

FIGHT RACISM! FIGHT IMPERIALISM!

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ON THE ROAD TO RECESSION

The economic turmoil in the international credit markets is taking its toll on the British economy. Six months ago government ministers confidently told us that the British economy could withstand global turbulence, and in March the Chancellor Alistair Darling claimed that Britain is the 'most stable' economy in the G7 major capitalist countries. The payback for their wishful thinking was not long in coming. By mid-July the tune had to change and Darling was forced to admit that the economic downturn looked set to be more profound and longer lasting than initially expected. DAVID YAFFE reports on the problems facing the British economy.

We have argued in past issues of FRFI that the parasitic character of British capitalism, its reliance on the earnings from its vast overseas assets – particularly those of its parasitic banking sector – and the growing weight of financial and business services in the domestic economy make it the imperialist country most vulnerable to external financial shocks.¹ Inexorably, therefore, the 'credit crunch' is leading to a rapid deterioration in the British economy with important social and political consequences.

A parasitic and decaying capitalism

Britain's overseas assets in 2007 were £6,486.5bn, an increase of 22.3% on 2006 and 33.7% on 2005. These assets were an unprecedented 4.7 times Britain's GDP. 58.4% of these assets, £3,784.6bn or 2.74 times Britain's GDP, were 'other investments' mainly loans and deposits abroad by UK banks – a gigantic usury capital. (See table, page 3)

Britain's foreign assets are more than matched by even greater foreign

liabilities of £6,836.9bn, nearly five times Britain's GDP, leaving a net external debt of £350.4bn, 25.4% of GDP. Despite this net external debt Britain still generates investment income surpluses from its international investment account. However these earnings of £6bn in 2007 have fallen significantly from 2005 when they reached £25.8bn. This will soon have serious repercussions for Britain's balance of payments.²

In 2007 Britain had a balance of payments deficit of £59.7bn. Britain spent around 4.3% of GDP more than it earned, a significant increase on the 2005 deficit at 2.5% of GDP. The deficit on the trade in goods has rapidly deteriorated since 2005 and reached a massive £89.5bn in 2007, 6.5% of GDP. Without the large surplus on the services trade of £38.3bn and the still positive, but decreasing income flow on the international investment account, the standard of living of the British people would have fallen. If the deficit continues to grow the pound will fall rapidly against other currencies.

This deteriorating situation is clearly unsustainable and will have political and social consequences in the near future.

Debts all round

The British economy has experienced a record period of nearly 17 years of economic growth. This could soon come to an end. With the global financial crisis threatening to halt the rapid expansion of credit that has been the driving force behind economic growth in the major capitalist countries over the last 60 years, the growing indebtedness in the public, personal and corporate sectors of the British economy has become unsupportable and ominous.

Public sector

Between April and June 2008, the public sector current deficit reached £20.4bn, an increase in the deficit on the same period last year of £7.9bn. Public sector net borrowing at £24.4bn is already 66% higher than that between April and June the previous year. It is the highest quarterly figure since records began in 1946. Overall public sector net debt reached £555.5bn at the end of June, 38.3% of GDP. The government is very close to breaching its self-imposed neo-liberal 'golden rule' that public sector net debt should not exceed 40% of GDP. In reality it has already broken the rule. Once the loan and guarantees

given to Northern Rock by the Bank of England are included in public accounts, the net debt at the end of June rises to £640.5bn or 44.2% of GDP. The situation can only deteriorate as corporate profitability and consumer spending fall further, reducing tax revenues, and the stagnation in the housing market slashes receipts from stamp duty. It is of little surprise that in mid-July the Treasury announced it is considering a change to its 'golden rule', as the government will not risk raising taxes with the economy facing a severe downturn.

Personal sector

Total UK personal debt reached £1,443bn at the end of May, a record 173% of household disposable income and 109% of GDP. Secured lending on homes stood at £1,210bn and unsecured consumer credit lending to individuals at £233bn. This debt is higher than that in any other G7 major capitalist economy. The average ratio of debt service to disposable income for mortgage borrowers in the first quarter of 2008 was 24.1% – the highest on record (*Financial Times* 11 July 2008).

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Say no to a two-tier health system

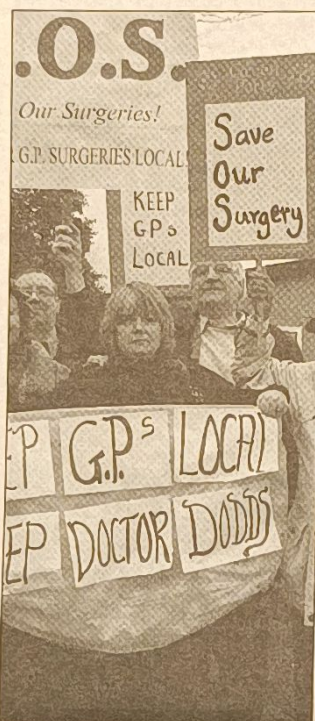
60 years ago the then Labour government set up the NHS as a universal health system free at the point of use. Now Labour is dismantling it and replacing it with a two-tier system that will provide a minimal service for the poor, and an adequate one only for those who can afford to pay extra.

Fresh from awarding United Health the management of three GP practices in April, Camden PCT is now in discussions with the likes of Virgin Healthcare to set up and run a Darzi polyclinic on the University College Hospital site. This will replace four existing GP practices.

Every PCT in the country now has to procure one new polyclinic or health centre by the end of December regardless of local needs. Private healthcare provider Assura has set out plans to build 68 polyclinics. NHS Chief Executive David Nicholson has publicly backed more private provision of primary and community healthcare services. Meanwhile Labour claims that its polyclinic proposal will not result in closure of GP surgeries has been given the lie by Haringey PCT which has published a ten-year plan where five such polyclinics would allow the closure of up to 45 practices. Overall, spending on out-sourced health services totalled £24bn last year.

However, an even bigger threat to the principles underpinning the NHS is the government's review of co-payments. Under the current rules, which have existed since the foundation of the NHS, a patient may not 'top up' NHS care with privately purchased drugs. This has affected a number of cancer sufferers who have tried to buy non-approved drugs and as a result been denied free NHS care. The outcome of the review will undoubtedly mean that co-payments will be allowed. This will of course benefit those who can afford to pay for such drugs. The foundation for a two-tier system will be laid. It is a far cry from the NHS Plan 2000 which correctly observed that 'user charges are unfair and inequitable in that they increase the proportion of funding from the unhealthy, old and poor compared with the healthy, young and wealthy.'

As time goes by, and as the crisis deepens, the services that the NHS will provide for free will inevitably reduce, and those that have to be



paid for as extras will equally inevitably increase. Former Health Minister Charles Clarke has already said that the NHS will have to start charging patients, arguing that NHS 'core services' should stay free but patients should pay for extras such as alternative medicines, health checks and out-of-hours visits by GPs. In a British Medical Association (BMA) debate on the issue, one doctor said research in the USA on the effect of co-payments found it adversely affected the poor – death rates in the poorest groups increased by 10% when they had to pay. This did not stop the BMA from approving the review.

NHS constitution

As part of the July NHS Next Stage Review, *High quality for all: a plan for*

the next ten years, the government published a draft of an NHS constitution. The document sets out NHS principles together with the rights and responsibilities of staff and patients. It includes an explicit responsibility for patients to make a 'significant contribution' to their good health, and to 'take some responsibility for this'. Whilst this may sound harmless, in reality it begs a whole lot of questions. How do the poor and the working class take care of their health when sports centres and facilities close down, and those that remain charge for use? How do they eat healthily as food prices rise? How do they maintain their mental health in conditions where there is no hope and no future? Ill health, physical and mental, is class influenced. The responsibility is fine for those who can afford to exercise it. Those who cannot, face a double-whammy: not only does their health suffer because they are poor, but in the future poor health may become grounds for denying free NHS care.

The draft constitution sets out 'the commitment to a service that is for everyone, paid for out of taxes, based on clinical need rather than an individual's ability to pay, and without discrimination of any kind' but does not define the scope of service to be provided free. The meaninglessness of the commitment becomes evident when we look at the state of maternity services. In July the Healthcare Commission revealed that there are serious problems in maternity care, which include significant shortages of midwives and obstetric specialist doctors. The Royal College of Midwives said that the NHS is not on track to recruit the promised extra 4,000 midwives needed by 2012. Maternal deaths have increased from 10 per 100,000 births in 1987, to 13 in 2002 and almost 14 in 2007. The number of women dying in pregnancy or soon after delivery has risen by almost 40% in 20 years. At the current rate, NHS spending on maternity will fall to its lowest for ten years by 2011. Top-up services to provide additional care will of course be available... to those who can afford them.

Aneurin Bevan, architect of the NHS, once said 'There are potent reasons why it would be unwise as well as mean to withhold the free [NHS] service from the visitor to Britain. How do we distinguish a visitor from anybody else? Are British citizens to carry means of identification everywhere to prove that they are not visitors? For if the sheep are to be separated from the goats, both must be classified.' Now hospital trusts have Overseas Visitors Teams with the power to refuse free treatment to the 'ineligible'. Thus the Homerton Hospital in East London, a foundation trust, has produced a document on the right to free NHS treatment, excluding information on the position of migrants, refugees or asylum seekers. Nurses, doctors and receptionists are now supposed to review patients' eligibility for free treatment, including children, asking them questions, and then reporting any concerns to the Overseas Visitors Team who will be free to harass patients who cannot pay.

Exclusion is the watchword for Labour's new health service: exclusion of those most in need, exclusion of those who cannot afford to pay, exclusion of foreigners. We must fight this inhuman attack on the working class.

DON'T PROP UP LABOUR

The Glasgow East election result, where Labour lost its 25th safest seat on a 22% swing to the Scottish Nationalist Party, showed that the meltdown in Labour's electoral support (see report in FRFI 203) has become critical. It follows the Henley by-election on 26 June, when Labour's share of the vote fell from 14.8% in 2005 to 3.1%; the candidate lost his deposit and came fifth behind the Greens and the BNP with just over 1,000 votes. The electoral coalition that brought Labour to government in 1997 and sustained its significant, albeit diminishing, majorities in 2001 and 2005 is disintegrating rapidly under its mismanagement of the deepening economic crisis. Real socialists must welcome this development and use it to build a real working class anti-imperialist and anti-racist movement. ROBERT CLOUGH reports.



Glasgow East is probably the most impoverished constituency anywhere in Britain. It has the highest number of benefit claimants – 11,000 – those who will be most affected by Work and Pensions Secretary Purnell's proposed forced labour scheme. Although the official unemployment rate is 10%, twice the national average; in fact half the adult population have to live on benefits, and 40% of the children in the constituency live in workless households. According to the Campaign to End Child Poverty, 60% of the children in the constituency live below the poverty line. Male life expectancy is estimated to be 69 years, eight years lower than the average. Half of all adults have no educational qualifications and fewer than half of all households own a car. These are the poor on whose votes Labour has depended in the past, but who have been completely abandoned by the Labour government. They returned the compliment with a body blow for Gordon Brown.

Labour's deepening unpopularity has a number of sources:

■ The Northern Rock debacle, when Labour gave a handout of £24m, guaranteed all savings to the tune of a further £30m, whilst those with Northern Rock mortgages faced a huge increase in monthly repayments and its staff faced redundancy;

■ The abolition of the 10% tax band which was effectively a wage cut for the low-paid, followed by the unseemly parliamentary bartering to buy off Labour MPs when they threatened to vote against the government;

■ The dramatic rises in food and fuel prices over the past year which have disproportionately affected the working class and worsened inequality;

■ The failure to build more than a handful of council houses, coupled with a limited social housing programme, forcing people into sub-

standard private rented accommodation or to take out mortgages they can now no longer afford;

■ The lies that were told to support the invasion of Iraq, the conduct of its occupation and the war in Afghanistan and the totally bogus war on terror;

■ The media and government-fuelled perception that immigration is out of control and that this is the source of housing and job shortages.

In 1997, Labour was able to assemble an electoral coalition of its traditional working class support, its privileged layers and the middle class disenchanted with the Tories. The corporate and banking interests in the City were won by an assurance that a Labour government would guarantee its interests. By 2005, this coalition had started to fray considerably around the edges: Labour's share of the vote had fallen to 36%, or to a mere 22% of the electorate as a whole. Turnout at 61% was higher than in 2001, but below the 71% of 1997. With fewer than 10 million votes in 2005, Labour had lost the support of 3.5 million voters in the intervening eight years. The losses had been particularly severe amongst social group C1 voters (professional, lower management and clerical): in 1997, 47% of those voting supported Labour, in 2005 this had fallen to 32% as against 36% for the Tories. Amongst C2s (skilled manual workers) there had been a smaller but still significant fall, from 54% to 40%, but this still exceeded support for the Tories, 33%.

Now that recession looms, the middle class and better-off sections of the working class are abandoning Labour because they blame the government for the housing crisis and their uncertain future. Meanwhile, the mass of the working class are deserting Labour because of rising food prices, the abolition of the 10% tax band, and continuing

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£10,000 fund

So far we have raised £2,440 and, although we have a further £3,345 pledged, this leaves us still well short of the target that we want to meet before autumn. Please rush your donations to us!

The rapidly developing crisis, together with the collapse in Labour's electoral fortunes, all point to the need to build a socialist, anti-imperialist movement in this country. Our consistent stand against Labour imperialism, our support for the oppressed and working class throughout the world, our engagement in the fight against racism and in defence of democratic rights in Britain, our solidarity with Cuba's socialist example together give us our distinctive voice.

Now we need to develop our work much more rapidly, as the crisis speeds upon us, and your support is crucial. Please give generously before the end of the summer holiday and help us meet our target by the autumn.

I enclose

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ON THE ROAD TO RECESSION

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Corporate sector

The corporate sector is more indebted than the personal sector. Non-financial companies' debt has reached 123% of GDP with a ratio of interest payments to profits of 28%. The most indebted companies are non-bank financial companies (hedge funds, private equity and wholesale mortgage lenders etc). The aggregate debt for these companies at £2,427bn has reached 171% of GDP at the end of the first quarter 2008. (*Independent.co.uk* 6 July 2008)

It will be the unwinding of this unprecedented debt in the public, personal and corporate sectors of the British economy which will force it into recession.

Paying for the crisis

The deepening crisis will inevitably lead to a further polarisation of British society along class lines. The poorer sections of the working class are being hit hardest, but the crisis will not stop there as millions of workers, including many now relatively well-paid, face losing their homes, unemployment, cuts in living standards and growing poverty. Recent developments indicate what is in store.

In June house prices were down by nearly 9% and mortgage approvals down 67% on a year ago. There were 38,688 mortgage possession claims and 247,187 consumer debt-related county court judgments during the first quarter of 2008. It can only get worse as the economy moves towards recession. (*Independent.co.uk* 6 July 2008)

The number claiming unemployment benefit saw the biggest rise for 16 years and is expected to rise further over the next 12 months as the downturn in finance and property extends to

other sectors. Total unemployment, which includes those not receiving unemployment benefit, reached 1.62m at the end of May. Job vacancies fell by 32,000 to 655,100 in the second quarter of 2008 – the largest fall for nearly seven years. The biggest drops were in construction, finance and business services and distribution, hotels and restaurants – the latter reflecting a general cutback in the leisure industry as the disposable incomes of the better-off working class and middle class are squeezed. Tens of thousands of jobs have already been lost in the construction industry given the crisis facing the housing sector. At least 10,000 could be lost in the City as the banks retrench. Finally the CBI is predicting a manufacturing recession and a loss of 36,000 jobs. This is only the beginning.

In June annual inflation measured by the consumer price index rose by 3.8%, up from 3.3% in May. Food inflation alone rose by 10.6%, up from 8.7% in May. Electricity, gas and other fuels rose to 13.8%, up from 11.2% in May. The poorer sections of the working class are hardest hit by inflation given the dramatically rising costs of food, fuel and energy. They also face slower rates of income growth than middle class families. The annual rise in average wages for the three months to May was only 3.8%, so that a majority of workers are facing real wage cuts. In mid-June 500,000 local government workers, predominantly low-paid, came out on strike for 48 hours rejecting the 2.45% wage increase on offer because it would be a substantial wage cut in real terms.

A government for the rich

The rich have done well under a Labour government whose leaders, in

their policies and personal behaviour, personify parasitic capitalism (see FRFI 194). Labour will not make the rich and powerful pay more tax even as public debt spirals upwards. Chancellor Darling had already backed down in the face of banking and corporate lobbying on budget proposals for a flat rate capital gains tax and for taxing wealthy non-domiciled residents in Britain.³ He has now retreated on a package of anti-tax avoidance measures designed to prevent up to £1bn tax revenues from multinational companies going offshore, after exempting multinational companies' foreign profits from UK tax. The business lobby vigorously protested and he will discuss a way of doing this that corporate business can tolerate.

A new chief executive for Northern Rock has just been recruited by the Treasury at a salary of £700,000 a year plus three bonus payments of £400,000 to compensate for loss of bonuses due to him at his previous job at Barclays. This is how the rich friends of this Labour government are rewarded. Labour should celebrate 'huge salaries in Britain' said the Business and Enterprise Secretary John Hutton.

Contrast this with the treatment of the poorer sections of the working class. As we reported after the March budget (FRFI 202), James Purnell, the Work and Pensions Secretary, was planning to implement a brutal 'welfare to work' regime administered by private companies and voluntary organisations on a payment by results basis. In a Green Paper published on 21 July, Purnell announced that the 2.6m people claiming incapacity benefit – in all but the worst cases – will be expected to make themselves available for some kind of work or lose their

Britain's External Assets £bn

	2005	% of total	% of GDP	2007	% of total	% of GDP	% increase 2005-07
Direct investment	705.9	14.6	57.2	851.1	13.1	61.6	20.6
Portfolio investment	1374.3	28.3	111.4	1824.1	28.2	132.0	32.7
Other investment	2745.3	56.6	222.4	3784.6	58.4	274.0	37.9
Reserve assets	24.7			26.7			
Total	4850.3		393.1	6486.5		469.5	33.7

benefits. Those on the dole for more than two years will 'be forced to take part in full-time activity such as community work' or lose their benefits. Drug users will be required to seek treatment or risk losing benefits. Lone parents will be eligible for a 'skill for work' payment to make themselves more employable. Private contractors will administer the scheme and be allowed to keep part of the benefits savings as profit. These are the punitive measures being proposed by a reactionary anti-working class government in a period of growing crisis and rising unemployment. Little surprise that the Tory Party said it would help Labour get the measure through Parliament.

Despite around 17 years of economic growth, 11 under Labour, the Labour government has barely begun to reverse the massive increase in poverty of the Tory years and inequality is continuing to grow. The number of people in poverty (people in households with income below 60% of the median after housing costs) is rising again and between 2005/06 and 2006/07 increased by 400,000 to 13.2m, 22% of the population. The number of children in poverty grew by

100,000 to 3.9m, 30% of all children, and the number of pensioners in poverty rose by 200,000 to 2.1m, 19% of all pensioners.

Under these conditions of a deepening economic, political, and social crisis it is imperative that a new working class movement is forged in the resistance to such measures. Its first task will be to break irrevocably with the racist, imperialist and anti-working class Labour Party.

1 See 'Britain: parasitic and decaying capitalism' in FRFI 194 December 2006/January 2007, available online: <http://www.revolutionarycommunist.org/frfi/pages/194.html> and 'Trouble ahead for British capitalism' FRFI 201 February/March 2008, online at www.revolutionarycommunist.org/frfi/pages/201/FRFI_201_en.html

2 See FRFI 194 for a detailed discussion of these issues. All statistics are taken from the relevant UK Official National Statistics and are provisional for the latest years and tend to be revised over time. This explains the differences between the 2005 statistics in this article and those in FRFI 194. Nevertheless the trend is clear and that is what is important for our analysis.

3 See 'A hole in my budget' in FRFI 202 April/May 2008.

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using inequality which will now be exacerbated by rising unemployment. On top of this, corporate and banking capital is becoming disillusioned with Labour's mismanagement of the economy, and is starting to move behind the Tories. Whilst Labour will seek to avoid a general election for as long as possible, its hand may be forced as the economic crisis becomes uncontrollable. In those circumstances no socialist can give it any support.

However, as always happens when Labour faces a crisis, the left rides to its rescue. Tony Woodley, Joint General Secretary of the Unite union, argues that 'The Labour party, the first major socialist party to embrace neo-liberalism, now has to let go of it to have any future... Only in Britain is the centre-left still hobbled by a timid leadership that believes the market can do no wrong, that a widening wealth gap is a matter of indifference, and that state intervention and regulation are dirty words. These ideological blinkers need to be discarded before Labour charges over an electoral cliff.' (*The Guardian*, 25 July 2008). He urges the adoption of 'old Labour' measures such as stopping NHS privatisation and ending university tuition fees.

Woodley is not alone. Worried by Labour's local election prospects, left MP John McDonnell issued a 10-point May Day manifesto to 'win back the support of our people'. The ten points

include calls to end privatisation, raise taxes on the rich, increase pensions and introduce a trade union freedom bill, but nothing is said about racism, repression, or the occupations of Afghanistan or Iraq. The majority of the left outside of the Labour Party has endorsed these points, Respect Renewal, the SWP and its Left Alternative amongst them. But how can you remain a socialist and seek the rescue of the racist, imperialist Labour Party? Left MP Jeremy Corbyn may condemn Purnell's welfare proposals as 'against the principles of the welfare state', but why are his principles so elastic that he continues to be a member of a party which is a byword for total reaction? We can ask the same thing of John McDonnell: if he can describe the proposals correctly as a 'moral disgrace', why is it then not a 'moral disgrace' for him to continue in the same party as Purnell? He describes the introduction of 42-days detention as drawing 'a line in the sand', but where has he drawn his own 'line in the sand'? When will he leave the Labour Party?

Socialists cannot give these Labour lefts the blank cheque they get from the likes of Respect or the SWP. Where are the demands on these MPs to stick by their principles, leave this reactionary party and build a new opposition to it? Recently, SWP leader John Rees articulated the left's fears when he attacked those in the

trade union leadership who want to suppress criticism of the Labour government for fear of helping the Tories:

'The problem with this approach is that it demobilises the very people upon whom a Labour government must depend for its support – trade unionists, anti-war campaigners, anti-racists and the tens of thousands who are fighting to defend the welfare state. Rather than rescue the government this strategy further undermines it and makes the situation worse.'

But far from getting trade unionists, anti-war campaigners, anti-racists and the thousands who are fighting to defend the welfare state to come to the rescue of the Labour government, socialists should be organising amongst them to do quite the opposite. Socialists should not have endorsed Ken Livingstone; they should not still be issuing coded calls to vote Labour against the BNP. They should not be spreading the illusion that the way forward for the working class is in alliance with the ever-diminishing Labour left.

Instead, they should be saying that the McDonnells, Corbys and Benns of this world have had too many chances to draw their lines in the sand, and that they are part of the problem, not the solution. They should be shouting from the rooftops that there can be no effective working class resistance unless it breaks completely and unconditionally from the Labour Party.

Fuelling world hunger

On 4 July 2008 *The Guardian* exposed a secret draft report on biofuels produced by the World Bank and labelled 'Not for circulation'. No wonder: in 17 pages of closely written statistics and graphs, the report gives the lie to US claims that biofuels contribute only 2-3% to food prices. It states baldly that of the 140% rise in food prices between 2002 and 2008, 105% is directly attributable to increased use of biofuels and the large shifts in land use, speculative activity and export bans that accompany that use.

It exposes as a cover-up, too, the British government-commissioned Gallagher Report on the impact of biofuels on the environment and global food prices. While warning of the dangers of diverting land from agriculture, its weak conclusion is that there is a future for biofuels but they 'must avoid land that would otherwise be used for food production'. The report admits some effect on food prices but on a scale 'difficult to model' and concludes 'In the longer term, higher prices will have a net small but detrimental effect on the poor that may be significant in specific locations'. Would that be the hunger that has led to protests in 30 countries already?

The Gallagher report was published in time to let the British government off the hook at the G8 summit in Japan in July, where there was hand-wringing over ris-

ing food and fuel prices, but no agreement on biofuels.

Instead, we were treated to the sickening hypocrisy of Prime Minister Gordon Brown finding time at G8 to advise the world to reduce its 'unnecessary demand' for food and instructing British families to stop wasting food, in between tucking into a six-course lunch and eight-course dinner. In Britain the price of food staples has soared by 21% in the past 12 months.

Aid agencies warn that the current crisis will push 100 million of the poorest people worldwide into starvation. The UN summit on food shortages in June concluded that \$20bn a year was needed to stave off a humanitarian crisis; in the event only \$3bn of new aid was promised and there was no agreement on limiting biofuel production. As Food and Agriculture Organisation Director General Jacques Diouf pointed out '\$11-12bn a year in subsidies and protective tariff policies have the effect of diverting 100 million tonnes of cereals from human consumption, mainly to satisfy a thirst for vehicles'.

Meanwhile the EU is pressing ahead with biofuel targets. In April, the Renewable Transport Fuel Obligation came into effect, meaning that all petrol and diesel sold in Britain must be 2.5% biofuels. These levels under the legislation are due to rise to 3.75% in April 2009 and 5% in April 2010.

Paul Mallon

Adventures of Freddie and Fannie in the Land of Make-Believe

Who are Fannie and Freddie?

'Freddie Mac' and 'Fannie Mae' sound like they should be characters out of a children's cartoon. In fact they're the leading financial characters in an absurd capitalist farce that will end in tragedy for the poor of the US. Both are US 'Government Sponsored Enterprises' (GSEs), also known as 'agencies'. Freddie is the 'Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation' and Fannie is the 'Federal National Mortgage Association'. Fannie Mae was founded in 1938, as part of the 'New Deal' – the program of state intervention to help rescue US capitalism after the 1929 depression. In 1968, to help balance the budget, part of Fannie Mae was taken off the government's balance sheet and privatized. Freddie Mac was established in 1970 as a private corporation with a public charter to provide competition with Fannie Mae.

So today, both are privately owned corporations supposed to fulfil a congressional charter to ensure that mortgages are available for affordable housing. They do this by buying mortgages off banks. Banks and other institutions create a 'primary market', making home mortgage loans to home buyers. The agencies are part of a 'secondary market' – they buy mortgages which meet their standards, pool them together and sell bonds, using these 'mortgage backed securities' (MBS) as collateral.

Why are they so important?

The agencies play a key direct role in the mortgage markets, increasing liquidity by cycling mortgages into cash which the banks can then loan out again. They guarantee the mortgages and charge the banks a fee for the service. Since 1980 they have expanded to an enormous degree:

Year	Total US residential mortgage market	Total agency mortgage investments and MBS	Investments as % of mortgage markets
1980	1,105	77.6	7.0%
1990	2,966	740.1	25.0%
2000	5,481	2,276.0	41.5%
2008Q1	12,082	5,252.8	43.4%

Without the agencies, the collapse in mortgage lending over the last year would have been even worse. In the first quarter of this year, they purchased more than three quarters of the total value of mortgages. If Fannie and Freddie seize up, then so will almost the entire residential mortgage industry.

Although agency securities are legally private bonds, they have certain privileges compared with those of other banks. For example, they are free of State and local taxes. In law the agency securities explicitly have no government backing, but they are universally treated as if there is an implicit guarantee of government backing. Indeed the agencies imitate US Treasury bonds in the way they are sold and serviced, and deliberately imply, particularly to foreign purchasers, that they are just another government security. This perceived guarantee allows the agencies to borrow at the best rates.

Agency debt is held as prime investment by all the major US banks, which have treated them, at least until recently, as almost as solid as US Treasuries. Of the first quarter 2008 total of \$4,594.6bn of agency debt (overwhelmingly from Freddie and Fannie), some \$922.9bn was held by US chartered commercial banks, \$517.8bn by insurance companies, \$329.3bn by state retirement funds, \$268.8 by private pension funds. These securities form the collateral for a huge amount of lending, since, in the event of a default, they can readily be sold. Any slide in quality of agency debt will hit liquidity throughout the entire US banking system.

About \$1,540.8bn of agency securities are held by foreign investors, about \$1 trillion by official financial institutions like central banks, counting them amongst their reserves. Any increase in the risk of agency securities, or downgrading of their quality will have huge repercussions on government finances and economic policy throughout the world.

The balance sheet

Every investment institution needs to keep a certain amount of capital on its balance sheet to redeem maturing debt, cover defaulted loans, and handle unanticipated events – like the implosion of the US housing market.

The agencies only take mortgages where the value is no more than 80% of the value of the property and also require that they are covered by mortgage insurance. However, over half the loans they guarantee date from 2005-2007, when additional loans were being piggybacked on top of the main loan, eroding remaining values in the properties. Mortgage insurers have been hit hard and may not be able to cover all losses. And Freddie has bought substantial portions of the supposedly investment quality subprime MBS we have discussed in pre-

Fannie is better off, but not by much: when we compare equity with the mortgage credit 'book of business', Fannie's equity covers 1.4%; Freddie's just 0.7%. In a falling mortgage market, this is just not enough.

The Land of Make-Believe

For years the saner bourgeois commentators and analysts have pointed out the potential problems which are now surfacing. Some politicians have been trying to reform the agencies for years. So how come nobody fixed this problem?

The two agencies have loaded up the gravy train with some \$20-25m every year, which then chugged round Washington, doling out bowlfuls in a massive lobbying effort for more than a decade. At its height Fannie used to spend \$55m per year to maintain 55 'partnership offices' in all but three states, now renamed as 'community business centers' whose job was to woo state legislators.⁴



Protesters outside Countrywide mortgage bank

Both presidential campaigns are infested with agency lobbyists:

'Rick Davis, McCain's campaign manager, was president of the Homeownership Alliance, which advocates the expansion of homeownership through low-interest mortgages funded by Fannie and Freddie. Arthur B. Culvahouse Jr, who is heading McCain's vice presidential vetting panel, was a lobbyist for Fannie Mae.

'Obama also has ties to the firms. James A. Johnson, the former head of his vice presidential vetting panel, was a chief executive of Fannie Mae. Maria Echaveste, a top Clinton White House official whose husband Christopher Edley Jr is a close Obama friend and adviser, has lobbied for Freddie Mac.

'Other Democratic luminaries who have advocated for the mortgage giants include... former congressman Harold E. Ford Jr (Tenn), now the head of the Democratic Leadership Council.'

As a result of this influence, the agencies have thwarted every attempt to bring them within the bounds of 'sound' capitalist behaviour. For years they managed to prevent investigation into fraudulent bookkeeping which cost the companies billions. This is how it has been able to keep \$1.4 trillion exposure off-balance sheet. They have successfully tamed their regulator, the Office of Federal Housing Enterprise Oversight (OFHEO), so that by law, it satisfies statutory minimum capital requirements by holding enough equity to cover just 0.45% of this.

Indeed, their regulator seems to have actively joined the lobbying effort. Accounting rule FAS140, if applied, would force the agencies (as

well as other financial institutions) to bring MBS onto the balance sheet. If that happens, the agencies will need \$75bn additional capital, according to investment bank Lehman's. James Lockhart, director of OFHEO, immediately retorted: 'an accounting change should not drive a capital change'. In other words, let's keep playing 'Let's Pretend'.

Wherever these assets appear in the accounts and however they are valued, the fact remains that the agencies don't have enough capital. They are operating a giant 'Ponzi' racket or pyramid scheme, which can only keep going as long as the money coming in covers that going out.

What's the fix for this mess?

Raising private capital is going to be difficult because, with all the uncertainty, the agencies' share price has collapsed, and nobody wants to throw good money after bad.

The Paulson plan

In the absence of any revolutionary alternative, finance capital has the initiative. Its representative, Hank Paulson, Treasury Secretary and parasite-in-chief, has devised a plan, now passed into legislation by Congress in record time. The measures give him authority until December 2009 to extend an unlimited line of credit to the agencies and to buy their stock, if conditions worsen. In an attempt to limit the hit to taxpayers, the ceiling on the national debt has been raised to \$10.6 trillion. Currently the National Debt is about \$9.5 trillion.

The Paulson plan is simply more 'Let's Pretend': it just extends more credit, delaying the final settling of accounts, which will include US taxpayers – the working and middle classes – handing over tens, even hundreds, of billions of dollars to rescue finance capital.

Meanwhile...

While Fannie and Freddie have been the stars, finance capital continues its relentless slide down, helped by a full supporting cast. IndyMac bank, second largest bank in the US, collapsed; the FBI is investigating potential fraud. US Bancorp wrote off \$16bn, Bank of America \$1.2bn, JPMorgan Chase \$1.1bn, Wells Fargo \$2.9bn, Citigroup \$14.2bn, Wachovia \$6.1bn, Merrill Lynch \$9.7bn, Washington Mutual \$2.2bn, Countrywide \$4.4bn. Senators Dodd and Conrad have been discovered to have received preferential 'VIP' terms on mortgages from ailing Countrywide mortgage bank. Grand jury subpoenas have been issued to Countrywide Financial Corp, New Century Financial Corp and IndyMac Federal Bank to investigate fraud and racketeering. Los Angeles is suing all the big banks, accusing them of anti-trust violations and defrauding taxpayers. Goldman Sachs, the one large bank to side-step the subprime crisis, has left the bank lobbying group Institute for International Finance, describing its attempts to 'refine' fair-value accounting as 'Alice in Wonderland accounting'. Total US profits have been falling absolutely, along with housing prices. Unemployment and foreclosures are up. McCain's economic adviser, former Senator Phil Gramm, architect of the deregulation which laid the basis for the credit crisis announced 'this is a mental recession... We've never been more dominant'.¹⁰

In short, everything is normal in the Land of Make-Believe.

Steve Palmer, US correspondent

Some 'socialists' are demanding 'nationalise the banks'.⁶ They are in excellent company with the more prudent sections of US finance capital: William Poole, former President of the St Louis Federal Reserve Bank, has also called for their nationalisation;⁷ Ben Bernanke, chairman of the US Federal Reserve told the US House Financial Services Committee: 'There certainly are a number of possibilities ranging from outright nationalization, to privatization to breaking them up'.⁸ When the entire structure starts to creak, the ruling class as a whole has no hesitation about throwing some of its members to the wolves.

As the *Wall Street Journal* put it: 'We haven't suddenly become socialists. What taxpayers need to understand is that Fannie and Freddie already practise socialism, albeit of the dishonest kind. Their profit is privatized but their risk is socialized. We're proposing a more honest form of socialism, with the prospect of long-term reform'.⁹

Yet instituting a 'long-term reform' – a regulatory system with realistic capitalization requirements and oversight – is not going to fix this problem. Even if it had been in place early enough, the only difference would have been how soon the problems came to light.

The only workable solution to the problem is to cancel all residential mortgages and to implement a housing program which ensures that people are housed on the basis of need, not wealth. But that would require a revolutionary movement, and that has yet to develop.

- 1 Calculated from Working Paper 2006-2, Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, and US Federal Reserve Bank, Z1 Flow of Funds Accounts.
- 2 Federal Reserve, Z1. See also 'Overseas investors take hard look at US mortgage giants', *International Herald Tribune*, 21 July 2008.
- 3 Len Blum, 'Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac Shares', *Westwood Capital*, 14 July 2008.
- 4 'Fannie Mae dissolving grass-roots lobbying network', *Washington Post*, 16 September 2005, page D01.
- 5 'Figures in both campaigns have deep ties to mortgage giants', *Washington Post*, 17 July 2008, pA06.
- 6 See, for example, Mick Brooks, 'Why you should worry about Fannie and Freddie', *In Defence of Marxism*, <http://www.marxist.com/why-you-should-worry-about-fannie-and-freddie.htm>.
- 7 CNBC TV, 11 July 2008.
- 8 Nightly business report, National Public Radio, 16 July 2008.
- 9 *Wall Street Journal*, 12 July 2008.
- 10 *Washington Times*, 9 July 2008.

Sats and scores education fails the tests

When the Thatcher/Baker Education Act of 1985 introduced a national reporting system for every school and each child, how we laughed. Socialist teachers and progressive people knew that these tests would expose class as the single most significant influence on a child's educational attainment. We predicted that the data would show not only 'outcomes' – test results – but also 'inputs' that is, resources from the state and society as a whole. These include: crowded classrooms, inadequate buildings, a high turnover of teachers, lack of after-school activities, not enough cash for the purchase of books, toys, computers, music, sport and leisure facilities; the list is as long as the middle class can make it for their own children. We also knew that redistribution of resources would not follow from national reports.

By 1997 the condition of state schools was so appalling that middle class voters and the better-off sections of the working class put the improvement of education at the top of their priority list. After the election of Labour on

Exam costs are now second only to the teaching bill for schools.

ETS 'best value for money'!

In 2007 British education company Edexcel lost the contract to administer

There is a history of complaints about ETS mismanagement. In 2004 40,000 teachers sat flawed exams in the US. In 2007 the *New York Times* described ETS as 'a highly competitive business operation that is as much multinational monopoly as non-profit institution'. As a non-profit organisation, ETS is exempt from paying federal corporate income tax on most of its operations. Furthermore it does not need to report financial information to the Securities and Exchange Commission. ETS also guards its 'educational assessment' secrets – last year a disclosure law was passed in New York State requiring ETS to make available certain test questions and graded answer sheets.

ETS shambles

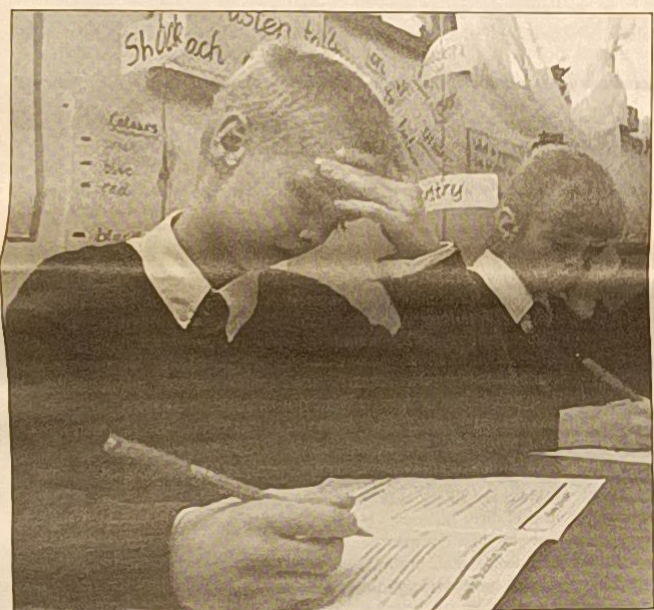
In England many of the 9,991 SATS markers began complaining about ETS computer assessment programmes as early as February this year. Training was an online marking exercise and errors could be adjusted on screen, so there was no external support. The results, said one KS2 Science marker, would be 'meaningless' because examiners were not able to discuss errors with a supervisor. A KS3 marker said she had to input 33,000 marks individually on the computer, and a KS3 Science examiner said he had got his girlfriend's 10-year-old son to do it. ETS's helpline was often blocked and emails went unanswered. Additionally exam scripts were sent to the wrong markers, often late or incomplete and it was impossible to amend pupil registration on line. Emergency centres were set up, some, it seems, employing pupils who had just finished A levels, in the hope of completing SATS by the 8 July deadline. Complete national SATS results will not be available until September.

So what?

The ETS shambles gives the lie to the Labour government's grovelling admiration for private enterprise as a shining beacon of efficiency in contrast to public control. In fact, where the privatised system is designed to generate maximum returns from the minimum possible outlay the margins for error are very small and the whole system depends on zero disruption. As if it is not bad enough that children's learning is reduced to computerised quick-fire recording, by now the entire education system is. Labour's data reporting system of managing schools depends on the annual SATS results for schools to plan and organise their classes into sets for the following academic year. Timetables, class size and teacher availability for September all depend on SATS. Inspectors use SATS to judge schools on progress and 'value-added', and Ofsted decide on the success or failure of schools according to SATS. Every year the league tables of school performance, area by area, are published and are now an integral part of the competition between schools for pupils, funding and status.

Send for OfQual

Labour, of course, has only one answer to the bureaucratic mess it has created. Make another quango of well-paid testers to test the testers, the Office of Quality or OfQual. Meanwhile the so-called 'irrevocable' five-year contract with ETS is in serious trouble, with the government considering 'all available options'. Susan Davidson



the slogan of 'education, education, education' a long period of increased public expenditure on state education followed. Labour not only enthusiastically took up the national testing, publication of results and league tables it inherited from the Tories but introduced so many additional layers of tests and targets that English schoolchildren are today the most tested in the world, facing national standards attainment tests (SATS) at ages seven (Key Stage 1), 11 (Key Stage 2) and 14 (Key Stage 3). After that pupils go on to GCSE exams with the much dreaded benchmark success, 5 A-C results including English and maths.

Data-reporting management of schools

The testing regime is a device to both ration state expenditure on the working class and to enforce discipline on teachers, parents and pupils and control over the curriculum. Additionally, the proliferation of data reporting has proved useful in opening up the state system to privatisation. Labour has turned national testing systems and examinations into commodities which are traded as a business opportunity to preferred bidders. The money runs into millions and is largely where Labour's education budget has gone.

the SATS marking after some exam papers disappeared in the post. It was replaced by ETS (Europe) which won a £165 million five-year 'irrevocable' contract to process 9.5 million papers. But this summer the marking of SATS is so chaotic that the whole system of national testing is in a mess.

ETS – Educational Testing Service

ETS is the world's largest private educational testing organisation, operating on an annual budget of about \$1.1 billion. ETS develops standardised tests taken by more than 3 million students annually, primarily in the US, for both schools and higher education.

Starting in 1937 this organisation pioneered the use of mark sense technology using the IBM 805 Test Scoring Machine. Today ETS is a US registered non-profit organisation with the mission 'to advance quality and equity in education by providing fair and valid assessments, research and related services'. There are several for-profit subsidiaries, such as Prometric, which administers tests by computer for licensing and certification in the professional world, and ETSEMEA, which operates in 42 countries in Europe and has a strong presence in the Middle East and Africa.

Labour's war on working class youth



Schoolchildren being checked for knives in Victoria Street, London

How grim to be murdered outside Lidl. "Waitrose or M&S Simply Food at the very least," quipped my dark-humoured friend. (Janice Turner, *The Times*, 5 July 2008)

The phrase 'knife crime' is on the lips of every British politician and journalist, with most of them keen to point out that it is getting worse and to argue for strong measures. Overall there is not actually more knife crime but it is increasingly the young who are both perpetrators and victims. More than 55% of incidents in the last year were in inner city areas of London, Birmingham and Manchester so those affected are mainly poor and black youngsters. But the government's solution is not to increase welfare programmes or investigate racism or poverty. Instead the response is more repression and imprisonment and it is the communities affected that will be made to pay.

Leading the charge is Labour Home Secretary Jacqui Smith. She recently said that 'anti social' youths should be 'harassed themselves', urging police to 'turn the tables' on those who don't 'live by the rules'. 'That car of theirs: is the tax up to date? Is it insured? Let's find out... And have they got a TV licence?... And as for the council tax, it shouldn't be difficult to check whether or not that's been paid. And what about benefit fraud? Can we run a check?' It is blindingly obvious that this means targeting working class families, particularly the poorest, and is typical of a government ruling in the interests of the middle class. She also called for courts to consider granting a parenting order whenever they issue an ASBO to a young person.

Since 1997 Labour has continued the tooling up of the police and state machinery which began under the Tories. ASBOs, dispersal orders, electronic tagging and stop-and-search have all been part of this drive to protect middle class privilege at the expense of those who have no privileges, and who might one day be forced to fight for their own rights. Like the crusade against 'hoodies', the new fascination with knife and gun crime is a continuation of the campaign to keep down working class youth in the poorest areas, and particularly black youngsters.

Knife crime offensive targets black youth

For the last 10 years the annual number of knife-related deaths has stood consistently at about 200-220. But this year more people under 20 have been stabbed to death in London than in all of 2007, and most of them are black or Asian. The number of under-16s getting hospital treatment for knife wounds has gone up 62% in the last five years.

This has been used to whip up panic. Police spokespeople are now claiming

that 'knife crime' is the biggest threat to society, overtaking 'terrorism'. Deputy Commissioner Paul Stephenson said: 'These measures reflect that tackling knife crime is the No 1 priority for the Met at this time... Everyone is being affected by what is going on and we all have to work together to get the message across that carrying knives has got to stop'.

In response to the recent wave of stabbings, London police launched Operation Blunt 2, 'a sustained, visible, long-term operation' in the words of Mayor Boris Johnson. According to police chief Sir Ian Blair the results up until 29 June were nearly 27,000 searches and 1,124 arrests for possession or other knife-related offences. In a sign of things to come a huge 95% of those arrested in one week – 105 people – were charged rather than cautioned.

There has been talk of forcing school students to go through metal detectors and supporters of the attack on working class youth are attempting to 'reach out' to communities, promoting snitching and surveillance.

Poverty and inequality

A recent report on gun crime, another ruling class headline-grabber, by the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies at King's College, said that 'children, young people, those living in deprived areas and members of black and minority ethnic communities are more likely to be the victims and to be convicted of firearm offences'. 27% of victims of shootings are black. These are phenomena that rise directly from the conditions of life for black youth in Britain. Youths understandably feel alienated in a society that they have no stake in. Ife Igumnubole, a youth worker in Hackney, London, said, 'There is a level of desperation on the streets, brought about by poverty, which is creating a culture of fear.'

Statistics have come out for the first time on police powers to demand people on the street to 'stop-and-account' for their actions, brought in in 2005. In just two years 3.27 million people were stopped, with the numbers rising year on year. Racism is inherent in this system. Black people are two and a half times more likely than whites to be questioned on the street. Under 'stop-and-search', a whole other category with its own shameful set of statistics, black people are seven times more likely to be held and three and half times more likely to be arrested.

The Labour government is once again showing its contempt for the poorest sections of British society. With a deepening economic crisis, things can only get worse for working class communities as Labour seeks more powers to repress the very people who feel it the hardest. We must fight back.

Louis Brehony

Zimbabwe deciding its destiny

The battle between the imperialist nations is intensifying as they stake claims on markets and resources worldwide. This battle is spreading to every continent, not least of all Africa. From the Horn of Africa in the north, to the Nigerian and Angolan oilfields in the west, to the political crisis in DR Congo, Kenya, Uganda in the centre and the east, imperialist greed lies behind wars and crises that are made to appear like internal conflicts. Ask the imperialists and they will tell you that the continent suffers from the greed and corruption of African political leaders and parties. What they don't tell you is that this corruption, for undoubtedly it exists, is not only fostered by imperialism, but is also a pale shadow of the rapacious greed of the imperialists themselves. This is the background to the sustained attack by British and US imperialism on the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe. CAROL BRICKLEY reports.



Agriculture is blighted by drought and lack of resources: Zimbabweans face famine

Despite the untold mineral resources of Sub-Saharan Africa, and the comparatively advanced industrial development of South Africa, the region is the poorest in a poor continent. Zimbabwe, formerly with a stable economy and an agriculture that could feed its own population, now has an economy in total collapse; it is suffering hyperinflation and is threatened by famine.

The two presidential elections held this year were corrupt, surrounded by violence, and have left the country in deeper crisis. The result of the first election on 29 March between main rivals Robert Mugabe of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF), and Morgan Tsvangirai of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), remains unpublished. When Mugabe stayed out of sight for five days afterwards, stock values on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange soared and the 'international community' (read the imperialists) prepared to 'rebuild the nation' with a good dose of neoliberalism. The International Monetary Fund hatched plans at its spring meeting in Washington. They celebrated too soon: Mugabe may have been down, he was not out. A re-run election was called in June and was boycotted by the MDC on the grounds of corruption and violent intimidation of its members. Mugabe came away ostensibly the victor, but with very little credibility.

The British and US imperialists have now intensified their attack on this poor benighted country. Anyone knowing the history of Southern Africa will have appreciated the irony of Britain's and the US's failure to impose sanctions on Zimbabwe at the United Nations (UN) Security Council in July (vetoed by China and Russia). Throughout the apartheid era, both Britain and the US exercised their veto consistently to prevent UN sanctions on South Africa, when the frontline states, including Zimbabwe, despite

their poverty and economic fragility, were the mainstay of opposition to the racist regime. Britain is, in fact, up to its neck in the tragedy that has overcome Zimbabwe, and no amount of finger-pointing can hide its perfidy.

It was Cecil Rhodes's British South Africa Company (BSA) that first colonised the country in the 1890s. The aim was to rob the region of its resources, and more particularly, for the politically astute Rhodes, to ensure peace and plenty in Britain via rich pickings from southern Africa. Southern Rhodesia, as Zimbabwe was then called, was settled by increasing numbers of white immigrants and when the BSA mandate ended in 1922, power was handed to this settler minority. What followed was the systematic transfer of fertile land from the black majority to the white minority under the Land Apportionment Act. Black families were forced off their ancestral land to supply cheap labour to the white-owned mines and factories, or to languish in infertile 'Reserves'.

In response to colonisation, liberation movements were formed all over Africa and flourished in the period after the Second World War. Zanu and Zapu (Zimbabwe African People's Union) in Southern Rhodesia were among them. Educated in South Africa, Robert Mugabe returned home to join the liberation struggle in the 1960s. In 1965 the white racist minority led by Ian Smith declared unilateral independence (UDI) with the intention of entrenching white minority rule for 'a thousand years'. Smith imprisoned the entire leadership of the liberation movements: Mugabe was detained without trial for ten years. Over the next 15 years various British governments, including two Labour governments, made timid attempts to reach deals with the Smith regime which would bring about black majority rule very, very gradually, while the regime's racist backers (including prominent British companies like Lonrho)

ran rings around the weak international sanctions and the white farmers profited from immense subsidies.

In 1974 the tables began to turn across the whole region of southern Africa: Mugabe was released from gaol, left the country for Mozambique, and the liberation war began in earnest from the east. In 1975 the US/British-backed invasion of Angola by the South African army, launched to prevent independence after the Portuguese withdrawal, was defeated by the Angolan MPLA with the considerable help of Cuba. The news of this defeat lit up the region. In 1976 the students in Soweto, South Africa, rose up against apartheid tyranny.

By the late 1970s, and following a failed attempt to impose a stooge black leader (Muzorewa), the Smith regime, under the auspices of Britain and the US, was forced to the negotiating table with the liberation movements. The Lancaster House talks brought about the first elections where the black majority had the vote: Zanu came to power under the leadership of Mugabe.

The Lancaster House Agreement, which brought the liberation war to an end in 1979, imposed grave restrictions on Zimbabwe's new government. The most significant of these were the safe-guarding of white representation in Parliament (20% of seats) and the restriction on the redistribution of land, both for the next ten years, 1980-1990. At the time of independence the white minority – 5% of the population – 'owned' 80% of the arable land. The deal, stitched up at the last minute with the agreement of the US when Zanu and Zapu threatened to walk out of the talks, promised British and US aid to compensate white farmers who were willing to sell their land. Land reform, the most important issue in the liberation war, was kept at a standstill.

In 1985 the Land Acquisition Act gave the government the right to purchase excess land for redistribution to

the landless. This Act had limited effect, mainly because the government could not afford to compensate landowners and white farmers vigorously opposed it. The government was powerless in the face of the farmers' resistance and from 1980 to 1990, only 71,000 families were resettled – a tiny fraction of the landless.

It is this issue of land ownership that lies at the heart of Zimbabwe's crisis. During the 1990s land was seized from white farmers without compensation as Mugabe attempted to keep his frustrated supporters in line. But this was not organised land reform, it was corrupt land-grabbing, and the British government used this as the excuse to withhold the aid it had promised. In a sustained campaign, international aid was cut off, Zimbabwe was thrown out of the Commonwealth and the EU instituted sanctions. The subsequent failure of agriculture is not just a result of under-resourcing black farmers, although this is crucial. The region is subject to prolonged droughts and to add to its misery Zimbabwe is blighted by an HIV/AIDS epidemic. Despite the progressive policies of the government (unlike those of South Africa), due to lack of funds, life expectancy has reduced to 37 years and a quarter of children are orphans. The collapse of the economy and political violence has caused many thousands of Zimbabweans to flee the country to neighbouring South Africa where, once again, they have been the target of politically-motivated violence.

The Zimbabwean people need help and support. In a world ruled by imperialism, where its ambitions are para-

mount, what the Zimbabweans are being offered is the opposite. When UN sanctions were blocked, the EU tightened its own sanctions further. Multinational companies like Anglo American and RioTinto, with substantial holdings in Zimbabwe's mineral and platinum mines, are perched ready to take advantage of any settlement while retaining their profitable foothold in the country. The South African President Thabo Mbeki has stepped in to organise talks between the opposing Mugabe and Tsvangirai parties with the aim of forging a unity government. Unfortunately, such a government, even if it can maintain stability, will be forced to introduce a settlement favourable to imperialism. The stakes are high. After more than a decade in power in South Africa, the ANC has itself failed to introduce land reform or lift the oppression of the mass of its working class. They promised that 30% of agricultural land would be transferred to black claimants by 2014; so far they have achieved just over 4%. Millions of black people still live in impoverished townships, without electricity or clean water and without jobs. The South African ruling class can ill-afford to see its neighbour in turmoil.

The biggest question of all is who will represent the interests of the black majority who are still waiting for liberation. Tsvangirai and the MDC are already beholden to imperialism. The old warhorse Mugabe can see that imperialism is ready to step in, but through his own corruption and failures he is impotent to stop them. This is the question not just for Zimbabwe, but for the whole continent.

British mercenary goes to gaol for coup plot – but what about his friends?

The mercenary business, or 'military contractors', is globally worth US\$100 billion a year. Simon Mann, who has been sentenced to 34 years for his part in a failed coup in Equatorial Guinea in 2004, was a main player in this dirty business. In the 1990s, one of his companies, Executive Outcomes, earned millions from the Angolan government for recapturing and guarding oil installations. Another, Sandline International, earned £5.6 million for smuggling arms into Sierra Leone against a UN embargo and was active in the civil war. They also put down a rebellion on the island of Bougainville for the government of Papua New Guinea and Rio Tinto Zinc.

Many of those captured with Mann were former apartheid death squad members. For instance, his second-in-command, Nick du Toit, who led the coup advance party, was CO of a unit called Reconnaissance Commando 5 which massacred 14 unarmed civilians in Gabarone, Botswana in June 1985. Mann and the others are cold-blooded hired killers.

We explained in FRFI 181 how Spain, as the former colonial power, planned to use the 2004 coup in Equatorial Guinea as an excuse to intervene to 'restore order' and install exiled opposition leader Severo Moto as president. We also explained that Britain and the US approved of the plan and how behind it all lay the drilling rights to Equatorial Guinea's oil reserves, the third largest in sub-Saharan Africa.

At his trial Mann admitted the role of the US and Spain, but kept quiet about Britain. He has let it be known that if and when he gets out of prison, he wants to return to the UK.

At the time of the coup, then Foreign Secretary Jack Straw was among those who denied all knowledge of it. Within months, Straw was forced to admit to Parliament that Britain knew of the plot over a month beforehand.

Those implicated in the plot by Mann include Mark Thatcher, fined £266,000 and given a four-year suspended sentence for supplying the helicopter to fly in the triumphant Moto, and Eli Calil, a friend of Peter Mandelson, who is alleged to have put up \$2 million backing money.

Others have yet to be investigated: a certain 'JH Archer', for example, who paid tens of thousands of pounds into Mann's coup account in Guernsey; Greg Wales, long-time friend of Margaret Thatcher; David Hart, Thatcher's enforcer during the 1984-85 miners' strike. Former Tory vice-chairman Howard Flight offered \$30 million to be invested in developing agriculture in Equatorial Guinea if the coup succeeded.

Why has SO15, the anti-terrorist branch, been wasting time persecuting a foolish young Muslim woman for writing rubbish poetic fantasies on a website rather than investigating alleged backers of real terrorism? It is inconceivable that MI5 and MI6 knew nothing of this conspiracy.

Finally we have the usual 'black hole of Calcutta' stories about Mann's conditions in the Black Beach prison in Equatorial Guinea. The wing he is kept in is newly built. He has appeared on TV in apparently good health – his manacles were even fitted over his trousers so as not to chafe his legs. He said he gets a glass of wine with his lunch. You don't get wine in Pentonville.

Thomas Atkins

PALESTINE

Hizbullah prisoner swap points the way for Palestinian resistance

On 16 July Hizbullah agreed a prisoner swap which saw Israel forced to release five Lebanese political prisoners and the remains of 199 Lebanese and Palestinian fighters in return for the remains of the two Israeli soldiers captured by Hizbullah in 2006. BOB SHEPHERD reports.

The prisoner swap sealed a political victory for Hizbullah and confirmed the defeat Israel suffered in 2006. Israel was forced to release Samir Kuntar, a Lebanese fighter accused of killing three Israelis in 1979. Meanwhile Hamas and the Palestinian resistance are demanding the release of up to 450 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, captured in Gaza in 2006.

Hizbullah General Secretary Nasrallah stated: 'The main element that made us reach [our goal] is steadfastness and victory in the face of the 2006 aggression, and the enemy's failure to reach any of its goals... If

we had been defeated in July 2006, Samir and the martyrs would not have been returned today... the period of defeat is over and the time of victory has arrived'. Hamas spokesperson Sami Abu Zuhri acknowledged that this was a major victory for the resistance and for Hizbullah.

In June Egypt brokered a truce between Israel and Hamas covering the Gaza Strip, starting on 19 June. Hamas conceded their previous position that any truce must cover both the West Bank and Gaza in order to lift the crippling economic siege of Gaza. Israel attempted to make the release of Gilad Shalit an integral part of the

truce but Hamas refused, making it clear that this would depend on the reciprocal release of a significant number of Palestinian prisoners.

According to the terms of the agreement, Israel would open border crossings within three days, allowing a limited flow of goods to enter into Gaza, and then after ten days lift virtually all restrictions on the flow of goods through the crossing points. In practice, Israel has reneged on its obligations to the extent that on 23 July, John Ging, director of UNRWA operations in Gaza declared: 'The situation in the Gaza Strip continues to deteriorate and the number of poor people continues to increase one month after a truce has been reached... Israel still doesn't allow all kinds of basic goods and food supplies into Gaza.'

Complaining that a small number of rockets had been fired from Gaza in the first two weeks of the truce, Israel has only opened the border crossings intermittently. Hamas have stopped these attacks, accusing Fatah of attempting to undermine the truce. Hamas have agreed with Islamic Jihad to 'disarm and arrest anyone for breaking the truce, for anyone who fires a shot now is simply trying to sabotage the resistance'. At the end of the first week of the truce Islamic Jihad issued a report which detailed Israel's violations. These included Israeli warships opening fire on Palestinian fishing boats, and Israeli army patrols randomly opening fire on farmers, wounding two in two separate incidents. On 10 July Israeli forces shot and killed an unarmed man



Israel released five Lebanese prisoners in the prisoner swap on 16 July

near the border following a 4 July decree that Palestinians were not allowed within 300 metres of the Gaza-Israel border.

The intermittent opening of the crossings has allowed a mere 30% increase in diesel and fuel oil supplies, not enough for the needs of the population. The Health Ministry in Gaza appealed on 9 July to humanitarian organisations to help over 500 patients who need life-saving treatment available only outside Gaza. Over 200 patients have died since Israel imposed the Gaza blockade in June 2006 because the Zionists would not allow them out for treatment.

Israel continues in its attempts to tie the truce and the opening of border crossings to the release of Shalit. Abu Ubayda, a spokesperson for Hamas's military wing, is quite clear: 'Whatever pressures they might exert in order to move the Shalit case forward,

they will not succeed because... Shalit's case hinges on releasing Palestinian prisoners.'

In the West Bank, Israel has stepped up its attacks on the resistance with around 400 arrests during the first month of the truce. Over 100 of these have been in Nablus and include the Vice-Mayor and Hamas Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) member Mona Mansour. Israeli forces also ransacked the offices of charities and civil institutions in Nablus, closing down 37 of them, as well as the Nablus shopping mall, claiming it was a front for Hamas. 45 PLC members are now being held in Israeli prisons. They include PLC Speaker, Dr Aziz Dwaik, held for two years without charge. Dwaik has been seriously ill and has now been operated on in prison, contrary to international convention which stipulates treatment in normal hospital.

Brown addresses the Knesset

On 21 July Gordon Brown became the first British Prime Minister to address the Israeli Knesset. Calling the occasion 'a singular honour indeed', he delivered a fawning defence of Zionism and Israel, linking opposition to Israel with anti-Semitism and terrorism. 'Britain is your true friend', he declared.

'A friend in difficult times as well as in good times; a friend who will stand beside you whenever your peace, your stability and your existence are under threat; a friend who shares an unbreakable partnership based on shared values of liberty, democracy and justice. And to those who mistakenly and outrageously call for the end of Israel let the message be: Britain will always stand firmly by Israel's side... I am proud to say that for the whole of my life, I have counted myself a friend of Israel.'

Adding 'I want to make clear that the British government... will stand full-square against any boycotts of Israel or Israeli academics and their institutions', he turned his attention to Iran, implying against the evidence provided in reports from the International Atomic Energy Commission and US intelligence, that Iran is developing nuclear weapons.

'I promise that just as we have led the work on three mandatory sanctions resolutions of the UN, the UK will continue to lead - with the US and our EU partners - in our determination to prevent an Iranian nuclear weapons programme... Iran has a clear choice to make: suspend its nuclear programme and accept our offer of negotiations or face growing isolation and the collective response not of one nation but of many nations.'

Britain's war crimes

'I am left with no doubt that, at the very worst, the British Security Service instigates the illegal detention and torture of British citizens and at the very best turns a blind eye to torture.' Tayab Ali, lawyer for two British citizens tortured in Pakistan

In July, Labour MP John McDonnell and Conservative chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Extraordinary Rendition Andrew Tyrie, accused the government of 'outsourcing' interrogation to places where torture was commonplace, such as Pakistan, and of 'watering down its "anti-torture commitments"' (*The Guardian*, 21 July 2008). They also condemned the government for failing to get the US to account for the use of British air space in cases of 'extraordinary rendition' to places of torture and warned that Britain could no longer rely on assurances by the US itself that it does not use torture. Tyrie called for an inquiry. The shameful collusion with torture, abuse and illegality that has become the hallmark of this British government is being forced out into the open.

Collusion with torture

Between April and July 2008, *The Guardian's* Ian Cobain reported the case of seven British men who had been held by Pakistani intelligence services (ISI) between 2003 and 2005 and tortured with, they believed, the full knowledge and complicity of members of British intelligence serv-

ices MI5 and MI6. They include:

- Salahuddin Amin, visited and interviewed several times by two MI5 officers in between being whipped, beaten with sticks, suspended from his wrists and threatened with an electric drill.
- A British man who had three fingernails forcibly extracted by ISI; he too was then questioned by British intelligence officers.
- Tariq Mahmood, abducted in Rawalpindi in October 2003, tortured and released without charge five months later, his passport handed back to him at the airport by a man he believes was from MI5.
- A British medical student abducted at gunpoint in 2005, held for two months at the offices of the Pakistan Intelligence Bureau and tortured. Afterwards, he too was questioned by British intelligence officers. He was eventually released without charge.
- Another man tortured by ISI who recalls also being interrogated, while hooded, by people speaking English, with both British and American accents.

Meanwhile, eight men freed from Guantanamo Bay have issued writs against MI5 and MI6, alleging their

complicity in their illegal detention and subsequent abuse.

Apart from such actions contravening numerous international treaties on human rights and the protection of prisoners, the British Criminal Justice Act of 1988 makes it a specific offence, punishable by life imprisonment, for a British official to instigate or consent to the inflicting of 'severe pain or suffering' on any person, anywhere in the world, or even acquiesce in such conduct.

Abuse in Iraq

In Iraq, the appalling litany of abuse of detainees by British soldiers continues. In early July, the Ministry of Defence was finally forced to pay out £2.8m to the family of Baha Mousa. Baha Mousa, a hotel worker, died in 2003 with 93 separate injuries on his body and his head shoved down a prison latrine after he and eight others had been beaten and abused for over 36 hours by members of the Queen's Lancashire Regiment. Only in March did the MoD accept that there had been 'substantive breaches' of parts of the European Convention on Human Rights. However, only one soldier, Corporal Donald Payne, was convicted, after being acquitted of manslaughter, for 'inhumane' treatment. Six others were acquitted of all charges. A public inquiry into Mousa's death is still to be held.

On 12 July, the MoD confirmed that the Royal Military Police have

launched an investigation into allegations that a boy of 14 was whipped, beaten, stripped naked and made to carry out an act of oral sex on another young male prisoner in Iraq by British troops (*Independent*, 13 July 2008). Meanwhile, court action is going on over a series of allegations surrounding the British base Camp Breadbasket in 2003, where prisoners were photographed suspended in nets hanging from forklift trucks or forced to simulate sexual acts with each other. In May 2004, 20 Iraqi civilians were allegedly executed at the British base in Abu Naji. Five survivors are bringing a claim for damages against the MoD.

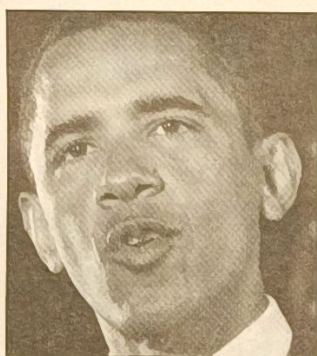
Normalising torture

Much as the MoD continues to squirm and point a finger at a few 'rogue soldiers', it is clear that the culture of abuse and humiliation of prisoners is being condoned at the highest level. Ever since President Bush ruled, in February 2002, that the Geneva Conventions and, by extension, all the international and national treaties and provisos banning inhumane and degrading treatment did not apply to any 'enemy combatant' in the 'war on terror', the gloves have been off. The US has redefined the meaning of 'torture' and shifted the terms of the debate, to the point where the British press routinely refer to 'the controversial technique known as "waterboarding"' - an example of what Reza Fiyuati (*Counterpunch*, 15 May 2008) has described as 'a distortion-discussion [that] is the best way of normalising really existing torture'. Waterboarding is not the 'dunk in the water' jovially

dismissed by Donald Rumsfeld, architect of the framework for legalised torture - but a technique designed to simulate drowning. Arch-sceptic Christopher Hitchens, who bought into the US line of a qualitative difference between 'extreme interrogation' (valid, he claimed, for 'high-value detainees') and 'outright torture', tried out water-boarding in controlled conditions and concluded 'Believe me, it's torture' (*Vanity Fair*, May 2008). We are told that in a time of global war, new rules apply. But the point about the Geneva Conventions was that they were precisely to be applied in that most testing of moral quagmires, a time of war and heightened national security. We must be clear: the inhumane and barbaric treatment that is being meted out to those perceived by the US and Britain as their enemies in the war on terror are war crimes of the highest order and we must hold our governments accountable.

In a sinister new development, the US Supreme Court has upheld the right of the President of the United States to designate citizens and non-citizens alike as 'enemy combatants' stripped of all rights, and hold them indefinitely, with only recourse to 'military commission' type tribunals. As investigative journalist Robert Parry points out (rinf.com) 'The war is a "war on terror" that can go on indefinitely and the "battlefield" is the world... actually this means the president has the right to do whatever he wants to whomever he wants wherever that person might be, virtually forever'. O, brave new world.

Cat Wiener



Obama's promises to reduce troop levels in Iraq if he is elected are empty

COLONISING IRAQ

The Bush administration is desperately trying to secure the colonisation of Iraq and control of its resources before the President leaves office. The US wants to impose a Status of Forces Agreement (Sofa) and a strategic framework agreement on Iraq that will ensure its long-term military domination of the country and allow the US to threaten other countries in the region, notably Iran. The agreements are reminiscent of those imposed on Iraq by British imperialism in the 1920s. JIM CRAVEN reports.

Initially, the US insisted on the right to maintain 58 military bases in Iraq, to control Iraqi airspace up to 30,000 feet, to conduct military operations and move troops into and out of the country without having to inform the Iraqi government. The US also demanded continued immunity from Iraqi law for all US personnel and for the 160,000 private mercenaries and contractors on whom they depend. It wanted all Iraqi security institutions and armament contracts to be under US supervision for ten years and the right to continue arresting and imprisoning Iraqis. Currently, there are around 25,000 Iraqis in prisons controlled by the occupying forces, almost all without trial or access to legal process. In return, the US promised to defend Iraq from external aggression. However, the US would define what constitutes such aggression, leaving open the possibility, for example, that it could attack Iran on the pretext that it trains Shia militia. The US also demanded the right to refuel its planes in Iraqi airspace, making Iraq an important staging post for US attacks on any country in the region. The agreements were to be open-ended, with at least two years' notice of curtailment.

Iraqi bourgeois compromise

The Iraqi government claimed to be outraged by the US demands. A majority of the Iraqi parliament wrote to the US Congress rejecting any long-term security deal. Many of them wanted a major reduction in US forces by the end of 2008. Others wanted US forces confined to barracks unless they are asked for assistance. Some wanted US forces out altogether. By 13 June Iraqi Prime Minister Al Maliki announced that negotiations had reached a 'dead end'.

In reality, however, the majority parties in the Iraqi parliament, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), Al Maliki's Dawa Party and the Kurdish parties, all favour large numbers of US troops remaining in the country and a US security guarantee. These parties represent the Iraqi elite and merchant classes who stand to gain most from foreign investment and the privatisation of Iraqi resources. They are well aware that, as the Iraqi defence minister pointed out in June, the Iraqi army will not be able to hold its own for many years. The US Government Accountability Office reported that although there are nearly half a million members of the Iraqi security forces, only 10% are able to operate without US help.

The Iraqi government's immediate concern in opposing the US demands was not to disrupt relations with Iran.

Al Maliki went to Tehran to reassure the Iranians that, 'We will not allow Iraq to become a platform for harming the security of Iran and its neighbours.' Iran supports the present Iraqi government and in particular ISCI, which was created in Iran. Members of the ISCI militia, the Badr Organisation, fought on Iran's side in the Iran-Iraq War. A second concern of the Iraqi government was not to appear as a US client because a large majority of Iraqis oppose the occupation. As the *Washington Post* summarised a Pentagon report in December 2007, 'Iraqis of all sectarian and ethnic groups believe that the US military invasion is the primary root of the differences between them, and see the departure of occupying forces as the key to national reconciliation.' ISCI, in particular, is worried that it will lose out to Al Sadr's followers in provincial elections due in November and hence their plans to control oil contracts in the Basra fields will fail.

Al Sadr has consistently opposed the imperialist occupation and is organising rallies against Sofa, calling for a timetable for US withdrawal and a referendum on any agreements. He gains most of his support from the poorest sections of the Iraqi population, those who have suffered most from the invasion and occupation. A US military intelligence report admitted the Sadrists will win 60% of the vote in the south in November.

US threats

The US government is making financial threats to get the agreements signed. Under the UN mandate, the Federal Reserve has refused Iraqi requests to diversify some of the \$50 billion of Iraqi assets it is holding out of the depreciating dollar and into other currencies. This has cost Iraq an estimated \$5 billion.

In late June, the US made some concessions. They agreed that private contractors should not have immunity from Iraqi law and that any Iraqi prisoners held or arrested by the US should be transferred to Iraqi custody. However, as Iraqi prisons are already overflowing, this would be a paper exercise. The US also proposed a joint US/Iraqi centre to co-ordinate security operations and promised that Iraq would not be used as a base to attack other countries. They reduced their demands for 58 bases to an unspecified 'few dozen' and ridiculously offered to call them 'Iraqi' bases. By spring of 2006 there were 106 US bases of all sizes in Iraq, but it is doubtful whether they presently have more than about 30 large bases. In any case, the US is building five mega-bases, any two of which would be sufficient to militarily dominate the whole country.



Sadr City, Baghdad

These mega-bases were planned shortly after the invasion, though former Defence Secretary Rumsfeld denied this. The bases are huge and supplied with all the amenities the troops might expect back home. Camp Balad, for instance, 60 miles north of Baghdad, occupies 16 square miles and houses 40,000 troops, contractors and special service operatives. The *Washington Post* described it as 'essentially a small American town smack in the middle of the most hostile part of Iraq'. The US embassy being built in the high security Baghdad Green Zone will cover 104 acres and house 1,000 diplomatic staff. It will have its own water and electricity supplies, anti-missile defences, blast resistant work spaces, recreation, retail and shopping areas and cost \$1.2 billion a year to operate. These facilities are intended to last for decades not months.

The US imperialists wanted the agreements signed by the end of July, though this is unlikely to happen. Knowing a majority of the US population oppose permanent bases in Iraq they have fashioned them as agreements rather than treaties, so they do not have to go before the Senate for approval with November's presidential elections looming. They want to present Barack Obama with a done deal should he win. However, Bush and his cronies shouldn't worry too much. Obama's promise to reduce troop numbers has always referred only to combat forces. He has never suggested withdrawing entirely from Iraq, telling Iraqi officials he will not act precipitately and will seek US military commanders' views.

Prelude to oil plunder

In late June, five major western multinationals signed their first significant contracts in their quest to exploit Iraqi

oil. BP, Shell, Exxon Mobil, Total and Chevron, and some smaller companies, signed deals covering oil fields from Kirkuk in the north to Rumaila in the south. The first four are heirs to the consortium that controlled Iraqi oil after the imperialist carve-up of the Middle East following the First World War until its nationalisation in 1972. There was no competitive tendering for the contracts and, importantly, the Russian Lukoil and Chinese and Indian firms lost out. The deals are worth around \$250 million each, which can be paid in oil, and are for technical support; selling expertise and equipment, rather than for managerial or capital control. The Iraqi government hopes they will increase production by 20% from the present 2.5 million barrels per day. The contracts' significance lies in the fact that big companies are not usually interested in service contracts. The oil industry watchdog Platform believes they are stepping stones; enabling the multinationals to get first preference on future contracts giving them control of the oil fields.

So far the Production Service Agreements (PSAs) that the western oil companies want in order to fully exploit Iraqi oil have not proved possible because the necessary legislation has stalled in the Iraqi parliament, due to widespread opposition among the Iraqi people. PSAs would amount to the privatisation of their oil. The Kurdistan Regional Government has agreed contracts with smaller companies, in defiance of the central government, but, since they do not have pipelines to get the oil out, it is thought the small companies will later sell on to the multinationals.

False claims for 'surge'

The Bush administration continues to claim its 'surge' strategy is a success,

pointing to the Iraqi 'Charge of the Knights' and 'Roar of the Lion' operations that gained control of Basra and Sadr City in Baghdad. The truth is that the Iraqi security forces were either deserting or being defeated by Al Sadr's Mehdi Army before the US and British forces came to their assistance. Even then, and despite reneging on a ceasefire deal, they only managed to enter the cities when Al Sadr withdrew his forces from the streets. The number of attacks by the Iraqi resistance, which fell by 75% at the beginning of this year, is rising again: at least 25 US soldiers were killed in June as they came under attack from both Shia and Sunnis. An Amnesty International report in May spoke of the occupying forces and 'trigger-happy private contractors' committing 'gross human rights violations, including unlawful killing of civilians, arbitrary arrests, destruction of property and violent house searches'. The report criticised the Iraqi government for extensive use of the death penalty, 'some after grossly unfair trials'. The official number of Iraqi civilians killed fell by over two thirds to 541 in January but rose again to more than 2,000 during March and April.

Refugee crisis deepens

Amnesty International reports that the Iraqi refugee crisis 'has steadily increased in size and complexity'; there are now 2.7 million Iraqis forced from their homes within the country, with over two million abroad and many more still trying to leave. For those abroad conditions are deteriorating because of increasing pressures in the countries concerned and because of lobbying from the Iraqi government to restrict access. In Syria, with 1.5 million refugees, the number needing food aid is predicted to rise from 120,000 now to 300,000 by the end of the year. Less than a quarter of children attend school. In Jordan, which has half a million refugees, Iraqis are not permitted to work and must pay \$761 a year if they do not have official status. Saudi Arabia is building a wall on the Iraqi border. For many Iraqi refugees, child labour and prostitution are the only means of survival.

The imperialist countries refuse to accept virtually any refugees. The US has taken just 1,608 Iraqis. In Britain, Iraqi asylum seekers who fail on their first application must leave within 21 days. Around 500 Iraqi Kurds have been deported in the last three years because the British government claimed northern Iraq was 'safe'. Sweden has even returned refugees claiming there was 'no armed conflict' in Iraq.

On the ninetieth anniversary of the RAF's formation, the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Glen Torpy, said on 18 March 2008: 'It is easy to forget that the RAF has now been flying continuously in the Middle East for 17 years'. Now into its tenth decade, the RAF has bombed Iraq in seven of these decades. Approximately one million Iraqis have been killed since the March 2003 invasion. The people of the Middle East will not 'easily forget' the RAF's bombing raids. Get all British and US forces out of the Middle East.

Resistance in Afghanistan cannot be contained

At the beginning of June, British and NATO commanders in Afghanistan claimed that the 'tipping point' had been reached in the fight against what they call the Taliban. If true, such a claim amounts to an admission that the resistance had had the upper hand up to that time. However, guerrilla wars, such as that being waged by the Afghans, do not amount to all-out conflict until one side overpowers the other. It is a war of intermittent surprise and harassment within which a retreat can be as much a positive tactic as an attack.

As if to make the point, just a week later Afghan fighters attacked Kandahar prison with bombs, rocket propelled grenades and machine gun fire, releasing 400 Taliban fighters and 750 other prisoners. On hearing the explosions NATO forces took cover, so that by the time they eventually arrived on the scene the fighters and ex-prisoners had gone. Taliban spokesman Qan Yusef Ahmadi claimed, 'People are rejoicing and sacrificing sheep. They

in areas where NATO forces had previously made repeated attempts to clear out resistance fighters. The German publication *Der Spiegel*, quoted on the World Socialist Website, said there were 8,950 attacks on the imperialist and Afghan government forces in 2007, ten times the number in 2004.

Imperialist troops stretched to breaking point

President Bush was forced to admit that June had been 'a tough month' and promised to send more troops by 2009. However, Admiral Mullen said: 'I don't have troops I can reach for ... to send into Afghanistan until I have reduced requirements in Iraq.' The 2,300 US marine force that had to be sent to Afghanistan in March because other NATO countries refused to increase their commitment will now have its tour of duty extended by at least a month, despite previous denials by US Defence Secretary Robert Gates.

A total of 1.6 million US troops have now served in either Iraq or

defeated but had simply 'melted away', as guerrilla fighters often do. All that had happened was that Mullah Salam, a local Taliban leader, had swapped sides and the occupying forces made him governor of the town. Now, Mullah Salam is under attack from British diplomats in Musa Qala as someone who runs a personal militia of thugs and 'likes to feather his own nest', having taxed his own villagers more than a ton of opium. Mullah Salam claims the British are undermining his efforts by releasing people he arrests and under-funding his war chest.

Casualties mount as violence intensifies

According to the UN, more than 8,000 people died as a result of the violence last year, the majority of them Taliban. In the first half of this year there was a 62% rise in civilian deaths compared with the same period last year. Around 700 Afghan civilians have been killed so far this year, more than a third of them by occupying and Afghan government forces. At the beginning of July, 47 people at a wedding celebration were killed by US fighter aircraft near the village of Kacu in Nuristan Province. The bride was among the dead. A further nine people were wounded and ten buried under the rubble. As always, the US initially denied the incident but had to retract following an Afghan government inquiry. A little earlier, 20 civilians had been killed or wounded by a US helicopter missile attack on the Nuristan-Kunar border.

The UN also reported that suicide bombings last year were 69% up on 2006. On 7 July 41 people were killed and another 141 injured in an attack on the Indian Embassy in Kabul. The Afghan government accused foreign intelligence agents of being involved, meaning Pakistan. The Afghan government believes many in the Pakistani government support the Afghan fighters as they supported the previous Taliban government in Afghanistan.

Much of the fighting in recent weeks has focused around Afghanistan's border with Pakistan. The entire 2,300 strong US Marine Unit sent as reinforcement in March has been leading an offensive in Garmsar, one of the main assembly points for fighters coming from Pakistan. Reports say 4,000 families have been forced from their homes following violent house searches. Several civilians have been killed by the imperialist forces. A local spokesman said the US actions were 'causing further alienation of the population'. Nine US soldiers were killed and 15 wounded in the border region on 13 July.

Growing differences with Pakistan 'allies'

In Pakistan itself, 11 Pakistani soldiers were killed near the border in an air strike by an unmanned US drone in June. The new Pakistani government had been pursuing peace deals with tribal leaders and resistance fighters in the region, much to the anger of both the US and Afghan governments. Afghan President Hamid Karzai had threatened to send troops into Pakistan. New Pakistani Prime Minister, Yousaf Raza Gillani, reacted angrily saying, 'We will take a stand for sovereignty, integrity and self-respect and we will not allow our soil to be

attacked.' A Pakistani analyst said the drone attack 'shows the US does not trust Pakistan with their intelligence, insisting that they will strike instead of letting you strike'. Over 1,000 Pakistani soldiers have been killed in border incidents. According to US commentator Brian Cloughley, there have been some dozen US air strikes in the past four years that have killed Pakistani citizens. The US military has claimed they were all legitimate acts of self-defence.

A report from the US Congress Committee says that: 'Anti-Americanism is at record levels thanks to US policies such as the war in Iraq and Washington's perceived hypocrisy... US approval ratings have fallen to

record lows across the world since 2002, particularly in Muslim countries and Latin America.' Despite this Zalmay Khalilzad, US Ambassador to the UN and former Ambassador to Iraq, is considering running for the Afghan presidency next year. The intensified fighting has cast doubt on whether the elections will go ahead.

In 2006 the then Labour Defence Secretary John Reid said, 'We would be perfectly happy to leave in three years and without firing one shot because our job is to protect the reconstruction.' This was a calculated deception. British troops are sinking into a mire. Get all British troops out of Afghanistan!

Jim Craven



The British Army is already several thousand under strength and the MoD is expanding the use of private security firms to protect bases both in Afghanistan and Iraq

are welcoming our people into their homes.' After two days no one had been recaptured and six days later some of the released Taliban fighters were reported to be helping resist an attack by Canadian troops in Argandab. Christopher Langton, of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, admitted, 'It (is) no longer possible to claim that the Taliban has been contained; it has freedom of movement around Afghanistan, even though NATO has sent more troops.'

Rising imperialist losses

June was the worst month so far for British casualties with 13 soldiers killed. Altogether 45 members of the NATO forces died, making June the second successive month in which casualties for the occupying forces in Afghanistan were greater than for those in Iraq. Battlefield analysts quoted in *The Independent* claimed that the chance of surviving a six-month tour of duty in Helmand was considerably less than that in either the Vietnam War or the Malvinas conflict.

In July, Admiral Michael Mullen, chair of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff said: 'The Taliban and their supporters have...grown more effective and aggressive in recent weeks, as the casualty figures clearly demonstrate'. Attacks on the imperialist forces between January and May were 40% higher than the same period last year. Significantly, many of the attacks were

Afghanistan or both. More than half a million have done more than two tours of duty, of whom 20,000 have done five or more. It has been estimated that \$59 billion a year will be needed to compensate injured veterans in 25 years' time. An average of 18 US military veterans are committing suicide each day, twice the civilian rate.

British forces in Afghanistan have risen from 6,600 to 8,500 in the past couple of years. A recent survey of the armed forces revealed low morale due to low pay, inadequate equipment and long tours of duty. Around half the serving members had considered leaving. The army is already several thousand under strength with a serious shortage of experienced warrant officers. The Ministry of Defence is having talks with private security firms to protect bases in Iraq and Afghanistan in order to relieve fighting troops. In the past two years the Ministry has spent over £75 million on such mercenaries. The Ministry is also investigating the use of new security technologies based on their experiences in the north of Ireland.

Another false dawn

When NATO forces entered Musa Qala last December they claimed it as another indication that they were defeating the Taliban and winning the hearts and minds of the Afghan people. In fact, witnesses at the time said the resistance fighters were not



Iran: divisions in the US ruling class

The 19 July meeting of a senior US State Department official and European Union representative with Iranian government officials in Geneva is a significant development. Previously the US insisted that it would not engage in serious diplomatic relations with Iran until Iran ended its nuclear enrichment programme. The US also proposed opening an interests section in Tehran which would be the first US diplomatic presence in Iran since the 1979 US hostage crisis. Whatever these developments come to, they reflect a serious division within the US ruling class and the ascendancy of a faction opposed to the neo-conservatives and Vice President Cheney who have been leading the call for an attack on Iran. Germany's government has led in efforts to start negotiations.

In 2007 a combined report of 16 US intelligence agencies said that Iran had halted its nuclear weapons programme in 2003. Key figures in the US military have cautioned against war on Iran. On 3 July the chair of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mullen, said, 'This is a very unstable part of the world, and I don't need it to be more unstable.' He warned against opening a 'third front' and called for 'dialogue' with Iran. The US military command is acutely aware that its forces are over-stretched in Iraq and Afghanistan. Democratic Party US presidential candidate Barack Obama expresses their views by calling for face-to-face meetings with Iran and pledging to transfer substantial numbers of US troops from Iraq to Afghanistan. US Defence Secretary Gates and Secretary of State Rice have led in seeking negotiations with Iran.

On 13 July *The Sunday Times*

carried a report that President Bush had given approval for an Israeli bomb attack on Iran. In 1981 Israel bombed an Iraqi nuclear reactor; last year it bombed what it described as a nuclear facility in Syria, and at the end of this May it conducted a 100-fighter-bomber exercise over the eastern Mediterranean as a trial run for attacking Iran. Israel's Transport Minister said, 'If Iran continues with its programme for developing nuclear weapons, we will attack it'. Such an attack was becoming 'unavoidable', he added. In response Iran tested missiles on 8 and 9 July, including a missile with the range to hit Israel. Senior Iranian officials said that Iran would destroy Israel and 32 US military bases in the Middle East and close the Strait of Hormuz if it were attacked.

The Strait of Hormuz, between Iran and the Arabian Peninsula, is a little over 21 miles wide at its narrowest point. Through it travels about 40% of the world's oil supplies. If the Strait were closed, oil prices would soar way above their already high level with dire consequences for international capitalism. Iraq's Shia-dominated puppet government has told the US that if Iran is attacked it will turn its Shia allies in Iraq against the US and any who remain loyal to it, thereby jeopardising plans for US military bases and multinational corporations' control of Iraq's oil reserves.

The struggle within the US ruling class and between US and European imperialism will continue. There is no certainty that war with Iran has been forestalled, but, for Israel, the prospect of attacking Iran looks like a big gamble, with powerful sections of the US state urging restraint.

Trevor Rayne

COLOMBIA: lies, bribes and videotape

On 2 July the Colombian government triumphantly announced that it had deceived FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) into releasing some captives: Ingrid Betancourt, a prominent Colombian politician and one time presidential candidate, three US military contractors and 11 Colombian police officers and soldiers. The action cynically exploited the good faith built up with FARC by recent Venezuelan initiatives to release prisoners; military operatives were disguised as journalists and Red Cross representatives, once again demonstrating the moral turpitude of President Uribe, who is intent on destroying opposition to a ruthless ruling class.

The FARC believed that they were releasing their prisoners to a humanitarian organisation, a fraudulent 'Misión Internacional Humanitaria', flying two helicopters painted white and orange, one a Russian-made MI-17. Defence Minister Santos admitted that seven members of the nine Colombian military involved pretended to be a journalist and cameraman from the progressive Venezuelan-based news organisation TeleSUR, an Italian, an Australian, an Arab (wearing a Keffiyeh), a Cuban and a Dominican. Some wore Che Guevara T-shirts. Two others were a real doctor and nurse. Uribe was forced to admit that one used the Red Cross insignia. Misuse of the Red Cross emblem is governed by articles to the Geneva Conventions, the international rules of war, and can be deemed a war crime. TeleSUR has condemned the impersonation of journalists as a serious danger to press staff, but what does that matter to a state that overrules the regular silencing of journalists, and which breaks the law on a daily basis? The two FARC leaders who were holding the prisoners also got into the helicopter, and have since been condemned by FARC.

This is the culmination of a period in which President Uribe has intensified the war against FARC as he builds a centralised military and police system – with US, Israeli and British support – out of the welter of gun-toting factions that have been the state's unofficial armed bands until now. The release of Betancourt and the others follows intense international and domestic pressure on Uribe to negotiate with FARC, a step he absolutely rejects. The Venezuelan government has pressed for international recognition of FARC to negotiate a peaceful political solution to the country's disastrous social condition. In January, despite Colombian military obstruction, Venezuela facilitated the freeing of Clara Rojas (Betancourt's presidential running mate) and former Congresswoman Consuelo Gonzalez de Perdomo. In late February, FARC unilaterally released four former Colombian legislators who had been held for more than six years – Senator Perez, Jorge Eduardo Gechem Turbay, Gloria Polanco and Orlando Beltran. FARC's concern to open negotiations was strikingly shown last year when Colombian Senator Piedad Cordoba visited two FARC leaders, Ricardo Palmera and Omaira Rojas Cabrera ('Sonia'), imprisoned in the US. They assured her that they would opt out of a prisoner exchange if their inclusion prevented a humanitarian accord being reached.

Furious at the way in which this demonstrated FARC's desire for peaceful discussions, Uribe launched a ferocious attack on FARC. In March, he illegally attacked Ecuadorian territory, killing two Executive Committee members and 23 other FARC mem-

bers of the 48th Front, many in cold blood after they had been wounded (see FRFI 202). The Colombian gangster state cynically took advantage of FARC communications as they tried to release prisoners in the pursuit of negotiations. The US has spent billions of dollars funding intelligence monitoring stations around Colombia to intercept FARC communications, man-hunting with Special Forces teams, using deception and infiltration, and a British-style 'hearts and minds' campaign, to turn the population against FARC.

This was followed by the bounty killing of Commander Ivan Rios, and the surrender of the head of the 47th Front, Nelly Avila Moreno ('Karina'), on 19 May. Huge sums have been paid to informants since President Clinton set up Plan Colombia and provided the Plan's first budget of \$7.5bn. The US, Colombian and French governments offered to pay \$20-100m each to those releasing Betancourt. This has paid off with invaluable propaganda benefits for both Uribe and Sarkozy in France.

Yet without FARC pursuing a policy of prisoner release, and without at least two traitors literally paid their weight in gold, the government would not have been able to induce – let alone videotape – the peaceful hand-over of Betancourt and the others by 60 FARC troops, the majority of them

oners in often barbaric conditions.

To prevent dialogue, Colombian opposition politicians and peace facilitators who support it are under formal investigation by the Prosecutor-General for communicating with FARC. They include Senator Cordoba, Colombian politician Alvaro Leyva, Carlos Lozano (editor of the Colombian Communist Party newspaper *Voz*), Democratic Pole Party Congressman Wilson Borja and Congresswoman Gloria Ines Ramirez, US development consultant Jim Jones and a number of Venezuelan and Ecuadorian officials. Ex-FARC prisoners, Senator Perez, former head of the Foreign Relations Committee in the Colombian Senate, and Clara Rojas have condemned Uribe's position.

Colombia's Defence Minister Santos admitted that the defeat of FARC was not yet in sight. On 5 July Fidel Castro wrote, 'I am not suggesting that anyone lay down their arms, when everyone who did so in the last 50 years did not survive to see peace. If I dared suggest anything to the FARC guerrillas that would simply be that they declare, by any means possible to the International Red Cross, their willingness to release the hostages and prisoners they are still holding, without any precondition.' The idea that the liquidation of organised working class resistance to state terror can be a solu-



President Uribe greets Betancourt on her release

women, for apparent transfer to another location. Uribe has carefully retained his reputation as a non-negotiator with 'terrorists', and continues to reject all outside proposals for peace negotiations. On 19 July he refused to authorise Nicaraguan President Ortega's offer to mediate peace talks. Military engagements between the two sides continue daily.

Despite propaganda against FARC claiming brutal treatment of its hostages, Betancourt was described as in 'amazingly good condition' by CNN, whilst her mother, Yolanda Pulecio, let slip that abuse directed at Betancourt in captivity had come only from the Colombian police and soldiers held with her! The three US 'contractors' were assessed as 'in very good physical shape' by the US army. Colombia and the US hold some 500 FARC pris-

tion to Colombia's problems is nonsense. The state's war against Colombia's workers has resulted in almost four million poor peasants and labourers being forced from their homes since 1985, the worst record in the world.

On 15 July the new FARC leader Alfonso Cano declared: 'As revolutionaries, we fight for the reconciliation of the Colombian family and the formation of the new just social fabric. But the oligarchy, that damned mixture of privileged fortunes, huge haciendas, gold cradles and political power, do not want to share even one iota of their privilege with the majorities of the country. That's why they avoid any real possibility for a peace negotiation... We will never give up the struggle for justice'.

Alvaro Michaels

BOLIVIA: Morales faces down ruling class subversion



Demonstration in support of Evo Morales

As 10 August approaches – the date for the referendum to determine whether President Evo Morales and eight departmental governors should continue in office – the ruling class has been trying its best to subvert the whole process, realising that Morales will survive the recall vote.

Initially the ruling class had supported the recall referendum, using its majority in the Senate to ensure that the necessary legislation was passed on 8 May this year. It followed the illegal autonomy vote in the department of Santa Cruz on 4 May, which the rich landowners and their imperialist backers had used to mobilise opposition to Morales. With 80% of those voting supporting autonomy, the ruling class thought it had Morales on the run. In June, three further autonomy referenda, equally illegal, were held in Beni, Pando and Tarija departments. Together with Santa Cruz these departments form the so-called 'Crescent' in the east of Bolivia, where almost all Bolivia's hydrocarbon resources are located, and where there are huge landowner and agribusiness interests. All three votes showed large majorities in favour of autonomy, but were also characterised by high rates of abstention (35-40%) as the poor heeded Morales' call not to participate.

However, things have not gone the way of the ruling class. Firstly, the Organisation of American States (OAS) has made it clear it will oppose any break-up of Bolivia, as have the Bolivian armed forces. This has created differences between, on the one hand, the openly fascist Santa Cruz landowner interests, led by Governor Ruben Costas and head of the Santa Cruz Civic Committee Branko Marinkovic, and, on the other, those around the neo-liberal party PODEMOS, led by former President Tutu Quiroga. Costas and Marinkovic are aiming for outright secession by the 'Crescent' departments; Quiroga realises that this is not a viable strategy.

Secondly, Morales has not backed down. With record state income from gas exports, he has been able to offer some significant improvements to the lives of the Bolivian poor. \$1.8 billion will be contributed to the development of 21 drinking water projects in Santa Cruz. He has announced the nationalisation of two of the biggest private pension funds – one administered by Swiss Zurich Financial Services, the other by Spanish Banco Bilbao – which together manage the savings of 10% of the Bolivian population. He has supported the stand by Chapare coca growers in evicting USAID agents from their region. Declaring that the debate 'is not over people, it is

over economic models: return to neo-liberalism or deepen the changes', he says: 'I believe this process of change has no going back. That is why they [the opposition] reject the recall referendum. Their request to bring forward elections, when there is a president elected with 54% of the vote, is a coup against democracy.' Cuba is building dozens of hospitals in the country, and Brazilian President Lula has said his nation would continue to support the expansion of Bolivia's gas industry; 73% of Bolivian gas now goes to Brazil. Venezuelan President Chavez recently announced his government will give \$883 million in aid to improve and expand the output of Bolivia's oil and gas industry. Lula and Chavez recently pledged to collectively contribute \$530 million to help with the development of highways linking La Paz, Beni and Pando.

Thirdly, the rules for the referendum which the opposition agreed to mean that the more likely losers will be Morales' enemies, with two opposition governors facing defeat. This is because Morales or the prefects must stand down if they receive a vote of no confidence greater than the percentage with which they won in the 2005 election. Morales received 53.74% support in 2005; if there are 53.74% plus one against him in the referendum, he will have to stand down and call fresh elections. The same rules apply for the governors.

Realising that this meant they were very unlikely to defeat Morales, the opposition governors first said they would not participate, and then decided they would, but that they wanted the rules changed so that it would require 50% plus one of the votes to go against them before they had to stand down to protect those who were most at risk. Then, in early July, they demanded a referendum on whether Sucre should be restored as Bolivia's capital city, a position it lost to La Paz in 1899, and at the end of the month threatened to organise hunger-strikes in support of this call, starting on 4 August. In May, Sucre was the scene of a racist attack by middle class students on indigenous representatives who were scheduled to meet Morales.

The 10 August referendum will be a vital test for those fighting for progress in Bolivia; a victory for Morales will help isolate neo-liberal opposition within the country and offer a chance to break opposition to the land reform programme, a vital step in consolidating the changes. It will also have a significant impact on the whole anti-imperialist process underway throughout Latin America. Socialists should have no doubt as to which side they are on.

Robert Clough

Exposing Cuba's enemies in the British press

Recent changes in Cuba's wage system, removing the cap on bonuses for workers who meet or exceed production targets, were portrayed in the international media as a step towards capitalist restoration in Cuba. Guardian reporter Rory Carroll, a long-standing critic of Cuban socialism, was cock-a-hoop. But his crowing is premature for, as HELEN YAFFE points out in this response, salary scales are not new in Cuba, and this measure has nothing to do with the return of capitalism.

Rory Carroll's article 'Cuban workers to get bonuses for extra effort' (*The Guardian*, 13 June 2008) was yet another misrepresentation of recent developments in Cuba. There has never been an 'egalitarian wage system', nor has 'every worker's wages been the same from a doctor to a street cleaner' – as stated in the website interview with Carroll.

Carroll declares the 'death-knell of the "new socialist man"', promoted by Che and Fidel, but Che himself devised a new salary scale, introduced in 1964, with 24 wage levels, plus a 15% bonus for over-completion. This scale linked wages to qualifications, creating an incentive to training, which was vital given the exodus of professionals and low educational level of Cuban workers. Like Marx himself, Che recognised the socialist principle: 'from each according to his ability to each according to his work' – which Carroll associates exclusively with Raul. Cuba has never claimed to be communist and therefore has never embraced the principle: 'from each

according to his ability, to each according to his need', which expresses the attainment of communist society.

Barely mentioning the devastating effects of the US blockade, Carroll describes as 'moribund', the Cuban economy which has grown between 7 and 12% annually since 2005. And what kind of 'impoverishment' is Carroll referring to when he dismisses Cuba's first-world standard, free, universal education and healthcare services – luxuries gradually being withdrawn in our own country? The Human Development Report now lists Cuba in the high-human development category.

The new regulation was introduced to standardise salary policy across the economy as part of the general implementation of the Enterprise Perfection System of economic management, operating in army enterprises since 1987. It also emerges out of the profound process of popular consultation in autumn last year, in which millions of Cubans made over 1.3 million concrete proposals for improving the

economy. Low salaries and high food prices are a principal concern for Cubans, as they are for an increasing proportion of the world today.

Capped or not, bonus payments in Cuba are awarded for over-completion of the national plan in the production of physical goods or services, that is, in terms of use-values, not in terms of profitability or exchange values. Workers identify their own material interests with the material well being of the socialist state. Carroll also ignores the fact that bonus payments remain capped at 30% for various bureaucrats, technicians and economists, a measure to prevent the emergence of a technocratic elite.

The new salary incentives reflect Cuba's push to reduce vulnerability to sharp rises in global fuel and food prices, rather than a return to capitalism. Recent policies aim to dramatically increase internal production and productivity, particularly in agriculture and exports. Carroll equates productivity with capitalism – but how efficient is this economic system which leaves millions unemployed because their work is not 'profitable', while millions of under-fives die every year of malnutrition and diarrhoea.

For 50 years, commentators on Cuba have predicted the collapse of the socialist Revolution. Carroll is repeating the same mistake.

An edited version of this article was first printed in *The Guardian* newspaper on 20 June 2008.



Recent policies aim to dramatically increase internal production and productivity, particularly in agriculture and exports.

Cuban 5 convictions upheld



RATB comrades protesting outside the US embassy within 24 hours of the appeal announcement. The same was done throughout the world and these reports have been collected by Free the Five committee in the US, see www.freethethefive.org/updates/Comuniques/COAppealsDemos060508.htm

On 4 June a US federal appeals court upheld convictions against the Cuban 5, political prisoners held in US jails. At the same time it decided the sentences against three of them were too harsh, including two who are serving life sentences. These cases have been sent back to the Florida federal court for resentencing. HANNAH CALLER reports on the frame-up in the case of the Cuban 5.

At the time of their arrest in 1998, the Cuban 5 were working in the US for the Cuban government, infiltrating Miami-based terrorist groups and gathering information to prevent further attacks against Cuba. In September 1998 they were arrested and charged on 26 counts, including espionage and conspiracy to commit murder. None of the charges against them involved violence, weapons or damage to property. After 17 months in solitary confinement they were put on trial in Miami, which has a huge Cuban exile community, largely hostile to the Revolution. Defence attorneys argued for a change of venue but this was denied and the 5 were found guilty. In 2005 the convictions of the 5 were overturned by a three-judge panel of the Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta and a retrial was to be held outside Miami. However, a 12-judge panel of the same court reversed this decision and no retrial was held.

The latest appeal outcome

As a result of the latest appeal decision Antonio Guerrero (life sentence plus ten years) and Ramon Labanino (life sentence plus 18 years) have had their life sentences removed and Fernando Gonzalez (19 years) is due to have his sentence reduced. Unbelievably their sentences will go before Joan Lenard,

the same judge who issued disproportionate sentences in the first place. In its 99-page ruling the appeals court found that Judge Lenard committed serious errors in the original trial. Despite this, the court of appeals is returning the case to her.

Rene Gonzalez (15 years) and Gerardo Hernandez (two life sentences plus 15 years) had their sentences upheld. In Gerardo's case, the decision was split two to one. The judge who voted in his favour wrote a 16-page opinion stating that Gerardo is innocent of the charge against him of conspiracy to commit murder.

The legal team will now ask the three judges to review their decision, after which they will have the right to go to the US Supreme Court to review some or all of the issues presented.

The political battle continues

The case of the Cuban 5 exposes the hypocrisy of the US's 'war on terror'. Orlando Bosch and Luis Posada Carriles were leaders of terror networks in Miami. Now they are both free men in the US while the Cuban 5, who were trying to stop terrorism, are held in maximum security prisons.

In the week after the appeal decision protests took place in 18 cities around the world. These included protests in Glasgow, Liverpool and London led by Rock around the Blockade (RATB). 12 September 2008 will mark ten years unjust incarceration of the Cuban Five, and RATB is organising demonstrations all over the country. The struggle for their freedom is an international struggle. Join us to break the silence surrounding the case and show solidarity with the Cuban Revolution, which the Cuban 5 so rightly and so strongly defend.

A Cuban communist speaks



Teresita Trujillo works for the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. From Cuba, she kindly agreed to answer a wide-ranging series of questions from FRFI.

The EU has recently voted to formally end diplomatic sanctions against Cuba. To what extent does this open the way to improved diplomatic and commercial links with European countries? What barriers to these, if any, remain?

The recent decision adopted by the Council, to end the diplomatic sanctions introduced in 2003, is a step forward in the rectification of EU policy on Cuba and a defeat for the present US Administration, which put enormous pressure on its European allies to prevent such a decision.

The EU Common Position on Cuba, introduced in 1996 by the then Spanish President Jose Maria Aznar, at the request of the US, remains the main obstacle for the normalisation of relations. The Common Position has been rejected by Cuba since its adoption for its discriminatory nature and its interference in the internal affairs of our country.

An entirely different framework is required for the improvement of relations between the EU and Cuba, one which is

based on mutual respect and non-interference in internal affairs.

The recent announcement of removing wage caps for workers in state enterprises has caused speculation in the British press that this is a step towards capitalist restoration in Cuba. In your opinion what is the true content of these reforms, and why are they being implemented now? Could they increase inequalities in the standard of living among Cubans, and are there measures in place to limit this?

Some press, not only in Britain, is portraying current changes in Cuba as a move towards capitalism. I do believe there is a purpose behind it: to create confusion and demobilise the huge support the Cuban Revolution enjoys all over the world.

The changes introduced in the salary policy will not increase inequalities; they are aimed at raising efficiency levels of the socialist economy under current conditions, after the recovery from the crisis it suffered in the 1990s. The living standards of the Cuban people have been recovering in the last few years and their continuous improvement can only be possible through increasing the levels of production, productivity and efficiency. The distribution of wealth in our society is ruled by socialist principles: From every one according to his/her capacity, to every one according to his/her work.

What effect would you expect an Obama victory in the US presidential elections to have on US-Cuba relations?

History has told us not to expect much from either party administration. Their differences with regards to their policies on Cuba are not very significant. We have always prepared for the worst and counted only on the will of the Cuban people to move forward against all odds.

Obama has made certain statements that could mean a slightly different

approach. Cuba has always made it clear to the US its readiness to engage in talks. We will have to wait and see how things evolve while we continue relying on our own strength.

Increasing agricultural production in Cuba has been identified as a priority. What, in your opinion, are the most promising measures being implemented in this area? Can you describe some of the difficulties that have to be taken into account?

One of the major difficulties today is the lack of agricultural labour force. The social, cultural and educational development has had an impact on the labour structure of rural populations, which have moved to work in other areas.

Agricultural production in Cuba is handled by state farms, co-operatives and individual farmers. The bulk of the production is bought by state enterprises that provide food for schools, daycare centres, homes for the elderly, hospitals, workplace canteens, restaurants, hotels, etc. One of the measures already introduced, which is beginning to yield results is the increase of sale prices to the state.

Also there is a recent decision to grant land to any citizen willing to produce agreed volumes of agricultural produce, part of which will be bought by the state enterprises, with the remainder to be sold at the agricultural free market.

There are also plans for the intensive production of rice, in co-operation with Vietnam.

Food production is vital for any country, even more so today, given the current rise in food prices that make it almost impossible for developing countries to acquire the necessary volumes and to sell them at affordable prices for their populations.

This is definitely an area in which we need to do a lot to achieve the necessary results, and several other measures to that aim will be gradually introduced.

FIDEL CASTRO: a revolutionary life

My Life Fidel Castro with Ignacio Ramonet,
Allen Lane 2007, £25 hbk, 724pp

Isaid once that one of our greatest errors in the beginning and many times down through the years of the Revolution was to believe that somebody knew how socialism ought to be constructed' (*My Life*, p623).

This book is, then, a tremendous testament to almost 50 years of constructing socialism without a blueprint. In it Castro details the Cuban people's incredible social, political, educational, cultural and international achievements during his life. The book takes the form of a series of conversations between the Cuban leader and the former editor of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Ignacio Ramonet. In a hundred hours with Castro, recorded between 2003 and 2005, we are given an unprecedented account of his life so far, from the schoolboy forging a glowing report card for his guardians to secure centavos for ice cream, to the mature revolutionary, on the phone advising President Chavez of Venezuela to stand firm during the April 2002 coup.

The unique value of this 700-page volume lies in the additional material detail which illustrates Castro's strategic and tactical skill. Every setback, every apparently hopeless situation has been made to yield something useful and progressive. After the failed attack on the Moncada Barracks on 26 July 1953, Fidel is betrayed and captured. Batista's soldiers are for shooting the prisoners without knowing Castro is amongst them. He relates the episode to make the point that a black Cuban Army officer restrained the troops by repeatedly arguing: 'Don't shoot. You can't kill ideas' (p162).

Ramonet tells us in the introduction that Fidel often says: 'It's ideas that transform the world, the way tools transform matter' (p14). Castro's own life of ceaseless revolutionary organisation and action demonstrates his central, Marxist understanding that it is the practical application of ideas that changes and transforms the world, not the individualistic heroism of a single person. Reflecting on the historic importance of particular men, Che's virtues of 'moral value... and conscience' are praised but also seen as 'of no importance unless one believed that men like him exist by the million - millions and millions of them - within the masses' (p307).

From privilege to protest

In describing those Cubans who allied themselves with the US to attack the Revolution at Playa Giron in 1961, he comments that 'among the invaders there were many who were the sons of large landowners and wealthy families. There you see clearly the class nature of the invasion' (p263).

How was it then that Fidel, the son of a large and wealthy landowner, was able to publicly declare on the day before that counter-revolutionary invasion: 'This is a socialist and democratic Revolution of the humble, by the humble, and for the humble' (p638)?

The answer lies in part, as he points out, in his family's class origins. Castro's father, Angel Castro, had been an illiterate immigrant from Galicia in Spain who had known grinding poverty and who never for-

got his roots. Castro describes his father's concern at the plight of the landless labourers during the *tiempo muerto*, the period of near starvation between the end of the sugar harvest and planting, and the measures he took to alleviate the situation.

At Havana University in 1945, Castro tells us, 'The leftists saw me as a queer duck - they'd say, "Son of landowners and a graduate of the Colegio de Belen, this guy must be the most reactionary person in the world"' (p94). While 20 years earlier, student Julio Mella, founder of the Cuban Communist Party, had been 'the presiding spirit', the odds were considerably different now: 'Of the 15,000 students... there were no more than 50 active, known anti-imperialists' (p94).

During this period of early political agitation, which led to his being physically excluded from the university precincts by thugs and police, Castro and his friends committed themselves to organising a challenge to injustice by building a federation of Latin American students, demanding 'the sovereignty of the European colonies throughout the hemisphere. That was our programme which was anti-imperialist and anti-dictatorial' (p99). In 1947 Castro headed for the Dominican Republic to lead a company of volunteers against the US-backed dictator there; in Panama he encountered students inflamed by US soldiers who had machine-gunned anti-occupation protesters and in Venezuela he noted the progressive promise of President Betancourt and the Revolutionary Junta. The developing student movement supported the Argentinean demands for the return of the Malvinas and expressed solidarity with the struggle for Puerto Rican independence. In 1948 he travelled to Colombia, where he met presidential candidate Jorge Eliecer Gaitan who agreed to support a congress of Latin American students. However Gaitan was assassinated in Bogota as the congress was in progress. Castro was caught up in the response of 'a people seeking justice... I joined the people; I grabbed a rifle in a police station... I witnessed the spectacle of a totally spontaneous popular revolution.' (p98)

Marxism

Out of this crucible of experience Fidel was forced to make some sense. He is unequivocal that it was his encounter with Marx which took him forward. Reading the *Communist Manifesto*:

'Marxism taught me what society was. I was like a blindfolded man in a forest who doesn't even know where north and south is. If you don't eventually come to truly understand the history of the class struggle, or at least have a clear idea that society is divided between the rich and the poor, and some people subjugate and exploit other people, you're lost in a forest, not knowing anything.' (p100)

Castro describes himself as a 'utopian Communist' then, but goes on to state: 'By 10 March 1952, the day of Batista's coup d'état, I'd already been a convinced Marxist-Leninist for several years' (p103).



With friend Salvador Allende, president of Chile, in Santiago de Chile, 1971

However, as Lenin pointed out forcefully to those who sniffed haughtily at the Easter Rising in Ireland in 1916, only the most 'hopeless doctrinaires' could think that there was anything like a 'pure social revolution where one army lines up on one side and declares "we are for socialism" and another lines up saying, "we are for imperialism"'. Castro quotes from Jose Marti, hero of the Cuban War of Independence, in his argument that winning battles can involve guile and concealment as well as courage.

'All that I have done up to now, and all I will do, is for that [to thwart US imperialism through Cuban independence]... It has to be done in silence, and indirectly, for there are things that must be concealed in order to be attained.' (p173)

It is a central axiom of Marxism that while the people do indeed make history they do not make it in circumstances of their own choosing. Castro explains that in 1960, after the Revolution, he had at first 'to appeal

to every recourse of my imagination to persuade them without giving our position away (ie, that we were going to proclaim socialism)' (p243).

But once the Revolution came under armed threat by US imperialism a year later, new, open tactics were necessary. On 16 April 1961, Castro openly proclaimed 'the socialist nature of our Revolution' (p257). The US invasion of Cuba was launched the next day at Playa Giron. Within 60 hours the Cubans had routed the invaders. Castro had appealed now to the working class and peasants to defend their Revolution under the banner of socialism. The attempted invasion had 'accelerated the revolutionary process' (p269). And, as Castro says later, 'Imperialist treachery, imperialist perfidy, stung by every measure of ours that benefited the people or consolidated national independence, forced us to keep our boots on and our combat equipment ready' (p308).

Castro considers an arc of liberation can be drawn from the landing of the *Granma* in Cuba in 1956, beginning the revolutionary war, to November 1975 when a small group of Cubans first engaged the forces of the racist army of apartheid South Africa. In the ultimate defeat of the apartheid army by Angolans, Namibians and Cubans: 'The imperialists and their pawns suffered the consequences of a Playa Giron multiplied many times over' (p334).

United States' African puppet regimes. Castro was in command of Cuban, Angolan and Namibian fighters in the largest military operation that Cuba had ever mounted. He directed generals whom he remembered as boys in the Rebel Army. Their struggle for justice which had begun in the mountains, plains and cities of Cuba was elevated to an international level a quarter of a century later. Castro reveals here that the US, using Israel as a proxy, was involved in the supply of atomic bombs to the racist apartheid regime. As the imperialist vultures circle Africa again, from Sudan to Zimbabwe, Castro's stirring account here confirms what has to be made common argument and knowledge today: that not one battalion, not one soldier, not one rifle was ever mobilised by Europe and the United States against apartheid in South Africa.

Winning the war?

However, history has bitterly demonstrated that while this battle was won resoundingly by Cuba and the liberation army of Angola, fatally wounding the racist regime, it was the imperialists who went on to win the war. From the triumph of Cuito Cuanavale it was only three short years until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Fidel tells it like this:

'When the Soviet Union and the Socialist Camp disappeared, no one would have wagered one cent on the survival of the Cuban Revolution. The country took a stunning blow when that great power collapsed and left us out in the cold, all by ourselves, and we lost all our markets for sugar, we stopped receiving foodstuffs, fuel, even the wood to bury our dead in' (p365).

Yet Cuba has survived. Why? 'Because the Revolution always had, has, and increasingly will have the support of a nation which is increasingly united, educated and combative.' (p366)

Ramonet presses Castro on issues that reflect the concerns of fixed liberal opinion in the West such as emigration from Cuba, the death penalty, the treatment of political dissidents and freedom of the press. Castro patiently refutes these prejudices, pointing out, for example, the obvious paradox that freedom of the press in the West is difficult to square with exclusive ownership of the media by rich individuals. Patient and diplomatic, yes, but also direct and combative in defending Cuba - it is easy to imagine Fidel raising that authoritative finger as he says emphatically 'Listen: I tell many of our friends who sometimes criticise us that they should try to understand the circumstances under which this country has to defend itself' (p479).

Meanwhile, the Cuban Revolution is looking to the future, cementing new alliances in Latin America. Castro describes the election of Evo Morales in Bolivia as 'the expression of the fact that the political map of Latin America is changing. New winds are blowing in this hemisphere... Imperialism no longer has the instruments it once had, nor can it apply them.' (p522/523)

These inspiring accounts from the frontlines in Cuba's 50-year battle against imperialism are of inestimable value to today's political struggles. We are made privy to the finest analysis of when to apply force, when to negotiate, when to dissemble and bluff, when to pause to analyse and reflect and when to act decisively - a constant ratiocination of the balance of class forces in the anti-imperialist battle for socialism. And yet sometimes his valour, optimism and audacity are simply breathtaking. Castro's life has been the Cuban Revolution, the building of socialism in that country and the sure marshalling of the forces - the growing masses of the poor around the globe - who are uniting to defeat imperialism. As Castro remarked of the Irish hunger strikers of 1981: 'Tremble, tyrants, before the courage of such men!'

Michael MacGregor

Junking the Corston Report – no let-up in women's imprisonment



FRFI joined Pauline Campbell's demonstration at Holloway in January 2008

It would have been a fitting tribute to Pauline Campbell, who died in May, if the Ministry of Justice had embraced the central recommendations of the Corston Report on 'Women with particular vulnerabilities in the criminal justice system', which was published last year. Pauline had spent five years struggling for justice following the death of her daughter Sarah in Styal prison and, without doubt, did more than any other person – or organisation, for that matter – to highlight the plight of women in prison. Her direct action, in demonstrating outside a prison every time a woman died within its walls, forced the issue of vulnerable women prisoners on to the agenda, and her constant harrying of those in power made certain it stayed there. Her death leaves a void that will be difficult to fill.

Women are responsible for 49% of all recorded incidents of self-harm in the penal system of England and

Wales, yet they account for less than 5% of the total prison population. Around 80% of women in prison suffer from diagnosable mental health problems and one in four were in care as children; over 50% say they suffered domestic violence and one in three that they have been sexually abused. Only 5% of children whose mothers are in prison remain in the family home and 66% of women prisoners have dependent children. In her report Baroness Jean Corston described the need for a 'distinct, radically different, visibly led, holistic, woman-centred integrated approach' to the problems of women in prison.

The report was commissioned by the Home Office and published in March 2007. Its central recommendation was that 'The government should announce within six months a clear strategy to replace existing women's prisons with suitable, geographically dispersed, small, multi-functional custodial centres within 10 years'.

Corston argued strongly against imprisoning vulnerable women who pose no risk to the public, pointing out that only a tiny minority of women are convicted of violent offences. She recommended that custodial sentences be reserved for 'serious and violent offenders who pose a threat to the public', that women unlikely to receive a custodial sentence should not be remanded in custody, that primary carers of young children are only remanded in custody after consideration of a probation report on the probable impact on their children, and that community sentences for 'non-violent women offenders' be the norm. The final paragraph of the Executive Summary of the Report states: 'if my package of recommendations is implemented, over time the women's prison population will decrease'.

In all, the report made 43 recommendations, including improvements to sanitation and hygiene in existing prisons and a reduction in strip-searching, as well as the establishment of an 'Inter-Departmental Ministerial Group' and a 'Commission' for 'women who offend or are at risk of offending'.

In December 2007 the government published its response. Ministers appeared to agree with Corston's analysis of the problems but highlighted the 'key issues' as setting up the 'Inter-Ministerial Group to provide governance' etc. The real central issue of closing women's prisons was referred back to be considered by 'a short project...chaired at Director level', which would report to Ministers by April 2008.

In June, Ministry of Justice Parliamentary Under-Secretary and 'Ministerial Champion for Women and Criminal Justice Matters', Maria Eagles MP, published a Progress Report and announced a number of small changes

related to Corston recommendations, including greater use of 'conditional cautioning' of women (which among other gems, will see prostitutes sign up to attend 'life classes' and be liable to arrest if they fail to attend); a pilot women's centre in Bristol, a pilot for use of a less intrusive type of searching and, of course, a cross-departmental women's unit to 'manage and co-ordinate the work on Corston across all relevant departments'.

No-one should be fooled by the talk of 'accepting', 'delivering', 'managing' and 'co-ordinating'. Eagles' Progress Report also contains the government's rejection of the crucial proposal to replace women's prisons by small custodial units. Instead, more women's prisons will open. A new wing is due to open next year at Bronzefield prison and plans are in the pipeline to turn Styal into Europe's largest women's prison. So if any 'small custodial unit' does now appear in a blaze of 'implementing Corston' publicity, take note that this will be in addition to existing prison places, not instead of, as Corston intended.

So who cares? Some of us do; that's why on 10 August there will be a demonstration outside Styal prison to mark Prisoners' Justice Day and commemorate the life and work of Pauline Campbell, a brave and true warrior in the fight for justice for prisoners.

Eric Allison and Nicki Jameson

Prisoners' Justice Day demonstration, Sunday 10 August 1-3pm, outside Styal prison, Wilmslow, Cheshire (nearest stations Wilmslow and Manchester Airport). In memory of all prisoners who have died as a result of prison brutality and negligence, and in celebration of the life and work of Pauline Campbell. **Called by No More Prisons, and supported by Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!, 325 Magazine, Brighton Anarchist Black Cross, Campaign Against Prison Slavery, Justice for Women, Professor Joe Sim and others.** For more details email pikieub2000@yahoo.co.uk

There will also be a solidarity demonstration organised by London FRFI at Holloway prison at 12 noon.

Titan prisons

On 5 June the Ministry of Justice published *Consultation Paper CP10/08* on Titan prisons. Those who wish to submit their views now have until 28 August. The term 'consultation' is used loosely as the government has already accepted the suggestion of the Carter Review (see FRFI 202) to build three 'Titan' prisons. These will be situated in or near to London, the West Midlands and the north west of England, and will house up to 2,500 prisoners each. The plan is to have the first Titan open by 2012. The cost of each new mega-prison is provisionally estimated at £350m at today's prices. Although every new prison which has been built since Labour came to power has been built using private finance, the construction costs of the Titans will be borne by the tax-payer, although it is not yet determined who will run them.

The 'consultation' is not meant to address anything of substance but to concentrate on providing responses to questions such as 'How should we segment the offender population... in order to best protect the public, reduce reoffending, deliver value for money and align supply and demand?'

FRFI thinks that this is too narrow a framework and suggests that our readers let the Ministry of Justice know their opinions on the plans to construct these massive prisons and increase the already staggering number of people behind bars still further.

To express your views on Titan prisons, write to Elizabeth Allen, Titan Prison Consultation, 9.07 Selborne House, 54-60 Victoria Street, London SW1E 6QW; telephone 020 7210 2677; email titan.consultation@justice.gov.uk

Government plans for longer detention without trial and secret inquests

On 8 July the House of Lords debated the Counter-Terrorism Bill, which contains the controversial proposal to extend pre-charge detention in terrorism cases to 42 days. A majority of those who spoke in the Lords' debate opposed this proposal; however the vote will not take place until October. After that, the Bill will go back to the House of Commons, where it was narrowly passed in June, for reconsideration. **NICKI JAMESON** reports.

Unlike many recent anti-terrorism laws which have been rushed through Parliament, the government does not appear to be in a massive hurry to bring in the 42 days' detention, despite arguing vociferously that it is vital for police operations. Instead it seems keener to milk the debate for public relations purposes. As barrister and baroness Helena Kennedy put it in the Lords' debate: 'This is the politics of polling, focus groups and populism where the question is asked "In which policy area do the public think we are doing well? Let's capitalise on it, give them some more tough action which will then be opposed by the other parties. We can then claim that the public are safe in our hands, not theirs."'

This is a big gamble for Labour. In 2005 its plan to extend the previous 14-day maximum pre-charge detention period to 90 days saw Tony Blair's first parliamentary defeat. After the vote, which culminated in the current 28-day law, Blair's reputation nose-dived in parliamentary circles but his stock with the tabloid



United Families and Friends annual demonstration against deaths in custody – the Counter-Terrorism Bill contains plans to hold some inquests in secret without a jury

media rose somewhat. Faced with recent local and by-election disaster, Gordon Brown is hoping to do better and be seen as both successful and 'tough'. In the run-up to the Commons vote in June, rumours abounded of Cabinet ministers meeting with Labour MPs who had threatened to vote against the proposal, offering them

incentives to stay faithful. BBC News Editor Nick Robinson wrote on his blog 'One MP is boasting that they were told that the prime minister would oppose American sanctions on Cuba. Another that they've been promised an improvement in the miners' compensation scheme...' Whatever the truth, Keith Vaz, Austin

Mitchell and a number of others who had originally opposed the proposal, voted with the government, which scraped to victory by nine votes – the precise number of MPs from Ian Paisley's rabidly loyalist Democratic Unionist Party, which threw its support behind Brown.

The vote prompted the bizarre resignation of Tory Shadow Home Secretary David Davis, who declared that 42 days' detention was a matter of principle and he would seek re-election as vindication. Why exactly Davis, who supports capital punishment and has advocated withdrawing Britain from both the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the United Nations Convention on Refugees, is so taxed by this particular extension of the police state that the Conservative and Labour Parties have been constructing for the past 30-plus years remains a mystery.

The actual 42-day detention proposal is a mess. The idea is that where a senior police officer, the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Home Secretary agree that there is a 'grave exceptional terrorist threat', Parliament will be informed and the extension permitted. In individual cases a senior judge will also be involved. Both Houses of Parliament will get to scrutinise the order within seven days and vote on it and it will be in force for 30 days. Among those who consider this unnecessary, irrelevant or unworkable are Lord Goldsmith (former Attorney General), Lord Falconer (former Lord Chancellor and mate of Blair's), Lord Paul Condon (ex-Met Police Chief) and Lady Manningham-Butler (recently retired Head of MI5). Gunning for the extension to 42 days -

and indeed for any extension or power that the police request – are Lord Peter Imbert (another ex-Met Police Chief and responsible for the fitting up of the Guildford 4 in the 1970s) and Lord Carlile, the government-appointed supposedly 'independent' reviewer of terrorism legislation.

The Counter-Terrorism Bill also contains a provision for inquests to be heard without a jury and in secret. The Secretary of State will have the power to issue a certificate stating that an inquest must be heard without a jury in front of a government-approved coroner and that some evidence can only be disclosed to a government-appointed lawyer. A certificate can be issued where the inquest will involve 'the consideration of material that should not be made public in the interests of national security, in the interests of the relationship between the United Kingdom and another country, or otherwise in the public interest.' This could potentially encompass any situation in which material disclosed might prove embarrassing to or reflect badly on the state. The family of Azelle Rodney, who was shot dead by the police in a pre-planned surveillance operation in April 2005, has already been told that his inquest will be subject to the new measures.

Whether or not the 42-day detention and secret inquest clauses survive the House of Lords vote, a further Commons vote and possible legal challenges on the basis they infringe various articles of the ECHR, the Counter-Terrorism Bill will definitely become law, making it the sixth piece of repressive 'anti-terrorism' legislation introduced by the Labour Party since 2000.

FRFI ROUNDUP

Organising against racism

Fight racism!

The Northern Conference Against Racism, hosted by Tyneside Community Action for Refugees (TCAR) in Newcastle on 21 June was a great success, with over 130 people participating in two panel discussions and ten workshops.

Speakers included Arun Kundnani from the Institute of Race Relations, Cristel Amis from Black Women's Rape Action Project, Lena Dominelli from Durham University, Charles Chinweizu from FRFI and Kudzi Amandla from TCAR. Running through all these speeches was a clear focus on the role of the British state as the chief defender of racism in Britain. As Charles Chinweizu put it: 'Immigration controls in the hands of the racist British state will always be racist, be used against the oppressed and be used to attack and divide workers. If the working class is to be united to defend its rights to decent education, to employment, healthcare and housing, then a movement must be built which is capable of defending immigrants from all racist attacks – not just from the BNP, but most importantly, from

led sessions and distributed TCAR's newsletter, *Resistance*. The conference was organised on an entirely democratic basis, involving individuals and groups from outside TCAR, who made a significant contribution. Even those left groups, like the SWP, who had opposed the conference on the basis that it 'clashed' with an anti-fascist march in London, felt compelled to relate to this vibrant event and send representatives along.

The conference demonstrated the potential for broader anti-racist organisation on Tyneside with a clear focus on the role of the British state. The challenge now will be to translate this potential into a more permanent alliance, that can strengthen and support the struggles of all those under attack from racism on Tyneside. Join us! Email: tynesidecam@yahoo.co.uk; phone: 07858 346 276. Website: www.tynesidecam.co.uk

On 14 June supporters of FRFI in London hosted a Break the Chains rally in solidarity with political prisoners of imperialism. The rally took place outside the South African embassy. Break the Chains was supported by individuals and groups, including Kurdish comrades from Halkevi demanding the release of Abdullah Ocalan from his incarceration and freedom for Kurdistan, Rock around the Blockade and the Marti-Maceo Organisation of Cubans in Britain, who are both campaigning for the Cuban Five, and the London Guantanamo Campaign. Towards the end of the rally we received news of an uprising at Campsfield Detention Centre, which highlighted the importance of such a demonstration. Protests also continue each month at Communications House, the central London reporting centre for asylum seekers. We urge you to join us.

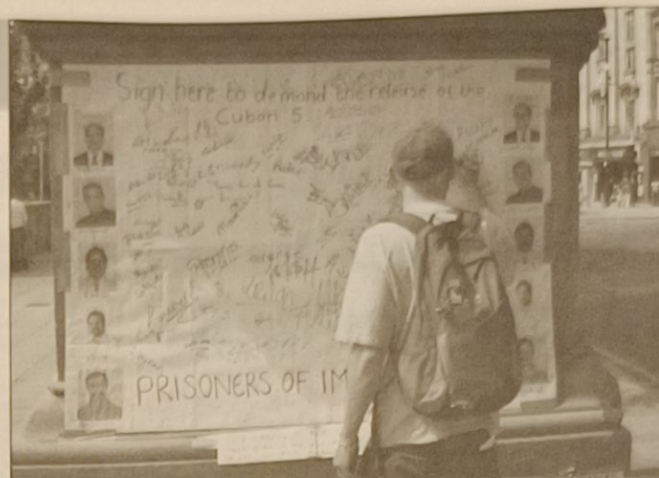
Defend democratic rights!

On 19 May a lively demonstration took place in Newcastle outside the court hearing of four FRFI activists charged

with participating in the unlicensed collection of donations at an anti-deportation street event in May 2007. The trial has now been rescheduled for 18-19 August, to allow time for the magistrate to view the five hours of CCTV footage submitted as evidence by the prosecution. Using the excuse of the few pounds collected by activists, the council is prepared to accept these mounting costs for the prosecution in order to shut down political activity on the streets. Meanwhile, FRFI comrades in Dundee continue to challenge the attack on democratic rights which took place last year when there was a violent and illegal arrest as leaflets were being distributed for RATB's successful Cuban Speaking Tour. Tayside Police have finally been forced to release the official CCTV footage which shows that the cops lied when they claimed that the comrade had lashed out with arms and legs. Nothing of the sort happened and the Defence Campaign is continuing to demand freedom of information, access to communications between the police and the Procurator Fiscal, and that the cops be held legally accountable for their repressive behaviour.

Fight imperialism!

FRFI members and supporters have been campaigning each weekend against the ongoing occupation of Iraq. These protests have taken place in London, Newcastle, Manchester, Glasgow and Dundee and have received wide support from local communities who have shown their anger against the illegal war. In London we have also continued our eight-year weekly picket of Marks & Spencer – Britain's biggest corporate sponsor of Israel. The brutal occupation of the Palestinian people must be opposed, as must all the injustices of imperialism both abroad and here in Britain. Look at our Events listings for meetings and demonstrations in your area and come and join us!



In Manchester, RATB members set up a wall-petition for the Cuba 5

EVENTS

LONDON

Every Thursday 6-8pm
Demonstration for Palestine – boycott M&S
Outside Marks & Spencer, Oxford Street (Nearest tube Marble Arch)
Special rally on Thursday 25 September to mark the 8th anniversary of the Intifada

Tuesdays 5 August and 2 September 1-2pm
Demonstrate against Labour's racist immigration laws
Communications House
Old Street, EC1 (Nearest tube Old St)

Saturday 9 August 3pm
Marx walk of London with a revolutionary guide
Meet at Piccadilly Circus underground exit number one (above ground) £5

For further information phone 020 7837 1688 or email londonfrfi@gmail.com

NEWCASTLE

Saturday 16 August 11am-2pm
Demonstration for Palestine – boycott M&S
Outside Marks & Spencer, Northumberland Street

Monday 18 August 9am
Whose streets? Protest outside the hearing of four activists charged with

unlicensed collecting at an anti-deportation street event in May 2007
Gosforth Magistrates Court, West Avenue

Every Saturday 3pm
Weekly meeting of Tyneside Community Action for Refugees
Downstairs at Amnesty Bookshop, bottom of Westgate Road. Monthly general meetings in St Thomas Church, Haymarket
tynesidecam@yahoo.co.uk
07989 879 310

We also have street actions in Newcastle every Saturday 11am-2pm and other stalls around the region:
call or email for details
Phone: 07858 346 276
Email: frfinortheast@googlemail.com
Website: www.frfinortheast.co.uk

MANCHESTER

Sunday 17 August 2pm
FRFI forum: NHS in chaos: healthcare in Labour's Britain
Cross Street chapel, off Market Street,

Contact: mrcrgfrfi@fmail.net
07519 427 093

Sunday 10 August 1pm
Prisoners Justice Day demonstration
Called by No More Prisons
at Styal Womens Prison,
Styal Road, Cheshire



FRFI speaker Charles Chinweizu at the TCAR conference

the strongest attacker – the British imperialist state. An anti-racist movement must by definition be anti-imperialist'.

TCAR members, some of whom have only recently become involved in political activity, stewarded, chaired,



RATB ROUNDUP

RATB tells Lloyds TSB, 'Hands off Cuba!'

On 16 June 2008 *The Guardian* newspaper reported that Lloyds TSB Bank has written to customers who have dealings with Cuba telling them to cut off their links or take their business elsewhere. The letter states: 'I must advise you to find alternative ways of making payments to your suppliers with Cuban connections'. This is a result of the Helms-Burton Act, a US federal law which strengthens the US blockade of Cuba by threatening sanctions against companies outside the US that trade with Cuba. RATB has responded by initiating a letter writing campaign and held a lively protest outside Lloyds TSB in Camden, London on 12 July. Contact us if you want to organise a protest outside your local Lloyds TSB branch.

Celebrating the Cuban Revolution

On 26 July, RATB celebrated 55 years since the attack on the Moncada Barracks that sparked the Cuban Revolution. A large crowd attended an all-day Cuba fiesta in Brixton, south London, enjoying Cuban food, salsa classes and live music. The event was supported by the RMT trade union, the Marti-Maceo Cultural Association of Cubans in Britain and the Movement of Ecuadorians in the UK. In Manchester and Edinburgh, city centre stalls brought Cuba's anti-imperialist

message out onto the streets. In Newcastle, RATB organised an outdoor music concert, complete with a 'hip-hopera' telling the story of the Cuban Revolution, followed by a film.

Free the Cuban 5!

On 12 September, the Cuban 5 (see page 11) will have been unjustly imprisoned in the US for 10 years. On 5 and 7 June demonstrations were held in London, Liverpool and Glasgow, to condemn the court decision to turn down their latest appeal. In Newcastle the local RATB group showed the film *Mission Against Terror* about the case of the Five, and the terrorist attacks against Cuba that they were trying to prevent. On Saturday 13 September RATB will be organising actions around the country as part of international protests to mark the tenth anniversary of the Cuban 5's incarceration.

Educational meetings

Regular RATB educational meetings and film showings in Newcastle, Manchester and London have addressed issues raised during the successful Cuba speaking tour earlier this year, not just about Cuba, but about the necessity of building socialism in Britain. In Manchester the monthly Cine Revolucion film club is being run by new RATB members. In London monthly educational meetings, are also led by new members. These have included discussions on the health and education systems in Cuba, which sparked serious analysis of the demise of the British welfare state.

There is now an organising group for RATB in London, open to anyone who wants to be active in defending socialist Cuba. If you would like to take part or set up a branch of RATB where you live please contact us.



Lots of fun at the 26 July Cuba Fiesta

EVENTS

LONDON

RATB monthly educational and campaign meeting
Tuesday 12 August 7-9.30pm
Upstairs at Calthorpe Arms,,
Grays Inn Road WC1

Tuesday 9 September
Ring to confirm time and venue

Reading material from RATB pamphlet, *Revolutionary Cuba, the streets are ours*
Order your copy for £3 (cheque or postal order to Rock around the Blockade) and send to BM RATB, London WC1N 3XX

Saturday 13 September 12-3pm
Rally to demand immediate release of the Cuban 5, political prisoners in US gaols on the tenth anniversary of their incarceration
North pavement of Trafalgar Square

For further information phone 020 7837 1688 or email office@ratb.org.uk

MANCHESTER

Sunday 24 August 2pm
Film showing of *Mission against Terror*
Cross Street chapel, off Market Street

Saturday 13 September 12pm
Free the Cuban 5!
Defend socialist Cuba!
Piccadilly Gardens

Manchester RATB: manc@ratb.org.uk
07940 988 203

DURHAM

Saturday 16 August 12-3pm
Hungry for Change! Street action on the food and fuel crisis and biofuels
Framwellgate Bridge, bottom of Silver Street

NEWCASTLE

Friday 27 September 7pm
Public forum with Cuban permaculturalist Roberto, featured in the film *The power of community: how Cuba survived peak oil*
Star and Shadow Cinema, Stepney Bank, Byker Bridge
Organised by North East Permaculture Network, supported by RATB.

DUNDEE

Thursday 25 September 7-9pm
The Revolution will not be televised – documentary account of the failed US backed coup against the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela in 2002
Room G3
Dundee University Tower,
Perth Road

Saturdays 12.30-2.30
Street stalls
Murraygate

CHOOSE THE RCG

If you believe that the treachery of the opportunist British labour and trade union movement must be challenged, then there is no alternative – **Join the RCG!**

I would like to join/receive more information about the RCG ☐

I would like to join an FRFI Readers & Supporters Group ☐

Name _____

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website: www.revolutionarycommunist.org

LETTERS

The POA and the working class

I attended the May Day rally in Newcastle's Exhibition Park this year, but was unaware of the FRFI banner denouncing the Prison Officers Association or the subsequent reaction of the chairman of the May Day Committee. Until, that is, I read the article in FRFI number 203. My concern is that FRFI are being rather naive in that it is not possible to pick and choose which sections of the working class can or cannot be supported. Prison officers undoubtedly directly support the state and are in the contradictory position of having to supervise the incarceration of fellow workers. But such contradiction is in the very nature of capitalism and despite its need for gaolers the capitalist state wishes to pay them as little as possible thus fostering a working class reaction, a trade union response.

As a teacher I am implicated in the transmission of the capitalist ideology and inculcating the skills and discipline required for the future functioning of the system. If I am accused by a student of some impropriety then my union, the NUT, will support me. Does this place me and my colleagues beyond the pale? Should I renounce my adherence to the socialist cause and promulgate a more (C)onservative position in keeping with the actuality of my job?

When the London dockers marched in enthusiastic support of Enoch Powell following his 'rivers of blood speech' I'm sure FRFI, had it been around then, would have opposed them. I doubt, though, that banners calling dockers enemies of the working class would have been publicly displayed. The ideological infiltration into the working class is profound and those ideas need to be confronted and countered. However, this will not be achieved by selective ostracism. While there are no doubt large numbers jailed who should not be, that is not the fault of the POA. Would FRFI erect a similar banner condemning Cuban prison officers? They may well serve a different cause, but I suspect they are similar characters.

Brutality is a feature of capitalism: after all criminals can be brutal towards their victims who are usually fellow members of the working class and to each other. There will be a need for Laval controls under socialism and the means to enforce them. The FRFI are surely not anarchists who hold a seemingly simplistic view that merely abolishing capitalism will realise universal virtue? Radical looking sloganeering will do nothing to further the socialist cause, only engaging with the whole disparate class can, even those we are not so comfortable

with. After all, the Bolsheviks actively campaigned amongst soldiers to join the cause rather than anathematise them as brutal agents of the Tsar.

DAVE ALTON
Newcastle

FRFI would like to thank Dave Alton for his letter. At a time when there is relatively little political struggle taking place in Britain, it is not surprising that people on the left should examine any sign of militancy to see how the immediate demands being made by one section relate to the wider interests of the working class as a whole.

Dave compares the British POA in 2008 with Russian soldiers at the time of the Russian Revolution. The two are difficult to compare as Britain is not in a revolutionary situation, however, if we follow the logic for a while we see that the Bolsheviks created Soviets of soldiers with the precise aim of fomenting dissent and getting the soldiers to turn their guns against the state, instead of against the Revolution. The focus of their political work among the army was not to defend the soldiers' own narrow interests while shoring up the status quo. In contrast, those on the British left today who are so keen to support the POA against the government are not putting any revolutionary demands on the union but slavishly following its economic agenda.

So, what should socialists ask of

the Prison Officers' Association? It is certainly true that the union has tried to reposition itself over the past 20 years and shake off its erstwhile brutal, racist image. But this has to date been packaging, rather than substance. If the POA has any claim to be progressive, it must resolutely stand up for the human rights of prisoners. John McDonnell has issued a ten-point programme of demands for the Labour Party – here are FRFI's five for the POA.

1. **Campaign against imprisoning children, not for more weaponry to inflict injury on imprisoned children.** The POA correctly criticised the Prison Service's authorisation of the use of PAVA, an immobilising gas, on young protesting prisoners in June 2007, but its members did not refuse to use the gas and the POA exploited the occasion to demand staff in prisons holding children be issued with extendable batons.

2. **Stop attacking asylum seekers.** The routine response to protests in immigration detention centres is to call in 'Tornado teams' of riot-clad prison officers to break up the protests. The POA claims to be against racism so it should refuse to allow its members to attack detainees who are demonstrating against Britain's racist immigration laws and practices.

3. **Concentrate press statements on attacking the government, not prisoners.** Left supporters of the POA claim the union's members and prisoners have a shared interest in improving prison

conditions. So the union should instruct its officials to stop issuing scaremongering press statements opposing government measures to relieve overcrowding by moving prisoners to less restrictive regimes and telling journalists that prisons are so cushy that no-one would want to escape.

4. **Campaign for less imprisonment, not more.** Although the POA is a member of the Criminal Justice Alliance, which campaigns against prison overcrowding, its approach is in contrast with that of other members, who campaign for less use of custody. When the government issued its consultation document on Titar prisons, POA National Chairman Colin Moses said 'New prisons are welcome, but old established prisons that deliver must not be closed.'

5. **Work to rule in the interests of prisoners!** Faced with the legal restrictions on prison officers going on strike, POA branches frequently 'work to rule'. This inevitably means prisoners not getting out of their cells for association, exercise or education, life sentence prisoners not getting 'escorted town visits' and a general reduction in the few facilities prisoners can usually rely on. A progressive POA would turn this on its head and work to rule by not giving out disciplinary charges and behaviour warnings, refusing to conduct unnecessary searches, not writing up 'security reports', not censoring mail, listening into phonecalls or banning visitors.

Nicki Jameson

The RCG and the unions

Today I received the latest FRFI and I am very impressed with all the articles.

I was appalled that supporters of the capitalist state in the Labour Party and the Communist Party of Britain wished to ban from May Day those who opposed the servile role of prison guards in the capitalist state's system of punitive and brutal abuse in the prison system.

However, in the column headed 'Choose the RCG' (p 15) there is this over-reaction, which seems to be sectarian against the labour and trade union movement: 'If you believe that the treachery of the opportunist British labour and trade union movement must be challenged then there is no alternative – join the RCG!'

Is the RCG against the labour and trade union movement in which working class activists like railway workers, coal miners and others organise? Or is the RCG against bureaucratic officials who mis-represent or fail to represent working class interests? Labour bureaucrats and working class

activists in the trade unions and labour movement are not the same thing!

Wouldn't it be better to say we are against capitalism and in favour of working class movement that is not imposed on by bureaucratic, capitalist-serving officials and instead is led in a socialist way?

MARTYN STEVENS
South London

Reply

There is a problem in the way Martyn Stevens poses the question: if the reactionary or opportunist behaviour of the trade union and labour movement is the result of 'capitalist serving officials' why haven't working class activists been able to sweep them away long ago? After all, there are not that many such functionaries compared to the number of trade union members! The fact is that opportunism extends far beyond a handful of trade union bureaucrats:

imperialism has created a much broader layer of more affluent workers determined to protect their privileged conditions than existed say in Lenin's time. Even when they sound radical, their representatives take a reactionary standpoint: this explains why the likes of the Communist Party of Britain and most of the rest of the left support the POA.

We support trade union actions when they defend working class interests and we oppose the anti-trade union laws. However, we argue that 'a new union movement will have to break the shackles of the current trade union laws. It will therefore have to confront the official trade union movement which hasn't the slightest intention of doing anything which might threaten its assets or its income... It will be a movement of those who are now without employment and trade union rights.' (FRFI 132, August/September 1996). A more recent article which the comrade could read concludes that 'At each and every stage the unions have protected Labour and the interests of British imperialism because they have a real stake in the system, not because of their bureaucracy.' (FRFI 193, October/November 2006)

Robert Clough

Justice for Binyam Mohamed

British resident Binyam Mohamed has spent four years incarcerated in the Guantanamo concentration camp and now faces trial at one of the US's farcical 'Military Commissions' where a confession extracted under torture can be used against him. Mohamed was arrested in Pakistan in 2002, where an M15 officer interviewed him for three hours and told him he was being sent to an Arab country where he would be tortured. He was flown to Morocco and suffered 18 months of horrific abuse including having his penis repeatedly slashed with a scalpel. Eventually he signed a statement agreeing that he had met Osama Bin Laden several times. He was then flown to the CIA's 'Dark Prison' in Afghanistan and tortured again before being sent to Guantanamo, where he has been subjected to solitary confinement, constant loud music and extremes of heat and cold. His lawyers say he is in a state of severe depression and post-traumatic stress and are concerned for his sanity.

British agencies have evidence that Mohamed was tortured but have told his lawyers that they are under no obligation to hand it over. As even his US-appointed military counsel Lieutenant-Colonel Yvonne Bradley admitted: 'I have been charged with defending Mr Mohamed to the best of my ability. I cannot pretend that the military commissions are fair, but how can I possibly hope to help Mr Mohamed if his own government leaves him to his fate?' (*The Times*, 7 May 2008)

On 10 June 2008 the British campaigning organisation Reprieve published *Human cargo: Binyam Mohamed and the rendition frequent flier programme*, a full account of his appalling treatment and British collusion with it. For more details and to join the campaign for justice for Binyam Mohamed, go to www.reprieve.org.uk

CAT WIENER
South London

Fragrant waters

I am a reader of *Socialist Standard* and supporter of the Socialist Party of Great Britain and companion parties in the World Socialism Movement.

I note with interest a comment in the Cuba News item 'SWP

Poison' (FRFI 203, page 12), where Trevor Rayne makes the comment that 'The US Navy is resurrecting its fourth fleet in the Caribbean with the intention of threatening... Bolivia.'

Perhaps your correspondent is unaware of the geographical situation of Bolivia or perhaps he is too young to recall the debut album of Martin Stephenson &

The Daintees, whose perspicacious comment on that landlocked country, moistened only by the fragrant waters of Lake Titicaca, was the blindingly obvious statement 'You can't take a boat to Bolivia'.

IAN CUSACK
Newcastle

www.worldsocialism.org

Ian

My rock era somewhat pre-dates County Durham's finest: 'Things are not what they seem', (Jagger, Richards and Faithfull, 1971). You can't take a boat to Afghanistan, but that has not stopped the US Seventh Fleet, parked in the Indian Ocean, from raining bombs and missiles on the country. When the Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB) was formed in 1902 you certainly could take a boat to Bolivia, for then it still formally had a coastline. However, unlike the SPGB, times change. Bolivia has lost its coast and nautical, aeronautical and rocket science have progressed to bring us aircraft carriers, submarines and the like.

Trevor Rayne

Labour tools up for new wars

On 3 July, in Govan, one of the poorest areas of Glasgow, Defence Secretary Des Browne announced a £4bn order for two gargantuan aircraft carriers, the bulk of the work to be done at Govan and Rosyth. The Queen Elizabeth and the Prince of Wales will be twice the size of the Invincible class carriers they replace, with a range of 10,000 miles, enabling them to strike almost anywhere in the world from British ports.

The new ships will have a lifespan of up to 50 years. The British state is clearly gearing up for another century of war, plunder and brutality. Already, the US and Britain are building up naval forces in the Persian Gulf, ready for a strike against Iran.

Rosyth's Labour MSP, John Park, a former union leader at the dockyard, told *The Courier*, 'I'm really excited by this news. These

contracts have guaranteed the future of the dockyard and will bring thousands of jobs to Scotland'. Meanwhile, Jamie Webster, the trade union convenor at Govan described the contracts as, 'a dream come true'. Leading members of the Scottish National Party and the Liberal Democrats joined the chorus of approval.

In late July, one of Britain's two serving aircraft carriers, the *Ark Royal*, was involved in joint anti-submarine exercises with the US Navy in the North Atlantic, with forces from Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Peru playing the part of Iranian or Chinese submarines. It's little mystery what the British state has planned for its two new ships.

PADDY FORBES
Scotland

Close Campsfield and all immigration prisons!



Kurdish demonstrators on FRFI Break the Chains event, 14 June 2008

On 14 June as FRFI supporters were gathered in Trafalgar Square for the Break the Chains rally in support of political prisoners and detainees around the world (see page 14), we received news from a Kurdish comrade, who had just left the event, that immigration detainees in Campsfield in Oxfordshire were staging a protest and that there was a fire in the centre. We managed to speak to a Kurdish detainee inside the detention centre, who told us that a small group of men had begun a protest over conditions and that others of many different nationalities had quickly joined in. **NICKI JAMESON** reports.

The authorities responded to the protest by sending in riot-clad prison officers. A BBC report covered up the reality, saying they were there to 'escort detainees back to their rooms' and that 'detainees were held in an exercise yard to calm down'.

This protest follows others at Campsfield in March, August and December 2007. Exactly two years before the latest protest 140 detainees went on hunger strike following the take-over of the centre by US company GEO (Global Expertise on Outsourcing) from previous private contractors GSL and the violent removal of a Somali detainee who had gone onto the roof of the centre.

Five days after the protest seven detainees escaped. Again this is just the latest in a history of escapes from Campsfield, with 26 prisoners going on the run in August 2007.

GEO Group UK is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the GEO Group Inc, which describes itself as 'an industry leader in the international privatised corrections market'. It was founded by George C Zoley, former director of the Wackenhut Corporation, and is planning for 'substantial growth in Australia, South Africa, the United Kingdom and other areas in Europe for corrections and immigration services'. It opened a UK office in 2004 in order to 'vigorously pursue' a slice of

'the second largest private correctional market in the world'.

On 24 June FRFI supporters attended an inspiring meeting organised by No Borders entitled 'Resistance in Detention' addressed by former detainees who have been involved in militant and successful hunger strikes, protests and uprisings at Yarl's Wood, Campsfield, Colnbrook and Harmondsworth Immigration Removal Centres over the past three years. There is no doubt that as long as the British government continues to criminalise and imprison asylum seekers and immigrants there will be resistance from inside the detention centres. It is our job to support that resistance from outside.

Angel Group profits from asylum seekers

Shelter is a basic necessity for survival, yet in Britain where profit ranks above the needs of the majority, many people are homeless or housed in terrible conditions.

In 1999 the British Labour government introduced a system to disperse and house asylum seekers across the country. It had not yet brought in sufficient draconian anti-immigration provisions to prevent the entrance of and easily deport as many asylum seekers as it wished and was still bound by laws against leaving people homeless and destitute. It therefore had to institute some method of providing minimum housing and support at the least cost. The dispersal system was designed to isolate and discourage asylum seekers, with the added bonus for the racist state of ensuring that local people in poor housing would still consider that the provision of any housing, no matter how sub-standard, to asylum seekers, was a slap in the face to them, and instead of blaming the state, would blame the immigrants.

The Home Office's National Asylum Support Service (NASS) then contracted with local councils and private companies to provide housing for asylum seekers. This proved to be a massive business opportunity for one particular company called Angel Group.

Angel started housing refugees in Kent in 1999 and is now the biggest

asylum seeker landlord in Britain; by the end of 2003 it was a multi-million pound business, making its owner, Julia Davey, Britain's 15th richest woman, paying herself a salary of £458,000 and collecting nearly £1m in dividends.

In 1999 Angel Group bought an old nurses' home in Newcastle, calling it Angel Heights. Its first occupants were Iraqi and Iranian asylum seekers who soon began to protest over poor conditions, leading to the arrest and imprisonment of their spokesmen. In its first two years Angel Heights generated £700,000 profit. With a five-year contract with NASS amounting to £20m a year, Angel Group started acquiring and renting properties across Yorkshire and the north east. At its busiest the company was providing more than 3,600 bed spaces to NASS, earning a fee of £102 a week for each space.

Angel Group's properties are often overcrowded, with multiple single-parent families in the same house, without locks on each family's part of the house, and adults, some of whom are strangers, together in the same room. Tenants have reported being kept for months without gas and electricity and waiting weeks for repairs. Angel Group employees routinely let themselves into people's homes without any notice, inspect belongings and threaten to throw people out of their

accommodation for complaining about the conditions. Areas of Scotswood in Newcastle that have been boarded up for years, were scheduled for demolition and are infested with rats and cockroaches, have been opened up by Angel Group to house asylum seekers.

Angel Group claims to provide 'high quality accommodation and support services to vulnerable people', yet because it is a private company its priority is to make a profit. With fewer council homes being built every year and more and more unaffordable private homes taking their place, the interests of the working class in Britain have blatantly been written off by the state in favour of those of big business and a minority of rich people. This clearly shows us who our real enemy is and how it is not immigrants who are to blame for housing shortages.

Tyneside Community Action for Refugees and other groups have been holding demonstrations against Angel Group. In Newcastle there have also been campaigns to save people's homes from demolition to make way for luxury river front apartments and groups are organising to demand better living standards in tower blocks. It is only when we realise these struggles are the same that we will be able to effect any kind of real change.

Mark Tzemeti

EU Return Directive: jackboot Europe



Immigration detainees in Vincennes, France

On 18 June the European Parliament voted to ratify the 'Return Directive', a viciously racist piece of legislation aimed at cleansing Europe of so-called 'illegal' migrants from Africa, Asia and Latin America. This new directive will allow European states to:

- extend the maximum period of detention for immigrants who have 'resided irregularly in European territory' (and who have committed no crime) for up to 18 months prior to banning them from re-entering any part of the EU for up to five years;
- hold immigrants in prisons in the absence of enough detention centres;
- allow the detention and deportation of all undocumented migrants including unaccompanied minors and pregnant women;
- expel unaccompanied minors and other migrants to a country where they have neither family nor legal support.

In debating the Directive, the standing provision that children, the elderly, pregnant women, those with independent evidence of torture and those with serious mental or physical disabilities should generally not be detained was explicitly overridden.

The Directive will enshrine detention and deportation as the routine tools of immigration control throughout Europe as they already are in Britain – which has opted out of the Directive, since its existing legislation is even more draconian. Migrants from Latin America in particular have

been organising protests against a threatened new wave of repression. Latin American leaders have spoken out harshly against the new law, with Rafael Correa of Ecuador calling it a 'hate directive', threatening to suspend talks between the EU and the Andean Community if it is implemented. Hugo Chavez of Venezuela has condemned the EU for 'legalising barbarism' and threatened to disrupt oil supplies to Europe.

This Directive follows in the wake of a number of other racist measures being implemented by the EU, including a proposal by Spain that airlines and shipping lines should 'collect and forward data on all passengers at the time of boarding to law enforcement agencies at the destination country' and inform authorities of anyone not travelling on the date shown on their return ticket – a wholesale surveillance of everyone's movements within Europe. In March, the EU had already agreed to give US authorities direct access to all passenger data. On 10 July, the EU passed a resolution permitting the future fingerprinting of children as young as ten (they had originally wanted six) for biometric identification. In Italy, Berlusconi's ultra-right government has passed a law to fingerprint all Roma and legally discriminate against them on the basis that 'they are all thieves'. This incipient fascism that is creeping through Europe must be opposed.

Cat Wiener

Bully of Gleneagles to run UK Border Agency Inspectorate

Former Chief Constable of Tayside Police John Vine CBE has been appointed head of the Inspectorate of the UK Border Agency. Placed there in recognition for his services to the British ruling class, he recently awarded himself a performance bonus of £17,000 on his final salary of £123,000 at a Police Board meeting, where compliant councillors took just 10 seconds to vote to exclude the press and public from any open scrutiny of his record. Vine's record does, however, need serious examination to forewarn us all of his likely performance in his new post.

In June the BBC website revealed that Vine's force had received 588 complaints between January 2007

and May 2008. This included 87 accusations of assault, 19 of excessive force and 49 of harassment or oppressive conduct, as well as 32 complaints of unlawful arrest or detention. Vine earned a reputation as the Bully of Gleneagles from 2005, when he deployed a Chinook military helicopter against peaceful anti-G8 demonstrators, organised ID cards for eight-year-olds and illegally detained citizens on the highway. He followed this by sanctioning the use of Special Branch spies against Muslim students and pupils in Dundee. Of course as a top cop he had his sense of humour and sensitivities – what about that suicide bomber joke to the Perth Bar Association?

Vine now goes on to inspect a corrupt, brutal and racist agency which of late distinguished itself by excluding the father of Baha Mousa when he tried to enter this country for an official meeting with the Ministry of Defence. Baha Mousa was the Iraqi civilian beaten to death by British soldiers in a Basra detention camp. Vine has clearly developed the skills and outlook needed to supervise this government force and the UK Border Agency should have no problem with a man of this background – a safe and loyal pair of hands to oversee the dirty work of harassing and attacking refugees and their supporters.

Michael MacGregor