



Strikers' banners read "we are learning French"

# German workers "learn French"

ON 30 September and 1 October, over 100,000 German car and truck workers walked out in protest at cuts in sick pay.

As the weekly *Der Spiegel* put it, "The dispute over social provision has reached the factories." Strikers carried banners that declared "Wir lernen französisch" — "we are learning French" — with reference to the great strike wave of November-December 1995 which partly stalled the French government's plans for cuts.

Sick pay has been cut from 100% of wages to 80% as part of the conservative government's £30 billion budget cuts. The new law came into effect on 1 October. Many workers, however, have industrial agreements on 100% sick pay, over and above the law. The bosses say that the change in the law automatically cancels those agreements; the unions say no. A day of protest across the metal-working industries is planned for 24 October, and a big demonstration for 26 October, in Kiel.

Some employers have backed down. Siemens, after saying it would cut sick pay to 80%, has agreed to keep it at 100%, "for now". Audi says it will keep 100% sick pay, but chalk up a "time debt" for each worker of 20% of any hours off sick, to be made good later.

The process of pushing the cuts through parliament, and protesting against them in the streets, has been rumbling on since April. It is a slow, spluttering mobilisation of the German

working class, but nevertheless a major breach in Germany's political culture of consensus, a major move towards class struggle in response to what *Der Spiegel* calls the change, "from welfare state to competition state."

It would be wrong to see Kohl's cuts — or the similar sweeping cuts being pushed by the French and Italian governments — as imposed on the German, French and Italian capitalists by a mystical overbearing force called "Maastricht".

Europe's capitalist governments wrote strict budgetary policies into the Maastricht treaty, and are implementing

those budget restrictions by social spending cuts, because *they want to in their own class interests*. To beat those cuts, workers all across Europe need to fight their own bosses, not a disembodied outside power. The French workers recognised this in November-December 1995 and it seems that the German workers recognise it too. The preparations for the all-European march against unemployment and for welfare, scheduled for June 1997, will be a good opportunity to make the necessary working-class links across Europe.

Rhodri Evans

## Will Italy break up?

**I**NDEPENDENCE FOR Padania! In a comic-opera demonstration on 15 September, Northern Leagues leader Umberto Bossi announced that he would soon separate northern Italy from the rest of the country, and make it an independent state inside the European Union, with a new name chosen by himself. Only 20,000 people came to his rally, while the neo-fascists gathered 150,000 for a demonstration in favour of Italian unity in the northern city of Milan.

The Northern Leagues' populist denunciation of "the thieves in Rome" has nonetheless won a lot of support since the break-up of Italy's old political order, and Bossi's campaign may be able to push Italy towards some federal

arrangement: talk is of a German model.

Lombardy, in northern Italy, has twice the income per head of the south and Sicily. Lombardy's income per head is similar to that of the richer areas of Germany, the south's to Ireland's. This economic gap is bigger than within any other European state, and it is based on a long history.

Yet there is no "national oppression" of the north by the south. If the justified grievances of northern workers are channelled into "nationalist" rather than class struggle, they become a mean-spirited and divisive, — or even semi-racist sowing with the "European" north against the "African" south.

Chris Reynolds

## The big dipper

**T**HE Royal Mail dispute is starting to look like a big dipper — one where the ups are pretty tame, but the downs are spectacular. First the CWU union executive, on 4 September, declared a period of “consultation and reflection”. Then, having worked itself up to calling new strikes on 20-21 and 22-23 September, on 19 September it cancelled them and said it would ballot union members, not on the deal — offered by Royal Mail at the end of July, and not improved since then — but on whether to continue industrial action. Ballot papers are due to go out on 11 October, and be counted by 29 October. Over September and October, Royal Mail — and the Tory press, and, scandalously, the Labour Party leadership — have been able to pile the pressure on postal workers while all the pressure is taken off them.

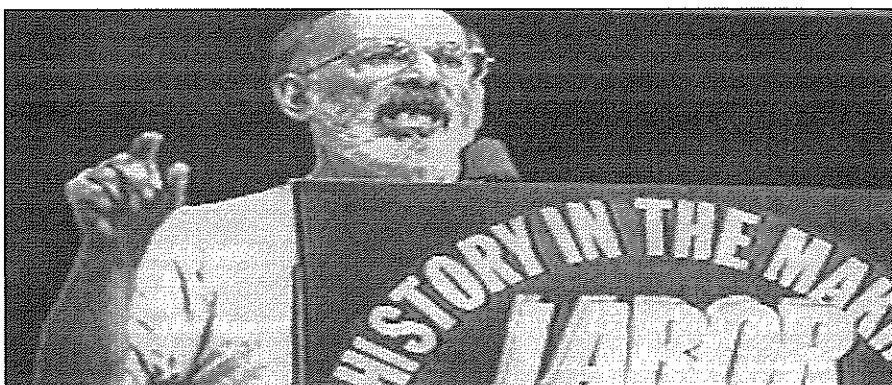
Tony Blair and his friends wanted to be sure that their carefully-planned “New Labour” soundbites, at their Blackpool conference starting on 30 September, were not “spoiled” by reports of postal strikes coming straight afterwards on the TV news.

The Labour leadership threw its weight against the dispute — demanding a new ballot, warning that they would publicly oppose the union if it refused, speculating about new laws to impose reballoting on employers’ offers and binding arbitration in the public sector — in order to clear the postal workers out of the way of their media show. Union general secretary Alan Johnson went along with them, and he outmanoeuvred the union’s Executive Council because of its lack of a coherent strategy and a collective will.

CWU activists will work for a massive yes vote in the new ballot on strike action. They will argue to convince their more wobbly comrades, and those who have grown tired and cynical about the union because of the actions of their leaders, that the issues at stake are still worth fighting for: a shorter working week for everyone, a decent weekly wage without robbing Peter to pay Paul, refusal of teamworking and part-time jobs in delivery.

But the September setbacks show that the rank and file must take control. They need a body where Executive Council and rank and file members can exchange information, arrive at agreed decisions, and act on them. They need a leadership that can understand the Labour Party leadership’s manoeuvres, and use the weight which the union still has in Labour Party structures to counter them.

*A postal worker*



Labor Party leader Tony Mazzocchi addresses delegates

## The Republicrat victory

**I**F the polls are to be believed, Clinton stands a good chance of being swept back into the White House. He would then have the distinction of being the first two term Democratic president since Franklin Roosevelt — that is, in over two generations. The meteoric rise and impending collapse of the the radical Republicans, under the guidance of Newt Gingrich, nevertheless masks a rather menacing reality. For no matter how the election plays itself out, it is the Republicans who set the agenda and whose world view now informs both parties.

The abolition of the federal income supports — the welfare system — and their replacement by short-term, individually administered state “work programs” which now exclude legal noncitizen residents, including the aged and infirm, bulldozes one of the central props undergirding the edifice of pro-working class concessions that had long been considered an immutable heritage of the New Deal. Despite the very palpable fear that the lives of millions of children will

be devastated, only one standing Democratic senator could muster the principle to vote in defiance of the mainstream. To place this moral and political collapse of the Clintonites into perspective, it is worthwhile recalling that Richard Nixon, once pilloried as the virtual antichrist of the liberal pantheon, proposed a guaranteed minimal income for all and universal health coverage.

Social vision under the new Democrats consists in having reduced the deficit, trimmed the federal employment rolls, scapegoated the indigent and broadened the scope of the death penalty. This may not quite be the intersection of Wall Street and the gutter, but neither is it very far from this all too familiar Republican thoroughfare.

It is therefore truly remarkable that as the political center hurtles to the right, pro-Democratic lesser evilism is being successfully sold to the progressive community not as a painful moral dilemma, but as a fundamental and inescapable moral imperative. Career paths in establishment liberalism

## Dockers stop ships in solidarity

**A**USTRALIAN dockers have declared “rolling bans” on Indonesian cargoes and ships to support demands for the release of independent trade union leaders Muchtar Pakpahan and Dita Sari. The Maritime Union of Australia announced on 18 September that all Indonesian cargoes and ships would be delayed by 24 hours.

In the 1940s Australian dockers stopped military cargoes in order to aid Indonesia’s independence struggle against Dutch rule. Now they have taken up the same cause of international solidarity, this time against the independent Indonesian capitalist class.

Muchtar Pakpahan, leader of an independent trade-union movement called the SBSI, was arrested on 29 July, in the clam-

pdown which followed street-fighting on 27 July in Indonesia’s capital, Jakarta. Dita Sari, president of the other main independent union group, the PPBI, had already been jailed on 8 July. Both face charges of “subversion”, which can carry the death penalty.

The military regime has ordered the arrest of all members of the PRD [People’s Democratic Party], a new radical party linked to the PPBI. About 25 members are in jail, including PRD chair Budiman Sudjatmiko. Some have been tortured.

Contact TAPOL, the Indonesian human rights campaign, at 0181-771 2904 (phone), 0181-653 0322 (fax), or tapol@gn.apc.org (e-mail).

*Martin Thomas*

have always been paved with self-debasement. But for the AFL-CIO tops to have invested such prodigious sums — over \$35 million — into the election of a so blatant anti-working-class, anti-union alliance demonstrates a breathtakingly reckless disregard for even their own narrow, bureaucratic self-interest. In this case, an infinite capacity for betrayal is always combined with an equal aptitude for avoiding any practical conclusions from the experience.

Tragically, as the case for independent politics all but makes itself, the nascent progressive movements have all but abandoned the only real expression of organized opposition on the national scene — the Ralph Nader campaign. For all its deficiencies, the Nader movement has as its heart a solid anti-corporate, pro-worker — if not quite class struggle — agenda. Were it to hand the Democrats a real setback, if only in a few strategic election districts, it could introduce a radicalizing dynamic to mass politics.

Yet the New Party, now acting as the respectable rearguard of progressivism, hastened to maintain its respectable image as the voice of the “viable, pro-Clinton left,” while the newly established Labor Party, embracing inertia as a political virtue, promptly sat on its hands for fear of prematurely disrupting its relations with the trade union leadership. Mired in lesser-evilmism, the would-be future bureaucrats of the left forget that it is not the certainty of immediate victory, but experience of deepening grassroots involvement, of acting and learning, that holds the promise of a new left.

*Barry Finger*

## Class war in the USA

**"P**REDATORY corporations and their politician allies have declared class war on America's working people", according to the USA's newly-formed Labor Party, in a statement on the new "Welfare Reform" Bill signed by President Clinton "Workfare" will allow for replacing regular jobs that pay wages and provide benefits with slots filled by recipients of public assistance who will work in exchange for their meagre grants instead of wages.

In June, nearly 1,400 delegates representing more than 1.2 million organized workers at the Labor Party's Founding Convention adopted a "A Call For Economic Justice", centred on a demand for a Constitutional Amendment Guaranteeing Everyone a Job at a Living Wage (\$10 per hour, adjusted for inflation).

The Labor Party can be contacted by e-mail at [lpa@labornet.org](mailto:lpa@labornet.org), by phone at 00 1 202 234 5190, or by fax at 00 1 202 234 5266.

# Israel: the danger of war

**Adam Keller reports from Tel-Aviv**

**T**HE situation now is really very dangerous. We are living with the possibility of war in the near future. Such a war could involve Syria and even Egypt. The situation is inherently unstable. The armed Palestinian enclaves are surrounded by the Israeli army and Israeli settlements. Either we will go forward towards a Palestinian state or backwards to total occupation. To go back to total occupation would mean the Israeli army reconquering the Palestinians. That would mean hundreds of Israeli casualties, as well as thousands of Palestinians.

The current tension has been building up for quite some time, even under the previous Labour government.

Netanyahu began by making the start of real negotiations dependent on the closure of three Palestinian offices in Jerusalem. Arafat was willing to make this concession to the Israelis on the understanding that there would be goodwill gestures in return, but after the offices were closed the Jerusalem municipality demolished a Palestinian club for youth and handicapped people. It was a slap in the face for Arafat.

There were other provocations. The Israeli government resumed settlement activity. At first Egypt's president Mubarak was inclined to give Netanyahu some credit. Netanyahu had gone out of his way to be friendly to Mubarak, and the Egyptians had put pressure on the Syrians to allow the new government a period of grace. However, Netanyahu had promised Mubarak the release of the Palestinian women prisoners, which he then reneged upon.

Netanyahu has some basic underlying problems. To be elected he rested on a coalition of essentially incompatible forces. Some, perhaps the majority, of his support comes from people not so different from the Labour hawks. These people are found at every level of Likud — from the grass roots to the government. They believe that the Oslo

process should continue, but that the old government was giving the Palestinians too much too quickly.

But Likud also depends on the extreme right, the settlers, the religious fanatics, who are all against the agreement.

And Netanyahu himself holds incompatible sets of views. He wants a strong Israel, a greater Israel. He wants to keep as much of the Territories as possible and to continue the settlement.

However, he also favours privatisation, deregulation and free trade. And in the Israeli context these views are incompatible. Free trade implies open borders, peace, stability and good relationships with neighbouring states. Nationalism implies national mobilisation, isolation and war.

The Israeli bourgeoisie is solidly behind Labour and the peace process. The character of the Labour Party is similar to that of the US Democratic Party. However, paradoxically, the Israeli equivalents of the US's WASPs vote Labour and the minority coalitions associated with the US Democrats vote Likud in Israel.

During the last two weeks there have been many demonstrations for peace, including two big rallies of 20-30,000 people. The Jewish people on these marches are almost all European Jews. The slogan for an independent Palestinian state is now almost universally accepted amongst these people, though there is some spectrum of opinion about what rights such a state would have.

Netanyahu does not deserve workers' support, and he is not their true representative. Nevertheless, he does have some base in the working class. However these working class supporters of Netanyahu are not the people who normally demonstrate on the streets for the right. When a terrorist bomb exploded in central Tel Aviv, the people of the slums of southern Tel Aviv did demonstrate — very violently — against Arabs. But they are not generally mobilised for nationalism. If it does come to a Palestinian state, these people will not be among the active opponents.