

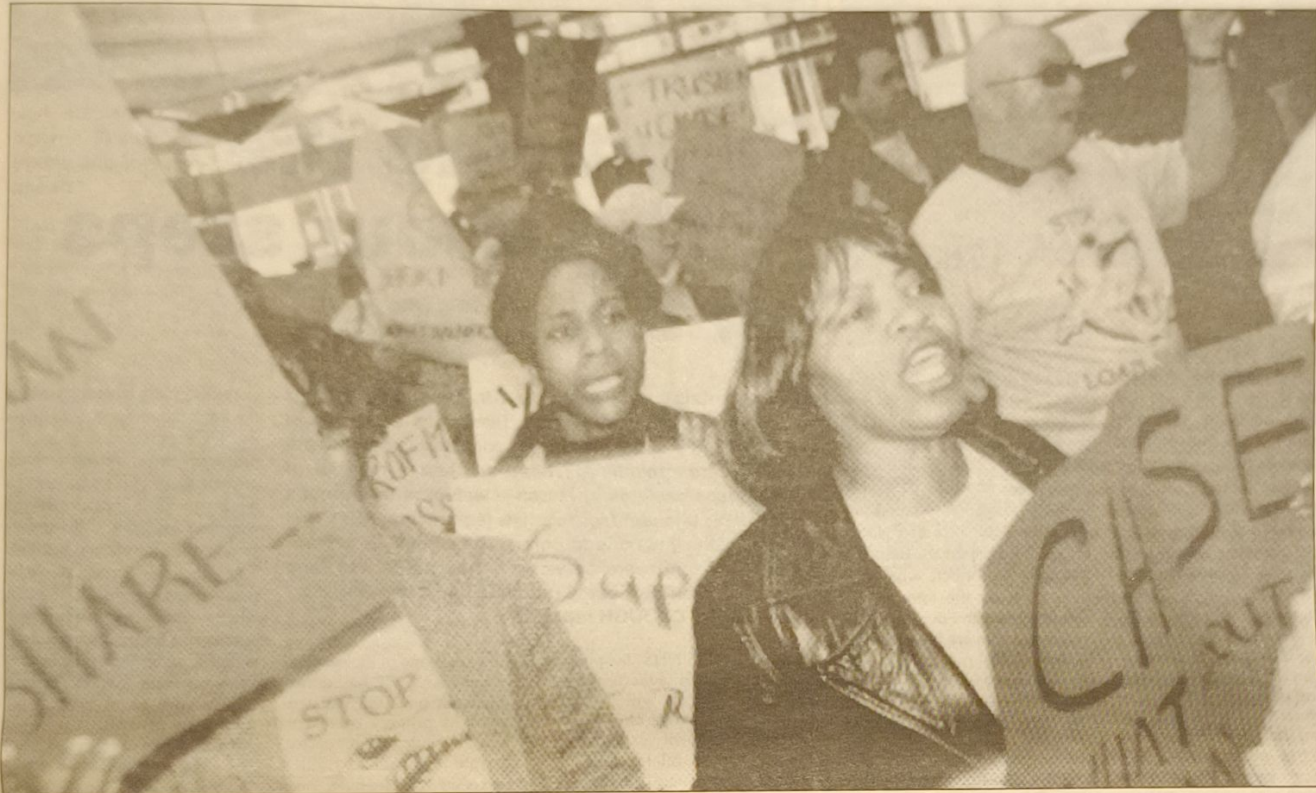
FIGHT RACISM! FIGHT IMPERIALISM!

Revolutionary Communist Group

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Bear Stearns offices, Manhattan: homeowners demonstrate against the Federal Reserve Bank guarantee

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GLOBAL ECONOMIC CRISIS BACK FROM THE ABYSS

In mid-March, by the narrowest of squeaks, the US Federal Reserve Bank managed to stop the financial system from toppling over the edge and into the abyss. Around the world, stock exchanges, which had been in decline, suddenly bounced back up. Many financial commentators claimed that a floor had been hit from which they could only move back up. First appearances are deceptive, however, and it is clear that the credit crisis is far from over. The measures taken by the US, British and European central banks, are just buying time. The deeper underlying problems with capitalism particularly in the US and Britain, remain; the write downs are far from over and the cancer has spread well beyond its origins in the mortgage market. Newly proposed regulation is just empty political posturing.

Fed changes muck into brass

What has the Federal Reserve done and why? Already last year, the credit crisis brought with it a crisis of liquidity: risky sub-prime mortgage-backed securities were no longer acceptable collateral against loans. Banks, uncertain of getting their money back, began to stop lending to each other. If banks do not lend to each other, capital ceases to circulate and if capital stops circulating, it stops making profits. Since profit-making is the whole point of capitalist economies, liquidity

crises risk triggering much deeper economic crises, dragging production to a halt. Instead of lending to other banks and customers, funds were increasingly diverted into purchase of 'Treasuries' (US government-backed Treasury securities), the safest type of security. This is what is meant by a 'flight to quality'.

The Fed has tried to address this by a series of increasingly desperate measures. In concert with other central banks, the Fed introduced what is known in the US as the Term Auction Facility (TAF). The TAF allowed the

Fed to make short-term loans against much riskier assets than usual, including the mortgage-backed securities which triggered the credit crisis. The risky mortgage-backed muck would be recycled into liquid funds to free up lending.

However, the various rate cuts failed to prevent continued uncertainty over credit risks and liquidity problems increased. The 'flight to quality' continued and can be measured by the extent of the unsatisfied demand for Treasuries. By the week of 5 March, 'Fails' – the number of Treasuries purchasers had requested but failed to receive and how many dealers were asked to deliver but didn't – had grown to \$1,795bn, way up from just \$87bn on 20 February, and far above the \$374bn average for 2007 (Federal Reserve Bank of New York, Primary Dealer Statistics). More had to be done if the system was not to grind to a halt.

On 7 March, the Fed announced that it would be making a further \$100bn available through the TAF. In addition, it would undertake \$100bn of 'Repurchase Agreements' – 'repos'. With a repo, money is exchanged for securities with an agreement to repurchase it later – the Fed would purchase securities from banks and the banks would repurchase them up to a month later. This appar-

ently pointless exercise increases liquidity by providing money in exchange for less liquid securities. Further, the Fed increased the amount of Treasuries it would auction to \$40bn.

On 11 March, the Fed announced the Term Securities Lending Facility (TSLF). The TSLF, a temporary measure for six months, allows the Fed to lend up to a total of \$200bn of Treasuries to 'Primary Dealers' – the big investment banks like Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley – in exchange for far riskier assets. The TSLF would then allow the primary dealers to supply Treasuries to meet this demand in exchange for money which they could lend.

Finally, the US Treasury directed Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the government-chartered companies which purchase mortgages, and which guarantee some 40% of US home loans, to increase their portfolio, putting more liquidity into the system and taking more muck off the hands of the private banks.

Although the Fed had now opened the taps to allow \$400bn to flow into the system – putting half of its entire assets of some \$800bn on the line – this was not enough. On 14 March, within 24 hours, investment bank Bear Stearns lost nearly half its market value. JP Morgan, a rival invest-

ment bank, backed by the Fed, announced it was making a loan of unspecified size to Bear. By Monday, this had turned into outright purchase, backed by the Fed up to \$30bn of losses, for \$2 per share – a total of \$240m, when even its office building is valued at \$1.1bn! Howls from stockholders and threats of lawsuits forced JP Morgan to increase the 'offer' to \$10 per share. This extraordinary and unprecedented shotgun marriage, combined with a further cut in Fed rates by a total of 1%, finally encouraged the stock market to move up.

But the credit problems remain: all that has happened is that the Fed and the other central banks have taken on the risk – temporarily. The securities they have taken on are still of dubious worth and will be returned to the banks in the next few months. The very worst of the sub-prime backed securities remain. Although there have been almost \$200bn in write downs since this crisis began, the sub-prime crisis which triggered it has not run its course. The Fed has bought time – but has spent a lot of its ammunition fighting the crisis: half its reserves are committed and interest rates are now down to 2½%.

At the root of the credit crisis is the underlying crisis of profitability. This

continued on page 5

Welcome...

Condemn me, it does not matter, history will absolve me.
Fidel Castro

As Fidel Castro declined nomination for the Council of State the world's media turned its scrutiny on Cuba. Journalists asked: What would happen now Fidel was no longer at the helm? Would the transition to a new leadership bring about crisis? Was this indeed the beginning of the end of socialism in Cuba? Such questions were answered by the calmness of the Cuban people themselves: the revolution is here to stay, socialism would continue to be built and developed.

This resounding and defiant message was brought to Britain by three Cubans – Orlando Borrego, Jesus Garcia and Yoselin Rufin, who answered numerous questions about the Cuban revolution during the hugely successful Cuba: Socialism into the 21st Century Speaking Tour (see pp7-10). As the British press and large sections of the so called 'left' denounced the leadership of Fidel and told lies about the Cuban revolution (see p10), the Speaking Tour spread the truth about the gains of the revolution and the necessity of building socialism here in Britain.

Britain is an imperialist country that is destroying the world and people's lives in search of ever greater profit. Unlike in Cuba, where democracy comes from the mass of the people, here it is held in the hands of the few – the ruling class who control the political and economic system. While the Speaking Tour highlighted Cuba's internationalist spirit in its support of the poor through health and education programmes, it also contrasted this internationalism with the actions of imperialist governments that rampage around the world:

In Palestine the people of Gaza are continuing to fight against the brutal onslaught of the imperialist backed regime of Israel (see p4) and in Latin America Colombia's President Uribe receives tacit support from Washington for Colombia's provocations against



Fidel and Raul Castro

Ecuador and Venezuela. Such moves from imperialism have only gone so far as to strengthen solidarity between the revolutionary movements that are sweeping across the continent (see p11).

In Iraq the imperialist powers are resorting to the indiscriminate bombing and murder of the people. Unwilling to sacrifice their own troops in Basra, the occupation armies are arming and directing the security forces of the puppet government in an attempt to crush the resistance of the people. And in Afghanistan, the British and US armies are losing their tentative hold on the country and are calling for other imperialist nations to do more (see p6).

The global economy teeters on the brink of serious crisis as the financial system begins to unravel (see pp1, 3, and 5). In Britain the economic crisis means that the needs of the people are being squeezed further by the need for profit. We are seeing that even the fundamentals of the welfare state such as education and health are being 'sold' on the market leaving the working class with restricted provision (see p2 and 3). Furthermore, the state is attacking and marginalising the poorest sections of the working class by threatening cuts to housing and welfare benefits (see p4).

This attack on the working class has its sharpest expression in the persecution of asy-

lum seekers and those who have fled imperialist destruction of their home countries to seek a living here. Many asylum seekers are being denied the most basic and important health treatment (see p16) while others have been locked up, forced to fight for a semblance of justice as best as they can through the British legal system, such as the case of the Harmondsworth Four (see p16). The racial fires are being stoked further by the ruling class with the white working class being told that their enemies are migrants from other countries (see p12). Divide and rule, whether it be here or in Iraq, is how the few have managed to always stay on top.

Many people, including much of the US working class, are being swept up by the Democratic presidential campaign circus between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama (see p5). But despite the talk of change there is no difference in the class interest of such candidates, regardless of their gender, race or rhetoric. Ultimately there can be no parliamentary path to socialism, only a revolutionary path. This is what Cuba has demonstrated and this was the clear message that came out of the Speaking Tour. Now is the time to start building a revolutionary movement in this country. Read these pages, get educated and get active in the urgent work that we are doing (see p14).



Privatising the NHS: Labour steps up the pace

'NHS hospitals can advertise to attract patients'. 'Anger at plan for private surgeries'. 'Pledge to battle Virgin NHS plan'. 'NHS chief reaffirms commitment to private primary care providers'. These are just a handful of newspaper headlines in March – welcome to Labour's *Sicko* NHS. Michael Moore's film (see review FRFI 199) is a warning of what is to come. The wholesale privatisation of health care services is now underway, and with it will inevitably come rationing and a two-tier service. ROBERT CLOUGH reports.

From 1 April, NHS hospitals will be able to advertise for patients – but so will private hospitals as 'patient choice' of hospital treatment extends to include any hospital, public or private, that meets Department of Health standards on quality and price. Meanwhile a new appeals process is being set up to ensure that all health care providers – including private firms – have an equal chance of getting NHS contracts. The move reflects instructions to Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) that they must purchase services such as diagnostic tests and minor operations 'from the providers who are best placed to deliver' and that any new or 'significantly changed' service of any size must be put out to tender. The appeals panel will of course have 'private sector expertise' – in other words, private sector representation.

Following Derbyshire PCT's decision in 2006 to hand over the running of two GP practices to US health giant UnitedHealth UK, proposals to sell off the running of health care facilities to the private sector are accelerating:

- Camden PCT has also agreed to transfer the running of three GP practices to UnitedHealth UK. Parent UnitedHealth Group is the largest and most profitable health insurance company in the US, insuring over 70 million people;
- In line with government requirements, Camden PCT additionally plans to tender for the supply of out-of-hours GP services when the contract with the present provider, not-for-profit Camidoc, ends on 1 April. Camidoc also supplies this service to four other nearby PCTs;
- Tower Hamlets PCT has agreed to Atos Healthcare taking over the large St Paul practice in the east end of London. Atos is a management and computer consultancy.
- Sheffield PCT wants to establish a large private medical practice in the city; Virgin

Healthcare is one of the bidders.

- Birmingham PCT has drawn up plans to pass the management of its primary care services to the 'independent sector' – private companies. Bidders are expected to include, once again, Virgin Healthcare;
- Kingston hospital is proposing to hand over its elective surgery centre, opened last autumn, to private sector management and is completing the tendering process.

Virgin Healthcare, just set up last year, is holding presentations all over the country in an effort to gain its first NHS contracts, popping up for instance in Oxford, Sheffield and Liverpool. It believes that by 2050 the market for private health care will be worth the same as the NHS, and not surprisingly wants a slice of the action.

In an effort to soften up GPs for privatisation the government has forced them to agree to work in the evenings and at weekends even if it means closing during other times of the working week. This would be a direct attack on the needs of the elderly and those unable to work. As it is, there is no identifiable benefit to patients since those professionals who work alongside GPs will not be available outside normal working hours. In reality it is an attempt to make salaried work more attractive to new GPs so that private companies can recruit them. To make it even easier for the private sector, the Department of Health plans to change regulations to allow untrained GPs to work in 113 new surgeries being set up under the Equitable Access in Primary Medical Care programme. The only restriction is that one of the GPs in these surgeries be fully trained. Perhaps UnitedHealth knew of this change when it bid for the Camden practices – it was reputed to be proposing to charge the PCT £70 per patient as opposed to the £100 bid by neighbouring practices.

Whilst many have focused on the implication for service quality if GP practices are run for profit, private companies which provide these PCTs will have to be involved in practice-based commissioning, a little-understood policy introduced in 2004. Since their universal establishment five years ago, PCTs have taken over responsibility for purchasing hospital services on behalf of their local population. With Payment by Results this now works on a contractual basis – an essential step if private providers are to be induced to offer hospital services. Practice-based commissioning involves GP practices in the purchase of hospital services by giving them an indicative budget. The PCT continues to manage the money, but the decisions about what hospital care is purchased, and where, is nominally passed into the hands of GPs, usually organised into consortia. Commissioning a patient-led NHS, published in 2005, accelerated the implementation of practice-based commissioning and demanded the involvement of all GP practices by the end of 2006.

As private companies start to take over GP practices so they will have a direct involvement in deciding how and where money is to be spent on hospital care. Furthermore, they will be represented on PCT Boards and Professional Executive Committees. Labour's plan is to franchise those primary care services for which PCTs presently have responsibility – district nursing, health visiting and so on – leaving PCTs to just do commissioning. A step in this direction is a pilot scheme involving the construction of eight privately-run polyclinics. Now PCTs have received instructions to establish one polyclinic each, regardless of need. There is no doubt that the buildings and the services within them will in future be run by private companies.

Alongside this the NHS has drawn up a list of 14 approved companies to bid for contracts to 'help' PCTs spend the £75 billion they have for commissioning health care. The list of course includes UnitedHealth, which *Sicko* featured prominently for both denying health insurance and then denying payments to those who were insured. The fight against privatisation is on.

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FRFI Fund Drive

The success of the Rock around the Blockade Speaking Tour proves that there is a new mood, among young people in particular, who have a desire to engage critically with the world, to find out more about socialism and the struggles taking place in the rest of the world. Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism! will meet the challenge of being part of a movement that reflects this thirst for change. We need to keep Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism! going and expand its influence to reach new regions, cities and towns. For that we need money to develop our infrastructure. We appeal to you, our readers, to help us with your donations. You know how vital FRFI is for building a new socialist anti-imperialist movement; please send us your donations large and small.

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A hole in my budget

Faced with economic turmoil in the international credit markets and no General Election planned for over a year, Alistair Darling's first Budget was a subdued occasion with little offered but the vacuous reassurance that Britain is the 'most stable' economy in the G7 major capitalist countries. Indeed 'stability' has now taken the place of 'prudence', which littered the early Budget speeches of Gordon Brown's many years as Chancellor. 'The core purpose of this Budget is stability – now and in the future' said Darling in opening his Budget speech and stable/stability recurred some 30 times in the speech. The British economy is however far from being stable and it faces very turbulent times in the months ahead.*



Alistair Darling, Chancellor of the Exchequer

Many decisions on taxation and expenditure were already laid out in the previous year's Budget or announced in last October's Pre-Budget Report (PBR). Darling, like Brown before him, is rigidly constrained by Labour's neo-liberal agenda; the 'fiscal discipline' needed to promote the interests of banking and multinational capital at the heart of Labour's economic doctrine. So very little could be done given the state of the British economy. The tinkering he did meant that overall the poor still got less, while significant concessions were offered to the rich and better off. Empty gestures were made towards the environment and tackling climate change. His claims to have taken more steps in this Budget to halve child poverty

by 2010 and help 'working families to escape permanently the cycle of deprivation that blights their lives' are risible. Public spending as a percentage of GDP is already being squeezed, and is planned to be squeezed even further in the years 2011-2013, growing by only 1.9% a year, well below the anticipated rate of growth of the economy. Most of these projections are anyway based on extremely optimistic forecasts, with economic growth revised downwards in the Budget by only 0.25 percentage points in each of the next two years, despite the economic turmoil in global financial markets. There is a large hole in this Budget which will grow rapidly over the next few years.

No matter how tight the Budget is, defence spending

will continue to grow. Darling boasted in his speech that 'the defence budget has seen the longest period of increased spending in a generation'. This year the government will raise

spending by over £2bn to fund the war in Afghanistan and Iraq. The cost of operations since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 now totals £10bn and will continue to rise.

Public debt is growing

Public sector net debt – excluding the debt of Northern Rock to the Bank of England – is already getting very close to Labour's self-imposed fiscal limit of 40% of GDP, as tax receipts start to fall with the inevitable slowdown in economic growth. Public debt is projected to reach 39.8% of GDP in 2010-11 and will only avoid the fiscal limit because of £2.5bn tax increases in that year. These projections are also hopelessly optimistic. Cumulative public sector net borrowing from 2008-09 to 2011-12 has risen from a projected £99bn in the 2006 PBR to £140bn now – a rise of £41bn in the projections over a year and a half (*Financial Times* 13 March 2008). If the British economy follows the US into recession – a real possibility given the importance of the housing and financial sector in the British economy – public sector debt would rapidly rise above the fiscal limits, public spending would be cut and government anti-poverty policies would be swiftly cast aside.

Little for the poor...

The significant tax changes were made in the last budget and come into operation this April. The basic rate of income tax has been cut from 22% to 20% and the 10% starting rate for most income is abolished. Some higher earners face a rise of National Insurance (NI) contributions with the widening of the 11% band. Overall those on incomes below £18,000 a year will lose out, with those on £8,000-£10,000 a year losing most.

A one off £50 increase to the winter fuel allowance for the pensioners over 60 and £100 for those over 80 does very little to compensate for the massive rise in fuel costs over the last few years. Pensioners' basic costs have risen well above the totally inadequate rise in the state pension and pension credit. Food prices alone are rising at 6.6% a year according to the government.

Child benefit will be raised to £20 a week for the eldest child and the child element of the child tax credit will be increased by £50 a year above inflation from April 2009. In addition, from October 2009 child benefit will no longer be counted in assessing council tax and housing benefits for working families. Together these measures with other minor changes are intended to take an additional 250,000 children out of poverty over the next few years. They are unlikely to succeed and, even if they do, the government's target of halving child poverty by 2010 is nowhere near to being achievable. According to the Institute of Fiscal Studies, an extra £3.4bn a year would have to be spent to reach the target. The Budget measures amounted to only £1.7bn over two years.

Most of these measures are concerned with the working poor. The non-working poor are to face a new brutal 'welfare to work' regime. The new work and pensions secretary, James Purnell, announced that from April 2010 all 2.7m incapacity benefit claimants are to attend medical assessment to see if they are fit to work.

Private companies and voluntary organisations would be paid by results to get these claimants into low-paid jobs. The man behind these proposals is a multi-millionaire investment banker, David Freud, welfare advisor to the government. He is the author of the Freud Report, which called for large sections of the welfare state to be privatised.

...special treatment for the rich

Well-paid workers generally benefit most from the tax and NI changes from last year's Budget. Wealthy pensioners and buy-to-let investors particularly gain as they do not pay NI on their income.

There had been a great deal of noise from the business and banking lobby complaining about the measures, announced last autumn, to have a single 18% flat rate capital gains tax (CGT) and to impose an annual levy of £30,000 on high earning 'non-domiciled' residents in Britain for at least seven years. Darling made it clear in this Budget that he has almost completely backed down.

On CGT, Darling introduced a new 'entrepreneurs' relief' allowing business owners a £1m lifetime capital gains allowance at the old 10% tax rate. There are around 120,000 registered 'non-doms', mostly wealthy City workers. They do not pay tax on overseas earnings. Concession after concession was made to them. The £30,000 levy will remain and be classified as a tax payment to allow US citizens to offset the charge against US tax bills. They will not have to pay tax on capital gains made on UK assets in offshore trusts if the money is not brought into this country. The charge will not be increased during this parliament or the next. It will not be imposed on children under 18. Changes were even made to the method of counting the number of days an individual spends in the UK for residency and tax purposes. The days a person arrives and leaves the country will no longer be included, but only those when the person is present at midnight will be counted. It is no surprise that Michael Snyder, chairman of the City's policy and resources committee, said Mr Darling had done everything the City had asked him to, apart from abolishing the £30,000 charge.

Tax avoidance deprived the government of direct taxes annually between £11bn and £41bn in the early years of this decade, according to the first official analysis of the 'tax gap' published on Budget day. The concessions made to the business and banking lobby in this Budget show the Labour government has little intention of doing anything significant about it. Closure of tax avoidance loopholes will raise a paltry £600m next year. It is no surprise that there is such a gaping hole in the Budget and that it is the poorer sections of the working class, not the wealthy friends of the government, who will be expected to pay for it.

David Yaffe

*See 'Troubles ahead for British capitalism' in FRFI 201 February/March 2008.

Education notes

No country for young people

Education Notes regularly documents the scandal of Britain's treatment of young people. In 2002 the United Nations, under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, condemned British education ministers for ignoring student opinions. In 2007 a United Nations UNICEF report put Britain's young people at the top of the league in the developed world for childhood unhappiness. The existing combination of fierce authoritarian directives with the marketing of educational provision and community life has created a miserable mixture of capitalist culture. In introducing the first tests at the age of four the Labour government set children out on a long path of failure at every stage. Only the very rich, the most powerful and the latest celebrity can count as successful in Britain. The rest are 'failing' if they do not reach the top of the league at every stage in their over-tested youth.



2005: Cherie Blair and Craig Phillips open the construction industry centre in Liverpool. Its future is now in doubt as private enterprise falls flat

aged by Labour to run itself as an individual business in servile imitation of the free market. In a similar mish-mash of centralised directives versus on-the-ground realities, more than 70 schools officially praised for being among 'the most improved in the country' are also on a government hit list of 'failing' schools threatened regularly with closure.

When the private sector fails

Carter & Carter is a private sector business that was given a deal worth £15 million over

three years ago as the preferred bidder to run the 'Pathways to work' and 'Train to Gain' construction industry skills courses. By the time they had 27,000 students on the books at training centres across the UK, Carter & Carter's share price had collapsed and the company is now in the hands of administrators (bankrupt). Carter & Carter's courses for building construction and the motor industry have been snapped up by further education colleges, with Newcastle College buying most of the business in a deal that will see its turnover rise from £90 million a year to £150 million. This failure of the private sector and reversion to the public sector will become more common in education as in health and social services. Rapidly expanding private sector businesses are dependent on bank finance secured on the basis of projected future income. In the end, there wasn't enough government subsidised work to make those projections come true for Carter & Carter to make a healthy profit. There may be trouble ahead but will this take the shine off Labour's grovelling admiration of free enterprise? Apparently not.

Database destinies

Britain has the highest number of people in the world on a national DNA database at 4.5 million genetic samples. This includes nearly one million 10 to 18 year olds who have committed no criminal offence. Already schoolchildren regu-

larly give their fingerprints when using libraries and for registration in many schools. But this is not enough. Gary Pugh, director of forensic sciences at Scotland Yard and the new DNA spokesman for the Association of Chief Police Officers wants more. He is urging the collection of DNA from the age of five at primary school. He supports the call by the Institute for Public Policy Research for children showing anti-social attitudes to be targeted between the ages of 5 and 12 for 'treatment'. Says Pugh, 'You could argue the younger the better ... we have to find out who are possibly going to be the biggest threat to society in the future'.

Mosquito that menace

Sharp observation of trouble-makers in the lunch hall or playground may pick out individuals at the age of 5 but collective punishment is doled out to other age groups. The Mosquito device consists of a metal box that emits a high frequency pulsing noise several times a second audible over a 15 metre radius, unpleasant enough to force young people to leave the area in minutes. It is being sold as 'the ultrasonic teenage deterrent' because its frequency can be picked up only by the acute hearing of the under-25s. Thousands are being bought by police forces, train companies, retailers, housing associations and individuals who want to get rid of teenagers loitering near their homes.

Susan Davidson

Back to the workhouse

In a virulent attack on the poorest sections of the working class, housing minister Caroline Flint suggested that unemployed people in council housing could risk losing their homes if they don't prove that they are looking for work. In a *Guardian* interview on 5 February Flint claimed she was 'surprised' to learn the statistics about unemployment among social tenants. She said that the government wanted to tackle the culture of 'no one works round here', arguing that unemployment is 'a form of peer pressure' within the community itself: 'If you are in a family, an estate or a neighbourhood where nobody works that impacts on your own aspiration.'

Both in the interview and in a speech the next day to the Fabian Society, she stated that housing should be seen as a privilege: new council tenants should have to sign 'commitment contracts' agreeing to look for work in order to be eligible. If they failed to show their commitment to find a job and to the principle of 'something for something', they could lose their council homes. This could be extended in future to include existing tenants. Unemployed tenants would also be made to do skills 'audits', giving

left. Hardly any are being built: in 2006 there were just 277 new council houses built nationally – with only four in London. Under Labour, council housing is being systematically abolished. No wonder the numbers on the council house waiting list have soared to 1.6 million, up 60% since Labour came to office.

In January Flint's predecessor Yvette Cooper boasted there would be 30,000 new social homes built this year, a figure that will rise to 45,000 by 2010: but this is less than a fifth of all housing needed in that time. As it is, social housing plans face a £2.5bn shortfall in funding: planned output has risen 52% and funding only by 36%, with £10.5 billion needed and £8 billion allocated. Overall the number of social housing households has fallen by nearly half a million since 1997, more than 10%.

The decline in social and in particular council housing affects the poorest sections of the population: in 2005/06 the annual gross income for social tenants was £12,200 compared to £28,850 for households across all tenures. More than half of social housing tenants have an annual income of less than £10,000. Other figures show that:

- 55% of council tenants are unemployed – 20% more than in 1981;
- There are 4 million people living in social housing in the UK. 2.6 million are of working age, with about 1.4 million out of work. Nearly 75% of social tenants under 25 are unemployed;
- Nearly a third of social tenants are aged over 65;
- Over 25% of all ethnic minority householders are social tenants;
- 46% of lone parents live in social housing, making up 18% of all social housing tenants;
- 40% of all households needing specially adapted accommodation are in the social sector. One in seven social houses are involved.

Caroline Flint's attack on council and social housing tenants is therefore a calculated attack on the poor, the elderly, the disabled and black people. As mortgage rates rise with the credit crisis and people lose their jobs, so those who bought their council house will more and more default on their repayments: they are the ones with the British equivalent of sub-prime mortgages. Repossessions, up 21% in 2007 from 2006, will increase rapidly, adding further to the pressure on social housing. At the time of writing MPs are trying desperately to prevent a freedom of information application detailing the huge amounts of money they claim for second homes. Such are the priorities of our parliamentary representatives; they do not care a jot for the poor.

Louis Brehony



Council flats demolished in London SE1

ing the state more power to force people into low paid, temporary and insecure jobs.

The housing minister's comments were met with criticism, even from sections of the ruling class. David Orr, chief executive of the National Housing Federation, which represents housing associations in England, said: 'Such a policy would be unfair and impossible to enforce. Many of the jobs open to people, especially at the lower skills end, are insecure or temporary. Also, people with health problems, such as mental health issues, may find there are periods when they cannot keep up their job.' Flint was not to be deterred, reiterating on 21 March: 'The debate that I started a few weeks ago will continue over the coming months,' and adding for good measure that landlords should be given a role in making sure tenants find work. The government's plans would mark a return to the infamous Poor Laws of the 19th century which forced workers out of their homes into the workhouse if they were deemed to be eligible for any relief.

Yet the reason the unemployed and poor live in council houses is precisely because of past government policy. Between 1981 and 1997 1.4 million council tenants bought their homes; since then, under the Labour government, they have been joined by half a million more whilst a further million council homes have been transferred to housing associations or arm's length organisations. There are now only just over 2 million council homes

Palestine: resistance puts pressure on Abbas

Despite the appalling slaughter of over 120 Palestinians during the first week of March, the Zionists remain unable to destroy the resistance of the people of Gaza. Rockets continue to be fired into Israel; ominously from the standpoint of imperialism, demonstrations in support of the beleaguered people took place in the West Bank and in Israel itself. The Zionists are no nearer to destroying the democratically-elected Hamas government, and nor are Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah allies able to extend their writ beyond the West Bank. Instead there is now talk of a possible ceasefire. **BOB SHEPHERD** reports.

Last November's Annapolis peace conference was supposedly the start of a process to end the 'Palestinian-Israeli conflict' and establish a viable Palestinian state by the end of 2008. They said all the Palestinians had to do to make this vision a reality was to reject Hamas and its resistance to the Israeli occupation. The imperialists would help by delivering some real economic benefits to the Palestinian people on the West Bank and so bolster the position of Abbas and his illegitimate, unelected government. The 'benefits' of Abbas's collaboration with imperialism and Israel could then be contrasted to the supposed 'failures' of Hamas's resistance strategy in Gaza.

Hamas's 'failures' would be guaranteed through the economic blockade of Gaza which has continued to intensify alongside a widening Israeli military onslaught. What could not be guaranteed was the 'success' of Abbas since the Israeli government has refused to make any significant concession to him, for instance by stopping settlement expansion. Thus in February the mayor of Jerusalem broadcast plans to build 10,000 new housing units for Zionists in various districts of East Jerusalem. Days later,



Gaza 2008

killed 11 Palestinians including three children. The next day Israeli deputy defence minister Matan Vilnai declared, 'The more Qassam fire intensifies and the rockets reach a longer range, they will bring upon themselves a bigger shoa because we will use all our might to defend ourselves.' Shoah is the Hebrew term for the Holocaust and rarely used by Zionists outside that context. It was clearly a declaration of

itself to protest against the slaughter. In East Jerusalem Palestinian school students left their classrooms on 3 March to demonstrate on the main Salah Ad-Din street, burning rubbish, throwing stones and attacking Israeli cars. Abbas was forced to declare that negotiations with Israel could not continue, a position he had to maintain even after a pre-arranged meeting with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on 4 March. By the afternoon of the next day, however, Abbas had done a u-turn and agreed to re-

sume talks without a ceasefire. Meanwhile Rice had met with Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni after which she declared: 'There are enemies of peace that will always try to hold hostage the Palestinian cause and the future of the Palestinian people for their own state. And Hamas, which in effect holds the people of Gaza hostage in their hands, is now trying to make the path to a Palestinian state hostage to them. And we cannot permit that to happen.'

In response, on 6 March, a Palestinian from East Jerusalem shot and killed eight students at an Orthodox Jewish seminary in Jerusalem that is a centre for the Zionist settler movement in the West Bank. An unofficial 'understanding' brokered by Egypt temporarily halted any Israeli response and resistance rocket attacks. However on 12 March Israeli forces assassinated Mohamed Shehada, a leader of Islamic Jihad's military wing along with four of his comrades as he visited his destroyed family home in Bethlehem in the West Bank. Thousands of West Bank Palestinians came out for their funerals calling on Abbas to stop negotiations with Israel and to resume talks with Hamas. The Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, Fatah's military wing, issued a statement that the continued Israeli aggression leaves only one option open, to work 'faithfully to regain the unity of the Palestinian people since that is the most important source of strength it has'. It also called on Abbas to dismiss Salam Fayyad, his Prime Minister. The pressure has forced Abbas to backtrack once more: a meeting in Yemen between Hamas and Fatah at the end of March agreed to direct talks in April, a position Abbas has since endorsed. Meanwhile Egypt is brokering discussions between the Zionists on the one hand and Hamas and Islamic Jihad on the other over another ceasefire. The resistance continues.

**End the blockade of Gaza!
Defend the Palestinian people!**



Palestinians protest in the West Bank city of Ramallah against Israel's attack on Gaza on 2 March 2008

on 9 March, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert announced plans to build 750 housing units in Givat Ze'ev, a Jewish settlement 8km from Jerusalem, and to incorporate it into a Greater Jerusalem.

Meanwhile resistance in Gaza continued with rocket attacks on Israel targeting the town of Sderot and later reaching the city of Ashkelon. This was despite Zionist attacks which killed 76 people in Gaza in January. On 27 February a rocket killed a Sderot resident, the first Israeli death caused by rocket fire since May 2007. Within 24 hours Israeli forces had

intent as on 1 March, Israel launched attacks on Gaza that killed 63 Palestinians. Included in this figure were 17 children, one just two years old, and a family of six whose house in Gaza City was blown up by missiles fired from an F-16 fighter bomber. In the period from 27 February to 5 March the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights documented 130 deaths in the Gaza Strip, including 51 civilians and 31 children.

The savagery of the Israeli assault brought thousands of Palestinians out onto the streets throughout the West Bank, East Jerusalem and inside Israel

BACK FROM THE ABYSS

continued from page 1

is becoming evident even to the most reluctant observer. Total domestic profits fell by \$46.9bn in the third quarter of 2007 and by \$108.7bn in the fourth quarter. It was only increased profits from abroad that prevented the decline being any worse; net profits from abroad rose by \$26.4bn and \$55.8bn during the same period. Non-farm employment fell by 63,000 in February.

Consequences

As we have explained in previous articles in FRFI, the credit crisis is spreading wider. In the flight to quality, the demand for Treasuries has driven their yields lower. Last year both 2-year and 10-year Notes yielded over 5%; currently the yields have declined to about 1.68% and 3.5% respectively. The *Financial Times* quotes a manager at South Korea's National Pension Service: 'The Fed continues to cut interest rates. We are still making profits from the Treasuries that we bought in the past but we think we'd better dispose of them and had better buy higher-yielding European government debt, for example.' This is very bad news for the US economy, because foreign purchases of Treasuries have been key to funding the US government – in June 2007, foreigners held some \$6,007bn of US long term debt, about 66% of the entire Federal debt. As foreign buying of Treasuries declines, it will be more difficult to finance government spending and will worsen the US balance of payments.

The drop in interest rates in the US compared to the rest of the world has driven the dollar down against other currencies. This has made US exports cheaper, but it has made imports more expensive – petrol at the pump is about 20% more expensive than a year ago; government figures show inflation running around 4%, but more realistic alternative calculations show 10%. This pushes workers' living standards down. At the same time it reduces earnings of foreign companies operating in the US. Toyota's revenue is estimated to have fallen by some \$8.75bn since June. The Japanese Nikkei stock exchange index has fallen 30%, from about 18,000 to under 13,000, forcing the unwinding of so-called 'carry trades' – the cheap money many hedge funds used to finance the bubble in the US. These unwinds will lead to massive de-leveraging.

The various write-downs and lack of liquidity have forced hedge funds and others to sell what would normally be their safest assets, municipal bonds, driving their price down. Many of these bonds have been issued as 'auction-rate' bonds, so-called because the rates are reset at auctions every 7 to 35 days. The attraction was the lower rates that normally had to be paid compared to fixed-rate bonds – perhaps 1-1½% lower. Normally 'munis' are snapped up but now purchases have dwindled. The uncertainty surrounding the creditworthiness of bond insurers, and the general reluctance to lend have driven many potential investors away. In the absence of sufficient bids, the rate reverts to a punitive rate set by the bank which is managing the issue. The New York Port Authority found itself paying 20% interest on its bonds in February, up from 4.3%. Some schools in New York are paying as

'The fightback against this wretched, selfish, unjust, crisis-ridden system has begun and will grow stronger!'

much as 12%. The Louisiana Superdome, home of the New Orleans Saints, is now paying \$1.2m per month instead of \$500,000 – money which is lining the pockets of wealthy capitalists instead of helping the reconstruction of the wrecked city. Several student loan companies, which used to rely on the auction rate market, have withdrawn from lending. This may affect thousands of students who have been accepted at colleges this autumn.

The massive wave of mergers and acquisitions has almost completely subsided. The most spectacular exception, which goes to prove the point is the leveraged buy-out of Clear Channel, a huge US radio network, which is the object of a \$19bn private equity deal from Bain Capital. Citigroup, Morgan Stanley, Credit Suisse, Royal Bank of Scotland and Wachovia agreed to lend some \$22bn in 2006, but have got cold feet as they watched the share price fall to \$26.92, way short of the original offer price of \$39.20. As we go to press, their attempts to renegotiate the deal or withdraw have apparently been prevented by a Texas court.

The consequences are felt in capital markets outside the US and western Europe. In Australia, the Centro Properties Group is facing margin calls from lenders and has to repay their loans. So is Rubicon Japan Trust. It is expected that capital inflows into Russia will fall to some \$25bn this year, down from \$82.3bn in 2007, because most Russian companies will be unable to issue bonds on foreign exchanges.

So far the ruling class has been able to arrange its financial affairs to its own liking, throwing the responsibility for paying for the credit crisis largely upon the shoulders of US workers and the middle class. But these cosy arrangements are so blatant that they invite protest and on 26 March dozens of protesters paraded around inside Bear Stearns, contrasting the bail-out of Bear Stearns with the pain and suffering created by the increased mortgage rates and foreclosures.

The capitalists say that Bear Stearns investment bank was 'too big' to be 'allowed to fail'. This is another way of saying that the rest of us are too small and unimportant to be bothered about. Ruling class tinkering with regulation won't help us. The fightback against this wretched, selfish, unjust, crisis-ridden system has begun and will grow stronger!

Steve Palmer
US correspondent



US presidential elections

Clinton plays race card against Obama

When the race opened for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, Hillary Clinton was the clear favourite. She's very visibly right-wing: supports the war; is in the pocket of AIPAC, the Zionist lobbying organisation; supports nuclear proliferation to US proxy regimes like Israel and Pakistan and has even fought attempts by the Bush administration to cut some military programmes.

When Senator Barack Obama announced his candidacy, the sense of entitlement, complacency and arrogance of the Clinton camp dismissed his chances: after all, just how much bother could this young, inexperienced upstart black candidate be? Then Obama won Iowa, which is 94% white ... and has gone on to win many States and more delegates than Clinton to the nominating convention.

The Clinton campaign has responded by taking the gloves off and throwing all the dirt they can at Obama. Son of a white working-class American mother and Kenyan father, born in Hawaii, schooled in Indonesia, experimented with drugs in adolescence, community organizer in Chicago, first black president of the Harvard Law Review, State Senator and Senator, Barack Hussein Obama's evolution is at once a classic ascent from obscurity story of the so-called 'American Dream' and simultaneously a rich source of racial stereotypes. Clinton has wasted no time to play on prejudice: asked if Obama was a Muslim (he's not), Clinton responded with equivocation: 'there is nothing to base that on. As far as I know.' We've had videos of Obama's pastor condemning US genocide, pictures of Obama wearing a turban (traditional dress in his father's heritage), mutterings about his middle name.

Clinton – the underdog – has generously suggested that Obama go take a seat at the back of her bus and be her Vice Presidential running-mate – a move that has universally angered the black community. After agreeing with the Democratic National Committee that the Florida and Michigan primaries be excluded because they were held early, Clinton has reversed her position and is trying to claim their delegates as hers. She has even said that Republican war criminal candidate, John McCain, would make a better candidate than Obama!

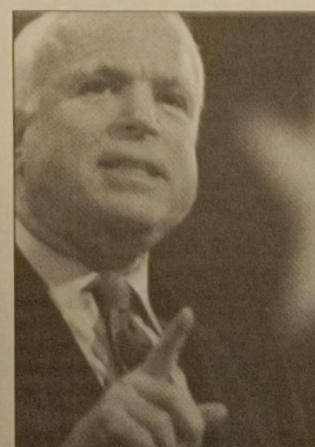
Obama's youth, calm demeanour, and inspiring, if empty, rhetoric about 'change' have made him attractive to younger voters and others who want something different – particularly an end to the war.

The black community was initially lukewarm for a complex of reasons. Some didn't believe he could get

enough support to be the nominee; a few wondered if he was 'black enough'; many understand that, if Obama is the Democratic candidate, he is also the prime target of racist assassins, and have considered a vote for Obama as passing a death sentence. However, his evident success, combined with the Clinton campaign's playing of the race card, have encouraged far wider black participation in the primaries than in the past. Latinos, previously assumed to be safely in the Clinton camp, have shown support for Obama.

What is going on here has nothing to do with actual change: although he opposed the war, Obama's stated policies are not very different from Clinton's. He supports Israel, 'free markets' and the rest. Bourgeois commentators invoke 'charisma' and other psychological factors to try to explain Obama's success and the bitterness of the struggle between the two candidates.

However, the differences reflect the



Republican candidate, John McCain

crumbling of the old coalition which was the basis of the Democratic Party and correspondingly different strategies for winning the general election. In past articles we have emphasised that the Democratic Party was an uneasy coalition of sections of the better off middle class, the US labour aristocracy, black and Latino minorities and working women. The electoral strategy has been to win the so-called 'Reagan Democrats' – the more backward sections of the labour aristocracy who have supported the Republicans. Yet the decline in size of the traditional white working class, the split in the US trade union movement, the growing importance of Latinos, the dissatisfaction of younger workers and the disaffection of blacks has split that coalition. The Clinton campaign is scared of losing the Reagan Democrats and expects the rest of the Democrat constituency to join Obama at the back of the bus. The Obama campaign is counting on attracting dissatisfied younger voters and on catalysing previously under-represented groups, like the black community into political action, and dragging some of the Reagan Democrats behind them.

American working people are deeply opposed to this war, anxious about their economic future and hungry for change. They have had enough of the open imperialism of the Republican Party. The job of the Democratic Party is to offer empty but soothing promises about meeting these concerns while changing absolutely nothing. Clinton is too tied to the coalitions and messages of the past to throw enough sand in everyone's eyes. Obama is much more plausible as the future face of the Democratic Party: seeming to offer a progressive alternative while actually blunting and diverting real opposition.

Steve Palmer

IRAQ

'surge success' unravels

The fires beneath the ashes still burned and have burst into flames. On the fifth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, 20 March, the US and British governments gave the impression of victory. Labour Foreign Secretary David Miliband said, 'I think the war itself was a remarkable victory... building the peace has been more difficult but indications over the last year or two have been more encouraging about change'. President Bush told US forces that the 'surge' had 'opened the door to a major strategic victory in the broader war on terrorism'. Three days later four US soldiers were blown up, bringing the death toll for US soldiers in Iraq to 4,000. On 25 March the Iraqi army attacked the Shia population's biggest militia, the Mehdi Army, in Basra, unleashing clashes from Basra to Baghdad as the militia fought back. Four days into the fighting the Mehdi Army still commanded much of Basra. Mortars and rockets fired from Baghdad's Shia neighbourhoods struck the Green Zone containing the US embassy and Iraqi government. US General Petraeus accused Iran of supplying the weapons and Baghdad was placed under a three day curfew. If this is 'victory' what would defeat look like?

JIM CRAVEN and TREVOR RAYNE report.



Demonstration in Sadr City

Prime Minister Al Maliki supervised the attack after gaining US permission for the assault. RAF and USAF planes bombed Mehdi Army positions. The Basra region holds 70% of Iraq's known oil reserves and provides 90% of state revenues. Basra is strategically located next to Iran and for US supply-routes from Kuwait. The Mehdi Army and its leader, Moqtada Al Sadr, are supported by the poorest of the Shia people. In 2004 they fought the invaders at Najaf, but last August Al Sadr declared a ceasefire. Tens of thousands of Al Sadr's supporters marched in Baghdad on 27 March demanding the overthrow of the puppet government. President Bush declared the battle against the militia 'a defining moment' for Iraq (yet another!). This assault could rebound heavily against the invaders and their placemen.

Imperialists retreat

The stark fact is that with a rapidly deepening economic crisis, the imperialists can no longer afford an interminable 'war against terrorism'. Nobel prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz told the congressional Joint Economic Committee that the long-term costs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, including such as health care for veterans, would be more than \$3 trillion for the US alone and a similar amount for other countries.

Imperialism has been forced to reduce its ambitions in Iraq to securing

military bases and oil. In a revealing phrase last December General Petraeus described Iraq as being 'close to a sustainable level of violence'. This January, President Bush signed a statement that he would not be bound by clauses in the defence appropriation bill prohibiting funds being used to establish permanent US bases in Iraq or exercising control of Iraqi oil.

The imperialists cannot afford to admit defeat in Iraq as this would undermine the US strategy of global hegemony through military might; a power on which British imperialism relies to defend its own international interests. So, although US forces are being reduced, there will be at least 10,000 more US troops in Iraq this summer than before the 'surge'.

A key development reducing the violence in Iraq, allowing the claims that the 'surge' was working, is coming undone. Sections of the Al Sawah or Awakening Movement, drawn from former Sunni resistance fighters, are turning against their new US paymasters because nothing has changed for the better; Sunnis are still being killed by Shia-dominated police. Abu Marouf, a leader of 13,000 members of the Awakening Movement who belonged to the 1920 Revolution Brigade and the Islamic Army said: 'If the Americans think they can use us to crush Al Qaeda and then push us to one side they are mistaken. If there is no change in three months there will be war again.'

Turkey's February invasion of Iraq highlighted dilemmas facing the imperialist occupation. Turkey attacked Kurdish (PKK) guerrillas. The PKK have fought a long national liberation struggle against the Turkish state for the rights of all Kurds. Turkey's ultimate aim, however, was to deter the prospect of an autonomous Kurdish state in northern Iraq. Turkish forces withdrew a week after their incursion, but their government made clear that the invasion set a precedent to intervene whenever it sees fit. The Turkish bourgeoisie fears that a viable Kurdish authority in northern Iraq will encourage Kurds in Turkey, Iran and Syria to increase their fight for sovereignty.

Turkey is an important US ally. It has NATO's second largest forces and is at the hub of oil pipelines from the Caspian Basin and Central Asia. Turkey's support would be crucial to a US attack on Iran. The US provided intelligence for Turkey's invasion of Iraq, but was nervous about the consequences; US Defence Secretary Gates said he hoped the Turks would 'wrap this thing up as soon as they can'. The Kurdish region is the only part of Iraq that has been relatively stable and favourable to the imperialist occupation, but the Kurdish Regional Government is becoming impatient and signing oil contracts in defiance of the Iraqi government.

Every move the invaders make is being turned against them. Every ally may suddenly turn into a foe. It is an old lesson that is being scorched into the imperialists' brain: you will not put out the fire with fire.

NEW SLAUGHTER PLANNED IN AFGHANISTAN

British forces are planning a new onslaught in southern Afghanistan in an attempt to inflict a decisive defeat on those resisting the occupation of their country. President Bush also wants US troops to join Pakistani forces in operations against supporters and bases of the resistance fighters along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and to conduct air strikes within Pakistan.

The offensive comes at a time of mounting problems for US, British



Resistance fighters in Basra

and Canadian troops responsible for the bulk of the fighting. Some in the imperialist military have recently admitted that they are losing the war and that a military victory may not be possible. Ex-US General Dan McNeil estimated that: 'If proper US military counter-insurgency doctrine were followed, the US would need 400,000 troops to defeat the resistance.' Currently the imperialists have 66,000 troops in Afghanistan. Over-stretched and battered on the ground, the invaders have resorted to air power. In 2007 they launched 3,572 air strikes, twice the number of the previous year and 20 times 2005's total.

Last autumn Labour Defence Secretary Des Browne admitted the war in Afghanistan 'could last decades'. When the present wave of British troops was being despatched, the then Defence Secretary John Reid would have had us believe it was a peace-keeping mission and that he could foresee the forces returning within a few months without a shot being fired. In the year from August 2006 alone, British troops fired nearly four million bullets and 25,000 rounds of artillery. Over 6,000 Afghans were killed by the occupiers in 2007.

This January, the Commons Defence Select Committee said the performance of British forces was deteriorating, with insufficient rest time and an increase in early departure for tours of duty. The Committee said urgent steps should be taken to reduce the burden. But army recruitment remains well below target, particularly among ethnic minorities. Britain's cost of the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq doubled last year to £3.5 billion

Imperialist rivalries

So why are the imperialists planning a new offensive? The reason is more political than military. For over a year the US and Britain have been pleading with other NATO states to send more troops and equipment to Afghanistan and to deploy their troops in the battle zones of the south. Canada threatened to withdraw its troops unless NATO responded. France and Germany have persistently refused; they see no advantage in getting dragged further into a war that would provide them with few advantages. It suits their purpose to give token support while withholding effective means by which the US could grab the spoils.

In February, Germany rejected US

demands to use their 3,200 troops in northern Afghanistan to replace 2,200 US troops due to be withdrawn from combat zones this autumn. German spokespeople described the demands as 'impertinent' and 'fantastic cheek'. At the NATO Security Conference a few days later, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates demanded 'a fair distribution of the burden' and said 'a two-tiered alliance' in which some fought actively and others 'had the luxury of opting for stability and civilian operations' would destroy NATO. Germany agreed to a small increase in troop numbers and to extend their field of operations, but not to the battlefields. France's offer to send 1,000 troops to relieve US forces in the east was accompanied by what one British commentator described as 'outrageous demands'.

Russia has taken advantage of divisions in NATO to counter the US, which has challenged Russia by planning missile bases in Eastern Europe and manipulating the independence of Kosovo. Former President Putin believed that the US is using the war in Afghanistan to put down roots in Central Asia, to control pipelines from the Caspian Basin and to surround Russia and China with military bases. He wants Germany to withdraw all its troops from Afghanistan. According to opinion polls, more than half the German population agrees.

The US and Britain believe that by asserting themselves in Afghanistan, divisions within NATO will be settled by facts on the ground. They hope they can stop France, Germany and other imperialist rivals profiting politically from their present problems and end prospects of greater co-operation between Russia and Western Europe.

When the imperialist offensive fails, the crisis within NATO and inter-imperialist rivalry will intensify. They will only leave, however, when they are forced out by the Afghan people. As a statement from the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan points out, 'After seven years, there is no peace, human rights, democracy or reconstruction in Afghanistan. The destitution and suffering of our people is increasing every day... We believe that if the troops leave Afghanistan, our people will become more free and come out of their current puzzlement and doubts... Afghanistan's freedom can only be achieved by the Afghan people themselves.'

Prince Harry's 'normal' service

Prince Harry's ten-week tour, serving his grandmother's forces in Helmand, helped make the tragedy in Afghanistan a media spectacle. One newspaper website encouraged us to 'Watch Prince Harry fighting in Helmand', alongside the latest goals from the Premier League. The site did not carry the latest report on Afghanistan from the UN Development Fund, which states that life expectancy and literacy continue to fall, while malnutrition increases. One in six children die before their first birthday, half the population lives below the poverty line and hundreds of thousands of Afghan people have been displaced from their homes.

Prince Harry quipped: 'It's very nice to be a sort of normal person for once. This is about as normal as I am going to get.' For a member of an imperialist ruling class it is 'normal' to occupy someone else's country by force and to direct 1,000lb bombs on to their villages, (Harry acted as an air strike controller); something similar is a centuries-old tradition.

Unfortunately for Harry, he has been withdrawn from Afghanistan and is refused permission to serve in Iraq. He will just have to content himself with making friends with fascist dictators, as his great uncle did, or going to fancy dress parties as a Nazi, which we know he enjoys.

ROCK AROUND THE BLOCKADE

SPEAKING TOUR CUBA

SOCIALISM INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

'I thought they were brilliant, very informative. They answered a lot of questions and impressed me with their intimate knowledge of the Cuban system... I wish I had told more people. It was illuminating. Do it again!'

Maya, Manchester meeting

'Last Saturday's meeting was something that I will never forget ... I am from Brazil and to hear Orlando Borrego speak about Cuba and Che was something incredible. For Latin Americans Che is not just a face on a flag, he is our hero.'

Farah, London meeting

The tour reached an audience of 2,700 people in 11 cities, and membership of RATB has nearly trebled as a result. Following this success, RATB will expand its work: starting groups in new areas and holding regular organising meetings all over Britain. RATB is non-sectarian: all participants who support the aims of RATB are welcome to participate, speak, promote their views and sell literature at events.

RATB's aims are: to campaign in support of the Cuban Revolution and Cuban socialism; to campaign against the US blockade and oppose any British government collaboration with it; to support the revolutionary democratic movements in Latin America and the Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas (ALBA); to oppose the US occupation of Guantanamo and demand the release of prisoners held there; to campaign for the freedom of the Cuban 5; and to support the Boycott Bacardi campaign. In all of our campaigning work we will be part of building a socialist movement in Britain. If you support these aims we urge you to come to an RATB meeting and get involved (see events listings page 14).

RATB owes a huge debt of gratitude to the three Cuban speakers, who inspired thousands of people while they were here with their revolutionary example.

Orlando Borrego is possibly the most distinguished contributor from Cuba's revolutionary leadership to have spoken on tour in Britain. Many people who attended the tour were attracted by the chance to hear about the role he played in the revolution. However, they also heard in-depth discussions about socialist political economy and Che's contribution to economic development in Cuba. Borrego's contemporary links to the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela gave a sense of the urgency of the contemporary struggle in Latin America.

During the tour Jesus Garcia's exposition of Cuban democracy counteracted the lies and distortions found in both the bourgeois and left press. In a meeting in Glasgow, attended by 350 people, Garcia read aloud from a copy of *Socialist Worker*, newspaper of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), denouncing its lies about Cuba, and expressing incredulity that people who call themselves socialists could write such reactionary propaganda. He said that in a sense the article was right: that in Cuba socialism is imposed from the top down, however not by an elite as the SWP makes out, but by the Cuban people, who are at the top of Cuba's system of popular power. As he went on to explain, all elected representatives in Cuba are subject to the right of recall if they do not carry out the wishes of those who elected them, and they receive no special privileges



From 21 February to 7 March 2008, Orlando Borrego, Jesus Garcia and Yoselin Rufin, representatives of three generations of the Cuban revolution, toured Britain with Rock around the Blockade (RATB) on the 'Cuba: Socialism into the 21st Century' speaking tour. They came to confront the lies about Cuba, drawing on their own experiences of the process of building socialism.

for their political work. Garcia is especially qualified to answer critics who say there is no democracy in Cuba because he has been elected to the system of People's Power since 1989, and was elected again to his municipal assembly in Cuba's most recent elections in December.

As a young woman Yoselin Rufin could relate to the hundreds of young people who came to the tour. It was obvious that they felt comfortable asking her questions about everything from the Cuban political system to everyday life for a young woman in Cuba. Yoselin is a National Council member of the Cuban Federation of University Students, an organisation that played an active role in the revolutionary struggle preceding 1959. Today it is one of dozens of mass organisations represented in Cuba's National Assembly. In 2007, at just 22 years of age, Yoselin became one of the youngest members of the Cuban Communist Party. She is a member of the government's Permanent Commission for Candidacy, Social Prevention, Drugs and Recreation. She works as a teacher, so she was able to describe, based on first-hand experience, the progress of the Cuban education system, for example, reducing class sizes to 20 students per class in secondary schools and 15 in primary schools, despite the Special Period and the continuing effects of the blockade.

Trade union support

The speaking tour received substantial support from sections of the British trade union movement – both financially and in terms of publicity and providing venues for meetings.

Sponsorship came from the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT), at national and branch level, and from branches of the Communication Workers Union (Manchester Combined Branch) and the National Union of Miners (North East area). The RMT also hosted a press conference and a formal reception for the Cubans in London. RATB intends to build on this link with the RMT, which was one of the first trade unions to cease financial contributions to the Labour Party.

Bob Crow, General Secretary of the RMT, spoke at the inaugural meeting of the tour at Bolivar Hall (part of the Venezuelan embassy), where people queued around the block to get in. Sharing the platform were the Cuban Ambassador, Rene Mujica Cantelar, and Felix Plasencia, Minister Counsellor of the Venezuelan Embassy in London, demonstrating the revolutionary links between contemporary Cuba and Venezuela. Bob Crow described the event as 'a cherished day for our union' and stated 'The battle of ideas taking place in the world at the moment is one of global capitalism against the ideas of socialism... The reason we're supporting this tour is that we believe what's taking place in Cuba is the opposite of the battle of ideas that's being pushed by imperialism, capitalism and big business... The reality is that a little island, being squeezed economically by the biggest power in the world, has, for 49 years, demonstrated that there's a different world.' He continued, 'You can't just be a communist, you've got to learn to be one. I've learnt a lot off a revolutionary here today and I feel sorry for

those people that didn't get involved in this tour because they said it might be too sectarian. I tell you what, the ones who make these tours sectarian are the ones that don't want to get involved.'

Unfortunately, the sectarianism that Bob Crow referred to was a real obstacle to the tour. RATB has always been prepared to work with the Cuba Solidarity Campaign (CSC), but the CSC has tried to monopolise solidarity with Cuba. In the run-up to the tour the CSC ignored invitations from RATB to get involved in the speaking tour. At the CSC-organised Latin America 2007 conference Rob Miller, director of the CSC, prevented an RATB activist from handing out leaflets for the tour because he said RATB was in 'competition' with the CSC. As became clear from conversations with CSC local branch members, the CSC National Executive warned branches not to organise joint events with RATB as part of the tour, causing some that had initially shown enthusiasm to pull out.

The speaking tour attracted hundreds of young people to the main public events. In addition RATB held meetings at six universities, four schools and two youth groups to ensure that as many young people as possible could hear the Cubans speak. On Monday 3 March Yoselin Rufin and Jesus Garcia spoke to 70 people at Farnborough Sixth Form College, including 60 students who had returned to school in the evening to attend the meeting. Yoselin spoke about political representation of young people in Cuba, pointing out that there are four students in the

newly elected 31-member Council of State. At Pimlico School in inner London 37 students attended an optional after-school meeting in their school library. Pimlico has just been turned into an 'academy', and a question was raised about the British government's selling off of the education system. Yoselin recalled that, during the Special Period, students had proposed to the government that some families should make a financial contribution to the cost of university education, but discussions in the National Assembly concluded that free education was a non-negotiable right of all Cubans.

The popularity of the meetings and the high calibre of questions from the audience at every event show that British people are not just hungry for an alternative to capitalism, but also recognise that Cuba is building an alternative. The frenzied reporting from all sections of the British media that followed Fidel Castro's decision not to seek re-election to Cuba's Council of State showed how out of touch with reality mainstream 'opinion formers' and journalists actually are, and how desperate they are to tarnish Cuba's example. However, the inspirational example of our three speakers spoke for itself: Borrego, with a life spent making sacrifices for the revolution, who still works as a government adviser on a salary of 650 pesos (approx £14) per month, and knows equally well how to make an audience laugh as how to debate the finer points of socialist economics. Jesus, an elected representative in Cuba's democratic system and a strong critic within it, astounded by the lengths people will go to slander Cuba. And finally Yoselin, a young, educated woman, ready to defend the revolution 'till my last breath', as she said in one meeting.

In the closing speech of the tour, the Revolutionary Communist Group's David Yaffe spoke about the need to recognise Cuba as the vanguard of anti-imperialist and socialist struggles. He encouraged people to join RATB and the RCG in the fight for a revolutionary movement.

The speaking tour exceeded all expectations. We are forever indebted to the Cuban comrades for their hard work and openness in speaking about their revolutionary experiences. At a time of increased attack on Cuba from the bourgeois media and imperialist politicians, solidarity with Cuba is more important than ever. The speaking tour proved that there is interest in political discussion, something that RATB intends to build on.

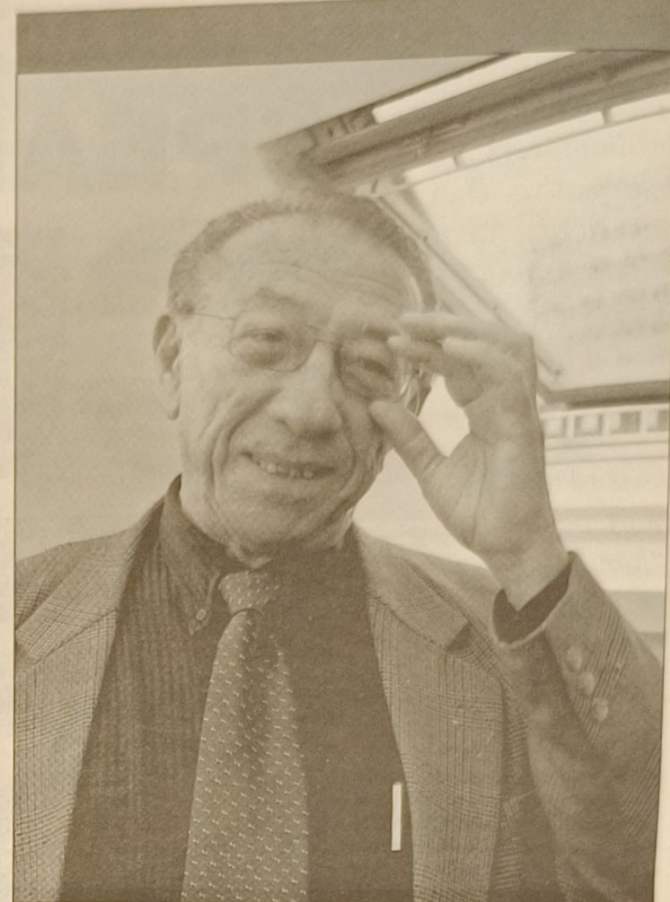
Our society is as unequal as ever. The Labour government presides over war, poverty, racism and corruption. The most important thing our Cuban comrades have shown us is that the power of capitalism can be challenged.

ROCK AROUND THE BLOCKADE SPEAKING TOUR

SOCIALISM INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

'It's very important that people know about Cuban reality... What people know is just propaganda... about how bad socialism is... It's not true. I was born in Cuba and lived there for 28 years and I can say for a fact that socialism is a system that gives benefits to people... I believe that this tour will open minds, especially when you are bringing Cubans in and asking what the reality is.'

Rene, Newcastle meeting



INTERVIEW WITH ORLANDO BORREGO

FRFI: What were the changes that took place when Fidel Castro declined to stand for election to the post of President of the Council of State?

OB: The first point is that Fidel has not resigned. Due to health problems he considered that it was essential to pass on his responsibilities. This was done in a fundamentally democratic way with an election in the new assembly for the President of the Council of State and of the Council of Ministers.

I think this was an intelligent decision, so that he could use his time in a calmer manner to develop his ideas and make reflections that are of fundamental importance for the young, for the country and indeed for Latin America. He can now work with more efficiency than ever in this line, and honour his life-long working commitment to the Cuban people.

FRFI: Tell us about Raul Castro

OB: He is a very modest man and never allowed himself to be an object of publicity. However, we know of his long history as a communist militant since before Moncada [the attack on Moncada barracks in 1953] and he identified with Che Guevara for this reason. At Moncada he showed an outstanding attitude and distinguished himself even as a prisoner by striking down the rifle of one of the Batista guards, so saving a comrade.

Later in the Sierra Maestra he was an exceptional fighter and revealed his capacity after the landing of the *Granma* and the atrocious conditions that were faced by the revolutionaries. When they re-grouped at Five Palms (*Cinco Palmeras*) he was the only one who appeared with five rifles, whereas the majority of the others had lost their own. From this we have the famous saying 'now we can win the war!' Afterwards he was military chief of a column, on the eastern second front of the country. It is known that as a military chief he practically created a structure of preparatory government there, with schools and so on. He paid great attention to this task. In the armed forces he was very successful. Imperialism couldn't beat us, and this, combined with his human qualities, guaranteed the future of the state.

One cannot speak of Raul simply in terms of his brother. He has his own definite merits, which the country recognises, and as a result he has now taken up the leadership. It's clear that everyone thinks he will be successful in the future.

FRFI: Commentators outside Cuba

have said that Raul shows a tendency to return to the use of capitalist elements in the economy.

OB: Well such commentators are misrepresenting matters throughout the world. Raul Castro has demonstrated great initiative and a creative capacity which is very important at this stage. He has initiated very important organisational changes which do not challenge the principles of revolution, but strengthen its supreme object: to construct a socialist state which will enhance the welfare of the people. The organisational and economic changes that he brought about in the armed forces were very successful. Those who say he could return to the market economy don't know Raul. For Raul, it is absolutely clear that to reach socialism we can't use capitalist methods.

FRFI: Tell us about the deepening relations between Cuba and Venezuela.

OB: Chavez revealed that he has enthusiastically informed himself of Fidel's and Che's thoughts and has become the greatest of friends with Fidel. The Bolivarian revolution has called upon Cuba for support to consolidate the process. This project provides the possibility for wealthier Latin American states, for example Venezuela with its oil and other resources, to help the poorer ones. Cuba has given intense support to this project, in public health, education and its experience in almost all other areas. The collaboration between Cuba and Venezuela is centred on the ALBA project. Cuba has a ministry for Venezuelan relations to deal with the frequent meetings in many areas. Many important projects have been agreed for example in transport, railways, ports and harbours and so on, in the basic industries, in agriculture, all pursuing the dreams of Bolivar and Jose Marti.

US imperialism is trying to destroy this. As the project of reunion of countries, of Bolivar's dreams, makes progress, imperialism won't be able to dominate us in the same way as it used to. Now in Venezuela the Congress of the PSUV (United Socialist Party of Venezuela) is determining its fundamental political programme for the Bolivarian revolution and consolidating its political base. For Cuba the Bolivarian project is a definitive project for the future which, as I have said, was dreamed of by Jose Marti, Che and Fidel and this is what the people deserve.

FRFI: Is it possible to foresee which states will be the next to join

ALBA? What are the next important steps for ALBA to take?

OB: It's clear that some countries are definitely identified with ALBA: Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua and Bolivia. Ecuador is to a certain extent incorporated and President Correa wants to reinforce this collaboration. Argentina which is clearly not socialist, yet involved in progressive measures, has strong relations with Venezuela. Latin Americans are an optimistic people who have realised that the neo-liberal line and US policies are not correct and never will be. It is an economic system and form of government that leads to suffering and problems in Latin America. To the extent to which the people become more aware of this and they construct social organisations, they will be able to accelerate their entry into ALBA.

In my opinion the future offers great promise with the incorporation of more states, such as in the Caribbean, into ALBA which will receive great benefits of membership, especially through the creation of Petrocaribe [Venezuela sells cheap oil to Caribbean signatories]. Now as never before Latin America has a promising future, and we see more opportunities to solve its social and political problems.

FRFI: Can we turn to the question of the Battle of Ideas and its relation to the concept of the 'new man'?

OB: The Battle of Ideas is a concrete expression of comrade Fidel. We've worked with it for many years, and it has great significance in that for a revolution to be socialist it needs a motor for permanent renewal of ideas, not to let them age with dogmas or allow them to become stale or out of date.

From the point of view of the economy it has a very important role. We can't speak of political or cultural projects if there are no material resources to make them happen. The Battle of Ideas has extensively treated the question of linking revolution and resources, providing social solutions to the problems of the country. Its significance is that it's impossible to think of socialism if we can't also think of the new person in that society, as was observed by Che.

Perhaps the most important contribution in this respect is Che's thought. In every moment of every important battle his understanding of economics involved a battle of ideas. It signifies a new awakening, a new motor, pushing forward the Cuban revolution. Discussion of the 'new man' is a serious matter in revolutionary Cuba, introducing

novelty into the Cuban revolution that prevents paralysis or stagnation. In this respect we can talk of the introduction of computers and a beautiful result of the Battle of Ideas: taking computers to the mountains so that primary school children there can become informed of these developments.

The Battle of Ideas has been extended through international collaboration, I have often heard Chavez speaking of it, and Venezuela and other countries are developing ideas jointly to develop the revolution.

FRFI: One of the proposals in the draft programme of the PSUV concerns the planned economy. It says that the object is to neutralise the operation of the law of value within the economy. Can you tell us more about this and link it to Che's influence on the Bolivarian revolution?

OB: I can speak about this since I have been involved in the discussion about the model or models that might be adopted by the Bolivarian economy. Socialism as a system is very young, 90 or perhaps 100 years, counting the experience of the Soviet Union of course. In attempts to perfect such a system there have been many arguments about the experiments to date, in Russia and up until today, including us in Cuba.

I was asked to support 'Mission Che' in Venezuela, because of my experience, and was asked last year to discuss this question in the Bolivarian Assembly. The Bolivarian revolution and Chavez are very concerned with the mechanism of the market, the laws of capital, which were misinterpreted and misused in the socialist states of Europe, and which can damage the economy of the Bolivarian republic.

Of course we rejected market criteria when asked. When consulted I always agreed with Che's ideas, not because it was him but because they were always grounded in a scientific approach, an historical approach, and are decisive today in the world in helping to find the most efficient path towards socialism. Che was furious at the way the Soviet Union was moving towards a corruption of its socialist economic system and predicted in 1966 that the USSR and eastern Europe were returning to capitalism. This totally negative experience is fully understood by Chavez, he knows he cannot copy such models, use auto financing methods [as in the USSR], or simply copy other countries' experiences, including those of Cuba.

In my book *The way to Socialism [Rumbo al Socialismo Caracas 2006]*

— which I dedicated to Chavez on his presidential election victory of 2006 — I examine how Venezuela can deal with these problems and what Che thought about these things. The Bolivarian revolution has every possibility of taking advantage of the experience of all those countries that have fought for socialism. Nevertheless the case of Cuba is one where the state has remained firmly committed to defending socialism throughout its existence and Venezuela can use this experience in its own development.

FRFI: What is your evaluation of the speaking tour, and do you have a message for members of Rock around the Blockade?

OB: Well this was the most exhausting tour! We visited more than eight important cities and towns, London, Glasgow, Nottingham etc in each of which we held two or three meetings, some 15 to 20 altogether, and if we add the TV, radio and newspaper interviews that we gave, it was very intensive. I have never undertaken such an intense tour in any country!

This tour has given me great satisfaction, and the effort made has been very productive. The tour was built by a majority of young people, who were working with few resources, full of arguments and knowledge.

I always say that in such a tour as this where we are able to exchange ideas, to assess changes and developments in the world, aiming for a happier and more equal world, if we can clarify the ideas of only 10% of those we met, it will be a big achievement, and in this case I think we have achieved 100%.

I must congratulate the organisers of this tour for their hard work, the extraordinary programme they arranged. Almost all the meetings we had were full, some to overflowing with people unable to get in. I should also like to thank the Venezuelan and Cuban embassies for their support.

The tour had important results. As Cubans we thank you very much for the support received for Cuba, for supporting the Cuban 5, heroes unjustly imprisoned in the United States. I urge our comrades here in Britain — those of Rock around the Blockade — to continue their fight for unity, to become more effective. I hope that you can continue your activities with other comrades and from other countries.

The young people I toured with were very educated, very conscious, very revolutionary. If we can multiply these forces we will have completed the tasks we set ourselves.



Left to right: Orlando Borrego, Yoselin Rufin, Felix Plasencia (Venezuelan Embassy), Helen Yaffe (RATB), Jesus Garcia

'It was particularly interesting to learn about how the Cuban system of government works and how members are elected. This was quite a revelation in light of the way our media only ever talks about dictatorship in Cuba.'

Michelle, Glasgow

ROCK AROUND THE BLOCKADE SPEAKING TOUR

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JESUS GARCIA ON THE PARTY

The Cuban concept of 'party' is deeply rooted in Martí's concept of the party [from Jose Martí, Cuban national hero in the struggle against Spanish colonialism, ed]. It is not a party as an electoral instrument, nor a party as a formal instrument for the ruling of society by one particular group. Martí decided that we needed one party for the ruling of the war, and after the war to develop the new republic. Following that concept, Fidel always tried to develop a different kind of unity among revolutionaries and when the revolution won there were three forces that had supported the revolution. These three forces immediately understood that it is necessary to unite in one political party. Our party was formed in that moment.

Why in Cuba after the revolution did the other parties disappear? It is very simple: they did not have social support. They were parties supported only by the Cuban bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie either decided not to participate legally in Cuban political life or they left Cuba to become counter revolutionaries. They decided not to

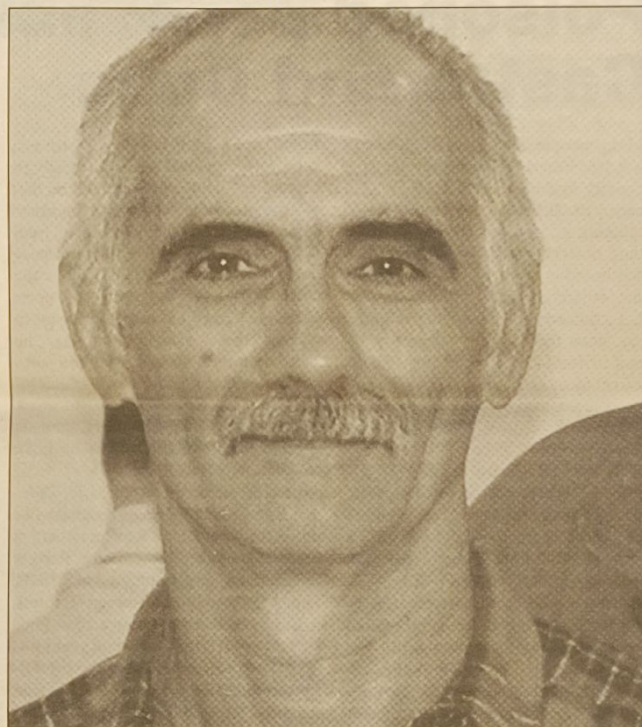
use the opportunities for participation that the Cuban revolutionary government gave from the first moment. As a result after 1959 only the three forces I spoke of remained: the Revolutionary Directorate, the Socialist Party and the 26 July Movement. After that they founded the Cuban Communist Party.

The role of this party now is the rule of society from the position of a political, ideological group. What does this mean? For instance, the decisions of the Communist Party are not obligatory for all people, even for Communist Party members, they are obligatory only in a political sense. If you disagree, the most that can happen is that you could be expelled from the Party, nothing more. The decisions of the Party are political decisions – decisions that the Party should try to enforce through the example of its militants, through creating conviction in the people, explaining why they have taken these decisions. This is different from decisions of the state that are obligatory for everyone, which are laws; if you disobey those you

could be imprisoned.

Of course the Party has another quality: authority. This is based on the example of its members and on the fact that people know its decisions are taken after a wide process of discussion, not just including Party members. For instance, at the Fourth Congress of the Party held at the beginning of the Special Period, the CP put forward a document with proposals about the changes that needed to be introduced in our society. This document was discussed with the Cuban population first, and only after this participatory process was it presented and analysed at the Party Congress and agreed. As a result of this process, people not only believe in the Party, they also feel, in some sense, part of this Party even though they are not members.

Another important point is that the Party doesn't stand in elections because in our system that is what we decided. Before 1993 the Party was head of the Candidacy Commission. After 1993 we decided that the Party would no longer be in this position. ■



DAVID YAFFE (RCG) ON BUILDING A SOCIALIST MOVEMENT

Cuba represents the vanguard in the long struggle ahead to create 'another world' – to build socialism. Cuba is in the vanguard of the world fightback against imperialism, having withstood the mightiest empire the world has ever seen for nearly 50 years. Cuba is in the process of building the most developed form of socialism that the world has experienced so far. That is why all real socialists and progressive people throughout the world give their solidarity and support to the Cuban revolution.

In imperialist Britain we can best consolidate our support for the Cuban revolution by beginning the process of building a new socialist movement here...

Throughout this tour the Cuban speakers have demonstrated Cuba's vanguard role in the global struggle to build a more just and human world – a socialist one. How can we respond to them when no real movement against imperialism exists in this country? How do we account for our failure in this country to begin to take our place

with the Cubans in this struggle for socialism? How can this situation be changed?

First we must recognise that we live in an imperialist country. Britain is a leading imperialist power and this is decisive in determining all the major economic and political developments in this country.

...As an imperialist nation Britain benefits from the super-exploitation and profits sucked out of the underdeveloped world. This allows the creation of privileged layers of the working class or a labour aristocracy bribed out of the super-profits of imperialism. This reality has had a very negative impact on the British labour movement – a movement which reflects the interests of the more privileged sections of the working class. Britain expresses this parasitism more than any other country of the world. Today Britain acts as an offshore banking centre for much of the world's capital. The City of London is at the heart of this process.

Imperialism has enabled Britain to

live well beyond its means... Labour's justification for 'humanitarian wars' and its support for military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan alongside the US is explicable in terms of the need for any bourgeois government in power to protect Britain's vital global interests.

But the gains from imperialism are spread ever more unequally, so that inequality has rapidly grown and widespread poverty has remained throughout the more than 10 years of Labour governments... The poorer sections of the working class have no political representation in this country...

The political elites, no matter what government is in power, run capitalism in the interests of the large corporations and international banks. In Britain these political elites in government have become the supine agents of the City of London. The Labour Party is no exception to this – its leaders personify parasitic capitalism...

No socialist movement can be built in this country without a total break with the rotten imperialist and racist

Labour Party. Opposing war in Iraq and Afghanistan means totally breaking with the Labour Party. Opposing racist immigration law and defending asylum seekers means totally breaking with the Labour Party. Opposing the increasing privatisation of the NHS and the state education system means totally breaking with the Labour Party.

To build a socialist movement in Britain we must support all those throughout the world resisting imperialism.

To build a socialist movement in Britain we must stand in solidarity with socialist Cuba and the developing revolutionary democratic states in Latin America.

We must start now and build a new tradition that breaks with the sectarian attitudes in the British labour and left movement. It is no longer acceptable that some who call for solidarity with Cuba can, at the same time, call for a boycott of this speaking tour...

The latest global financial crisis, triggered by the downturn in the US

housing market, threatens to halt the relentless expansion of credit that has been the driving force behind economic growth in the major capitalist countries over the last 60 years. This will have serious social consequences. In Britain the reactionary Labour government is preparing for this outcome by attacking the working class.

Labour is tightening further its brutal reactionary 'welfare to work' regime. It is cutting the wages of public sector workers. Attacks on our democratic rights to protest and organise will be strengthened. Increased surveillance and police powers will become the norm.

All these developments mean that time is not on our side. The decision to build a new socialist movement cannot be delayed.

From the Cubans we know that another world is possible – a socialist one. What can we do? If you are not in RATB join it today. If you are in RATB and not in a socialist organisation begin to work with the RCG today... ■

ROCK AROUND THE BLOCKADE SPEAKING TOUR

SOCIALISM INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

What Fidel Castro said

Given the overwhelming and vitriolic response from the British media, it would have been easy to lose sight of the essential facts about Fidel Castro's decision not to seek or accept re-election to Cuba's Council of State.

On 19 February Fidel Castro, after being nominated and elected to the Cuban National Assembly, announced that he would neither 'aspire to nor accept' re-election as president of Cuba's Council of State due to continuing health problems. It is important to note this was the appropriate time in Cuba's electoral process for this decision to be made public. In July

2006 Fidel Castro had temporarily stepped down from most of his duties as head of the Council of State due to ill health.

On 24 February, the following Sunday, the new National Assembly Council of State from among its members. '[I]t would be a betrayal to my conscience to accept a responsibility requiring more mobility and dedication than I am physically able to offer' wrote Fidel in a letter published in *Granma*, the newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party. The vote at the National Assembly followed and Raul Castro was elected President

of the Council of State (the de-facto President of Cuba).

During his recovery from the serious health complications of last year, Fidel Castro has been writing for *Granma* on diverse topics, from biofuels and the environment to the candidates in the US primaries. In his announcement in February he pledged to continue this role, drawing on a lifetime's experience of revolutionary leadership: 'My only wish is to fight as a soldier in the battle of ideas. I shall continue to write under the heading of "Reflections by comrade Fidel". It will be just another weapon you can count on'.

Poisoned pens: abusing Castro and Cuba

'Many people in the world not only lack freedom of thought but also the capacity to think, because it has been destroyed. Billions of human beings, including a large percentage of those living in developed societies, are told what brand of soda they should drink, what cigarettes they should smoke, what clothes and shoes they should wear, what they should eat and what brand of food they should buy. Their political ideas are supplied in the same way.' Fidel Castro 1 June 2000, cited by Nelson P Valdes, *Counterpunch*, 17 March 2008.

When Fidel Castro wrote, 'I will neither aspire to nor accept the position of President of the Council of State and Commander in Chief' on 18 February 2008 it drew the predictable response of anticipation from the Miami counter-revolutionaries. President Bush declared: 'The international community should work with the Cuban people to begin to build institutions that are necessary for democracy.' The British government solemnly reiterated: 'Our position on Cuba is a long-standing one, which is that we have always sought to encourage a peaceful transition to democracy in Cuba.' It is to be expected that these contemporary representatives of the class that tried to 'strangle Bolshevism at birth' (Churchill) will use any opportunity to denigrate the Cuban revolution. Castro's decision is revealing: the British media planned a deluge of misinformation. It is psychological warfare; a propaganda blockade. Their formulations are stereotypes intended to prevent thought and are repeated by what passes for the progressive and left media in Britain.

In 1897 William Randolph Hearst, owner of the *New York Journal*, sent a cable to his Havana correspondent, 'You furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war.' The picture was furnished and the US duly acquired Cuba.

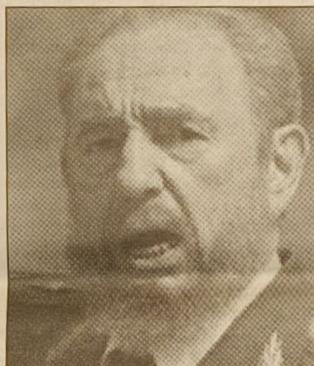
The major British newspapers are controlled by monopoly corporations. *The Independent* is considered a liberal newspaper; its 20 February edition devoted seven pages to Castro's decision not to stand for election. *The Independent* belongs to a group that owns 200 media titles and whose leading shareholder is Sir Tony O'Reilly, billionaire and former chief executive of the US food corporation Heinz. The

main article sets the tone: 'Castro is a relic of a vanished age and fossilised revolution,' and proceeds to claim that 'Castro's regime holds large numbers of political prisoners, suppresses freedom of expression and otherwise tramples on human rights'. Does the writer of these words, Rupert Cornwell, provide any evidence to support these accusations? Has he ever attempted to research the substance or otherwise of these denunciations? No! A journalist who in other circumstances appears intelligent is obliged to parrot this. Does he have any shame?

In the same issue of *The Independent* Elizabeth Nash recounts her time in Havana working as a researcher for the Labour Party's international department in 1979, under the standard heading 'I shook hands - then sat through a nine-hour speech'; 'To their [Cuban communists'] unease, I chummed up with fellow social democrats including the recently installed Grenadian prime minister Maurice Bishop, shortly to be assassinated after US troops invaded his island...' Not one to let facts get in the way of her purpose (Bishop was killed before the US invaded and was a close ally of the Cuban revolution), Nash tells of meeting a Cuban who had heard of the Sandinistas' overthrow of Somoza in Nicaragua and hoped that the same might happen in Cuba. This preposterous equation of Castro with Somoza is an insult to the Sandinistas who in 1979 and today look to Cuba and Castro for inspiration.

On *The Independent's* comment pages the SWP's humourist Mark Steel descended to the clichéd heading 'So, farewell, Fidel - but please don't give a speech', cue for canned laughter. Steel repeats criticisms of Cuba so commonplace as to be presumed factual: 'It's true that there's no legal opposition permitted in the country, that independent trade unions are illegal, and the poor are kept away from areas where they might put off tourists.' This no doubt satisfies his paymaster, but Steel reveals a disregard for Cuba that is politically inspired and serves a privileged class interest.

Ignorance compounded by arrogance
The Socialist Worker of 1 March 2008



felt compelled to condense as many of the caricatures of Cuba as could possibly be got into one article. Thus we have 'While ordinary Cubans did not play much of a role in the 1959 revolution,' (a demonstrable falsehood)... 'All the paraphernalia of a Communist one-party state came with the package, including exclusive facilities and relatively high living standards for Communist Party leaders,' (what facilities and what privileges? None are ever identified). 'Today Cuba's economy is far from being a socialist paradise, with a thriving black market and widespread prostitution...' 'Once a revolution with mass popular backing, if not mass popular participation, it became a stagnant hierarchy with authoritarian control', and so on. Peter Taaffe in *The Socialist* (29 February 2008), falsely implies that all Cubans elected to office are 'from just one party' and concludes, 'Steps should be taken now to organise a mass campaign in Cuba to prepare the ground for real workers' democracy.'

Taaffe, the SWP and *The Independent*, the British government and President Bush might as well be reading from the same script. It is arrogant, ignorant and chauvinist. For the bourgeoisie to lie about Cuba is consistent with their class interests. When much of the British left displays the same disdain for finding out the facts about Cuba and giving them serious consideration, it reveals that they are imbued with the same chauvinism as the British ruling class. This is the same British left that supported the reactionary Solidarnosc in Poland and counter-revolutionary mujahedeen in Afghanistan and cheered the collapse of the Soviet Union.

YOSELIN RUFIN



'My impression is that young people in Britain are excluded from political life and, in most cases, social life. They are not an important priority for this government. Not everyone has the opportunity to study and to gain further knowledge. They can live however and wherever and no one cares. I think that in future projects, if you [RATB] organise another tour, the most important thing is for young people to be informed about what is happening in Cuba and the role of young people there. Young Cubans take decisions about things that affect them; 25% of the national assembly is made up of students of our universities.'

Castro's lengthy speeches warrant study not sneering contempt. This is a leader who believes that the Cuban people require information and analysis if they are to be able to build socialism; the method of government is far from the stereotype of dictatorship that the left presents. Castro and the Cuban Communists have maintained a dialogue with the Cuban people. When the government was forced to retreat from socialist measures they did not make a virtue of it; they recognised the retreat and called it by its name, the better to debate and advance when circumstances allowed. The Cuban government and people have not 'fossilised' the revolution in dogma nor do they turn the Party and its leaders into icons for worship. Problems are identified, discussed and confronted - not all have easy solutions. Given the constant US threat to Cuba, the attempts to assassinate Castro, the invasion, bomb attacks, sabotage, biological warfare and

attempted economic strangulation of the revolution, state repression of counter-revolution is necessary. Anyone who has met the Cuban people in Cuba understands that it is precisely the political consciousness of the Cuban working class and their control of the Cuban state that has maintained the Cuban revolution in the face of terrific opposition from abroad.

We ask those people who are interested in building socialism to have the humility and integrity to recognise that we must study if we want to understand; that no blueprint for building socialism has been laid down. Reject the standard formulas that are supplied. For as long as imperialism exists it is certain that all steps forward risk being driven into reverse, even so far as to capitalist restoration. Only by continuing to build socialism can Cuban independence and the gains achieved thus far be maintained. The Cuban people and government know this.

Trevor Rayne

'It helped me understand about Cuban elections and how they work, what the universities and health care were like. Even though it is a poor country, no one is starving. And there is a sense of community, no one is out for themselves. It's really made me want to get to know more about what is happening in Latin America.'
Sandra, student, Liverpool meeting

Venezuela – PSUV founding conference success

'Throughout this period of transition, which at this moment marches from a state capitalism dominated by market forces towards a state socialism with a regulated market, the aim is to move towards a communal state socialism, with the strategic objective of totally neutralising the law of value within the functioning economy'. (Draft Programme of the United Socialist party of Venezuela, paragraph II.4)

The United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) was established in April 2007 to unite all the pro-Chavez forces that have emerged during the political revolution that has taken place over the last ten years. By June 2007, some 5.7 million people had joined the party. It had originally planned to hold its founding congress in October. However its members postponed the congress so as to campaign for the amendments to the Constitution put to the December referendum. The narrow defeat in the referendum was certainly a consequence of the absence of a functioning mass working class party. This is clear from the intense efforts President Chavez is making to build the party on a socialist programme. The founding conference thus began on 12 January and, with meetings all across the country, finished on 2 March. At the final meeting President Chavez argued that the party must unite different groups and consolidate a mass base among the poor that support the revolution: the party's fundamental role is to guarantee the revolution's permanence.

The last weekend in February saw Chavez elected president of the party with the power to appoint five vice presidents, the first of whom was retired General Alberto Muller Rojas who headed the successful 1998 presidential campaign. On 1-2 March, 16,071 delegates approved a programme and declaration of principles for the new party. The whole process was complete when on 9 March 90,000 spokespeople and alternate spokespeople elected 15 delegates and 15 alternate delegates to a national directorate, as well as five heads of commissions. The spokespeople had themselves been elected by local aggregates of 7-12 branches or battalions of which there are over 12,000. Great efforts had been made to ensure a really democratic process throughout.

Muller Rojas noted that 'you cannot construct a party in one year — we have a multitude of 5.7 million people who enrolled in the party and it will take years to build such a party, particularly given the lack of political culture, after 40 or 50 years of the exclusion of the majority from politics'. There is an



Chavez and supporters, 2006

active concern among party members about the need to fight 'bureaucratism', and about the dangers of a long culture of corruption and clientelism within the country. Muller Rojas announced the forthcoming inauguration of a PSUV publishing house - funded by members - to support the study of history and the revolutionary process, and the training of party cadres.

There is both a call for unity amongst the 20 different groups that have

merged into the PSUV, and a call to respect the many currents outside the party, such as indigenous movements and student groups. Chavez has withdrawn his criticism of the Communist Party and 'Homeland For All' for not joining the PSUV. There is also a call for an alliance of the left in Latin America to defend it from US imperialism. The growing threat from the US — its recent provocative military acts alongside the Colombian regime, its

joint naval exercises with Colombian forces, the reinforcement of its fleet and bases in Curacao, the defamation campaign against the Venezuelan government, its financing of opposition activities of all sorts, its promotion of separation for the state of Zulia, demonstrate the accuracy of Chavez's observations and the coherence of his international strategy.

The process of building from below is now to be supported by a new 'Mission 13 April' and a programme for the formation of socialist communities mooted during the constitutional reform attempt last December. These are communities that collectively manage and operate productive enterprises. On 17 March Chavez stated 'We have to aim at the base of the economy, from the bottom up... We have to multiply this, and put the means of production into the hands of the people.' From mid-March nearly two thousand community projects will be granted the equivalent of \$186 million. Most of these projects involve repairing or building new infrastructure, including water and irrigation systems, and the formation of new communal economic enterprises. Chavez insisted that 'Every penny, every credit that we give out has to go towards the construction of a socialist model. But we have to plan it, and it should be accompanied with socialist ideology.' In the face of the most recent US attempts to provoke war in the region, domestic construction must go hand in hand with internationalism. 'The conclusion is clear: in order to end poverty, it is necessary to give power to the poor and build socialism; to impede war, it is necessary to end imperialism.' (Draft Declaration of Principles of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, paragraph 3)

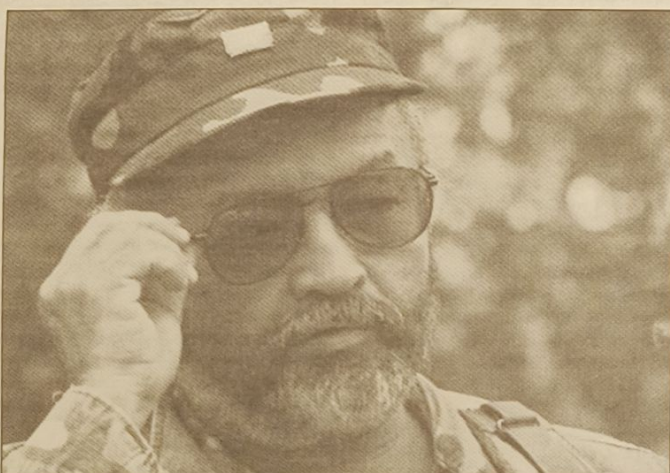
Alvaro Michaels

US-Colombian warmongers

On 1 March two members of the FARC-EP Central High Command, Raul Reyes and Julian Conrado, and twenty three other members of the 48th Front were butchered inside Ecuador. At least five smart bombs exploded within a 50-metre radius during a night attack, an impossible achievement for the Colombian Air Force. Two days before the attack, US Admiral Joseph Nimmich met with Colombian military leaders in Bogota with the stated purpose of 'sharing vital information in the fight against terrorism.' US intelligence located the base after Reyes used his satellite phone to arrange the goodwill release of four prisoners — ex-members of the Colombian Congress — to Venezuelan officials two days earlier. Chavez described Colombia as the 'Israel of Latin America'.

Last November Uribe shamelessly bombed the location of a meeting between Reyes and Senator Piedad Cordoba, a Colombian Congress representative, just after it had ended. Despite this, Reyes, the lead contact in negotiations for the exchange of prisoners of war, subsequently released two prisoners: Clara Rojas — ex-vice presidential candidate — and Consuelo Gonzalez — ex-Congress member — to Red Cross and Venezuelan government delegates, inside Colombia on 10 January. To exhibit goodwill, Chavez had also released Colombian paramilitaries arrested in 2004 as they prepared terrorist actions in Venezuela.

All Venezuela and FARC's sincere attempts to restart negotiations to end the civil war in Colombia have been cynically abused by Uribe's gangster government. Colombian Police General Oscar Naranjo — who previously resigned as anti-drug chief when his brother was arrested for trafficking in Germany — claimed they had captured Reyes's laptop with 'proof' of both Ecuador and Venezuela's financial and other dealings with FARC. (Greg Palast exposes these claims at <http://www.gregpalast.com/300-million-from-chavez-to-farc-a-fake/#more-1>). Both countries have ridiculed the charges, including the idiotic charge that FARC seeks nuclear weapons which followed the sudden 'discovery' of 66lbs of natural uranium



Raul Reyes of the FARC

by the roadside south of Bogota. As Ecuador's President Correa said, 'It is difficult to speak with someone who constantly lies and when he is exposed, invents a new infamy.' Uribe then called for President Chavez to be taken to the International Criminal Court for Crimes against Humanity and Genocide. This was outrageous hypocrisy: in 2002, Uribe set a seven year waiting period for the investigation of crimes committed by pro-state paramilitaries in Colombia to give them time to escape.

Venezuela and Ecuador reacted immediately to the incursion into Ecuador's territory, sending troops to their Colombian borders, whilst Chavez warned that any further incursion would be a cause for war. The majority of other Latin American States also condemned the attack. The Rio Group of 20 states debated the matter at a previously-scheduled meeting in the Dominican Republic on 7 March and rejected the Colombian attack. Uribe told a meeting of his party leaders that

he would do the same again and that the Rio Group declaration 'was nothing more than a pantomime.'

The same day, Colombian Defence Minister Santos announced that a third FARC Comandante, Ivan Rios, had been assassinated on 4 March by a man called Rojas, an alleged FARC traitor. But an anonymous official had previously reported Comandante Rios's death as the result of an assault carried out by an elite wing of the Colombian army. It is apparent that Uribe's clique is lying wholesale in order to conceal US military management and to try to demoralise FARC.

A week later, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Chile and Brazil to get support for Washington's position on Colombia's attack. In Brazil she proposed the 'flexibilization of borders', to allow the Colombian military to combat groups like the FARC outside its territory. President Lula flatly rejected this. On 18 March, the foreign ministers of the Organisation of American States (OAS) approved a resolution ratifying the declaration of the Rio Group considering the incursion a 'clear violation' of articles 19 and 21 of the OAS Charter. State officials from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Peru condemned the assault. US representative Negroponte said the US 'supported' the resolution in order to 'build trust between Colombia and Ecuador' yet argued that Colombia's military incursion was 'legitimate defence.' In the meantime, following Uribe's claims about supposed Venezuelan links with FARC, the Bush administration launched a preliminary legal inquiry that could put Venezuela on the US list of nations that support terrorism.

If this pretext for sanctions and embargoes against the Bolivarian republic succeeds, it will severely limit the ability of US firms to do business with Caracas while making it nearly impossible for Venezuela to export oil to the United States or import vital spare parts. This would force an acceleration

of the Bolivarian revolution and expose the growing conflicts within the US economy.

FARC's aims

FARC wants to re-establish a military free zone to re-open discussions on a peaceful solution to the Colombian civil war. Uribe wants only the strengthening of the state and the destruction of his opponents. Yet he cannot destroy FARC or the other democrats opposing his government. Indeed opposition is growing. Once back in Bogota Consuelo Gonzalez said she would devote all her efforts to facilitate the exchange of a further 45 prisoners held by FARC for 500 guerrillas held in Colombian prisons, a process in which she said President Chavez has a vital role to play. She and the families of prisoners held by FARC refused to join the state and business sponsored anti-FARC marches on 4 February. On 6 February a large demonstration against state and paramilitary violence was held in the capital.

Uribe is now faced with even more pressure from prisoners' families to enter wider formal discussions. Killing the key FARC contact was his answer, but the majority of Colombians see this as a blow to hopes for peace. Chavez has called for an internationally-mediated solution to the conflict with the recognition, as a first step, of FARC and Colombia's second largest guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), as belligerent forces. FARC and the ELN were listed as 'terrorist' by the USA only after 9/11, after 40 years of civil war. As Chavez said... 'if it is necessary to have a terrorist list, then that list should be headed by the US government because of its illegal invasion and massacre of innocent civilians in Iraq.' Uribe is caught: he cannot defeat FARC and the democratic forces against him, but neither can he make concessions to them since it would expose the brutality of the Colombian ruling class.

Alvaro Michaels

BBC Two's 'White Season'

What exactly did BBC Two intend to do in its 'White Season'? Why did they organise a survey, not randomly as claimed, but aimed at white people with a very specific question about being 'voiceless' and unrepresented. Was it to manipulate the message that people in Britain feel that 'nobody speaks for them' and that they are 'becoming invisible' in order to serve the purpose of a race and not a class agenda? The 'White Season' was launched by a discussion based on a small telephone poll of 1,012 white British adults aged 18+ which showed that 58% of white working class people felt nobody speaks for people like them and 46% of white middle class people felt the same. *Newsnight* guest speaker Bob Crow of the RMT energetically agreed that the Labour government and the media do not represent the interests of, and in fact attack, the working class but, he asserted, this is entirely a matter of class, not of race.

BBC2, however, clearly had an agenda to view the white British working class as particular victims of neglect and dispossession by the Labour government. This is the political stance of not only the British National Party but of an increasing section of the media and professional class who have historically played exactly this role of encouraging and justifying the racism of others.

The series kicked off with a documentary about Enoch Powell's 1968 speech against immigration from the British Commonwealth in which he predicted that 'in 15 or 20 years the



Demonstrators protesting against Enoch Powell

black man will have the whip hand over the white man' and 'rivers of blood would be shed'. Then, as now, racists protest that they are not allowed to say what they think and Powell was congratulated 40 years ago for 'daring to speak out'. The BBC 'White Season' was promoted on this idea of fearless 'speaking out'. The series was anchored by a much repeated trailer which shows a shaven-headed man's face being blacked up

with writing by brown hands over the words, 'Is the white working class in Britain becoming invisible?' What emerged from the series of documentaries is that the white working class are, some of them, old and grumpily retired in *Wibsey's Working Men's Club*; young and unemployed in Peterborough where equally white eastern European casual, seasonal workers do the unwanted agri-business jobs of harvesting and packing;

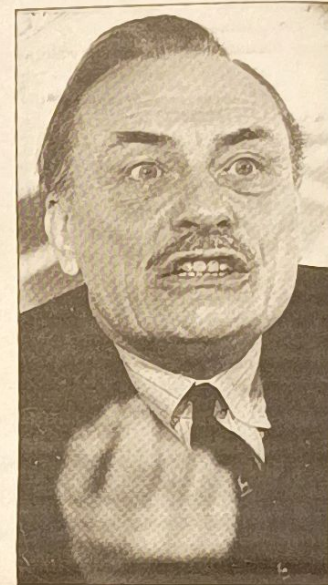
hardly present in the multicultural primary school in Birmingham which has never had more than 10 white children on its register at a time; dysfunctional in *Moving On* where a young girl embraces the Islam of her school friends as a sanctuary from a chaotic world; and neighbourly in *All White in Barking* where an English and an African couple become friendly and even the BNP activist has an Anglo/Nigerian grandchild. Then there is the Jewish social club of 50 years standing whose members have mixed views about old Monty and his live-in carer/girlfriend Betty from Uganda. 'Invisible' does not even rate in this.

The most opportunistic racist game of all was to call a documentary on Easington in County Durham, *The Whitest Place in Britain*. White had nothing to do with it. This ex-mining village could have been named as the most shamefully abandoned and depopulated working class community in Britain. The fate of Easington represents an attack on whole sections of the British working class who are alienated as a result of the closure of entire industries, the rundown of manufacturing and council housing, the assault on trade unions and the deregulation of the labour market. Instead of showing what results from the British ruling class homage to big business and privatisation, the BBC provides a running commentary on the racial composition of a defeated community.

Michael Moore, the director of *Sicko* and *Bowling for Columbine*, among other films, published a best seller in 2002 called *Stupid White Men*. His targets were the neo-conservatives, Bush, Rumsfeld, Cheney and

their associates whose politics are dominated by militarism, greed and power. He happily included both Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice in the Stupid White Men class of person. The BBC Two's 'White Season' could have targeted the parallel folk and institutions in Britain dominated by the equally stupid white ruling class which would include the judiciary, the armed forces, the civil service and indeed the BBC itself. It still remains a puzzle why the 'White Season' flirted with the provocative suggestion that Enoch Powell represents the ideals of 'free speech'. Are they stupid?

Susan Davidson



Enoch Powell

Health, human rights and the United Nations

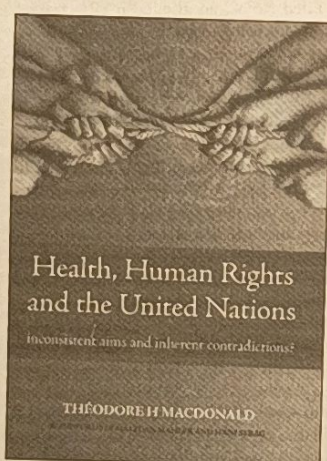
Theodore H MacDonald, *Health, human rights and the United Nations – inconsistent aims and inherent contradictions?* Radcliffe Publishing Ltd 2008 ISBN-13: 078 1 84619 241 8, 196 pages

This book follows *Health, trade and human rights* (ISBN 1-84619-050-9) 2006, and *The global human right to health – dream or possibility?* (ISBN 978-1-84619-201-2), 2007. Forthcoming is *Sacrificing the WHO to the highest bidder*. This publication rate is in keeping with Theodore MacDonald's over 200 research papers and over 40 books (from which he draws no financial gain) reflecting his life-long commitment to human rights and immense contribution to health promotion and public health, emphasising that without primary health care for all, nothing else is achievable.

Imperialism's barbaric practices are meticulously documented, using easily accessible examples. MacDonald ensures that revolutionary Cuba is prominent in the discussion of alternative ways of organising society in the interests of the people and that socialism is on the agenda.

Health, human rights and the United Nations gives the history of the establishment of the UN, its initial declarations, aims and objectives, the other organisations that have come under its umbrella and the political and economic forces at play that stop the objectives' achievement. This is set in the context of the most basic levels of health access for the world's population, which are as far away as ever from attainment.

The 1948 Universal Declaration of



Human Rights at the establishment of the UN and the setting up of the World Health Organisation (WHO) aimed to promote and defend global access to primary health care as a basis for all other human rights and personal dignity. The 1978 Alma Ata Declaration recognised that the barriers to adequate health are economic and political rather than clinical.

The WHO was developed to ensure that the UN's basic declarations could be safeguarded, enable access to primary health care for all, eradicate diseases and promote public health; similar agencies were UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) and UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation).

Other agencies came under the umbrella of the UN: the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade

Organisation (WTO). MacDonald shows how these prevent UN goals from being achieved.

The WB's and IMF's Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) force oppressed nations to cut back on publicly funded services such as health and education as a condition for loans. This has slowed progress towards achieving the 1973 Health For All campaign's 38 targets by 2000. Former UN general secretary Kofi Annan introduced the Millennium Developmental Goals in 2000 to try and prevent the WHO being undermined.

The WTO has controlled global trade through the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). Trade is organised against the poorer nations through protectionist tariffs and these have a direct impact on health. The effect of TRIPS, 'a radical re-interpretation of patent law', is illustrated by the pharmaceutical companies who produce anti-retroviral drugs for those with HIV/AIDS too expensive for the majority of affected countries to buy. However, when India and Brazil produced a generic version at 5% of the cost, TRIPS restricted the sale.

MacDonald details human rights abuses: child soldiers, sexual abuse by UN personnel, human trafficking, and shows how the failure of the UN to protect human rights has led to its undermining, and the encouragement of NGOs.

A chapter deals with Britain's appalling record on human rights. The arms trade promoting more effective ways of killing; the treatment of asylum seekers; Britain's involvement in people trafficking and the Labour government's contempt for the Human Rights Act when it did not fit its military and political objectives. A UNICEF 2007 report found that 'the

human rights of British children were more seriously violated than any of the other 21 developed nations studied' with unacceptable levels of poverty and low aspirations for their future, deprived in affection, education, materially and socially;

Despite the WHO's achievements, 17 million people still die every year from infectious diseases. MacDonald

asks whether the structure of the UN will allow the WHO to fulfill the Health For All mandate and concludes that reforming or replacing the UN will not solve the problems of manipulation and domination of corporate interests. What is needed is a 'socially responsive philosophy, essentially egalitarian and socialist in its world view'.

Hannah Caller

Obituary – Brendan Hughes

Irish revolutionary (1948-2008)

IRA commander in Belfast and leader of the H-Block prisoners

Brendan Hughes dedicated his life to the fight against British imperialism in Ireland. Born in the Grosvenor Road area of West Belfast in 1948, he was first arrested by the British army while in Aden with the merchant navy on suspicion of being an 'Arab terrorist'. From 1969, he understood the need to defend nationalist areas from British army and loyalist attack; he joined the Provisional IRA in the early 1970s, becoming a skilled street fighter, his unit carrying out five or six attacks in a day at the peak of the armed confrontation with the British army in the 1970s.

Arrested alongside current Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams in May 1973 and interned without trial, he was held in the cages of Long Kesh until his escape in October 1973. Outside he assumed a new identity and resumed active service with the IRA, directing and leading operations from a house in the middle class Malone area of South Belfast. In May 1974 he was captured again by the British army and served over 12 years in prison. Whilst inside, Brendan took on a leadership role among Republican prisoners and pitted himself and his comrades against the British Labour government's attempts to criminalise the Irish national liberation struggle. He was among hundreds of political prisoners who took part in the five year long struggle from May 1976 for political status which involved the no wash and blanket protests. In October 1980 Brendan led the first hunger strike for 53 days before it was ended in December. Brendan never fully recovered from his hunger strike and suffered from a variety of heart and vision problems and arthritis.

On his release from the H-Blocks in 1986, Brendan resumed active service with the IRA. His role within the movement continued to be a military one overseeing arms smuggling. A dedicated socialist, Brendan attempted to organise his fellow workers against low pay and conditions on the building sites of West Belfast. In recent years he became one of the most principled and articulate opponents of the so called Irish peace process. Asked in 2000 if he were satisfied with the outcome of the struggle and the peace process, Brendan stated, 'No. I do not feel any satisfaction whatsoever. All the questions raised in the course of this struggle have not been answered and the republican struggle has not been concluded. The things which we cherished such as a thirty two county democratic socialist republic are no longer mentioned.'

Brendan Hughes died as he lived, an unrepentant Irish revolutionary.

Paul Mallon

British prisons brutalise working class children

Britain has a long, pernicious history of brutalising working class children confined to state institutions, so it was hardly surprising when an amendment to the rules governing 'secure training centres' was introduced, widening the use of so-called 'physical control in care restraint techniques', one of which authorised staff to inflict blows to children's faces, euphemistically called the 'nose distraction technique'. A recent legal challenge was partially successful in that the court found the rules were amended on the basis of 'flawed and unlawful decision making'; however it did not agree to quash them.

The use of overt physical violence to control socially marginalised children is nothing new and for decades Borstals and Detention Centres operated regimes designed to teach a 'tough lesson' based on fear and intimidation. The death of a child in the Reading Detention Centre in the late 1960s partially exposed the regime of terror, although the state was careful to maintain the illusion that it neither sanctioned nor created the violence. More recently the extraordinarily high incidence of suicides, self-harm and suspicious deaths in Feltham Young Offenders Institute suggest that intimidation and brutality remain standard.

methods. Subsequently children's minister Beverley Hughes announced that she was suspending the methods pending a report by a panel of medical experts. Her concern was obviously not based on moral reservations, but simply possible legal consequences.

In October 2007 the Prison Officers Association offered its own enlightened contribution by calling for a change in the rules to allow prison staff to use batons on children as young as 15.

The psychological damage to children in custody is well-researched; 85% of young prisoners show signs of personality disorder, with 10% exhibiting signs of severe psychotic illness such as schizophrenia. Into this mix of mental suffering and pain the state wants to throw some good old-fashioned physical brutality. This is systemic child abuse and thousands of working class children are irreparably damaged by it.

Usually keen to whip up hysteria and hatred against child abusers when campaigning for tougher laws, the media have remained consistently quiet about the abuse of children in closed institutions. The number of 15-17 year-olds in prison custody has increased by 86% since Labour took office. Each year over 70,000 children are dealt with through the criminal



Hassockfield Secure Training Centre - where Adam Rickwood died

Thirty children have died in custody since 1990; the youngest, Adam Rickwood, was just 14. Over a third of boys and girls in custody have felt unsafe at some time; one in ten say they have been hit, kicked or assaulted by a member of staff.

Traditionally the state has never publicly admitted to deliberate violence in subduing 'disruptive' children, which is why the statute authorising overt brutality was so disquieting and shocking. More liberal elements in government, in the form of the Parliamentary Joint Committee On Human Rights, announced a review of such 'restraint'

justice system and around 12,000 incarcerated in institutions that are no more than training grounds for the adult prison system.

This represents the wholesale destruction of young working class lives in the interests of a system that is itself inherently anti-social and predatory towards the poor and powerless. The imprisonment of children is barbaric and one of the worst forms of state cruelty, and unless we campaign against it we are all in some way complicit.

John Bowden,
Noranside Prison, Scotland

Free Mumia Abu-Jamal! No to the racist death penalty!



On 27 March the Third Circuit Court of Appeals in Philadelphia upheld the conviction of former Black Panther Mumia Abu-Jamal, rejected an application for a

fresh trial and ordered instead a new sentencing hearing to decide whether Mumia will be resented to die or condemned to life imprisonment.

Mumia was framed for the murder of a Philadelphia police officer in 1981. The courts have refused to admit a wealth of evidence that proves his innocence. His case dramatically illustrates the racism of the US justice system and particularly the use of the death penalty.

Protests took place around the world against the new decision. In London RCG comrades attended the US embassy protest organised by the Partisan Defense Committee. Further protests are planned for 12 April.

Free the Lucasville Five!

'They rose above their status as prisoners, and became, for a few days ... what rebels in Attica had demanded a generation before them: men. As such, they did not betray each other; they did not dishonour each other; they reached beyond their prison "tribes" to reach commonality.' Mumia Abu-Jamal

On 11 April 1993 prisoners at the South Ohio Correctional Facility (SOCF) at Lucasville began a protest which would become one of the longest in US history. Fifteen years later, five participants remain on death row. NICKI JAMESON reports.

Lucasville

As with almost every prison uprising, the protest at Lucasville arose from a period of increasing abuse of prisoners by the authorities. In 1990 a new warden Arthur Tate had been appointed with a remit to exert authoritarian control. Tate cut privileges and educational programmes and began canvassing prisoners to inform on one another.

Massive problems were also caused by overcrowding and enforced cell-sharing. Lucasville was intended to house 1,540 prisoners; when the uprising began, it held 1,820, with 820 doubled up. Many of the complaints about doubling up came from prisoners, both black and white, forced to share with prisoners of a different race. The prison was a dangerous place, with a high level of violence, and many prisoners, who would not otherwise have joined a gang, particularly not one organised along racial or racist lines, did so purely for protection and safety.

The uprising

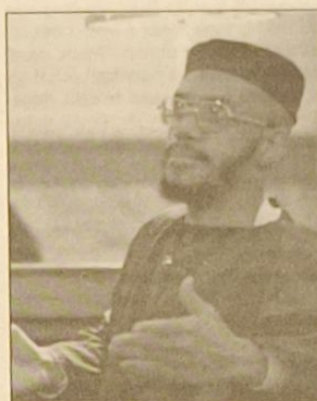
The specific event that sparked the uprising was Tate's announcement that all prisoners would be tested for TB using a method that involved injecting under the skin a substance which many Muslim prisoners believed contained alcohol. Representatives of the Muslims met Tate and requested an alternative method. Tate did not back down and made it clear that testing would be done by force.

With battle lines drawn, Tate left the prison for the weekend. Again in common with many large-scale prison uprisings, such as that at Strangeways, Manchester in 1990, many commentators believe he expected a protest to take place that would be relatively small and would assist him in requesting more money and resources from the state.

Muslim prisoners did indeed plan a small protest to highlight Tate's intransigence over the TB testing. They planned to take some guards hostage for a short while, without injuring them, and use them as leverage to allow them to contact higher administration and the media. A similar strategy had worked a few years earlier. However, they had not reckoned on the effect of years of pent-up frustration on all sections of the prison population. The protest escalated rapidly: keys were seized from guards and prisoners freed from their cells; guards were beaten as well as captured; prisoners who had been informants were attacked and nine were killed. In his informative book, from which most of this article is drawn, Staughton Lynd writes that 'The word used by almost every participant to describe these first hours of the uprising is "chaos".'

The 'convict race'

Just over half of Lucasville prisoners were black. The majority of the



Siddique Abdullah Hasan

remainder came from poor white communities. Neither group was used to living in a racially integrated situation and both perceived the other with suspicion. According to Lynd 'Once the uprising began, the overriding problem for the prisoners in rebellion was that what had begun as a protest against the authorities might turn into a race riot among prisoners.' However, what emerged from the deeply divided prison groupings was a common bond - a shared struggle against shared grievances.

As soon as it was apparent that this was a major disturbance that would not be over in a matter of hours, prisoners began to organise food, medical care, security and internal communication. Lynd writes that representatives of the three organised groups (Muslims, Black Gangster Disciples and Aryan Brotherhood) set aside their differences and 'began to meet to deal with problems arising from the uprising and to find a strategy to end it'. They discussed demands including replacement of Tate, improved medical care, alternative methods of TB testing, ending overcrowding and forced cell-sharing, a promised annual Christmas phone-call, no persecution of perceived ring-leaders. Graffiti written in the prison during the protest reads: 'Black and White Together 11 Days', 'Convict Unity' and 'Convict Race'.

On 15 April the prisoners sent two men - one black, one white - to attempt to negotiate with the guards. The white negotiator, George Skatzes, spoke through a megaphone, saying: 'We are oppressed people, we have come together as one. We are brothers...we are a unit here, they try to make this a racial issue. It is not a racial issue. Black and white alike have joined hands in SOCF and become one strong unit.'

But the state blocked and delayed negotiations, and cut off the electricity and water to the prisoners. The state evidence against four of the Lucasville Five claims that 'gang leaders' then met and decided that if power and water were not restored, they would kill a guard hostage. There is no evidence of such a decision being made at any meeting. Lynd writes that '...when a guard was in fact killed that morning, it was not as a result of the morning meeting but because a group of prisoners, in a rogue action, took the matter into their own hands.'

The prison authorities did then negotiate and on 18 April Arthur Tate

signed a 21-point agreement, which was a watered-down version of a list of prisoners' demands submitted to him. On 21 April the remaining hostages were released and 407 prisoners surrendered.

The Lucasville Five

The state was desperate to break the precarious unity that had been forged and exact revenge for the death of Officer Vallandigham. Police officers set about playing classic mind-games on those seen as leading protagonists, attempting to persuade them others had already 'snitched' and they could only save themselves from death sentences by doing likewise.

The Lucasville Five are three black men, Siddique Abdullah Hasan, Namir Abdul Mateen and Bomani Shakur, and two white men, George Skatzes and Jason Robb. They face the death penalty because they were among those who tried to negotiate a peaceful end to the revolt and because they did not give in to the pressure to inform on others.

Their trials were held in a racist atmosphere, as Siddique Hasan has described '...the State's fear and hatred of my religion... became evident when, during the course of my trial in Cincinnati, the State repeatedly focused on my race, religion and Islamic attire - all to create an atmosphere of racial prejudice and Islamophobia before a predominantly white and Catholic jury'. The capital trials were held in front of 'death qualified' juries; that is juries made up of people who had already testified that they were not against the death penalty.

Four of the Lucasville Five are now at Youngstown 'supermax' prison, where they are kept in solitary confinement for 23 hours a day in concrete cells measuring 7½ x 11 feet.

The Five all have pending appeals in the Federal District Court. Several others who were sentenced to life imprisonment have no appeals left and will only be freed if the Parole Board directs their release. Campaigners are calling for an amnesty for all those sentenced for allegedly participating in the Lucasville uprising.

For more information read Staughton Lynd's book *Lucasville - the untold story of a prison uprising* Temple University Press, 2004.

For updates on the continuing campaign to free the Lucasville Five, go to <http://freehasan.org> or <http://www.prisonersolidarity.org/lucasville.htm>

You can write to the Lucasville Five:
Siddique Abdullah Hasan # R130-559,
Bomani Shakur (aka Keith Lamar) #317-117,
Jason Robb #308-919
Namir Abdul Mateen (aka James Were) #173-245
Ohio State Penitentiary
878 Coltsville-Hubbard Road
Youngstown OH 44505-4635, USA.

George Skatzes #173-501
Mansfield Correctional Institute
PO Box 788
Mansfield OH 44901-0788, USA

FRFI ROUNDUP

As well as helping to organise the RATB Speaking Tour (see pages 7-10) FRFI members and supporters have been on the streets campaigning against the actions of the racist Labour government at home and abroad.

Defend asylum seekers!

In Manchester the North West Asylum Seekers Defence Group (NWASDG) has held a number of recent events including a well-attended organising meeting and a street theatre event where the lies told by the mainstream media about asylum seekers were exposed. On 22 March a street event in Longsight attracted support from many different communities including Iranian, Turkish, Somali and Kosovan. In London FRFI members have supported the struggle of the Harmondsworth Four for justice (see p16 for details) and have continued the monthly demonstrations of Communications House, the reporting centre for asylum seekers.

ganising Group. We encourage anyone interested in getting involved to attend the first meeting (see events for details).

Stop the war!

On 15 March FRFI activists joined the Stop the War demonstrations around the country to mark the 5th anniversary of the invasion of Iraq by the US and British forces. At the main march in London our loud anti-imperialist contingent was joined by Turkish communists from the MLKP and Congolese activists. In Manchester a protest was organised under the slogans, 'Troops out of Iraq, Afghanistan and Kurdistan!', 'Israel out of Palestine!' Supporters brought mega-



Demonstration on the fifth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq

In Newcastle the Tyneside Community Action for Refugees (TCAR) has been working with asylum seekers to fight against discrimination and deportations. Already TCAR has forged enduring links between asylum seekers, refugees, British activists and local people who have signed the Pledge of Resistance against dawn raids in their local area.

A conference in June has been planned to bring together a wide range of groups and individuals, united in their opposition to racism. It will enable us to exchange knowledge and experiences about different forms of racism and allow us to start building links to strengthen the anti-racist movement. However, the conference can only happen with wider support. TCAR invites all groups and individuals interested in helping organise the conference to join a Conference Or-

phones, banners, displays and drums, making the demo a highly visible show of solidarity with the oppressed people resisting imperialism in the Middle East. Activists in Scotland also joined the national Stop the War demonstration in Glasgow.

Defend the right to protest

The Dundee Heathfield Arrest Campaign has achieved one of its demands in that the charges of disorderly conduct have been dropped against Michael, an FRFI comrade arrested violently at the end of November 2007 (see FRFI 200). Video of the latter part of the arrest is available on YouTube under 'Dundee Arrest'. It shows Michael face down while two officers of the Tayside police forcibly handcuff him for handing out leaflets and distributing FRFI.

The main demand of the campaign now is to secure official CCTV footage of the assault. This has been confirmed as being in the possession of the police. The procurator fiscal, responsible for prosecutions in Scotland has stated in a letter: 'The conduct which led to your arrest did not amount to a crime under Scottish law.' The campaign called a city centre rally on 22 March to demand the CCTV footage and for justice and the defence of democratic rights. The rally was supported by FRFI activists from Glasgow and Dundee as well as members of the Scottish Socialist Party, Solidarity and the Socialist Workers Party. The campaign has also received the support of Michael's union branch at the Annual General Meeting of Dundee City Union.

Newcastle city council are trying to pros-

ecute four activists charged with participating in an unlicensed collection at an anti-deportation street event on 7 May 2007. A Freedom of Information Act request made by one of the defendants returned four documents relating to correspondence between the council and police regarding the prosecution, including handwritten notes of a telephone conversation apparently initiated by police on 3 May 2007, four days before the events the prosecution relates to. Sections of emails between the council and police were blanked out. Against opposition from council lawyers, the defendants have had the case postponed until 19 May to allow an application to the court for the full release of the documents. Despite many elected councillors expressing surprise that the prosecution is taking place, an appli-

cation to submit a petition to the full meeting of the council on 5 March was refused on the grounds that it may prejudice the prosecution of the case. A lively demonstration took place outside the council meeting, attended by FRFI and other supporters of the newly formed Whose Streets? campaign. Other groups and individuals are urgently needed to join the campaign and to organise with us against these attacks which threaten all grassroots activists on Tyneside. The campaign can be contacted at: whosestreets@googlemail.com

Get active in the urgent work of building an anti-imperialist movement here in Britain by joining with us at our meetings and demonstrations over the next two months. See Events for details.

EVENTS

LONDON

Every Thursday 6-8pm
Victory to the Intifada!
Picket of Marks & Spencer
Oxford Street, WC1
(Nearest tube Marble Arch)

Tuesdays 1 April and 6 May 1-2pm
Demonstration: Defend asylum seekers!
Fight Labour's racist immigration laws!
Communications House
Old Street, EC1 (Nearest tube Old Street)

Thursday 1 May
Contingent on the May Day demonstration
Assemble Clerkenwell Green. Time TBC.

Saturday 10 May 1pm
Contingent on the National Demonstration for Palestine
Assemble Temple tube, Victoria Embankment

For further details call: 020 7837 1688
Or 07790 896 430
Email: northlondon@rcgfrfi.plus.com/
eastlondon@rcgfrfi.plus.com

NORTH EAST

Sunderland
Sunday 6 April 5pm
Public Forum: Capitalism and the British State
West Park Church
8 Brookside Gardens (off Stockton Road)

Newcastle
Thursday 10 April 7pm
FRFI Readers Group discussion:

Capitalism on the Rocks

Contact us for reading material
Culture Café (above Get Stuffed takeaway),
St. Mary's Place

Saturday 19 April 11am-2pm
Victory to the Intifada!
Picket of Marks & Spencer
Northumberland Street

Saturday 19 April 3pm
TCAR Conference Organising Group Meeting
Amnesty Bookshop,
92 Westgate Road

Thursday 24 April 7pm
FRFI Readers Group discussion:
Racism in Britain
Contact us for reading material
Culture Café

Saturday 3 May
Anti-Imperialist Contingent as part of Tyne and Wear May Day march
Contact us for details

Thursday 8 May 7pm
FRFI Readers Group discussion:
Imperialism and the Labour Aristocracy
Contact us for reading material
Culture Café

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

Street actions every Saturday 11am-2pm and other stalls around the region

For further details call: 07858 346 276
Email: frfinortheast@googlemail.com
Website: www.frfinortheast.co.uk

NORTH WEST

Manchester
Sunday 6 April 2pm
Anti Imperialist Forum! Why Socialism?
Cross Street Chapel, near Market Street

Thursday 17 April 7.30pm
NWASDG campaign meeting
Friends Meeting House
Mount Street, behind Central Library

Sunday 27 April
FRFI Sponsored Walk
Kinder Scout, Peak District
Contact us to take part or to sponsor a walker

Saturday 10 May 12 noon
Protest: Speak out against racism!
Open air, open mic demo
Organised by NWASDG
Piccadilly Gardens

SCOTLAND

Glasgow
Wednesday 9 April 5.30pm
FRFI Readers Group meeting
Boyd Orr building, University Avenue,
Glasgow University
(Round the corner from Hillhead Underground station)

Dundee
Saturdays 26 April and 24 May 1- 2.30pm
Free Speech Rally:
Defend Democratic Rights!
Called by Dundee Heathfield Arrest Campaign
Meet Brooksbank Clock, Murraygate



RATB ROUNDUP

Following the hugely successful Cuban Speaking Tour meetings, Rock around the Blockade (RATB) groups are being set up in many towns and cities, including in new areas. Membership has nearly trebled and new events are being planned. Public campaign meetings are taking place to discuss the way forward.

In Manchester, which attracted 350 people during the tour, the local RATB group is gaining recognition as the only active solidarity group in the city. The build up to the tour raised RATB's profile in the North West, with regular stalls, meetings and other events. There was a positive report of the Manchester University meeting in the *Student Direct* newspaper the following week. Since the Speaking Tour there have been campaign meetings to discuss future activities in solidarity with Cuba and to raise the issue of socialism within other campaigns.

The initial meeting on 5 March decided that the group should organise a 'Hands off Cuba!' demonstration on 26 July - an important date in the Cuban calendar, marking the beginning of the revolutionary armed struggle against the Batista dictatorship in 1953.

Liverpool RATB has held a film showing and a 'Why socialism?' discussion. A regular cycle of meetings and discussions is planned as part of the plan to establish new groups around the country.

In London RATB activists have held *Cuba! Africa! Revolution!* film screenings to packed-out rooms at the London School of Economics (LSE), in conjunction with LSE FRFI Student Society, about Cuba's internationalist support for oppressed peoples in the world's poorest continent. The documentaries tell the story of Cuba's solidarity missions, and the meetings have had lively discussions concerning the role of socialists in Britain, in terms of their internationalist duty in support of the Cuban revolution. There are further meetings planned at LSE based on different aspects of the Cuban revolution, contact us for details.

In the North East months of hard work paid off when over 400 people came to hear Borrego, Garcia and Rufin speak at four meetings in Durham and Newcastle. FRFI and RATB activists have been building on this enthusiasm in the weeks since, with regular street events in Sunderland and a public forum planned for 6 April, organised by comrades who have become involved through the speaking tour. The first of a series of FRFI Readers' Group meetings took place in Newcastle on 13 March to discuss 'Health Matters', a new pamphlet bringing together articles published in FRFI dealing with the Labour government's attacks on the NHS and the alternative demonstrated by Cuba.

On 29 March RATB activists organised a regional day of action in solidarity with the Cuban 5, imprisoned in the US for their work in exposing terrorist attacks against Cuba. The day included a rally with street theatre at

Grey's Monument in Newcastle, where messages of support were read from RATB groups around Britain. This was followed by a fundraising meal and finally a Rebel Music club night with a host of local DJs at the Northumberland Arms, which continued into the early hours of the morning.

Following the success of the Glasgow leg of the speaking tour, RATB has established regular film showings and educational about Cuban socialism and the revolutionary processes in Latin America. Recent meetings have discussed Hugo Chavez's condemnation of the fascist, US-backed government of Colombia and Cuba's crucial role in the liberation of Africa from colonial rule. On Saturday 5 April, a Rock Around the Blockade dayschool will be held at Glasgow University, discussing 'Revolution & Socialism in Latin America'. We are urging everyone interested in fighting against imperialism to attend this important meeting!

The response to the Speaking Tour across Britain has shown that there are many people interested in revolutionary politics and communist ideas, despite the best efforts of the British media and sections of the left to spread lies about Cuba. This is a very exciting period to join in the urgent campaign work in support of the Cuban revolution. Come and share your enthusiasm and ideas with us. Our events list gives details of meetings and demonstrations around the country. If you are interested in setting up your own RATB branch where you live, get in touch with us for help and support.

Viva Cuba!



EVENTS

LONDON

Tuesday 15 April and 13 May 6.30pm
Education and discussion about the Cuban revolution
S75 (April), S78 (May), St Clements Building, Houghton Street, London School of Economics. (Nearest tube Holborn)
These meetings are the first of several educational based around *Revolutionary Cuba: the streets are ours*. For a copy of the pamphlet or for information on forthcoming educational meetings contact: office@rathb.org.uk

NORTH WEST

Liverpool
Saturday 5 April 1-3pm
Street stall - Free the Cuban 5! End the illegal blockade of Cuba!
Church Street, Liverpool city centre

Tuesdays 8 April (part 1) and 29 April (part 2) 7.30pm
Film showing and discussion:
Cuba! Africa! Revolution!

El Rincon, Roscoe Street
Saturday 26 April 1-3pm
Street stall - Free the Cuban 5! End the illegal blockade of Cuba!
Church Street, city centre

NORTH EAST

Newcastle
Tuesday 15 April 7pm
Film showing and discussion:
Cuba! Africa! Revolution! (part 2)
Part 2 of this amazing program focuses on the fall of apartheid in South Africa, when 300,000 Cubans fought alongside African revolutionaries.
Stage 2, Northumbria Students Union, Sandyford Road

SCOTLAND

Dundee
Wednesday 30 April (part 1) and 28 May (part 2) 7-9pm
Film showing and discussion:
Cuba! Africa! Revolution!
Room G3, Dundee University Tower Building
Perth Road
Contact: frlscotland@yahoo.co.uk

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 _____

Address _____

Tel _____

email _____

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Thanks for support

Dear FRFI

I want to thank all of you for your support and reliance. Thanks to those people who spent their time in and out of court to support us. All of you are doing an honourable affair. My special thanks to the jury, to those ordinary people who did not follow the prosecution's falsehood but made the right decision, decision of honest people.

Thank you very much
God'll bless you

ANDREY PYLAEV

One of the Harmondsworth Four, currently detained in Colnbrook IRC. FRFI urges readers to send messages of support to him: Andrey PylaeV 31025, Colnbrook IRC, PO Box 837, Uxbridge, UB8 9AZ

LETTERS

FRFI BCM Box 5909 London WC1N 3XX e-mail: editorial@rcgfrfi.plus.com
website: www.revolutionarycommunist.org

Borrego: a great revolutionary

I attended the Rock around the Blockade night in Glasgow at Central Hotel. All the speakers were excellent, especially Orlando Borrego who was very interesting, making points about the slavery of the industrial revolution in this country.

If the people made the decisions about our needs in Britain there wouldn't be 10% owning everything and the rest of us struggling.

Education and the health service are a minefield and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan cause more oppression than we already have.

There are so many lies about

Cuba just as the imperialists spread lies about the struggles in Algeria and Ireland and many other parts of the world.

Tell Orlando Borrego he was very entertaining as well as a great revolutionary, and it was an honour for Glasgow to experience his wisdom with all the other Cubans.

Cuban society is one of the few places which opens their doors to the persecuted of the world and offers help.

Ellos son muy valiente! Viva los Cubanos!

AMINA SIEGERSON
Glasgow

Defending asylum seekers

Writing in the north east paper *Sunday Sun* on 2 March, Middlesborough councillor Joan McTigue attacked the protestors at Harmondsworth Immigration Removal Centre (IRC) claiming that the 'rampage' had been 'masterminded' by the four men then on trial. This was before they were acquitted of these charges. She repeated *Daily Mail* claims about the allegedly privileged conditions of the detainees, contrasting them with the poverty that faced many in her ward. However, as FRFI has shown, the conditions in Harmondsworth had just been condemned by Chief Inspector of Prisons Anne Owers before the uprising took place.

Poor treatment of asylum seekers in detention centres isn't restricted to Harmondsworth. In Yarl's Wood, which holds 405 women and families with children (including babies), women have reported violence from staff including assault, being handcuffed, drugged and beaten up. One detainee described the food at Yarl's Wood as 'days old re-heated jacket potatoes, uncooked rice, partially cooked fried eggs, hair, dirt and sometimes maggots in it. It's rationed so we don't get enough to eat – one tin of sardines between three people.'

McTigue does not question the poverty that is forced on to asylum

seekers since their right to work was taken away in 2002. Many families survive on £35 vouchers per week and there are currently approximately 300 destitute asylum seekers in Newcastle alone, failed asylum seekers who are kicked out of their accommodation, have no right to work and cannot return to their countries because even by the reckoning of the Home Office (which considers Iraq and Afghanistan safe) it is unsafe to return. For example Somalia has no planes flying there because it's so dangerous, so failed Somali asylum seekers are forced into destitution.

Working class people in Councillor McTigue's Middlesborough ward, in my ward in Newcastle and throughout Britain are poor because the Labour government is increasing the pension age but cutting the pension money, building private 'affordable' housing schemes (ie expensive flats) instead of building council houses, selling the NHS off to private companies, spending billions on wars overseas and giving tax breaks to companies and corporations.

The real criminals are not asylum seekers but the fat cats in government and business.

SAM MAGILL
TCAR activist, Newcastle

Left defends Ken Livingstone

The mayoral election in London on 1 May promises to be very tight-run: Ken Livingstone, as he reels under allegations of sleaze, currently trails Tory Boris Johnson in opinion polls. However, all may not be lost – come the left to the rescue! Respect Renewal will not be putting forward a candidate: George Galloway making it clear that he would be supporting Livingstone 'when he does the right thing, like facing down Tory clown Boris Johnson'. The other half of the old Respect, the SWP and its allies, now the Left List, are standing a mayoral candidate: Lindsey German. However, in her election address, she writes: 'I have many points of agreement with Ken Livingstone – his anti-racist and anti-imperialist policies are a credit to London.' In a

craven attempt to be seen not to split the Labour vote, she adds: 'I'm asking all my supporters to use their second preference Mayoral vote to make sure we don't end up saddled with a Tory as Mayor of London.'

Neither Respect Renewal nor the SWP's Left List represent anything progressive in this election. Their endorsement of the representative of the racist, imperialist Labour Party (who, we should remember, defended the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes and supported the onslaught on Yugoslavia) shows once again that they are prepared to shackle anything remotely progressive to the interests of their alliance with the Labour Party.

ROBERT CLOUGH
London

Trotskyists and the Venezuelan referendum

I would like to say a few words about Alvaro Michaels' article 'Venezuela – Chavez leads' in the last issue of FRFI.

The founding of the PSUV is indeed a welcome step, a firm step into the future.

In the very narrow referendum defeat of 2 December 2007, details of which comrade Michaels gives, one must assess the negative impact of the Trotskyist treachery: such groups as the UNT (National Workers' Union) of Orlando Chirino, or the so-called UST (Workers' Socialist' Unity), PLS ('Socialist' Liberty Party) or the 'Venezuelan wing' of the LIT (International 'Socialist' League) – after all, when have the bloody Trotskyist nerds had a shortage of microsects with leftist-sounding acronymic hooks for the gullible and naïve to bite on? Just before the referendum they went into an all-out rampage amongst the humblest sectors of Caracas and other cities, no doubt flashing their 'leftist' credentials for all to

see, but fully in cahoots with the CIA and Venezuelan reactionaries, urging the masses to abstain from the referendum. Or they would say, since Chavez is such a brutal dictator – if you must show up at the polls, then turn in a blank ballot.

That treachery is compounded because, despite getting many criticisms for it by left and progressive elements who warned: do not trust the treacherous Trotskyists, Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution were open-minded enough to give even the Trotskyists the benefit of the doubt and listen to what they said. Fatal mistake!

Like the great Hugo said, the narrow defeat was 'por ahora' – for now. The Bolivarian revolution is far from over and many vital battles lie ahead. Only that for those battles the people will be on the alert for the treacherous fifth-columnists.

ANA LUCIA GELABERT
Political prisoner
Texas

Ali Ozer must stay

The Ozer family must stay! Working is not a crime! No deportations to Turkey!

Ali Riza Ozer, his wife and son are asylum seekers from Turkey. As a communist and supporter of the Kurdish struggle, Ali took part in May Day and workers' rights demonstrations, as well as protests for the rights of prisoners.

Communists are systematically attacked by the Turkish state, which frequently assassinates members and supporters of revolutionary organisations, while viciously repressing the struggle for Kurdish self determination – as the recent invasion of Northern Iraq showed.

In 2003 the Ozer family fled their home in Izmir, Turkey, and came to Britain. When they arrived they spent three days in a detention

centre in Dover and then a week in Oakington Immigration Removal Centre. They were then 'dispersed' to Manchester and applied for asylum. Despite applications to the High Court, all three were refused asylum. They are now applying to the European Court of Human Rights.

Forced to survive on supermarket vouchers – as asylum seekers are banned from working – Ali got a cash-in-hand job at a food distribution company in Openshaw. On 28 February he left for work early in the morning. The factory was raided and he was arrested by Border and Immigration officers, along with his workmate Haydar Aksu. The two were kept in Pendleton police station in Salford for 3-4 days before being moved to Manchester Airport detention centre. Haydar was then sent to Campfield prison, and Ali to

Maternity services overstretched

Figures recently release under the Freedom of Information legislation show the appalling state of NHS maternity services. Many women in labour are being turned away from hospitals in Britain because maternity units are overstretched and understaffed.

In 2007, maternity wards in almost 10% of trusts turned women away on at least ten days. One trust in Yorkshire closed 39 times between October and January due to lack of staff and 42% of trusts did not get through 2007 without turning women about to give birth away at least once.

This comes at a time when the number of midwives and nurses unable to get a job six months after qualification has risen by 80% over the last three years. As privatisation and spending cuts bring constant pressure to downgrade nurses and reduce their numbers to save money, so we can expect services to deteriorate further.

HANNAH CALLER
London

Oakington. On 14 March, Haydar, a Kurdish refugee, was deported to Turkey – his family, dependent upon him, remain in Manchester.

Ali remains in Oakington prison, locked up for the 'crime' of working to support himself and his family. His son, a socialist and activist in the North West Asylum Seekers Defence Group (NWSADG), is campaigning for his father's release, and for their right to stay in Britain. A central issue in this campaign is to demand the right of asylum seekers to work.

Demand Ali Ozer's release! Send letters to the Minister for Immigration, mentioning Ali's Home Office Reference Number O1066983: 3rd Floor Peel Building, 2 Marsham Street, London, SW1P 4DF

NWSADG
Manchester

Protest against prison deaths

For protesting against prisoners dying in the care of the state, I have again been arrested and charged with obstruction – my 15th arrest since 2004 and the fifth time I've been charged. The first three charges were dropped before trial; the fourth charge went to trial and I was acquitted.

Here's an update on the senseless prosecution, which is a waste of the court's time, and a scandalous waste of public money. I am not alone in thinking it is vindictive.

On 5 February 2008, I was arrested at a prison-death demonstration outside Styal Prison, the jail responsible for my daughter's death in 2003. The demonstration was to protest against the death of Lisa Marley, a young mother who died on 23 January 2008 while on 'suicide watch' at the prison. Lisa was on

remand, and therefore legally innocent when she died.

At my first court appearance on 27 February 2008 I entered a 'not guilty' plea. A pre-trial review took place on 19 March 2008. Both hearings were at Macclesfield Magistrates' Court. It was clear to anyone attending the pre-trial review that I was distressed and close to tears. I told the court I hadn't slept the previous evening, that I was exhausted, and that I was receiving treatment for two medical conditions.

Macclesfield is where I identified the body of my only child Sarah, so the place has bad memories for me. I explained this to the bench, and asked if the case could be transferred to another court. I was told to make a request in writing.

There is little humanity in our criminal justice system. I'm treated as a number in the system.

I wondered if the court had any compassion, so asked for the case to be discontinued, on the grounds that I am a grieving mother and because bereavement is a vulnerability factor. My request was refused. The court said the case would continue, on the grounds that it is in the public interest for me to be prosecuted. I was upset and angry as I left the courtroom, and my parting words to the bench were 'this court is a farce'.

My next pre-trial review is on 9 April 2008. I would encourage readers to write to the CPS, to query how this prosecution can possibly be in the public interest: Crown Prosecution Service (Crewe), Crewe Police Station, 3rd Floor, Civic Centre, Crewe, Cheshire, CW1 2DQ.

PAULINE CAMPBELL
Bereaved mother of Sarah Elizabeth Campbell, 18, who died on 'suicide watch' in Styal Prison's segregation unit, 2003

Immigrants and social housing

As the tabloid press raise scare stories about immigrants taking over council housing, I wanted to

remind FRFI readers that contrary to popular perception, asylum seekers and non-EU immigrants are not eligible for social housing. Even the large numbers of Poles and other east European migrants who have moved to Britain in the past two years scarcely use it – at present they have been allocated a mere 1%

of council or housing association flats. Instead, about 90% of them are living in accommodation at the bottom end of the private rented sector, often forced into poor and over-crowded conditions.

LOUIS BREHONY
Manchester

FIGHT RACISM

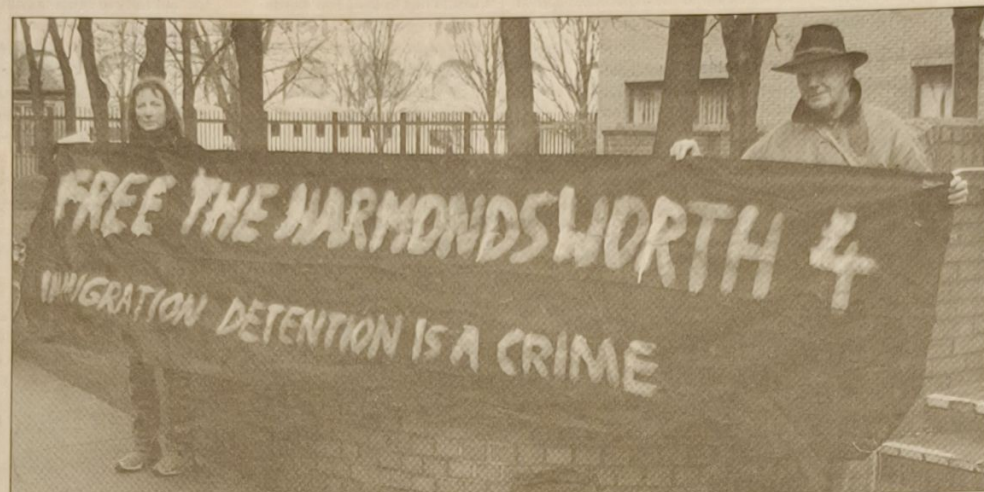
FIGHT IMPERIALISM

Victory but not justice for the Harmondsworth Four!

On 22 February, after a six-week trial, all four defendants charged following the November 2006 Harmondsworth Immigration Removal Centre (IRC) uprising were acquitted of conspiring to commit violent disorder or criminal damage and various charges of damaging property. (Two had earlier pleaded guilty to specific acts of minor criminal damage.) The verdict was a great victory against the inhumane system of immigration detention and a positive result for all those who struggle and campaign against it. It was, however, hardly justice for the Harmondsworth Four, who, already detained at the time of the protest, had spent over a year on remand in criminal prisons and after the trial were redetained under immigration law.

The four men, two Russians, a Palestinian and an Egyptian, appear to have been picked almost at random by the British state to face a highly political prosecution in revenge for the uprising that wrecked Harmondsworth. They were accused of spending weeks plotting 'widespread disorder and destruction'. The 'evidence' for this came largely from a detainee witness for the prosecution, who is said to have bartered his testimony for permission to work in Britain.

In reality the uprising was a spontaneous protest in response to cumulative grievances, brought to a head by the publication of the Chief Inspector of Prisons' report into conditions at



the detention centre on the same day that a Brazilian detainee was violently restrained by officers.

Much of what actually happened during the protest was accepted by both sides, but many actions which the prosecution tried to label as criminal behaviour were in fact the prisoners defending themselves when staff responded to the revolt by locking detainees into their rooms while parts of the IRC were on fire, and shutting others out on the yard in the cold. Detainees refused to be locked in and broke windows to allow fresh air in or

to pass water into those who could not get out.

One Detention Custody Officer (DCO) gave evidence that one of the defendants was red-faced and waving his arms around in an inciting manner, but, when shown CCTV footage, admitted she was wrong and the defendant was seemingly joking around. Another DCO referred to detainees in the courtyard as: 'Africans drumming on bins, doing war-dance'.

The four defendants were grilled by the prosecution barrister and repeatedly accused of organising against the

system. In his summing up the prosecutor quoted the two Russian defendants as saying they were treated worse than dogs in kennels, and referred to their letter to FRFI (see http://www.revolutionarycommunist.org/racism/letter_harm4.html), saying 'in 2007 they wrote a letter still complaining about detention and the treatment...no doubt they spent their long and boring days complaining and plotting...'

The jury was out for a week and could not agree on the verdict. Although the judge had directed that this was 'not a

political trial' and the jury's views on immigration detention were irrelevant, there was clearly plenty to deliberate on. Finally the jury returned a majority verdict that all four were not guilty.

As FRFI goes to press the Harmondsworth Four remain imprisoned. Three of them now face renewed legal battles against deportation. Ironically the fourth man had already made clear before the protest that he was not contesting his deportation and was just keen to leave.

The Support the Harmondsworth Four campaign was set up in November 2007 and FRFI has participated actively in it, together with Barbed-Wire Britain, Campaign against Racism and Fascism, London No Borders and the Payday Men's Network. The campaign demonstrated outside the court each Monday and had an observer in court almost every day of the trial. It also picketed Kalyx, the private contractor that runs Harmondsworth, on the day of the verdict. The campaign continues to visit and support the prisoners and can be contacted at:

harmondsworth4@riseup.net
Donations towards financial support for the detainees can be paid into No Borders London's bank account (ref: 65252615; sort code: 08-92-99) or cheques payable to No Borders London sent via FRFI.

Nicki Jameson

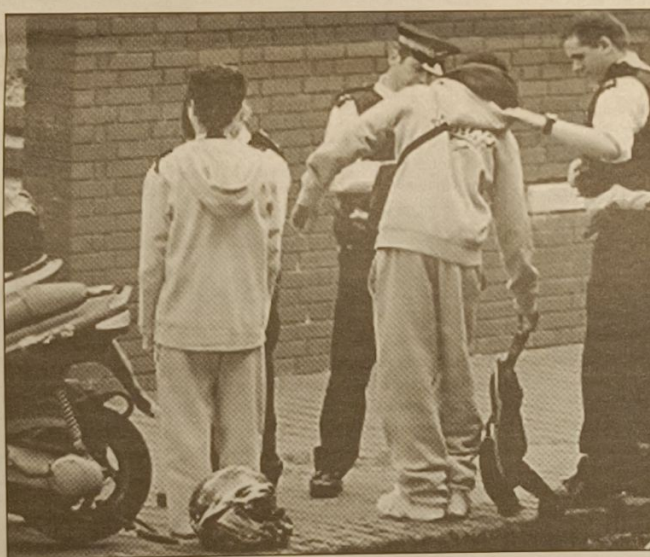
Sus laws are back

One of the hallmarks of the last 11 years of Labour government rule has been its assault on civil liberties. Alongside the introduction of the Human Rights Act – meant to protect human rights more substantially than ever before, and about which government ministers have never ceased to complain – every area of life has been subject to a vast array of new laws and regulations. The British are the most monitored and regulated population in Europe and the introduction of ID cards will only intensify this.

The favourite argument of the middle classes is that such monitoring and regulation will not affect the innocent. By innocent, they mean themselves. The guilty and the suspect, as always, are the working class, and in particular black and minority ethnic people, immigrants, asylum seekers, social housing tenants and young working class people in general. So when, in January, the government announced its intention to review police powers to stop and search, a gamut of arguments were rehearsed to show that this would be for the 'public' good and would especially benefit black and Asian communities.

In fact the Tories and the Labour government agree that police powers should be widened to allow them to stop and search without giving a reason, and that the form-filling attached to stop and search powers should be abolished. Police activities will be subject to less regulation, while the working class will be subject to more.

The real irony is that the regulations that govern stop and search were introduced as a quid pro quo for extending police powers in the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE). Before this the police had used a selection of common law and statute from the 19th century, including the Vagrancy Act 1824, loosely called 'sus' laws, to stop and search anyone



they wanted. The 'sus' laws were a particular favourite of the Metropolitan Police who are still responsible for a quarter of all stops and searches in the country. These laws were used routinely to stop and search black youth, and came under scrutiny in 1981 after a racist police operation, 'Operation Swamp' led to the Brixton riots. With PACE, the police became empowered to stop and search anyone on reasonable suspicion of criminal activity, but not simply because of appearance or race.

Police already have powers to stop and search without 'reasonable grounds' under s60 of the Criminal Justice Public Order Act 1994 and s44 of the Terrorism Act 2000. In 2002/03, 83,920 people were stopped in London using these powers: a ten-fold increase over three years. Nationally, black people are eight times and Asian people five times more likely to be stopped and searched than white

people (Home Office 2004). In London between 2000 and 2002, stop and search rates increased by 30% for black people, by 41% for Asian people, and 8% for white people. The consequent arrest rates are pitiful. Under most categories of 'grounds for stop and search' the arrest rate is less than 10%. In the year up to April 2007 police carried out 25,374 stops under s44 alone; between April and August 2007 there were 32,395. Over a fifth of those stopped were Asian, despite Asian people making up only a tenth of London's population.

Even before police powers are increased and regulation reduced, police use of stop and search powers is clearly discriminatory. Unlike Tory leader David Cameron who claimed in the *Sun* that 'the police are no longer racist', those of us who live on planet earth are sure that the 'sus' laws are back.

Carol Brickley

Britain's barbaric health policy for asylum seekers

'To stop treating patients in the knowledge that they are being sent home to die is an unacceptable breach of the duties of any health professional.' *The Lancet*

Britain committed 'an atrocious barbarism' in the words of leading British medical journal *The Lancet* when Ama Sumani was deported to Ghana in January in the middle of life-saving treatment in a Cardiff hospital. She died on 19 March, having been unable to afford treatment for her cancer and related kidney disease. Ama had been in Britain for five years, had been receiving treatment including kidney dialysis for one year and was ruthlessly removed from her hospital bed in a wheelchair by officers from the Border and Immigration Agency, whose head, Lin Homer, said that this case was 'not exceptional'.

Reducing access to health care

In 2003, the Department of Health scrapped the rule that anyone in Britain for over a year was entitled to free health care. The plans were that everyone should be treated and staff would afterwards establish if they should be charged; if they couldn't pay, the hospital would write off the debt. Asylum seekers would be entitled to free care while their claims were processed and all emergency care would be free.

The outcome has been that many vulnerable asylum seekers are unclear as to whether treatment is available to them; there is great confusion about what constitutes emergency care and the inherent racism of immigration controls results in black and Asian British people being challenged to prove their right to treatment.

Currently asylum seekers are entitled to NHS treatment without charge for as long as their applications, including appeals, are under consideration. Those whose appeals have been refused can register with GPs at the surgery's discretion. There are many documented cases of asylum seekers being turned away from surgeries. Secondary care, including treatment underway, can be charged

for from the date the asylum claim is deemed to have failed.

Denial of free treatment

The Refugee Council has documented cases of asylum seekers being billed, being turned away or having operations cancelled and of people subsequently going underground having not received the treatment they need. In 2006, it documented 17 cases of women denied access to maternity care. Eight were told, against all rules, that they would get no care unless they paid up front.

Maternity services should, according to the Department of Health, always be classified as 'immediately necessary treatment' and provided even if the woman can't pay. Only after a battle by health care workers, has treatment to prevent transmission of HIV from mother to child been classified as maternity care. If the woman is chargeable, 'reasonable steps should be taken to recover the debt' says the government.

In many cases the treatment bills are so terrifying that people disappear. In 2006 a Chinese woman, having been turned away during her pregnancy by her NHS Trust on grounds of needing to pay in advance, delivered her baby at home unsupported; she then needed admission for medical complications but fled after the bills appeared and could not be found for further post-natal checks.

Inhumane and uncivilised

In 2002 a British Medical Association report *Asylum Seekers: meeting their health-care needs* concluded that in many cases the health of asylum seekers actually worsens after arrival in Britain and that Britain is failing vulnerable people who have been subjected to persecution, including torture and rape.

In March 2008 the Independent Asylum Commission issued a damning report, stating that Britain's treatment of asylum seekers 'falls seriously below the standards to be expected of a humane and civilised society'.

Hannah Caller