.

One day Bush cancels regulations protecting workers' safety, the next day he interferes in airline negotiations, and on the following day he overturns federal regulations barring labour law violators from bidding on federal contracts and winks at the illegal frame-up of the Charleston 5. Their only crime – and its no crime – was to stand up to the vicious, anti-labour racist attack against longshore workers in South Carolina. The fight of the Charleston 5 is an integral part of the new labor movement, of the fight against globalization, and of a growing coalition to turn the South from a base of reaction and racism to one of progressive politics and equality.

This unrelenting and many-sided drive against labour should convince every democratic-minded American and every progressive organization, and especially our Party, to rally around labour. For one thing is clear – a crippled labour movement is a crippling blow to the developing struggles against the Bush administration and the ultra right.

### **New Conditions**

Until recently, the Bush crowd and his right wing corporate supporters were on a roll. And then something unforeseen happened. Senator Jeffords from the small state of Vermont switched his party affiliation from Republican to Independent.

Literally overnight the Bush-Cheney-Lott-Delay-Scalia orchestrated blitzkrieg against the people's living standards and democratic rights went from a gallop to a crawl. The ultra right's legislative plans are extremely problematic now.

At the same time, the prospects of winning legislative victories have considerably improved. What seemed like an uphill battle a few weeks ago is a winnable battle now. Indeed, recent polls strongly suggest that the defection of Jeffords is an expression of a larger phenomenon in US politics in which a growing majority of American people are distancing themselves from Bush and his policies. Perhaps the biggest gap is over the protection of the environment, which is an issue that has to move closer to the centre of our theoretical work and practical activities.

Of course, mass pressure and broad people's unity





has to be brought to bear on Democratic politicians as well as moderate Republicans. It is the only way to rebuff Bush and to win legislative victories. It is the only way to win gains in any arena of struggle.

The labour and the people's organizations would make a mistake in completely relying on the Democrats in Congress, but, by the same token, a successful legislative fight isn't possible without the assistance of the Democratic Party or at least a section of it. Sure we would like to hang our hat on an independent, labor-led people's party, but no such party exists at this moment although we need to do more to accelerate the formation of such a party. This Convention should go into this question and generate some new thinking and initiatives. In the meantime, however, labour and the people have no choice but to construct legislative majorities with the hand they have been dealt.

Without a doubt, the 2002 elections loom large now. They could be a turning point in the struggle against the right danger, although the working class and people should not singularly focus on them to the neglect of immediate mass struggles. How to manage that dialectic is something that the progressive movement, including communists, will have to try to resolve.

### **Mass Struggle**

To what extent mass resistance to Bush's policies develops depends in the end on the organized initiatives of labour, the African American, Mexican American, and other oppressed peoples, women, retirees, farmers and farm workers, gays and lesbians, environmental and peace activists, the disabled, and other social movements and strata. A big tent strategy is imperative.

The good news is that mass struggles are moving in that direction. Go it alone ideas are uncommon. Coalition building is becoming a priority. Most mass organizations, even single issue ones, approach politics in a broad way. Militancy has grown although much more is necessary. Multi-racial, multi-national unity is more palpably felt. New organizational forms are emerging in nearly every field of struggle. More advanced demands are surfacing owing to the sharpness of the struggle in some instances. There are fewer illusions about the Democratic Party. And, finally, the new labour movement is increasingly assuming a leading role in this still fluid process.

This is a moment when large peoples' majorities can be assembled and win political victories while further isolating Baby Bush. This is a moment when a more co-ordinated national movement can come into being to battle the extreme right.

Thus, every struggle, every initiative, and every demand should be connected to the larger task of building a nationally coordinated struggle against the Bush administration. If that isn't the outlook of labor and people's activists then the forest is being missed for the trees.

### **Unity Process**

The unity of all democratic forces is imperative. But it doesn't materialize spontaneously. It has to be fought for constantly. It requires a timely response to

the ruling class's strategies of division. It develops around specific issues rather than abstract and general appeals for unity. It takes a skillful combination of the overall needs of the class and people with the specific demands of its particular sections.

I would like to mention three specific struggles that have a bearing on the unity of the democratic movement against the right danger and the trans-national corporations.

The industrial, mineral extraction, and transportation industries are disproportionately feeling the pinch of the current economic slowdown – not to mention longer-term job losses extending over two decades. The Bush administration, aware of this predicament, is cleverly and cynically dangling job opportunities in front of these sections of the labour movement as a trade off for their support for Star Wars, the administration's energy policy, and other legislative initiatives. It is also looking ahead to the mid-term elections in 2002. Such support causes tensions in the AFL-CIO, which so far has presented a united front against the extreme right. It also throws a wrench into the coalition of labour and its allies.

To prevent further division, a two-track policy is needed. On one track, given the recent developments in the Senate, labour along with its allies can re-enter the political arena with confidence that they can win new victories on a broad range of issues. On the other track, labor and its allies should address the issue of job creation and income protection, especially in specific sectors of the economy, like steel.

A jobs program that is environmentally friendly, accents military conversion to peacetime needs, comes at the expense of corporate profits and the super wealthy, and promotes labor unity at home and worldwide would go a long way to neutralizing Bush's politics of division.

In this regard, our Party should get fully behind the Public Works and Infrastructure Bill (HB 1364). This bill would create jobs in steel and other hard hit sectors of the economy and provide badly needed infrastructure repairs in our nation's cities. The bill gives the labor movement, the racially oppressed, and the unemployed a concrete way to struggle against the economic crisis. It is not the only way, however. Other legislative bills, for instance, addressing specific aspects of the economic crisis will be introduced at the state and congressional level, possibly including a jobs bill modeled after the Martinez bill.

### **For Equality And Against Racism**

Another struggle that has a major bearing on the unity process is the fight for equality and against racism. Simply said, this struggle is at the core of the struggle for class and all people's unity, democracy and social progress. This political proposition has been a cornerstone of our strategic outlook since the Party's formation more than eight decades ago.

Over those past eight decades vast political, economic, and social transformations have altered in extraordinary ways the terrain on which the working class and its allies battle its class enemies.



Nevertheless, the overarching necessity of fighting for full equality of nationally and racially oppressed peoples and against racism has lost none of its strategic importance.

Today, the immediate obstacle to full equality is right wing political reaction. Which comes as no surprise. While racist ideology is a core element of capitalist ideology, the ideological and political positions of the ultra right, sometimes dressed up in academic language of university scholars, are invariably extreme and crude.

Thus, the struggle for equality faces new challenges and dangers because of the political ascendancy of the extreme right. Further complicating the struggle for equality is the cyclical downturn and the ongoing process of global economic restructuring.

Consider for a moment the economic and social conditions in the communities of the African American, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Asian American, Native American, and other nationally and racially oppressed peoples. In nearly every category that measures social well being, conditions are abysmal. Roughly a third of African American, Latino, and Native American Indian people are living in poverty. Unemployment, while showing some improvements during the boom of the 1990s, is creeping up again and the real question is: Why were the gains of the good economic times so meagre? The reduction of government spending for education, welfare, health care, housing, and the dismantling of affirmative action programs are severely affecting the nationally and racially oppressed communities. And homelessness, hunger, and child poverty permanently stalk the streets of the segregated neighborhoods of our nation.

One of the most outrageous expressions of racism is the officially sanctioned repression that terrorizes communities where people of colour live. Police brutality and murder continue with the perpetrators receiving barely a slap on the wrist even in cases where the evidence seems to prove without a doubt that the police acted like vigilantes. Racial profiling goes on unabated, despite public protest. And, finally, the criminal justice system from the point of arrest to death row is steeped in the crudest forms of inequality and racism.

It seems like jails can't be constructed fast enough to accommodate the swelling prison population of whom the disproportionate number are young, African American men. This reality has prompted some of the more thoughtful analysts on the left to speak of a prison industrial complex.

The political objective of this many-sided assault is obvious: to shatter in a million pieces the social fabric of the communities of the nationally and racially oppressed and at the same time to divide the labour movement from its natural and strategic allies – the African American, Mexican American, and other nationally and racially oppressed people.

Thus the stakes are high and the outcome still hangs in balance. Nevertheless, there are reasons for confidence that new victories can be won. The main one is that the labour-African American alliance, the labour-Mexican American alliance, and the alliance of labour and all the nationally and racially

oppressed are at a new level. Without such unity the struggle to defeat Bush and right wing political reaction, which at this moment is the main obstacle to equality and social progress, would be a mirage.

In this regard, nationally and racially oppressed workers and their organizations have a unique role to play. At the same time, the labor movement as a whole, and white workers in their own self-interests, have to elevate the struggle for full equality and against racism. In recent years we have given insufficient attention to the special role of white workers and people in this struggle. We should correct this shortcoming at this Convention.

### **New Reality**

Our slogan of black, brown, and white unity fits the new trends in the working class and people's movement. It reflects a new and dynamic feature of today's reality. For decades we brought to every site of struggle the slogan: Black and White, Unite and Fight! The materialization of that slogan undergirded the great organizing and people's victories of the Depression and WWII years. It was instrumental to the historic victories over Jim Crow in the South two decades later as well.

On one level, the slogan reflected our conviction that without a more vigorous struggle for black-white working class unity and against racism victories against the monopoly corporations were very unlikely. On a deeper level, it identified the African American people as the main strategic partner of the working class. The logic of this position correctly rested on the role of slavery in the historic evolution of our country, the overwhelming working class makeup of the African American people, their location in the strategic sectors of the economy, and finally, the interrelationship of the African American freedom movement with the general class and democratic struggles in our country.

More recently, we have adjusted our slogan to black, brown, and white unity or multi-racial, multi-national unity in order to more accurately capture the changing demographic profile of our working class and people. This adjustment was never intended to diminish the strategic importance of the struggle for African American equality and against racism, although it may inadvertently have.

In struggles too numerous to mention, it is clear that black, brown, white unity is a new feature of today's movement and an absolutely necessary requirement to secure victories against racism and for class and social advances. Isn't this a conclusion that we can draw from the near victory of Antonio Villaraigosa in the Los Angeles mayoral election?

The new census corroborates this point of view. Even a quick reading of the data reveals that substantial changes have occurred in the demographic profile of our nation's people and working class in the short space of a decade. Particularly striking is the new numerical strength of the Mexican American and other Latino peoples whose numbers have swelled with the waves of immigration from Mexico and Central and South America.

At the same time, the real political significance of the Mexican American and other Latino people



pivots not only on their swelling size. It also springs from the fact that the Mexican American and Latino people bring a contagious militancy, new forms of struggle, a coalition approach, and class consciousness to the struggle for equality and class unity. The main currents of this movement see their struggles not as separate from the general democratic and class struggles, but rather as an integral part of them. In this regard immigrant workers play a special role, which we do not yet fully appreciate.

At the same time, we should contest the political pundits who would like to use the new census to foment divisions among nationally and racially oppressed peoples, weaken labor unity, and stir up anti-immigrant feeling. We have never reduced the significance of the national question in its general or particular form to the numbers of one or another oppressed people. Politics, as Lenin said, is more like higher mathematics than simple arithmetic. That's particularly true of the national question.

Underlying our concept of multi-racial, multi-national unity is the commonality of national and racial exploitation and oppression along with the recognition that broad multi-racial, multi-national unity is a strategic requirement for victories on every front of struggle and at every stage of struggle. There is nothing tactical about the fight for black, brown, and white unity and against racism. It is a fundamental principle.

Thus, the concept of multi-racial, multi-national unity was a necessary and correct strategic adjustment on our part. But perhaps in doing so we lost sight of the specific features and role of each of the nationality questions. This was a mistake. On the ground, on the terrain of struggle especially, it is imperative that we appreciate the specific features of each nationality question and its interrelationship with other oppressed nationalities and the working class movement.

Without that we will find it difficult to deepen our role in the fight for black-brown unity and multi-racial, multi-national working class unity. Without that we will find it difficult to strengthen the labour-African American alliance, the labour-Mexican American alliance, and the labour-nationally oppressed people's alliance – all of which constitute the foundation of all people's unity.

### **Women's Equality**

Still another struggle that has a critical bearing on the unity of the labour and people's movement is the struggle for women's equality. It is reshaping our country. Women are found in nearly every arena of political, economic, and social life. Women are agents of progressive change. New issues and demands arising from the fact that women combine unpaid labour in the home with underpaid labour in the workplace are altering the legislative terrain as well as mass thinking.

Reproductive rights, equal pay for comparable work, living wages, parental leave, quality public education, health care, repetitive motion injuries, and affirmative action are a few of the issues that are traceable at least in part to the women's movement.

First wave feminism won suffrage rights in the

early decades of the last century. Second wave feminism broke down the legal structure of discrimination in the workplace, secured reproductive rights and extended the boundaries of freedom for women in society. The challenge to third wave feminism is to eliminate institutionalized inequality in the workplace, home, and society and to secure full and actual equality.

The immediate barrier, of course, is the ultra right and its right wing corporate, anti-democratic agenda. Not for a long time – maybe never – has the women's movement confronted such a many-sided assault on its rights and conditions.

The lesson of the 2000 election campaign is that the struggle for women's equality is inextricably bound up with the broader struggles against the right wing corporate agenda and for democracy. No movement and no section of our nation's people are in a position to go it alone.

By the same token, the labor movement and its allies have to appreciate that women constitute an active and leading component of every section of the broader people's movement, beginning with labor. Indeed, given the new role of women arising from the transformation in the U.S. and global economy and the self-activity of women themselves, women as a social force along with the working class and the racially and nationally oppressed are at the strategic core of class and democratic struggles in our country. Indeed, no fundamental challenge to the ascendancy of the ultra right is possible without the full measure of involvement of women as workers, mothers, caregivers, and community activists.

In this regard, trade union women, standing at the intersection of the working class, racially oppressed, and women's movements, have an enormous role to play in the crystallization of a broad labour-led people's coalition against the extreme right.

Their multiple identities bring not only added burdens, but also a broad understanding of the interconnectedness of class and democratic struggles. To put it differently, trade union women are less likely to see political struggle in compartmentalized and non-class ways, thus making them especially attuned to the issues of unity and coalition building.

At the Party-sponsored conference on women's equality this spring, the participants concluded that our theoretical and practical work is not commensurate with the new level of struggle for equality. Noting that the emerging struggles against the extreme right and the economic crisis will bring millions of women and their allies into struggle, we agreed to do everything to strengthen our work for women's equality, including creating an atmosphere in our Party that allows communist women to make their fullest theoretical and practical contributions to the Party and broader movements. Likewise, the labor and people's movement has to continue to raise the level of struggle for the full equality of women and against male supremacy. ★

*[The remainder of Sam Webb's speech focussed on the role of the Communist Party. It will be re-printed in the next issue of CR –ed]*



# The Case for Communism

**John Foster**

**H**ow should we put the case for communism? Today. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union. At a time when the working class movement is ideologically weaker than it has been for many years. And when many on the Left themselves are uncertain about the feasibility of either a planned economy or any alternative type of state power that could administer it. This article is written to start a discussion. It will attempt a case for Communism, but its main purpose is to identify those issues which require further debate.

Marx took it as self-evident that the primary case for communism is made by capitalism itself. Capitalism creates the material base: a system of production involving the large-scale concentration of capital, the complex interlocking of different processes across society and the continuing and dynamic transformation of the productive potential of labour. Capitalism creates the social means. It brings into being a labour force, concentrates it, compels it to organise to protect its conditions and makes collective action a social reality. Capitalism also provides the reasons. Capitalism exploits. It seeks to divide working people against each other. It demands that each unit of capital maximises its profit or dies. It has no way of ensuring that its

productive power is put to social use – or even fully used at all. Its competitive character, united with the power of the capitalist nation state, brings imperialism and war.

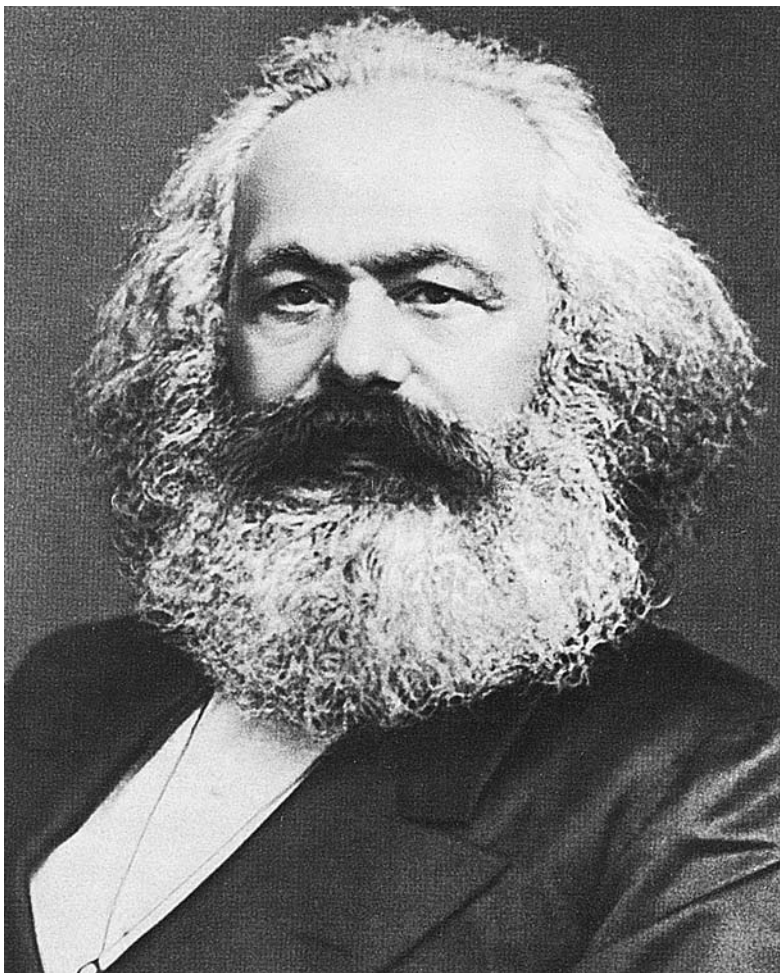
All this is as true in 2001 as it was in 1868. The concentration of capital is now on a colossal scale. Profits are still maintained by the coercion of unemployment. Imperialist powers are aggressively subordinating weaker nations in order to resolve their own economic crises. For most of the world's population poverty has worsened in the long-run. The past thirty years have seen growing levels of malnutrition and starvation – and in the last five years living standards have fallen sharply in some East Asian and Latin American countries previously experiencing fast industrialisation. It is true that for a minority, those living in the advanced capitalist countries, material levels of consumption have risen. But so also has the intensity of their work and the inequality of income between rich and poor.

However, two of Marx's claims might well be queried. One concerns the working class. Critics would challenge the assumption that working people today have the organisational potential to pose a coherent opposition to capitalism as such. And this challenge is often linked to a second: the viability of any alternative. Maybe, they say, capitalism is wasteful and exploitative. Maybe it is socially divisive. But capitalism continues to transform society's productive potential and there is altogether no evidence that any alternative system could do as well. Why should workers risk everything for a system that would most probably leave them worse off?

In so far as the challenge on the working class is about its size, it can be answered fairly easily. Marx never defined the working class in terms of industrial or manual workers. This was a definition developed not by Marx but by Adam Smith and, as used by today's sociologists, is quite alien to Marx's concept of labour being a union of hand and brain. Marx deemed all those whose labour was exploited for profit to be members of the working class. They were so because they had a class interest to oppose capital and ultimately the state that defends it. On this basis the working class is bigger than it has ever been. Trade union density among white collar workers in Britain today is no less than that among "manual" workers

The challenge is more substantial when applied to the issue of organisation and political consciousness – particularly when it comes to the political will to establish an alternative socialist social system. The political disintegration of the Soviet Union has been used very effectively by the enemies of socialism to query whether a non-capitalist society could ever be economically effective. Added to this, there are other questions that do not come from the enemies of socialism which are considerably more difficult. They concern the political and social organisation of socialist societies and their long-term viability.

Proponents of liberal democracy have frequently



sought to characterise past socialist societies as systems of arbitrary rule enforced by unaccountable communist parties masquerading as the working class. Conversely, they argue that only a law-governed market-based system of individual ownership can sustain individual liberty. Once the state takes over from the market, once economic power becomes concentrated and is monopolised by an elite, arbitrary invasions of personal freedom are inevitable.

Forget the irony – that this excellently describes capitalist liberal democracy as it exists today – and there remain real issues to address. On too many occasions Communist Parties have lost their internal democracy and become dominated by personalised cliques. Even in those socialist societies where socialism had a mass base and institutions of mass democracy had been established, it often proved difficult to carry forward socialist consciousness to the next generation. In the Soviet Union where the survival of at least some forms of mass democracy proved surprisingly robust, Yuri Andropov spoke in the 1980s of the continuing consequences of the “alienation of labour”. Individualism could regenerate itself under socialism. So could nationalism and racism. And socialism would regress. Ruling communist parties would increasingly seek to keep power out of unreliable hands and the excluded majority of workers would lose any conception of themselves as somehow being collectively “in power”.

Opponents of socialism have very successfully rolled together all these negative experiences into one monolithic “failure of communism”. The social achievements of socialism are forgotten. The economic and political strength that defeated fascism is as if it never existed. In popular consciousness even the economic disasters resulting from the switch to a capitalist market system are often attributed to “communism” itself.

Ideologically it is almost as if Marx had never lived – leaving the field open to the spiritual heirs of the utopians of the 19th century, Proudhon and Bakunin. Anti-capitalism is an inspiration to thousands of young people: they fling themselves as bravely against the police lines at Genoa or Seattle as those in Paris in 1848. But there is little or no awareness of how to bring wider social forces into play and a profound distrust of organisation or old political structures. The paralysis of direction is no less marked in the trade union movement. Opposition to privatisation and neo-liberal economics is combined with a general failure to pose any coherent socialist alternative.

This is why putting the case for communism is not some pious piece of antiquarianism but an urgent political need. Marx did indeed demonstrate how capitalism creates the historical conditions for socialism. Yet his primary preoccupation, and his own definition of his main contribution, was about how this change could be brought about. It was Marx who defined the need for a Communist Party, its relationship to the working class and other social

forces and the way politically the transition to socialism should take place. In so far as it has been Communists who have been most associated with the practical attempts to build socialism, their successes and their failures, it must primarily be Communists who draw the lessons. Others on the Left – most, it has to be said, more in the tradition of Proudhon and Bakunin – will never do this. They prefer to dwell rhetorically to socialism’s failure and simply ascribe it to Communist rule. The vital experience of the past century, of success as well as failure, will be lost – which is precisely what our ruling class wants.

Let’s start with Marx’s own prescriptions for political action. Anyone looking at them for the first time will find them a strange combination of caution and radicalism, of insistence on mass involvement and requirements for discipline and control. Marx argued that Communists had to be totally realistic about stages of development. The working class would always need its own independent organisation as a class. But alliances were also essential. And they would have to be formed in line with the current balance of class forces. At particular stages these allies would include the peasantry and even sections of the capitalist class. Immediate political objectives would reflect the particular circumstances and usually run well short of socialism. Yet the transition to socialism itself demanded revolutionary change. The capitalist state had to be destroyed – in the sense of a coherent structure of institutions that operated to meet the legal, social and economic needs of capitalism. And the working class had to constitute itself politically and organisationally in a way that governing institutions responded fully and entirely to the needs of socialist construction. In other words the working class had to become a ruling class – with all the revolutionary transformation of consciousness that this required.

This change in consciousness was central to Marx’s assumptions. A very significant part of the working population, probably a majority, had to go through a process of political mobilisation that both built on and transcended an existing sectional collectivism, overcame sexism, racism and narrow consumerism and created an understanding of what constituted its leading role. Only in this way could a mass base be created for a new working class state. Marx was entirely realistic about this process. It would inevitably be ragged and incomplete: the new society would bear all the birthmarks of the old. But unless a major part of the working class had been themselves been involved in the revolutionary process, and had understood its significance as class struggle, there could be no firm basis for the new order.

But what new order? Again Marx was sharply realistic. He abhorred utopianism and all attempts to detail some ideal future. For he knew the future would not be ideal. Over a long historical epoch the priority had to be on developing society’s material base – overcoming the legacy of uneven



development, environmental imbalance and stunted human potential.

In these circumstances there could be no naive egalitarianism. In creating the material basis for the new order remuneration had to be based on contribution – minus what was needed for social investment. Marx poured scorn on utopian schemes for “exchanges of labour value” – regardless of the social value of what was produced. In the preface to the first German edition of the *Poverty of Philosophy*, written a few months after Marx’s death, Engels stressed Marx’s belief in the essential role of competition to determine what commodities society actually needed.

So, on the one hand, Marx emphasised mass involvement by the working class. But, on the other, it had to be an involvement that understood the need for investment, wage differentials, material incentives and the discipline of competition. Only when the long-term consequences of alienation had been overcome, when work had become the prime necessity of life and the material conditions of abundance created could remuneration be in terms of need and “the free development of each [be].. the condition for the free development of all”. Only then. A difficult legacy indeed.

These prescriptions did not come out of thin air. For forty years Marx was centrally positioned in the working class politics of a rapidly industrialising Europe. He was involved in the democratic challenges of 1842 and 1848 and also, though less directly, in the first attempt to establish a form of working class state in the Paris Commune of 1871. When he drew conclusions, he sought to do so collectively – though often with great difficulty – through debate and discussion within organisations of communists and trade unionists.

This commitment to practice, to the testing and development of theory through collective action, has been the hallmark of Communist work ever since. It was what Marx saw as defining Communists and is as essential to the case for communism as the perspective for change itself. Here we will focus briefly on just two key issues: the relationship of the Communist Party to the working class and the role of class and party in socialist change.

Marx made the classic statement way back in 1848. “The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working class parties. They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole”. Communists “point out and bring to the fore the common interests of the entire proletariat”; they “always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole” in the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to go through. Their role is to represent “the line of march” for each particular national struggle at each particular time.

These words need clarifying. They were not meant to claim that Communists somehow knew it all simply by virtue of their name or because they

called themselves Marxists. Nor did Marx, or Lenin after him, ever have any notion that the Communist Party should be an elite of intellectuals that brought Marxism to the working class from outside. Quite the contrary. The reason for a party was two-fold. While class understanding develops within the working class, and most readily within those sections of large scale employment most exposed to capitalist crisis, it will be an uneven and difficult process. The most knowledgeable, experienced and combative workers will suffer displacement and victimisation: defeat will often bring disillusion and passivity. Organisation limits this and enables knowledge and class experience to be carried forward.

Organisation was also critical for an even more important reason. A Marxist or scientific understanding of social change has to be both learnt and developed, and development requires testing in practice. Organisation is needed for democratic discussion, disciplined and collective implementation and as a forum for further reassessment. Marxism is not an intellectual instrument that can just be picked up and used. The strategy and tactics of any communist party have to be specific and concrete: matched to the historical circumstances of its working class. A communist party has therefore to be “of” its working class, because that class can alone replace capitalism, but organisationally distinct from the everyday organisations of working class struggle such as trade unions. Such mass organisations will inevitably encompass all levels of consciousness and will in any normal circumstances reflect many of the ideas of capitalist society in general. A communist party, on the other hand, will represent those who accept the need to work unitedly to replace capitalism as a system – and continuously assess the lessons of that struggle.

Key to everything therefore is the relation between the Communist Party and the wider mass organisations. Today, it can be argued, there is a distinctive Communist style of work which results from over a century of active involvement in the wider movement and many mistakes and reappraisals. Every communist party will have its own story to tell of periods of sectarian isolation, others when reformist ideas invaded the party from outside and others when breakdowns in internal democracy prevented the further development of strategy and theory.

What characterises this style of work? In essence it is confidence in the working class and its basic organisations: a confidence borne of necessity. For ultimately it has to be workers in these organisations who become class conscious if there is to be any progress towards a different order. These and no others. There can be no short cuts. Accordingly, the Communist Party does not seek to establish “doctrinally pure” front organisations under its direct control. Nor is the party primarily a recruiting organisation or an electoral machine on its own behalf.



The key organisations are those for the routine day to day defence of working class interests. First and foremost these are the trade unions. But they also include tenants and community organisations, organisations defending the rights of particular groupings such as black and ethnic minorities, young people, women and pensioners. Individual Communists seek to build these organisations and their effectiveness: to develop confidence that collective action can bring change. They do so in the knowledge that for long periods of time the level of activity will be purely defensive and often sectional. But Communists also know that occasions will occur in which broader alliances can be established, solidarity developed and class understanding thereby transformed.

In terms of how this is done, it is very important to be specific. The whole point of a communist party is that it develops general (international) experience concretely in its own national circumstances. So here, because anything else would be presumptuous, let's consider Britain.

Our communist party has always been relatively very small and has worked within a massively bigger trade union and labour movement. It has never entered government. It has had very few elected representatives. At particular points, however, the party has had a relatively decisive role in bringing the working class movement into action – sometimes with historic consequences for the balance of class forces.

The late 1960s and early 1970s would be one example. This period saw first a Labour and then a Conservative government seek to limit trade union rights, to impose an incomes policy and to run the economy with significantly higher levels of unemployment and particularly detrimental effects for regional economies. The Communist Party argued for the use of strike action to bring pressure to bear on governments. The reformist leaderships of the TUC opposed such action. From very small beginnings in 1968 the movement of shop floor, shop steward led resistance grew. Within five years the position had been transformed. By 1973 TUC itself was backing political strike action. Regional alliances had been established, based on the trade union movement, communities and local business, to press for interventionist economic policies. Solidarity strike action was taking place on issues of unemployment and public services. Two miners strikes had restored the right to free collective bargaining. Shipyard workers on the Clyde had taken over their yards for a year to assert the right to work. By 1974 the Labour Party was calling for an Irreversible shift in the balance of wealth and power in favour of working people and won a general election on that basis.

These changes were certainly not engineered by a conspiracy of communists. Nor did communists work alone. The key work was done by many rank and file activists, communists and non-communists, winning arguments in the workplace and democratically gaining votes for particular

courses of action. In mining, shipbuilding, the docks and the car industry communists were especially to the fore. Their contribution was particularly important in two areas. One was to raise the need for solidarity between different groups of workers. The other was to pose the necessity for the building of alliances with other social forces. Critical to the success of the shipyard workers on the Clyde was the strategic vision which led to the creation of a regional/national alliance, including local business, and the resulting political isolation of Conservative government in Scotland. In this sense the working class was at last taking a leading role – defining the way forward for other social forces within a wider anti-monopoly alliance.

The ability of Communists to achieve this in the struggles of the early 1970s was precisely because they had the genuine trust of those with whom they worked. The outcome, as well as defeating government attempts to shackle the unions and building a mass movement, left individual organisations stronger – as much as anything because these wider struggles created tens of thousands of activists whose political horizons and experience had been transformed. The great majority of these activists were in the Labour Party and this in turn had major political consequences for the democratisation and leftward movement of that party by the early 1980s – developments which gravely worried our ruling class.

Today the position of our Communist Party will hardly recommend itself to any self-styled revolutionary. The CPB still identifies the Labour Party as the organisation that must be the focus of Left activity. It is not denied that the Labour government is fully aligned to imperialism. It is accepted that the potential actions of the Blair government on Star Wars and euro membership will strengthen the most aggressive trends in imperialism today.

Yet the CPB also sees the converse of this reality. New Labour's ability to govern on behalf of the British ruling class largely depends on a relationship with the trade union movement, the working class electorate and the Labour Party as a mass organisation. And it is precisely here that the organised majority of working people are and where the key changes will have to be won if the labour movement is to go forward to the next stage. It is also at this level, and nowhere else, that actual changes in policy on the euro and Star Wars have to be made – changes that are critical for working people across the world and which will most effectively open up contradictions in the international alignments of our ruling class. The Communist Party would probably attract many more recruits if it took a different, more "revolutionary" position. But it would not, it is suggested, be conducting itself as a Communist Party – a position argued in detail in the current (2001) edition of Britain's Road to Socialism.

What then of the other issue that is so crucial in the case for communism: the relationship between



the party, the working class and state under socialism? The British party has no experience of its own. But it is an issue which no party can ignore. The reverses of 1989-91 colour the entire climate within which working people operate across the world. While this is not the place to rehearse the entire debate, already well developed elsewhere, it is important to itemise some of the key points.

It might be proposed initially, as a basis of argument, that the economic functioning of centrally planned economies has generally been good. Economics, in any narrow sense, were not the problem. Growth rates in the socialist countries were generally higher than those of comparable capitalist societies for most of the post-war period. The much slower growth of later 1970s and 1980s largely reflected the political decision to reallocate resources from investment to military use. Today growth rates in Cuba and China, each adopting very different models of development, are higher than those of comparable economies in their regions. Both countries have (so far) shown themselves to have sufficient political cohesion to be able to handle transnational companies on terms that do not subordinate their own national objectives – a matter of no small importance to other countries in the third world.

The difficulties relate more to the long-term interactions between economic and political development and the way in which socialist state power is constructed and sustained. What follows is no more than a list.

First, there is the issue of how labour discipline is developed and accumulation of capital secured at the same time as widening the mass base of a socialist society. There is the longstanding debate on material and moral incentives. There is the newer one, posed dramatically in China, of market socialism and of privately owned capital operating in a relatively open market for labour. What form of labour regime is most compatible with maintaining and deepening socialist consciousness – or at least avoiding its catastrophic loss? No doubt most of the answers will be concrete and specific, relating to the circumstances of time and place. But there are also general issues here.

Second, there is the much wider but linked issue of the forms of socialist state power. Again answers are likely to be specific. Britain's Road to Socialism stresses the retention of the institutions of parliamentary democracy and a commitment to the operation of a plural party system including parties opposed to socialism. This perspective, central to the BRS, was developed after the last war to match the particular national circumstances of a country where the working class had won democracy prior to socialism and where institutions previously based solely on the representation of capitalist property were democratised. Questions, however, remain about how this process of democratisation will be completed. For any transition to socialism this will be crucial. The government apparatus has to be made fully responsive to the legal, social and

economic requirements of socialist construction. In this sense what should comprise the socialist state in terms of institutions that express the political will of the working class as a class? Is it enough at this stage to say that this will be done through the parliamentary representation, and extra-parliamentary pressure, of the trade union movement and its party, the Labour Party, once that party has been transformed through struggle – once it regains its previous democratic and federal structure and the Communist Party again becomes an integral part of it?

This leads directly on to a final question. What should be the relationship between the Communist Party and the state under socialism? One influential critique of the Soviet Union poses the fusion of the Communist Party with the state apparatus as a major cause of inertia and loss of momentum. The role of the Communist Party, it argues, is to spearhead the social forces of change. The role of the state, even the socialist state, is to sustain the existing socialist order. A fusion between the two aborts social progress. It might be claimed that the formulations of the BRS provide a guarantee against the problem. The Communist Party would be in government and at the same time also exist as a democratic entity outside it with its own internal structures. But is this too glib? Such a separation of roles was also formally the case in the Soviet Union and elsewhere.

So to summarise.

There is a case against capitalism. It becomes more urgent by the day. The weight of imperialist domination is proving increasingly destructive, economically and in terms of social cohesion, for a majority of people across the world. In the advanced capitalist countries big business is enforcing a free market regime that once more uses unemployment, casualisation and insecurity as its principal weapons of control and is directly creating the conditions for racism and fascism.

There is also a case for communism. It is somewhat different from the generalised case "for Socialism" – which in its popular and rhetorical form is usually weakly specified except, by implication, against the experience of the "communist states". The case for communism rests as much on its methods as its objectives. It is not utopian. It seeks a scientific, tested approach. It seeks to do this through the actual experience of working class struggle – including that in the building of socialism. In attempting to put the case for communism today it is therefore this experience in particular that we as Communists have a duty to assess. ★

#### Notes

1 Bahmed Azad, *Heroic Struggle – Bitter Defeat: factors contributing to the downfall of the socialist state in the USSR*, International Publishers, New York, 2000.

2 Frederick Engels, "Marx and Rodbertus. Preface to the First German edition of *The Poverty of Philosophy*", Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, XXVI, pp. 278-291, Moscow, 1990





# James Connolly and Esperanto

by Ken Keable

In the 1970s I was a member of the Communist Party Esperanto Group, a specialist group within the CPGB. There I first learned of the evidence that James Connolly, the great Scots-Irish Marxist, trade union leader and Irish nationalist, spoke Esperanto. But recently I have found evidence that three other martyrs of the 1916 Easter Rising – Joseph Plunkett, Francis Sheehy-Skeffington and Peadar Machen – spoke it or were interested in it. My purpose here is to set out all this evidence, and to discuss how Esperanto fits in with Connolly's ideology, and more.

In the 1930s my mother, Gladys Keable (1909-1972), was Organiser of the British Labour Esperanto Association (BLEA) and in 1937 she became the last Secretary of the International of Proletarian Esperantists (IPE). My father, Bill Keable (1903-94), was editor of the BLEA bulletin, *Ruga Esperantisto* (Red Esperantist). Consequently I have always had a strong awareness of the connections between Esperanto and socialist ideas, and the value of Esperanto as a tool of international labour solidarity.

## The Historical Background

In 1887 Ludovik Zamenhof, a Jewish Polish doctor, published his first book on the international language he had devised. He insisted from the start that it was not his property, but that, like all languages, it belonged to the people who used it, and would develop in accordance with their needs. He called himself "Doktoro Esperanto", which means "Doctor One-who-is-hoping", and soon Esperanto became the name of the language. One of his earliest converts, and the first in the English-speaking world, was Richard Geoghegan (pronounced gaygun), an expert in oriental languages as well as of Irish, who was born in Birkenhead of Irish parents, and was brought up in Dublin. He wrote the textbook that introduced Esperanto to the English-speaking world, and he became the second Esperanto author, after Zamenhof.

Esperanto was an idea that caught the imagination of many progressives at the time, including many socialists. This trend occurred (though possibly not in Connolly's time) in the Independent Labour Party, of which Connolly was a member in his early years in Scotland. Like many others, my mother learnt Esperanto in the 1920s, in England, as a result of her membership of the ILP. World Esperanto Congresses, held annually from 1905 to 1913, received considerable press coverage. Connolly was in the USA in 1910, when the venue

was Washington. In 1903-8 political workers' Esperanto organisations were formed in Stockholm, Frankfurt on Main, The Hague, Paris etc and the first international one, *Internacia Asocio Paco-Libereco*, was founded in Paris in 1906. Through its publications it sought to oppose "militarism, capitalism, alcoholism, and all dogmas and prejudices" and to "improve social life". It did not survive the 1914-18 war<sup>1</sup>.

## The Evidence

A short history<sup>2</sup> published in 1996 says that the first Esperanto organisation in Ireland was the Dublin Esperanto Group founded in 1905, and that an all-Ireland organisation, *La Irlanda Esperanto-Asocio*, was formed in 1907, with Joseph Plunkett, later to be one of the seven signatories of the 1916 proclamation, on its first committee. He had, it says, a good knowledge of Irish, Latin, Greek, French and English, as well as Esperanto.

The only evidence I have that Connolly spoke Esperanto is found in *James Connolly, His Life, Work and Writings*, by Desmond Ryan (Talbot Press, Dublin 1924) p.69: "German he knows, French, Italian, Esperanto too, some Irish, much economic, revolutionary, historical and general lore." Ryan knew Connolly personally. He also mentions Peadar Machen, Vice-president of Dublin Trades Council, who was killed in the Easter Rising. After saying how Machen loved speaking Irish, Ryan says (on p80), "He fought hard, too, for the claims of Esperanto". He describes Machen as a close disciple of Connolly.

I learned recently from Christopher Fettes, a vice-president of the Esperanto Association of Ireland, that Sheehy-Skeffington had some Esperanto books among his possessions at the time of his death. Francis's son Owen Sheehy-Skeffington, who taught Fettes, gave him this information when he was a student. A biography of Sheehy-Skeffington (*With Wooden Sword*, by Leah Levenson, Gill & MacMillan 1983) says (p.13) that, in a letter to his local newspaper in Co. Cavan in 1893, at age fifteen, he wrote that "Gaelic" was irretrievably dead and "the study of Esperanto would be more useful to the youth of Ireland". This book also says that he took his degree, at University College Dublin, in modern languages.

Bulmer Hobson was a prominent republican of the period. A leading Irish Esperantist, Maire Mullarney, has told me that, being a family friend, she took over his house in Dublin after he died in 1969, and that among his library she found an



Esperanto dictionary and a novel in Esperanto. It is possible, of course, that Hobson's interest in Esperanto began long after 1916.

Sheehy-Skeffington and Machen were members of Connolly's Socialist Party of Ireland from its foundation in 1904, and worked closely with him on many campaigns right up to 1916 when all three met their deaths.

In light of these facts, there seems no reason to doubt the statement by Desmond Ryan that Connolly spoke Esperanto. I hope someone will take up the challenge to seek more information on this.

### **The place of Esperanto in Connolly's ideas.**

In *Workers' Republic* of December 2nd 1899, Connolly wrote:

*"I believe the establishment of a universal language to facilitate communication between the peoples is highly to be desired. But I incline also to the belief that this desirable result would be attained sooner as the result of a free agreement which would accept one language to be taught in all primary schools, in addition to the national language, than by the attempt to crush out the existing national vehicles of expression. The complete success of the attempts at Russification or Germanisation, or kindred efforts to destroy the language of a people would, in my opinion, only create greater barriers to the acceptance of a universal language. Each conquering race, lusting after universal domination, would be bitterly intolerant of the language of every rival, and therefore more disinclined to accept a common medium than would a number of small races, with whom the desire to facilitate commercial and literary intercourse with the world, would take the place of lust of domination."*<sup>3</sup>

The above is consistent with support for Esperanto, which is meant to *supplement* other languages, not to replace them. It also shows that Connolly agreed with one of the central arguments for Esperanto, namely that the language problem will never be solved by one of the great powers trying to impose its language on the others. Esperanto can be acceptable to all because it gives no nation a special advantage.

When he stood in a municipal election in Dublin in 1902, Connolly issued an election leaflet in Yiddish, an action that was very unusual for the time, and highlights both his internationalism and his marked awareness of the language barrier.

In *The Harp* (April 1908) he wrote:

*"I do believe in the necessity, and indeed in the inevitability of an universal language; but I do not believe it will be brought about, or even hastened, by smaller races or nations consenting to the extinction of their language. Such a course of action, or rather of slavish inaction, would not hasten the day of a universal language, but would rather lead to the intensification of the struggle for mastery between the languages of the greater powers.*

*On the other hand, a large number of small communities, speaking different tongues, are*

*more likely to agree upon a common language as a common means of communication than a small number of great empires, each jealous of its own power and seeking its own supremacy."*

This has indeed been the experience of Esperanto. It has been the great powers which have blocked its progress, whereas support has mainly come from smaller and weaker language communities. The above quotation, although not proving that Connolly was an Esperantist by 1908, shows that he had given the subject of an international language considerable thought and that he supported the idea.

Whilst in America, Connolly learnt Italian and German in order to discuss socialism and trade unionism with immigrant workers. He did a lot of studying whilst on long train journeys across the USA, and it may be that this was when he learnt Esperanto.

Esperanto fits Connolly's belief that nationalism and internationalism should go together. By putting all language communities, large and small, on the same level, it helps to protect minority languages, expresses the idea of the equality of nations, and helps to unite nationalism with internationalism. It also expresses the idea of the unity of humankind.

One attraction for Connolly would have been its obvious potential as a tool of international solidarity, and for the spread of socialist ideas. It has indeed been used for this purpose. Much basic socialist and Marxist literature was published in Esperanto by SAT, the Workers' Esperanto Movement, which was founded in Paris in 1921. A pro-Soviet organisation, the International of Proletarian Esperantists (Internacio de Proleta Esperantistaro – IPE), split away from SAT in 1932, uniting about 13,000 members in 18 countries, publishing 33 periodicals<sup>5</sup>. In 1935 it had about 17,500 members, of whom half were operating illegally. From 1932 to about 1939 IPE operated a sophisticated system (called "Proletarian Esperanto Correspondence" – PEK) of gathering news of labour and anti-fascist activities from its national affiliates. The collected material was copied to all affiliates, who translated them into their local languages for publication. IPE also organised the twinning of Soviet factories with other factories, IPE members providing the translation service. PEK distributed on-the-spot news of the Spanish War, Chinese resistance to Japan's invasion and of pre-war resistance to Nazism. IPE collapsed after Stalin began persecuting Esperantists.

"The Latin of democracy" gives many of the benefits of studying Latin for only a fraction of the work. This is because its spelling, pronunciation and grammar are very simple and totally regular, and because its vocabulary is drawn from the words most common to the main European language groups, (especially the Latin-based group). Hence knowledge of Esperanto makes it easier to study a foreign language, teaches grammar, and helps reveal the meaning of



unfamiliar English words. These benefits would have appealed to Connolly, a self-educated man from an impoverished background.

### **The Relevance of Esperanto in the 21st Century**

The time for the world to agree on a single, neutral language for international purposes is long overdue, and is only prevented, as Connolly predicted, by the rivalry of the great powers. English is not neutral, but is rightly seen as a vehicle for US influence. (It is also far too difficult to learn and has numerous variants). In March 2001, President Chirac of France called for a worldwide alliance of speakers of the Latin-based languages to resist the spread of English.

The need of the EU for a common language is also obvious, and will become more so as the EU expands. The EU has already decided that expansion will require it to abandon the present pretence of “language equality”, thus relegating some language communities to second-class status. (The EU officially has 11 working languages, which theoretically have equal status, although in reality most EU offices use either English or French). As the world has over 3000 languages, learning more of them will *never* solve the problem. Only a neutral language, designed for the purpose, has the potential to solve the problem of the language barrier on a fair basis acceptable to all.

The language barrier impedes the much-needed growth of international solidarity, not only for the labour movement, but for a host of other movements as well, e.g. those concerning women's rights, other human rights, world hunger, environmental issues and world peace. Esperanto organisations campaigning on these issues already exist, but could be much more effective if more activists in these fields (especially from the English-speaking world) became Esperantists.

After the Second World War, Esperanto flourished in some countries of the Soviet bloc, notably Bulgaria and Hungary, and to a lesser extent Poland and the GDR. China has mostly been quite supportive and today Esperanto is taught in a number of universities there. The China Academy of Sciences recently adopted Esperanto as one of its official working languages. The movement also receives official support in Cuba, and when, in 1990, the World Esperanto Congress was held in Havana, Fidel Castro told the congress “I am a soldier for Esperanto”. The Communist parties of Portugal and Russia have recently come out in support of Esperanto, and in July 1996 the Communist group in the French Senate proposed a law on the teaching of Esperanto.

Today there are two main worldwide left-wing Esperanto organisations. The largest is SAT which is an umbrella movement for several different left groups. The other is *Internacia Kolektivo Esperantista Komunista (IKEK)*. Its quarterly magazine *Internaciisto* contains news and ideas from many countries. SAT has a small branch in

Britain. Probably the biggest working-class organisation is *Internacia Fervojista Esperanto-Federacio* for railway workers, which has affiliates in many countries, including China, and holds lively gatherings.

### **Restore the Link**

In the early 1930s the main strongholds of Esperanto were in Germany and the USSR. In 1932 the pro-soviet *Germana Laborista Esperanto-Asocio* had 4000 members in over 200 branches. In his book *Mein Kampf*, Hitler wrote “Esperanto is an arm of the Jews” and after seizing power in 1933 he systematically destroyed the Esperanto movement in Germany and all the occupied countries. In the USSR, despite the very pro-communist stance of the Union of Soviet Esperantists (which was affiliated to IPE), and the state support it had received in Lenin's time and later, in 1938 the Stalin regime denounced Esperantists as “dangerous cosmopolitans” and spies. Thousands were sent to labour camps and some executed. These persecutions caused a severe setback for Esperanto worldwide. Subsequent attempts to make Russian the interlanguage of the socialist bloc were, inevitably, a failure – logically they meant that Cuba should speak to Vietnam in Russian.

One of the tasks of socialists in the 21st century should be to restore the link between Esperanto and socialism, and between Esperanto and the labour movement. Esperanto in the hands of the labour movement can become a mighty weapon of international solidarity.

### **Appendix**

Since the middle ages there have been many attempts to create an international language. (Robert Boyle, the founder of chemistry, invented one that greatly interested Isaac Newton). But only

Ludovik L Zamenhof  
(1859-1917) the  
creator of Esperanto



one has been a success. Esperanto has achieved a large following, a considerable literature of original and translated works, novels, drama, poetry, songs and scientific papers. The World Esperanto Association has members in 117 countries and national associations in over 60. It has consultative status with UNESCO and NGO status with the United Nations. Hundreds of people have learned it from birth as a first language. Until a number of governments make it a priority, all that Esperantists can do is to prove that it works, and to keep developing it by use in more and more fields. Unlike English, its claim to become the *agreed* second language is principled: it is neutral, it is designed for the purpose, and its correct usage is defined by its international usage, not by how it is spoken by native speakers in one place.

About 3000 Esperantists have registered their e-mail addresses with a central directory, and many local, national and international Esperanto organisations now have websites. Much Esperanto literature is available on the Web, as well as courses for learning the language.

Regular Esperanto programmes are currently broadcast on six radio stations: Warsaw, The Vatican, Beijing, Havana, Vienna and RAI Internacia (based in Rome). Warsaw and Beijing

broadcast daily in Esperanto.

Estimates of the number of Esperantists in the world indicate about one million – some say two – but it is difficult to attach meaning to these figures, as it is difficult to define who qualifies as an Esperantist. ★

**Notes:**

1. D Blanke (Ed.), *Sociopolitikaj Aspektoj de la Esperanto-Movado*, Hungarian Esperanto Association, Budapest 1978, p.46-7, 50 and 56.
2. Liam Ó Cuirc, *Mallonga Historio de la Esperanto-Movado en Irlando*, Esperanto Association of Ireland, Dublin 1996, p.9 etc.
3. In *Workers' Republic* of December 2nd 1899, in reply to a questionnaire sent to him by the Polish paper, *Krytka*. Quoted in *James Connolly, Collected Works, Vol. I*, New Books Publications, Dublin 1987, p.345.
4. Quoted in *Collected Works, Vol 1*, (as above), p. 341.
5. *Ilustrita Historio de la Laborista Esperanto-Movado*, Fritz-Hüser-Institut, Dortmund 1993.

**Further Reading, Information and Websites:**

Marjorie Boulton, *Zamenhof, Creator of Esperanto*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1960.  
 Esperanto Association of Britain: 210 Felixstowe Road, Ipswich, IP3 9BJ  
[www.esperanto.demon.co.uk](http://www.esperanto.demon.co.uk) There are groups in many British towns and cities, and organisations for Scotland and Wales, reachable via EAB.  
 Information in English on the Web:  
[www.webcom.com/~donh/esperanto.html](http://www.webcom.com/~donh/esperanto.html) or [www.uea.org](http://www.uea.org)

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# Marxism and Religion: A SYNTHESIS?

**Martin Jenkins**

This is a contribution to the debate regarding the relation between Marxism and Religion that has been contained in previous issues of *Communist Review*<sup>1</sup>. Essentially, I believe that Marxism is reconcilable with Religion and vice versa in certain respects. Therefore not only political co-operation but also philosophical dialogue cannot be ruled out in toto. The debate is to be welcomed because co-operation is, I believe, desirable between as many sections of the progressive Left as possible in the interest of creating the type of society we all want.

## The problem.

The central problem as I understand it is the irreconcilability between the Materialist ontology held by Marxism in the guises of Historical and Dialectical Materialism and the Metaphysical ontology held by orthodox religions holding belief in a future/other reality apart from this one. But what is meant or understood as a 'Religion' is a problematic area.

## What is a Religion?

What is a Religion? A set of beliefs concerning a Transcendental Deity? If so then Paganism is not a Religion because of its belief in an Immanent and not Transcendent Deity. But Paganism is a Religion. Belief in a Deity then as the criteria for a Religion? Buddhism does not believe in a deity yet this is classed as a religion. Religion defined as belief in an afterlife? Buddhism does not believe in as afterlife, strictly speaking, along with Hinduism, it believes in the transmigration of the soul which, is something different. Moreover, the writings of certain Religious writers such as Spinoza (1632-1677)<sup>2</sup> do not maintain the existence of an afterlife. Is Religion to be defined as belief in a future state of Justice, Peace and Love? Then is Marxist Communism a Religion?

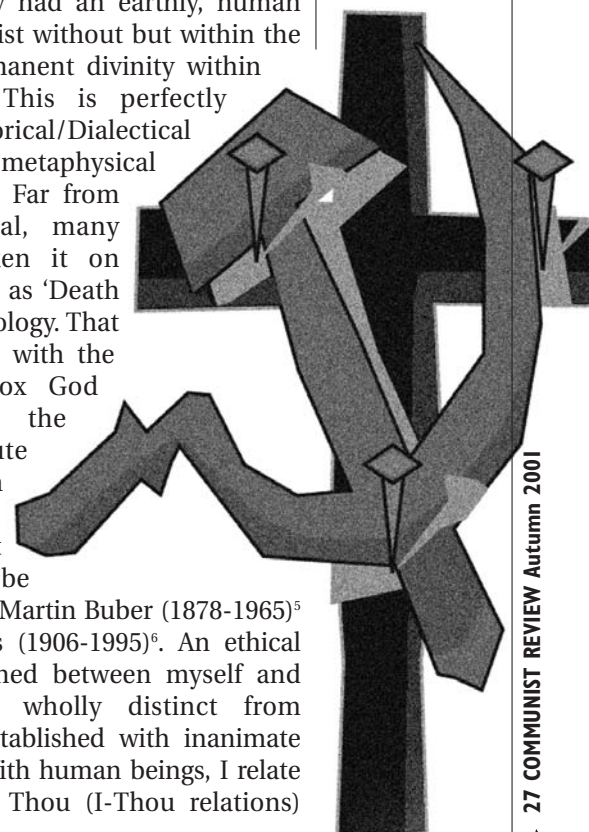
In short, to define what is and what is not a Religion using an immutable criteria will prove difficult. But if, as Ifor Torbe quotes Engels<sup>3</sup> as writing, reality is 'a ceaseless flux, in unresting motion and change', then categories, descriptions and definitions of this reality also change. This is not linguistic sophistry or to paraphrase Humpty

Dumpty of *Alice in Wonderland*, making words mean anything I want them to mean. Understanding, language and the conceptual structure of social-being change overtime. This has particular relevance to recent developments in Theology where the traditional, orthodox boundaries of Theistic Religion have been exploded..

## Religion without God.

Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*<sup>4</sup> made a big impression on Marx of course. It also proposed the important point that human beings create God; God does not create human beings. Feuerbach argued that 'God' was the abstracted human essence posited in an alienated form. Alienation would be banished when human beings recognised that such qualities as goodness, justice, love and holiness were human qualities. These qualities were wrongly taken as having a heavenly origin when they really had an earthly, human origin. God does not exist without but within the human heart – an immanent divinity within each human being. This is perfectly reconcilable with Historical/Dialectical materialism. There is no metaphysical two-world theory here. Far from rejecting this proposal, many Theologians have taken it on board and developed it as 'Death of God or Post-God Theology. That is, Theology concerned with the death of the orthodox God understood as the Transcendent, Absolute Being – the old man in the clouds if you like.

Another development along these lines can be found in the writings of Martin Buber (1878-1965)<sup>5</sup> and Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995)<sup>6</sup>. An ethical relationship is established between myself and other human beings wholly distinct from impersonal relations established with inanimate objects (I-It relations) With human beings, I relate to an Other, a You or Thou (I-Thou relations)



Relating to human beings involves a relation, a commitment that goes beyond the relation to inanimate 'It' things. The uniqueness and significance of the human is witnessed through other human beings. This uniqueness is the divine. God is the other human being and not the Transcendent Being of metaphysical, orthodoxy. This line of thought can be found in Judaism, in Christianity, in Islam and in Hinduism.

The Sea of Faith Network, which arose in Britain in the 1980's, holds that Christian faith is a social creation. 'God' does not exist as such. The metaphor of 'God' was a powerful symbol used in the articulation of peak human experiences. The articulation of such experiences has differed according to historical and social circumstances. The Bible is taken to be records of peak human experiences articulated through the language and understanding of a given people at a given time. It is not a document to be taken literally as unthinking Fundamentalists do. Today, peak human experiences are accounted for materially (i.e. sociologically, psychologically).

The Network seeks to reconcile the believer and non-believer alike in the view that Faith is a social creation. Thus:

*"The atheist and realist would see in the heart of their disagreement about faith the question of God's existence. The non-realist strategy is to undermine this very question and thereby challenge the believer and non-believer to come to a common understanding."*<sup>8</sup>

The common understanding is sought by the acceptance that human creativity lies behind all human activity, knowledge and understanding. This is achieved in part by means of Language that springs from active, communities. Common understanding means that certain feelings, states, experiences, do not derive from 'the beyond', or from God but; are the social, psychological, material basis of what has been called 'God'. Just as a piece of music embodies beauty, rapture and peak experiences, religious concepts embody such states – both are human constructs and creations having material origins. As Marx wrote:

*"It is not consciousness that creates life but life that creates consciousness"*<sup>9</sup>

The 'highs' and the 'lows' of conscious human experience are expressed in Faith. Rather like in poetry, or music, or love; profound, ecstatic states are experienced and articulated culturally. In the past, such peak Human experiences were, by orthodox metaphysical religion, described as the Sacred, the Divine, as God and attributed to another, higher Transcendent Being. They are now attributed to the human condition, arising from and explicable within, human experience. Religion does not create humanity; Humanity creates religion.

Philosophically, this is not irreconcilable with Historical Materialism. Ideas such as faith, religion, have arisen from a materialist basis in order to understand, articulate and express human needs, feelings and experiences. Social human life is

phenomenologically lived and understood through the content of the Superstructure. The human individual, others and the world are given meaning and value. The Superstructure is in turn, determined directly and indirectly, with qualifications and in varying degrees by the Economic Base. But doesn't this materialist explanation apply to fascism, liberalism and the like? It does but these political projects are not reconcilable with the Marxist political project when many of the 'godless' theologies are. Various articles have been written addressing the oppressive effects of Capitalism on human beings and communities.<sup>10</sup>

### Conclusion.

This, to me, creates a Philosophical ground of common understanding. Just as the Bible became accessible to socially revolutionary interpretations after it was translated from Latin to English, so the understanding and appreciation of what is 'sacred' also becomes alive when removed from the decaying categories of Orthodox Theology.

Accepting that Faith is a social construct removes the super-natural, metaphysical element and thereby, any impediment to the Philosophical co-operation between Marxism and Religion.

The mutual suspicion and exclusiveness perpetuated by conservative elements in both the Left and in the Religious establishment is something to be overcome. Sometimes, it will not be possible. But there is scope to allow a revitalisation of the progressive Left to a broader extent than otherwise by engaging in dialogue. Contrary to the mummifiers of fixed concepts and positions, things do change. Dialectical method is about accounting for this. Marxism and Religion can have a fruitful debate. This is a debate we do need. ★

### Notes

1. *Marxism and Religion*. By Geoff Bottoms. Communist Review #31. Winter 2000.
  2. *Marxism and Religion: A debate we do not need*. By Ifor Torbe. Communist Review #34 Spring 2001.
  3. Benedict Spinoza. *The Ethics*. Everyman 1989.
  4. Communist Review. Op cites.
  5. Ludwig Feuerbach. *The Essence of Christianity*. Prometheus Books. 1989.
  6. Martin Buber. *I And Thou*. Charles Scribner's Sons. 1970.
  7. Emmanuel Levinas. *Totality and Infinity*. Duquesne University Press 1998.
  8. It's Non-Realist message is not restricted to the Christian religion but is applicable to Buddhists, Muslims.
  9. P.15 Introduction by Stephen Mitchell. *Time and Tide: Sea of Faith beyond the Millennium*. O Books. 2001.
  10. P.47. Karl Marx, Frederick Engels. *The German Ideology*. Lawrence and Wishart. 1985.
  11. See for instance various articles in issues of the Sea of Faith (S.O.F) Magazine:
  12. Patti Whalley Humans. Humanitarianism and Human Rights. S.O.F #45. Jan 2000.
  13. Phillip Knight One small cheer for Capitalism. S. O. F #44 Nov 2000.
  14. Dinah Livingstone. Postmodernism. S.O.F #42 July 2000.
- Also books such as:  
David Boulton. Gerard Winstanley and the Republic of Heaven. The Quaker Bookshop.



# Useful websites

**Communist Party of Britain and Young Communist League**

<http://www.communist-party.org.uk>

**Morning Star**  
socialist daily newspaper

<http://www.poptel.org.uk/morning-star>

**Searchlight**  
anti-fascist magazine

<http://www.searchlightmagazine.com>

**Trades Union Congress**

<http://www.tuc.org.uk>

**International Centre for Trade Union Rights**

<http://www.ictur.labournet.org>

**Cuba Solidarity Campaign**

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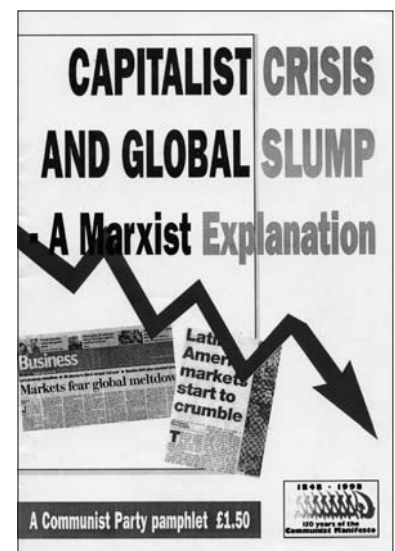
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