

Political repression in Russia

BY STAN CROOKE

LAST weekend's police attacks on anti-Putin demonstrators in Moscow and St. Petersburg underlined the extent to which the Kremlin is prepared to go in snuffing out all manifestations of opposition in the run-up to this year's parliamentary elections and next year's presidential elections.

In Moscow around 2,000 demonstrators who gathered for a protest rally in Pushkin Square on Saturday were surrounded by 9,000 riot police. Police made 170 arrests, including former chess champion Gary Kasparov, who now heads the United Civil Front and the broader coalition known as "The Other Russia".

The following day around 500 demonstrators gathered in St. Petersburg in another anti-Putin rally organised by "The Other Russia", despite several of the rally's organisers having been arrested on arrival in the city. When the protestors attempted to stage a demonstration after their rally, the police staged baton-charges and made 150 arrests.

Less overt than last weekend's physical attacks on demonstrators, but more far-reaching in terms of consolidating Putin's authoritarianism, are the recent changes to Russia's electoral system which have been implemented by the Kremlin.

Following on from the election of provincial governors being replaced by their appointment by Putin himself, and the requirement that registered political parties must have at least 50,000 members and be represented in at least half of Russia's provinces, political parties must now win at least 7% of all votes cast throughout Russia in order to win any seats in the Duma (parliament).

The previous mixed system of "first-past-

the-post" constituencies in conjunction with seats allocated according to the number of votes cast for party lists has now been replaced by a list-only system. This will make it more difficult for opposition candidates with a strong local base, but no national following, to secure re-election to the Duma.

The earlier requirement that an election would be valid only if at least 25% of the

electorate participated has also been scrapped. Given the increasingly vacuous nature of Russian electoral "contests", even 25% electoral participation might prove too high a hurdle for the forthcoming parliamentary and presidential elections.

In order to create an illusion of democratic pluralism, the Kremlin has recently set up "A Just Russia" to take part in the parliamentary elections. "A Just Russia" claims to be social-democratic in outlook, but is in fact pro-Putin and nothing other than an artificial creation of the Kremlin.

Similarly, next year's presidential elections are likely to consist of a "choice" between two equally pro-Putin candidates, Sergei Ivanov and Dmitry Medvedev. Putin himself is constitutionally barred from seeking a third term of office, although there have been suggestions that he may amend

the constitution in order to scrap that restriction.

These national electoral "reforms" and initiatives have been backed up by local legislation. In Moscow, for example, the city council has banned rallies in the vicinity of historic monuments, defined the minimum space for participants in a rally as one square meter for every two protestors, and empowered police to break up indoor political rallies if there are more participants than chairs.

A recent study found that 78% of senior politicians and civil servants in Russia had a background, like Putin himself, in the secret service or the armed forces. Putin's increasingly strident authoritarianism would suggest that the proportion is set to increase still further.

Riot police attack opposition protestors in Moscow

Whose "other Russia?"

LAST weekend's demonstrations in Moscow and St. Petersburg which were attacked by the police had been organised by "The Other Russia" (TOR), initiated by Garry Kasparov in 2005 and formally launched in 2006.

TOR's founding conference condemned Putin's government for "the destruction of civil liberties and the cleansing of the political field." The conference committed TOR to "freeing the country from outbreaks of prejudice, racism and xenophobia," to "returning Russia to the democratic path," and to "restoring the constitutional norms and the rule of the people."

The two central demands raised by TOR are unobjectionable: free and fair parliamentary elections in December of this year, and free and fair presidential elections in March of next year.

But the signatories to TOR's founding statement include politicians and political leaders – such as Mikhail Kasyanov, Victor Anpilov, and Eduard Limonov – whose politics have nothing in common with the worthy liberal goals expressed in the statement.

Appointed Prime Minister by Putin in May of 2000, Kasyanov was popularly known as "Misha Two Per Cent" throughout his term of office, for allegedly requiring two per cent 'commission' on all loans to private businesses. Kasyanov was an uncritical Putin loyalist until his sacking in February of 2004. Only after his dismissal did he begin to criticise Putin for undermining democracy in Russia.

According to one Russian political commentator, "Kasyanov's ratings and popularity are minimal. In the eyes of the population, Kasyanov is a symbol of corruption, and no opposition forces can

seriously support him." But this will not prevent TOR from, in all likelihood, selecting Kasyanov as its candidate for the 2008 presidential elections.

Anpilov is the leader of the so-called "Workers Russia" organisation. The organisation and its leader are unashamed anti-semites and admirers of Stalin. According to Anpilov: "Stalin saw the danger to the party ... represented by the remnants of the Zionist Bund that had wormed their way into the Bolsheviks in 1917 and quickly seized the key posts in the party and the state. With typical decisiveness Stalin took practical measures to restore the proletarian character of the party."

Why TOR believes that Anpilov will help "free the country from outbreaks of prejudice, racism and xenophobia" remains to be explained. The same applies to TOR's readiness to welcome Eduard Limonov and his National Bolshevik Party (NBP) into its ranks.

Limonov and the NBP are more neo-fascist than Stalinist. Limonov has, or had, links with fascists such as Alain de Benoist and Jean-Marie Le Pen in France, and with Jean Francois Thiriart in Belgium, as well as having been an enthusiastic supporter of the regime of Radovan Karadzic in Bosnia. Despite Limonov's political evolution in recent years, he remains a Russian ultra-nationalist.

TOR is not an influential organisation. Its ability to achieve publicity for itself owes less to its degree of support amongst the general population than to the direct-action tactics employed by members of the NBP, carried out under banners deliberately reminiscent of Nazi insignia.

Protests against Pakistan's dictatorship

BY SACHA ISMAIL

London and Washington's favourite military dictator, General Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan, has been in power since 2000 and "constitutional" president of Pakistan since 2002. This year, he plans to have himself re-elected for another five term, and is determined to crush anyone who gets in his way.

The last month has seen a rising tide of protests sparked by Musharraf's decision on 9 March to suspend Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, chief justice of Pakistan's supreme court, and try him on charges of corruption.

Beginning with lawyers' strikes and demonstrations, this movement has now drawn in wider forces, with all the country's trade union federations, for instance, calling for actions against the government. The response from the regime has been widespread repression, with baton-charges, rubber bullets and tear gas. One TV station that portrayed images of bloodied protesters had its offices smashed and its staff beaten, while another was temporarily taken off the air.

Musharraf's regime is a clear indication of how little Bush and Blair are interested in democracy. Chaudhry, himself naturally a conservative ruling class figure, was

suspended because his independent mindedness got in the way of the government's plans. On the one hand, he helped expose the disappearance of hundreds of Pakistanis by the Inter-Security Intelligence secret police, causing enormous embarrassment to the government; on the other, he overturned the sale of state-owned Pakistan Steel Mills to a group of businessmen close to Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz.

Chaudhry was also due to rule on whether it is constitutional for Musharraf to run for a second term as president. The general wants to be re-elected by the existing parliament before new elections take place in October, and does not want a troublesome judiciary getting in the way.

The strongest political opposition to Musharraf, unfortunately, is made up of radical Islamist groups. The main bourgeois "democratic" parties, the Muslim League and the Pakistan People's Party, have an appalling record in government. The labour movement and the left are very weak, after years of assaults on the working class, including by Musharraf. Nonetheless, they remain the only force that can be trusted to pursue the struggle for democracy through to its end.

• For more see the website of the Labour Party of Pakistan: www.laborpakistan.org

Activist left makes impact on French poll

BY JOAN TREVOR

The first round of voting in the French presidential election will be on Sunday 22 April; assuming that no one wins a majority then (and no one will) the second round will be two weeks later on Sunday 6 May.

The likely run-off in the second round will be between right-winger Nicolas Sarkozy, recently interior minister, and the not very left-wing Socialist Party candidate Ségolène Royal. A repeat of the situation in 2002 when the National Front fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen got through to the second round is unlikely.

In the campaign for the first round, those candidates that succeeded in getting the 500 signatures of the mayors or other elected politicians they need to stand — and that was a tall order for many — have been able to put forward their programmes on the public media, guaranteed equal air time. That has made, all told, for quite a lot of anti-capitalist propaganda, albeit of variable quality.

The Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) candidate Olivier Besancenot is riding higher than the other far-left candidates in the opinion polls: on 16 April he was on 5 per cent, the Communist Party's Marie-George Buffet (posing as a "united left" candidate) and Lutte Ouvrière (LO)'s Arlette Laguiller on 2.5 per cent, the Greens' Dominique Voynet on 2 per cent and José Bové, the radical small farmer, who earlier ruled himself out of standing as a unity candidate

for the anti-capitalist left, and ended up standing as a candidate for himself, on 1.5 per cent. It looks like the far left is heading for a lower score overall than in 2002, when in the first round LO got 5.7 per cent, LCR 4.3 per cent, and the Workers' Party 0.5 per cent.

The LCR's campaign includes an emergency plan "to change our lives and cast off the rule of capital", with these demands:

- A real job on a good wage.
- Work fewer hours and not so hard, so that everyone can have a job.
- The right to a safe environment — our lives, not their profits.
- Defend and extend social protection.
- Public services to meet social need.
- The rights and the means to live our lives the way we want.

LCR campaign slogans are: "Our lives matter more than their profits"; "Vote the way you fight" ("Votez comme vous luttez"); "For a new anti-capitalist force"; "Yes, for socialism!"; "An effective vote: vote with your heart and with your head".

The last is an appeal to those who support LCR policies but fear a replay of 2002 and so would vote Royal in the first round. It also addresses those who would vote for the centre-right candidate, François Bayrou, on the grounds that he alone, with Socialist Party and centre votes, can beat Nicolas Sarkozy in the second round. The LCR says that 2002 happened because the Socialist Party's candidate, prime

minister Lionel Jospin, performed disastrously, and:

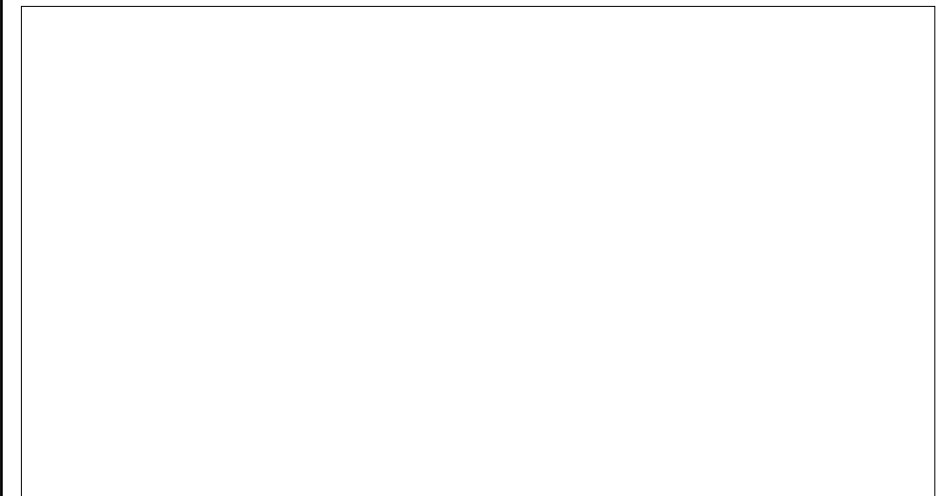
"Sarkozy but must be beaten, but we also need to beat the politics of the right, and of those who in the name of the left only give neoliberalism [capitalism] more options... we will have five years of a new presidency. If it is of the right, we can place no confidence in the soft left to lead the resistance against the bosses, as the last five years have amply demonstrated. If it is Socialist, we will need an opposition to its left to force ordinary people's aspirations on it. Were Royal elected, she would carry out policies to the right of those of Socialist governments of the past, and so much more so if she is not under the pressure that a good score for candidates to her left would represent."

Following hard on the presidential election are the parliamentary elections on 10 and 17 June; the parliamentary elections, naturally, are likely to follow the pattern of the presidential election. That was the intention when the constitution was changed in 2000 to replace the presidential septennat (seven year term) with the quinquennat (five years).

Chirac wanted to guard against any more periods of "cohabitation", where the president is of one political persuasion, and the parliament and the prime minister of another.

- Campaign websites
www.besancenot2007.org
www.arlette-laguiller.org
www.unisavecbove.org

Irish nurses' action



NURSES in Ireland are taking industrial action over pay and working hours. 40,000 members of the Irish Nurses' Organisation and the Psychiatric Nurses' Association, seeking a 10.6% pay rise alongside a 4-hour cut in their 39-hour working week, are in the third week of working-to-rule, refusing to do clerical or IT work. One-hour stoppages have taken place across the country, including in the largest hospital in Ireland, St. James's in Dublin.

Nurses are the only qualified group in Irish hospitals to work a 39-hour week — other grades work 35, with some clerical staff working 33. Hospital porters, organised by public sector union SIPTU, also work 39 hours — despite settling its national wage claim for the nurses it organises, SIPTU is in talks with INO around its claim for a 35-hour week for thousands of health sector workers. A victory over hours for nurses has potential repercussions for large sections of Irish workers — there are signs

that other workers in the sector, such as childcare staff, will seek a similar arrangement if the nurses win, and improvements in pay and conditions in the public sector are likely to impact private health companies too.

In the run-up to a general election in Ireland, beating the unions in the health sector would be a massive gain for the right-wing Fianna Fail/Progressive Democrat government. As in Britain, the Irish health service is being privatised piece-by-piece, with massive tax breaks for private hospitals, higher charges for public patients treated in private hospitals and large-scale siphoning of public money into private hands. 70% of Irish nurses leave within three years of completing their training.

The Irish health unions are showing the way with their militant, nationally-coordinated pay campaign. As British unions discuss national action over public sector pay, they could learn important lessons.

Iraq: war doubled?

From the back page

Small-scale clashes between US troops and the Sadrists have increased, on US initiative.

The cause of the Iraqi labour movement, of self-determination for the peoples of Iraq, and of democracy and secularism, has nothing to gain from the victory of any force in this multi-cornered war.

The brutal, corrupt US occupation is grinding Iraqi society into dust. All the sectarian militias, from their different angles, offer only sectarian civil war and, if they win, expansion of their current "mini-Taliban" local regimes into full-scale fundamentalist dictatorships.

The Iraqi labour movement is already much-harassed, and risks being crushed if the Islamists triumph. But it is the main non-sectarian movement in the country, and the one cause for hope.

It has not had sufficient aid and solidarity from the international labour movement. But, with increased resources, the Iraqi labour movement could unite large numbers of the population around it in a campaign against the new oil law, which allows for privatisation and sell-off to foreign interests under regional control.

It could rouse millions in a campaign to demand jobs or adequate dole, in a once-prosperous country where now 28% of all children suffer from malnutrition and one child in ten has a chronic illness. Millions of Iraqis depend on government rations to survive. With vast numbers of people fleeing their homes because of sectarian conflict, and a corrupt administration, distribution of the rations is erratic.

It could combine support for the right to self-determination for the Kurds with opposition to Kurdish revanchism and energetic mobilisation on social and economic grievances within the Kurdish areas, where something nearer normal conditions for trade-union and political activity exist but where the relative prosperity is monopolised by the machines of the Kurdish-nationalist warlord parties, the PUK and KDP.

That is the programme to end the horror of the US/UK occupation without tipping the country into the more rapid horror of full-scale sectarian civil war and militarised Islamist rule. The odds against it are huge, and becoming larger. But our task is solidarity with the Iraqi labour movement, ten or a hundred times than it has received so far.

Why does the USA breed violence?

BY SOFIE BUCKLAND

ON Monday 16 April a 23-year old South Korean student opened fire at Virginia Tech university, killing 33 and injuring at least 29. The latest in a string of shooting sprees going back as far as 1966, the massacre at Virginia Tech begs the question; why does this keep happening, and why particularly in the USA?

The killer, Cho Seung-hui, was clearly mentally ill, but there are too many common trends in mass killings, particularly school shootings, for the phenomenon to be solely the product of a series of deranged individuals. Other factors — the class background of perpetrators, the easily availability of guns in the USA and the general alienating unpleasantness of school life — need to be considered.

The Virginia Tech shootings fit the profile of most school killing sprees — a lower middle class student under pressure to achieve amongst more affluent students. Cho's suicide note denounced his fellow students as "rich kids" and "deceitful charlatans". Clearly the vast majority of students don't shoot their classmates, regardless of how much pressure they're under, but socialists must acknowledge the effect the education system has on young people — we might not, for the most part, turn to random mass violence, but the boredom and monotony of bourgeois education and the brutal, humiliating hierarchies that exist in schools and colleges play a large part in such tragedies. Similar gun violence in workplaces, such as the 2006 shooting of seven postal workers by a former employee, and within families, just serves to highlight how these brutalising conditions are not limited to school

days — they pervade capitalist society as a whole.

Living in small, isolated units, under tremendous pressure to achieve and accumulate wealth, attending repetitive, unfulfilling school courses or repetitive, unfulfilling jobs is the general pattern of life in all countries; but not all countries produce the staggering amount of random mass gun violence the USA does. The comparative insecurity of the USA, with no state healthcare, an even lower minimum wage than Britain, weaker unions and greater crime rate undoubtedly plays a part here, alongside the liberal availability of guns.

Virginia has some of the most liberal gun laws in the USA, allowing residents to buy one handgun a month, and not requiring background checks first. Whilst there is debate amongst socialists around whether we should call for stricter gun controls, and how, it is

surely the case that allowing and even promoting individual gun ownership in a society with such tensions is a recipe for even more random violence and mass killings.

We might not want the bourgeois state to have a monopoly on guns, but we don't want anyone a bit pissed off with school or work to be so easily able to resort to gun violence either. Individuals being able to buy guns (and in the case of the USA, powerful semi-automatic assault weapons) is an entirely different question from the availability of weapons for workers' militias in a potential revolutionary situation.

As socialists we want a society which doesn't produce such violence — it is important to address the social causes of violence as well as the need for better gun control, particularly when calls for controls have led to greater state and school power over pupils.