

Teachers' union at crossroads

By Pat Murphy

THE left will go to NUT conference in confident mood this year. All the evidence suggests they are a leadership in-waiting.

The union's elected President and Vice-President are both left-wing women (Carole Regan and Christine Blower) and, more important, the recent elections to the National Executive saw yet another sharp shift to the left with a net gain of three seats.

The ruling Broad Left group now has 21 seats on the union's executive while the combined forces of the Socialist Teachers' Alliance (STA) and the Campaign for a Democratic and Fighting Union (CDFU) have 19. Two seats are held by dissenting ex-members of the Broad Left. The official position is one therefore of no overall control. In reality, these "dissidents" will vote with the existing leadership, but they will do so in wholly new circumstances.

This election defeat for the Broad Left comes just as they have to put ambitious plans to overhaul the union's structure to conference. The plans would end representative or delegate democracy in the union, and would concentrate power in the hands of the General Secretary.

Rank and file members throughout the labour movement should study events in the NUT because they certainly prefigure the plans of other union and Labour bureaucrats.

General Secretary Doug McAvoy's plan is called "Extending Democracy" and entails putting union decisions out to referendum-style ballots of the whole membership.

These decisions include all policies passed by conference, all donations or affiliations by local branches, and all nominations for office.

No conference policy would be implemented by the union leadership until it had been endorsed by a ballot of all members in which the executive would frame the questions and control material sent out with the ballot.

Perhaps most dangerous of all, the new system would give the executive the power to propose any rule change without the agreement of conference or any representative body, and to have it agreed in a membership ballot which, again, they would control. With such a power, they could abolish conference!

The second big issue at conference will be the invitation to Gillian Shephard to speak. The Tory Education Secretary addressing teacher trade



Doug McAvoy: turning his back on conference democracy

unionists is bound to provoke fury and that is what the General Secretary intended.

He knows the best chance of making the case for curbing the power of conference is to make it appear raucous and divided. Gillian Shephard is the *agent provocateur*.

It is vital that the left keeps its head and avoids this trap. There will be protest against Shephard but it must be unified, and effective, and not disrupt conference.

At a time when education workers and users are suffering relentless attacks there is a danger that the conference of the largest teachers' union in Britain will be frittered away in Doug McAvoy's bureaucratic stitch-ups.

There are other important decisions to fight for.

The Tories' programme of tests and league tables has been allowed to gather pace again despite the widespread opposition from teachers and parents. A very successful boycott by the teaching unions two years ago was abruptly ended by leaderships who gained nothing more than a review of the National Curriculum by Ron Dearing.

Now that that review is complete it is clear that the tests still stand and that the government still intends publishing league tables of the Key Stage 2 tests. These tests taken at age 11 will function as a new "11-plus" and provide the mechanism for re-introducing selection.

At conference the left will try to start a campaign against these policies with a view to a new boycott. Winning such a vote would be a tremendous boost.

The main thrust of the Tories' assault on teachers this year has been the hysterical focus on "failing teachers" as the cause of all problems in education. They have replaced the old system of inspection with OFSTED, an agency designed to seek out failure rather than

support and develop schools. The head of OFSTED is a right-wing ideologue called Chris Woodhead. In the last few months his strategy has been to blame and sack teachers, attack inner-city schools, and close down schools which follow teaching methods of which he and the government disapprove.

One of the biggest branches, Birmingham, will propose industrial action in any school where a teacher is victimised as a result of an OFSTED inspection and the Hackney branch is proposing nationwide non-cooperation with OFSTED.

Above all, however, the Tory plan to introduce vouchers into education is a serious threat.

The nursery voucher scheme currently being piloted will lead to vouchers in the rest of the education system if it succeeds. The NUT will debate proposals to campaign effectively against nursery vouchers. It is essential that we get action and that we link up with parents and other education unions.

The final, crucial point to bear in mind about this year's conference is that it will be the last one before the general election.

Tony Blair and David Blunkett have made it clear that they intend to make education a focal point in the election campaign. They have also made clear their willingness to echo the Tories in attacking teachers and comprehensive education.

The NUT leadership has been craven in its lack of opposition to these outbursts from the Labour front bench. They seem to believe the best chance of relief from the Tory onslaught of 17 years is to establish the closest possible relationship with the Labour leadership.

The conference will see a major debate about education policies for the coming year. Those of us on the left will try to commit the union to a determined defence of state comprehensive education, and opposition to selection, fast-track learning and opting out. The general election should be an opportunity to campaign for a properly funded egalitarian education system, not an exercise in sycophancy.

Ensuring the NUT will continue as a fighting trade union is the main task of the delegates at conference. The results of their efforts will have an impact on tens of thousands beyond. Beating Doug McAvoy and his advance guard of new unionists will be a defeat for their ideas throughout the labour movement and it will strengthen those trying to stop Tony Blair's plan to turn Labour into a party run by plebiscite. ■

Fighting redundancies in Liverpool

By Cate Murphy,
Liverpool UNISON

AT the time of writing Liverpool City Council is sending out redundancy notices to 200 council workers. One letter was hand delivered after 11pm on Saturday — so much for the scurrying around in taxis that was supposed to have ended with the demise of Degsy.

Letters are also going out advising City Council employees that their existing contracts are terminating with effect from 30 June 1996. The reason for this letter is to issue new contracts and end pay protection for those who have been re-deployed. There are about 300 workers who are on pay protection, with many of them standing to lose £1,000 to £2,000 and, in one case, £7,000 each year.

The Joint Trade Union Committee's move to ballot all the workforce at the same time for strike action seems to have focussed management's attention. From a threat of more than 800 redundancies and attacks on pay and conditions, we have forced them to think again.

The proposed pay cut has been dropped, those facing redundancy are to be offered re-deployment and the one-day enforced unpaid leave is to be withdrawn. The City Council unions' determination to stop management's attacks on our wages, terms and conditions and jobs has meant that we have scored a major victory.

The united action of UNISON members, and members of other trade unions, in overwhelmingly voting to go to ballot for strike action has won a victory, but there is no time to celebrate yet.

There are still the issues of the ending of pay protection, ending supernumerary status, the possibility that if staff are not re-deployed the enforced redundancies will be carried out and the simple fact that management will be looking for other areas to cut over the coming months.

We've won a partial victory but we are preparing to stop any further attacks. All the JTUC unions are ready to go to ballot for strike action against redundancies, cuts in terms and conditions and pay cuts if necessary. The job now is to convince the membership that they can't afford to drop their guard.

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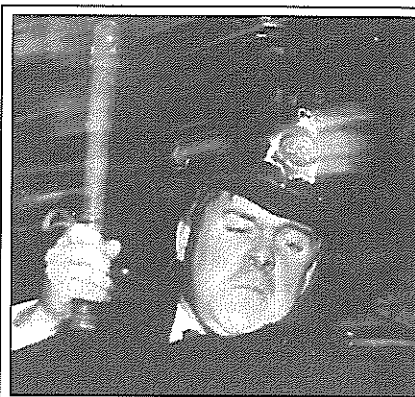
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PC98

When Bobby was a little child
His intellect was weakish,
And all his deeds, to put it mild
Were just a trifle sneakish.

He peached unto his dad each day
About his little brother,
And spied upon his sister May.
And went and told his mother.

Thus by the time he entered
school
It quite became his passion
To sneak and spy and fib and lie
In every form and fashion.

His playmates in the
schoolyard he
Would coax to some offense,
Then tell the teacher secretly,
To shine at their expense.

His every act confirmed the truth
That Nature had bestowed
The slimy brains upon a youth
Intended for a toad.

For when his 'prentice time was
wrecked
Through liberties abused,
And men who valued self-respect
To work with him refused.

Now, Bobby was a strapping
wight,
And strong in bone and sinew;
He sought a job wherein he might
His dirty work continue.

A sort of job where brass and bone
Are qualities admired,
Where belly-crawling graft alone
Makes manhood unrequired.

Performing filthy duties that
The most abandoned swine
Disgustedly would boggle at
And gruntingly decline.

And Bobby had not far to seek:
It soon became his fate
To pry and spy and lie and
sneak —
As PC 98.

By John S Clark

Youth in Britain — never had it so good?

By Niall Brown

YOUNG people in Britain are among the lowest earners, are most prone to unemployment, are barred from benefits, are disproportionately represented among the homeless and don't vote!

These are all conclusions of a recent report by the British Youth Council, "Never had it so good? The truth about being young in '90s Britain."

The report makes frightening reading. Some of its findings:

- 16-24 year olds face unemployment levels nearly twice the national average, 15.4% compared to 8.5%.
- 16-24 year olds amount for 1 in 3 of those earning £2.50 an hour or less.
- As a proportion of average earnings, young people's pay fell by 6-8% for men and 8-12% for women between 1985 and 1995.
- 458,000 16-24 year olds earn £2.50 or less an hour.
- 61% of 15-24 year olds have a disposable income of £50 or less.

● There are over 100,000 single young homeless people aged 16-25 in England and Wales. They do not have a right to permanent housing unless they are "vulnerable."

● Suicide among young men aged 15-24 has risen by 75% since 1982.

● 2.5 million young people didn't vote at the last election.

In short, young people face unprecedented levels of poverty, homelessness and stress.

Under-25s have borne the brunt of the Tories' attacks over the last 17 years. We have seen a massive increase in youth unemployment, and wages and benefits are much lower for under 25s than for over 25s. The Tories have viciously attacked student grants, and most students, along with 16-17 year olds, are excluded from the benefits system. The Tories have pushed young people from one dead-end cheap-labour scheme to the next.

Not surprisingly, young people are becoming the heaviest users of drugs and alcohol to cope with the stress of being young in '90s Britain.

The report makes some useful policy suggestions, e.g. equality in work and benefits. What we need to make that happen is for young people to be involved in campaigning for their demands.

The labour movement ought to be central to this. But Blair refuses to say that a minimum wage will apply to young workers. And along with Gordon Brown, he proposes a Workfare scheme to batter youth into dead-end jobs and training schemes on fear of losing their benefits.

The trade unions, too, are failing to campaign around issues like youth rights in work, and are not doing what is necessary to build youth sections that could help to rejuvenate the trade union movement.

Young people want a voice and they want change. But with little or no opposition to these Tory attacks coming from the Labour Party, youth are giving up on politics.

"Rock the vote" might get one or two to the ballot box but it won't solve the problems we currently face. We need a Labour campaign for youth!

Fight for democracy in New Labour

By Adie Kemp

TONY Blair recently announced to the press (followed a little later by a letter to constituencies) a new breakthrough in the marvellously democratic way the Labour Party is now run.

The electorate, he says, have a right to know what Labour's (sorry, *New Labour's*) policies are before the general election, and so he has developed a new innovative concept called a *manifesto*.

You may be forgiven for thinking that this idea had been invented some time ago. Old Labour had manifestos made up of policy that had received majority support at a conference. But Tony's idea is a radical, exciting and totally new vision, entirely fitting for New Labour.

In Tony's new manifesto, all the policies will be decided by the National Executive. Then they will be put to conference for a yes or no vote (no amendments allowed in New Labour). And the ultimate pinnacle for Tony's new idea is a postal vote of all the members, after the conference.

We must not forget that Tony's manifesto will contain no spending commitments whatsoever, or any hint of Labour's tax plans. Because, whilst the electorate deserves to know, it doesn't deserve to know *too much*.

A quick look behind the scenes is required before it is possible to understand why Blair is proposing this new departure.

The manifesto idea looks like "Son of Clause Four" — a press stunt designed to

prove Tony Blair's success in transforming the Labour Party into his own image. And to a degree it is. But though the press may have played Blair's game for the Clause IV debate, there is not going to be nearly as much interest the second time around.

In fact, Blair's game plan is longer than that. First, he is trying to undermine any rebellion from within the party to his actions once he gets into office. By writing a manifesto now that spells out Blairite "One-Nation" government, he hopes to cut support for protests about that government before it begins.

Second, he is attacking the core of representative democracy in the party by making policy decisions reached through constituencies and conference even more irrelevant to what a Labour government is committed to do. This fits with the direction the Blair machine is pushing the party.

New members are encouraged to campaign, not in their own constituencies, but in the nearest "marginal", organised direct from Walworth Road. Young Labour groups are told that meetings which take decisions are boring. Candidates even vaguely on the left are forced more and more into following the model from Walworth Road for their election campaign, because the manifesto won't say anything else for them to use. The whole package is designed to turn party members into electoral foot soldiers instead of allowing them a say in the policy decisions, or even the style of their local campaigning.

However, as difficult as it was to justify a yes-or-no vote on Clause IV, ordinary party

members will balk even more at voting for or against a twenty page manifesto. The result will almost certainly be a pathetic turnout in the postal vote.

Even if Tony Blair's plans for the new manifesto go through, it may not imply very much for the protests inside the party that will arise under the Labour government. If the membership doesn't see any role for itself in decision making, it won't feel any loyalty to the decisions made. And the pressure from Labour voters, who, despite Blair's speeches to the contrary, still believe a Labour government will renationalise water, pump money into the health service, reduce class sizes, will push party members and trade unionists into making a stand against a Blair government.

Socialists in the Labour Party should be arguing now for the manifesto to be based upon the representative democracy of the party. By pushing for involvement at constituency level, for an amendment process, and for the final vote to be taken at conference, we can use the debate over Blair's New Labour manifesto to make ordinary party members aware of how much their rights are being eroded, and how the democratic processes of the party are being destroyed.

We should be pushing now for people to get involved in the Network of the Socialist Campaign Group and fighting for the concept of collective democratic decision making.

When the fightback against a Blair government starts, those socialists inside the Labour Party will have a pivotal role to play.

Students must build on the ground

Mick Duncan, of the National Union of Students Executive, describes the background to their recent conference and asks what militant students should do now.

IN MARCH 1995 the student movement was thrown into turmoil. The Blairite Labour Students leadership of the National Union of Students (NUS) proposed at annual conference to review our policy supporting full student grants.

They said they didn't want to ditch NUS's commitment to grants, or accept the Tory government's grant cuts and loans, but that they wanted to "open up the debate" and "set the tone for the general election."

They promised a genuine consultation of NUS members in order to form a policy with wide support which they could present to politicians. They won the vote to have a "review."

After the vote, activists began to see the move for what it was: a first step to abolishing NUS's commitment to grants.

At that conference a number of us launched the Campaign for Free Education (CFE). We predicted that the promised "review" would be a paper exercise which had as its aim paving the way for Blair's Labour government to introduce graduate tax without opposition from students. We were right.

There was no wide-ranging review. Instead, the NUS leadership sent a questionnaire to student union presidents during the Easter holiday, to be returned within 10 days.

The NUS leadership chose to ignore the result of even that limited exercise because most replies favoured grants and free education!

The leadership unilaterally called an emergency conference of the union for May 1995, to change NUS policy. The Blairites expected to win because most delegates would be Higher Education student union officers, who they find easier to control!

CFE built like hell for the conference, organising debates up and down the country, and contacting delegations from colleges who had rarely taken an active interest in NUS before.

To our surprise but even more to the Blairites, the day of the special conference arrived and CFE won a resounding victory: a commitment to free education and also, for once, a serious strategy to start fighting for it.

The NUS President who two months previously had won a sizeable vote from Labour loyalists was wheeled out to speak against this policy, and students told him where to go.

In the days after the emergency confer-

ence Labour Students threatened to stop CFE organising on the ground. For once, they were true to their word.

After a telling-off from Walworth Road they set to attacking NUS area organisations — grass roots organisations which link smaller Further Education college unions with unions in Higher Education.

The "areas" had been the backbone of the Campaign for Free Education and had enabled many small unions, whose members have so much to lose, to participate in the conference.

After we had won the union to free education policy we prepared for the new academic year and to pressurise the National Executive to fight for it.

The National Executive announced their programme of campaigns for the first term — they did not even mention the free education policy passed two months before. The emergency conference had voted to organise a national demonstration. The Executive set a date for the demo but they did their worst to scupper it.

Undaunted, the minority on the Executive worked to ensure that the demonstration was not a flop. And 300 student activists attended a meeting held after the demo to build our campaign.

Student unions up and down the country affiliated to the Campaign for Free Education, and general meetings and referenda showed overwhelming support for our policies.

The Labour Students hacks were surprised at the level of life left in the student movement after they had tried to run it down for the last 15 years. But we knew that free education sentiment at the grass roots could not guarantee success at the 1996 annual conference.

When their careers are on the line and when they are backed by Walworth Road, Tories, Liberals, big business, the media, Labour Students hacks fight hard and dirty.

CFE geared up for the annual conference, putting together a broad slate of candidates for the National Executive, uniting people from across the political spectrum who support free education.

Labour Students geared up too! Before the conference this year they had a list of all the delegates and they sent them glossy publicity putting their case from Walworth Road.

When the actual conference came, slanderous and fantastical leaflets calling our demands "revolutionary rhetoric" awaited delegates as they stepped off trains and coaches in Blackpool.

Labour Students stuffed our campaign stall in an obscure corner of the Winter Gardens and gave their own stall pride of place.

They put enormous pressure on student unions with free education policy to break their mandates — in too many cases they succeeded. Many delegates voting against

free education appeared as delegates from colleges where they were not actually students.

Labour Students stitched up the debate tighter than ever, rushing through the vote on free education with little discussion.

Labour Students won their position on a card vote by 55% to 45% — not a convincing margin, but they won nonetheless.

But then we had known that they had resources we did not, and that they would not roll over and give up when they lost back in May 1995.

CFE is not demoralised. We won a minority of places on the National Executive, a platform for free education policies next year, and our final free education caucus was the biggest of all conference.

Students are ready to go back and build the kind of movement which will not only take Labour Students on on their favourite territory — conference — but which will transform a limp and unorganised student movement on the ground.

Frankly, we have to build the student movement practically from scratch. During this campaign many students spoke at meetings for the first time and canvassed delegates, but, on the whole, campaigning in the colleges is no longer standard.

Labour Students get away with running NUS principally as a springboard for their careers powerful movement with political answers and activities to beat them and the Tories.

We have to build that movement.

When this year, NUS allows Tory quangos to close down colleges, we have to have a movement which can take on the quangos and save the colleges.

When NUS supports colleges shutting down left-wing unions, we must be in a position to take on the college authorities and defend those unions.

We can win NUS back and save the soul of the union but only if we do the work in the colleges to ensure that when we call a demonstration in London, it's massive. When we call a day of action, hundreds of thousands take part.

It sounds like a big job and it is. But we have no choice but to do it.

As a first step we must convince those who were with us at conference that it can and must be done and to join us in doing it.

Also crucial is the fight inside Labour Students. A number of Labour Students members, not always left-wingers, voted with us at conference. We have been weak and slow in taking the fight to Labour Student conferences and we must remedy that and win back Labour Students to free education.

This year we came close. We can see this year as a dress rehearsal. Now we understand better what we need to do to win.

Blair has won the battle but he must not win the war. ■

New Solutions? No solutions!

By Bill Davies

I ATTENDED the Conference of the National Union of Students this Easter as a "first-time delegate". I have been delegated to trade union conferences in the past. However, the "new realism" agenda of those conferences did nothing to prepare me for the outpouring of unadulterated rubbish coming from the right-wing clique which runs NUS. This clique is centred around Labour Students and a new Walworth Road-funded campaign, the so-called "New Solutions".

From 9 in the morning until 11 at night we were subjected to speeches from New Solutions poodles claiming that they (and NUS's new policy supporting graduate tax) represented "realism, not rhetoric". And yet all they could come up with in support of this policy was erroneous and therefore empty rhetoric.

Most popular rhetorical point of the week: "The NUS policy of full living grants and restoration of benefits for all students in post-16 education has failed students and stopped the expansion of further education." Token Labour Students further education students and/or a Labour Student with a regional accent would get up and make this point accompanied by hysterical cheering and foot stomping from University delegates. Because of the grants policy, we were told, students are facing hardship and debt. Because of the grants policy, further education students can't get a decent education. This makes as much sense as saying the NUS logo has failed students and is causing student hardship.

The government did not cut grants because NUS policy was against cutting grants! The government did not fail to fund further education because NUS had a policy against cutting grants! To think so is to indulge in mind-boggling superstition.

It seems to me that it is because the NUS leadership has failed to implement the long-held policy against grant cuts and for free education that the government has impoverished students and cut their grants.

The most right-wing trade unions — the EETPU or the AEU for instance — would defend their members' interests better. The most cynical, most right-wing trade union bureaucrat would not go into a meeting with management and say "we give in to all your demands, we have no interests separate from yours, anything you say goes..." But this is effectively what NUS has done by giving up its policy on free education. They are saying to this government (or a future Labour government) "do what you like to post-16 education, charge what you want, to

whoever you want..." It's pathetic!

Even at the level of so-called 'realistic' economics the arguments of Labour Students/New Solutions didn't make sense. They complained that the extra cost of giving 1979-level grants to all students in post-16 education is £11 billion per year. Yet 1979-level grants is the amount of money students require in order to escape the hardship they are now facing.

So, is there a 'new solution' that costs less than £11 billion. There are three ways to reduce the figure it seems to me:

1. Restrict the number of students.
2. Allow the quality of their education to get even worse.
3. Don't alleviate student hardship.

Yet the Great New Realists say they are not in favour of any of these measures. They say they want to widen access, improve quality and alleviate hardship blah, blah, blah, rhetoric, rhetoric, rhetoric.

*"After selling out
students the top table
became very arrogant
and triumphalist...
orchestrated full-scale
witch-hunts."*

The only people with a clear answer to this all important question — where will the money come from? — was the Campaign for Free Education (CFE). CFE say increase taxes on the wealthiest individuals and on the big profits of big business; shift government spending away from less deserving areas like nuclear weapons and the monarchy.

In contrast, Not Very Original Solutions say: "We want a funding partnership of society, business and those who have benefited from post-16 education". "Funding partnership"? Sounds great, everyone involved gives voluntarily in a spirit of co-operation perhaps? No way. What they mean is more taxation: general taxation and graduate tax on everyone who has been through post-16 education.

But hang on a minute... I thought that more taxation was anathema to New Labour because "the country can't afford it" and "there are higher priorities than funding post-16 education." Illogical or what...?

In fact the kind of taxes New Solutions are talking about are going to place an extra burden on people with low and middle incomes — especially those who have been through post-16 education. Surely this is more "unacceptable" than

burdening the rich with extra taxes.

Inevitably this "Pay nothing now, but pay a lot later" education policy will deter students from working-class backgrounds, older students, students not expecting to obtain highly-paid employment and so on from entering higher education. Students like me!

After selling out students — the vast majority of whom cannot be said to have been represented at the conference — the top table became very arrogant and triumphalist. Not content with running around in stupid, tee-shirts emblazoned with a "Trotskyists" logo they orchestrated full scale witch-hunts against the Campaign for Free Education (as you'd expect I suppose) but also *Workers' Liberty*. There were two events in particular which Joe Stalin would be proud of.

CFE Further Education National Committee member Ed Whitby was no-confided, in a motion which he had not seen until 10 seconds before it was moved, and was allowed 45 seconds to reply to it. Sheep-like, Labour Students FE delegates put up their hands to vote for the motion, without the tiniest concern for due process, or natural justice. Not very "decent" or "fair", Mr Blair.

On Wednesday evening *Workers' Liberty* organised a debate between ourselves and Sinn Féin. Delegates — many from Northern Ireland — with all kinds of different opinions, including Unionist opinion, came to listen and to participate (something there is scarcely little opportunity to do in the main conference). It was a calm, rational — dare I say it? — comradely debate. Did Labour Students come along to take part? No, they decided to put it about that we had "invited a terrorist to speak"... and how outrageous this was, etc. How dare they!

Peace in Ireland will not be easy to achieve for sure, but it will not be achieved by stamping on debate and trying to censor opinion. Everyone who attended the meeting (some 70-80 delegates) thought it worthwhile, and what is more, badly needed, given the complete lack of interest displayed in the main conference for the "peace process". Yet this is one of the most central political issues for workers in Britain and Ireland!

What can you expect? These people can't even take care of their own backyard — fighting for free education — so you can't expect them to care about what happens a few miles away across a narrow strip of sea!

But I did not go at all fed up. The Campaign for Free Education will fight on. The demand for free education will continue to be popular, as long as working-class people continue to value — and they do — the right to a decent education for their children and for themselves. ■

The transformation of vegetarians into cannibals and cannibals into profits

By Ann Mack

THE BSE crisis reveals a lot about the irrationalities of capitalist production.

As far as we can tell, the basic root cause of the spread of BSE has been the transformation of a vegetarian animal into a meat-eater and then into a cannibal.

This transformation was driven by the need of agri-business to convert beef cattle into maximum profits regardless of the quality of the commodity produced. If that meant feeding them infected sheep or cattle, then so be it.

The result was an inferior product which no longer functioned simply as food but also as a potential carrier of disease.

What happened was that the entirely rational human drive to economise and avoid waste (finding a use for the

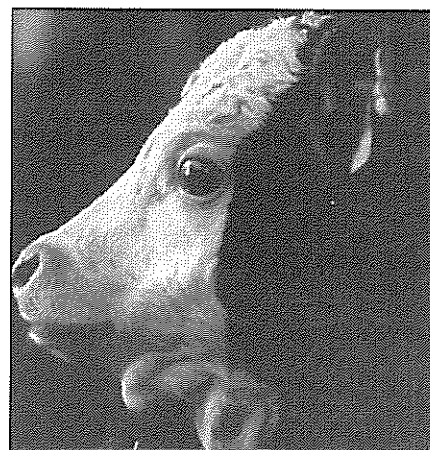
by-products of slaughter-houses) was converted into an irrational orgy of gambling with people's health.

The reason for this transformation is that food production is geared entirely to generating huge profits for the giant firms which dominate the industry rather than to producing wholesome and nutritious food.

At present, there is no mechanism through which conscious human control can be asserted over the food production process to ensure that food is safe to eat. In fact, what limited controls there used to be have been abolished by the Tories.

Instead, the primary concern is, as one Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food "expert" told the BBC last week, "to move as much beef through the system as possible." In other words, to convert cattle into profits.

The only response for socialists is to press for proper health standards in the food industry enforced by workers'



control.

At present the TGWU Agricultural Workers section is campaigning for a new food standards agency to enforce tough regulations on the food bosses.

That's a start, but we need to build on it by giving food workers the right to stop an unsafe job — either unsafe to themselves or to consumers — and the guarantee of jobs outside the food industry so they can act to safeguard health and safety without risking their livelihoods.

Mad cows — or mad economics?

By Colin Foster

ACCORDING to the *Economist* magazine, even the "maximum bill" from the mad-cow crisis should produce "little extra pressure to raise interest rates or abandon planned tax cuts."

The *Economist* reckons the one-off bill to the Treasury from slaughtering all 12 million cattle in Britain as £15 billion, and the continuing costs at £1 billion a year. Its sums are faulty because it does not include, for example, the Treasury's loss of tax income from farmers and from meat industry workers and businesses. But there is a rational core to the magazine's posed complacency.

A diversified, productive modern economy, with total output of some £700 billion a year, can in principle deal with huge adjustments in single sectors quite easily. If productive resources were the only limitation, the government could easily spend £20 billion one-off, and £2 billion to £3 billion yearly, on dealing with the mad cow crisis — just as it could spend the same amount on rebuilding the Health Service!

"Cost to the Treasury", however, is a false measure of the impact of the crisis. If the oil crisis of 1974 could have been measured by the extra cost to various government budgets of the sudden rise in oil prices then it would have appeared very manageable.

A capitalist economy depends on the equilibrium of a vastly intricate chain of payments — A paying B who then pays C, who then clears their debt to D, and so on. If the chain breaks in too many places, then a slump results. Abundance of resources is no countervailing factor: on the contrary, as Marx put it, "industry and commerce seem to be destroyed; and why? Because there is too much civilisation, too much means of subsistence, too much industry, too much commerce." C fails to pay D; D goes bust; D's workers and bosses no longer buy what A produces; the circle of payments turns into a downward spiral, goods are unsold, equipment is idle, workers are unemployed.

The oil price rise set off such a spiral: companies ran short of cash because of their unexpectedly high energy bills, and set defaults rippling through the system. The mad cow crisis could do the same, on a smaller scale: if farmers, abattoirs, renderers and meat wholesalers go bust, the firms who supply them are left with bad debts and then, in turn, default on payments to their suppliers.

Britain uses about two million barrels per day of oil at a current price of about £13 per barrel. If the oil price suddenly trebled, as it did in 1974, oil bills would increase by about £20 billion a year. The beef industry involves about 500,000 people. If they are all suddenly £10,000 a year worse off on average, then they are £5 billion short for paying their bills.

Thus, the impact of the beef crisis is substantially smaller, even on the most drastic assumptions, than that of the oil crisis, but it could be far from tiny. British capitalism is in a fragile condition to deal with such impacts, because it is running at historically high levels of debt.

It is difficult to estimate the impact more precisely, because there are so many variables. The main concern of the government and the European Union is to get people buying beef again, far above any considerations of safety: will they succeed, and how quickly? What rate of slaughter of cattle at risk will the government decide on? How widely will the EU spread the cost?

Given the political weight of farmers and the meat industry, it is fairly certain that the government will pay out a lot in compensation. This will reduce the risk of a chain reaction of defaults on payment, but create other problems.

To cover the spending, the government would sell more bonds (bits of paper on which it pays interest). Increased government bond sales tend to squeeze productive investment (to an uncertain extent) by draining wealth away and pushing up interest rates. Reduced investment can lead to disproportionate disruption in the whole economy, because it wrecks the most volatile sectors, those producing machinery and equipment.

Mad cows — or mad economics?

Mad cows and Englishmen

By Les Hearn

LATE in March, some ten years after the BSE epidemic started in British cows, scientists advising the government stated that "the most likely explanation" for ten unusual cases of Creutzfeldt-Jacob Disease (CJD) was exposure to the agent that causes BSE, by implication through eating infected beef products. After years of government reassurances, the effect was explosive. Here we look at BSE, CJD and how the two diseases may have become entangled.

BSE — what it is and why it is there

BOVINE spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) is a new disease of cattle, the first cases being reported in 1986. While the full details of its mode of action are not available, it is almost definitely the sheep disease scrapie spreading into a new species.

BSE is similar to two human diseases, CJD and kuru. All four diseases cause substantial loss of cells in the brain, with an accompanying loss of mental and physical abilities. There may be genetic factors determining whether an individual gets infected, but it is definite that there is an infectious agent involved.

Scrapie is transmitted between sheep; BSE is transmitted in feed containing matter from infected sheep and perhaps also from cows to their offspring; kuru was formerly trans-

mitted to members of the Fore tribe of Papua-New Guinea when they handled the skulls of their dead relatives as part of their funerary rites (infected brain material was probably accidentally rubbed into cuts, rather than being eaten, as was formerly thought); and CJD has been contracted by recipients of growth hormone, extracted from the brains of people who had died without being diagnosed as suffering from CJD.

How then, did material from sheep with scrapie get into the food of cattle? Cows are 100% vegetarian under normal circumstances but are fed extra protein in cattle cake to help them grow and produce milk. Cattle cake was originally a rather wholesome mixture of grains and nuts but extra protein came to be added in the form of soya beans and then fish meal. Some consumers claimed to be able to detect a fishy taste in some meat.

The best quality protein comes from soya and fish but it is cheaper to use protein from other animal sources in cattle feed. Inevitably, this has come from those animals or parts of animals not easily sold, i.e., diseased or suspect animals and less attractive offal and bones.

This should not be a problem unless disease organisms or agents persist in the protein supplements. Unfortunately, the presumed cause of scrapie, prion protein [see box] is quite persistent. Even so, BSE did not occur until a change in the process of protein extraction was authorised by the Ministry of Agriculture in the late 1970s. This involved a move from treating batches of material at high temperatures to drive off solvents used to remove excess fat to a continuous method not involving use of solvents which therefore allowed a lower temperature. Undoubtedly, this allowed the scrapie agent to survive in the feed. Labour agriculture spokesperson Gavin Strang claims that Labour would have tightened up regulations had it been re-elected. In the event, the new Conservative government was not prepared to raise costs in the dairy industry. The first cases of BSE were not seen for several years after the relaxation in regulations because it has quite a long incubation period — some four years in cattle.

What the government did

AS soon as it was identified as a new disease, BSE was linked to scrapie-infected matter in cattle feed. However, it was two years before the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) was set up. The government's chief advisor on BSE, Richard Southwood of Oxford University, says that he would have recommended removing diseased animals from the food cycle in 1986, if he had been asked. He also states that ministers were hostile to many of his recommendations. In particular, he advised that farmers be given full compensation for infected cattle destroyed. The government only offered a 50% grant, admitting recently that this policy encouraged farmers to pass off infected cattle as healthy.

Mad cows and Englishmen

**LES HEARN'S
SCIENCE
COLUMN**

The latest news from the world of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) is that laboratory mice can catch the "mad cow" disease just by eating brains

We brought you the news first: Les Hearn's Science column, *Socialist Organiser* February 1990!

In late 1989, the ministry banned the inclusion of certain cattle offal, such as brain and spinal cord, in foods for human consumption. Southwood had to insist that the ban be permanent. However, it is admitted by all except government ministers that farmers carried on using up old stocks of contaminated feed and that abattoirs frequently bend or break the rules on forbidden cattle offal. Officials, too, were less than diligent in enforcing the rules and closing loopholes.

The result of all these delays and failures is that cases of BSE peaked in 1992, at least two years later than they need have, and that large amounts of diseased meat entered the food chain up to 1989, also at least two years longer than need have been. In fact, if the scrapie problem had been treated with caution, instead of complacency, BSE need never have occurred.

If BSE does cause CJD, the ten (or twelve, now) cases could be the start of an outbreak that could last for several more years.

Does BSE cause CJD

IN 1989, the risk to humans from BSE was said by most scientists to be "remote." The government then said that beef was safe, with John Gummer force-feeding his daughter a burger to emphasise this. The recent pronouncement by the SEAC does not say that BSE is causing the atypical cases of CJD, merely that it is the most likely explanation at present.

Much more research is needed to confirm the theory. First, the agent that causes BSE must be identified. Second, the agent must be recovered from the brains of supposed victims of the BSE/CJD. Third, the agent must be shown to cause the disease in experimental animals.

There are many problems with this research. It seems likely that one particular strain of sheep scrapie is responsible for BSE and yet it seems that the infectious agent has never got into the human population despite the eating of mutton. Why should it suddenly become dangerous to people? At the same time, it seems that the agent that causes BSE has crossed several other species barriers, infecting animals as diverse as antelopes and cats.

There is also a report that the unusual type of CJD has been found in humans before BSE was reported. Nevertheless, until we know for sure, it is prudent to do everything possible to eliminate the possibility of infection. ■

Prion diseases

MOST diseases are caused by creatures with DNA or its close relative RNA — bacteria, fungi, protozoa or viruses. There are a very small number of diseases where all attempts to identify an agent possessing DNA or RNA have been unsuccessful. In these cases, kuru, scrapie, CJD and BSE it seems that the agent may be an infective protein or *prion*. No one knows how a protein can cause such diseases but all other possibilities seem to have been ruled out.

One theory is that the prion affects a very similar protein already in brain cells, one that is essential for the correct operation of those cells. It induces it to change its shape (become denatured) so that it can no longer do its work. This may lead to cell death, perhaps by the body's immune system attacking the unusual protein. The changed protein may be released, get into nearby cells, and repeat the process. Through some sort of chain reaction, more and more cells are affected, leading to a progressive loss of brain cells and a spongy appearance to the brain.

If true, there should perhaps be other prions capable of affecting cells in other parts of the body. So far, candidates for the role of prions have been identified but there is some way to go before the theory is proved.