

John Major's "beef war"

By Alan Gilbert

THE Tory Government has been walking wounded since the Exchange Rate Mechanism crisis of September 1992, when John Major and his government blew £10 billion on an economic policy and then trashed it a few days later. Their desperate lunge on 21 May 1996 confirmed that this government is still no more able to map a straight course than the unfortunate cows at the centre of its latest trouble.

After seven members of a European Union committee of veterinary experts blocked relaxation of the EU's ban on exports of British beef and beef products, John Major announced that Britain would refuse to cooperate with any EU business.

Who knows, Major may even be so dimwitted and short-sighted that he still thinks he has been clever, or even that this affair can win an election for him as the Falklands war of 1982 won the 1983 election for Margaret Thatcher. If so, he is wrong.

Though it is dwindling and aging, there is still a pool of anti-German bigotry in the Tory Party and in the country, shown when Thatcher had to sack her close ally Nicholas Ridley for raving openly about the European Union being "a German racket." But calls from both the Thatcherite right and the Stalinistic left to rally against a "German-dominated Europe" have less and less grip.

As Hugo Young noted in the *Guardian*, "people do not ignore reality, and Sunday's [27 May] *Observer* poll emphatically confirms it. The hysteria of... the tabloids has [not] blinded voters to the fact that BSE originated as a British problem, was intensified by the deregulatory passion of Thatcherism, rouses the understandable anxiety of Europeans who want to avoid getting it, and has been handled with the crassest incompetence by present min-

isters".

Besides, Thatcher won the Falklands war, although at terrible cost. There is no flag-waving victory to be won in the "beef war". The ban would have been eased anyway, bit by bit; it will probably be eased later as a result of Major's defiant gesture, not earlier. In the meantime he has blocked EU measures which the British government wanted — and worsened the deep-going divisions over Europe in the Tory party.

The Thatcherite section of the Tory party, and a (minority) sector of the British capitalist class, wants Britain to be a cheap offshore site for production and financial dealings, reliant on foreign investment from the US and Asia, linked only loosely to Europe, and operating with markedly lower wages and social overheads than Europe. The wing of the Tory party represented by Heseltine and Clarke, and the majority of the British capitalist class, believe that British capitalism has no future outside an increasingly integrated capitalist Europe.

The conflict is profound, and especially dangerous because it can be accelerated by European schedules over which no Tory politician has much control. The "beef war" has sharpened it. Within a

few days, some Tories were telling the press: "Beef is the pathfinding issue, but it's not the end of the road. We must now make a habit of using the British veto". On the other side, some Tory ministers let it be known that they were pressing for the non-cooperation to be ended. One wearily told the *Financial Times*: "We will show the typical John Major style. Bluster. Attack. Dither. Retreat".

Bryan Nicholson, president of the bosses' federation, the CBI, lambasted "romantic nationalism and churlish xenophobia".

The only saving factor for Major is the feebleness of the Labour leadership. Plainly they were never going to respond in a working-class way, for example by counterposing Labour and trade-union non-cooperation with the Tories. But they chose to launch a pro-EU policy document just a few days into the "beef war". Would they oppose the Tories outright even on that basis? Oh dear no! They were not against non-cooperation "in the national interest", as long as there was proper "consultation", of course...

And for the 36,000 workers who so far, on the TGWU's calculations, have lost their jobs through the beef crisis, Labour had not a word.

Towards a summer of discontent?

Rail and post go into battle

By Tom Willis

THE result of the postal workers' strike ballot should be known by the time you read this article. Both the Communication Workers' Union (CWU) and management expect a large majority for action. Barring legal challenges or a fresh offer which forces a re-ballot, all is set for a series of weekly one-day strikes in June. These will be followed by an all-out indefinite strike if Royal Mail management don't back down.

The ballot is the culmination of a prolonged war of attrition in Royal Mail. Up and down the country management have been trying it on, particularly over disciplinaries. They have been met by a series of unofficial walk-outs and guerrilla actions. In recent months there have been "wild-cat" strikes in Liverpool, Manchester, Newport, St Helens, London and Scotland over victimisations and attacks on working conditions.

Last November's Scottish postal strike, affecting most of the country, was about the defence of just four full-time jobs. It was the biggest unofficial and illegal strike since the Second World War.

The moving force behind all this is Royal Mail management's attempt to ratchet up the levels of exploitation of post office workers. Central to their offensive, and the immediate

focus for the strike ballot is the "Employee Agenda".

The Employee Agenda proposes the introduction of team working and will undermine union workplace power, increase casualisation and part-time working and abolish seniority to replace it with the blue-eyed boys and girls syndrome.

The union has responded by demanding a shorter working week of 35 hours and five days — postal workers work a six-day week — and the maintenance of the second delivery and guaranteed job security.

There is a danger that CWU joint General Secretary, Alan Johnson, who has been forced into this dispute by pressure from below, will be prepared to make concessions on one set of issues in return for management backing down on others. The union apparatus may try to ram through a deal which involves concessions over teamworking and which would lead to postal workers competing against each other to work faster and faster. Head office have suggested to local reps that the press and public are "not interested in team working". This hints at an attitude of the less the team working is discussed, the easier it will be to ram through a dirty deal involving unacceptable concessions.

The key to the development of the dispute lies in the hands of the leadership of the large powerful metropolitan CWU branches. They

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have demonstrated that they have both the clout to organise effective unofficial action independent of the national full-time leadership, and that they can liaise nationally to put pressure on the postal executive. The ballot came about after unofficial branch based national rank and file meetings started to put some pressure on postal executive members who then forced Johnson into pulling out of talks and moving to a ballot.

It is absolutely vital that now this unofficial network has managed to force some action it is not put into mothballs, leaving everything in the hands of the executive.

Over the last few years, Royal Mail has been the site of around one-third of all disputes nationwide. The outcome of this battle will therefore shape the development of the industrial class struggle well beyond the Post Office itself.

A victory for the postalworkers will surely embolden other groups of workers, and, coming on the eve of the likely election of a Blair government, it should help to break down the influence of the "don't-rock-the-boat-wait-for-Labour" line which is being vigorously peddled by virtually every section of the official trade union leadership at the moment.

A victory for Royal Mail management will have the opposite effect. It will set back probably the most militant group of workers in the country at present and encourage the bosses all along the line. It will also encourage Blair to "get tough" on the public sector unions if elected.

For that reason it is absolutely vital that all serious socialists and trade unionists do everything they can to help the postalworkers win.

Postalworkers' support groups should be set up in every town and city. Other groups of workers moving into dispute should try to co-ordinate their action with the postalworkers.

This kind of activity is already happening in particular localities, for instance a Mid-Lothian workers' liaison committee, drawing together stewards and reps across industry, has been established in and around Edinburgh with strong support from both the local CWU and RMT, who are also in the middle of a strike ballot of guards and senior conductors. The issue of co-ordinated rail and postalworker strike days has already been discussed and supported in this forum. It provides a model to be applied elsewhere.

The rail ballots are over grade specific issues

but they have the potential to generate a strike at least as self-sustaining and effective as the 1994 signalworkers' dispute.

Both guards and senior conductors are "safety critical" grades, meaning that trains can't run without them. The only way for the train operators to keep the trains running is to use hundreds of members of the train drivers' craft union ASLEF as scabs, an unlikely and dangerous prospect.

A victory for the guards and conductors will delay and hold back the bosses' offensive across the whole of the privatised railways, while encouraging union resistance.

The post and rail ballots are particular significant given the relatively low level of activity elsewhere.

There is to be no national action over pay in most of local government and the health service this year although a local government manual workers' strike is still a very remote outside possibility. Local disputes are, of course, still taking place. The same picture applies to education and the Civil Service.

The introduction of the hated Jobseeker's Allowance has caused a lot of local disputes in the Civil Service. There have been strikes at a number of Benefits Agency offices for the introduction of screens. What is needed now is a proper campaign of national industrial action up to and including all-out.

Across the rest of the public sector, action tends to be locally isolated. Firefighters in Merseyside, Derbyshire and Essex are all in the midst of or entering local strikes, but no national dispute is on the cards, particularly after the decision of the London Region of the Fire Brigades Union not to ballot for strikes over cuts.

A tube strike is possible over pay and hours, but we are still in the very first stages and it is too early to say what will develop. A determined lead from the local RMT could well get action going round the issue of shorter hours — a campaign that will undermine ASLEF's unofficial "no-strike" deal with London Underground Limited. But at present all the initiative is in the hands of ASLEF, who are setting the pace with a ballot due to start soon.

In most of the private sector industrial action is at a very low level with the Mersey dockers' determined stand against casualisation standing out as an exception to the rule.

An awful lot now hangs on the outcome of a handful of disputes.

Deep d

By a very narrow margin the Israeli right seem to have won the 30 May general election. It may well be a radical turning point in the Middle East. Michel Warshawski, who is a member of the Israeli Trotskyist organisation, Matzpen, spoke to Mark Osborn.

AS the final votes are counted it looks very likely that Benyamin Netanyahu will beat Shimon Peres in the vote for prime minister.

The new system of voting meant casting a vote for the prime minister and then voting for a party list.

We supported the bloc of the Communist Party and the National Democratic Alliance, which is a new regroupment of all the Palestinian national organisations inside Israel.

In the vote for the prime minister we called for an abstention.

WL: I agree that socialists could not vote for Peres. Nevertheless, there must have been a lot of pressure to do so: there is a rational case for voting for Peres and there are real differences between the candidates.

It is true that there was very strong pressure. Some people who would never — in the past — have voted Labour, voted for Peres. Some people, including close friends of mine, who had said they would abstain, at the last moment voted for Peres. They felt that they could not allow Netanyahu to be elected...

Presumably the left is now very depressed

Yes, right now they are. Everyone is down. But, in most cases, when I ask for a rational explanation of this feeling people have some difficulties in explaining the policy differences — either on social-economic matters or on policy towards the Palestinians. There is a gap between the emotions and rational analysis.

But it will make a difference on questions such as the settlements, towards the Palestinian administration...

Yes, they will be more arrogant. But the question is not what Likud's policy will be, but what exactly could be expected from

Divisions in Israel

Peres' policy. He had made it very clear from the actions of the last government and from his election campaign that he does not intend to make any compromise concerning settlements and Jerusalem.

It is not that Likud is becoming more progressive, but rather that Labour is now applying Likud policies.

Even from a purely electoral point of view the Lebanon war was a disaster for Labour. They miscalculated: for every vote they expected to win on the Jewish side they lost two Palestinian votes. I calculate they lost about 25,000 votes — 10,000

abstaining and a further 15,000 not turning out to vote.

But they also, in fact, lost Jewish votes too. Here this war was considered a complete failure.

In my opinion Labour lost the election after the assassination of [leading Hamas member] Yihya Ayash [by Israeli security forces]. After the killing of Rabin the concept of peace was very popular and the right were in disarray.

But then they provoked a breakdown of the ceasefire with Hamas by killing Yihya Ayash. Suicide bombings followed. This

allowed the right to present Peres' policy as contradictory to personal security.

Objectively, from the point of view of the Israeli state, the Labour Party's policy was very successful — and it is no accident that big business is one hundred per cent behind Labour. However, now, they had allowed themselves to be presented as failures by Likud.

I think that there are some other reasons for Labour's loss. Structurally, there is a deep division in the Israeli people. This is not an ideological, but a social division. 50% of the population — more or less — will never vote Labour. The Oriental Jews will never vote Labour. This is irreversible. These people consider Labour and the so-called Labour Zionists, Meretz, as their enemies — the people who are responsible for their situation, who humiliate and patronise them. This is a matter of class.

This situation is not new. What is new is that the religious community now considers the Labour Party as anti-religious and opposed to their way of life. This is the culmination of a process going back 20 years.

I think it is a mistake to try to explain this as a pro- or anti-peace matter or a left- or right-wing question. It is social. It is about class.

What are your perspectives now?

Potentially one positive development from a right wing government is that there will be a demystification of politics.

Restarting an opposition in parliament and on the streets will be shaped by the government that is formed. If there is a national unity government in the future the opposition in the Knesset will be 9 members from Meretz and 9 from the Arab parties.

If the Labour Party is in opposition we may well have a new turn in Peace Now activity.

Germany's workers are fighting back

By Rhodri Evans

GERMAN capitalist investment is pouring into Britain, which already gets the bulk of Japanese and US investment in Europe. A South Korean firm has recently decided to produce in South Wales rather than Korea because Welsh wages are cheaper than Korean.

German building workers are in dispute with the bosses because they have refused to agree to a minimum wage which would stop them employing building workers from other countries (including Britain) at half German wages or less.

Now Germany's chancellor, Helmut Kohl, is telling German workers that they must accept a public-sector pay freeze and drastic social cuts, totalling over £30 billion off the government budget, because they are the most expensive workers in the world. They must go down the same road as Britain.

Kohl claims that the freeze and the cuts are the only way to cut unemployment and save Germany's welfare state. As if Britain did not prove the opposite! Worldwide, the general pattern is that strong labour movements and higher wages go together with better "social wages" and lower unemployment, not the opposite.

Labour costs per hour are about 40% higher in west Germany than in Britain, on 1991 figures. But investment, training, and productivity are higher, too. In 1991 it took 29.9 hours to assemble a Ford car in Germany, against 52.2 hours in Britain, making German labour costs per unit product cheaper than British. As Karl Marx pointed out in *Capital* — using Britain and Germany as illustrations then, too, but the other way round — "it will be found frequently that the wage in the first nation is higher than in the second, whilst

the relative price of labour... as compared both with surplus-value and with the value of the product, stands higher in the second than in the first".

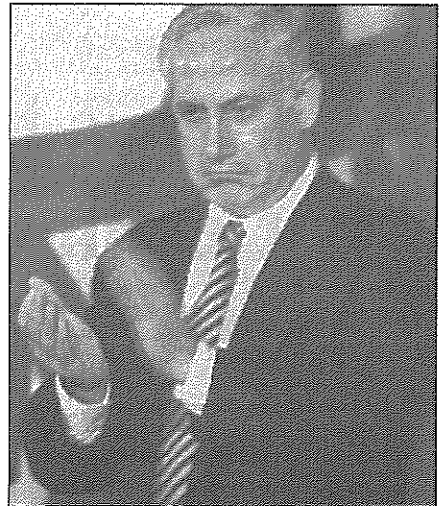
Moreover, a bigger part of the German workforce than of the British is employed in direct production: 39.2% in manufacturing in 1991, as against only 27.5% in Britain.

The British road would take German workers the same way as British workers — to mass pauperisation, social despair, and demoralising insecurity. At present Germany, strained by the travails of unification with the old Stalinist state in the east and by the influx of many ethnic-German "Aussiedler" from Eastern Europe, has an unemployment rate slightly higher than Britain's. The social effects are far less brutal. Unemployment benefit is paid at 60% of previous wages, and, overall, social benefits run 36% higher, per head of population, than Britain's.

The government plans to raise the pension age for women; cut unemployment benefit, sick pay, child benefit and job protection; and reduce social health insurance, for example for dental treatment.

The opposition Social-Democratic Party is, for once, protesting loudly, and has the strength in the upper house of parliament to block these plans. The danger must be that they will settle for some reduced or slowed-down version. Opinion surveys show a big majority against the cuts. Trade unions organised protest marches all across Germany on 1 May, and a round of protest strikes by the public-sector union OTV on 20-22 May.

The increased international mobility and fluidity of capital makes German capitalists less willing to invest patiently for the long term. An international "levelling" of workers' conditions is under way. The coming struggles of the German unions will play a big part in deciding whether it is a levelling-up or a levelling-down.



Benjamin Netanyahu

Socialist Labour Party: little controversy, no orientation, no hope

By Martin Thomas

SMIRKING contentedly, Patrick Sikorski, in the chair, called Arthur Scargill to speak against the first challenge to the platform from the floor at the Socialist Labour Party's founding conference on 4 May.

Using the same arm-waving and finger-stabbing that might accompany a rallying speech at a strike meeting, Scargill told the conference to reject Steve Freeman's proposal to move up a contentious item from the end of the agenda, where it might be lost for lack of time. The Steering Committee had done a difficult job well. Moreover, Scargill added, pressing the "politically correct" buttons, changing the agenda might displace the "vitally important" (though uncontroversial) item on disabled rights.

Only a small minority voted against the platform, no more than had refused to join the long and loud applause when a visitor to the conference from the Cuban embassy was announced. Policy amendments from various small groups of revolutionaries who have joined the SLP (from "The Leninist", RDG, Workers' Power...) were all defeated, the closest vote being on scrapping all immigration controls.

On the face of it, the nominal Trotskyists at the centre of the SLP — Patrick Sikorski,

and other ex-members of Socialist Outlook like Brian Heron and Caroline Sikorski — have become prisoners of the Stalinistic, left-reformist politics of Scargill. But it runs the other way, too. Scargill, who despite his ideology was an important and in many ways estimable leader in the mass labour movement for 20 years, from the mid-'60s to the mid-'80s, has become the prisoner of the sectarian, Potemkin-village, "party-building" schemes of the supposed Trotskyists.

The SLP conference even refused to amend the platform's declaration that: "Today, radical opposition in Britain is symbolised not by the Labour and trade union movement but by the groupings such as those which defeated the poll tax, the anti-motorway and animal rights bodies, Greenpeace and other anti-nuclear campaigners, and those fighting against opencast mining".

About 600 of the SLP's claimed 4,000 members attended the conference. The conference seemed markedly more working-class than most far-left gatherings, but also much more elderly. Most members looked to be at least in their 40s. The SLP has a scattering of prominent trade-union officials, especially in the rail union RMT, but not, I think, many pivotal rank-and-file activists.

My impression was more of a gathering of isolated, disoriented activists, people who have become progressively alienated from their Labour Party and trade union branches by the drift to the right over the last ten years. The political tone was more disappointed reformist than revolutionary. Scargill's sneers at talk about "what one revolutionary said to another in 1917", and his claim that to talk about "armed revolution" was "absolutely irresponsible", went down well.

The conference documents were full of promises about what "a Socialist Labour government" would do, but lacking in ideas about what the SLP, as a small left group, can do now.

Some SLP members have joined the Welfare State Network. If they can draw other SLP members into that activity, then a great deal can be achieved: some hundreds of working-class socialists, currently scattered, can be drawn into immediate, concerted, and effective grass-roots activity. In that activity, and in discussion round it, many can be convinced that their conclusion from the decline of the Labour Party and the Communist Party should not be to despair of the labour movement, but to reject the reformist and Stalinist ideas which shaped that decline.

But if the SLP continues to set its sights on the future parliamentary achievements of "a Socialist Labour government", with little idea of what to do between now and then, its prospects are poor.

Inside the unions

A new left in UNISON

By Sleeper

THIS year's conference of UNISON, the giant that unites workers across a large part of the public sector, could see some interesting developments for the left.

UNISON was created out of the merger of three unions — COHSE, NALGO and NUPE — but has still not gelled together as a proper, single, united union. Disunity exists at the rank and file level as much as it does at the level of the leadership.

UNISON's left has until now been far too dominated by the left that existed in NALGO. Left forces from the old manual union, NUPE, and the health service based COHSE, have been pushed to the side.

Though a lot of the ex-NALGO UNISON membership is made up of people in low-paid, boring, white-collar work, the bulk of the left from NALGO tends to be "professional" people in revolutionary groups.

The ex-NUPE and COHSE left are justifiably suspicious of the pretensions of many people from this milieu and turned off by the prevalence of anti-Labour posturing. They react to what they perceive as a lack of concern for the kind of issues faced by such as hospital porters, hospital cleaners, refuse collectors. They also see the ex-NALGO left showing a lack of respect for the alternative left traditions of the other unions, particularly NUPE.

Last year the ex-NALGO people mounted various left challenges to Rodney Bickerstaffe in the election for UNISON General Secretary. These were perceived by NUPE/COHSE people as a pointless and divisive challenge to someone they regarded as "their man" in the official leadership. This has created a situation where a new left organisation — UNISON Labour Left — is set to emerge. This could build on the strength of the non-NALGO left, providing a voice for the blue-collar workers, and those who wish to develop an agenda of demands on a Labour government, while attempting to draw in some of the ex-NALGO left.

The launch of UNISON Labour Left is an entirely positive development. *Workers' Liberty* supporters in the union will do everything they can to help it grow into a force that can play a central part in getting a national leadership elected which is prepared to organise national industrial action against the pay freeze and job cuts.

This would be a huge step forward from where we are today, with Militant and their hangers-on content to be part of a left that is a "principled" 10% minority with no strategy whatsoever for the union as a whole and no role except to split the broader left and let the right wing win NEC elections.

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