

Alliance for Workers' Liberty

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Motions passed , defeated, and remitted. (Discussion Bulletin 269).

Taking stock of the “new anti-capitalism”

§1. The anti-capitalist or global justice movement has been an important milieu for the AWL to intervene in for many years.

As participants, we continuously evaluate the nature of the movement, its tendencies, its composition, the role of the revolutionary left within it - and try to shape its direction.

§2. Our conference in 2000 noted the fact that large numbers of youth were becoming politicised by demonstrations, meetings, direct action and other protests. We registered the opportunities to discuss ideas such as the nature of capitalism, class, privatisation, globalisation, etc, with significant numbers of young people. At our 2004 conference, we noted that “a new radical generation is emerging - piecemeal, fragmented and diffuse”, evidenced in part by these mobilisations.

The development of the milieu §3. The new anti-capitalist milieu started to emerge as a loose “movement of movements” from the mid-1990s around such initiatives as the Zapatistas in Mexico, the anti-sweatshop campaigns in the United States, and the Jubilee debt campaign, but involving much larger numbers of young people than the relatively small activist cores of those various initiatives.

§4. The Seattle demonstration in November 1999, attended by 50,000 people with the significant involvement of US unions and youth from environmental and single-issue campaigns brought the various strands together for the first time in a highprofile public way.

§5. Hopes that seemed reasonable at the time for “Seattle” to mark the beginning of a revival of the US trade union movement have not been realised: that movement has stagnated and now split. However, the milieu which identified with “Seattle” has expanded. Since then, notable mobilisations have taken place in Washington, Millau, Melbourne, Prague and Nice in 2000, Quebec, Gothenburg and peaking in Genoa in 2001, when 300,000 demonstrated. The anti-capitalist milieu also yielded many of the millions who marched around the world against the war in Iraq in 2003, and the hundreds of thousands who turned out against the G8 at Evian, the anti-Bush events in 2003 and the G8 mobilisations in Scotland in 2005.

§6. Another measure of the movement’s impact is its large gatherings and events. The first World Social Forum (WSF) in Porto Alegre in 2001 attracted 20,000 people. The second in 2002 was double the size. Since then the annual events have attracted around 100,000 participants.

§7. Regional events have also been well attended. Around 50,000 people attended the first European Social Forum in Florence in 2002, and were joined by a million people marching against the war in Iraq. The Paris Social Forum in 2003 was also well attended and the London Social Forum in 2004 attracted

25,000 participants.

§8. The global ruling classes have managed to circumvent most of the protests. The WTO and G8 continue to meet and promote neoliberalism. Nevertheless the new anti-capitalist milieu is still a large and vibrant, though amorphous milieu in which it is possible to make propaganda for our ideas and to engage some of the best people in joint work.

§9. There are numerous tendencies within the milieu, characterised by a distinct attitude to the working class and the state. The predominant politics is bourgeois reformist, exemplified by the leadership of ATTAC and most other nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). There are reactionary anticapitalist tendencies, including localisers and Islamists. There are ostensibly revolutionary groups, such as the autonomists and the nominally Marxist left. And there is a lot of “soft anarchism”, characterised not so much by any doctrinal commitment to immediate abolition of the state as by a preference for one-off actions, affinity groups, - though some are involved in more long-term campaigning work.

The NGOs

§10. There are now millions of NGOs across the globe.

Some NGOs are very old and not even left-wing, for example the churches. But the number of NGOs, and NGO workers, has increased dramatically in the last 30 years. An increasing number of them provide information and material criticising neoliberalism and sometimes organise local activist groups (e.g.

Oxfam).

§11. Some of these NGOs do important work in exposing the behaviour of firms and governments. Others want little more than a liberal face on 21st-century capitalism. Very few look to the working class as the crucial social agent of change, though a handful make solidarity with workers’ struggles.

ATTAC

§12. The most visible organisation representing the reformist trend in the anti-capitalist movement is ATTAC France.

ATTAC was launched in 1998, following a call for an “Association for the Tobin Tax for Aid to Citizens” by the magazine *Le Monde Diplomatique*. It claims more than 30,000 members and was central to the mobilisations at Millau, Nice 2 and Evian. It overlaps with official politics, for example with the French Socialist Party. Some revolutionaries are active within it.

§13. The AWL believes that the Tobin Tax (a worldwide tax of 0.1% on all currency-exchange transactions) is not suitable as an immediate stepping-stone demand, because it does not start from grass-roots workers’ struggles. It would need a vast international mobilisation to enforce it on the world’s governments and the vested interests of international finance. It is not a full-scale answer to capitalism, because a mobilisation of that scale would not limit itself to taking only 0.1% from the super-rich.

USAS

§14. United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) represents the best example of a worker-oriented movement within the anti-capitalist milieu. It has groups in around 200 colleges in the United States, dominating student politics on campuses since it was founded in 1998. USAS has fought for campus workers to get a living wage and for college apparel to be made under non-sweatshop conditions.

§15. USAS has an office in Washington, with full timers and funding from unions. Before 2000, it was a conglomeration of different campus groups, lacking a national infrastructure to initiate campaigns. After a debate, USAS rejected the model of “consensus decision making”, in favour of an elected governing body and majority voting.

§16. USAS has evolved into a broad-based student-labour solidarity group. It played a significant role in the victory of the Kukdong workers in Mexico. It has helped trade unionists in El Salvador and in the Dominican Republic and supported the formation of the anti-war campaign United for Peace and Justice in 2002.

§17. USAS is a good example of the potential of the anticapitalist movement. It is a model to inspire the Students Against Sweatshops and the No Sweat campaign.

Autonomism

§18. Autonomism originates in “workerist” currents of the Italian left in the 1960s. Autonomism has included a wide range of different tendencies, including anarchists, the Disobedienti, (formerly the White Overalls), supporters of Toni Negri and the Black Bloc. Others Zapatista tendencies such as People’s Global Action have an autonomist tinge. The goal of many of these people is ‘liberated space’ - pushing the state back and ‘do your own thing’, (compost toilets, allotments, alternative theatre, squatting, cycle campaigns, etc).

§19. Autonomists have shown imagination and exuberance at anti-capitalist events. They focus on the molecular rebellions developing underneath bureaucratized, media-filtered official politics, emphasising the role of activity from below. We should also give similar attention to what they call “the murmuring among the proletariat”.

§20. However autonomists reject the idea of overthrowing the capitalist state power and replacing it with a workers’ state.

They also reject organising revolutionary parties as a necessary step towards working class self-emancipation.

The organised left

§21. The organised left is a minority within the anticapitalist milieu today. The largest organisations are Rifondazione Comunista in Italy, the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) in France and the Socialist Workers’ Party (SWP) in Britain.

§22. These organisations argue that the enemy is capitalism - with neoliberal globalisation its latest stage - and the advanced capitalist states. They also argue, at least implicitly, that the solution is socialism.

§23. However they frequently engage in political and organisational self-censorship, arguing for negativism (anticapitalist, anti-imperialism, anti-war) without spelling out what they are for. They rarely put the working class at the centre of the politics of the movement. Organisationally some of this left

often goes along with its worst practices of the reformists and autonomists rather than defending democratic procedures.

§24. For example Globalise Resistance in Britain is simply a transmission belt for the politics of the SWP, and now lacks even the veneer of a broad-based campaign. It has organised little solidarity with workers, nor has it sought to turn anticapitalist activists towards the labour movement.

§25. The anti-capitalist movement in Italy has been made up of a network of town and city “social forums” and the Rifondazione Comunista. At their peak in 2003, there were around 170 local social forums. The movement has organised large demonstrations in Genoa (and in response to the killing of Carlo Giuliani), Florence, against the Iraq war and against Bush’s visit.

§26. However since 2003 Rifondazione has lurched to the right. It has decided to join the new left coalition L’Unione (Unity) and to participate in a Prodi government if the left wins the election in April. And the local social forums have largely disappeared.

Latin America

§27. Events in Latin America have provided great inspiration to the anti-capitalist movement across the globe. The uprising in Ecuador, the water war and gas war in Bolivia, the uprising in Argentina and even the Chávez regime in Venezuela have all been setbacks for neoliberalism.

§28. There have been some notable successes for working class organisations in this process. The piqueteros, assemblies and occupied factories played a vital role in both the downfall of the old regime and the continuation of struggle in Argentina, despite the restabilisation under Kirchner. The uprisings in Bolivia were organised by the El Alto Regional Labour Confederation (COR), the COB trade union federation, peasant organisations, students, miners, teachers and the neighbourhood associations.

§29. However none of these movements have been able to threaten the rule of capital. Although vital defence organisations have been built and elections won by leftists, none of these movements have these cohered into mass revolutionary socialist organisations.

Differences within the milieu §30. Right from the start there have been widely differing strands within the “new anti-capitalism”, ranging from people close to the mainstream of the French Socialist Party or of the Brazilian Workers’ Party - who are at best anti-neoliberal, and scarcely militant even about that - to various forms of ultraleftism.

There have been a certain number of set-piece debates at Social Forums and at other levels; but, maybe because of the extreme diffuseness of the milieu, these debates have not led to some views vanquishing others, or new syntheses being formed, or the different views evolving through interaction and conflict with their rivals. Rather, the different viewpoints continue to exist alongside each other, not very much changed.

§31. The catch-all slogan of “Another World is Possible” is deliberately ambiguous, masking huge differences about the kind of alternative that is desirable. Some simply want a return to the kind of Keynesian economics and bipolar politics that dominated before 1973, or a softer, more humane capitalism.

Others are opposed to globalisation rather than to capitalism, wanting to retreat into alternative communities cut off from the global market, either locally or nationally. Very few fight for a perspective of turning the anti-capitalist milieu towards the working class and towards the task of rebuilding the labour movement to fight for socialism; but a much greater number are

open to that perspective.

§32. Arcane organisational structures have dogged the development of the anti-capitalist movement. The consensus model of decision-making has kept self-appointed leaders in place and tended to reinforce the lowest common denominator politics of negativism. It results, as at the London Social Forum, in the SWP and Socialist Action, hiding behind Livingstone, carving out opponents and impose their own politics. It also inhibits links between the movement and democratically organised workers' organisations, such as trade unions.

§33. The ban on political parties has had a similar effect, despite being a polite fiction in practice. The PT have organised most of the WSFs, Rifondazione organised Florence the LCR largely ran the Paris Social Forum, and the SWP and Livingstone's office had a big part in shaping the London ESF.

Yet political parties are formally barred from the movement.

This not only reinforces the limited democracy in the movement, but also hampers its influence on the electoral terrain.

§34. Bourgeois commentators, in the Financial Times for example, speculated that the wave of rallying to the flag which followed the 11 September 2001 Al Qaeda attack on New York would drown the "new anti-capitalism". It did not. In fact Bush's "war on terror" has become unpopular among a much larger constituency than the "new anti-capitalism", and probably thus provided it with a supportive periphery rather than quashing it.

§35. On the other hand, the activist section of that "anti-war" constituency has often been dominated by a negativist "anti-imperialism of idiots" (SWP in Britain; WWP in USA; less so, but still significantly, in many other countries). The intermeshing of the "new anti-capitalism" with the "anti-war" constituency has thus tended to melt its anti-capitalism into "anti-Bushism" rather than developing it towards a sharp positive working-class focus.

The activists

§36. An important question for the impact of the movement is what the activists have gone on to do. The "movement" in its broadest sense is now over ten years old, dating back to the beginnings of solidarity with the Zapatistas (1994) and Reclaim The Streets in Britain (1995). Over those ten years there must have been some hundreds of thousands of young people drawn into politics by one or another activity associated with the "new anti-capitalism". As with any broad, loose radicalisation, many of those hundreds of thousands will just have joined one or another action and taken their political commitment no further.

But not all. Over those ten years, what have those who are still politically-engaged gone on to do? A few have joined the revolutionary left, but in general, so far, no revolutionary Marxist group has recruited large numbers from the milieu.

§37. More reformist left currents show no signs of a large influx of new young activists, either. Some activists now do paid work for NGOs, small not-for-profit businesses or the voluntary sector. Others, for example from USAS, have gone on to become organisers and officials in trade unions. Many have gone to work but have not become active trade unionists in their workplaces.

§38. It seems that a lot of "new anti-capitalists" remain engaged, but see activity as a matter of being available to join this or that one-off "action", rather than as building an organised movement. They may call themselves "anarchists", but often what they mean by that is not adherence to one or another anarchist theory, group or publication, but rather just the "oneoff actions" mode of politics. This means that the "new anticapitalist" milieu

remains pretty much as "piecemeal, fragmented, and diffuse" as it was five or more years ago. It makes for continuing difficulties in developing organised activity within this milieu, identifying activists, and drawing them towards revolutionary politics. But the size of the milieu means that those tasks, though difficult, are still vital.

No Sweat and the anti-capitalist milieu

§39. The best attempt to connect the anti-capitalist milieu to working class politics has been No Sweat in the UK, and other organisations like it such as USAS. The principal virtue of No Sweat is that through direct links with actual workers struggles, it has helped workers win against capital and the local state in Indonesia, Mexico, Iraq, Haiti and elsewhere. Its focus on the working class marks it out from other anti-corporate NGOs such as the World Development Movement and War on Want.

§40. National unions CWU, NUT, RMT, Unison, GMB, Usdaw and PCS, plus NUS and other local branches are affiliated. No Sweat has brought together activists from different strands within the movement and worked constructively alongside existing campaigns, such as Labour Behind the Label, Haiti Solidarity Campaign, the Argentina Solidarity Campaign and others. It has also done positive work with unions such as the GMB. It has organised lively conferences, direct action, taken activists to demonstrations and is recognised by a wide layer of young people and trade unionists as a vibrant campaign.

§41. No Sweat has developed a student campaign, Students Against Sweatshops. There is an important milieu among students, typified by People and Planet, which have moved to the left following the G8 protests. Students Against Sweatshops is vital for relating to that milieu. It has organised a sweatshopfree campus campaign and a successful anti-sweatshop week of action featuring a Zanon worker in February.

§42. The full potential of No Sweat has yet to be realised.

Although some local groups exist, there is not yet a full functioning network of local supporters. No Sweat has a large contact list, but it is sustained by a relatively small layer of activists. Although a few No Sweat activists have become working class socialists, most have not taken that step.

Tasks of the AWL

§43. The anti-capitalist movement shows no signs of diminishing in size or activity. The AWL should continue to relate positively to it. Our politics include valuable experiences and lessons for young activists, which will help make their political endeavours more effective. We have answers to the basic questions for anyone who wants to change the world.

§44. We also have much to learn from the creativity of the movement and for making our politics accessible and relevant to a new generation. We need to engage consistently with the political ideas and debates that go on within the movement.

§45. We cannot predict exactly how the anti-capitalist movement will evolve. With the intervention of Marxists like ourselves, we can help galvanise an important section of a new generation to become working class socialist militants. If the politics of the reformists triumph, the movement will peter out into mainstream bourgeois politics. With the politics of the SWP, it will turn youth away from progressive politics completely. Our intervention is therefore vital to the future of the movement.

§46. Our approach should continue along the lines set out by past conferences. We aim to turn the best activists towards the

labour movement and to our revolutionary socialist politics. We support demands raised by the movement that are consistent with our politics. We don't evade arguments e.g. on the Tobin tax, where we disagree. We build No Sweat and Student Against Sweatshops as broad-based, internationalist, workers' solidarity campaigns. We take part in mobilisations and conferences like the ESF to make propaganda for our politics and to engage activists in joint work as far as possible.

Anti-racism

1. The growth in hostility to Britain's Muslim communities after 9/11 and 7/7 has combined with New Labour's failure to meet working-class aspirations for improved living standards, public services and social rights and its vicious legislative and rhetorical assaults on immigrants and asylum-seekers to create fertile ground for the growth of racism and the far right. We have seen a rise in racist attacks on black and Asian people, Muslims, asylum-seekers, migrant workers, Jews, and gypsies. In this situation anti-racist propaganda and campaigning is essential for any self-respecting socialist organisation. The AWL must concentrate more on anti-racist propaganda and make more interventions into anti-racist campaigns.

2. We should produce a high quality anti-racist broadsheet - and a simpler leaflet version that can be downloaded from the website - that deals with modern day British racism, including racism posed in terms of hostility towards Muslims (for instance, in terms of the so-called anti-terror laws, stop-and-search procedures by the police and anti-Muslim propaganda by the BNP), the recent rise in anti-Semitism across Britain and the rest of Europe, and also anti-immigrant and anti-asylum-seeker racism; and use this to help intervene into the trade union movement, and other relevant political arenas, to agitate for and thus mobilise a united front opposition to racism and fascism. Moreover, we should continue to utilise our existing pamphlet 'How to beat the racists', and (as and when resources permit) update this.

3. We should develop a "BNP watch" or "Racist watch" section on the website and in Solidarity that keeps an eye on what the BNP and other racist organisations are doing and saying and poses responses in terms of basic working-class, socialist politics.

4. We should as far as possible involve ourselves in the genuine local anti-fascist campaigning groups that exist (eg in Dagenham, Leeds, Keighley), while maintaining and making propaganda for our position that cross-class "anti-racist" collaborations with the Lib Dems, Tories etc will not beat racism and fascism, and that alliance with conservative religious leaders beyond immediate physical defence against the far right is wrong. Essentially, we must embed ourselves within relevant antiracist and anti-fascist initiatives to agitate for and thus mobilise links with the labour movement, and to put across our distinct politics on both the nature of, and how to fight, racism and fascism.

5. We should where possible use materials produced by and participate in campaigns organised by Searchlight, in so far as it develops local anti-fascist activism and criticises Unite Against Fascism from the left, but we should also remain critical of the organisation's general politics and approach.

6. There is a burgeoning movement for immigrants' and asylum seekers' rights, against deportations etc. We should involve ourselves in this movement, maintaining our principled position of opposition to immigration controls. The EC should discuss this question and prepare a basic set of proposals for the NC.

7. We should have a session at the 2006 summerschool on

modern day British racism and fascism.

8. We should make propaganda for a united anti-racist and anti-fascist campaign based on the labour movement and organising both local and national campaigns against the far right on the basis of a united campaign against racism and for good jobs, homes and services for all, immigrant or 'native', black or white.

9. We should involve ourselves in the work of Unite Against Fascism, whilst maintaining and making propaganda on our position that cross-class 'anti-racist' collaborations with the Tories, etc, will not beat racism and fascism. And also that alliance with conservative Muslim leaders is wrong.

10. UAF is a top-heavy popular-frontist organisation, with little internal life or grass-roots activism, tying the trade unions to an "anti-BNP" alliance with such people as Tory ex-MP Teddy Taylor and former Orange Order and Monday Club leader Martyn Smyth, and geared to asking people to vote for any "respectable" party against the BNP. We oppose this approach. However it would be tactically maladroit to attempt to make disaffiliation an issue in the unions. Most likely such an attempt would simply isolate us. Much better would be to positively propose that trade unions found a democratic, labour movement-based anti-racist/anti-fascist organisation capable of instigating grass-roots campaigning work. This approach will be the focus for our propaganda work and our practical proposals.

Building a Marxist presence in the unions

"The Communists are distinguished from the other working class parties by this only: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat independently of all nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole." Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party".

PENSIONS DISPUTE: THE RUSH TO A RESERVED RIGHTS DEAL

At last year's AWL conference we observed, "Despite the manoeuvrings of the various union leaderships, the possibility of co-ordinated public sector trade union action is not dead and in any event the case for such action remains strong. Indeed the very fact of the unions being involved in a cross public sector forum with Ministers on public sector pensions creates a certain de facto alliance. The issue is whether it will be an alliance of bureaucrats desperately seeking to narrow down the issues and to reach some sort of reserved rights pension agreement with the government to avoid a cross sector industrial dispute or an active alliance of trade unions determined to protect the integrity of the various pension schemes by ensuring that all employees enjoy the same benefits." Experience has shown that our expectation of a bureaucratic rush to a reserved rights deal was correct. A two tier workforce has been introduced throughout a great swathe of the public sector without so much as one bullet being fired.

THE PENSION DEAL

Although Union leaders have been quick to trumpet their “victory”, for understandable reasons they have not been so keen to explain the enormous downsides of the deal, which, in summary and without trying to deal with all the issues in a fully detailed way:

introduces a two-tier pensions workforce throughout the civil service, the NHS, and education - a dramatic extension to pay inequality as pensions are simply deferred pay.

has seen unions, including the “Marxist”-led PCS, calling on the Blairites to introduce two tier pension deals throughout the rest of the public sector in order to be “fair” to existing workers in local government and the fire service;

gives new staff the choice between paying higher contributions for the privilege of retiring at 60 — not the most obviously easy and attractive prospect for low paid staff — or to continue working until they are 65;

sees the Government “deduct” money and therefore benefits from the new schemes for future civil service, NHS and education employees to “pay” for the “reserved rights” of existing members (because all the schemes have to be paid for within the Government’s “cost envelopes”);

Leaves the unions *unable to negotiate, as opposed to suggest*, how the new pension schemes might be structured because, having already declared that exiting members will never fight for future members, they enter the “negotiating” meetings without any leverage whatsoever;

leaves existing scheme members vulnerable to future attack as more and more of the workforce is inevitably made up of staff lacking the “reserved rights” (beside the straight forward impulse to return to the attack for purely political reasons, the “cost envelopes” may even yet come back to haunt the unions if a New Labour or Tory or coalition government decides that the planned savings are not being achieved/that the schemes are becoming too expensive and exceeding the envelope);

abandons public sector unity by leaving local government and fire service workers, who are not covered by the deal, isolated (the fight of firefighters and local government workers clearly does not pose the same threat to New Labour as one also involving civil service, NHS, and education worker);

makes the fight for a working class wide political and industrial response to the pensions crisis much harder.

Undoubtedly New Labour’s retreat from its original plan *for some public sector workers* to change the retirement age to 65 (in 2013 or 2018, depending on sector) shows the potential of the trade union movement to protect workers. It is a lesson we should hammer home in our discussions with young people and would be radicals and anti-capitalists.

It is understandable that, for many members, having what civil service union leaders at least have misleadingly described as a “guarantee” of existing rights appears to be a very good thing indeed (there is no more legal or contractual guarantee of existing rights than when New Labour first announced its attack on pension age).

But protecting, for the time being, what existing members already have was not a proper trade off for refraining from industrial action, selling the pass on future members, leaving existing members vulnerable to renewed attack, and leaving other public sector workers to deal separately with the Blair regime. Effectively, the reserved rights are the Blairites’ breathtakingly cheeky trade off for a poorer scheme for workers hired from the summer of 2006 onwards and a free hand with local government and the fire fighters.

We do not have a crisis of life expectancy but of exploitation, inequality, and roll back of long-won rights. The roll-back continues with the imposition of a retirement age of 65 for future public sector trade unionists. According to calculations provided by the Government Actuary Department, one in 5 men and one in eight women (970,000 people) who reach 65 do not reach 67 (based on figures recorded between 2002 and 2004 - Daily Telegraph, 18/11,2005). According to the Parliamentary Monitor (January 2006), the average Glasgow male has a life expectancy of just 69.3 years The union leaders’ acceptance of an occupational scheme retirement age of 65 already moves the labour movement “five years closer” to Turner’s aim for the state pension.

THE MEMBERS WOULD NOT FIGHT

The essential justification for the deal is that the members would not fight for future members. However the fact is that the union leaders, including “awkward squad” General Secretaries positively sold the deal to the members they then blame for their own lack of courage and they did so without any genuine attempt to set out the downsides of the deal. They did not even seek members views and they did not seek to persuade members that a reserved rights deal would be too vulnerable to future attack or indeed that we should care about future members (who would come be joining from the summer of 2006). PCS has even produced a national recruitment leaflet on the back of the deal.

Moreover, each of the unions set themselves up so that a reserved rights deal would be on the cards. (The PCS leadership, despite their original strike ballot mandate also covering job loss and national pay, deliberately refrained from making these two issues central to its campaign work in a way that would have given an appeal for action a greater base of support. Long before the March action was called, let alone called off by PCS, the AWL and Socialist Caucus were urging the leadership to put pay and jobs on an equal footing with pensions, stressing that low and unequal pay means low and unequal pensions and the danger of narrowing the appeal of the dispute to pensions which would always hit individual members to a different extent).

THE LOST OPPORTUNITY

In settling for the reserved rights deal the union leaderships passed up a golden opportunity to reverse the years of working class retreat and defeat in pension provision, foreswore any wider labour movement vision of working class interests, and threw away the opportunity to place working class politics centre stage after years of the Blairite attempt to drive the organised labour movement out of politics.

For at the core of the pension dispute were, or at least should have been, rival visions of society. One bound up with a concern for “labour costs”, “competitiveness”, “labour market rigidities”, “pension fund affordability”, low taxes for the rich, the need to compel people to work longer. The other insisting on the right of working people not to have to spend all their relatively fit years working (or indeed working until they die), on their right to a decent standard of living in old age, and the need for a fundamentally more progressive taxation system and a more equal society.

On one level, these latter arguments would be nothing more than the “political economy of the working class” inserted into bourgeois society - although that would be a very good thing.

However, we need to place the pensions dispute in the context of a labour movement ruled by the Blairite cuckoo for some 15

years, itself the consequence of nearly two decades of defeat, retreat and passivity under the Tories.

In this context, trade unions organising *defensive* industrial action across millions of workers whilst raising *formally reformist but politically aggressive demands* (for example, for a significant increase in the value of the state pension, for the reconnection of the state pension to wage movements, for the compensation of private sector workers who had been swindled or otherwise denied their legitimate pension expectations, and for an end to the two tier workforce) would have seen the labour movement attract thousands of new recruits, dramatically reasserting and re-politicising itself as a national force, shaking up national politics, and providing an alternative vision (however limited) and an alternative pole of attraction outside of the Blair/Brown, Tory, Liberal axis.

The possibility of re-energising and re-politicising the movement is not an after the fact discovery to suit factional purposes. Similar points were made in our paper and leaflets, and in the bulletins of the left wing PCS grouping Socialist Caucus, before the planned March action was called off. They were also made, albeit in its typically bombastic and exaggerated way by the Socialist Party, which effectively runs PCS (with support from ex-SP elements (SSP), the SWP, CP and others).

Its journal, *The Socialist*, wrote on the 19 March, "Members of public sector unions organising over one million workers voted in favour of strike action to defend pensions. This represents the biggest action of its kind in Britain for over 20 years. Blair and Co imagine that the general election will be fought out with the Tories and Liberals by promising to cut back the jobs and conditions in the 'feather-bedded public sector'.

They are in for a rude awakening. Their attacks have unleashed the long slumbering giant of the organised trade union movement... This is just the beginning of a fightback. Public sector workers will be organising to escalate the action until the government backs down, drawing in private sector workers and all those who believe that workers deserve a living pension." Unfortunately subsequent history has not worked out quite that way (although the SP has its own twisting take on the Government's "partial retreat").

Once the strike action was called off the General Election was dominated by the anti-working class messages of New Labour and the Tories and Liberals without anything resembling a "rude awakening" to disturb them. Instead of private sector workers being "drawn in" the SP now advises that they will be inspired by the reserved rights deal to fight for their own pensions (presumably on a reserved rights basis and in the small percentage of the private sector that are organised into unions).

Nevertheless, the "slumbering giant" should have been "unleashed", it should have been "just the beginning of the fightback", and it should have drawn in other workers.

We should not forget all this that and we should not let others forget it when we explain the political and industrial differences between ourselves and not just union leaders like Prentis *but also the would-be Marxist leaders of PCS*. We need to emphasise "what might have been" in order to drive home the need for a different kind of union leadership, for a rank and file movement across the unions, and for the development of a serious Socialist organisation.

THE PCS MARXISTS

Last year we agreed to pay especial attention to the PCS - "a union of some 300,000 members... led by would-be Marxists (of

various stripes) whose conception of their role, of the membership (as of the wider working class), and what needs to be done on the key issues is radically different to ours - because one way or another it is going to throw up a host of lessons... for how socialists should act within the unions." Here is not the place to go into the detail of the experience over the past year but it has been a remarkable one, rich with negative lessons, that has seen, for instance: one SWP NEC member resign the SWP after voting for the reserved rights deal (against the organisation's line) and another write a ridiculous and horrible letter of recantation after voting for the reserved rights deal; The SWP then voting, in the Left Unity NEC slate elections, for all the NEC members who had voted to accept the reserved rights deal and against the majority of Socialist Caucus candidates who opposed it (it seems its ok to vote for the deal really provided you don't associate the SWP with the vote); The Left Unity/SP leadership: claim that the reserved rights deal was a partial victory but refrain from saying whether it was in any way a defeat; avoid all mention of a two tier workforce in bulletins to PCS members (although it's allowed in The Socialist, presumably on the grounds that PCS members don't read it); claim that it is "fully committed to getting the best possible deal for new entrants" but refuse to submit a pensions claim or agree a negotiating bottom line; misrepresent what is going on in negotiations; spin the most dreadful line on the isolation of fire fighters and local government workers (they "... go into the negotiations in the knowledge concessions are there to be had and that the threat of action brings results" whilst making clear that the threat of being isolated and the government cutting up rough were critical elements in the PCS leadership's decision to accept the reserved rights deal and... leave the fire fighters and local government workers to fight on alone).

Promise mass and growing action before the March dispute was called off; promise even bigger action if the government did not back down after the actual was called off; and avow that it is not afraid to take further action on behalf of the new members if the scheme is not good enough (of course it is!).

The PCS "Marxists" have in truth provided a left cover for the leaderships of the other unions, whom they happily denounce in private and in their press — in the "socialist" part of their lives. In their fear of being isolated against the Blairites, they nevertheless prefer, in their real active labour movement roles, a unity of the union bureaucracies to the hard work of building unity with the most active, militant, layers of the public sector unions.

PENSIONS - A CLASS PERSPECTIVE FOR THE MONTHS AHEAD

Instead of starting to divide trade unionists from spring/summer this year on the basis of reserved rights in pensions, we argue in the relevant trade unions for a broader class perspective that points to the need for a powerful industrial and political campaign that seeks, amongst other things, to: integrate the fight around jobs, privatisation, pay, and pensions into one public sector fight for a different vision of services and the treatment of service workers and service users (precise formulations depending on sector); drives up public sector pay (low and unequal pay will always result in low and unequal occupational pensions — most PCS members already work beyond 60 because they cannot afford to do otherwise); increase the pension accrual rate (MPs are on 1/40th of their substantial salaries for every year worked and the top bosses are on 1/30th — public sector workers are on 1/60th and 1/80th); significantly boost the state pension and reconnect it to wages; reach out to

private sector workers and pensioners' groups in their fight for pension justice; seek to build workers' unity across the European Union on the basis of a levelling up of terms and conditions, benefits, and pensions (major pension fights have taken place across Europe).

In view of the enormous amount of reserved rights deal propaganda that has already been thrown at members we seek in the Union conferences to relate to the issue through the details of the emerging new schemes for members i.e. we demand that the respective Executive Councils work towards removing the two tier workforce. This should reduce the demagogic attacks that will be made upon us as people who wish to remove or are willing to risk losing members their existing rights. The precise formulations will vary from union to union but we should minimally call for political campaigning around the positions outlined above and for solidarity with local government workers and fire fighters. Where politically possible we should seek to tie the campaign against a two tier workforce to industrial action over other issues.

GATE GOURMET The biggest other industrial battle over 2005-6, after the pensions dispute, was Gate Gourmet. Our coverage of this was critical of the TGWU's failure to try to organise further solidarity action, after the initial baggage handlers' solidarity strike, and their handling of negotiations, and follow-up from negotiations, with Gate Gourmet. Some AWLers have dissented from this view, and there has been extensive discussion on our e-lists and in some meetings. A vote-out on this debate at conference would serve little purpose - since there is nothing we can do now about the Gate Gourmet dispute - but the debate and discussion should continue.

PROSPECTS FOR 2006

If the unions had genuinely stirred themselves into mass action over pensions during the past 12 months we would have had a more beneficial environment to work within, explaining fighting policies in an atmosphere of struggle and mass activity.

Obviously longer term factors render recruitment from trade union activity hard: the blows of Thatcherism and Blairism; years of low strike rates; the collapse of British manufacturing; the supineness of the union leaders and their failure to recruit and organise for many years; the consequential absence of any trade unionism from whole swathes of the private sector and its disorganisation in much of the public sector; the low levels of young people now organised into unions; the formal and defacto, institutional and individual, de-politicisation of much of the labour movement (disaffiliation of the FBU and expulsion of the RMT with no strategic working class political alternative being advanced by either union, the collapse of local trades councils and trade union delegations to CLPs with no solid, alternative, local cross union organisational and political forms emerging, the disappearance of much of the CP/Labour left elements); the not very awkwardness of the "awkward squad"; the ideological and political hopelessness of what passes for the Far Left; the collapse of "socialism" as an alternative to capitalism.

It is possible to talk oneself into a certain fatalism, simply comparing 2006 to 1979. However, if we compare to the "long view" historical picture (rather than the unique circumstances between say 1945 and 1979), the picture for trade unionism in Britain shows considerable openings and opportunities. The fact is, there are millions of workers still in trade unions and a lot more workers who would join a trade union if the leaders actually lead the necessary battles to organise and improve the lot of millions of low paid workers - not the least the many hundreds of thousands

of non-members in public sector areas where the unions are recognised and the representatives working on facility time (often substantial facility time).

AWL has answers to the vital needs of millions of actual and would be trade unionists and we have detailed answers for the many thousands of activists and would-be activists who wish to organise those workers and lead them out of the present impasse of low pay, privatisation, pension scheme fold ups, job loss, long hours and so on and so forth.

In the workplaces, the branches, regional structures, left groupings and so on and so forth, we can and do come across workers ready to listen and be organised - provided we are seen as authoritative activists, with clear, principled and consistent industrial policies that have been hammered out over time, pushed forward at every opportunity, providing answers to the big and the little questions concerning the workers in the relevant sector. If we have answers for dealing with the bosses, in which our criticisms of the union leaders flow from those answers (rather than our criticism of the union leaders seeming to be hinged on critical comments in passing on the bosses), then we will be able to organise bigger forces than ourselves and, vitally, recruit.

The lessons of the pensions dispute (*which we should be driving home wherever and whenever we can*), the impending possible conflict involving local government workers and the reflection it casts on the reserved rights settlement, the actual and potential disputes in particular parts of the public sector as Blair/Brown push on with their "reform agenda" (for example, jobs and privatisation fight in DWP, national pay in the wider civil service, privatisation in education), the real pressure that competition will bring to bear on post office workers, all these and more give us a real opportunity over the next 12 months to explain our politics to the most politically/industrially advanced elements and, potentially, to much greater numbers striking against New Labour.

BUILDING A MARXIST PRESENCE IN THE UNIONS

As Hal Draper put it: "Other socialist groups have oriented themselves to the intellectuals and intelligentsia, and still others to the working class. They oriented themselves in these directions because they believed that these were green fields for recruitment. Now, that is one way of looking at social sections. It is not the movement of a class itself which will re-make society - it is your 'army.' And for the purpose of recruiting your army, you orient yourself to different sectors of society..."

"Now, that whole approach is completely alien to Marxism.

For Marx and for Marx alone the significance of working class socialism was not simply that you orient to this class because you can get the most out of them, but that it is this class which, when it gets into motion, shakes the foundations of capitalist society".

And the place where workers come together as workers, and can most easily understand their collective identity and strength as workers, is the workplace and the union.

At the same time we know, as James P Cannon put it, that: "The surest way to lose one's fighting faith is to succumb to one's immediate environment; to see things only as they are and not as they are changing and must change; to see only what is before one's eyes and imagine that it is permanent. That is the cursed fate of the trade unionist who separates himself from the revolutionary party. In normal times, the trade union, by its very nature, is a culture-broth of opportunism. No trade unionist, overwhelmed by the petty concerns and limited aims of the day, can retain his vision of the larger issues and the will to fight for them without the

party...

"The party is the highest prize to the young trade unionist who becomes a revolutionist, the apple of his eye. But to the revolutionist who becomes transformed into a trade unionist - we have all seen this happen more than once - the party is no prize at all. The mere trade unionist, who thinks in terms of 'union politics' and 'power blocs' and little caucuses with little fakers to run for some little office, pushing one's personal interest here and there - why should he belong to a revolutionary party? For such a person the party is a millstone around his neck, interfering with his success as a 'practical' trade union politician. And in the present political situation in the country, it's a danger - in the union, in the shop, and in life in general".

Such problems inevitably weigh heavier in a period like the present when revolutionary politics are unpopular and workingclass confidence is low. The answer is not to stand aside from the vital work to be done in the trade unions, but to integrate our trade-union activists well with AWL, and the AWL well with our trade-union activity.

As matters of routine practice, this means: 1. In our trade-union and workplace activity, always seeking out new people who may be interested in discussing our politics, and discussing with them; selling the paper, and using leaflets and petitions, to assist in this.

2. Making sure that all our trade-union activists are involved not only in trade-union activity but also in wider political activity - AWL meetings, forums, and schools; campaigns and demonstrations; etc. - and work to draw contacts met in tradeunion activity also into wider political activity.

3. Having a consistent, clear, visible political direction to our trade-union activity. "Politics" means not just motions on Iraq or such issues in union branches - though those are important - but also a clear, coherent, class line in what we say on industrial issues. Each fraction should make sure it is visible in its union and sector as the advocate of such a class line, which in the present situation revolves around two main themes, levelling up pay and conditions and organising the unorganised.

LEVELLING UP PAY AND CONDITIONS

As the Financial Times, no less, reports: "The story of pay in the UK over the past 25 years resembles that of the families featured in the 1970s television drama series *Upstairs, Downstairs* where the living standards of the householders contrasted markedly with those of the servants below stairs" (FT.com site, 28/09/05).

In *Workers' Liberty* 21 we reported that economic differentials had increased since Thatcherism not only between the rich and the poor, but also within the working class.

"The well-paid manual male worker ('upper decile') who got about twice as much as the lower-paid (bottom decile) in 1978 now [1995] gets two-and-a-half times as much. The larger inequality among non-manual workers has increased; so has the gap between non-manual and manual workers. The median adult male full-time non-manual worker got 41% more than the median manual worker in 1992, as against only 30% more in 1981, and 23% more in 1971. By 1992 the well-paid ('upper quartile') male non-manual worker got 3.3 times as much as the low-paid manual worker. The manual pay gap is the biggest since records began in 1886...

"Average real full-time wages for cleaners, or for bricklayers, went up only 3 per cent between 1976 and 1994, while better-paid workers gained 50 per cent (Social Trends 1995)".

This trend has not been reversed by the Blair-Brown government. The introduction of the National Minimum Wage must have reduced inequality a bit - but not enough to make a dent in the general trend. Since 1997 the Brownite approach to targeted benefits and tax credits has increased living standards for poorest pensioners and many parents. Nevertheless the New Labour hands-off approach to regulation of the labour market is in itself a creator of the very "social exclusion" their policies are claimed to deal with.

"In the year to April 2005, weekly earnings of full-time employees in the top ten per cent of the distribution grew faster than those in the bottom ten per cent... This has been true for six of the past eight years. During the years since the introduction of the National Minimum Wage in 1998, the top decile [the wage which is more than the bottom 90% get, but less than the top 10%] increased by 33.8% against a bottom decile increase of 30.2%" [i.e. in the wage which is less than the top 90% get, but more than the bottom 10%]. ("Patterns of pay: results of the ASHE 1997 to 2005", Office for National Statistics. <http://tinyurl.com/8rquc>.) Differentials have increased, not only between jobs and between employers, but also between people doing similar jobs for the same employer. According to a PCS survey published in 2004, the minimum rates for AAs (the lowest grade in the civil service) ranged between bargaining units from £8,834 to £13,715.

The deal made by public service unions in October 2005 means no more and no less than that, in future, conditions (or "deferred pay") will differ seriously between public service workers doing the same job for the same employer. Some will be on one pension scheme, others on a new, worse, one. Such differentials are already common in the private sector.

With the differentiation in pay and conditions come longer hours. A TUC study from February 2002, based on analysis of the government's Labour Force Survey and a TUC commissioned survey, reported that nearly 4 million persons or 16% of the labour force were working over 48 hours per week compared to 3.3 million (then 15%) in the early 1990s, and that the numbers working over 55 hours per week had risen to 1.5 million.

The average working week for the UK was 43.6 hours, compared to an EU-wide average of 40.3 hours. Long hours were particularly prevalent among managerial and professional workers of both sexes, and among male workers in more highly skilled jobs in manufacturing, construction and transport. The main reason given by manual workers for working long hours was the need to enhance earnings through overtime.

Along with the separation of "core" workers from "contracted-out" agency and casual workers has come an attack on "job security". The ideological accompaniment to marketisation is the employers' insistence that there is no such thing as a "job for life". Not only should we be campaigning for a living wage, but also for a living wage for life. We need to challenge the ideology that even in a time of so called economic growth and greater employment there can be no job security.

But neo-liberal structural changes within the labour market over the past decades have pushed relentlessly towards greater differentiation within the working class. The stripping-out of the provision of cleaning, catering, and other facilities, usually (but not always) "low-skill" labour, leads to lower pay as well as minimal conditions. And even when unions fight for levelling up within sectors, they find that the ownership and control of employment policy in these areas is often spread across several sectors. Carillion, Balfour Beattie, Mitie, for example provide facilities to companies across the private and public sectors.

Another structural change that has led to low pay and

conditions is the use of agency and other forms of temporary labour. The UK Government has effectively so far sabotaged the European Union directive giving rights to agency workers. This is a key issue that the trade union movement is formally united on. Fighting for the unions to convert that formal unity into an effective campaign against the Government will be an important part of our drive for "levelling-up".

Fundamentally, the increase in differentials within the working class has come about because of the weakening of trade-union organisation. The converse is also true. Trade union organisation cannot be rebuilt, except episodically or sectorally, by tactics focused on getting better deals for a minority of workers and leaving the rest in the "too difficult" box. We must fight for the unions to set their sights on levelling up pay and conditions across the industries in which they organise - between employers; within employers, between "core" and contracted-out or agency or casual workers, etc.

Our comrades in the PCS, and their allies in Socialist Caucus, have for a long time argued for PCS to wage a national civil service campaign for national pay, levelling up to the best pay rates, and tied to a campaign on pensions and jobs.

Nominally and disingenuously, the PCS leadership has had a 'national pay claim' for a few years, but it has steadfastly avoided campaigning and fighting for it.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union "Campaign 2000" in Victoria - a drive based on "pattern bargaining", i.e. levelling every workplace up to the "pattern" of the best conditions - is a successful model. The Australian government is now introducing legislation which tries specifically to ban such "pattern bargaining".

The general "levelling-up" approach is relevant in every sector. We should promote it everywhere.

ORGANISING THE UNORGANISED

"In autumn 2004, the rate of union membership (union density) among all workers was 26.0 per cent, a fall of 0.6 percentage points compared with 2003. Union density among employees is higher, at 28.8 per cent, although this too has fallen from the 29.3 per cent seen in 2003.

"Union density is slightly higher for women than for men and higher among older employees. More than a third of those aged 35 and over were union members, compared with a quarter of those aged 25 to 34". (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=4>) The 2003 figure was an increase on 2002 (29.0%), and a 30,000 rise in the actual number of union members. Set against the sizeable rise in public sector employment, which brings a semi-automatic rise in union membership, these figures are poor.

From 1998 public sector employment rose every year to stand at 5,826,000 in September 2005. This was 663,000 higher than in June 1998.

The rise will not continue. Moreover, in 2003 only 11% of 16-24 year olds were union members, while 35% of over-50s were. Unless the unions change their orientation, continued privatisation and the mere passage of time, not to mention future economic crises, will reduce union membership in coming years.

In 2004, 18% of workplaces had a majority of union members, and in 27% of workplaces a union (with some members in the workplace) was recognised: these figures show decline from 1998, when 22% of workplaces had a majority of union members, and a union was recognised in 33%. The decline in union recognition has been sharp in smaller workplaces - from 28% of workplaces with ten to 24 employees in 1998, to 18% in 2004. The percentage

of workplaces engaging in any collective bargaining over pay fell from 30% in 1998 to 22% in 2004. (Workplace Employment Relations Survey).

In short, while "organising" has become the accepted wisdom of any half smart trade union bureaucrat over the past few years, the official union talk about "the organising agenda" has not been matched by actions.

We need to emphasise our own agenda on organising. This should include:

1. Recruitment strategies which are committed to local selforganisation rather than relying on recognition deals discussed nationally.
2. Lay control of both newly organised workplaces and the union structures which they interface with.
3. Union structures that integrate newly organised workers with other organised workers within a sector.
4. The principle that organising is about organising the class.

The most fundamental problem here, however, is the willingness to fight of the union leaderships. Unless unions fight and win better pay and conditions for workers, including those workers who have fallen behind as differentials have increased, no amount of increased organising budgets will rebuild the unions.

We must advocate in the unions that they turn, not just to recruiting new members, but to giving the new members the means to organise and to win better pay and conditions.

The distinctive organising approaches of the pre-World War One Industrial Workers of the World can be a model here. The IWW organised workers often previously considered unorganisable - lumber workers, railway construction workers, seasonal harvest workers, agency workers - transient, casualised workers, with no experience of union organisation, and often with few effective political rights.

The IWW practised:

- * industrial unionism (as against craft unionism)
- * energetic class-struggle agitation, propaganda, and agitation
- * low membership fees
- * low or no initiation fees
- * concentrated, high-intensity waves of organising
- * addressing workers in new areas with a set of demands to be won by the union once organised (developed after a lot of preliminary discussion with workers in those areas) rather than with general agitation about the advantages of having a union in the abstract; following up the recruiting drive with immediate preparation for action on those demands
- * organising areas by getting volunteers to go in and take jobs in those areas, then talk union on the job
- * using colourful, high-profile public agitation
- * helping new recruits to elect their own job delegates and committees of delegates, and to take control of their own organisation.
- * trying always to make industrial action short, sharp, and decisive. If a dispute dragged on regardless, constantly and imaginatively trying new active tactics - never leaving the workers passive
- * an open, democratic approach, with disputes always run by strike committees elected from the workers and regularly reporting back.

The IWW found it hard to consolidate a mass membership and a permanent on-the-job organisation anywhere (except, apparently, the Philadelphia waterfront). Even after its spectacular success in the Lawrence strike of 1912, IWW membership in the textile factories quickly shrank back to the small activist minority.

In terms of trade-union tactics, the IWW's decisive mistake

here seems to have been its “principle” of never signing agreements with the bosses. You could join the IWW to be a revolutionary activist, or to organise a more-or-less immediate strike in your workplace - but not for routine, “quiet” tradeunion activity.

That false principle can be rejected while still adopting the IWW’s positive methods.

Another method used recently by independent union organisers in Mexico and around Free Trade Zones in other countries, and also to some degree by unions in some richer countries such as Australia, is trade-union organising by visiting workers door-to-door in their homes, rather than at the workplace.

In some unions in Britain today, rank and file control over organising drives is an issue. A model to follow here is the RMT’s method of paying rank and file members’ wages for days which they take as unpaid leave from work in order to do union organising.

UNION UNITY ON AN INDUSTRIAL BASIS

Together with the basic drives to level up pay and conditions, and to organise the unorganised, must go union unity on an industrial basis.

That includes:

- * Uniting, and if possible merging, unions in each industry (e.g. RMT and ASLEF in rail);
- * Joint union committees for each workplace and employer;
- * Unions which organise “core” workers reaching out to organise contracted-out, ancillary, casual, and agency workers.

THE “AWKWARD SQUAD” HAS NOT ATTEMPTED A CONCERTED INDUSTRIAL FIGHTBACK

The new generation of union leaders:

Paul Mackney, NATFHE, elected 1997

Mick Rix, ASLEF, elected May 1998 (ousted in June 2003 by right-winger Shaun Brady - who was then, in his turn, sacked by the union Executive in August 2004 and replaced by the leftish Keith Norman)

Andy Gilchrist, FBU, elected June 2000; Matt Wrack, FBU, elected May 2005

Billy Hayes, CWU, took office July 2001

Jeremy Dear, NUJ, October 2001

Bob Crow, RMT, February 2002.

Mark Serwotka, PCS, took office June 2002 (elected December 2000)

Derek Simpson, Amicus, elected June 2002

Tony Woodley, TGWU, elected June 2003

Possibly Paul Kenny (became acting general secretary of the GMB in April 2005), and the person he replaced - Kevin Curran (who was elected general secretary in April 2003 and resigned in April 2005) should also be included in this “awkward squad”.

There has been a clear shift in union elections to the left - and to electing people who present themselves as tradeunionists, out to improve their members’ pay and conditions by organisation, rather than just as “partners” with government and employers. Woodley has had left majorities elected to the TGWU GEC in his wake; Simpson got a left almost-majority elected to the Amicus executive.

All that is good. It plainly shows something we can build on in the rank and file. But from (a minority of) union members voting,

in their homes, for more militant leaders, to those union members being more organised and confident in the workplace, or those militant leaders organising victorious struggles, is a big step. And one not yet taken.

The task of building an alternative Left current and a rank and file movement is not the less urgent for the election of the so-called “real trade unionists”, the-not-very-awkward “awkward” squad whose reputations have been burnished by the recollections of the likes of Barry Reamsbottom and Ken Jackson. Their handling of the pensions dispute should make us sharply critical of these people.

It is of course a good thing that they have been elected, rather than the old right wing with its habit of representing the employers and the government to the members rather than the other way round. But their election is a demonstrably inadequate step forward. If we are to build ourselves and help build and shape the wider Left in the unions then we have to counterpose consistently our policies to theirs, however “diplomatically” that might need to be done on occasions.

In any case the fact of “real trade unionists” taking up senior posts does not lessen the need for a rank and file movement. Our 1988 pamphlet, “Lessons of the Postal Strike”, warned, “... even principled left wingers can become right wing bureaucrats if they take up positions and responsibilities in the union machine without possessing clear political ideas or without being willing to subject themselves to rank and file control.” To document the bleak facts is not to suggest that they are inevitable or unchangeable. It is simply to state soberly where we are, so that we can better change things.

Despite more favourable conditions than the 1990s (lower unemployment, greater capitalist growth), and despite some small victories here and there, none of the “awkward squad” has led a big and vigorous, let alone victorious, national campaign on pay and conditions. That fact by itself is sufficient to explain the adverse situation on other counts.

Andy Gilchrist was by no means the worst of the “awkward squad” when he launched the FBU’s pay campaign of 2002; but that ended in a fiasco. Billy Hayes, again, is by no means the worst of the “awkward squad”; but under his leadership (and more specifically under the leadership of his Deputy General Secretary Postal, Dave Ward, who claims to be more left wing), postal workers, who were the most militant sector of the British working class, accounting for one-third of all strikes, have negotiated away thousands of jobs and seen conditions worsen and militancy shrivel. As with the pensions sell-out, the crucial deal here, “Major Change”, was supported on the union Executive by would-be Marxists, in this case the SWP.

“Three years ago, Royal Mail had the worst strike record in the UK, losing an average of 50,000 days every year to industrial action. In the first quarter of 2005, this was down to 866 days”. (Financial Times, 22/07/05).

There were fewer strikes recorded in 2004 than in any year on record. Some were bigger, so the total of striker-days was higher than in 2003, and higher than the very low rates of the 1990s (except 1996), though still low by historical standards.

(The average for the 1980s was 7.2 million striker-days per year, and for the 1970s, 12.9 million).

“In 2004 904,900 working days were lost in the UK as a result of labour disputes - almost double the total lost in 2003 (499,100), less than three-quarters of the total lost in 2002 (1,323,300) and higher than the average for ten years 1994 to 2003 (560,200).

There were 130 stoppages of work in 2004 because of labour disputes - the lowest annual total on record.

The 2004 figure of 130 compares with 133 stoppages in 2003 and 146 stoppages in 2002”.

(<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/article.asp?id=1177>) Union membership has grown, if at all, very little more than could be expected from the semi-automatic effects of increased public sector employment.

The “awkward squad” has done some good things by putting left-wing motions through TUC and Labour Party conferences, but even that may be losing momentum.

“Up until recently its members met as a group before TUC General Council meetings. This is no longer the case, either because of a lack of will or, more likely, because people like Derek Simpson would not come along anyway”. (Socialism Today, December 2005) There is no evidence of any general increase yet in the number of workplace union representatives (about 230,000 on the best available estimates, which probably err on the high side). Nor in their activity. In 2004 there was a union rep in their workplace at 45% of workplaces where a union was recognised (13% of all workplaces), down from 55% in 1998 (WERS).

There is no evidence of a general increase yet in active participation in Trades Councils, union branches, or stewards’ committees. The anecdotal and impressionistic evidence is that stewards’ committees have declined more sharply than the number of trade unionists, or the number of stewards; and that the decline has not been reversed.

Whilst the axis of the official trade union movement has moved left with the election of nominally left leaders and the passing of left policy at Congress, the right has not gone away.

Unions such as USDAW, Community, and FDA have formally right policies and leaders. The remnants of the right are given much more weight by Blairites as the reasonable voice of working people, and through the promotion of their ideas in forums such as Unions 21, the Fabian Society, and IPPR they have access to the political mainstream. Since 1997 the Blairites have made use of tame trade unionists and their apologists within the Labour Party. This has led to the developments of the “partnership agenda” in Government initiatives such as Union Learning and the Union Modernisation Fund.

There are still many trade union bureaucrats in powerful positions in “left” trade unions who are from a right-wing tradition. There are many new trade union officials and future leaders who are being schooled in company unionism. Even many who call themselves left use the “machine” methods of the old right.

UNION “LEFTS” AND RANK AND FILE MOVEMENTS

By historical standards, seven million trade unionists and two hundred thousand union activists are a formidable base to start from in struggling to improve workers’ conditions and rebuild workers’ organisation. The fact is that the start, in a serious way, has yet to be made. The “awkward squad” has not done it.

The inadequacy of the Left opposition (such as it was) to the reserved rights deal on public sector pensions -much of the Left actually supported it - demonstrates yet again the need for us to organise wider layers of the Left around our distinctive industrial policies, to link them as best we can across the unions, whilst simultaneously advocating at every opportunity the need for a rank and file movement based on the official branch and workplace structures, with real roots amongst the membership, a serious programme to actually take the class forward, and seeking to base itself around real disputes.

For all that we ourselves were inadequate in acting upon our decisions of last year, it remains right to propagandise and agitate on the need for a rank and file organisation because it is necessary, it points up the inadequacies of the existing Left trade union groupings and in particular the SP and SWP, and it expresses our basic democratic working class politics. Indeed without us, it is difficult to see how such a movement will be built in Britain in the foreseeable future. If the Minority Movement could not have existed without the Communist Party we should be telling ourselves that a modern Minority Movement cannot exist without ourselves.

The “awkward squad” leaders are responsible for their own actions. Part of the explanation for their weakness, however, is the weakness of the organised union “lefts” behind them.

At present, none of the “awkward squad” has behind him or her an effervescent body of left-wing activists, rooted in the workplaces and strong in the union, which can both push the leaders into militant stances and ensure that those militant stances can effectively translate into militant action in the workplaces.

The union “lefts” have mostly not grown recently, despite their electoral successes. They are significant because they often include many (though not all) of the best activists in the unions, at least of those activists who have chosen to interest themselves significantly in union affairs outside their workplace. Weak though they are, they are sizeable compared to AWL’s small forces. But here again, a sober assessment of the deficiencies of what exists is necessary in order to be able to change things. The union “lefts” are mostly made up of older activists, often worn down by years of trade unionism as damage-limitation. They function mostly as electoral (and sometimes resolution-passing) machines, even though some of them are led by activists of the revolutionary left.

The Amicus left, Amicus Unity Gazette, a mostly old-CP/ left Labour body, won 23 out of 48 places on the Amicus Executive in the December 2003 elections. Given that Amicus general secretary Derek Simpson had been elected in June 2002 as a left-winger, that should have made possible big changes in a union long notoriously right-wing and unmilitant. In fact Simpson has allied himself with right-wing full-time officials from the old regime, and the left bloc on the Executive has split, expelling its more left-wing members (SWPers) for refusing to condemn the Multiplex strike. Unity Gazette is weak in terms of meetings and outside-of-elections activity.

In September 2005, Simpson victimised three full-time officials associated with the Unity Gazette left wing (Socialist Appeal in this case, rather than SWP). A conference of Unity Gazette in February 2006 had a narrow majority for Simpson’s supporters against the left wing, and removed the Socialist Appeal people from the Gazette’s committee.

The TGWU Broad Left, long secret, is now semi-public. But it is not a militant rank-and-file grouping. It is primarily an electoral machine whose majority politics can be roughly described as Tribune or soft Stalinist. It is also small. A long-prepared TGWU Broad Left day school in October 2005 drew dozens rather than hundreds.

GMB has no organised left.

Four of the bigger public sector unions have relatively visible left groupings. A major factor in our ability to intervene in these groupings is whether or not we have active and experienced AWLers involved in London, where the biggest concentrations of left activists are. In PCS and CWU we have such involvement; in Unison and NUT, less so, as yet.

Unison United Left claims 150 people at its founding meeting

in late 2001, and 171 subscribers to its e-list now. It has few meetings and rarely campaigns in a coherent way on industrial issues. Its weakness even as an electoral machine was shown in February 2005 when its candidate for Unison general secretary, Jon Rogers, won 18,306 votes, 7.5% of the total turnout and 1.2% of the 1.5 million Unison members eligible to vote. A major reason for that must have been that Rogers' election campaign was very weak on the big pay-and-conditions questions for Unison members, like pensions, and focused more on criticising the union leadership for not carrying out union policy against the Iraq war. In its functioning as an organisation, Unison United Left depends very heavily on a few SWP members.

PCS Left Unity dominates its union, and claims 100 to 150 at its last conference in December 2005. It is much dominated by the Socialist Party, which is also strong among the full-time officials in the union. There is a smaller but more militant left group within Left Unity, Socialist Caucus, within which AWLers are influential.

NUT has two left groupings, the Socialist Teachers Alliance (which is bigger and more "political", but with politics focused on supporting Cuba, boycotting Israel, etc.) and the Campaign for a Democratic and Fighting Union. In the June 2004 election for NUT general secretary, the STA/ CDFU candidate, Ian Murch, won 45% of the vote. The STA opposed the October 2005 pensions sell-out, while the CDFU members on the NUT Executive supported it. The NUT also has a left paper within the union, Campaign Teacher, sponsored by branches rather than by the STA and CDFU, and some history of branch-based activist networks on big issues (SATs, Academies, etc.) The CWU Broad Left controls the Engineering section (the majority section) of the Telecoms Executive. The involvement of postal members in the CWU Broad Left is mainly on an individual leftie basis. It has no influence on policy or elections within the postal constituency. The predominant political faction in the CWU Broad Left is the Socialist Party, plus many people who were in Militant in its heyday. The CWU Broad Left is however a broad church of opinion, dividing on the basis of Labour Party/ anti-Labour party and industrially hard/ soft.

The RMT (especially on the London Underground) possibly has a larger body of industrially-based left-wing activists among its membership than any other union. Yet it has no organised left. There have been a few attempts in recent years to get one going, but all have been small and semi-secret.

NATFHE has a left grouping called "Rank and File", heavily influenced by the SWP.

These groups have no organised links between them. The last attempt to establish such links, in 1996, petered out. The history of successive attempts at such links is summarised at <http://www.workersliberty.org/node/view/4603>.

In the AWL conference document of 2000, before the rise of the "awkward squad", we wrote: "The left, especially the revolutionary left, are still very weak in the main manual and private sector unions. The old CP influence is all but gone too".

That is no longer exactly true. In many unions, and not only in the public sector or in white-collar trades, the left is - or appears! - strong at general secretary and national executive level. At workplace level, however, it remains more-or-less unchangedly true.

We must work towards a model of a rank and file movement which is primarily based on workplace activists and workplace organisation, coming together primarily to promote struggles.

We must fight to turn the existing union lefts as far as possible in that direction, and also gear ourselves to (wherever we can)

rebuilding union activism, and drawing in new young union activists, from the ground up.

That, too, is where the most important of our new industrial recruits to AWL will come from - the people who in years to come can and must lead a major revival of the industrial organisation of the British working class.

REVIEW OF LAST YEAR'S CONFERENCE DECISIONS

The general picture is that our own weaknesses, and the weaknesses of the movement around us, have prevented us pushing through the desirable goals we set ourselves in our 2005 conference resolution.

We organised an AWL trade union school in September 2005.

The Little Trade Union Committee has continued to function, but attempts to get a bigger Industrial Committee functioning have not worked well. Recommendation: strengthen the Little Trade Union Committee by adding one or two additional members, and mandate it to organise extended meetings from time to time. The Trade Union Committees should experiment with 'meetings' by way of Internet Relay Chat and phone hook-ups, as well as face-to-face.

It remains a key task of serious working-class militants and socialists to propagandise and seek to build an alliance across the public sector. In the coming period all AWL members should be seeking to establish formal branch and regional links between their union organisations and those elsewhere in the public sector. The local government dispute provides both an opportunity and a requirement of solidarity to do just that.

We did not implement last year's decision, to try to initiate a rank and file public sector alliance, at all well - partly but very much only partly, for reasons out of our control. The resulting meeting was held late and was very small. However, it agreed to experiment with coordinating and issuing information on public sector attacks (e.g. through an e-bulletin) and to see what wider elements can be drawn in.

We have produced a new draft of AWL policy on union democracy, <http://www.workersliberty.org/node/view/4812>, and await responses from the AWL union fractions.

BULLETINS

Tubeworker and Off The Rails continue (with a considerable response to Tubeworker), and our PCS comrades have produced material through the Socialist Caucus. Decisions to produce AWL bulletins in CWU and Unison have not been carried out (except at the union conferences). We should seek to revive Postalworker; and continue to encourage AWL union fractions to produce regular bulletins (i.e. not just at conferences), even if on a modest scale and mostly made up of material also utilised in the paper. Everything points to the need in our industrial work for much greater political sharpness, a much higher level of internal organisation, a much more assertive and frequent espousal of our distinctive "industrial" policies (be that under our own banner or that of a wider grouping), and more cohesive and focused efforts to work with wider groupings of the best militants and to win new recruits.

INTEGRATING YOUNG COMRADES INTO TRADEUNION WORK

In the pensions battle, once again our size has proved an impediment to getting our ideas and arguments across and to

making a real difference in individual unions in the pensions dispute. It is probably the case that our biggest impact has been in PCS, where comrades are able to work amongst the Left Unity and the Socialist Caucus, and our banner could be carried by an AWLer who was the only member on the union Executive to vote against the sell-out. But even in PCS our impact is strictly limited by lack of numbers.

Since the last conference we have had little success in persuading student comrades to get jobs in certain areas and to add their commitment to our campaigning trade union work. We must keep up the pressure on this issue and properly monitor the results. The importance of trade union activity, and therefore the need for young comrades to get jobs in key areas, should be a feature of AWL student events.

We should reaffirm our 2005 decision to prioritise getting newer and younger comrades into the Tube, the Post, BT, and the Health Service. Such jobs have vastly more potential for comrades to become experienced, competent, class-struggle Marxists, with a real influence among workers and a real ability to recruit new workers to Marxist politics, than voluntary-sector jobs or jobs as union organisers.

And an infusion of energetic younger comrades into our union work will help us recruit more successfully from the trade-union work itself. Trade Union comrades have to be able to demonstrate that they have the answers to the basic industrial issues confronting union members. But it is vital that those who we are working with do not see us as the best trade unionists but as the best socialists who in consequence are the best trade unionists. There is no other way of persuading someone to make the move from working with us as a good trade unionist to joining us as a socialist.

The AWL must put down deeper and more extensive roots in the trade union movement. It must win positions - not in the sense of simply acquiring another office or more administrative work but in the sense of using positions to build a base in unions, to reach out to more workers and more activists, to learn from them and to help provide the answers they need to the small and big issues confronting them.

THE FIGHT FOR WORKING-CLASS POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND THE LABOUR REPRESENTATION COMMITTEE

And even when they have a relatively free hand, those union leaders who were elected to be “awkward” are not being very awkward when confronted with Government power. Witness their failure to consistently challenge the Labour leadership over low pay, privatisation, the anti-union laws and other issues. The role of the “big four” unions and their role as Labour Party affiliates is key here. Three out of the four have so-called “awkward” leaders, and even Dave Prentis of Unison is known to play left to keep his popularity with his own members. The Labour Party trade union link is a key focus for both the limits and possibilities of current political trade unionism.

The limitations, however, demonstrate not simply the inadequacies of the existing Labour affiliated union leaders but the lack of a widely held Left perspective for restoring working class political representation.

It isn't just a matter of the stupidities of stunts like Respect, or indeed even of the lack of a genuine labour movement orientation, but the lack of any rational conception of how working politics can be restored and any rational conception as to what working class politics might consist of. Instead we are treated to an endless

diet of denunciations of “neo-liberalism” without any positive working-class alternative. To some degree the debate between the Blairites and sections of the European political elite is the former's concern that the latter are too protectionist, too restrictive, and too protecting of workers' rights. Left hostility to the “American model” does not tell us what we should advocate instead and leaves the Left seeming to be nothing more than either the advocates of the status quo or the hopeful beneficiaries of EU social protection.

We should fight in the unions for them, in the election for Labour leader to follow Blair, to nominate a candidate who will be loyal to basic trade-union policies. We should fight against the fatuous illusions expressed in such statements as Tony Woodley's on 19 February: “A ‘Blair Two’ isn't the answer, it's a ‘Brown One’.”

The Labour Representation Committee was set up as a Labour left organisation that reaches out beyond Labour party members and trade unionists from affiliated unions. It is supported by 4 Unions, CWU, RMT, FBU and the Bakers Union. It has several hundred individual members. It has an Annual motion and delegate based Conference. Individual Campaign group MPs are involved in the LRC, most predominately John McDonnell. All AWL members should join individually and argue for affiliation of their Union branch to the LRC. The LRC is an amalgam of activists from Labour left currents with trade union activists both from affiliated and non affiliated Unions. People who are not members of the Labour Party can join the LRC. The LRC attracts a range of people, from the Marxist left to left Labour loyalists.

Our strategy to build the LRC is that of encouraging the growth of a broad labour-movement based organisation with a working-class political agenda. Depending on developments in the Labour Party, this organisation has the potential to have a significant role in any split of the Labour Party on a labourmovement versus Blair-Brownite basis and/or as a grouping within the Party that argues for working class politics. It has a key role in advocating our stand on working-class political representation.

Current LRC campaigning priorities include employment rights and the Trade Union Freedom bill, housing policy, against privatisation, and against marketisation of education and health, and Labour party democracy.

The “breakthrough” possibility for the LRC that would see its political significance increase is the affiliation of one or more of the big four Labour Party affiliated unions. The most important thing we can do, immediately, even with our own small resources, is the development of LRC groups on a union-by-union basis. Such groups exist in CWU and PCS.

We should seek to initiate building them in Unison, NUT, TGWU-Amicus, etc.

Additions to trade union document

1. Welfare State Campaign

For many on the left the LRC and the crisis of working class representation in politics seems an abstraction compared to short cut demands for a new party now. We have called over the years for a campaign to link the issue of political representation to the defence of the Welfare State representing the independent political economy of the working class. Despite our best efforts and some well attended lobbies and conferences we failed to build the

Welfare State Network (WSN) into the broader CND style campaign we desired.

Nevertheless the idea remains sound and remains part of our strategy for rearming the TUs and broader labour movement in the fight against the advance of the market and privatisation into all areas of life. Some positive developments described below should give us hope for the future but as yet the circumstances would not allow for us trying to just relaunch the WSN again.

1) John McDonnell is pushing for the development of a national Public Sector Alliance involving some of the more prominent members of the 'awkward squad' but also including some smaller TUs not usually seen as likely suspects. It's clear that he sees a focus outside of parliament for this strategy.

2) The campaign against the Pension Reforms should not be written of despite the missed opportunities and sell outs documented above. The very successful Local Government strike day and likely follow up action is at risk of being marginalised. But as details of the individual sectional deals within the 'reserved rights' framework become clearer the possibility of getting back to some more generalised action improves. Already the FBU are considering action as the governments fine detail on the deal will include a strict limitation on ill health retirement etc. Similar 'small print' may lead to sectional action in the Health Service and beyond. Unison's APF withholding funds from the LPs local election campaign, although a gesture, does demonstrate that they are willing to draw a line on this issue.

3) The development of the Education Alliance in defence of state education. The White Paper has seen an outraged response both inside the PLP and also the trade unions and some community campaigns. It is clear that Blair/Brown are committed to get the main thrust of their privatisation of individual schools through on the back of Tory votes. Local responses to public meetings etc do demonstrate a willingness to fight on this issue including a significant proportion of the LP.

4) Further rounds of commissioning for PFI, LIFT (PFI for primary care) and Independent (Private) Treatment Centres are likely to exacerbate the current financial crisis in the NHS. The recent round of redundancies, the ongoing job freezes etc are all the result of NHS budget being leached by the private sector. The setting up of the Keep Our NHS Public Campaign/SOS NHS and the potential for UNISON and others to actually commit to a campaign are important changes to the previously isolated community campaigns and lone voices amongst professionals. Again the setting up of local groups which draw in community based campaigns, patient groups etc are significant. There seems to be a broader acknowledgement that local campaigns alone are limited within the framework of a developed national market for healthcare overcoming the localism that has limited these struggles.

Whilst these are all very positive developments they won't automatically lead to a unified campaign to defend the Welfare State or transform the Labour Party. They are less likely to find any satisfactory outcome in the one solution, build our party prescription of RESPECT of CNWP.

It should be our task to build these independents campaigns separately and provide the political framework of the LRC to pull them together to force the pace of change and regroupment inside and outside the LP that we have long seen as necessary. Unlike the Stop the War Campaign these are clear class based campaigns where we are unlikely to be excluded for or exclude ourselves on the basis of our particular politics. Unlike the rest of the Left we still consider strategy to be an important part of the socialist struggle and will not be reduced to the empty rhetoric of more

action now, build our party sloganeering of our competitors.

Education and Health are relatively strong areas for us in terms of our trade union implantation and the respective campaigns will be open to all comrades anyway.

Conference therefore resolves: 1) To prioritise these campaigns in the next year.

2) For each branch to nominate a comrade to be in charge our local interventions into the campaign against the education white paper and KONHSP and take a lead in forming and building local groups.

3) To consolidate and formalise a page in the paper to Defending the Welfare State with an emphasis on local reports. These campaigns to be included as regular agenda items at branches, the EC, NC, TU committee etc.

4) Both the UNISON and NUT/NATFHE fractions to produce a monthly bulletin for activists in their respective areas circulated via our existing email lists and broader forums i.e. UNISON Health Activist e-list. Given the freedom of electronic copy these could be compiled from articles in the paper etc and would have the form of a sector wide workplace bulletin.

5) Through the SGUC, LRC etc. we seek opportunities for joint working on these issues. The recent adoption of a joint Pension Campaign strategy by the SGUC has been largely a paper commitment from the SP but we have worked jointly with the AGS on the issue and independents have picked up on the initiative.

6) We have the overall aim of recreating a national campaign, as circumstance allows, sponsored by the LRC etc. This is a longer term aim but one that should be present in our propaganda from the beginning.

2. Trade Union Freedom Bill

This AGM recognises the opportunities to push forward the case against the anti union laws in the campaign for a Trade Union Freedom Bill. This Bill is currently being promoted by the United Campaign for the Repeal of the Anti union Laws and the Labour Representation Committee. We note that it is also has much mainstream labour movement support being the current Conference policy of both the TUC and the Labour Party. We recognise the danger of a watering down of the current demands in the Bill through the actions of the right of the trade union movement, especially in the area of the right to take solidarity action, therefore all AWL Branches will

1. Produce an action plan to maximise our opportunities to promote our policies on the anti union laws in the local labour movement including obtaining invites for AWL speakers in trade union branches and other labour movement bodies through the use of UCRATL and LRC

2. Build support for a rank and file participation in the lobby of parliament on the TUFEB in the autumn

3. Labour Party conference

This AGM calls on comrades to look at the possibilities of becoming delegates to this years Labour Party Conference, either through affiliated Unions or local Constituency Labour Parties.

Cartoons and Hijab

Two motions passed.

1

Religious conservatives are on the march against free speech and secularism. The violent demonstrations that stopped the play by Gurpeet Kaur Bhatti in Birmingham, the Christian drive against *Jerry Springer The Opera*, and the support of most religious groups for gagging free speech in the Religious Hatred Legislation, are all part of this reactionary religious offensive.

The international Islamist campaign against the cartoons in the Danish paper *Jyllands-Posten* has reinforced the urgent need to oppose religious reactionaries and the widespread influence of cultural relativism. Britain among the European countries is most strongly in the grip of cultural relativism, the liberal establishment, the press, the leadership of the labour movement, and the left have totally failed the test presented by religious revanchism and in particular the systematic Islamist campaign against freedom of speech. We said in *Solidarity*: "On 1st or 2nd February, 22 papers in 13 European countries published some or all of the cartoons.

Papers in the Czech Republic and Poland followed on 4 February". None of the British press, none of the left press other than our web site joined this act of protest against an Islamist attempt to crush freedom of expression. Britain had a soft ban on the cartoons imposed by everyone from the Government, the right wing press barons, through the liberal press and to the so-called revolutionary left. In these circumstances, we were right to put the cartoons on our website.

While the liberal establishment are just proving once again their unwillingness to defend basic democratic liberties the left has plumbed new depths by repeating its tragic support for Stalinism or third world nationalism in farcical backing of religious backwardness.

2

This AGM believes that the AWL was correct to react to the campaign against the Danish cartoons depicting Muhammed by a demonstrative assertion of our opposition to religious censorship and of our solidarity with those who suffered as a result of having taken a stand on the issue. We recognise that some of the Danish cartoons could have been interpreted as identifying all Muslims as terrorists. The AWL will continue to campaign against religious censorship, for secularism and against laws and institutions that give a privileged position to religion (e.g. faith schools, the law against religious hatred).

Solidarity with Iraqi workers

1. The situation in Iraq three years after the invasion and overthrow of Saddam is one of chaos and instability within which none of the contending forces (the occupying powers, the Sunni-Baathist insurgency, the Shia and Kurdish parties, the labour movement) is strong enough to impose its will on the others.

This stalemate is reflected in: * the continuing inability of the parties elected in December 2005 to form a government representative of all sections of the Iraqi people; * the inability of the US and its allies to defeat the insurgency or even to find

reliable allies with mass popular support; * the inability of the 'resistance' to force the occupation out; * the possibility of a civil war, in which any effective central authority would cease to exist.

2. This situation is far messier and has not resulted in any of the more clear cut scenarios we foresaw.

Our 2003 AGM document stated: "Out of this US/Iraq war could develop a political quagmire which would open up a whole new chapter in the history of imperialism. After an initial success against Saddam Hussein, the USA could get drawn into trying to impose effective (if not formal) colonial rule on Iraq, by way of heavy involvement by the US military to suppress mass popular resistance to a replacement regime which lacks a domestic political base and becomes in effect just a puppet government." Our 2004 document stated: "31. The US would certainly like to find some way to hand over authority to Iraqis, and (gradually) withdraw its military forces. This looks harder in practice. The possibility remains that the US and its UK allies could get bogged down in Iraq for a long time; or they might look to some other, non-democratic way to hand over 'authority' (e.g. covertly sponsoring a coup of some kind through which a general takes power who is able to appear as not simply US-imposed but can be guaranteed to work within rules acceptable to the USA).

32. Or perhaps they will manage the transition successfully.

There are historical precedents for American-dominated military occupation leading to the creation of functioning, prosperous bourgeois democracies - Europe and Japan after the Second World War... The parallels are limited: there was nothing comparable to the Iraqi 'resistance' in the post-war period; the scale of the devastation - and of the economies which had suffered it - was far greater." While there is certainly a quagmire, things have turned out differently. Elements of both these scenarios have come about - there have been significant steps towards bourgeois democracy through elections, as we recognised in 2005, yet no stable state has emerged. While there are no obvious candidates for a puppet government and there is no indication that the US wants or is able to impose direct colonial rule, the occupiers still exercise an effective veto over developments. These two elements - an elected government that does not represent US interests and the continuing power of the occupation - are in tension and potentially serious conflict, though it may be in the interests of both to negotiate a modus vivendi. The nihilistic 'resistance' does not represent a viable (let alone desirable) political alternative.

We have neither full self-determination and democracy, on the one hand, nor a US-imposed regime, on the other. Nor is it likely that either of these alternatives will come about in the near future. The most likely course is a continuation of the present chaos with the prospect of development into civil war.

Sectarian tension is increasing in Iraq. The development of that sectarian tension into full-scale civil war would mean not only the almost certain destruction of the labour movement and any democratic organisation, but also the bloody tearing-apart of Iraq into statelets controlled by political Islamists or the Kurdish warlord parties. A positive development has been the creation of community self-defence militias aimed against sectarian violence in some areas. This would have to be on a massively larger scale to counter the trend towards civil war.

3. For Iraqis who were initially happy with the overthrow of Saddam and hoped this would lead to something better, the occupation has brought the senseless brutality and slaughter of civilians, the economic looting by US rulers, the arrogance, the casual deployment of lethal firepower, arbitrary arrests and torture, and a failure to make good the damage of the war so that many of the basic necessities of life, such as a reliable power supply still do

not exist.

There is therefore a bitterness and disillusionment with the results of the occupation even amongst those not politically sympathetic to the 'resistance'. Recent opinion polls show between 70-80% of Iraqis favouring withdrawal, with a broadly equal proportion favouring a deadline of six months and of two years (though the proportions of Shia, Kurds and Sunni differ radically). 76% believe the US would not withdraw if asked.

In the face of mounting losses and the growing unpopularity of the war in the US, there is emerging among sections of the US ruling class who supported the war a willingness to consider a 'cut and run' withdrawal from Iraq. While this not an immediate prospect – and would mark a political defeat on the scale of Vietnam – the US desire to minimise its own casualties is already leading to an abandonment of parts of the country. A sudden scuttling by the USA would tip the country into a fullscale civil war. But the USA's current course leads more slowly to the same conclusion.

In Solidarity 3/80, the article "Iraq: Has The Time Come For "Troops Out Now"?" noted: "Should socialists therefore adopt the call for immediate US-British withdrawal, on the grounds that catastrophe is almost certain and delaying withdrawal will only worsen it?"

The case for that gets stronger by the day. The occupying forces were always an element in the chaos, as well as a "promise" that they might set a framework in which a bourgeois-democratic government with enough support to survive could emerge as an alternative to the chaos. More and more now, they are only a component of the chaos...

The sober truth needs to be clearly recognised that the trend of events is away from any benign scenario for Iraq's future. "The occupation has thus not been a force standing apart from a descent into chaos created purely by intra-Iraqi conflicts set loose by the overthrow of Saddam. The US and UK do not just 'hold the ring'. Their policies and actions have played a major (though not the only) role in creating a situation that may lead to civil war. They have acted as recruiting agents for the 'resistance'.

4. The situation has degenerated beyond the point where a 'benign' scenario (which has been unlikely since the end of the invasion) is on the cards. Almost all the likely scenarios in Iraq, based on current trends, are unfavourable for the labour movement.

Even if the occupation forces succeed in stabilising the fragile state structure, those left in control are unlikely to show sympathy for labour and democratic movements. The electoral majority is held by Shi'ite Islamists who are responsible for the Decree 875 of August 2005, in principle establishing full government control over all trade-union funds, and for the introduction of a constitution which deletes the right to strike stipulated, at least in principle, in the Transitional Administrative Law.

The forces that could create a more positive outcome – above all, the labour movement – are not at present strong enough to be effective in changing this situation. For that to become a possibility, the Iraqi labour movement must survive and develop, organisationally and politically. It has since 2003 been able to benefit from the openings created by the overthrow of Saddam. This 'breathing space' is a contingent result of the invasion and the lack of a stable regime, on the one hand, and its own weakness, on the other. It is currently on the defensive, marginalised by, on the one hand, the rise to power of the Shi'ite Islamists (in uneasy alliance with the US/ UK occupation forces); on the other the sectarian conflict.

5. AWL was against the war. We offer no support to the

American, British, or any ruling class, their states, their politicians, or their armies. We analyse the motives of the American, British and other ruling classes in their dealings with Iraq; solidarise with the new Iraqi labour movement wherever it clashes with the occupiers; indict US/UK misdeeds unsparingly; say to those Iraqi socialists whom we can reach and to people in Britain that they cannot rely on the US and UK to bring democracy. We long ago, before the war, pointed out that the occupation of Iraq would not curb Islamist terrorism.

We say that the peoples of Iraq must have self determination. Self-determination and the ending of the occupation is a precondition for consistent democracy in Iraq.

We maintain a stance of hostility to the troops and we do not call on the British and Americans to stay.

6. Our programme for Iraq remains as spelled out in our March 2005 pamphlet: Solidarity with the Iraqi workers' movement Against the US/UK occupation of Iraq Against the Islamist/ ex-Ba'thist militias For a secular democratic republic Full civil rights for all, including equality for women Self-determination for the Kurds and rights for minorities For a workers' government in Iraq.

7. Our practical activity in Britain on the question of Iraq should focus round building Iraq Union Solidarity.

Remitted:

AWL political education

1. What the working class needs, in order to emancipate itself, is organisation and clarity of ideas. The job of a revolutionary working-class grouping like ours is to promote that organisation and clarity of ideas. In our three-word summary of what we do - "agitate, educate, organise" - education is pivotal. Agitation, if it is not to be demagoguery, must be spun from, and consistent with, a well-understood programme and world-view. Organisation, if it is to make progress on a scene already full of ineffectual talk by trade union leaders about "the organising agenda", must be based on clear ideas of whom to organise, how, and for what purposes.

2. We are a small grouping. Today, as is the norm, though not the unbreakable norm, the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class. Our progress necessarily depends on convincing people of a set of ideas radically different from the conventional wisdom, and refuting that conventional wisdom. We have to educate; for that, we need selfeducation.

3. Currently we are not able to operate as a faction in a lively broader political labour movement in which many activists can and do learn a great deal of working-class socialist politics, and gravitate to Marxist groupings, "on the hoof", in the process of the debates and battles within the movement. We are not surrounded by a broad looselysocialist culture. There are some sections of the trade-union movement where we can intervene in an active political life shaped by a broad loosely-socialist culture, but they are limited. There are many young people interested in our ideas, but often they know no more of "socialism" than they do of "bimetallism" or the "single-taxers". To be effective, we have to train ourselves to be effective propagandists - communicators of many ideas to small numbers of people - able to draw people towards our ideas from the most diverse starting points. People will gravitate to us if we develop a strong gravitational pull -

which we can do through the clarity, confidence, vigour, and tenacity with which we "evangelise" for our ideas, and no other way.

4. In so far as there is a "left" culture around us, it is predominantly a negativist, solely anti-capitalist and antiimperialist, culture, very weak on positive working-class socialist ideas. There must be many people who, looking at the left from a distance, identify it as the "supporters of political Islam", the "boycotters of Israel", or the "anti- Europeans". We have to combat and refute not only the dominant conventional wisdoms of the ruling class, but also the dominant conventional wisdoms of the loosely-defined left.

5. All these considerations point to political education being central for us.

6. Political education requires individual reading and study. But also more. If it is to serve revolutionary politics adequately, political education must be collective, too. It is not just that the participants in a school comes away knowing more than when they arrived, as they might by spending the same time with a book. They get to learn more by way of a collective AWL political discussion. We develop a shared understanding. We know that other AWL members have taken part in the same discussion and can take the same ideas out with confidence into the world around us.

If participants come to the event as people already fairly knowledgeable on the subject treated, they come to take an active part - leading small-group discussions, for example - in spreading that knowledge, and to learn by experience how to explain issues clearly and concisely to new people.

7. This approach should lead to an increase in shared understanding. It does not imply marginalising or outlawing dissent. Dissenters take part in collective political education, putting their individual views, and get heard with respect.

They have a chance to convince - or be convinced. If they fail, at least they will know the majority view better, and the majority will know the dissenting view better. In fact, if individual dissent is to play a valuable revolutionary role, as it can, it is vital that it be integrated into a process of collective discussion, rather than left at the flabby socialdemocratic level, where there is an official "line" - and then an incoherent scattering of individual "reservations", doubts, and dissents, which generates only practical sluggishness, not the sort of intellectual friction which sharpens ideas.

8. On this basis AWL conference 2005 decided to schedule regular political day schools, nationally organised though each school is run twice, once in London and once in the North. These events are not just for newer comrades, or younger comrades, or comrades relatively free of trade-union responsibilities - but for all comrades to attend - to learn, to teach, or both.

They are organised monthly, with exceptions for the summer and Christmas periods, and for the times around AWL conference and summer school.

We have organised four schools. The attendances have been as follows:

- Marxism and the trade unions, October 2005. London 26, Sheffield 26
 - Globalisation and imperialism, November 2005. London 45, Leeds 17
 - AWL and SWP, December 2005. London 22, Sheffield 28
 - Israel and Palestine, February 2005. London 25, Leeds 19
- The schedule for the rest of 2006 is:
AWL day school on Ireland 20 May Sheffield; 3 June London
AWL summer school 1-2 July London

AWL day school on the revolutionary party 30 September
London; tba North

AWL day school on the Russian Revolution 21 October
Sheffield; 28 October London

AWL day school on the history of the AWL 25 November
London; tba North

10. The schools have been organised not as lecture sessions - though those have their proper time and place - but primarily round small "workshop" groups with a "facilitator" limiting himself or herself to a short introduction and short summings-up or comments. This increases active participation, and enables us to draw more comrades into a "teaching" role, by them leading the small groups. The schools have been prepared for by the circulation of (short) reading material and of discussion points for the small groups.

11. They have worked well - giving comrades access to much more basic theoretical discussion, and with a richer range of contributions, than they can normally get in their labour movement work or in the smaller framework of AWL branches. We should continue with them.

12. We have a larger periphery than in 2005, though still fragile and diffuse - student contacts, contacts through work in No Sweat, and, in patches, some contacts through trade union work. With the Blair-Brown government more and more unpopular, we can recruit new socialists - so long as we can gear our members to turning out, seeking and following up contacts, acting as effective advocates of Marxist ideas.

The essential fuel for such a turn is vitality of ideas. We should continue and develop the schedule of day schools in order to develop that vitality of ideas.

13. The EC is instructed to review the following ideas for improving the schools.

a) Drawing more comrades into planning the reading and discussion points.

b) Planning the make-up of the small "workshop" groups, and lining up more knowledgeable comrades in advance to lead them, rather than leaving the groups' make-up to more-or-less random distribution on the day.

c) Having the schools "chaired" so as to hold the "facilitator" to time limits.

d) Investigating and experimenting with other educational methods.

Student report

It remains the case that, as recent AWL conference have noted, universities and colleges are by far the largest concentrations of young people in Britain. Since youth recruitment is vital for revolutionaries, work in colleges and in the student movement is therefore a priority.

Since the early 1980s the AWL and its predecessor organisations have born this out in practice by exercising significant influence in and recruiting significant numbers of people from the British student movement.

It is also the case that, on most campuses today, left-wing activity such as public meetings organised even half-way consistently and competently will attract people. There are no longer usually ready-made forums such as large left-wing Labour Clubs to operate in, but there are still a lot of students who want to take part in left-wing activity at one level or another and whom we can make contact with - IF we are properly organised. Recent recruitment provides evidence of how public routines such as

paper sales can make a real difference.

Since at the latest 2002 NUS and the student movement generally has flagged, and so has our intervention in it, resulting in not only lesser influence but a smaller Student Fraction.

We have begun to turn that round. The balance sheet for the last year is broadly positive, though there remains a long way to go if student work is to play its role in ensuring a healthy future for our tendency.

i) We have been involved in establishing a new broad NUS group, Education Not for Sale. Events at the 2005 NUS conference allowed us to rally small numbers of activists around the perspective of a new student left organisation; following a successful conference in September 2005, this project has gathered larger number of people around it and gained some life, although it still requires extensive development both in terms of its campaigns and in terms of establish a large self-perpetuating core of activists.

ii) As a result of our participation in ENS our intervention in NUS has been significantly stronger, allowing us to win back some of the ground lost to Socialist Action/Student Broad Left between 2002 and 2005. Our comrades' intervention in NUS Women's Campaign deserves particular mention here. At the same time, it has not been enough to noticeably slow the continual collapse of NUS and most student unions political and activist culture. Like many student unions, NUS is moving fast towards a 'business model' of increasing powerful full-time managers, less campaigning and more emphasis on commercial services.

iii) We have taken part in the establishment of a Students Against Sweatshops project which is semi-autonomous from No Sweat with strong possibilities for the development of a campaign organising many of the very large numbers of young people in Britain who want to fight sweatshop labour. The antisweatshop week of action held in February had many problems, but was broadly-speaking a success. Developing work in People & Planet has been slow, though there is now some possibility of getting the organisation as a whole to take up antisweatshop/ workers' rights campaigning. Significant P&P activists appear to be moving left, more as a result of the G8 protests etc than our influence.

iv) Through these various interventions we have expanded our periphery and recruited a small number of very valuable young activists (both students and non-students) and gained a small number of valuable sympathisers.

However, we have also lost a (smaller) number of useful comrades for a variety of reasons in the last six months. We need to both organise a push on increasing the AWL profile on campuses where we have people (paper sales, meetings etc) and one on educating our members, sympathisers and periphery. We have also experienced other problems within the fraction; we have not had a proper fraction meeting since October 2005 and the fraction has not used the series of AWL day-schools to their full potential in terms of educating ourselves and our contacts about our politics.

Our priorities for the next year should be: i) To continue to help to develop Education Not for Sale, arguing for the creation of a full-blown membership campaign which becomes decisively the dominant force on the NUS left and has links with activists on most university campuses.

ii) To maintain and attempt to expand our presence in NUS and train comrades to take a leadership role in their student unions as well as in grassroots activity.

iii) To devote more resources to helping to develop SAS as an activist network which organises serious campaigns on and beyond campus in the manner of the US United Students Against Sweatshops. The student fraction should discuss about how work

in P&P can be progressed more rapidly and effectively.

iv) To organise a major drive to recruit from our contacts, expand and strengthen politically our close periphery and educate our comrades and sympathisers. To increase the profile of AWL on campuses where we have people through establishing stronger routines of paper sales, public meetings etc. The experience of comrades in places such as York show that even basic "profile-raising" activity such as regular paper sales gets results. Branches should be prepared to help student comrades organise such activity on their campuses.

v) To put more effort into building and maintaining fractional discipline, primarily by organising and holding quarterly AWL student fraction meetings. We will also make more effort to ensure that student comrades and contacts attend AWL day-schools and educationals.

Addition to anti-racist motion

Furthermore, we should expose the politics of multiculturalism as essentialist, capitalist-complicit and, ultimately, divisive in a genuine labour movement response against racism, and put forward our political alternative.

Motions defeated or fell

On hijab - defeated

The road taken by the British left has included several clear milestones, and a major one was their support for the campaign against the French ban on the veil in state schools.

It was correct to attack the motives, hypocrisy and the practical impact, leaving religious schools in place, of the ban. It was wrong for Marxists to oppose the ban on the veil in schools, which had in effect, been in place in French state schools.

The veil is the touchstone issue in the battle against Islamic reaction; its political use is central. Opposing the French, flawed but secular tradition marked a major capitulation by the British left especially in the context of a unanimous anti secular, cultural relativist consensus in Britain.

Marxists should not shy away from the truth for fear of being unpopular in this context. The veil is a tool and symbol of the oppression of women; it is the cutting edge of Islamic reaction and should not be allowed in schools.

(Note: the opposition to this text was motivated on the basis of reaffirming AWL 2004 policy as follows:]

1. We oppose the hijab as a social mechanism of female subordination, and we oppose pressure on girls to wear the hijab. Our priority is to help and support secularists and leftists in the mainly-Muslim communities who fight that pressure.

2. We are for universal secular education. We should seek to launch a counter-campaign in Britain against faith schools, the intrusion of religion in ordinary state schools, and the toleration, in the name of multi-culturalism, of Muslim girls being excluded by parental pressure from parts of education.

3. We do not support the new French law. It will probably be counter-productive. It fails to allow the necessary space for dealing sensitively and respectfully with teenagers' desires to experiment in dealing with the world around them.

1. *The AWL should campaign for equal comprehensive and mixed secular education for all. This will include; Opposition to all religious and private schools and an end to all state funding and charity status for schools that are not secular state schools.*

This state education system would be compulsory as would be the full curriculum ending the right of parents to withdraw children from any parts of the syllabus including sex education, sport science.

2. *We should defend minorities against racism, standing shoulder to shoulder with 'communities' against racists but politically we aim to split 'communities' along class lines breaking workers and youth away from religious authority and reactionary tradition.*

The debate surrounding the French law on the hijab has exposed the unwillingness of the broad "far left" to stand up for democratic and socialist values in general, and secularism in particular. Combating this political degeneration is an essential part of regenerating an authentically socialist culture in the labour movement. Propaganda and agitation for secularism in both state institutions and the education system are a vital component of the socialist fight for democracy. We therefore reaffirm our support for - Complete separation of religion and the state.

Disestablishment of the Church of England; abolition of the Monarchy and the House of Lords - The abolition of blasphemy laws, not their extension to religions other than Christianity.

- A secular education system. Abolition of private schools; all state schools to be fully secular and comprehensive.

Over the coming year, the paper should carry articles on the question of secularism; the teachers', student, UNISON and other relevant fractions should investigate the possibilities for campaigns supporting secularism in education.

On Muhammad cartoons - defeated

To include in motion 2:

"It would have been better not to have republished these particular cartoons ourselves".

On Muhammad cartoons - fell

The debate within AWL on the Danish cartoons has been distorted by an understandable desire to define ourselves against the unprincipled British 'left' consensus. By publishing the cartoons however, we did not distinguish ourselves clearly enough from the reactionary arguments and racist prejudice against muslim communities in the UK. We failed to fully acknowledge the deliberately provocative actions of those who wished to exploit the important issue of free speech for racist and reactionary ends. We also failed to acknowledge and explore the nature of the relationship between race and religious identity seriously. We must plug ourselves into the reality that 9/11 and 7/7 have reconfigured racism and racial identities. The more minority Muslim communities have come under attack, the more they have wished to assert their Muslim identity - Racial and religious identities have intertwined. We believe that it is an urgent necessity to challenge religious fundamentalism by working to split

communities with religious affiliations on a class basis and should therefore be adopting this strategic approach to our political work.

Amendment on Iraq - defeated

Add at the end of point 6: As a consequence, we adopt as a central demand, prominent in our press, alongside our support for and solidarity with the workers' movement and our opposition to the 'resistance', a generalised opposition to the occupation of Iraq. This may be expressed in a range of slogans such as 'No to the occupation of Iraq', 'End the occupation of Iraq', 'For an independent, sovereign Iraq.'