



COMMUNIST REVIEW

- **Gregor Gall** The Potency of Occupations to Resist Redundancy
- **Bill Greenshields and Graham Stevenson** Trade Unions and Internationalism
- **Peter Latham** Theories of the State and Local Government, Part 3
- **Prabhat Patnaik** Is the World Capitalist Crisis Over?

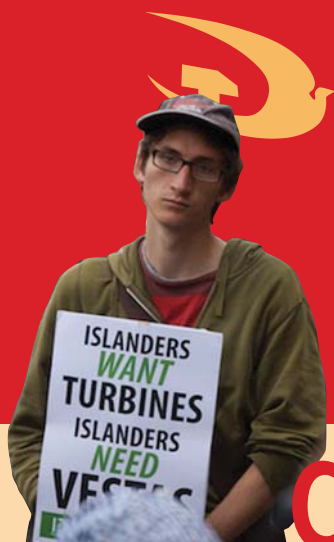


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Agitate, Educate, Organise Occupy! Examining the Potency of Occupations to Resist Redundancy

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Front cover: monument to the
Flint, Michigan, sit-down strike
(see article p.5)

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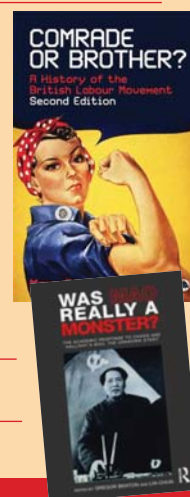
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editorial



By Martin Levy

IN DECEMBER, delegates from 192 countries will meet in Copenhagen to try to decide a follow-up treaty to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on greenhouse gas emissions.

The problems that the world faces are formidable. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, there is a 90% probability that the recent warming is due to human activities – principally emissions of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide, CO₂, from burning of fossil fuels to release energy. Those emissions increased from 21.3 billion tonnes in 1990 to 25.6 billion in 2003. Britain’s Meteorological Office has predicted that, at this rate, the world will experience an average temperature rise of 4°C by 2060.

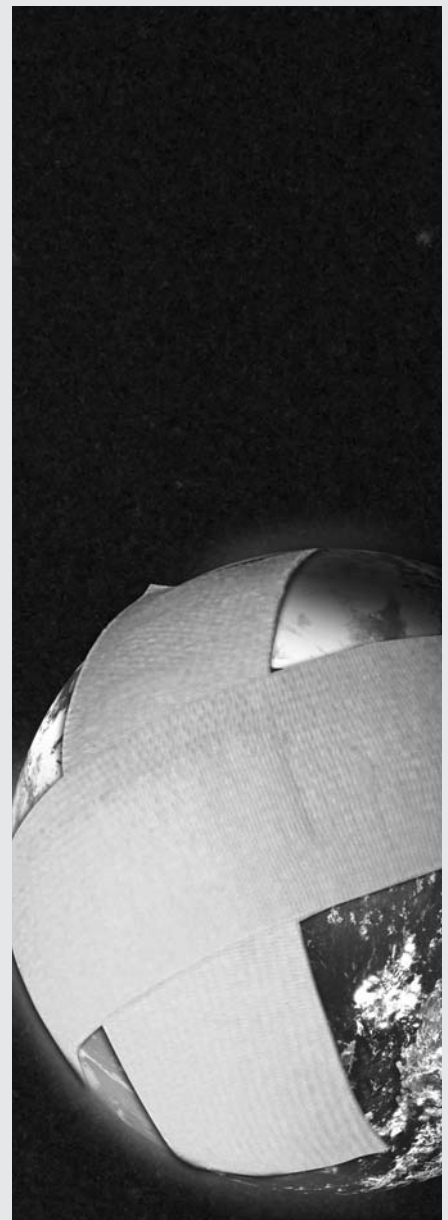
The consequences are likely to be drastic: a sea level rise of 2 metres or so, threatening many highly populated coastal areas; the release of methane, another potent greenhouse gas, from Arctic tundra – so providing positive feedback; the end of the Gulf Stream, which paradoxically would make Britain’s climate colder, threatening our domestic agriculture; more frequent and more violent hurricanes, of the sort which cost socialist Cuba 20% of its GDP in 2008; changed rainfall patterns, leading to desertification and loss of food production; and, following on from this, civil breakdown in many underdeveloped countries, mass migration and widespread deaths from hunger and disease.

The Kyoto Protocol itself was not that great: it did not cover transport, including the rapidly growing aviation sector; the USA opted out, on the basis

that controls would damage its economy; and the market principle underpinned the whole agreement, including an emissions trading scheme at its heart. The consequence, as one financial consultant admitted, is that carbon has become “a new commodity, a new currency”,¹ while emissions have risen year on year. Big polluters are capped, but they can get round this by investing in dubious “emissions-cutting” projects in the developing world, generating certified reductions which they can offset against their own emissions. There is also a growing “voluntary” market in unofficial carbon credits, into which speculators, middlemen and financial institutions like Crédit Suisse and Morgan Stanley have moved, even buying options on credits not yet generated or which might be awarded in the European Emissions Trading Scheme, starting in 2013.

All the signs are that the developed capitalist world will flunk the challenge at Copenhagen. True, the USA will take part, and there is recognition that an 80% reduction in CO₂ emissions by 2050 is needed; but the arguments are about who will bear the brunt and what the baseline year will be. There are also complaints about the expense of doing this at a time of economic crisis. Again, a carbon trading scheme is being proposed; and the EU is challenging poorer nations to cut emissions, in order to get more aid – when the USA, Germany and Britain have been the top 3 per capita emitters over the last 125 years, and are thereby responsible for much of the current problem.

In fact, even Britain’s claimed



emissions reduction since 1990 is an illusion, as the new Chief Government Scientist, Prof David Mackay, has pointed out. During the last two decades, he says, we have exported much of our industry to countries like India and China. If the “embedded” emissions from this industrial production, exported back to Britain, were included, then the British emissions total would have risen 19% since 1990. Professor Dieter Helm of Oxford University estimates that roughly half this country’s energy footprint actually lives overseas: *consumption rather than production is important*.

The market cannot solve the problem of climate change, because it is based on maximising private profit. In its pamphlet *A World to Save*, published back in 2003, the Communist Party of Britain argued that the priority in reducing emissions had to be a massive energy conservation programme, planning now for increased comfort but reduced consumption. This would include: insulation of homes, workplaces and public buildings; shifting freight from road and air to rail and sea; moving fewer goods, and transporting them shorter distances; and moving jobs to workers rather than workers to jobs.

The pamphlet also argued for a planned energy production programme, to minimise greenhouse gas emissions and to maximise the energy from renewables, with all sectors of the energy industry brought under public ownership and control. It recognised an important role for British deep-mined coal; and more recently the CPB has extended this policy by endorsing the National Union of Mineworkers’ call for carbon capture and storage (CCS) at coal-fired power stations.

At long last government and EU approval has been given for one CCS scheme, at Hatfield near Doncaster. Yet this falls well short of a planned energy policy. It is only one plant; and, to limit costs on energy producers, the government is only insisting on capture of 20-25% of the emissions.

Meanwhile the government’s inaction over the Vestas closure in the Isle of Wight demonstrates again their

subservience to the market. Vestas has moved its wind-turbine production to the USA, after pocketing a £3.5 million development grant to come to Ryde in the first place. The tragedy is that this is not only a loss of British manufacturing, but of the ability to build those very products that could make a major contribution to reducing our dependence on fossil fuel energy sources.

The Vestas closure decision sparked an inspiring response by the workforce – the occupation of the factory in an attempt to preserve both the jobs and the facility. The workers in turn may well have been inspired by the Visteon occupations in Belfast and Bilsdon earlier this year. Yet, as manufacturing continues to haemorrhage, worker occupation remains an infrequent response. In the lead article in this issue of *Communist Review*, Gregor Gall examines the tactic from a historical and contemporary standpoint, identifying a range of factors to help explain why occupations occur in some cases, but not in others. He calls for politically engaged academics to undertake primary research, interviewing different groups of workers in order to understand their different reactions. Without this detailed level of understanding, he says, “the tactic of worker occupation will not become sufficiently widespread and powerful to be able to force employers to recalculate the costs and benefits facing them.”

In the previous issue of *CR*, we featured a number of contributions from the Communist Party’s Trade Union Cadre School in February. Here, we include two more, both on the theme of trade unions and internationalism. Graham Stevenson looks at how the neoliberal economic policies of the last 25 years have forced many trade unions into an increasing internationalisation of their work. Partly it is a question of joint campaigns targeting corporate offices of transnational corporations, opposing anti-union policies; but also international contacts, often in creative ways, can secure a successful outcome to a domestic dispute when the employer has extended supply lines.

Bill Greenshields takes a somewhat different theme: the implications of the international crisis for how trade unions and the Left should operate at home. He notes that, while the crisis has discredited neoliberal claims that the market can determine everything, there is nothing new in the state “standing four-square for capitalism, and making workers pay for its crises”. Neoliberalism, he says, is simply a mask

for the ugly face of the state in this highest stage of capitalism. And, although the mask has slipped, the ruling class still has its structures intact, now globalised and most concretely entrenched in the European Union.

At the basis of our problems, he continues, is the promotion in the EU of the “free” movement of capital, goods and labour – the last-mentioned being more correctly described as *forced* movement. We need to tackle this internationally, he says, because it runs completely counter to a just political and economic system for working people. However, to make such endeavours a reality we have to start at home. That, he states, is why the Lindsey refinery workers’ action was “spot on”. In each individual country, workers can influence their own unions to demand decent jobs, security, pay and conditions; in helping ourselves we also help our sisters and brothers overseas.

The role of the state is picked up again in the third and final part of Peter Latham’s *Orthodox and Marxist Theories of the State and Local Government*. Here he looks at non-communist Marxist and radical work from the late 1960s, giving particular credit to Ralph Miliband for identifying that the state is not simply a servant of the ruling class – indeed it could not carry out its function of appearing to be neutral if that were so. Rather the state has a degree of autonomy, but acts in partnership with the ruling class, to contain class conflict and pressure from below. Since national and local governments may be tempted to make too generous concessions to popular demands, non-elected parts of the state – like top civil servants, police, judges and the mass media – are vital to the ruling class.

It is in this context that centrally-imposed changes on local government have to be viewed. Quoting Christopher Stoney, Peter Latham points out that, quite apart from the controls on local council expenditure, and privatisation of local services, there has been a shift in balance from democratically elected councillors to quangos with appointed, faceless and elite groups of people and to a corporate management, pro-business, approach within local government. He argues that, to combat this, an alternative national economic and political strategy is essential – one which explains the economic crisis, advances immediate proposals but also opens the way for more fundamental change. Both the Labour Representation Committee’s Left Economics Advisory

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The 2009 TUC passed important motions on the People's Charter and on campaigning against the effects of the recession. But will the General Council pick up the ball and run with it?

Panel, and the Communist Party's Left Wing Programme provide the basis for such an alternative, he says. One might also add that the People's Charter is the first step towards such an alternative, especially as it has now been adopted overwhelmingly at the 2009 Trades Union Congress.

The 2009 TUC was also noteworthy for carrying some other positive motions: for the first time, a decision to boycott goods from Israeli settlements in occupied Palestine; and the resolution taken forward from the Annual Conference of Trades Union Councils, calling for the national launch of several campaigns as the basis for the TUC's response to the slump – campaigns for state intervention to protect jobs, for protection of workers from unfair dismissal, for saving the remaining TUC unemployed workers' centres and *against* poverty for workers, whether employed or out of work. With unemployment already at 2.5 million, including nearly 1 million 16-24 year-olds, such a programme is absolutely vital. But will the General Council pick up the ball and run with it? The signs are not good. The aim of the 2009 Congress seemed to be that nothing that urged mobilisation, and would therefore embarrass the Labour government, would get through – at least, not until the final day, when the media spotlight was turned

down, and when most of the controversial motions were tabled.

The Labour Party conference two weeks after the TUC was characterised by an even more supine approach. And so we had the spectacle of the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Prime Minister promising cuts in public services to pay for the bankers' bail-out, without any howls of protest from the major trade unions. Small wonder then that the Tories were able to go one step further at their own conference, threatening of even more draconian cuts: New Labour had prepared the ground for them.

It is not as if the world economic crisis is over. In this issue of *CR* we print an analysis by Indian Marxist economist Prabhat Patnaik, which shows clearly that in the USA – whose economic activity matters for the world – real earnings per employed worker are declining, individual state government expenditures have also fallen and even the current level of federal stimulus is unlikely to be sustained, because of opposition by finance capital. He draws an analogy with 1937, when President Roosevelt cut back the federal deficit, plunging the US economy once more into a depression. Prabhat Patnaik also argues that the present crisis is not just recessionary, but rather a whole new historical juncture. Getting out of one form of the

crisis means getting into another, that of escalating inflation: in Joan Robinson's terminology, the "inflationary barrier" has been lowered.

Prabhat Patnaik writes that this conjuncture has arisen because of, on the one hand, the enormous concentration of finance capital, looking for speculative gains wherever there is a scarcity; and, on the other, the exhaustion of the scope for easy increase in supplies of a whole number of commodities, whether agricultural produce or raw materials like oil. Capitalism can get out of this crisis in the end, but only after much time, and at the expense of working people. In Britain, the budget cuts, whether by the Tories, LibDems or New Labour, are just the start of a coming ruling class offensive to solve the crisis in the interests of big capital.

The labour movement in Britain cannot afford to stand idly by. Inaction, in the hope that Labour will be re-elected, is not a solution. At present, there is little to prevent a Tory victory, unless traditional Labour supporters can be galvanised to vote – and they are unlikely to do that on the promise of public spending cuts after the election. However, a Labour government would certainly provide more favourable conditions for the working class to resist the ruling class onslaught. So the trade





union movement needs to wage a vigorous fight on two fronts – firstly, for a change of policy, using the People’s Charter as a basis for mass campaigning; and secondly, for the maximum vote to defeat the Tories. The degree to which that fight is waged now will determine the combativeness with which any post-election resistance to the ruling class onslaught can be sustained and developed.

At the time of writing, the Communication Workers’ Union has just announced plans for industrial action against Royal Mail. In the media, some premature parallels have already been drawn with the great Miners’ Strike of 25 years ago. However, although the scale of the dispute is not the same, the implications for the trade union movement are no less profound. Victory for the Royal Mail management would be the

green light for a massive attack on working conditions and trade union rights across the public sector, if not the economy at large. If the strikes go ahead, therefore, the whole trade union movement will need to back the CWU and pressurise the government into bringing the Royal Mail management to heel. Since the CWU remains affiliated to the Labour Party, there is still some significant leverage to be exerted. If the government fails to respond, it will not only be risking Labour’s relationship with the CWU, but threatening its last remaining chances for re-election in 2010.

This issue of *CR* contains three discussion contributions (one a letter) on articles from previous editions. We hope that this will stimulate more. We also have two book reviews and our regular *Soul Food* poetry selection, which for the first time includes reader suggestions: may the trend continue! ■

Notes

1 Tom Whitehouse of Carbon International, quoted in *New Scientist*, 19 April 2008, p 38.

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Agitate, Educate, ~~Organise~~ Occupy!

Examining the Potency of Occupations to Resist Redundancy



By Gregor Gall

Introduction

Worker occupation – alternatively known as a sit-in or a sit-down strike – is historically a well-known, if rather infrequently used, response of organised workers to aggressive employers. The Flint car workers' sit-down strike of 1936-1937 in the United States¹ is a prime example of this, while the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders (UCS)² work-in of 1971-2 in Scotland is another. Both were successful, the former in gaining union recognition and the latter in preventing yard closure.

Occupations have been used for an array of reasons, ranging from resisting victimisation of union activists and unilaterally imposed changes in working conditions to demanding higher pay. Indeed, the tactic is potentially a particularly powerful tool by

which workers can respond to and resist redundancy, since it provides the sort of leverage against employers that strikes cannot. But the global recession of late 2007 onwards has witnessed very few examples of workers deploying this tactic – certainly far fewer than might have been expected, given the depth and extent of this recession when compared with that of the early 1980s. For example, in the United States, there has been just one worker occupation (Chicago Windows and Doors) and one threat (Hartmarx) so far in this current recession.

This article seeks to examine the conditions and characteristics of those worker occupations that have taken place, in order to understand their social and political dynamics, and thereby to

explain the current infrequency of this form of resistance. Drawing on an array of media reporting, comprising quality establishment media as well as left-wing and progressive media, I shall examine contemporary worker occupations in nine western economies – primarily Australia, Britain, Canada, Ireland, France and the US, but also Greece, Italy and Spain. From this, I shall elaborate a series of grounded³ factors which can help account for action rather than inaction over deploying the occupation tactic. In this way, the counterfactual method⁴ can then be used as a device to try to open up an understanding of why the vast majority of workers in these economies have not used this tactic, when faced with

comparable situations of redundancy and workplace closure to those who did use it.

The choice of countries allows both comparisons and contrasts to be made since – on an array of key indicators like union strength, union traditions and labour market regulation – each country can be placed in a different position. If we take union density as an institutional proxy⁵ for union strength, then the countries vary from the very low – like France and the US – to the quite high – like Ireland and Italy. When talking of union mobilising traditions, countries like Australia, Britain, Canada, Ireland and the US are quite conservative in comparison with the more militant, direct action and street mobilising traditions in





Upper Clyde Shipbuilders (UCS) work-in

France, Greece, Italy and Spain. Finally, in terms of employment relations and labour markets, Britain, Ireland and the US are towards the deregulated, neo-liberal end of the spectrum while France, Greece, Italy and Spain are more regulated on the basis of social clauses.

I consider that this micro-level approach is more productive than a macro-level one which would emphasise general factors such as decline in worker consciousness, union presence and union combativity in an ungrounded and abstract way. With the latter approach, there would be a level of disengagement in explaining differences in the frequency of occupation, since union decline (measured by union density) has occurred in all the countries, albeit unevenly. Rather, the micro-level approach is based on

being able to focus on more immediate and meaningful factors and processes which concern and affect workers in the decisions about whether to be active or passive in the face of redundancy.

However, because this article is not based on primary research – *ie* direct interviews with the participants at the times of their occupations – there is a limit to how far it can explore an important variable in accounting for action or inaction. This is the social psychology of the workers – the cognitive processes by which they interact with each other in discussion and possible pursuit of ideas. Faced with comparable situations, different groups of workers have acted in quite different ways and only a very small minority have responded by taking militant action. This suggests

that the differentiating factor may be the collective social psychology of the different groups. Nonetheless, the present article can provide a valuable role in flagging up this aspect.

Occupation versus Strike

In responding to a sizeable number of (compulsory) redundancies, usually involving workplace closure – whether through divestment (like offshoring and outsourcing) or outright closure – control of the plant and machinery is a strong card for workers to play. Thus, the tactic of occupation is superior to that of the strike because the latter presumes that work will resume in the end. Moreover, striking has traditionally been defined, not just as a withdrawal of labour at the points of production,

distribution or exchange, but also as walking off the job – which in turn means leaving the workplace. In a situation of closure, striking puts workers on the outside and this places them in a weaker position. It means standing at the entrances, and trying to stop goods, machinery, plant and so on leaving. Given that workers are restricted by what is lawful for picketing, and by the practical difficulty of sustaining mass pickets in order physically to bar entrances, the employer is likely to be able to vacate the premises without too much trouble. So striking allows the initiative to stay with the employer. Indeed, it often plays straight into the employer's hands because it is a civil breach of the employment contract. This means that employers can effectively let workers sack

themselves – and without offering any pay-off.

Alternatively, workplace occupation offers the possibility of maintaining control of the employer's assets from the inside and preventing their being seized back. The leverage thereby created revolves around the assets, which may include: (i) stocks of goods – which still have a marketable value or which are needed for delivering orders; (ii) plant and machinery – which could be either transferred to another part of the employer's business or sold on; and (iii) the land and buildings – which have a value which cannot be realised, since any sale is stopped. Again, and compared with striking and picketing, it is physically easier with occupation to prevent asset removal because the workplace can be barricaded from the inside. It allows the initiative to stay with the workers, requiring the employer to break into his or her own workplace.

So worker occupation can allow effective action against employers – which is preferable to ineffective action like striking (in this case) as well as to accommodation and passivity. However, it should not be assumed that it is a silver bullet: occupations can raise employer costs of closure and of doing business elsewhere, but they do not necessarily prevent these. The latter outcome would require either state intervention or effective solidarity action from the employer's other workers. Moreover, an additional aspect is that occupations are a much more demanding activity than striking: they are "24/7"; they involve challenges to the property rights of employers; and they require much more planning and organisation – supplying and cooking food, providing washing facilities, bedding, entertainment and so on. Finally, the one clear rider to the superiority of the occupation over the strike,

particularly in terms of outcomes, concerns the situation where workers are confronted by outsourcing or offshoring of their jobs. In these instances, and where the strike affects the production of goods and the delivery of services (rather than the movement of plant and machinery), some leverage can be exerted if the employer's new facility is not up and running to take over production of goods or delivery of services from the soon-to-be closed-down workplace. In these specific situations, the strike is not superior to the occupation but is more of a match.

Worker Occupations in Historical and Contemporary Contexts

Occupations as a historical phenomenon most starkly emerged in the twentieth century, in Russia in 1917, Italy during 1919-21, the US during 1936-7 and France in 1936 and 1968 (although studies have noted their use in Britain and the US in the nineteenth century). In Britain, Ken Coates argued that "Before [UCS in] 1971 the vocabulary of sit-ins was hardly ever used."⁶ Thereafter, Coates⁷ recorded some 250 worker occupations between 1971 and 1976; and, from his figures (and those of others), it is clear that some 100 occupations took place between 1979 and 1985. Subsequently, in Britain there have been at most two or three workplace occupations per year.

To some extent this low level – at least from the mid-1990s – can be accounted for by relatively low rates of unemployment, mass redundancy and workplace closure. However, the continuing haemorrhaging of manufacturing capacity through plant closures provided – and continues to provide – a seemingly ample canvas upon which occupations could have been staged. Indeed, the tactic of occupation was far more

Table 1: Workplace Occupations Since Late 2007

Country	No. of Occupations	Labour Force / Millions	Occupations per Million Workers	Unemployment Rate June '09 / %
Australia	2	11	0.18	5.7
Britain	7	31	0.22	7.6
Canada	4	18	0.22	8.6
France	28	28	1.0	9.3
Greece	6	5	1.2	9.4
Ireland	7	2	3.5	11.9
Italy	9	25	0.36	7.4
Spain	3	22	0.14	17.9
USA	1	153	0.007	9.5

commonly used in the post-1980s period by protesters against closures of schools and social amenities (community centres, leisure facilities) and by students in their colleges and universities.

This same pattern of far more occupations in prior periods can be detected in countries like Australia, Canada and the United States. However, probably only in Argentina – as its economy imploded in the early 2000s – has there been a large wave of workplace occupations to resist redundancy. These were work-ins similar to the UCS one but differed in that the employers often took flight so that *de facto* ownership passed into the hands of the workforce and the workplaces became cooperatively and collectively owned by their workers.

Contemporary Workplace Occupations

The numerical roll call of occupations since late 2007 is given in Table 1; for a balanced perspective we should bear in mind the relative labour force sizes, also shown. In Australia, Britain, Canada, France, Ireland and the US, the overwhelming majority of occupations have been in factories rather than offices in the public or private sector. This is indicative of the greater availability of resources like machinery and stock, which have a more valuable and manifestly

physical nature and can be more easily captured than information and data, which are not necessarily physically embedded in a single workplace. The figures for Greece, Italy and Spain are harder to come by – primarily through limited English language sources – and are therefore less robust, but two points are worth noting. First, factories subject to closure there have been blockaded as well as occupied – the purpose, as with picketing, being to prevent the removal of assets. Second, occupation of government offices has often been used to create political leverage, *ie* to try to force the government to intercede with employers closing workplaces.

The fourth column of the table, which is rough and not very scientific, suggests that the countries fall into 3 groups: the USA, with a very low rate of workplace occupations; Australia, Britain, Canada, Italy and Spain, with comparable rates (although Italy's is twice that of Spain and Canada); and relatively high rates in France, Greece and Ireland (although the last two may be a statistical aberration as they have the smallest workforces).

One notable feature of occupations, particularly where they last for more than a week, is that they almost always necessitate forms of wider, extra-workplace political campaigning. This is



because social organisation to provide the basics of life and intelligence is required to sustain the occupation. It is often also required because the parties which the workers seek to develop leverage over, like employers or the government (where government intervention is demanded), have other points of external leverage which the supporters of the occupation seek to target. The significance of this is that workplace occupations should not be counterposed to political campaigning in a simple “either ... or” way (as some have done or may think others have advocated), for there can be an organic and complementary relationship.

Motivations and Stimuli

In the context of the discussion of strike versus occupation, we can presuppose that the foundations for the latter are aspects of consciousness – primarily anger and organisation. Here, anger exists through being at the end of the line with nowhere to go, and wanting to do something to remedy this situation. Existing social organisation – like a union – allows something to be done collectively about this. This contrasts with other facets of worker consciousness, such as a fatalism and resignation that nothing can be done, and that the workers themselves have no power of remedy (even with the social organisation of a union or group that represents workers’ interests). But this is insufficient to explain action compared to inaction as per occupations because there are many situations where workers are angry and organised but take no such action (nor any other, like a strike or a political campaign); and the line between creative anger which leads to action and angry fatalism which leads to inaction is not a clearly defined and immutable “Chinese Wall”. So, to try to

flesh out the issues, it is helpful to identify the main and most frequent characteristics of the stimuli to workplace occupations to date. These are:

- 1 total redundancy of all workers and closure rather than partial downsizing of the workforce;
- 2 short timescale – notice of immediate redundancy and closure;
- 3 no severance pay, and loss of pension rights as a result of bankruptcy (genuine or otherwise);
- 4 a unionised workforce;
- 5 previous high profile examples of worker occupation in recent times.

Let us look at each of these in turn:

1 The collectivised nature of the redundancy experience helps create a critical mass of aggrieved workers where there is a sense that they are “all in this together” and that they can make a united stand. This can be contrasted with a situation where only part of the workforce is being made redundant and thus a divergence of interests opens up among the workers concerned.

2 The immediate and unforeseen nature of the announcement of redundancy, coupled with its being effective from the time of announcement, provides for no period of consultation or dialogue with the employer about measures for amelioration or alternative work. Thus, there is a greater “shock to the system” of the workers and their anger is potentially greater.

3 The grave sense of procedural injustice is heightened by the material injustice of no redundancy compensation from the employer and the loss of pension entitlements (as deferred wages and through worker contributions), because the employer either becomes bankrupt, or goes into administration with many creditors lined up to seek redress – putting the redun-

dant workers in the position of being only one party amongst many.

4 Those workers who are already unionised display a higher ability – all other things being equal – collectively to resist the redundancies because they do not have to undertake the additional task of forming a collective association of workers at the same time as staging the act of resistance through occupation. Existing collective organisation, relations and consciousness thus place them in a better position to step up to the plate.

5 Workers in countries (or parts of countries) where there have recently been other workers’ occupations against closure and redundancy stand in a better position to deploy the tactic because they are aware of a living example. In other words, the tactic penetrates their consciousness and becomes a slightly more possible form of collective resistance.

However, even this initial attempt to grapple with a grounded explanation for action provides only limited illumination, for not all the occupations had all these features nor even a majority of them. The only feature common to all was the first, although the second was quite common. In a number of cases workers became unionised in the process of an occupation so that social organisation preceded unionisation (such as at Prisme, or Vestas in Britain); cases exist where redundancy payments were to be made but these were felt to be insufficient (such as Calcast and Visteon in Britain); and some occupations took place without the benefit of recent examples (such as Republic Windows and Doors in Chicago). Moreover, and just as importantly, there were many cases where all the features were present but no occupation took place. This suggests that other

factors, and workers’ assessments thereof, were at play. But before proceeding to explore this avenue, it is worth understanding where and how some of the five factors laid out above did operate and did so together.

In the 2009 Visteon case in Britain, it was not just the six minutes’ notice of immediate redundancy, with loss of pension entitlements and no redundancy pay (thereby reneging on the pledge to match the Ford terms and conditions after the sell-off from Ford) while the employer’s other businesses remained in profitable operation, that led to the occupation. This is apparent because the notice was delivered to all three workforces simultaneously; but the Belfast workers responded by immediate occupation whereas the Enfield and Basildon workers left the factories and adjourned to the pub to discuss their fate. It was only after hearing of the Belfast occupation that the workers at the other plants reappraised their reactions and tried to emulate their Belfast colleagues. In the case of holiday company Thomas Cook in Ireland in mid-2009, the occupation of the Grafton Street office in Dublin inspired their colleagues at the North Earl Street office in Dublin to do similarly. The background was the bringing forward of previously announced closure plans and the threat to award poorer redundancy entitlements unless the company’s initial terms were accepted. By contrast, the Vestas occupation in its pre-figurative and initial stages was heavily influenced by the Visteon example, where Visteon workers came down to the Isle of Wight factory to talk to the Vestas workers.

In France, it can be ventured that the high-profile media attention given to worker occupations (and their success), because of the

occupiers' use of boss-napping or threats to blow up the factory, has helped the occupation tactic enter the workers' lexicon. Here we have the occurrence of what is known as a positive demonstration effect. The reverse is the case in the United States where the sole occupation (despite some success) does not seem to have managed to penetrate workers' consciousness in an enabling way. Some of this can be put down to the relatively low level of cross-states media coverage in the USA. However, the French pattern of replication through the conduit of the media does not seem to have occurred in Britain; despite the high levels of attention given to both the Visteon and Vestas occupations, no more have been forthcoming. The same could be said of Ireland where,

following the Thomas Cook occupations, the *Irish Independent*⁸ reported on employer feeling with an article entitled "Bosses fear more sit-ins in redundancy battles" – but no more have taken place. This indicates that the transfer of knowledge between workers may be a facilitator rather than a creator, adding to an existing set of factors that may favour staging an occupation.

National Variables

Regarding the material and contextual factors, which vary by country, the key ones for workers' interests are the labour market situation, union strength and traditions, and state regulation of redundancy terms. Recalling what was argued above about the salience of macro-level factors over action and inaction, it is

now appropriate to consider their influence. Rather than give a direct explanation of the actions of workers in regard to occupations, these macro-level factors paint the backdrop against which the role of the micro-level factors may be observed.

Accordingly, some workers will believe that they have better or worse chances of finding alternative employment (at whatever level of pay) depending on the state of the local labour market and the technical and social skills they possess. Across the nine economies, as the final column of Table 1 shows, unemployment levels varied quite widely in mid-2009. Taking these figures in conjunction with the the micro-level factors examined above, it is clearly not a simple case that workers with no

sense of alternative employment opportunities are more likely to think of organising occupations than those who feel they have such opportunities. If the former were indeed so, and in proportionate terms, then we would expect high rates of worker occupation in France, Greece, Ireland, Spain and the US. As already indicated, this is true only for France and possibly Ireland. So there is no mechanical or automatic relationship between unemployment levels and workers' actions – indeed, other factors must be at play.

Nonetheless, it can be ventured that this sense of no alternative employment is a necessary factor – without being sufficient. That said, the terms of redundancy have an important bearing on this calculation, since pay-offs of



Vestas lock-in



certain sizes can blunt or delay redundancy's impact. Some workers will calculate that they have enough to ride out the hard times. But again, there are still cases where reasonable redundancy terms have not provided a bulwark against worker occupation.

Turning to the issue of union strength and traditions, there are again marked variations. Taking union density as an obvious but admittedly poor proxy for union strength (given the absence of other suitable direct measures⁹), the latest available figures show that it is highest in Italy (35%) and Ireland (32%) while moderate (between 20%-29%) in Australia, Britain, Canada and Greece. Within this, Britain and Canada have higher densities than Australia and Greece. Meanwhile, Spain and the US have union densities between 10% and 19% while in France density is less than 10%. As with levels of unemployment, there is again a presumed correlation between union strength and

the frequency of occupations. For example, on this indication, the lowest rates would be expected in France, Spain and the US. This is especially true for the US, partly so for Spain but not France. By contrast, the high levels of union strength in Ireland and Italy do seem to be a factor in the relative frequency of occupations there, although again the Irish figure may be anomalous, because of the small workforce; and in fact the correlation breaks down for Greece, which in fact should show a *lower* figure than Italy and Ireland, rather than a higher one.

In fact density is a very institutionalised measure and cannot be used productively on its own as a guide. Therefore, the issue of union mobilising traditions now comes into play. The obvious point that stands out is that workers in France, with extremely low levels of unionisation and high unemployment, would seem to be heavily influenced by the quite pronounced traditions of direct action. In a sense, it is

a counterweight to low levels of unionisation overall. In contrast, the relatively conservative traditions in the US (along with low levels of unionisation) may help account for the abject infrequency of worker occupations there.

On this basis of union mobilising traditions, one would also expect more occupations on a proportionate basis in Greece, Italy and Spain and fewer in Australia, Britain, Canada and Ireland. There is truth in this but only partially. A further factor here is that the dominant traditions of direct action in the southern European countries might act as both stimulant and barrier to occupations: some workers may see them as a natural extension to general strike mobilisations, which involve huge mass demonstrations; while others may regard them as unnecessary, because of the staging of these mass general strikes. The same point could also be made about the generally much higher level of strike activity in these countries than in the other five. But in both cases, Spain may stand out as an anomaly, for it has experienced far fewer occupations than might be expected.

One final salient aspect of union mobilising traditions is the presence of historically large communist parties, in France, Greece, Italy and Spain. Largely excluded from the mainstream political process, these parties have at various times been able to mount major campaigns of civil disobedience and mass mobilisation. Despite the Cold War-inspired division of the trade union movement, the continued existence of left-wing trade union federations has been an important factor in these developments. It is notable that France, Greece and Italy stand out as having high incidences of worker occupations, but again Spain remains an anomaly.

There are two further reasons why even less

significance should be attached to overall levels of unionisation. First, since the majority of workers who engaged in occupying were unionised, their ability to do so does not appear to have been influenced by the issue of whether workers elsewhere in their country were or were not unionised. Secondly, since some occupations (albeit a minority) involved non-unionised workers, the lack of union membership did not seem to be an impediment.

In terms of state regulation of the labour market and redundancy procedures, there are some important differences between countries. In Britain, redundancy of over 100 employees requires a statutory 90-day consultation period; and no government-subsidised short-time working scheme exists, except for a small one in Wales. In Italy there is a safety-net scheme through government subsidy, to keep threatened workers in their employment for several months while they look for new jobs. Moreover, in southern Europe, collective consultation over redundancies and closure is interpreted as involving greater obligations upon the employer either to take on board counter-proposals made by workers or seriously to consider these even if they are subsequently refuted (especially following the European Court of Justice judgement on Renault's unlawful closure of its Vilvoorde plant in Belgium in 1997). This is not the case in Britain or Ireland, which approximate more closely to the situation in Australia, Canada and the US.

On this basis, one would expect more occupations in the more neo-liberalised economies and fewer in the more socially-minded economies of southern Europe. But again this is not the case and not all countries can be fitted easily into these two categories. Ireland and Spain stand out as anomalies within the two groups.



French unions

Outcomes

Very few occupations have won outright victories in terms of saving all, or a substantial number of, the workers' jobs, or of gaining significant offers of redeployment. Nonetheless, the leverage created – along with the ensuing employers' sensitivity to their brand and reputation – has facilitated a number of gains: redundancy payments or their enhancement; the implementation of lawful notice periods; the extension of the time before shutdown; and the guarantee of pension entitlements. Occupation does appear to have been more productive than the use of strike action in comparable situations. The outcomes have not varied a great deal in relation to the proportion of the workforce involved, the duration of the occupation or the extent of solidarity support raised for the occupiers. This is because an occupation which prevents employer (or police) access to the premises does not require all or even a majority of the workforce. Rather, there are minimum numbers of workers needed, relative to the size of the occupied buildings, particularly in regard to strategic areas and the number of entrances.

Union Responsiveness

Occupations in the nine countries under study are an unlawful form of industrial action, whether in terms of violating property rights (like trespass or seizure) or of balloting and notification regulations. This potentially brings the workers – where members – into conflict with their unions for failing to support their taking or seeking to take militant action. For example, in Ireland the TSSA did not support its members' action in Thomas Cook; while in Italy the metal workers' union, Fiom, did not endorse an occupation by its members near Milan. This contrasts with the RMT's clear support of the workers who joined it during the Vestas occupation.

However, the position of affected unions has been a little more complex than either outright condemnation and hostility, or support. Thus, many have made clear that they cannot officially endorse such actions while at the same time seeking favourable resolution for their members through acting as their political advocates, lobbyists and negotiators. Moreover, some union leaders have given what may be regarded as tacit support or encouragement: for example, Tony Woodley, Unite joint-general secretary, said that he would not be surprised if more occupations occurred in Britain, because of the injustice done to workers and their anger at this.¹⁰ In this regard, union attitudes have been broadly similar to those for their members taking unofficial strike action.

Conclusion

This article has sought to provide a grounded explanation of the phenomenon of worker occupations of workplaces when faced with redundancy and closure. In particular, it has emphasised that an array of factors is necessary to explain why occupations happen – but these cannot be sufficient, given the paucity of such actions. By examining those occupations that have occurred, it has been possible to identify an array of factors which can on a counterfactual basis account for the inaction too.

In doing this, I have gone beyond the tendency of some on the Left to shout from the sidelines, "Such and such workers have occupied their workplace – you should do it too, you can do it too", as an act of voluntarism. If this were a valid approach, then we would reasonably expect many more occupations. Because this has not been the case, we can conclude that such an approach is mistaken. It fails to appreciate the complexity and specificity of

the contingent social processes involving worker action as well as the material foundations of concrete circumstances and how the two interact together.

The complexity relates to workers' varying assessments of their situation and their expectations about whether an occupation will bring useful leverage over their employer in terms of a basic cost/benefit calculation. The contingency and specificity relate to a series of micro-level factors which can help explain in general terms – albeit in a retrospective way – why occupations take place (as opposed to predicting whether they will take place). I have related these to macro-level factors in order to appreciate how wider societal processes can impact on them. But the accent has always been on providing a foundation in non-determinate and non-mechanical ways.

That said, this article has not been able to delve into the important area of the way in which workers' consciousness operates, because of the nature of the material on which it is based. The Visteon Belfast and Thomas Cook Grafton Street occupations showed that workers in the same companies, when presented

with the same situations, may react in quite different ways. Clearly, what is now needed is primary research, interviewing the respective groups of workers, in order to understand these different reactions. Presumably, lines of investigation would concentrate on the role of the shop stewards/union representatives and the nature of the workplace unionism within the local areas. Only through this level of investigation can we hope to develop a deep and holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

This is the kind of work that politically-engaged academics need to conduct to be of good service to organised labour's traditions of fighting back. Without this level of detailed understanding (amongst other things), the tactic of worker occupation will not become sufficiently widespread and powerful to be able to force employers to recalculate the costs and benefits facing them. This was the case in the 1970s, when workers were more and better organised and more oppositionally conscious, having emerged out of a period of sustained growth in working class consciousness and action.

Notes

1 See J Brecher, *Strike (revised and updated edition)*, South End Press, Boston, MA, 1997, and A Preis, *Labor's Giant Step: Twenty Years of the CIO*, Pathfinder, New York, 1974.

2 J Foster and C Woolfson, *The Politics of the UCS Work-In: Class Alliances and the Right to Work*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1986.

3 "Grounded theory" is that sort of theory in social science which is derived inductively. The researcher examines data on one or several particular situations and aims, without any theoretical preconception, to understand what is happening. Each different situation is considered to be a whole, in which different variables (factors) interact in complex ways to produced the observed outcomes. – Ed.

4 A historical method which examines what would have happened to the same people simultaneously

exposed and not exposed to the same factor. – Ed

5 An "institutional proxy" or measure is one which is widely accepted but without rigorous justification. – Ed.

6 K Coates, *Work-ins, Sit-ins and Industrial Democracy: the Implications of Factory Occupations in Britain in the Early 'Seventies*, Spokesman, Nottingham, 1981, p11.

7 Coates, *op cit*.

8 15 August 2009.

9 Using the annual level of strike activity per 1000 workers may seem an obvious alternative but the variations in strike patterns, regulation of the employment relationship and legislation governing industrial disputes are so great across the nine countries that this is not considered to be a particularly useful measure. It would be like comparing apples with oranges.

10 See *Guardian*, 25 July 2009.

The International Crisis and Trade Union Organisation

Internationalism Begins at Home¹

By Bill Greenshields



Early in 2009 I spent some time in Australia and then in Cuba, attending fantastic, militant education union conferences on behalf of the National Union of Teachers. In Cuba there were 3,500 delegates from all over Latin America and Africa, and a few from Europe and so on, finding out that outside of Cuba just about everybody is facing exactly the same kind of problems.

In Australia, for example, the people voted out the Thatcherite Howard regime, and brought in John Rudd, who has modelled the Australian Labour Party almost entirely on the New Labour project here. In terms of education, Rudd is introducing, blow for blow, programme for programme, what has been imposed on British schools by New Labour – “testing” and school league tables, deprofessionalisation of teachers, the commodification of education and control by the private sector, performance-related pay and other private sector management tools. This is no accident – it is a capitalist imperative.

Thus, international trade union activity is becoming more clearly



significant to rank-and-file workers as they become aware that we are all facing the same issues. But growing awareness is not enough. How do we fight at home, and in the international arena, successfully to confront these generalised attacks?

You may have heard that the Chinese do not have a single character for “crisis”, but rather two: “dangerous opportunity”. If we see the capitalist crisis as that, presenting us with a situation beset with dangers but one which is absolutely full of fantastic opportunity too, then it underlines the need for the Communist Party, for analysis, for dialectical materialism, for clarity and for developing a way forward. Otherwise we are going to stagger from one position to another, from one campaign to another – and the times are too dangerous for that. We have to be absolutely clear about what we are doing, and why.

The international crisis has resulted in something very positive for us. It has discredited the claims of neoliberalism that the market can successfully determine everything – though, without a doubt, capitalists, their politicians and their state will want to return to this lie. Normal service, they hope, will be resumed as soon as possible.

But, as the very politicians who have peddled the lies of neoliberalism – many of the New Labour breed – have had to use all the resources of the state to “intervene” in the crisis, ordinary people who might have thought there was some credibility to the notion of “the free market solution” become disillusioned in the true and best meaning of the word. Our role is to ensure that such disillusionment does not result in demoralisation and cynicism, but rather in a conviction that “another world is possible” – if we organise and fight for it.

There is nothing new in the state standing four-square for capitalism, and making workers pay for its crises. Marx wrote in *Manifesto of the Communist Party* in 1848:

“The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.”²

Lenin was writing about state monopoly capitalism in 1917. His *Preface to the First Edition of The State & Revolution* begins:

“The question of the state is now acquiring particular importance

both in theory and in practical politics. The imperialist war has immensely accelerated and intensified the process of transformation of monopoly capitalism into state-monopoly capitalism. The monstrous oppression of the working people by the state, which is merging more and more with the all-powerful capitalist associations, is becoming increasingly monstrous.”³

Understanding the strategic political implication of the “merging” of the capitalist state with capitalist monopolies led communists to work for, and offer leadership to, broad anti-monopolist alliances as a critical step in the development of the working class struggle for socialism. But the role of the state as direct defender and prop of the capitalist monopolies remains the “big secret” of capitalism – though it is a secret very poorly kept. Every worker can glimpse it whenever they are attacked, and see it clearly when they are in struggle against those attacks.

But still the state is presented as “mediator”, as independent of the class struggle, rather than as the instrument of class rule. And the most enthusiastic peddlers of this lie are in the leadership of the Labour Party – who are best placed to know just how big a lie it is. As a result, many workers who see the truth still shrug their shoulders and believe that it must ever be so. How do we break that resignation, nationally and internationally?

Neoliberalism, the false premise that the market can determine everything, is simply a mask for the ugly face of the state in this highest stage of capitalism. That mask has clearly slipped at this time of financial meltdown, coinciding with a deep economic crisis. But the ruling class still has its political rules and structures intact, and those structures are “globalised” in the further development of imperialism – most fundamentally and immediately for us in the European Union.

The EU is dishonestly promoted by some within our trade union movement as an example of international co-operation, with potential for workers’ internationalism to be expressed within it – the ever elusive “social model”. Nothing could be further from the truth. Just as the British state defends capitalism and prepares to make workers pay for its crises, so the European Union plays the same role across its member states.

There can be no “social model” in this aggressively capitalist club.

Others perceiving the fundamentally anti-worker nature of the European Union mistakenly see it as a “foreign enemy”, a new imperialist power imposing its will on poor old Britain. But British capital and capitalists lie at the heart of the EU. Clearly there are important national aspects to the struggle, centrally questions of sovereignty and democracy. But we have to ask, “Sovereignty and democracy for what?” The European Union simply represents state monopoly capitalism on a European-wide basis. The struggle against it is fundamentally a class struggle, and one integrally bound up with the struggle for genuine democracy.

What lies at the basis of the problems for us, and the perceived, at least short-term, salvation for capitalism, is the promotion of the “free movement of capital, goods and labour”. The Czech President, the *Guardian* pundits, Gordon Brown and his quisling party, John Monks of the ETUC, the Tories, leaders of our own TUC and many, many more apologists for capitalism are all rushing to the defence of the “free movement of labour”, or – as we should recognise it – the *forced* movement of labour. The movement of populations around the world is just the internationalisation, if you like, of Tebbit’s diktat, “Get on your bike and look for work.” That is what it is about.

So the fantastic and heroic action initially taken by the Lindsey refinery workers and taken up by many others is spot on. We should have an absolute right to work in our own country, though that doesn’t mean that the solution is in expelling other workers. The Lindsey workers sent the racists packing when they turned up with their anti-worker slogans.

Anyone alleging racist motives among those fighting for the right to work here is making mischief. It is a case either of jumping to a conclusion or of deliberately trying to mislead people. If employers choose to bring people from other parts of the world, or if people from other parts of the world choose to come, that in no way denies local workers the right to work in their own country. A misplaced distortion of “internationalism” – often put forward by naïve ultra-leftists – must not be allowed to undermine the class struggle in any one nation.

This is something we need to take up and universalise, through motions to trade union conferences, through the



Left Wing Programme, through the People's Charter. We need to fight for an absolute right to work and an absolute right to a home – for all workers, at home and abroad. That is internationalism in action.

Whenever we put our unions at the heart of the community, with such simple demands – whether nationally, locally through trades councils, or whatever – we get a tremendous response. If we fail in this the BNP will take advantage: we know that they are doing it now, they are on the streets, with a simplistic, racist, xenophobic message. That is a very dangerous side of the current opportunity, that people will look at the BNP and find what they see as an easy answer.

There isn't an easy answer to capitalism, but it is a relatively straightforward proposition to say, "If capitalism can't provide you with the right to work in your own country, and the right to a home, then what really is the benefit of that system to you?"

Too many trade unions have got used to "dealing with" redundancies, rather than fighting for jobs. The immediate response is often: "What is the best deal we can get out of this for our members?" These are critical questions of a capitalist world view and a socialist world view – a bosses' response and a workers' response – that we have to tackle. We can't allow the trade union movement to set its sights so low – that the best we can hope for is that people take their redundancy pay and disappear quietly.

Internationally, we need to tackle this issue of the free movement of labour, because it runs completely counter to the question of how to achieve a political and economic system that meets the needs of its people. It turns workers into imports and exports. There is nothing "free" about the forced movement of millions of workers around Europe. It has as its objective the super-exploitation of migrant workers, the devastation of their home economies – leaving them vulnerable to future capitalist exploitative investment – and the undermining of pay, conditions and job security of the workers in those economies which import the cheap migrant labour.

We need to make, maintain and build on direct contacts bilaterally with our sister unions in other EU member states, and through our international union organisations. The Party has a role in this too, meeting with our fraternal Parties in common cause. The task is to "globalise" the battle for jobs, and to mobilise against the "free movement of labour".

But how do we make such international endeavours a reality? In fact internationalism begins at home. Most organised rank and file workers are not in a position to work directly with workers and unions throughout Europe beyond expressions of solidarity. But we can influence our own unions to make absolute demands on the system here at home for decent jobs, security, pay, conditions. To do so directly defends workers here, and also helps us meet our international obligations to the workers of other nations, who, like us, need to take up these class issues in their home countries. These things can be fought for in each individual country: there is no distinction in my mind between that struggle and international struggle. In fact such struggles give solid foundation to the building of practical international solidarity.

We need a new unemployed workers' movement. My branch of the Party is meeting with the Indian Workers Association and the director of the Unemployed Workers Centre, to look at what we can start to do in our trades councils, pulling people together, in order both to support the new move towards a genuine fight for jobs and to bring out the political lessons about the nature of a society which cannot guarantee full employment. Capitalists are determined to promote competition between workers, and their system provides essential instability for workers throughout Europe – throughout the world. That instability and competition is not an aberration, nor a problem that can be "reformed" away. It is an integral part of capitalism, specifically used to protect the capitalist system and to maximise exploitation and profit.

We need, as a Party and in our trade unions at every level, from workplaces, branches, trades councils, national executives, wherever we can, to assert these things. The People's Charter is a

very good starting point and we ought to be cracking on with it. But we as a Party have a massive amount of policy already – embodied in pamphlets such as *Workers of all Lands, Halting the Decline of Manufacturing Industry and The Politics of the Economic Crisis*. How are we using them?

The question is, as ever, what are we, every one of us, going to do about it? We need to set ourselves something that we want to have done by the end of next week, by the end of next month, in a year's time that will transform the situation, that will bring the international lessons home and enable the British working class to fight back.

As Comrade Stalin said at one time, "Once the correct political line has been laid down, organisational work decides everything".⁴ We really have to take that to heart and say, "What is our local branch of the Party doing to make sure that the trades council is effective, to build the fight against unemployment and against evictions, and really to play our part?"

I come back to where I started. Cuba is a fantastic internationalist country, sending doctors, nurses, educators, health workers, engineers and agronomists all over the world. But their real international contribution is what they do in Cuba. Their system survives and grows stronger and they put the needs of their people first – and that is what we have to put to workers within our own trade unions: "How is our trade union putting the collective, the needs of working people, first?" That is our international contribution, that will break down this false notion of the free movement and migration of whole peoples, dislocating them, destroying their economies at home, and separating them from their families and their roots. Those things need to be challenged on a world scale, but we have to start here. Internationalism begins at home.

Notes

1 A contribution to the CPB Trade Union Cadre School, 7-8 February, 2009.

2 K Marx and F Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 6, p 486.

3 V I Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol 25, p 387.

4 J V Stalin, *Report on the Work of the Central Committee to the 17th Congress of the CPSU(B)* (26 January 1934), in *Leninism*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1940, p 528; see also <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/work/1934/01/26.htm>. [The full quotation is: "Good resolutions and declarations in favour of the general line of the Party are only a beginning; they merely

express the desire for victory, but not the victory itself. After the correct line has been laid down, after a correct solution of the problem has been found, success depends on how the work is organised; on the organisation of the struggle for the application of the Party line; on the proper selection of personnel; on the way a check is kept on the fulfilment of the decisions of the leading bodies. Otherwise the correct line of the Party and the correct solutions are in danger of being seriously prejudiced. Furthermore, after the correct political line has been laid down, organisational work decides everything, including the fate of the political line itself, its success or failure." – Ed.]

The International Crisis and Trade Union Organisation

Organising Internationally



by Graham Stevenson

OVER THE LAST DECADE and a half, the question of internationalism in trade unions has been very much framed in the context of “globalisation”. We hear it even now: politicians say, “Globalisation is here, it changes everything, there is nothing we can do.” And many trade unions found the period of neoliberalism of the last 25 years heavily characterised by an increasing internationalisation of the work in which they were engaged.

Of course, globalisation is a bit of a misnomer. You only have to read the first few lines of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 1848, to realise that globalisation has been part of capitalism for a very, very long time. Having said that, there has clearly been a surge in the international activities of companies, the growth of transnational corporations, largely associated with new technologies and new production methods.

Trade unions have for a

long time responded to international challenges. Indeed the First International, the International of what was then unfortunately named “Working Men”, was created by Marx and his comrades precisely for many of the same reasons that we conceive as the grounds for internationalism today. Indeed, if you look into the archives of the First International, you will see East Midlands textile trade unionists very heavily obsessed with the issue of imported French, Flemish or German workers coming to strike-break, and the trade unionists using the First International as a means of attempting to prevent this and to communicate with the workers.

In fact, the earliest episode of that sort of activity that I have come across in researching East Midlands history was in Derby in 1833; so this issue of “British jobs for British workers” has been with us for a very long time – and it really is all about the

price of labour power, the standards of labour and so on. The labour mobility that we have seen, with the changes in Eastern Europe, the growth of the European Union and now the crisis, merely adds to this constant threat that has existed as long as capitalism has existed.

Of course the trade union internationals were paralleled by political internationals; and for much of the 20th century international trade union links were very much influenced by the way in which socialists and communists were either allied or hostile. Very deep splits within international labour were created by the Cold War – in many cases quite deliberately by the forces of reaction. We have seen a gradual realignment take place, notably in Western Europe: many of the big trade union federations which historically came out of the communist stable, particularly in France, Italy, Spain and Portugal, have begun to join with the internationals that existed

throughout the Cold War.

Actually, this beginning of a realignment was not easily accepted. As recently as 10 years ago I found myself on the board of the International Transport Workers Federation, the ITF, arguing with American trade unions that sections of the French CGT should be accepted into affiliation – and the Americans were hostile. Indeed there were French trade unionists who were hostile to it as well, so it hasn't been that easy, and of course the process is still unfolding. In fact the Cuban trade union centre is currently investigating the possibility of affiliating to this mainstream international trade union federation in the transport world.

The ITF is very much part of my role as head of the transport division of Unite, so I shall refer to it a few times. It was not necessarily always a paragon of great virtue, I should say. During the 1950s it collaborated with the



CIA, to prevent workers in Marseilles from striking to stop munitions going to relieve the French at Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam. The consequence was that the French dockers' federation still refuses to join the ITF – talk about memories being very, very long!

What is of interest is the way in which international relations between trade unionists have changed in the last 10 years or so. Before the turn of the century most international trade union activity was almost of a touristic variety: it was about meeting up, having nice exchanges and dinners, and giving each other presents. Many of the bodies that grew up in that Cold War period have evolved into being really quite tame and often quite useless organisations, that do not really serve the needs of individual unions that are seeking to become fighting, organising trade unions.

An odd thing has happened. When the big international federation, the ICTFU, as it was called, was founded it permitted a certain number of industry federations – one for transport workers, one for metal workers, and so on. There are about eight left, and they became known during the 1990s as Global Union Federations or GUFs for short. Some of the GUFs are more effective while others have not really reformed themselves, have not become very relevant, have not taken on board affiliates from militant unions that used to be outside the family. But what a number of unions, working both within GUFs and on a bilateral basis, have begun to do is to look at the commonality and how they can work together.

An example of that is the campaign about contract cleaning workers to which Rhys McCarthy referred in the previous issue of *Communist Review*.² Many of these companies, like ISS – which is

actually a Danish-owned company – are European transnational corporations with a particular relationship with a particular state in Europe, although they now operate in literally scores of countries, maybe hundreds, right across the globe. It has become very evident that all the power and decision-making in these companies is at corporate level, *ie* they make decisions about closure, expansion and all sorts of other questions on the basis of a global corporate approach. However, when unions work together across the globe, focused specifically on that company, then it can be shifted. Joint union campaigns have involved e-mail and – 10 years ago – fax blitzes, sending thousands of faxes to the CEO of a particular corporation, saying “Why don't you recognise unions in ... ?” – *eg*, the United States of America.

Indeed the USA has been a focus for a great deal of this activity because, despite recent growth, unions there are only about a quarter of the size that they were 50 years ago. It is important to understand that, in America, union recognition is a legal question. Individuals don't join unions – you can't join just like that. You have to have a legal contract with your employer and that legal contract is given to a union only after a great deal of struggle. Most employers engage in ferocious campaigning activity of a kind that you would not be able to comprehend. Just forget what you think about as anti-unionism among British employers: in the USA it is so vicious, so extreme, so personal and with so much resource invested into it, that it really is incomprehensible. And when you have a situation where transnational corporations – like ISS – begin to own American companies and British or French companies at the same time, then they begin to import their American industrial relations policy into many other countries as well – because “if it works there, why



wouldn't it work here? Let's try it." So it is now in the interests of trade unions to work closely in cases like that, whether they are in Australia, America, Denmark or wherever.

There are at least 20 major transnational corporations where like-minded unions – sometimes with a global union federation, sometimes completely apart from it – have been co-ordinating and campaigning. I myself have been heavily involved in campaigning work to assist American trade unionists to gain recognition in companies owned by British firms in the public transport arena: First Bus, Stagecoach, Go Ahead, Arriva, and so on. Many of them own quite significant companies in America, most notably in the school bus phenomenon, which for us is a little bit unusual.³ A great deal of campaigning activity is taking place in this country to assist American trade unionists to win greater footholds in companies which in America are completely anti-union, whereas in this country they have accepted trade unions over many years. To some extent that has been successful: the Teamsters' union, for example, last year alone recruited 15,000 workers on something like 20 contracts in the USA and Canada (to all intents and purposes a single entity for North American union organisation).

But we have also had allied benefits that are much closer to home. For example, car

delivery drivers in this country – those big transporters that carry cars from factories to ports, to showrooms – are all organised by Unite (formerly the T&G) and are highly paid. That is quite unusual, since in Europe they are mostly self-employed and not unionised. For about 10 years now the Ford motor company in Britain has been seeking to wriggle out of its contract with Ansa, the firm that handles the car deliveries. You might say that Ford has been trying to export peripheral employment since they have been looking for a much more fluid, more flexible kind of contract – they don't want any unionised arrangements. And we have had a series of disputes with Ansa (although in reality it is Ford that is the problem), culminating about three years ago in what we believed was going to be a major national dispute, with all 700 or so drivers having to stop work. We knew we could stop the 5000 car delivery drivers in all other companies – that would of course be secondary picketing – we could stop the car industry moving in this country, but we had to face the reality that there are no cars manufactured in Britain any more. They all come from Spain or Germany. What to do about that?

What we had to do was prepare in advance a very clear strategy for tackling the supply line. Where are all Ford's factories in Europe? How do they get the cars from them, or



the parts, engines, bodies? We had to identify 30 factories across the whole of Europe, supply lines that include ports like Barcelona, ports in Turkey that nobody had ever heard of, railways even. To track all this down we found that sometimes it was a good idea to bypass trade unions and get to workers themselves. The German unions were not very helpful but the German workers were: if you could make contact inside the factory in Cologne you could find out what day the cars left the factory and how they got to a scab port in Holland. Ford avoided the big unionised port, so we had to find the exact supply line, which included travelling on barges on the Rhine and which mercifully turned out to be unionised. And so we had to deal with the issues of language and communication with individual workers' representatives in small companies, such as the 50-strong German company that handled barge delivery on the Rhine. "What would you do if we had a strike?" we said. "Would you take action, because we can't, but you can?" "Oh yes, we'll do it," they said. Almost nobody knows about this but we nearly had a situation where the whole of the European car industry came to a standstill. What saved it was that the T&G General Secretary was able to go to Ford Europe's managing director and say, "Here is our plan, do you want

"the Teamsters' union ... last year alone recruited 15,000 workers"

to take us on? This is what we are going to do." "Oh, no, no," they said, "it's all been a misunderstanding." So that issue has completely disappeared.

Of course out of a process like that you not only embolden workers, provide them with opportunities, because we're talking about how could we get car workers, car delivery workers or their families to some remote place in Holland to picket the two-mile gap between the end of the canal and the beginning of the railway. We had to think about that kind of approach. What it does is enforce the concept of organising at the workplace as well. So internationalism allied to an organising strategy, using international links in a very creative and constructive way, is a very positive thing for us.

Now I must turn to the whole question of the European Union and the way in which international trade union activity is conducted there. The first thing to note is that the European TUC actually receives 85% of its funding from the European Commission. So if you just stop and think about that for a second, it may explain why there is sometimes a tension between what we want from the European trade union movement and what we actually get. The ETUC is firmly wedded to a lobby-on-the-inside, softly, softly approach. They will engage in a little bit of demonstration activity, but not very much and it is all very polite. On the other hand some of the European arms of these global union federations have engaged in combative activity to prevent further liberalisation. The European Transport Workers' Federation – the European arm of the ITF – has actively campaigned to stop further transport deregulation.

Most notably, the EU attempted to introduce a device that would have opened the market in European ports. They have tried three times over nine years and we have stopped them every time. Admittedly, the final time, it may have taken an alliance with the anarchist union in Barcelona to achieve quite the punch that we had. 10,000 dockers assembled in the streets of Brussels, or maybe it was the rockets from Barcelona going through the Brussels headquarters that finally convinced them – I don't know. However, we did have a very good effect in lobbying and I have to say that even the European centre parties were sometimes better than the British Labour Party, which was useless.

Finally I want to discuss Workers Uniting, "the first global union", bringing together Unite and the United Steel Workers of America (which is actually from Canada as well). One can draw a parallel between the engineers and Amicus, on the one hand, and the USW on the other, because steel-making has collapsed in both Sheffield and America, and the USW is a product of mergers – like Amicus – and has nurses, train drivers and all sort of other workers in it. There appears to be a great deal in common in the thinking about the international steel industry, in particular: the EU is flooding both the British and American markets with cheap steel coming from Slovakia and that is a matter of concern. So I can understand where all that comes from.

What has actually been agreed is that such a formation will exist: precisely how it will function is still an open question. There has not been an acceptance of the implicit logic behind the plan – it has just been put forward in terms of like-minded unions in different countries working together so well that what they ought to do is to join together. Well, if we were going to do

that then the T&G should merge with the Teamsters, not the Steel Workers, so why the latter? It is a response to the fear that the GUFs, the big internationals, are too loose and have not really been engaging in organising and activity. I have indicated that that is not actually so, that where a deliberate strategy has been engaged upon – as we did in the T&G 20 years ago with the ITF and the ETF – then you can transform internationals like these GUFs into real live forces for the assistance of workers in international struggle. So a strategy just based upon international mergers is perhaps too limited an approach – although one cannot rule anything out, because the T&G section of Unite after all is an international union. There are members in the Republic of Ireland – a very significant number – in the United Kingdom and in Gibraltar. The T&G used to have members in Malta, though not any more, but it does have a very close relationship with the Maltese General Workers Union. International unions are not *per se* necessarily a wrong thing but it is not right to imagine that somehow they are a panacea, a single solution. What is clear is that we need an on-the-ground connection between workers engaged in similar industries, with similar employers, working together in the common interest. If you do that you can actually gain something out of international exchanges.

Notes

- 1 A contribution to the CPB Trade Union Cadre School, 7-8 February, 2009.
- 2 R McCarthy, *Organising the Unorganised: Going Back to Basics*, in *Communist Review* No 54, Autumn 2009, p 17.
- 3 All children in America have to get bussed from where they live to a certain school, to ensure the racial complement of the school is moderately balanced.

Orthodox and Marxist Theories of the State and Local Government

Part 3:

Other British Marxist and Radical Work since the Late 1960s

Part 1 of this article in *Communist Review* 53 discussed the methodological and theoretical basis of my forthcoming pamphlet entitled *Local Democracy versus "Local Governance"*; and critically analysed orthodox non-Marxist theories of the state and local government.¹ Part 2 in *Communist Review* 54 focused on the Marxist theory of the state and local government in terms of state monopoly capitalism.² This final part of the article discusses, in sections I-V, other British Marxist and radical work on the state and local government since the late 1980s. Section VI summarises the article's main arguments, and considers the alternative policies needed to solve the crisis of both state monopoly capitalism and local government as well as strategies required to implement them.



By Peter Latham

I: Ralph Miliband's Theory of Containment of Class Conflict and Pressure from Below

Ralph Miliband's most famous and important intellectual contribution was *The State in Capitalist Society* published in 1969, and his ensuing debate with the Althusserian Marxist Nicos Poulantzas.³ As Michael Newman argues:

"Their most fundamental differences were not in their conclusions, but in their methods, their approaches, and their underlying attitudes. Miliband took both the theory and practice of liberal democracy seriously, but aimed to demonstrate *empirically* that a broadly Marxist interpretation of

capitalist society was valid. Poulantzas was not primarily interested in liberal democracy or empirical evidence. His purpose was to establish a theory of the

political, which was based on a specific reading of Marx and which was wholly separate from 'bourgeois' approaches."⁴

Miliband in his later work considered that:

"The notion of the state as an 'instrument'... tends to obscure what has come to be seen as a crucial property of the state, namely its *relative autonomy* from the 'ruling class' and from civil society at large."⁵

He also wrote that

"The dynamic of state action is explained by Marxism in terms of the imperative requirements of capital or the inexorable pressure of capitalists; and these are indeed of very great importance. But to focus exclusively on them is to leave out of account other very



Ralph Miliband

powerful impulses to state action generated from within the state by the people who are in charge of the decision-making power. These impulses undoubtedly exist; and they cannot be taken to be synonymous with the purposes of dominant classes.”⁶

Miliband therefore concluded that

“an accurate and realistic ‘model’ of the relationship between the dominant class in advanced capitalist societies and the state is one of *partnership between two different, separate forces*, linked to each other by many threads, yet each having its own separate sphere of concerns. The terms of that partnership are not fixed but constantly shifting, and affected by many different circumstances, and notably by the state of class struggle.”⁷

Political-office holders have their own interests – to stay in office – when they make policy choices. Yet:

“This larger concern of political-office holders does not, in itself, present any threat to the long-term interests of capital... it is on the contrary essential to their preservation. If governments are to defend these interests effectively, they simply must have a considerable degree of autonomy in deciding how this is to be done, what concessions are to be made to other and conflicting interests and forces, and by what means pressure from below may best be contained. This autonomy is indeed ‘relative’; but it is nevertheless real.”⁸

The danger then for capital is that governments may be tempted to make too generous concessions to popular demands. This is why the non-elected parts of the state are so vital. Thus top civil servants are crucial for restraining ministers;⁹ the military, security services, police and judges are crucial for containing pressure from below;¹⁰ and non-coercive institutions in civil society (such as the mass media) are concerned with “hegemony”, which is “a process of struggle, a permanent striving, a ceaseless endeavour to maintain control over the ‘hearts and minds’ of subordinate classes”.¹¹

The containment of class conflict and pressure from below was central to

Miliband’s analysis of *both* the national state and local government. Orthodox analysts of local government admit the relevance of class analysis in the past, but – due to reform and democratisation – view it as largely irrelevant to the present. Nevertheless, there was a marked differentiation between Labour councils and others in terms of both the class interests they represented and the policies they typically adopted. Outright rebellion – Poplar in 1921, Clay Cross in 1972 – has been rare due to the reasons given by Harvey and Hood:

“The government does have at its disposal a large arsenal of financial, administrative and coercive means to ensure compliance, and the courts can usually be relied upon to act as a strong restraining force upon such councils.”¹²

However, things could have been very different if central government had been faced with “twenty Poplars and an equal number of Clay Crosses”.¹³ The influence of senior officers in local government – who have similar ideologies to senior civil servants – is also considerable, because councillors rely upon their advice. Since the 1980s, as Miliband predicted, the trend towards caution has intensified following the greater concentration of power in the hands of chief executives, the adoption of strategic management techniques and the introduction of the executive and scrutiny system by New Labour under which most councillors now have no role in policy-making.

Miliband, as shown in Part 2 of this article, is the only Marxist whose writings on the British national state and local government acknowledged the significance of James Harvey and Katherine Hood’s earlier work, *The British State*. Moreover, the perspective in Miliband’s chapter on local government in *Capitalist Democracy in Britain* – with its emphasis on class and power cited above – is similar to that adopted by Harvey and Hood. Probably the major limitation of Miliband’s approach is that the political economy underpinning his analyses is theoretically and empirically under-developed – unlike earlier and current work using the perspective of state monopoly capitalism and some of the Marxist work on British local government since the late 1970s. Sections II to V below discuss the latter work and subsequent studies based on these earlier debates.

II: Cynthia Cockburn’s “Structuralist” Theory of the “Local State”

The term “local state” was used by Cynthia Cockburn as an alternative to the traditional “public administration” approach to studying local government, which narrowly focused upon local government institutions and ignored the wider economic, political and social context in which they operated. Cockburn argued that we need to go beyond the conventional framework and see local government “for what it really is: a key part of the state in capitalist society”.¹⁴ In particular, as there is “no ready-made theory of local government”, Cockburn maintained that

“It is necessary to piece together a number of concepts about the state as a whole and draw conclusions from them for local government. There are fundamental ideas in the early writings of Marx on which later work has built. ... The first of these is that the state can only be understood by looking at the way wealth is produced in a particular society ... [and] is specific to the mode of production ... second ... that the state in capitalism is an instrument of class domination ... third ... its characteristic function is repression: its main role is to keep the working class in its place and to set things up, with forceful sanctions, in such a way that capital itself, business interests as a whole, normally survive and prosper.”¹⁵

The work of Louis Althusser and Nicos Poulantzas is then used by Cockburn to update Marx’s views on the state to include social reproduction and ideology as important concerns of the local state.¹⁶ That is, education, housing and other social services are provided to ensure a healthy and cooperative labour force for capital; and the local state also institutionalises class conflict and encourages people to accept dominant values. Cockburn then uses this theoretical approach to provide an exemplary empirical study of the London Borough of Lambeth.

However, as Simon Duncan and Mark Goodwin observed in 1988, the



major contradiction in Cockburn's work is that the capitalist state

“is viewed functionally as a given thing, a pre-existing instrument possessed by the capitalist class, rather than as a historically emerging, changing and contradictory class relation. The local state then, is not differentiated from the national state in terms of process, only in terms of functions that happen to be carried out locally.”¹⁷

Thus, as Duncan and Goodwin conclude, Cockburn

“reduces two contradictory social processes of the local state – that it is simultaneously agent and obstacle for the national state – to those of a one-way agent This results from the search for a universal model of a thing – the capitalist state – which can be applied to all places at all times using one ‘model’ of activity as the basis of understanding. This line of reasoning is ... misleading ... historically and conceptually.”¹⁸

III: The “Dual State” Theory of Alan Cawson and Peter Saunders

Alan Cawson and Peter Saunders make no distinction between national and local states because they argue that distinct political processes operate on each level: which require two different political theories to explain them. The latter, according to Duncan and Goodwin, “begs the question of why the term and hence the concept of the local state is used at all.”¹⁹ Cawson and Saunders argue that central state intervention mainly occurs in relation to the production process and it proceeds through a policy process of corporate mediation; while local state activity is mainly concerned with consumption processes, where policies are developed through competitive political struggles. Interests mobilised at the centre around production reflect the organised class interests of industrial and finance capital, the professions and organised labour, whereas local mobilisation is usually formed on the basis of consumption sectors such as council tenants.²⁰

The major problem with this approach is highlighted by Saunders himself:

“Since most state policies will involve some relevance for both production and consumption, it can be difficult to disentangle the two and to distinguish empirically between primarily-production orientated and primarily-consumption orientated interventions.”²¹

Moreover, there is little empirical evidence to support the “dual state” thesis. For instance, Patrick Dunleavy, using generous criteria, showed that in the period up to 1914 only just over a third of local authority expenditure could be classified as social consumption; and in 1984 roads, education and housing, which contribute to private production and capital accumulation, accounted for 65 per cent of local authority spending.²² The response of Saunders to such criticism was that the “dual state” thesis is an “ideal type” research strategy rather than an account of reality; but, as Duncan and Goodwin point out, if “corporatist bargaining over production in the national state and pluralist conflict over consumption in the local state, are *not* typical tendencies, or do not reflect some social logic, then perhaps the ‘thesis’ is not something to continue with.”²³

IV: Simon Duncan and Mark Goodwin’s Theory of “Social Relations” and “Uneven Development”

Despite the “unchanging local state forms” that “the dual state thesis and Cockburn’s structuralist thesis both imply”, Duncan and Goodwin still consider that “the concept ‘local state’ is vital to a full understanding of the current crisis of local-central relations”; but only if it is recognised that “local-level state institutions are constantly being restructured ... and these changes are linked to changes in state relations as a whole and to changes in the overall form of capitalist social relations.”²⁴ Social relations, including class relations, are “unevenly developed”, which “means that social groups are also spatially

constituted and differentiated, with variable local strengths and importance”; and “locally constituted groups” can use “local state institutions to further their own interests, perhaps in opposition to centrally dominant interests.”²⁵ For example, farmers/landowners can maintain a cheap local labour force via their domination of many rural local governments; and the provision of cheap and often good-quality council housing by Labour authorities was an essential component in the development of local cultures of Labourism.²⁶

Duncan and Goodwin, drawing on Gramsci, also do not see “uneven development ... simply as a matter of capitalist production – however, central and wide-reaching this might be”, because the “practices of civil society ... are also, like the processes of capitalist development, uneven in themselves and so create differentiation”.²⁷ For example, in South Wales the relatively autonomous and egalitarian work practices of coal miners encouraged a combative and collective outlook. Conversely, the more hierarchical and paternalistic work practices of coal miners in North-east England had the opposite effect.²⁸ Duncan and Goodwin then applied their theory to the local government crisis in the late 1980s.

The term “local government” rather than “local state” is used in this article because the big difficulty with the latter term is that it contradicts the Marxist concept of state power as the manifold combination of formal and informal instruments of ruling class power that evolve and change in line with capitalism’s unfolding contradictions and with the tempo and character of class struggle. State power has to be understood dialectically – as a whole and as changing continually in response to overall contradictions. In this sense state power cannot be anything but both local and central. Separating it does not make sense. However, what did make a key difference, and what has rendered any representative form of government at both national and local level so problematic for capital, has been the introduction of democracy – and the continual battle over whether it can be used as a tool to control organised labour, or used by organised labour to limit and contain the power of capital. All of which is consistent with the main thrust of Duncan and Goodwin’s theory which, unlike those of Cockburn, Cawson and Saunders, is still relevant when analysing post-1988 developments up to and including New Labour’s “local governance” project.

V: British Marxist and Radical Work on Local Government since the Late 1980s

According to Marxists, as Christopher Stoney observes, the contradictions and crises inherent in the development of capitalism necessitated intervention by the governments of advanced capitalist countries “to sustain and promote the conditions required for profitable investment and accumulation”.²⁹ Moreover, the “rising level of intervention required to maintain accumulation and legitimisation presents the state with contradictory pressures both to spend and to control spending.”³⁰ Hence, as “locally elected government is important for the purposes of legitimation, but at the same time represents a barrier to the overall reduction in state expenditure, its relationship with central government is dialectical.”³⁰

The post-1988 strategy did not represent a radical departure from previous policies. Stoney highlighted three mutually interrelated features:

1. There has been a continuation of the concern to control local authorities’ spending but this has resulted in a reform of the system of local government finance – which not only enhances the degree of central control over spending but also reduces significantly the power and discretion of local authorities in relation to the level of local taxation. Through the Revenue Support Grant (RSG) and Uniform Business Rate (UBR), central government now controls over 80 per cent of local government expenditure, while authorities’ discretion over the level of local taxation is limited by the gearing effect of increased spending on the Council Tax, and the Government’s powers to cap local tax increases.
2. Central government’s strategy aimed to reduce directly the scope of influence and control of elected local authorities over the economic and social welfare of local communities. For example, the 1988 Education Reform Act reduced the scope of local authority influence through the delegation of budgets to schools and allowed schools to opt out of local authority control and become grant maintained, financed directly by central government.
3. The 1988 Local Government Act subjected a range of services to compulsory competitive tendering (CCT); and this was extended further by the 1992 Local Government Act to include internal support services such as personnel and finance. Such legislation led local authorities to reduce their involvement in direct services and to focus increasingly on their role as purchasers of services under contractual arrangements, a key aspect of the marketisation of public services.³¹

“The shift in balance from democratically elected councillors, who can be held accountable to the electorate, towards appointed, faceless and elite groups of people has serious implications for public sector management and the local political economy”



In its attempts to bypass elected local authorities, central government has, wherever possible, given powers to non-elected agencies.³² The result has been a rapid expansion in the number of quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations (quangos) which carry responsibility for aspects of local public policy and service provision. Examples include the former Training and Enterprise Councils and the Urban Development Corporations. It was estimated that the amount of public money spent by quangos represented £46.6 billion in 1993, nearly one third of total public spending.³³ Since then, the percentage of public expenditure undertaken by quangos has risen: estimates suggested that, prior to the 1987 general election, this figure was closer to one half, and the proportion has increased even more under New Labour.

The shift in balance from democratically elected councillors, who can be held accountable to the electorate, towards appointed, faceless and elite groups of people has serious implications for public sector management and the local political economy. Paul Hoggett points out that some of the Training and Enterprise Councils and trusts set up to bypass local government were actually constituted as private companies, and one casualty of their emergence has been “any semblance of open government, as many of the new bodies resort to hiding behind the shroud of ‘business secrecy’ as a means of avoiding scrutiny either by the public or their own employees”.³⁴

The emergence of “new managerialism” and the rapid growth in the number of partnerships between local authorities and the private sector, as Allan Cochrane argues, has been pivotal in the move from the traditional welfare state to the market-driven enterprise state:

“...the importance of business in policy making at local level goes beyond direct involvement, which is strongest in the fields most directly relevant to business interests, such as economic development, education and training. It has substantially influenced more traditional responsibilities of the welfare state, too, confirming the move away from the local state as provider of collective consumption, to local state as defender of enterprise”.³⁵

As a consequence of increased



business involvement, Cochrane suggests that traditional welfare problems, such as inner-city decay, have been reinterpreted as problems of economic growth, and urban regeneration defined as business confidence and growth. This tendency to present contentious political issues as a set of technical business problems has been further stimulated by the emergence of partnerships. Encouraged by the Audit Commission, deregulation and a competitive system of funding, local authorities have had little choice but to enter into direct partnerships with the private sector in an attempt to secure finance for local regeneration.

The impact of private sector partnerships on local government was the focus of a report cited by Cochrane who described how it calls for business plans to be drawn up and for the partnership to function as a Board of Directors when co-ordinating activities. It also recommended the setting up of “executive power and agency” separate from elected local governments. In addition to structural changes the report stressed the need for accompanying changes in business practice and language which reflect the growing influence of strategic management:

“The language of business – the jargon of the new management – is used as a focus of development. Stress is placed on the need to develop ‘mission’ statements, and business plans, based on SWOT³⁶ analysis. The new teams are advised to aim for flagship projects, rather than integrated programmes which elected local government is expected to develop. They are exhorted to act like business.”³⁷

The importance of corporate management in this context is in communicating with business and in creating favourable conditions for inward investment from the private sector. In a wider context, it instils potential investors with confidence that “rational” economic strategy can be pursued locally without fear of political and bureaucratic hindrance and without the uncertainty and reversals in policy that used to accompany changes in the political complexion of the council.

Pressures to transform local government management have come from various quarters. Central government has consistently urged local authorities to review management methods and adopt a more systematic

and strategic approach. Closer links and partnerships with business have facilitated the importation of private sector management techniques;³⁸ and senior managers have, on the whole, been eager to take up the enterprise mantra of the Audit Commission and the Local Government Management Board with its emphasis on commercial and business metaphors, and the promise of a more influential role for themselves. The result has been an identifiable change in local government management, the emergence of “new managerialism” and its creation of managerial elites or cadres.³⁹ The philosophy of “new managerialism” is elitist, essentially directive and authoritarian and one which seeks to establish management’s “right to manage” by excluding trade union and collective participation in the decision-making process.⁴⁰ Its introduction into the public sector, through innovations such as strategic management, is seen as an attempt to change values, priorities and practices, and by so doing gain support and legitimisation for a radical programme of reform. This has involved extensive training and development for top public managers, enhanced financial incentive for managers willing to adopt these new principals and often redundancy for those who resist.⁴¹ Cochrane describes this new breed as “managerial careerists” and suggests that they no longer seek legitimacy from the electoral process, but from their ability to fit in with the latest management language, such as the shift from “client” to “consumer”.⁴²

In this managerial transformation, the traditional public sector themes of collectivism, welfare and civic duty have become unfashionable. “Personnel” is now “Human Resource Management”; chief officers are recast as “directors” or “strategic executives”; and glamorous, career enhancing “flagship projects” compete with more prosaic day-to-day responsibilities for scarce resources. The development of a professional, corporate image is seen as vital and is often symbolised by slick corporate logos depicting local landmarks and attractions.⁴³ “In this new corporate world”, as Stoney notes,

“the language of local politics is superseded by the anodyne and clinical discourse of management speak which is seen to legitimate management authority as a morally and politically neutral technical activity. The veil of rationality is spread over contentious decisions concerning,

for example, the imposition of staff redundancies, pay freezes and cutbacks in services. The emphasis is placed upon achieving ‘leaner’, ‘fitter’ organisations through a process of ‘downsizing’ or ‘rightsizing’.”⁴⁴

However, as Farnham and Horton point out, this notion of rationality hides the fact that collectively senior public service managers are actually “agents” of political and economic change and, in this sense, they argue that management has been politicised:

“Such managers may claim that they are neutral professionals, carrying out policy made by the politicians and committed to organisational effectiveness and efficiency. In fact they have been responsible for driving through a series of extensive and sometimes contentious programmes of political reforms in the public services in the name of managerial competence. With few exceptions, they have provided little resistance to these changes and, some would add, many of them have been rewarded handsomely for their efforts in doing so.”⁴⁰

The primary objectives of public sector reforms have been greater



economy and value for money. These aims, according to Stoney,

“have been pursued largely through a combination of cost control methods and an increase in the intensity and pressure of work for council employees. Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) has been the major instrument used to enforce both measures, replacing hierarchical control with the market as a means of coordinating activity and resources, and combining reductions in the number of staff with increased workloads, lower rates of pay and worse terms and conditions.”⁴⁴

Central to these strategies have been some classical examples of neo-Taylorism such as: tight cash limits and cash planning; staff cuts; the introduction of performance indicators which stress economy and efficiency; staff appraisal and merit pay systems; more devolution to line managers; short-term contracts; and a rhetorical emphasis on responsiveness to the consumer.⁴⁵ Such strategies shift attention away from fundamental issues, such as public sector funding and the social distribution of wealth, and onto labour who are blamed for being inflexible and resistant to change. A similar logic underpins the requirement that councils publish

performance indicators on a regular basis. The overwhelming constraints on local government to maintain tight control over spending have further necessitated more corporate forms of management which protect and insulate strategic decisions from local needs and demands. In this way, increased participation and representation is limited to technical and operational matters of finance as opposed to influencing the overall level of funding and the way in which it is allocated.

Stoney in 1998 concluded that:

1. for Marxists the restructuring of local government in Britain during the previous two decades

“cannot be understood as simply a contingent response to external pressures for innovation, efficiency and improved performance. Rather, it is a result of the contradictory forces within capitalism and the attempt by consecutive Conservative Governments, and now Labour, to manage them [S]trategies to control state expenditure have involved increasing centralisation and fragmentation of the state, with many local government functions being removed into enclosed, non-elected arenas, making them more amenable to central control and direction. These strategies are designed to

bypass or circumvent local government which, because of its democratic accountability to local electorates and a traditionally organised workforce, has tended to defend against cuts in local expenditure.”⁴⁶

2. where responsibility for state spending has remained with local authorities,

“increasingly corporate and centralised forms of management and decision-making have emerged with the capacity to insulate strategic decisions from competing local demands and the politics of welfare This process has involved a reconfiguration of the balance of power in the community with some sectional interests such as business gaining greater influence over key decisions. Internally this has meant (re)establishing management’s ‘right’ to manage ... weakening the power and influence of local government trade unions and ‘professionals’, through legislation and contracting, and the creation of well rewarded managerial elites with the executive power and ‘objectivity’ to enforce painful cuts in services and jobs.”⁴⁶

3. by insulating and de-politicising those aspects of decision-making which are of direct significance to business,

“local authorities have been able to forge closer links with the private sector. Encouraged by an increasingly competitive funding system and a growing dependency on private investment, local authorities have established partnerships and joint ventures The growing influence of the private sector is also reflected in, and reinforced by, the willingness of many senior executives and members to embrace private sector management techniques and to cultivate a more entrepreneurial and commercial spirit within the organisation.”⁴⁷

4. the internal reforms within local authorities have also been

“part of the overall strategy to make local government a ‘safer’



and more predictable institution in terms of spending and financial control. Though it is still possible for local authorities to be controlled by left-wing members, their scope for delivering a 'radical' agenda ha[s] been much reduced through a combination of the legislative and financial reforms of the last two decades and by the process of internal restructuring which has shifted the balance of power locally [A]lthough many council members and senior officers object to many of the enabling reforms and express concern about the general direction and future of local government, in practice ... the scope for real strategic choice has ironically been severely curtailed."⁴⁸

Stoney's main contribution has been meticulously to analyse within a Marxist framework the introduction of strategic management into local government up to 1998, that occurred after the original Cockburn/Cawson and Saunders/Duncan and Goodwin debates. Moreover, the trends identified by Stoney, as shown by the work of Dexter Whitfield, have intensified under New Labour – for example, the "Best Value" regime, which removed compulsory competition in local government but extended competition to all services via options appraisals. A further phase in neoliberalism began in the early 2000s with a new emphasis on commissioning and contestability. The "state was not 'rolled back' or 'hollowed out' but reconfigured and transformed into making, supporting and sustaining markets".⁴⁹ There was also a rapid growth in arms-length public/private organisations such as foundation schools and hospitals, and outsourcing to strategic partnerships and local public service boards.

Furthermore, as Whitfield also emphasises, the different forms of marketisation do not take place in isolation: "They are part of a broader restructuring of the state in the interests of capital".⁴⁹ For example, Essex County Council's current plan for a mega-strategic partnership⁵⁰ and Barnet's proposal to shrink the council to a "strategic hub" with services delivered by "service delivery vehicles"⁵¹ indicate that local authorities are "commencing another spate of radical reorganisation" which, as Whitfield concludes, is rooted "in the same policies and ideology that led to the current financial crisis".⁵²

VI: Summary of Main Arguments, and Alternative Policies and Strategies to Solve the Crisis of State Monopoly Capitalism and Local Government

The Marxist dialectical methodology used in this article shows that:

- the social-democratic theory of the central state and local government – with its stress on neutrality, responsibility, gradualism, efficiency and rejection of class politics and struggle as an instrument of change – is essentially an extension of 19th century liberal theory to the 20th century, when Labour replaced the Liberals as the second main party, following the gradual introduction of universal suffrage.
- Conservative New Right and New Labour governments – despite their neoliberal rhetoric emphasising "innovation", "efficiency", "enabling" and "community empowerment" – in practice intervene in the state monopoly capitalist stage on behalf of big business and the multinationals, to restore the conditions in which profitable investment and capital accumulation can take place.
- despite New Labour's acceptance of the Julius Report, recommending more privatisation, the banks are increasingly unwilling to finance PFI programmes, so the government has taken on more risk – which undermines the sole justification for the policy – and at a much higher price to the taxpayer.

New Labour's 22 per cent share of the vote in the June 2009 local elections was the lowest ever recorded for either of the two main parties. In European elections at the same time they received only 15.7 per cent, equivalent to only 5.3 per cent of the electorate. Thus, we are at a point where the working class has become detached from its traditional party due to New Labour no longer being even a social democratic party. Paraphrasing Antonio Gramsci, "the old [New Labour] is dying and the new [a mass democratic working class party] cannot [yet] be born".⁵³

An alternative national economic and political strategy is therefore now essential – one which explains the current crisis, advances immediate proposals but also opens the way for more fundamental

change. The Labour Representation Committee's Left Economics Advisory Panel provides the basis for such an alternative,⁵⁴ as does the Communist Party of Britain's Left Wing Programme, which includes the following key economic, environmental and social policies:

- no more imperialist wars and occupations for big business; scrap Britain's weapons of mass destruction;
- increased taxes on the rich and big business, including a wealth tax on the super-rich and a windfall tax on energy, banking and supermarket profits, to boost public spending;
- restoring the value of state pensions and benefits and reintroducing student grants in place of fees;
- price controls on basic foods, household fuel and petrol, and cuts in VAT on essential goods and services such as children's clothes;
- a wages offensive by the trade union movement to increase public and private sector pay, including a drive to win bargaining rights for the TUC to negotiate with the government on the national minimum wage;
- state intervention to stop mass redundancies in viable enterprises, to impose import levies on companies which have exported jobs from Britain and to rebuild Britain's industrial base;
- controls on the export of capital and directed investment into civilian research, development and manufacturing production with an emphasis on green technology and sustainable energy production;
- public ownership of the railways, bus transport, energy utilities, armaments and pharmaceuticals, together with the reconstruction of a state banking sector;
- an end to all forms of privatisation, profiteering and marketisation in the public sector;
- a massive programme of council house building to provide affordable housing and create jobs.⁵⁵

This ten-point programme would not only make the monopoly capitalists pay for their crisis and raise the quality of life of many millions of people. It would also begin to shift the balance of wealth and power in favour of the working class, pointing the way forward to Britain's road to socialism. Repeal of the Local Governments Acts 2000 and 2007 – to allow *all* councils to re-introduce the committee system, restore the right of *all* councillors to make policy, abolish US-style directly-elected mayors and reinstate directly provided services – is also necessary.

The pre-condition for winning a progressive and socialist alternative in national and local government remains a mass democratic party of the working class and the labour movement, either through reclaiming the Labour Party from the New Labour clique or through the formation of a new party. For, as John Foster argues:

“Without democratisation, progressive economic reform is not sustainable [A]ll the proposals outlined ... would be declared illegal under European Law The trade union movement needs to lead a campaign to repeal the relevant sections of the EU treaties ... in alliance with workers elsewhere in Europe Restoring the democratic powers of Parliament is an essential precondition for any challenge to the executive power of state-monopoly capital ... and

the ... fight for the restoration of internal Labour Party democracy ... could be driven forward and given momentum by mass campaigning in a way which impacts directly upon the struggle between left and right inside the trade union movement and the Labour Party.”⁵⁶

At the moment, across the public sector, including local government, the government pay policy and so-called efficiency savings are cutting real wages, jobs and services with damaging consequences for the local economy. This provides huge opportunities for bringing together local community groups and trade unions defending public and social services against New Labour’s cuts and privatisation – to ensure that the campaigns required to combat these cuts are genuinely broad-based. Trades councils, in particular, can play an important unifying role within

the labour movement and act as a bridge between the unions and local communities. Moreover, the People’s Charter – “a distillation of policies already overwhelmingly backed by the trade union movement” and now endorsed by the TUC – is a unifying focus for such work; and “a united public campaign to raise a million signatures in its support would have a potentially transformative effect on politics in Britain”.⁵⁷

The current economic downturn – because of its high level of dependence on the financial sector that is at the core of the crisis – is likely to be more severe for Britain than in any other advanced capitalist country. Hence, together with the housing crisis and large scale unemployment, the coming period will see further conditions created, if the political will is there, for a new active unity between community groups and unions to defend wages and public services as they come under attack from cutbacks on an unprecedented scale.

Notes

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Is the World Capitalist Crisis Over?¹



By Prabhat Patnaik

AN IMPRESSION has got around in India that the world capitalist crisis is over. It is no longer front page news in newspapers. One scarcely hears a word about it on television. And now that the Sensex² has crossed the 15,000 mark, up from 9,000 to which it had plunged a few months ago, everything appears fine to the Indian elite, which has wasted no time in spreading the cheerful news around. To be sure, the Indian elite is not alone in having this perception. An air of cautious optimism pervades even the elites in advanced countries which have been the hardest-hit by the crisis. They are more cautious, but optimistic nonetheless.

Much of this optimism springs from the behaviour of some financial indicators, notably the stock markets, whose impact on the real economy, though existent, can be tenuous. On the real economy itself, the most optimistic position is that we may be nearing the bottom of the crisis, that things are unlikely to get worse, which is very different of course from saying that things are back to “normal”. Thus British prime minister Gordon Brown has taken solace from the fact that though unemployment in Britain is *rising*, the increase in unemployment across periods is coming down. Much the same was being said about the United States until the month of June; but the increase in unemployment in June was much higher than in May, which put paid to even these hopes. Even on current figures, therefore, we cannot say we are at the end of the decline.

Three Negative Factors

There are three factors moreover, each relating to the United States (whose level of economic activity matters the most for the world economy), though similar phenomena may be occurring elsewhere as well, which militate against the downturn itself coming to an end, *ie* which prevent the bottom itself being reached. The first of these is wage deflation, *ie* the decline in the real earnings per worker of the *employed workers themselves*. Now, the initial drop in the level of aggregate demand which triggered the crisis has been getting aggravated by the decline in employment anyway; but this is further accentuated by the decline in the real earnings per head of the employed workers. This tertiary drop in demand, compounding the primary drop owing to the initial jolt, and the secondary drop owing to the decline in employment, will contribute to a further prolongation of the decline in the level of economic activity and employment.

The second factor is the decline in the level of expenditures of the state governments in the US. While the federal government in the US is allowed to run fiscal deficits, state governments are not: when their revenue drops, as it does in a recession, their expenditure too drops. Now, even though the federal government in the US has run a massive fiscal deficit, most of it has gone for shoring up the banks, adding to their coffers where the money lies quietly,

but not generating demand in the economy. That part of the fiscal deficit which constitutes federal government expenditure on goods and services, and which therefore adds to the level of demand in the economy, is quite small, not much more than the currently-estimated decline in the expenditure of the state governments owing to their obligation to balance budgets; but if this decline persists, and exceeds anticipations, then this federal fiscal stimulus is likely to get swamped by the decline in state government expenditures.

The third factor consists in the fact that even this level of federal fiscal stimulus is unlikely to be sustained over time. Finance capital, as is well-known, is opposed to any direct State intervention in demand management: it prefers “sound finance”, *ie* the State balancing its revenue with expenditure, or, at the most, running a small, pre-determined magnitude of fiscal deficit relative to GDP. So, even the current level of the fiscal deficit, which the Obama administration is running, is anathema to finance capital, and the large number of conservative economists and commentators who articulate its positions. The very suspicion that the bottom has been reached, if it gets spuriously confirmed by, say, the unemployment figure not registering an increase for a couple of months, will increase pressure on the federal government to cut down its fiscal deficit, which will once more push the US economy back into a decline.

This is exactly what happened in 1937, when, after the initial phase of the New Deal appeared to have ended the decline started by the Great Depression, President Roosevelt was pressurised into cutting back the federal fiscal deficit, with the result that the US economy plunged once more into a depression, from which it recovered only through the resurgence in military spending that marked the onset of the Second World War. At present, so strong is the pressure for cutting back on the fiscal deficit in the US that even if the bottom of the recession is not reached, President Obama will still find it hard to sustain the tempo of deficit spending; any suspicion that the bottom has been reached will make the pressure irresistible, pushing the economy back into a decline.

A Whole New Conjuncture

All this would suggest that the crisis in the US is far from over; and if so, then the crisis in the world economy too is far from over. *But there is a deeper reason why the crisis is not over, and that is because the crisis is not just a recessionary crisis, as is commonly supposed.* In fact the current world capitalist crisis is such that if it does not appear in one particular *form*, then it will appear in a different *form*. Recession is just one of the *forms* in which it appears. If the recession abates, then the crisis will appear in a different *form*, namely that of a sharp inflation affecting in particular energy and food prices, which incidentally is the *form* in



which it had appeared *before the recession*.

The crisis therefore must not be identified with only one particular form; *it represents a whole new conjuncture*. When we look at this conjuncture in its totality, then it becomes clear that overcoming it within the parameters of the capitalism we have known till now, does not appear possible. To say this is not to say that capitalism will *collapse*, that never happens; nor is it to suggest that the crisis will necessarily persist in one particular form, *eg* that the recession will never be overcome. The point being made is that capitalism, as it has existed hitherto, has entered into a period of permanent crisis, from which the system may still emerge through substantial restructuring (if it does not get transcended altogether), but only after a considerable time, through much groping, and the creation, through such groping, of an appropriate political balance of class forces that will carry out such restructuring. In short, as in the inter-war period, we are entering into a phase of capitalism where a major qualitative transition, as distinct from the mere playing out of its immanent

tendencies, has come on the agenda. Where that transition will lead, will be decided ultimately by the outcome of political struggle; *but the conjuncture that has brought such a transition on to the agenda is the crisis*.

Characteristics of this Conjuncture

What are the characteristics of this conjuncture and why has it come about? In a modern capitalist economy, as is well-known, if the level of economic activity is pushed beyond a point, then this gives rise to an inflationary upsurge. This happens for a variety of mutually-reinforcing reasons: as the relative size of the reserve army drops below some threshold, the workers' bargaining strength improves, money wage claims begin to mount, and – since capitalists price their products as a “mark-up” over their unit variable costs – inflation ensues. Likewise, when the level of activity increases beyond a point, raw material prices begin to climb, which again get passed on through higher prices, calling forth higher money wage claims (even to defend the prevailing real wages), and hence, once more, escalating inflation.

This point, beyond which an inflationary upsurge

ensues, and which, following Joan Robinson's terminology, one can call the “inflationary barrier”,³ sets a limit to the feasible level of economic activity in a modern capitalist economy. The actual level of economic activity can be less than this, but not above this, in any period, if capitalism is to remain viable. Now, *the conjuncture constituting the current crisis is characterised by the fact that this “inflationary barrier” has got lowered, ie the level of economic activity at which an inflationary upsurge will arise has got reduced*. The economy can perform below this level, as it is doing now in the capitalist world, but that constitutes recession. But as it gets out of the recession, precisely because the “inflationary barrier” has got lowered, it would soon get into an inflationary upsurge. Hence it is not the recession *alone* that constitutes the crisis, or inflation *alone*; it is the totality of the conjuncture where getting out of *one form* of the crisis entails getting into *another form* of the crisis.

This conjuncture has arisen because, on the one hand, there is an enormous concentration of finance capital, looking around for speculative gains, which can move into particular commodity markets whenever

there is a whiff of possible scarcity, or of the possibility of creating a scarcity; and on the other hand, the scope for an easy augmentation of supplies has got exhausted in the case of a number of commodities. In a whole range of agricultural commodities where production is carried out by a mass of petty producers, the very fact of their impoverishment under a regime dominated by international finance capital, has made supply augmentation difficult; indeed even simple reproduction on their part has become difficult, as is evident from the vast numbers of peasant suicides in India. The withdrawal of State support, which they enjoyed under the post-independence *dirigiste* regime, but no longer do under neo-liberalism, has pushed large numbers of them into unviability, where they cannot cope with the needs of the capitalist world economy.

In the case of other commodities, like oil, the end of the colonial arrangement has meant loss of control over this crucial resource by the capitalist metropolis. Production is now controlled to a significant extent by OPEC, which no doubt is amenable to pressure by imperialism but cannot just be dictated to by it. And imperialism's large-scale bid for re-colonisation, entailing a reacquisition of control over this resource, though persistent and continuing, has run into rough weather. It is this conjuncture that constitutes the crisis, which must not therefore be identified only with its recessionary form.

Notes

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International Marxists Debate Global Problems at a Time of Crisis

By Jenny Clegg

OVER 100 MARXIST political economists from 11 countries gathered in Paris at the end of May to exchange ideas and discuss how to use Marxism at this time of crisis. This was the Fourth Forum of the World Association for Political Economy (WAPE), an international academic organisation chaired by Cheng Enfu of the Academy of Marxism, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, with vice-chairs, David Kotz (the University of Massachusetts) and Hiroshi Ohnishi (Kyoto University), all leading world Marxists.

This year's forum was titled *Nation, State, and Democratic Governance of the Global Economy and Politics*. Many of the papers presented focused on the world financial and economic crisis – its nature and causes – as well as responses to it. The related crises of energy, food, and climate change were also hot topics of debate, whilst other papers discussed imperialism, China's economic reforms and democratisation as well as considerations of value and unequal exchange theories.

The global order clearly confronts many problems, demanding international dialogue and cooperation; what is lacking, however, are shared values and a common goal given that the global rules are made by the richest and most powerful countries and reflect their concerns. Mainstream economics, unable to understand let alone respond to the crisis, has been exposed as bankrupt. In contrast, WAPE provides an important meeting ground for reinvigorating Marxist debate through dialogue between Chinese and Western perspectives. As WAPE's chair noted in his opening address, Marxist economics has not only the capability but also the responsibility to play an active role in tackling world problems.

WAPE's mission is to pass down, develop and carry forward the core Marxian economic paradigms – the labour theory of value, the superiority of public ownership and the theory of socialism and communism – using these to “analyse and study the world economy, reveal the law of development and its mechanism, offer proper policies to promote the economic and social improvement on the national and global level, so as to improve the welfare of all the people in the world”.

According to the final statement drafted from the Paris meeting, the crisis is not just the result of bad management nor is it only a consequence of deregulation but “mainly [it is] a consequence of capitalism, as a system, with over-exploitation of labour”. As such it is hardly surprising that “capitalist leaders are reluctant to change anything in their previous behaviour”. And despite the G20 summit, “nor are the powerful capitalist nations...ready to give up their privileges”. Given the current uncertainties, “the design of global governance is going to be the result of contradictory strategies to reshape the world It is necessary to get not only a democratic, fair but also a peaceful globalisation”.

The Forum was hosted by the Gabriel Peri Foundation, a non-partisan organisation initiated by the French Communist Party (PCF) aimed at carrying out research on matters of contemporary history, particularly the history of communist and workers' movements.

The theme of next year's forum, to be held in China, aims to link analyses of the causes of global problems with discussion of solutions.

Discussion



On **Stalin's Philosophical and Political Testament**

by Hans Heinz Holz

By Kenny Coyle

Nikita Khrushchev

Hans Heinz Holz's article in *Communist Review* No 53¹ was a stimulating contribution to the debate about the reasons for the collapse of the USSR and the nature of "Stalinism". However, I find myself in sharp opposition to a number of Comrade Holz's assertions, which seem to me to provide a false trail for further discussion in this area.

Comrade Holz describes Khrushchev's criticism against Stalin as "counter-revolutionary". He says that as a result of the 20th CPSU Congress "Stalin's works were subjected to a tacit taboo, which contributed from an ideological point of view to the theoretical decline of relevant Soviet social sciences." He then goes on to argue that both *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR* and *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics* represent planks of Stalin's platform for a postwar re-evaluation of Soviet society, a reaction against bureaucratisation of political power and the entrenchment of dogmatism in ideology. Comrade Holz concedes though that "nothing subsequently happened to demonstrate their effective validity."

In short, Comrade Holz argues that in the postwar period Stalin was about to launch a new programme of democratisation and openness, a process cut short by his death in 1953 and then bungled and betrayed by his successors.²

Since the collapse of the European socialist states in 1989-91, there has been a certain current in the communist movement arguing that the origin of the collapse should simply be dated to the period following Stalin's death and in particular the condemnation of the "personality cult" at the 20th CPSU congress led by Nikita Khrushchev. Previous failings and problems were explained primarily as the result of objective factors, such as economic backwardness, the low cultural level, the continuous threat of war and the catastrophic losses caused by the actual experience of the 1941-45 war against Nazism.

Of course, Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" has many weaknesses. The first and most fundamental is that it was never publicly published in the Soviet Union itself, although it was read out to meetings of CPSU organisations and the



Komsomol with the option to invite non-members. Nonetheless, it was hardly the best start for a process of democratisation.

Second, as a once-ardent Stalinist himself, Khrushchev could hardly be expected to provide the systematic self-criticism that was necessary.³

Third, Khrushchev's criticisms remained at the level of the subjective factor. They were criticisms aimed at an individual who promoted a personality cult, not a party or state that tolerated and encouraged it. It is also the case that some of Khrushchev's points were inaccurate, for example the myth of Stalin's incapacity during the first moments of the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union in 1941.⁴ These criticisms notwithstanding, Comrade Holz's description of the speech as "counter-revolutionary" is, at best, hyperbole.

Nonetheless, the 20th CPSU Congress stands out as the beginning of a process, incomplete and ultimately unsuccessful, to return the party to democratic centralist procedures, widen socialist democracy in Soviet society and re-establish a socialist legality that would prevent the unrestrained and arbitrary repressions that were the particular hallmark of the Stalin period.

The necessity for this approach was widely accepted by the world communist movement in those years. In reality only two parties, at the time, dared to move the debate beyond issues of Stalin's personality to a deeper, more substantive analysis of Soviet reality. Those two parties were the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

PCI leader Palmiro Togliatti's long interview with the PCI's magazine *Nuovi Argomenti* reflected not only his own experience in exile in Moscow as a leader of the Comintern but also his role as leader of a mass party that had experienced both fascism and bourgeois democracy. He criticised the Khrushchev speech on the grounds that the exclusive focus on Stalin's personality defects were hardly adequate to explain the degeneration of the Soviet political system.⁵

The Chinese Communist Party on the other hand had successfully carried out its own revolution and Stalin's role and advice was by no means always entirely helpful. In any case, subsequent Chinese experience showed a determination to hew their own path of socialist construction that differed substantially from Stalin's methods in the USSR.⁶

The importance of this debate is highlighted by the fact that within half a dozen years, the PCI and CCP seemed to stand at opposite ends of the spectrum within a world communist movement that no longer had a single unchallengeable centre. For some communists, even today, 1956 was the Fall of Eden.

But let us return to Comrade Holz's perspective. In a separate discussion, he argued that:

"theory [in the USSR] began to become poor I would say after Stalin. During the period of Stalin's power there were a lot of intense theoretical discussion in the scientific magazines and it is not true that Stalin was the cause of the impoverishment of theory. It was after him."⁷

A slightly different picture of the nature of academic debate in the Soviet natural sciences comes from the Irish Marxist writer Helena Sheehan. Discussing the now infamous Lysenko debates about genetics, she noted that:

"The growing ascendancy of Lysenko coincided with the purges that reached into virtually every Soviet institution during 1936 to 1939. Already, before [leading Soviet scientist] Vavilov's arrest, the losses among Soviet biologists had been staggering. In 1936, Israel Agol, Max Levin, and Solomon Levit, all communists working in the field of biological theory, were publicly denounced as 'enemies of the people' and arrested. With regard to Agol and Levin, the charges involved vague references to 'menshevism' and association with a Trotskyist conspiracy. As to Levit, the director of the Institute of Medical Genetics, his studies of human heredity had supposedly made him an abettor of Nazi doctrines, or so it was declared at a meeting of the science division of the Moscow party organisation, presided over by Amos Kolman. Levit died in prison and his institute was closed. The other two were shot.

"They were followed by a host of others. Many were arrested. Of these some were shot, while others simply died in prison. Others were witch-hunted, lost their jobs, and were forced into

other areas of work. Institutes were closed down. Journals ceased to appear. Books were removed from library shelves. Texts were revised. Names became unmentionable. The 7th International Congress of Genetics, which was scheduled to be held in Moscow in August 1937, was cancelled. When the Congress did take place in Edinburgh in 1939, no Soviet scientists were present, not even Vavilov who had been elected its President."⁸

Political debate was of course even more directly affected. For example, it is somewhat eerie to see Comrade Holz quote Gramsci's critique of Nikolai Bukharin, one of Bolshevism's most talented intellectuals, when we know that Stalin had Bukharin executed by firing squad after a show trial. Marx's remark that "The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism of the weapon",⁹ proved horribly prophetic, but in a manner which Marx would have been horrified to witness.

Whatever his theoretical weaknesses, primarily centring on his grasp of dialectics, Bukharin was one of the great intellects of Bolshevism and by no means the only one physically eliminated with Stalin's consent. The truth is that Soviet intellectual life in every sphere was marked by the mass repressions and persistent violations of socialist democracy and legality.

If Comrade Holz is right that in the post-war period Stalin was poised to launch a programme of democratisation, one is left asking why Stalin chose the relatively peripheral issues of linguistics or economic textbooks as a guise to push his platform rather than a more directly political programme. Was he scared of being outvoted?

Stalin is also responsible for encouraging major illusions about the level of development of Soviet socialism that persisted long after his death and became enshrined even in the programmes of the de-Stalinisers. In 1939, at the 18th congress of the CPSU Stalin said:

"We are going ahead, towards Communism. Will our state remain in the period of Communism also?"

"Yes, it will, unless the capitalist encirclement is liquidated, and unless the danger of foreign military attack has

disappeared. Naturally, of course, the forms of our state will again change in conformity with the change in the situation at home and abroad.”¹⁰

Such an idea stands in complete contradiction of Lenin’s understanding that one of the defining features of the transition from socialism to full communism was that the state would “wither away”. Yet this illusion was retained during the Khrushchev period, when the Soviet party’s programme predicted that the USSR would enter the period of communism during the 1980s.

The Stalin era is one of the most complex and contradictory periods of modern socialism. It combined stunning material advances with huge human costs, it displayed mass heroism and collective sacrifice alongside dreadful brutality and crimes. It is certainly necessary to reassess Stalin and his theoretical work, but to detach this from the harsh realities of Stalin’s actual political practice is impossible.



Discussion

Marxism and the Laws of Motion in Historical Materialism

A response to
Mary Davis by
Jonathan White

IN A CONTRIBUTION to a recent edition of *Communist Review*, Mary Davis urges communists to embrace a non-dogmatic historical materialism in the spirit of its founding thinkers which recognises struggle and contradictions but which rejects laws.¹ In this rejoinder I want to argue that this would be a mistake. Driven by a laudable urge to operate with a living and non-dogmatic Marxism, I would suggest that Mary unintentionally pushes towards a theory that has no support in Marx or Engels’ writing on historical materialism. Laws operate across the whole range of Marxist theory, running through the texts that Mary herself cites in evidence. I also argue that the idea that historical materialism could operate without laws rests on a misunderstanding of how Marxian laws function. If they are understood properly, I contest, there is no need to fear them. Finally, I suggest that to follow Mary’s path is to run into theoretical problems that take Marxism close to the very idealism that she so ably dispatches in her own article.

Laws in Marxism

The idea that laws can be identified at work in society, economy and history is central to the Marxist conceptual armoury. But in making this claim it is important to realise what we are not saying. Marx’s laws, wherever applied, are abstractions that begin the process of cognition. They uncover the primary and governing tendencies at work in any given phenomenon. But they also enable their own subsequent refinement in the process of studying how they manifest themselves in complex and concrete situations. In part this is because the contradictory nature of reality gives rise to counter-tendencies with which they interact in complex concrete historical moments. Crucially, as a result, they do not necessarily lead directly to predictable empirical outcomes. It is this that most obviously distinguishes them from the common-sense meaning of laws in bourgeois natural and social sciences.

This has been helpfully fleshed out by Ben Fine in his introduction to *Capital*, the work in which Marxian laws are most obvious – and

Notes

- 1 H H Holz, *Communist Review* No 53, Summer 2009, pp 32-7.
- 2 Grover Furr has put forward the same arguments in his *Stalin and Democratic Reform*, Parts 1 and 2 at <http://clogic.eserver.org/2005/furr.html>.
- 3 *On the Personality Cult and its Consequences*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2007/apr/26/greatspeeches1>.
- 4 G Roberts, *Stalin’s Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939-1953*, pp 89-91, Yale University Press, 2006.
- 5 P Togliatti, *Interview with Nuovi Argomenti* (1956), in *On Gramsci and other Writings*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1979.
- 6 *On The Historical Experience of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (April 1956) and *More On The Historical Experience of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (December 1956) can be found at www.marx2mao.com/Other/HEDP56.html.
- 7 From an interview in Dublin, published on the Connolly Youth Movement’s website at <http://www.cym.ie/documents/hhh.pdf>.
- 8 H Sheehan, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Science: A Critical History*, Humanity Books, New York, 2nd Edn 1993, p 226; also at <http://www.marxists.org/subject/science/essays/sheehan.htm>.
- 9 K Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law*, in K Marx and F Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol 3, p 182; also at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>.
- 10 J V Stalin, *Report on the Work of the Central Committee to the Eighteenth Congress of the CPSU(B)* (Delivered March 10, 1939), in *Leninism*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, p 662; also at <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1939/03/10.htm>

contentious. In *Capital*, as Fine explains,

“Marxian laws express the key material forces constituted by capitalist social relations [A]lthough Marxian laws and tendencies arise from the social relations defining the mode of production and are themselves necessary (unavoidable) they do not directly determine empirical outcomes.”²

Further, he suggests,

“For Marx, laws and tendencies have to be located analytically in the context of their sources and the more complex ways in which they manifest themselves. For example, tendencies always interact with counter-tendencies as well as in the context of particular historical circumstances, leading to undetermined – but in principle understandable outcomes.”²

It is clear that this is how Marx himself understood his laws to operate. There are two obvious concrete examples in *Capital*, for instance. The first is the General Law of Capitalist Accumulation, in which Marx shows how the expansion of capital creates, as a necessary corollary, the industrial reserve army of labour, swelling the ranks of the impoverished, marginal and the “socially excluded”, to use today’s jargon. This, Marx says, is

“the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation. Like all other laws, it is modified in its working by many circumstances, the analysis of which does not concern us here.”³



That analysis does not concern Marx at this point of the discussion, as he is developing a structural argument about the functioning of the capitalist system at its most general and not in any concrete context.

Similarly, there is the famous Law of the Tendency of the Rate of Profit to Fall. Initially, the law is stated as a general law; but in the passages that follow this general law is said to be subject to a number of “counteracting influences at work that cross and annul the effect of the general law and which give it the characteristic of a tendency.”⁴ This seems a clear statement of the functioning of laws in Marxism: the general law is general in the sense of being unavoidable and necessary. But, through its complex interaction with counteracting tendencies in particular historical situations, its effects are manifested in the form of a tendency, not an “iron”, bourgeois law with straightforwardly predictable empirical outcomes.

If we accept that laws function in the capitalist system, can we say that it is possible that other social or historical phenomena might be free of laws? No. For any theory that aims at a total view of the world, it is highly problematic to suppose that laws could pertain in one sphere of life but not in others – as the long running debate over the presence or absence of a dialectic in nature shows. Aside from this however, there

is no justification for such a position in the works of Marx and Engels.

In *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Engels surveys the emergence of dialectical materialist thought across the various fields of human knowledge as a higher form of older “mechanistic” materialism and Hegelian idealism, encompassing, carrying forward and overthrowing both traditions. Engels neatly summarises dialectical materialism as

“the idea that the world is to be comprehended not as a complex of ready-made things but as a complex of processes in which apparently stable things go through uninterrupted change of coming into being and passing away, in which through all the seeming contingency and in spite of all temporary retrogression, a progressive development finally asserts itself....”⁵

It would seem clear from this that the discovery of laws and tendencies, conceived as we have seen above, is an essential part of any cognition based on such a view of science. Engels makes this explicit in his survey of advances in the natural and historical sciences. In relation to the former, he explains how, by the nineteenth century, the dialectical interconnectedness of natural systems had forced itself into consciousness, overthrowing the metaphysical connections of idealist natural philosophy. Similarly, Engels goes on to show the same process at work in the historical sciences:

“What is true of nature, which is thus recognised as a historical process of development too, is likewise true of the

history of society in all its branches and of the totality of all sciences dealing with things human (and divine).”⁶

Here too, Engels shows, the idealist histories of interconnections made in the minds of philosophers are overturned by a materialist dialectics that uncovers real processes at work:

“Here, therefore, just as in the realm of nature, it was a question of doing away with these manufactured artificial interconnections by finding the real ones – a task ultimately amounting to the discovery of the *general laws of motion* (my emphasis) which assert themselves as the ruling ones in the history of human society.”⁶

Laws in Historical Materialism

So what are the general laws of motion that assert themselves in the history of human society? At the highest level of abstraction, the motor of human history for Marx and Engels is the contradiction between humans and “nature” or the external world. In early works like *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels develop their materialist conception of history on the basis of their understanding of the motive power or productive activity. Humans express their essence through productive activity, acting upon, appropriating and overcoming the limits imposed by nature, transforming both nature and themselves in the process. Humans produce through social relations which become established; and then, as the process of production continues, at a certain point these relations become fetters on further development, and humans begin to struggle to transform these social relations.

Having established human productive activity as the motor of historical change, in the famous *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* which Mary Davis quotes, Marx can be seen to develop the analysis at a more concrete level, looking at how this contradiction manifests itself in the development of human societies. He achieves this by introducing a new set of concepts, identifying the contradictory unity of the forces and relations of production – the complex of techniques and tools of production in any given historical period – and the property relations through which these are expressed. In explaining how this dialectical relationship works, Marx establishes a general Law of Motion of Human History at a lower level of abstraction, permitting more concrete analysis.

It is a general law of human history that the relations of production at any given historical period must be adapted to and correspond to the character of production, but at the same time, that the development inherent in production will at a given point come into contradiction with the existing relations of production. As Marx puts it in the *Preface*,

“In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which

correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.”⁷

But it is not simply the case that productive forces throw up corresponding relations of production. The relationship, Marx shows, is a dialectical one:

“At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production, or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters.”⁷

This is a general law of human history that asserts itself beyond all setbacks. In all cases, it is this contradiction between forces and the relations to which they give rise that generates the period of social revolution.

This produces a further law of human history – the Law of Progress. History has a progressive character because it is the vehicle for the unfolding and development of human productive powers in society. As Marx puts it,

“No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior

relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured in the framework of the old society. Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem only arises when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation.”⁷

This is a huge area of historical discussion, and space precludes any serious treatment of it here. However, it should immediately be noted that both the Law of Motion of Human History and the Law of Progress embodied here in the *Preface* are to be understood in exactly the same way as Marx’s general laws elsewhere in his work. They arise from the phenomena under discussion and, while they are necessary and unavoidable, they do not directly determine empirical outcomes.

To recall the earlier discussion, laws and tendencies always interact with counter-tendencies as well as in the context of particular historical circumstances. But they are also the condition of study at a greater level of concreteness. And if theory, or historical understanding, is going to be a guide to practice, the analysis must be developed at a more concrete level. Each mode of production and each period of social revolution must be understood in terms of its particular laws of motion and its own particular contradictions.

Laws and Counter-Tendencies in the Era of Social Revolution

Both the general law of historical development and

the law of the progressive development of the productive forces are subject to counter-tendencies. For example, it is not predetermined that the era of social revolution produced by the growing contradiction between productive forces and the relations that obtain at any given time will result in even development. In many cases, the dominant relations of production can demonstrate the ability to permit expansion of productive forces for far longer than elsewhere. This recognition arguably underpins Marx’s efforts to develop a theory of the Asiatic mode of production, for example, to explain how a relatively dynamic feudal system, whose contradictions generated capitalism in Europe, was not reproduced outside of that continent.⁸

The counter-tendencies that moderate the operation of the laws of historical development were also explored by the Soviet historian Chistozvonov, as explicated in John Foster’s article *The End of History and Historical Materialism*.⁹ Chistozvonov, according to Foster, set out to explain why it was that during the 17th century, feudal relations of production were able to reassert themselves as part of a period of historical reaction across Europe, but were unable to do so in England. To explain this “reversibility” of history, which might seem to undermine both the Law of Historical Development and the Law of Progress, Chistozvonov examined the relative strength of the tendencies working toward the development of productive forces and propelling states toward revolutionary change, and those tendencies that enabled the sustaining of feudal relations. The essence of his argument was that the development of capitalism depended on its ability to expand the productive forces in agriculture at a rate sufficient to feed the surplus wage- and food-dependent



population it created. If it was unable to do this, a demographic crisis enabled the reassertion of feudal relations of production, through which the productive forces continued to develop at a slower rate. Where capitalist relations were developed to the point in which the new system was able to feed its emerging agrarian proletariat, then the balance tipped in favour of the faster growth of capitalist relations, and feudalism had no basis on which to reassert itself.

The establishment of one dynamic capitalist economy had a revolutionising effect on the rest of Europe. The Law of Historical Development thus asserted itself, but in an uneven way, always moderated in its working by the counter-tendencies that push towards the maintenance of the existing relations.¹⁰

At a more concrete level, each distinct mode of production has its own particular contradictions and throws up its own laws. As a practical revolutionary, Marx was impelled to spend the largest part of his theoretical labour developing the understanding of the particular contradictions and laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production. The structural contradiction in the capitalist mode is that between its capacity to develop the productive forces through social labour, and the private relations of production which become an increasing fetter on the further development of social labour and the productive forces.

This structural contradiction in capitalism is the source of Marx's theory of capitalism's tendency toward crisis. The private appropriation of production for the purposes of profit gives capitalism its tendency to develop the productive forces without limit and at the same time its limited ability to consume the products created. Upon this contradiction arise

the two laws that we observed earlier as characteristics of the system as a whole. As we saw above, these are the Law of the Tendency of the Rate of Profit to Fall – the law whereby living labour, the source of profit, is expelled from the production process in the search for greater profit – and the Law of Capitalist Accumulation, whereby the expansion of value creates as a necessary corollary, a swelling reserve army of labour and a growth in the ranks of the impoverished.

The fundamental contradiction also creates capitalism's gravedigger – the proletariat – and the conditions of its overthrow by a superior mode of production – a labour force able to take over, control and expand social production. We can see from this that the era of social revolution in the transition from capitalism to socialism (and possibly, partially, back again) is governed by the struggle between two tendencies. It will play out according to the relative strengths of the tendency toward the development of social labour (and an organised, class conscious working class able to control it) and the counter-tendency toward the maintenance of private relations of production.

Base and Superstructure in the Era of Social Revolution

However, having asserted the centrality of laws and tendencies to Marxism as a whole, it is important to recall, with Ben Fine,² that their operation is not only moderated by counter-tendencies at a similar or lower level of abstraction, but also by the concrete historical circumstances at any given moment.

It is in order to enable closer and more concrete investigation of the way in which the period of social revolution manifests itself in

history that Marx then introduces a further set of concepts, the distinction between the base and the superstructure of any given historical society. The base does not correspond exactly to either the forces or relations of production. Indeed the base is really an amalgam of forces and relations. The force of the distinction between base and superstructure is to give Marxist analysis the tools with which to study the epiphenomena of human societies – the social and ideological superstructures which rise up on the basis of the given state of productive forces and relations of production – while insisting that the fundamental motor of change lies in the sphere of material production and reproduction.

Introducing this contradictory unity, between the base and the superstructure, allows Marxists to see once more how the superstructures of social practice, institutions and ideological forms correspond to the development of productive forces and production relations but at the same time become places where the contradiction between forces and relations of production is manifested in specific historical societies and where change is forced through the agencies of classes in struggle. This, as Mary Davis correctly points out, enabled Marxists to posit a superior form of historical explanation to the idealist historians of the bourgeoisie who are fixated on the forms of social and ideological superstructure as the sources of historical change.¹¹

There is really nothing dogmatic about any of this. As we have seen, Marx and Engels were at pains to define the precise meaning of their laws in every field and no less in the field of historical explanation. Engels explained this in a series of letters on historical materialism, making particular reference to a

vulgarised and mechanistic interpretation of Marxist history from which he distanced their work. It is worth quoting one of these letters at length as it is a fine explanation of the limits of the general law of historical change.

“According to the materialist conception of history, the ultimately determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. More than this, neither Marx nor I have ever asserted The economic structure is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure – political forms of the class struggle and its results, to wit: constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle *etc*, juridical forms and even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas, also exercise their influence upon the course of historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form. There is an interaction of all these elements in which amid all the endless host of accidents (that is, of things and events whose inner interconnectedness is so remote or impossible of proof that we can regard it as non-existent or negligible), the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary. Otherwise the application of the

theory to any given period of history would be easier than the solution of a simple equation of the first degree.”¹²

As with other areas of Marxist theory, laws exist and pertain in historical materialism and it is necessary that they do so. But that is the premise for more detailed and concrete work, not a substitute and it does not mean that their outcomes are predictable.

The Political Price of a Lawless World

Finally, the concern is that the call for the abandoning of laws of historical development makes theory incoherent and less able to direct practical struggle. The operation of laws in the Marxian sense is, as we have seen, anything but dogmatic. But more seriously, if we were to excise laws from materialist dialectics, the theory would become incoherent and would be correspondingly less able to function as a guide to practical action.

Without an understanding of, for example, the balance of the tendencies toward the composition of an organised working class, able to take control of the means of production through being thrown together in complex organisations of labour and the tendencies toward their dispersion or domination by monopoly capital, the course of the class struggle in any given instance is purely a matter of subjective understanding in the working class. Working class political strategy is reduced to its ability to operate in the given superstructure, cut loose from its moorings in the dynamics at work in the basis. This is dangerous territory in which one can only rely on a partial and one-sided understanding of the contradiction between capital and labour, detached from anchorage in the dynamics of history and of the potential transition between

the capitalist and the socialist modes of production. On one side lies a vulgar Marxism only too familiar on the British left and on the other lies the indeterminate and classless politics of Eurocommunism.

I have tried to argue that Marxists should not be afraid of the language of laws, properly understood. There is nothing vulgar or mechanistic about Marx's laws. Indeed, they are central to dialectical materialism and operate at all levels across the whole field of knowledge, from political economy, to natural science and historical materialism. Properly applied, they are the condition of a truly concrete understanding of concrete conditions and therefore, are the conditions of truly revolutionary practice.

Notes

- 1 M Davis, *What is Historical Materialism?*, in *Communist Review*, No 53, Summer 2009, p 10.
- 2 B Fine and A Saad-Filho, *Marx's Capital, Fourth Edition*, Pluto, London, 2004, p 112.
- 3 K Marx, *Capital, Volume I* (Progress, Moscow, 1986), p 603.
- 4 K Marx, *Capital, Volume III* (Progress, Moscow, 1984), p 232.
- 5 F Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1976, p 41.
- 6 *Ibid*, pp 44-45.
- 7 K Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Lawrence & Wishart, London and Moscow, 1981, p 21.
- 8 For a useful discussion of this aspect of Marx's thought, see Eric Hobsbawm's introduction in K Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1964, pp 67-120.
- 9 J. Foster, *The End of History and Historical Materialism: A Defence of Marxist Dialectics*, in *Marxism and Struggle: Toward the Millennium* (M Davis and M Mayo, Eds), Praxis Press, London, 1998, pp. 29-54.
- 10 In this essay, the author draws important lessons from Chistozvonov's work for a Marxist understanding of the collapse of Soviet socialism.
- 11 Davis, *op cit*, p 11.
- 12 F Engels, Letter to J Bloch in Koenigsberg, London, September 21, 1890, in K Marx and F Engels, *Selected Works in Three Volumes, Vol 3*, Progress, Moscow, 1983, p 487.

Letter to the Editor

From Hyman Frankel

Professor Mary Davis ends her article, *What is Historical Materialism?* in *Communist Review* No 53 with the following:

“Without historical materialism, we cannot understand the past or the present. That is why we need it; that is why we have to defend it – and we have to, free from dogmatism and the notion that somehow there are laws.”

On the other hand, in his contribution in the same issue, Professor Erwin Marquit quotes Engels thus:

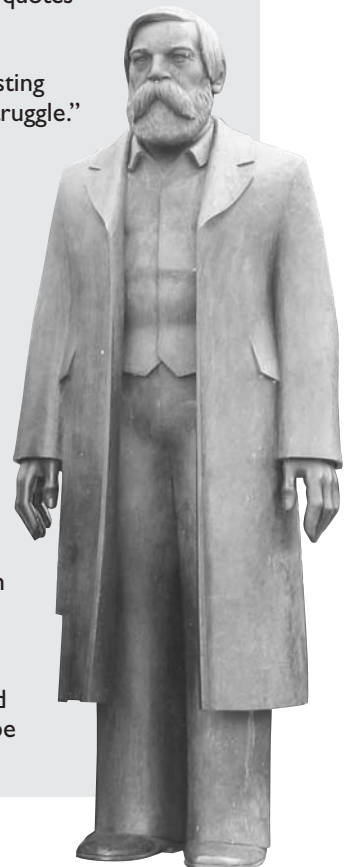
“The fact that our subjective thought and the objective world are subject to the same laws, and hence, that in the final analysis they cannot contradict each other in their results, but must coincide, governs absolutely our whole theoretical thought.”

Who is right – Davis, who denies the existence of laws, or Engels, who asserts them? Quite clearly, it is Engels. A law is a statement that is thought to be true in all cases and may be used to predict future occurrences. Examples are endless. Davis herself quotes one:

“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.”

Another is $F = ma^2$, where F is the force applied to a body, m its mass and a the acceleration produced. And so on.

I would hazard a guess that Mary Davis is still too much influenced by the collapse of Stalinist socialism and is throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Laws are not forever, although they may have very long lives. But, if there were no laws, we revolutionaries would have no guides to help us on our way. A lot of academics, divorced from everyday struggles, exaggerate in this way; hence postmodernism, which also argues that the “old” laws of socialism, communism and Marxism are obsolete and must be thrown out of the window.



BOOK REVIEW

Comrade or Brother?

A History of the British Labour Movement

Review by Marjorie Mayo

MARY DAVIS explains in her introduction to the second edition of this important book that there had been many requests for it, once the first edition sold out. The history of the origins and development of the labour movement is vitally important for trade unionists, and indeed is a popular subject for labour movement activists – as the author herself testifies, on the basis of more than thirty years teaching in this area. She points out that:

“All oppressed and exploited groups have the right to reclaim their past – none more so than the working class itself. The inheritors of the struggle for working-class rights and trade union freedoms are predisposed to want to know something of their past – if the labour movement itself fails to impart such information, then it will either filter through in a distorted form or remain unknown.”

However, books on the subject that are both seriously analytical and readily accessible have been in short supply. Small wonder then, that the first edition of *Comrade or Brother?* sold out as it did.

In publishing this second edition, Mary Davis has set out to encourage discussion and critical reflection on the key ideological questions that have been the subject of so much debate in the past, debates that continue to have relevance for the future of the labour movement

today. In particular, as a feminist and an anti-racist, she has been concerned to redress past imbalances, putting women and black people back where they rightly belong, as integral to the history of the labour movement. Gender has been and continues to be central to the continuing restructuring and renegotiation of capitalist relations, as she explains, and this is also the case for the history of black people and the labour movement.

In addition, Mary Davis has taken the opportunity to add material and emphases, bringing the history of the labour movement further up to date. The first edition ended in the 1950s. This second edition draws upon materials that have become available more recently, including Cabinet and other state papers up to the mid-70s (more recent papers still being subject to the rule that restricts their publication for a thirty-year period). These sources provide the basis for critical reflections on the period between 1951 and 1979, challenging previously accepted descriptions of this period as one of relative consensus, pointing to the underlying conflicts, even before the Thatcher years in government.

Comrade or Brother? is organised in three sections. Part 1 sets the economic and political context for the development of the labour movement with the industrial revolution and the political struggles of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which included the anti-slavery and Chartist movements as well as the trade union movement itself.

Although the full extent of women's involvement is under-researched, as Mary Davis explains, they were actively involved in the Chartist movement, just as they were likely to have been actively involved in the early labour movement.

Part 2 moves on through the middle years of the nineteenth century – when Britain was the “workshop of the world”, but facing increasing competition from other industrialising countries – up to and including the First World War and beyond. The boom of the middle years of the nineteenth century was followed by the “Great Depression” in the latter part, with some recovery masking continuing underlying problems in the early twentieth century. The boom years were associated with the ideological dominance of the labour aristocracy, those sections of the working class who could identify tangible possibilities of advancement, whether individually or collectively, through negotiation and arbitration – cooperation rather than class struggle. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, more militant forms of struggle developed, including those in which women played key roles – the rise of a mass labour movement. This was also the period of the establishment of the Labour Party, to break the then relative political consensus of ruling interests, to represent the interests of labour. As the book goes on to argue, by the end of the First World War, the Labour Party had gained a foothold, but was becoming at least partially

**Comrade or Brother?
A History of the British
Labour Movement,
2nd Edition**

BY MARY DAVIS

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7453-25767; hbk, £60, ISBN
978-0-7453-25774)



incorporated into the state machine. Although there were honourable exceptions, the mainstream of the labour movement was also marred by at best silence on – and at worst aggressive support for – imperialism.

The third part of the book moves on to more recent times, in the context of the restructuring between the two World Wars, the General Strike, the role of Labour governments and unemployment, struggles against fascism, post-war reconstruction, the development of the welfare state and the Cold War. This section also explores the role of women and black workers' resistance in the context of struggles for colonial freedom. The final chapters challenge the more generally accepted view of the fifties and sixties, up to the end of the seventies, as a period of relative political consensus. In fact, both Tory and Labour governments demonstrated concerns to limit the power of labour, in a period of increasing trade union membership and confidence – the “Forward March of Labour”, as this period has been characterised. There was rank-and-file resistance (via the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions) to these attempts to impose legal constraints on trade union organising and pressures for equal pay.

The concluding chapter argues that the Thatcher years represented major setbacks. As Mary Davis points out, we are “in an era of declining trade union membership and high unemployment”, despite efforts to challenge these trends, a period in which “we have witnessed more

defeats than victories”. However, “The past is there and cannot be altered” – although we can learn by reflecting upon past experiences of organisation and struggle. Working class organisations' histories have not been linear – on the contrary, these histories have been marked by peaks and troughs, partly related to, but not completely determined by wider economic pressures and processes. The labour movement has also been characterised by on-going struggles between left- and right-wing trends. Labour movement activists still have choices to make, in the current context, including choices about whether and how to build the movement in ways that appeal to all workers, and particularly to those most vulnerable to super-exploitation because of their race or gender.

Comrade or Brother? is written in an accessible style. Mary Davis has shared her writing with students of trade unionism over the years, engaging with their questions, comments and concerns. The book reflects these processes of dialogue, making this a most valuable tool for discussion within the labour movement, highlighting the key themes for debate. Each chapter also includes suggestions for further reading. Those concerned with education within the Communist Party, at whichever level, will find *Comrade or Brother?* particularly useful. As John Foster has commented, this is “in a real sense a history for our own times” – a key resource for the continuing battle of ideas.

BOOK REVIEW

Was Mao Really a Monster?

Review by Kenny Coyle

THE PUBLICATION in 2005 of *Mao: The Unknown Story* by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday caused something of a sensation. Written by a Chinese best-selling writer and her Western historian husband, the book appeared to strip away the mythology of the founder of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and reveal him as a bloodthirsty sadist and unprincipled opportunist. Basing itself on apparently unrivalled sources, the book appeared to debunk many of the heroic tales of the Long March. Mao was held responsible for deliberately orchestrating famines and wars, fomenting coups and so on. As a personality, Mao was presented as a coward, an incompetent, a megalomaniac and a warmonger.

The book was embraced by many Western reviewers as turning our understanding of Mao, and thereby the PRC, on its head. Former Hong Kong colonial governor Chris Patten and former Labour deputy leader Roy Hattersley – among others – heaped lavish praise on the book and its authors. Its credibility was apparently enhanced by the huge number of references

that appeared to show a remarkable degree of scholarship and research.

However, the book's reception among scholars of Chinese history was very different. Even profoundly anti-communist reviewers expressed their concern that the book was so irredeemably biased, emotionally charged and one-sided that it could not be taken seriously as an intellectual study. Others questioned Halliday and Chang's research, pointing to the confusing structure of the reference notes and the impossibility of verifying a number of allegations. Still others found much of the evidence flimsy or simply false.

Gregor Benton and Lin Chun have brought together a collection of academic reviews that cast a sharply critical light on *Mao: The Unknown Story*. In itself, this is a valuable venture, for Chang and Halliday's perspective both reflects and in turn helped shape a Western vision of Mao and China that sees revolutionary struggle as offering only destruction and bloodshed.

The reviews are by no means uncritical of Mao



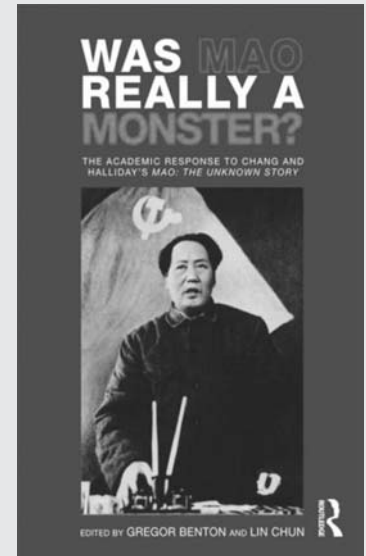
himself, nor are they uniform in their criticism of Chang and Halliday. One, by Arthur Waldron, in fact broadly accepts their vision. However, the others represent a powerful rebuttal of Chang and Halliday's positions. Aside from some straightforward historical challenges to *Mao: The Unknown Story* by a number of the contributors there are also some other fascinating perspectives showing how the demonisation of the "evil"

Mao fits concepts familiar in Western popular culture, where complex social phenomena are reduced to the results of individual psychosis.

Benton and Lin have done well to bring together such diverse perspectives without losing sight of the ultimate issue, that Chang and Halliday distorted history in their book and departed from the most basic standards of evidence and historical argument. Any number of examples can be given.

Was Mao Really a Monster?: The Academic Response to Chang and Halliday's *Mao: The Unknown Story*

EDITED BY GREGOR BENTON,
LIN CHUN
(ROUTLEDGE, 2009, 208 PP, PBK
£22.99, ISBN 978-0-415-49330-7;
Hbk £85, ISBN 978-0-415-49329-1)



In one of their most publicised claims, Chang and Halliday disputed the existence of the Battle of Luding Bridge during the Long March, claiming that an unnamed eyewitness told them there had been no clashes at the time. Yet, when an Australian news team visited the spot later, they found villagers who distinctly remembered the battle. In fact, Chang and Halliday rely a great deal on the criticisms by the Comintern military adviser Otto Braun – who hated Mao – as a reliable testimony of the Long March, but omit to mention that Braun's memoirs, published in English as *A Comintern Agent in China: 1932-39*, also give a detailed account of the Battle of Luding Bridge.

A number of contributors note that the book often contradicts Chang's own bestseller *Wild Swans* which, while critical of Mao, also detailed Chiang Kai-shek's crimes and corruption. These have disappeared from Chang's later work.

However, Jon Halliday, once a radical scholar inclined toward Maoism, gets off a little too lightly. China is

not his area of specialism, but his academic credentials are crucial to buttress Chang's Chinese background. An expert on Japan and Korea, Halliday is the author, along with the US historian of Korea Bruce Cumings, of *Korea: The Unknown War*. Yet, despite the many allegations regarding Mao's involvement in the Korean War, we find no reference in *Mao: The Unknown Story* either to Halliday's own previous work or that of his former collaborator Cumings.

Just as, in years gone by, disgraced Chinese leaders like Lin Biao or Liu Shaoqi were airbrushed out of official portraits, so Halliday has sought to detach himself from his own scholarship, which he ignores rather than disavows.

Also included in *Was Mao Really a Monster?* are reviews by Chinese citizens, which can broadly be described as belonging to a school often described as the "Chinese New Left". This current rejects or is critical of the current Chinese government's policies and sees attacks on Mao as the Trojan Horse for counter-revolution. Nonetheless there is some serious discussion in

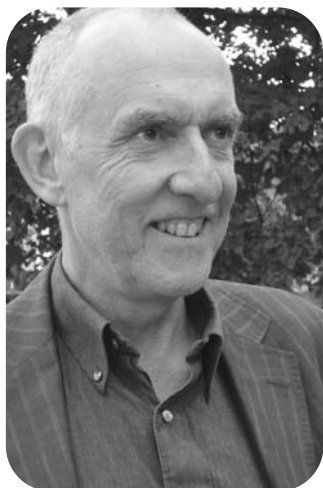
these contributions of issues such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution that are well worth considering. Interestingly both Chinese contributors undermine Chang's biographical credibility as one of Mao's "victims".

Unfortunately there is no "official" Chinese response to the book. *Mao: The Unknown Story* remains banned there, although I know of at least one Chinese journalist who bought copies overseas. On asking my friend why he had bought an English-language version of the book on a trip, I was told that it was because he wanted to compare it with the Chinese-language version he had already bought from Taiwan. He was intrigued to see how different the versions were, and described the book as "not telling the whole truth". In fact, *Mao: The Unknown Story* was initially rejected by publishers in both Hong Kong and Taiwan, on the grounds that Chinese readers were familiar with many of the sources and arguments and would question the book's credibility. Substantial changes had to be made in

Taiwan as a result of legal action by pro-Chiang Kai-Shek veterans who felt slandered by the book's claims!

Mao's status as a the revered founding father of the Chinese state is an obvious target for those who want more broadly to undermine the foundations of the PRC. In 1981, the Communist Party of China adopted a resolution that weighed up Mao's strengths and weaknesses. It decided that Mao's positive contributions vastly outweighed his negative influence, and established a ratio of 70:30. Yet open discussion and research on many periods of the PRC's history remains difficult and in certain areas taboo within China. The PRC will need to tackle these issues openly and honestly, however painful they might be. The alternative is to leave the field open to the Changs and Hallidays.

Was Mao Really a Monster? is an excellent and stimulating book and, for those wanting to get a taste of contemporary discussion on Chinese history, it is an essential counterweight to what is in danger of becoming accepted orthodoxy.



SOUL FOOD

A regular literary selection

Selected by Mike Quille

LET US START with a few rather topical lines about bankers, from America's Ogden Nash:

Most bankers dwell in marble halls,
Which they get to live in because they
encourage deposits and discourage
withdrawals,
And particularly they all observe one
rule which woe betide the banker
who fails to heed it,
Which is that you must never lend any
money to anybody unless they
don't need it.¹

In the last issue of *Communist Review*, Robert Griffiths called for the communist movement “to study and develop Marxist political economy”.² Clearly, an understanding of the capitalist economic cycle, which generated the banking crisis and subsequent mass unemployment from which we are currently suffering, is necessary in order to mount a robust critique of the economics and politics of capitalism, and to develop a more durable and genuinely socialist political alternative.

What, you may ask, has poetry got to do with this? I hope that these *Soul Food* selections, and the background notes, show that the answer is “a great deal”. In its content, its form and its purpose, poetry can contribute a great deal to

“heartening” our struggle for socialism; and that struggle can also inspire great poetry. They work together well on many levels: as Tony Benn says in his Preface to the recent (and highly recommended) anthology of poetry from the *Morning Star*, “both are international and both speak across the barriers of language and local culture”.³

I also hope that the selection inspires you not only to appreciate the richness and rightness of committed political poetry, but also to write it yourselves. After all, the dialectical, materialist tradition of philosophy, or “creative Marxism”,⁴ calls for active engagement with the world as a necessary part of understanding and changing it. This active engagement is not only about debates and charters and marches and strikes, it is also about creative activity, including writing. It is about finding the right tone and mood, the words and the images, and the rhymes and the rhythms, which will articulate as powerfully as possible our communist imagination, our feelings and thoughts about life under, against, and after capitalism.

To illustrate this, let's have a look at some other American poems. In the last issue, readers were invited to suggest poems which were related in some way to the current crisis of capitalism. Amongst suggestions received were the poems

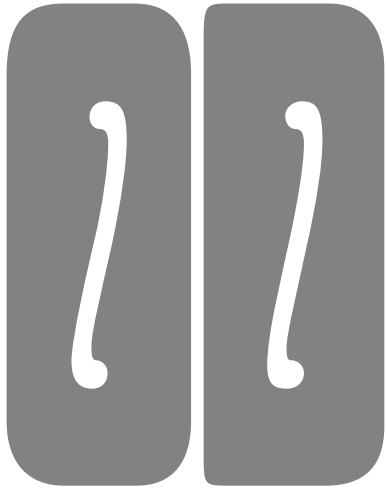


Ogden Nash (1902-71)

printed below, together with a few background notes.

The first poem is by Charles W Woods, who lived earlier in the last century. In those days, in America, poetry was a genuinely popular activity. There were far fewer cultural barriers preventing people from the enjoyment of not only reading but writing poetry.

Like Nash's poem, it has a comic aspect to it, expressed in the rollicking rhymes and rhythms, and made-up words – especially when read out loud. But, as you can see, it also has a serious, indeed deadly serious message, as befits a poem written in 1914. And I don't suppose there can be many poems that express so clearly how capitalist overproduction leads to imperialist aggression!



King of the Magical Pump

Oh, the loyalest gink with the
royalest wink
Is the King of the Magical Pump;
Of the magical, tragical pump:
The latest and greatest and
right-up-to-datest
And finest, divinest old I-am-the-
State-ist
Who ever held sway for a year
and a day
In the Kingdom of Chumpetty-
Chump.

And the magical pump in His
Majesty's dump,
That too, is a wonderful thing,
A wonderful, thunderful thing.
It's wonderful, blunderful,
thunderful, plunderful,
Cranky and yanky and get-out-
and-under-ful:
And what do you s'pose (if
there's no one who knows)
What it pumpetty-pumped for
the King!

It pumped up his prunes and his
new pantaloons
And it pumped up his bibles and
beer;
His tribal old bibles and beer:
For palaces, chalices, garters or
gallusses,

Or jeans for his queens or his
Julias and Alices,
The King of the Chumps, he just
went to the pumps
And whatever he wished would
appear.

And the Chumpetty-Chumps
who were pumping the
pumps
Which pumped up these thing-
a-mum bobs,
These thing-a-mum, jing-a-mum
bobs,
They humped it and jumped it
and pumpetty-pumped it
And fearfully, tearfully liked it or
lumped it;
While the King in his glee
hollered "Bully for me!
Ain't you glad that I gave you
your jobs?"

Oh, the Chumpetty-Chumps
were a wise lot o' gumps
And they said a religious "Amen,"
A prodigious, religious "Amen."
For ages these sages had had
(it's outrageous)
One jing-a-mum thing-a-mum
each as their wages:
And pray, who could say, if he
cut off their pay,
What on earth would become
of them then?

But the King of the Chumps was
a kindly old Umps
And he paid them as much as he
durst
(as much as all such as he durst)
For humping and jumping and
pumpy-pump-pumping
Anything that a king could
imagine their dumping:
Till he said "Go to roost, we
have over-produced
And we've got to get rid of
these first."

Then the Chumpetty-Chumps
went to bumping the bumps
In a tragic and thingum-less
plight;
In a thingum-less, jingum-less
plight:
They blubbered and lubbered
and went to the cupboard –
"No pumpee, no Chumpee"
they said as they rubbered –
Till the loving old King caught a
thought on the wing
Which was sure to set
everything right.

Said the King of the Pumps to
the Chumpetty-Chumps:
"It's as plain as the face on
your nose,
As the face on the base of
your nose,





Donald Justice (1925-2004)

The lesson this session of
business depression
Points out beyond doubt that
foreign aggression
Has caused a big slump in the
work of the pump –
So up men, and after your foes!”

Then in joy and in laughter, they
upped and went after
To fight for their country and King;
For their pumpty old country
and King:
And dashing in, crashing in,
bravely they're smashing in;
(One jingum per dingum they
get while they're cashing in)
Until the Big Umps want to
start up the Pumps:
When they'll work for one
thingum per ding.

Oh the loyalest Gink with the
royalest wink
Is the King of the Magical Pump;
Of the magical, tragical pump:
An oodle of boodle he's got by
his noodle
And umpty-nine Chumpties he's
fed with flapdoodle –
For we live for a thingum and
die for a jingum
In the Kingdom of Chumpetty-
Chump.⁵

The next poem is by Donald Justice, another American poet, who lived from 1925 to 2004. He wrote in a wide variety of styles, including in this format, called a “pantoum”. This is a poem with four-line stanzas, where the first and third lines become the basis for the second and fourth lines of the next stanza, and so on till the end, when the first and third lines of the poem reappear as the second and fourth lines. The almost hypnotic effect that this pattern of repetition gives to the



William Blake

poem, together with the stopped lines, evokes well the miserable, debilitating daily grind of hopeless poverty, amongst ordinary people in the Thirties.

Perhaps also, in the background, there is a sense of the inevitable repetition of economic crises. As we all keep hearing, we are currently experiencing the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. I wonder whether any of our readers could write a modern equivalent?

Pantoum of the Great Depression

Our lives avoided tragedy
Simply by going on and on,
Without end and with little
apparent meaning.
Oh, there were storms and
small catastrophes.

Simply by going on and on
We managed. No need for the
heroic.
Oh, there were storms and
small catastrophes.
I don't remember all the
particulars.

We managed. No need for the
heroic.
There were the usual celebra-
tions, the usual sorrows.
I don't remember all the
particulars.
Across the fence, the neighbors
were our chorus.

There were the usual celebra-
tions, the usual sorrows
Thank god no one said anything
in verse.
The neighbors were our only
chorus,

And if we suffered we kept quiet
about it.

At no time did anyone say
anything in verse.
It was the ordinary pities and
fears consumed us,
And if we suffered we kept quiet
about it.
No audience would ever know
our story.

It was the ordinary pities and
fears consumed us.
We gathered on porches; the
moon rose; we were poor.
What audience would ever
know our story?
Beyond our windows shone the
actual world.

We gathered on porches; the
moon rose; we were poor.
And time went by, drawn by
slow horses.
Somewhere beyond our
windows shone the world.
The Great Depression had
entered our souls like fog.

And time went by, drawn by
slow horses.
We did not ourselves know
what the end was.
The Great Depression had
entered our souls like fog.
We had our flaws, perhaps a few
private virtues.

But we did not ourselves know
what the end was.
People like us simply go on.
We have our flaws, perhaps a
few private virtues,
But it is by blind chance only
that we escape tragedy.

And there is no plot in that; it is
devoid of poetry.⁶

There's a very interesting, dialectical contradiction here. The writer imagines and expresses a state of affairs which is powerless, meaningless, and “devoid of poetry”; yet he does so powerfully, meaningfully, and poetically.

There is of course a widespread view, unfortunately shared by many poets, that politics is devoid of poetry, and poetry should be devoid of politics. That politics and poetry are like chalk and cheese, oil and water, the Moon and the Sun, the working class and the capitalist class: they cannot, and should not, be mixed up. “Pure” poetry, in this view, transcends the

base and dirty business of politics, especially political agitation against capitalism. If they're not interested in hymning the rich and powerful, poets should confine themselves to the eternal verities of human nature, pastoral idylls, or some supremely irrelevant piece of close observation of the hairs in your right earhole.

William Blake did not agree with this kind of view. And neither did the Scottish poet and communist, Hugh MacDiarmid (1892-1978).

A pretty tribute to the old
rural scene
Can mask a base betrayal of
Mankind;
The mellowest religious
reference conceal
The Kruschen spirit of
Fascism behind,
In short, any utterance that
is not pure
Propaganda is impure
propaganda for sure!⁷

So shall we have a brief look at this rather neglected poet? More than anyone else I can think of, his poems illustrate



the application of the philosophy of dialectical or scientific materialism, discussed in *Communist Review* No 53, to the writing of poetry.

First, some brief biographical details. Hugh MacDiarmid was the adopted name of Christopher Murray Grieve. Politically and poetically, he was a lifelong and active nationalist and communist, trying throughout his life to integrate political insight with poetic ability, in a kind of angry, argued roar against political and cultural oppression, wherever it came from. It probably goes without saying that he made quite a few enemies. He was expelled in the early 1930s by the National Party of Scotland for being too communist, and then a few years later by the Communist Party for being too nationalist. It should be noted, however, that he was later welcomed back into the Communist Party in the 1950s.

MacDiarmid read voraciously and wrote voluminously. He tried to fuse all modern strands of thought into an attack on the “belly-grip” of capitalism’s economic determinism, with the aim of

..... establishing a right good
fellowship
Forever free of the belly-grip.⁸

Many of his poems have a dialectical aspect to them. As a great example of a Marxian approach to poetics, consider the following:

The Skeleton of the Future

Red granite and black diorite,
with the blue
Of the labradorite crystals
gleaming like precious stones
In the light reflected from the
snow; and behind them
The eternal lightening of Lenin’s
bones.⁹

Note how the use of geological language evokes as its “thesis” an unyielding, brilliant hardness. There is a kind of glittering menace and sternness, and a sense of scientific and historical materialism and objectivity. And yet, like the contrasting colours of red and black, we can also detect a contrasting “antithetical” set of meanings. We imagine Lenin’s message burning like an electrical storm, and this evokes a more spiritual, subjective and imaginative world. And there is perhaps a “synthesis” in the overall movement of the poem, its implied promise of a positive, inevitably

socialist future. The poem is a wonderful expression of dialectical materialism, the “flower and iron of the truth” as MacDiarmid called it.¹⁰

MacDiarmid’s attitude to poetry and art in general was clear and uncompromising: it must not fall into the trap of thinking itself outside, above and beyond history, real life, the actual, painful realities of an exploitative economic system, and class struggle. Let him speak for himself, in these extracts from a long poem called *Against Infantilism*:

Art must be related to the
central issues of life,
Not serve a sub-artistic purpose
that could as well
Be served by possession of a
new motor-car
Or a holiday on the Continent
perhaps.
What do we Scottish writers
most lack, most need?
– An immediate experience of
the concrete,
A rich overflowing apprehension
of the definite
Day-by-day content of our
people’s lives,
A burningly clear understanding
of the factors at work,
Of the actual correlation of the
forces, in labour today;
A Dundee jute mill, Singer’s,
Beardmore’s,
The ghost towns, ruined fishing
villages, slave camps,
And all the derelict areas of our
countryside;
The writer not first and
foremost concerned with
these
Lacks the centrality that alone
can give
Value to his work – he is a
trifler, a traitor,
To his art and to mankind alike,
A fool choosing flight and
fantasy,
Not to be pitied, but despised.
It is a lying cry to say
That human nature cannot be
changed.
(.....)
There is nothing whatever in
contemporary biology,
Either the science of heredity or
of genetics,
Nothing we know of the
mechanisms of inheritance,
Nothing in the nature of the
genes or chromosomes,

To stand in the way of the radicals' enthusiasm
 For social transformation – the revolutionists'
 Advocacy of profoundly-altered social systems.
 On the other hand there is a vast accumulation
 Of evidence from the sociological sciences,
 Economy, anthropology, sociology,
 Politics, the philosophy of history, to substantiate
 The necessity, the sanity, and the wisdom
 Of deep changes in all institutions, customs,
 Habits, values – in short, civilizations.
 Human nature is the last thing we need to worry about.
 Let us attend to the circumstances that condition it.
 (.....)
 Scottish writers, the height and depth of your writings

Will be measured by the extent to which
 The dialectics of our era find expression
 In the artistic imagery – how widely, forcefully, clearly
 The burning contemporary problems are expressed in it,
 The class war, the struggles and ideals
 Of the proletariat bent on changing the world,
 And consequently on changing human nature.¹¹

So there you have it. The challenge to writers is to express the “flower and iron” of the communist imagination; to develop a Marxian poetics, in the same creative, successful way that economics, politics, history and literature have been re-imagined by communists; and above all, to help make sure that all that is squalid smelts into fair.

Back to America for the last word, the final poem in this selection. It is by Langston Hughes (1902-67). Hughes wrote many poems about the life

and struggles of black working class people, including this great short lyric about “a dream deferred”. Is it the American Dream? The dream of civil rights? Or the dream of a socialist revolution? You decide.....

Harlem

What happens to a dream deferred?
 Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?
 Or fester like a sore –
 And then run?
 Does it stink like rotten meat?
 Or crust and sugar over –
 like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?¹²

In the next issue, let's have some poems to mark International Women's Day. Comments and suggestions, and poems, are welcome.

Notes

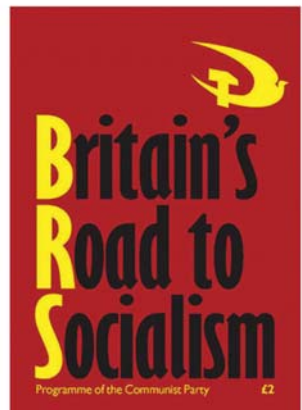
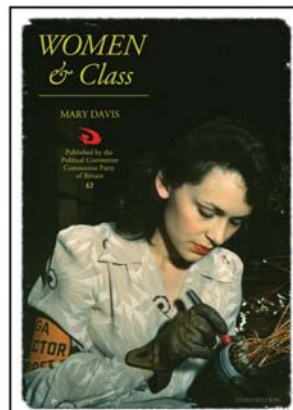
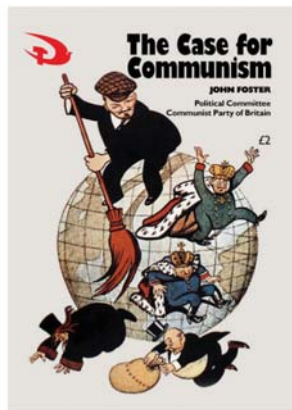
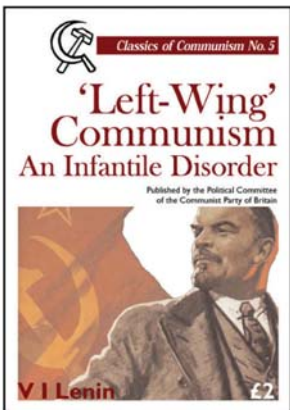
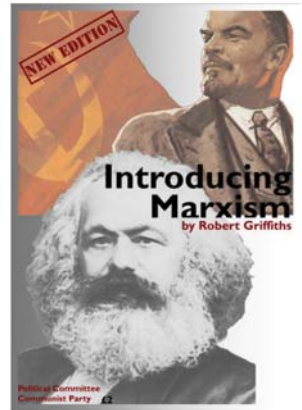
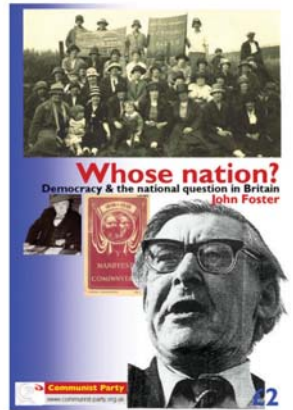
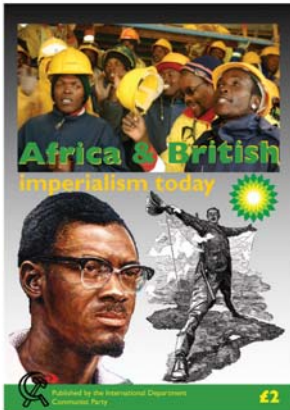
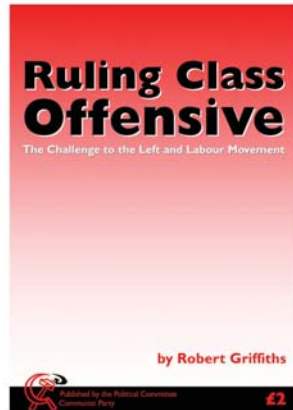
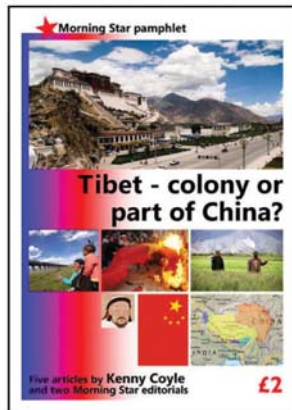
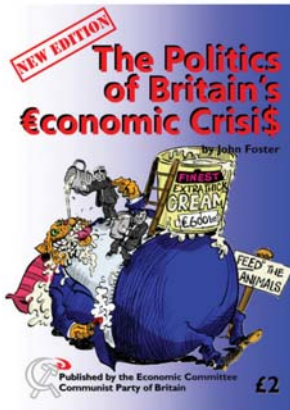
1 From the poem *Bankers Are Just Like Anybody Else, Only Richer*, in Ogden Nash, *Collected Verse*, J. M Dent and Sons, 1961, p 157.
 2 Robert Griffiths, *Trends in the British Economy and Employment*, in *Communist Review* 54, Autumn 2009, p. 15.
 3 *Well Versed* (J Rety, Ed), Hearing Eye, 2009.
 4 M Levy, M Davis and E Marquit, *Who Needs Philosophy?*, in *Communist Review* No 53, Summer

2009, p 9 ff.
 5 M W Van Wienen, *Rendezvous with Death: American Poems of the Great War*, University of Illinois, 2002, p 76.
 6 D Justice, *Collected Poems*, Knopf 2004, p 29.
 7 From the poem *Poetry and Propaganda* in *The Socialist Poems of Hugh MacDiarmid* (T S Law and T Berwick, Eds), Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, p13. Kruschen Salts are a kind of laxative, although

“crushing” is clearly not too far away as a meaning.
 8 From the poem *The Belly-Grip*, in Law and Berwick, *op cit*, 1978, p 31.
 9 Law and Berwick, *op cit*, p100.
 10 From the poem *First Hymn to Lenin*, in Law and Berwick, *op cit*, p 36.
 11 Law and Berwick, *op cit*, p 64.
 12 Langston Hughes, *Selected Poems*, Serpent's Tail, 1999, p 268.

Junk food: an irregular cartoon strip





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