

# 1917

"To face reality squarely; not to seek the line of least resistance; to call things by their right names; to speak the truth to the masses, no matter how bitter it may be; not to fear obstacles; to be true in little things as in big ones; to base one's program on the logic of the class struggle; to be bold when the hour of action arrives—these are the rules of the Fourth International"

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*Defend Yugoslavia Against NATO's Attack!*

## Balkan Quagmire

NATO's terror bombing of Yugoslavia is the largest-scale military operation in Europe since World War II. Modeled on the 1991 U.S.-led "Operation Desert Storm," NATO's attempt to batter the Serbian dominated Yugoslav republic into submission is an assertion of the Western imperialists' "right" to impose their will on any country on earth. Hundreds of Yugoslav civilians have already been killed and thousands more wounded. While Pentagon

public-relations hacks have repeatedly proclaimed their determination to protect Kosovo's persecuted Albanians, and promised that the imperialists' "smart bombs" would only be used on strictly "military targets," Pristina, the capital of Kosovo, has been devastated by NATO's "humanitarian" bombers. Bridges, factories, radio and television installations, as well as fuel depots and power-generating facilities in Serbia, have been knocked out.

With U.S. planes spearheading the aerial attack, Bill Clinton continues to deny plans for an invasion of Yugoslavia. Meanwhile preparations for a full-scale NATO ground assault go forward inexorably. If NATO attacks the Yugoslav army on the ground, the conflict could rapidly spread throughout the entire region. If enough of the invaders end up being sent home in body bags, it could ignite serious popular opposition within the imperialist heartlands.

Reprinted below are two political statements by the International Bolshevik Tendency opposing the criminal aggression against Yugoslavia. The first, dated 30 March, is supplemented by a 26 April update which explains why, after the remnants of the Kosovo Liberation Army signed on as NATO auxiliaries, Marxists no longer raise "Independence for Kosovo" as an immediate demand.

30 March—On 24 March NATO launched a massive aerial assault on dozens of targets across Yugoslavia. Socialists and class-conscious workers around the world must oppose this criminal aggression through every possible means. NATO's murderous onslaught, which comes after years of economic embargo, is intended to force Slobodan Milosevic to sign the Rambouillet "peace" accord, thereby surrendering Yugoslav sovereignty over Kosovo (an ethnically Albanian province) and permitting NATO to garrison 28,000 soldiers there.

NATO's leaders justify their bombing campaign with hypocritical cant about the Serbian "human rights" abuses of Kosovo's persecuted Albanian majority. But imperialist outrage over such abuses is always extremely selective. It was not much in evidence in East Timor during the past quarter century as the Indonesian military brutally crushed all opposition. Nor has there been an outpouring of "humanitarian" concern over the fact that in an ongoing campaign against its own persecuted minority, Turkey (a full-fledged NATO member) has destroyed some 3,000 Kurdish villages and forced hundreds of thousands of Kurds to flee their homes. In fact, Turkey and Indonesia have both received substantial military aid and economic assistance from the U.S. and its allies over the years.

### Crocodile Tears & Geo-Political Calculations

The desperate Albanians in Kosovo who welcomed the imperialist assault on the Serbs will find out soon enough that NATO is no friend of the oppressed. The "humanitarian" crocodile tears shed over the plight of the Kosovars by Clinton, Blair, Schröder et al., are solely aimed at building support for NATO's campaign and boosting their own approval ratings. Bill Clinton came very close to making this explicit in his initial address to the American people explaining the attack, when he stressed the necessity to safeguard NATO's "credibility."

While the imperialists are fundamentally indifferent to the plight of the Kosovars, they are vitally interested in quelling, or at least controlling, ethnic conflicts in the Balkans which threaten to ignite a conflagration that could spread far beyond the borders of the former Yugoslav workers' state. To exert effective control, NATO must demonstrate a "credible" capacity to punish those who defy it. It was Milosevic's refusal to do as he was told, not his abuse of the Kosovars, that led NATO to attack.

The rulers of "Fortress Europe," who profess to be so horrified by Serbian "ethnic cleansing" in Kosovo, are busy getting rid of thousands of refugees from an earlier round

of communal conflict in the region and tightening restrictions on those who remain. Their concerns about halting Serb pogroms are in part motivated by a desire to avoid a new influx of refugees. The NATO powers are willing to spend billions on bombing, but plead poverty when it comes to aiding the very people whose interests they supposedly hold so dear. Marxists demand that the borders be open to *all* Balkan refugees: *No deportations! Full citizenship rights for all immigrants!*

The U.S.-led NATO attack on Yugoslavia is an assertion of the imperialists' "right" to bomb any country whose domestic policies they do not approve of. Some more sober imperialist observers, including the certified war criminal and former U.S. secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, are uneasy about the implications of such a precedent. They worry that doing away with even a pretense of respect for national sovereignty and "international law" could, in the end, further destabilize the imperialist world order.

### Self-Determination for Kosovo! Down With the Pogromists!

Kosovo's Albanian majority, who, prior to the current wave of pogroms, constituted 90 percent of the population, have been brutally oppressed by their Serb overlords since

*continued on page 10*

### Correction

Most of the text of the 29 July 1955 letter from James P. Cannon to Myra Tanner Weiss reprinted in 1917 No. 20 was in fact previously published in Cannon's book *The First Ten Years of American Communism*.

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### 1917

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# Abolish the Racist Death Penalty!

## Labor: Fight to Free Mumia!



ILWU shuts U.S. West Coast ports, leads 24 April demonstration in San Francisco to demand Mumia's freedom

22 April—Mumia Abu-Jamal, former Black Panther and radical journalist, has been on death row in Pennsylvania for 17 years—framed for an act he did not commit by a vicious and racist system that aims to silence an eloquent critic. Mumia, whose passionate arguments on behalf of the oppressed have earned him a well-deserved reputation as “the Voice of the Voiceless,” is undoubtedly the best known death-row inmate in the U.S. today.

On Mumia's birthday, April 24th, hundreds of thousands of people around the world will be mobilizing in his defense. Many will participate because they know that an injury to one is an injury to all. Workers, minorities and all the oppressed share a common interest in defending those who are attacked for daring to speak out against oppression. Millions are following Mumia's case, especially on the West Coast of the U.S., where it is receiving considerable mainstream media attention. In a crucially important development, union militants have initiated several labor actions to promote his cause.

Saturday is normally a day in which a lot of cargo is moved on the docks on the West Coast, but not this week. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) has declared a “stop-work” in solidarity with Mumia for the day shift on Saturday 24 April in every port from San Diego to Bellingham (north of Seattle). This decision was made by delegates to a 26 March convention of the ILWU's longshore division. The convention also voted to ask ILWU members to join the demonstration for Mumia in San Francisco on that day. This action by a significant sector of the U.S. working class adds immensely to the impact of the 24 April demonstrations.

In January, members of a teachers' union in Oakland, California (the Oakland Education Association—OEA) defied opposition from the capitalist media, the cops, the mayor, school administrators and their own union president, to hold a teach-in on Mumia's case in their classrooms. The event, which was widely publicized in the local media, proved to be hugely popular among Oakland's predominantly black population, and, as a result, the OEA bureaucrats and school administrators did not attempt any reprisals.

Brazilian teachers in the state of Rio de Janeiro have declared one hour stop-work meetings on 23 April to “relate Mumia Abu-Jamal's situation with the need for an ongoing struggle against racism in all its forms around the world.” Many international labor federations (including in Brazil, France, Italy, New Zealand and South Africa) have also joined the campaign for Mumia's freedom.

For his part, Mumia is on record in support of a variety of labor struggles. In 1998 he endorsed the ILWU's campaign against a legal attack by the employers for an earlier demonstration of solidarity with striking dockers in Liverpool, England. More recently, Mumia refused a request for an interview by ABC-TV's popular *20/20* program because he supported locked-out camera operators and technicians, and did not want to speak with strikebreakers. In an interview with the ILWU's *Dispatcher*, Mumia explained:

“I had to ask myself, ‘Would I cross a picket line if I were living in quasi-freedom, and walking to the studio?’ The answer was an irrevocable, ‘no.’ How could I do less, even under these circumstances? I felt an intense affinity for the

people of NABET, and felt it was an important opportunity to express and dramatize my solidarity with them."

### **Sinister Cop Provocations**

The struggle for Mumia's freedom is gaining momentum, but it is also facing mounting opposition, particularly in Philadelphia. On 13 April, organizers of the planned "Millions for Mumia" demonstration in Philadelphia reported that they had learned Mayor Ed Rendell and the Philadelphia Police Department were planning to interfere with the 24 April demonstration. The city authorities have apparently decreed that only a "ceremonial parade" of some 500 people will be permitted to march from the site of the mass rally in front of city hall. At the same time, it was revealed that on the night before the mass demonstration, several major arteries would be blocked off in the city to facilitate a police "memorial dinner" for Daniel Faulkner, the cop whose death was pinned on Mumia.

Organizers of the "Millions for Mumia" demonstration denounced these provocations and vowed to go ahead with the march, with or without, official authorization. Pam Africa, of "International Concerned Family & Friends of Mumia Abu-Jamal," condemned this decision:

"This racist city administration is forcing hundreds of thousands of people to come here to save the life of an innocent man....We are not coming on vacation. They have forced us to make this stand.

"Our voices will be heard, I am confident that people will come in even larger numbers when word of this outrage spreads. We have already set a precedent. Thousands of Mumia's supporters have marched countless times to the site we proposed."

The demonstrations in San Francisco, Philadelphia and other cities internationally build on the wave of actions which occurred in 1995 when Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge initially signed a death warrant for Mumia, slating him for execution on 17 August. The massive international outcry this produced forced the state of Pennsylvania to suspend the execution, only ten days before the scheduled date.

Mumia is once again threatened with imminent execution. He will soon file an application with the U.S. Supreme Court asserting that he did not have a fair trial. If this is not accepted, Mumia must resort to the Philadelphia federal district court, which will decide whether or not it wishes to hear new evidence in the case. The appeals process is almost exhausted and Tom Ridge, who remains governor, is as eager as ever to sign the death warrant.

### **Who is Mumia Abu-Jamal, and Why Does the Ruling Class Hate Him?**

Born Wesley Cook in Philadelphia on 24 April 1954, Mumia became politically active in his early teens. At 15, he helped to found the Philadelphia chapter of the Black Panther Party. After the Panthers collapsed, Mumia began work as a radiojournalist, focusing on "history from below," and editorializing against the injustices of capitalism. He was an outspoken opponent of police brutality and defended the Philadelphia-based, Rasta-inspired MOVE collective against a continuing campaign of police harassment. (This campaign reached its pinnacle in 1985 when Philly cops and federal police agents incinerated the MOVE compound, murdering 11 people.)

A little before 4 a.m. on 9 December 1981, Mumia, who

was moonlighting as a cab driver, witnessed a police officer assaulting his brother. He stopped his cab and rushed over. The events that followed remain somewhat confused, largely due to the state's tampering with evidence and coercing witnesses. What is clear is that police officer Daniel Faulkner was shot dead and Mumia was critically wounded by a bullet from Faulkner's gun which penetrated his liver and lodged against his spine.

The procedures undertaken by the cops and courts from this point on were clearly aimed at convicting Mumia, regardless of the evidence. The police failed to perform standard on-scene ballistic tests to determine if Mumia's licensed handgun had even been fired. Other suspects picked up in the vicinity on the night of the shooting were forced to undergo testing for gunshot residue on their hands. Mumia was not. The medical examiner judged the fatal bullet to be .44 caliber. Mumia's pistol was a .38. One of the two bullet shards extracted from the policeman's corpse has been "misplaced" by the state. Numerous witnesses who initially testified for the prosecution have since recanted and allege that they were pressured by the police into fingering Mumia in the first place.

It is abundantly clear that Mumia did not receive a fair trial, even by the standards of the racist justice system. It is also clear from the evidence and the testimony of the witnesses that Mumia is the victim of a police frame-up. Witnesses who could have proved his innocence were not called and evidence that could have exonerated him was suppressed. His lawyer (an incompetent public defender who was subsequently disbarred) did not interview a single witness in preparation for the trial. The defense had no funds to hire either a pathologist or a ballistics expert. Black jurors were systematically removed from the jury, and a bogus "confession" was introduced.

The prosecutor at the original trial, Joseph McGill, also committed two gross procedural violations of Mumia's rights by citing his membership in the Black Panther Party as "evidence" of his guilt and secondly by arguing in his summation that the jury should not hesitate to sentence Mumia to death because death-row inmates were not (at that time) being executed in Pennsylvania. Ron Castille, the district attorney who opposed Mumia in his first appeal, now sits on the State Supreme Court, which recently (October 1998) refused to hear a new appeal.

The judge in the 1982 trial, Albert Sabo, a life-time supporter of the Fraternal Order of Police, also conducted Mumia's 1995 post-conviction relief hearings. Known as a hanging judge, Sabo had a reputation for handing down more death sentences than any other judge in the U.S. All but two of the people Sabo sentenced to death were members of visible minorities. Sabo conducted himself in a prejudicial manner toward the defendant and his counsel throughout the proceedings.

### **Capitalism and Racism**

The vindictive persecution of Mumia Abu-Jamal rests on two cornerstones of the American free enterprise system—racial oppression and political repression. Racism, a structural component of capitalism, is, in the U.S., a legacy of slavery. American blacks have historically been aggregated into the lowest paid and dirtiest jobs, and ghettoized into a "reserve army." The super-exploitation of blacks has tended to depress all wages and white-supremacist ideology has also impeded the development of class-



consciousness among the white working-class:

"When American capitalism hit full stride after the Civil War, it had a ready-made labor reserve army in the multi-millioned black population, *already* branded from birth due to the ideology of racial inferiority handed down from slavery. Thus the *specific* features of American history combined with the *general* needs of capitalist development to create a black color-caste, forcibly segregated at the bottom of society."

—"Black Liberation & the Class Struggle,"  
1917 No.8, 1990

The institutionalization of racism in American society is most glaring within the judicial system. Prisons have become a growth industry in the U.S. with over 1.5 million people, disproportionately black and poor, incarcerated. At the pinnacle of the U.S. criminal justice system rests the death penalty, the victims of which are also disproportionately black. Recent court rulings undercutting traditional *habeas corpus* rights have sped up the machinery of death.

### Political Repression in America: from Haymarket to Mumia

Mumia Abu-Jamal is a victim of more than just judicial racism. He was also tried and condemned for his political views. The U.S. ruling class does not generally flaunt the political nature of its legal system, and frequently charges the rulers of other countries with "human rights abuses" when they resort to the death penalty to silence political opponents. In general America's rulers have found that bourgeois democracy represents the most effective and inexpensive form of government. So long as the capitalists do not feel any serious danger to their rule, they prefer the safety valve provided by bourgeois electoralism. The existence of democratic rights also helps maintain the illusion of rule by consent.

But the wealthy and powerful U.S. bourgeoisie has also periodically resorted to persecuting individual rebels in high-profile political trials. This record stretches from the Haymarket martyrs hanged in 1887 for leading the fight for an eight-hour day; to Sacco and Vanzetti, two anarchist immigrants sent to the electric chair in 1927 for a double murder they did not commit; to the judicial murder in 1953 of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg at the height of the McCarthyite witchhunt.

Even in wealthy imperialist countries which do not have capital punishment, the state often wields the power of life and death. Fatalities in custody, including suicide, are commonplace, as is death resulting from "accidental" shootings or beatings by police. Cops are on the front lines of the capitalist state. Their primary role is to defend private property and its owners which, under bourgeois democracy, sometimes means suppressing those deemed to be an ideological danger to the status quo.

To struggle for social justice, working people and the oppressed must recognize their enemies. Mumia Abu-Jamal has inspired tens of thousands of young militants with his courageous resistance to his oppressors as he continues to struggle, "live from death row." His case exemplifies the link between the reality of racist oppression and the repressive functions of the state.

### IBT Active in Mumia's Defense

The International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT) is one of a large number of organizations which have joined the battle



1917 PHOTO

IBT marches in 24 April demonstration in Philadelphia

to free Mumia. Where our modest resources have permitted, we have sought to participate in building united-front actions to broaden support for Mumia's freedom and to draw new layers into the struggle. Within the framework of joint action, we continue to argue for our own views of the lessons to be learned and the necessary political tasks.

In Toronto, IBT members joined with a variety of other leftist groupings in organizing a demonstration in Mumia's defense on 14 November 1998, after Pennsylvania's Supreme Court turned down his appeal for a new trial. Some 150 people attended the rally, organized under the slogans "Free Mumia Abu-Jamal! Down With the Racist Death Penalty!" Organizations sponsoring and speaking at this demonstration, besides the IBT, were Anti-Racist Action, Friends of MOVE, Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, Socialist Action and the Trotskyist League (TL—Canadian affiliate of the U.S. Spartacist League).

The same organizations (with the exception of the TL, which announced that it no longer intended to participate in building such events) have been joined by many more, including the International Socialists, the Black Action Defence Committee, the New Democratic Youth (youth group of Canada's mass social-democratic party) and several unions in building a demonstration in Toronto on 24 April.

In England, IBT comrades have played a central role, along with some anarchist comrades and others, in initiating and building the united-front coalition "Mumia Must Live!" under the slogans of "Free Mumia Abu-Jamal! Abolish the Racist Death Penalty!" This coalition, established in London early in 1999, is publicizing Mumia's cause across

the country, leafleting at many political events and building for a Sunday 25 April "Evening for Mumia" featuring speeches, comedy and music to coincide with the actions internationally. Endorsers of the campaign include the Liverpool dockers, Labour left MP Jeremy Corbyn, George Silcott (whose brother Winston was unjustly imprisoned by the racist police) and a variety of left groups including the Alliance for Workers Liberty, Anarchist Black Cross, Anarchist Communist Federation, Communist Party of Great Britain and Socialist Labour Party (Hackney branch). The coalition has also received support from branches and shop stewards within the public-sector union UNISON; the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union; and the National Union of Journalists (which made Mumia an honorary member in 1995).

Our New Zealand comrades initiated a "Committee to Free Mumia Abu-Jamal" in Wellington which includes leftists and anarchists among others. On Saturday, 28 November 1998, the Committee held a rally under the banner "Free Mumia Abu-Jamal!" to coincide with Thanksgiving Day actions in the U.S. The Wellington demonstration, which was supported by officials of the Trade Union Federation, drew almost 50 participants. The Committee is organizing a Mumia demonstration to coincide with the 24 April international protests.

Our comrades in Albany, New York have circulated a resolution among local trade unionists outlining Mumia's case and concluding:

"The Labor Movement of the Haymarket martyrs and the Ludlow Massacre, of Joe Hill and Big Bill Haywood, of Sacco and Vanzetti, and, more recently, of PATCO, the Decatur war zone, and the Detroit Newspaper strike/lockout calls for the immediate release of Mumia Abu-Jamal."

This motion was endorsed by the Albany local of the

American Postal Workers Union along with unions representing all graduate student employees in New York state and professors in Albany.

## The Power of Labor

In the San Francisco Bay Area, IBT comrades are involved with the Labor Action Committee to Free Mumia Abu-Jamal (LAC), which was established in February by trade-union activists from the ILWU and other unions to "educate workers and promote labor action" in the struggle to free Mumia Abu-Jamal. Jack Heyman, a key activist in the LAC, is also on the executive board of ILWU Local 10 and it was he who initially put forward the motion for the stop-work actions on 24 April.

The ILWU's protest, as well as the initiatives taken by teachers unions in Oakland and Rio de Janeiro, represent a major step forward in the defense of Mumia and the campaign against the death penalty. But they are also important for the union movement itself, which is hobbled by bureaucratic and conservative leaderships who often oppose action for anything but the short-term interests of their own dues base. The recognition by some sections of the longshore and teachers' unions that their interests are connected to achieving justice for Mumia is a most welcome development.

The fight for Mumia's freedom is of vital importance to every leftist, every trade unionist and everyone else committed to the struggle for social justice. Mumia's life can only be saved through mass protests to expose the hideous frame-up being perpetrated by Philadelphia's cops and courts. Ultimately the struggle to uproot the system of racist injustice which Mumia's case exemplifies requires the forging of a leadership in the labor movement committed to mobilizing workers and the oppressed to struggle for the expropriation of the expropriators.

## Mumia Awarded John Brown Medal

The following remarks were made by Larry Lawrence in presenting the John Brown Society's Gold Medal to Pam Africa on behalf of Mumia Abu-Jamal in front of an overflow crowd of more than 1,500 at the Town Hall in New York City on 26 February.

*We of the John Brown Society thank the organizers for the privilege of paying our respects tonight to the determined and courageous Mumia Abu-Jamal.*

*Our Gold Medal goes only to those who have suffered and sacrificed greatly for the sacred cause of justice for the poor. We speak in the name of one of the 19th century's greatest champions of the exploited slaves to honor those fighters today who demonstrate the same great strength of character that took John Brown to Kansas and Harper's Ferry. John Brown raised high the lamp of racial equality to light the pathway of mankind.*

*We feel that revolutionary fighters for social justice for the poor are the most important people on the face of the earth, and that they deserve all the love and respect that we can pay them.*

*I also want to point out that we do not give our award to the capitalist politicians of the two major parties. Their careers are about corrupted self-seeking and they serve as instruments for a brutal U.S. military machine.*

*We are above all romantics and dreamers. Argument and polemics have an important place on the far left, but we also*

*need poetry and classical eloquence as a part of our efforts. We can take the cause of social equality to a higher level by going back to the 19th century and learning from such figures as William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips and Frederick Douglass.*

*They were both fighters and lyrical public speakers. Wendell Phillips taught us that: "None know what it is to live till they redeem life from its seeming monotony by laying it a sacrifice upon the altar of some great cause." Leon Trotsky, in a different context, spoke for revolutionary fighters of our century when he said in 1938, that our highest happiness can be achieved when we have, "the consciousness that one participates in the building of a better future, that one carries on his shoulders a particle of the fate of mankind...."*

*Mumia challenges each of us from his prison cell to stand on his broad shoulders and look with him into the vast future of mankind. A future of universal brotherhood and justice. We must set him free so that he can return to us and help us in the grand battle to make a better world for all working people. May the spirit of John Brown lighten his terrible burden in these difficult hours.*

*I say to him now that he stands solidly in the John Brown tradition. It is one of the greatest honors of my life to present the Gold Medal of the John Brown Society to Mumia Abu-Jamal.*

## Longshore/Warehouse Militant Caucus: a Great Tradition

# Origin of ILWU's Political Action



1917 PHOTO

**December 1984: Howard Keylor addresses Berkeley students on anti-apartheid boycott**

The idea of mobilizing the power of the organized working class for Mumia's freedom did not arise spontaneously in the Bay Area or Brazil. Many of the militants associated with the Labor Action Committee to Free Mumia Abu-Jamal (LAC), as well as some of the key initiators of the Oakland school teach-ins, were involved in the trade-union work of the then-revolutionary Spartacist League (SL) of the 1970s. Some also participated in the more modest activities of the forerunners of the International Bolshevik Tendency. In Rio de Janeiro, the teachers' action has been spearheaded by militants associated with the Liga Quarta-Internacionalista do Brasil, which is linked to the Internationalist Group in the U.S., itself a recent split from the SL.

The LAC referred to the historical precedents for the International Longshore and Warehouse Union's 24 April action in an 8 April press release:

"This groundbreaking call for a work action in defense of a political prisoner comes out of a long history of ILWU solidarity with numerous struggles, including shipping boycotts to protest the right-wing coup of General Augusto Pinochet in Chile in 1973, and against apartheid in South Africa in 1984, which received recognition from Nelson Mandela."

The 1984 action, which lasted 11 days and took place in defiance of several back-to-work orders, was led by longshore militant and IBT supporter, Howard Keylor. Keylor pointed out that many leftists are unaware of the background to the longshore stop-work actions and strikes of the 1970s and 1980s, which in turn laid the basis for the ILWU's current defense of Mumia:

"In the period between 1974 and the early 1980s (by which time the Spartacist League had wrecked the work

and driven the best trade-union political militants out of politics and, in many cases, out of their unions), the ILWU Longshore/Warehouse Militant Caucus posed a clear class-struggle pole to the class-collaborationist policies that had become so deeply engrained in the union. Perhaps the greatest success we had in trying to deepen workers' class consciousness was in demystifying the sanctity of the capitalist laws which forbid workers' political or solidarity strikes, as well as job actions in their own defense. By 1984, the San Francisco longshoremen were able to carry out a successful 11-day illegal political strike refusing to work South African cargo without suffering state or employer reprisals. The West Coast longshore union went on to wage port, regional, and coastwise strikes in violation of the contract and of federal law in their own defense, as well as in support of other workers such as the Liverpool dockers and Australian wharfies."

We uphold the perspective of building programmatically-defined class-struggle caucuses in the unions. None of the labor actions carried out in support of Mumia have been initiated or actively supported by the Spartacist League. In recent years, the SL has done some valuable work in Mumia's defense, but these days it generally avoids participating in united fronts with other leftists.

Any initiative that points in the direction of class-struggle unionism is welcome, but even the skillful application of united-front tactics by individual labor militants cannot substitute for organized nuclei of class-conscious militants within the unions struggling to win the membership to a perspective of powerful, united class struggle. This ultimately requires the creation of a political organization linking the struggles of every sector of the exploited and oppressed—a mass revolutionary workers' party.

# Open Letter to Workers Vanguard

## Disagreeable Sectarians

The following is an open letter to Workers Vanguard, newspaper of the Spartacist League/U.S.:

25 April 1999

Comrades:

As we have occasionally pointed out in the past, the Spartacist League/Partisan Defense Committee (SL/PDC) deserves credit for its pioneering work in publicizing the case of Mumia Abu-Jamal and organizing for his freedom. Since 1995 Mumia's case has won ever broader support within the left and labor movement internationally. Regrettably you have not seen this as an opportunity to engage in common work and political struggle with activists from other organizations. Instead you have tended to allow petty sectarian organizational considerations to take precedence over principled united-front activity to free Mumia.

The 16 April *Workers Vanguard* (WV) commentary on recent events in Mumia's defense campaign is a case in point. The article, headlined "Mobilize the Power of Labor! Free Mumia Now!," treats in an extremely cursory manner the exceptionally important work-stoppage by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) on 24 April. *Every port from San Diego to Bellingham Washington was shut down for the day in solidarity with Mumia!* It is hard to overstate the importance of such an event—particularly in this period in which organized labor has been on the defensive. Yet this actual, living, mobilization of the "Power of Labor" to free Mumia is dismissed with a single paragraph buried in the text. You claim that it was organized so as "to minimize the cost to the company," but Saturday can be one of the busiest days on the docks. You also mistakenly report that the work stoppage was only for two hours, rather than for the entire day shift.

You grudgingly admit that it was, "a powerful statement of the social power" of labor to win Mumia's freedom. The ILWU's coastwide shutdown for Mumia was an action that, to our knowledge, is unprecedented in the history of U.S. labor for at least the last 50 years. Of course we look forward to the hypothetical "broader actions" that you project for the future, but this event was of *historic* importance, something you are clearly loathe to admit.

You reported that "the ILWU" had called for the action, but did not inform your readers that it had been initiated by Jack Heyman, a former SL supporter, who is currently on the executive board of the ILWU's San Francisco local, and is also active in the Labor Action Committee to Free Mumia (LAC), along with IBT comrades, former SL trade-union supporters and others. Many LAC participants played an active role in building the historic 1984 labor boycott of apartheid cargo in San Francisco. This boycott established an important precedent for the ILWU's recent action in defense of Mumia. The SL's shameful sectarianism in 1984 was thoroughly documented by three former Spartacist trade-union activists in "Third Period Robertsonism at Pier 80," published in *Bulletin of the External Tendency of the iSt*, No. 4, May 1985.

Brother Heyman is introduced in the WV article as someone "who postures as the left wing of the ILWU Local 10 executive board" and roundly denounced for having the

temerity to ask the "non-sectarian" PDC for a list of union endorsements gathered in the past for Mumia. WV admits that these endorsements were all a matter of public record, but still smears Heyman as someone whose real aim:

"is to go after the reds, in the service of the labor bureaucracy (whose seats Heyman et al. desire to fill) and of concealing the true nature of the capitalist state."

WV denounces the Labor Action Committee as a "veritable rogues' gallery" whose "visceral hatred" of the Spartacist League has led them to try to give a "labor façade to the class-collaborationist politics that define the 'Millions for Mumia' protests." The fact that Heyman (and the other comrades working in the LAC), through a combination of hard work and political skill made a vital contribution to sparking the most powerful act of labor solidarity in Mumia's defense to date, is completely ignored by WV which claims that the LAC:

"obscures the class nature of the capitalist state, deep-sixes any mention of the Democratic Party and completely obviates the centrality of the fight for black liberation to the cause of the emancipation of all of labor."

The willingness to employ such brainless slanders has a great deal to do with why the contemporary Spartacist League is so widely reviled on the left and has so little influence in the labor movement.

WV wraps up its denunciation of the Labor Action Committee with a condemnation of its appeal for labor organizations to:

"join the ILWU at the head of a demonstration whose whole premise is not the cause of mobilizing the social power of the multiracial working class for Jamal's freedom but rather one which appeals to the agencies of the class enemy for 'justice'."

The SL did not organize a contingent in either the San Francisco or Philadelphia "Millions for Mumia" demonstrations on 24 April and it is clear that you *opposed* mobilizing the labor movement (or anyone else) for these events. The ostensible reason for this sectarianism is that you disagree with one of the main slogans of the rallies (i.e., for a "New Trial" for Mumia). You prefer the call to "Free Mumia!" So do we. Nonetheless we do not see this as a reason to abstain from participating in national events that are many times larger than any rallies the SL/PDC has been able to organize. Of course we participate in these demonstrations with our own slogans, including the call to "Free Mumia!"

We recall that during the Vietnam War the SL marched in many demonstrations organized around clearly social-pacifist slogans, but carried its own placards calling for victory to the Indochinese Revolution. The ILWU contingent, which headed the 24 April demonstration in San Francisco, raised the call to "Free Mumia!" It did not, to my knowledge, call for a "New Trial."

WV approvingly quoted the remarks of a participant in an SL meeting last February who asked:

"How about somebody telling the truth, that there's no way that Mumia's going to get justice in the courts. It's going to be exactly the same frame-up bullshit that happened the first time."





S. STAPLER—RBB

Toronto, 24 April: IBT supporter speaks at 'Free Mumia' united-front demonstration

It is not impossible that a new trial could result in an acquittal. To assert otherwise is fake ultra-leftism. Fake, because the SL doesn't truly believe it. If a new trial can *only* result in "exactly the same frame-up bullshit," why is the PDC's Rachel Wolkenstein still participating in Mumia's defense team which has been pursuing every possible legal avenue, including trying to win a retrial? Furthermore, in the 1970s, the SL itself launched successful court challenges against infringements of its democratic rights by both the U.S. Secret Service and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The SL's abstentionism was not fundamentally dictated by the choice of slogans by the "Millions for Mumia" organizers. This is proved by the fact that both the London and Toronto united-front events held in conjunction with the Philadelphia and San Francisco rallies were organized on the basis of the call to "Free Mumia!" Yet in both cases, the Spartacist League's co-thinkers refused to endorse or help build the events. In London, where a solidarity night organized by the "Mumia Must Live!" coalition drew over 100 people, the SL did not send even a single supporter.

In Toronto, a united-front demonstration was held involving many of the same groups that had organized a successful 14 November 1998 protest to demand Mumia's freedom. On that occasion the Trotskyist League (the SL's Canadian sister section) had been an active participant in the united front. But although it was invited, it refused to attend the planning meetings for the 24 April demonstration. At one of these meetings, a proposal was floated to change the basis of unity from "Free Mumia!" to a call for a new trial. Our comrades, and others, argued against mak-

ing such a change and the proposal was shelved.

In Toronto, 150 people turned out to demonstrate for Mumia's freedom across the street from the U.S. consulate. Among the participants were ten TL supporters. Speakers from the endorsing organizations addressed the crowd, including representatives of the United Secretariat, the International Socialists, Socialist Resistance (formerly Labour Militant), the Black Action Defense Committee, New Socialists, Friends of MOVE, Nation of Islam and ourselves. TL members marched in the picket line, carried their own placards and raised their own chants. Two TL supporters stood in front of the rally with a large banner featuring a picture of Mumia and virtually identical slogans to those that the demonstration had been organized around. The absurdity of the TL's posture was widely commented on at the demonstration—they agreed with the slogans, turned out and participated in the event, but for some inexplicable reason refused to endorse or build it.

Such "tactics" are not likely to win many converts among the left. Most political activists regard the SL as a slightly ridiculous, frequently hysterical and generally disagreeable sect. The only purpose of the SL leadership's semi-abstention from the campaign to free Mumia can be to seal off their membership from excessive exposure to other leftists and social reality in general. In the process, the SL/PDC has managed to squander the political credibility it gained from its important early work in the fight for Mumia's freedom.

Samuel T.  
for the International Bolshevik Tendency



# Balkan Quagmire...

*continued from page 2*

Milosevic revoked Kosovo's autonomous status within the Serbian Republic a decade ago. Schools, universities, libraries, and radio and television stations that provided services in Albanian were shut down and Albanians were systematically excluded from all public-sector jobs. This compelled the Kosovars to improvise their own parallel civil administration and organize rudimentary educational and healthcare services for themselves. In recent years Serbian authorities attempted to strengthen their hold on Kosovo by shipping in thousands of Serb refugees (themselves victims of earlier "ethnic cleansing" drives in Croatia and Bosnia).

Claiming to combat "terrorism," the Serbian police ruthlessly suppressed every attempt to organize peaceful protests by the Albanian population. This ultimately left the armed-struggle guerrillaism of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) as the only apparent option. The absence of any visible opposition within Serbia to Milosevic's chauvinism helped cement the grip of the KLA nationalists over the Kosovars. The KLA, for its part, would be extremely hostile to any Albanians who saw in Serbian workers a potential class ally, rather than simply a communal enemy.

We call for the defense of Yugoslavia (including Kosovo) against NATO forces, but we do not defend the "territorial integrity" of the existing Serbian state. We adamantly oppose the renewed wave of murderous "ethnic cleansing" being carried out by Milosevic against Kosovo's Albanian citizens in the wake of NATO's attack. The Kosovars have every right to forcibly resist their Serb oppressors and to determine their own future. All communities (including members of Kosovo's Serb minority) have the right to self-defense against communalist pogroms.

The Kosovo Liberation Army is made up of people who are just as committed to a program of national exclusiveness as Milosevic and his ilk. The KLA is determined to gain independence from the Serbs and only signed the Rambouillet agreement (which specifies that Kosovo remain nominally part of Serbia for three years) as a maneu-

## Kosovo Liberation Army soldiers



REUTERS

ver. They hoped that Serb intransigence would lead NATO to attack.

While we offer no political support to the bourgeois-nationalist KLA, we nonetheless side with them militarily in their struggle for freedom from their Serb oppressors. If, in the course of the present conflict, the KLA should become subordinated to, or begin to operate essentially as an auxiliary of, the NATO aggressors, our attitude would change to one of favoring the victory of the Yugoslav army over both the imperialists and their auxiliaries.

The U.S. (which is orchestrating the assault on Yugoslavia) has been reluctant to start redrawing borders in the region and has not been promoting an independent Kosovo. The German bourgeoisie appears more open to the possibility. This is not the first time that American and German policies have diverged—in 1991 Germany defied the U.S. and gave Croatia, its traditional regional client, a green light to secede from Yugoslavia.

Under the auspices of NATO, the U.S. intends to continue playing a significant role in European affairs. There are some tensions, but for the most part, the major players in the European Union (EU) are happy to have American participation in ensuring "stability" (i.e., imperialist dominance), as they expand the EU and deepen their economic penetration of Eastern Europe.

## Cracks in the Imperialist Consensus

The Greek and Italian governments have already indicated that they favor stopping the bombing and attempting to reopen negotiations with Milosevic. The U.S. administration is well aware that popular support for the campaign is shallow and could quickly evaporate if the American military begins to suffer serious casualties. This is why Clinton took the unusual step of announcing in advance that, whatever the outcome of the bombardment, NATO would not be sending ground troops into Kosovo. While such declarations are subject to change, at this point a substantial section of the American bourgeoisie has serious reservations about the wisdom of stepping into the Balkan quagmire.

This was reflected in the fact that the U.S. Senate only endorsed Clinton's decision to start bombing by a vote of 58 to 41. The liberals have signed on, but among the Republican right there is a reluctance to get involved in what they see as a European problem. There is a growing isolationist sentiment among a sector of the American bourgeoisie which occasionally finds expression in complaints about underwriting NATO's occupation of Bosnia (which is all that is preserving "peace" there). It is also reflected in opposition to funding the United Nations, the IMF and the World Bank.

The U.S. rulers are mindful of the painful lessons learned in Lebanon in 1983, and Somalia a decade later, when the world's only superpower was forced to cut and run as soon as Marines and Rangers started coming home in body bags. If NATO's punishing air attacks do not compel Milosevic to relent, the next move may be to upgrade the KLA's military capacity in an attempt to "Albanianize" the conflict. But, in the short run at least, the KLA is not likely to be a match for Milosevic's army, even after it has been "degraded" by NATO's bombardment.

The small-fry NATO gangsters (Canada, Belgium, Holland, etc.) have provided a few planes and bombs, as well as a full complement of sanctimonious prattle about the importance of preventing violence and preserving "peace." Britain's Tony Blair, who has made a more substantial con-



REUTERS

### 'Collateral damage' from NATO's bombs

tribution of lethal weaponry, has also provided plenty of pious sermonizing to justify the Labour Party's role as the chief executive of British imperialism. He is enthusiastically backed by the Tories, the Liberal Democrats and the vast majority of his own members of parliament, including many on the so-called left, like Ken Livingstone. Labour's dissidents, led by veteran peacenik Tony Benn, are complaining that the bombing commenced without the blessing of the United Nations. Meanwhile, the British press, which has been full of comparisons between Milosevic and Hitler, is openly advocating that NATO send in ground troops to fight the Serbs.

The German media is also campaigning for launching a ground offensive and is busy preparing public opinion for the inevitable casualties. Germany's ruling Social Democrat/Green coalition fulsomely backs the NATO campaign, the first operational mission for the German military since 1945. The SPD, whose leaders are openly discussing the possibility of sending soldiers to fight the Serbs, has long supported German imperial ambitions. After supporting NATO's bombing of the Bosnian Serbs in 1995, and the subsequent dispatch of German "peacekeepers" to Bosnia, the former pacifists of the Green Party have also become comfortable with their new, bellicose stance.

### Balkan Powder Keg

Many bourgeois analysts are concerned that NATO's bombing campaign, intended to stabilize the situation, may instead widen the conflict and draw in other powers in the region. A likely flash point is Macedonia, presently home to some 10,000 NATO troops who are slated to march into Kosovo when, and if, Milosevic is forced to capitulate and

sign the Rambouillet deal.

But so far Belgrade has responded to NATO's assault by redoubling its "ethnic cleansing" in Kosovo, concentrating particularly on areas where the KLA is strongest. The tens of thousands of refugees from Kosovo who are pouring into Macedonia join a large Albanian population with their own grievances about their treatment at the hands of the country's Slavic majority. It is not difficult to imagine how this could produce an explosion.

Upheaval in Macedonia would have major repercussions throughout the region. The Bulgarians regard Macedonian as merely a Bulgarian dialect, and consider Macedonia a prime candidate for inclusion in "Greater Bulgaria." This would, of course, be unacceptable to Greece, Serbia, and Albania (which, if it were stronger, would like to unite the Albanians of western Macedonia, along with those of Montenegro and Kosovo into a "Greater Albania").

Several million Macedonians live in northern Greece, a regional superpower which has had strained relations with Macedonia in recent years. Greek intervention would inevitably be met by a countermove from Turkey. And, not too far in the background, is Russia, a bankrupt former "superpower" whose impotent protests NATO has simply ignored. Although hobbled, Russia remains an important factor in Europe and the world, and NATO's attack on its traditional Balkan ally has fueled the resurgence of Great Russian xenophobia.

### Nationalism & Counterrevolution

The roots of the current round of Balkan conflicts lie in the victory of capitalist counterrevolution and the destruc-



P. PARROT/SYGMA

**Albanian Kosovar refugees at the Macedonian border**

tion of the deformed Yugoslav workers' state created after World War II by Josip Broz Tito's peasant-based Stalinist partisans. In the 1950s and 60s, the Yugoslav federation enjoyed considerable economic growth, which provided the basis for rising living standards for its citizens. During this period, Tito's Yugoslav League of Communists (LCY) was largely successful in defusing the bitter national antagonisms which had bedeviled the region for centuries.

After a break with Stalin in 1948, the Titoists sought to secure their position through a combination of maneuvers with Western imperialism, experiments with market "reforms" and foreign investment, and a policy of economic decentralization that was promoted as "workers' self-management." These measures undermined the Yugoslav workers' state by increasing imperialist influence in the economy, generating a layer of wealthy entrepreneurs with connections to elements of the ruling LCY bureaucracy and encouraging centrifugal tendencies in the economy which led, in turn, to a revival of national antagonisms.

By the late 1980s the federal system and the authority of the central government had largely disintegrated. Milosevic, who was to play a key role in the destruction of the Yugoslav deformed workers' state, had originally consolidated his position at the head of the LCY bureaucracy in Serbia by fanning the flames of Serb chauvinism. His decision, in 1990, after revoking Kosovo's autonomous status, to declare a state of emergency in the province triggered a series of inter-ethnic conflicts which ripped the Yugoslav federation apart.

Croatia and Slovenia seceded in 1991 and a bloody three-cornered communal war between Serbs, Muslims and Croats erupted in Bosnia-Herzegovina. This conflict raged until 1995, when, through a combination of NATO air strikes against the Bosnian Serbs, bribes and economic

pressure, the Dayton "peace" accord was signed, and 30,000 NATO "peacekeepers" arrived to enforce it. Today Bosnia is little more than a NATO protectorate where compliant puppet regimes perch unsteadily on thousands of imperialist bayonets.

### **For a Socialist Federation of the Balkans!**

The task of ridding the region of Milosevic and the other nationalist demagogues and despots belongs to the workers and oppressed peoples of the Balkans. Political and military interventions in the region by the capitalist Great Powers have always served reactionary ends, and this one is no exception. Only a socialist federation of the Balkans, forged in struggle against the various imperialists, their allies and vassals, can provide the basis for an equitable resolution of the competing national claims and guarantee a secure future for the many peoples of the region.

If they are to avoid being led to the slaughterhouse in the future, working people in the imperialist countries must learn to oppose the criminal ventures of their "own" rulers. Class-conscious workers in Europe and North America will cheer every time Serb gunners shoot a NATO pirate out of the sky. With every act of solidarity they undertake on behalf of NATO's victims, workers in the imperialist countries strike a blow for their own liberation.

The history of national conflicts and ethnic antagonisms during the past decade demonstrates that the competing national aspirations of the peoples of the Balkans cannot be equitably resolved under capitalism. Only revolutionary internationalism provides a viable alternative to the murderous credo of national exclusiveness.

The task of forging a revolutionary leadership for the workers of the Balkans, based on the Trotskyist program of

class unity across national lines, is not an easy one—yet there is no alternative. The bitter truth is that the more remote such a prospect appears, the more bloody and barbaric the conflicts will be. The struggle for a Socialist Federation of the Balkans is not utopian—it is the only historically progressive answer to the irrationality of national exclusivity and revanchism.

**Defend Yugoslavia! Defeat NATO Aggression!  
No to "Ethnic Cleansing"—Independence for Kosovo!  
Imperialists Out of the Balkans!**

## KLA Becomes NATO's Proxy

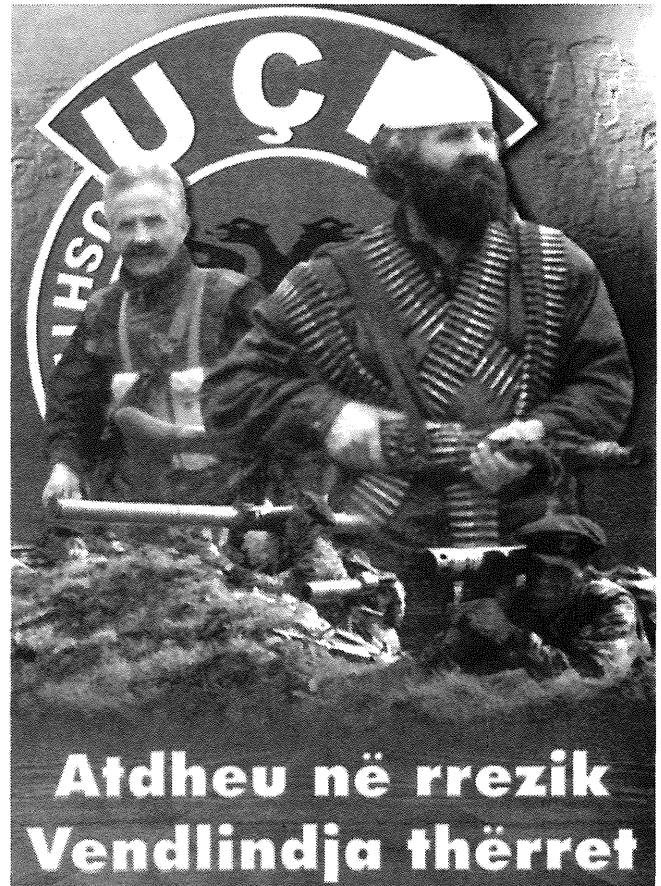
26 April—Prior to the commencement of NATO's attack on Yugoslavia last month, the Serbian leadership claimed that it would only take their police and military a week to ten days to mop up the Kosovo Liberation Army "terrorists," who controlled almost half of the predominantly Albanian province. As soon as NATO's bombs began to fall, the Serbs launched a military drive to smash KLA strongholds and depopulate their "base areas." The result was an exodus of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Albanians who poured across the borders into Albania, Macedonia and Montenegro. NATO publicists, and the imperialist media, downplayed the Serbs' military campaign against the KLA, and depicted the torrent of refugees as a diabolical and unforeseeable tactic devised by Milosevic to embarrass the great powers.

For their part, the Serbs suggested that Kosovo's Albanians were fleeing NATO's bombs and noted that some tens of thousands of Serbs had also fled the region. NATO did bomb Pristina, Kosovo's capital, and a desire not to end up as "collateral damage" doubtless motivated some of the refugees. But the flood of ethnic Albanians was primarily the result of the Yugoslav army's previously advertised offensive against the KLA. Similar forced population transfers were used by U.S. forces in Vietnam in the 1960s and the Salvadoran military in the 1980s in their drive against leftist insurgents.

The KLA has been regarded by the imperialists as an unsavory bunch of thugs heavily involved in the heroin trade and connected to dangerous Islamic fundamentalists. At points during the negotiations leading up to the Rambouillet "peace" settlement, the KLA assumed a non-compliant posture. This is hardly surprising, as the deal called for KLA units to be disarmed, while NATO's army of occupation set about constructing a new, suitably tractable, political regime for the region. In the end, the KLA delegation signed the Rambouillet contract hoping that Belgrade's refusal to cede Kosovo to NATO would lead to an imperialist assault.

Revolutionaries oppose Serbian "ethnic cleansing" and all other crimes against the Kosovo Albanians. The military struggle of the KLA against the Yugoslav army and police was a just one—and their aspiration to gain independence from their Serb oppressors was entirely supportable. The commencement of NATO's campaign to "degrade" the Serb military did not automatically change this. Yet the configuration of forces made it highly likely that the ethnic Albanians' struggle for freedom would soon be subsumed by the imperialist assault on Yugoslavia.

The Yugoslav military effectively minimized casualties in their campaign against the KLA by avoiding close com-



Kosovo Liberation Army recruitment poster

bat and instead using tanks and artillery to first surround and then bombard villages held by the insurgents. Equipped only with light weapons, the KLA was unable to offer any effective resistance to Serb armor and was destroyed as an effective military force within a matter of weeks. As the Serb campaign against the KLA wound down, the flood of refugees abated. This was portrayed by the Western media as yet another fiendish and unpredictable trick by Milosevic. At the same time, Belgrade's attempts to initiate diplomatic contacts with a view to ending NATO's bombing were rebuffed.

Meanwhile the KLA remnants which regrouped in northern Albania sought a tighter relationship with NATO. In our 30 March statement (reprinted above) we anticipated such a possibility and qualified our support to the KLA accordingly:

"If, in the course of the present conflict, the KLA should become subordinated to, or begin to operate essentially as an auxiliary of, the NATO aggressors, our attitude would change to one of favoring the victory of the Yugoslav army over both the imperialists and their auxiliaries."

It is possible to trace the course of this development through accounts published in the British press. The 12 April issue of the *Independent* reported:

"OSCE [Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe] officials believe that the KLA has changed its tactics: instead of trying to defend villages from the Serbs it is concentrating on hit-and-run guerrilla attacks against the Yugoslav army, while attempting to protect the huge numbers of displaced Albanians trapped in the hills. Al-





REUTERS

### Serb tanks on patrol in Pristina

though the West denies that it is arming the KLA, the rebel army acts as Nato's eyes and ears in Kosovo."

On the same day, another London paper, the *Daily Telegraph*, reported:

"America has started secret negotiations with the Kosovo Liberation Army about supplying it with specialist weapons to attack Serb ground forces in Kosovo that continue to evade Nato's air campaign. Frustrated at the lack of progress against Serbian tanks, artillery and armoured vehicles, Washington has started sounding out other trusted Nato partners about arming the KLA with wire-guided missiles. It comes after desperate pleas for help from the KLA by satellite phone to American military advisers. There has been a clear softening of stance by the State Department, which last year was willing to accept descriptions of the KLA as terrorist criminals but now appears to view it as an organisation it can do business with....The equipment being considered for shipment to Kosovo includes wire-guided anti-tank missiles, medium mortars and other weapons useful against armor."

A few days later, on 18 April, the *Sunday Telegraph* reported:

"Nato is now quietly drafting the KLA into its war against Slobodan Milosevic. It is even considering plans to train them and ease the arms embargo on Yugoslavia to supply them with weapons such as mortars and rocket-propelled grenades. From their remaining enclaves within Kosovo and reconnaissance missions staged from Albania, the rebels already use satellite and cellular telephones to provide Nato with details on Serbian targets."

On 22 April, Robert Fisk, one of Britain's better informed print journalists, wrote an article in the *Independent* under the headline: "Nato resorts to war by proxy." The KLA is today exactly that: a proxy for NATO. This relationship is a product of the crushing military setbacks suffered by the KLA on the one hand, and the failure of NATO's air strikes to deliver a quick and painless victory on the other.

Military defense of Yugoslavia against imperialist attack does not negate the right of Kosovo's Albanians to resist Serb oppression, nor, on the level of principle, their right to separate from Serbia. The Kosovo Albanians are entitled to determine their own future, like every other people. But the right to self-determination cannot be exercised through NATO occupation. In subordinating itself to NATO, the KLA, which currently constitutes the only visible leadership of Kosovo's Albanian population, has been essentially transformed into an instrument of imperialist policy. The KLA still talks about achieving "independence," but it is in fact supporting NATO's drive to turn Kosovo into an imperialist protectorate on the Bosnian model.

We stand in the tradition of Vladimir Lenin who, in the midst of World War I, asserted that: "To be in favour of an all-European war merely for the sake of restoring Poland is to be a nationalist of the worst sort..." ("The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up"). Lenin observed that Marxists do not regard the right of self-determination as a categorical imperative:

"The several demands of democracy, including self-determination, are not an absolute, but only a *small part* of the general-democratic (now: general-socialist) *world* movement. In individual concrete cases, the part may contradict the whole; if so, it must be rejected. It is possible that the republican movement in one country may be merely an instrument of the clerical or financial-monarchist intrigues of other countries; if so, we must *not* support this particular, concrete movement...."

—*Ibid.*

The KLA can no longer be considered as any kind of national liberation movement—it is today simply a cat's paw of imperialism. We have therefore dropped the call for "Independence for Kosovo" as an immediate, agitational, demand because in the present context it can only serve as a cover for the schemes of the imperialists.



# Permanent Revolution and Kurdistan.

## Free Öcalan! Defend the PKK!

The following is an edited and abridged translation of an article originally published as a 24 February supplement to *Bolschewik*, journal of *Gruppe Spartakus*, German section of the IBT.

Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), was captured on 15 February by agents of the Turkish secret service who greeted him with the cynical words, "Welcome home, you are now our guest." One thing that Öcalan, Turkey's Public Enemy No. 1, can be certain of is the deadly hostility of his military "hosts" who have made no pretense of "fairness." Immediately after Öcalan was snatched in Kenya, his Turkish lawyer was arrested and members of his international legal team were turned away at the border, and hundreds of members of the only remaining legal pro-Kurdish party, Hadep, were imprisoned. The international left and workers' movement, particularly in Germany and Turkey, must take up the struggle to defend Öcalan and all other Kurdish activists. We therefore agree with the PKK that "demonstrations, rallies and occupations must take place with the aim of saving the life of the chairman of the PKK" (MED TV News, 16 February).

The successful defense of Öcalan, and the PKK as a whole, against the judicial systems of both Turkey and Germany requires, above all, the kind of massive working-class action which can threaten the bourgeois social order. Leftists and class-conscious workers in Germany must actively defend the Kurdish resistance. The case of Öcalan, and the numerous other PKK militants who are now threatened with arrest and deportation, is clearly a situation where "an injury to one is an injury to all!"

The Kurds' justified protests against their Turkish oppressors (and German collaborators) have been met by a campaign aimed at abolishing dual citizenship and strengthening anti-democratic laws. Both government and opposition politicians, as well as the corporate media, are involved in this vicious crusade. After the bloody massacre of Kurds at the Israeli embassy in Berlin, fundamental democratic rights were suspended as authorities banned all demonstrations in the city. Chancellor Schröder and Home Secretary Schily declare that "we" Germans must not permit conflicts on "our" streets which are not "ours" and, further, that "we" should crack down hard on Kurdish protesters, including considering using fast-track deportations. This cynical nationalist propaganda threatens the welfare and even the lives of Kurdish activists.

In recent years, the German state has directly participated in conflicts in Turkey. It banned the international Musa Anter peace train to Diyarbakir in 1997, suppressed *Kurtulus* (a newspaper critical of the Turkish regime) and conducted a brutal raid on the Anadolu publishing company in Cologne. Germany has politically supported all the oppressive measures undertaken by its NATO partner in Ankara while continuing to supply arms to the Turkish military. German imperialism is already a party to this conflict and an enemy of those who stand for the liberation of Kurdish and Turkish workers and peasants! It is sheer hypocrisy for Schröder et al to make a distinction between "their" conflicts and "ours" because the struggle has



C. AUGUSTIN

Kurdish demonstrators in Germany defend Öcalan

reached German streets and involves German police—as if the German state is in the habit of tolerating internal class struggle! The ruling class routinely responds to resistance against oppression "with adequate force." In 1997, when students protesting education cuts entered the inviolable precincts of parliament, they were attacked by mounted police; when angry miners protesting mass redundancies occupied the motorway, they were threatened with charges of breaching the peace; at recent anti-fascist demonstrations many leftists have been arrested. The point is not to counterpose "their" Kurdish/Turkish conflicts to "our" German ones, but to see that the fundamental conflict of interest is between the exploiters and oppressors (them) and the exploited and oppressed (us). Those who do not understand that the state's attacks on the PKK are also attacks on the entire left and workers' movement (German, Turkish and Kurdish) understand nothing!

Without the same legal rights as German leftists, Kurdish militants face the threat of deportation back to the Turkish state's torture chambers. This threat by the German government is not an empty one. In 1994, the SPD's minister of the interior for Baden-Württemberg brushed aside hypocritical concerns about "legality" and responded to similar Kurdish protests by saying that he had already started deportations. This is why we demand: Full citizenship rights for all immigrants—now! Stop the deportations!

### Revolutionary Politics or Imperialist Diplomacy?

The International Bolshevik Tendency and its German section, the *Gruppe Spartakus*, stand for the defense of the Kurdish resistance, and particularly the PKK, against both



**Kurdish, Turkish immigrant workers: an integral part of German working class**

the Turkish state and its imperialist allies. We have repeatedly called for lifting the ban on the PKK. In the face of the outrageous proceedings against Öcalan by Turkey's terrorist regime, it is necessary to organize broad united-front actions and mass mobilizations under the slogan: "Immediate and Unconditional Release of Abdullah Öcalan!" Instead, Nizametin Tas of the PKK central committee has appealed to the "progressive public" and "all democratic progressive groups" to send "observer delegations to Turkey" (MED TV News, 16 February). Such impotent moralistic appeals will not subdue the bloodhounds of the military dictatorship or their imperialist backers, nor will they be of any use in "safeguarding the life of chairman Apo"—this requires determined international mass mobilizations of immigrants and workers.

This is not the first time the PKK has relied on imperialist diplomacy rather than revolutionary mass mobilizations. Tas appeals to the governments of the European Union (EU) and the U.S. to "put pressure on the fascist Turkish state," while Kurdish demonstrators demand that the German government advocate a "fair" trial. We refuse to endorse demands that the Turkish military give Öcalan a "fair trial," or calls on Germany and the other European imperialists to apply diplomatic pressure on Turkey.

Turkey is not fascist, but its political regime is dominated by the military. When foxes put a hare on trial, the hare always ends up as their dinner, however formally correct the juridical procedure. Öcalan doubtless fulfils all the criteria for being convicted of high treason according to Turkey's Kemalist [Kemal Atatürk founded the modern Turkish state after World War I] legal code and judiciary—even a "fair" trial would put his life in jeopardy. Turkey's bloody rulers have no right to conduct any kind of trial of Öcalan. The Kemalist state has discriminated against and oppressed the Kurds since it was founded. Kurds are not allowed to speak their own language, their culture is sup-

pressed, and their region is mired in deep poverty and economic backwardness. The Turkish state has responded to all signs of Kurdish resistance with censorship, arrest, torture, massacres and the destruction of thousands of Kurdish villages. The PKK and Öcalan are not politically responsible for the thousands of people killed in the Turkish military's dirty war against the Kurdish nation. That responsibility lies solely with Turkey's rulers and their imperialist protectors. The only way that justice can prevail, and the only way to stop these barbaric attacks, is through the revolutionary overthrow of the oppressors.

The PKK's appeals to the imperialists are utopian and counterposed to the path of liberation for the Kurdish masses. Imperialism, as the oppressor of millions, cannot suddenly change its nature and become the liberator of the Kurds. The economic and political underdevelopment of Kurdistan and the Middle East is a product of the imperialist world system. The capitalists in the economically advanced imperialist countries use a combination of competition in the global market, access to investment and credits, and military muscle to ensure the continuation of their exploitation of the underdeveloped countries.

Under the terms of the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, which carved up the Middle East under British and French hegemony, the Kurds were divided between four states. Liberal appeals to the European Union, combined with the notion of offering Turkey EU membership, provided it agrees to respect "human rights," are utterly utopian. It is inconceivable that the EU will want to assume responsibility for running the Turkish "poorhouse," at least in the near future. All of the EU's supposed human-rights concerns simply serve as an excuse to hold Turkey at arm's length. They will not, and are not intended to, improve the situation of the Kurds in Turkey. If dependent Turkey were to join the EU, it would mean giving up its sovereignty (e.g., in agriculture) to further the interests of the European imperialists—

which could only inflict even more harm on the oppressed and exploited.

The U.S. imperialists' "protection" of the Kurds in northern Iraq keeps them penned in refugee camps and retards any struggle for liberation. It provides a smokescreen for American attacks on Iraq, and allows the Turkish military to freely attack PKK positions in northern Iraq. We call for driving the imperialists out of the Middle East, and the immediate withdrawal of the Turkish army from Kurdistan. We support the right of all oppressed nations to self-determination.

Contrary to the fantasies of some in the Kurdistan solidarity milieu, Öcalan's departure from Syria did not represent a diplomatic breakthrough in the search for a "political solution" to the war in Kurdistan. Öcalan's odyssey revealed how illusory the PKK's diplomatic hopes were. No state on earth was willing to grant Öcalan asylum or stand with the Kurdish liberation struggle. Italy politely asked Öcalan to leave and in Greece pro-Kurdish cabinet ministers found themselves in trouble. Öcalan is a veritable "hot potato." No government would have him, except his Turkish jailers. He shares the fate of the Kurdish nation as a pawn on the chessboard of international diplomacy.

Instead of appealing to the left and the international workers' movement, the PKK looked for support from the imperialists and Heinrich Lummer, an ultra-rightist German politician with fascist connections who is notorious for sending riot police to attack squatters in Berlin during the 1980s. The PKK's orientation to the right was not a political miscalculation—its roots lie in the PKK's petty-bourgeois, nationalist politics.

### **Socialism or Barbarism— Permanent Revolution or Stajism?**

Like most Turkish Stalinists and Maoists, the PKK believes that the backwardness of Kurdistan means that socialism is not on the agenda and instead it is necessary to fight for a bourgeois-nationalist, multi-class "people's revolution," to open the road for independent (state-assisted) capitalist development. Leaving aside a bit of decorative, but meaningless, socialist phraseology, this is what the PKK's program boils down to. Inevitably this strategy requires the subordination of the interests of Kurdish workers and peasants to those of the feeble petty exploiters who make up the Kurdish bourgeoisie—grandiloquently dubbed the "patriotic bourgeoisie." The PKK turns a blind eye to the countless economic, political and personal links that tie the indigenous bourgeoisie in underdeveloped countries to the landed elites and their imperialist patrons.

This is why the PKK attempted to establish a diplomatic rapprochement with the imperialists, and why they have long taken pride in collaborating with the "patriotic" Kurdish landowners. No ruling class ever allies itself with the toiling masses unless they are assured that the oppressed have subordinated their struggles to those of the bourgeoisie—in this case, it means accepting feudal oppression in the name of uniting the Kurdish nation. This policy does not lead to liberation or an improved life for the exploited masses of Kurdistan. It has produced instead the anti-Semitic articles written by Öcalan (under his pen names Ayden Safer and A. Inanc, e.g., in *Ozgur Ulke*, 28/29 August 1994), as well as flirtation with Islamicist tendencies, and even explicit support for imperialist racism:

"Unfortunately, the backwardness of our people is a blot



DER SPIEGEL

**Turkish troops bombard Kurdish rebels**

on developed Germany. This makes me sad. Germany should not have been made to suffer this evil....This is why racism is spreading again. Quite justified, by the way! I also think that the right is right. I want to say quite openly that on this issue I do not think like a social democrat. The right-wingers are right."

—Öcalan in an interview with journalist Günther Wallraff

The PKK sees the task of Kurdish liberation as an essentially isolated national task (with the Kurdistan solidarity milieu as its semi-diplomatic support group), but communists view the Kurds' struggle as a potential catalyst for proletarian revolution throughout the Middle East. There is no isolated national path to economic development and social progress under capitalism in the era of imperialism with its global market and international division of labor. Recognizing this reality is the necessary starting point for all revolutionary calculations and actions. The dreams of Asia's "tiger economies" about catching up with the imperialists have been buried beneath the wreckage of the latest financial crisis. Considering the economic backwardness of these countries and the pressures exerted by global competition, capital demands that for these economies to "develop," i.e., remain profitable, they must have vastly greater rates of exploitation of their human and natural resources. Fantasies about a "national democratic stage" of harmonious capitalist development prior to proletarian revolution can only serve the interests of the nascent national bourgeoisie and lead inexorably to a nightmare for the working class (China 1927, Spain 1936-39, Indonesia 1965-66, Chile 1972-73). The capitalists know this. However, petty-bourgeois formations like the PKK are still promoting the same bourgeois program and the same stagist model of national capitalist development which has led to defeat so often in the past.

The strategy of permanent revolution, vindicated in practice by the October Revolution of 1917, provides the only viable alternative. It is based on two premises: a) the tasks of the bourgeois revolution (democratic rights, the

land question and the national question) cannot be carried out by the national bourgeoisie, but only through proletarian revolution supported by the masses of impoverished peasants; and b) only international socialist revolution can open the road for the economic, political and cultural emancipation of the masses. The bureaucratic degeneration of the world's first workers' state through Stalin's policy of "socialism in one country" demonstrated this in practice.

### **Kurdistan & Revolution in the Middle East**

We unconditionally defend the right of the Kurdish nation to self-determination, that is, to establish a separate state, but we do not currently advocate that the Kurds attempt to exercise this right:

"In the present circumstances an independent Kurdish state would find itself in very great difficulty....surrounded by its historic oppressors, but it would be a society characterized by backward, pre-capitalist social structures. Because of its underdevelopment, an independent Kurdistan would find itself at the mercy of the regional as well as imperialist powers."

—*Bolshevik* No. 2

The essential obstacle to real social liberation is Kurdistan's lack of the primary prerequisite for socialist revolution: a proletariat.

"Kurdistan is not a classical case of a colonial revolution, as for example, China and Vietnam were earlier this century. In both these cases, the proletariat was small, but with sufficient economic and political power to lead the peasantry in a successful assault on both the imperialist masters and their indigenous bourgeois allies."

—*Ibid.*

In China and Vietnam the victory of Stalinist-led guerrilla movements, which opposed the independent political activity of the proletariat, inevitably produced despotic, bureaucratically deformed workers' states. As we noted in our previous article:

"One of the peculiarities of the Kurdish national question is that it is intertwined with the social question in the states with Kurdish minorities and, through them, in all the states of the Near East. The fight for the freedom of the Kurds requires a common struggle with the Turkish, Persian and Arab working masses. Any serious threat to capitalist rule in Turkey, for example, must inevitably pose the question of the Kurds. The Kurdish struggle for national liberation, on the other hand, could easily spark a wave of upheavals that would shatter the brittle regimes of the region."

—*Ibid.*

The existing capitalist states must be replaced by a socialist federation of the Middle East, within which the Kurds can decide their own future. If the Kurdish freedom struggle were to take this direction, the effects would be felt far beyond the Middle East. It could also provide a powerful impulse for proletarian struggle in Germany and every other country in Europe that is presently home to some of the millions of immigrant workers from the Middle East.

### **Proletarian Internationalism vs. Petty-Bourgeois Nationalism**

The PKK's fight for an independent Kurdistan, which is not connected to the class struggle and lacks any socialist content, has reached a dead end. Victory in the guerrilla

struggle seems to have disappeared from the PKK's agenda. The PKK's nationalist orientation is absolutely incompatible with the realities of the international class struggle. Indiscriminate attacks on Turkish tourist centers, shops and cafes can only serve to undermine internationalist unity among the exploited and oppressed, as opposed to legitimate attacks on agents of the Turkish or German states or fascists. Revolutionary internationalists oppose attacks on newsstands, tea houses or fast-food outlets which are targeted simply on the basis that they are Turkish. We would defend these premises, and their civilian patrons, against the blind fury of the PKK nationalists. We take the same approach toward attacks which do not directly and exclusively target the Turkish state or big business, but aim instead at tourist centers—nationalist attempts to hurt the Turkish state "indirectly" by ruthlessly killing Turkish, Kurdish and West European workers are indefensible.

The tragedy is that the PKK's nationalist logic is exactly the opposite of the requirements for the liberation of the Kurds from national oppression and semi-feudal exploitation. International working-class unity is the only viable alternative to the reactionary collaboration between German imperialism and Turkey's rulers.

A good example of how such an approach can work was the longshore boycott in the mid-1980s in San Francisco, where supporters of the International Bolshevik Tendency played a leading role. This political strike against apartheid, which lasted for eleven days, was directed against unloading South African cargo. It cost the apartheid regime dearly, while promoting an internationalist and class-struggle approach to the burning political issues faced by the working class—essential prerequisites for the revolutionary liberation of humanity. Such an internationalist revolutionary perspective is realizable. In 1991, during the Gulf War, when the Turkish government sought to mobilize popular opinion against Iraq, spontaneous protests erupted in Turkish Kurdistan. The demands raised there were taken up by other Turkish and Kurdish workers in mass strikes and demonstrations. This political awakening of the Turkish working class in solidarity with the Kurdish liberation struggle was seen as a serious threat to the Turkish regime.

In Germany and other European states, revolutionary workers must openly and actively solidarize with the cause of immigrant workers and, in particular, with the struggle of the Kurds against national oppression. Revolutionaries must also seek to make connections with the proletarianized immigrants of the Middle East with the perspective of building a revolutionary alternative leadership within the unions counterposed to the existing reformist bureaucracy. The PKK, by organizing immigrant Kurds as Kurdish patriots rather than as workers without a fatherland, acts as an obstacle to proletarian internationalism and thus, ultimately, to the liberation of the Kurds. A careful analysis of the Kurdish question leads to the conclusion that, as important as it is to defend the PKK, it is equally important to sharply criticize their politics. Kurdish fighters must break with the PKK, as well as the numerous smaller Maoist and Stalinist pseudo-Leninist revisionist groupings, and participate in building a Leninist-Trotskyist international organization, based on the program of permanent revolution, with sections in every state—including Turkey and Germany. This is the road to the revolutionary liberation of the Kurds and all the other oppressed and exploited peoples of the world.



# *Down with UN Starvation Embargo!* **Hands Off Iraq!**



PETER DEJONG-AP

**Funeral procession for young Iraqi victims of UN blockade**

*Reprinted below is the IBT's 19 December 1998 statement on the imperialist bombing of Iraq.*

At 12:49 am Thursday morning Baghdad air raid sirens sounded, and minutes later the city was subjected to the first wave of a punitive imperialist terror-bombing operation dubbed "Desert Fox" by the U.S. Pentagon. Clinton's "Desert Fox," like George Bush's 1991 "Desert Storm," is all about maintaining U.S. hegemony in the oil-rich Middle East. Britain's social-democratic prime minister, Tony Blair, volunteered British bombers for the murderous campaign. Blair has also vigorously defended Clinton against suggestions that the timing of the assault had anything to do with postponing a scheduled vote on impeachment by the U.S. House of Representatives.

The pretext for the current attack is Iraq's supposed failure to fully comply with UN arms inspectors. During the 1980s, Iraq was armed and supported by Britain, Germany and the U.S. as a bulwark against Iran's Islamic Revolution. Today Saddam's former patrons feign horror at the thought that Iraq may still possess some of the weaponry which they originally provided. Yet UN inspectors have conceded that Iraq's nuclear and chemical weapons programs have been dismantled, and they also admit that no evidence of biological weaponry has been found. The hys-

teria in the imperialist media about the supposed dangers posed by Saddam's "weapons of mass destruction" also routinely ignores the fact that the medium-range missiles Iraq possessed (which are necessary to deliver such weapons) have been decommissioned.

Saddam Hussein is a brutal dictator and the enemy of the Iraqi masses, but his only "crime" in the eyes of imperialism is that he is not pliable enough. Having failed to topple Hussein in the aftermath of Desert Storm, for the past eight years the U.S. has subjected Iraq to a vicious embargo that is directly responsible for the deaths of well over a million Iraqis—two-thirds of them children. The ongoing campaign against Iraq is, at bottom, an assertion of America's "vital interest" in controlling the oilfields of the Middle East by negating Baghdad's capacity to lean on the Saudis, Kuwaitis and other U.S. clients in the region. The continuing pressure on Saddam has also allowed the U.S. considerable leverage over Iraq's oil industry which holds more than ten percent of the world's total proven oil reserves. For years the open-ended "weapons inspections" have provided a pretext for the indefinite continuation of UN sanctions, and the restriction of Iraqi oil sales.

American/British insistence on the importance of heeding UN resolutions has always been very selective.





DICK HALSTEAD-TIME

**February 1998: Clinton's war cabinet booed by students at televised Ohio State University meeting**

The Israelis, the main U.S. ally in the Middle East, have for years simply ignored UN decisions they don't like. Unlike Iraq, the U.S., Britain and Israel possess both substantial quantities of "weapons of mass destruction" and the means to deliver them, but none of them would tolerate the infringements of sovereignty to which Iraq has been subjected. The inspectors (who the Iraqis rightly regard as little more than spies for the imperialists) supposedly report to the UN, yet "Desert Fox" began before the UN Security Council even had a chance to discuss the report which supposedly occasioned it.

In his televised speech from the White House announcing the attack, President Bill Clinton bragged that U.S. policy toward Iraq was one of "intense diplomatic pressure backed by overwhelming force." A considerable amount of diplomatic pressure has also been used on America's allies in Europe and its Middle East clients. Germany's social-democratic chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, eagerly endorsed the U.S. assault, as did Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, but France has shown a marked lack of enthusiasm and Russia recalled its ambassador from Washington to signal its displeasure.

One reason the U.S. did not wait for the Security Council before launching its offensive may be because three of the five permanent members of the council have interests that, to one extent or another, conflict with those of the British/American axis. The Chinese Stalinists, who are attempting the impossible task of presiding over an orderly transition from collectivized property to capitalism, have recently had increasing frictions with Washington over trade issues, spheres of influence in Asia, and China's handling of various pro-American dissidents. The leaders of Russia's bank-

rupt capitalist-restorationist regime find it galling to have to watch the U.S. humiliate a traditional ally. Moreover Iraq owes Russia \$7 billion which cannot be repaid while Iraqi oil is embargoed. France is also owed some \$5 billion by the Iraqis. In addition to these debts, both French and Russian oil companies have reportedly been negotiating lucrative oil development deals with Iraq which cannot go forward until the UN sanctions are lifted.

The international working class has a side in this struggle—and it is with Iraq, and its government, against the British and U.S. pirates and their allies. This in no way implies any political support to Saddam Hussein, the "butcher of Baghdad," whose brutal dictatorship has been maintained through murder of every potential opponent, the crushing of the left and workers' movement and savage repression of religious and ethnic minorities, particularly the Kurds. We look forward to the revolutionary overthrow of Saddam, the reactionary Arab sheiks and colonels, and the racist Zionists, and the opening of the road to the Socialist Federation of the Middle East.

The U.S.'s preferred option is to organize some kind of palace coup to replace Hussein with a more subservient dictator. In explaining the rationale for this latest campaign of imperialist aggression, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright announced that: "we have come to the determination that the Iraqi people would benefit if they had a government that really represented them" (*New York Times*, 18 December [1998]). This encapsulates the cynicism and arrogance of the imperialists—so eager are they to "save" the Iraqi people from Saddam that they are willing to rain death on tens of thousands to do so.

### **Defend Iraq! Down with Imperialist Gunboat Diplomacy!**

In the imperialist countries it is imperative that socialists and class-conscious workers resist the outrages perpetrated by "our" leaders through mass mobilizations, political strikes and any other available means. It is also important to oppose the semi-official media campaign aimed at whipping up anti-Iraq sentiment which, particularly in the U.S., could potentially escalate into racist hysteria directed against all Arabic and Islamic peoples.

This British/American bombing exercise cannot be called a "war;" it is an act of massive state terrorism against a virtually defenseless, primarily civilian, population. We bitterly regret that Iraq is forced to face this assault as lightly armed as it is, and that the imperialist forces seem likely to escape without suffering any serious military reverses in their gigantic criminal undertaking.

In the present confrontation Marxists stand with millions of people around the world who are angered by the murderous campaign against Iraq by the U.S., Britain and their accomplices. But the job of Marxists is to channel that anger, to win workers and young militants to understand that it is necessary to go beyond mere opposition to particular outrages and begin serious and sustained revolutionary work to end the irrational and blood-drenched imperialist order and replace it with a system in which human need comes before pursuit of private profit. This requires a struggle to forge Trotskyist parties, rooted in the proletariat, in every region of the world. It is to that struggle that we of the International Bolshevik Tendency are committed.

# IBT's Second International Conference

## Weathering the Storm

The shifting politics and organizational allegiances of individuals is one of the perennial features of life on the left. The significance of such movements can only be assessed in the context of the overall situation of the workers' movement and the opportunities of the day. In the last eighteen months, the International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT) witnessed the departure of two small internal oppositions with clearly rightward trajectories. Four comrades rejected the transitional program, and one comrade decided that voting for workers' parties within popular fronts could be a legitimate tactic. In this same period, other leftward-moving individuals—including one from the International Socialists (IS) in Canada and two former members of the Revolutionary Workers League (RWL) in the United States—joined the IBT.

The IBT's Second International Conference, in January 1998, allowed comrades to discuss the international political situation, evaluate our work over the past period and air political differences that had arisen since our 1994 conference. The "Tasks and Perspectives" resolution adopted by the conference began with the following observation:

"The collapse of the USSR, a world-historic victory for imperialism, has cast a long shadow over this decade. While the capitalists' triumphalist propaganda about 'the death of communism' is destined to take its place beside the equally stupid declaration that 1989 marked the 'end of history,' the fall of Soviet Stalinism profoundly affected the consciousness of hundreds of millions of workers and oppressed people around the world."

The triumph of counterrevolution in the USSR produced a dramatic deterioration in living standards, life expectancy and economic security for working people throughout the former Soviet bloc, and sparked a series of bitter nationalist conflicts in the region. It also led to a wholesale assault on social programs and working-class living standards in the imperialist countries.

The rightward shift in the international political spectrum is evident within the left and workers' movement. With a few highly significant exceptions, the unions in the imperialist countries have generally been quiescent and, in some places, their influence and membership have declined considerably. In many countries the trade-union bureaucrats have been unable or unwilling to mount any serious resistance, even of a defensive character, to protect gains won in the past.

The conference document noted that, in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, "the ostensibly revolutionary left is as fragmented, disoriented and demoralized as at any time since the defeat of the Paris Commune." To a considerable extent, the capitalists' present advantageous position derives from the popular view that the collapse of Stalinism refutes the idea that working people will ever be able to create a socialist society. The capitalists have been emboldened and, in many cases, appear to have forgotten that the concessions they are now so eager to revoke were originally granted to avert massive revolutionary social upheavals.

The increasingly aggressive corporate attacks on working people are setting the stage for large-scale eruptions of

class struggle internationally in the next period. These social explosions will propel tens of millions onto the path of revolutionary struggle. Initially, such outbreaks will inevitably have a politically primitive and semi-spontaneous character. In the absence of a visible and authoritative revolutionary alternative, much of this spontaneous anger and energy is likely to be squandered in the dead-end of petty-bourgeois radicalism (e.g., anarchism, life-stylism, environmentalism, syndicalism, etc.).

Time spent reinventing the wheel is time wasted. The crucial task for Marxists in this period is to carry forward the programmatic acquisitions of the past which alone provide the basis for recreating a revolutionary, internationalist leadership for the working class. But what steps toward rebuilding such a leadership are open to a small group of revolutionaries today? In our "Tasks and Perspectives" resolution we noted that since our inception our primary objective has been, "to ensure the survival of an anti-revisionist ideological pole within the international Trotskyist 'far left.'" The struggle to preserve the thread of revolutionary continuity carried forward by Trotsky's Fourth International after the Stalinization of the Comintern remains a vital precondition for the selection and training of the revolutionary cadres of tomorrow.

Maintaining this perspective is not always easy. Our small organization has not been immune to the pressures created by the setbacks suffered by the international working class in recent years. When the class is in retreat, few workers are actively seeking a revolutionary alternative. Not all comrades have the fortitude or vision to uphold positions that they may intellectually accept to be historically necessary, if at the moment, these views are not met with an enthusiastic response.

The impulse to attempt to escape political isolation and gain influence within broader social layers is powerful but, in a period when opportunities are few, such appetites frequently lead to jettisoning elements of the revolutionary program. But an authentically revolutionary leadership for the working class can only be reformed with cadres who are willing to tell the truth to the masses, no matter how unpopular it may be, and who are capable of sustaining themselves by taking a long view of history.

### Debate Over the Transitional Program

We had long planned to publish an edition of Trotsky's 1938 *Transitional Program*, tracing its development from the early Communist International and highlighting its role in the exemplary trade-union interventions carried out by the then-revolutionary Spartacist tendency in the 1970s. This was an ambitious project for a group of our size, but we considered it to be a critical part of our struggle to illuminate the programmatic connection between the revolutionary Comintern, Trotsky's Left Opposition and the Spartacist League of the 1960s and 70s.

In discussions prior to our conference, it became clear that some comrades had developed serious differences over fundamental elements of our political program and historical tradition. Comrade Jim Cullen, who made very



Anti-EU protestor

ACTION PRESS

significant contributions to the IBT during his ten years of membership, both as our leading member in New York, and as a member of the editorial board of this journal, announced that he had come to view the essential programmatic conceptions of the *Transitional Program* as no longer applicable. He framed the issue as follows:

"The fundamental question about the TP today is this: Did the post-war world represent a continuation of the same epoch as Trotsky describes in the TP, in which case the perspectives it contains remain fundamentally our own? Or did it, on the contrary, represent a different epoch, in which case a re-evaluation of perspectives is called for?"

The majority of the IBT maintained that Lenin and Trotsky had been correct to see the outbreak of World War I as signaling a qualitative transformation in the history of capitalism as a world system: its progressive historical mission was exhausted and a new, imperialist, epoch of "wars and revolutions" had begun. In this epoch of imperialism, socialist revolution is on the historical agenda and the task of revolutionaries is to intervene in the day-to-day struggles of the working class with a program linking the immediate issues faced by working people to the necessity of overturning the existing social order. Such a program must be composed of demands capable of organizing the working class for revolutionary struggle.

Comrade Cullen and his co-thinkers argued that, since World War II, we have been living in a new epoch in which socialist revolution has not been on the historical agenda (at least in the metropolitan countries). Consequently, in their view, the *Transitional Program* is a document of merely historical interest. Cullen's leading supporter soon came to the conclusion that not only Trotsky's program, but also Lenin's organizational model, should be junked. He decided that it

was therefore pointless to wait for the IBT conference, and, instead, went off to sign up as a social democrat. Cullen and his two remaining supporters waited until the conference, and then walked out at the beginning of what had been scheduled as an entire day of discussion on the issue of the transitional program.

## Maastricht & Marxism

A secondary issue in the debate, which Cullen and his collaborators correctly identified as a particular instance of their more general political differences, was the question of our attitude toward the European Union. This difference came to light when comrade Cullen criticized the position advocated by IBT co-thinkers (and others) within Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party in Britain. The premier issue of the *Marxist Bulletin* (April 1997) declared:

"We reject the Maastricht plan for an imperialist super-state as well as the Eurosceptics' alternative, which points to an autarkic, protectionist Britain. We must prepare for aggressive resistance to all capitalist attacks on wages, living standards and social services, whether these are advanced on the grounds of promoting European integration, safeguarding British sovereignty or simply making British industry 'competitive'. Workers' struggle across national lines—not nationalist poison—must be our reply to capitalist attacks."

The minority comrades characterized this position as "ultra-left" and "abstentionist" although it was clearly in line with the IBT's positions on the 1992 Maastricht referendum, as well as the 1988 Canada/U.S. Free Trade Agreement.

The debate on this issue, which occupied most of the second day of the conference, revealed that comrade Cullen and his associates had come to the view that socialism is not a viable option for the foreseeable future. They therefore considered it a matter of some urgency for workers to embrace what they took to be the least oppressive variant for organizing capitalism. Perhaps it should have come as no surprise that after losing on this issue, the minority comrades would decide to walk out before what had been billed as the "main event"—the discussion on the transitional program.

Soon after his departure, comrade Cullen made his liquidationist conclusions explicit by observing that it would be "absurd" for him and his followers to attempt to launch a new organization. Discouraged by the course of political developments in the last quarter century (and particularly the past decade), they concluded that we, and those whose work we are continuing, have misread history in a rather fundamental way.

Given the depth and scope of their differences, it was inevitable that we would part ways, for these comrades had changed their minds about the fundamental validity of the project to which they were once recruited. On the whole, our oppositionists conducted themselves in a serious and politically responsible manner during their time in the IBT. While we cannot endorse their pessimistic conclusions, we appreciate the fact that by fighting for their views they helped deepen our understanding of, and commitment to, the Trotskyist tradition for which we stand.

## From the IBT to the Socialist Alliance

Another issue discussed at our conference was the future of the former IBT members in Britain who had been instrumental in the publication of the *SLP Marxist Bulletin*.

These comrades had concluded from the SLP's December 1997 national conference (see article elsewhere in this issue) that they had no reason to remain in the SLP, and were in the process of deciding on the manner of exiting and their future perspectives.

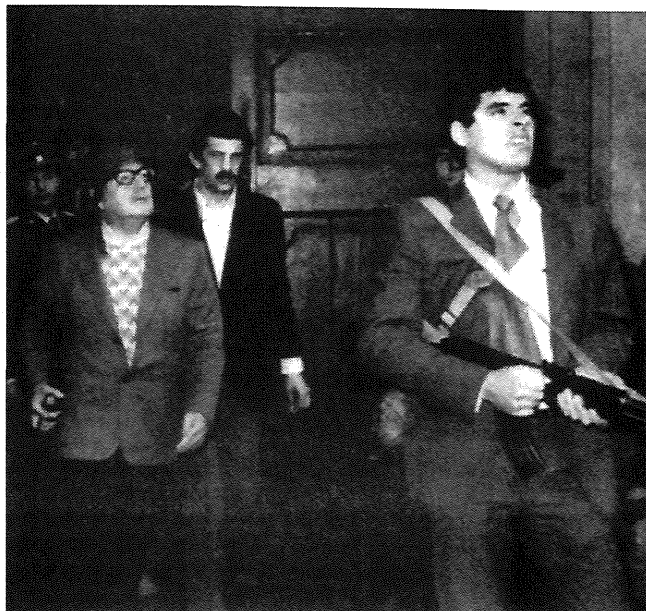
Many ostensible Trotskyists in Britain believe there is no role for a small group except as an entry inside some larger formation. It became apparent that one MB comrade, Ian Donovan, was uncomfortable with the developing consensus that the best means of propagating the program necessary for socialist revolution was through re-constituting a British section of the IBT.

Comrade Donovan has many talents, and, though at times erratic, he played a valuable role in helping establish the IBT in Britain. As the *Marxist Bulletin* comrades prepared to depart from the SLP, he began to express an intense desire to participate in the newly-revived Socialist Alliance. The other comrades did not share this enthusiasm, and tended to view the Socialist Alliance, in both conception and execution, as a propaganda bloc between a variety of ostensibly socialist formations "united" on the basis of a lowest-common denominator program somewhat to the right of most of its components. In short: a swamp.

In departing the IBT, comrade Donovan downplayed the issue of the Socialist Alliance. Instead, he took issue with our view that the Spartacist tendency of the 1970s represented the continuity of authentic Trotskyism. Comrade Donovan had been a member of the Spartacist League/Britain (SL/B) in the mid-1980s, after the group had undergone a qualitative degeneration, and he had been a victim of gross abuse at the hands of the SL/B leadership. During his time in the IBT, he periodically displayed a certain subjectivity toward the SL/B.

In the period leading up to his departure from the IBT, comrade Donovan began to argue that the Spartacist tendency had been wrong in citing Trotsky to support its opposition to voting for workers' parties participating in popular fronts (i.e., alliances with bourgeois parties). When Salvador Allende was elected at the head of the Chile's Unidad Popular, the SL wrote:

"It is the most elementary duty for revolutionary Marxists to irreconcilably oppose the Popular Front in the elec-



NEW YORK TIMES

11 September 1973: end of 'Chilean Road to Socialism'

tion and to place absolutely no confidence in it in power. Any 'critical support' to the Allende coalition is class treason, paving the way for a bloody defeat for the Chilean working people when domestic reaction, abetted by international imperialism, is ready."

—*Spartacist*, No. 19, November-December 1970

The remarkable prescience of this assessment is all the more impressive because the SL stood alone among all the world's supposed Trotskyist currents in refusing any political support to Allende. A quarter of a century after Pinochet delivered the "bloody defeat" predicted in *Spartacist*, comrade Donovan asserted that, because Leon Trotsky never explicitly opposed voting for workers' parties in popular-front alliances, it was possible, at least in principle, for revolutionaries to call for votes to Unidad Popular candidates.

In its 1970 statement, the SL had explained the political logic of its position:

"Within reformist workers' parties there is a profound contradiction between their proletarian base and formal ideology and the class-collaborationist aims and personal appetites of their leaderships. This is why Marxists...give reformist parties such 'critical support'—against overt agents of capital—as will tend to regroup the proletarian base around a revolutionary program."

—*Ibid.*

When the reformists enter into a common formation with the capitalist parties this contradiction is suppressed for the duration of the bloc:

"It is our job then to re-create the basis for struggle *within* such parties by demanding that they *break* with the coalition. This break must be the elementary precondition for even the most critical support."

—*Ibid.*

The Bolsheviks conducted just such a campaign against Kerensky's coalition with the bourgeoisie under the slogan "Down with the Ten Capitalist Ministers." Lenin's absolute political opposition to popular frontism in 1917 was critical to the success of the October Revolution. Conversely, where revolutionaries have been unable to mount such a

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campaign on an effective scale, the results have been uniformly disastrous—from Shanghai in 1927 to Santiago in 1973.

Comrade Donovan came to regard the SL's rejection of electoral support to all the candidates in popular fronts as evidence of hopeless sectarian abstentionism. An IBT leader who responded to Donovan suggested that there could be a subjective element involved in this reassessment:

"I understand that your experience with the degenerated SL/B was very traumatic. I suspect that this has something to do with your apparent impulse to want [to] reject the iSt as ever having been any good. As you know the IBT is based on quite a different assessment."

The IBT leadership proposed that, "as this discussion does not grow out of any question posed in our actual work" and involved a "hypothetical question of possible electoral tactics toward a possible popular-front coalition," a substantive discussion could be postponed until the next preconference period. Comrade Donovan found that to be unacceptable and promptly left the IBT to begin publication of his own journal, *Revolution & Truth*. He also joined the London unit of the Socialist Alliance, of which he was subsequently elected chair.

(Last January, nine months after leaving the IBT, Donovan assaulted a member of the Spartacist League/Britain at a demonstration commemorating the British Army's 1972 Bloody Sunday massacre in Ireland after she slandered him as a supporter of the reactionary Royal Ulster Constabulary. Our comrades on the spot immediately condemned the assault. We have a longstanding commitment to defend any leftist, including members of the Spartacist tendency, against such physical attacks.)

Comrades Cullen and Donovan left the IBT for different reasons, but they shared a common impulse to abjure the "sectarian," "ultra-left" and "abstentionist" Trotskyist tradition which they once embraced. In commenting on comrade Cullen's departure in a posting on our website, we recalled Trotsky's observation:

"Great political defeats inevitably provoke a reconsideration of values, generally occurring in two directions. On the one hand the true vanguard, enriched by the experi-

ence of defeat, defends with tooth and nail the heritage of revolutionary thought and on this basis attempts to educate new cadres for the mass struggle to come. On the other hand the routinists, centrists, and dilettantes, frightened by defeat, do their best to destroy the authority of revolutionary tradition and go backward in their search for a 'New Word.'"

—"Stalinism and Bolshevism: Concerning the Historical and Theoretical Roots of the Fourth International" (29 August 1937)

## Two, Three, Many MEGs!

Politics is a two-way street, and our 1998 "Tasks and Perspectives" document projected that:

"The rightward shift in the politics of ostensibly revolutionary groups is likely to continue to produce splits and fissures. Inevitably that process should throw up some leftward-moving elements."

A few such exceptional individuals continue to find their way to us, attracted by the consistently revolutionary program for which we struggle. An outstanding recent example was the decision of two comrades of the Marxist Education Group (MEG) of Albany, New York, to join the IBT. (See also the statement of Stephen J., formerly a member of the Canadian International Socialists elsewhere in this issue.)

In 1995 the MEG was founded by former members of the centrist Revolutionary Workers League (RWL) who had become alienated by that organization's subordination of programmatic considerations to the frenetic organizational dictates of the group's leaders. After a few years spent participating in a range of agitational activities in Albany, the MEG comrades concluded that it was necessary to widen their field of activity, and explore the possibility of regrouping with other revolutionaries.

The MEG had always regarded the struggle of the Revolutionary Tendency (RT—forerunner of the Spartacist League) in the American Socialist Workers Party of the early 1960s as a critical episode in the history of American Trotskyism. This inclined them to sympathetically consider the historical record of the Spartacist League. Yet their encounters with the Spartacist League in the 1990s as members of the RWL made them wary of the SL's claim to represent the continuity of the RT. They were not impressed by the SL's tendency to substitute hysterics, ultimatums and name-calling for serious political debate.

In early 1998 the MEG contacted both the IBT and the Internationalist Group (led by the SL's former editor Jan Norden). This led to a series of discussions, both written and verbal, with both groups focusing on the Russian question, the general strike and the history of the SL's political degeneration. Ultimately the comrades concluded that the IBT was the most consistent representative of the revolutionary programmatic heritage of the RT and early SL.

The recruitment of serious young revolutionaries moving from centrism to Trotskyism is always welcome, but it has particular significance in a period of limited opportunities. It is also important as a harbinger of potentially larger revolutionary regroupments in the future as the tide of counterrevolution ebbs, and the profound contradictions embedded in the post-Soviet New World Order begin to erupt. We look forward to that moment, when the capitalists, their agents and ideologues will be forcefully reminded that "Red Ain't Dead!"

(Interested readers can find related material at our website: "www.bolshevik.org")

# REVOLUTIONARY HISTORY

## Culture & Revolution in the Thought of Leon Trotsky

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# Bolsheviks in King Arthur's Court

## SLP: a Postmortem

In early 1996 British mineworkers' leader Arthur Scargill launched the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) in a revolt against the overtly pro-capitalist policies embraced by Tony Blair's New Labour Party. From the beginning, the SLP contained a contradiction between the left-Labourism of its initiators and the more radically socialist aspirations of the militants it attracted. At its birth, the SLP could have been the catalyst for a major regroupment of the most class-conscious sections of Labour's traditional working-class base and hundreds of subjective revolutionaries from the British left. But by its second conference, in December 1997, it was evident that the SLP had hardened into a dead-end reformist sect.

British supporters of the International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT) spent two years inside the SLP, from its inception until shortly after its second conference. They joined the SLP without illusions, knowing that the break with Blair's New Labour represented a serious step to the left for the SLP's small working-class base, but that many illusions in Labourite parliamentarianism remained. Our comrades were seriously committed to building the SLP into a party with enough leverage to split New Labour. In the course of the political struggles required to carry out such a perspective, they hoped to expand the influence of revolutionary Marxist ideas within the British working class.

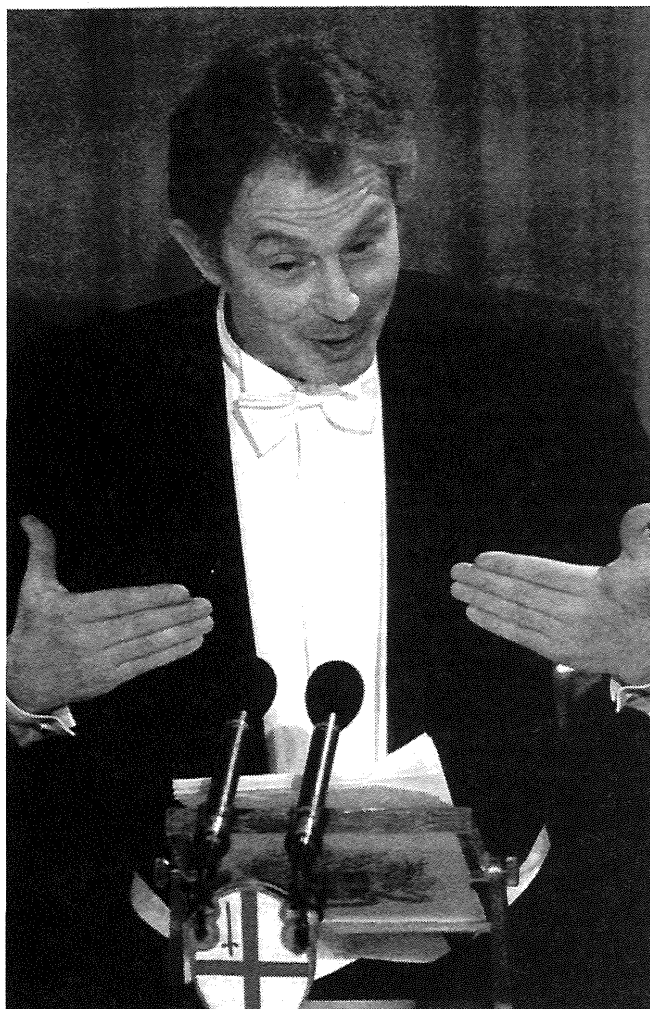
We consider this intervention in a real movement of a section of the British working class to have been a valuable experience which helped establish the IBT as a small, but serious, component of the left, with a reputation for combining unity in action with programmatic clarity. Unfortunately, the SLP as a whole did not achieve any degree of success in breaking a broader layer of British workers from Labour. Nevertheless, an evaluation of the rise and fall of the SLP, and the intervention of Marxists inside it, can provide valuable lessons for the future.

During most of this century the Labour Party served as a "socialist" insurance policy for Britain's capitalist rulers against the sort of revolutionary catastrophe that befell their Russian cousins in 1917. But the triumph of counter-revolution in the USSR in 1991, widely interpreted by bourgeois ideologues as signaling the "end of communism," radically altered the rules of the game. Having decided that they no longer face any danger from revolutionary upheavals, the bourgeoisie is now intent on revoking many of the concessions made to working people in the past.

In the imperialist countries today, the mass social democratic parties, which have always served as the political agents of the bourgeoisie within the workers' movement, no longer even pretend to fight for improvements. Instead they vie openly with the capitalist parties for the job of dismantling the social gains won by previous generations.

### Origins of the SLP

Tony Blair represents those in the Labour Party who want to sever the remaining links with the unions and emerge as the liberal party of British imperialism. One of Blair's first acts as Labour leader in 1995 was to formally re-



Tony Blair's New Labour: breaking with the unions

pudiate the platonic commitment to socialism codified in Clause IV of the party's constitution.

Arthur Scargill, a prominent Labour "left," declared that Blair's victory on Clause IV meant that it was necessary to launch a new party—a *socialist* labor party. Assisting Scargill in this venture were a few officials of the once-mighty National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), a handful of veteran British Stalinists, and a small circle of cadres who were once connected to the "United Secretariat of the Fourth International."

Scargill's reputation was by far the SLP's most important asset. His role as the leader of the heroic, year-long NUM strike of 1984-85 provided the SLP with instant recognition and ready access to the capitalist media—assets which no other British left group possessed. Scargill's radical image, and the SLP's initial rhetorical appeal to all "socialists and communists" to join, attracted both experienced "far left" activists and a layer of trade unionists from Labour's "hard left."

Many of those who initially rallied to the SLP had vivid memories of the miners' valiant struggle and bitterly recalled the cowardly betrayals of their strike by the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress bureaucrats. Had Scargill chosen to launch a new party a decade earlier, he could very likely have gathered many more supporters than he was able to by the time Blair had taken over. Yet, despite Arthur Scargill's reputation as a fearsome "red" and his courageous defense of the Soviet Union at the height of the Thatcher/Reagan Cold War hysteria of the early 1980s, his politics never transcended left-Labourism.

In launching the SLP, Scargill and his coterie were inordinately concerned with maintaining a tight grip on their new venture. They demanded that anyone joining the SLP renounce all previous organizational affiliations and frowned on anything which smacked of "factional" activity. Such requirements naturally repelled many potential affiliates, including the thousand-odd members of Militant Labour (now the Socialist Party) whose leaders had initially shown interest.

Despite these ill omens, in its formative period the SLP bubbled with internal political life. In March 1996, two months before the founding conference, members were invited to a one-day policy meeting during which workshops met to draft policy papers on topics including economics, anti-racism, women, youth, international relations, Ireland, European Union, healthcare and education. The papers produced by the workshops were discussed and amended in a round of subsequent meetings and then sent out to the branches for consideration prior to the May founding conference.

All views were supposedly welcome, but it was clear from the outset that the leadership was anxious to curb the expression of views contrary to its own left-reformist political framework. At one point during the March 1996 meeting, Arthur Scargill himself rushed from the economic policy workshop to squelch a suggestion in the European Union workshop that the SLP declare itself opposed to British imperialism—whether in *or* out of Europe. While Arthur was busy combating such "ultra-left" sentiments on European unity, participants in the economics workshop proposed that the SLP commit itself to a policy of expropriation of capitalist property and the institution of workers' management of production as necessary preconditions for the construction of a socialized economy. These proposals, which reflected the views of many SLP members, were rejected by the group's founders as too far to the left of traditional Labourite "socialism."

## Founding Conference

At the SLP's founding conference, the leadership got its way on most issues. But on the question of British troops in Ireland it was forced to bow to pressure from the left, when it became clear that a large majority of the 500 conference attendees supported the immediate withdrawal of all troops. This was an important break from the Labour Party's social-chauvinist record on Ireland. The SLP conference also came close to dumping the leadership's proposed "anti-racist immigration policy" for British imperialism in favor of scrapping controls altogether. Several other leftist amendments received respectable votes at the conference.

Despite the fact that many of the workers who had broken with Labour to join Scargill's venture were open to

arguments that went beyond traditional Labourism, it became clear the Scargill leadership retained sufficient political authority among its base to ensure that the SLP's program remained within the framework of militant reformism.

In the early days, many SLP branches had several dozen members and their own active internal political life. But one of the features of the blatantly undemocratic constitution imposed by the leadership at the founding conference (without any discussion) was the stipulation that branches must be based on parliamentary constituencies. This took some time to actually implement in the face of resistance in many localities. This measure, copied from the Labour Party, was designed to prevent the bigger and more dynamic branches emerging as a potential counterweight to the national leadership. The leadership also used the dubious authority of the constitution and its ban on dual membership to arbitrarily exclude individual members, groupings and, in some cases, whole branches, with little explanation and no right of appeal.

Instead of seeking to expand its influence among revolutionary minded youth and shop-floor unionists, the leadership spent its time pursuing left-posturing union bureaucrats and disaffected Labourite parliamentary careerists. Scargill was continually hinting about imminent breakthroughs in this field, but little ever came of it.

Barbara D., a prominent IBT supporter in Britain, stood for election to the National Executive Committee (NEC) at the SLP's founding conference as part of a hastily improvised slate from the March 1996 economics workshop. The slate was comprised of those who had wanted to include the call for the expropriation of the bourgeoisie in the SLP program. This leftist bloc made a good showing with Barbara, its top vote-getter, coming within a single vote of being elected. The various members of this slate represented a considerable spectrum of leftist opinion, and debates on related issues continued for some time after the conference. In a major contribution to this discussion, Barbara argued that the SLP should seek to connect the economic and political interests of working people:

"Socialist Labour's economic policy should be about two inextricably linked objectives—meeting the immediate needs of the working class today and setting up an economic system for the future that will fundamentally meet the needs of all. Capitalism does neither. We need to smash it and replace it with a system run by the working class, a centrally planned, collectively-owned economy that manages the resources of society in the interests of all. "We don't need to wait until the SLP achieves political office. We can begin, even as a small, new party, in fighting for the things we need now. And we should do this regardless of the impact it will have on the capitalist system. Capitalism can only meet basic needs partially and temporarily, if at all. By fighting for our needs, we have no choice but to challenge capitalism.

"We can begin with fighting unemployment, through measures like those outlined in the policy document—a four-day working week with no loss of pay, a ban on all non-essential overtime and voluntary retirement on full pay at age 55....

"The ruling class will not take kindly to this kind of economics....

"Workers need to take control of economic concerns—the industries in which they work, the utilities, the banks. We cannot just talk about nationalisation. The question is

who will run them once they are nationalised and who will benefit from them. This is why we have to talk about nationalisation without compensation—clearly taking these businesses, and their financial rewards, out of the hands of the capitalists and into the hands of the workers. We must fight for workers control of the economy, so that workers benefit from the economy.

"And again the forces of the state will be used against us. 'Without compensation' will leave the ruling class fighting for their lives. Be in no doubt that they will be willing to use physical violence against us. We must be prepared to defend ourselves. The picket line is the first level of this defence, but it will ultimately be necessary to build our own state to defend the new economic system we want to set up. This is why the needs of today are inseparable from the type of society we need for the future."

—"SLP Economic Policy: A Discussion Document,"  
June 1996

## Marxist Bulletin Launched

The differences within the leftist NEC slate were too serious and too deeply held for there to be any prospect that the bloc might develop into a long-term programmatically-based opposition to the SLP leadership. A few months after the conference, Barbara, her former IBT comrades and several other left-wingers collaborated in the production of "A Marxist Programme for the SLP," and subsequently, in early 1997, launched the *SLP Marxist Bulletin (MB)*.

While the Marxist Programme advocated "the immediate and unconditional withdrawal" of British troops from Northern Ireland and called for defending the oppressed Catholics from Orange terrorism, it did not endorse the SLP leadership's call for a "united Ireland" on the grounds that such a call implied support for the forcible incorporation of the Protestant minority within a unitary (Catholic-dominated) state. Such a policy would tend to reinforce the grip of the Orange bigots on Protestant workers.

On the question of European integration, the *SLP Marxist Bulletin* counterposed socialist internationalism to the Scargill leadership's little-Englandism. The *MB* program rejected "the Maastricht plan for a European imperialist super-state as well as the Eurosceptics' alternative, which points to an autarkic, protectionist Britain," and proclaimed that, "Workers' struggle across national lines—not nationalist poison—must be our reply to capitalist attacks."

Supporters of the *MB* openly challenged the SLP leadership's tendency to focus exclusively on immediate demands, thereby tacitly treating the socialist objective as something unreal or impractical:

"The major weakness [of the SLP program].. is the yawning chasm between the programme of immediate demands, which is explicitly posed as a series of reforms to the existing system, and the final goal of 'creating a socialist society'.

"We should be aware that this kind of division, between 'immediate demands' and the 'final goal' (also known as the 'minimum' and 'maximum' programmes) is a characteristic hallmark of social democratic politics. The Labour Party, right through the days of Ramsay MacDonald through to Wilson/Callaghan, could tolerate airy talk of its 'final goal' as expressed in the old Labour Party Clause IV, as long as its programme of immediate demands were kept *completely separate* from anything that pointed to the necessity to go beyond capitalism. To the Labour Party, any demands that pointed *concretely* to the need to de-

stroy capitalism itself constituted 'extremism' and were to be avoided like the plague."

—"Where are we going?," reprinted in  
*SLP Marxist Bulletin* No. 1

## Work Among Women & Youth

*Marxist Bulletin* supporters actively participated in the SLP women's section. One of the more animated political controversies that took place in the women's section arose when an *MB* comrade proposed that the SLP come out against all state censorship. Some women activists supported this, but others, particularly those who identified more strongly with feminism, took the view that the thing to do was pressure the capitalist state to act in an anti-sexist manner.

Several *Marxist Bulletin* supporters played key roles in laying the groundwork for a Socialist Labour youth conference in late 1996 that was supposed to launch a youth group. *MB* comrades produced a draft "Youth Charter," which provoked considerable discussion particularly around its proposals for decriminalizing drugs, abolishing the age of consent and reasserting the traditional Marxist view that police and volunteer soldiers are not part of the workers' movement. *MB* supporters argued vigorously against the reformist notion that the armed thugs of the capitalist state are just "workers in uniform," who should be admitted to the trade-union movement.

The young SLPers who participated in the initial preparations for a youth group were committed to building an organization that could make substantial gains for the SLP among young people. But the SLP leadership was concerned that a vibrant youth wing could end up as an organizing center for leftist opposition. So the NEC aborted the whole initiative by arbitrarily lowering the age limit from 30 to 25, thereby disqualifying most of the members of the interim committee.

## The SLP and the Elections

As the May 1997 general election approached, it became evident that New Labour, despite its overtly pro-capitalist policies, would retain most of its traditional working-class support on the grounds that it alone could rout the discredited Tories, creating an uphill struggle for the 63 SLPers who contested seats. The energy and effectiveness of *SLP Marxist Bulletin* supporters during the campaign was widely respected and added weight to their critique of the leadership's political vacillations and bureaucratism.

In theory, local SLP branches were free to choose their own candidates, but in several cases, the leadership rigged the selection process. When the Brent East SLP branch decided to stand against Blair's candidate, former Greater London Council leader Ken Livingstone, Scargill publicly disowned them, and declared that the SLP had "never intended" to run against Livingstone (*Morning Star*, 3 February 1997).

Throughout the campaign, the SLP leadership remained silent on the question of voting for New Labour where the SLP was not running. The opportunist desire to stay friendly with New Labour's "lefts," which lay at the bottom of this, blurred the SLP's image, confused its supporters, and undercut its ability to pose a serious alternative to the Blairites.

The *Marxist Bulletin*, which was acknowledged as "the main voice of the [SLP's] Trotskyist left" by the *Weekly*



**Arthur Scargill: big frog in a little pond**

*Worker* (13 December 1997), argued against voting for New Labour, and proposed that SLP branches not running candidates should be allowed to choose between abstention and critically supporting other leftist candidates. This, the only policy consistent with the break with New Labour in the first place, was opposed by many self-proclaimed Marxists in the SLP (mostly former "Trotskyist" Labour Party entrists), who wanted to vote for the Blairites where the SLP was not contesting the seat.

### **Scargill and the 'Red Menace'**

From the founding conference onward, the Scargill leadership imagined that the best way to consolidate the SLP (and ensure their control) was to eliminate all leftist critics. This effort absorbed an inordinate amount of the time and attention of the leadership and, in the end, proved entirely counterproductive. The crude methods employed to purge suspected oppositionists (typically the more active and effective SLP members) poisoned the internal atmosphere and discredited Scargill and his coterie among many members who recalled all too well how witchhunts against the Labour left had paved the way for Blair in the first place.

While more politically savvy SLP members recognized the leadership's arguments for proscribing members of "outside" organizations as bogus and self-serving, this policy made sense to many members who resented people who claimed membership in the SLP, but refused to take the organization seriously. This indignation was directed particularly at sympathizers of the Communist Party of

Great Britain (CPGB), the most leftist remnant of British Stalinism. The CPGB's *Weekly Worker* regularly published reports of internal developments in the SLP, which frequently included well-founded criticisms. But their refusal to respect the SLP's right to any kind of an internal life made it easy for Scargill to get rid of anyone identified as a CPGB sympathizer.

Supporters of the IBT, on the other hand, acceded to the SLP leadership's demands, and dissolved their separate public organization, without abandoning their political views. In September 1997, Arthur Scargill made a feeble attempt to intimidate *MB* activists with a letter in which he disingenuously inquired:

"Could I ask you why you are connected with 'Marxist Bulletin' and have endorsed the 'Statement to the NEC on the question of party democracy' when you know these actions are in conflict with the Socialist Labour Party's constitution?"

The *MB* comrades responded by flatly asserting their intention to continue to argue for their policies within the SLP, and Scargill backed off.

### **The Fight for Democracy in the SLP**

The "statement on party democracy," to which Scargill referred in his letter to the *Marxist Bulletin*, had been drafted by a group of SLP comrades who met regularly in Reading during 1997. The Reading statement (which was endorsed by 15 branches and 80 individual members, in addition to the *Marxist Bulletin*), represented the Scargill leadership's most serious challenge.



Previously, a handful of SLP members, including several sympathetic to the CPGB and the Workers Power group (WP), had launched their own "Campaign for a Democratic SLP" (CDSLP). Unlike the Reading bloc, which took care to keep its activities strictly internal, the CDSLP made its criticism public, in one case, at the London press conference called by the SLP to launch its national election campaign. The CDSLP's antics were not well received by most SLP members, many of whom were well aware that WP was advising people to vote for Blair's candidates rather than the SLP. The CDSLP, whose influence in the SLP, was negligible, provided the bourgeois press with a chance to poke fun at the left, and gave the SLP leadership an excuse to smear all their left critics as agents of Blair.

Unlike Workers Power, the CPGB was broadly supportive of the SLP initiative, yet their participation in the CDSLP gave most SLP members the impression they didn't take membership in the SLP very seriously. The *Marxist Bulletin*, like most of the Reading bloc, completely dissociated themselves from the CDSLP, but firmly opposed the leadership's attempts to drive out suspected WP or CPGB supporters.

The majority of the Reading bloc decided to run a "democracy" slate for the NEC at the SLP's upcoming congress. *Marxist Bulletin* supporters explained why they chose not to participate in this venture in a 27 October 1997 letter:

"We believe that the production of lowest common denominator joint propaganda for the NEC elections, even with the right to produce our own separate propaganda, would be detrimental to the necessary struggle for political clarity at the Congress. We believe such a slate implies a much higher level of political agreement than in fact exists.

"The Congress is the highest body of the SLP and to have argued for more democracy and discussion, as our united front has done, and yet then not to take full advantage of those opportunities that do exist seems more than a little contradictory."

—reprinted in *SLP Marxist Bulletin* No. 5, December 1997

While most other participants in the Reading bloc took the view that internal democracy took priority over all other questions, the *Marxist Bulletin* insisted, that to effectively oppose the bureaucratization of the SLP, it was also necessary to challenge the leadership's Labourite political appetites. To this end, *MB* supporters put forward resolutions in their branches on Ireland, the European Union, censorship and immigration controls; a special conference issue of the *SLP Marxist Bulletin* included a detailed analysis of most of the conference resolutions. Five *MB* comrades ran as a slate on the "Marxist Programme for the SLP."

*Marxist Bulletin* supporters addressed the question of internal democracy with a constitutional amendment which included the following:

"Members of the Party have the constitutional right to advocate changes of Party policy on any question, and to combine together in tendencies or factions to change Party policy or the Party leadership, subject only to their abiding by the Rules, Constitution and Objectives of the Party."

This simple statement of elementary democratic principle was supported by a substantial portion of the member-

ship, and picked up by a number of SLP branches, including several where the *Marxist Bulletin* had no direct connections.

At the founding conference, where the leadership had initially imposed its constitution, Arthur Scargill had assured everyone that it could be discussed and amended at the next conference. But at the second conference, almost every attempt to propose a constitutional amendment was ruled out of order on the grounds that it contradicted the constitution. To give some semblance of legality to their dubious use of the constitution, the leadership handed out copies of a lengthy and complicated disciplinary code, which they then insisted on putting to an immediate vote, without giving delegates a chance to read it. The lowest point in this whole farce was undoubtedly the discovery by the membership, part way through the first day of the conference, that three Scargill loyalists (supposedly representing a society of retired miners) had been awarded a bloc vote greater than the combined total of all the regularly elected delegates from local branches! The leadership's ability to get away with such measures signaled that the SLP's transformation into a Stalinoid shell was qualitatively complete.

The grotesque bureaucratic manipulations at the December 1997 congress guaranteed victory for the leadership over its critics, but the price was high. Most of the SLP's more talented and active members were driven out and the morale and enthusiasm of those who remained was sapped. The supporters of the *Marxist Bulletin*, and hundreds of others, walked out in the weeks following the conference. In London, three-quarters of the members, including most of the activists, have left. And the purging continues as various erstwhile leadership allies, including the grouping around Patrick Sikorski, formerly associated with the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, and the neo-Stalinist homophobes associated with Royston Bull's *Economic & Philosophical Science Review*, have themselves fallen out of favor with King Arthur.

## An Opportunity Squandered

Many of the ostensible revolutionaries who were originally attracted to the SLP imagined that they were helping launch a new all-inclusive (reformist) workers' party (sometimes referred to as a "communist-labour party," or a "party of recomposition"), within which they could find a home as a loyal left wing. The *Marxist Bulletin* comrades took a different approach. While opposing the proscription on dual membership in other leftist organizations, they rejected the attempt to recreate a "party of the whole class." From the outset, the comrades who went on to found the *Marxist Bulletin* saw the SLP as an opportunity to win some of the more politically conscious worker militants to revolutionary socialism.

"In political life there can be no guarantees. It is of course possible that bureaucratic manoeuvres or political purges could turn the SLP into a lifeless shell and wreck the whole project. It is also conceivable that even with the most exemplary leadership and the most vigorous and active membership the SLP will still not be able to establish itself as a viable player in national politics in the near future. It is impossible to know unless we try. But the possibility exists that the SLP will develop a sufficiently hard-hitting set of politics and be able to project them effectively enough to attract thousands of working-class youth and union militants disgusted by Blair & Co. And if

the SLP retains a sufficiently open and democratic internal régime it could educate and politically develop this new layer into socialist activists and organisers who are able to reach tens of thousands of others."

—"The Socialist Labour Party—Why Bob Pitt is Wrong," *What Next*, No. 2, 1996

The SLP began as a politically contradictory and unstable formation breaking to the left from New Labour. At times of heightened activity, political developments can be very swift, and Marxists must be alert to both the direction and speed of motion if opportunities for revolutionary breakthroughs are to be seized. It is also necessary to know when it is time to move on. In announcing their resignation from the SLP, supporters of the *Marxist Bulletin* wrote the following:

"We say to those militants that remain in the SLP: comrades, you are wasting your time. The party was worth something once, but that potential has been destroyed. We have a better chance of building a mass working-class party that can fight for our interests if we are outside the

straitjacket of the SLP.

"Many past and present members of the SLP will play an important part in the future of the British workers' movement. But the SLP is no longer the arena in which they can do so. Marxists, and all those committed to a socialist future, must look elsewhere for joint activity, discussion and debate.

"The need for a working-class alternative to Blair's Labour Party is stronger than ever. The need for a party with a Marxist programme that can lead the working class to victory is an absolute necessity. The Socialist Labour Party is neither.

"Supporters of the *Marxist Bulletin* will be establishing a group outside the SLP. We will be working for the same objectives and arguing for the same programme as we did inside the SLP. We look forward to continued work with any comrades who wish to build a real, revolutionary, alternative to Labourism, and with broad layers of individuals and groups on specific issues where we have agreement. We will engage in and encourage the process of political debate the SLP has stifled—the programmatic struggle necessary for the future of our class."

## ICL Debates IBT



On 13 February, the Trotskyist League (Canadian affiliate of the International Communist League, headed by the Spartacist League/U.S.) debated the International Bolshevik Tendency on the national question in Quebec. The event was sponsored by the Brock Socialists, a student group at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario. The entire transcript of the debate has been posted on our web site ([www.bolshevik.org](http://www.bolshevik.org)). It will also be available in the forthcoming *Trotskyist Bulletin* No. 7.

# Open Letter to the International Socialists

## From Cliff to Trotsky

The following letter was distributed at a national gathering of the Canadian International Socialists in Toronto.

1 May 1998

Dear comrades,

I was an active member of the IS for three years (September 1994 to December 1997), but I am no longer a member of your organization. I think I owe it to IS comrades to explain my differences. I hope you will seriously consider what I have to say.

I was expelled by Abbie Bakan on December 10, 1997 for allegedly "infiltrating" the International Socialists (IS) on behalf of the International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT) and the Trotskyist League of Canada (TL). The allegation is an obvious lie—anyone who knows anything about the IBT and the TL knows that they are competing organizations. Even if I wanted to "infiltrate" the IS, which of course I didn't, it would be impossible to do so on behalf of both of these groups.

This does not mean that I did not develop differences with the IS on several critical issues. However, I did not have sinister motives. In the period from when I began to develop some serious differences until I was expelled, I carried out all my responsibilities as a full member of the organization—attending paper sales and meetings, as well as paying dues. I did resign my post as Fredericton branch convenor, which I think was the honorable thing to do, given my growing doubts about much of the group's basic political orientation. I also corresponded with the IBT and TL, a fact I did not try to conceal. In a phone conversation with Carolyn Egan in mid-November, I asked if this was acceptable to the IS. She said it was acceptable and that the IS didn't want to lose me. When I was expelled, Abbie's ultimatum was that if I continued talking to the IBT or TL, I would no longer be a member of the organization. This is consistent with the IS policy of sealing its members off from political competition. It was likely that I would have left the IS at some point, but it should have been on my own terms.

### The Political Period

The IS characterizes the era that we are living through as one of "economic instability and political volatility." This is generally correct, but it leaves out a lot. Globally the capitalists have been on the offensive for the past decade. This primarily results from their victory in the "Cold War" over the USSR which strengthened U.S. imperialism and its allies. The existence of the Soviet Union as a counterweight to the NATO imperialists strengthened the hand of various nationalists in their conflicts with imperialism and played a key role in the defeats of imperialism in China, Cuba and Vietnam. One of the first fruits of the disintegration of the USSR under Gorbachev was the crushing of Iraq in the murderous 1991 Desert Storm attack. The ultimate collapse of the Soviet bloc led directly to a series of major concessions and retreats by leftist forces globally, e.g., South Africa, Nicaragua and El Salvador.

Of course history did not come to an end when the Stalinist regimes did—the working class has continued to

struggle. But we must recognize that the recent significant struggles (Ontario, France, South Korea) have had a defensive character and that generally the level of political consciousness is far behind the level of struggle. The consciousness of the proletariat has been *lowered*, not raised, by the destruction of the Soviet Union (which, while it was not genuinely socialist, was correctly seen by many workers as having an economy that, since 1917, had operated outside the dictates of global capitalism). One consequence of the imperialist victory in the Cold War is that the word "socialism" has been temporarily erased from the vocabulary of many in the workers' movement. The capitalists have also concluded that socialism is dead—which is one reason they are being so aggressive about take backs. Particularly in Western Europe after World War II, the capitalists made important concessions in terms of the social wage because they wanted to undercut the appeal of "socialist" East Europe.

The IS leadership says that there are "deep pools of bitterness." Yes there are, but so what!? Bitterness does not equal class consciousness. Unemployed German workers joined the Nazis in the 1930s because they were bitter. *Socialist Worker* noted that many workers, embittered by Bob Rae's NDP government in Ontario, turned around and voted for the capitalist parties.

Lenin said that class struggle does not automatically produce revolutionary consciousness. Those who don't understand this always tend to overestimate (and tail) existing movements in the class, and downplay the party question and the need for revolutionaries to fight for leadership. Lenin called this tendency "economism." If the working class is revolutionary in itself, it doesn't need a party to lead it.

The working class, through its own struggles for existence, can only achieve *trade-union consciousness*—a form of *bourgeois ideology*. This is because working class struggle tends to be sectional and national. The role of the vanguard party is to bring *political class consciousness* (an understanding of history, of the various social classes and oppressed groupings in society and of the common interest shared by workers internationally) to the most advanced workers from outside the framework of their own immediate experience:

"We have said that *there could not have been* Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers. It would have to be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation, etc.

"...the spontaneous struggle of the proletariat will not become its genuine 'class struggle' until this struggle is led by a strong organization of revolutionaries."

—V.I. Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?* (1902)

The initial members of a communist movement will naturally come to revolutionary politics as intellectuals (Marx,



DAVID KING

**'... the role of vanguard fighter can be fulfilled only by a party that is guided by the most advanced theory'—V.I. Lenin**

Engels, Lenin and Trotsky all came from such backgrounds). Life on the shop floor may give workers a gut-level hatred of their boss, but it does not automatically give them an understanding of the operation of the capitalist system as a whole. This does not mean that workers cannot become Marxist revolutionaries, but to do so requires investigation independent of their own work experience.

### The Party Question

An unbalanced view of the state of the class struggle leads the IS to overestimate the possibilities for the left in general and itself in particular. This has produced a recruitment policy that was best summed up by Alex Callinicos of the British Socialist Workers Party as: "If it walks, sell it the paper; if it buys the paper, recruit it." There is an amazing contradiction between this definition of membership and the IS claim to be building a Leninist vanguard. The "open recruitment" policy, apart from anything else, makes the IS extremely vulnerable to infiltration by fascists and the state.

In the 1903 Bolshevik/Menshevik split over the criteria for membership, what side would the IS really be on? In his 1959 book, *Rosa Luxemburg*, Tony Cliff, founder of the IS tendency, wrote: "for Marxists, in advanced industrial countries, Lenin's original position can much less serve as a guide than Rosa Luxemburg's...." This statement was edited out of further editions of the book, but it shows that the party question is not a question of principle for the IS, but one that changes according to the historical juncture. Luxemburg herself came to recognize that Lenin had been right against her on the necessity for a revolutionary vanguard party, as opposed to an all-inclusive "party of the whole class." ISers—Lenin argued for a high commitment to politics and activity as a criterion for member-

ship—agreed? Now take a look at your branch membership list. 'Nuff said.

Leon Trotsky, leader of the Russian Revolution and founder of the Red Army, opened the *Transitional Program* with the lines: "The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat" (*The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, 1938). The party question is the central one for revolutionaries.

A real revolutionary group must be made up of serious people, committed to the revolutionary program. This defines the membership of a Leninist group. But in the IS you can be a lot of things—a feminist, a social democrat or an anarchist. These are all forms of bourgeois consciousness. It is the task of Marxists to argue with people like this, to win them away from such illusions—not to recruit them as they are and thereby dilute the organization. To feminists, we say, "draw a class line, not a sex line;" to social democrats, we say, "you have to break the power of the bourgeois state;" to anarchists, we say, "the proletariat needs a state to defend its revolution." Only those who reject feminism, social democracy or anarchism, and embrace Marxism, can be recruited. If you started a rock-climbing club, would you let people join who thought you should go scuba-diving instead? The IS has too many people going in too many different directions. As a whole, they have no direction. This is what Lenin had to say about those who put artificial unity over political principle:

"We are marching in a compact group along a precipitous and difficult path, firmly holding each other by the hand. We are surrounded on all sides by enemies, and we have to advance almost constantly under their fire. We have combined, by a freely adopted decision, for the purpose of fighting the enemy, and not of retreating into the neighbouring marsh, the inhabitants of which, from the very



outset, have reproached us with having separated ourselves into an exclusive group and with having chosen the path of struggle instead of the path of conciliation. And now some among us begin to cry out: Let us go into the marsh! And when we begin to shame them, they retort: What backward people you are! Are you not ashamed to deny us the liberty to invite you to take a better road! Oh, yes, gentlemen! You are free not only to invite us, but to go yourselves wherever you will, even into the marsh. In fact, we think that the marsh is your proper place, and we are prepared to render *you* every assistance to get there. Only let go of our hands, don't clutch at us and don't besmirch the grand word freedom, for we too are 'free' to go where we please, free to fight not only against the marsh, but also against those who are turning towards the marsh!"

—*What Is To Be Done?*

Chris Harman of the British SWP referred to Lenin's analogy to explain the kinds of problems that arise with low-level recruitment:

"The revolutionary party exists so as to make it possible for the most conscious and militant workers and intellectuals to engage in scientific discussion as a prelude to concerted and cohesive action. This is not possible without general participation in party activities. This requires clarity and precision in argument combined with organizational decisiveness. The alternative is the 'marsh'—where elements motivated by scientific precision are so mixed up with those who are irremediably confused as to prevent any decisive action, effectively allowing the most backward to lead. The discipline necessary for such a debate is the discipline of those who have 'combined by a freely adopted decision.' Unless the party has clear boundaries and unless it is coherent enough to implement decisions, discussion over its decisions, far from being 'free,' is pointless."

—"Party and Class," 1969

The IS leaders will say that refusing to recruit people who don't understand or agree with your program is a characteristic of "small group mentality" and is "sectarianism." They will deny that the IS is accommodationist and claim that if you don't recruit new youth as soon as you meet them you will never see them again. But if there really is a radicalization, won't people show up more than once? Why sign up people who aren't really interested or committed when you know that in a few weeks or a month they will drift off? The constant turnover produced by the "Open Recruitment" policy has produced a less political organization and an overall lowering of the level of the membership.

An organization built in this way is doomed either to be bypassed by great events or to betray. One of the main reasons the Second International supported their own rulers in the First World War was because they built a "broad" inclusive organization on lowest common denominator (that is, reformist) politics. This ensured that at critical moments they could not offer decisive revolutionary leadership to the working class. The IS leadership knows this history, but is incapable of drawing the operational conclusions. When people criticize this policy, the response they get is that they are "self-important" and that they should get busy recruiting.

The priority of revolutionaries must be to forge a politically principled *vanguard* of the working class. In periods in which the working class is not on the offensive, small revolutionary groups that make "growth" their top priority



AFF-DPA

**Kim Dae Jung: IS choice for South Korean president**

must politically adapt to the existing (bourgeois) consciousness of the class. Such groups can *never* lead a working-class revolution.

### 'Don't Bomb Iraq' or 'Defend Iraq'?

Being a revolutionary is not easy. It means saying unpopular things a lot of the time, but the task of revolutionaries is to "say what is." You have to raise a revolutionary program to be able to win people to revolutionary politics. In 1915, the Bolsheviks said "Turn the Guns Around!" It was unpopular, and people hated them for it, but they kept on saying it because it was correct. By 1917, when the brutalized, impoverished, war-weary Russian proletariat understood that the Bolsheviks had told them the truth there was a mass radicalization that turned the Bolsheviks into a mass party and led directly to the October Revolution.

In the 1991 Gulf War the IS abandoned the Leninist position of military defense of Iraq so that they could enter anti-war coalitions with their left-liberal milieu. Because of their lack of political principles, they would not distinguish between an imperialist power and an imperialist victim (Iraq). In the recent Gulf crisis, the slogan of the British SWP was "Don't Bomb Iraq." Does this mean that it is okay to starve Iraq as an alternative; is it okay for the U.S. imperialists to use diplomatic pressure? It is bad enough to tail behind progressive movements, but don't tail France, Russia and Saudi Arabia. The IS, in this case, bowed to the pressure of bourgeois ideology.

### Opportunism & NDP Loyalism

IS opportunism is clearly displayed in Canada by the perpetual call for a vote to the New Democratic Party (in



TORONTO STAR

**Bob Rae: NDP union-bashing ex-premier of Ontario**

Britain it is the Labour Party). This is explained by referring to Lenin's tactic of critical support. But in the early 1920s, when Lenin advanced this tactic, there was a wide layer of militant workers following the recently created Labour Party. Since it hadn't been in government, and claimed to be a workers' party committed to socialism, many advanced elements of the working class had deep illusions in it. Lenin's proposal was designed to help put Labour into office to expose its real pro-capitalist character and shatter the illusions of the workers who supported it.

Lenin also proposed that the Communist Party should seek to organizationally affiliate with the Labour Party. How different the situation is today! The NDP and New Labour retain a connection to the union bureaucracy, but they do not even pretend to run on a working-class program. They are very clear that capitalism has nothing to fear with them in power—as they have proven time and again.

The task of revolutionaries is to break illusions. But for supposed Marxists to call for voting for the social democrats when they run on an overtly pro-capitalist program and point to their record of union-bashing and attacks on the poor and oppressed can only *create* illusions.

The treatment of the NDP in the internal bulletin released prior to last year's election (April 23 1997) notes that in Ontario the labor bureaucracy had pulled back from confrontations with the Mike Harris government in order to campaign for the NDP: "Union militants are expected to re-

place their picket signs with lawn signs." The document goes on:

"we have to be the memory of the class. In the middle of the Bob Rae years of despair, when thousands were leaving the party, we argued against the stream to still vote for the NDP. Our vote for the NDP has nothing to do with its record. It is the only party that is based on the union movement and not the corporations. We know it will sell-out."

This is an astounding statement, when you think of it. Firstly because the IS almost never goes "against the stream." But secondly because it so brazenly admits that its electoral support to the NDP has nothing to do with the existence of illusions of the workers, but merely the fact that it is connected to the labor bureaucrats. The NDP is so far to the right that it cannot really be accused of "selling out"—it runs on its record of blatantly attacking workers, and the IS calls for electing it! The Steering Committee document continues:

"We were criticized by people like Jack Layton [a prominent left-NDP municipal politician in Toronto] for taking this position [i.e., voting NDP]. Their support to the NDP is based on illusions that the NDP will make a difference. When they saw the NDP implement Tory cuts, they abandoned the party."

Bob Rae's government was so hated by working class people for acting like Tories that Layton wanted to get some distance from it. But not the IS leadership! Apparently without seeing the obvious contradiction, the leadership document goes on to quote Lenin's famous comment on critical support:

"I want to support [the Labour Party] in the same way as the rope supports a hanged man—that the impending establishment of the government of the [Labour Party] will prove that I am right, will bring the masses over to my side, and will hasten the political death of the [Labour Party]...."

—"Left-Wing" Communism—An Infantile Disorder

The NDP in power had hung itself—the best elements in its base were melting away. Yet *still* the IS supported the social democrats. This is *exactly the opposite* of what Lenin advocated. Instead of seeking to rally some of the thousands of workers who were deserting the NDP in disgust at its betrayals, and direct them to the left into supporting independent labor candidates against NDPers who backed the hated Social Contract, *Socialist Worker* used its credentials to try to corral left-wing voters for Rae.

The confusion of the IS policy on the NDP is perhaps best summed up by the Steering Committee in the following:

"So we call for a vote to the NDP. But we do not support the NDP. We organize a revolutionary socialist organization that is an opponent of the NDP's, whose goal it is to replace it. We vote for the NDP, but we do not campaign for them or join the party."

If the NDP (or Tony Blair's Labour Party in Britain) was worth voting for, *if* it commanded the allegiance of a sizeable number of socialist-minded workers who had illusions in it, *then* it would make sense to campaign for it, or perhaps even affiliate to it, in order to make contact with and influence that layer of militants. But when there is no such layer because the social democracy is so nakedly pro-capitalist, then there is no reason for revolutionaries to call for militant workers to vote for it. In fact, by doing so, Marxists can actually help create illusions among leftist



U.S. ARCHIVES

Seoul students enthusiastically greet North Koreans, summer 1950

workers that there is some reason to still vote NDP.

Of course the IS likes to present its votes to the NDP and Labour Party as a "class vote" against the bosses' parties. But that is revealed as just so much cynical doubletalk by the fact that the IS internationally is also willing to call for votes to openly bourgeois parties—such as the South Africa's African National Congress in 1994 and South Korean presidential candidate Kim Dae Jung in 1987. Despite all the fine talk about working-class independence, the IS bottom line is always determined by popularity.

Those who don't believe that the working class can be won to Marxism through the intervention of socialists putting forward a revolutionary program you end up adapting to the existing consciousness and watering down their politics.

Some years ago the American International Socialist Organization (ISO) supported the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) as they campaigned for state intervention to "clean up" the union. Now that the courts have thrown out the TDU-backed teamster president Ron Carey, the ISO is singing a different tune:

"Government intervention was widely viewed as a step forward, especially since the government set up the first direct elections for Teamster presidency—which elected Ron Carey in 1991.

"But it only was a matter of time before the government, having established its right to intervene in the unions, would go against the interests of the rank and file."

—Sharon Smith in *Socialist Review*, No. 215, January 1998, "A crime to organize?"

Marxism is useless if you don't argue it with people. What's the good of opposing state intervention after the

fact? The ISO didn't have the guts to raise the Marxist slogan of class independence when it really mattered. The new position is nothing but commentary. The ISO's failure to raise a Marxist program when it really mattered is evidence that they don't believe that the working class can be won to revolution through the intervention of a vanguard party. So they water things down.

### Democratic Centralism or Bureaucratic Centralism?

Some ISers who agree with some of these points may think, "well, we made some mistakes, nobody's perfect, but we are a democratic group and our mistakes are correctable." But these "mistakes" form a pattern—one which can only be broken by going to the roots of the whole IS tradition. And the IS leadership is very resistant to any kind of fundamental political discussion. IS national meetings don't usually feature much political discussion. Mostly they repeat old affirmations: "the period is great, we've got to recruit." Any opposition to the leadership is taken care of very quickly, and in a way designed to prevent serious political discussion. In Vancouver, the Steering Committee recently split the branch to isolate a democratically elected branch leadership. In my own case, it took only slightly more than a month to expel me after it became known that I was developing differences.

The lack of democracy is particularly clear in the way the international group runs. The IS internationally is a *bureaucratic centralist* organization. Individual members at the national level have no say in determining the international line of the group. The Central Committee (CC) of the British

SWP simply gives orders to the other national leaderships. When the SWP leaders decided in the early 1990s that it was time for a “turn,” the membership had no say in this. Periodic delegated international conventions and an elected international leadership (as in the Fourth International under Trotsky) could provide the possibility of democratically evaluating and correcting the line of the group. But at the same time it would also pose the “risk” that members might not agree with everything laid down by the British CC. Trotsky stood for a democratic-centralist international: “We stand not for democracy in general, but for *centralist* democracy. It is precisely for this reason that we place national leadership above local leadership and international leadership above national leadership.”

—“An Open Letter to All Members of the Leninbund,”  
6 February 1930

The means used to short-circuit serious political debate internally are also extended [externally], in an attempt to shelter ISers from political discussion with people outside the group as well. Organizations such as the Trotskyist League and the Bolshevik Tendency are excluded from all IS public meetings purely on the basis of their politics—to avoid any uncomfortable questions they might raise. I admit that I once agreed with, and participated in, the IS exclusion policy. I regret this and now reject this policy 100 percent. I also regret and repudiate anything I may have said in ignorance about these groups in the past.

The IS policy is not even limited to the groups standing furthest to its left. At Marxism '97, IS members were instructed not to talk to or even take leaflets from members of other groups, “hear no evil—read no evil!” In an internal memo written after the Montreal anti-poverty conference in January 1996, where Labour Militant and other groups turned up, the IS leadership admitted that, “no matter how bonkers the politics of some of these sects, they can grow just like us.” But the conclusion was that it is a “terrible mistake” to even talk to any of them:

“Talking to members of one of these groups is not the same as talking to a contact. They are poison, and we have to turn our back hard on them. It is a distraction for us to be spending time analyzing their politics, discussing their paper, etc. It sucks us into the ‘otherworldly’ milieu of the small sects. They are irrelevant.”

For similar reasons the IS generally avoids, or at least tries to minimize, situations where its members end up working closely with members of other groups even when they share a common objective (like to defend Mumia Abu Jamal). If the politics of all the other groups were indeed so irrelevant to the issues facing the working class, there would not be much need for discussion. But the fact is that they often discuss the same issues that the IS does, even if they sometimes draw different conclusions or propose different tactics. Whether they are right or wrong on a particular question, a policy of simply refusing to read, discuss or debate with them is not aimed at helping develop a rounded Marxist consciousness—it can only tend to prevent IS members from seriously thinking about politics.

The IS leadership’s policy of refusing to discuss or debate other elements of the left is exactly the opposite to that of Lenin and Trotsky. IS members should ask themselves why the writings of all the great revolutionaries (e.g. Marx, Lenin and Trotsky) are *full* of polemics and political criticisms of other leftists. They wrote lots of articles directed at shades of leftist opinion that were much smaller and more “irrelevant” in relative terms, than the other Canadian left

groups. They were not afraid of politically engaging their political rivals, and they knew that the best way to educate their members and supporters was by drawing what Lenin called “lines of demarcation” through polemics.

Marxism is a science. A science can only develop if all shades of opinion are able to be heard. I believe that the revolutionary left would be in much better shape if differences were debated thoroughly and openly. Real revolutionaries practice workers’ democracy—they don’t just advocate it in the abstract. Political exclusions and attempts to prevent your members from reading or discussing other points of view on the left only make sense if you have something to hide. These techniques are designed to help the IS “Go for Growth,” but in the end they can only end up depoliticizing the IS.

## Revolutionary Continuity

It is very important to know the history of the Marxist movement and particularly of your own organization. An organization’s history tells you a great deal about why it is where it is today and where it is likely to go. In the IS little attention is paid to the group’s history. Most members pick up this information informally in bits and pieces. Many people know that in Canada the IS originated in the 1970s as a group within the Waffle—a left-nationalist faction of the NDP.

For those who don’t know, Tony Cliff, founder of the IS tendency internationally, was expelled from the Fourth International for refusing to support North Korea against American imperialism and its South Korean puppet in the Korean War. Cliff said that North Korea, like the USSR, was “state capitalist.” In fact it was not capitalist—which is why the U.S. was so hostile to it. North Korea was modeled on the Soviet Union under Stalin—the old landed ruling class and their imperialist patrons’ property had been expropriated, the economy was collectivized and the dictatorial Kim Il Sung regime monopolized all political power.

One thing that Tony Cliff and the IS leadership have never been able to explain is why, if it was incorrect to call for a victory of the North Korean Stalinists against the U.S. and its South Korean puppets in the 1950s, was it okay to support the North Vietnamese Stalinists against the U.S. and its South Vietnamese puppets 15 years later? The forces involved in the two conflicts were virtually identical. The only thing that was different—and for the IS this is decisive—was the *degree of popularity*. In the early 1950s the Cold War was at its height and there was a massive wave of anti-communist hysteria. Tony Cliff’s declaration that Russia and its allies were “capitalist” meant that he no longer had to defend it or the other deformed workers’ states (including North Korea and China) against imperialism. This was clearly a direct result of the enormous ideological pressures of McCarthyism bearing down on the left. But by the late 1960s, with the New Left, the Vietnamese were popular with the radicalizing students the IS sought to recruit. So Cliff switched the IS line to defending the (popular) Stalinists against imperialism. Trotsky said that opportunists always know which way the wind is blowing.

## Conclusion

I would like to make it clear that I have no personal animosity toward comrades in the IS. I know there are plenty of dedicated people in the group who really want to be communists and to fight to change the world. Unfortu-





BLACK STAR

**Vietnam War protest, Washington 1967. Mass anti-war movement led IS to support 'state-capitalist' North Vietnam**

nately, they are in the wrong organization.

The IS's flawed analysis of the period and faulty understanding of the party question is connected to its history of political adaptation to prevailing winds. The fact that the analysis of the period and so much more originates largely by bureaucratic decree from the SWP CC adds to the difficulty of attempting any serious change in the group's direction. The leadership is constantly saying, "we're on the verge of something big—look at the American, British and Greek groups—just push a little harder." This keeps members running, but they aren't really going in any direction. They are like chickens with their heads cut off—running around a lot, but not really getting anywhere.

When the big break doesn't come, people get demoralized. I've seen some good people move away from revolutionary politics after a period of frantic activity. When this happens the IS rarely makes much effort to keep them and instead tends to say "they were no good, let's recruit some new people." The raw, relatively politically inexperienced people, who are constantly being recruited to regenerate the group, have the advantage of making it very easy for the regime to get what it wants internally. In the last few months, I have done some reading about other groups which took a similar approach in the past. Some of them grew to thousands of people, but ultimately fell apart because what holds a group together is the set of ideas, the program, shared by the members. Groups like the IS, which place a higher value on short-run success than winning influence for their ideas, end up spitting out a lot of good people, many of whom drift away from the left.

The only way to build a serious group is on the basis of a serious, consistently revolutionary program and consistently politically principled activity. Some may say that the

IS is the biggest group in Canada, and that their "sectarian" opponents are too small to influence things. Being small is no virtue, but it is better to have a revolutionary group of whatever size than a bigger revisionist one. Because a small revolutionary group has the possibility of one day leading to victory, whereas an opportunist one (like the IS) never can, no matter how big it gets. There are a lot of individuals in the IS who can have a large impact on the direction of the revolutionary left in this country. But the road to revolution is a precipitous path and there are no shortcuts. It is sometimes difficult, but it is always necessary, to tell the working class the truth. A revolutionary group must have the courage to openly side with Iraq against Canadian imperialism in a military conflict in the Persian Gulf or to vote for leftist opponents of the capitalist ANC in South Africa.

I declare for the International Bolshevik Tendency. After considerable study I have come to the conclusion that the IBT represents real revolutionary continuity—from the formerly revolutionary Spartacist League, through the Revolutionary Tendency, the American Socialist Workers Party, Trotsky's Fourth International and back to the Bolshevik Party that led the Russian proletariat to power. The IBT is the living embodiment of the program of Lenin and Trotsky—the program of Bolshevism.

The only possibility for the future of humanity on this planet is communism. This can only come about through a proletarian revolution led by a vanguard party. I look forward to future discussions with IS members about how such a party can be created.

*Reforge the Fourth International—World Party of Socialist Revolution!*

Yours for workers' democracy  
Stephen J.

# Fake Socialists vs. Women's Liberation

## Apologists for Islamic Reaction



GALUMY-MAGNUM

Mullahs in Iranian parliament

Reprinted below is the text of an IBT statement on an incident that took place in Toronto during the celebration of International Women's Day in 1998:

The removal of two literature tables from Toronto's International Women's Day (IWD) fair at Ryerson Polytechnic on March 7 [1998] has created a major controversy on the Canadian left. One table belonged to the racist Canadian Forces. The other, entitled "Positive Images of Women in Islam," was set up to promote the Iranian theocracy's record on women. It was stocked with a variety of propaganda materials published by the Ministry of Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and displayed quotations from "Imam Khomeini"—the reactionary cleric who led the movement that toppled the Shah in January 1979.

Khomeini's Islamic Republic immediately moved to impose the veil, crush the left and restore the barbaric practices of flogging, amputation and stoning. On 8 March 1979, a few short weeks after taking power, Islamic thugs opened fire on Teheran's International Women's Day demonstration. In the months that followed, the Imam's "Revolutionary Guards" attacked national and religious minorities and murdered thousands of leftists, feminists, homosexuals, "adulterers," atheists and other "enemies of Allah."

Recently the Iranian government has sought to soften its well-deserved reputation as one of the world's most misogynist regimes. The chance to set up a propaganda stall at International Women's Day in Toronto presented an excellent public relations opportunity, while also serving to discreetly intimidate refugees from the mullahs' death squads. The liberal feminists who organized the IWD fair were happy to welcome IRI participation just as they embraced the "sisters" from the Canadian Forces.

Not everyone saw things this way. Women comrades of the Workers' Communist Party of Iran (WCPI), some of whom had spent years in the mullahs' jails, took the lead in driving out the Imam's propagandists. The New Socialists, Socialist Action, Trotskyist League, Ontario Coalition Against Poverty and a variety of left-feminists and anarchists also participated in this commendable action. (None

of our comrades were present at the time, otherwise we would certainly have joined in.) After removing the Khomeinites, the leftist protesters turned to the Canadian military and ran them out as well.

Predictably, the feminist organizers of the fair, as well as various liberals, feminist union bureaucrats and fake-socialists, opposed the exclusions. Among the supposedly Marxist groups which sided with the Khomeinites were the Communist Party, Socialist Resistance (formerly Labour Militant), Communist League (followers of Jack Barnes) and International Socialists (IS).

The IS has been the most outspoken defender of the IRI's "right" to participate in IWD. With consummate cynicism, the IS leadership claims that this action, initiated and largely carried out by émigré Iranians, was a "racist" act motivated by blanket hostility to believers in Islam:

"The booth was attacked and the women expelled from the fair on the bogus argument that the religion they represent is sexist."

"This is just racist."

—*Socialist Worker* [Canada], 11 March 1998

The IS article goes on to smear the protesters by associating them with the National Front fascists in France, on the grounds that they too oppose the veil! This cynical trick recalls the Zionists' practice of branding all criticism of Israel as "anti-Semitic."

In a 28 March statement defending the action, WCPI supporter Hassan Varash explained:

"one of the women standing behind the booth as the staff admitted that she was employed by the Iranian consulate in Canada...."

"And another fact is that the IRI's booth was far from the [WCPI]'s, whereas there was a table just attached to the [WCPI]'s booth which belonged to an Islamic women's group. This group has always been present in the fair for a number of years and the [WCPI] had no problem with their presence....The only thing that caused the action was the fact that the booth belonged to the Islamic state, which was perceived as an insult to the cause of women's equality, and as a threat to the security of the regime's opponents in Canada. For this reason the [WCPI] was determined to force the IRI's agents out.

"The slogans used and chanted until the agents were expelled were also indicative of the fact that the protesters planned to expel the IRI, not the Muslim women—slogans such as 'Down with the Islamic Republic of Iran,' 'Stop stoning in Iran,' 'Islamic terrorists out, out,' etc."

The 25 March [1998] issue of *Socialist Worker* carried a full page editorial by Paul Kellogg, disingenuously posing the issue as one of "defend[ing] the right of all religious minorities to participate in the fight for women's rights and the fight against poverty." Kellogg asserts that "no evidence has been advanced" to prove that the booth, which was stocked with official IRI propaganda and staffed by a woman who admitted to working part-time for the Iranian consular service, was in any way connected to the Iranian state. But Kellogg and the IS leadership don't care: "Even if there were a booth at IWD that had some backing from the Iranian state, would that justify an attack?" The IS says no.



ROBERT SCHULLER—AFP

At issue is the attitude of socialists toward the mullahs' "Islamic Revolution," which the IS supported. While not supporting the IRL, the IS considers Islamic fundamentalism to have a progressive aspect inasmuch as it is "a type of nationalism, a response to the crushing hand of imperialism in the Middle East." Thus Kellogg views Khomeini's revolution positively:

"What makes the Iranian state reactionary is not its religion, but the class project of its rulers—a class project which set itself the task first to destroy the gains made by Iranian workers and the poor in the revolution of 1979, and second to rebuild an Iranian capitalist class...."

But there was no workers' revolution in 1979—there was a reactionary mass mobilization that toppled a reactionary dictator. The millions of workers and poor people who participated in the struggle to oust the hated Shah and his brutal regime did so under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini who unambiguously declared his intention of creating an Islamic state. The overthrow of the bloody Pahlavi dictatorship did *not* result in any gains for the workers' movement, but rather in its rapid destruction at the hands of Khomeini's Islamic gangs. It is bad enough that the IS loudly hailed the "Islamic Revolution" at the time, but to continue promoting the lie that it brought "gains" to Iran's workers and oppressed is positively perverse.

In 1978-79 the IS treated the mobilizations against the Shah as a working class upsurge in which Khomeini and his mullahs were only incidental figures. The Canadian IS paper ran a front-page blurb (copied from its British parent) that proclaimed: "Suddenly, workers' power in Iran has exploded on to the world stage...Iran, fired by workers' power, can fuel the struggle for socialism" (*Workers' Action*, December 1978-January 1979).

While acknowledging that Khomeini held a position of "symbolic leadership" in this supposed explosion of "workers' power," the IS asserted that: "At present there is a complete vacuum of political leadership among the Iranian working class." This was simply untrue—the leadership of the Iranian workers' movement (principally the Moscow-line Tudeh Party, but the other leftist groups as well) made the same "optimistic" assessment of the character of the "Is-

lamic Revolution" as the IS. Instead of warning the workers of the mortal danger posed by Islamic reaction, they celebrated the dimensions of Khomeini's "mass movement," and painted rosy pictures of the unfolding of an inexorably revolutionary process. An article from the February 1979 issue of *Workers' Action* entitled "The form—religion; The spirit—revolution" asserted:

"Khomeini has many reactionary views. He is an absolute anti-communist. But, for the time being Khomeini is a symbolic focus for a revolt which began in the mosques because it was the only place the people could organize their opposition without fear of the dreaded SAVAK.

"But to believe the people of Iran are fighting and dying in their hundreds and thousands only to let one reactionary leader be replaced by another is absurd."

What was "absurd" was the refusal of the IS and the rest of the fake-left internationally (and in Iran) to open their eyes to the dangers of Islamic reaction. In fact the opposition to the Shah extended far beyond the mosques. Leftist organizations had substantial support both on the campuses and in the unions, particularly among the oil workers. The problem was that the Iranian left, like the IS, tailed Khomeini and his movement. Only the then-revolutionary Spartacist tendency (whose program the International Bolshevik Tendency upholds today) raised the necessary program for the Iranian workers: "Down with the Shah! Down with the Mullahs! Workers to Power!"

Had the Shah's propaganda ministry attempted to set up a literature table at the first IWD march in 1978, the feminist and leftist organizers would certainly have joined refugees from his dictatorship in overturning it. If two black stooges of the hated apartheid regime had attempted to set up a table to promote "positive images of black women in South Africa," they would surely have received the same treatment. Publicists for Iran's brutally misogynist regime who turn up at events dedicated to promoting women's liberation deserve no less. Those miserable "socialists" who choose to defend the Islamic reactionaries against their victims thereby take political responsibility for the terrible crimes of the mullahs against Iran's workers, women and other oppressed people.

# General Strike...

*continued from page 48*

thing else necessary to keep things going during a generalized work stoppage.

The massive deployment of state repression has often been sufficient to demoralize the strikers, but in some cases repression has backfired and resulted in a surge of support for the workers. In situations where the workers' movement is strong, and its cause popular, strikers have been able to disperse scabs and neutralize elements of the capitalists' repressive apparatus. When this happens, the bosses are usually anxious to make a deal.

## Early Proponents of General Strikes

In discussing the general strike question, it is useful to know something about its origins and evolution. The first relatively modern advocate of the general strike was Jean Meslier, a rather unorthodox French priest, who was active in the early 1700s. Meslier has been accused of being an atheist, and he may have been the original "liberation theologian." He is credited with the pithy observation that so pleased Voltaire to the effect that humanity will only be free, "when the last king is strangled with the guts of the last priest." Meslier is also remembered for his observation that if the "small people" (or "commoners") were to stop working, the First and Second Estates (the nobility and clergy) would soon collapse under their own weight.

Echoes of Meslier's suggestion of conducting a general strike against the nobility were still floating around some 60 years later at the time of the French Revolution. Constantin Volney, a member of the National Assembly, published an influential book in 1791 which contained a dialogue between the "People" (composed of "every profession useful to society") and the "Privileged Class" (or "Men living in idleness at the expense of those who labour"), in which the People demand separation from the parasites:

"We toil, and you enjoy; we produce, and you dissipate; wealth flows from us, and you absorb it.—Privileged men, class distinct from the people, form a nation apart and govern yourselves."

—*The Ruins, or a Survey of the Revolutions of Empires*,  
1819

Such well known figures as Jean Paul Marat and Gracchus Babeuf mentioned the idea of a general strike. It was also picked up by the "English Jacobins"—a circle of radicals also known as the "London Corresponding Society" who translated and published Volney's book.

The first known attempt to actually carry out a general strike occurred in Scotland in April 1820 in response to government repression after the infamous Peterloo massacre the year before. Initially the Glasgow radicals had planned to join a proposed tax revolt in England, but in January 1820 decided:

"that there should be 'a Strike' of work everywhere upon the first of March following and to continue for some days which it was thought would effectuate an Insurrection."

—quoted in *Threats of Revolution in Britain 1789-1848*,  
M. Thomis and P. Holt, 1977

The objective of these insurrectionaries was to win "a Radical Reform, Universal Suffrage, and Annual Parliaments," and they made some attempt to arrange for simultaneous action in England. The strike lasted for a week and initially succeeded in closing down every enterprise in

Glasgow and the surrounding area. But its failure to spread further, allowed the authorities to soon gain the upper hand. The end came with the defeat of a small party of rebels after a shoot-out with some of King George's redcoats in what was dubbed "the Battle of Bonnymuir."

Despite this initial experience, the idea of a general strike as a means of redressing social injustice remained popular. In the 1830s its foremost exponent was William Benbow, a radical cobbler and former Quaker preacher, whose popular 1832 pamphlet on the subject, entitled "Grand National Holiday and Congress of Productive Classes" was widely circulated. Benbow observed:

"All men enjoy life, but do not enjoy it equally...The only class of persons in society, as it is now constituted, who enjoy any considerable portion of ease, pleasure and happiness, are those who do the least towards producing anything good or necessary for the community at large."

Benbow asserted that all the mass of humanity lacked was:

"a knowledge of ourselves; a knowledge of our own power, of our immense might, and the right we have to employ in action that immense power."

—quoted in *Communism and the General Strike*,  
W.H. Crook, 1960

Benbow proposed to rectify the existing social inequalities by means of a "Grand National Holiday" of about a month's time, during which the workers would withdraw their labor. His plan had a few kinks that needed to be worked out—like how the strikers were supposed to feed themselves during the walkout—but it was nevertheless adopted by the Chartists, the most advanced and militant working-class movement of the time.

In August 1842, a strike against brutal wage cuts in the mines and textile mills that erupted in the north of England was spread by "flying pickets" across the region and into Scotland and Wales. This strike is often referred to as the "Plug Plot" because the strikers made a point of pulling the plugs of the steam boilers in every factory to ensure that production ceased. The Chartists supported this action, and though they did not lead it, their name is often associated with it. At its height, some 500,000 workers were involved, but the strike fizzled out after a month as they were gradually starved back to work.

In the 1860s, English members of the First International, who were active in the Reform League, threatened a "universal cessation of labour" to back demands for voting rights for (male) workers. This threat was taken seriously by the Tory government which promptly pushed through a reform bill to significantly widen the franchise.

## Belgian General Strikes and the SPD

In 1891, on May Day, 100,000 Belgian workers, spearheaded by the Walloon coalminers, went out on strike to demand the vote. While they eventually returned to work three weeks later without winning their demands, the support for their action was sufficient to convince the leadership of the reformist Belgian Workers Party (POB) that a general strike could be an effective tactic. In 1893, the POB initiated a successful general strike. The government, which had not taken the threat seriously, was caught by surprise and was forced to grant a vote to male workers (although not an equal one, as extra votes were awarded to citizens on the basis of their property holdings, education or profession).

The victory in Belgium made a great impression interna-



tionally and sparked a wide-ranging discussion of the general strike tactic within the Second International, particularly in its largest and most influential section, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). There were three main tendencies within the SPD. The right wing, which was dominated by the official union leadership, was chiefly concerned with the question of legality. As "practical" bread-and-butter bureaucrats with comfortable positions to protect, they tended to view talk of using the mass strike for revolutionary purposes as foolish and possibly dangerous. They considered that a general strike should only be used to gain the franchise or to protect the unions' legal status or other democratic rights. They were particularly concerned that any general strike have clearly delineated objectives, and be carefully controlled by the union leadership.

The SPD left wing took a diametrically opposed position. Their foremost representative was the brilliant Polish émigré, Rosa Luxemburg, who viewed the "mass strike" as a means to unleash mass popular revolutionary action. There was also a "center" tendency headed by Karl Kautsky, then regarded as the world's preeminent Marxist. In opposition to the SPD right, Kautsky asserted that the mass strike could, hypothetically, be used for revolutionary purposes. He agreed, however, that it was primarily a defensive weapon which had to be directed and controlled by the official leaders of the workers' organizations.

The divisions over the mass strike paralleled a broader debate over political strategy between the same three tendencies. Eduard Bernstein, the leading figure of the "revisionist" right wing, openly advocated a gradualist, reformist strategy. His position was encapsulated by his famous remark that: "The movement means everything for me and what is *usually* called 'the final aim of socialism' is nothing." Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht (who in 1918 went on to found the German Communist Party) represented those in the SPD who believed that revolution was an imminent possibility. Kautsky stood in the middle—agreeing with the left that socialist revolution was necessary and inevitable, but consigning it to the hazy future.

In 1902, the Belgian workers' movement launched another general strike, this time to win an equal vote for all adults (including women). Participation was much higher than in it had been in 1893—some 350,000 workers took part, but this time the government was better prepared. They had organized scabs and also tightened things up in the army, which had been a bit unsteady in 1893.

The POB leadership, sensing that the government was going to offer serious resistance, immediately began to backpedal. The first thing they dropped was the demand for the female franchise. This was followed by a series of other concessions, but the more they conceded, the more intransigent the government became. As the POB retreated, the wavering middle-class elements increasingly went over to the government's side. There's a lesson here.

Finally, the POB leadership tried one last face-saving gambit. They asked the king to dissolve parliament, i.e., to dismiss the government. When the king, to no one's surprise, sided with the government against the workers, the POB bureaucrats declared victory and called off the strike. In fact, the workers had won nothing.

The strike had been followed closely by everyone in the SPD. Rosa Luxemburg was impolite enough to point out that the strike had been defeated, even though a high percentage of workers had participated and the unions had



SOVFO

Rosa Luxemburg

initially enjoyed a great deal of popular support. Luxemburg attributed the defeat to the POB leadership's craven declaration at the outset that, whatever happened, they would obey the "law." This signaled to the government that it could do as it wished, without fear of retaliation from the union leaders. There's always a calculation to be made in such situations: sometimes repression works, but sometimes when you attack people, you enrage them. It can be a dangerous game. But when you are guaranteed, in advance, that *whatever* you do, the other side is not going to hit back, there is not much to stop you from whacking them.

And that's what happened: at every step the POB's timid legalism demoralized their followers and emboldened their enemies. Luxemburg's observations were very acute, and clearly illuminated the reasons for the defeat.

### Russia 1905: From General Strike to Insurrection

The next major discussion of the general strike within the international socialist movement was sparked by events in Russia in 1905-06. In tsarist Russia a feudalistic/autocratic political regime rested atop a population that was overwhelmingly peasant. Yet there was also a very modern, and fully capitalist industrial sector, financed from abroad. Russian factories had state-of-the-art technology and a potentially powerful working class that was young, highly concentrated and subjected to savage exploitation. Workers had no political rights and often suffered physical brutality in the workplace.

There was very little room in tsarist Russia for the development of the layer of privileged labor aristocrats who pre-



NATIONAL MUSEUM OF LABOUR HISTORY

**British General Strike, 1926: workers stop scab truck trying to enter London docks**

dominated in the Belgian, English and German workers' movements. In Russia anyone involved in union organizing risked jail. Under such circumstances, union leaders tend to be a different sort of person than we are used to here, where those at the top enjoy comfortable offices, expense accounts and substantial salaries.

The tsarist police routinely responded to strikes by attacking the workers: riding horses into them, beating, arresting and even killing them. Many strikes were broken and many unionists were jailed. Workers in one factory would often get upset when their friends and relatives, who happened to work in the factory next door, were being brutalized, and they would sometimes walk out spontaneously to help. This proved to be a remarkably effective way of curbing these attacks, because it put pressure on the owners of enterprises that were not directly involved in the dispute to demand that the police be reined in.

In these situations, when workers in a number of factories were out together, they would often gather to discuss the situation, and jointly plan their next move. These assemblies were the forerunners of the "soviets," or workers' councils, of 1905.

In 1904, the tsar got involved in a disastrous war with Japan that demoralized the army and discredited the regime. In January 1905, a strike broke out at the Putilov Iron Works, an important factory in St. Petersburg. It was led by Father Gapon, a priest and part-time police agent, who was anxious to keep the strike under control and avoid any escalation. At the same time, however, he was under some pressure to deliver the goods for the strikers. He therefore proposed that the workers petition the tsar at the Winter Palace. So the workers formed a large procession under

Gapon's leadership, and holding high religious icons and the tsar's picture, they marched off.

But the tsar had grown tired of all the strikes, and decided not to receive the petition. Instead, he had his troops open fire on the marchers. Eight hundred demonstrators were killed and hundreds more were wounded. The idea was that a show of force would demonstrate to the "little people" who was boss. But it didn't have that effect at all. This massacre enraged people throughout the country and produced a wave of strikes that, for the first time, swept right across the empire. Initially the struggle involved workers and students, but eventually in many areas, the peasants also revolted, burning down the manor houses and lynching the landowners. There were so many of these outbreaks, and they were so widespread, that the regime couldn't control them.

This popular disaffection also extended to the military. When army units were sent out to crush an uprising on an aristocrat's estate, the soldiers (most of whom were peasants themselves) would often end up shooting their sergeant or lieutenant instead of the insurgents. Sergei Eisenstein's 1926 movie, "Battleship Potemkin," depicted a famous naval mutiny that took place in June 1905.

Originally these upheavals were almost entirely spontaneous. Members of the various left parties in each locality took part, but there was no planning or central direction, which made them more difficult to repress. The informal assemblies of employees from different factories that had become common during earlier, smaller-scale confrontations with the employers and the police began to operate on a larger scale and, in many regions, played a central role in the struggle.

Rosa Luxemburg captured the fluid character of these events in her 1906 book *The Mass Strike*:

"The mass strike, as the Russian revolution shows it to us, is such a changeable phenomenon that it reflects all phases of the political and economic struggle, all stages and factors of the revolution....Political and economic strikes, mass strikes and partial strikes, demonstrative strikes and fighting strikes, general strikes of individual branches of industry and general strikes in individual towns, peaceful wage struggles and street massacres, barricade fighting—all these run through one another, run side by side, cross one another, flow in and over one another—it is ceaselessly moving, a changing sea of phenomena."

The high point came with a national general strike which swept the country, beginning with a strike by printers in Moscow in September 1905. In October, Moscow railway employees walked out and were joined by rail, telegraph and postal workers across the country. Before long almost every other group of workers were also out in a general strike that shut down the national transportation and communication system. This paralyzed the regime's ability to deploy, or even communicate with, its troops. The strikers' demands became increasingly political: an elected government and basic civil rights.

The strike was coordinated by joint strike committees (soviets) in St. Petersburg, Moscow and other cities. These soviets, which included representatives from factories throughout a given area, began to take responsibility for ensuring food supplies and maintaining social order. This signified the emergence of an embryonic *workers'* government alongside the official one.

In a bid to regain control, the tsar made what appeared to be major political concessions in his "October Manifesto." He announced that he had undergone a miraculous conversion and now saw the importance of "democracy." From now on, he promised, there would be a parliament (a "duma") and citizens would have freedom of speech, association and assembly. This was naturally very popular and most strikers soon returned to work thinking that they had won.

As the tide of struggle began to ebb, the government started to crack down. Punitive attacks were launched in previously rebellious areas. Martial law was declared in Poland, which had been one of the most troublesome regions of the empire, and the military began to court-martial leaders of the mutinies.

The left organizations responded to these new attacks by calling another general strike for November. As the strike movement once again began to build, the government made another tactical retreat—dropping the court-martials, lifting martial law in Poland and making a few other concessions. But as soon as strike preparations wound down, the authorities once again went on the offensive. This time the police arrested prominent workers' leaders, including Leon Trotsky and other leaders of the St. Petersburg Soviet.

Once again the workers' movement sought to renew the general strike. This time the authorities were able to keep the lid on in St. Petersburg, but in Moscow, and other areas of the country, the struggle was fought with a new intensity. It was obvious that winning concessions from the tsarist state was pointless, if the government reneged on their promises as soon as things settled down. So the Moscow workers, with the Bolsheviks in the lead, launched an up-

rising, which was defeated after several weeks of street fighting. Disturbances continued intermittently for another 18 months, but the autocracy gradually regained control.

The Moscow uprising was the first serious attempt to use a general strike as a bridge to insurrection. Fifteen years later, Lenin observed that without the "dress rehearsal" of 1905, the victory in 1917 would not have been possible. A broad layer of politically-conscious workers learned about the regime they faced and the impossibility of reforming it. The experience also taught the revolutionaries about the politics of mass mobilization, and some of the practical aspects of challenging the state power.

The experience of 1905 also illuminated the limits of the general strike. It had been powerful enough to dislocate the state power and to extract concessions, at least on paper, but ultimately, when the regime regained its balance, the reforms were rescinded.

Lenin had only been able to return to Russia in October, but he had followed events closely, and clearly understood the importance of the mass strike in paralyzing the government and rallying the masses of the oppressed and disaffected behind the proletariat. He also came to appreciate the importance of the soviets (an institution not foreseen by Marx, or any other socialist theorist) as a mechanism for the mobilization of the working class.

Leon Trotsky, the most prominent figure in the St. Petersburg Soviet, which had functioned as the leading center of the revolt, drew many of the same conclusions as Lenin from the events. It was not sufficient to paralyze the autocracy or even force some concessions—what was necessary was that the workers, at the head of the oppressed, suppress the tsar's police and military, expropriate the landowners and industrialists, and establish organs of proletarian power.

Luxemburg's views on the general strike broadly paralleled those of Lenin and Trotsky. She too recognized that by December 1905 it had been necessary to go beyond the mass strike to the seizure of power, and she saluted the Russian workers for their heroic attempt to do so. Luxemburg tended to place somewhat more emphasis on the capacity of the mass strike to unleash the spontaneous revolutionary energies of the masses than either Lenin or Trotsky, but she was correct that a general strike is not something that can be artificially decreed by the official leadership of the workers' movement:

"the mass strike, as shown to us in the Russian revolution, is not a crafty method discovered by subtle reasoning for the purpose of making the proletarian struggle more effective, *but the method of motion of the proletarian mass, the phenomenal form of the proletarian struggle in the revolution.*"

—*The Mass Strike*

## Varieties of General Strikes

Thirty years after the experiences of 1905, Trotsky wrote a letter to the British Independent Labour Party (ILP) in which he quoted Frederick Engels' comment in 1893:

"the political strike must either prove victorious immediately by the threat alone (as in Belgium, where the army was very shaky), or it must end in a colossal fiasco, or, finally, *lead directly to the barricades.*"

Trotsky suggested that the October 1905 general strike in Russia, as well as the 1893 Belgian strike, belonged to the first of these categories—the government took fright and



DAVID KING

**Moscow workers' demonstration, 1905. The lead banner reads 'Workers of the World, Unite!'**

made concessions without a serious test of strength.

The second scenario, that of a "colossal fiasco," occurs when the government is well-prepared and has confidence in its troops, and the strike is a bureaucratic, top-down affair, "calculated not for decisive battles, but to 'frighten' the enemy." The capitalists usually make a point of being well-informed about such things, and are likely to become more aggressive—not more conciliatory—if they sense that the workers' leadership is not seriously prepared for struggle.

The third type of general strike "leads directly to the barricades." Among the factors that determine the victory or defeat of an insurrectionary general strike Trotsky lists:

"the class differentiation of society, the specific weight of the proletariat, the mood of the lower layers of the petty bourgeoisie, the social composition and the political mood of the army, etc. However, among the conditions for victory, far from the last place is occupied by the *correct revolutionary leadership and its clear understanding of the conditions and methods of the general strike and of its transition to open revolutionary struggle.*"

—"The ILP and the Fourth International,"  
18 September 1935, emphasis in original

There are other possible scenarios—cases where revolutionists might call for a general strike without having the seizure of state power as an immediate objective. Trotsky analyzed the situation in France in 1935 in the following terms:

"It is precisely because the present intermediate state regime is extremely unstable, that the general strike *can* achieve very great partial successes by forcing the government to take to the road of concessions on the question

of the Bonapartist decree-laws, the two-year term of military service, etc."

—"Once Again, Whither France?"

Yet general strikes pose the question of power, at least implicitly, even when they are launched for more modest objectives:

"Whatever may be the slogans and the motive for which the general strike is initiated, if it includes the genuine masses, and if these masses are quite resolved to struggle, the general strike inevitably poses before all classes in the nation the question: *Who will be the master of the house?*"

—*Ibid.*

In his letter to the ILP, Trotsky discussed another type of "general strike"—one much closer to the recent "Days of Action" in Ontario. In this kind of "general strike," the union leadership:

"arrives at an agreement with the class enemy as to the course and outcome of the strike. The parliamentarians and the trade unionists perceive at a given moment the need to provide an outlet for the accumulated ire of the masses....In such cases they come scurrying through the backstairs to the government and obtain the permission to head the general strike, this with the obligation to conclude it as soon as possible, without any damage being done to the state crockery."

Such arrangements can be made explicitly or implicitly. It is the latter that we have been seeing in Ontario, but the essential point is the same: the union leaders are using these "Days of Action" mass mobilizations to make a political statement and to give their base a chance to blow off steam. The union tops want to give their members the impression that they're involved in a serious struggle while at the same time signaling to the capitalists in advance that they are not



really going to make any trouble. Trotsky made the following comment about a similar sort of "general strike" which the French unions called a week after right wingers attempted to launch a coup on 12 February 1934:

"Every class conscious worker must say to himself that the pressure from below must have been extremely powerful if Jouhaux himself [chief union bureaucrat] had to bestir for a moment out of his immobility. True, involved here was not a general strike in the proper meaning of the term, but only a 24-hour demonstration. But this restriction was *not* put by the *masses*, it was dictated from *above*."

—"Once Again, Whither France?"

The Ontario "Days of Action" have been very limited, very tightly managed, and have, on the whole, had much more the character of a series of city-wide demonstrations rather than serious general strikes. The union leaders clearly intend these actions to be a means of pressuring, rather than seriously confronting [Conservative Premier Mike] Harris. Their objective all along has been to get a seat at the table so that they can have a say in *how* the Tory agenda is going to be implemented—where and when the cuts will come; which schools and hospitals will be axed, etc. The character of the mobilizations and the way they've been conducted reflect this intent.

These "Days of Action" have been heavily dependent on the mobilization of the union apparatus. The unions have been hiring additional staff and paying the regulars a lot of overtime. They've also put resources into advertising and public relations. The union tops are neither willing to, nor capable of, politicizing the struggle, and they don't want to encourage serious militancy. In general, they have been careful to avoid giving the impression that these are serious mobilizations against the bosses or even the Harris government.

The OFL [Ontario Federation of Labour] leadership has also taken a deferential attitude toward the "Pink Paper" unions which have sought to undercut even the very limited "Days of Action." The leadership of the Steelworkers, Paperworkers, et al. almost seem to welcome the Tory attacks as a judgement on those who refused to vote for Bob Rae and his NDP union-bashers in the last election.

The union bureaucrats want to be able to turn the movement on and off like a tap. They also want to avoid being outflanked on the left by the emergence of more militant elements. As long as they're able to maintain the degree of control that we've seen so far, it is clear that the capitalists aren't going to face any serious inconvenience.

We've had quite a few of these "Days of Action" now and everyone knows what to expect. But at the beginning, no one was certain how it was going to play out. The first city shutdown took place in London [Ontario] in December 1995. Now London is not exactly known as a hotbed of labor radicalism, so it was a bit of a challenge. The business types invested in quite an aggressive advertising campaign encouraging the citizenry to stand up to the "union bosses." The local unions made some preliminary attempts to mobilize support. They called a few advance rallies and were surprised at how strong the level of support was.

The most important confrontation took place outside the city limits at the Ford Talbotville plant. It's a very large installation, and it makes a lot of money for Ford. The CAW [Canadian Auto Workers] declared that they would be shutting it on that day, but Ford did not want to lose a day's production, and took the precaution of getting a court injunc-

tion prohibiting picketing. The company then ordered all employees to report to work or face serious consequences. The OPP [Ontario Provincial Police] announced that they were prepared to enforce the court injunction and would send in the tactical squad if necessary. Nobody was going to defy the law—the Ford plant was going to stay open. But Buzz Hargrove, head of the CAW, calmly responded that the plant would be shut.

It was all very dramatic. That night, as we were driving down from Toronto, we heard news bulletins on the radio every ten minutes. There was clearly going to be a major confrontation. But when we got to the site, we found the plant shut tight and no cops in sight. Instead, there were perhaps 150 well organized, disciplined CAW pickets who looked like they knew how to handle themselves. It was really quite impressive: "proletarian order."

The CAW let it be known that if Ford were to pursue the legal remedies too aggressively, there would be a whole lot more lost production. Eventually, when the case finally got to court a year or so later, it was thrown out on some technicality. There is an important lesson here. Of course it was not widely advertised—just a little item buried in the business section, but it is an important example of the use of the kind of tactics that built the unions in the first place. On a small scale it provided a glimpse of what a real general strike would look like.

The high point of the "Days of Action" has been the Toronto shutdown in October 1996. As at Fort Talbotville, the capitalists threatened individual workers and the unions with punitive sanctions and court orders. And once again, the unions ignored the threats, and went ahead with the attempt to close down Toronto for a day.

The key was the transit system. The courts issued an injunction to keep the buses and subways running. The unions countered by dispatching 200 or 300 serious pickets to major transit installations in the middle of the night, before the crews reported for the day shift. These pickets were not sent to pass out informational leaflets, although they did provide a little hands-on education to the very few gung-ho managers and others who were unwise enough to try to report for work. So the would-be scabs were kept out, the injunctions were ripped up, and the transit system was shut tight. The police decided not to push things to a confrontation.

It had been widely predicted that if the TTC [Toronto Transit Commission] was shut down, downtown Toronto would be tied up with an enormous traffic jam due to all the transit riders driving their cars to work. But that morning, downtown Toronto looked like a ghost town. No one even tried to go to work. After months of bluster and intimidation, the capitalists decided not to risk a confrontation, and just closed up shop for the day. Toronto is, of course, the financial capital of this country, and it's not a particularly strong union town. Initially, the OFL brass had been reluctant to try to shut Toronto, so this was an important display of union strength.

It's quite significant that immediately after the Toronto shutdown, the pollsters reported a dramatic drop in support for Harris, and a surge in support for organized labor. Working people were saying to themselves: "Hey, we don't have to put up with this—look what we can do!" And there was a lot of talk about the next step, which was generally assumed to be a province-wide "Day of Action." This mood was widely noted, and elements of the Tories' base began to worry that perhaps Harris had gone too far, that his

brass-knuckle tactics might turn out to be more trouble than they were worth.

But the OFL leadership was even more worried. They feared that they had put something in motion that might soon escape their control. The growing self-confidence of the union ranks and the widespread anticipation that the counterattack on the Tories would be stepped up in the aftermath of the Toronto success, alarmed them. The union brass wasted little time making it clear that, as far as they were concerned, the unions had made their point, and there were no plans to escalate things further. So before long, the surge of militant sentiment abated and the Tories' standings in the polls returned to their previous levels.

### Three Critical Points

Over the past three years there have been three obvious points at which a union counteroffensive could have delivered a serious blow to the Harris government. In each situation there were risks, but the odds were much better than even that the unions could score a major victory. The first opportunity came in March 1996, when 50,000 OPSEU [Ontario Public Service Employees' Union] members were out on strike. A lot of people in the labor movement were pleasantly surprised when the OPSEU ranks didn't just collapse—despite having a leadership that was about as bad as could be imagined.

The critical moment in this conflict came when Harris sent a unit of the OPP tactical squad to attack a few dozen peaceful picketers at Queen's Park right in front of a couple of TV cameras. People who saw the assault on the evening news that night wanted to know what was going on. These ordinary civil servants are peacefully picketing, and then, with no provocation, they are attacked by these riot cops dressed up like Darth Vader. It was a revelation for a lot of people out there in TV-land. There are lots of places in the world where this is routine, where cops don't bother much with democratic niceties, but in Canada people are supposed to have a few democratic rights.

Gord Wilson [then OFL head] threatened that if this continued, the unions would organize their own squads and start "whacking back." (Not a bad idea, but of course he wasn't serious.) But it was not just organized labor, there was a feeling of outrage at this display of thuggishness by Harris. Various priests, clergymen, rabbis and other eminent figures demanded an inquiry, and the Tory speaker of the house [provincial parliament] agreed to conduct one. Harris, caught off balance, had to go along with setting up some kind of investigation. Of course, nothing came of it, but at that moment, a class-struggle leadership in the unions could have delivered a powerful blow to the Harrisites by launching solidarity strikes with OPSEU against the Tories and their goons.

The next major opportunity came with the Toronto strike. Having successfully defied Harris, the courts and the bosses to close down Toronto, and having then organized a demonstration of 250,000 the next day—the largest ever seen in Canada—the unions were briefly riding a surge of popular support. All kinds of people suddenly became aware of the power of the working class and the power of its organizations. Harris and the Tories are mostly nasty, small people. The Toronto strike had shaken them and the big money interests that they represent. But the question for both sides was "what next?" As soon as it became clear that the OFL tops had no intention of pushing their advantage, the Tories regained their nerve, and in a

matter of a few weeks, it was almost as if the whole thing had never happened.

The third major opportunity was the teachers' strike last October [1997]. On some questions there has been a molecular evolution of popular/working-class consciousness in Ontario under Harris. This will not go on getting better and better, every day in every way, of course—particularly given the character of the union leadership. But it's extremely significant that in this province founded by the Loyalist refugees from the American Revolution, 125,000 traditionally conservative teachers went on a two-week political strike in an attempt to defeat Tory attacks on public education. The Tories denounced it as a dangerous, "illegal" attempt to thwart democracy. They also portrayed it as an attack on children. These themes were echoed by every major newspaper and television commentator.

Yet they couldn't sell it. They had big ads, focus groups, studies and lots of consultants trying to figure out why people seemed less concerned about the consequences of the teachers' contempt for the law, than about the Tories' educational "reforms." Law and order is supposed to be a hot button for the right wing—but it didn't work, despite the near unanimous condemnation of the strike by the capitalist media.

The fact is that the Harris government itself had done a lot to undercut popular illusions in bourgeois democracy and the "rule of law." By rejigging the rules to ram through whatever legislation they felt like, and marginalizing the role of their parliamentary opposition, the Tories undercut the legitimacy of the process in the eyes of much of the population. If the teachers were "breaking the law" in opposing Tory attempts to wreck the school system and widen the gulf between rich and poor, most working people decided that they were in favor of law-breaking, at least on this issue. This is a potentially highly significant development.

Support for the teachers remained firm and was even tending to rise as the action went into its second week. On the tenth day of the strike [5 November 1997] the traditionally Tory [Toronto] *Globe and Mail*—the pre-eminent mouthpiece of Canadian capitalism—advised Harris that his government:

"may be losing the battle for public opinion. The teachers' apparently illegal walkout is disrupting the lives of millions of students and parents, yet at this point Ontarians prefer the teachers' version of events to the government's."

With things starting to run out of control, the *Globe* editorialists provided Harris with a list of concessions to make to the teachers. And then, after the editorial page was set, a late-breaking news flash arrived which ended up on the front page of the same issue: "Teachers may end walkout." The union leaders had lost their nerve.

So, there it was—a classic case of the crisis of political leadership. The teachers wanted to struggle and all that stood between them and victory was the political character of their leaders. It was a huge opportunity thrown away.

### Lessons of the Ontario 'Days of Action'

There are some important lessons to be drawn from these "Days of Action." The first is that the organized working class is the key to any successful struggle against social oppression. That's pretty widely recognized now. The flip side is that for the workers' movement to emerge victorious in a major confrontation with the Tories, they must be seen to champion the interests of all the oppressed: the disabled,

the sick, single parents, aboriginals, immigrants and refugees, racial and linguistic minorities, victims of police brutality, welfare recipients and every other social group the Harris government has gone after.

The third obvious lesson is that the existing union leadership is profoundly conservative and fundamentally pro-capitalist. The labor bureaucracy is a petty-bourgeois social layer which functions as the “labor lieutenants of capital.” But they also embody a certain contradiction, because their existence depends on the preservation of the organizations of the working class. In certain circumstances, in limited ways, elements of the bureaucracy are prepared to go beyond the framework of capitalist legality if they feel enough pressure from below and they feel that their own interests are somehow threatened. We’ve seen some of that, and it’s important to recognize.

Another very important lesson of these “Days of Action” is that rank-and-file unionists and other working people *will fight* if they’re given a lead. If they feel that there is something important at stake, and if their organizations are prepared for struggle, the ranks have shown, once again, that they will run risks and to do what needs to be done. That’s important.

Finally, it should be noted that due to the timidity of the union leadership, the “Days of Action” have done very little, if anything, to stay the Tories’ hand. Yet they have nonetheless provided some very important object lessons for the people who participated in them, and even for those who merely witnessed them. This is a bit intangible, but it may be quite significant in the future. These limited actions, if nothing else, have shown that the working class has real social power and that a general strike *could* work. That is now very clear to literally millions of people in Ontario.

After the teachers’ unions pulled the plug on their strike, they held one last rally at Queen’s Park. Perhaps 50,000 people turned out (mainly teachers). You could just feel the frustration felt by many at their leadership’s capitulation. During the speeches from the bureaucrats on the platform, half the crowd expressed their disgust with angry chants of “General Strike! General Strike!” That was their way of saying that they didn’t want to fold the action—they wanted to *expand* it. They wanted to turn it into a general strike—to get rid of Bill 160 [the Tory bill attacking public education] and bring down Harris.

## General Strikes & Revolutionary Leadership

Now, some left groups (for example, the comrades of the Trotskyist League [TL—Canadian affiliate of the Spartacist League/U.S.]) think that it is wrong to call for a general strike to bring down the Tories at this point. They argue that such a development would necessarily pose the question of social revolution and for that, they tell us, you need a mass revolutionary workers’ party.

It is conceivable that a revolutionary situation could develop out of a mass strike to bring down the Harris government, but when we have raised the general strike slogan during the previous “Days of Action,” this is not how we have posed it. Rather, we were calling for something that was on the immediate agenda—the logical next step in the struggle. We are, unfortunately, a bit further away than that from a socialist revolution at the moment.

The experience of the workers’ movement internationally shows that mass strikes can achieve a great deal, even



BILL SANFORD—CANADA WIDE

## December 1995 ‘Day of Action’ in London, Ontario

in situations which are not immediately revolutionary. What is required is bold and skillful leadership and proper preparation (in both a technical and political sense). A mass strike can present major opportunities for revolutionary organizations, even very small ones.

For example, in Minneapolis in 1934, a handful of Trotskyist militants initiated struggles which led to a series of aggressive truckers’ strikes and ultimately resulted in a city-wide general strike that turned Minneapolis from an open-shop town into a union stronghold and gave the Trotskyists a powerful base in the Mid-West labor movement. If the TL comrades want to wait until they grow into a mass party before raising the general strike slogan, that is their business—but this is not how Lenin, Trotsky or Cannon [James P. Cannon, the historic leader of the American Trotskyist movement] approached the question.

The role of Marxists in the unions is to advance a program representing the historic interests of the working class. Instead of trying to pressure the trade-union bureaucrats to be a bit more militant, revolutionaries seek to expose their fundamental loyalty to the capitalists and the necessity to create a new kind of leadership, one that is not committed to playing by the bosses’ rules, nor to attempting to make this irrational social system work.

## *Lessons from Working-Class History*

# Marxism & the General Strike



MINNEAPOLIS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

**Minneapolis General Strike, 1934. On 22 May, strikers dispersed cops and scabs in the 'Battle of Deputies Run.'**

*The following is an edited version of a talk given by Tom Riley at a public meeting in St. Catharines, Ontario on 30 April 1998—the eve of a one-day "Day of Action" in that city.*

The question of the general strike has often been a subject of controversy within the Marxist movement. One thing that complicates the issue is the fact that the term has been used to cover a wide variety of events—from mass insurrectionary upheavals to heavily bureaucratized one-day political protests. General strikes have been employed to win economic gains, to resist state repression, and to win or defend a variety of political and social gains.

In Germany in 1920, a workers' general strike aborted an attempted right-wing coup (the Kapp Putsch). The San Francisco General Strike in 1934 secured the union hiring hall for dockworkers. In Spain in 1936, workers responded to General Francisco Franco's attempt to seize power with an immediate general strike and a semi-spontaneous insurrection which initially overwhelmed the army. In Belgium, a country with a long history of general strikes, there were

two political strikes in the early 1950s: one in 1950, to oppose the reinstatement of King Leopold III, a Nazi collaborator; and another in 1952, to shorten the term that armed forces conscripts had to serve. In Quebec in 1972, workers carried out a semi-insurrectionary general strike in response to the jailing of three union leaders. There are literally hundreds of other examples that could be cited.

A general strike represents a major challenge to any regime because it poses—at least implicitly—the question of which class shall rule: the bourgeoisie, or the proletariat. With potentially so much at stake, both sides are often forced to choose between escalation or capitulation.

In some cases the capitalists have won by waiting out the strikers—after all, working people need to eat and cannot usually last long without incomes. In other situations the capitalists have crushed general strikes with repression or broken them through a combination of police pressure and the use of scabs (typically privileged petty-bourgeois elements) to drive the buses, unload the freight, and do every-

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