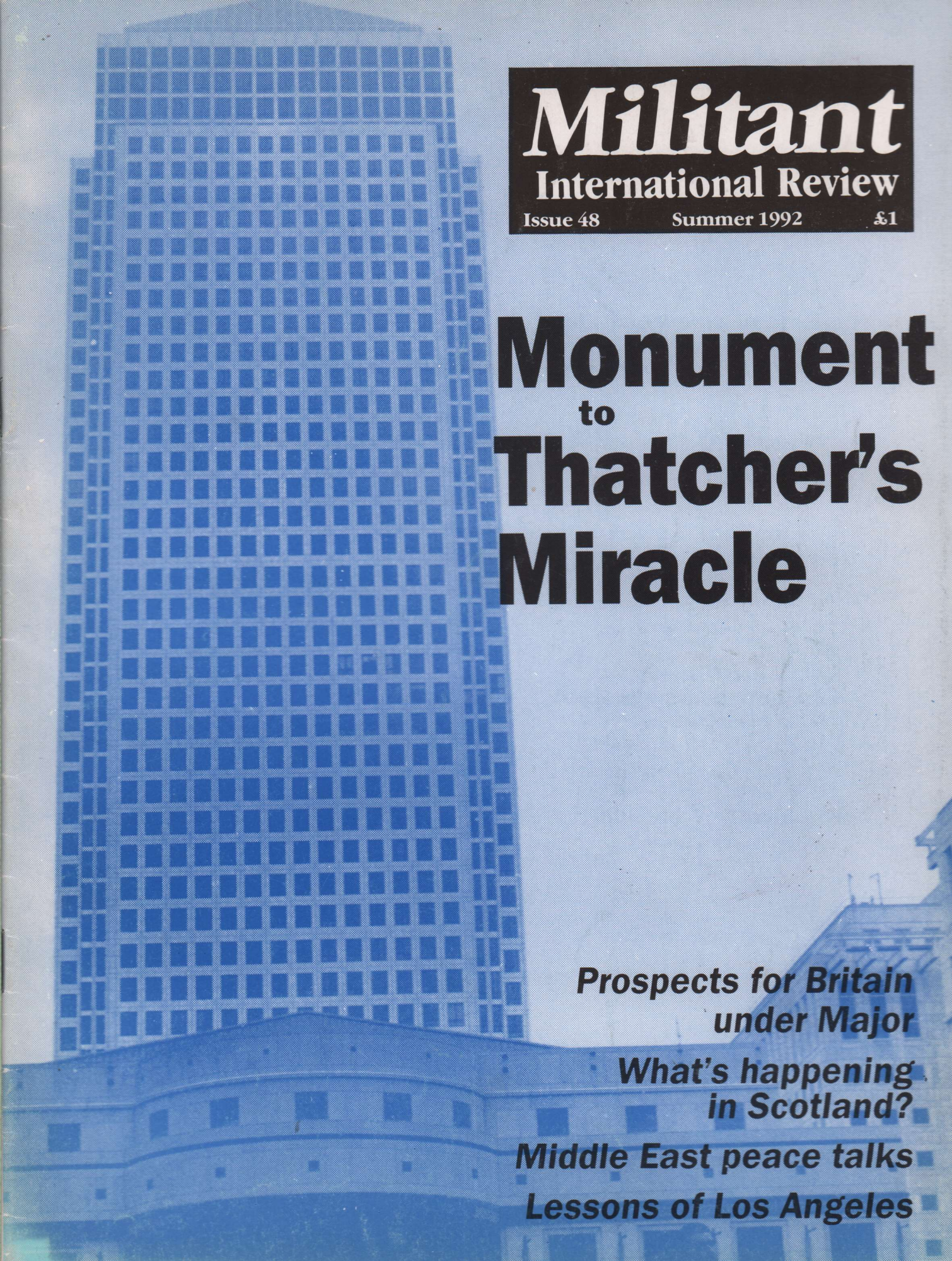




**Militant**

**International Review**

Issue 48

Summer 1992

£1

# **Monument to Thatcher's Miracle**

**Prospects for Britain  
under Major**

**What's happening  
in Scotland?**

**Middle East peace talks**

**Lessons of Los Angeles**

# Militant

## International Review

Summer 1992

Issue 48

Editor: Lynn Walsh

3-13 Hepscott Road London E9 5HB.



*The Tories may have won a fourth successive victory but, argues **Peter Taaffe**, Britain's underlying economic and social malaise continues.*



*For the first time sworn enemies sat across the negotiating tables. **Sam Lewenstein** asks, what are the prospects for the Middle East peace talks?*

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Cover photo: **Duncan Harris**.

ISBN 0906582 121. P&P by Militant Publications, 3-13 Hepscott Road, London E9 5HB.

# Prospects for Britain under Major

*The Tories have won a fourth successive victory but, argues Peter Taaffe, Britain's underlying economic and social malaise continues.*

**It was not  
preordained  
that the  
Tories would  
win**

"THE ECONOMIC SITUATION in Britain has reached extreme acuteness. Still, the political superstructure of this arch-conservative country extraordinarily lags behind the changes in the economic basis. Before having recourse to new political forms and methods, all the classes of the British nation are attempting time and again to ransack the old storerooms, turn the old clothes of their grandfathers and grandmothers inside out... it will in all probability take more than one month, perhaps more than one year, for the political superstructure to become adapted to the real economic and international situation of the country."

These lines were written by Leon Trotsky shortly after the coming to power of the 1931 'National' government. On the basis of the catastrophic economic position of British capitalism, Trotsky correctly anticipated huge social upheavals. Yet the commentators of the day were mesmerised by the crushing parliamentary majority of the National government, just as their counterparts today are by Major's puny 21-seat majority.

Strikes convulse Germany. A momentous general strike grips Spain. Flames consume Los Angeles. One country after another in Europe, let alone in the former colonial and semi-colonial world, is racked by social upheavals and strikes. And yet the spokesmen of British capitalism, echoing Voltaire's Dr Pangloss, believe that 'everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds'. The election afterglow is summed up by *The Financial Times*: "Britain is now an island of stability."

Violent mood swings, as is well known, are usually associated with a disturbed personality, in this case a chronically unstable class. Before April 9 the British ruling class, through its spokesmen, expressed morbid fears for the future, for society and its own long-term prospects. Major's general election victory, as much an astonishment to himself as to most

other people, has now acted as a giant 'upper' for the British bourgeois.

Their euphoria has been bolstered by the dejection of the right-wing Labour leaders in the aftermath of the election debacle. Seeking to unload responsibility for this defeat from their shoulders, where it belongs, onto the working class, one after another they have declared that we are in for 'one-party government' for the foreseeable future. Their refrain is: 'if we can't win in a recession, when can we win', or 'the people voted selfishly'.

They have been joined by other superficial commentators, who for some reason imagine that they are 'Marxists', claiming that it is the effects of the 1980s boom which explains the fourth victory in succession of the Tories. It is true that the legacy of the boom has left traces in the outlook of big sections of the working class. Trotsky himself commented that in no other country was the religion of capitalist progress more firmly based than in Britain in the past. It was this hope for a return to the 'good old days' of the 1980s — more a triumph of hope over experience — which compelled many unenthusiastically to either cast their vote for Major on April 9 or to abstain.

Yet it was not preordained that the Tories would win. On the contrary, the objective situation in Britain posed the possibility of defeat for the government. Britain has experienced the longest if not yet the deepest recession for sixty years. Home repossession devastated the lives of more than 80,000 families last year alone. Their experience of Thatcher's 'property-owning democracy' is eviction, invariably followed by a miserable existence in 'bed-and-breakfast' accommodation.

These factors, together with the savage attacks on the health service and education, and with the memory of the poll tax still fresh, should have been decisive in removing the Tories from power. That they weren't was



entirely the responsibility of Kinnoch, Smith and their 'shadow cabinet'. Andreas Papandreou, leader of the Greek Socialist Party PASOK, commented that Labour's defeat arose from the fact that Labour 'were no different' from the Tories. Papandreou, adept at verbal radicalism, makes a more accurate assessment of the British general election results than some alleged 'Marxists'.

IN REALITY, AS in 1983 and 1987, the bourgeois commentators, and echoing them the Labour right-wing, have unleashed a huge ideological campaign to paralyse the will to struggle of the working class. The first fiddle in this chorus naturally belonged to the 'communist' renegade, Martin Jacques, former editor of *Marxism Today*, who, days after the election, declared that "the Conservative Party has become the permanent party of government just like the Liberal Democrats in Japan, the Christian Democrats in Italy and, until recently, the Social Democrats in Sweden." (*The Observer*, 12 April, 1992).

Entirely escaping the notice of this drawing room socialist is the fact that the Japanese Liberal Democrats owe their 'one-party domination' to the powerful economic engine of Japanese capitalism and the pusillanimous behaviour of the leaders of the Japanese Communist and Socialist Parties. The latter have recently been implicated in a series of corruption scandals, one involving a Socialist Party parliamentarian and a mobster! Tied as they are

now to the 'market', that is, capitalism, they don't hesitate to push their snouts into the state trough like any corrupt bourgeois politician. This is an international phenomenon. Their counterparts in Italy — not just the corrupt Craxis of the Italian Socialist Party but now also members of the former 'Communist' Party in Milan — have dirtied their hands. So have the 'Socialist' leaders in France, as well as other European 'Social-Democrats'. All have been found to have their hands in the state till.

In Italy moreover, the former 'one-party' regime of the Christian Democrats is coming apart at the seams. The glue holding the disparate factions together in the past was the spectre of 'communism'. The leaders of the former 'Communist' Party, the PSD, have openly embraced capitalism, and all the fissiparous tendencies within the Christian Democrats have come to the surface.

The economic and social situation in Britain bears no comparison to Japan in the past or even to Italy today. The underlying sickness was disguised by the election result. The argument that 'if Labour can't win in a recession it never will' is entirely facile. When faced with economic uncertainty, it is not unusual that the mass of the population will cling to 'the devil they know'. Thus in 1935, notwithstanding the devastating effects of the inter-war slump and the savage attacks on the living standards of the British workers, the National government was nevertheless re-elected.

This process is re-inforced when 'the devil



*Ex-'Communist'*  
Martin Jacques.



that they don't know' offers an uncertain future, or the impression of pain for many of them. This is precisely what Labour's programme, particularly in regard to tax, meant for millions who would otherwise have been swayed into supporting Labour. *Militant* argued against the disastrous impression which the tax measures of Smith and Kinnock gave to skilled workers and sections of the lower middle-class. It was not difficult to anticipate this. Hattersley had committed precisely this blunder in 1987 with baleful consequences for Labour.

It is true that the Tory tabloids, as always, told the most barefaced lies about Labour's 'tax nightmare'. Yet this propaganda would not have rooted itself in such fertile soil unless the Labour leaders' own words and actions had not ploughed up the ground for it beforehand. Add to this the organic ambivalence of Kinnock — refusing point-blank to take a position, for example, on proportional representation — and a programme no different from the Tories in fundamentals, then another defeat for Labour could not be ruled out. The election edition of the *MIR* certainly did not discount this possibility.

'Society is moving to the right', is now the refrain. Yet April 9 in no way vindicates this false analysis. It is true that the Tories remained at 42% of the poll with 14 million votes, 7% ahead of Labour. But 1.6 million more voted for Labour compared to 1987. Add the one million who dropped off the electoral register, probably to avoid the poll tax and in all likelihood Labour inclined, and the gap between Labour and the Tories is not as great as bourgeois commentators have argued. Certainly, given Britain's electoral system, just a handful of people, less than 3,000, would have needed to have voted in the eleven closest seats for parties opposing the Tories and Major would have lost his Commons majority. There are in addition 22 seats with Tory majorities of under 1,000.

More importantly the performance of Marxist candidates in Coventry, Pollok and Broadgreen completely undermines the 'move to the right' argument. The marvellous result of Tommy Sheridan, coming 'from nowhere' to record more than 6,000 votes, is a living rejection of this idea. Dave Nellist came within a hairsbreadth of winning in Coventry and Terry Fields recorded a magnificent 5,900 votes despite the calumnies and distortions which he and *Militant* have endured in Liverpool in the past period. Demonstrating that his marvellous result in the general election was no 'fluke', Tommy Sheridan was elected from his prison cell as a councillor for Pollok one month later. These results foreshadow future successes for Marxism in the storms which loom ahead in British society.

THERE HAS BEEN a determined attempt by capitalist commentators to refurbish Major's

'liberal' image. His regime, if we are to believe them, represents a departure from Thatcherism. It is true that the Queen's speech attempted to refute the impression that a frontal assault is to be made on the rights and conditions of the working-class. A tiger can pleasantly droop its eyelids and sheathe its claws, but it nevertheless remains a tiger and will show that when cornered.

The ferocity of Thatcherism arose from the long-term decay of British capitalism and the collision between the classes which this engenders. But she completely failed to restore the former power of British capitalism. There is not a glimmer of long-term hope to be found in any of the analyses of the serious economic commentators. The Thatcher 'miracle' is now utterly discredited. Unemployment rose by 150% from 1.1m to 2.6m officially. In reality, it stands at almost 4m. The average rate of growth of the economy was 1.5%, far less than during the 1960s and 1970s. Manufacturing output is at the level it was 12 years ago and absolutely lower than the level it was 18 years ago. Just five million workers, only 22% of the labour force, now work in manufacturing industry, the lowest number in a hundred years.

The problems have inexorably piled up. The bill will have to be paid in the stormy period we are now going into. The escape routes which Thatcher luckily discovered in the 1980s are now closed off. There will be no world boom which can cover up the underlying disease of the British economy. Indeed the tremors on the Tokyo stock exchange, together with the strikes in west Germany, could presage a further slowdown in these economies leading to a generalised recession or a marked slowdown throughout the capitalist world. On the other hand it is possible that a unsynchronised spluttering recovery could begin this year. Japan and west Germany could stagnate or experience a further slowing-down in their growth rate while the US and Britain slowly climb out of the economic trough. In any event little hope exists for the bulk of the 30m unemployed in the advanced industrialised countries being absorbed back into industry.

The collapse of the huge property company Olympia and York (O&Y), both reveals the underlying problems of British capitalism and threatens to enormously aggravate them. The mad dash to construct office space in the 1980s — as if the boom was never-ending — was typified by O&Y's decision to build Canary Wharf. This now threatens to become a huge white elephant, as its office space will probably never be fully occupied. There is 40m square feet of empty office space in London, 20% of the total stock. This compares with a vacancy rate of 10% in 1974, the last time there was a major property collapse.

Olympia and York have piled up accumulated debts of £6.7bn worldwide. But they are not

the only property company which has over-reached itself. Moreover, the big banks have an estimated £50bn directly or indirectly tied up in property loans. In the early 1970s a similar situation arose, with the Heath government stepping in to rescue the 'secondary banks'. If they hadn't then the whole banking sector would have been plunged into crisis, which in turn could have precipitated an industrial crisis. Ultimately it was the working class which footed the bill in increased taxes, as they will this time round if the government intervenes.

At present this government seems to have a 'hands off' approach. In so doing they risk precipitating a property collapse. In any event, the huge expensive empty office developments, which mock the plight of the London homeless, are a fitting epitaph to Thatcher's 'miracle years'. They also epitomise the growing 'excess capacity', in turn an expression of its incapacity, which will typify British capitalism in the 1990s.

Over the last two years manufacturing investment has fallen by a third with output down by 10% and employment collapsing by 600,000. Last year alone manufacturing capacity fell by 4%, which means that even if there is an upswing British industry will be incapable of satisfying demand. As a consequence imports will flood in, aggravating the already chronic balance of payments crisis. Import penetration in manufacturing goods — ie the ratio of imports to demand at home — has accelerated every year from 26.2% in 1980 to 30% in 1989.

Even a growth in the economy, expected to be anaemic, will not prevent the inexorable rise in unemployment. A one million rise in unemployment adds an extra £8bn to government spending, through lost tax revenue, unemployment benefit, etc. The public sector borrowing requirement (PSBR), admitted by Lamont to be a huge £28bn, could spiral to £32bn by the end of this year, and to £40bn or more in two to three years.

The Tories are desperate to plug the gap between government income and expenditure. They will curb public expenditure but the other dimension involves attempts to boost economic 'recovery' and thereby increase tax revenues. Hence the 0.5% decrease of the base lending rate which, coming as it did just before the local government elections, had the added advantage of helping the Tories on the electoral field. However, economic Nemesis beckons for the Tory government. Corporate as well as personal indebtedness, the 'debt overhang' harped on by bourgeois economists, is acting as a brake on any economic upswing, not just in Britain but throughout the capitalist world as a whole.

IT IS THE underlying malaise of the British economy which will compel this government, notwithstanding Major's blandishments, to



launch an offensive at a certain stage against the rights and conditions of the British working class. The ballooning government deficit is a guarantee of savage attacks on the public sector. There will be either tax increases, that is indirect taxes, or the slashing of government expenditure, or, more likely, a mixture of both.

The appointment of the arch-monetarist Thatcherites, Portillo and Lilley, to jobs which involve the cutting of government expenditure is not at all accidental. The Queen's speech revealed the preparations for partial de-nationalisation of British Rail and the outright selling-off of British Coal. Thirty thousand railwaymen and thousands of miners could lose their jobs.

The more serious strategists of capital sense a looming clash. Their unease was voiced by the Archbishop of Canterbury with his denunciations of the high salaries of directors and managers. In the wake of the Los Angeles riots we have had the outbursts in Coventry. In trepidation bourgeois commentators warn that "when the grievances of the dispossessed find no outlet in the political system they reach for alternatives." (*Guardian*, 11 April 1992). No less than in America, the accumulated rage gathered in the inner cities could explode in the next period. Elements of the 'third world' exist in most of the major cities of Britain.

The outbreak of dysentery, a disease usually associated with the slums of Calcutta, has spread like a plague from Scotland to Greater Manchester to Yorkshire and now to the West Midlands. This shows the degradation which many of the poor have been forced into. During the first 15 weeks of this year, according to *The Independent*, 28 April 1992, a total of 7,500 cases were reported in England and Wales compared with 1,708 in the same period in 1991.

Now the schools, traditionally offering some

**Local government will be a key battleground.**

**The serious strategists of capital sense a looming clash.**



**A Thatcherite wing remains in the Tory party.**

kind of lifeline out of poverty, are to be crushed by the government's 'reforms'. The local management of schools (LMS) has led to the threat of redundancies amongst thousands of teachers. The crisis in education sums up the organic crisis of British capitalism. In the boom the ruling class needed an educated, technically equipped workforce. Now what is required is a highly trained elite, while the rest receive an inadequate basic education, which fits them for part-time low paid employment.

In the colleges and universities the increased ratio of students to teachers, together with the general impoverishment of students, has laid the ground for clashes to develop. Conditions similar to those which lead to the explosion in France in 1968 are maturing, not just in Britain but on a European scale. Add to this the savage attack planned on low paid workers, whereby the "abolition of wages councils will turn Britain into the sweatshop of Europe" (Low Paid Unit), and a potent brew of social, political and industrial upheaval is posed for Britain in the period we are going into.

CLASS POLARISATION WILL inevitably develop. This will, in turn, introduce new divisions into the Tory Party. Some commentators have compared Major's 21-seat majority to the 'comfortable' 12-seat majority enjoyed by Churchill in 1951-55. Yet the objective situation now confronting Major is entirely different to Churchill's position then. The Tories in 1951 came to power at the beginning of a long economic upswing for British and world capitalism. Major presides over an unprecedented slide in the economic power of British capitalism. Like Dickens's Uriah Heep, he will, with a smile and 'ever so 'umbly', attack workers' living standards.

The strategists of capital have, however, learnt a little from the brutal reign of Thatcher. Despite all their warnings, bolstered by a 100-plus seat majority, she pushed through the poll tax. True, she paid dearly for this, but so did the British capitalists who confronted the largest mass civil disobedience campaign in British history. This has left an indelible impression on social relations in Britain and on the outlook of workers in particular.

Determined not to have their fingers burnt once more, right from the outset the government was given a warning by its Tory critics. In its first parliamentary test, over the election of the Speaker, the government saw its own candidate rejected in favour of Labour's Betty Boothroyd. The opposition was mobilised by Tory John Biffen, rather than Labour's front bench!

This was followed by the resignation of a Tory junior minister over the Maastricht treaty vote and the Commons revolt on the same issue. Add to this the constant carping of Thatcher — with her claim that there is 'no such thing as Majorism' — together with the new Tory right-wing

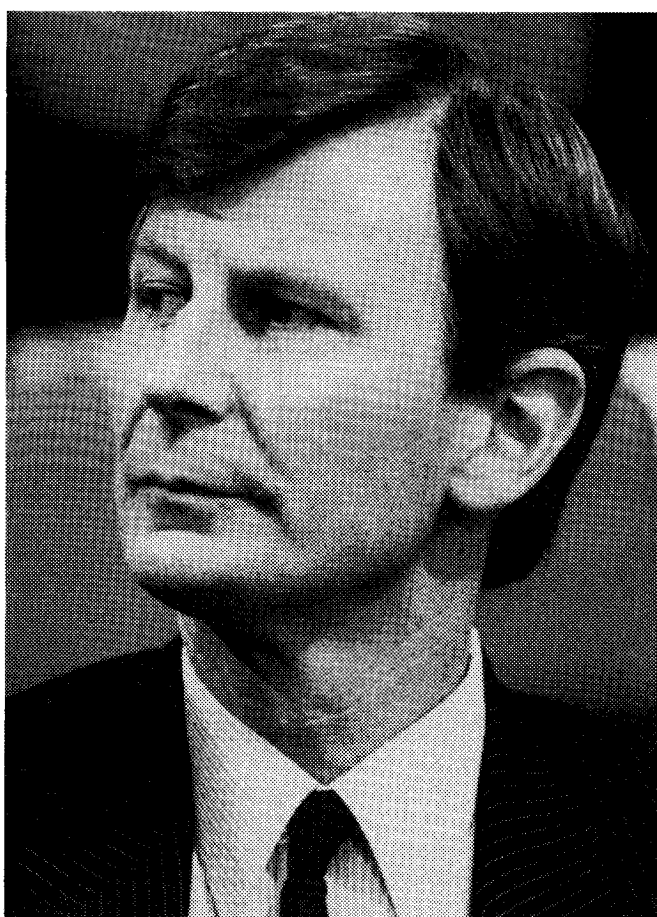
parliamentary intake, and the scene is set for an even greater clash between the different wings of the Tory Party.

There is a San Andreas fault line between 'wets' and Thatcherite 'hards' which runs right through the modern Tory Party. It is an open question as to whether Major's government will see out its full term of office. Notwithstanding the tame opposition served up by Labour's front bench, the social earthquakes which are coming can splinter the government.

THE ELECTION DEFEAT represents a turning point for the consciousness of the British working class. The ceaseless refrain 'wait for a Labour government' cuts no ice. Nor will the attempts of those like Jordan, leader of the new Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU), to seek an accommodation with the employers and the government. Jordan praised the appointment of Gillian Shepard as Employment Secretary as a sign that the Tories were seeking 'more consensus' in industry. He suffered a brutal rebuff in the Queen's speech where further attacks on the trade unions were signposted, including moves to eliminate the 'check-off' system of paying union dues. Further legislation allowing union officials and shop stewards to be sued for calling strikes is being contemplated.

The economic situation will compel British capitalism to launch an offensive against the wages and conditions of the British workers. *The Financial Times* bluntly declared "UK wage inflation must fall, and soon." But the spokesmen of British capitalism look with trepidation at the development of 'super-unions'. They have pondered the lessons of the recent strike wave in Germany where huge concentrated union federations have shown the power of the working class once it moves into action. Even the merger of the AEU and the EETPU, while carried out in a bureaucratic fashion, is correctly perceived in the long-term as a huge potential threat. *The Financial Times* growls with alarm, in particular, at the possible merger of NALGO, NUPE and COHSE. It even suggested that "there could be a public interest case for regulating union mergers in the same way as industrial mergers, to curb the abuse of monopoly power." (10 April 1992).

For decades the British bourgeois bemoaned the existence of dozens if not hundreds of unions with which they were forced to negotiate. They looked wistfully towards the 'disciplined' unions in Germany. But such is the dialectic of history that they now correctly perceive the gathering together of huge concentrations of workers under one union banner as a colossal potential threat to them and their system. This threat would be all the greater if these amalgamations of unions took place through the democratisation of the union structures, and with greater rank-and-file control. The union tops, however, see mergers, in the main,



as an attempt to shore up the powers of the trade union officialdom. Nevertheless the process of amalgamation in the long run will serve to enhance the power of the working class and their organisations, particularly when the rank-and-file move, as they inevitably will, and shift these organisations towards the left, thoroughly purging them of bureaucratic habits, methods and leaders.

This growing mood was shown in the union conferences held even in the first few days which followed the election. At the NUT conference, for example, the delegates reflected the growing alarm at the Tories offensive in the schools and the preparedness of teachers to resist. Only with difficulty, and by persuading the conference to adopt contradictory resolutions, did the union leadership manage to deflect the clamour for action coming from the ranks. Nevertheless, at local level, votes in favour of strike action to prevent redundancies have taken place.

At the USDAW conference, the shopworkers' union, the shackles placed on the delegates by the union tops began to be thrown off. There were demands for action on wages, to resist the offensive of the employers against shopworkers' conditions, and for the involvement of young members through special 'youth committees'. Supporters of *Militant*, previously kept at arms length by the delegates, were warmly accepted on this occasion. The union ranks had been told

that expulsion of *Militant* was the price to be paid for Labour's general election victory. Instead a Tory government was once more installed in power and the delegates raised their voices in opposition to further witch-hunts in the Labour Party.

It is true that last year the number of strikes in Britain was at a hundred-year low. This reflected the effects of the recession, and the restraining hand of the union leaderships. However, within weeks of the general election, a series of disputes have bubbled up, particularly in the London area. Successful strike struggles have been conducted on the building sites of London, under the auspices of the newly formed magnificent 'Joint Sites Committee'. Tube-workers balloted in favour of strike action to compel London Transport to step back from compulsory redundancies.

Big battles loom for the unions in the local authorities as the government moves in the direction of the 'Americanisation' of local government, seeking to strip councils of most of their powers in education, housing etc. Already Harrow council has announced that all national pay bargaining arrangements for their workers, except teachers, will cease. Twenty-five councils, largely Tory, have taken this road in the last two years. Harrow, however, is the first one in London to declare war on the local authority unions.

The employers' offensive will be against wage rises, already running at an allegedly 'unaccept-

**Smith and Gould vie with each other to distance themselves from the unions**

**'UK wage  
inflation must  
fall, and  
soon'  
*Financial  
Times***

able' 7.5%, and against rights and conditions. In the civil service the government will inevitably move in the direction of 'privatising', of splitting up and thus attempting to neuter the power of the unions. All of this will not go without fierce resistance from the working class.

TORY SPOKESMEN HAVE declared that Britain is a country 'at ease with itself. This view is unfortunately echoed by the leaders of the Labour and trade union movement. John Smith has declared that Labour must direct its attention to the 'contented majority'. It seems that 'one-third' are discontented, (they exist in poverty) while 'two-thirds' of the population are comfortably off. This is an entirely false picture of the situation which exists in Britain or for that matter throughout the advanced capitalist world.

There has been a huge widening between the rich and poor. A gulf has opened up between the classes. Even those workers with jobs and not too badly off at present, are insecure, faced with the ever-present threat of redundancies, house repossessions, etc. That this mood is not translated into parliamentary arithmetic in favour of Labour, is entirely the responsibility of the Labour leaders. But it is a law that the working class, checked on the parliamentary field, turns towards the industrial field. Added to this is the 'extra-parliamentary' arena which will complement the battles which will unfold in the factories.

The remorseless undermining of previously accepted rights in the social sphere itself threatens to ignite an explosion. Already social services 'experts' have urged the government to retreat on the denial of social security benefits to 16 and 17-year olds. This assumes even greater urgency in the wake of the Los Angeles riots and the riots in Coventry. The movements in industry, the resistance against the education 'reforms', the battle to prevent the destruction of council housing; all will be reflected at a certain stage in the organisations of the working class.

The trade unions will undoubtedly undergo a period of transformation. This at a certain stage will be reflected in a movement into the Labour Party. However, as *Militant* correctly predicted, the Labour Party leadership have moved even further towards the right in the aftermath of the election.

Gould and Smith vie with each other to distance themselves from the trade unions. Some union leaders have supported this, while those like Sawyer of NUPE and Tuffin of the UCW demand some 'residual' link. It cannot be ruled out that the right-wing will succeed this time in eliminating from Labour's aims clause four, part four of Labour's constitution, which enshrines the idea of the socialist transformation of society. It is even possible that the formal links with the trade unions can be broken or, at the very least, severely weakened. The Labour

Party, moreover, will generally remain empty for the foreseeable future, as there is nothing in the policies or programme of either of the leadership contenders to inspire workers and youth to join.

But even if all of the Labour right's 'counter-revolution' is carried through, this would not fundamentally alter the character of the Labour Party. The British Labour Party, more than its European counter-parts, was an outgrowth of the trade unions, its 'political expression'. It is doubtful whether it can continue to exist, even as a parliamentary machine, without finance from the trade unions, unless the government decides to introduce the state financing of parties. This is not immediately on the agenda. It is possible that the British Labour Party could become like the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), which does not have formal trade union links. However once there is a deep-going movement of the proletariat this will inevitably be reflected within the Labour Party.

Some bourgeois ideologists fervently hope that it can be transformed into a British version of the American 'Democratic Party'. Such a hope is forlorn. It can however move much further to the right than at any other time in the postwar period. This will not be without opposition from the ranks of the unions or the Labour Party itself. Nevertheless splits, this time towards the left, cannot be ruled out. The outline of such a development exists in the formation of 'Scotland United', led by George Galloway, Denis Canavan, and their supporters amongst Scottish Labour MPs.

A mass left reformist wing will only take shape within the Labour Party on the basis of big events, first of all on the industrial plane in the unions and then at a later stage reflected in the Labour Party. Therefore in the explosive situation that will develop in British society, huge scope exists for a force which can offer a fighting socialist programme.

Anthony King, the pollster, declared in *The Economist*, after a survey at the turn of the year recorded that 48% of the population accept the idea of a 'mainly socialist society', that this was "no longer on offer in Britain." In fact such an 'offer' was made to the workers of Pollok, Coventry and Broadgreen, and to those who were prepared not to pay their poll tax, and it brought forth a magnificent response. It was *Militant* who provided such an alternative in the big movements of an extra-parliamentary character, as well as on the electoral field in a limited arena, in the past period. While we remain orientated towards the mass organisations of the working class, given their present paralysis under right-wing domination, *Militant* will independently organise all those forces who are prepared to fight against the Tory and employers' offensive and for the socialist regeneration of the labour movement. □

# Youth and the election

*What attitude did young people have towards the general election? Andrea Enisuh reports.*

THE FIRST MEETING of Labour's national executive committee after the election received a confidential report from general secretary Larry Whitty on why Labour lost. Pinpointing "a general unease about our economic incompetence... a generalised distrust of the party and the leadership", the report, according to *The Guardian*, (2 May) highlighted "the main areas of under-performance... the traditional Labour core vote, the unemployed, council tenants, DE social class... Among the unemployed, Labour's vote actually fell."

He was especially 'disturbed' by the fall in the youth vote: "Historically this was an area of very substantial Labour advantage; the Tories are now ahead. This... is a serious worry. Perhaps they are indeed Thatcher's children."

In fact, many youth simply did not vote. *The Observer* argued that this was the lowest turnout amongst the 18-24 age group since the age of majority was lowered. Having experienced nothing but a Tory government, with all the cuts and attacks on living conditions that went with it, Labour should have had a groundswell of support amongst youth.

Three million first time voters became eligible to vote this year — at 7% of the electorate, a potentially decisive section. In 1974, the last year that Labour won a general election, 42% of first time voters supported Labour, 24% the Conservatives. (*Financial Times*, 31 March, 1992). But as Larry Whitty concedes, this election witnessed a drop in youth support for Labour.

The years spent destroying Labour's youth section have taken their toll. When *The Scotsman* conducted a survey of the parties' youth sections during the election, to avoid embarrassment the Labour leaders claimed that membership details were secret! The truth is that the party bureaucracy have strangled the Labour Party Young Socialists (LPYS). Under the leadership of *Militant* supporters the LPYS, campaigning on a bold socialist programme, was a pole of attraction to whole layers of young workers and youth generally. The sanitised right-wing party of today — minus a youth section — does not have that appeal.

This was confirmed in the mock elections held in many schools across Britain during the

general election period. *The Observer's* 'young election', with 160,915 voters, showed the Tories ahead of Labour by five points. The BBC's *Newsround* election, involving 1,481 schools and 435,695 voters, had Labour, 26.8%, narrowly ahead of the Tories' 25.4%. The Green Party polled 11.8%.

This contrasts with the enthusiastic support generated amongst young people for the socialist campaigns of Terry Fields, Dave Nellist and Tommy Sheridan. In Scotland the apparently radical policies of the SNP were a greater pull amongst youth than in the population as a whole. Yet Tommy Sheridan became a focus for hundreds of youth. *The Scotsman* (28 February) reported a classroom discussion at a North Glasgow training centre: "Donald Dewar and Alex Salmond were names that drew a blank from the 17-19 year olds. Only Tommy Sheridan, of Scottish Militant Labour, generated enthusiasm. 'He's a bit of a hero to them', explained the centre's manager." Ian Mahon, aged 17, perhaps summed up the attitude of many of those young people: "I'd vote for Tommy Sheridan. I love the guy to bits. He's impressed me. He'll even take the jail! I don't care if he is a communist."

In Coventry South East evidence of youth support for Dave Nellist was clear. A poll was conducted by the *Birmingham Post* on March 25 which, unlike many other election polls, accurately forecast the result, giving official Labour 32%, and Dave Nellist 30%. In the event, official Labour won 32% of the vote and Dave 29%. In the *Post's* poll, a staggering 41% of 18-24 year olds supported Dave Nellist, compared to just 27% for official Labour. In contrast, amongst the retired, official Labour polled 40%, Dave 10%.

Numerous social surveys have shown that youth are not 'Thatcher's children' — their attitudes are to the left of the Labour leaders on most issues. If the Labour leaders were to seriously consider why they lost the election they would have to address their inability to attract young people. The lack of a democratic youth section that could have carried out a vibrant campaign and won the youth vote stems from the party's shift to the right. As we warned in the election edition of the *MIR*, "large numbers of young people simply will not vote when there is nothing to convince them that there will be any meaningful change in the way they live under a Labour government". (p4) Labour and trade union activists must learn the lessons of this defeat. □



Dave Nellist.

# Scotland now?

*A mood of angry defiance has begun to sweep through Scotland, argues Alan McCombes.*

**The Scottish Tory leaders have been lulled into a false sense of security**

ON THE MORNING of May 8 the Scottish political establishment was rocked by news of the stunning successes of the newly-formed Scottish Militant Labour (SML) in the local elections in Glasgow.

'The night Scottish Militant Labour showed it could no longer be ignored in Glasgow', proclaimed a headline in *The Scotsman* newspaper, over an article which reported that SML candidates had "inflicted humiliating defeats upon their official Labour Party opponents." On the same theme, the *Glasgow Herald* described the "deep sense of hurt and outrage among Glasgow Labour councillors as the full impact of Militant successes sunk in... to have the Scottish National Party (SNP) bite lumps out of the party is bad enough. For Scottish Militant Labour to do likewise is horrifying and humiliating for a seemingly unshakeable Labour Group."

Not only the Labour leaders, but every major political party in Scotland must now be viewing with trepidation the rise of Scottish Militant Labour in the deprived housing schemes of Glasgow.

Following on from the stunning success of Tommy Sheridan in Pollok in the general election, where he received more than 6,000 votes, these local victories mark a historical breakthrough for the forces of Marxism in Scotland. In seven seats across Glasgow, *Militant*-backed candidates won a staggering 38.7% of the total vote. This compared to an official Labour vote of just 32%, 20% for the SNP and a derisory 9% for the Tories.

Yet, as columnist Ian Bell pointed out in *The Observer*, "Militant is supposed to be dead and buried with a stake through its heart. But here was Tommy Sheridan reaching out from his jail cell to plant a sizeable spanner in the works of the Glasgow Labour machine."

Unlike the established political parties, Scottish Militant Labour was not conceived as an electoral machine, devoted solely to electioneering. It was created as a vehicle through which to expand the influence of Marxist ideas within the Scottish working class, and to exert pressure upon the official labour movement to return to the ideas of struggle, solidarity and socialism.

Nonetheless, these victories will provide an important platform from which to spread the ideas of Marxism throughout Glasgow and Scotland. At the same time they will enable Scottish Militant Labour to play an even greater role in the day-to-day struggles in Scotland against damp housing, school closures, the poll tax, hospital opt-outs, dysentery and poverty.

But the main significance of these results is that they have brought out into the open the underlying mood of defiance and rebellion simmering inside Scotland's cities at the present time.

THE TORY LEADERS in Scotland appear to have been lulled into a false sense of security as a result of their marginally increased share of the vote in the general election. Like a football manager who has just seen his team come from six-nil down to score an unexpected consolation goal in the final seconds, Scottish Tory leader Ian Lang has deliberately sought to put on a brave face. However, if the Tories seriously believe that they are now on course for a recovery in Scotland, they are living on a different planet.

It is true that by playing the 'union card' the Tories succeeded in scaring a small layer of ex-Tory voters back into the fold. With all the other parties committed to major constitutional reform, the Tories had threatened that a vote for any other party would be a vote for instability, upheaval and the eventual 'Balkanisation' of Britain.

Despite this scaremongering they were once again resoundingly defeated in Scotland, with 75% of the electorate voting for opposition parties. Although they held on to a few marginal seats, this was largely due to a fall in the Labour vote in the working class areas as a result of increased support for the SNP and the loss of thousands of voters from the electoral register in every constituency.

Significantly, the two Tory gains were in Grampian, in North-east Scotland. At the centre of the oil industry, the Grampian region is now the most prosperous in the whole of the United Kingdom, with an unemployment rate of just 4.4%, and living standards among the highest in



**Audience at a  
Scottish Militant  
Labour rally.**

Western Europe.

On the other side of Scotland, in contrast, Strathclyde, with more than two million inhabitants, is the second most impoverished region in the UK after Northern Ireland. The unemployment rate in Strathclyde is almost three times that of Grampian.

Although Scotland has not suffered the brutal national oppression found in other parts of the world, there is a strong undercurrent of national resentment flowing under the surface of Scottish society.

In the aftermath of the election, the Tory leaders claim that there is no real mood for constitutional change in Scotland; that on the streets and on the doorsteps people are more concerned with bread and butter issues such as unemployment, housing and the NHS than with the national question. This argument has been echoed by sections of the right wing of the Labour and trade union movement, notably Brian Wilson MP, and national trade union leaders such as John Edmonds.

It is true that in opinion polls, when people are asked to list the priorities that concern them, issues such as devolution and nationalism do not feature as frequently as the poll tax, unemployment, the NHS or housing. On May 7, the SNP made the serious tactical mistake of attempting to turn these local elections into a referendum on the constitutional future of Scot-

land. For working class families living in intolerable housing conditions, inundated with threatening letters from sheriff officers, and struggling against poverty and debt, there are more pressing and immediate problems to pre-occupy them.

Nevertheless, when people come to seek solutions to their problems, the national question invariably looms large. As a result of successive Tory general election victories in England, there is now in Scotland an increasing sense of alienation and political impotence. In the 1983 general election, a survey of Scottish public opinion showed that at that stage only 13% of Scots were in favour of independence, with a mere 0.05% of the population considering devolution and nationalism to be important issues in the election. Now support for Scottish independence is at least 30%, frequently rising even higher such as at the time of the Ravenscraig closure announcement, when polls showed 50% support. In the 1992 general election, between 15-20% of the electorate regarded the national question as a key issue.

As *Militant* anticipated, the SNP made only modest advances in the election. For the broad mass of working class voters in Scotland, the real possibility of ousting the Tories outweighed all other considerations on April 9. However, with these hopes now in tatters, the pendulum is likely to swing back in the direction of nat-



*Jim Sillars.*

ionalism in the next period. In the local elections on May 7, the SNP gained votes everywhere, especially in working-class Labour strongholds such as Glasgow, Fife and Dundee. In Scotland as a whole, they won 24% of the vote, pushing the Tories back into third place. In contrast to the previous local elections in 1988, when Labour's lead over the SNP stood at 21%, Labour's lead on May 7 was slashed to just 10%. Yet several new factors have arisen in the situation in Scotland since the general election which are likely to complicate the picture, and possibly even cut across the advance of the SNP, at least for a temporary period.

IN THE FIRST place, there is disarray within the ranks of the SNP itself. Lacking any sense of proportion, the SNP leadership made the extravagant claim in the run-up to the general election that they were on course to win a majority of Scottish seats — a completely unbalanced estimate of the situation which has played a role in demoralising a section of the party's rank-and-file.

Although the total SNP vote increased by 50% in this general election, the party ended up with just three seats, the same number as in 1987. The most serious blow suffered by the SNP was the loss of Jim Sillars' seat in Govan. Judging by his outbursts after the election — he described the Scottish people as "90 minutes patriots who lack the bottle to take the road of independence" — Sillars himself now appears to be personally demoralised.

Sillars' defeat has weakened the SNP's left-wing, notwithstanding the successes of a number of left-wing SNP candidates in the local elections. SNP leader Alex Salmond, whose political base is in the rural North-east of Scotland, already appears to be moving to the right in the aftermath of the general election. In an interview in the *Glasgow Herald*, Salmond condemned what he called "talk of anti-Tory fronts and eliminating Scottish Tories. That makes many people who might be sympathetic to the Scottish cause feel unnecessarily threatened. The campaign we should engage in is not anti-Tory but pro-Scottish."

In a TV debate with Labour MP George Galloway, the day after the general election, Salmond, in language similar to that used by the Labour leaders in the past, attacked Galloway for preaching civil disobedience. To the dismay of many rank-and-file SNP activists, he went on to argue that change could only be brought about 'democratically' — ie through the ballot box. Thus Alex Salmond, once expelled from the SNP for his membership of the left-wing '79 Group, now appears to be distancing himself from the radicalism which has been the main hallmark of the recent SNP revival.

There is now a gulf developing between the SNP rank and file in the cities, particularly in the West of Scotland, and the middle class right-

wing leaning elements who dominate the party elsewhere. Open civil war, leading to a split within the SNP, is a distinct possibility in the foreseeable future.

AT THE SAME time, there is growing tension within the ranks of the Labour Party in Scotland. On the one side is the 'nationalist' wing, involving the pressure group, Scottish Labour Action, and a number of left-wing MPs and STUC leaders. As well as demanding action from the Labour leaders around the call for a multi-option referendum, the nationalist left are also calling for complete autonomy for the Scottish Labour Party.

But these demands will be fiercely resisted by the party's so-called 'unionist' wing, which is based largely upon the Scottish party leadership and the right-wing led trade unions. A foretaste of what could develop was given in a recent report in *The Guardian* that "senior Scottish Labour MPs are pressing for tough action against at least 10 colleagues who are preparing to defy the leadership with a rolling programme of parliamentary protests to highlight the case for a referendum on Scotland's constitutional future... the time is fast approaching when either whips or a new leader must warn Scotland United supporters about their future conduct in the party." (26 May 1992).

Labour's nationalist wing has been the main driving force behind 'Scotland United'. Although at this stage 'Scotland United' is a single-issue campaign, based upon the demand for a multi-option referendum, it is not ruled out that it could eventually take shape as a fully-fledged political party, drawing together the left-wing of the SNP and the nationalist wing of the Labour and trade union movement.

At a time when the SNP leadership has appeared paralysed by indecision, 'Scotland United' has begun to take on some of the features of a mass movement. Assisted by pop stars and entertainers, including Ricky Ross of Deacon Blue, Donnie Munro of Runrig, and Pat Kane of Hue and Cry, 'Scotland United' has already mobilised some of the biggest rallies ever seen in Scotland around the national question.

Scottish Militant Labour fully supports the campaign for a multi-option referendum on Scotland's future. According to one recent opinion poll, this demand now has the support of almost 70% of the Scottish population. If the Tories refuse to give ground on this issue, the Scottish Militant Labour Group on Glasgow district council will demand that the Labour-dominated Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COLSA) organise its own unofficial referendum early next year. The outcome of that referendum should in turn be regarded as a mandate for mass action on the part of the Labour and trade union movement in Scotland, including Labour-controlled district and regional councils.

In the meantime, Scottish Militant Labour will continue to participate in, and build support for, the activities of 'Scotland United'. With the Labour and SNP leaders standing in the sidelines, wringing their hands in despair, unable and unwilling to take action against the Tories, people like Galloway and Canavan have shown that they're prepared to stand up and be counted.

IT WOULD BE dishonest to pretend that we do not have important political differences with the leadership of 'Scotland United'. Albeit in a friendly fashion, Scottish Militant Labour will not shirk from offering constructive criticism of 'Scotland United' where we are in disagreement with the method or tactics of its leaders. However, at this stage, 'Scotland United' lacks any democratic structure within which differences of opinion can be debated. It is a serious weakness, for a movement which is campaigning for democracy and attempting to build mass popular support, that all of its decisions are taken by a small group of unelected leaders. One of the great strengths of the Anti-Poll Tax Federation is that it is a grass roots campaign, with a network of local branches, regular delegate conferences and a democratically elected leadership, accountable to the rank-and-file.

Another potential weakness of 'Scotland United' is its refusal to take up, even in the most general fashion, the burning social problems facing Scotland under the Tories. Some of its leaders have called for 'party politics to go into suspended animation' until constitutional change is achieved. The dilemma facing 'Scotland United' is exactly the same as that which confronted the Scottish Constitutional Convention — how to force concessions from a hostile Tory government. The fact that the SNP walked out of the Convention is neither here nor there: without organised mass political and industrial action, there was always more likelihood of Scotland winning the World Cup than of the Tories backing down.

Unlike the now discredited Constitutional Convention, 'Scotland United' has at least been prepared to take to the streets and attempt to mobilise popular support behind the campaign. But in order to sustain and develop such a movement, particularly if it is to draw into activity the decisive sections of the working class, the campaign has to find a way of linking the general question of a Scottish parliament with the concrete issues that concern ordinary people.

As a logical extension of the idea that the Tories have no mandate to govern Scotland, 'Scotland United' should now call upon every non-Tory controlled local authority in the country to band together and refuse to implement any further Tory cuts and cease all co-operation with the poll tax. This demand alone would arouse massive popular support, and would even find a sympathetic echo among

whole swathes of Labour and left-leaning SNP councillors who now find themselves, after the general election, in a desperate position.

Undoubtedly, the Liberal Democrats within 'Scotland United' would throw up their hands in horror at such a suggestion. But the leadership of 'Scotland United' have to weigh up carefully the price of unity. The Liberal Democrats won only 13% of the vote in Scotland. Yet their presence within 'Scotland United' may prove to be the Achilles Heel which paralyses the entire movement.

The very name 'Scotland United' is a misnomer. In reality, Scotland is a grotesquely divided society. Edinburgh's New Town is separated by just a few miles from the city's poverty-ridden Pilton housing scheme. Yet economically, socially and politically they are on two different planets. There is not one but two Scotlands, co-existing side-by-side. One awash with wealth, owning vast tracts of countryside. And the other of giro cheques and YTS schemes, of housing schemes fitted with wall-to-wall damp, and of mortality rates which rank amongst the highest in the Western world.

Scotland's bankers, businessmen and landowners oppose constitutional change, not because they are anti-Scottish, but because they are anti-working class and anti-socialist. They fear that a Scottish parliament would come under enormous pressure from the working class to carry through radical left-wing measures. Some sections of the Scottish business establishment have begun to flirt with the idea of limited constitutional change, not with any enthusiasm but because they are nervous of the possible consequences of clinging to the status quo. Others remain implacable opponents of any reform.

Certainly, whether or not the Tories concede any ground on this issue depends upon how events develop in Scotland — only if the movement for constitutional change is seen to be gathering strength will the Tories consider making concessions. On the other hand, if the initial momentum behind 'Scotland United' is seen to run out of steam, then the Tories are likely to stand firm, just as Thatcher stood firm in the aftermath of the 1987 general election.

This is not 1987. The last five years has seen a sea-change in Scotland. The impact of the poll tax campaign has penetrated deeply within working-class communities from one end of the country to the other. More than in any other part of Britain, there exists in Scotland a clear understanding that mass defiance of the law led directly to the downfall of Thatcher.

The anti-poll tax struggle has made militancy respectable. It has instilled a sense of confidence and power into the hearts and minds of the Scottish working class. The rise of Scottish Militant Labour in the housing schemes of Glasgow is just one symptom of the changing mood which has begun to sweep through Scotland. □

**A clear understanding exists that mass defiance led to the downfall of Thatcher**

# Lessons of LA

*The following article appeared in the May edition of the American Marxist paper, Labor Militant.*

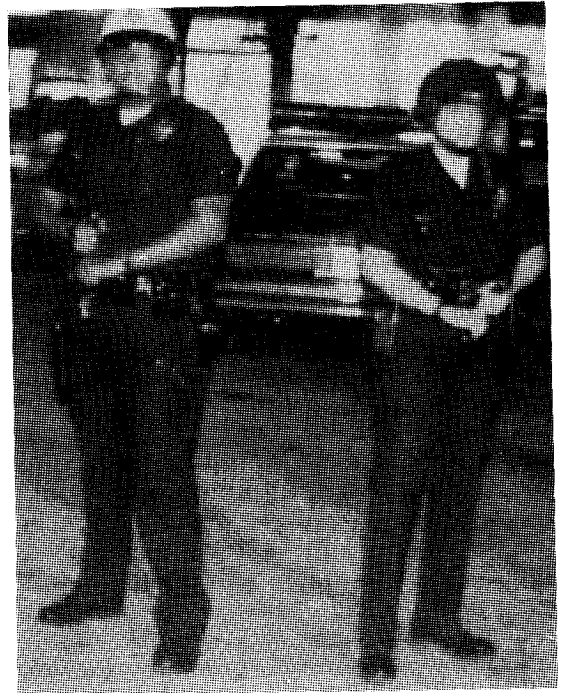
FIRST THE LOS ANGELES cops shocked unemployed construction worker Rodney King with their 5,000-voltage stun guns. Then they surrounded him, kicking and clubbing him, inflicting a total of 56 blows. This savagery was videotaped. It was clear for all to see that these cops were guilty.

However, the cops, their lawyers and the legal system conspired to move the trial from Los Angeles to suburban Simi Valley, 100 miles away in which the black population is only 2%. Thus the jury was rigged right from the start and the cops were acquitted.

The explosion of justifiable anger that followed this racist verdict left at least 44 dead, 1,900 injured, 5,200 arrested, 3,700 buildings burned and riots, demonstrations and injuries in several cities from coast to coast. These events constituted the most serious mass upheavals in the US since the 1960s.

The responsibility for this verdict and its aftermath lies with big business and its politicians, the Republicans and Democrats who have carried out the policies of big business over the past decades. Under the Reagan and Bush presidencies, in co-operation with the Democrat-controlled Congress, the rich have gotten richer and the poor poorer. The richest 1% of the population, 834,000 households, now own more than the bottom 90% — 84 million households. The ending of the 1982-90 boom has focused a spotlight on this savage inequality. Social services have been cut and poverty has exploded. The Californian state budget has plunged into a \$14bn deficit and major cuts in services and education have been made. Over the past decade, wages have been cut and unions attacked. Between 1979 and 1982, 70,000 well-paid, mainly unionised jobs were destroyed by the recession and the drive for profit in South Central Los Angeles. The result is that inequality, pressures and tensions in society reached a breaking point.

The earning power of the working class as a whole has fallen by 11% over the past decade. For black, Latino and other specially oppressed racial minorities, the earning power has collapsed. Between 1973 and 1990, the average yearly



income of black high school graduates declined by 44% and 35% for Latinos. Poverty is over 30% among blacks and Latinos while at 14% overall. Poverty in South Central Los Angeles is 40% and in some parts 90%. Youth unemployment is 40%. Only 11% of the adult population of South Central LA can afford a median priced home. As one commentator on the upheavals stated, these statistics of poverty and joblessness 'are the social context of the riots.'

TO DEAL WITH this, big business strengthened the police. The poor, especially the black and Latino poor, were to be forced to accept their worsening poverty by violence and coercion. The cops shot and clubbed and the jails filled up. The one-in-four young black males now in prison or under court supervision is more than the number in college. A higher percentage of the black population is in prison in the US than in South Africa. The US has the highest percentage of its population in prison than any country in the world.

To get away with its increased attacks on all workers' living standards and rights, big business stepped up its racist divide and rule propaganda and policies: civil rights laws and reforms were weakened and blacks were portrayed as being responsible for their own poverty and for crime.

**These were the most serious mass upheavals in the US since the 1960s.**

The labor leaders gave no way out, as they refused to unite and mobilise the working class as a whole against big business. Concession contracts were accepted which sold hundreds of thousands of well-paid union jobs. A constructive way to fight back, which only the labor movement can give and which is the responsibility of the labor leaders to provide, was not given and living standards continued to decline.

The increasing number of black political leaders were absorbed into the big business parties and carried out big business, profit-addicted capitalist policies. Black Democrat Tom Bradley, Mayor of Los Angeles for 19 years, has represented the interests of downtown real estate speculators, the banks and Japanese capitalists. He has presided over the rise of glittering office buildings in the city centre, while neighborhoods such as the mainly black South Central LA and the mainly Latino East LA have sunk further into poverty and despair.

The riots, uprisings and lootings which followed the acquittal of the four cops showed that big business's attacks on living standards, and especially on the living standards of black and Latino workers and youth, are no longer going to be accepted without massive opposition. In that sense, the developments in Los Angeles and throughout the US are signs of the future movement of the US working class.

NO SUPPORT CAN be given to the hypocritical condemnation of violence and looting by Bush and the other politicians, academics and media of big business. These are the people, this is the class, that murdered over 100,000 Iraqis to keep down the price of oil. Bush is the man who described LA police chief Gates as 'exemplary.' Clinton is the governor of Arkansas with some of the worst anti-union laws, poverty rates and racial discrimination in the US.

But for activists of the specially oppressed minorities and in the labor movement, the form that this explosion of anger took has to be discussed. This is necessary in order to clarify a correct program, strategy and tactics for the struggles and upheavals that lie ahead.

With the working class and youth of the cities unable to endure any longer, and with no lead from the labor leaders, the explosion of anger in Los Angeles turned into the burning of buildings and looting. The gangs in the areas moved into the vacuum and organised the activities on a mass scale. These actions, plus incidents like the attack on the truck driver, were concentrated on by the big business media. The enormous outrage at the acquittal of the cops, which was shared by 89% of the population, was weakened by this. Even in the black neighborhoods of the major cities, there was a hesitancy to take action against the verdict as the fear of their own neighborhoods going up in flames became stronger. The burnings and looting, therefore, have tended to cut across the possibility of



mobilising millions into mass demonstrations against the verdict.

***Bush surveys the aftermath.***

What was necessary was for the mass outrage in Los Angeles to be armed with a program, strategy and tactics which would have tapped the anger and discontent that exists among the working class and youth as a whole and would have shown a way out of the crisis. Such a program would have started from the demand that the Los Angeles police department must pay for their crimes.

This should have been linked to the fact that the cops are controlled by big business and they are used as an occupation force to subdue the most poverty-ridden neighborhoods, to break strikes and bust unions. The demand should have been raised for the replacement of this force by a labour-community controlled police force. Elected committees of representatives from the unions, workplaces and neighborhoods — from local to national level — should control this force. All members of such a police force should live in the areas they work.

This demand would need to be linked to a program of massive public works, under trade union control and at union rates of pay, to build houses, schools, hospitals, roads etc, funded by cuts in military spending and the nationalisation, under workers' control and management, of the top 500 banks and major industries. This would allow the economy to be run according to the needs of the majority and not those of

**The form this explosion of anger took has to be discussed**

**These events  
are an  
indication of  
things to  
come in the  
1990s.**

short-term speculation and the profits of the rich.

A campaign against racism is needed. By dividing the working class, racism weakens and reduces the living standards of all workers. Uniting the working class around such a program, along with a mass campaign to organise the unorganised into the trade union movement and the building of a union-based Labor Party to contest the coming elections with socialist policies, needs to be at the forefront of the struggle to solve the problems.

On the basis of such a program, the outpouring of rage at the acquittal of the cops could have been turned into a demonstration of millions in Los Angeles. This would have won the support of workers and youth all over the US. It would have been a major setback for big business and its policies, laying the basis for a mass labor movement capable of moving on to the transformation of US society along democratic socialist lines.

Huey Newton, leader of the Black Panther Party, urged his comrade Bobby Seale from his prison cell after the murder of Martin Luther King: "Tell them not to riot because all it would do is get 50 or 100 people killed," but to "get the community to become an organised force ready to defend itself." To this must be added the need to take the offensive against the capitalist system that is responsible for the conditions that exist in South Central and East Los Angeles.

The blame for the death and suffering in the aftermath of the acquittal of the cops lies with Bush, the Republicans, the Democrats, the capitalist class and their system. But the responsibility for solving the problems that lie at the root of these events lies with the labor leaders who control the 16 million-strong organised trade union movement, potentially the most powerful force in society. The blame for the form this outpouring of rage took lies on their shoulders. They abdicated their role and left working people leaderless.

Three weeks before the Los Angeles events, the nearly six months-long Caterpillar strike was called off by the labor leaders. If this battle, between the world's biggest construction equipment maker and one of America's most powerful unions, had been continued and stepped up into an occupation of the plants, and had been given a program that would have appealed to all workers and youth, this would have turned the rising discontent into a mass movement capable of changing society.

In the space of a few weeks the labor leaders refused to lead, first at Caterpillar and then in Los Angeles and nationwide in response to the acquittal. Their lamb-like silence left the working-class and the specially oppressed minorities leaderless and the field open to be exploited by the Clintons, the Perots, the racists, and gang leaders in Los Angeles. This refusal to act must

be condemned and the struggle taken up within the labor movement for the labor leaders to take action against poverty and racism.

THE EFFECTS OF the Los Angeles events did not stop at the borders of the US but have had world significance. They represent a body blow to US imperialism and its attempt to create a 'new world order', in which it would totally dominate after the collapse of stalinism. When its arrogant representatives lecture the pro-capitalist elements and the working class in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and demand major cuts in living standards in the future or when they do the same in Latin America, Africa and Asia, their authority will be greatly weakened.

The uprisings in Los Angeles and other US cities are part of the explosion of revolt building throughout the underdeveloped world against the increasingly aggressive policies of imperialism and the new world situation. They are part of the same pressure that has produced the riots in Venezuela; strikes and demonstrations throughout Latin America; the fifteen million-strong general strike in India; and the demonstrations and movements in the Middle East and Africa.

US imperialism and its counterparts have responded to these movements, which are in opposition to their policies and interests, by invading Grenada and Panama; bombing Libya and, most recently, waging war against Iraq. Those same troops that went into Iraq, went into Los Angeles. The objective is the same: to force the most impoverished victims of imperialism's policies to accept their lot. No support can be given to the intervention of imperialism's armed forces, the National Guard and the federal army, whether in the Middle East, Central America or Los Angeles. Whatever excuse is given for their armed intervention — to 'stop drugs coming through Panama', to 'stop Iraq from developing nuclear weapons', to 'stop looting in Los Angeles' — the real reason is to prop up the rule and profits of big business.

The uprisings around the acquittal also represent the beginnings of a backlash, political and otherwise, against the 1980s. The bills are now coming due. Chicago, the third largest city in the US, was flooded in April as a result of the neglect of the infrastructure and the deregulation of the 1980s. Los Angeles, the second largest city in the US, was burning as the month came to a close due to the refusal of big business to invest in infrastructure, the living standards of working people and its racist and repressive policies. These events are an indication of the shape of things to come in the 1990s. It is up to the labor leaders to organise a mass Labor Party, a mass unionisation drive, a campaign against racism and to mobilise and unite the working class around a democratic socialist program. □

# Peace Settlement

## — Or preparing for a new war?

*Sam Lewenstein looks at the prospects for the Middle East peace talks.*

THE BEGINNING OF the Middle East peace talks took place in a blaze of world-wide media coverage. For the first time sworn enemies sat across negotiating tables. Hopes were raised for a final end to the never-ending cycle of war and bloody conflict in the Middle East. But is a settlement possible? Can these negotiations reconcile the aspirations of the Palestinians for a national homeland and, at the same time, the fears Israeli Jewish workers have for their security?

These talks do represent a new departure. Their extensive nature, in terms of the number of countries involved, is not accidental, but is rooted in recent developments in the Middle East, as well as the titanic changes in world relations over the last two years.

The Middle East has long been a region of vital strategic and economic importance to the superpowers, because of its oil supplies. Huge resources were pumped into the region by the Soviet Union and the US, each vying to get the upper hand in the number of client states they influenced. None of the contradictions in the region were solved. In fact they were exacerbated, leading to a periodic outbreak of bloody wars and a constant conflict between the Israeli state and the Palestinian masses.

1989 changed this. The massive movements which swept stalinist regimes from power across Eastern Europe had immediate effect within the Middle East. The then Soviet Union began to withdraw funding, and its favourable trade agreements, with countries like Syria. As the *Wall Street Journal* said on 30 October, 1991: "Shorn of his old patron, the Soviet Union, and any hope of allying himself with a strong Iraqi military in a war against Israel, the Syrian president has no choice but to appease the US and avoid hostilities with the Jewish state."

The extent to which the former Soviet Union has declined as a world superpower is indicated by the evolution of the peace talks themselves. Originally a joint US/Soviet sponsored event, when the first session opened in October 1991 a demoralised and broken Gorbachev used his

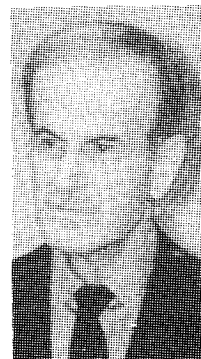
speech to plead for aid for the fast disintegrating Soviet Union. By the time talks were held in Russia, now part of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Yeltsin did not even turn up and Saudi Arabia and Kuwait had to underwrite the costs.

The collapse of Stalinism left a power vacuum for US imperialism in the Middle East. The USA's intervention in the Gulf war further increased its commitments in the region. The victory over Iraq was US imperialism's biggest success since world war two. After stalemate in Korea and defeat in Vietnam, this victory boosted the confidence of the American ruling class to attempt further counter-revolutionary interventions in the neo-colonial world.

But while the US achieved a relatively easy military victory, winning the peace has been fraught with difficulties. Grand plans for a Gulf Cooperation Force, based on the armies of Middle Eastern countries who participated in Operation Desert Storm, have come to nothing. None of the rulers of the countries involved trust each other enough to stomach foreign troops on their soil. Neither were they prepared to fund such a venture.

Moreover, US imperialism, portraying itself as the 'defender of democracy' during the Gulf war, promised a solution to the problems of the Middle East. However, Saddam Hussein cleverly used the oppression of the Palestinians, promising to withdraw from Kuwait if the Palestinians were granted a homeland. While Bush vehemently opposed any 'linkage', this had an effect on the consciousness of the Arab masses in particular. It was brought home to Bush and other US bourgeois strategists the potential for further bitter conflict around the Palestinian question.

The reactionary Arab leaders felt obliged to put pressure on the US, although not out of any heartfelt concern for the super-oppressed Palestinians. While many of these rulers have portrayed themselves as champions of the Palestinians' cause, this has been mainly to deflect criticism of their own rule by the masses of the Middle East. After the Gulf war, this became



**Syrian president Assad.**

**A number of  
factors forced  
the  
reactionary  
Likud  
government to  
the  
negotiating  
table.**

especially important given that they had participated in what was perceived by wide layers of the Arab masses as a bloody intervention by imperialism to protect its strategic interests in the region.

The main driving force, therefore, behind US imperialism's desire to find some sort of settlement, has been the enormous instability that exists in the Middle East. This has increased markedly since the Gulf war, particularly because of the economic devastation which resulted from the conflict. US imperialism hopes that by achieving a 'peace settlement' they can at least delay the onset of a new conflagration.

WHAT IS PUBLICALLY on offer in these negotiations as far as US imperialism is concerned? The US hopes for an end to the Arab boycott of trade with Israel and the development of regional economic agreements, including on water supplies; issues which have the potential of sparking off a new war in the future. The US would also be prepared to discuss the withdrawal of the Israeli army from the Golan Heights and the South Lebanon security zone in return for Arab 'guarantees' of Israeli security.

Limited self-government in the occupied territories for a trial period of two years is also proposed. This would allow the Palestinians to elect local councils with limited powers. After five years they hope that Israeli-Palestinian negotiations would lead to some sort of autonomy. No mention is made of the status of the Israeli army (IDF) in the territories during this period.

What is the secret agenda of US imperialism behind this public position? By setting up new regional economic agreements, involving discussions on further aid to the Middle East, the US hopes to be able to balance between the Arab countries and Israel to maintain an uneasy peace, using dollars as a carrot or stick where necessary.

Concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the US hopes limited self-government will be enough to cause splits in the Palestinian masses and isolate those mainly young Palestinians who have been at the forefront of the intifada, and who regard participation in the talks as a betrayal of the struggle for national liberation of their people. In effect they hope to derail the intifada, the magnificent struggle which has rocked the Israeli state to its foundations over the last four years.

HISTORICALLY, HAVING CREATED the basis for the Arab-Israeli conflict, which has resulted in six bloody wars in the region, the US has attempted periodically to paper over the instability in a vain attempt to protect their strategic interests and oil supplies to the West. But this is US imperialism's most serious attempt yet to find a negotiated regional settlement.

To secure the participation of most Arab

countries required huge pressure. But the prospect of more US aid in return for participation in the talks, given the economic devastation caused by the Gulf war, was a compelling factor. The war caused huge population movements, among them over 360,000 Palestinians expelled from Kuwait. The poorer Arab countries lost billions of dollars in remittances from their workers in the Gulf states. The UN-imposed boycott of trade with Iraq also drove them into deep crisis.

Jordan, for example, has seen a 10% rise in population since the end of the war, as 300,000 Palestinian refugees entered the country. Its foreign debt has increased to \$8bn, with at least \$1bn per annum being lost in remittances. The number of people living below the poverty line has increased to one million, nearly a third of the population, while 150,000 people have no income whatsoever. The war meant the loss of \$3.6bn in trade, equal to 77% of GDP.

A number of factors were instrumental in forcing the right-wing reactionary Likud government to the negotiating table. During the Gulf war civilian areas were hit by missiles for the first time in Israeli history. This had a huge effect on Israeli workers' psychology. The promise of every government that economic sacrifices by Israeli workers were necessary to prevent military attacks of this sort has been shown to be false. The Gulf war helped to crystallise a feeling of war weariness which is a constant feature among Israeli Jews. Just before the Madrid conference opened, 91% of Israelis supported participation in the peace talks. Fifty thousand demonstrated in Tel Aviv.

The four year-old intifada has also had a profound effect on the consciousness of Israeli Jews. Zionism's slogan prior to the foundation of Israel was: 'A land without people, for a people without a land.' Golda Meir, former Israeli prime minister, put it more succinctly: 'There are no such people as the Palestinians.' The tenacious and determined struggle conducted by young Palestinians and workers has changed all this. Beneath the surface, most Israeli Jews now understand that a military 'solution' to the Palestinian question would lead to a bloody civil war, with no guarantee of victory.

The wish for peace among the majority of Israeli Jews is generalised: what it hides however are the different currents of consciousness that exist among workers and young Israelis. Some believe that concessions must be made to the Palestinians and that there must be an end to the permanent state of war that Israel faces. Others support participation in the talks, in order to drive a hard bargain and to make sure no significant concessions are given to the Palestinians, to gain time for Israel to strengthen itself for a future war. There is a lurking fear that these talks like others will fail: even in the heady days of the initial Madrid talks, 37% believed this to be the case.

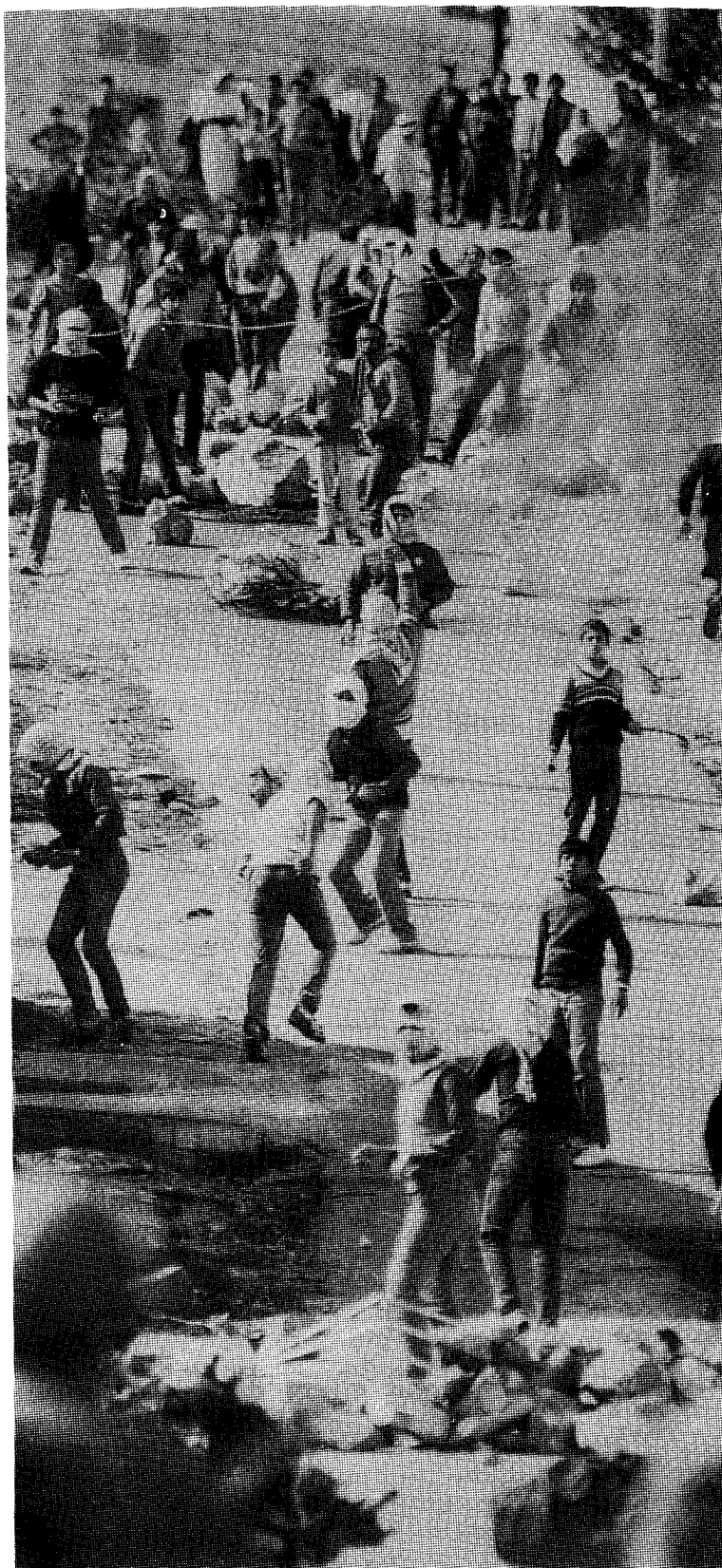
Added to this is the developing economic crisis exacerbated by the aliyah (immigration) of 320,000 Soviet Jews. The Israeli government greeted their arrival as a huge propaganda coup, a demographic victory over the fast expanding Palestinian population: reinforcements for the beleaguered Israeli state surrounded by hostile Arab neighbours and threatened from within by the menace of the Palestinians. While the arrival of the Soviet Jews has led to a boost in the housing market, this has been at the expense of a huge increase in foreign debt.

Moreover, Palestinian workers from both sides of the green line, normally hired to do the most menial jobs, have been sacked to give jobs to new immigrants, leading to rocketing unemployment, plunging living standards and developing social collapse in the Arab areas of Israel and the occupied territories.

But the immigrants are, in the main, highly qualified and discontented with the new situation they face. Unemployment among the new arrivals is 40% and such is the economic pressure on the government that the new immigrants grant has now been turned into a loan. Inflation has reached 18% while according to government figures, over 570,000 Israeli Jews live below the poverty line. The most optimistic forecasts look to a growth rate in the economy of 1-2% this year. The country lost \$1bn during the Gulf war. While a propaganda victory for the Israeli regime, the arrival of the Soviet Jews introduces more explosive material into society, because of the inability of Israeli capitalism to absorb them.

Shamir's government, therefore, was desperate for US agreement to guarantee \$10bn worth of loans. Israel has been dependent upon US financial support from its formation. Since 1949 the US has given Israel \$53bn in aid, equivalent to \$1,000 per year for every man, woman and child in the country. So Bush was given his bargaining counter on a plate — he simply refused to authorise the loans until after the peace talks were concluded. This is the most severe pressure applied by any US president against Israel, and indicates the seriousness with which US imperialism approached the talks.

Despite this setback, Shamir and his government have not fundamentally changed their position of refusing to make territorial concessions to the Palestinians in return for 'peace'. The Likud leaders have launched a new phase of an old war: the forced dispossession of Palestinians and the confiscation of their land. In the past year the rate of building new houses for settlers has doubled. Some analysts predict that the Jewish population of the occupied territories will pass 250,000 this year. Between one and two-thirds of all housing starts in Israel will be made in the territories. While they are discussing peace in Madrid and Moscow, the Likud government has been creating 'facts' on the ground.



THE AGREEMENT of the PLO to the start of negotiations was also initially important to US imperialism. The massive concessions the PLO leadership made are a consequence of their mistaken policies of the past. Unfortunately, they retain the illusion that imperialism can be pressurised to grant an autonomous Palestinian



**What can the talks achieve?**

state in the Middle East.

They have conducted a dual policy of diplomacy on the one hand and attacks on Israeli targets on the other. Neither has worked. The PLO's policy of individual terrorism has sacrificed the lives of some of the best young Palestinians while driving Jewish workers into the arms of the state without fundamentally threatening the Israeli regime. While the PLO leadership has relied on reactionary Arab regimes for support, these have been prepared to betray the Palestinian people at each decisive turning point.

During the Gulf war, there was huge support for Saddam amongst Palestinians, because of his verbal championing of their cause but also because he attacked imperialism. If the PLO leaders had refused to recognise this pressure from below, they would have been totally discredited. But this support for Saddam had a price. After the war, the Gulf states who had supplied the PLO with billions of dollars, cut off their funding. If they had not accepted the US conditions then they would have been left out in the diplomatic cold.

As a result the PLO agreed not to have their own delegation or to have any official representatives on the Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. They also agreed to the exclusion of any East Jerusalem Palestinians. This represented a huge climbdown, as this area was annexed during the 1967 war and even the UN regards it as occupied territory! East Jerusalem is the capital of West Bank political life.

There are different trends amongst the Palestinians, both supporting and opposing the negotiations. The intifada has continued despite facing one of the most brutal and well-armed state machines in the world. However, while the movement has not been broken, the intifada has not been armed with a strategy to split the social basis of support for the Israeli state. As a result no significant concessions have been wrested from the Israeli ruling class. With no apparent headway being made, with 750 Palestinian deaths, 50,000 wounded in Gaza alone, and 15,000 detained, the mass participation in the intifada which was a characteristic of the early days, has largely subsided for the time being.

As a result sections of the Palestinian population have reluctantly accepted the peace talks in the absence of anything else. If a settlement is reached on limited self-government then it is likely that amongst sections of the masses there would be a resigned acceptance, with the hope that autonomy and an independent state may follow.

Among the hard core of the intifada, mainly made up of young Palestinians, there is strong opposition to negotiations and any sort of settlement short of an independent Palestinian state. These youth feel betrayed by the Palestinian delegation, fearing that yet another layer of their leaders is being drawn into the orbit of US

imperialism to be bogged down in endless negotiations and bought off with promises of leading positions within whatever self-government may be agreed upon.

These fears are well founded. In the Washington talks Palestinian delegates boasted that their speeches had been written in co-operation with the US State Department, demonstrating their 'return to favour' with the Americans. During the negotiations new 'political action committees' have been set up in the occupied territories. Their function, explained Faisal al-Husseini, a leading East Jerusalem Palestinian, "is to protect the peace process. They will protect the street from high expectations and desperate feelings." (*Jerusalem Report*, 28 November 1991). In other words, to reassert control in the territories and provide a new layer of 'leadership' to sell any possible settlement to the Palestinian masses.

THERE IS NO doubt that among some workers and young Israelis there are enormous illusions in these negotiations. At best they hope a lasting peace will be reached; at worst, at least the next war will be delayed.

Yet it would be completely wrong to support the idea that these talks, even if they produce some sort of agreement, would be the first step to peace and an independent Palestinian state. To do this would be to confuse and mislead those Jewish workers and youth who look to the talks to produce a lasting peace, since at a certain stage it would become clear that the interests of US imperialism, Israeli capitalism, and the reactionary Arab nationalist leaders cannot be reconciled with such a solution. Incapable of solving the huge social and economic problems that exist in the Middle East, they will not be able therefore to provide an answer to the national conflicts which are a running sore in the region. The Palestinians are not just fighting for an independent homeland. They are also fighting for decent housing, education, wages and jobs, which they have been denied for so long. That is why the struggle for national liberation and socialism are interlinked.

The political map of the Middle East is not just composed of the borders of the different countries. A closer look shows a criss-cross of numerous fracture lines within and between countries, the result of huge social, economic and political pressures. While a formal agreement might paper over the surface of one or two of these cracks, the contradictions would still exist ready to burst through at any moment. The example of the recent magnificent Lebanese general strike shows this. In four days the government was swept from power. A movement like this in any Middle Eastern country could provide the conditions for earth-shattering events which would render any 'agreement' meaningless.

It is possible then that a tenuous agreement

could be reached on limited measures of self-government for the Palestinians. It may be possible, particularly after the general election in June, for there to be negotiations on the withdrawal of the IDF from the Golan Heights. But the most that the Israeli government is likely to consider is its replacement by UN forces to protect the 20,000 remaining Jewish settlers, in order to stop a massive reaction in Israel. But this is like trying to square the circle. These are massive contradictions dressed up in the clothes of solutions.

That the 'peace process' could produce a long-term solution involving the creation of a Palestinian homeland, based on the occupied territories and answering the fears Israeli Jews have for their security, is completely ruled out. Such a homeland would face the opposition of 170,000, armed and mainly reactionary, Jewish settlers. Just the economic cost of re-settlement would be \$20bn. But, as Eliakim Haetzni, a right-wing MP said: "Autonomy for Palestinians will mean a terrorist Palestinian state. It will bring civil war." If forcible re-settlement was attempted there is no doubt a civil war would take place. Faced with no alternative solution many Jews living in Israel proper would be stampeded through fears for their security into supporting the settlers.

Moreover, no mention has been made in the 'peace' negotiations of the two-and-a-half million Palestinian refugees spread throughout the Middle East. The contradiction that lies at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, from the foundation of Israel in 1948, was that a supposedly safe haven for Jews fleeing the holocaust was built on the basis of the forced expulsion of the Palestinians, creating a new diaspora in the Middle East. Perhaps the greatest support for a Palestinian homeland, and the greatest bitterness towards the Israeli state, is felt among these refugees.

But the US could not countenance an independent Palestinian state with the right-of-return. Such a development would lead to a huge revolutionary movement among the Palestinians. The release from four decades of brutal repression would unleash a movement with huge expectations and increased confidence which would eventually engulf the Arab masses of the entire region in the struggle for decent living standards and democracy. Therefore, while the US may be prepared to push the Israelis to make concessions in order to derail the Palestinian struggle, they will do nothing to threaten the stability of their most important outpost in the region.

IT IS NOT possible then to know precisely what limited 'agreement' these peace talks could produce or how long they will last. There are numerous points at which they could break down.

The outcome of the Israeli elections in June is



certainly a 'wild card' in the equation. The Likud government lost its parliamentary majority as two right-wing parties, Moledet and Tehiya, deserted the government because of rumours that the Israeli delegation was offering the Palestinians limited self-government. Although this precipitated new elections, the extreme right's withdrawal came at an opportune time for Shamir. The 'progress' of the peace talks has been slowed and the US presidential elections which follow will delay the possibility of any conclusion to the talks being reached.

In addition, Shamir has been able to portray himself as the leader best able to safeguard Israel's security in talks with the Palestinians, previously having been handicapped by the intransigent extreme-right. Of course, this will not stop him attempting to bribe the far-right and religious parties with generous donations to their organisations in a possible scramble to form a new government after the elections.

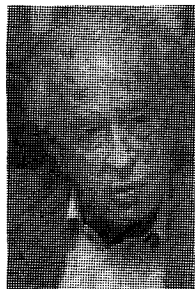
Since elections were called there has been a shift towards the Labour Party, primarily due to the dissatisfaction with the Likud government. While many Soviet Jews oppose 'socialism', as they see it, their extreme discontent with the progress of absorption has tipped them to support Labour on economic issues. The election of Yitzhak Rabin as new leader of the Labour Party has also been a factor.

Seen as a 'strong leader', without the taint of defeat that his predecessor Shimon Perez had, Rabin has showed a flexibility not previously displayed concerning the Palestinians. Interviewed by *The Independent*, (17 April 1992), he avoided a direct answer on the issue of statehood but said: "I am not saying the Palestinians have no rights to aspire to." His view of Palestinian autonomy is almost that of US imperialism

**Faisal al-Husseini with US Secretary of State, James Baker.**



**Shamir.**



*Yitzhak Rabin.*

— limited self-government for five years excluding jurisdiction over security and foreign affairs. With the suggestion that \$10bn worth of loans would be granted to a Labour government, US imperialism has clearly shown where its support lies at this juncture.

Rabin also commented glowingly of "the new generation of very educated and clever people" in the occupied territories. He is referring here to the negotiators involved in the peace talks whom, if handled correctly, he hopes to lean on as a political influence over the Palestinian masses.

If Labour is elected, then it is more likely that a short-term agreement on self-government could be reached. The Labour administration would probably inject more money into the territories which, while not fundamentally changing the situation, could provide hope for future change. It would also create the financial basis for building up a new Palestinian leadership in the territories. Rabin would probably switch some money presently being spent on the huge expansion of new settlements in the occupied territories to spending on unemployment and other social issues within Israel.

If Likud wins, then a short-term agreement is less likely but nevertheless possible under the pressure of US imperialism. What may transpire is an endless round of talks followed by a breakdown at a certain stage. If there is a national government, it is more likely that Likud would be forced to reach some sort of agreement, or face another general election with the likelihood of defeat.

HOWEVER, WHILE US imperialism will do its utmost to keep them going, behind the facade of the peace talks the different regimes are preparing for renewed war within the next few years. Syria is spending the \$2bn it received for participation in the Gulf war on new advanced Scud missiles from North Korea and China. Their range includes all major civilian areas in Israel. Despite the US refusal to grant \$10bn loans to Israel, it continues to supply advanced military technology to its main ally in the Middle East.

It is not clear on exactly what issue a future war could break out. But there is enough raw material to provide the first spark. One issue could be water supplies. Elias Salameh, professor of water resources at Jordan University, recently said: "Sometime between 1995 and 2005 there is a high probability that Israel, Jordan and the West Bank will face such progressively worsening shortages that there will be a conflict." Israel has always kept strict military objectives regarding water supplies during its wars against the Arab countries. During the last stages of the 1967 war its army made a rush for the headwaters of the River Jordan. By redirecting water into Israel's national water-carrying system, the Jordan has been reduced to a trickle

in its lower reaches. The Israeli government has previously threatened to destroy any attempt to build a dam on the River Yarmuk, in Jordan.

Uphcavals in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon or Syria could also precipitate new wars. The bonapartist dictatorship of President Assad in Syria has based its rule on hostile opposition to Israel. For decades the Syrian Ba'ath party demanded huge sacrifices from its population on the basis of military opposition to the 'Zionist enemy'. Now they are negotiating with this enemy. This contradiction could provide the spark for a social explosion which would demand an end to food and consumer goods shortages, as well as democratic rights and an end to the one-party regime. Such a development would reverberate throughout the region, with a direct impact on the course of the Palestinian struggle in Israel and the occupied territories.

The inability of US imperialism to bankroll the financially crippled Arab regimes will lead to enormous struggles unfolding. The unease felt amongst wide layers of the Arab masses towards the intervention of US imperialism in the Gulf, despite their opposition to Saddam Hussein's regime, will crystalise into outright anger at the new hardships they face. This will fuse with the anger of those Arab workers and peasants who supported Saddam and who, despite being cowed in the immediate aftermath of the war, feel an increasingly bitter hatred towards imperialism's role in the region.

This anger will be directed against the leaders of their own regimes first, who will be seen as the stooges of imperialism, receiving money from the US but unwilling to end the poverty of their own masses. It was a similar process which led to the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981 by one of his own soldiers, three years after he had signed the Camp David peace accord with the Israeli government.

Contradictory trends will appear amongst the Palestinian masses whatever the outcome of the talks. Certainly, the Palestinian youth at the forefront of the intifada feel that their struggle has been stabbed in the back by their leaders' participation in these talks. With the eclipse of the Communist Party as a pole of attraction, there will be a growth in support for the different Islamic fundamentalist groups. They are seen as the most consistent opponents of imperialism in the Middle East. Their position has been to boycott the peace talks, and to increase individual terrorist attacks against Israeli targets.

The election successes of the fundamentalists in Algeria will boost their support while the military coup will elevate them to martyrdom. Driven by hatred towards the Zionist Israeli government and frustration at not being able to make headway in the struggle for national liberation, increasing numbers of the most militant young Palestinians will commit further acts of individual terrorism, which although requiring great personal bravery, will be futile in their



results.

These will have the effect of driving Israeli Jews further to the right. Israeli Jewish settlers have promised to establish a new settlement for every attack against them. The Likud government have surreptitiously supported this. They have also legalised the formation of vigilante groups of settlers to tour the territories. But beating the drum of security will not solve the social problems that will face the incoming Israeli government, whatever its composition.

The inability of imperialism, Zionism and the reactionary Arab regimes to provide an answer to the social, political, and economic problems will lead to a worsening of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At times Israel will teter on the brink of civil war while at other times social conflict will come to the fore.

Palestinian and Jewish workers are separated by a formidable barrier created by the national conflict. Despite geographical proximity, developments among Jewish workers are hidden from the Palestinians by this barrier which is of a political and physical character. The latter because of the repressive measures of the IDF, which have turned the Palestinian areas of the occupied territories into bantustan-like ghettos: the former because many Palestinians direct their hatred of the 'Zionist government's' actions against all Israeli Jews — a response which is encouraged by the PLO's lack of strategy and tactics to win national liberation.

The situation in the Middle East is crying out for a solution which only the ideas of workers' unity and genuine socialism can provide. The Palestinian masses and Jewish workers will go through bitter experiences. With the growth of Marxist ideas and their own experience, the Palestinians will realise that the only way in which national liberation can be achieved is by neutralising or splitting away support of Jewish workers from the Zionist state, and uniting the masses of the region in the struggle for socialism.

Worsening social conditions will force Jewish workers onto the road of struggle once again. Solidarity action between different groups of Jewish workers will solve the problem of fragmentation that exists. The crumbling away of national unity against the 'menace' of surrounding Arab countries, will be a product of this process. It is along this road that increasing numbers of workers and young Israelis will be won to the ideas of Marxism.

The struggle for workers' unity and socialism will mean the overthrow of the reactionary Arab regimes, and Zionism and capitalism in Israel. This will clear the way for the construction of a socialist federation of Middle Eastern countries, containing a socialist Palestinian state alongside a socialist Israel. A democratically planned economy under workers' control could provide the basis to solve the social, economic and political problems which have fed the fires of nationalism since 1948. □

***Jewish settlers  
in the West  
Bank.***

# Nuclear weapons for sale

by Pete Dickenson

**There are four former Soviet Republics with nuclear weapons**

THE BREAK-UP OF the Soviet Union into its constituent republics, along with the attempts of Iraq to build a nuclear bomb, have highlighted the question of nuclear proliferation. The collapse of Stalinism, which represents a victory for imperialism, will lead to an unequalled level of instability in post-world war two international relations. The Gulf war itself would probably not have taken place under the 'old world order'.

This is happening at a time when hardly a dent has been made in the nuclear arsenals, East and West. The cuts made so far have been largely cosmetic and any future reductions in inter-continental missiles will depend on the willingness of the individual former soviet republics to comply.

The spread of nuclear weapons could come from individual states developing their own technology or from the export of hardware and expertise from other nuclear powers. The first route is long, difficult and expensive as the experience of Iraq has demonstrated. It is first necessary to produce sufficient weapons-grade uranium for a bomb, about 20 kilogrammes. This form of uranium, called the 235-isotope, is only found mixed with much larger quantities of uranium-238, which is not suitable for bombs.

The process of separating the two forms of uranium is slow and expensive. The modern way of doing this is to use a centrifuge. The Iraqis, however, were using a calutron which is old-fashioned technology, used to

make the Hiroshima bomb. It involves accelerating particles of uranium through a magnetic field where the lighter 235-isotope follows a slightly different path to the heavier uranium-238. It is then possible to collect the two separately.

After the material has been collected, which might take years for one bomb, it is necessary to detonate the explosion and to control the shape of the uranium with conventional explosives. This has to be done so that a chain reaction occurs and the bomb doesn't fizzle out. Modern detonators are based on micro-electronics and it would be very difficult for a country with limited technical resources to design one from scratch. There have been press reports that the Iraqis acquired a detonator from an existing nuclear power.

Most 'unofficial' nuclear powers like India and Brazil built up stocks of weapons grade material through civil nuclear power programmes and got the expertise to build a bomb by recruiting staff who had worked in the nuclear industry in the West. This was probably combined with the 'acquisition' of key components manufactured by a leading nuclear power.

After a working bomb has been made it is still necessary to find a way of dropping it. Only the leading powers have inter-continental missiles, other countries have to use aircraft or short-range missiles like the Iraqi Scuds. Aircraft are vulnerable to missile attack and Scud-type missiles are inaccurate, unrel-

iable and will only go a few hundred miles.

TO DATE THESE technical difficulties have held back the proliferation of nuclear weapons, although there are now probably a dozen countries with a secret nuclear capacity, including Israel and South Africa. The collapse of the Soviet Union will change this situation. There are four republics with nuclear weapons, Russia, Ukraine, Belorussia and Kazakstan. The capabilities of these nuclear powers are of a different order of magnitude to the ex-colonial nuclear states. The bombs developed by Pakistan or Brazil are fission devices, like the ones dropped on Japan. They use the energy released in splitting the atom. The weapons in the Soviet republics on the other hand are hydrogen, or fusion bombs. They are based on the release of energy when atomic particles are fused together to form a new nucleus, and are many hundreds of times more powerful than an atomic or fission bomb.

The delivery systems are totally different as well. The technological gap between the USA and the USSR was at its smallest in the missile field. The Soviet Union developed inter-continental missiles with multiple independently targeted warheads. These can be launched from the ground or from submarines. The only difference with the American version is that they are slightly less accurate, hitting a target within 200 metres instead of 20 metres.

The US government is trying to stop the proliferation of the massive Soviet arsenal to non-nuclear states, and Yeltsin is attempting to concentrate all the nuclear weapons on Russian soil. Formal agreements have been reached between the four nuclear republics to move strategic and tactical missiles to Russia. The strategic missiles are long-range, inter-continental weapons, the tactical weapons could be short-range missiles or nuclear artillery shells for use on the battlefield.

At the moment it is impossible to know how far the republican leaders intend to honour the agreement to move their arsen-

## Science Notes

als to Russia. There are 28,000 nuclear weapons, the majority of which are small tactical systems, and in the dislocation and chaos, amidst the growing national tensions between the republics, some of them could be 'lost'.

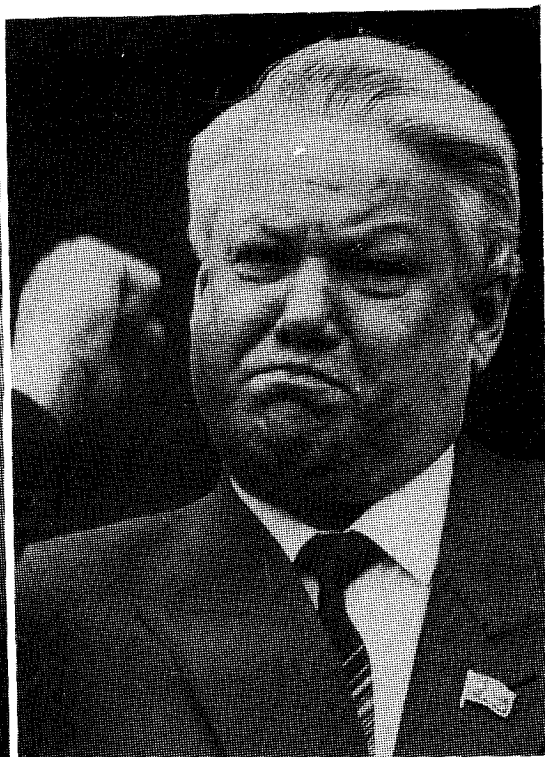
There are two aspects to proliferation. The first is the export of technology and the second the export of expertise. In the long run, the second presents the greatest danger, since the possession of knowledge is decisive in the final analysis.

For example, warheads need constant attention to keep them effective. Plutonium devices contain other elements apart from plutonium to increase their power, such as tritium. It has a half-life of only twelve years, which means every year approximately 5% of it decays into helium gas and has eventually to be replaced. Some of the plutonium also decays into an element called americium, which then reacts with the remaining plutonium producing heat, which damages the electronic circuits and the conventional explosives which are present. This can seriously affect the working of the bomb which is very sensitive to the correct operation of the explosives, as was mentioned previously.

The former Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow made sure that the key workers at nuclear installations outside Russia were ethnic Russians. Without their help it would be difficult to carry out the complex maintenance detailed above or to operate the missile systems. There is, however, a question mark over the loyalty of the Russian military technicians to the new Russian state. Many senior Russian officers, for example, have chosen to serve with the Ukrainian army.

Moreover, even if the non-Russian republics cannot eventually maintain complete warheads, they could still sell individual components. There will be huge economic pressures on them to sell items such as detonators or quantities of plutonium.

It is estimated that there are over one million scientists and technicians working on nuclear weapons or in nuclear facilities



in the former Soviet Union. About 4,000 of these have the expertise to make a warhead, although it is unlikely that one individual could do so. There have been press reports already that senior scientists at the top nuclear research centre, the Kurchatov Institute of Atomic Energy in Moscow, have been approached by Libya. They were offered \$2,000 a month, which is not a lot by Western standards but represents more than 200 times the current average salary in Russia. The story may be partly black propaganda by the US against Gaddafi, but approaches like this will undoubtedly take place.

The EC has pledged \$65m and the US \$25m to develop programmes to keep redundant nuclear scientists in the country. But these sums will probably be inadequate. Nuclear research and warhead production was done mainly in closed cities, many of which were in the region around the Ural mountains. These cities had no names, just numbers, although some had populations of several hundred thousand. The working conditions were relatively good and the scientists were a privileged elite. They will take a lot of persuading to stay in what could become remote ghost towns.

IT WOULD BE wrong to exaggerate the dangers of a regional nuclear war taking place as a result of this proliferation, but the chances of it happening will undoubtedly increase. The US can still exert enormous political pressure on most ex-colonial countries and will do so, fearing the revolutionary consequences of the wave of revulsion that would sweep the globe in the event of a nuclear strike. But on the other hand, the nightmare scenario of a regional nuclear war between client states escalating into a superpower confrontation has disappeared. The imperative of US imperialism to prevent a 'small' nuclear war will not be as overwhelming as before. They will certainly not prevent a war for humanitarian reasons. The nuclear bombs dropped on Japan in world war two were meant as a warning to Stalin not to try to overrun the whole of Europe, and not to speed the end of the Pacific war as they claimed.

The instability in world relations after the collapse of Stalinism will create new situations where the planet could again be devastated by nuclear weapons used in regional conflicts. The working class is the only force which can halt the threat of a new slide into barbarism. □

**'Nuclear presidents'**  
**Kravchik,**  
**Ukraine, and**  
**Yeltsin, Russia.**

# Life of a union rebel?

**Yvonne Harrison reviews Eric Hammond's recently published autobiography.**

MEMORIES OF THE EETPU's treacherous role during the 1984-85 miners' strike and at Wapping are inextricably linked with the name of Eric Hammond. His autobiography, *Maverick – The Life of a Union Rebel* shows why.

The basis of Hammond's 'trade unionism' is business unionism, where union leaders do deals over the heads of the rank-and-file, with rights to organise and struggle compromised or bartered away. The miners' strike starkly revealed where this trend of trade unionism leads. His role throughout the year-long strike can only be described as one of sabotage!

The EETPU had close links with the scab 'Union of Democratic Mineworkers' (UDM). Hammond admits: "Once the UDM was formed, I had a number of private meetings with Roy Lynk, and we staged a meeting of the two union executives at our Cudham Hall..." Hammond also had a cosy relationship with Energy Minister, Peter Walker, freely admitting that Walker consulted him about oil-fired power stations, "so they kept on extra sets... in Kent which were burning around the clock throughout the dispute, 10% beyond their stated capacity."

Yet, he begins his distorted account of this historic struggle with the bald statement that he offered the NUM "the chance to win the year-long pit strike just three months into the dispute"! Hammond claims he offered to urge power workers to stop work if the NUM held a ballot, renounced violence on the picket lines and renounced any political objectives in the strike – the same issues that the Tories were using to attack the miners and their leaders.

Yet it wasn't the miners who forced the strike on the Tories but the Tories who forced the fight onto the miners, after months of elaborate secret contingency planning. If the miners had won Thatcher would have fallen, as she did after the victory of the anti-poll tax campaign. The violence on the picket lines was also rooted in the military-like preparations of the government, the police and the coal board. To have conceded to Hammond would have damaged the solidarity of the dispute, capitulating to the propaganda of the Tories and the media. Hammond knew there was no way principled trade union fighters could come up with any form of words that would satisfy his demands.

Many good trade unionists thought that tact-

ically it would have been better for the miners to have balloted. Nevertheless, when the strike was on and the miners, along with their communities, had voted overwhelmingly with their feet, the ballot issue should not have been an impediment to solidarity. The question to every serious trade unionist was – whose side are you on? In reality, Hammond came down emphatically for the Tories in their efforts to smash the NUM. His 'offer' was propaganda point scoring. At the EETPU conference his real position was clear: "We will not placidly accept the escalation from one day of action to another resulting in a nationwide strike. The executive will not support a serious extension without the consent of all trade unions involved through a ballot vote, and *even then our recommendation would be, vote 'No.'*"

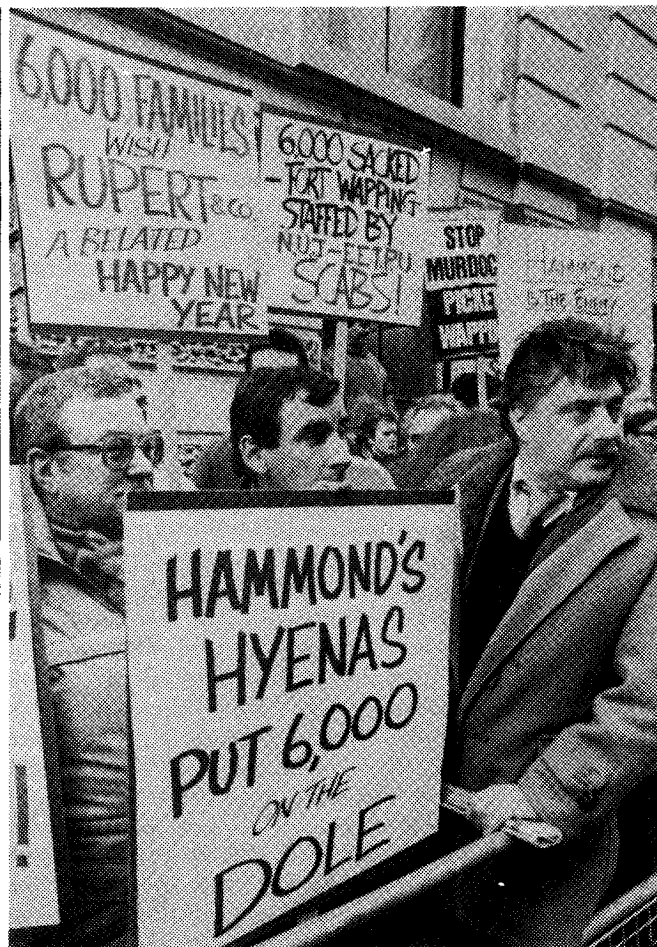
IN BOTH THE miners' strike and at Wapping, Hammond bore a great responsibility for the divisions that rent the movement. But it was the failure of the TUC leadership to act decisively to gain victory for the miners and then the printers which gave a green light for the Tories to introduce further anti-union legislation.

Of course, Hammond was not opposed to Tory intervention in internal union affairs. In a chapter entitled 'Thatcher's ballot bonus' he welcomes secret postal balloting: "Thatcher did a favour to everyone who believes in fair play and union democracy." *Militant* consistently argues that union leaders should be accountable to their members through regular election of all representatives, full-time and lay. But the method of such elections should be determined by the membership themselves and not by the law. Postal balloting has not resulted in more members' taking part in elections – the percentage voting has fallen year by year. Union elections are now more open to state interference and bureaucratic manipulation. The role of activists who see the candidates in action, has been undermined in favour of the union machine and the press.

Hammond praises the Tory anti-union legislation: "I told the TUC General Council that, before the end of the century, we would be erecting statues to Norman Tebbit for making them listen to the members and consequently saving the unions"! But Tebbit's aim was to 'neuter' the trade unions. And how has the legal power to sequester unions' assets, to prevent solidarity action, to ban trade unions (GCHQ) and now attempts to prevent unofficial strikes, 'democratised' unions?

The EETPU were the first, with the AEU, to

**"Thatcher did a favour to everyone who believes in union democracy"**



take the Tories' blood money, state funding for postal ballots. This was despite clear TUC policy for a boycott. Hammond justifies this by saying all other trade unions have now followed the same path. However, a principled stand could have been used to build opposition against the rest of the Tory anti-union laws. Those who took the money undermined the struggle against all the anti-union laws.

Initially, Thatcher and the Tories trod warily, carefully testing the water before each attack. But as the 1980s progressed, the Tories became more confident that the right-wing trade union leaders would not lead a fight and would act as a dead weight on attempts by ordinary members to fight back. This book merely confirms in chapter and verse how right the Tories were.

Many union leaders, having failed their members, stood back complaining — 'our members would not fight'. They forget those that braved all — the miners, dockers, printers, and seafarers. It was the right-wing leaders' failure to mount an effective opposition to the Tories' legislation, and most of the left-wing leaders' failure to organise against the right, that led to the series of vicious attacks on trade union and workers' rights. Now, as the Tories begin their fourth term of office, a further round of anti-union legislation is planned.

THE ICING ON the cake for the Tories was the

role the EETPU played at Wapping. The long series of secret meetings which led to Wapping began on 31 January 1985. Murdoch "was looking for ways of 'utilising' his Wapping plant. Resistance by the print unions... meant the venture was in danger of turning into a white elephant. Having set out the scenario, Murdoch, whose American newspaper empire had shed thousands of staff as new technology had been introduced, made it clear he wanted to do the same in the UK. What could we do to help, Murdoch asked impassively. Could our members set up the machinery? *'Not only that,'* I told him, *'but they could operate it as well.'* There was an almost audible click as Rupert suddenly realised that here was an opportunity to end print union power once and for all. He turned to me and said, 'Eric, I think we might be able to do a deal.'" (My emphasis — YH)

Hammond gave Murdoch the confidence and the troops he needed to take on the print unions. During the construction of 'Fortress Wapping', a 'hot iron' foundry (the old method of producing print) was built, a clear indication that, prior to Hammond's offer, Murdoch intended to concede defeat over the introduction of new technology. Without Hammond, Murdoch would have had no alternative but to continue to deal with the print unions.

Hammond attempts to justify backing Murdoch by citing 'restrictive practices'. What

**"Here was an opportunity to end print union power once and for all"**

**Murdoch“ has  
shown  
no gratitude,  
even though  
he couldn't  
have  
succeeded  
without us”**

exactly did he object to? Management were denied the right to hire and fire at will! These elements of workers' control had been established through years of struggle on Fleet Street, giving confidence to other workers, including in the electronic and power industries.

But Hammond's real motives are spelt out in the book: "I was convinced that because of the ballot money issue, it would not be long before we were forced outside the TUC, possibly setting up an alternative and more moderate member-based umbrella trade union grouping with unions like the AEU and the UDM. What better start, I thought, than striking at the heart of the Left and giving one of its favourite safe havens, the print unions, a bloody nose?"

Yet despite Hammond's treachery, Murdoch could have been defeated. The printers fought a magnificent one-year battle. Tragically, the leaders of the print unions failed to deepen the strike within the print industry and particularly in Fleet Street. But the TUC leadership were also responsible. What exemplifies the failure of the TUC above all is that despite the responsibility Hammond bore for the dispute, despite the EETPU's role in organising scabs, six months into the strike he was still involved in TUC negotiations with Murdoch!

This placatory attitude merely increased his confidence: "After the TUC tap on our knuckles in February 1986, I saw no reason to shy away from Murdoch. In fact, I was being urged by Norman Willis to assist in reaching a settlement... On 18 June, Norman Willis... wrote to me confirming a formal request for us to use our 'best endeavours with our members at Wapping, and with the company' to get talks going."

Hammond flew to Los Angeles, on the TUC's behalf, to be wined and dined luxuriously by Murdoch. The whole episode is related in terms of one luxury event after another. "We stayed at the Beverly Hills hotel... we rounded off the next day with Rupert and his family... at a fine restaurant... The following day we relaxed... at the Hollywood Park horse races." Hammond then complains, "there were no thanks from the print unions for our efforts to get them a better deal!"

However, more galling for Hammond was that despite betraying the print jobs to Murdoch, the EETPU were denied their thirty pieces of silver — recognition at Wapping. "I try not to look back and wish matters had been different, not to complain at News International's duplicity — after all, we were using Murdoch as much as he was using us... He has shown no spark of gratitude, even though he couldn't have succeeded without us, and... our people at Wapping."

All union leaders should learn from the Wapping debacle. If you act as a fifth column for the employers, you will be used by them so long as they think necessary, and then be tossed

aside with the contempt you deserve.

The EETPU were under threat of expulsion from the TUC from 1985, when they disregarded TUC policy on postal ballots. A 'shoddy compromise' resulted... followed by Wapping. Each time the TUC weakened in their resolve to deal with the EETPU leaders for their blatant acts of betrayal, each time were they further emboldened to flagrantly disregard TUC policy.

The compromises finally came to an end, however, on the question of single-union, no-strike deals. To the last minute the TUC leaders begged for a compromise to prevent the EETPU leaving. As Hammond explains, when cases of single union deals were referred to the TUC disputes committee he would offer "to try to renegotiate the deals, give three months' notice and seek to get an agreement to include other unions. What we actually did was to wink to the employers, 'Don't you dare.' We got off the hook..."

EARLY IN THE book Hammond states that "the one thing I fear most... is to be considered a coward." His task for the remainder of the book is to prove his 'bravery' at Warrington, Wapping and during the miners' strike. In fact he consistently adopted the line of least resistance against the employers, whatever the cost to the working class.

Trotsky, in his writings on the unions in the 1930s, pointed out that capitalism in a period of decline exhausts any reforming role for the trade union leaders. They face two alternatives: either to link the day-to-day struggles of workers with the need to change society, raising the sights of workers involved in struggle; or to reconcile themselves to capitalism and the constraints that places on workers — ending up as the policemen of their own class.

Hammond took the latter course more brazenly than most other trade union leaders in modern times. But the trend towards collaboration has taken a hold in the past period. The then lefts who verbally opposed Hammond's 'business unionism' in the 1980s, found themselves dragged along in the wake of the right because of their failure to put forward a real alternative. They lacked confidence in the working class to struggle to thwart the attacks of the employers and to fight for socialism.

On the other hand Hammond displayed all the smugness and arrogance of those who have the backing of the capitalists. Each attack by Hammond on workers was rewarded by plaudits from the press. Flattered by this he went further into the mire, while still hypocritically keeping up a pretence of representing the interests of working people. It is up to the young workers in the new Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union to rebuild the democratic and fighting traditions for which the EETPU was once renowned. □

# Book Reviews

*The Samson Option: Israel America and the Bomb*

By Seymour M Hersh

Published by Faber and Faber, 1991, at £15.99

Reviewed by  
Mike Waddington

THE REVELATION IN Hersh's book of Robert Maxwell's possible involvement in the kidnapping by Israel of the scientist Mordecai Vanunu was somewhat overshadowed by the tycoon's death in typically mysterious circumstances. But Hersh, an investigative reporter, has gathered together other fascinating information in tracing the story of the development of nuclear weapons by Israel, in particular the role of France and the USA.

France in the 1950s faced rebellion throughout its North African 'empire' and backed Israel against Nasser's Egypt, which was supporting the anti-imperialist movements. Israel was armed by France from 1955 in a programme started by the 'Socialist' Party premier Mollet. France and Israel collaborated on a French weapon, tested in 1960. France then gave help to build a secret weapons establishment at Dimona in the Negev desert.

Dimona was built by immigrant labour. The North African Jews were "treated like slaves by French and Israelis alike." France also gave Israel access to its own

chemical and biological weapons establishment in the Sahara.

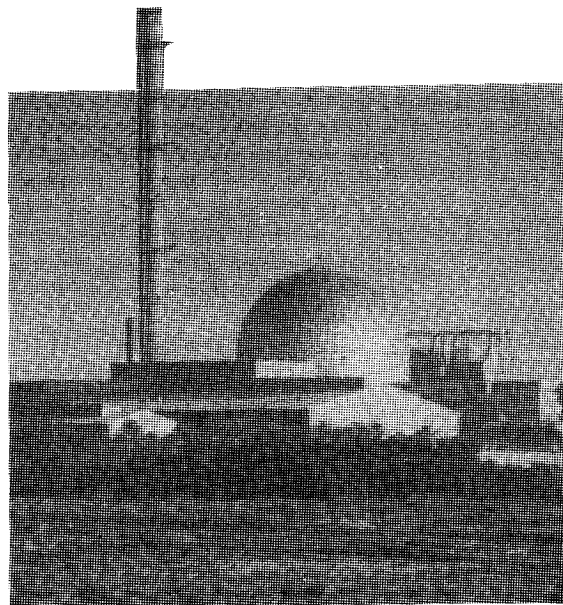
France dropped Israel after the Six-Day War of 1967 but the US took up the baton, with Germany providing uranium and Norway heavy water for the 'purely peaceful' nuclear programme.

When Begin bombed Iraq's Osirak nuclear power station in 1981 with US-supplied jets, President Reagan responded with "well, boys will be boys." This is indicative of the official attitude from the 1960s. Nixon and Kissinger publicly called for support for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation treaty while privately supporting attempts to arm Israel and Japan with nuclear weapons. As early as 1973 Israel had 20 warheads. In September 1979 Israel, in collaboration with South Africa, exploded a nuclear device.

Israel protected Dimona from attack. In 1967 they 'accidentally' attacked the US warship *Liberty*. Thirty-four people were killed but the matter was 'overlooked' by the US. The Israelis also shot down one of their own fighters that came too close to Dimona. In February 1973 a Libyan airliner was shot down for straying too close: 108 were killed.

The 'Samson Option' refers to Israel's deterrent theory: if they go down, like the biblical Samson, they will bring the whole edifice down with them! This justified targeting cities in the USSR.

Mordecai Vanunu was the scien-



tist responsible for giving details of the Israeli weapons establishment at Dimona to the *Sunday Times*. He was kidnapped, transported back to Israel, and jailed. Vanunu's assassination had been considered. His revelations in 1986 hit a raw nerve, bringing before the world details of Israel's nuclear capacity. The *Sunday Mirror*, who had also been approached by Vanunu's agent, described the news as "a hoax, or even something more sinister — a plot to discredit Israel." (p309)

Maxwell's probable involvement in the kidnapping of Vanunu covers only the last few pages of this book — but as a whole, *The Samson Option*, as a study in imperialist hypocrisy, is worth the read.

***The Dimona weapons complex.***

*Columbus — His Enterprise*  
By Hans Koning

Published by the Latin American Bureau, 1992, at £4.99

Reviewed by  
Tony Aitman

1992 IS THE 500th anniversary of the 'discovery' of America by Christopher Columbus, and already the celebrations have begun, ranging from the sentimental to the disgraceful. One such

event is Liverpool's Tall Ships spectacular, doubtless celebrating the triangular slave trade with the New World which generated the city's original wealth!

It is good news, therefore, that the Latin American Bureau (LAB) has republished *Columbus — His Enterprise* by Hans Koning. A reappraisal of Columbus is a necessary alternative to what Koning calls the "Eurocentric, white race-oriented, teaching of history."

The LAB has a record over many

years of producing excellent material on struggles in Latin America and the Caribbean. Amongst all the material produced for the anniversary, for anyone wanting an accessible, easy-to-read answer to the Columbus myth, this is the book. Written primarily for high school pupils, it shows clearly that the roots of Columbus' journey lay not in the love of adventure — or a belief that the world was flat! — but in the greed of Spanish merchants

for a quick route to the riches of the East, in particular, Chinese gold.

Exposing the hypocrisy of the Church, Koning shows how, in the name of 'love' and 'charity', Columbus led the systematic enslavement and extinction of the native peoples of the Americas. He shows that colonialism has always meant the brutal subjugation of native populations. He also exposes the irony that those who opposed the enslavement of the 'Indians' because they were dying in their thousands could only propose in its place the importation of 'stronger' African slaves — thus beginning the infamous African slave trade.

As a textbook written by a non-Marxist, the book does have its weaknesses. Koning talks in the

introduction of using the anniversary celebrations to find a "final reconciliation of the races of America", an impossibility as long as capitalism remains. In the words of Malcolm X, you can't have capitalism without racism. Koning hopes for "an atonement of past crimes." By whom? Are we all collectively guilty of the crimes of world capitalism. Or does he expect the ruling class to beg forgiveness for its actions in the past, while continuing those self-same crimes today?

To Koning, Columbus was "a man of his race", a "typical man of the (white) West"; World War II was "a great white-race civil war." Despite a disclaimer, itself couched in racial terms — "I am not ignoring the cruelties of other races... they too fill the pages of

history with man's inhumanity to man" — Koning persists in talking about 'the West'. Not Western capitalism, not a West itself divided into classes with an oppressing and exploiting ruling class, but the West as a single entity, for whose actions we all must take the blame. It is this concept of the class struggle that is missing from Koning's analysis.

Despite these weaknesses, mostly confined to the introduction and afterword, the book itself remains an interesting, worthwhile exposure of the Columbus myth. For anyone looking for an antidote to all the jingoistic ballyhoo surrounding the Columbus celebrations, I can think of no better book.



*From the House of War*  
 By John Simpson  
 Published by Arrow Books,  
 1991, at £6.99  
 Reviewed by  
 David Kaplan

JOHN SIMPSON IS the foreign affairs editor of the BBC. He was amongst the first British journalists to arrive in Baghdad after the invasion of Kuwait, in August 1990. Based on personal experience and interviews, his book is a "viewpoint from Baghdad" of the Gulf war and the events which led up to it.

The 'unilateral' reporters like Simpson, and including Mark Urban, a BBC *Newsnight* reporter,

and Robert Fisk, a journalist for *The Independent*, looked down on the official pool system set up by the western coalition forces: "It did no good to the journalists who belonged to it and who, therefore, were closely associated with the military. The unilaterals felt that living the army life and wearing uniform for its own sake blurred the necessary distinction between the reporters and the people they were reporting on." In the end, it was the 'unilaterals' who were free to do the more adventurous and informative reporting.

Simpson tries to relate the feelings of 'ordinary' Iraqis: "The system of reward and punishment obliged people to come out onto the streets and go through the motions of hero-worship with enthusiasm, or face the consequences." A teacher spoke to him: "You must realise that no one here supports Saddam. No one wants this war to happen. No one wants Kuwait." She was part of a demonstration outside the British embassy; journalists had been informed that it was taking place by the Iraqi Information Ministry. Children were shouting 'Down, down, Bush. Down, down, Thatcher'. The teacher continued: "We are only here because we have to be. No one wants to demonstrate. You must understand that."

Although there was a fear of the Iraqi regime's brutal methods, there is, however, no doubt that large sections of the Arab workers and peasants had no sympathy for the Kuwaiti regime and were totally opposed to the US-led inter-

vention. This was especially the case in Palestine, Jordan, Algeria and Morocco. Simpson walked around the Arab quarters of old Jerusalem. Walls were daubed with 'Saddam our leader' and 'Unite for action'.

Simpson argues that Saddam was taking an almost entirely unwilling country into war. Does this explain the massive defeat of the Iraqi army in a land war that finished just 100 hours after it had started? Simpson thinks so. In fact Iraq would have made a formidable opponent if the anti-imperialist feeling amongst the Iraqi people had been successfully tapped. Securing democratic rights (including the right of self-determination of the Kurds), the arming of the Iraqi masses and exposing the reasons for the war would have gone a long way towards this.

In its reports on the insurrection in Kurdistan at the end of the war, the book gives a vivid description of the aspirations — soon to be dashed — of those living during the apparent demise of a hated dictatorship: "There are few more heady experiences than being with people who have liberated themselves by their own efforts from some hated regime. Everyone is a brother. Revolutionary crowds cease to be a collection of cowardly, fallible individuals and become, for a brief moment, something grander and generous..."

This book is worth reading. It is a strong reminder of the swings in opinion during the crisis in both the Middle East and in the West.

# Letters

Dear Comrades,

Peter Lush's review of Labour's housing programme in the *MIR* election special rightly pointed out its most important weakness — the Labour leaders won't commit themselves to come up with the necessary cash.

But I believe there's another important fault in their approach — the Tories have a strategy for housing and Labour doesn't.

This is not to say that the Tories have a strategy to eliminate homelessness, slum housing or sky-high rents and mortgages. Of course they don't. But they are committed to eliminating publicly-owned housing, just as they're committed to wiping out all other public ownership.

One reason for this is that they can't bear to see something not making a profit for their rich friends. Our homes shouldn't just be sitting there keeping the rain off our heads; they should be providing our betters with a few extra quid from rent and interest.

But there's another reason. Thatcher had a strategy, which hasn't been reversed by her successors, of trying to create a permanent electoral base for the Tories and a permanent social base for capitalism — her 'property-owning democracy'.

If Britain wasn't going to be Napoleon's 'nation of shopkeepers' again — Tesco and Sainsburys have seen to that — it would have to be transformed into a nation of home-owners all with a couple of shares in a privatised industry and membership of Bupa.

This is a coherent strategy based on what they see as the interests of the class they represent. Labour's trouble is that its leaders don't have any alternative set of ideas from the opposing class point of view. In fact the Labour

leaders have swallowed the Tories' ideology whole. They accept that the capitalist market has triumphed and refuse to defend public ownership. So, as well as having no plans to pay for a house-building programme, they are afraid to defend the idea of publicly-owned housing.

On the face of it the Tories' strategy seems to have worked — and the Labour leaders certainly believe it has. More than two-thirds of housing stock is now owner-occupied.

But this hasn't been because of mass conversions to free-market ideology. The main cause of the house-sale boom was that mortgages dropped and rents rose, making it as cheap to buy as to rent — and as at some point you hoped to have paid your mortgage off.

This was helped by the Tories introducing subsidised mortgages on council homes so as to get them out of council control.

But that's all changed. Those who bought at the height of the boom were soon confronted with a 50% increase in interest rates. Mortgage debt has gone from 30% of personal disposable income to more than 70%.

For millions of people the Tories' housing strategy has been a disaster. Home-owners have seen their mortgage payments soar and many can't afford the repairs and care their homes need, meaning Britain's housing stock is decaying at an alarming and accelerating rate.

Then there's the Tories' plans to take rented housing out of council control. They have advanced various schemes to accomplish this. The most notorious have been HATs which have met stiff resistance in most areas where they've been proposed.

But they have other tactics as well. In fact, everything they propose in housing is

associated with this strategy. They've starved councils' housing budgets through ring-fencing and cuts.

Encouraging housing associations, estate management schemes and so on are also part of this plan. It's easy to see why some tenants are attracted to an alternative to council housing in its present state, although the campaign against HATs has also shown many tenants' suspicion of privately-owned housing.

The main reason tenants look for alternatives is that council housing has been starved of money and left to deteriorate, although they're also attracted to the chance to have more control over running their estates.

Labour leaders react to Tory proposals individually; they don't point out the Tories' not-so-secret plans. There's no point in socialists campaigning against existing housing associations or the principle of tenants running their estates. But we should point out why the Tories are advocating these measures and encourage tenants to check the small print for plans to privatise.

But I don't believe Labour should advocate these measures. A socialist housing policy shouldn't encourage housing associations, it should unashamedly stand for massively expanded public housing under council control. It should extend tenants' control but oppose attempts to get estates fighting against each other for funds.

I also don't agree with Peter that Labour should stand for interest-free mortgages. Nationalised banks should offer low-interest, stable mortgages, which would be a big improvement on today's situation. Interest-free loans should be reserved for public services.

A socialist housing policy would demand homes for all as a right and explain that this

***Have you any comments about this issue of the MIR? Let's hear from you.***



can only be guaranteed through expanding publicly-owned housing.

There should be a programme of repair and renovation of existing housing stock. But the key to solving the housing crisis is building homes with good materials, good planning and low rents.

That means a central plan to build publicly owned housing with democratic control by councils and tenants.

**Tony Cross, Tower Hamlets**



Dear Comrades,  
The recent death of Dr Isaac Asimov provides an appropriate opportunity to discuss his contribution to science and science fiction in a career that spanned five decades. His serious scientific writings popularised science and the nature of his science fiction was different to other writers.

Asimov's major works do not deal with bug-eyed monsters

or strange alien cultures but with humans. He dealt with the probable impact of science and technology on human society rather than *Star Wars* adventuring. He aimed to make his readers think rather than recoil in horror.

That's not to say that he made accurate predictions of the future — he foretold the positronic robot and hyper-space but not the personal computer or the car phone.

But he took the civilised view that robots — autonomous mechanical devices — could only be allowed to function in human society if their programming included three unbreakable laws: a robot cannot harm a human being or through inaction allow a human being to come to harm; a robot must obey the orders given to it by a human being unless they conflict with law one; a robot

must protect its own existence unless this conflicts with law one.

In reality, in their callous drive for profits, the Rupert Murdochs and Fords of this world have introduced new technology at the expense of human beings — except themselves and their shareholders, of course.

Yet Asimov had no illusions about the capitalist class — he simply believed that they would be swept away by what he called 'psycho-historical necessity'.

He personified 'psycho-history' in Hari Seldon in *The Foundation* trilogy. Seldon foresaw how a better society could be constructed on the ruins of the former galactic empire. He set up two Foundations 'at the opposite ends of the galaxy' to bring it about.

Asimov wasn't a Marxist — writing in America in the McCarthy era it was unlikely that he would be! — but it is no accident that Hollywood has failed to turn any of his works into space epics. Some of his ideas are far too dangerous.

Take the anti-racism of his work. He presents the inhabitants of earth as a persecuted race in the later *Robot* novels. He also showed the subjugation and oppression of a white race in *The Currents of Space* in which apartheid is subjected to ruthless satire.

His atheism did not endear him to the movie moguls either. He found it hard to believe in a loving God who would 'condemn his opponents to a kind of super-Auschwitz for eternity'.

Finally, a word of warning. Like all professional writers, Asimov's work is uneven. His work aimed at a juvenile market is just that — juvenile. His later work followed the trend of sci-fi and included sex scenes which he seems to have written reluctantly and not very well.

Nevertheless his best works — the *Foundation* and *Robot* novels — and many of the short stories, are of a very high standard.

**Derek McMillan, Sussex**

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