

FIGHT RACISM! FIGHT IMPERIALISM!

Revolutionary Communist Group

Number 207

February/March 2009

(unwaged 50p) 80p

Solidarity
price
£1

www.revolutionarycommunist.org



Saturday 24 January: demonstration in London against the BBC's refusal the broadcast an appeal for the people of Gaza

INSIDE

PALESTINE

Editorial p2
Assault on Gaza p1/2/3/4

NEWS

Greece: protestors lead way for Europe p5

POLICING THE CRISIS

Licence to kill p6

CAPITALIST CRISIS

British economy heading for bankruptcy? p7

US elections: insoluble crisis p10

CUBA VIVE

50th anniversary of the Revolution p8/9

LATIN AMERICA

Venezuela/Bolivia/Ecuador p11

IRAQ/AFGHANISTAN

US forces mass in Afghanistan p12

Occupation of Iraq no end in sight p12

FIGHT RACISM!

Migrant workers hit by crisis p16

+ news, prisoners fightback round-up and letters

BARBARITY ASSAULT ON GAZA

The savage Israeli onslaught on Gaza, 'Operation Cast Lead', which left 1,300 Palestinians dead including 280 children, and over 50,000 homeless, was a calculated act to break the resistance of the Palestinian people. For three weeks, while horrific pictures filled our TV screens, imperialist politicians repeated the mantra that Hamas must stop launching rockets into southern Israel, and refused to do anything to stop the slaughter, or in the case of the US, condoned it. No wonder that following the ceasefire on 20 January, Hamas leader Khalid Mishaal condemned the EU, declaring 'Shame on you, it is a crime that you failed to stop the aggression on us and then stop us using the weapons of resistance. This is a disgrace to Europe.' Israel had targeted schools, hospitals, medical workers, mosques and UN buildings, and used white phosphorus shells and experimental DIME weapons in its onslaught. BOB SHEPHERD reports.

Israel's onslaught on Gaza was the latest in a long line of brutal acts of terror that began with the massacres and ethnic cleansing of the Nakba in 1948. The Zionists' goal is the creation of a 'Greater Israel' leaving the Palestinian population crushed and confined to isolated cantons under Israeli control. All Palestinian resist-

ance to this project has to be crushed. The fact that the Palestinian population in Gaza are the bedrock of support for Hamas and are in the forefront of resistance led inexorably to the devastating air strikes on 27 December and the massacre that followed.

The Zionists attempted to justify their onslaught by claiming that

Hamas had broken a six-month ceasefire agreed last summer, and was raining rockets down on southern Israel. The claim was backed up by the British Labour government and the other imperialist states, but it was a complete lie. Israel had manufactured the breakdown of the ceasefire in order to begin the slaughter in Gaza.

The siege of Gaza

On 12 September 2005, the last Zionist settlers and troops left Gaza. But the purpose of their withdrawal was to freeze any chance of political progress since the Zionists would be able to open and close border crossings as and when they wished, preventing fuel, food and other essential supplies from entering the enclave. As Dov Weisglass, then Prime Minister Sharon's Chief of Staff, described the unilateral pullout, 'it supplies the amount of formaldehyde that is necessary so there will not be a political process with the Palestinians' whilst another of Sharon's advisers, Arnon Soffer, declared, 'When 2.5 million people live in a closed off Gaza it's going to be a human catastrophe. These people will become bigger animals than they are today, with the aid of an insane fundamentalist Islam.

The pressure on the border will be awful. It's going to be a terrible war. So, if we want to remain alive we will have to kill and kill. All day, every day' (*Jerusalem Post*, 10 May 2004).

Border crossing closures increased in frequency and duration following the Hamas victory in the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) in January 2006. Britain, the US and the EU all supported Israel in its condemnation of Hamas, and cut off all aid to Hamas-run institutions. Any aid the imperialists continued to deliver was channelled to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (see FRFI 191). On 5 May 2006, John Ging, director of operations for UNRWA in Gaza, spelled out the consequences: 'two weeks ago we were counting down to a humanitarian crisis in Gaza, today that crisis is on our doorstep ... there are now shortages of medical supplies in the public hospitals in the Gaza Strip and UNRWA has seen a large increase in the number of refugees coming to its centres seeking food aid and cash assistance'.

Imperialist manoeuvres to undermine the Hamas government culminated in an attempted coup by Fatah in June 2007 in Gaza, which Hamas swiftly defeated. From then on the

Zionists effectively locked down Gaza, allowing a level of supplies sufficient to avoid mass starvation but reducing the population to destitution. Over 80% of the population of Gaza came to depend on food aid. These siege conditions persuaded Hamas to agree a six-month ceasefire which came into force on 19 June 2008. Hamas agreed to stop rocket attacks on southern Israel while the Zionists promised to open border crossings into Gaza, and Egypt would open the Rafah crossing. Hamas had been reluctant to agree to any ceasefire that excluded the West Bank, but the conditions of life in Gaza forced their hand. What they didn't know then was that the Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak was already planning the assault on Gaza.

The ceasefire and its breakdown

A report issued in January 2009 by the Israeli Zionist organisation, Intelligence and Terrorism Information Centre (ITIC) acknowledged that in: 'The six months of the Lull Arrangement [ceasefire] ... Hamas was careful to maintain the ceasefire'. In the six months preceding the ceasefire

continued on page 3

EDITORIAL STATEMENT WHO SPEAKS FOR THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE?

The savage Zionist onslaught on Gaza was yet another step towards Israel's ultimate aim of destroying the Palestinian people. The issue was never Hamas rocket attacks, it was to complete the subjugation of the Gazan population. In this the Zionists failed. The Palestinian struggle for national liberation is one that communists and anti-imperialists throughout the world must support, for whilst the Palestinian people resist, imperialist control of the Middle East will always be under threat.

As the Zionists launched wave after wave of bombs and missiles on 27 December, the bourgeois media, where they did not immediately parrot Israeli lies about 'terrorism' and 'self-defence', presented an equivalence between the Israeli onslaught and Hamas rocket attacks on Sderot and Ashkelon. Never did they tell the truth: that Israel is a racist, colonial-settler, expansionist state; and that the Palestinians are engaged in a struggle for national liberation, for without such a struggle they would be obliterated as a people. Sderot and Ashkelon were Palestinian villages before their populations were expelled by Israeli forces in 1948; their descendants live today in dire poverty in Gaza whilst the settler population of those villages lives in relative prosperity.

In 1991, *Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism*, summarising the experience of the first Palestinian Intifada which had started in 1987, stated that:

'Zionism cannot and will never recognise Palestinian self-determination. Despite the myths, it did not even accept the 1948 UN plan which divided Palestine into a Jewish and a Palestinian state. Israel's first Prime Minister, Ben Gurion, then stated:

"...after the formation of a large army in the wake of the establishment of the state, we will abolish partition and expand to the whole of Palestine"

The history of Zionism is the bloody story of this colonial expansion. Today, more than ever in the past, the Israeli ruling class is being driven towards its "Greater Israel".

(FRFI 104, December 1991/January 1992)

Israel is a racist, settler-colonial, expansionist state. In the lead-up to the Oslo peace accords in 1993, we wrote that the purpose of Zionist settlement policies was 'to utterly fragment Palestinian demographic continuity and thus forever destroy the foundation for any Palestinian state - either a democratic secular state across the whole of Palestine or even the two-state solution advanced by the Palestinian Liberation Organisation's (PLO) bourgeois trend.' (FRFI 113, June/July 1993).

Events since then have proved this point over and over again. The vast expansion of Israeli settlements on the West Bank, an increase in the settler population from 110,000 in 1993 to 285,000 today, with an increase of 200,000 in the number of settlers in Jerusalem; the construction of the Apartheid Wall; the sealing off of Gaza; the targeting of civilians and children by the Zionist army; all this is to destroy the Palestinian people as a nation. The Oslo peace accords, an attempt by the Palestinian bourgeoisie to come to an accommodation with the Zionist colonialists, proved disastrous for the mass of the Palestinian population. As the record showed, there was never any intention by the Zionists to agree to a two-state solution. Given the unbearable conditions they faced, there was no alternative for the Palestinian people but to rise up again to fight for their national rights - hence the second Intifada which started more than eight years ago in September 2000.

Despite its isolation, despite the ferocious attempts of the Zionists and their imperialist allies, the struggle of the Palestinian people remains undefeated. Hamas plays a vital part in that struggle. Whilst imperialism in the persons of Hillary Clinton or Gordon Brown speaks for the Zionists, anti-imperialists must speak up for the Palestinian people and demand an end to occupation, an end to settlements and an end to the terror.

*Victory to the Palestinian Resistance! Isolate the racist Israeli state!
End British support for Israel!
Boycott Israeli Goods!*



Gazan protestors burn the Israeli flag, Gaza City, 30 January 2009

Israel's terror weapons

From early on during the onslaught on Gaza it became evident that the Israelis were using munitions whose purpose was to create the maximum harm to civilians. Two such were DIME munitions and white phosphorus.

DIME - Dense Inert Metal Explosive

DIME bombs produce a powerful and lethal blast within a radius of 5-10 metres, spraying a superheated powder of Heavy Metal Tungsten Alloy (HMTA). Scientific studies have found that HMTA is chemically toxic, damages the immune system and rapidly causes cancer. DIME was developed for use in urban conflicts at the US Air Force Research Laboratory. The people of Gaza suffered injuries consistent with the use of DIME in July 2006 from munitions launched by Israeli drones.

Doctors in Gaza both in 2006 and during the recent Israeli bombardment recorded victims who have had their legs amputated leaving 'signs of heat and burns near the point of the amputation...as if a saw was used to cut through the bone'. Wounded legs and arms have been burned from the inside to the point that they cannot return to life again. Internal organs and soft tissue are damaged but no fragments are detected by X-ray. Those wounded usually die. On 19 January 2009 Norwegian surgeon Erik Fosse, working at the Al Shifa hospital in northern Gaza, noted: '...most of the patients I saw were children. If they



Phosphorus shells explode in Gaza

are trying to be accurate, it seems obvious these weapons were aimed at children'.

Protocol I of the Geneva Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons prohibits the use of 'any weapon the primary effect of which is to injure by fragments which in the human body escape detection by X-rays'.

White phosphorus

White phosphorus (WP) is an element which is highly reactive with oxygen. WP munitions are usually artillery shells containing 116 white phosphorus wedges which are spread over several hundred square metres as the shell explodes. The wedges ignite on contact with the air and are seen as a shower of burning white streaks. When WP touches human skin it burns to the bone, causing terrible injuries and forcing doctors to excise large areas of flesh. WP also sparks fires that are difficult to extinguish.

Doctors in Gaza have been struggling to treat patients with unusually

deadly burns. Patients with 15% burns, which they ought to survive, have been dying. Surgeon Nafiz Abu Shabaan, head of the burns unit at Al Shifa hospital, described opening the head wound of a three-year-old girl and seeing smoke coming out. A substance was removed from the wound and it continued to burn until it disappeared. The child died.

The use of WP is strictly limited under UN conventions and international humanitarian law only to create smoke, set fire to military targets, or to mark military targets. It is prohibited to use WP against or near civilians.

The Israeli army used huge quantities of WP munitions during the 1982 assault on Beirut, during a 1993 invasion of South Lebanon and more recently during the 2006 war against Lebanon. Every time it uses such weapons, it issues routine denials which are later found to be utter lies. The same happened during the invasion of Gaza.

Labour friends of Zionism

Throughout the war Labour was determined to show that it supported Israel whatever the opinions of the majority of people in the country. Although on 29 December Prime Minister Gordon Brown said he was 'appalled' by the violence, two days later he was clearly laying the blame on Hamas:

'I call on Gazan militants to cease all rocket attacks on Israel immediately. These attacks are designed to cause random destruction and to undermine the prospects of peace talks led by President Abbas. I understand the Israeli government's sense of obligation to its population.'

On 3 January, as Israel began its ground attack, Brown called for Israel to 'scale back' its attack, saying that 'too many' had died. On 4 January, with 480 Palestinians dead, Brown said: 'What we've got to do almost immediately is to work harder than we've done for an immediate ceasefire.' He set three goals, the top priority being an end to Hamas rocket attacks on Israel, followed by an end to arms shipments into Gaza, and last of all the opening of Gaza's border crossings.

In the first days of Israel's attacks Britain openly blocked efforts in the UN to call for a ceasefire, on the basis that the proposed resolution did not place sufficient blame on the Pal-



Prime Minister Gordon Brown shakes hands with Israel's President Shimon Peres Downing Street, November 2008.

estinians. On 4 January former British ambassador Craig Murray stated on his blog that according to high level diplomatic contacts at the UN, British diplomats on the UN Security Council continued to be under direct instructions to offer 'tacit support' to the US's efforts to block a ceasefire, even whilst Gordon Brown 'appealed domestic horror at the Israeli massacre in Gaza by calling for a ceasefire'.

Meanwhile Labour ministers were expressing concern about the pro-Palestinian demonstrations. On 5 January, Communities' Secretary Hazel Blears, who had argued on 10 December for the need to confront 'non-violent extremism' by Muslims,

said she was 'very concerned' that the conflict in Gaza could foster extremism, whilst Justice Minister Shahid Malik suggested that the events were having a 'profoundly acute and unhealthy' effect on Muslim communities in Britain. On 8 January 14 Muslims from the government's panel of 'counter-extremism' advisors wrote to Brown warning that 'For Muslims in the UK and abroad, we run the risk of potentially creating a loss of faith in the political process.' This is the source of the government's concern that 'too many' have died in Gaza - not that they are opposed to Israel's barbaric actions, but that they are worried about the impact on the streets of Britain.

On 15 January Brown also offered assistance to Israel to monitor Gaza's borders, including support from the British navy, supposedly to prevent Hamas re-arming. The prospect of the deployment of the British navy coincides with renewed talks between British Gas and Israel on the exploitation of gas reserves off the coast of Gaza. These total one trillion cubic feet, equivalent to 150 million barrels of oil, for which British Gas has held a 90% licence since 1999 in partnership with the Palestinian Authority. A proposed deal whereby the gas would be exported to Israel collapsed in 2007. In June 2008, Israel approached British Gas to reopen negotiations which took place under the direction of Ehud Olmert in October 2008.

Thomas Vincent

continued from page 1

ITIC said that an average of 380 rocket and mortar shells were launched each month from Gaza, whilst in the period from 19 June to 4 November 2008, a total of 30 rocket and mortar shells landed in Israel, causing no injuries. During the same period, according to the Palestinian Human Rights Commission, Israeli forces killed 12 Palestinians in the West Bank, and on 10 July killed one Palestinian in Gaza. In other words, Hamas and the other resistance factions more or less stopped the rocket fire while Israel continued to assassinate Hamas and Islamic Jihad members in the West Bank and Gaza.

Yet the Zionists did not relax border crossing closures, and it was they who broke the ceasefire when on 4/5 November their forces entered Gaza and in two incidents killed one Islamic Jihad and six Hamas militants. Hamas and Islamic Jihad retaliated with rocket and mortar fire, to which the Zionists responded by shutting the borders completely. By 13 November, John Ging was saying that 'We cannot describe the situation in the Gaza Strip except as a terrible and terrifying one. There are 750,000 refugees who depend on what we offer them in food supplies. Israel is preventing us from distributing these supplies.' (FRFI 206).

On 14 December Khaled Mishaal placed the responsibility for the situation on the Zionists, saying that the 'enemy did not abide by it [the ceasefire] and we in Hamas and the majority of other Palestinian forces believe that the truce will be over and will not be renewed'. Islamic Jihad leader Khalid Al Batsh said 'Israel is the sole beneficiary of the truce while we are starving to death... we in the Islamic Jihad movement would rather die in the trenches of resistance than in the hospitals of starvation'. On 25 December, Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni told Egypt's President Mubarak about the planned attack.

Operation 'Cast Lead'

The Israeli air strikes began at 11.30am on Saturday 27 December just as children were leaving school, catching many in the explosions as missiles and bombs hailed down on the densely populated streets of Gaza City. Principal targets were government buildings which Israel characterised as 'terrorist infrastructure' so as to destroy Hamas's ability to govern. An attack on a police graduation ceremony in Gaza City left over 40 dead including the Gaza head of police. By the end of the day, at least 235 Palestinians had been killed and 700 wounded. Gaza's hospitals were overwhelmed, with a shortage of basic medicines and equipment to treat the wounded. Medical staff told those with less severe injuries to go home as there was no treatment available.

The cynical response of both Britain and the US was to place the blame on Hamas, while hypocritically calling on Israel to avoid civilian casualties. The British Foreign Office called on 'militants in the Gaza Strip to immediately cease all rocket attacks on Israel'. A White House spokesperson declared 'Hamas's continued rocket attacks into Israel must cease if the violence is to stop. Hamas must end its terrorist activity if it wishes to play a role in the future of the Palestinian people... The US urges Israel to avoid civilian casualties as it targets Hamas in Gaza'.

Imperialism's puppet Mahmoud Abbas blamed Hamas for not renewing the ceasefire agreement and provoking the onslaught. Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces broke up demonstrations in the West Bank after they became expressions of support for Hamas. The Egyptian weekly *Al-Ahram* quoted a Fatah spokesperson as saying 'If we allow the masses to take to the street, Hamas would be able to re-establish itself very fast here'.

Egypt initially allowed some wound-

BARBARITY ASSAULT ON GAZA

ed to cross the border for treatment, but supported the Israeli onslaught by keeping the Rafah crossing closed. On Sunday 28 December as hundreds of people attempted to break through the border fence, Egyptian guards opened fire, killing one Palestinian. On 8 January the Secretary General of the Union of Arab Doctors denounced the Egyptian government for blocking Arab medical volunteers from using the Rafah crossing to enter Gaza.

Continued air strikes hit more government buildings, mosques and universities, including the Islamic University in Gaza City, as well as the border areas around Rafah to destroy the tunnels into Egypt on which Gazans rely for supplies denied by the Israeli siege. On 3 January Israeli armour and troops entered Gaza with a concerted campaign to target medical workers and UN buildings:

- 4 January: an air strike hits two ambulances, killing four paramedics.
- 6 January: a UN school in Jabaliya refugee camp sheltering civilians is shelled, killing 43. Two other schools are hit: one in Khan Younis killing two and the other in Gaza City killing three people.
- 7 January: the central headquarters of the Union of Health Care Committees in Gaza City is bombed, destroying a specialised medical centre and three mobile clinics.
- 8 January: an Israeli tank attacks a UN aid convoy killing one of the Palestinian drivers. UNRWA suspends all aid delivery.
- 10 January: a Norwegian Aid Agency vehicle is destroyed by an Israeli missile just north of Gaza City.
- 15 January: the Al Quds hospital in Gaza City is set on fire after it is attacked with white phosphorus shells. Two other hospitals to the east of the city and a Red Crescent office are also attacked.
- 15 January: the main UNRWA compound in Gaza City is hit with white phosphorus shells, destroying the limited supplies of food and medical aid



An Israeli bomb falls on Beit Hanoun, Gaza Strip

stockpiled there.

- 17 January: a UN school in Beit Lahiya is shelled with white phosphorus munitions, killing two children.

The racist disregard for Palestinian lives exhibited by the Israeli forces was clearly exposed by an International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) statement on 8 January detailing the denial of medical help to wounded Palestinians for four days. The Zaytoun area of Gaza City had been under shell fire from 3 January but medical teams were refused access until 7 January. The teams found in one house, four small children huddled next to their dead mothers, and, in another, 15 survivors including several who were wounded. The ICRC statement was clear, 'the Israeli military failed to meet its obligation under international humanitarian law to care for and evacuate the wounded'.

Britain supplies the weapons that kill Palestinian children

In November 2008 Labour government Business Secretary Lord Mandelson told a City of London Mansion House audience he wanted closer ties with our 'firm friend' Israel. The target was bilateral trade worth £3 billion a year by 2012, up from £2.3 billion in 2007. British exports to Israel have averaged about £1.8 billion and imports £1.25 billion a year since 1997. Imported goods from Israel rose from £839 million in 1997 to £1.04 billion in 2007. Israel's major trade partners are the US, Britain and Germany. The EU is Israel's largest export market and second main source of imports after the US. Israel is part of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership intended to promote free trade across the EU's southern periphery.

The Israeli arms industry is integrated into the US and European military-industrial complexes, including interlocking ownerships. Israel's wars serve as laboratories to test weapons and tactics. Israeli sol-

diers trained the Metropolitan Police who killed Jean Charles de Menezes.

British export licences granted for arms sales to Israel were worth £11.5 million in 2004, £22.5 million in 2005 and £24 million in the first six months of 2008. BAE Systems supplies components for F16 fighter jets destined for Israel. MPE in Liverpool supplies parts for Israeli F15s and F16s. UAV Engines of Lichfield is Israeli-owned and makes the engines used in Israel's Hermes 450 drones. Smiths Industries of Croydon and Augusta Westland of Yeovil contribute to the Israeli Defence Force Apache helicopter gun-ships. Israel has supplied the British military with cluster shells (used on Basra), grenades, machine guns, drones, armour protection for helicopters, targeting instruments and more. British and Israeli arms companies are engaged in joint research projects.

Trevor Rayne

Palestinian resistance in Israel

As the Zionist onslaught on Gaza started, for the first time since the 1948 Nakba, hundreds of thousands of Palestinian citizens of Israel from the Galilee in the north, to Jaffa, and the Negev in the south, took to the streets of their towns, cities and villages in solidarity with their fellow Palestinians in Gaza. In the first week after the war, more than 150,000 demonstrated in the Palestinian city of Sakhneen. In the following week, over 100,000 demonstrated in different cities.

In Jaffa, a flourishing Palestinian city until the Zionists destroyed it in 1948, the remaining Palestinian community who live in dire poverty as a result of Israel's racist policy demonstrated carrying the banner, 'Gaza, Jaffa, one people, one cause.' The Israeli police responded to demonstrations by arresting over 500 Palestinians, half of them under 18.

Racism in a country which describes itself as the 'only democracy in the Middle East' is promoted by the Israeli Parliament, the Knesset. To punish the Palestinian minority for demonstrating against the war, the Knesset Central Elections Committee voted overwhelmingly on 12 January 2009 to deny Arabs (as Palestinians are called in Israel in an effort to abolish their national identity) the right to any political representation by banning their parties from running in Israel's February general election. Palestinian citizens of Israel constitute one sixth of Israel's population.

Although the decision was revoked by the Israeli High Court on 20 January, racist incitement by Israeli politicians against the Palestinians continues. Avigdor Liberman, leader of Yisrael Beiteinu and a former Minister in the current coalition government said at the court hearing 'We need to treat some Arab MKs [Members of Knesset] like we treated Hamas... The option of revoking the citizenship of the branch of terrorist organisations within the Knesset will be kept open.' During the Gazan onslaught, he said 'we must continue



Demonstrators in Jaffa

to fight Hamas just like the United States did with the Japanese in World War II. Then, too, the occupation of the country was unnecessary.' This was a clear reference to the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Meanwhile Kadima Minister of Foreign Affairs Tzipi Livni claimed during the onslaught that 'there's no humanitarian crisis in Gaza' - implying that Palestinians in Gaza are not human beings.

Liberman's popularity among Israelis is ever-increasing. On 21 January 2009, Israel's Channel 2 election poll revealed that Liberman's party may win 16 Knesset seats out of 120 in the February elections. For many Israelis, what Tzipi Livni and Ehud Barak have done in Gaza is not enough, as polls show that the Likud, the right-wing party led by former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, is set to get 34% of the vote, as opposed to 17% for Livni's allegedly moderate Kadima party. In racist Israel, as the banner of a protester from Jaffa sums it up: 'Elections in Israel 2009: The more you kill, the more you win'.

Manal Darwish

Britain: new forces threaten old alliances

There was a huge outburst of anger across Britain at Israel's attack on Gaza. Demonstrations on 3 January were unprecedented in their spread throughout the country. A week later, upwards of 50,000 marched in London, 10,000 in Edinburgh, and 5,000 in Birmingham. In some cities, there were several protests a week; on 17 January there were further protests across the country.

On 23 January, protestors entered the EDO arms factory near Brighton, which manufactures components for Israeli F15 and F16 aircraft and Hellfire missiles, and 'decommissioned' the equipment they found. Six were arrested. Seventeen universities and BBC buildings in London, Manchester and Glasgow were occupied.

In many places protests were marked by their militancy and preparedness to confront the forces of the state. They included many young working class people, predominantly Muslim, mobilised in numbers not seen since before the invasion of Iraq in 2003. From the outset the opportunists who run the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC), Stop the War Coalition and CND tried to prevent the demonstrators from acting outside of their control.

The PSC in London set the tone. Following an angry demonstration outside the Israeli embassy in London on 28 December, the PSC scheduled daily protests the following week for 2-4pm. Each day, the PSC attempted to shut down the protest at a time it had agreed with the police, against the wishes of many demonstrators. On one occasion, as PSC National Chair Betty Hunter gave demonstrators ten

minutes to leave, a protester answered: 'If Israel stops its attacks in ten minutes, then we'll stop our demonstration'. The protest continued. At the second, huge London demonstration on 10 January, thousands of demonstrators halted outside the Israeli Embassy despite efforts of stewards to move them on. When some of the demonstrators were attacked by the police, they resisted. For the third national demonstration, on 24 January, the opportunists chose a route which went nowhere near the embassy.

In Edinburgh on 10 January, the intent of the PSC/SWP organisers was to march people up to barriers in front of the US consulate and then march them away again as quickly as possible, despite an appeal from the SWP for people to bring old shoes. In the event protestors remained for some time in front of the consulate, keeping up militant chanting as hundreds of shoes, sticks and bottles rained down on the consulate and the police, whilst stewards and police made calls in vain for the march to 'move along'.

In order to re-establish and then maintain their control of any developments, the opportunists excluded the new forces from any decision-making

process by publicising organising meetings as little as possible – this was the case in Glasgow, Dundee, Manchester and Liverpool. These were reserved for 'activists'. In Newcastle, the PSC chair at the first meeting after the Israeli attack announced that the only item of discussion would be the national demonstration in London on 10 January, and at a meeting on 26 January spoke of public protests at the city centre Monument as a 'declining asset'.

The opportunists also tried to dampen down any acts of militancy or examples of politics they did not find acceptable. Thus on 30 December a Dundee protest attended by 200 people was told by the self-appointed organiser as they arrived that 'now is not the time for anger or politics'; similarly on 6 January Salma Yaqoob of Birmingham Stop the War asked a noisy demonstration outside the city

council for silence, telling the angry crowd 'If you care for the Palestinians, now is the time to be quiet and orderly'. Meanwhile Manchester Stop the War opposed a call-out by other organisations to protest against a Zionist rally on 11 January.

Overall the opportunists attempted to exclude any serious politics. National demonstrations were addressed by the usual round-up of Labour politicians – Tony Benn, and MPs Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell. At a protest in South Shields outside a Labour Party dinner attended by Foreign Secretary David Miliband on 23 January, the SWP attempted to drown out anyone exposing Labour's long-term support for Zionism.

Local actions however are continuing, and FRFI urges its readers to get involved wherever they can.

Thomas Vincent

Cuba, Venezuela and Bolivia condemn Israeli attack on Gaza

The expulsion by the Venezuelan and Bolivian governments of their respective Israeli ambassadors over the attack on Gaza was a vital act of solidarity with the Palestinian people.

The Cuban government issued a statement of condemnation within hours of the Israeli attack starting, describing it as 'criminal'. The statement pointed out that the attack 'is occurring in the midst of the illegal blockade imposed for the last 18 months by the Israeli government on the Gaza Strip and directed at annihilating the Palestinian population, including children, women and the elderly, and forcing them to surrender out of hunger and sickness.' The statement urged 'the international community to condemn the massacre and to request an immediate end for the attacks against the Palestinian civil population. Cuba reiterates its unwavering solidarity and support for the heroic and long-suffering Palestinian people.'

The Venezuelan government expelled the Israeli ambassador on 6 January 2009, and then, with Bolivia, broke diplomatic relations with Israel on 14 January 'if the world had any conscience, the president of Israel should be taken before an international court, together with the president of the United States', President Chavez said. Meanwhile Evo Morales attacked the United Nations 'Insecurity Council' for its 'lukewarm' response and said he would 'bring genocide charges against top Israeli officials' in the International Criminal Court. The Ecuadorian and Nicaraguan governments condemned Israel as 'criminal' and expressed solidarity with the Palestinian people.

Chavez's stand has made him a hero in Palestine and much of the Middle East as people have contrasted his principled stand with those of the Arab governments. The stance of the three governments is important since, not only does it demonstrate their support for the Palestinian people, it also establishes a socialist, anti-imperialist pole in international relations.



3 January: FRFI activists on the Manchester demonstration against Israeli attacks on Gaza

Round up of action

FRFI supporters have been active throughout the country in support of the Palestinian people.

On Sunday 28 December, within hours of the first Israeli attack on Gaza, FRFI activists in Glasgow joined several hundred people in a spontaneous march around George Square. We attended demonstrations on 3 and 10 January in Glasgow and Edinburgh and protests organised by the Scottish PSC against Lloyds TSB, one of which saw an impromptu march from George Square to the bank and another one in which a PSC member was arrested. In Dundee FRFI has also been involved in regular protests. Despite a supporter being summonsed for obstruction for refusing to take down a stall, these protests will continue.

In Manchester, supporters were also active, being part of a demonstration outside the BBC offices in Manchester on 28 December and then involved in the setting up of the Gaza Solidarity Committee. This committee called a demonstration of 3,000 in Manchester on 3 January. FRFI supporters played a major role in organising further events including a picket outside Lloyds TSB followed by an open mike protest in Piccadilly Gardens on 10 January. Supporters also attended a protest against the Stand up for Israel rally organised by the Manchester Zionist Council and addressed by Labour MPs Ivan Lewis and Louise Ellman in Albert Square on 11 January.

In Newcastle, FRFI supporters organised weekly pickets of Marks and Spencer with up to 40 protestors. To keep the movement alive and democratic, FRFI organised open action forums to plan future events including a rolling picket through the city centre on 17 January, reported in the regional *Sunday Sun*.

'Demonstrators with Fight Racism Fight Imperialism caused major disruption to shoppers and traffic in Newcastle for more than two hours as they targeted several high-street stores they claim support Israel...more than 200 protesters carried out a series of demonstrations against the continuing Israeli attacks on Gaza.'

In London, FRFI supporters attended the daily pickets of the Israeli embassy from the day they were called, mobilising people to join the weekly picket of Oxford Street Marks and Spencer which they have organised since the start of the Intifada. On the major demonstrations they have ensured that their contingents have been the noisiest and most militant, with an open mike on both the marches and the pickets.



Die-in in Lloyds bank, Newcastle

BBC lies and distortions

Napoleon once remarked that he would give three regiments for a newspaper. Management of the media during war is part of psychological operations; intended to maximise the scope of military actions and their effectiveness. In *The Art of War* Sun Tzu observed that 'Military force is based upon deception.' Thus for Israeli war planners the criminal is presented as the victim and the aggressor as the defender. Reviewing their latest operations, the Israeli military will be satisfied that the media in the major imperialist countries was successfully managed, the BBC being a prime example. This portends future slaughter.

The attack was planned months ago together with the supporting media campaign and the public relations staff carefully selected and rehearsed. All international journalists were banned from going into Gaza for the duration of the assault. Like the BBC's Michael Sergeant, they were held in

Jerusalem or, like the BBC's Middle East editor Jeremy Bowen, they were embedded with Israeli forces in Israel close to Gaza. Subsequently they relied on the Israeli Intelligence and Terrorism Information Centre for reports which re-cycled Israeli Defence Ministry briefings. Schools, mosques and hospitals became ' Hamas infrastructure' and ' Hamas leader killed in air strike' (BBC website) was the illegal murder of 16 Palestinians, including 11 children. Ten houses were destroyed in the attack. Israeli control of information included the confiscation of all their troops' mobile phones; during the 2006 invasion of Lebanon Israeli soldiers phoned home for help and to describe what was happening.

Protestors have rightly targeted BBC offices for bias and refusing to screen the appeal by leading charities on behalf of Gaza's people. The BBC is British government owned and its senior executives rotate their careers

through business, government ministry and BBC boardrooms. The founding executive, Lord Reith, prevented any trade union representatives gaining access to the radio during the 1926 General Strike. For 40 years in Bush House a brigadier passed on the names of applicants for editorial jobs at the BBC World Service to MI5 for vetting. Reith expressed the partiality of the BBC for the ruling class it represents, 'They know they can trust us not to be impartial.'

Current BBC director-general Mark Thompson visited the then Israeli Prime Minister Sharon and Palestinian Authority leader Abbas in 2005 to assure them that BBC coverage of the Middle East would be totally impartial. The Zionist lobby operates at the highest levels of the British government. Both Blair and Gordon Brown are members of Labour Friends of Israel. Foreign Minister David Miliband has relatives who are Zionist settlers on the West Bank. Three fundraising scandals implicating Labour government leaders in the past five years have involved wealthy Zionists. Being 'impartial' to the premeditated murder of a people is to be complicit in that murder.

Trevor Rayne

GREECE

Greek protesters lead the way for Europe



Athens: Greek protestors confront the police during riots in December

ANDREW ALEXANDER

Protests continue following the uprising that consumed the country in December 2008, triggered by the murder of a 15-year-old boy, Alexandros Grigoropoulos, who was shot dead by police in Athens on 6 December. Riots then quickly spread to Thessaloniki, Greece's second largest city, to the northern cities of Komotini and Ioannina, to Crete and other islands and towns. The two police officers involved in the shooting were arrested on 8 December and Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis, of the conservative New Democracy (ND) party wrote to the boy's parents expressing his profound sorrow in a desperate and failed attempt to stop the dissent from spreading.

The majority of those demonstrating were students and school pupils who expressed their sadness and anger

about his death but it quickly became clear that behind the protests lay widespread discontent with intolerable social and political conditions. Greece is being buffeted hard by the economic global crisis. Around a quarter of under 20-year-olds in Greece are unemployed and live below the poverty level. For university graduates the rate of unemployment is 28%. Having studied for years many are then forced to take poorly-paid work. The shooting was the spark that lit the tinderbox and the rioting in Greece was the first mass action in Europe against the current capitalist crisis.

Students lead the way

Students occupied several of the main universities and planned and directed protests from them. Under Greek law university campuses are autonomous zones which the police and army are banned from entering. This law was enacted in response to a massacre in

1973 at the Athens Polytechnic when 24 students, who were campaigning against the military junta at the time, were killed by the army. These events are still fresh in the minds of many Greeks and the government decided against announcing a state of emergency, realising that having the army on the streets would further radicalise the people.

It has been widely reported in the international bourgeois press that the 'rioters' were anarchists. It is true that the anarchist trend in Greece is significant and did form the backbone of many of the demonstrations. However, the movement consists of a variety of different trends, including socialist and communist organisations. The media inevitably focused on rock throwing and the burning of shops (not to mention the burning down of the main Christmas tree in Athens - those neo-pagan barbarians!). What they failed to mention were the quickly established and self-organising meetings and discussions that were taking place in countless student halls around the country, as the youth debated at a very high political level and discussed how to build and develop the protests.

On 10 December the whole of Greece came to a standstill as a previously scheduled general strike meant thousands of workers joined the student-led protests on the street. The police responded with further brutality against demonstrators, putting over 70 in hospital, many with serious injuries. The links between the original murder, wider police brutality, government incompetence, and deepening capitalist crisis were becoming more and more apparent. A radicalisation process was accelerating and it became obvious that the conservative government was going to have to rely on its social democratic allies for help.

Opportunism goes into overdrive

With Karamanlis facing growing criticism for his handling of the crisis - and his single-seat majority in the 300-member parliament looking increasingly vulnerable - the opposition leader, George Papandreou of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), stepped up calls for early elections. Coming out of emergency talks, requested by Karamanlis in an attempt to contain the crisis, Papandreou said it had become clear the government was incapable of defending the public from rioters.

For the first time in many years PASOK is ahead of ND in the polls. Both these bourgeois parties have ruled on similar programmes for many years and their change at the top of the polls is hardly surprising. However, what is of interest is that the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) has increased its support to 12% and overtaken the Greek Communist Party (KKE) as the largest left organisation and third most popular overall.

The KKE represents the opportunistic and social-democratic left. The party openly condemned the protests and leading KKE members declared that they were organised by 'desperados' and 'fanatically violent elements,' whose only aim was destruction. The KKE deliberately organised its own demonstration, of about 10,000 people, on 11 December in an attempt to suppress the movement as quickly as possible. Their allies in the trade unions also followed suit as the trade union leadership began to cancel several planned major demonstrations. On 15 December, when many workers assembled for a demonstration, trade union stewards stopped them and broke the demonstration up. Such sectarianism led to many counter moves by demonstrators not joined to the trade unions. In one action, workers and youth occupied the headquarters of the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE) on 17 December. One of the protesters, Nikolaus, a coffee shop worker, criticised the trade unions as a bureaucratic elite that no longer has any connection to ordinary workers. 'The

trade unions have done nothing to support the protests. That is why we have occupied this building.'

SYRIZA displays more radical characteristics. It was formed as a coalition in 2001 under the title 'Space for Dialogue for the Unity and Common Action of the Left'. By January 2004 it had evolved into the Coalition of the Radical Left. The main parties forming it were Synaspismos (SY), Renewing Communist Ecological Left (AKO), Internationalist Workers Left (DEA), Movement for the United in Action Left (KEDA), who split from the KKE, and several independent left activists.

The coalition campaigned against such issues as neo-liberalism, anti-terror legislation and the war in Kosovo. Exactly just how revolutionary SYRIZA will be is yet to be seen but it has clearly identified with the current movement and has called on the workers and students to topple the government.

Since December demonstrations have continued but they have diminished in size. Both the police in their brutality and the social democrats in their opportunism have been partially successful in their task of subduing the movement. However, dissent is still evident and the youth in particular have gone through a huge politicisation process. As the economic conditions worsen the demonstrations and clashes with the police will develop again. We should take inspiration as the revolutionary road for us all begins to snake between state brutality and naked opportunism.

STOP PRESS!

On 28 January thousands of Greek farmers set up a protest which paralysed the country. Using tractors and trailers, the farmers blockaded around 70 main roads, cutting several links between towns including severing Athens from Thessalonika. Border crossings with Bulgaria, Macedonia and Turkey have remained closed due to the farmers' actions. As we go to press the protestors are refusing to move and are continuing their demands for more funding from the government.

RUSSIA AND UKRAINE Regional tensions

TREVOR RAYNE

Russia stopped supplying gas to Ukraine on 1 January and a week later stopped all supplies to Europe passing through Ukraine. Russia accused Ukraine of stealing gas intended for other European countries. Supplies resumed on 20 January when the Ukrainian government agreed to pay a higher price for the energy.

About one fifth of the European Union's gas supplies are piped from Russia across the Ukraine. Bulgaria receives 80% of its gas from Russia, Austria 70%, Germany 30% and Italy 17%. In the midst of freezing temperatures Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Hungary, Macedonia, Serbia and Greece were particularly hit by the shut down. Slovakia declared a state of 'energy emergency' and the French Peugeot-Citroen car factory was closed. There were demonstrations against Russia in several countries. British Prime Minister Brown declared: 'No nation can be allowed to exert an energy stranglehold over Europe.' Mighty fine words, but Britain does not import gas from Russia and so bombast was a luxury he could afford.

The dispute is part of the manoeuvres between the US, the EU and Russia for influence in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, of which August 2008's war in Georgia



Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, left, and Russia's state-run natural gas monopoly Gazprom chief Alexei Miller

was a manifestation. Additionally, Russia needs extra revenues from its energy supplies to maintain economic growth and sustain its now imperiled middle class; falling oil prices have pushed down Russian currency reserves, the war in Georgia hastened a capital flight from Russia and the Russian stock market fell 75% between May and October 2008.

On 5 November Russian President Medvedev said that Russia would place missiles in Kaliningrad, between Poland and Lithuania, if the US goes ahead with stationing its anti-missile system in Poland and the Czech Republic. The Ukrainian government continues to seek membership of the

EU and NATO. On 12 December, with Ukrainian President Yushchenko at his side, Russian Prime Minister Putin warned that Russia 'has its own' responses to increased US military presence in the region. The then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and the Ukraine foreign minister signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement on 19 December wherein the two countries will increase 'ongoing programmes of co-operation and assistance on defence and security issues...of benefit to both nations and the region'. The Agreement included US proposals to modernise Ukraine's gas transit infrastructure and 'diversify and secure Ukraine's source of nuclear fuel'. Rice signed a similar agreement with Georgia on 9 January. At a meeting of gas producing countries in Moscow on 23 December, Putin said, 'the era of cheap energy resources, of cheap gas is...coming to an end'.

With the Russia-Ukraine gas dispute settled for now the manoeuvring and tensions will intensify. Germany is building a gas pipeline with Russia's Gazprom beneath the Baltic Sea and direct from Russia to Germany, avoiding any third countries. US imperialism will fight harder to control the Caspian and Central Asian oil and gas reserves and pipelines to Europe that do not pass through Russia (the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline and the proposed Nabucco pipeline from Baku through Georgia, Turkey and onto Europe). On 28 January, in a gesture of goodwill towards the new US administration, Russia agreed to suspend stationing missiles in Kaliningrad. The US government must now make its calculations and will soon reveal its hand.

Massive protests in France



French high school students on a demonstration in Paris 15 January

TREVOR RAYNE

The crisis of international capitalism is provoking mass protests across Europe from Iceland to Greece and Latvia to France. On 29 January at least 2.5 million people protested at 200 marches and rallies in towns and cities across France against the French government, its attacks on the public sector and working conditions and against rising unemployment. The protests were called by eight trade union groups and accompanied by a 24-hour nationwide strike; rail and bus services, airports, schools and postal services were closed down. The Paris demonstration was even joined by stock exchange workers. Univer-

sity and high school occupations are continuing.

Socialist Party leaders positioned themselves on the French protests, hoping to channel the people's anger to their electoral advantage. An opinion poll showed 69% of French voters supporting the protests. European governments are facing a real dilemma: they do not have a clue how to solve the economic and social crisis, other than to throw more money at it and hope for the best, and to attack the living standards of the working class thereby exacerbating the crisis and threatening to turn it into a political crisis. French President Sarkozy has seen the demonstrations and will tread very cautiously from now on if he wishes his political office to survive.

Licence to kill

Landmarks in the development of police powers to kill and get away with it

The new Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Paul Stephenson was appointed on 28 January promising to 'convince all the communities of London that the Met is on their side'. His appointment followed the resignation of Sir Ian Blair in November 2008, who left under several looming clouds, not least the imminent verdict of the Jean Charles de Menezes inquest; allegations of racism from senior Asian police colleagues and a boycott by the Metropolitan Black Police Association; and an investigation into personal corruption.

The open verdict in the De Menezes inquest, which ended in December, proved to be the indictment of policing that Sir Ian Blair had feared. The jury were prevented from bringing a verdict of unlawful killing by a ruling of the coroner, but went as far as they could to point to the culpability of the police. The De Menezes family welcomed the verdict as at least some recognition of the circumstances of their son's killing in Stockwell on 22 July 2005. But the family did not receive justice and they stand in a long line of families who have been on the receiving end of the development of police tactics to deal with political opponents, tactics which include murder and brutality.

Despite the new Commissioner's stated hopes, the Metropolitan Police is not a 'service', it is a force which operates on behalf of the British state and cannot possibly be on the side of all communities. In the last 40 years, two issues have been the catalysts for fundamental reviews of how the police force operates. First was the renewed nationalist struggle in Ireland from the late 1960s onwards. Second was the outbreak of inner city uprisings from the early 1980s onwards. Before this the British police and British Army – twin agents of British rule – pursued different methods. Abroad the British state developed specialist repressive tactics to deal with opposition. In Britain it was 'policing by consent', with occasional exceptions if the working class fought back. For the most part, Britain's imperialist exploits ensured civil peace at home at the expense of the oppressed nations in the British Empire.

The outbreak of the 'Troubles' in the north of Ireland brought the struggle against imperialist rule to Britain's doorstep, and to mainland cities. During the 1970s new tactics were developed to deal with this opposition to British rule. In particular, Sir Kenneth Newman, Chief Constable, Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), and Brigadier General Frank Kitson, British Army, were at the forefront of adapting the methods of colonial policing to deal with the Republican movement.

The first inner city uprisings in Britain in 1981, at Brixton in London and Toxteth in Liverpool, severely tested the police who tried to crush the black and white youth on the streets. The police only narrowly held their ground despite the lack of any real organised fightback. When order was restored, Newman, now Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, ensured that the lessons of the Irish struggle were adapted for use against any section of the British population that challenged the British state. In Britain increased police powers were used against the striking miners (1984-5) and against the black community in Broadwater Farm (1985).

Shoot to kill in Ireland

It was in Ireland that the shoot-to-kill policy, operated by the RUC and the British Army, first emerged. For many

years the nationalist people in the north had believed that individual Republican activists had been targeted and killed by British forces, but in 1982, within a one month period, six men were shot dead by the RUC. All six shootings followed a similar pattern. The men were unarmed and were shot by members of the RUC E4A unit, an SAS-trained squad. E4A was effectively a heavily-armed, covert police murder squad organised on military lines, operating from unmarked cars. After each killing the RUC issued a false cover story, removed witnesses and destroyed forensic evidence. A forged RUC report was compiled on one man after his death (he had no Republican connections) in order to implicate him.

Five years later, in 1988, the British Attorney General closed all inquiries into the events of 1982, regretting that there was some evidence of police corruption but because of 'considerations of national security' no charges would be brought against the officers involved in the killings or the subsequent conspiracy to obstruct justice.

Two months later, an IRA active service unit was gunned down on the streets of Gibraltar. Despite British claims, and press reports describing the 'bomb', there was no remote-controlled bomb, and the victims were unarmed. The SAS killers claimed that their victims made aggressive movements before being riddled with bullets. The subsequent inquest was rigged and independent witnesses were intimidated and slandered. The similarities between the 1982 killings and the events in Gibraltar are striking.* And the British government got away with it again.

The killing of Harry Stanley

Armed response units and Specialist Firearms Officers (SFOs) were introduced on the streets of London in 1991. This represented a culmination of the changes begun by Newman in 1982. No more policing by consent. Police powers to deal with political demonstrations and militant strikers like the miners were dramatically enhanced. The Prevention of Terrorism Act became a permanent fixture in British law, as civil rights were diminished to make way for policing 'the enemy within'.

On 22 September 1999, Glaswegian Harry Stanley was gunned down in the street near his home in Hackney



Increased police powers were used against the striking miners in 1984-5

by two SFOs. They claimed they had been tipped off that an Irishman was walking the streets with a sawn-off shotgun. Harry Stanley was carrying a repaired table leg in a plastic bag. The SFOs claimed that they had shouted warnings for him to stop but Stanley made an aggressive movement pointing 'the gun' in their direction, so, to defend themselves, they shot him. Stanley had no political connections and was entirely innocent. Well, you might say, we all make mistakes, don't we, but that is not the end of the Harry Stanley story.

In the days following the killing, Stanley's family were subject to grilling by the Metropolitan Police, trying to convince them that Harry's mood was suicidal and to suggest that he may have set out to get shot. Harry's son described the police as 'the gestapo'. At the first inquest in 2002 the coroner ruled out unlawful killing as a verdict, and admitted into evidence Harry Stanley's criminal record, despite its irrelevance since the SFOs did not know who they had shot. The evidence of the two officers was strikingly similar due to the fact that they were allowed to compile their statements together. This is still normal procedure for shooting incidents. They claimed that Harry was facing them when he was shot. The jury, unconvinced, returned an open verdict.

As a result of further forensic evidence showing that Harry was shot in the back of the head, a second inquest was called which ended with a verdict of unlawful killing. The two SFOs then began a public campaign to avoid being put on trial for manslaughter or murder, enlisting the aid of the press to advertise the trauma they and their families were suffering. With the help of further 'expert evidence' they were able to successfully judicially review and quash the second inquest verdict. The new 'expert evidence' came from a US professor who claimed that people who are being shot can move very quickly and that police who shoot them often get the facts wrong due to trauma.

In the end, six years after the killing, all the criminal and disciplinary charges against the SFOs were dropped. The Stanley family did not get any justice at all. Neatly, from now on at such inquests, forensic evidence which runs counter to police evidence could be discounted.

These were the lengths the police

were willing to go to in 2005 to justify shooting an entirely innocent man. They were prepared to go further.

Anti-terror policing

The attacks on London Transport passengers on 7 July 2005 which killed 52 people and the later, failed, attacks on 21 July, once again changed the nature of policing in London. As a result of bombings in other cities, in particular Madrid in March 2004, the police developed a new strategy for dealing with suicide bombers, called KRATOS. This is essentially a procedure for killing identified suicide bombers without warning.

Just as the Irish community in Britain found itself targeted indiscriminately in response to the IRA's campaign, and just as the black community in Broadwater Farm was held under police siege in 1985, the Muslim community soon found that they were to be the next to suffer. Massive increases in stop-and-search of any young men 'looking like Muslims' and raids on premises in Muslim areas were justified on the grounds that 'being Muslim' means you may be guilty.

At 4am on 2 June 2006 the Met police raided two houses in Forest Gate, East London. They claimed to have 'intelligence' that the houses were being used to manufacture a 'dirty bomb'. The raid involved armed officers wearing full biological protection outfits, including masks and breathing apparatus, carrying torches. In the course of the raid, one man was shot and another wounded on the head. Both said they were terrified by the raid and did not realise it was the police. The victim of the shooting and his brother, after medical treatment, were arrested and taken to Paddington Green Police Station where they were held for seven days, after which they were released without charge. Nine other people, including a baby, were taken to Plaistow police station, where, although not under arrest, they were held in the police canteen and 'persuaded' to give DNA samples and fingerprints, with no access to solicitors.

No 'dirty bomb' was found. None of the complaints against the police were upheld in the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) inquiry and no criminal charges brought. The shooting was held to be an accident on a dark landing. The head

injury was in line with the police strategy of 'dominating by aggressive behaviour causing fear'. The officer concerned said he had struck the man because he did not obey instructions and 'he was reaching under his bed for something'. Most of the police officers could not be identified because of their protective outfits, so most of the complaints went no further.

It is now lawful, on the basis of undisclosed 'intelligence', for large numbers of police to raid your home in the middle of the night, treat you extremely aggressively and violently, and if they deem it necessary, or you try to protect yourself and your family, they can assault you or shoot you. You will have no redress.

The killing of Jean Charles de Menezes

The facts of the shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes on 22 July 2005, the attempted cover-up, failed investigations, and decision not to charge or discipline any of the Met Police officers involved, show how far the British state will go to defend itself. De Menezes was shot in full view of passengers having been 'identified' as one of the failed bombers from the day before. The police only had a vague idea of what their target looked like, but on the basis of their racist descriptions of the man who left a block of flats in Tulse Hill, caught two buses and entered the tube at Stockwell station, they had no hesitation about pumping seven dum dum bullets into his brain.

The immediate response of the police was to cover-up their mistake. Within hours press reports appeared describing De Menezes as wearing bulky clothing, behaving nervously, jumping the barriers into the station. De Menezes was wearing light clothing, carrying nothing and did not jump the barriers. Police press statements from Scotland Yard claimed that he had emerged from a known terrorist house – not a block of flats – and that he had failed to respond to police warnings. Once it was known that Jean Charles was an innocent Brazilian, news was spread that he was an illegal immigrant, and later that he was a suspected rapist – as if this might justify his treatment. At Scotland Yard, lying press releases were being issued and the police were holding back the information that they had shot an innocent man. The Commissioner even claimed that he did not know this until the following day. Sir Ian Blair tried to block the investigation by the IPCC, but he didn't have bothered as the IPCC already had a deserved reputation for dismissing complaints against the police.

Readers will recognise the pattern of police behaviour and cover-up which was manifest in Ireland's shoot-to-kill cases, the Gibraltar three and at Harry Stanley's inquests: lie about the events surrounding the shootings and then blame the victim. The IPCC duly found that individual police were not to blame. A charge of breaching health and safety laws was brought against the Metropolitan Police, for which they were fined. The inquest jury did its best and rejected the police evidence, but they may be the last jury able to do so. The Labour government is now preparing legislation to ensure that future inquests in cases involving national security or sensitive intelligence will be held in private without a jury. This will seal the whole system and ensure that the police can get away with murder with no questions asked.

Jane Bennett

* Many of the events cited in this article have been the subject of articles in FRFI or in books and pamphlets written over the last 30 years. Most of these are available on the RCG website, including *Murder on the Rock*, an analysis of shoot to kill and the Gibraltar Three. I gratefully acknowledge this work. See: www.revolutionarycommunist.org For the de Menezes family campaign, see: justice4jean.org

Britain's economy heading for bankruptcy?

\$14 trillion was wiped off global share values in 2008, a record yearly decline. The US Dow Jones lost nearly 35%. The main European stockmarkets performed even worse, with falls of more than 40%. London's FTSE 100 lost 31.3% of its value, the largest annual decline since the index was created in 1985. The British government's rescue plan for leading UK banks last October made little impression. In 2008 HBOS lost 90.4% of its value, Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) 78% and Lloyds TSB 73%.

The UK trade deficit of £8.3bn for November 2008 (latest) is the largest deficit since records began in 1697. The pound fell to a 23-year low against the dollar on 23 January 2009. Britain is officially in recession with the economy falling 1.5% in the fourth quarter of 2008 – the largest contraction for nearly 30 years. The IMF predicts the British economy will fall by 2.8% in 2009, the deepest recession of any large capitalist country. Unemployment rose by 132,000 to 1.92m – 6.1% of the workforce – in the three months to November 2008 and thousands of further redundancies are being announced each day. Government borrowing in the first nine months of the financial year reached a record £71.2bn. In early January interest rates were cut to 1.5%, a 315-year low, in a desperate effort to boost lending. DAVID YAFFE reports on the deepening crisis of the British economy.

Saving the banks and the City

For some time now we have been arguing that British capitalism with its bloated and usurious banking sector is the imperialist economy most vulnerable to external financial shocks.¹ In mid-December Chancellor Alistair Darling went some way to admitting this when he told the House of Commons that Britain will suffer more from the global economic downturn due to a loss of City revenues: 'London is the major financial services sector of the world. Of course we are likely to be more severely affected as a result of the profitability being reduced'. Saving the banks and the City of London has been the central focus of British government policy during this crisis.

What was the impact of the £400bn rescue plan including the £37bn bailout of three banks by the government last October? As the City Minister Lord Myners revealed recently, on Friday 10 October the banking system was within three hours of collapse. The government intervention, he said, helped to stabilise the immediate situation. 'Major large depositors were attempting to withdraw – and willing to pay penalties for early withdrawal – from a number of large banks. The steady influence of what we did should not be underestimated.' (Timesonline 24 January 2009). After the immediate crisis the banks, however, effectively did not increase lending to private customers, home buyers or businesses following the bail-out but used the money to bolster their balance sheets. They did not lower their interest rates on lending in line with Bank of England cuts in the base rate. They used the difference in the rates to widen profit margins. That is, they did what should have been expected: they privatised the benefits of public funds and guarantees. This is what led to calls from left and right of the political spectrum for the nationalisation of the banks, or at least those banks that took taxpayers' money.

During the first few weeks of January 2009, share prices of the RBS, Barclays and Lloyds Banking

Group (formed from the takeover of HBOS by Lloyds TSB) continued their rapid fall. On one day, 16 January, Barclays lost 25% of its value. On 19 January further measures had to be hurriedly brought forward by the government in a last-ditch effort to shore up the banking system and slow down the rapid downturn in the British economy. The government increased its stake in RBS from 58% to 68%. A government insurance scheme would allow banks to insure against bad debts. The state-owned bank Northern Rock would re-enter the mortgage market and be given more time to repay its debt. The Bank of England would be able to buy up to £50bn worth of debts of companies in all sectors of the economy, so increasing their liquidity, with taxpayers taking the risk of businesses failing, not the banks. This package takes government interventions in the economy potentially to a remarkable £617bn since Northern Rock collapsed in September 2007.

The immediate reaction of the markets was brutally clear. On 19 January when the news emerged that RBS was facing the biggest corporate loss ever of £28bn in 2008, its shares plummeted 67% to 11.6p, valuing the banking group at £4.5bn compared to £78bn 18 months previously (Financial Times 20 January 2009). Lloyds Banking Group lost a third of its value and Barclays a further 10%. The government was now carrying paper losses of £17bn on its £37bn investment in the banks last October. The situation continued to deteriorate. There were further falls in bank shares as the pound plunged against the dollar. Foreign financial institutions and capital are leaving the country. Around 30% of lending capacity has already been withdrawn. With foreign financial institutions currently providing directly or indirectly 50% of corporate loans, this could have very serious consequences for the British economy.

That is why the voices calling for nationalisation became even louder. John McFall, chairman of the Treasury Select Committee and friend of the Prime Minister, called for the

complete nationalisation of Lloyds and RBS. Even Martin Wolf, a staunch supporter of free markets and neo-liberal globalisation, raised concerns of potential losses to taxpayers. He argues that 'private management of socialised risk is dangerous' and that 'temporary nationalisation is logical' (Financial Times 23 January 2009). Yet this reactionary Labour government, committed as it is to corporate banking capital and the City of London, has so far resisted such calls. 'We have a clear view that British banks are best managed and owned commercially and not by the government' Chancellor Darling told the House of Commons on 19 January.

(PFI) are now at risk because of the credit crunch. A leaked health service memo shows that health managers can 'expect a capital desert' and real problems in completing projects because no banks are financing PFI schemes (The Guardian 26 January 2009). Tim Byles head of the public body set up to rebuild secondary schools throughout England said that by Christmas last year no banks had been willing to invest in the school's programme. The Labour government, ideologically committed as it is to the privatisation agenda, is considering underwriting the deals to prevent public sector building plans grinding to a halt. Byles indicated government thinking

A crisis that will bankrupt the country?

Britain, the oldest imperialist country, sustains the high standard of living of its citizens through the income generated by financial services sector of the economy and the 'gigantic usury capital' of its parasitic banks and financial institutions based in the City of London (see FRFI 194). That is why this crisis of the world capitalist system threatens the economic foundations of British capitalism.

Jim Rogers, chairman of Rogers Holdings and co-founder of the Quantum Fund with the financier George Soros, underscored this reality when he announced that the UK econ-



Gordon Brown and Chancellor Alistair Darling announce the second rescue plan for the banks

The government is desperate to avoid nationalisation, holding to an unfounded belief that eventually it will be possible to return to a modified, slightly more regulated situation in which things carry on much as they did before the credit crunch hit home. This is in line with Britain's refusal to join a new international crackdown on financial secrecy and tax havens and underlies Britain's negotiation stance for the G20 summit in April 2009 calling for open, lightly regulated capital markets (The Guardian 22 January 2009). For the Labour government nothing must stand in the way of the City and its parasitic banks sustaining London's place as 'the major financial services sector of the world'.

Labour's privatisation agenda unravelling

The deepening recession and the squeeze on credit are having a dramatic impact on Labour's privatisation agenda. Five train operators covering more than a quarter of the rail network are already on the critical list with train operators warning that the recession could have a 'potentially devastating' impact on their finances. It appears that the 'gravy train' of easy profits is over and, faced with significant falls of revenue, the operators now want the government to bail them out. They have asked for renegotiation of their franchises and more government subsidies. Services will be cut and workers made redundant. Similar problems are emerging with the private bus operators.

Hospital and school building and improvement programmes financed through the private finance initiative

when he said: 'we are looking at ways to share the risk between public and private sectors. The original notion of PFI was to transfer the risk to the private sector – that carries with it a price' (The Guardian 27 January 2009). Need we comment?

The banks are making it almost impossible for providers of social housing to access credit at a reasonable rate of interest. The seven lenders to the sector, including the government bailed-out RBS and Lloyds, are using every opportunity to raise existing interest rates on loans to housing associations that build and maintain most of Britain's social housing. Tom Daley, chair of a group of large London-based housing associations, warned: 'if nothing changes, our sector is going to be devastated and nobody is going to build social housing' (Financial Times 26 January 2009).

The state pension in this country is at an appallingly low level. Final salary schemes have therefore been an important component of the income of the better-off sections of the working class and middle class on retirement. With the growing recession, private sector final salary schemes could very quickly be withdrawn. The National Association of Pension Funds reports that hundreds of thousands are about to lose their right to a final salary pension. More than 650,000 of the 2.7m people still saving in a final salary scheme could be affected. Ros Altman, an independent pensions expert, has called this development 'the death knell' of private sector final salary schemes (Financial Times 24/25 January 2009).

omy was 'finished'. He told Bloomberg, the global distributor of information services: 'I would urge you to sell any sterling. I hate to say it, but I would not put any money in the UK'. He wrote in the Financial Times (View of the Day FT.com 22 January 2009) that: 'The two main pillars of support for sterling have been North Sea Oil and the strength of the UK financial services sector, in particular the City of London's role'. North Sea oil is running out, and London's standing as a financial centre is set to suffer. He continued: 'The City of London is finished, the financial centre of the world is moving east'.

The Labour government still holds to the illusion that the City of London can survive the global financial turmoil. The Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg believes Britain must join the euro to salvage public finances and prevent the 'permanent decline of the City' (Financial Times 21 January 2009). The Tories cannot say anything on this or they would split apart. The ruling class is panicking and divided. A crisis of this order is going to change the political landscape. This is the period when social and economic developments are creating the conditions for building a new socialist movement in this country. We must seize the time.

1 See 'Britain: parasitic and decaying capitalism' FRFI 194 Dec 2006/Jan 2007, www.revolutionarycommunist.org/downloads/FRFI194_07_10_parasitic.pdf
2 See 'Desperate Times Desperate Measures' In FRFI 206 Dec 2008/Jan 2009 for a discussion of this plan, www.revolutionarycommunist.org/frpages/206/FRFI_206_cri.html



years of resistance and development in Cuba

'I conclude wishing you and all of our compatriots, good health and much energy for the year 2009. We shall need them both... We Cuban

revolutionaries can look at our past with our heads held high and into the future with the same confidence in our strength and our capacity to resist. Let's congratulate ourselves on the 50th anniversary of the victory of the Revolution'. (Raul Castro, speech to National Assembly, 27 December 2008)

Throughout the world, individuals, communities and governments joined the Cuban people in celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution. The island is admired around the world. It has been respected for half a century for resisting imperialist aggression and providing military support to revolutionaries overseas, for its world-leading human development indicators resulting from its socialist welfare system, its internationalist education and health care programmes, its biotechnology industry, its ecologically sustainable development and its achievements in sport and culture.

Here in Britain, however, the 50th anniversary was marked by the sneering suggestion that the Revolution has failed to liberate the Cuban people from political repression and poverty and that contemporary reforms have been introduced in recognition of this failure – heralding the return of consumerism or even capitalism to the island.

Such commentaries in the bourgeois media are based on profound mis-characterisations of the Revolution which obscure the way that development strategy has been formulated since 1959. These are:

- 1) Fidel Castro (and since 2006, Raul Castro) has been responsible for every decision and policy implemented and different stages within the Revolution are the product of his psychological whims and driven by his determination to maintain a monopoly on power.
- 2) There is no democracy and civil society is repressed.
- 3) All developments are ideological rather than practical measures for dealing with concrete problems.

Refusing to recognise the revolutionary process, these interpretations censor a rich history of internal debate, conflict, and consensus in Cuba. The opinions and values of the Cuban people are diverse and this is reflected in the coexistence of different political tendencies within their leadership. The measures introduced in each period have depended on which tendency has been able to win the argument or secure a consensus at each stage, and the outcome is largely determined by material conditions both on the island and internationally. Radical new measures or retreats, U-turns or consolidations, cannot be understood in terms of individual power politics.

To move beyond these crude and politically motivated caricatures, it is essential to understand the challenge which confronted the Cuban revolutionaries when they seized power 50 years ago. How can you achieve economic development with equity in an underdeveloped island, without relying on capitalist mechanisms (profit,

material incentives, competition, the law of value) which undermine the collective consciousness and new social relations integral to socialism and communism? To this complex problem were added the further obstacles of having a small domestic market hugely reliant on international trade, the US blockade and its imposition on third countries, military, economic and political attack, and diplomatic isolation.

For half a century, policy in Cuba has been formulated within existing limits:

political commitments – socialist welfare, state planning, the predominance of state property, anti-imperialist internationalism;
economic constraints – the US blockade, trade dependency, difficulty with obtaining credit and the relative 'backwardness' of Cuban industry and agriculture outside pockets of advanced technology.

Policy has fluctuated between what is ideal – emphasising socialist consciousness – and what is necessary – conceding pragmatic reforms, but always within these limits. The Cuban Revolution has developed through various stages which reflect fluctuations in its ability to push forward socialist development, creating innovative new social and political forms, without falling back on capitalist mechanisms to solve economic problems.

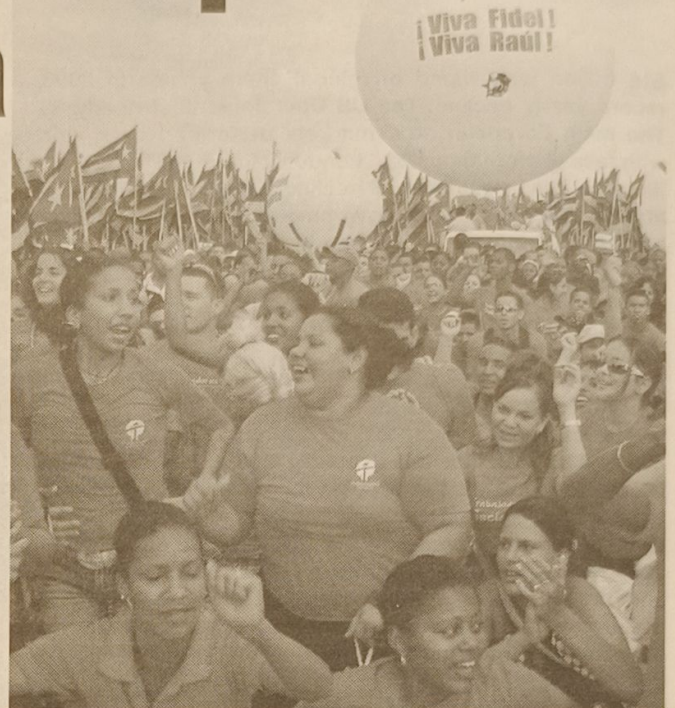
The 1990s were difficult years for the Revolution. The collapse of the socialist bloc countries between 1989 and 1991 cut off around 80% of Cuba's trade; GDP plummeted by 35% and food shortages decreased caloric intake by nearly 40%. The crisis was exacerbated by punitive laws tightening the US blockade in 1990, 1992, and 1996. During this 'Special Period' pragmatic reforms were introduced – joint ventures with foreign capital, the legalisation of the dollar, small-scale private enterprise and financial autonomy for state enterprises – to stimulate the economy and get vital goods to the people. Nonetheless, the Revolution did not renege on political commitment to socialist welfare, state planning and the predominance of state property. Once the economy sta-

bilised and recovered, many pro-market measures were rolled back.

Material recovery was accompanied by the Battle of Ideas, a campaign of political regeneration initiated in 2000, involving hundreds of social programmes and investments to reverse the inequalities of the previous decade. This process of the reconsolidation of socialist principles is based on the concept that education and culture create commitment to political ideas but that these remain abstract if the standard of living is insufficient to alleviate daily concerns for survival. However, material improvements should not be achieved by promoting market exchanges and encouraging private enterprise, but by budgetary controls, central planning, and state investment in skills training and education, fostering industry, exploiting natural resources, diversifying agriculture, and investing in research and development for industrial production and the medical industry.

The many interesting developments in Cuba over these years have been closely followed and analysed in *Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!* These have included:

- 2003-2005, measures introduced to recentralise financial resources, providing the state with a lever to foster productivity and efficiency gains via investments and planning, not via competition and 'free enterprise' (FRFI 182 and 183).
- December 2004, the initiation of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), with the signing of trade deals between Cuba and Venezuela (FRFI 183). This built on previous cooperation in which Cuba sent educationalists and healthcare professionals to Venezuela *en masse* (FRFI 177). The programme was subsequently extended to Bolivia, Nicaragua and elsewhere in South America and simultaneously saw the development of emergency medical contingents to countries around the world (FRFI 190).
- 2005-2006, a campaign against corruption which emphasised the



Social workers celebrate International Workers' Day on 1 May, 2008

concept of work as a social duty (FRFI 189 and 194)

- 2006, the Energy Revolution, focusing on economic and ecological efficiency – reducing energy consumption, government subsidies and vulnerability to US attack (FRFI 189).
- 2007-2008 six months of elections for the Municipal, Provincial and the National Assemblies – culminating in a new government in which 61% of representatives were born after the Revolution and 63% were new to national government – a leadership which is both young and new, committed to the political principles of the Revolution and ready to adapt to contemporary challenges and consciousness (FRFI 201).
- Autumn 2007, a nationwide popular consultation during which millions of Cuban citizens discussed the country's problems and made 1.3 million concrete proposals (FRFI 200 and 203).
- Autumn 2008, 3.4 million workers considered proposed changes to the social security law (FRFI 206).

The Cuban Revolution has demonstrated the real meaning of democracy – where the masses are active in determining the policies which affect them individually and collectively.

Bourgeois commentators have remained largely silent on these developments, baling on about Cuba's material poverty even as economic growth ranged between 7.5% and 12.5% per annum from 2005 to 2007. Ignorant, lazy or malicious critics have distorted developments in Cuba. For example, new legislation allowing Cubans to buy computers, DVDs and mobile phones was celebrated as the embrace of consumerism, when it owed more to the installation of a new national grid significantly increasing the electrical supply (FRFI 203). In summer 2008, journalists cheered the end of the cap on wage bonuses as the death of egalitarianism – yet it was actually to standardise salary policy across the economy as part of the implementation of the enterprise perfection system of economic manage-

ment, which had operated in army enterprises since 1987 (FRFI 204). When journalists celebrated the resurgence of private ownership, it was really a campaign to hand out idle arable land in usufruct (short-term rent free loan) for those who would produce food and sell it to the state at established prices (FRFI 205 and 206).

2008 was a difficult year for the Cuban Revolution because of:

- the fall in world prices of Cuba's principal exports – nickel, sugar and sea food – and a rise in the cost of importing foodstuffs and fuel
- the world recession
- the devastating impact of three hurricanes which caused \$10 billion of destruction, including 530,000 homes damaged.

Despite this, Cuba's economic growth reached 4.3%, down from the 8% planned, but far superior to the advanced capitalist countries. Most importantly, economic growth in Cuba leads to increased social investments. Recently, transport has been massively improved, new jobs have been created in the state sector and millions of durable goods have been distributed under the Energy Revolution. Current priorities are to raise food production and to make progress in solving Cuba's outstanding housing problem, which was exacerbated by the hurricanes.

'The more Cuba resists the more she is respected and Cuba is ready to win the respect of the entire world.'

For 50 years, the Cuban people have resisted imperialism. However, their best form of resistance has not just been in asserting their national sovereignty, but in creating an alternative model of development which places human beings at its centre. They have consolidated their socialist Revolution without dogmatism, without fear of criticism, without compromise, with imagination, creativity and integrity – developing, improving and prospering.

Viva 50 years of the socialist revolution in Cuba! Forward to the next 50 years!

Helen Yaffe



The rebel army in the Sierra Maestra, including Che Guevara, Raul Castro and Fidel Castro

Revolutionary commitment to health and education

Education

In 1953, 60% of Cubans over six years old had a maximum of three years' schooling. 3.5% had secondary education and 1% had university education. In 1960, expenditure on education was increased by 10%, school capacity rose by 25% and teaching staff by 30%. 37 new schools were built in Havana. These schools provided free education for everyone, removing financial barriers to education. The literacy campaign



Cuba gives its children the most caring educational upbringing

was initiated and within one year illiteracy was reduced to less than 4% as over 300,000 people, including 100,000 school children, taught over 700,000 people how to read and write. The success of the campaign lay in linking literacy with liberation. Addressing the young volunteer teachers, Fidel Castro said: 'While you teach them what you have learned in school, they will be teaching you what they have learned from the hard life they have led. They will teach you the 'why' of the Revolution better than any speech, better than any book.'

By 1969, every Cuban child had free access to primary education and over 80% were in secondary schools. Today Cuba has over 2,000 secondary schools and 37 universities; class sizes have been reduced to 20 students per teacher in primary schools and 15 students in secondary schools.

Health

Pre-revolutionary Cuba had private health care for the rich, a social security system for some employees and an under-funded public system for the rest. There were virtually no health services in rural areas. In 1959 there was one medical school and 6,000 doctors – 3,000 of whom left Cuba. The infant mortality was 60 per 1,000 live births and life expectancy 59 years. These are

key human development indicators. Fifty years later in 2008, infant mortality has fallen to 4.7 per 1,000 live births, lower than the US and Britain and with no significant geographical or class differences among the Cuban population, and life expectancy has risen to 77.4 years.

In 1964, polyclinics were set up to help expand outreach. In 1984, the family doctor programme was introduced and covered 99.2% of Cuba's population by 2003. This provides health services embedded in communities, concentrating on health promotion and disease prevention. Each doctor and nurse unit is responsible for 120 families.

In 1978, the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Alma Ata Declaration described health care as a political as well as a clinical issue and developed a Health For All 2000 campaign. Cuba was the first country to achieve these millennium goals – demonstrating that the welfare targets are achievable, but only outside the 'free-market' development model. Alongside primary and preventive care, Cuba has internationally recognised pharmaceutical and biotechnological industries.

International health networks

Since 1960, 185,000 Cuban health professionals and technicians have fulfilled international missions in 103 oppressed nations. In July 2006, there were 28,664 Cuban health professionals in 68 countries, more than those working for the WHO. In many regions of countries like Honduras, Haiti, Guatemala, Mali and Gambia, Cuban doctors are the first to provide free health services to rural indigenous communities.

The first Cuban medical emergency team was sent to earthquake-devastated Chile in 1960. Disaster relief was given to 16 countries over the next 20 years. Since 1963, 100 governmental contracts have been made with Cuba for a sustained medical presence overseas.

In 1998, Hurricane Mitch left 2.4m people homeless in Central America and the Caribbean. Cuba sent emergency medical teams which then stayed on, leading to the formation of the Comprehensive Health Programme which now involves 27 countries. In 1999, with the establishment of the Latin American School of Medicine, Cuba began free medical training for students from underdeveloped countries and soon included poor students from

the US. Graduates are asked to return to work in the poor areas of their own countries.

The Henry Reeve Disaster Response Contingent was set up in 2005 when 1,500 Cuban doctors offered to help the US after Hurricane Katrina. The US government refused, but the Cubans went to Pakistan after the devastating earthquake in October 2005. They stayed all other aid agencies and treated one million people.

More than 35,000 Venezuelans have received free medical attention in Cuba since a bilateral Integral Cooperation Agreement signed in 2000. In July 2004 Cuba and Venezuela initiated Operation Miracle, a programme for restoring eyesight which has benefited 1.38 million people from 33 countries so far.

The Cuban Revolution has given dignity and hope to millions of people around the world, as well as to the Cuban population, and their health and educational achievements reflect the triumph of the society they are building. In the words of Che Guevara: 'We are realists, we dream the impossible'.

Hannah Caller

British media lies

Lenin remarked that 'in capitalist usage, freedom of the press means freedom of the rich to bribe the press, freedom to use their wealth to shape and fabricate so-called public opinion'. The 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution confirmed Lenin's observation. Ever willing to please their employers, teams of journalists scoured Havana seeking those disillusioned with the Revolution or with a grievance against it. For the capitalist media, socialism is a threat and when it achieves real gains for the people, as it has done in Cuba, and when capitalism is demonstrably failing, Cuba becomes a double threat and is therefore deluged in poison and lies.

The BBC World Service ran a series dwelling upon the undoubted problems that the Cuban people face and for 'balance' gave the Miami exiles plenty of opportunity to insult the Revolution. Under the headline 'As hard times bite, Cubans show little appetite for celebration' *The Guardian's* Rory Carroll and Andres Schipani interviewed an author and former book editor, a former ambassador and high ranking official and an academic 'who rears pigs in his garden'.

These selected commentators provided a sorry tale of deprivation and the reporters commented, 'In the absence of material improvements the revolution's legitimacy rests largely on health care and education, success stories that have given Cuba first-world rates of infant mortality, life expectancy, literacy and university graduation.' (*The Guardian* 1 January 2009) What are health care and education if they are not material improvements of the most essential kind?

The Independent's Leonard Doyle serves up clichés that have earned many a comfortable living down the years: Raul Castro 'a dour Stalinist technocrat', 'Cuba's gulag', 'the so many who rot in Castro's jails' etc. Doyle quotes and names two critics of the Cuban government and they pose for *The Independent's* photographer, presumably oblivious to the terrors of Cuba's supposed 'gulag' (2 January 2009). If the BBC's reporters and Doyle, Carroll and Schipani want to find economic ruin and disenchantment they should come back to Britain where they will find it in abundance.

Trevor Rayne

50 years of US attacks

Since 1959, the administrations of ten US presidents have attempted to destroy the Cuban Revolution through invasion, terrorism, sabotage and a crippling economic blockade. The cost to Cuba has been high.

Terrorism, sabotage and invasion

3,478 Cubans have been killed and 2,099 seriously injured by attacks launched from the United States.

Covert operations against Cuba began under President Eisenhower, just months after the Revolution. US-trained armed gangs killed young volunteers in the national literacy campaign, sabotaged factories, farms and fuel depots and planted bombs in cinemas and shops. There were instances of coastal villages and fishermen being machine-gunned from speedboats, hijacking of aircraft and attacks on overseas embassies.

On 16 April 1961, 1,200 Cuban exiles invaded Cuba at Playa Giron (Bay of Pigs). They were trained and led by CIA agents and supported by US warships and planes dropping napalm. Within 72 hours, the Cuban army had defeated the invasion, but at the cost of

176 lives. 1,000 of the invading troops were taken into Cuban custody and later exchanged for medical supplies.

After the failed invasion, attacks continued. In 1976 a Cuban airliner was bombed and 73 civilians killed. This was master-minded by the CIA-trained Posada Carriles and Orlando Bosch, who today walk freely in Miami under US government protection.

Millions of dollars of USAID is channelled to Cuban 'dissidents' on the island every year, attempting to generate an internal opposition. This strategy was stepped up massively under the last Bush administration.

The blockade

The blockade forbids any US company, including foreign subsidiaries, from trading with Cuba. No product containing US-made components can be sold to Cuba. No US bank can provide credit to Cuba. The blockade has cost the island \$92bn in loss of export markets and increased import prices.

In the 1990s the blockade was tightened to obstruct companies from third countries trading with Cuba: for example, ships that dock in Cuban ports are forbidden from entering a US port for

six months. Recently, under pressure from the US government, British banks Barclays and Lloyds TSB stopped transferring their customers' money to Cuba.

However, the US is increasingly isolated in its policy towards Cuba. In October 2008, for the 17th year in a row, the UN General Assembly voted against the blockade by a margin of 185 countries to three (US, Israel, Palau). Although US President Obama has talked about easing restrictions on travel to Cuba, and removing limits on remittances sent by Cuban Americans to their relatives on the island, he has made it clear that he would not end the blockade.

In December 2008, 47 years after being expelled because of US pressure, Cuba rejoined the Organisation of American States at a summit in Brazil, where the blockade of Cuba was unanimously condemned. For the first time, the US was not invited. During the summit, Raul Castro affirmed Cuba's readiness to talk to the US, but only on equal terms: 'If Mr Obama wants to have a discussion, we will. It's increasingly difficult to isolate Cuba. We are small, but we have shown we cannot be easily dominated'.

Sam Vincent

From isolation to ALBA

For 50 years, from its early years of isolation, through the turbulent 1970s and 1980s and the fall of the USSR, the Cuban Revolution has shown both principle and pragmatism in the political alliances it has forged. Today, it is able to stand in the forefront of the revolutionary and popular movements sweeping across Latin America.

In the bipolar world of 1959, the USSR originally saw Cuba as lying outside its 'sphere of influence'. But in the face of US hostility, reflected in the Bay of Pigs mercenary invasion of 1961, Cuba feared both economic strangulation and all-out military attack by the US and entered into formal diplomatic and trade relations with the USSR in 1960. The placing of Soviet nuclear missiles on Cuban territory in 1962 – leading to the Cuban Missile Crisis – shook US imperialism and ensured it never dared to invade the island. Cuba became a member of the socialist trading bloc, Comecon – allowing the Revolution to continue to develop in the face of continuing attempts by the US to isolate it. In 1962, a complete US blockade was imposed and, at the behest of



Presidents Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro

the US, Cuba was expelled from the Organisation of American States, and all the countries of Latin America, with the exception of Mexico, broke off diplomatic relations.

But Cuba was building new alliances according to its own revolutionary and socialist principles. In 1961, Cuba sent aid to the Algerian liberation movement. By 1965, as the people of Angola and Guinea Bissau rose up against Portuguese colonialism, Cuba provided fighting units, instruc-

tors and aid. In 1965, Che Guevara led Cuban units to support the guerrilla movement in eastern Congo. Despite initially viewing Cuba's practical support for African liberation movements as 'adventurist', the USSR eventually supported the Cuban intervention in Angola and the confrontation with the racist South African invading forces. In 1988, Angolan and Cuban troops decisively defeated the apartheid army at Cuito Cuanavale, a victory which created the conditions for Namibian inde-

pendence and the eventual overthrow of apartheid.

Cuba gave support for revolutionary guerrilla movements throughout Latin America from 1959 into the 1970s and established anti-imperialist alliances with Salvador Allende's government in Chile 1971-3 and with the Sandinista government led by Ortega in Nicaragua from 1979.

Cuba also offered political asylum to many within the Black Panther Party in the US, sent doctors, medicines and blood to Vietnam in 1974, spoke out in support of the Irish liberation struggle, supported the Palestinian struggle and does not recognise the state of Israel. Wherever the poor and oppressed of the world were organising against imperialism, Cuba stood shoulder to shoulder with them.

The 1980s and 1990s were years of neo-liberal counter-offensive, spearheaded by US President Reagan and British premier Thatcher. The collapse of the USSR in 1991 suddenly deprived Cuba of its staunchest ally and 80% of its trade and Cuba found itself isolated and vulnerable, plunged into an economic crisis. Cuba had little option but to reduce its support for guerrilla movements and, looking to economic survival

through joint business ventures and tourism, make its peace with its Latin American neighbours and seek alliances with social democratic parties in Europe. However, on the international stage, Cuba continued to speak out against the new world order and call Latin American unity against imperialism. It was the only country in the Security Council other than Yemen to condemn the 1991 UN-backed invasion of Iraq.

Socialism for the 21st century

In the dark days of 1991, Fidel Castro stated: 'Saving the revolution in Cuba and saving socialism in Cuba... will be the great international service that our people can render humanity'. And so it has proved to be. In the face of the relentless degradation imposed on Latin America with increasing intensity in the 1990s, new movements began to emerge, the most significant of which brought to power Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and his Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, established with Cuba and soon joined by Bolivia, Nicaragua, Dominica and Honduras, in a vital new and potentially revolutionary alliance for the whole continent.

Cat Wiener

US elections: facing the system's insoluble contradictions

The United States has a new President, the 44th. Undeniably the election of a black citizen to the most powerful job in the world is a major landmark and welcome signal of change. Equally undeniable is the vast, palpable feeling of excitement amongst working-class and middle-class citizens about the possibilities for change and of goodwill toward the new President. Indeed, it is not only US citizens who have welcomed Obama's election. But we have to look beyond these surface impressions to establish what this development means for US imperialism. US correspondent **STEVE PALMER** reports.

One of the consistent themes of our coverage of the Bush administration has been that many of its policies have been controversial amongst the ruling class: the Iraq war was clearly unnecessary, badly executed and rife with corruption; the war in Afghanistan has failed to strengthen the local puppet regime or to undermine support for the Taliban; the contempt for science manifest in pretending away global warming, impeding stem-cell research and in industry-manipulated drug approval; the bungled handling of natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina; needless alienation of foreign allies, such as France; the insistence on legalising torture; Guantanamo; the imposition of the Global Gag Rule linking aid to the ban on abortion and family planning advice anywhere in the world, and so on.

At the same time, the core mission of the imperialist state, the protection and advancement of US economic dominance, was handled miserably as far as the ruling class is concerned. The financial crisis has staggered from 'solution' to 'solution', without any end in sight. Budget deficits have steadily increased. The entire imperialist relationship with Latin America has been left to rot. While the US has been overstretched in Iraq and Afghanistan, it has been unable to hold back or destroy popular anti-imperialist movements in Latin America and has allowed imperialist rivals from Europe to strengthen their position. Mexico, which borders the US, is rife with internal insurrections and widespread vicious gang warfare, exacerbated by free-market policies

there and by the crackdown in the US on undocumented migrant workers who are now no longer able to support their families.

While it is difficult to know the thinking of the ruling class, an interesting insight was given by *Washington Post* writer Kathleen Parker:

"I keep having this experience over and over and over again. I cannot count the number of times people have come up to me and said, or rather whispered, 'I have voted for a Democrat for the first time in my entire life'. This includes even people who served in, for example, the Reagan administration – over and over: 'I voted for a Democrat for the very first time'."

Finally, there was growing dissatisfaction amongst the working class, including massive political mobilisations of undocumented workers, sections of the middle class and of the ruling class. Clearly, as far as the ruling class is concerned, they need someone intelligent, competent, pragmatic and non-partisan in charge who will serve the interests of imperialism as a whole, not a narrow and conflicting ideological agenda.

The task

The US is in a very bad way, quite apart from the financial crisis.

The social infrastructure is in a terrible state: 30% of school students fail to graduate from high-school, school spending has fallen by two-fifths since 2001 and, in 43% of schools, the poor state of facilities interferes with delivering instruction. Internationally, in tests in 2006, the US was beaten in reading by 10 other countries, in scientific literacy by 22, and in mathe-



Barack Obama on the campaign trail

matical literacy by 31. States' expenditure on higher education has grown by 21% over the last 20 years – but on prisons by 127%. The US has 5% of the world's population and 25% of its prisoners: 1 in every 100 of its citizens are currently in jail.

When it comes to health, life expectancy is lower than in 41 other countries; infant mortality is higher than in 29 – and has actually increased under Bush – and maternal mortality rates are higher than in 35 other countries. Some 45m people have no health insurance coverage. Annually, more than 3.5m people suffer homelessness, 1.35m of them children. Some 35m people, about 10% of the population, suffer from hunger.

Employment has been falling absolutely for the last year and at an accelerating rate. In 2008, 2.6m people lost their jobs, 1.9m in just the last four months of 2008. The official unemployment rate is now 7.2%, but in some localities it is more than twice that. Unofficial calculations show the rate to be considerably higher. Unlike in other imperialist countries, those who lose their jobs lose health benefits. The share of employees with a work-related pension fell from 50.6%

in 1979 to 42.8% in 2006. 60% of male workers have a real hourly wage that is absolutely lower than it was in 1979.

Physically, the United States itself is literally on the verge of collapsing and crumbling: of almost 600,000 bridges, more than 25% are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete; half the locks on 12,000 miles of inland waterways are functionally obsolete; more than 3,300 dams are unsafe or deficient, many of them susceptible to large flooding events or earthquakes; the highways need more than \$150bn annually spent to maintain and improve them, but receive less than half that; people in the US spend the equivalent of 2.5m working days every year stuck in traffic; commercial airline delays and cancellations have been increasing every year. Altogether there is about \$1.6 trillion of infrastructure work needed. Although money has been allocated for some of this capital infrastructure spending, much of it has been raided to finance current spending and enable tax reductions for the wealthy.

The key question, as Fidel Castro has remarked about Obama, is not whether he is sincere, but 'What will

he do when the immense power in his hands proves absolutely useless for overcoming the system's insoluble antagonistic contradictions?' He has already shown his support for imperialist foreign policy by approving airstrikes in Pakistan, which killed 22 civilians.

At home, in the face of steady economic decline and the acute financial crisis, President Obama is proposing an \$825bn 'stimulus package'. The crucial question is: how will this be financed? Obviously it has to be by borrowing. But from whom, and how will it be paid back? It is not at all clear that the foreign lenders who have kept the US afloat for decades will be either able (since their economies are going into recession too) or willing. Their willingness depends on their expectation of their loans being financed and paid off in the future. For that to happen, the US economy has to return to some form of strong and autonomous capitalist growth. To do that requires a massive increase in the profitability of US capital and therefore a massive destruction of the standard of living of the middle and working classes.

More important to US finance capital than the stimulus package is a plan to get the banks out of crisis. Estimates of total potential losses by banks reach as high as \$3.2 trillion – about a quarter of US annual production. Politically, it's going to be harder to simply throw more truckloads of free money at them. Obama's team are exploring other ways to do this, including buying the almost worthless garbage assets from the banks at inflated prices and dumping them in the laps of 'taxpayers' – ie of working people – using a so-called 'Bad bank' whose assets are junk.

Whatever they decide to do, this crisis is going to intensify, and attacks on the middle and working classes will increase, whatever Obama's inclinations. In the forthcoming death match between the US economy and the law of value, Obama is going to be little more than a spectator. ■

Guantanamo: rule of law upheld – torture condemned

CAT WIENER

On 21 January 2009, President Obama made the long-awaited announcement that the US concentration camp at Guantanamo Bay will be closed within the year. This was followed by orders to:

- abolish the secret worldwide network of CIA 'ghost prisons'
- ban the use of torture by restricting CIA operatives to the US Field Army Manual, which explicitly rules out the use of torture, coercion, physical abuse and threats
- end illegal 'rendition flights'
- halt and review the use of the infamous 'military commission' courts.

The previous day, in his inauguration speech, Obama signalled the new US administration's commitment to international treaties on human rights, in particular the Geneva Conventions.

These announcements roll back the worst excesses of the Bush Adminis-

tration and are to be welcomed. Since 2001, the United States had been chipping away at prohibitions on torture, ultimately achieving a *de facto* legalisation of an internationally abhorred practice. Former US Attorney General Alberto Gonzalez derided the Geneva Conventions as 'quaint and outdated' and teams of White House lawyers were dedicated to eroding the rights of detainees. For seven years, the camp at Guantanamo has stood outside the provisions of international or US domestic law, a black hole where hundreds of so-called 'illegal combatants' have been held indefinitely, stripped of their rights and subjected to torture and abuse. The classified presidential order to set up CIA secret prisons worldwide was issued within five days of the 11 September attacks on the US in 2001. Despite Bush's assurances in September 2006 that all these prisons were now empty, it is estimated that some 26,000 prisoners, including children, are still being held clandestinely by the CIA. This sinister network covers Iraq and Afghanistan, Djibouti,



The new President signs orders to close the military prison at Guantanamo Bay

Bosnia, Kosovo, Poland, Romania and the British dependency of Diego Garcia as well as military ships where detainees are completely out of the reach of the Red Cross, lawyers, journalists or campaigners. In addition, torture on behalf of the US has been outsourced to proxy countries such as Morocco and Jordan. Obama's pronouncements bring to an end the official US sanctioning of brutal torture, illegality, kidnapping and disappearances that were the hallmarks of imperialism's 'war on terror'.

But more remains to be done. The

mechanism by which detainees will be released or tried is still to be worked out, with countries such as Portugal urging the EU to take some of Guantanamo's detainees and Britain declaring it will take only two – former British residents Binyam Mohamed and Shaker Aamer. Human rights activists warn that amendments to the US Field Army Manual could open the door to 'revised interrogation techniques' not so very far removed from torture.

In Britain, the priority must be to expose the full scale of British complicity with US torture, kidnapping and

other abuses. In 2008, British law courts found that an MI5 officer had participated in the unlawful interrogation of Binyam Mohamed while he was held in Pakistan (see FRFI 2006) and, despite agreeing that there was an 'arguable case' that Mohamed had been tortured and abused in custody, British Foreign Secretary David Miliband has refused to disclose information about CIA practices. The cross party parliamentary intelligence and security committee is expected to censure the British government for withholding information about the extent of its cooperation with the CIA's secret prison network and what it knew about the torture of prisoners in Guantanamo.

Britain cannot be let off the hook while questions remain about its cooperation with the US illegal 'extraordinary rendition' flights of kidnapped detainees over British airspace and the use of Diego Garcia as a CIA prison base. And the campaign must continue against Britain's own abuse of detainees through the use of closed courts, secret hearings, control orders and the willingness to rely on evidence obtained through torture. In December 2008, in a sinister echo of the Bush administration's words, British Immigration Minister Phil Woolas called for Britain to rethink its commitment to the Geneva Conventions, describing them as 'outdated'. ■

Venezuela: deepening democracy

ALVARO MICHAELS

'I'm not going to tell Obama what to do, but by immediately withdrawing from Iraq, from all of the military bases they have all over the world, he could use those billions of dollars to buy medical equipment for the people of the United States, and provide social security, free healthcare, education.' President Chavez

Obama – a new train on old tracks

In a provocative two-part interview shown on 13 and 18 January by the US Spanish-language network Univision, Obama declared that Chavez has 'been a force that has interrupted progress in the region'. With the standard incantation 'We need to be firm when we see this news, that Venezuela is exporting terrorist activities or supporting malicious entities like the FARC,' he stated 'This creates problems that are not acceptable'. In response Chavez noted that the US was the world's top exporter of terrorism and harshly criticised Obama's silence over the bloody assault on Gaza by Israel, saying 'There is still time' for Obama to change his views. 'No one should say that I threw the first stone at Obama. He threw it at me.'

A new constitutional amendment campaign

On 18 December last year, a majority of the Venezuelan National Assembly approved the first reading of amendments to articles of the Constitution which would remove the current limit of two terms for all elected officials including the president. Electors would not lose the right to a recall referendum should they wish to remove such officials from office in the middle of any term. By 14 January, Chavez supporters were able to present 4.7 million signatures supporting the referendum to the National Assembly. The National Electoral Council (CNE) has organised the referendum for 15 February.

This change is vital for the progress

of the Venezuelan revolution, and will remove the restriction on voters which prevents them from re-electing their chosen candidates. This obstruction to democracy would otherwise force President Chavez to relinquish office in 2012 against the wishes of the vast majority of the electorate. His leadership is clearly central to the further development of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) in government, and the deepening of the democratic process in Venezuela. Inevitably the wealthy and their imperialist mentors are desperate to defeat this.

In early January, Alberto Federico Ravell, director of the anti-government Globovision TV, met three key opposition party leaders in Puerto Rico: Jorge Borges a leader of Justice First, Luis Planas, Secretary General of the Christian Democratic Party, and Emilio Barboza, President of A New Era, together with US advisers. US Venezuelan embassy official John Caulfield joined them. They planned a campaign against the proposed constitutional amendment. 'The group of advisors has been working very hard recently... with ideas for television commercials, events and speeches,' Ravell wrote in a leaked email. The Plan would cost \$3 million. Denouncing this, President Chavez again demanded the US end its long history of intervention in the affairs of its southern neighbours. Some of those who met in Puerto Rico later met with US officials in New York to plan their strategy further.

The PSUV has set up the 'Simon Bolivar Campaign' to win the referendum. Chavez has stressed that its success 'will mark a rupturing with the old democracy. After this we are planning a break with the democratic model called classical liberalism.' During a visit to Venezuela on 17 January, Brazilian President Lula observed that 'no one is asking [Colombian President Alvaro] Uribe why he wants a third term,' clearly pointing to the US imperialism's double standards in its attacks on Venezuela. Committees across Venezuela committed themselves to the campaign. Over



Hugo Chavez speaking at a campaign rally for a 'Yes' vote in the referendum

20,000 people attended the swearing-in of the heads of PSUV 'Yes' committees in Caracas on 17 January. There are an estimated 9,800 committees nationwide involving some 100,000 people. The National Women's 'Yes' Front in Carabobo state has a membership of 20,000 women; each woman in the Front is aiming to get 30 people to vote 'Yes'.

Opposition provocation and violence

On 9 January over 40 PSUV supporters were injured by members of the opposition hurling missiles and explosives during the swearing in of the newly elected governor of Tachira state. Three PSUV members of the regional assembly were wounded. Meanwhile, anti-government students launched protests against the referendum. One group tried to block one of the main freeways in Caracas; police dispersed them with tear gas and water cannon. Some students were videotaped setting fire to the national park north of Caracas, which is very susceptible to forest fires during the dry season. 'We know what this is about: it is the chaos plan, the Pact of

Puerto Rico,' said Chavez.

On 17 January, six Colombian paramilitaries were detained in Maracay, Aragua state. On 27 January, 31 more Colombian paramilitaries were detained in the Caracas suburb of Petare. Weapons, grenades and two kilograms of explosives were also seized in Maracay.

On the same day violent protests by middle class students erupted in at least six major Venezuelan cities following a week of relative calm. In Cagua, Aragua state, police detained 12 demonstrators armed with rocks and Molotov cocktails. The remaining demonstrators took refuge in buildings on their university campus, which by law security forces cannot enter. In Cumana, Sucre state, university students blocked off major avenues and attacked National Guard troops with glass bottles and stones. Students from privileged backgrounds at the University of the Andes campuses in Merida and San Cristobal also shut down major streets by burning tyres. Interior and Justice Minister Tarek El-Aissami accused university authori-

ties and the private media of inciting confrontations with state security forces in order to spread an image of the Chavez government as repressive.

Social transformation

The PSUV in Congress continues to force forward social change. In an end-of-year speech, Chavez repeated 'we'll continue giving to the people, what is theirs... Venezuela will never go back.' 'The Venezuela of today, compared to Venezuela ten years ago... Venezuela was falling apart, it was in pieces, today Venezuela is a country that is remaking itself, reconstructing itself, transforming itself.' The current Plan of Investments, 2008-2013 provides \$100 billion over four years for social ends.

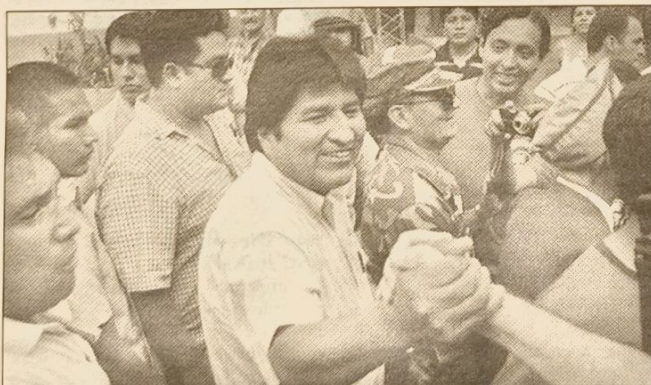
The government's neighbourhood healthcare programme has built 6,531 health and diagnostic centres in every part of the country, Chavez said. Infant mortality has decreased from 21.4 per thousand live births to 13.4 today. The 'Mission Miracle' eye-care programme has performed 594,886 eye operations on Venezuelans, while dental care, previously reserved for the elite, has become available to the masses so that the average number of consultations has risen from four for every thousand people in 2003 to 365 in 2008. The number of Venezuelans in school at all levels has increased by 1.3 million since 1998; this does not include the hundreds of thousands enrolled in government-sponsored educational programmes. 178,808 toddlers are included in the early childhood education programme 'Little Simon,' and 256,164 toddlers are enrolled in state-funded pre-schools. Meanwhile, four million children now receive free meals at school, a number which Chavez said has increased fourfold under his government. Through the creation of free internet centres Venezuela now has the highest rate of internet access in Latin America. 'Never in the history of Venezuela, in such a short time, has our country experienced such extraordinary change. Only through revolution can this be achieved', Chavez concluded. ■

Bolivia: landslide for a new constitution

ROBERT CLOUGH

On Sunday 25 January the people of Bolivia voted by 61.5% to 38.5% for a new constitution that gives greater rights to the indigenous people who make up nearly two-thirds of the population. In a simultaneous vote, they agreed by 79% to 21% to limit land-holdings to a maximum of 5,000 hectares, the lower of two options. This will not apply retrospectively however unless the land is left fallow – a significant concession made to the agribusiness sector in the east of the country where there are numerous estates of 100,000 hectares or greater. The constitution also disestablishes the Catholic church in recognition of its colonial character, although it does not legalise abortion. It prohibits the creation of US military bases in the country. Health and education, and basic services, such as water, sewage, gas and electricity, are deemed to be human rights. Indigenous communities will have their languages and their local forms of community justice recognised, and will also have access to reserved seats in the Senate.

The vote followed an attempt by the wealthy based in the eastern province of Santa Cruz to destabilise the country



Evo Morales celebrates the approval of the new constitution

and even threaten secession. Ruling class violence failed however to deter the mass of the people. Of the nine provinces, six voted in favour of the constitution, including two in the east: Tarija, where most of Bolivia's gas reserves are located, and Pando, where an opposition death squad killed 20 peasants marching to a pro-Morales rally last summer.

Two days before the referendum President Evo Morales announced the nationalisation of the Chaco oil company, owned by BP. And in the days fol-

lowing, he was also able to announce that the last of the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) officials had left Bolivia. DEA staff had been a crucial arm in the US's attempts to suppress coca production in the country and their expulsion was symbolic of the change in relations between Bolivia and US imperialism. With Bolivia being able at the same time to declare itself the third Latin American country to be illiteracy-free after Cuba and Venezuela, the forces of reaction remain on the back foot.

Ecuador: mining law splits the indigenous community

SAMUELE MAZZOLINI, MOVEMENT OF ECUADORIANS IN THE UK

A recent spate of protests by some indigenous groups in Ecuador against a new mining law has exposed tensions with the radical government of President Rafael Correa. The urgency of the law arose from a decision by the former Constituent Assembly to cancel all existing legislation, thereby suspending all mining concessions while mandating a term of six months for the development of a new legal framework.

Correa had defended from the very beginning the necessity of a new way of mining that introduces a considerable degree of environmental responsibility, and that increases the stake of the Ecuadorian state in terms of royalties and taxation. Broadly, the law that Correa and his supporters proposed would provide a series of guarantees to areas affected by potential mining, including the right to a non-binding referendum.

Correa has warned that 'we cannot live as beggars while sitting on a sack of gold', highlighting the state's budgetary problems with the declining prices and reserves of Ecuadorian oil, and the badly needed social and infrastructure projects that the new Constitution prescribes.

The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) and some ecologists did not consider

the safeguards sufficient, and tried to block the approval of the new law. On 20 January, a national mobilisation against the law took place. However, support was limited. In the 1990s, the indigenous movement had organised uprisings that were strong enough to topple two presidents. But the movement fragmented after the CONAIE leadership decided to join the previous reactionary Gutierrez government. Hence some sections of the indigenous movement broadly support the law, especially as they have seen in Correa's government the first executive really attending to their concerns. It is not by chance that Pachakutik, the political arm of CONAIE, kept a certain distance from the protest, and that other indigenous groups and communities have had only mild criticisms of the law's provisions.

There are clearly serious issues at stake. On the one hand there are the needs of the environment which has been severely damaged by past mining and oil extraction. On the other, Correa envisages a model of development to deliver decent standards of living for a population where 30% live in poverty. He is conscious that mining in itself cannot be a model for sustainable development and that the environmental resources of Ecuador must be preserved, but recognises the importance of generating the necessary funds to build a new economy. ■

US forces mass in Afghanistan

In his farewell speech to cadets at the US military academy, President Bush said, 'We've reshaped our approach to national security [and] laid a solid foundation on which future presidents and future military leaders can build... We must stay on the offensive.'

Speaking on NBC news in December President-elect Barack Obama said, 'Afghanistan and its border regions with Pakistan... is the central front... in the war against terrorism.' Obama wanted 'a new national security strategy that uses all elements of American power'. JIM CRAVEN reports.



Afghan villagers shout slogans against the US and Afghan governments during a demonstration following a US operation in their village, in Meherlam, capital of Laghman province, 25 January 2009

US foreign policy depends not on the individuals in power but on what the ruling class and US imperialism demands. Obama will send an extra brigade of soldiers to Afghanistan in January, to be followed by a further 26,000 combat troops and support personnel, almost doubling the present US forces in the country to a total of 60,000. The number of mercenaries will also be significantly increased. Britain has been asked to send another 3,000 to 5,000 troops. On 25 January Vice President Biden said he expected 'an uptick' in US casualties. President Obama sanctioned two missile attacks on Pakistan on 23 January, resulting in the deaths of 22 people including children.

Resistance grows

The US build-up is a response to

growing resistance to the imperialist occupation of Afghanistan. The International Council on Security and Development (ICOS) reported in December that resistance fighters have a permanent presence in 72% of the country and are closing in on Kabul. ICOS said the resistance movement is 'attracting sympathy beyond its traditional support base and has gained a measure of political legitimacy among many Afghans'. Attacks by the Afghan resistance increased by 51% overall last year and by 62% in the Kabul area. Qari Yousaf Ahmadi, a spokesman for the Taliban warned, 'If the Americans are going to send more troops we are ready for that. They will have to send more coffins as well for taking their dead bodies back.'

At the beginning of December, supporters of the Afghan resistance

destroyed 200 trucks and containers of military equipment at depots in Peshawar in north-west Pakistan. The road from Peshawar to Kabul carries around 80% of US/NATO supplies. The supply route itself is under constant threat from resistance fighters. With the planned increase in numbers, supply routes for the occupying forces will become even more important. Consequently, the imperialists are planning another route from Georgia and through Central Asia; a route that could also support US bases in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, tighten the encirclement of Russia and ultimately run Caspian oil and gas.

Imperialists divided

In addition to increasing their own forces, US and NATO plan to establish tribal militias or *lashkars* similar

to the Awakening Councils that curtailed Sunni resistance to the occupation in Iraq. The British plan to bribe tribal elders with around £800 a year to fight the Taliban. It will be funded under the 'Afghan Social Outreach Programme'. The US will fund a similar initiative in the east. General Petraeus, head of US Central Command, described the plan in terms of buying off resistance commanders and slaughtering those who cannot be bought. Other members of NATO are not so sure. The Canadian Defence Minister Peter McKay said there was 'no agreement round the table on it'. Critics are concerned that the plan would entrench tribal differences, bolster local warlords, create private militias, and spark sectarian differences.

Such disagreements highlight the continuing divisions within NATO. Over the past two years, most NATO nations have persistently refused pleas from the US to increase combat troops or provide more helicopters. As imperialist rivals as well as sometime allies of the US, they see nothing to be gained from aiding the US military fight a losing battle. The Netherlands has said it will pull out by June 2010 and Canada by December 2011. The Spanish, Italian and Norwegian contingents have also said they may leave soon.

The US has now agreed to seek talks with members of the resistance. However, a US spokesman described talking to the Taliban as 'less an attempt to come up with a grand deal, and more an effort to split and demoralise the enemy'. The Taliban say they will not hold talks until all occupying forces have left Afghanistan. Mullar Omar told Afghan President Karzai, 'Do not presume that in the presence of the occupying forces, the followers of the path of Islamic resistance will ever abandon their legitimate struggle merely on your empty, and farcical pledges, material privileges and personal immunity.' Obama has appointed veteran US diplomat Richard Holbrooke as special envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan, triggering rumours that the US will replace Karzai as their local placeman; Holbrooke has previously denounced corruption in the Afghan police and government.

War threatens Pakistan and India

The imperialists claim the tribal areas of northwest Pakistan are being used as training grounds for Afghan resistance fighters. Since August there have been more than 20 US air strikes and a ground incursion by US special forces in the region. More than 100 Pakistanis, most of them civilians, have been killed and villages destroyed in the indiscriminate raids. The US has also put pressure on Pakistan to eradicate support for the Afghan resistance in the area. Both the US military action and the role imposed on the Pakistan army are intensely unpopular in Pakistan. Sections of the army, the Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI) and the Pakistani ruling class are sympathetic to the Taliban, having traditionally regarded Afghanistan almost as a province of their country

and a rearguard against aggression by India.

The US has repeatedly accused the ISI of undermining efforts to attack the Afghan resistance. It has only been able to maintain Pakistan's reluctant assistance because of the economic and military hold it has had over successive dictators and weak civilian governments. Last summer, at a time of economic crisis in Pakistan, the US used the promise of IMF loans to demand further Pakistani action. When a Pakistan-based group, Lashkar-e-Toiba, was accused of last November's attacks in Mumbai, Admiral Mike Mullen, chair of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, immediately used the opportunity to call on Pakistan 'to take more and concerted action against militant extremists elsewhere in the country'. The US tried to get Lt-General Hamid Gul, retired head of the ISI and considered a leading Taliban supporter, blacklisted at the United Nations because of his association with Lashkar-e-Toiba.

In fact, Lashkar-e-Toiba, like the Taliban, was created and supported by the US, Pakistani and Saudi governments, the CIA and the ISI, which included General Gul, in order to fight against the Soviet forces in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Following the US attempt to blacklist him, General Gul said, 'I was quite a darling of theirs at one time. It looks like they have a habit of betraying their friends.'

For 20 years the US has been manoeuvring India from its traditional position of non-alliance to be part of the US military net around China. The US signed an anti-ballistic missile treaty with India and an agreement to supply nuclear material that allows India's own limited supplies of uranium to be diverted to weapons use, thus side-stepping the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. This alliance with India gives the US another means to put pressure on Pakistan, which, for most of the time since 'independence' has been in dispute, and sometimes at war, with India.

The US/NATO war in Afghanistan is part of US imperialism's strategy to maintain global economic and political dominance by using its military power. British imperialism defends its global interest by riding on the back of the US military, often goading it into further action. Their cynical manipulation of nations now threatens to engulf the whole of south Asia and beyond in further death and destruction. In the aftermath of the Mumbai raids both the Indian and Pakistani governments stirred up racial hatred to bolster their weak domestic positions. The right-wing BJP and RSS parties in India demanded greater hostility to Pakistan. The BJP called for a response to the Mumbai attacks equivalent to Bush's response to 9/11. India test-fired a supersonic Cruise missile. Pakistan claimed Indian fighter planes had made incursions into their airspace and that India was preparing to attack Pakistan and training camps in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. Elements in both countries spoke of nuclear war.

Occupation of Iraq – no end in sight

When Iraqi journalist Muntazer Al Zaidi threw his shoes at President Bush during a Baghdad press conference last December shouting, 'This is a farewell kiss. This is from the widows, the orphans and those who were killed in Iraq', he no doubt hoped to be seeing the end not only of Bush but also the whole of the imperialist occupying forces. The Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) signed between the US and the Iraqi governments in November calls for US troops to be withdrawn from Iraqi towns and cities by 30 June this year and from the whole of Iraq by the end of 2011. Opposition to the occupation by the people of Iraq and neighbouring governments, principally Iran, forced the Iraqi government to insist on far more than the US initially wanted to concede. But they both knew that the Iraqi government and President Al Maliki had to be able to pose as ending the occupation; otherwise the followers of Moqtada Al Sadr, who, unlike the Iraqi government, have consistently opposed the occupation, were likely to make sweeping gains in the forthcoming provincial elections. SOFA, however, includes provision for it to be cancelled by either side at any time.

Even if the agreement is instituted, it allows the Iraqi government to request US assistance in combat operations against 'terrorists...outlaw groups...remnants of the former regime' and 'temporary support for surveillance and control of Iraqi airspace'. Non-combat US forces will be involved in 'training, equipping, supporting, supplying and upgrading logistical systems'. General Ray Odierno, commander of US forces in Iraq, anticipates US forces will still be in Iraqi towns and cities and in joint US/Iraqi military bases in cities long after the 30 June deadline. The US military will still be free to move equipment and personnel



Baghdad, 30 January 2009. Supporters of Al Sadr burn the US flag during a protest against the occupation

without interference by the Iraqi government. Although SOFA forbids the use of Iraq as a base for attacking other countries, the associated Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) allows the US to use 'military measures or any other measures' to deal with 'external or internal threats'.

Iraqi government spokesman Ali Al Dabbagh admitted that Iraqi security forces would be 'unable to control the country for another decade' and that the government would be willing to extend the December 2011 deadline. President Al Maliki confirmed that 'We can change the date or articles if that is necessary'. The SFA commits the US and Iraq to a 'long term relationship in economic, diplomatic, cultural and security fields'. The US will supply the Iraqi airforce with F16s and helicopters together with training and maintenance personnel. John Nagl, who drafted the US counter-insurgency plan with General Petraeus, said, 'There are going to be Americans helping Iraqis keep their F16s in the air for at least a decade.'

All of which has led Moqtada Al Sadr to denounce the agreement as a betrayal and a subtle way to extend the

occupation. A Sadrist spokesman, Ahmed Al Masoudi told *The Washington Post*, 'This confirmed our view that US forces will never withdraw from the cities next summer, and that they will never leave Iraq by the end of 2011. Iraqis will discover that the government has bamboozled them about this agreement.'

During the US election campaign Barack Obama promised, 'My first day in office I will bring the Joint Chiefs of Staff in, and I will give them a new mission, and that is to end this war – responsibly, deliberately but decisively.' Last month President-elect Obama somewhat less decisively said 'it might be necessary – likely to be necessary – to maintain a residual force to provide potential training, logistical support, to protect our civilians in Iraq...I have tried not to put a number on it'. Others in the Obama camp have not been so reticent. Colin Kahl, co-ordinator of Obama's Iraq Working Group, suggests there will; still be 60,000 to 80,000 US troops in Iraq in two years time. Two weeks into the Obama administration no significant initiatives have been taken on Iraq.

Jim Craven

Prisoners' rights under attack

Since Labour came to power in 1997 the prison population of England and Wales has increased from 61,000 to 81,748. The government has created more than 3,000 new criminal offences and totally changed the sentencing framework so that an unprecedented number of prisoners are serving indeterminate sentences. Britain has more life-sentenced prisoners than Germany, France, Russia and Turkey put together. The prison system is full to bursting and conditions are worsening. Prisoners have few legal tools with which to defend themselves but have at times been able to bring successful court actions against the prison system's worst excesses. Labour's Justice Minister Jack Straw and the Prison Officers' Association want to stop them doing this. **NICKI JAMESON** reports.

It was Straw who, in 1998 when Home Secretary, introduced the Human Rights Act (HRA), incorporating the provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) into British law. As a result, from October 2000 anyone wishing to complain about infringements of the articles of the Convention could do so through domestic courts without having to take their case to the European Court in Strasbourg.

The ECHR is a bourgeois charter and does not contain rights to be fed, clothed, housed or educated; however it provides for basic civil liberties, protecting the rights not to be tortured or subject to arbitrary detention and to have a fair trial, family life and freedom of expression. These have proved of use to prisoners struggling to maintain a level of decent treatment against a punitive and oppressive system. For example, Robert Napier took successful action against the Scottish prison system's continued use of 'slopping out' (being locked in a cell with no toilet facilities except a bucket) and new mothers who had given birth in prison used the HRA to extend their rights to keep their children with them. A series of cases has reduced the executive power of the state to over-ride decisions by the Parole Board or judges on release or length of time to be served and has established the right of prisoners to have parole and disciplinary hearings heard by nominally independent parties (the Parole Board and magistrates) at oral hearings, rather than behind closed doors. There have also been changes to inquest procedure and the inquiries that have to take place when someone dies in custody.

The Labour government now regards the HRA as a millstone around its neck. Tony Blair frequently complained about it and said he wanted to opt out of inconvenient sections, such as the prohibition on detention without trial and even protection from torture. Consequently none of the gains won through legal challenges are ever completely secure and the government endlessly tries to reverse or ignore adverse decisions. In most cases it is reluctantly compelled to implement changes but has totally refused to act on prisoners' right to vote, despite a European Court ruling against Britain in 2004.

On 8 December 2008 Straw was interviewed by the right-wing *Daily*

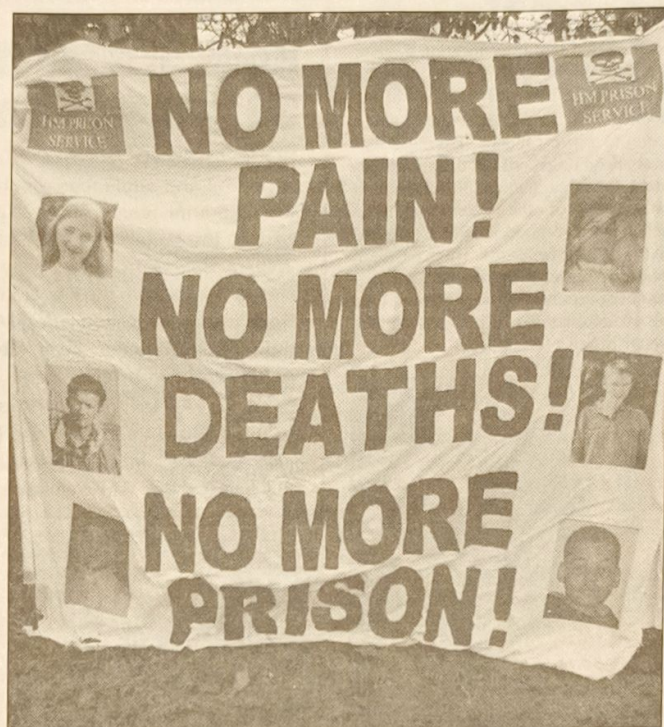
Mail about his plans to 'rebalance' the Act and make provision of fundamental rights dependent on obedience to the state and the law. Straw said he aimed to 'generate a debate about whether there should be a declaration of responsibilities and rights which grow together, the kind of rights we are owed and the rights which we owe... It's about identifying values that bind us and what it is that makes Britain great, that makes the whole of us greater than the sum of its parts.'

The *Mail* was ecstatic that Straw is now less enthusiastic about the HRA but less keen on the idea that he might replace it with a bill of 'rights and responsibilities'. In its view 'the proper response to the Human Rights Act is simply to get rid of the thing, and to derogate from those bits of the European Convention on Human Rights that we don't like... Trying instead to codify "responsibilities"... would do nothing to resolve the problems'.

The *Mail* and other tabloid papers, particularly those aimed at a more middle class readership, have long branded the HRA 'a villain's charter' and have devoted endless column inches to lambasting courts that have upheld cases brought by prisoners. The received wisdom is that prisoners, illegal immigrants, paedophiles, travellers, 'feral youth' or anyone else loathed by the mouthpieces of middle England are massively protected by human rights law which allows them to live in luxury despite their evil doing. In their view such people should be treated as less than human and stripped of all civil rights.

The Prison Officers' Association (POA) has long been complicit in feeding lies and half-truths to the press to bolster this attack and the moment Straw's *Mail* interview was published, it issued a press statement, welcoming 'the Justice Secretary's plans to overhaul the Human Rights Act amidst concerns that it has become a charter for criminals.' POA Chairman Colin Moses said: 'For too long prisoners have used the Human Rights Act to undermine prison staff and prevent them from fulfilling their full role... Prisoners have abused the Human Rights Act and use it on a daily basis to achieve their own aims and this was not the purpose of this Act.'

General Secretary Brian Caton added: 'The compensation culture amongst the mainstream prison popu-



Demonstration outside Styal prison against deaths in prison: see inside news

lation is constantly on the increase at an unbelievable cost to the taxpayer. I hope that Mr Straw takes a serious look at the way some law firms appear to exploit the Human Rights Act to gain compensation for prisoners using the Legal Aid Scheme. Justice has to be seen to be done and currently POA members and employees working in the criminal justice system are getting a raw deal.'

In fact most compensation claims by prisoners have little to do with the HRA and are for common law abuses such as wrongful imprisonment, assault and misfeasance in public office. It is not easy to bring such a claim successfully and the government has recently scandalously capped the compensation payments to innocent prisoners released following the overturning of wrongful convictions. The picture Caton paints of struggling prison officers failing to get fair treatment while the courts reward litigious prisoners is simply dishonest.

It is not only prisoners who sue for compensation. POA members regularly make claims on the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority and litigate over assaults, illness, stress and the distress of witnessing murders, suicides or riots. The union retains the services of a specialist solicitors' firm for this express purpose. In 2006 over £1 million was paid to six Cardiff prison officers for trauma caused by finding the mutilated body of a prisoner murdered by his cell-mate, while prisoners who have witnessed suicides and murders rarely receive any counselling, let alone compensation for the trauma.

Straw told the *Mail* he has 'given instructions in the services I control to be much tougher on compensation claims, such as for injuries at work.' The state will therefore be vigorously resisting compensation claims from prison officers and prisoners alike, but rather than standing shoulder to shoulder with prisoners, Caton and the POA side with Straw and attack the prisoners. This total lack of basic solidarity is never challenged by those left groups and trade unions who frequently invite Caton to speak on their

platforms, where he champions workers' rights and boasts of how the POA has stood up to the government's ban on its right to strike. On 10 January he told the audience at the RMT-organised 'Conference to discuss the crisis in working-class political representation' where he was a key speaker: 'We want trade union and human rights and we won't get them from this government. We want liberty, justice and peace. I want to see the shackles that currently tie us down broken.'

When prisoners take action to defend their basic human rights, they do so on behalf of all of us. The British state herds working class people into prison in increasing numbers and as the capitalist crisis deepens and more people lose their jobs and homes, there will be yet more imprisonment. At the same time political dissent is being suppressed and the 'war on terror' is criminalising entire communities. Trade unionists who take the kind of militant action that the POA says it applauds will also face prison. The fight for prisoners' rights has always been a key component of struggles for liberty and justice. Any attacks by Jack Straw, the POA, the *Daily Mail* and other opponents of prisoners' rights must be strenuously resisted. ■

INSIDE NEWS

Ronnie Easterbrook

On 22 January FRFI supporters joined Brighton ABC and the Friends of Ronnie Easterbrook outside the Ministry of Justice in London to show our solidarity with Ronnie, who, as we go to press is entering the sixth week of a hunger-strike.

Ronnie was sentenced to life for armed robbery and attempted murder in 1988 after a failed robbery on a supermarket wages van. A police informant set the job up and Ronnie and two others were ambushed by PT17, the elite tactical firearms unit. Tony Ash was shot dead, despite surrendering, and Ronnie, Gary Wilson and a police inspector all suffered gunshot wounds. Also lying in wait was a Thames TV crew, who captured the shoot-out on film.

Ronnie maintains he was a victim of a police shoot-to-kill policy, modelled on tactics used in the north of Ireland, but was prevented from putting forward a defence based on this, both by his own barrister's refusal to co-operate and the judge's refusal to allow a political defence. He ended up having to represent himself and as he admits, made a lousy job of it.

Ronnie refuses to apply for parole because he doesn't recognise the legality of his sentence, saying that until he gets a new trial justice will not have been done. He is already in failing health due to previous protests and this may be his final act against a judicial system he believes has unjustly imprisoned him for 20 years.

Write urging a review of Ronnie's case to: Jacqui Smith, MP, Secretary of State for the Home Office, 2 Marsham Street, London, SW1P 4DF.

Fax: 020 8760 3132

email: smithhj@parliament.uk

Send messages of solidarity to Ronnie Easterbrook (B58459) HMP Gartree, Gallowfield Road, Market Harborough LE16 7RP.

Death in Styal

On 8 January 36-year-old Alison Colk was found hanged in Styal prison on the first day of a 28-day sentence for theft. The Prison Service has been boasting that there were 'only' 61 self-inflicted deaths in prisons in England and Wales in 2008, a reduction on previous years. But any death is one too many. From 2004 to her own death last year, every time a woman prisoner died, Pauline Campbell, whose own daughter Sarah died in Styal in January 2003, staged a demonstration outside the prison. FRFI supporters attended many such events around the country. Continuing that tradition, a small group of people who knew and worked with Pauline held a demonstration outside Styal on 28 January in memory of Alison Colk and all the women who have needlessly died in British prisons.

In memoriam – Terry O'Halloran

Terry O'Halloran, former editor of the FRFI Prisoners Fightback page, died 20 years ago on 23 January 1989 at the age of 36. Terry was a talented journalist and active in the NUJ, being Chair of the London Freelance Branch at the time of his death. He could, no doubt, have had a successful career as a bourgeois journalist but chose instead to put his skills at the services of the political movement. He wrote and campaigned on all the issues of the day – Ireland, South Africa, prisoners' rights, housing, benefit cuts, the strikes of the miners and print-workers. A member of the Revolutionary Communist Group for 14 years, he was instrumental in developing our position on the struggle in Ireland and in recognising the importance of struggles in prison to the working class movement as a whole.

EDUCATION NOTES

Poverty is no excuse – again

In 1999, two years into the Labour government, Education Minister David Blunkett threatened schools with closure if exam results did not improve. He said, 'There are cynics out there who say that school performance is all about socio-economics and the areas that these schools are located in', but 'poverty is no excuse for secondary schools failing to achieve ambitious new government targets to raise the GCSE pass rate'. Ten years on and with the annual publication of the schools league tables, the current Education Minister Ed Balls says the same again, 'Schools should stop blaming poverty for bad exam results', and he attacks what he calls the 'excuses culture that persists in many communities'.

response to both the persistence of poverty under Labour and to the impact of the current economic recession with all the social dangers that arise from this.

For despite the millions that have been poured into the education system, the polarisation between the working class and the better-off sections of the population has increased since Labour came to power. Indeed, Labour's ten-year spending record has disproportionately favoured the middle class with only 35% of the poorest children achieving five good GCSEs compared to 63% of the better-off. There has been a 3% increase in the poorest children reaching a university degree compared to an increase of 26% among the better-off.



It's a puzzle: the Prime Minister and Alan Milburn contemplate the greasy pole

Poverty is the explanation

It has been called 'the secret that everybody knows': that children of poor families are far less likely to do well at school than those whose parents are on a good income. To human beings it is obvious. As a general rule, the children of better-off parents experience conditions that can be agreed to benefit human development: good housing and food, a variety of experiences including holidays and a relaxed environment free from financial worry. For deprived children, poverty at home is supplemented by inadequate state provision. The poor attend less well resourced, often overcrowded classrooms with high teacher turnover. None of this is absolute and it does not automatically follow that a child will or will not have an interest in learning or humane values, but it certainly helps. It is not cynicism but facts that show the strong correlation between social class and academic results. Two examples: firstly, poor primary pupils are five times more likely to be excluded from school, than those in rich areas. Secondly, while overall about 14% of pupils in England get a free school meal, the high-performing grammar schools have just 2% of eligible pupils, compared to a figure of about 46% in poor areas, with their under-resourced and inadequate schools. Access to a free school meal is used as a measure of child poverty, although recent research shows this to be an inadequate guideline since half of the 25% of pupils living below the poverty line do not even qualify. Blunkett and Balls have plenty of children between them and know what it costs to provide the necessities and pleasures of life, as their own incomes indicate. They are not really in denial about this, they are simply lying, bullying and apologising for capitalism.

Social mobility White Paper

Just as Balls was making his pronouncements about punishing teachers, pupils and parents, the government was publishing a White Paper on social mobility. The report and proposals, entitled *New Opportunities*, is a gesture in

Labour's reforms – neo-liberal reforms

Cabinet adviser Alan Milburn MP told the Social Mobility Commission that produced *New Opportunities*, 'This is the right time for the government to make its core purpose creating an upwardly mobile society again.' In come three proposals; £57 million to extend free childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds; all 'vulnerable' mothers-to-be given access to a dedicated family nurse through pregnancy and the first two years; effective teachers to be offered £10,000 bonuses to come and stay at the schools which need them. Out go 'value for money', 'no rights without responsibilities', 'feral children' and 'feckless mothers'.

Oh that Labour Party! It can smile and smile and still be a damned villain. For who has privatised most nursery care beyond the pockets of working class people but Labour? Who has delivered land, buildings and a massive proportion of the infrastructure of state education into the pockets of the private sector, but Labour? Who has privileged success and wealth and attacked the poorest and neediest in society, but Labour? And now it offers up a rescue package to salvage some of the wreckage it has made of the welfare state.

State education under attack

Blunkett was Minister for Education and Employment, Charles Clarke was Minister for Education and Skills and today Ed Balls is Minister for Children, Schools and Families. This shift in titles tells its own story. Labour has relentlessly attacked the very idea of state education, selling it off and fragmenting its provision until it has pushed back social responsibility onto the family and the individual, leaving each to buy and pay for what is out there in the market place. This is the expression of the alliance between Labour and the rotten and discredited neo-liberalism that has been such a disaster for Britain and the world. It will not be forgotten or forgiven.

Susan Davidson



Bolivar Hall was full on 17 January when RATB celebrated the 50th anniversary. Inset: Rafael Sardinas, Counsellor at the Cuban Embassy who was a guest speaker

Rock around the Blockade celebrates 50 years of the Revolution

ROCK AROUND THE BLOCKADE thanks all those who participated – as speakers, organisers, sponsors and audiences – in three national events held between 17 and 25 January to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution. The first event was held in London in Bolivar Hall, part of the Venezuelan embassy. Speakers included Rafael Sardinas from the Cuban embassy, William Suarez from the Venezuelan embassy and Ruben Vidaurre from the Bolivian embassy, Neeva Shanti from the Revolutionary Communist Group (RCG), Helen Yaffe and Hannah Caller from Rock around the Blockade (RATB), Diego Almeida from the Movement of Ecuadorians in the UK (MERU) and Jeremy Dear, General Secretary of the National Union of Journalists, speaking on behalf of Justice for Colombia. Around 250 people attended the event throughout the day. On Saturday 24 January in Liverpool, speakers from RCG, RATB and MERU spoke alongside Sardinas from the Cuban embassy and Diana Raby, author of *Democracy and Revolution in Latin America*. On Sunday 25 January, speakers from RCG, RATB and MERU addressed a packed meeting room in Glasgow. See RATB website for full reports: www.ratb.org.uk

FRFI EVENTS

LONDON

Tuesdays 3 March and 7 April 1-2pm
Fight Labour's racist immigration laws

Picket Communications House, Old Street, EC1.
Nearest tube Old Street

Saturday 14 February 12pm
Boycott Israeli Goods! Victory to the Intifada! rolling picket
M&S Edgware Road
Nearest tube Edgware Rd

Saturday 7 March 12-5pm
FRFI student society day of debate and discussion:
The crisis and resistance, from Palestine to Cuba
Room D602, Clement House, Aldwych
London School of Economics, WC2
Nearest tube Holborn

Every Thursday 6-8pm
Support Palestine – Boycott Marks & Spencer
Outside M&S, Oxford St, WC1
Nearest tube Marble Arch

For further details call 020 7837 1688
Or email londonfrfi@gmail.com

NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE

Sunday 8 February 3pm
Public forum: Marxist analysis of the economic crisis
Stage 2, Northumbria University Student Union,
Sandyford Road

Wednesday 11 February 7pm
Film: The Black Panthers
Stage 2, Northumbria University Student Union

Saturday 28 February 12pm
Tyneside Community Action for Refugees' second 'Speak out against racism'
Grey's Monument

Thursday 12 March 7pm
Film: Salud!
Stage 2, Northumbria University Student Union

Every Thursday 5-7pm
Support Palestine – Boycott Marks & Spencer
Outside M&S, Northumberland Street

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

Every Sunday 3-6pm
Lecture series on Marx's Capital
Training Room, first floor of Northumbria University Student Union Building,
Sandyford Road

We also have street actions every Saturday 11am-2pm and other stalls around the northeast region: call or email for details

Phone: 07858 346 276
Email: frfinortheast@googlegmail.com

DURHAM

Thursday 12 February 7pm
Film: Fidel: the untold story
Upstairs in the Big Jug pub, Claypath

Thursday 12 March 7pm
Film: Bolivia is not for sale
Upstairs in the Big Jug pub, Claypath

GLASGOW

Sunday 8 March 2-5pm
The crisis and resistance, from Palestine to Cuba
Jury's Inn Hotel, 80 Jamaica Street

DUNDEE

Thursday 26 February 7.30pm
The crisis and imperialism: No to a future of poverty, racism and war!
Room G7, Dundee University Tower
Perth Road

Further information
Tel: 07779 785 529
Email: frfiscotland@yahoo.co.uk

MANCHESTER

Sunday 22 February 2pm
Public forum: Capitalism in crisis – developing a Marxist analysis
Cross Street Chapel,
Cross Street

Regular street actions 07519 427 093 for details.

ROCK AROUND THE BLOCKADE

LONDON

Wednesday 11 February 7-9.30pm
Rock around the Blockade public meeting hosted by LSE FRFI student society

Film: 638 ways to kill Castro followed by discussion and eye-witness account of the 50th anniversary celebrations in Cuba.
Room Z229, St Philip's Building, Sheffield Street, LSE
WC2. Nearest tube Holborn/Temple.

NEWCASTLE

Saturday 7 March 2-6pm
Meeting: Palestine voices of resistance
Royal St Hotel

LIVERPOOL

Tuesday 10 February 7.30pm
Film: Memories of underdevelopment
El Rincon Latino, Roscoe Street, L1

Tuesday 24 February 7.30pm

Film: Montana de Luz
A new film about Cuban paramedic brigades in Namibia and Haiti
El Rincon Latino

Tuesday 10 March 7.30pm
Film: Guerreros del Arcoiris
about recent events in Bolivia
El Rincon Latino

Tuesday 31 March 7.30pm
Book launch: Che Guevara: the economics of socialism – Helen Yaffe
El Rincon Latino

MANCHESTER

Sunday 8 February 2pm
Film: Salud!
Cross Street Chapel, Cross Street

Sunday 15 March 2pm
Film: Montana de Luz
Cross Street Chapel, Cross Street

GLASGOW

Thursday 5 February 7.30pm
Marxist forum: Revolutionary Cuba – the streets are ours!
Upstairs at The Junction bar, 14 West George Street,
(Next to Queen Street station)

Wednesday 1 April 7pm
Stand up for Cuba! Fundraising comedy night for socialist Cuba
Maggie May's, 60 Trongate
Tickets £5/3

Counter-revolution in Tibet

I am disappointed by the absence of a robust response in FRFI 206 to Karina McLachlain's overlong letter in the previous issue supporting counter-revolution in Tibet.

She claims of the Dalai Lama that 'Even now, few world leaders will meet him'. I haven't kept count, but he has recently met – and I have the pictures to prove it – German chancellor Angela Merkel; Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper; Charles 'Wingnut' Windsor; the Pope; President Sarkozy of France and Republican presidential candidate Senator John McCain. President George W Bush met him in May 2001, in November 2005 and in October 2007, when the Dalai Lama received the US Congressional Gold Medal of Honor, Congress's highest civilian honour. The Dalai

Lama has remarked that 'I have great respect for, in fact I love, President Bush because he is very frank, very straightforward. His intentions are good'.

From a strictly legal point of view, it is true that the CIA no longer funds the Dalai Lama. Instead, US government money is now channelled through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) – the same vehicle financing opposition to President Chavez in Venezuela. The 'Free Tibet Campaign', which McLachlain urges us to join, is part of the International Tibet Support Network, which has received funding from the US government via the NED. Michael Barker has written a long, well-documented expose of the Dalai Lama's links with imperialism at www.globalresearch.ca

Finally, McLachlain argues: 'Marx did not suggest it was possible for a feudalist economy to pass directly to a socialist one without a period of capitalism between'. Nowhere does Marx or Engels insist that all societies have to pass through a rigid set of stages before arriving at socialism. Marx's correspondence with the People's Will organisation in Russia included a detailed discussion of the possibility of avoiding capitalism by basing the Russian Revolution on the Commune, and certainly recognised the possibility that economically more advanced countries could help the less developed avoid the tortures of capitalism. It speaks volumes to the kind of Tibet that McLachlain and her friends apparently want: forcing the Tibetan people to have to suffer under capitalism to satisfy their stageist interpretation of history.

STEVE PALMER
United States

Whose side are you on?

Ms McLachlain's letter in FRFI 205 in defence of the religious reactionary Dalai Lama proves that she doesn't understand that humanity is divided into classes. As a consequence she repeats old opportunist theories to back up her argument. These theories were held by the Mensheviks and others in the Second International and are held by today's opportunist petty bourgeois left. All of them, including McLachlain, libel Marx by attributing their nonsense to him.

Marx did not hold the view that a feudal society had to endure a period of capitalism before, at some day in the distant future, there would be the rapture of the saints and they could have their socialism.

Marx and Engels, as active participants of the 1848 revolutions which swept Europe in a failed bid to sweep away feudal practices and customs, observed that the capitalists were finished as a progressive class. Several volumes of their *Collected Works* deal with this.

Lenin in 1917 drew from what Marx and Engels wrote to produce his *April Thesis* in which he argued for turning the February bourgeois democratic revolution into a socialist revolution.

The class line runs betwixt these two political positions. McLachlain is on one side and Marx, Engels and Lenin on the other. I am not nit-picking, because the South African Communist Party and others, in places like

Britain, made McLachlain's argument at the end of apartheid. They were motivated by fear that the South African masses were going too far, too fast. These opportunists smothered the revolutionary fervour, enabling the local capitalists and the imperialists to manage the situation. She also repeats another old opportunist position when she claims Tibet was 'not ripe for revolution'. The SWP and others often use this as an excuse for not supporting revolutionary movements in the so-called 'third world'. It is a manifestation of racist western chauvinism.

What was Lenin's position on this? After all, unlike McLachlain, the SWP etc, he actually did successfully lead a revolution. In 1917 he wrote to the Tashkent Soviet. The countryside around the town was politically, economically and culturally similar to Tibet in 1950. It also was ruled by a parasitical, patriarchal caste of religious zealots who horribly oppressed women. Lenin said: 'We are in a position to inspire the masses and urge for independent political thinking and independent political action, even where a proletariat is practically non-existent' (*Collected Works* Vol 31, pp242-243).

China's motive in regard to Tibet in the 1950s was not plunder but self-defence. General Clausewitz wrote that 'war is a continuation of politics by different means'. To understand a war and decide if you

are going to take a side, you have to look at the policies of both sides. As McLachlain admits, the Dalai Lama was being advised and his forces trained and armed by US imperialism. There should be no disagreement that the Dalai Lama's policy was to ally with imperialism.

At this time the fledgling Chinese socialist state was actually at war with imperialism. On 20 April 1949 four Royal Navy warships on the Yangtze river in China engaged the People's Liberation Army. The battle lasted for 102 days until 31 July. On 25 November 1950 over 100,000 soldiers from the US Eighth Army and allies led by General Douglas MacArthur began an assault on the Yula river – the border between North Korea and China. The Chinese defeated MacArthur with a brilliant counterattack and entered the Korean War. The US frequently threatened to nuke Chinese cities during that war.

China's policy was to defend the gains of their revolution. What was China supposed to do about Tibet in these circumstances? They did the right thing and neutralised the threat.

Although it's historical, we take sides in old wars, if only to learn lessons, mourn defeats and celebrate victories. We had a side in France 1871, Russia 1917 and China during this period. Historically, on Tibet Ms McLachlain is siding with imperialism and feudal reaction.

THOMAS ATKINS
London

Fight prison censorship!

Thank you very much for your new year card. I read the copies of FRFI you sent. They are very useful for me and the two other comrades in my cell, although we tend to receive them late as the prison administration generally withholds them. But we apply to court for each issue to be handed over to us and finally we receive it, even if only after two or three months. Nevertheless FRFI is useful for us so please continue to send it. Now this letter will be blocked by the administration and only sent after a court has decided that it should be!

Let us hope 2009 will shine for the struggle of the world's working class and oppressed. We believe it will, because capitalism is in a deep crisis and the working class, the oppressed and the youth will take to the streets to demand their rights and a seek a new world, a new social system.

ZIYA ULUSOY
1 No'lu F tipi cezaevi
B139 Tekirdag, Turkey

On 20 December I had a phone call from Peter Hakala in HMP Frankland telling me that the prison is making renewed efforts to have FRFI stopped at Frankland. Also, that correspondence from a prisoner to other prisoners is now forbidden unless a relative is involved. Is this not a contravention of Article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights? I was concerned that another prisoner, Danny Clarke at

Wakefield, has had a heart attack and I only knew about it from a message from him via a letter to Peter. These moves apparently emanate from Kevin Wales, head of security at Frankland.

GEORGE COOMBS
East Sussex

Wishing you health, wealth and happiness in the new year. Thank you for sending the paper without fail. And commendations on producing a well-written – in fact, the best-written – paper.

Sent on behalf of EESA BAROT
NB5353, Belmarsh, who is still forbidden to correspond with us.

FRFI is committed to resisting all attempts to censor our publication and prevent it reaching prisoners. We applaud the stance taken by the Turkish comrades to ensure that they receive political material in prison and we ask readers to support the British prisoners in Frankland and Belmarsh who have been told they cannot correspond with FRFI on the spurious basis that our address is a box number. We have had the same address for 30 years and the Prison Service has no right to suddenly start using this as an excuse to interfere with our mail to prisoners. Please write letters of complaint to the Director General of the Prison Service, Phil Wheatley at Prison Service Headquarters, Cleland House, Page Street, London, SW1P 4LN, 020 7217 2661 phil.wheatley@hmps.gsi.gov.uk

Prisoners' greetings for a year of renewed struggle

The empire lurches from crisis to catastrophe while the corporate ruling class uses financial *leger-de-main* to grind the shards of labour into ever-finer dust and further rob the proletariat. This makes it hard to see much cause for jollity. Darkness suffuses the socio-economic landscape. The question for us is not whether the future will be brighter but whether we will settle for the wan glow of another reformist rebound of the capitalist yo-yo or turn this winter of our discontent into a radiant revolutionary spring, to banish the cold shadows of exploitation and oppression from the earth. I'm opting for the latter! May your new year be fine and worthy of celebration. The future holds promise.

BILL DUNNE #10916-086
USP Big Sandy, PO Box 2068, Inez, KY 41224, US

Thank you very very much for your season's greetings. I was very pleased to read that you will be continuing my FRFI subscription. This month a left-wing comrade

here in Bruchsal's prison will be released. Christian Klar (a former member of the Red Army Faction) was arrested and convicted of murder in 1982. Now, 26 years later, he will leave the prison. Good news, isn't it?

THOMAS MEYER-FALK
JVA - Z. 3113. Schonbornstrasse 32,
D-76646 Bruchsal, Germany
www.freedomforthomas.wordpress.com

Comradely greetings and our fervent wishes that in 2009 yours are made a reality. Venceremos!

On behalf of the political prisoners of the communist PCE(r) and GRAPO, Spain. Please send letters of solidarity to the PCE(r)'s secretary-general Manuel Perez Martinez, Mod 13, Centro Penitenciario Madrid II (Alcala-Meco), 28880 Alcala de Henares, Madrid, Spain, who served eight years in a French prison for his political activities and now faces a possible life sentence in Spain.

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 _____

e-mail _____

SUBSCRIBE to the best anti-imperialist newspaper in Britain FIGHT RACISM! FIGHT IMPERIALISM!

Subscription rates:

- Britain (inc N. Ireland): £7.50 for 6 issues, £14 for 12 issues
- Europe (Air): £11 for 6 issues, £21 for 12 issues
- Rest of world (Air PPR): £12.50 for 6 issues, £24 for 12 issues
- Rest of world (air-sealed): £19.50 for 6 issues, £38 for 12 issues
- Libraries and institutions: double individual rates

Make cheques/POs payable to Larkin Publications.
Add £5 for foreign currency cheques.

I wish to subscribe to FRFI beginning with issue _____

Name _____

Address _____

I enclose payment of £_____ for _____ issues at rate _____

Return this form to:

FRFI,
BCM Box 5909,
London WC1N 3XX

Protest at BBC partiality for Zionism

On Monday 26 January, a group of about 50 people gathered outside the BBC Headquarters in Portland place to protest against against the BBCs continued refusal to broadcast the Gaza appeal run by the Disasters Emergency Committee. The protest included students from SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) who have been occupying their college, followed by 17 other universities around the country. Speaking to reporters, protester Stewart Halford stated that 'Not only has the BBC's entire reporting over the grief in Gaza been a complete disgrace and failure of duty to the British public, but to now refuse to screen an appeal by Britain's leading charities is unacceptable...people either need aid or they don't'. He added that if

Sky doesn't change its decision not to screen the appeal it will receive the same treatment as the BBC.

The crowd chanted 'Mark Thompson [BBC director general], shame on you', 'Impartiality, that's a crime, you don't care if children die' and 'If you don't play, we won't pay'. A group of us set fire to our TV licences to loud applause from other protesters. Earlier, a group of people had tried to occupy the building but had been dragged out by police. There will be future actions if the BBC does not change its position, including bringing old television sets and leaving them outside the BBC drenched in red paint.

SAM TAYLOR
London

ERRATUM

Apologies to FRFI readers for a factual error in my article 'USA Inc: too big to fail', FRFI 206. I had explained that banks were failing to lend and instead hanging onto the cash. I gave a figure of \$1.2 trillion being hoarded. Embarrassingly, I had overlooked a note to the relevant tables. The \$633.9 billion of reserve balances with the federal reserve bank are included in the \$854.3 billion of cash held by the banks, because they can be withdrawn from the Fed on demand. So the amount being hoarded was just \$568 billion – still a huge amount.

This factual error does not alter the major point I was making: indeed, the problem has become worse. Reserve balances have grown by \$164.6 billion to a total of \$798.5 billion at the end of 2008, while cash in the banks has grown by \$162.2 billion to a new high of \$1,016.5 billion. This means that the cash hoard has now grown to \$730.2 billion, showing that the problem is only getting worse.

Steve Palmer

A tonic for the mind

Thanks for the December FRFI. The splendid articles are a tonic for the mind, filled as they are with irrefutable truths. Writers like David Yaffe, Steve Palmer and Robert Clough remind me of Herbert

Marcuse's statement that liberalism (capitalism, that is) and fascism are utterly false and find their common refutation in Marxism.

JOHN O'HIGGINS
Leicester

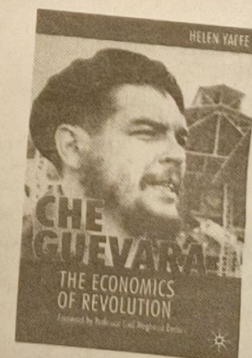
Che Guevara: The Economics of Revolution

Helen Yaffe, Palgrave Macmillan, 20 February 2009.

Based on new archival research and interviews with his contemporaries and colleagues, this book records Guevara's contribution to industrial organisation, economic management and socialist political economy debates as a member of the Cuban government. It rescues the history of his work as President of the National Bank, head of the Department of Industrialisation and Minister of Industries from 1959-1965.

Guevara created the Budgetary Finance System, an economic management system unique to socialism and based on the productive and managerial techniques of US corporations. It was also consistent with his Marxist analysis and included policies to promote education and training, establish administrative controls, forge workers' participation in management, found science and technology institutes and raise consciousness whilst institutionalising psychology as a management tool. In addition, the book shows how Guevara was able to predict that capitalism would return to the Soviet Union.

Available at the reduced price of £15 from our stalls or send a cheque to Larkin Publications, BCM Box 5909, London WC1N 3XX for £17, including p&p.



Migrant workers hit by capitalist crisis

Since 2000 the Labour government has been rearranging the immigration system, primarily to exclude black workers from Asia and Africa. Immigration of low-skilled workers from countries outside the EU has been shut off via the Points-Based System, while short-term immigration from the former socialist countries of eastern Europe has been encouraged. By April 2008 there were 665,000 migrants from eastern Europe living in Britain – around two-thirds from Poland.

Marx explained how capitalism relies on a 'reserve army of labour' and how this 'mass of human material always ready for exploitation' keeps wages low for the mass of the working class and maintains workers in a state of uncertainty and instability, knowing they may be hired and fired as needed.

Migrant workers in Britain from A8 countries (Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary) are mainly young and single; 75% are 16-39 years old. They are eligible for some welfare benefits while working and, after a year's continuous full-time employment, for unemployment benefit. Migrants from the 'A2 countries', Romania and Bulgaria, have fewer entitlements and are mainly restricted to temporary work in agriculture or food-processing, where the labour is hard and low paid and there is always a seasonal labour shortage. Many are on piece work, where instead of being paid by the hour, they are paid by the punnet of fruit picked or chicken plucked. Piece rates are supposed to be equivalent to the minimum hourly wage but there are numerous ways employers get around this, such as recording fewer hours than really worked or deducting 'expenses' for tools, transport and overcrowded and overpriced accommodation.

Many east European workers are registered as self-employed and find work via agencies. They are denied basic employment rights such as holiday pay, sick pay, redundancy pay and the right to claim unfair dismissal. In June 2008 *The Guardian* exposed a case where east Europeans, employed via a maze of sub-contracting agencies to work on the construction site of a government-backed PFI hospital in Nottinghamshire, were paid less than £1 per hour, with one worker taking home £8.80 for a 37-hour week, and

another netting £66 for working 70 hours after deductions for accommodation and tools. The construction industry scheme, which registers the workers as technically self-employed, also deducted £76.80 from their wages each week.

The capitalist crisis that is now hitting Britain is tearing through the economies of eastern Europe as well. Migrant workers are therefore forced to choose between two precarious situations. According to the Federation of Poles in Great Britain (ZPWB) the response is polarised, with working families with children choosing to stay on a long-term basis, while single Poles and childless couples, particularly those who had been living in rural areas, are leaving in large numbers. Up to 200,000 are thought to have left in the last year, having lost their jobs or due to poor employment conditions.

Home Office statistics released in November 2008 showed a drop of 36% of A8 nationals registering to work in Britain, with a similar statistic for A2 nationals. Increased unemployment among migrant workers already here has led to a high incidence of homelessness, especially in London and Belfast. In January 2009 *The Times* reported that one in five of the approximately 3,000 street-homeless people in London are from eastern Europe.

Migrant workers are victims of the crisis of capitalism but as recession deepens they will increasingly be scapegoated. The ZPWB says that there has already been a 20% rise in racist attacks on Polish workers in the last year and has published details of 60 incidents, ranging from graffiti, assaults and arson to murder. Anti-racists need to organise urgently against the rising tide of xenophobia.

Annie Richardson
and Nicki Jameson

Racist incidents against Polish people in November and December 2008 include:

- Kettering – Polish man sustains fractured skull in racist attack by four men
- Louth – Butlins employee hits Polish co-worker in the face after yelling 'Go back to Poland'
- Bradford – Polish man attacked with brick by teenager
- Kingston – Two Polish men attacked on night bus with bottles need 43 stitches
- Llantheglw – Polish family forced to close food store after suffering racist graffiti and break-ins
- Mansfield – Man appears in court for ramming wheelie bin against door of Polish man and making racist comments
- Airdrie – Polish brothers attacked with flammable liquid in assault by 10 youths
- Caernarfon – Man imprisoned for a year for punching and racially abusing Polish man waiting for ferry to Ireland

At the Labour Party conference in 2007 Prime Minister Gordon Brown promised 'British jobs for British workers', deliberately pandering to national chauvinism. As we go to press Brown has been forced to simultaneously preach against protectionism and defend his slogan as striking construction workers took up his call. The slogan has become the rallying call in a series of disputes and demonstrations where foreign contractors are employing foreign workers instead of local labour. The Labour Prime Minister has unleashed a torrent of racism.



Polish workers preparing to leave for low-paid work in Britain

Charter flights to repression

In November 2008, Immigration Minister Phil Woolas boasted that the government is deporting immigrants at a rate of one every eight minutes. To achieve this, it is making increasing use of charter flight mass deportations. Many of these have been to northern Iraq. On 17 September 2008, 52 Kurdish asylum seekers, who had physically resisted being put on a flight two days before, were deported from Stansted airport. On 27 October, another 50 were deported. On 15 December, 46 people were deported on a Hamburg International flight via Germany. One of the deportees was taken off the plane and sent back to Britain, after wounding himself with scissors. In January 2009, another 25 people were deported.

There were charter flight deportations to Jamaica in December 2007 and March 2008, and in January 2009 the government began mass deportation to Sri Lanka. There has been increasing discussion of co-ordinated EU deportations and the EU border police agency Frontex is already organising operations such as the charter to Lagos in July 2008, which collected 41 people from nine countries, including Ireland, France and Spain.

ed on 320 flights and in the following year (February 2006-January 2007) there were 64 flights; the majority of them part of Operation Aardvark (51 flights removing 1,267 people to east European countries) and Operation Ravel (11 flights taking 259 people to Afghanistan).

Following the 2007 flight to Kinshasa, there have not been any mass deportations to DRC, mainly due to a protracted legal challenge to the 'Country Guidance' used by immigration tribunals in cases regarding that country. This process has now been exhausted and deportations look set to resume. At the end of January 2009, the Congo Support Project issued a warning that 'good sources' had informed it that the Migration Directorate from Kinshasa was due to visit London to sign up to a British government plan to 'repatriate' over 4,000 Congolese people.

Although it is attempting to keep specifics, such as cost and planned flights, under wraps, the government is keen to boast of having effected successful mass deportations. Deporting 'illegal immigrants' and 'failed asylum seekers' en masse makes it look tough and assists in maintaining the imperialist myth that countries it

Immigration detainees fight back in Italy

As reported in the last two issues of FRFI, confrontation has grown between the reactionary, racist ruling class under the leadership of Silvio Berlusconi and those forces in Italy beginning to fight back. On 24 January up to 800 migrants and refugees escaped from the deportation centre in Lampedusa, a small island 200km south of Sicily and 100 km off the coast of Tunisia. The remaining detainees then tore down the security gates, meaning around 1,300 people were able to escape, although the majority then returned. Migrants marched on the town hall, chanting 'Freedom! Freedom!' and 'Help us'.

Lampedusa is the first port of call for many migrants from Africa and the deportation centre on the island functions both as a 'centre of first reception' and a 'centre of identification and expulsion' (CIE). Now in line with the hard-line racist, anti-immigrant stance of ruling coalition partner, Lega Nord, changes have been introduced that will see migrants 'processed' and deported straight from Lampedusa rather than being allowed to move on to Sicily or southern Italy

where there are open asylum centres. So far this year 50 Egyptian migrants have been deported from the island.

Following the arrival of hundreds of new migrants from across the Mediterranean and Interior Minister Roberto Maroni's refusal to allow any movement off the island, the situation at the deportation centre became critical. Nearly 2,000 people were crushed into a centre capable of accommodating just 850, with many forced to sleep rough in the rain. On 23 January the UN High Commission on Refugees released a press statement, stating that 'the overcrowding of the tempo-

rary reception centre on the small island is creating a humanitarian situation of concern' and that the cause of the problem was the change introduced by the Italian government at the start of the year which forced migrants to stay on Lampedusa.

Local residents also held a 4,000-strong protest at Maroni's decision to open a new CIE in a disused military base, with Lampedusa's mayor Bernardino De Rubeis saying many believed the new deportation centre 'would become a sort of prison.' According to reports, there has been no hostility between migrants and residents, with many escapees joining the local protest, and locals helping to feed and shelter those who escaped. It is a clear sign that the racist divisions sown by Lega Nord and Berlusconi can be defeated.

Joseph Eskovitch



The detention centre on the island of Lampedusa, Italy, where the escape took place



Iraqi refugees protest against forcible deportation to Iraq outside the Home Office, London, 11 April 2008

The precise number of charter flight deportations is not known. Up until 2007, the government disclosed figures in response to parliamentary questions or Freedom of Information Act requests but is now refusing to do so, stating the information is 'commercially sensitive'. Presumably this means it is embarrassed about the cost incurred and wants to protect airlines involved from becoming the target of campaigns in the way the now defunct XL Airways did after it deported 40 adults and children to Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in February 2007.

The British government has been using charter flight deportations since 2001. Up until the end of January 2006, 12,956 people had been remov-

has occupied militarily, like Iraq and Afghanistan, or plundered for their resources, like DRC, are safe. Deportations on routine flights have not stopped, but protests against airlines which carry out removals and the reactions of travellers who find their fellow passengers are refusing to board or screaming until they are taken off planes have rendered carrying deportees on standard flights far less popular with airlines.

Opposition to charter flight deportations must be stepped up and co-ordinated, so that resisting any flight becomes the task of all anti-racist campaigners, not just of those concerned with the specific country.

Fight all deportations!

Nicki Jameson