

# Israel and the politics of the last atrocity



THE history of colonialism contains many scenes of half-naked men with spears charging machine guns — but even they could hope to see off some of their enemies. Israeli's April war in Lebanon — like the US-British-European Gulf war of 1991 — goes far beyond that.

This war was fought on one side from a position of military and technological superiority so overwhelmingly absolute that the other side was all but defenceless. There were no Israeli army casualties in the April war! It was as someone described at the end of the Gulf war, "like shooting fish in a barrel".

Israel, the regional super power enjoying overwhelming technical-military superiority, set out like an unfeeling giant to upend a large part of Lebanese society, wrecking its economy and trying thus to force the Lebanese government to suppress anti-Israeli guerrillas operating from its territory. Half a million people were overnight turned into refugees by systematic Israeli bombing. That was the intention.

Conducted by politicians who will have to answer to an electorate and therefore have to minimise their own casualties, Israel's war was a high-tech computer game affair. The universal horror when they blasted the UN refugee centre at Qana, killing dozens of civilians, seems to have given some in the government pause for thought. But Israel's display of the dementia of naked, unrestrained power has been as gross as it was out of all proportion to the events which allegedly triggered it.

Yet disgust and horror are not enough. It is necessary to keep the overall picture in mind. This April war and the Qana massacre do not stand alone, but in a long chain of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Politics extrapolated from the last atrocity are always one-sided politics. Two months ago, the atrocities were by Muslim fundamentalists against Israeli civilians, 56 of whom died in four bombings in Israel's cities. Extrapolate from that and, like many Israelis, you will wind up on the other sides. We need an all-sided view.

*"What Israel has done is watered the poisoned vines of Arab revanchism with the blood of its helpless victims."*

We say that the Palestinians should have full independence, without Israeli interference, in the areas where they are the majority — now!

Yet, there is no force strong enough to realise that. The peace accord that gave limited autonomy to Palestinian Arabs may, if it survives, develop into full self-government for the Palestinian Arabs. That is the best chance. That is why it is — despite its immense limitations and inadequacies — the most hopeful development in the Middle East since 1948.

If it is destroyed, it is likely to give place not to something better, but to something regressive and worse.

It is the goal both of the Muslim fundamentalists Hamas and the Iranian-financed Hizbullah and of their Jewish equivalents to destroy and abort the movement towards accord, thereby subverting the all too slow progress towards Palestinian autonomy. The Jewish chauvinists want to clear "Eretz Israel" of Arabs, the Muslim fundamentalists to destroy Arafat and clear 'Arab Palestinians' of Jews.

In so far as winning the late May Israeli elections determined the decision to launch "operation Grapes of Wrath", the Israeli government might — if it were candid — claim that it thereby acted to secure the real interests of both Jews and Arabs by ensuring that the Israeli government is not overthrown and the drive for normalisation of Israeli/Palestinian relations weakened or destroyed

along with it. That may even be electorally and politically true.

If it is, it is a terrible comment on the state of our world that in order to increase its chance of winning an election in the only democracy in the whole region, an election on which may depend so much, a government feels obliged to unleash the most savage destruction on a neighbouring country.

In fact, what Israel has done is watered the poisoned vines of Arab revanchism with the blood of its helpless victims.

Socialists must condemn Israel. We must back the Palestinian demand for full independence in the areas in which they are the majority. We must support those Israelis who oppose chauvinism and work for a just settlement with the Palestinian Arabs. ■

# Italy, 1996 and 1976

TWENTY years ago, in June 1976, the Italian Communist Party narrowly failed to beat Italy's Tory party — the Christian Democrats, who had ruled ever since World War 2 — in a general election.

It was a hectic moment. There was much talk of the CIA organising a military coup if the CP won. The CP leaders took it seriously. After the military coup against a Socialist Party government in Chile in 1973, they had dropped their call for a "left government" in Italy, and demanded no more than a coalition with the Christian Democrats. They declared support for NATO and for public spending cuts, and padded their list of candidates with non-CP figures like a former air force Chief of Staff.

Yet the ruling class still feared that the CP might encourage or unleash the militant workers who had shaken Italy again and again with great strikes since 1969. The Pope declared that to vote CP was a "sin". Italy's many-thousands-strong semi-Maoist, semi-anarchist revolutionary left foresaw (in the words of the British *Socialist Worker*, then close to them) "socialism or fascism within two or three years".

Twenty years later, on 21 April 1996, the Communist Party, renamed PDS, won office at the head of the Olive Tree coalition. Share prices soared on the Milan Stock Exchange. International financiers rushed to buy lira. The British bosses' paper the *Financial Times* hailed the Olive Tree's "prudent economic programme" and "the greatest opportunity for stable and responsible government that Italy has seen in years". It quoted Italian bankers as reckoning that the PDS's "strong links with the unions could be an advantage in pushing through austerity measures in sensitive areas such as healthcare".

The Olive Tree depends for its parliamentary majority on support from Rifondazione Comunista, a party which unites a fraction of the old CP with other left-wing groups including some revolutionaries, but to many bankers it seems more reliable than the right-wing Freedom Alliance, whose leader, Silvio Berlusconi, is heavily tainted with financial scandal and unwilling to push ahead with dismantling the elaborate networks of state patronage built up over decades by corrupt Christian Democrats.

So sometimes, after all, bourgeois virtue is rewarded. After decades of strenuous effort, the PDS/CP leaders have finally con-



Leader of the Olive Tree, Romano Prodi

vinced the Italian bosses and bankers that they have erased radicalism from their ranks. Probably, looking back on it, the bosses regret that they were so slow to be convinced. If they had given the CP the seats in a coalition government which it wanted in the 1970s, they might have got themselves valuable help in controlling the working-class militancy of those years.

But are they once again being slow to catch on? Are they once again prisoners of outdated perceptions? The bosses reckon on some working-class resistance to cuts, but assume that the PDS can control it. Militancy will not rise above the relatively modest levels seen since the mid-1970s; defiance will be as manageable as it was to the privatising, welfare-cutting "new social democratic" governments of Spain, France, Australia or New Zealand in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Italy's plutocrats may be wrong. In 1995 Italian workers blocked the planned cuts of the right-wing government then headed by Silvio Berlusconi with tremendous strikes and the biggest demonstrations in Italy since World War 2. Their combativity still lacks an adequate political voice and a leadership — but for how long? ■

## Why poverty grows

THERE is no poverty in Britain. So says Peter Lilley, who is a Tory government minister — in fact, the minister charged with social security measures to relieve poverty.

Asked by the United Nations what Britain was doing to mend poverty, Lilley replied: "The UK [already has] the infrastructure and social protection systems to prevent poverty and maintain living standards."

On the same day as Lilley's letter was released, the Child Poverty Action Group published a report arguing that one child in three is growing up in poverty (on or below income support), and one person in four overall is in poverty (it was 1 in 7 in 1979).

The Tories' reply is that this poverty is only relative, not absolute. In other words, so long as people do not directly starve or freeze to death, they are not poor.

In 1991 a survey found that hundreds of thousands of small children go without enough to eat at least once a month because their parents are short of cash; well over a million have "nutritionally poor" diets. Diseases of poverty such as rickets have reappeared.

Some hundreds of thousands — no-one knows exactly — are homeless.

Being homeless on the streets is reckoned to take about twenty years off your life. Being poor with a home shortens your life too. A recent survey found that relative poverty shortens life much more than lower absolute living standards combined with less inequality.

It was a translation into medical research of what William Morris declared over 100 years ago: "The most grinding poverty is a trifling evil compared with the inequality of classes".

Human beings are social animals. Human life is not just biological survival as individuals, but life in society. To get out of poverty means more than not starving or freezing to death; it means being able to take a normal and dignified part in society.

Capitalism does create poverty. Regularly and routinely, workers are paid no more than the value of their labour power, which is defined by a "living wage" adequate to keep the working class fit for work. Regularly and routinely workers are poor relative to the riches they produce for the capitalist class and its hangers-on. And, while the averagely-paid worker generally scrapes by in modest comfort, regularly and routinely capitalism throws millions out of their jobs. Capitalism cannot work without unemployed people, and without those unemployed people being unable to maintain even a working-class standard of living.

And for Peter Lilley, that's just fine. He thinks the system should work and the people should not complain. We think the people should live and the system should suffer.