

# Scottish postal workers' strike

## A victory for solidarity

### Editorial

THE end of last year witnessed the very first signs of what could turn into a new revival of industrial militancy.

In a magnificent and truly inspiring display of solidarity rank and file postal workers shut down the whole of Scotland. The dispute started over the demotion from full to part-time status of just five workers in one office, but, through flying pickets, solidarity strikes and walkouts against the victimisation of workers who refused to handle "re-directed" (i.e. scab) mail it became an all-out strike across most of Scotland.

Despite threats of victimisations, court proceedings against union activists and instructions to return to work from the CWU union leadership, the rank and file held out and won an important victory.

Management reinstated all full-time jobs that had been downgraded and agreed to no victimisation. The only negative element was the fact that the dispute was called off without management backing down on its underlying cause — their attempt to abolish the second delivery. They want to convert vast numbers of postal workers from full to part-time status, thus saving on wages, and use improved sorting technology not to benefit the workers, through reduced hours, and the public, through an improved service, but to boost their profits.

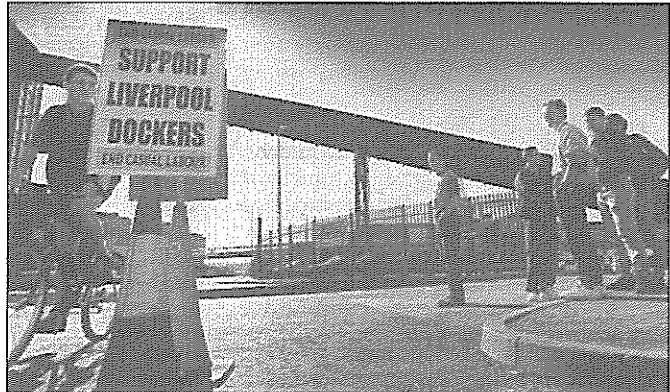
The Scottish strike could have been turned into an all-out fight to defend the second delivery in the weeks before Christmas (the best conceivable time for a postal strike) and in future the issue will be raised again in circumstances not necessarily as favourable to the union. But, nevertheless this was an important victory.

It was followed by unofficial walk-outs at Ford and Vauxhall where workers are gearing up for a fight over pay and conditions. Despite the strings, the latest rejected offer at Vauxhall already amounts to a wage increase and a cut in the working week — a sign of improved bargaining power.

These come together with a series of defensive battles — the Liverpool docks, Hillingdon hospital cleaners and porters, JJ Foods workers, Merseyside FBU — and we could just be on the verge of a real revival. However, a cold assessment has to say that we are not there yet, even though a few more victories like we saw in Scotland would have a huge psychological effect far greater than the boost they would make to the strike statistics.

Nevertheless the overall situation still remains unfavourable.

We are in the midst of a long and deep ebb in the industrial struggle. Strikes are at their lowest level this century. Union membership and density continues to decline. The TUC affiliated unions have



Mersey docks: the return of solidarity

lost a full third of their membership since 1979. National or cross industry disputes are becoming rarer, though they have not disappeared entirely (as they did in the period after the defeat of the General Strike in 1926 — not to reappear until the early '50s). The anti-union laws and the pressure of unemployment provide a major obstacle to any revival of militancy.

In turn, the overall political situation and the stranglehold of the bureaucracy over the movement magnify the effects of the objective situation. This could be seen most clearly last year in the way the ASLEF and UNISON health leaderships squandered a real mood for struggle over pay in their respective sectors. Sell-out is the only way to describe the outcome, as it was in the Tate and Lyle dispute, which was called off by the GMB and AEEU leaders without any gains.

Underpinning the sell-outs is not only bureaucratic timidity but the general perspective of waiting for the election of a Labour government, which is shared by all sections of the bureaucracy, from the AEEU's hard right [and its newly elected "soft left" President Davey Hall] to the official TGWU left. This does not mean that it is impossible to draw the official leadership into supporting action, but it does make it exceedingly difficult to develop the kind of co-ordinated national fightback demanded by the objective situation, particularly in the public sector.

Despite all this important battles will continue to break out as we saw in Scotland and will continue to be won by our side.

Short of waiting for the election of a Labour government to improve the situation the decisive factor is the extent to which the rank and file of the unions can organise to seize control and fight back. The Scottish postal strike gives us a glimpse of the possibilities. ■

## For a Labour government in '96!

THE LABOUR Party is the political wing of the multi-million strong trade union movement. It is very far from being a socialist party. In and out of office, it has always preserved the capitalist system, never challenged it or replaced it. Labour governments have turned on their working-class supporters when the interests of capitalism have demanded it.

The Labour Party is thus a bourgeois workers' party. But it is the only governmental alternative available to the working class movement now.

Therefore, despite Blair and the new right and their authoritar-

ian agenda, the election of a Labour government is the central immediate task facing the labour movement.

With the election of a Blair government the log-jam in British politics will begin to break up. Blair will immediately be faced with expectations and demands. A Blair government will be expected to do something about the devastation the Tories have wreaked over the last 17 or 18 years. The inhibitions against working-class action that have grown up in the labour movement over the last decade and a half of setbacks and defeats will begin to dissolve after the Tory defeat. ■

Blair's "New Labour" ideology is still, in part, a form of Labourism. It represents a fusion of elements of authoritarian Christian-Democratic social market philosophy with the right-wing business unionism of the mainstream of the trade union bureaucracy. It is merely a particularly degenerate form of the classical Labourite fusion of trade unionism and elements of the bourgeois intellectual consensus.

In the long view of history, only two developments were theoretically possible for old Labour.

Either, it would collapse back into Liberalism pure and simple, or, it would be reconstructed as an effective instrument of the working class. The great anomaly of Labourism is that for decades it did neither.

There are two reasons for this. The revolutionary left failed to win significant sections of the working class away from Labourism. For much of the present century the bourgeoisie rested on the trade union bureaucracy as the main pillar of its rule.

Today, capital does not require (and cannot afford the price of) the kind of succour previously given to it by the Labour and trade union apparatus. The fundamental achievement of Thatcherism from this perspective was to shackle the trade unions.

It is this that makes Blair so much more dangerous for the labour movement. He has a clear conception of the historic possibility of abolishing Labour in its old form and has a favourable objective environment in which to go about it. Nonetheless, Blair has not yet succeeded in severing the trade union link.

The reality now is subordination of the

trade union apparatuses to a "Liberal" party which is ideologically much closer to Asquith than to Attlee. Blair even uses the same rhetoric of opposition to "vested interests" (amongst which he includes the unions) that the "New Liberals" of the turn of the century employed.

Blair has taken the European Social Democratic strategy of "reformism without reforms" and developed it into a viciously anti-working class project for the regeneration of capital. Blair can offer no significant reforms to Labour's working class base: his task is to demolish what remains of the welfare state and to replace it with a US-style system of private health insurance and workfare.

Rock solid Labour supporters continue to give Blair "critical support" despite the fact that many of them understand the meaning of Blair's programme. There is no other way to break Tory power. Frustration with Blair is palpable.

There is reason to expect that out of that will come major battles in the Labour Party, and between the parliamentary elite and their working class supporters, under a Blair government.

This is not just an optimistic scenario as ideological comfort for socialists who remain inside the Labour Party, but recognition of the basic realities of working-class politics.

There is nothing the Blairites fear more than opposition inside the Labour Party and the affiliated unions and the linking of that opposition to mass struggles outside of parliament in defence of the welfare state and free trade unions.

A glimpse of the extent of their fear was provided recently by Clare Short's article in *New Statesman*: "Get the Trots out of my Party!"

Ms Short called on the "democratic left" to "draw a line between itself and the Trotskyist entrists" and warned:

"We have members whose first loyalty is or was to Militant, Socialist Organiser or the IMG... who have an organised political project... thus we have motions and composites that talk about the things we care about most — the welfare state, the minimum wage, public services etc — that use our language of passionate commitment, but make demands that they know cannot be realised. This is the classical "transitional demand" that wins support because it aspires to what we want but is designed to expose the limits of reformism and thus to win us all to a revolutionary perspective. The problem with this... is that the left, well beyond the Trotskyist entrists, keeps lining up behind impossible demands."

Labour's post-1945 welfare state was once considered impossible, Ms Short!

The Trotskyists will continue to gain support for the rebuilding of the welfare state, free trade unions and full employment from well beyond our ranks. This will happen, not because our demands are "impossible", but because our demands correspond to the immediate burning needs of very broad layers of the working class. That's why serious Marxists like the Alliance for Workers' Liberty are not going to follow Scargill's lead and abandon our work in the Labour Party on the verge of the first Labour government in nearly two decades. ■

## The arms merchant rules — OK?

MOHAMMED al Mas'ari is going to court to challenge the British Government's decision to deport him to the Caribbean island of Dominica.

Al Mas'ari is a Saudi Arabian political refugee (of Islamic-fundamentalist, not democratic, stripe), and Tory minister Ann Widdecombe has spelled it out: "We have close trade relations with a friendly state who have been the subject of very consistent criticism from Mr al Mas'ari." She can



Mohammed al Mas'ari

say that again!

And that worries the Tory government because it is hand-in-glove with, or rather glove-over-hand for, the arms merchants.

Andrew Green, just appointed British ambassador to Saudi Arabia, is a director of Vickers. Vickers boss Colin Chandler was head of the government's Defence Exports office when Margaret Thatcher personally secured the huge al Yamamah arms deal in 1985.

The Government is unashamedly and openly acting as a conscience-free instrument of commercial policy. Never mind what is right: what pays best? Remember that, when they talk about democratic principles! Those principles count for nothing against the arms bosses' desire to get a slice from the wealth of Saudi Arabia's rulers, who run one of the world's most vile regimes. It suppresses all trade-union or political rights, in the manner of a Stalinist state, and also suppresses many of the personal liberties which even Stalinist states allowed. Women have to cover their faces and generally do not leave their homes. There is no cinema, theatre or music. The only public entertainments are

football and public executions. Much of the labour is done by migrant workers with virtually no legal rights.

Mohammed al Mas'ari and his friends might make things worse, but they are not in power. If they were, the Tories would deal with them too, and defer to them: that is what they did with Khomeini, the fundamentalist bigot who wreaked havoc in Iran.

Yet Labour is in effect backing the government. It has not attempted to uphold the democratic principle of the right to political asylum. Labour spokesperson David Clark said: "It worries me if the arms industry becomes a whipping horse." Davey Hall, recently elected president of the AEEU as the left candidate, was "concerned that contracts should not be held ransom by some civil rights dissident."

"Peace, jobs, freedom" — as Labour's banners used to read in the early 1980s — should be our aim, not jobs at the expense of preparing for war and suppressing freedom. The skills and technology of Britain's huge arms industry should be turned to social use, under public ownership and a workers' reconversion plan. ■

## Arthur Scargill's "Socialist Labour Party"

# A stillborn Stalinist sect

EVEN BEFORE it has been officially launched, Arthur Scargill's proposed Socialist Labour Party already looks more like a stillborn Stalinist sect than a serious challenge to Tony Blair's domination of the Labour Party and labour-movement politics.

The SLP project reflects not the good side of Scargill, the class fighter who led the great miners' strike of 1984-85, but his bad side, the socialist who never emancipated himself from Stalinism.

For a start, the basic idea on which the party is founded is wrong. Scargill's priority is for the left to stand parliamentary candidates against Labour in every seat (or at least in every seat where there is not a sitting Socialist Campaign Group MP). But this will just be a stunt, a counter-productive diversion. By creating a (small) split in the Labour vote it will help the Tories. It sets the SLP at odds with the vast majority of class-conscious workers who desperately want to remove the Tories and elect a Labour government.

While Scargill expresses the frustration and disgust that many workers feel with the Labour leadership, he does not address the fact that most frustrated Labour supporters remain Labour supporters. Come the general election, they will vote Labour because Labour is the only available working class-based alternative to the Tories.

Scargill's mistake here flows naturally from his bureaucratic and elitist conception of socialist politics, which is well expressed in his draft constitution for the SLP. The draft reads like an unintentional parody of the worst elements of the Labour Party constitution mixed up with the rule-book of the old Brezhnev-era Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Alongside all the paraphernalia of imagined affiliated trade unions, district committees, women's, black and youth sections, it includes:

- The automatic expulsion of any

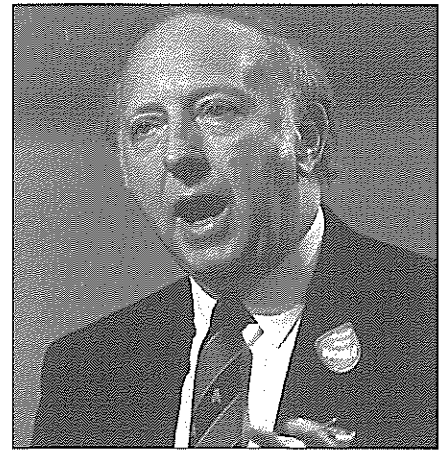
individual or organisation "engaged in the promotion of policies in opposition to those of the party." This rules out any form of activity to change party policy. It excludes anyone who expresses disagreement with the party line. It is a dictator's dream.

- A bi-annual Party Congress, with resolutions only from regions or affiliated organisations. This beats Brezhnev, but is worse than the situation in the Labour Party, which still has annual conferences with resolutions from Constituency Labour Parties.

The authoritarian nature of the SLP's proposed constitution reflects Scargill's own concept of socialism.

For Scargill, socialism is not the self-liberating drive of the working class, rooted in the class struggles of capitalism and aiming for a society democratically controlled by the freely associated producers. The draft constitution mentions the working class nowhere, and in its reprise of Labour's old Clause Four it substitutes "the people" for "the workers by hand or brain". Who expresses the will of "the people"? Presumably a leadership like that of the SLP. Its rule will be defined as "socialist" only by state ownership of the means of production. For Scargill, socialism existed in the USSR until it was betrayed by Gorbachev.

The draft constitution indicates a focus on electoral activity alone, and not a drive on all fronts of the class struggle, ideological, political, and industrial. Although Scargill pretends that the SLP will include affiliated trade unions, his draft makes no provision for the organisation of SLP supporters in particular unions or industries. In other words, his is a concept of a political party that accepts the artificial division between the political and industrial struggles, between electoral politics and workplace struggle. He wishes to win a majority in Par-



For Scargill socialism existed in the USSR

liament and nationalise everything, but he does not want to have SLP fractions in unions and industries developing their own ideas and troubling the union bureaucrats whom he (vainly) hopes to get to affiliate to the SLP.

Public ownership of the means of production is just one element of socialism. Without democratic working-class control, public ownership is not common ownership, but simply state ownership. State ownership can serve the capitalist system, as the nationalisations of the 1945 Labour government did, or, on a wider scale, become the economic basis for bureaucratic class rule such as we saw under Stalinism. Either way, the reduction of socialism to state ownership, and the shelving of the revolutionary-democratic notion of working-class self-liberation, amounts to the greatest intellectual victory for the bourgeoisie in the whole of the 20th century. Yet it is also the ideological base and core of Scargill's SLP.

If Scargill proceeds with his plan to launch the SLP, then he will discredit not only himself — thus wasting the authority he commands from his role in the great miners' strike — but also every organisation and individual that he pulls in. This may look like a farce, but in reality it is a tragedy. ❏

- On the SLP see also page 9.

## After the Alliance for Workers' Liberty Conference

# Organising the socialists

We asked Elaine Jones, one of the youth organisers of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, to report on the recent AWL conference.

WHAT sort of party do workers need to change society? Arthur Scargill has one answer. His projected "Socialist Labour

Party" sets itself to the left of Labour — and rigidly outside Labour, supplementing Labour's ban on dual membership with one of its own. And it has a constitution which requires all members to agree with all the party's policies (or at least pretend to), or else be expelled.

At the fourth AWL conference in Lon-

don on 25-26 November, we had a different answer.

As we met, the French workers' great mass-strike movement was just beginning. That movement reinforced our will to continue campaigning for the defence and rebuilding of the welfare state, as one of our key tasks in the next few years.

It is clear that the next Labour government, instead of restoring the cuts made by the Tories, will dismantle welfare services still further. Peter Mandelson has said New Labour should abolish universal child benefit, introduce workfare programmes for the unemployed and single mothers, insist on no-strike deals in the public sector, and promote private pensions.

But people expect more from Labour. ▶

Anger which now remains underground will break through under a Labour government. Even those who were prepared to keep quiet and not rock the boat because they wanted a Labour government will protest when they see what a Blair government intends.

The AWL and its campaigning will be focused inside the existing labour movement, trade unions and Labour Party, not outside. We fight to transform the labour movement, not to build "our own" movement in parallel.

Putting demands on Labour and organising within the labour movement around those demands will be a central activity in the next few years.

We adopted a new constitution which must be unique on the revolutionary left in its guarantees for open debate. We took a contrary attitude to Scargill on our party structure as well as on our attitude to the Labour Party.

"All activists are obliged to support the majority decisions of the relevant AWL bodies in action. They also have the right to express dissenting opinions, to gain a fair hearing for those opinions, and to organise inside the AWL to change AWL policy.

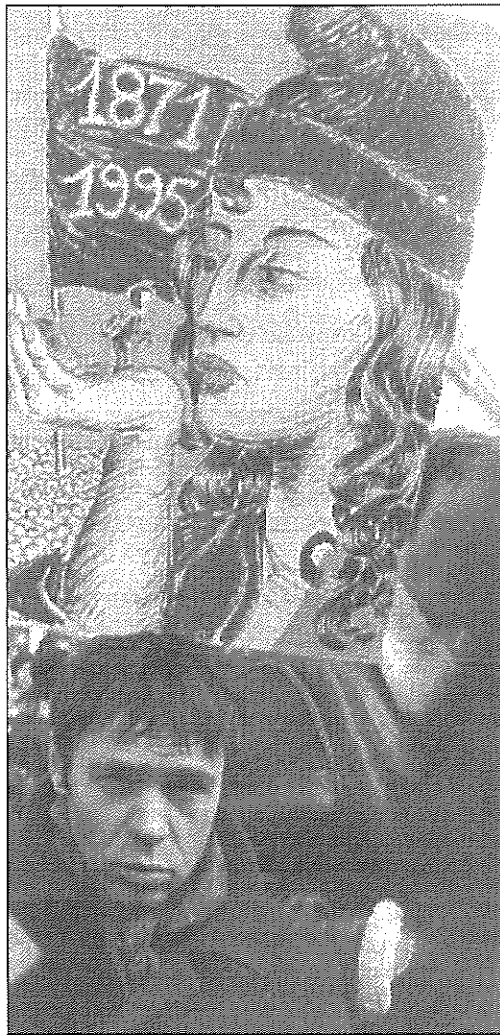
"Activists should not pretend to hold beliefs contrary to their real ones. Minority comrades have a right to state [publicly, outside the AWL] that they hold a minority position, and to give a brief explanation...

"AWL 'custom and practice' will be that minority views can be expressed, and majority opinion challenged, in our public press."

For us to put Marxism into practice, all our members need to be educated politically otherwise, as in many other groups on the left, knowledge becomes the property of an elite, a priestly caste sitting above the rest of the organisation's membership.

If we are all educated, then the organisation as a whole understands what is going on and can make informed decisions. The conference therefore voted to develop new structures for education for all members of the organisation.

We started a debate which will clarify the AWL's traditions. Over the years we have developed a political tradition of our own, starting where we had to start — in "official" post-Trotsky Trotskyism — but evolving into a different, and we think more



Workers' banner of the recent French strikes recalls the working class takeover of Paris — the Commune — in 1871

authentic, Trotskyism. Instead of looking for never-changing blueprints to achieve socialism, we have tried to use the methods of Marxism, learn lessons, and reassess.

On the USSR, we have been forced to conclude that while Trotsky's concrete descriptions of the Stalinist degeneration of the USSR were largely accurate, and his programme for the working class to carry out a new revolution correct, his analytical framework ("degenerated workers' state") was inadequate.

After 1945 the majority of post-Trotsky Trotskyists followed Pablo, Mandel and Cannon in describing a vast new range of Stalinist states as degenerated or deformed workers' states, post-capitalist and in transition from capitalism to socialism.

Stalinism had destroyed labour movements and imposed totalitarian regimes on the working classes of eastern Europe, regimes like that in the USSR which Trotsky in 1938 rightly described as differing from Hitler's regime "only in its more unbridled savagery." Still, for Pablo and Mandel, this was the workers' socialist revolution, only "deformed".

Thus the self-organisation and activity of the working class was no longer so central or essential. Progress could come instead from Stalinist statified property or petty-bourgeois nationalist revolutions. We concluded that the Stalinist systems were new forms of class exploitation, a limited, dead-end episode within the epoch of capitalism rather than anything post-capitalist.

We have looked at other Trotskyist traditions besides those of Cannon and Mandel, such as that of Shachtman's Workers' Party, which developed one

theory of Stalinism as a new form of class society. In relation to the Soviet Union and on organisational issues, we learn from both the Shachtmanite and the Cannonite tradition, and continue to develop our ideas.

Where Scargill's SLP is dominated by nostalgia for the old USSR, we aim show why Stalinism was not socialism — and what it was. We restate Marx's idea: "The emancipation of the working class is also the emancipation of all human beings without distinction of race and sex."

We are Leninists, but not Stalinoid kitsch-Leninists of the sort now dominant on the would-be Trotskyist left. We believe the October revolution in 1917 was one of the great liberating events in human history. All socialists should learn the lessons of that revolution — and one especially relevant now is that without the slow preparatory work of Lenin and a small group of comrades, in the most difficult years of working-class defeat, there would have been no working-class revolution in 1917. As Zinoviev put it in his history of the Bolshevik party, there were many years of "hopeless breakdown, demoralisation and decline... Lenin's enormous stature as a leader most clearly emerged in just this difficult time... when [he] had alone, or almost alone, to defend the idea of the party with his pen, his spoken word, and his organisational work." ☐

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