

# The dementia of power



A rescuer pulls the body of a child from a shelled building in Nabatiyeh

Adam Keller reports from  
Tel Aviv

IN the gloomy days of early March, Israeli President Ezer Weitzman, former dove turned hawk and infamous for his unpresidential tongue, called for a complete suspension of the peace process with all Arab partners. He proposed introducing a radical new principle of policy: "If you can't find a needle in a haystack, burn the whole stack." One and a half months later, it seems that Peres was driven to try taking his advice to heart.

Israel has been in control of South Lebanon ever since the "mini-invasion" of 1978. In all that time it has never been admitted that South Lebanon is an occupied territory; the Israeli general in charge is designated "chief liaison officer" rather than "military governor." Nevertheless, there is no longer any pretence that the area is in fact ruled by the "local militia" known as the "South Lebanon Army." The SLA mercenaries proved completely unable to fend for themselves; the constant presence of thousands of Israeli troops is needed to maintain control of the area. In contrast, the Hizbullah guerrillas — Syria's allies — are efficient,

highly motivated fighters who neither need nor desire the direct involvement of Syrian troops. Thus, the South Lebanon "war by proxy" turned out to have a built-in advantage for Syria.

In early 1996, Hizbullah made a series of daring ambushes and raids on Israeli military convoys, deep inside the "security zone." As a resistance movement struggling to liberate occupied Lebanese territory, Hizbullah gained support also from many Lebanese who do not share its militant Islamic ideology.

Among the Israeli-backed SLA troops, morale plummeted; there were reports of a high desertion rate, with some SLA deserters actually going over to the guerrillas. The Israeli army command ached "to get back" at the Hizbullah — but attacks on villages where the guerrillas hid inevitably resulted in civilian casualties in contravention of Israel's obligation under the July 1993 cease-fire; in such cases, Hizbullah retaliated by shooting Katyusha rockets at northern Israel — particularly at the long-suffering town of Kiryat Shmona.

The army command, which had so recently been given a free hand on the West Bank, started pressuring Peres to have the same freedom of action in Lebanon. They were aided by the right-wing oppo-

sition, which blamed Peres for "tying the army's hands." Local politicians in the northern towns agitated for "a big blow in Lebanon to get rid of the Katyushas once and for all"; when Peres intended to visit Kiryat Shmona, local Likud militants rioted at the town entrance, forcing him to cancel the visit.

There was little original in "Operation Grapes of Wrath" — the official name of the war started on April 11. Not only were the tactics very similar to those used (not very successfully) by Rabin in 1993, but the reactions of the peace movement and of Israeli society in general followed closely the pattern established in all the military adventures in Lebanon since 1982: the same spontaneous opposition by radical peace groups; the same hesitation, indecision and silence during the war's initial stages from more mainstream groups such as Peace Now; the same massive propaganda campaign centring on the plight of inhabitants in the north, creating a kind of emotional blackmail to support the war (though it was the war which forced the inhabitants of the north to flee or hide continuously in bomb shelters).

One thing, however, was a bit different: the number of critical articles which found their way into the opinion pages of the

mass-circulation papers — even with the news pages of the same papers looking like sheets of jingoist war propaganda. Nahum Barnea of *Yediot Abaronot*, Israel's biggest daily, voiced a note of caution on the very first day: "All Lebanon wars start well, with video films of enemy command centres being blown up — the problems begin later" (*Y.A.*, April 12).

Also on the 12th, the first protest vigils were held, at the call of the Hadash communists and the new, mostly Arab, Tadjamu group, with several dozen activists at each of the usual places: Defence Ministry in Tel Aviv, Prime Minister's Residence in Jerusalem, Nisnas Neighbourhood in Haifa... On the weekly Friday vigil of Women in Black and Yesh Gvul in Tel Aviv on that same day, ten-year old signs were dug out and put again into use, with the slogan: Bring the soldiers back from Lebanon!

During the 1982-1985 period, this had been an enormously powerful slogan, especially drawing the support of soldiers' parents. This memory clearly influenced the choice of the army's strategy in the present war: the option of ground operations further into Lebanon, with soldiers constantly exposed to guerrilla ambushes and suicide bombers, was ruled out. Proposals by Likud's Ariel Sharon and Rafael Eytan — to extend northward the Lebanese zone under Israeli rule — were not well received. Instead the operation aimed at maximising the use of Israel's enormous fire-power: air force, artillery and gunboats.

The inhabitants of 45 villages were told through the Israeli-controlled South Lebanon Radio "to leave immediately, on pain of being bombed and shelled." Later, this ultimatum was extended to 45 further villages, and then to the ancient city of Tyre with its 150,000 inhabitants. By then hundreds of thousands of panic-stricken people who had to flee from their homes started to crowd into Beirut, creating an enormous strain on its resources. (Ironically, it was Hizbullah, with its network of charity organisations, which was equipped to take care of the wave of refugees — and incidentally garner additional political influence.)

At the same time, the Israeli navy blockaded the Lebanese ports, and continuing air raids destroyed the Lebanese capital's power stations. Undermining the Lebanese economy and undoing the Hariri Government's efforts to rebuild the ruins of Lebanon was not just an incidental by-effect; it was the repeatedly and openly stated central part of the whole strategy — an economic war, aimed at forcing the Lebanese government to disarm Hizbullah, much as the closure of Israel's borders to Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip was aimed at forcing Arafat to move against Hamas.

In this strategy, direct fighting against the Katyushas was in fact secondary. Nevertheless, the army and air force had at least to be seen doing their best, since "stopping the Katyushas" was the only legitimate aim of the whole operation. The Katyusha rocket — an obsolete, short-range, inaccurate weapon by the standards of regular



**Hamas demonstration**

armies — is a perfect guerrilla weapon: small, light, easy to hide and transport; capable of being launched from among vegetation and without much preparation.

As the army once more found out, it is very difficult to prevent the shooting of Katyushas; the best which artillery and air-planes could do was to shoot back at the spot from which the Katyusha had been fired — and where, in most cases, the guerrillas were no longer present. The army's attempt at an answer to that problem, a new sophisticated radar system, failed to stop the Katyushas — and produced the war's worst calamity, the massacre of Kana.

On the evening of April 18, more than a hundred people answered the call of Gush Shalom to demonstrate in Tel Aviv. A long thin line spread along the defence ministry, standing in the pouring rain with the signs "There is a Solution: Get out of Lebanon!" The following day the artillery barrage tore into the refugee encampment improvised at the U.N. position in Kana Village, killing in two minutes many more civilians than were killed in all this year's Hamas bombings in Israel put together.

The exact circumstances leading to the Kana carnage, the apportioning of responsibility, will doubtlessly be debated for years. Did the Israeli military intelligence know the refugees were there? (And how could they not know, when they were day after day shown on international TV networks?) And if military intelligence knew, why was the Artillery Corps not warned? Did Hizbullah really shoot from the vicinity? And if they did, does it absolve Israel of responsibility for the grisly results?

The exact answers to such questions hardly make a difference to the men, women and children who were mangled, torn to bits, or burned to death at Kana. Nor did they make a big difference to the military and political results. Israeli wars in general — and this war in particular — are fought nearly as much on CNN News as on the battlefield. Western public opinion — and the effect upon it of the horror scenes

from Kana — were a factor which a mini-power like Israel could not ignore. Plans for further escalation were shelved, and the focus shifted to intense diplomatic efforts aimed at achieving a cease-fire.

The pictures of horror had appeared also on Israeli TV — which hitherto showed very little of how the war looked from the Lebanese side. There were several protest actions. An already-scheduled Hadash rally in Tel Aviv, brought several hundreds, chanting slogans and listening to the emotional speeches of poets Dan Almagor and Yitzchak La'or. At Tel Aviv University, the students picketed the hall where Peres — as it happened, on precisely this day — delivered a speech. Peace Now broke its silence, calling for withdrawal from Lebanon and holding an improvised vigil in Jerusalem, near the place where the long-dormant Jerusalem Women in Black surged into renewed action. And Yesh Gvul published the most sharply worded ad in its history, denouncing Kana as a war crime and calling upon pilots and artillerymen to refuse participation "in surgical operation upon Lebanese villages."

Yet there was nothing resembling the explosion of anger and moral outrage which gripped Israel in September 1982. The people in general accepted Peres' position that "it was a tragic accident which we deeply regret, but for which the Hizbullah is to blame." What may have lamed the reaction in Israeli Jewish society is the concern with the impending elections: most of those who could have been expected to come out on the street did not want to harm Peres' chances for re-election.

Most of the protests in Israel occurred among the Arab citizens. In dozens of towns and villages there were demonstrations and rallies, with black flags of mourning and angry shouts: "Peres, Peres, hey hey hey — how many kids did you kill today?" The main street of Nazareth broke into hours of violent, Intifada-like riot; an angry youth told Israeli TV: "Now we are as angry as you were after the Tel Aviv bombing."

After Kana, commentators of different political shades were near-unanimous in defining the whole Lebanon operation as "failure" or "fiasco". There were confident expectations of an immediate ceasefire. In the event, it took a whole further week of agony on both sides of the border, with intensive diplomatic efforts centring upon Damascus and confirming President Assad's position as the power-broker of Lebanon.

Under the new "understandings," Israel and Hizbullah are both strictly forbidden to harm civilians or use civilian areas as "launching grounds" for attacks; and both sides reserve an undefined "right to self-defence." There is no explicit mention, either of the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon or Hizbullah actions against that occupation.

The most novel part of the "understandings" sets up a "monitoring committee" consisting of Israel, Syria, Lebanon, the United States and France; disputes are supposed to be resolved within this body, rather than in cycles of retribution and counter-retribution, as hitherto. Such a mechanism might work for some interim period, but would surely break down if there is no serious move towards Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon.

Hizbullah emerged unbroken from the seventeen days of fighting, continuing to shoot until the very last minute before the ceasefire and, unlike Hamas, demonstrating complete control over its men, none of whom continued to shoot after that moment. A featherweight boxer, emerging on his feet after seventeen bouts with a heavyweight, would certainly be accounted the victor — if the world of sport allowed such matches.

Hizbullah emerged politically strengthened, gaining popularity and legitimacy in its own Shiite constituency and in Lebanese society in general. The war seems to have united Muslim and Christian Lebanese to a degree long unthinkable. This new-found unity may eventually serve the Lebanese, not only towards Israel but towards their big "protector" as well.

The Israeli generals also claim to have won, to have restored the Israeli army's power of deterrence. They could hardly speak otherwise in public. Nevertheless, those forces which seek to solve Israel's problems by brute force seem somewhat chastened. And it is certainly a fact that many mainstream commentators now speak of Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon as a concrete political possibility.

On the night of the cease-fire, Prime Minister Peres told Israeli TV: "Hizbullah says we are occupying South Lebanon? Well, we told the Syrians and Lebanese that through the peace process the Israeli presence in South Lebanon could be totally eradicated!"

Though Israel always stated that in principle its presence in Lebanon is not permanent, it was never put in quite these words... ■

## Briefing

# Israel/Palestine

### Late 19th century:

Pogroms (anti-Jewish massacres) in the Russian Empire. Millions of Jews flee to Western Europe or the USA. The Zionist movement emerges, proposing a Jewish state be created. A small trickle of Jews emigrates to Palestine (then under Turkish rule) to start building a settler community there.

### After World War 1:

Britain takes Palestine from the collapsed Turkish empire. To help win the war it has promised support for a "Jewish homeland" in Palestine, and the trickle of settlers increases. The British colonial administration balances between the Jews and the Arabs, who become increasingly alarmed as Jewish settlement expands.

### After 1933:

Nazis take power in Germany. Increasing persecution of Jews; more Jews flee to Palestine; other countries close their doors to Jews.

### 1940s:

Nazis massacre six million Jews.

### 1945-7:

Jewish survivors of the Nazi massacre face pogroms in Poland and anti-Jewish demonstrations in Britain, US, Australia, etc. More flee to Palestine. The settler community there, now one-third of Palestine's population, launches an open fight for a Jewish state. The United Nations proposes partition.

### 1948:

Britain bails out. War between the Jewish community of Palestine and the surrounding Arab states, whose armies are commanded by British officers. Jews conquer three-quarters of Palestine and set up a new state, Israel. 800,000 Palestinian Arabs flee the war: Israel will not readmit them, the surrounding Arab states keep them in refugee camps. The Arabs remaining in Israel become second-class citizens there.

### 1956:

War between Israel, Britain and France, on the one side, and Egypt on the other, sparked by Egypt nationalising the Suez Canal. This is followed by increased pressure on Jews living in Arab countries, and hundreds of thousands flee to Israel.

### 1967:

New war between Israel and the Arab states. Israel seizes those parts of Palestine which it had not conquered in 1948, the West Bank and the Gaza strip; another 350,000 Palestinian Arabs become refugees.

### 1968-9:

The Palestinian nationalist movement Fatah takes over the Palestine Liberation Organisation, previously a front for the Arab governments, and replaces the old slogan "drive the Jews into the sea" with the call for a "democratic secular state" in all Palestine.

### 1970:

Jordanian government, seeing the radical Palestinian guerrilla groups as a threat, massacres and disperses Palestinian refugees in Jordan.

### 1973:

Renewed war between Israel and Arab states.

### 1975:

Lebanese state collapses in civil war, partly sparked by friction over Palestinian guerrillas using Lebanon as a base for actions against Israel.

### 1976:

Syria invades Lebanon, massacres many Palestinians.

### From 1978:

Repeated Israeli incursions into and attacks on Lebanon.

### 1979:

Peace deal between Israel and Egypt.

### 1987, December:

"Intifada" begins — mass rebellion in the West Bank and Gaza against the Israeli military occupation.

### 1988, December:

Palestine Liberation Organisation adopts policy of "two peoples, two states" — demanding an independent Palestinian state while recognising Israel's right to exist.

### 1993:

PLO and Israel negotiate deal under which Israel is to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and Jericho and allow some Palestinian authority in the West Bank.

# Royal Mail strike looms

By a north-west postal worker

WE appear to be on the verge of a national postal strike. Royal Mail management have threatened drastic attacks on terms and conditions, designed to increase exploitation and undermine union organisation. Workers face casualisation, part-time status and speed up, and customers a slower and less frequent service.

The leadership of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) have warned of a ballot for national strike action if management do not return to the negotiating table by the beginning of May.

Management's proposals were revealed by a reluctant General Secretary, Alan Johnson, after the union's postal executive forced him to pull out of any further talks

on the bosses' so-called "Employee Agenda."

Royal Mail bosses wanted:

- Teamworking, with all absences to be covered by members of the team.
- Day-to-day variation of attendance and break times at management's say-so.
- No rotation of duties.
- No more than two people on deliveries serving each customer over a year (this would prevent five-day weeks).

Management have now raised the prospect of imposing these proposals without agreement.

In response the postal executive has sent out a mixed message to management. Instead of proceeding immediately to a national ballot for all-out action to win the shorter working week and secure the second delivery — removal of which would turn most delivery jobs into part-time work

— the national leadership have pleaded for more talks.

Postal workers have immense industrial muscle and are not afraid to use it. At the end of 1995 Scottish postal workers staged the biggest illegal and unofficial strike seen in any industry since World War 2 to save just four full-time jobs. They were successful, despite the attempts of the CWU hierarchy to bludgeon them back to work, backed up by management's threats to use the anti-union laws.

Branches need to prepare for the coming confrontation. The rank and file must be armed with the arguments, and strike committees set up now to get out publicity and maximise the vote for action in any ballot.

And the national leadership need to be reined in. The biggest danger right now is that Johnson will try to get a package deal which he could present as a victory on some issues while giving away key concessions to management on team-working or deliveries.

# Glaisdale: Tories are to blame

By William Irons

"FORTY-FIVE reasons why a head has to ban this thug", shouted the *Daily Mirror* headline of 23 April. Among teachers, the main opener for conversations was: "What about this Glaisdale kid, then?"

After a catalogue of violent incidents and disruptive behaviour, 13 year old Richard Wilding was expelled from Glaisdale comprehensive, a school on the run-down Broxtowe estate in Nottingham. The exclusion itself was not newsworthy, nor the fact that his parents had successfully appealed against the decision to exclude. It was the resistance of the staff that turned it into a news item.

All the staff at the school agreed — he should no longer be taught at the school. This was backed up by the main teacher unions, the NUT, NAS/UWT and even the less militant ATL. None were happy with the compromise solution that was offered. This would have allowed Richard to come back on site, be taught by a supply teacher for part of the time, and have special needs teaching for the rest.

This solution, patched up by the Local Education Authority, was supported by Richard's parents, but the teachers rejected it because it meant he would be in the playground and corridors at break and other times.

The matter was brought to a head when the NAS/UWT threatened to go on indefinite strike from Friday 26 April. In the end, total exclusion of the boy from the school was achieved. But the question still remains: what to do with the increasing problem of pupils like Richard Wilding? There are tens of thousands of others like him throughout the country, a few in every school. We need short-term and long-term answers.

The *Mirror* and the *Express* saw Richard as a rogue child from a rogue family who deserve

very little sympathy. The *Guardian* had a photograph of him playing chess and was willing to allow that he might have been misjudged. The *Telegraph* implied that teachers had brought it on themselves by supporting the abolition of corporal punishment.

Only the *Independent* made some attempt to look at the underlying problem and the growing numbers of exclusions from schools. It suggested that more resources were needed in schools, special units and special schools.

For the Government, Gillian Shephard could only comment, in the hypocritical manner that is her trademark, that while she appreciated that the teachers might have a case she bitterly regretted their decision to go on strike and deprive children of their education. Stephen Byers, the Labour spokesperson, echoed her... of course.

Shephard was sidestepping any Government responsibility, claiming it was simply a matter between the school and her parents. However, the Government must take the major blame. It has fostered the general pressure and demoralisation in society and families in particular, then put damaged children into mainstream education, where it has put schools under pressure with inadequate funding, league tables, open enrolment, and SATs.

In the short term, schools have very little option but to exclude pupils prone to violent or disruptive behaviour. The teachers and the other pupils need some degree of protection. In the long term, society cannot simply wash its hands of children like Richard Wilding. It needs to provide care and resourcing.

In the meantime we are likely to have a "post-Glaisdale syndrome" where many views, reactionary and enlightened, will be expressed. Hopefully it will start a process to solve this problem. For the time being the action of the NAS/UWT has had a salutary effect. But without a fight for adequate funding there will be no adequate solution.

## The industrial front

CIVIL Service workers in the DSS are mounting a series of week-long strikes in opposition to Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) pilot schemes in Peckham, South London and Brighton. The strikes follow successful action in West London earlier this month.

These local disputes could provide an important springboard for the sustained national action needed to beat the JSA.

**UNISON members working for Liverpool City Council have started their ballot for strike action to defeat plans for job cuts.**

**The council workers will be joining fire-fighters and others in a day of solidarity strike action in support of the sacked Liverpool dockers, who are entering the 8th month of the dispute.**

THE Merseyside fire-fighters — who are also now into the 8th month of their dispute over budget cuts — are set to be joined by crews in Essex and Derbyshire who are balloting for a series of 9 hour strikes over job cuts and station closures.

The need for a co-ordinated national jobs fight is set to be high on the agenda of this month's FBU conference in Bridlington.

**A FIVE day strike by GMB members at Johnston Shields textiles in Ayrshire has won a £4 minimum wage for the worst paid workers at the plant.**



## Train crew: strike together!

By a Scotrail driver

ON 17 May train crew grades organised by the RMT will be balloting to strike over Physical Needs Breaks (going to the toilet, eating etc.) for conductors, payments for past productivity, payment for extra duties taken by senior conductors in the past, and commission payments for assistant ticket examiners. Drivers may also be balloted over opposition to management's "Driver's Restructuring Initiative."

This is the situation train crews now face:

- Guards can be working for up to 9 hours without a break. They are not allowed to eat or drink on board trains or in front of passengers.

- Under the proposed "One Train Team" proposal, jobs will be lost and responsibility for safety put entirely in the hands of the driver.

A successful fight by conductors over payment for past extra duties will make management think twice about implementing "One Train Teams".

Management will try to use drivers organised by ASLEF to break any strikes, as they did in 1994 during the signal workers' strike. We cannot afford any more disunity on the rails. Co-ordinated strike action will maximise pressure on management.

# Rail strikes looming

# Organise the unorganised!

By a Yorkshire trackworker

PRIVATISATION of the railway network has had a shattering effect on union organisation, but some parts of the railworkers' union RMT are preparing to fight back.

Important decisions were made at the Signal and Telecommunications, Permanent Way and Overhead Traction Grades Conference of the RMT, meeting in Ayr on the 25-26 April. This conference represents the majority of trackworkers within the RMT.

Casual working is being introduced apace in a mad dash to cut costs and boost profits for the new "Infrastructure Maintenance Companies" (IMCos) and "Track Renewals Companies" (TRUs) which are bidding to win maintenance contracts from Railtrack.

Trackworkers have traditionally

opposed "contractors", and have done whatever was possible, openly or covertly, to resist. This has been seen, rightly, as the best method of retaining the conditions and jobs of established trackworkers. BR has had to employ full-time permanent workers on union negotiated rates of pay and conditions.

This week's conference recognised that, since many of the ex-BR IMCos and TRUs are now in private hands, the bulk of trackworkers are now employed by private firms. A lot of them are tin-pot concerns employing agency workers on short-term contracts.

It was agreed to actively recruit such workers and to establish a minimum set of demands — on wages, sick pay, holidays, health and safety.

The idea of turning the RMT back into a campaigning, agitational, organising force among the unorganised will have to be fought for throughout the union. This is a good start.

## Support the Chelfields catering workers

## Rail spivs' £10 a day pay insult

CHELFIELDS is one of the many companies now operating privatised trolley services on trains. £3 per hour is far too much to pay workers, according to their bosses.

Early in April, Chelfields suddenly required its employees to sign for a letter saying that from 28 April their pay was to be cut from £3 per hour to just £10 per day (about £1.10 per hour). Any further earnings were to come from commission, at the rate of 20p in the pound on takings above £50.00. Takings are rarely at this level. Often stocks are not available — something the workers have no control over.

Chelfields workers have refused to accept this cut. They will continue to work as normal but for the previously agreed rates of pay.

It is possible the company may now back off. However, despite a full complement of workers at all locations, the company has placed

vacancy adverts in Job Centres and student union buildings. Chelfields have summarily dismissed workers before and could be preparing to do so again.

With rail privatisation, hundreds of companies, old and new, are running around looking for a quick profit. If that means poverty wages for frightened workers, then so what?

- Write to Chelfields Limited at Crown House, 3B Airport Industrial Estate, Kingston Park, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE3 2EF, letting them know what you think of £10 a day.

- Write to your MP asking them to intervene.

- Write to the press. Let the workers on the trolleys know that they have your support.

- Finally, look out for further news of the company attempting to force its policy through. Your support may then be needed even more.

## Support the Craigentinny strikers

RMT members at Craigentinny inter-city maintenance workshops near Edinburgh are involved in a series of one-day strikes.

The dispute started over management's refusal to negotiate over rosters but has turned into a major battle which raises the question of the future of the workshops — part of the East Coast Mainline — which have just been bought by Sea Containers Ltd, a notorious US asset stripper and union buster.

The Craigentinny workers are appealing to workers at the other East Coast Mainline depots at Heaton and Bounds Green not to handle any re-directed work from Edinburgh.

# Russian workers are organising

By Bob Arnot and Kirill

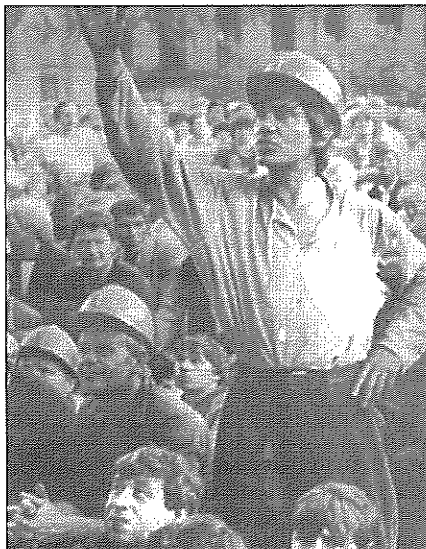
Buketov\*

THE Russian trade unions were denied the opportunity to participate in the 1993 elections for the Russian State Duma. After Yeltsin bombed the parliament building in October 1993, as part of the general repression, all forces that supported the parliament were excluded from participation in the elections. Therefore, for the traditional unions, which represent about 50 million workers, participation in the 1995 electoral race provided the first experience of independent struggle for parliamentary positions. This experience was not successful, but at the same time it was not a complete failure because it has been part of a process that has allowed the clarification of an independent political position for Russian trade unions.

The political self-determination of Russian trade unions had its first expression in the attempt to establish a Party of Labour. This project failed because the impetus for its establishment came from outside the experience and cadre of the trade unions. However, the need for a political voice for trade unions has increased as the economic situation has deteriorated.

The reasons cited by trade union leaders for the need to participate in the elections in 1995, were to develop and refine labour legislation; to implement real legislative initiatives through their representatives; and to increase the authority of the trade unions. According to the trade union officials, the aim of the trade union caucus in parliament was to establish a real system of laws regulating social and labour relations. Against the background of the development of a criminalised capitalism these regulations are a minimum requirement to protect workers' interests. However, the first objective for trade unions and their representatives was to solve the problem of the non-payment of wages.

Throughout 1995 the level of non-payment had risen from around 4 trillion roubles at the start of the year to almost 25 trillion by the end of the year. The non-payment of wages means that most workers are only paid a fraction of their entitlement and then many months late. Throughout 1995 trade unions organised a widespread series of collective actions at individual enterprises in an attempt to resolve these problems. However, after the biggest strike wave in Russia in the 1990s, trade unions recognised that the problem of non-payment could not be resolved at the level of the single enter-



Russian miners

prise. Only by increasing the pressure at the centre of state power could the problems be addressed.

Yeltsin also recognised, early in the election campaign, the potential power of the trade unions and sought to harness this by the creation of a "left" electoral bloc headed by Ivan Rybkin, the former speaker of the Duma. Yeltsin's initial idea was to create a left bloc as a "loyal opposition" to the government bloc led by Victor Chernomyrdin. The Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FITUR) was in the first instance willing to join this bloc but only on certain conditions. Firstly, they argued that it was necessary for Rybkin to openly declare that the bloc was in opposition to the economic and social policies of the Yeltsin government. Secondly, they argued that the Rybkin bloc should campaign for the minimum wage to be increased to at least the level of the officially determined poverty line. This would then have a series of knock-on effects, as a variety of wage, benefit and grant levels are directly related to the minimum wage and would have been beneficial for a broad sector of the Russian working population. Finally, the trade unions wanted a commitment to the solution of the non-payment problems.

As Rybkin refused to accept these points and, furthermore, refused to appear at the FITUR conference, the trade unions declined to join the bloc. This meant if they wanted to participate in the elections they had to find another route, either joining another bloc or standing independently. FITUR called for the creation of an oppositional bloc of democratic left forces but the existing parties and blocs were only interested in subsuming the trade unions into their organisations, not in joining a bloc on an equal basis. The only organisation that was interested in a bloc on an equal footing was the Russian United Industrial Party (ROPP) which

compromised the enterprise directors and managers from the old state sector — the so-called "Red Directors".

The common basis for this apparently strange combination is to be found in the contradictory political economy of the current period. The Yeltsin government, at the behest of the IMF, has sought to solve the problem of inflation by massive cuts in the money supply. This has meant that the state has been unable to provide enterprises with payment for state orders, as well as being unable to pay workers their wages. However, even if there was some limited common interest underlying this bloc, many people described it from the outset, as a union of "sheep and wolves". Nevertheless, in the summer of 1995, the Union of Labour was created. Many trade unions refused to participate in this union and some of them entered the electoral lists of other groups and blocs. For example, the agricultural workers joined the Agrarian Party lists. Unsurprisingly, in the course of the campaign the difference in perspective between the partners in the union became glaringly obvious but the mistake was recognised too late.

In the elections the Union of Labour polled over 1 million votes or 1.6% of the total vote. Their vote was highest in the industrial centres where the economic crisis has been deepest and reached almost 12% in Ivanovo region, where the textile industry has collapsed and where unemployment is amongst the highest in Russia. This result was better than many trade union activists had anticipated and recent sociological research suggests that without the industrialists the trade union vote would have been higher. The overall level of the trade union vote was consistent with the number of trade union activists who participate in collective actions, for example on May Day or when mass actions have been called against the government. The vote confirms that there is a sizeable constituency among rank and file workers who recognise the necessity for independent trade union politics. On the basis of their experience in the election campaign and in recognition of their basic support, the trade unions have eliminated the industrialists from the Union of Labour.

In the presidential campaign the Union of Labour has made a decision to support none of the presidential candidates, seeing little difference between them from the point of view of ordinary workers. Whilst the Party of Labour was essentially based upon a group of left intellectuals the Union of Labour has been established by trade unions. Its eventual success or failure will be determined by its ability to reflect the real interests of Russian workers in the continuing crisis. It may have a base upon which to grow but if it simply reflects the interests of the trade union bureaucracy it will be still-born. ■

\* Kirill Buketov is the editor of the Russian journal *Workers Politics (Rabochaya Politika)*. Bob Arnot is a member of the editorial board of the journal *Critique*.

# Social-democracy in the '90s

By Martin Thomas

THE social-democratic governments in Australia and Spain have lost office this year, after 14 years governing Spain and 13 years in Australia. France's 14 years of a Socialist Party president — ten of them with a Socialist prime minister, too — ended in 1995.

Tony Blair and his group see these social democracies, Australia's especially, as a model for their "New Labour". Yet in all these countries the working class and the labour movement are worse off than they were before the long period of social-democratic rule.

Social-democratic governments have always turned against militant workers. They have always subordinated working-class interests to "national" capitalist interests, in war and in crisis. Yet their long-term trend was always to increase welfare provision and public regulation of the economy, however slowly, however inadequately, however bureaucratically.

These new social-democratic governments of the 1980s and 1990s were different. They privatised, deregulated, cut taxes for the rich and for business, and systematically extended means-testing of welfare benefits. They explicitly supported the free market as the basic rule of the economy, with public intervention only to deal with pockets of "market failure". Their approach — called "economic rationalism" in Australia, "economic liberalism" in France, or "Rogernomics" under New Zealand's 1984-90 Labour government — paralleled Thatcherism.

In France (1981), Spain (1982), Australia (1983) and New Zealand (1984), the social-democratic governments took over in countries long dominated by right-wing governments with a state-interventionist, protectionist, nationalist economic regime including a measure of paternalistic welfare provision (greater in New Zealand, smaller in Spain). And they did so in a capitalist world radically changed from the 1930s and '40s, when those economic regimes were shaped.

In the 1930s and '40s, the world was divided into trading blocs, with tariff barriers. Transport and communications were relatively much more expensive than today, especially for countries like Australia and New Zealand, far distant from their main trade partner, Britain. Industrial development everywhere was based round the heavy industries of coal, iron and steel. Every government had an incentive, and during World War 2 a compulsion, to use state power to develop its own relatively self-contained industrial base. International flows of capital were small and tightly-controlled.

Over the 1950s and '60s, this international regime changed, bit by bit. Tariffs



Spanish workers fight Gonzalez

were cut. Colonial empires were dismantled. The European Community developed. The multinational corporations ranged more widely across the world, in manufacturing now as well as raw-materials industries (mining and agriculture).

Then in 1971 the USA abandoned the dollar's fixed exchange rate against gold, the cornerstone of the US-hegemonised, controlled, capitalist internationalism of the 1950s and '60s. It was pushed into this decision by the huge accumulation of dollars held overseas after being spent on the Vietnam war, and by the long-term decline of the US's industrial supremacy.

*"The social-democrats would say that they were doing essential 'modernisation' in a way that minimised damage to the poor."*

Two possible roads were open for world capitalism: a return to the trading blocs of the 1930s, or a much more anarchic and uncontrolled international free market. Falteringly, and not without deviations towards the trading-bloc regime, it has moved on the free-market road. Since the early 1980s, international capital movements have multiplied and speeded up by a factor of thousands.

Meanwhile, transport and communications had become relatively cheaper. A new industrial revolution based on microelectronics pushed the heavy industries of coal, iron and steel out of the centre of economic life.

The French government of 1981 was the last hurrah of the old social democracy. As Mitterrand won the presidency, workers danced in the streets and cracked open

bottles of champagne in the factories. He abolished the death penalty and the Gaullist state security court, called off plans to build a nuclear power station, and declared an amnesty for many categories of prisoners.

Thirty-six banks were nationalised, along with five large private companies. Public spending was increased by 27%, the minimum wage upped by 10%, the legal working week cut to 39 hours..

But capital fled. Unemployment grew to over two million by November 1981. Inflation reached 14%. France ran a big trade deficit. In June 1982, Mitterrand made a complete about-turn. Wages were frozen. The government embarked on austerity measures which, the Economist noted, "even Mrs Thatcher might appreciate." Public spending was cut, especially on health (but not on the military). By 1984, France had the highest youth unemployment in the industrialised world. It would soon be overtaken — by social-democratic Spain, which now has 23% jobless overall.

The Spanish Socialist Party had won the elections of 1982. It immediately set about holding down wages, reducing unemployment benefit, and cutting thousands of jobs in the steel industry. There was working class resistance — and mass action by students and school students — including short general strikes, but the government survived.

In New Zealand between 1984 and '90, Labour cut tariffs; privatised telecom, Air New Zealand, the State Insurance Office and the Post Office bank; halved top income tax rates, cut corporation tax, and introduced VAT; opened the financial system to the international markets; and made the central bank independent of elected control, with a mandate to cut inflation before all else.

Australian Labor has cut tariff protection from 24% in 1983 to less than 10% in 1995. The country's manufacturing jobs have been cut by one-quarter, and unemployment is now 8.5% (25% among youth). The Commonwealth Bank, Qantas, and other

enterprises have been privatised; air travel and other industries have been deregulated; private competition has been introduced into telecom. Top tax rates have been slashed, means-testing of welfare has been extended, and free university education replaced by loans, to be repaid by a graduate tax. Australia's exposure to international capital flows has increased dramatically. The stock of Australian direct investment abroad rose from \$5.5 billion in 1982 to \$106 billion in 1994; the country's gross foreign debt ballooned to \$202 billion.

The social-democrats would say that they were doing essential "modernisation" in a way that minimised the damage to the poor. Nowhere, it is true, did they introduce vicious anti-union laws like those of Britain's Tories. And they brought in some reforms. Spain's legislated autonomy for the Basque country and Catalonia. New Zealand's banned all ships with nuclear weapons from its waters. Australia's restored Medicare, introduced Aboriginal land rights, and defended multiculturalism and Asian immigration against the right. In fact, Hawke or Keating (from Australia), or Lange (from New Zealand), would probably be sacked for leftism if they sat in Blair's Shadow Cabinet.

Yet everywhere the social-democratic governments left the rich richer, the poor poorer, and masses unemployed. They cultivated friendships with big business and claimed to represent the "middle class". Everywhere they left the working class not only worse off, but in a worse condition of organisation and spirit. In Australia, trade-union membership has dropped from 50% to 33% of the workforce.

The social-democratic "lesser evil" has not avoided the Tory "greater evil", but opened the door for it. Since 1990 New Zealand's National (Tory) party has attacked union rights — reducing the level of unionisation from 45% to 20% in the space of four years — and cut welfare so that only the very poor receive free or subsidised health care or other benefits. What was once the world's first welfare state now depends on charity "food banks" to feed its poor.

Everywhere, workers resisted the new social democracy. Everywhere the resistance was piecemeal and defeated. And — what is worst from the point of view of Marxists who never expected much from social democracy — working-class disillusion with the social-democrats has flowed not into left-wing alternatives but into political disengagement, especially among youth. In New Zealand, Labour's right-wing policies led in 1989 to a split — Jim Anderton's New Labour — which took with it the majority of the Labour Party's active membership and the support of some trade unions. But that is only a partial exception to the rule. New Labour has gone into an alliance with middle-class splinter groups (the Democrats and the Liberals), and even negotiated with the right-wing New Zealand First party.

Part of the problem is that the new world regime of capitalism leaves little space for

reform politics short of an internationalist revolutionary assault on finance capital. It leaves more than the social-democratic leaders haunted by memories of the economic failures and the working-class militancy, believe, but it leaves little. *The Financial Times* aptly summed up the conversion in 1990 of the Swedish social democrats, previously the most confident champions of the "old" model, into "new" social democracy: "Under intense pressure from overseas financial opinion that forced up interest rates... and led to a huge outflow of capital from Sweden, the Swedish government is having to abandon a long-held commitment to full employment and the Welfare State. The international money-markets have become the arbiters of Sweden's future, not the Social Democratic ideologues". Social democracy, as long as it remains social democracy, has no choice but to collapse into old-fashioned "Liberal-Labour" politics.

The most obvious candidates to fill a gap to the left of social democracy, the Communist Parties, have dwindled. This is a crisis accelerated by the collapse of Stalinism in 1989, but it began long before. The Italian CP (renamed PDS), now finds itself in a strong position, but it was in favour of privatisation as early as the 1970s!

In fact, in France, in Spain, and in Portugal, the Socialist Parties owed their success in the late 1970s and early 1980s not to any deep, long-established roots in the working class, but to their ability to outflank the Communist Parties (and the smaller revolutionary groups) as the political follow-on from the big struggles and radicalisations of the late 1960s and early '70s.

## *"The new world regime of capitalism leaves very little space for reform politics."*

In France, the Socialist Party had got only 5% of the vote in the presidential poll of 1969, while the CP scored 21.5%. In Portugal, Spain and Greece, the Socialist Parties became big parliamentary parties in the 1970s in a period of big struggles and transitions from dictatorship to bourgeois democracy. In the preceding decades, these parties had been small illegal groups; and the main organised force in the clandestine anti-fascist (or anti-dictatorship) resistance had been the Stalinists, not the Socialists. In France and Italy the Stalinists had been the main working-class parties ever since the World War Two resistance.

Nor had the Socialist Parties the same links to the trade union movement as the Labour Party in Britain (or Australia). Although some union federations have loose alliances with the Socialist Parties (the UGT in Spain, the CFDT in France), they have no organisational link: the unions did not set up the Socialist Parties, nor do they have delegates to their various com-

mittees. And all these countries have other union federations, the largest usually CP-dominated.

The Socialist Parties outstripped the CPs with often radical rhetoric, free from the taint of Stalinism. But the revolutionary left, too, has declined or stagnated, and so has the militant working-class constituency on which the revolutionary left naturally bases itself. The biggest revolutionary groups in Italy and Portugal, which once numbered many thousands, have shrivelled and disappeared; in Spain there is hardly any far left at all now. In France, Lutte Ouvrière, despite winning a tremendous 1.6 million votes in the 1995 presidential election, says that its periphery has dwindled, and the other revolutionary groups are in worse shape.

Part of the reason is that all the revolutionary groups missed chances in the 1970s — thus making the revival of social democracy easier, or at least more unchallenged. All the groups were ultra-left, in one way or another; all grossly underestimated the political strength of social democracy. One of the main lessons of the 1970s is that even with an appalling record, and even without the historical and organisational links to the working class of the British Labour Party, social democracy is a much tougher force than many on the left believed in the 1970s. While it may not be appropriate for revolutionaries to work inside those parties, a united front approach to win workers away from them is vital: it won't happen automatically, or in the heat of the struggle alone. Even the "new" social-democracy, with its openly pro-market policies, cannot simply be by-passed. The New Zealand Labour Party, for example, has been explaining how it "went a bit too far to the right" in the 1980s, singing some old tunes again, and regaining some support.

A second reason is the working-class defeats in industrial struggle over the 1980s — none, in the countries of "new social-democratic" governments, as devastating as the British miners' defeat of 1984-5, but cumulatively substantial.

A third reason is a shift in the whole political culture. For a hundred years, from the origins of the modern socialist labour movement to the 1980s, there were manifest, mainstream political developments which signalled (or seemed to signal) to socialists that history was moving our way: the growth of trade unions and labour parties; the extension of state welfare; the expansion of state enterprise and economic control; the Russian revolution; the industrial success of the Soviet Union; the Stalinist revolutions in Yugoslavia, China, Vietnam and other countries after World War 2. There were Trotskyists who criticised social-democratic reforms, who argued that Stalinism was a negation of socialism, and who proposed a working-class, libertarian concept of socialism very different from a simple extrapolation of the mainstream "socialistic" trends. But the great majority of people who became socialists, even if they would move to Trotskyism, must have



started off with a vague, instinctive identification with the mainstream "socialistic" and "revolutionary" contestation of the established order, clarifying their ideas later. The Trotskyists had no choice but, one way or another, to swim in the streams of mainstream "socialism"; and many of them swallowed a lot of the stream they swam in.

Now those signals have gone. Young people becoming aware of politics see Stalinism in collapse and discredit, social-democratic parties proposing only packages of counter-reform slightly different from the open capitalist parties, and small revolutionary groups with what must seem to them to be obscure variants of the old socialism abandoned by the social-democrats and Stalinists. No wonder many of them conclude that politics offers no hope.

The turning point, perhaps, was 1975-6. The old social-democratic policies were shown to be unable even to soften modern capitalist crises. Revolutionaries triumphed in Cambodia and Vietnam — and launched mass terror and slaughter in Cambodia, repression in Vietnam which sent thousands risking their lives in frail little boats to escape across the seas. Then the Chinese government publicly opted for its current "capitalist road". The Maoist revolutionary groups — organisations many thousands strong, and some with a working-class following, in Italy, Germany, Portugal, Spain, and France — collapsed ignominiously.

The pro-capitalist direction of the East European revolutions of 1989-91 was in part a product of the shift in political culture — over the 1980s, almost all the ideologues of the anti-Stalinist resistance had become pro-capitalist, where in the 1970s or earlier they would have been socialistic — and it also became a great factor pushing the shift further, discrediting the whole language of socialism for hundreds of millions of people.

Class struggle will revive, because it is built into the relations of wage-labour and capital. Socialist ideas will revive, because they are rooted in the logic of the class struggle. But for the present we are, in some respects, back in a period like that which Karl Marx had to deal with for his entire life after the revolutions of 1848 — when revolution was discredited, socialist ideas were eclipsed, workers everywhere were dominated by openly bourgeois politics, and even trade-union struggle was feeble. Marx used that period to lay the ideological basis for a new socialist political culture.

The revolutionary left must do the same now, going back to the original ideas of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, and others, clearing away the encrustations of the decades when socialist culture was dominated by Stalinism and social democracy, renewing and revising the ideas in the light of new conditions. The human need for hope for a better society, hope to escape the capitalist world of mass unemployment, poverty, and alienation, cannot be long suppressed. The new social democrats offer no hope. We must. ■

# Iran's sham elections

By Maryam

IN the months preceding the so-called elections to the fifth session of the Islamic Parliament, the people of Iran were subjected by the Islamic regime to an especially severe reign of religious despotism and civil oppression. Democratic elections are normally considered to be means of exercising the voters' political freedom to choose the government.

In the regime of the Islamic republic they are used only to extend, deepen and strengthen the existing dictatorship. They are almost entirely a sham and a fraud. The rival factions within the Islamic regime use tightly managed "elections" to work out their internal power struggles for prestige, position and dominance and to give a spurious stamp of legitimacy to their rule.

Elections demand maximum political freedom, yet in Iran the preparations for the elections of the fifth session of the Parliament have brought about such an atmosphere of repression, fear and terror that even the supporters of various factions of the regime (with the exception of the present dominant factions) found it impossible to participate in it. Arbitrary bans on candidates and the annulment of first round election results, have already caused major problems for those who tried to use the "elections".

For that reason, in early March, the political forces of Workers' Left Unity jointly called upon the Iranian people to boycott these "elections", reminding them that they have no interests in the battle between the two factions of the regime. The left opposition reminded the people that they have no future with the Islamic Republic regime, that freedom and free elections cannot be achieved without overthrowing this regime.

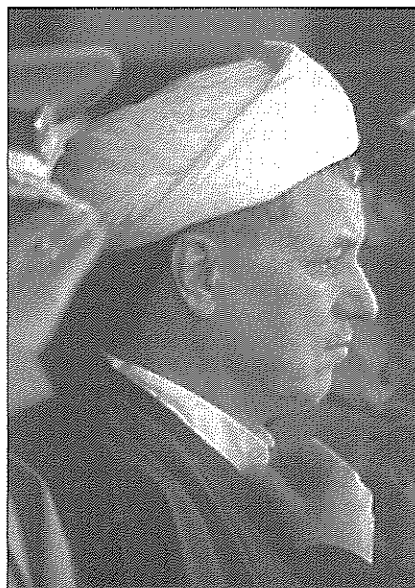
Subsequent events proved us to be right. The elections ended up as a mere contest between supporters of President Rafsanjani and his opponents in the "conservative" Council of Guardians, a religious body through which Iran's clergy maintains its grip on power.

In early April, the Council of Guardians annulled the voting in eight cities, including Isfahan, Iran's third largest city with five seats in the Parliament. The other cities were Malayer, Najafabad, Naeen, Mian-

doab, Meimeh, Borkhar and Khomeini Shahr. The Council of Guardians accused "some candidates" of using "anti-revolutionary" slogans, "making illusory promises", and "of buying off voters." Significantly, however, the council never specified the identity of the accused candidates.

In the first round of elections, over 30 members of the Majles were denied permission to stand for the new Parliament. Jamshid Mansourian, a candidate from Mashhad, a large city in north-eastern Iran, was denied permission to run because he had signed a public announcement for a memorial service for the late leader of the Freedom Movement, Mehdi Bazargan, the Islamic Republic's first Prime Minister! Newspapers critical of the government or the Council of Guardians' strict supervision of "candidates" were banned.

On 8 March, the day of the first-round elections, in the north-western city of Bonab, riot police opened fire on demonstrators protesting against governmental interference in the election. The weekly local newspaper, *Rassad*, published in the nearby town of Maragheh, was closed down and its publisher detained as punishment for its critical reporting of the unrest in Bonab. The newspaper had stated that at least six people were killed and 120 wounded when Revolutionary Guards opened fire on unarmed demonstrators. It is now believed that 29 people were killed in Bonab on 8 March.



Representing one faction of the ruling class: Rafsanjani