



# Are the police bugging you?

**"M**Y god, I had no idea the police did that!" So said Lord [Jim] Callaghan during the House of Lords debate on the Police Bill, after being told there were 500 buggings a year when he was Prime Minister. Where has this pathetic right-wing Labour grandee been all these years? Up the arse of the bourgeoisie, trying to avoid hearing anything bad about them and their system.

As any lefty/CND/animal rights activist will tell you, the police have had our numbers for years. However, familiarity, and possibly a little paranoia, about funny whirring noises when we pick up the phone should not make us complacent about the growth of police powers. The immediate background to the introduction of this Police Bill is the "modernisation", the increasing sophistication and centralisation of police operations and "intelligence". We witnessed what this meant during the miners' strike, when police were deployed from all over Britain to beat up strikers picketing in Nottinghamshire. Powers, such as the bugging of citizens, which were in the past improvised by the police are now to be made statutory, to

be ratified by law made in Parliament. This is partly what the Police Bill is about. Its main proposals are:

- The National Criminal Intelligence Service, which has been going since 1992, will have its existence ratified by Parliament. A National Crime Squad to "prevent and detect serious crime which is of relevance to more than one police area in England and Wales" will support the work of the NCIS.

- The NCIS will have free rein to collect information about us. "Intelligence information" could include as much prejudicial and speculative material as they fancy, including information about a person's sexual orientation. The information doesn't have to be accurate. It only need be "useful in detecting crime." And who will be the best judge of that? The police!

- The use of bugs (which have been planted by the police after they have broken into your home or office) is to be legalised! The Tories wanted to give Chief Constables authority over the use of electronic surveillance, but Labour and the Liberals have passed amendments in the Lords which will get either the judiciary or special commissioners to give authority. Bugs will be authorised if they

are likely to be of "substantial value in the prevention or detection of serious crime." As the police define "serious crime" and the value of their detective work, they will get their way over whom they bug every time.

The new law has another, different, but equally nasty agenda.

All employers (not just agencies that deal with children) can now have access to criminal records not yet "unspent" under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974. Whilst it is not unreasonable to prevent convicted sex offenders from working with children, this should not be used as an excuse to give all employers access to criminal records. When you consider that 12% of men born in 1973 have an "unspent" conviction, the threat of a black list of people who are never-to-be-employed "criminals" looks serious.

Police Bill may well be just one of many "get-tough-on-crime" proposals from the Tories in what will probably be the last breaths of their government. It is another populist response to the problems of crime, an attempt to be seen to be dealing with the consequences of the inequality they have created. Despite Labour's last minute "reservations" about the Police Bill we know Labour will not really challenge any proposal that "deals with crime", no matter how half-baked, because they wannabe tough too.

However the Police Bill is another, significant, step towards the centralisation of creation of new powers for the police and the further undermining of the notion of accountability. The labour movement must campaign to force Labour to repeal this Bill if it becomes law, and, dismantle the new "intelligence" unit.

*Helen Rate*

# Towards a Scottish Assembly?

THE question of the Scottish Assembly will dominate General Election campaigning in Scotland and remain high on the political agenda in Scotland after the election too.

Labour and the Liberal Democrats are both committed to a Scottish Assembly. After Blair's about-turn last year, Labour policy is now for holding a two-question referendum (for/against an Assembly; for/against an Assembly with tax-raising powers) prior to the establishment of an Assembly. The Liberal Democrats have gone along with the idea of a referendum.

The Scottish National Party has hitherto vacillated on the question of an Assembly, uncertain as to whether to regard it as a diversion from the goal of independence or a step towards it. In late January, however, the SNP finally came down in favour.

The Tories are against an Assembly. They too, however, are trying to present themselves as the real Scottish patriots — bringing back the Stone of Destiny to Scotland, and now claiming to be the true defenders of the Declaration of Arbroath of 1320.

The response of the left in Scotland to the question of a Scottish Assembly reveals more about the left than about the issues. The Scottish Socialist Alliance has made an Assembly its central political demand. It now argues that the real decision in Scottish politics is between those parties (Labour, Lib-Dems and SNP) who support an Assembly and those (the Tories) who do not.

For the SSA, therefore, the class basis of a party (i.e. Labour's continuing, albeit weakened, links with the unions) is of secondary importance to its policies on Scottish self-government.

Scottish Militant Labour, a component part of the SSA, likewise raises the Scottish Assembly as a central political demand but with a slightly more 'radical' gloss (see *Workers' Liberty* 37).

The Socialist Workers Party has vacillated but now directs its fire against the demand for an Assembly.

In part, this is a product of their normal syndicalist sectarianism. In part, it is probably also an attempt to sharpen their profile against the competing forces of the SSA and Scottish Militant Labour.

The Socialist Labour Party does not

bother with the question of an Assembly at all. Its political programme makes no mention of Scottish self-government.

The Campaign for Socialism is the organisation of the Scottish Labour left, except that it is not very organised and even less left-wing. It supports a Scottish Assembly with tax-raising powers.

Almost everywhere, there is a lack of clarity about what kind of Assembly is being demanded. For some an Assembly is a step towards independence; for others it is a way of preserving the unity of the United Kingdom. For some an Assembly would be little more than a glorified local council; for others it would virtually be a sovereign parliament. Also, much discussion about an Assembly is speculative. There is a demand for an Assembly, but not a living campaign. Discussion about an Assembly often therefore takes the form of drawing up blueprints for the future.

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**"Most of the Scottish left are grafting left-sounding phraseology and rhetoric onto essentially nationalistic arguments."**

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The debate is similar to that over UK membership of the Common Market in the early Seventies, and the left's attitude to Third Worldism in the same period.

The controversy about British membership of the Common Market was not a debate between socialists. The two sides in the debate were those in favour of British integration into a capitalist Europe, and those in favour of a more isolationist British capitalism. The bulk of the British left tagged along behind the latter, trying to put a left-sounding gloss on essentially nationalist arguments. The Little Englanders used nationalist arguments against the "Brussels bureaucracy". The left invented "good", "socialist" reasons to be anti-European, deluding themselves into believing that they were thereby demarcating themselves from the nationalists.

The debate about the Scottish Assem-

bly is certainly not a re-run of that debate. But most of the Scottish left is playing a comparable role: they are grafting left-sounding phraseology and rhetoric onto essentially nationalistic arguments. The product is a political incoherence which confuses rather than clarifies. The analogy with the left's admiration of Third Worldism is likewise limited, but nonetheless valid.

Many national liberation movements admired by the left paid at best only lip service to socialist ideas. For much of the left this was of secondary importance. What counted was that a victory for them would be a blow against the imperialist metropolis.

The same mentality is certainly implicit, and often explicit, in the Scottish left's advocacy of a Scottish Assembly. The creation of the latter would mean a weakening, if not the eventual collapse, of the existing United Kingdom state. It must therefore be a good thing.

What counts, and is seen as inherently progressive, is a transfer of powers from Westminster to Edinburgh. And the more powers that are transferred from the former to the latter, then the more "radical" is such an event.

But this method of (speculative) guesses about what is worst for the bosses is false. What should count is what is best for the working class — and not just in Scotland.

The Scottish people are not an oppressed nation. There are no laws banning Scots from speaking their historic language or flying their national flag. There is no persecution of those who demand Scottish independence — the SNP is a perfectly legal, mainstream, bourgeois political party.

If one were to go down this road of dividing the world into oppressor and oppressed nations, then Scotland would belong to the former category.

The demand for a Scottish Assembly is essentially the product of the emergence of a different voting pattern in Scotland and Britain as a whole (the former votes Labour, the latter votes Tory) combined with a declining confidence in Labour to achieve anything positive even if elected at an all-British level.

The fact that there is no real national question at stake in Scotland is no reason



for socialists to oppose the demand for an Assembly. There was no national question at stake when the Tories scrapped the Greater London Council. That did not prevent socialists from opposing its abolition.

But to recognise the legitimacy of the demand for an Assembly is not the same as making it the lynchpin of your political programme. Nor does it justify accommodating to Scottish populism by cloaking the nationalist demands in

"socialist" rhetoric.

The fact that the Scottish Socialist Alliance makes the issue of Scottish self-government the decisive criterion against which to judge other political organisations is a measure of the extent to which sections of the Scottish left have abandoned a class perspective in favour of Scottish populism.

The task confronting Scottish socialists in Scotland is to cut through the pseudo-socialist rhetoric which sur-

rounds the demand for an Assembly.

This may be a less attractive proposition than that of jumping on the Scottish Assembly bandwagon and proclaiming oneself the champion of a bigger, better and more powerful Scottish Assembly. But it is a proposition which remains rooted in class politics.

In that sense the key issues for socialists in Scotland is not the question of for/against a Scottish Assembly (although, on balance, socialists would probably call for a "yes" vote in a referendum) but that of defending the basic tenets of socialism in the face of an increasingly pervasive Scottish populism.

Such an approach can easily degenerate into sectarianism. The SWP's attitude to a Scottish Assembly is an example of this. (In their case, however, their attitude to an Assembly is a product of their ingrained sectarianism, rather than vice versa.)

But to have to guard against such a danger is better than to embrace Scottish populism, and to delude oneself into believing that the more fervently one demands a Scottish Assembly, and the more powers which one demands for such an Assembly, then the more "left-wing" and "anti-capitalist" is one's political programme.

*Stan Crooke*

## Letter from Hong Kong

# From boom to gloom

**F**OR over a decade, Hong Kong has effectively served as the expanding Chinese economy's biggest port. It has emerged as the Pacific region's biggest financial centre, a pivotal place like New York and London in other timezones. At the same time, manufacturing industry in Hong Kong has declined. Tax concessions, low labour costs, and the absence of even the minimal health-and-safety and labour-protection regulations which exist in Hong Kong, have pulled both global and Hong-Kong-based entrepreneurs into China's "special economic zones". At least half a million manufacturing jobs were lost in Hong Kong over the 1980s and '90s, and the territory's population is only six million.

Hong Kong managed to absorb this massive and rapid deindustrialisation without major labour or social unrest. Chinese trade boosted the

services sector; there was a long property/construction boom; and organised labour was relatively weak and working under greater legal constraints than in many other industrialised countries. The trade unions in the manufacturing sector have been traditionally pro-Beijing, and their "patriotic" stance inhibited them from seriously fighting against factory closures in Hong Kong.

The medium to long-term economic prospects of Hong Kong are not good. The financial sector, however successful in fighting off regional competition, is not going to be able to sustain the economy on its own. Sooner or later, China will develop cheaper and bigger container ports, and Hong Kong's share of trade will decrease. The local manufacturing base will continue to shrink, and the lack of the government initiatives that encourage

research and development in Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea, will block the high-tech up-market route.

The territory has been importing cheaper labour from China, Thailand, etc., into the construction industry, and this has led the local trade unions, without exception, into campaigning for immigration controls. The cost of land is kept high by government policy of releasing land at a trickle and gaining huge revenue from it. Demographically, the proportion of elderly is increasing steadily, the flow of school-leavers on to a shrinking jobs market is still to peak, and it is not clear to me how the city can support seven or eight million people in the next decade or so. All these underlying problems are there, ready to be triggered off by any destabilising political event.

China has massive investments in Hong Kong, and will want to sustain its economy, but does not believe that political heavy-handedness will have any economic side-effects. I suppose we will find out after 30 June 1997.

*Cheung Siu Ming*

# A workers' party in Korea?

**Paul Field spoke to Kwang Ho Lee, chief editor of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions' weekly newspaper, at its offices in Seoul, on 17 January 1997. Myoung Joon Kim acted as translator.**

**YOU** have succeeded in mobilising diverse groups of workers such as nurses, bank and insurance personnel, auto workers, shipbuilders and transport workers. How did you achieve such class unity?

The Government made it possible.

Of course, this kind of mass action is based on our organising ability, but the Government inadvertently strengthened our forces with such a wide, sweeping attack. There is scarcely an industry whose workers are not affected by at least one article in the new law.

For example, the inclusion of hospitals in the category of "essential services" subject to intervention and compulsory arbitration was an eleventh-hour decision by the government. Each industry sees the law as very much its own problem.

THE foreign press are saying that the strikes on 14 and 15 January [when the Federation of Korean Trade Unions called action] were a disappointment to the unions. They quote the Government's claim that the FKTU only succeeded in mobilising 50,000 of its 1.2 million members to join the 300,000 KCTU members who took strike action.

The numbers are accurate. The FKTU figure is very low because its leadership lacks the competence and experience to organise strike action on such a scale.

The FKTU have many internal problems. The telecommunications and railway workers' unions of the FKTU are very conservative. They even objected when the FKTU chairman was filmed shaking hands with KCTU leader Kwon Yong-gil. They continue to attack the FKTU leadership for cooperating with the KCTU in the strikes.

The FKTU has systematic problems relating to a conservative leadership that has no experience of struggle. Now the pressure for struggle is coming from the



grass roots, but their industrial leadership is very weak. Yesterday, the union at Korea Bank, the country's largest bank, left the FKTU's industrial-level federation because it had failed to organise effective struggle.

The FKTU's basic problem is that it has a long history of collaboration with the government, from which it still receives subsidies and maintains many institutional ties. It is compromised in the eyes of many workers by this institutional relationship with the government.

But the KCTU's standpoint now is not to focus on criticising the FKTU but to concentrate on organising effective solidarity action with any group or organisation of workers prepared to join the struggle against these pernicious laws.

One of the metal industry unions in the FKTU, after a debate and with the support of 90% of its factory-level membership, has decided to leave the FKTU and affiliate to the KCTU.

Many unions in the FKTU are moving towards struggle.

Action is also being taken by groups of unorganised workers. It is our job to





# International conference Prepare the socialist alternative!

**T**HREE revolutionary Marxist groups, the AWL, the Workers' Organisation for Socialist Action (South Africa), and Socialismo Rivoluzionario (Italy), are coming together to organise an International Conference: "On the eve of the year 2000: Stop capitalist barbarism! Prepare the socialist alternative!" The conference is scheduled for 4-8 December in Cape Town, South Africa.

The appeal for the conference declares: "The defenders of capitalism have been blowing their own trumpets about the collapse of the regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, calling it a victory for the market economy, and hailing it as the death of communism.

"The collapse of all these regimes does indeed mean that the historical context that we face is different today from what it has been for most of the 20th Century. In particular, for socialists it means that the international working class can now mount a proper challenge to the rule of international capital.

"Together with the collapse of Stalinism, we have seen the crumbling of the other major challenge to barbaric capitalism: social democracy. Pure, raw capitalism and savage liberalism have once again replaced the tentative attempts at democratising capitalism: Fabianism, the co-operative movement, the concept of universal social benefits, have all given way to rampant greed, to the profit motive, to a generalised submission of the state before the so-called free market, and to drastic border controls on workers' freedom of movement between different blocks.

"The welfare states that existed over much of the developed world and some of the rest of the world have seen private capital literally invade social services: from electricity to rubbish collection, from health care to pensions.

"We, socialists, need to co-ordinate, on a regional and on an international level, so that these daily struggles all over the world, can learn from one another, can

reinforce one another.

"It is certainly not a centralised international party that we are proposing. Especially not one with a centre in one or other European capital and small franchises in other countries. Such international parties run the risk of establishing predatory relationships with unfiliated revolutionary groups.

"What working people in struggle need, what socialists the world over need, is mutual support. Shared political ideas. Exchanged documents. We need to plan regional campaigns. And sometimes to co-ordinate international campaigns. And we need to build close contacts with one another.

"We, the undersigned, are organisations that believe that socialism is not only viable today, but that more than ever before, it is necessary to build the will for socialism.

"We have come from different socialist traditions, we have divergent ideas left over from past struggles on many issues, and it is time now for us to overcome all those forms of sectarianism that characterised the immediate past: a time in history when we had to confront Stalinism and Maoism, represented by powerful nation states, as well as confront the capitalist system itself.

"Now we must move into the new era. Savage capitalism is very dangerous now. All the predictions about barbarism are on our doorstep now. We must unite our efforts to oppose capitalism in its present form, and to build the basis for a socialist future. The legacy of revolutionary socialist organisations attempting to co-operate with one another is a long and rich one. We need to learn all we can from all the work that has been done by socialists from the First International onwards.

"At the same time, much immediate practical work awaits us."

● More information from AWL, PO Box 823, London SE15 4NA; WOSA, PO Box 491, Salt River 7925, South Africa; or SR, via Gian Battista, Vico 12, Milano, Italy.

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foster the growth of unions among those workers who join the struggle.

Even though the KCTU was not formed until 1995, the individual democratic unions have displayed a strong bond of solidarity since the birth of the democratic labour movement in 1987. The blue-collar manual workers from Chunnohyup, together with Upjoeng Hoey's white-collar and public-sector workers, and the large democratic union federations inside the Hyundai and Daewoo chaebols [industrial conglomerates], always combined in a solidarity struggle around the issue of the labour laws.

Several years of organising joint solidarity action and protests meant that while some strategic and political differences existed between the leaderships of these organisations, they were brought into a close working relationship with each other. So, although the KCTU may seem new, it is not. The unions have a wealth of practical experience of solidarity.

In this respect the leaders merely respond to the desire for class unity from the rank and file of the workers in separate industries.

**DO you see potential for a political movement or party to develop around the unions that would have the power to transform Korean society?**

The KCTU does not have any specific proposal to organise a political party at this time. But the situation is such that workers are rapidly developing consciousness. Consequently the demand for a political movement organised by workers grows from the grass roots level as a result of this general strike. The union leaderships are also considering strategy and tactics for this kind of direction.

However, the broad coalition that has been assembled in support of the strikes represents the discontent that is felt against [president] Kim Yong Sam rather than a popular movement for the formation of a workers' party.

Moreover, many Korean people retain a traditionally conservative attitude towards the idea of an electoral or mass party of workers. So we must proceed carefully.

While we have no immediate plans to create any such party, it remains our medium- to long-term objective to move in that direction. This struggle is an excellent opportunity to advance towards that aim.

● The interview was originally done for Labour Left Briefing, and a shorter version has appeared there.

# The new Eastern Europe Smiles for the IMF, scowls for the workers

**F**OR International Monetary Fund chief Michel Camdessus, speaking in December 1994, Albania was a model for the shift to private-profit economics in ex-Stalinist Eastern Europe.

"There are about ten countries — and I am pleased to say the number has been growing — where most of the work of freeing prices and the exchange and trade system has been done, where significant progress has been made toward macroeconomic stabilisation, and where substantial structural reforms have been implemented in a number of areas. I include here Albania — prodigious efforts and remarkable results have been seen in this small country, the poorest in Europe..."

In Albania, as in the other IMF favourite, the Czech Republic, a post-Stalinist middle-class grouping had won firm control, marginalising the now "social democratic" remnants of the old Stalinist party. In fact, Sali Berisha's Democratic Party has almost established a new one-party state in Albania. It got 90 per cent of the seats in Parliament in much-disputed elections last May.

According to Human Rights Watch: "The secret police of Berisha's government are omnipresent. Plainclothes policemen have provoked demonstrators in some cities and harassed independent journalists. Individuals are cautious to criticise the government on the telephone or in public; an atmosphere of fear has spread over the country, reminiscent of Albania's communist past."

Now, as Tirana journalist Remzi Lana reports, "the country has been flooded by a wave of protests of thousands of citizens who have lost their savings in pyramid systems. Almost all the cities in Albania have been transformed into scenes of conflict of demonstrators with police forces, while administration buildings have been set on fire and destroyed..."

"Estimates are that about a billion dollars were invested in companies which offered interest rates from 8 to 25 per cent a month". This was about half Albania's total national income! As the old state-controlled economy collapsed, almost the whole population turned to living off the new capitalistic scams.

The classic pyramid scheme can continue only as long as the flow of new



After the collapse of the new capitalist economy, Albanian's citizens fight government riot cops.

punters — from whose money the "interest" can be paid to existing investors — outpaces its ever-increasing promises to pay out. The complication in Albania, it seems, is that its murky regime encouraged international drug mafias to use the pyramid schemes to "launder" their money. Pay-outs sufficient to seem like riches to Albanian workers and peasants counted as minor petty-cash expenses for this operation.

The pyramid schemes could thus last longer and dominate the economy more than anywhere else. The "democratic" government was content with its private pay-offs and the illusion that it had brought prosperity. When the flow of drug money faltered, the pyramid schemes made their promises more and more extravagant — in order to keep ahead of the game at least until they got new funds from abroad — and now the whole rotten structure has collapsed.

However, Camdessus was not entirely wrong. Private-profit capitalism is up and running in most of Eastern Europe. Inequality and pauperism have increased. Unemployment, even on underestimated official figures, has bal-

looned to 10% in Hungary and Romania, 12% in Bulgaria, 13% in Slovakia, 14% in Slovenia, 16% in Poland, 17% in Croatia, and 20% in East Germany, while the old Stalinist social-welfare system, where hand-outs and benefits were distributed through the workplace, has been scrapped with only a sketchy replacement. In Hungary, for example, only one-third of the unemployed were getting unemployment benefit in 1996. There is a lot of "crony capitalism", dominated by the old Stalinist bureaucrats.

Nevertheless, this is capitalism. Some Marxists used to believe that the old regimes were "deformed workers' states", and therefore that capitalism could not be installed in Eastern Europe without a social counter-revolution against the working class. In fact these countries have been changed into more-or-less normal capitalist economies with much less than a social counter-revolution and with the support of the workers.

By early 1996, the Czech Republic had sold off or shut down 81% of its large state-owned enterprises, Hungary 75%, Slovakia 44%, Poland 32%, Romania 13% and Bulgaria 10%. In Poland, Hungary,

and other countries, new small private companies produce a growing share of output. By 1996 there were 3.4 million non-agricultural private businesses in Eastern Europe.

Industrial output fell between 1989 and 1994 by a third in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, and over a half in Bulgaria and Romania, but has risen again, except in Bulgaria, since 1994. Foreign direct investment, though still low by world standards, has increased from an average of \$1.4 billion a year in 1988-92 to \$12 billion in 1995. These countries have crises and contradictions, but not the chaos in Russia, where industrial output is half what it was in 1991 and still declining, where wages, taxes and suppliers' bills are rarely paid, and where real incomes are 40% below 1991 even on official figures.

According to a study by Robert Flanagan of Stanford University: "There are new union organisations oriented toward collective bargaining, but they appear to be weak in comparison to their Western counterparts. On the other hand, the expanding private sector is essentially non-union. Excess wage payments are taxed at punitive rates in the state sector, apparently on the theory that management is even weaker than the unions."

Part of the reason for union weakness is state repression. A 1996 report by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions found that: "Governments in Central and Eastern Europe showed increasing hostility to trade unions. They viewed them as threats to their attempts to deregulate economies."

In the Czech Republic, for example, a draft law restricts the trade union rights of some 60,000 state employees. It bans strikes, and limits trade union recognition for bargaining purposes to groups representing a minimum of 40 per cent of the workforce in a workplace. The unions fear that the limit on recognition could be extended to other sectors. "The trend towards union-free workplaces increased", reports the ICFTU.

In Romania, a law under which only 60 workers are required to set up a trade union confederation has led to the creation of 26 national confederations, so that employers pick and choose with whom to bargain. Numerous restrictions on the right to strike mean that organising a legal strike is almost impossible. Lengthy and cumbersome procedures must precede a strike, including the submission of grievances to government-sponsored conciliation. The authorities can also impose binding arbitration.

Employers can apply to the Supreme

Court for a 90-day strike suspension on grounds of the "interests of the national economy". The courts have declared illegal virtually every major strike brought before them. The law imposes a financial liability on strike organisers. In health care, teaching, energy, transport, telecommunications and broadcasting, the law says one third of normal activity must be maintained during a strike.

Part of the reason for the continuing instability in Bulgaria, where on 4 February continued mass demonstrations by supporters of the new bourgeois party, the UDF, finally forced the BSP (ex-Stalinist) government to call new elections for April, is that the trade unions — organised in two federations, the new Podkrepa and the ex-official CITUB — have somewhat more strength there than elsewhere in Eastern Europe.

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Bulgaria's 1993 labour code provides wide scope for undermining collective bargaining; prohibits strikes in the public health, energy, communications, and water supply sectors; and prohibits trade unions from engaging in political activities.

The unions are weak in Eastern Europe, but they exist. Although socialist politics are for now pushed to the margin and discredited, the widespread working-class assent to market economics is not uncritical. Opinion surveys in Czechoslovakia and Hungary soon after the overthrow of Stalinism in 1989 showed most workers wanting some social-democratic system — but, unfortunately, willing to rely on "experts" to tell them how much social democracy was possible. The pro-capitalist experts, of course, told them that very little was possible. The dominant mood seems to be not so much enthusiastic pro-capitalism, but a soured reaction against Stalinist rhetoric — anti-utopianism, refusal to believe that political activity can or should much modify the "economic realism" of the market.

The East European revolutions of

1989 were made in large part for democracy, including the right to have free elections. Yet in Poland, in October 1991, just two years later, the turnout was only 43% for parliamentary elections. Electoral turnouts in Poland since then, and in other countries in Eastern Europe, have been better, but not specially high even by comparison with West European countries where elections are a tired, bureaucratised, and media-manipulated routine.

The new bourgeois parties in Eastern Europe are usually shaky and unstable. The old Stalinist political machines, having reshaped themselves into proper political parties and converted themselves into "social-democrats", have often defeated them. They campaign not for the restoration of Stalinism, but for a more cautious, less ruthless, transition to market capitalism. In other words, the old nomenklatura is the core of the new capitalist ruling class, and the new bourgeoisie, risen from the middle class, has been able only to secure a share of the spoils.

In Poland, the ex-Stalinists regained office in October 1993. In Hungary, the ex-Stalinists came back to government in 1994, in alliance with the more free-market but less nationalist of the two main new bourgeois parties. In Albania, the Socialist Party formed by former officials of one of the most hideous dictatorships in the Stalinist world now has its leaders beaten up by riot police as they join mass demonstrations against the corruption and undemocratic manipulation of the new rulers. In Romania, a "National Salvation Front" created by a fraction of the apparatus of the old dictatorship kept power, despite various schisms and coalitions, until November 1996. (That Romania's anti-union laws are the worst in Eastern Europe indicates that the ex-Stalinists are by no means necessarily more friendly to the workers than the new bourgeois parties.) In Bulgaria, the ex-Stalinists put through the first stages of dismantling the old Stalinist structures by themselves, without even a change of government. Not until October 1991 did the main new bourgeois party, the UDF, win office; it lost office, to a coalition government, in December 1992, and was heavily defeated by the ex-Stalinists in the December 1994 elections.

Nowhere, yet, has a real workers' party emerged in Eastern Europe; and the small socialist groups are still small, often smaller than in 1989. Yet the cruelty and contradictions of the new capitalism, as they develop, cannot fail to lay the basis for working-class socialism.

*Martin Thomas*

# Hillingdon strikers fight on

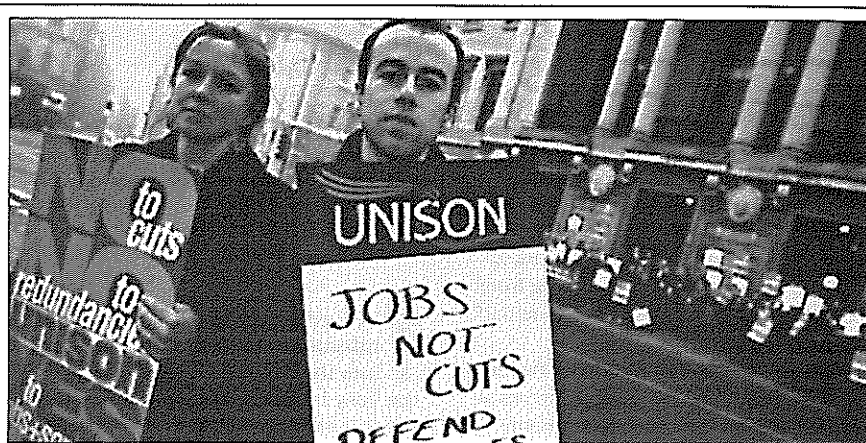
**T**HE strike by 53 women workers at Hillingdon Hospital is continuing despite UNISON withdrawing official support. The UNISON decision was taken by a vote of 4-3 at the National Executive's Industrial Action Committee in January. The union 'tops' were recommending a deal that would have meant a paltry £4,000 per head but no reinstatement. The strikers were not balloted — even though they have made it quite clear that they reject the 'offer'. So much for a member-led union.

The members balloted for strike action in September 1995 in response to Pall Mall's proposal to change their contracts and impose a 20 per cent pay cut. After some shenanigans the dispute was made official in November 1995. The strikers have been on the picket line seven days a week since October 1995. Their determination has been an inspiration to all trade unionists. The strikers have suffered racist abuse, physical attack, arrest and imprisonment. Before the dispute Pall Mall had demanded to see the passports of the mainly Asian domestic workers.

The dispute could and should be used as a crusade against all the private spivs cashing in on public services. Yet the UNISON leadership have only had a half-hearted strategy to win the dispute. It makes a mockery of all the good policies we have on the minimum wage, the national health service and racism.

In the current climate it is hard to win solidarity action. Nevertheless, UNISON is the biggest union in the country, with over 1.4 million members. We must make an example of the likes of Pall Mall. Not only must we continue to support the strike through donations, collections etc., but the union must do all it can to spread action to the rest of Pall Mall and its subsidiaries.

At the same time UNISON activists must call on the NEC to overturn the Industrial Action Committee's vote,



## Cuts round up

**L**AST month Labour announced its intention, if elected, to keep government budgets within the levels proposed by the Tories. This will mean continuation of the drastic cuts which have been made, year after year, by Labour councils unprepared to take on the Tories.

This year local councils face, on average, a 2.5% shortfall in the money they need to maintain the status quo on services. Councils will also face new costs for community care. Social services, on average, face a 4% cut.

The picture around the country is frightening: Glasgow faces a massive £78 million cut. 300 teaching jobs will go and education centres and library hours will be affected. £35 million are to go from Edinburgh council's budget. 100 home helps and 75 teachers are threatened

with redundancy.

Scotland as a whole faces a crisis in education — 1,500 teaching jobs are at risk. At the end of January 30,000 people marched through Glasgow to protest at the education cuts.

In Kent firefighters are fighting a 10% reduction in the fire service. If pressure on Kent County Council does not succeed in stopping job losses they will ballot on strike action.

Kent's £23.7 million cuts also include the privatisation of care for the elderly and disabled. The wholesale privatisation of all social services could become the norm if Labour continue present trends.

In Newcastle, where 400 jobs are at risk the UNISON branch is asking the council to delay agreeing a final budget until after the General Election. They want to put pressure on a Labour government to allow councils to spend more, to increase the level of government grant and to keep council tax rises down.

which goes against a National Conference decision. We must also firm up the promise made by Harriet Harman at the 1996 UNISON Health Conference to reinstate the women when Labour gain office.

1 Messages of support/donations to: Hillingdon Strikers Support Campaign (HSSC), c/o 27 Townsend Way, Northwood, Middlesex, HA6 1TG. Make any cheques payable to HSSC.

Andre D'Souza

# After the international dockers' strike...

**H**AVING turned down payouts of over £20,000 as part of a 'final offer' from the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company, the Liverpool dockers continue their fight — with an impressive show of international solidarity in January. In Liverpool, dockers and supporters face charges after occupying part of the port.

Meanwhile, dockers' leaders and Transport and General Workers' Union Deputy

General Secretary Jack Adams have drawn up a proposal whereby the dockers would set up a non-profit making co-operative to supply labour to all parts of the docks.

The dockers underline that any settlement must include acceptance of their key demands: jobs for the sacked dockworkers and removal of all non-union contract labour from the port.

The docks company have so far rejected

the plan — the finer details of which were not announced by the time we went to press — because part of it is the removal of scab labour supplied by Drake International from the port. They have called the scabs a "loyal workforce," providing an "excellent service."

Andy Dwyer, of the Merseyside Port Shop Stewards' Committee, said: "We're still picketing every day and asking our supporters all round the world for ongoing action."



There's no turning back."

There are obvious dangers in the "co-op" plan. Dockers will put themselves under pressure to accept worse wages and conditions to make the co-op competitive with other suppliers of labour, and to get contracts with port employers renewed. However, no loyal supporter of the dockers can object to them trying alternative approaches — even questionable ones — after so many months of deadlock.

An appeal for solidarity action on or around 20 January led to action in 105 ports and cities in 27 countries. Dockers, seafarers and other workers took part in workplace meetings, public meetings, demonstrations at British Embassies and Consulates, work-to-rules, and full-scale stoppages ranging from 30 minutes to 24 hours, between 15 and 25 January.

In Liverpool, nine dockers and five supporters occupied the three gantry cranes at the Seaforth Grain Terminal for 27 hours — halting work on a ship loading at the terminal. All 15 were arrested and were due to go to court to face charges of aggravated trespass and breach of the peace on 12 February.

The action worldwide included a 24 hour stoppage in Sweden, a three-day strike in Greece, ports closed on the east and west coasts of the USA, and an occupation of the offices of the Rhine Shipping Company in Basel, Switzerland. Action affected ports from Sri Lanka to Zimbabwe that process freight bound to or from Liverpool.

● Messages of support and donations to: Bro. J. Davies, Secretary, Merseyside Port Shop Stewards' Committee, 19 Scorton Street, Liverpool, L6 4AS. Cheques should be made payable to "Merseyside Dockers Shop Stewards' Appeal Fund."

Alan McArthur

# Tube faces sell-off

**T**HE Tories are promising to put privatisation of London Underground into their election manifesto. Using the Tory language of outright lies, they say this will "improve services" and "save public money". What it will really mean we can see from the fate of British Rail: bidding-down of wages, conditions and jobs in a drive for private profit and a worse service.

On the privatised railways trade union reps suffer victimisation. The RMT on Scotrail is currently taking strike action for the reinstatement of victimised trade unionists [see below].

Safety is also a key issue for workers and the public. Cutting costs on the railways has already cost lives. The same would be true of a privatised Tube, where safety standards urgently need improving rather than cutting.

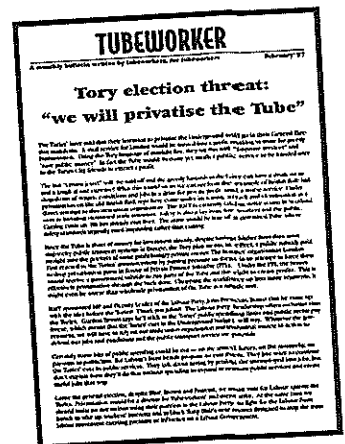
The Tube is already short of money for investment, despite having higher fares than most major-city public trans

port systems in Europe. The Tory plan means, in effect, a public subsidy paid straight into the pockets of profit-hungry private owners.

The bosses' organisation "London First" reacted to the Tories' announcement by attempting to force them to drop privatisation plans in favour of Private Finance Initiative (PFI). Under PFI, the bosses would receive a government subsidy to run parts of the Tube and the right to cream off any profits. This is privatisation by the back door.

Unfortunately, RMT-sponsored MP and Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, John Prescott, boasts that he came up with the idea of PFI before the Tories! Thank you John! Gordon Brown says he'll stick to the Tories' public spending limits and public sector pay freeze, so cuts in the Underground budget will stay.

*A tube worker*



## Scotrail strike: drivers must get on board!

**T**HE RMT ballot of all grades on Scotrail over the victimisations at Queen Street has been lost, but the fight is continuing.

The Scottish Strike Committee is recommending escalation of the strike among traincrew, with 15 and 17 February as the next strike days. This follows a successful strike on 1 February. There are also plans to reballoon all grades on a 37 hour week, with no strings attached.

There are added complications in the strike. Although a new owner for Scotrail is due to be announced, the Strathclyde Passenger Transport Executive is trying to hold up the sell-off until the general election — if Labour wins we will be the only part of the railway still in public owner-

ship. If the privatisation is stopped, the present management mob will remain in charge. A new management team might very well want to start with a clean slate. However, whoever it is in charge, they will get no respite from the union until the 17 disciplinary cases are dropped — at the very heart of the dispute is whether there is effective union organisation on the rails in Scotland.

ASLEF have so far not been involved in the dispute but it is in the interests of all rail workers, irrespective of whether they belong to RMT or ASLEF, to elect representatives through trade unions who can protect and defend them.

If the present strike is lost, are people who are prepared to stand up to manage-

ment going to take on LDC and other trade union positions? They will certainly think twice.

Union posts will be filled by people acceptable to management, because they do nothing for trade union members. Where will that leave the member facing discipline or pursuing a claim? That's how important the current strike is, and it is time all railworkers realised it.

Drivers have the power to end this strike with a victory for all trade unionists. They also have the power to break it. If the will is there, we can find ways around the anti-trade union laws. United we stand, divided we fall!

*A Scotrail drivers' rep*