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SOLIDARITY PRICE £3

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The politics of Socialist Organisation

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**Socialist Organiser, 1 August 1980.
Published by WL Publications Ltd, PO
Box 823, London SE15 4NA. Printed by
Probook Ltd (TU), London E10. Registered
as a newspaper with the Post Office.**



The student strike, 1980. Photo: John Jones

The renewal of socialism

Unite the left!

SOCIALIST ORGANISER WAS born in October 1978 on the eve of one of the great turning points in working class history — the victory of Margaret Thatcher in the May 1979 election. The roar of Tory triumph which greeted that victory was the signal for the most savage attack the working class had experienced in 50 years.

The bosses and their government set out to cripple the trade unions — and they have passed a series of laws restricting trade union rights which add up to the most authoritarian labour laws in Western Europe.

They set out to dismantle the welfare state, to prune it down to the roots — and we see the results of that now in a sick and fading National Health Service with its slum hospitals and killing waiting lists, on one side, and the growth of a private health service for those who can afford it on the other.

They set out to give the rich and the better off every advantage, "incentive" and perk they could get away with. The result has been that massive tax cuts for the rich have gone hand in hand with massive cuts in the social

services. They have brought in a poll tax under which the rich landlord and the tabloid porn baron pays the same as the bricklayer and the laundromat attendant with four kids.

They have virtually wiped out social housing and made Britain into a landlord's paradise in which tens of thousands of young people and other homeless roam the streets of London and other big cities, sleeping rough.

This was the threat the Tories posed in 1979. *Socialist Organiser* was started to help fight that threat — and to fight those in the labour movement who opened the doors to Thatcherism, the Labour Party leaders who had started the cutbacks in the welfare state in 1976-7.

The paper was started to help rearm the labour movement against both the treacherous right wing inside it and the threatening Tory barbarians outside preparing to overwhelm the labour movement and undo much of what the labour movement had achieved in society during a hundred years of activity.

The story of *SO* is completely entwined with the subsequent battles over 12 years to stop or limit the Tory attacks — the miners' strike, the fight against the poll tax — and, inside the labour movement, with the left wing struggle to reshape the mass labour movement into a class-struggle socialist force committed to overthrowing capitalism and making socialism.

For those 12 years *SO* has organised for socialist politics and taken initiatives to advance those politics. We have assembled a sizeable number of socialist activists in both the trade unions and the Labour Party around the paper.

We are dedicated to the following basic propositions:

□ That capitalism is a system of exploitation of the vast majority by a small class who own the means of production. They use their ownership of the means of production to extract and store up wealth for themselves, not hesitating, for example, to put

millions of people on the dole if it is necessary for that purpose.

□ That a socialist society, in which the economy is owned collectively by producers who live in a self-controlling and self-administering socialist democracy is a necessary alternative to capitalism.

□ That only the working class can create such a system, by taking control of society out of the hands of the capitalists in the West and the bureaucracy in the East.

□ That for this to become possible, the existing labour movement — Labour Party and trade unions — must democratise themselves by breaking the power of cliques, bureaucrats, and parliamentary elites within the organisations of the labour movement.

□ That, *simultaneously*, the labour movement must re-arm itself politically with the ideas and the immediate goal of a revolutionary socialist transformation of society.

□ That because socialism is impossible until the working class acts to realise it, and because there is only one working class and one mass labour movement, revolutionary socialists must work and organise within the existing labour movement, built by many decades and even centuries of working class struggle, to help the movement achieve this political and organisational self-renovation.

□ That if those who hold to the basic ideas of revolutionary socialism refuse to do this, they condemn themselves to sterility, by way of im-

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The struggles of black workers in South Africa have inspired millions throughout the world

tent sideline carping at the movement as it has been shaped by history so far, and to sectarian irrelevance in the irreplaceable work of changing the it.

□ That there are in stark logic only two alternatives: either to fight to change the existing labour movement, including its organic political wing, the Labour Party. Or, to adopt the project of building one's own "pure" labour movement from the ground up, in parallel to the one the working class has so far created. And therefore that those who reject the former, and, im-

plicitly, accept the latter, are in fact pessimistic and defeatist about the prospects facing the labour movement in the next historic period...no matter how "left" and "revolutionary" be their talk and their view of what they themselves are, and however "intransigent" and "uncompromising" their denunciations of the existing labour movement are.

□ That there is great urgency about the work of organising a non-sectarian and anti-sectarian left wing in the labour movement, to help it make itself ready to answer the needs of the situa-

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tion the working class faces now.

Because such a left wing must unite the revolutionary left around a perspective of winning the existing labour movement to revolutionary socialism, it must also be a left wing which **fights** (by reason and argument) the sectarians who counterpose their own organisations to those of the mass labour movement in a way which is destructive of the work that needs to be done.

□ That socialists must strive for the maximum unity against the Tories and against the right wing and their tame soft-left accomplices in the Labour Party.

□ That socialists should band together and organise themselves to fight for these goals. Sectarian organisation in tight one-faction pseudo-Leninist groups is counter-productive and usually horrific. Bitter experience of such groups has jaundiced many socialists against "organisations". Nevertheless, an **organisation of socialists is irreplaceable**. The right wing and the soft left are organised — and increasingly they claim a monopoly on the right to organise in the Labour Party. The class-struggle socialists too must be organised **within** the Labour Party and trade unions.

The story that follows of *Socialist Organiser's* fight over the last 12 years proves one thing conclusively: if we had been bigger, and better organised, our ideas would have carried more weight on the left at crucial turning points — and then the whole course of the struggle with the Thatcherites and Labour's right wing might have gone very differently.

1.8.90

Socialist Organiser was launched twelve years ago. Since then, the left has seen many changes. Thatcherism has gone from strength to strength, while the Left has suffered defeats. John O'Mahony and Martin Thomas look at the history of Socialist Organiser and the role it has played on the Left.

The beginnings

Socialist Organiser was launched in 1978 by the Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory, an alliance brought together to allow the left to have its own voice in the general election which, by mid-1978, it was clear would come soon.

The SCLV conference of July 1978 brought together 200 labour movement activists from all over Britain. Many of them, like Ken Livingstone, Ted Knight, etc. would occupy central positions in local government in subsequent years.

We pledged to fight for a Labour victory and a Tory defeat — but to



The battle for socialism

Fighting the Tories and Labour's right

fight on socialist policies. We pledged ourselves to continue the fight for socialism after — as we hoped — Labour had won an electoral victory over the Tories. We were convinced by experience that a re-elected Callaghan government would have no socialist or working class answers to the crisis of British capitalism. Consider the record of that government.

The 1974-79 Labour government

In February 1974, harassed by a miners' strike and a Middle East oil crisis, the Tories called a general election.

Labour emerged as the biggest party, though without a majority, and with a lower share of the total vote than at any time since 1931; the big gainer in votes was the Liberal Party.

In 1974 the Labour government repealed the Tories' laws curbing trade unions and forcing increased council rents, and there was a tremendous wave of wage strikes. Tony Benn, as Industry Minister, offered government aid to worker co-operatives in enterprises threatened by closure. Several shop stewards' committees wrote to Benn asking for their enterprise to be nationalised. Labour won a majority in a new general election in October 1974.

Britain lurched into economic crisis. Profits slumped to almost zero. Jack Jones and Denis Healey got together to propose the answer: a £6 limit on wage rises, imposed in July 1975.

Scanlon, Jones and the other left-wing trade union leaders had come to an agreement with Wilson, the so-

Ireland and Palestine

Socialist Organiser is distinguished on the left by our positions on both Ireland and Israel.

We believe that the only solution to the British-Irish conflict is a united Ireland which recognises as much regional autonomy for the distinct Protestant Irish community as is compatible with the right to self-determination of the Irish majority Gaelic-Catholic people. In practice, we believe, this means some sort of federal Ireland.

We give no support to the British troops. We are for British withdrawal on the basis of some such political settlement which satisfies the people (or most of them) in both communities. British withdrawal without such a settlement would not, we believe, mean a united Ireland, but a Protestant-Irish drive to secure their self-determination against the Irish majority, sectarian civil war, and bloody and permanent repartition. Neither socialist nor Wolfe Tone Republican aspirations can be served by such an outcome.

We reject calls for a "secular democratic state in all Palestine" because this laudable ideal solution is impossible. In reality the

slogan serves as camouflage for a programme of the subjugation of Israel by the surrounding Arab states.

We say the Israeli Jews have the right to a state of their own where they are the majority population. We call for two states for the two peoples in Palestine. We support the intifada, and the PLO's demand for a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. We are for a socialist United States of the Middle East, with self-determination for minority nations like the Kurds and the Israeli Jews.

What the two positions, on Ireland and on Israel/Palestine, have in common is a commitment to democratic solutions for all such national and communal conflicts.

We reject the idea implicit — and sometimes explicit — in the conventional left wing attitude to Israeli Jews and Irish Protestants, that some peoples are bad peoples, undeserving of collective rights no matter how long they have occupied their area. We base ourselves on the teachings of Marx and Lenin here, advocating working-class unity across the Jewish-Arab and Catholic-Protestant divides on a basis of mutual recognition of democratic rights and mutual agreement to fight for the rights of those who are now oppressed.



Photo: John Harris, IFL

called "Social Contract", signed in February 1973, which was supposed to provide for welfare-state improvements in return for wage restraint.

This was a Labour government with no organised challenge from the Left.

The Labour Left

The left — diffuse and unfocused — was shattered by its huge defeat in the referendum on the Common Market, in June 1975. Wilson had demoted Benn. The October '75 Labour Party conference showed its resentment by voting Denis Healey off the NEC and replacing him with Eric Heffer, but supported the £6 limit.

We saw Callaghan and Healey in 1976 and after dance to the dictates of the International Monetary Fund and

pioneer — albeit timidly and half-heartedly — the sort of policies which later, in their full-blooded version, came to be called Thatcherism.

In March 1976 Healey pushed through a huge programme of public spending cuts which he considered necessary to get a loan from the IMF. 37 Left Labour MPs initially voted against the cuts — defeating the government — and then fell into line when Wilson called a vote of confidence. The Parliamentary Left then collapsed and ceased to be a force.

The NEC remained left-wing. At the 1976 conference it moved a document which called for the nationalisation of the banks. In November 1976 it supported a demonstration against the Labour government on the question of cuts, which mobilised 80,000

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workers in London on a working day.

In 1978 Labour Party conference voted against the government continuing wage controls: it was the government's defiance of that vote which led to the "Winter of Discontent" and Labour's ignominious defeat in the May 1979 general election.

We knew the Tories had to be stopped, but that Labour's old-fashioned right wing was not a viable alternative. And we know that the old-fashioned 'Tribune' parliamentary left would do nothing about that.

So we organised independently to fight the Tories, recognising that while Labour was the only viable option that the working class had against them, Labour itself had to be transformed. We knew that the job was very urgent. Thus the SCLV.

The birth of Socialist Organiser

In October 1978 the SCLV launched Socialist Organiser, to advocate socialist policies — and organise for them.

In the build-up to the 1979 election, we put out election leaflets explaining the socialist position on the key political questions. These were circulated by local parties. It amounted to a socialist election campaign within the official election campaign. As we wrote at the time: "Our achievements in the election were limited, but only by our small forces. In principle we proved it possible to mount a distinct left-wing campaign within the Labour Party's campaign — for the first time since the ILP's break with the Labour Party in 1932, or maybe even for the first time since the early 1920s when the young

Workers Party made its general propaganda for socialism and did strike support work. But it had no immediate political answers to anything, except — 'Join the SWP'. That was its answer to everything!

For a while in 1978 it seemed that they were going to stand a lot of candidates against Labour in the election. In the event they stood none. They mumbled a grudging and half-hearted call to 'Vote Labour', while doing nothing to transform the Labour Party except trying to persuade individual socialists to abandon the fight against the right wing in the mass party of the working class and join them in sectarian isolation and irrelevance.

In '74-'79 the SWP had lost most of its active trade unionists. They were demoralised and alienated by a policy of ultra-militancy and shrill denunciation which lacked all relation to the cautious and hesitant evolution of workers' real response to the slump and the betrayals of the Labour government.

After some floundering the SWP finally regrouped itself round the idea that working class struggle had suffered a decisive 'downturn' in the mid-'70s. The practical conclusion was the sectarian orientation which they have followed (with this or that modification) to this day.

From wild expectations that they would replace the Labour Party, they slipped into passive acceptance that Labour would dominate working class politics for the foreseeable future, while the SWP concerned itself with the 'militant minority'. They could have summed up the policy as 'the SWP looks after the strikes, Labour looks after the rest'.

The inadequacy of this policy was cruelly exposed in the 1979 election. After 11 or 12 years of proclaiming everything in and about the Labour Party to be a waste of time, the SWP slipped into a brief anti-Tory pro-Labour binge. Paul Foot wrote: "For the next three weeks I am a strong Labour supporter. I am very anxious that a Tory government shouldn't be returned and I shall be going around to meetings we are having telling everyone to vote Labour."

'Socialist Unity'

Most bizarre of all was 'Socialist Unity'. This was a mini-electoral alliance, held together only by the project of standing candidates in the general election. Its core was the International Marxist Group, which had perhaps 700 members, and a cluster of

smaller groups such as 'Big Flame' and 'Marxist Worker'. This, they said, was the alternative to the Tories and the Labour Party!

But no, to be fair to them, they never sounded as if they believed that Socialist Unity was more than just an irresponsible stunt, whose purpose was to compete with the SWP.

When they did better than the SWP in a by-election in 1977, there was no stopping them. So, led by the people who now publish *Socialist Action*, and by others who are today probably a majority of the committed supporters of *Briefing*, Socialist Unity took off, a stupid sideshow, focussed essentially on the SWP. Just as the Thatcherites poised themselves to drive the party of the labour movement from office on a programme of drumming the labour movement into the ground!

They stood a handful of candidates in the June 1979 election, all of which got no more than a hundred or two votes.

The crazy 'Left'

And beyond the more-or-less rational 'ultra-left' was the Workers Revolutionary Party, which had recently sold itself as a propagandist and spy (on dissident Arabs and Jews) for Colonel Gadaffi of Libya, and the vile Iraqi dictatorship. The WRP stood a few dozen candidates. This was sick, but it was no joke. The WRP candidate in Newham North East got more votes than Arthur Latham, a leftish Labour MP, needed to keep his seat, which he lost...

The SCLV

The outrage that ultra-leftists felt against the outgoing Labour government was shared by those who set up the SCLV. But we knew outrage wasn't enough. We knew Labour — Labour as it was — was the only alternative to the Tories. We knew that socialists could not at will by-pass the Labour Party, which had been built over many decades by the organised working class.

We knew that at the heart of the ultra-leftists' posturing, stridently 'revolutionary' and 'positively socialist' as it seemed, there was deep pessimism and defeatism — and on certain levels, indifference: for example the grouping that has since evolved into the Revolutionary Communist Party — about the labour movement being able to fight off the gathering Tory offensive.

For, whether they knew it or not, to write off the Labour Party then was to say that the Tories would win govern-



mental power and that their offensive would thereby gain an immense boost in strength and power to inflict damage on the labour movement.

The development of the SCLV and the accompanying shift from pure propaganda activity in the Labour Party to an attempt to organise a broader Left, caused considerable controversy among Marxists. Many comrades argued that we were abandoning principles and giving credit to fake-lefts.

Events would prove otherwise.

Labour lost the 1979 election because the Labour government had alienated too many Labour voters. The Tories who came to power under Thatcher would ruthlessly carry through the monetarist cuts policies Labour had started in 1976-77, and do things the Callaghan government would not have even dared to try.

A new situation was created for the Left, and in this situation the unity of the Left in the SCLV would shatter.

Labour after the election

When we began, Labour was still in power, and Thatcher just a nasty rumbling threat on the sidelines. Even after the Tories won the general election, the labour movement still seemed to possess most of its old strength and vigour, and all of its determination not to let itself be pushed around by the bosses and the Tory party.

After the election the Labour Party immediately blew wide open. Thousands of militants said of the recent bitter experience of right wing Labour government 'Never again!'. They set out to remake the Labour Party, to equip it with policies that would be a real socialist answer to Thatcher. A majority of the CLPs took this attitude. We went on to elect Michael Foot as leader, and won the

electoral college for electing Labour leaders — depriving the Parliamentarians of their long-established monopoly. Tony Benn won almost 50% of the votes for Deputy leader in 1981, and 83% of the CLPs vote. The labour movement did indeed seem to be remaking itself. But the left failed to clinch its victories. We need to learn the lessons of why it failed.

Reselection of MPs

The years 1979-81 were among the most tumultuous in Labour's whole history. In October 1979 at Brighton the Labour Party conference voted for mandatory reselection of MPs and the principle of NEC control over the Party manifesto.

De-selection of MPs had been possible since the early 1970s, but required an elaborate procedure to initiate it. The reform made a selection contest automatic.

The demand for NEC control over the manifesto had been triggered when Harold Wilson personally vetoed the call for nationalisation of 25 top companies included in the NEC-drafted Labour Programme of 1973. Both reselection and NEC control had been campaigned for steadily since 1973 by the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, a ginger group set up that year.

A special conference in May 1980 approved a manifesto for 'Peace, Jobs and Freedom'. Tony Benn made the main speech, calling for abolition of the House of Lords, extension of public ownership, and no compensation for renationalised enterprises.

In July 1980, the NEC issued a draft manifesto, designed to be the first draft of a 'rolling manifesto' which would be continually updated and thus provide a

permanent check on the Parliamentary leadership. The enraged Parliamentary leadership could not stop the manifesto being issued, but did manage to cancel the press conference at which it was to be announced.

Electoral college

The Blackpool conference in October 1980 consolidated mandatory reselection, lost NEC control over the manifesto but voted in the principle of election of the Party leadership by the whole Party (not just the MPs). It adopted unilateral nuclear disarmament, backed direct action against local government cuts, and committed Labour to withdrawal from the Common Market.

Callaghan retired as Party leader the same month, trying to get a successor in position before the new leadership election procedure could be introduced.

But Callaghan's chosen successor, Denis Healey, was narrowly defeated by Michael Foot, an obvious interim figure and a long-time left-winger, though a faded one.

In November Labour MPs disrupted Parliament to stop the Tories decreeing a rise in council rents.

In January 1981 a special Labour Party conference adopted procedures for electing the leadership: there would be an electoral college with 40% of the vote for the unions and 30% each for the CLPs and the MPs.

The SDP

In March Shirley Williams, William Rodgers and David Owen quit the Labour Party to set up the SDP with Roy Jenkins. Tony Benn announced that he would stand for deputy leader against Denis Healey. At the end of a hectic battle he had 49.6% of the vote to Healey's 50.4%, including 83% of the constituency vote.

Formally the shift to the left was smaller than it had been in 1970-73. The NEC's draft manifesto of July 1980 omitted the proposal for nationalisation of 25 top companies which Wilson had vetoed in 1973, and the October 1981 conference remitted the proposal for the nationalisation of the banks and insurance companies which had been carried in 1971.

But the stability of Labour as a bourgeois workers' party had never been measured by how few or how many nationalisations its manifestos promised, but by how securely its leadership could control and protect themselves from the rank and file. On that criterion Labour had been seriously destabilised.

In the division in Labour's right wing that took place in March 1981, Healey, Hattersley, and the others who stayed in the Labour Party were right against Williams, Rodgers and Owen.

The SDPers found out 'from the right' what others have found out

Brick Lane, October 1978

Front page of **SO** no.1: a call to defend the Bengali community of Brick Lane, in East London, against a march by the Nazi National Front.

And all the other left papers made the same call? So you'd suppose. But they didn't. The Anti-Nazi League had arranged an assembly in Hyde Park, and a carnival in Brockwell Park, South London for the same day. **Socialist Worker** told the anti-fascists in Hyde Park that they should go to listen to the bands in Brockwell Park, or else they'd be letting the fascists "divert" them.

And **Socialist Challenge** (a forerunner of **Socialist Action** and **Socialist Outlook**) eagerly chimed in: the choice of Brockwell Park was "100% correct". The fascist march on the Bengalis of Brick Lane was, said **Socialist Challenge**, a "provocation"...against the ANL carnival! They even continued with that line after **Socialist Worker** had admitted that maybe they had misjudged it.

In those days, not only **Socialist Worker**, but also **Socialist Challenge**, used to de-



nounce **Socialist Organiser** roundly as semi-reformists because its supporters were in the Labour Party. Those ultra-revolutionaries went off peacefully to their concert, while the "semi-reformists" were on the streets against the fascists.





campaign. The practical work — production and circulation of literature, organisation of big meetings round the country and at trade union conferences with Benn and other speakers — was done largely by SCLV and CLPD.

But the meetings were big, there were a lot of them, and the effect was decisive on such things as getting Labour's leadership elected by the whole Party.

SO did not just build the big movement. It argued a policy. It argued that the Left which had destabilised the Labour Party must aim for a 'workers' government' — a government accountable to and based on the labour movement, which would take decisive measures against capitalist power and privilege.

Immediately, we called for the labour movement to break off all collaboration with the Tory government.

The struggle for Labour Party democracy had to be extended to a wholesale renovation of the labour movement. In particular, the struggle for democracy had to be taken into the trade unions — for all the Left's victories relied on a temporary and fragile alliance with the trade union bureaucrats annoyed by the Labour government's treatment of them in 1976-79 — and "we must rearm the movement with real socialist policies at the same time as we fight for democracy."

Thatcher could have been stopped

Within a short time after the 1979 election, opinion polls showed that Thatcher was deeply unpopular. She remained deeply unpopular until the Falklands War of 1982. A high level of

'from the left' — that Labour had deep and tenacious roots in the working class, and that breakaways, even with an impressive-seeming initial base, are likely to throw themselves into a void. And the right-wingers who stayed with Labour finally managed to make the Party safe again for capitalism. But it was a long and arduous struggle for them, not completed even today.

Socialist Organiser after the election

The SCLV played an important role. It initiated the Rank and File Mobilising Committee, the broadest united front of the Left in the Labour Party's history which led the struggle

for Party democracy.

The RFMC, like the SCLV, was not a project clearly planned in advance. We started with the idea — a united front on the democratic reforms — and then found we could do more with it than at first we imagined.

First we were able to get the agreement of the CLPD and then, with their support, we were able to pull in the rest of the Left — Labour Coordinating Committee, Institute of Workers' Control, ILP, Socialist Educational Association, NOLS, Clause 4, LPYS, Militant, Labour Action for Peace.

Most of these groups did little more than give their insignia to the

working class militancy continued. The massive industrial slump had yet to bear down on industrial militancy, depressing and undermining it. When the Tories embarked on the first of a series of anti-trade union laws, many militants began to talk of organising a general strike, of doing to Thatcher what we'd done to the Heath government in 1973-74, when the labour movement made it impossible for Heath to rule and forced him into a general election, which the Tories lost.

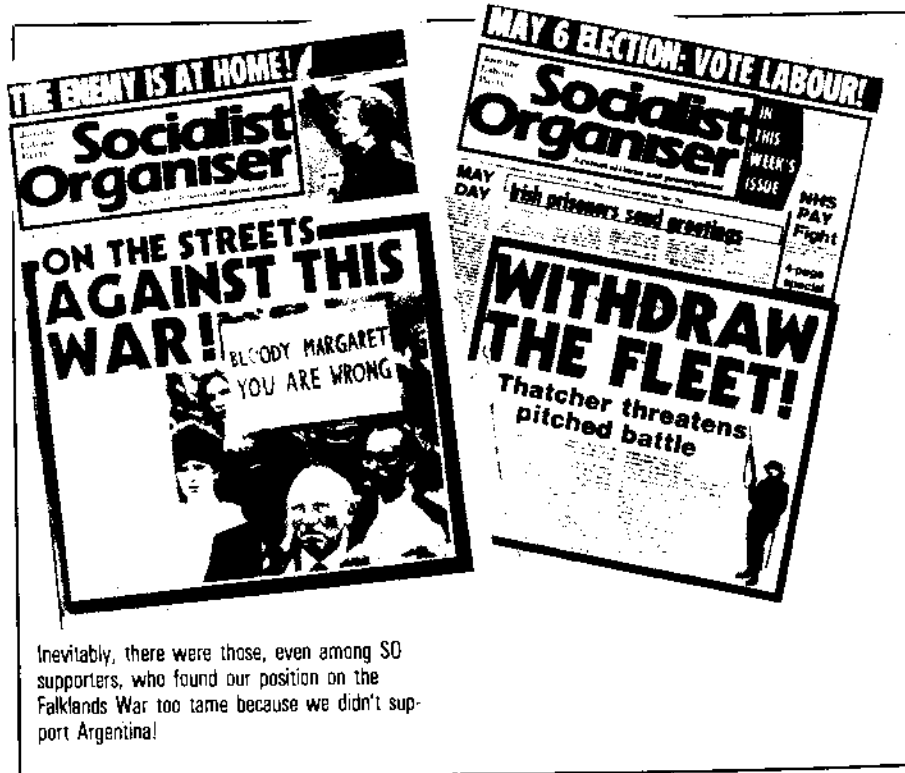
Reading the articles of that period now, you find yourself wondering if we were in the grip of a delirium! General Strike! In fact we were the opposite of delirious. We were sober and true to reality when we argued for the labour movement to put itself on the alert and go all out to beat Thatcher before Thatcher could grind us down.

Today, Thatcher seems an immensely powerful figure, almost invincible. That's because she has won a cumulative series of battles with the labour movement, and because we have lost them.

At the turn of the decade, however, it not only seemed different — it was different. If the labour movement had had leaders fit for the name, men and women with guts and commitment, leaders willing to fight and win on our side of the class struggle as Thatcher and her cronies have fought for theirs — if we had had that, things would have gone differently. The general pre-'82 unpopularity of Thatcher could have been linked with industrial action against, for example, anti-trade union laws, in a great anti-Tory crusade.

Lions, led by donkeys!

With leaders worthy of the name,



Inevitably, there were those, even among SO supporters, who found our position on the Falklands War too tame because we didn't support Argentina!

millions of British workers — people who during the seventies were among the most militant workers anywhere — need not have allowed themselves peacefully to be thrown out of the factories and onto the lengthening dole queues. With proper TUC leadership, industrial battles like the steel strike, and, of course, later, the miners' strike, could have been won. The fighting sections of the class wouldn't have, one after another, been left to fight on alone to defeat.

The British workers were lions in the battles of the 1970s — misled to needless defeat in the '80s by the donkeys at the head of the TUC and the Labour Party.

No, we were not delirious in 1980 and afterwards when we called for working class action to drive the Tories from office. That could have been done, before the Tories achieved the ascendancy they would have for the 1980s in British national life. That it wasn't done is one of the greatest crimes of misleadership in the long history of the international working class.

The bitter truth is that the Tories never defeated the working class in a head-on battle. They won by stealth and deception, using the economic slump as one weapon and the cowardice of most trade union leaders as the other.

The tragedy of Labour's Left

The place of the Labour Party Left in this saga of tragically avoidable

defeat was a central one. It so happened that when Thatcher moved into Downing Street, the Labour Left was moving towards taking over the town halls — Lambeth, Sheffield, the GLC, etc. What did they do there? These were people who had pondered on the recent record of the Wilson-Callaghan government and concluded 'Never again'. There must, they said, be a better way than this.

They began to take power in the town halls just as Thatcher was using her power in government to get down to radically reshaping Britain to make it more like the Red in Tooth and Claw capitalism in America; just as Thatcher unleashed a prolonged orgy of cuts, anti-union laws and welfare state dismantlement. How could they use local government power to thwart Thatcher and help raise up a force of working class resistance to stop her?

Two views emerged within the Left that were united in the SCLV and then in the Rank and File Mobilising Committee.

The first view said that local government should be used in resistance to Thatcher. They should refuse to implement Tory cuts. They should take advantage of every Tory attempt to force them to implement cuts, to mobilise the local communities against the government.

They should face the fact that the Tories were implacable, that it was all-out war which the labour movement would either win or pay very dearly for

losing. Such an approach demanded that the leftwingers, taking local government 'power' should be as good as their promises and fight, going to jail if necessary, taking as their model and guide George Lansbury's Poplar Council, which in 1922 went to jail en masse in defence of the people of their borough.

The local government left

The other approach was the one followed by the local government left in power — not to fight the Tories, but to procrastinate; not to fight the Tory cuts, but to pass them on to the working class electorate by raising money from them through higher rates to offset cuts, not to play the part of fighters, but that of people concerned first of all, and at whatever cost to the working class, with their own well-being, including their own future careers.

Instead of the local government left controlling a series of anti-Tory fortresses dotted about the country, holding out against Thatcherism, mobilising the electorate to oppose its practice and its ideas, the local government 'left' played ball with Thatcher. It made lots of noise against the cuts, but still it passed them on.

Ultimately some of the councillors

— notably in Lambeth and Liverpool — blundered into a confrontation with the government — years too late, after they had, over the years, demobilised the possible working class local opposition to Thatcher.

More than anything else this experience has shaped the Labour Party today. If it had not happened like that, Kinnock's ascendancy would not be what it is today in the Labour Party — and maybe Thatcher's ascendancy in Britain would not be so pronounced either. It is unlikely that the Labour left alone could have defeated Thatcher while the broad trade union class struggle was declining. But we could have lessened the defeat and offset the decline. Instead the local government left created a new school of wheeler-dealing, naked careerism and indifference to long-term socialist goals.

Socialist Organiser, which had taken all the key initiatives when the left was rising, refused to go along with the rate-raising local government left. We accurately pointed out what the choices were after Thatcher came to power in 1979. We were not mistaken. We pointed to the road of class struggle, of using local government to fight the Tories. We explained that Labour



controlled local government would either be Thatcher's tool or a weapon pointed at her.

These were the alternatives. The ignominious collapse of the local government left proves it. The collapse didn't come about as a result of unfavourable circumstances in a fight seriously fought. It came at the end of a long period of evasion and of rate rises — i.e. of passing on cuts and of procrastination whose outcome was only too easy to predict.

"Illusions of power"

By May 1979 the 'hard' left already controlled two Labour councils, in Lothian and Lambeth. In June the SCLV organised a 225-strong conference of London Labour activists on local government. Lambeth leader Ted Knight argued for rate rises as the answer to Tory government cuts; the left argued for Labour councils to mobilise for confrontation.

The debate continued vehemently through the next two years. Where were the Marxist groups, apart from SO? Most of them took no part at all. The 'Chartists' — first within SO, and then after they split, through Labour Briefing — were on the wrong side. They provided Marxist-sounding rationalisations for the rate-rise policy.

In November 1979 60,000 people joined an anti-cuts march in London in work time. In October 1980 the Labour Party conference voted to back direct action against cuts. But the potential was squandered.

Barely three weeks after the June 1979 conference where he had argued so vehemently for rate rises as necessary for a strategy to fight cuts, Ted Knight proposed four and a half per cent cuts in Lambeth! He was forced to reverse them by a rebellion from the local Labour Parties and trade unions. In January 1980 a Lothian Labour Party aggregate voted for "no cuts, no rate

rises" there.

At budget-making in spring 1980 both Lambeth and Lothian went for big rate rises (49 per cent in Lambeth). In November Lambeth imposed a supplementary rate, about £50 from the average ratepayer. A backlash against rate rises spread on Lambeth's council estates. In April 1981 Lambeth council, panicked by that backlash, made 10 per cent cuts.

In May 1981 Labour won the Greater London Council and Ken Livingstone was elected GLC leader. In May 1983 'hard leftists' won strong positions on a number of London borough councils. But the policy of muddling through continued to hold sway. Briefing defended rate rises as a way to 'win time' to prepare a struggle; in fact what the local government left were doing was losing the time in which a fight back by Labour councils, council workers, and local communities could link up with still buoyant industrial militancy.

The final fiasco came in 1984-5. Militant had won a dominant position on Liverpool City Council in May 1983. A campaign between then and the May 1984 elections showed the possibilities for mobilisation which still existed at that late date. But then Militant went for negotiations with the Tory government instead of a struggle. The Tories were willing to make concessions to avoid a common front of Liverpool and the miners. They made a deal: a little extra

money for Liverpool, a 17 per cent rate rise, and the bulk of the problems postponed to 1985.

The Tory government announced that from spring 1985 selected Labour councils would be 'rate-capped' — prevented from raising rates above a certain level. A Labour local government conference voted that the councils affected should refuse to set a rate. In spring 1985 the policy collapsed. Ken Livingstone's GLC and several other authorities set legal rates. 13 councils refused, or at least postponed rate-setting. One by one they collapsed. Liverpool remained last in the field. Militant wanted to set a legal rate (with an increase of 20 per cent) and muddle through. Under pressure from the council workers' unions, they set an illegal rate — and then mounted no campaign. Their stand collapsed in chaos when they suddenly announced that the council had run out of money and was going to issue redundancy notices to all its workforce "as a tactical measure".

Liverpool ended up making cuts. Other left councils turned to 'creative accounting' as an alternative to rate rises. Bit by bit, that way of muddling through also collapsed. The left council leaders became nothing more than would-be benevolent administrators of capitalist local government. Hundreds of thousands of Labour activists on the councils or around them, had been schooled in class collaboration.

"The victories so far are formal," we had warned in 1979-80. "They must be filled out with the content of working class struggle if the movement is to be regenerated. A 'democratised' labour movement will become a fighting organisation of the workers, hammering at the Tories and their backers, or it will quickly fall again under the control of the bureaucrats and time-servers" — who would use

witch-hunts to help them neutralise the democratic reforms.

That is indeed what happened. In December 1981 Michael Foot marked the start of the counter-offensive with a denunciation of the left-wing Labour candidate for the then forthcoming Bermondsey by-election, Peter Tatchell. In January 1982 the Labour Party and trade union leaders met in conclave at Bishops Stortford and agreed a programme of restabilisation.

A witch-hunt was launched against *Militant* — not because they were

dangerous (they had been passangers in the RFMC, no more), but because they were an easy target to use to frighten the whole left.

From then on three processes ran in parallel, reinforcing each other: the re-establishment of right-wing (and soft-left) control in the Labour Party; the defeats, decline and demoralisation of the local government left; and successive defeats for industrial militancy and weakening of the trade unions.

These processes did not run in straight lines, and they were not inevitable. *SO* advocated alternative policies on all three fronts. But our voice was too small to be decisive.

In October 1983, Neil Kinnock and Roy Hattersley swept to victory in the first leadership election under the new rules. Kinnock won 71.3 per cent of the electoral college as against 6.3 per cent for Eric Heffer; Roy Hattersley got 67.3 per cent while Michael Meacher got 27.9 per cent. A very wide range of Labour Party opinion believed that Kinnock-Hattersley was indeed the "dream ticket". Kinnock had refused to support Tony Benn for deputy in 1981, but he was after all a left-winger. At least he was a firm unilateralist, or so Labour activists tried to convince themselves. And Hattersley's election as deputy ensured that the right wing was integrated into the leadership in a subordinate role, and the bitter battles of 1979-81 would be avoided.

Reg Race's lead article in our paper, "Not our dream!", was widely resented. But we were right. Predictably, the Kinnock-Hattersley leader-

Precedent after precedent...

1979-80: Big left-wing upsurge in Labour Party, winning important democratic reforms, alarms the Establishment.

March 1981: David Owen and others split from Labour Party to form SDP.

October 1981: 'Manifesto Group' of right-wing MPs demand purge of *Militant* after Pat Wall is selected as Labour candidate for Bradford North. NEC stalls Wall's endorsement as a candidate and starts an "inquiry" into *Militant*.

November 1981: NEC forbids Hornsey Labour Party (in north London) to admit Tariq Ali, a former leader of the International Marxist Group, as a member.

December 1981: Labour's leader Michael Foot, speaking in Parliament, denounces Peter Tatchell, the Labour candidate selected for Bermondsey (south-east London), because Tatchell has written an article advocating "extra-parliamentary action".

January 1982: Cabal of trade union and Labour leaders at Bishops Stortford agrees plans to make the Labour Party safe for capitalism again.

Tribune calls for a Party tribunal to investigate and expel "some of the more secretive sectarian organisations".

June 1982: NEC discusses report of "inquiry" into *Militant* and decides to set up a

"register" of approved groups in the Labour Party (so that *Militant* can be dubbed a disapproved group and expelled).

Two campaigns set up against this: the 'Labour Steering Committee Against the Witch-hunt' (controlled by *Militant*) and 'Labour Against the Witch-hunt'.

Militant supporters take the Labour Party to court. To cut through its legal difficulties, and also to get round the problem that many right-wing groups in the Labour Party turn out to be ineligible for the register, the NEC lets the register become a dead letter.

February 1983: The NEC finally finds a "legal" formula to expel five members of the *Militant* editorial board (though their local Labour Parties refuse to recognise the expulsions, some of them maintaining this refusal for years). In the same month, Peter Tatchell, finally endorsed as Labour candidate for Bermondsey after the right-wing former MP Bob Mellish resigns to force a sudden by-election, is trounced by a vicious anti-gay, anti-left campaign from the Liberals.

October 1983: Labour Party conference confirms the expulsion of the five *Militant* EB members after they address the conference. Neil Kinnock elected leader.

1984-5: With opinion swinging to the left because of the miners' strike, the witch hunt marks time.

Late 1985: *Militant*, influential on Liverpool City Council, discredits itself by issuing 24,000 redundancy notices (as a "tactical move") and then collapsing into making cuts. **November:** Liverpool District Labour Party is suspended.

June 1986: Derek Hatton and other *Militant* supporters in Liverpool expelled. This time the campaigns against the expulsions are much lower key, and *Militant* relies almost exclusively on using the courts.

October 1986: Labour Party conference confirms the Liverpool expulsions and approves a new disciplinary procedure giving a "National Constitutional Committee" a right to expel anyone guilty of "a sustained course of conduct prejudicial to the Party".

Between then and its report to the 1989 Labour Party conference, the NCC dealt with 134 cases. Most of them concerned "membership of the *Militant* Tendency" and led to expulsion.

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After Brighton, Left must organise

TAKE THE FIGHT INTO THE UNIONS!



The movement for a democratic Labour Party depended on trade union officials who continued to be bureaucrats in "their own" organisations.



Shirley Williams, Bill Rodgers, David Owen: founders of the SDP

ship has turned out to be a shoddier, less talented version of the team of Harold Wilson and George Brown which took the leadership to similar acclaim 20 years earlier.

The October 1983 conference also confirmed the expulsion of five members of the *Militant* editorial board. But the acclaim for the new leadership could not hide the fact that the Labour Party was in a mess.

The witch-hunt against *Militant* had been carried out with great clumsiness. It had taken 18 months to expel five people. And even then the expulsions were not fully effective. Islington South CLP quietly continued to issue membership cards to Ted Grant and Peter Taaffe for some years afterwards, and the *Militant* newspaper, theoretically banned, was still sold in that CLP. Weary Labour Party officials visiting the constituency could not summon up the energy to do any more than tell the *Militant* sellers that they were banned and then turn a blind eye to them as they continued selling.

Despite *Militant's* stupidities — splitting the campaign against the witch-hunt, and using the capitalist courts — the whole exercise had benefitted *Militant* more than anyone else. They got tremendous free publicity and rapid recruitment.

The June 1983 general election had been Labour's worst since 1918. It won only 27.6 per cent of the vote — less than the 30.6% it won in 1931 after the then Party leader Ramsay Macdonald split to join up with the Tories, and only marginally more than

the 25.4 per cent gained by the Liberal-SDP Alliance. The Tories were helped by their boost from the Falklands War, and the Labour leaders' inability to voice any independence from the wave of chauvinism that came with that war. And then Labour's 1983 election campaign was a fiasco.

The cover of the election manifesto carried a number of portraits, presumably illustrating the range of people whom Labour was appealing to. One of the women portrayed was under threat of expulsion from the Labour Party! Diana Minns had clash-

Why Briefing split from SO

In early 1980, a number of SO supporters parted with us because they wanted to support the leaders of the local government left — Ted Knight, Ken Livingstone, etc. — and their policy of avoiding clashes with Thatcher's government over cuts by raising rates. That policy, we said, was a recipe for wasting the strength of the left.

Some of those who split off went to the Labour Coordinating Committee; the more serious of them launched Briefing. In time, Ken Livingstone and Ted Knight hived off from Briefing to produce *Labour Herald* (with the secret backing of Gerry Healy's WRP). Briefing grew critical of Livingstone and his allies as the years of dithering wore on, but never decisively distanced itself from them.

Today, Briefing, which thus began as an early product of the reflux of the left, has reconstituted itself on a hard left basis.

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ed with the National Executive because, as secretary of Hornsey CLP, she refused to exclude Tariq Ali from membership.

Inside the manifesto, unilateral nuclear disarmament featured prominently. Yet former Party leader James Callaghan publicly denounced the policy, and not one member of the current leadership defended it. The economic policy of the manifesto, promising that a Labour Government would borrow in order to revive British business convinced no-one, least of all, probably, the people who drafted it.

The Labour Left, too, made a poor showing in the election. Inspired by our achievements with the SCLV in 1979, an impressive-looking coalition of Labour leftists launched a campaign called "Socialists for a Labour Victory". SO joined in. But the campaign did nothing. The broad coalition was so vague politically that it had nothing much to say that was not in the official manifesto, and most of the leading people in it did not have the political will to do anything independently left-wing in the election campaign.

Labour's Left had been beaten back. But the emerging soft-left/right-wing coalition had not found its feet.

The miners' strike

The 1984-5 miners' strike revived the fading Labour Left for a period. The October 1984 Labour Party conference passed a motion, proposed by us, saying that the police should be kept out of industrial disputes. Unilateralism was reaffirmed with an 80% majority. Across the country, Labour leftists were the central force in miners' support committees. SO did all

it could to help, of course.

Two big Mineworkers' Defence Committee conferences linked the miners' support committees nationally, and linked the left in the Labour Party and the trade unions. But the initiative came late in the strike, and was weaker than it might have been. It was left to *SO* and *Briefing* while the bigger groups, *Militant* and the SWP contributed very little.

Militant was by now the biggest left force in the trade unions, through the Broad Lefts Organising Committee. By good luck, BLOC had a conference, arranged in advance, very near the start of the miners' strike. It passed a bland motion of support — and then did nothing throughout the whole strike apart from calling one lobby of the TUC. *Militant* was not even active in the miners' support committees (but they went out collecting money "for the miners").

The SWP, obsessed with its theories of the downturn, started to write off the miners' strike as inevitably headed for defeat only a few weeks after it started. Until autumn 1984 it refused to work in the miners' support committees, condemning them as "left-wing Oxfam".

In March 1985 the miners had to concede defeat. Here again the linkage, or lack of it, between struggles in the trade unions and struggles in the Labour Party, was important. Liverpool council had had the chance to open a second front alongside the miners in summer 1984 and had missed it because of *Militant's* political choices. In spring 1985 the official policy of Labour's local government conference was for Labour councils to defy the Tory government over rate-

capping. If the miners had known that the councils would organise a serious struggle, then that could have shored up their strike. In fact they had, and could have, no confidence in the councils.

The decline of the left after 1985

The double setback of the miners' defeat and the rate-capping fiasco drove the Labour Left back further. The mainstream Left disintegrated. More and more former "hard leftists" from local government went over to the "soft left".

GLC leader Ken Livingstone led the way, though he was later to tack back towards the "hard" left. His GLC, moreover, had sketched much of the political basis for the "soft left".

It was elected in May 1981 on promises to use the council for class struggle against the Tories. By early 1982 it had betrayed those promises. It turned instead to a different sort of radicalism. Using its huge money-raising abilities, it launched or aided a range of initiatives to help women, black people, lesbians and gays, and worker cooperatives. Much of what it did was good. The problem was that it was an **alternative** to class-struggle politics. It replaced class-struggle politics with American-style radical liberalism, with the Labour council as bankroller for a "rainbow coalition" of diverse client groups.

The Marxist left was also thrown back. After the debacle in Liverpool in late 1985, the Labour Party leadership started a new witch-hunt against *Militant*. It was much more efficient this time. *Militant* had seriously isolated themselves. At the October 1986 Labour Party conference there were only 325,000 votes against the witch-hunt, with 6,146,000 for. This time *Militant* made no effort at all to run a campaign against the expulsions, relying solely on legal action; the rest of the "hard" left voted against the expulsions but was not sufficiently motivated to organise a campaign of any substance.

The witch-hunt has continued since. The Labour leadership set up the National Constitutional Committee to facilitate expulsions, and a steady stream of expulsions has followed since, most, though by no means all, of *Militant* supporters. The Labour Party Young Socialists, *Militant's* stronghold for a decade and a half, has been shut down; it went with scarcely a whimper.

Militant's reaction has often caused speculation that they may be preparing to quit the Labour Party. That is possi-

ble. More probably, however, they are too demoralised to campaign seriously against expulsions (they have never been much good at hard battles against the odds) and console themselves anyway that they can probably gain more from the publicity and martyr-appeal of expulsions than they lose by having a few dozen people excluded from the Labour Party.

The SWP, also, has had no coherent perspective. In 1985 — presumably shocked by their experience in the miners' support committees — they started issuing open letters to *Militant* and selling papers outside Labour Party meetings.



Neil Kinnock: many were angry when *SO* criticised him in 1983. Photo: John Harris

Back to basics

SO's motto in 1985-6 was "Back to basics". Facts had to be faced, we argued: the Left was likely to be stagnant and demoralised for a while. To seek some grand gimmick to revive it was a waste of time.

The job of our paper, as we saw it, was to help the activists who were doing the hard work of maintaining and building Labour Party and trade union branches in this slack period; and to help the Left learn lessons and clarify its ideas. We wanted to regroup activists around the ideas of **working class socialism**, in opposition to the fashionable notions of "rainbow coalition" politics.

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Debate: the Falklands war

Already *SO* had more lively debate than other papers on the left. In 1979-81 it had carried long debates on local government policy — for rate rises or for confrontation? — and on perspectives for the Labour Party reform movement.

In 1982 *SO*'s columns were full of a furious debate on the South Atlantic war. Argentina's military regime, shaky because of growing working-class opposition, tried to shore itself up by invading and seizing the Falkland Islands in April 1982.

The islands, 400 miles off the coast, had been inhabited by a small British community, mainly farmers, since the 1830s — decades before the creation of modern Argentina. Argentina, however, had a longstanding nationalist claim to the islands.

The islands gave little profit to Britain, and British governments repeatedly tried to negotiate their cessation to Argentina. This encouraged the Argentine generals to think that seizing the islands would give them an easy victory and easy popularity.

The easy victory, however, was Margaret Thatcher's. She sent troops to the South Atlantic, who took back the islands in July, though not until after more people had been killed than the total population of the islands. Argentina's military performance was a fiasco, and the military regime fell soon after.

SO's editorial line was to denounce both Thatcher's war and Argentina's mini-imperialism. Most of the left, however, while agreeing with *SO* on opposition to Thatcher's war, gave positive support to Argentina. (The main exceptions were *Militant* — which had the surrealistic slogan of a socialist federation of Britain, Argentina and the Falkland Islands — and *Socialist Worker*, which at that time had not embarked on its current super-anti-imperialist binge and argued much the same view as *SO*). Many contributors to *SO* agreed with the pro-Argentine line. We debated at length, covering not only the specifics of the South Atlantic war but broader questions of the nature of modern imperialism, the reality of colonial independence, and the emergence of countries like Argentina as "sub-imperialist" powers.

The left and the EEC

Throughout the early '80s, too, there was a running debate in *SO*'s columns on the European Community.

Attitudes to European capitalist integration have been a point of dispute on the British left since the early '60s, but this was the first time (apart from a short, sharp debate in the SWP, then called IS, in 1971) that they had been debated consecutively and coherently.

The reaction of all the Marxist left when Britain's capitalist rulers first mooted entry to the Common Market, in the early '60s, was to say that the labour movement could support neither capitalist option, "in" or "out". It must reply to the internationalisation of capital by developing workers' international links, and not by trying to "keep Britain out".

Most contributors to *SO* argued that the initial reaction had been right, and the Marxist left should simply stick to its guns.

But over the 1970s the tide of nationalist "broad left" feeling grew strong. For a while, in 1972-75, opposition to British entry to the Common Market seemed to be the issue which separated left from right in British politics. And almost all the Marxist left — including many contributors to *SO* — started swimming with the tide.

Over the '80s the debate on the left continued, but started to shift. Today none of the Marxist papers or groups still campaigns to "get Britain out",

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though none of them has yet admitted that they were wrong on this in the past. On the "soft left", the dominant mood is now the exact reverse of what it was in the '70s: it is pro-EC, while Margaret Thatcher is now the leading anti-EC politician in Britain! *SO* has mapped out a consistent argument.

Ireland: Provos and Protestants

Ireland was a major issue of debate in *SO* from 1983 to 1986. Since the mid-'70s there had been stalemate in

When Vanessa Redgrave sued Socialist Organiser

In 1981 a determined attempt was made to destroy *Socialist Organiser*. We were sued for libel by the actress Vanessa Redgrave on behalf of Gerry Healy's "Workers' Revolutionary Party".

We had told the truth about the hysteria and violence of their organisation. And we had told the labour movement that they were financed by Arab bourgeois governments. No other paper — socialist or Fleet Street — had dared to do that, because of the risk of libel action.

Significantly, Redgrave sued us for comparing the WRP to the Moonies, not for what we said about where its money came from. We determined to fight the issue, through the courts if necessary, and not to let ourselves be intimidated into lying at the dictation of the WRP. It cost us many thousands of pounds, which we had to raise painfully from our supporters.

We campaigned politically in the labour movement — and so did the WRP, which waged a prolonged campaign of libel against *SO* in the pages of its daily paper *Marrowline*. Prominent labour movement people lent themselves to that campaign, most notably Ken Livingstone, whose paper *Labour Herald* was printed by the WRP press at cheap rates and was edited by a member of the



WRP "Central Committee", Steven Miller.

Those who supported our stand for the right to tell the truth as we knew it ranged from Tony Benn to the international Spartacist tendency.

The case dragged on for years, but never went to court. Vanessa Redgrave didn't dare. Finally, in 1985 the WRP exploded and a mass of revelations appeared even in the bourgeois press about life in the WRP. Healy's own associates admitted that the organisation had, in return for money, spied on Arab dissidents in Britain and on prominent British Jews. They had helped get a number of West CPers shot by the Saddam Hussein regime.

Northern Ireland; and pretty much stalemate on the British left, too. The conventional wisdom reduced itself to arguing for British troops out and asserting hopefully that this was synonymous with Irish self-determination and a united Ireland; but few people had much conviction about it, as was shown by the fact that demonstrations and campaigns on Ireland were all very, very small.

In *SO* we started to open new ground. The case against British troops, we agreed, was clear. But the hopeful assertion that Irish self-determination and a united Ireland would follow automatically from troops out was just wishful thinking. There were two communities in Ireland, Gaelic-Irish or Catholic, and Anglo-Scots-Irish or Protestant. However much we disagreed with the political views of the majority of Protestants, they had rights as a community and anyway must be accommodated for any democratic united Ireland to be possible. The call for troops out, we argued, must be linked with proposals for a federal united Ireland which would give regional autonomy to the Protestant-majority area in the north-east.

Arabs, Jews and Socialism

Another major debate opened in *SO* in 1985. There had been a simmering argument among *SO*'s contributors for many years on Israel/Palestine. *SO* had accepted what became the conventional wisdom on the left from the end of the 1960s — support for the destruction of Israel and its replacement by a "democratic secular state" across all Palestine. *SO* had denounced the ex-

trême conclusions drawn from this view — the banning of student Jewish Societies in British colleges, for example, on the grounds that they would not forswear Zionism — but accepted the basic view. A few contributors started to raise questions. If it is wrong, and anti-semitic, to ban Zionists in Britain, isn't it equally wrong to "ban Zionists" — that is, deny the Israeli Jews the right to their own state — in the Middle East? The Israeli Jews are clearly a nation. To deny them the right to their own nation-state is to brand them an "evil nation". That is anti-semitic; and the anti-semitic conclusions drawn in British politics followed logically. They were not aberrations.

Accepting the rights of the Israeli Jews does not, of course, mean failing to support the struggle of the Palestinian Arabs for their rights. The Palestinian Arabs, too, have a right to a state of their own. But the programme of the "democratic secular state" in all Palestine is at best a fantasy. It could be made reality only by conquest of Israel by the Arab states — in which case it would not be "democratic" at all. We should be for the maximum collaboration of the different nations and peoples, for a socialist United States of the Middle East — but with the right of self-determination for the minority nations, the Kurds and the Israeli Jews.

The 1987 election and Kinnock's New Model Labour Party

We tried to re-educate ourselves and the broader Left. Meanwhile, however, the Tories were steaming towards a third general election victory.

The 1987 general election was not as bad as 1983's. For a few weeks before polling day Neil Kinnock produced some half-vigorous defence, not of socialism, but at least of public welfare, against the Tories' free market philosophy. A few weeks could not outweigh years of campaigning almost exclusively against Labour's Left, but Labour's vote rose from 27.6% to 30.8%.

Tentative explorations of the possibility of running something like the 1979 SCLV brought no results. There was no sizeable, vigorous, confident left seeking its own voice within the election campaign. The whole of the Left — except the crazier sectarians of the type of the RCP — rallied to the job of trying to replace the Tories with the only working-class

alternative to hand, Neil Kinnock's Labour Party.

We tried to make sure that, whatever else was lacking in Labour's effort, it would not be *SO*. We filled the paper week after week with hard-hitting, basic exposures of the Tories' records and the Tories' policies.

But the major result of the 1987 election inside the Labour Party was to reinforce Kinnock's position. In the three years since then he has improved his advantage. Unilateralism has been scrapped, Common Market withdrawal junked, free-market economics adopted. The Policy Review allowed Kinnock to ride roughshod over Party Conference, and now he plans to secure his position by making procedures like the Policy Review the regular means of Labour Party decision-making instead of conference.

A challenge by Tony Benn and Eric Heffer for the Party leadership in 1988 allowed the Labour Left to revive a little. But only a little: the local Benn-Heffer campaign committees were, with some exceptions, feeble. The left vote at conference was poor: even Hattersley, even in the CLP section, won 60:40.

The main prop of the new regime in the Labour Party is certainly the trade union leaders. They are a more right-wing lot than they were in the '70s or even the early '80s. They are under much less pressure from their rank and



Argentina's General Galtieri: an anti-imperialist?

file. Battered and demoralised by ten years of Thatcher government, they are not inclined to argue the toss with the Parliamentary Labour leaders as their predecessors did in 1969-73 and 1978-81. They want a Labour government on almost any terms. If volunteering to have themselves fettered and tied by continued anti-union laws under a Labour government seems advisable to win votes, then volunteer they will.

But there has been a shift to the right in the constituencies, too. Benn's and Heffer's scores in the constituencies in 1988 were poor. The left candidates for the CLP section of the National Executive lost votes heavily in 1989. The two left-wing motions putting alternatives to the Policy Review's free-market economic philosophy in 1989 got miserable votes. *Militant's* line of nationalising 250 top companies got 239,000 and a motion for nationalising 25 top companies (the same policy that Wilson vetoed when the National Executive adopted it in 1973) got 459,000. Since both motions would have got trade union votes, they must both have won only a minority of the constituency delegates.

The ban on Socialist Organiser

The culmination — so far — of this shift to the right in the labour move-

ment was the Labour Party National Executive's decision to ban *Socialist Organiser* — taken at a meeting on 25 July 1990 without any charges being notified to us, without any notice of evidence, and without a hearing!

People may now be expelled from the Labour Party just for circulating SO.

But SO has no intention of giving up! For every reader or seller who is expelled from the Labour Party, two new ones will join the Labour Party or be won from among existing Labour activists.

Ironically, the proceedings which led to the ban started in early 1990, only just after the great wave of revolutions in Eastern Europe. Just as the one-party states collapsed in Eastern Europe, Neil Kinnock tried to move Labour a huge new step towards being a one-faction party!

Stalinism

SO was vigorous and unequivocal about supporting the Polish workers' movement Solidarnosc in 1980-1. For example, SO supported Solidarnosc's call for a trade union boycott of Polish goods after the declaration of martial law in December 1981, while other left papers hesitated or refused.

In 1987 SO set up the Campaign for Solidarity with Workers in the Eastern Bloc, and the paper has continued to cover and support that campaign ever since. With the collapse of Stalinism in



Eastern Europe, the balance of the campaign has changed: its main efforts now go towards helping the new socialist groups there, which fight both Stalinism and the new pro-capitalist governments of former oppositionists.

Stalinism is also an issue where SO has tried to re-educate itself and the left. When the paper was launched, almost all of its contributors accepted what has been the "orthodox Trotskyist" view since 1951 — that the Stalinist states are "degenerated and deformed workers' states". We gave that rather ambiguous formula a distinctively anti-Stalinist twist, but still we accepted it. In 1983 there was a flurry of debate in the paper when members of the editorial staff defended this view against writers who interpreted the formula as semi-support for Stalinism (implying, for example, acceptance of the USSR's military occupation of Afghanistan) and against writers who wanted to define the USSR as a new class society, bureaucratic-collectivist or state-capitalist.

The defence against the "new class" writers, however, lacked conviction. And in 1987 we finally opened a full-blown debate on the issue. Quite rapidly, almost all the contributors came to the conclusion that the 1951 formula was nonsense. The political regimes of the Stalinist states were viciously anti-working class; in view of the creation of nationalised economies by many petty-bourgeois and Stalinist formations in many countries since World War 2, without any working class action being involved, the idea that the nationalised property defined these states as "workers' states" could no longer be upheld; and their

Socialist Organiser and the "Zionist conspiracy"

In his book "If voting changed anything, they'd abolish it", Ken Livingstone purports to give an account of his relations with SO.

Essentially his account is untrue. There was a bitter political conflict between SO and Livingstone over policy for the local government left. It led to hard polemics, but it did not lead to a rupturing of relations. You will find Ken Livingstone collaborating with SO — in interviews with the paper, for example — long after that dispute.

The rupture and embittering of relations with Livingstone came about because of his links with Gerry Healy's "Workers' Revolutionary Party" — a group which he still publicly defends (see *Workers' Press*, July 1990, for example).

While the Healyites were trying to ruin us in the libel courts, and whipping up a lynch-mob atmosphere against us, with a clinically crazy campaign to show that we were part of an "international Zionist conspiracy stretching from the White House and members of Mrs Thatcher's cabinet to the editors of SO", Livingstone sang in chorus with the WRP. He collaborated with them (secretly) to produce *Labour Herald*.

For example, across the page of Gerry



Healy's *Newsline* from the crazy editorial about the "Zionist conspiracy" there was an interview with Livingstone who said that, yes, the recent BBC TV investigation of the WRP's money from Arab governments was obviously part of a "Zionist" drive against the WRP. When we publicly asked Livingstone to dissociate himself from the crazy and mercenary anti-semitism of the Healyites, he did not respond.

He continued to work with Healy. That is how our relationship with Livingstone became what it is now.



Soviet miners on strike

economies were, indeed, highly exploitative and nowise superior to capitalism in the development of the productive forces. The bureaucracies must be seen as new ruling classes, not superior but parallel to capitalism.

The debate continues — both between different views on the definition of the bureaucratic ruling classes and their economies ("state capitalist", "bureaucratic collectivist"), and with contributors who still see the Stalinist states as "degenerated and deformed workers' states" and those who see them as societies with no ruling class and no economic dynamic at all. But the dominant editorial view, we think, has been strikingly confirmed by the revolutions of 1989.

In the short term those revolutions have strengthened capitalism and the right wing in politics. In the longer term, though, we believe that they have cleared the way for a rebirth of

socialism from the Stalinist death-grip which crippled it for 60 years. *Socialist Organiser* will play a full part in that rebirth.

The road ahead

So what do we do? What is *SO's* role now? What do we say the Left should do?

Today *SO* continues a battle for class struggle politics as the only road to socialism, that is, of a free democratic working class society with neither capitalist exploitation or the kind of state tyranny you have in the Stalinist states.

The left should unite around a basic programme of commitment to the working class and hard commitment to the fight to replace the present wage-slave system with a cooperative, democratic socialist system as the central goal of our politics.

The left should learn the lessons of its own avoidable defeats. In the last 30 years we have been through an immense cycle of class struggle in this country — the healthy, vigorous left of the future will be built politically upon an analysis and discussion and assimilation of the lessons of this great cycle of class struggle, including in the negative lessons, part of which have been outlined above.

The hard left needs to arm itself with Marxism. Marxism isn't dead or reduced to the idiotic "shamefaced-anarcho-syndicalism for 10 year olds" purveyed by the SWP, or to the craven right wing falsetto Thatcherism of the CP and *Marxism Today*. But Marxism too suffers from the decades of international working class defeat, from the adulterations of 60 years of state-power-holding Stalinism which had bits of pidgin Marxist phraseology as its oppressive state religion. What is and is

not Marxism also needs to be hammered out in dialogue and discussion — free from religiosity and dogmatism.

The hard left needs to put the period of sectarianism behind it. Unfortunately the triumphant march of Kinnoch and what he represents in the labour movement will strengthen sectarianism and push politically immature people towards organisations such as the SWP. Sectarianism is one part of the price we pay for opportunism such as that of the Labour local government left, just as opportunism is itself sometimes part of the price we pay — in a vicious circle — for sectarianism. Some of the local government left fakers and opportunists — Ted Knight, for example — even came from a sectarian political background.

This is what the left needs to do. Despite the ban the Labour Party leaders have put on *Socialist Organiser*, we will continue to do what we have done in our first 12 years — advocate the working class side in the class struggle; express our implacable opposition to the Tories and the right wing of the labour movement; and continue to advocate a no less implacable opposition to the totalitarian Stalinist forgery of socialism and to those in the labour movement who champion and would replicate it.

On this basis we shall fight to overcome needless division and **unite the serious left.**

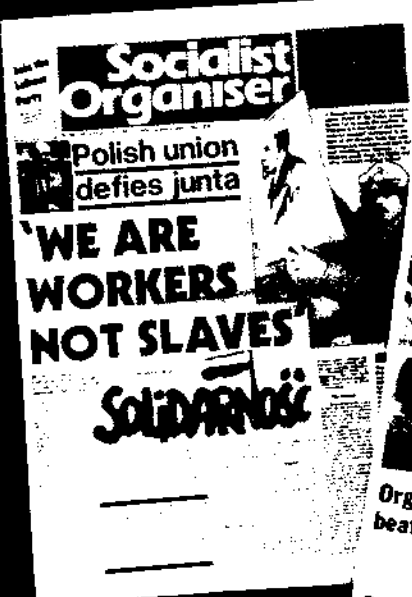
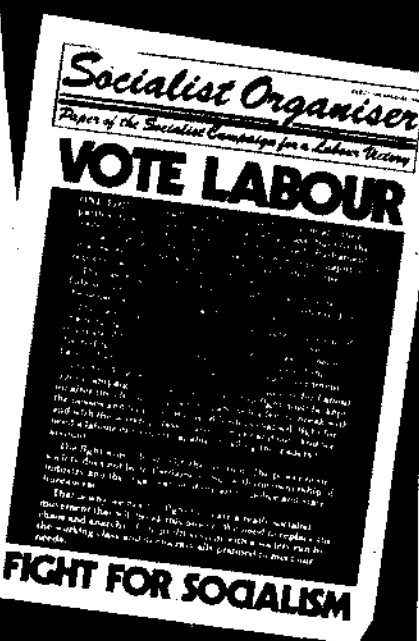
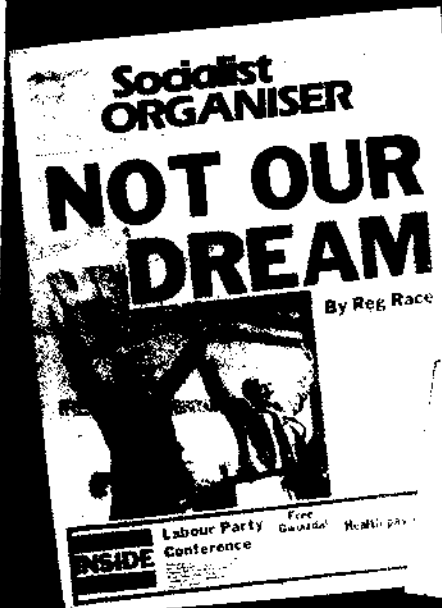
For 12 years we have maintained an open paper which produces, as a matter of course, rebuffs and rejoinders to our editorial line and to our articles in the paper. We will continue to do so.

Only a fool would believe that the serious Marxist left has an easy time ahead. No we haven't. It is most likely a very hard road ahead and there will be some who will find it too hard. Yet there is no other road.

We believe we live in a wage-slave society, in a world divided between the Western wage-slave system and the collapsing totalitarian state economies of the Stalinist states. If this is true then it follows that nothing will ever be right until we overthrow the oppressors and their states both East and West.

We remain, despite all the problems and setbacks, confident that the working class in the East and in the West will overthrow the systems of oppression and make a new world without class, race or sex oppression. In any case, for ourselves, we will do what we can to achieve the great socialist goal: the liberation of humanity from class society.

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"The decision by the National Executive Committee to proscribe Socialist Organiser was done without any attempt to hear their response to the accusations made. Moreover, the paper presented to the NEC about Socialist Organiser bore all the marks of a document written by the security services. It was almost as if Colin Wallace had been called back to duty for the purpose.

"Socialist Organiser has long reflected a wide range of socialist opinion in scholarly articles that draw heavily on the sources of socialist ideas, and it has included contributions by people of differing opinions, including members of the NEC itself.

"A Labour Party that cannot contain ideas of the kind that Socialist Organiser publishes is a party that will get narrower and narrower, will lose its sense of history, become separated from its ideological roots, and hence will offer no vision beyond the vision of a change of government in an election. I hope that members of the Party go on reading the paper, because that is still not an offence, though I cannot be sure for how long even that will be true."

Tony Benn

"Socialist Organiser's socialist credentials are beyond reproach. Its sympathisers — like many other socialists in the party — may hold minority views. But they are loyal members of the Labour Party, an asset to it, and they will, I understand, be happy to make any adjustments to their activity which the NEC may require. This, however, would rather interfere with the NEC's likely plans of disqualifying Lol Duffy. Hence the NEC may deem it necessary to build up Socialist Organiser into a Merseyside bug-bear, and on this basis proceed against it. These methods are alien to Labour's democratic tradition and should

Arguing for socialism since 1978

be condemned. Members must be alerted to the drift away from party democracy and towards intolerance and must mobilise against it."

Vladimir Derer

"I do not see any justification for the NEC to ban Socialist Organiser and expel supporters of Socialist Organiser. Socialist Organiser is a paper with a very wide and tolerant view. It seems to me this is one further example of what we said at the beginning of the witch-hunt: if you begin with one organisation, in the end you attack all of the left."

Eric Heffer

"We are talking about censorship — and it is absolutely intolerable. The Labour Party rule book appears to offer fairness to everybody — unless you happen to disagree with the leadership."

Billy Etherington, Vice President, NE Area NUM

"I am opposed to the NEC's ban against Socialist Organiser. I think that the Party ought to be concentrating on broadening its base rather than narrowing it. In the past I have supported moves to expel people for flagrant rule breaking or corruption. But this is for overtly political reasons."

Peter Hain

"I deplore the decision of the National Executive Committee to proscribe Socialist Organiser. I disagree strongly with the paper's political objectives, but I feel that its supporters have a view which should be heard within the labour movement. By this decision and the manner in which it was taken, the NEC has raised unnecessary doubts about Labour's commitment to a pluralist

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society, freedom of speech, and open government."

Phil Kelly, editor, Tribune

"The attack on Socialist Organiser is the continuation of the Kinnock leadership's attack on voices of dissent in the Labour Party. The so-called 'clean image' is for electoral purposes. But it is clear that this is not what the voters are interested in. People want to know what Labour will do about the economic situation, international issues, and the question of minorities. The Tories are attacking working people. The voters are bothered about Labour's response to the Tories — not the need to attack voices of dissent inside the Labour Party."

Mertha Osemor

"Comrades, in connection with difficulties created by the leadership of the Labour Party, we would like to express our full solidarity with sympathisers of Socialist Organiser. Both you and we recognise democracy inside the labour movement, in multi-tendency organisations, the possibilities of democracy from below and free political debate as a basic value of public life. With our solidarity in a common struggle for workers' liberty, East and West."

Josef Pinior, Milka Tyszkiewicz,
Jaroslaw Wardega, Socialist Political
Centre, Wroclaw, Poland

"Women for Socialism has been very grateful for the help of Socialist Organiser — particularly for trade union work. Obviously I am totally opposed to the ban on Socialist Organiser."

Ruth Clarke, Secretary, Women for
Socialism

"Proscriptions and witch-hunts within the



Party are not the way forward to a Labour government."

Dave Cooke, MSF National Executive

"When politicians try to proscribe the views of other people then we can be sure of one thing: that these politicians neither understand nor care about



We stand for workers' liberty page 24

democracy."

Jake Ecclestone, NUJ Deputy General Secretary

"I was suspended from the PLP in the 1960s for opposing the Vietnam war. I have always been against bans and proscriptions — where will it stop? Although I do not agree with Socialist Organiser's politics, I believe the Labour Party should be a broad church and I regret the direction we appear to be heading in."

Stan Newens MEP

"Thank god for Socialist Organiser! You helped us in our dispute from last Christmas. We did not win but it put pressure on the union to pick up on what was happening. It helped us financially and publicised our plight. It is stupid to expel such trade unionists and working class supporters from the Labour Party."

Roy Howell, East Midlands Company Rep (NUR)

"It's appalling, at a time when the Tories are on the run, that the Labour Party should

spend time turning inwards. Banning Socialist Organiser, who have done tremendous work for miners and other workers in struggle, shows crass stupidity.

"Why don't they just say they are more interested in yuppies and floating Tories than in having working class people in the Labour Party? It is appalling that they spend time, effort and money in witch-hunting within the Party when there is much more to gain by going for the Tories. The Party and trade union rank and file must say, enough is enough."

Paul Whetton, Manton NUM, S Yorkshire

"I think the ban is disgusting. The Party should be attacking the Tories, not its own members. As far as I'm concerned SO has always supported the Labour Party and the trade unions. Particularly in the miners' strike of 1984-5, giving support to workers in struggle who were fighting for jobs and communities. SO is always full of informative, useful accounts and articles."

Brenda Procter, Labour councillor, Stoke on Trent and Staffs Women Against Pit Closures



Czechoslovakia: the workers overthrow the old order, but remain led by the middle class

Why workers need class politics

Lessons from Eastern Europe

By **Ruth Cockcroft**
and **Cathy Nugent**

WHO COULD HAVE foreseen the working class across the whole of Eastern Europe awakening so sudden-

ly to an awareness of its own strength?

In Eastern Europe the working class numbers millions. Prospects for socialism have been given an immense boost by the awakening of this giant army of millions of workers who will find no means of defending themselves except the tried and tested methods of trade union and political self-organisation as a class.

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However, the East European working class is, at present, a subordinate part of a 'people's' movement which has no specifically working class politics. The politics of the broad popular movement include demands for an ill-defined 'democracy' and for the 'market'. Most workers, when asked, say they want a socially responsible market and democratic freedoms which are far deeper, more substantial and more all-embracing than is the parliamentary democracy of the West.

Evidence suggests that by 'democracy' workers express the ideas of running their own workplaces, of creating democratic structures in the newly emerging independent trade unions, and of writing, for themselves, laws which serve working people.

Workers not yet independent

As yet the working class in Eastern Europe has not formed its own democratic class structure, workers' councils ('soviets').

In the past such alternative forms of working class democracy have appeared as the spontaneous product of uprisings in which mass working class movements are involved. Through these new democratic structures workers begin to articulate and fight for political demands as a united politically independent class.

In the 1917 Russian Revolution for example, there came into existence a 'dual power' in which two forms of government emerged, one the organic form of working class power, the workers' councils ('soviets'), the other, the Provisional government, led by Kerensky, which aimed to stabilise a Russian bourgeois democracy.

Workers' Councils and mass strikes have already been the weapons of the working class in face of Stalinist oppression in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia at various times in the last 35 years. Strikes have played a part in the East European revolutions. These weapons and means of working class self-mobilisation may again become central in the period ahead as workers have to begin to act as workers to defend themselves, as they surely will. But the reality now is proletarian support for vague ideas of 'democracy' and for pro-market governments. There is no 'dual power', there is no mass revolutionary class-conscious workers' movement.

In contrast to the working class, the majority of people involved in the East European revolutions, there is the minority of liberal intellectuals, the layer which has placed itself at the head of the people's movements. They articulate demands which have political clarity and are well defined in their championing of capitalism. Sections of the bureaucracy agree with the dissident intelligentsia in advocating and promoting market capitalism and parliamentary democracy.

Unlike the working class the intelligentsia has had room under Stalinism (even in spite of harsh repression) to generate a political programme, to become assured of its future political role and to gain the confidence to propagate its own ideology. The intellectuals gain their clarity and confidence from being the local representatives and understudies of the West European bourgeoisie, with all its immense wealth, experience and prestige.

Clearly, the intelligentsia have had

some networks, loose organisations and forums in which to develop ideas and politics before the revolutions. So have the various churches, who play a major role. The working class has had no such organisation.

The working class has not even had trade unions in which to organise independently, still less an arena in which to develop its own political and philosophical ideas through the free exercise of speech, writing and assembly.

In Eastern Europe (and the USSR) things are made even more difficult for the newly awakening working class movements by the Stalinist misuse of the words and ideas used by socialist movements to define and express the interests of the working class. The names, symbols, banners and objectives of the old socialists have been made hateful to millions of workers because of their misuse by the Stalinists to camouflage and try to

justify their own anti-socialist rule over so many grim decades.

Revolutionary organisation

The greatest vacuum in Eastern Europe and Russia has been the absence of a revolutionary party of the working class — a party which had analysed and learned from the age of Stalinism, without forgetting what capitalism was and is; a party which could oppose Stalinism without supporting capitalism West European-style — in short an organisation which would fight the ideas of the intellectuals, the bureaucrats and the churches and vindicate genuine socialism.

The differences between the new East European governments and the working class will accelerate as moves towards market mechanisms produce austerity, inflation and unemployment. Huge struggles are inevitable.

Unite the fronts of class struggle

The chronic disunity of the Marxist movement has of course many causes, and it would be naive or demagogic to pretend that unity can be created immediately.

Is there then no way to unite the forces of the Marxist left? There is a way to begin to create unity — around the work of political intervention in the mass labour movement. After all, the lack of a stable and responsible functioning in the class struggle and in the labour movement, the fact of being marginal to that movement, is a major reason for the fissiparousness and disunity of the left, for the creation of sects around fads, persons, tactics, and fetishes, and for the creation of undemocratic self-perpetuating regimes which spawn a new group with each important difference.

It is necessary — in the first place — for the labour movement, but also, perhaps, for the Marxists! — to create a revolutionary movement in the working class movement, inside it, of it, and not outside it and needlessly counterposed to it.

Whether such an organisation should, or in the circumstances could, call itself a party is a minor detail. The Leninist conception of the revolutionary party is not of an apparatus, a public name or badge, but fundamentally of a body of Marxists who have clear ideas and who organise so as to enable strict and honest political accounting, rounded assessments, and decisive organisational and political initiatives. Its members or "supporters" work in the labour movement, in all its areas and aspects, and attempt to gain the political leadership and to tie the movement together into a coherent class force able to take power.



Such a group can and will be built in the existing movement. Without it only limited and unstable progress can be made. For example, the work of Labour Party militants can only be barren if it is not integrated with work in the trade unions. Neither the struggle in the Labour Party nor in the trade unions can be adequate without ideological combat against all the friends and agents of capitalism in society and in the labour movement. The real "revolutionary party" is the organisation of Marxists that can effectively do these essential tasks and tie together the fronts of the class struggle — in the political labour movement and in politics generally, in the trade unions, and in the ideological struggle — into a coherent whole against both the bourgeoisie and their right wing agents within the labour movement.





But bitter history teaches us that the most heroic of workers' struggles cannot be victorious unless socialists have built a party of politically conscious militants, a party which has learned from the experience of workers throughout history, a party which can actively intervene in working class struggles and decisively change their nature by giving them a clarity of goals and methods they would otherwise lack — a clarity for the working class such as the intelligentsia in Eastern Europe has for capitalism.

Trotsky put the point like this:

"Events have proved that without a party capable of directing the proletarian revolution, the revolution itself is rendered impossible. The proletariat cannot seize power by a spontaneous uprising. Even in highly industrialised and highly cultured Germany the spontaneous uprising of the workers in November 1918 only succeeded in transferring power into the hands of the bourgeoisie. One propertied class can seize the power that has been wrested from another propertied class because it is able to base itself upon the riches, its cultural level and its innumerable connections with the old state apparatus. **But there is nothing else that can serve the proletariat as the substitute for its own party**". (*Lessons of October*)

Today as events continue to unfold in Eastern Europe as the bloody defeat of the embryonic Chinese workers' movement last summer goes down into history, as pro-bourgeois forces fill the political vacuum in Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia and East Germany, we have once again proof of the burning need for a revolutionary organisation.

Unfortunately the proof is negative proof. The newly reborn East European workers' movement is delivering state power to pro-bourgeois Stalinists and marketeers.

Those words by Trotsky above are all the more tragic because their correctness has been obvious for decades to all honest students of working class history.

Workers as revolutionaries

Unlike the bourgeoisie, which germinates and grows in wealth and culture and becomes politically mature under the old feudal or neo-feudal regime, where it already exists as an exploiting class — and to an extent can even do this under a decrepit, rotting Stalinism, in Poland for example — the working class has no such advantages. The working class is born and always remains a wage-slave class under capitalism. The role of the working class is that of wage slaves, that of the basic exploited class.

The bourgeoisie, when they were progressive on a world-historic scale, developed their own means of production and access to culture, education and the institutions of the state, even before they took power. The bourgeois revolution can be indirect, and can even be delivered to the bourgeoisie by forces outside the immediate control of its own class.

The French Revolution was won by the sans-culottes, the radical plebian masses, under the influence of the Jacobins. In contrast, the proletarian revolution can only be a conscious political act. It can only be an act of the working class itself. For the workers' revolution, politics dominates, because politics is the means by which the working class organises itself as a conscious force — a 'class for itself', as Marxists put it — and then proceeds to win, by political action, its own economic emancipation.

The effects of Stalinism

It is even more complex and contradictory in the USSR and Eastern Europe now, because of the peculiarities of

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Stalinism. For example, in Eastern Europe now some of the best and most heroic working class militants have suicidal illusions in free market economics, and believe that parliamentary democracy of the West European sort is effective self-rule for the working class majority. Workers who live in countries such as Britain have learned the contrary.

Workers who rebel against market capitalism have only to go for the opposite of market capitalism to arrive at some notion — however crude, underdeveloped, and ultimately inadequate — of a viable working-class alternative, what might be called democratic collectivism. Those instinctive rebel ideas are not the same thing as scientific awareness of society and politics. Such clarity has to be fused with the spontaneous working class struggles by the activity of Marxists who have adequately theorised from the whole world-wide experience of the working class and made a scientific overview of bourgeois society and of the evolution of human society in general. But spontaneous workers' revolt against market capitalism does lead naturally and easily towards Marxist ideas, however. Workers in struggle learn with astonishing rapidity.

In Eastern Europe, when workers obey the rebel's gut instinct to overthrow and negate the system that oppresses them, the natural untutored impulse is to go for the system which in the West seems to breed both freedom and prosperity.

The phenomenon parallels what we see in the West, where good working-class militants have often blindly and ignorantly supported Stalinism in the

East because it seems to be the opposite of what they face immediately in their own conditions. Today, in Eastern Europe, the reflex rejection of the immediate system and the embracing of its seeming opposite is an overwhelming mass movement.

In practice it makes workers who want real, effective self-government when they embrace democracy and freedom from the dictates of bungling and grotesquely inefficient state bureaucrats when they support the market, prey to liberal intellectuals, turncoat bureaucrats and conniving political priests who do not want any of the things the workers want and most of whom will actually conspire and if necessary fight to stop the workers getting what they want.

A Marxist organisation is irreplaceable in such conditions if the working class is to defend itself in even the most minimal way — an organisation that does not start with a blind negation and inversion of Stalinism, but can see Stalinism in its place in history and knows also about that other system of working-class exploitation and oppression within the forms of freedom and democracy — in short, an organisation which is a true memory of the working class and can thus help the masses of newly roused workers to hammer out an independent working class outlook and programme which corresponds to their real interests and to the desires they express as 'democracy' and 'the market'.

Class and ideas

The working class does not possess privileged access to culture, arts and science. Workers do not possess leisure time in which to develop ideas. Everywhere the workers' movement is

Stalinism

Socialist Organisation has always supported working class struggles against the Stalinist police states of Eastern Europe. We ardently supported Solidarity in Poland when it emerged in 1980.

At the time we wrote: "We must actively support the workers in Russia and the other Stalinist states, and that means opposing their oppressors in every way we can. It means rousing the anger, the hatred and the active hostility of the labour movement against them."

"It is...as basic as not crossing a picket line. And as basic as the attitude that one takes to those who do."

We stood with Solidarity despite the hypocrisy of the American and British governments who claimed also to support it. We took a stand on the basic issue: here was a genuine workers' movement. We didn't simply react negatively to our enemies.

We helped launch the Campaign for Solidarity with Workers in the Eastern Bloc in 1987. In the wake of the collapse of the East European tyrannies in late 1989, a new

CSWEB conference in January 1990 attracted 500 people.

Our support for struggles against Stalinism has not been limited to workers' organisations alone. We have argued consistently for the rights of nations oppressed by Russia to self-determination.

Almost alone among Left socialists, we argued from day one that the Soviet troops should get out of Afghanistan. Whatever the political forces opposing Russian occupation — which were and are right wing and Islamic fundamentalist — this would not justify superpower occupation and the napalming of villages. The Afghan peoples had the right not to be occupied by a foreign force.

We argued that if Islamic fundamentalism justified Russian occupation, logically socialists would favour Soviet invasion of Iran or Pakistan.

Now, as the Stalinist states explode, it is vital that socialists in the West help the small anti-Stalinist socialist movements in the East. SO sees such help as a priority. That's why we have given over many of our pages over the past few months to debate and discussion about Eastern Europe, and to publicising the views of Eastern European socialists.

pervaded by alien class ideology, by the ideas of the ruling class.

A variant of that domination by the ruling class is when rebel workers take the motto 'my enemy's enemy is my friend' and accept as their answer to their immediate class enemy the alien ideas of the enemy's enemy. They take on a negative rather than positive imprint of their own ruling class but an imprint nonetheless.

It is not true that the Stalinist enemies of capitalism or the capitalist enemies of Stalinism, are our friends! Both the pro-Stalinist Arthur Scargill and the pro-capitalist Lech Walesa are terrible examples of what such politics can do to people who want to be working class militants.

We need independent working class politics and only Marxism can generate consistently independent working class politics.

Although economic class struggle is an instinctive rebellion of the working class, it is not in itself enough to create stable revolutionary socialist consciousness or to generate an adequate working class strategy. The Bolsheviks welded together a party of revolutionaries which attempted to articulate an independent set of working class ideas to guide the spontaneous rebellion. This meant the merging into a whole of the 'conscious' role of the Bolsheviks — who suggested ideas to

the class, generalised the results of the creative innovation of parts of the class, making them available to the whole class, and so on — with all levels of working class struggle and organisation.

The sad thing now about the wonderful movement of the East European, and increasingly of the Russian, working class, is that the workers have to begin almost from scratch, learning from immediate experience, with too little in the way of the accumulated and codified working class experience which a pre-existing organisation of Marxists would be able to contribute. Years of Stalinist repression annihilated socialist militants and all but uprooted and obliterated the genuine traditions of socialism and of unfalsified Marxism.

Our class in Eastern Europe, after the long night of Stalinism has lifted, is a class almost without a long-term memory. It will for this reason act against its own interests, or fail to act for its interests, and may have to pay dearly as a result.

Not for a very long time has there been clearer proof that the work of (for now) small groups of Marxists — which outsiders usually dismiss as a waste of time and life — is not a futile activity but an irreplaceable part of the fight for working class self-emancipation.

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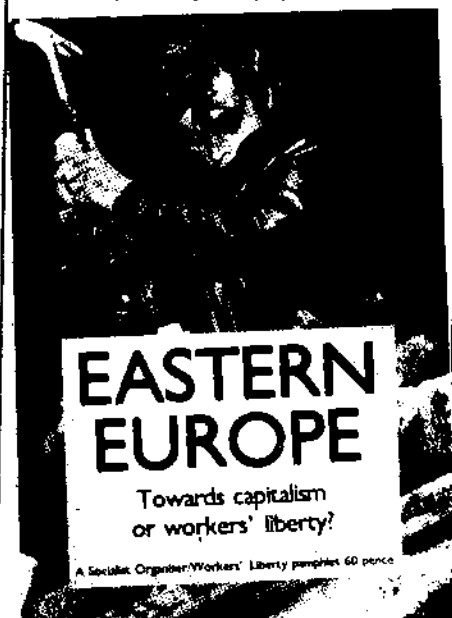
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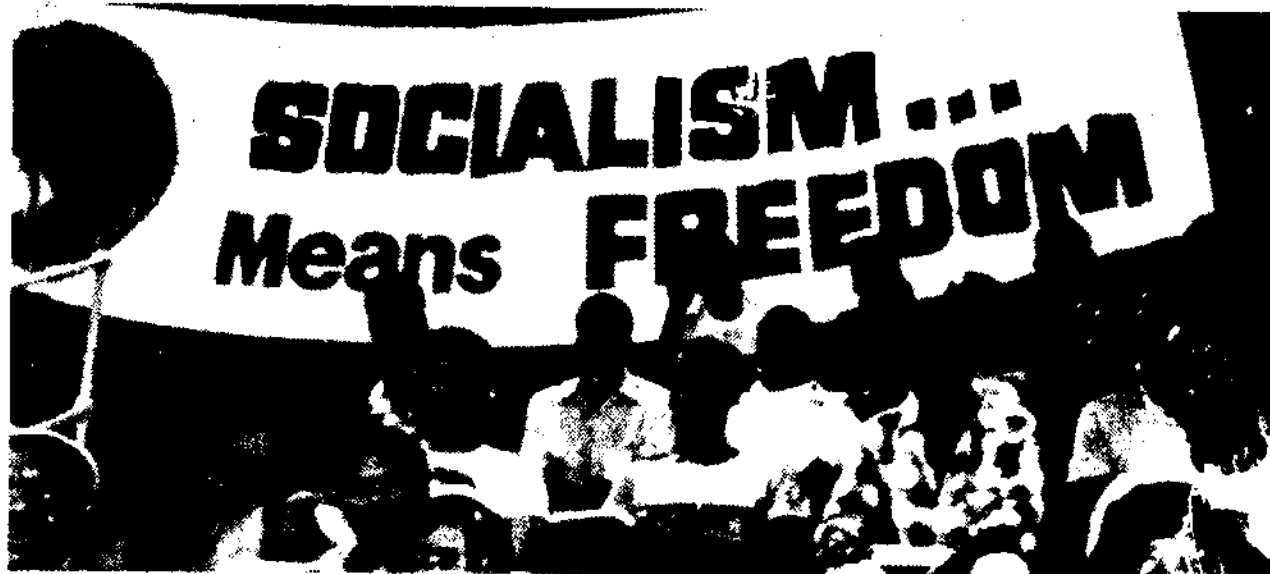
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Mineworkers union conference in South Africa

Why you should be a socialist

By Clive Bradley

THE THINK TANKS of the Western world say socialism is dead. In the last few months, regimes which for nearly half a century had claimed to be socialist have been forced, by huge popular opposition, to step aside. They are leaving socialism, as they and their ad-

vocates in the West had defined it, in ruins.

In contrast, Western capitalism, they say, is a system of democracy and liberty, economic efficiency and political freedom.

This conclusion is shared by those like Mrs Thatcher who want to let free-market capitalism rip, and those like Neil Kinnock who think it can and should be tamed. Socialism is dead, long live capitalism.

There is an alternative view, not given much publicity, that the opposite is true. It is **totalitarianism** that is dead, or dying — not socialism. Socialism is being reborn. The end of the totalitarian parody of socialism will give real socialists a new chance.

Socialist Organiser subscribes to this view. For our whole existence we have insisted that the regimes of Eastern Europe are not socialist. We want real workers' liberty, East and West: real control by working class people over their lives, over their communities and workplaces, over government and the economy. We want a society without rich and poor; without bigotry, without racism, where women are recognised as equal to men, where different nations don't blow each other to bits, but live together democratically.

All this is what we mean by socialism.

Those in the East today who believe that capitalism can fulfil their dreams of prosperity and freedom will find they are wrong. Capitalism is not only the economic success stories of West Germany and Japan: it is the disaster of Bolivia, where almost an entire population is reduced to growing the plant from which cocaine is made; it is the catastrophe of Ethiopia, endlessly hit by famine; it is the death squads of El Salvador.

For every person in Western capitalism who is comfortable and well-off, there are thousands who are starving, have no homes, have seen their countries ravaged by senseless wars. For every capitalist country with a parliamentary democracy, there is one with a military dictatorship. Some that are democracies now were dictatorship less than twenty years ago, even in Europe: countries like Spain, Greece and Portugal.

And even the richest capitalist countries contain within them massive inequalities. Every US city has ghettos of appalling poverty, where kids survive by selling crack to each other. Every major European city has a huge pool of unemployed.

On the streets of London it is now commonplace to see teenagers sitting in doorways wrapped in sleeping bags. Everyone knows that in the inner cities, the majority is poor, and in many cases getting poorer.

In the West as in the East, society is divided into classes. There are those with wealth and power, and those without it.

In Britain today, we elect the government. But no one elects the top civil servants. No one elects the bankers. No one elects the army top

We stand for workers' liberty

brass. Socialism would be a society in which all these things, government and the economy, administration and defence, are under the control of working class people.

A socialist movement aims to **organise** the powerless in society to fight militantly for their interests against the rich and powerful. It aims to break the power of big business, the Tories and their backers, and replace it with the real, democratic rule of the majority."

SOCIALIST ORGANISER AIMS to help build such a movement. *Socialist Organiser* is a legitimate part of the Labour Party and the labour movement. It is a Marxist newspaper, though that's an unfashionable thing to be. Throughout the history of the labour movement in Britain, Marxists have been active. One of the earliest real rank and file unions was organised by one of Karl Marx's daughters. From the birth of the Labour Party, there have been Marxist newspapers and organisations trying to influence the wider movement.

The word 'Marxist' conjures up either wild-eyed fanatics with secret arms supplies in their bedsits, or Ceausescu clones whose sole ambition in life is to force everyone else to eat black bread and wear drab uniforms. And unfortunately, some people who have seen themselves as Marxists have rather lived up to these stereotypes.

But Marx himself was not fighting for anything Ceausescu would have recognised. He was no secret plotter or supporter of nasty dictatorships. He was a **revolutionary democrat** who worked out a theory of how capitalist society works, and how working class struggle against it can develop.

Marxists try to understand the overall interests of the working class, to unite the working class movement, and **think ahead**. As Marx put it, they represent the 'movement of the future' in the movement of the present. Marxists try to bring the lessons of the whole history of the international working class struggle to the struggles of today.

For example, in Eastern Europe, real Marxists are trying to convince the mass democracy movements that

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capitalism is not the answer they are looking for. Marxists try to provide an **overview** of capitalism and totalitarianism.

Unless Marxists **convince** the mass movement, they will get nowhere. Marxists aim to achieve the rule over society by its majority — something which can't be imposed by small groups of people. Indeed, one of Marx's distinctive contributions to socialist theory was to challenge the dominant view of his day, that socialism would be brought about by 'conspirators'. No, said Marx: we need to win the mass working class movement.

For socialists today, after all the abominations of the Eastern European and Chinese regimes, it is important to reassert the connection between socialism and democracy. Ours is a socialism of **more** democracy than exists in Britain today, not less.

What kind of democracy? Over and over again, all across the world, in intense periods of struggle, workers have formed **workers' councils**, which can take control of enterprises, localities, and if linked together nationally, the whole country. Representatives in these councils are accountable to the people who elected them: they can be recalled if they are not acting according to their electors' wishes, they don't get paid more than the average worker, and posts are rotated. We want a democracy based on these kinds of institutions, rather than inadequate Westminster-style parliaments, where the people we elect can ignore us for the next five years, and anyway have less real power than the permanent civil service.

Parliament is better than no democracy at all, of course. And in

Women's Fightback

In 1980, just after this Tory government first got into power, women supporters of *Socialist Organiser* put out a call for all women's groups, women's sections in the Labour Party and trade unions, and single issue campaigns to get together to fight the Tories' attacks on women.

500 women came to the first conference from all over the country, and **Women's Fightback** was launched.

As well as intending to be an umbrella group for all the campaigns against the Tory attacks on our jobs and services, our rights to abortion, against deportations, etc., **Women's Fightback** was also the focus of a fight against sexism within our movement, which had silenced and excluded women for too long, and which had refused to see women's issues as their business.

Women's Fightback began the campaigns around democracy for women in the Labour Party, demanding the right of women's conference to be an integral part, rather than an advisory body which could be ignored. We fought for the demands, later taken up by WAC, of women's conference to elect its own representatives on Labour's NEC, for example.

Women's Fightback fought against the collapse of the local government Labour left in the early 1980s.

During the miners' strike **Women's Fightback** produced a women's strike bulletin that was used in pit villages throughout the country, particularly in Notts



and Yorkshire, playing a co-ordinating role with Women's Action Committees, and the pages of the paper were devoted to the women involved in the strike.

A day-school organised by **Women's Fightback** during the strike attracted over 150 women from 20 pit villages.

After the strike, and with the virtual collapse of the Left in the Labour Party, and of the women's movement, **Women's Fightback** shut down and a year later was re-started as the sister paper of *Socialist Organiser*. But it has continued to argue for the rights of women to an equal place in society and in our labour movement. And it continues to argue for the need for a working-class based women's movement, organisationally autonomous, which could organise all working class women to fight for those ends.

The experience of Women Against Pit Closures showed us that this is not divisive, but strengthens both women and the labour movement as a whole.

reality it is the ruling class that considers parliament expendable. It is now well-known that the 'security forces', like MI5, have plotted to bring down elected Labour governments in the past, and would do so again: that was the revelation contained in the book 'Spycatcher' that Mrs Thatcher most anxiously wanted kept secret. Top army officers are on record as having planned 'if necessary' to organise a military coup against the last Labour government: 'if law and order and national security were under threat — as they defined them.

We believe that every democratic freedom we have in Britain, which was won by struggle, is essential for the working class and the labour movement. We believe that democracy in Britain and elsewhere needs to be defended, and we have to fight against all sorts of erosions of our civil liberties. Democracy must be extended. All we say is that parliamentary democracy is not the only kind, and that something better is possible.

Socialism means also economic democracy, abolishing the inequalities of capitalism. Capitalism causes inequality. It is a system based on exploitation: that is, some people, the majority, work to produce society's wealth, while others get most of the wealth that is produced. A tiny proportion of society own most of its wealth. 200 or so monopolies control 80% of production in Britain. 10% of the population own over 50% of the country's marketable wealth.

The purpose of production, in capitalist society, is profit. Goods are not made just because people need them: a profit has to be possible. It is because of profit that the inner cities

rot; it simply doesn't pay to build decent houses (or houses at all, these days) or provide people with jobs.

It is because of profit that the health, education, transport and other services have been cut. They don't make enough money.

It is because of profit — the 'market' so beloved of Thatcher — that the Third World is starving. Many Third World countries export only one basic commodity. If its price on the world market falls, the Third World economy suffers. The country has to borrow from foreign banks which insist on an 'austerity programme' — spending cuts, unemployment.

There's no money to be made in aid to the starving. So they're left to rot, by governments and private enterprise, and charities foot the bill.

Even in the richer Third World countries, like Brazil, local profiteers make millions while the majority of society still ekes out a living in squalid shanty towns. According to recent reports, in the shanties of Rio de

Janeiro, unwanted and homeless children are being shot in the streets like dogs. There are — literally — millions of such children swarming in the streets of Brazil.

Socialism aims to replace the principle of private profit with democratic planning to meet society's needs.

MILLIONS OF WORKING class people now hope to god that Thatcher will lose the next general election and that the Labour Party will win it. So do we: and supporters of *Socialist Organiser* will be campaigning for a Labour victory in the future as we have in the past.

How have the Thatcher years shaped Britain? Was she as invincible as she sometimes seemed to be? How have different political forces changed over the past Thatcherite decade?

Thatcher was elected in 1979, after five years of a Labour government that had promised to 'squeeze the rich until their pips squeak'. In fact, that Labour government, after doing a deal with the International Monetary Fund,

South Africa

Socialist Organiser understood early on the significance of the independent, non-racial trade union movement in South Africa. We argued for working class solidarity with the trade unions at a time when it was unpopular to do so. Much of the anti-apartheid movement had a crude "boycott" approach — including even trade unions in the boycott!

From within the trade union movement emerged the beginnings of a clear working-class politics. The trade unions put great stress on workers' democracy — in their own organisations, and within the workplace. They were the seed bed for a powerful socialist movement.

But the unions entered a political sphere dominated by various forms of non-socialist populism. The most powerful of these, represented by the African National Congress, was very influenced by Stalinism: its friendly attitude to the Eastern European regimes and hostility to independent workers' organisation in those countries did not bode well for the South African unions themselves.

The rival populism, Black Consciousness, was often just a negative response to the Congress tradition, rather than a coherent alternative.

The trade unions had the potential to develop a clear working-class alternative to all these populist traditions.

Socialist Organiser argued that it was vital that militants in the unions set about forming their own political movement, working out their own programme, and fighting

apartheid on a working-class basis. We argued that the approach of many in the unions, which was to build up organisational strength and trust to that as a weapon against the populists, would be insufficient. If the unions did not strike out their own path politically, they would fall under the domination of the populists.

The beginnings of that socialist movement certainly existed within the unions. Perhaps the clearest example of its influence was the establishment of the Alexandra Action Committee by union militants like Moses Mayekiso. This was a neighbourhood-based democratic structure modelled on the unions' own democratic practices.

But the socialist minority in the unions did not strike out their own path clearly enough. The populists did come to dominate the trade union movement.

The importance of that fact can be seen today. As the ANC moves to negotiations with the representatives of South African capitalism — negotiations which will result in a "deracialised" capitalist South Africa — the unions have little independent role to play. Certainly they are not leading a militant struggle against capitalism, which had been their aim in the mid-1980s.

SO did not just preach from the sidelines. We build solidarity with South African workers and their organisations, and with South African socialists. We publicise the ideas of socialist minority currents in the South African liberation movement, even when we did not agree with all that they had to say. We provide a forum for discussion about the way forward in South Africa.

In the period ahead, such discussion, and such working-class solidarity, will be even more essential.

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launched a programme of cuts in health, education and welfare that the Tories only continued. Moreover, through its 'social contract', a deal this time with the trade union leaders, the Labour government presided over years of wage restraint and decline in workers' living standards.

It was a public sector revolt against the government's wages policy, the so-called 'winter of discontent', that forced it to call an election, which it lost.

So the Labour government functioned in fact as a thoroughly capitalist government, trying to 'run the country' without in any way challenging the centres of economic power. Harold Wilson, who was Prime Minister until 1976, and had been Prime Minister from 1964-70, recounts in his memoirs how, in a conversation with the director of the Bank of England, he was told that the Labour government would not be allowed to carry out its manifesto promises, which were considered too damaging to big business' interests.

By neither fighting the powers that be, nor defending the interests of the people who had elected it (with high hopes, after defeating the Tory government of Edward Heath), the Labour government succeeded only in demoralising its own supporters. The result was a big Tory victory, and the beginning of Thatcherism.

But it was by no means inevitable that Thatcher would still be in power eleven years on. It was possible to beat her — with mass campaigns and trade union muscle.

But it was by no means inevitable that Thatcher would still be in power eleven years on. It was possible to beat her — with mass campaigns and trade union muscle.

There were campaigns. Liverpool and Glasgow saw huge demonstrations against unemployment in the early 1980s. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) mobilised

thousands against the siting of Cruise missiles in Britain, Polaris missiles elsewhere in Europe, and the development of Britain's 'independent deterrent'. The campaign against the anti-abortion Corrie Bill, in 1979, was successful.

And there were strikes. In 1980, there was a big strike by workers in a central industry — steel. Steel workers chanted slogans for the TUC to call a general strike.

But the steel workers were defeated, and following their defeat, employment in the steel industry decimated. A pattern had been set. But the Tories still didn't get it all their own way. During the health service dispute of 1982, once again demands were raised for a general strike, and for a day — in September — there was the most widely-supported strike action of recent years.

The biggest battle of all was to come after the Tories had been re-elected in 1983. In March 1984, in response to a deliberate provocation by the National Coal Board, a strike spread across the coal industry. The miners' strike was to last almost exactly a year. It was a decisive turning point in the recent history of Britain, summing up all the lessons of the struggle against Thatcher.

The miners lost, with terrible consequences for their communities. But they didn't need to lose. The Tories and the NCB knew it wasn't an easy matter to beat the miners: they had shied away from confrontation before, and during the strike did everything they could to stop other sections of workers joining the miners on strike. Railworkers and others got much more favourable pay settlements than they would have otherwise; and Liverpool City council was bought off at the height of the summer when it looked like there could be a city-wide general strike against the government.

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Out and proud

Socialist Organiser has opposed all forms of bigotry, whether in society at large or in the labour movement. We have defended the right of the oppressed to organise independently within the Labour Party and trade unions.

Socialist Organiser has highlighted the struggle of lesbians and gay men for real equality. The paper over the years has carried many articles of concern to lesbians and gay men, including an occasional 'Out and Proud' column, discussing topical issues, such as the current spate of "queerbashing".

We have focused on the need for the labour movement to take up the issue, and on the effectiveness of self-organisation in getting the labour movement to act. One such example was Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners, which in 1984-85 raised support for the miners' strike among the lesbian and gay community of London and other cities, and was able to get a big response in mining communities. In 1985, the lesbian and gay Pride march was led by a miners' contingent.

Similar support groups have followed. Sometimes lesbian and gay politics has been too sectional and inward looking, especially in local government and student politics. **Socialist Organiser** has argued against this, and instead for an approach which builds unity between all sections of the working class.

Socialist Organiser supporters fought for many years to have the issue discussed at the conference of the Labour Party Young Socialists.

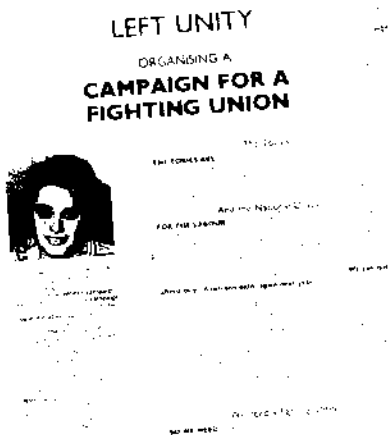
We see bigotry of all kinds as a massive obstacle to effective working-class struggle, and have always rejected the approach of some socialists which sees the raising of the issue as a diversion from "more important" issues. Lesbians and gay men are under attack from this and previous governments, and their rights must be defended.

The student left

Over the last few years **Socialist Organiser** has become very influential in the student movement. In both the National Union of Students (NUS) and the National Organisation of Labour Students (NOLS), **SO** has combined building a left-wing rank and file with making revolutionary socialist ideas popular amongst students.

Through initiatives such as 'Socialist Student' and 'Left Unity', **SO** has developed strategies for the student movement that have placed students' self-activity and an orientation to the labour movement as being central to beating the Tories.

SO has challenged the Kinnock-led student movement on their support for the Stalinist state student organisations in Eastern Europe. We have defended Jewish students' rights to organise. We have argued for NUS to back all liberation forces in



South Africa, not just the ANC.

'Left Unity', in which **SO** is central, is in the strongest position the hard left has been for many years, with four supporters on the NUS National Executive, and growing support throughout the country.

So why did the miners lose? Because of the abject failure of the labour movement as a whole to stand by them. Serious solidarity action could have stopped the Tories; a general strike could have defeated them. But the trade union leaders didn't lift a finger to help the NUM. Neil Kinnock sat on the fence, only timidly supporting the miners; solidarity actions remained isolated.

The miners' defeat showed up the weaknesses of the organisations of the labour movement. These organisations, the trade unions and the Labour Party, while still quite strong (Britain has a great many more trade union members, proportionately, than most countries, even after a fall in membership as a result of mass unemployment), were simply not up to the task of building solidarity and stan-

ding up to the Tories. They 'bottled out'. If we are not to see defeat after defeat, the trade unions and the Labour Party will have to be radically changed.

Changed how? They need to be more democratic, more responsive to their members' needs. Officials often aren't elected, presidents get to be there for life. The leaders, who usually don't identify with their own rank and file much, and often get paid massively more, should not only be made more accountable, but got rid of: the trade unions need new leaders, who are committed to the notion of **struggle**.

The NUM leaders proved very unusual during the strike, because they really did fight with everything they had. Yet even they had serious shortcomings. Despairing of real help from the other trade union leaders, Scargill called over their heads for a general strike, but there was no organisation in the unions, independent of the inert leaders, who could even begin to deliver such solidarity. That also needs to change: we need a **rank and file movement**, organising the militant activists, within and across the trade unions.

In the Labour Party, too, the feebleness of the leadership's support for the miners indicated, once again, the need for big changes.

There had already been attempts at change. Many people in the Labour Party had concluded from the Wilson-Callaghan years that there was only one way to avoid repeating them: greater accountability and democracy in the Party. In carrying out their cuts and IMF plans, the Labour leaders

had defied Labour Party policy. That should never be allowed to happen again.

The individual who best represented this new Labour Left, with its focus on Party democracy, was Tony Benn, who in 1981 narrowly missed being elected deputy leader. Already, by then, the Left had won significant victories: Labour Party leader and deputy leader were, after 1980, to be elected by Party conference, rather than just MPs, and there was to be automatic reselection of the MPs, so no one could be in a safe seat for life without ever being held to account by his or her local party. *Socialist Organiser* played a significant part in these democracy battles: we initiated a united campaign of the whole Left, the Rank and File Mobilising Committee for Labour Democracy, which was decisive in getting the democratic reforms pushed through.

But we also warned that a lot more needed to be done. The Labour Left was strong in the local Labour parties, but not in the trade unions. And the democracy campaign needed to be linked to a more radical challenge to the **policies** of the Labour leaders. Accountability was important, but not enough: Labour needed to be able to fight the bank and monopolies.

Leaders, rightly or wrongly, play a big role in politics. Cowardly or ineffective leaders help secure defeats. Thatcher has been, on the whole, from the point of view of the ruling class, a good leader — a militant fighter for the bosses' interests. We have had few such leaders.

But it is not just a matter of replacing cowards with brave fighters. Weak leaders often don't start out that way: they get worn down by the struggle, become cynical, lose faith in the capacity of the rank and file to fight back.

And even courageous leaders, without a clear idea of where they are going, can get lost, sometimes hopelessly lost. We need a whole movement with a clear sense of direction. The Labour Left of the 1980s suffered from a severe lack of political bearings.

By the time of the miners' strike, the Labour Left was in serious decline. In particular, it had itself suffered a major defeat in the sphere that many Labour Leftists had become active in — local government. For the first time, in the 1980s, the Labour Left was taking control of town halls around the country, including in the Greater London Council. Local government looked as



if it could be the force for opposition to the government.

But very quickly, the Left councils faced a choice, as the Tories began to cut the councils' budgets. Either the councils would mount opposition to central government with every weapon they could — convince the local communities and town hall workforces that it was necessary to take the government on with strikes, rent strikes, demonstrations and refuse to pay massive interest charges to the banks, trying to link up nationally so that the Tories would face a huge wave of opposition.

Or they would have to make cuts. Sooner or later they would have to make big cuts. The councils could either be fighters, or mere administrators. They chose to be benevolent administrators, making, at first, only small cuts, and raising rates in an effort to avoid bigger cuts or rent increases. But as the councils became little more than a cushion between the Tories and working class communities, they lost the chance to be, instead, a focus of opposition.

The jewel in the crown, the Greater London Council, capitulated to a judges' decision that cheap fares were illegal. Later, it let itself be abolished altogether with not much protest ex-

cept a few posters. One by one the councils found themselves making heavier and heavier cuts.

In Liverpool, from 1983 to 1985, there were, for a while, the beginnings of a real fight. But the council, dominated by a rather bureaucratic and self-interested Labour Party faction called *Militant*, wasted the opportunity, eventually going down to a messy and uninspiring defeat.

The miners' defeat was the most important. It propelled all those sections of the labour movement that were becoming depressed by their inability to stop Thatcher further to the right. A new mood of pessimism set in.

It was not only pessimism at the top: defeats and failures had demoralised and confused the rank and file. By the mid 1980s, there were fewer and fewer strikes. Despite a few hopeful signs, working class people felt Thatcher was, if not invincible, a very hard nut to crack. And lots of people supported her.

By 1990, that has begun to change. Now the question for the labour and trade union leaders is whether they can harness the kind of opposition to the government we have seen during, for example, the ambulance workers' dispute.

So the Tories rode out the 1980s to a

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significant extent on the strength of their enemies' weaknesses. Thatcher got elected a third time, and by now, more confident than ever, they had still more radical plans for privatising and Torifying Britain. A lot of their proposals have gone through. But still, it has not always been easy for them. The most unpopular of all, the poll tax, is proving difficult to collect in Scotland, and is facing opposition in England and Wales.



This is capitalism: cardboard cities amidst great wealth

The story of Liverpool council

The battle between the Tory government and Liverpool City Council from 1983 to 1985 stood at a tangent from most of the other local government struggles.

Far more clearly than elsewhere, Liverpool started off with an anti-cuts policy. Far more clearly than elsewhere, they had a strategy that relied on mass mobilisation. An impressive one-day general strike across the city demanded more money from central government.

Yet by the end of 1985, the city council was collapsing in ignominious retreat. They even began the process of sacking twenty-odd thousand council workers to avoid "going illegal".

The dominant political force in Liverpool City Council was the **Militant** tendency, and the council's behaviour throughout this period bore all the marks of **Militant**. They put their own sectarian and bureaucratic interests above those of the struggle as a whole.

Straight after the May council elections of 1984 they began winding down the struggle. It all went quiet — just as the miners' strike got underway. In July 1984, Liverpool Council did a deal with the government, described by **Militant** as a "95% victory", which removed Liverpool from the fight. In fact all the council had done was buy time — until the following year when the possibilities for beating the Tories would be less.

But **Militant** became delirious with self-importance.

They thought they could ride roughshod over everyone. They picked a fight, for obscure reasons, with the city's Black Caucus, appointing a **Militant** supporter, Samson Bond, as Race Relations Officer, against the Caucus's wishes.

The City Council had had a bad record in the employment of black people. The overwhelming majority of its workforce was white, despite the city's large black population. The Bond appointment was seen by



A symbol of the quality of leadership given by **Militant** to the workers of Liverpool.

many black people as a further snub. It caused a breach not only with the black community but with the Town Hall workers' union NALGO.

Big-mouth Derek Hatton just tried to bulldoze everyone.

In spring 1985 Liverpool Council had to make a new budget. The "95% victory" had only postponed the crunch — to a time after the miners had been defeated.

Militant went quiet again. The council delayed making a budget. It tried to make a balanced budget with a big rate rise, was pushed into a confrontation budget by the council workers' unions, then went quiet again.

Through the summer and autumn of 1985 the council endlessly delayed. Trade unionists simply did not know what was happening.

Then the council suddenly announced that its money had run out and it was sending out redundancy notices to all its staff — as a legal manoeuvre! Massive opposition forced the council to back down; then it tried again; then it was forced by legal action to withdraw the notices.

Finally a deal was struck with a Swiss bank. In fact the deal had been negotiated months before it was made public. It involved cuts — which had already been made, quietly, as the talk of confrontation thundered on.

Thus the fighting stand of 1983 degenerated into an unseemly series of squabbles. **Militant** talked big, got delusions of grandeur, then lost their nerve.

Any socialist tendency would have had problems in Liverpool in that period. But **Militant** would do no more than admit (much later) that the redundancy notices had been a "tactical error".

In Liverpool, **Militant** put their own sect interests above those of the class struggle, with disastrous results.

But once again, this opposition is not being led by the official labour movement. The Labour Party leaders are actively hostile to campaigns for non-payment; the trade union leaders have failed to mount a campaign of resistance to the poll tax's administration. This, unfortunately, is the all too familiar story.

The trade unions have suffered very badly under the formidable range of anti-union laws introduced by the Tories since 1980. These laws make effective legal strike action pretty well impossible, and big strikes, from the miners' strike, to print strikes, to the dockers' strike, have been crippled by the Tories' use of the courts. Unions have had their funds 'sequestered', or have been threatened with it.

Sometimes, for example, during the health workers' disputes, including the ambulance workers', the Tories have not felt confident enough to turn to the courts. But the union leaders, who had failed to campaign against the laws' introduction, have continued to be overawed by them. And Neil Kinnock now says a future Labour government will keep almost all of them.

The Tories' laws are not democratic, although they have been able to play on considerable public sympathy for the idea that trade unions are undemocratic and should be reformed. In the first place, democratic reform should come from within the unions, rather than be imposed on them. And democracy is not the Tories' real concern: the laws are designed to make strikes extremely difficult, however democratic the union structures.

All solidarity strikes are unlawful. Political strikes are unlawful. The strike wave that gave birth to Poland's Solidarnosc in 1980 would have been against the law if it had taken place in Tory Britain.

So far, therefore, the Tories have got away with a lot of what they wanted. But their popularity is at its lowest ebb since 1982, when Thatcher launched a jingoistic war with Argentina to boost her support. Recent struggles have shown that the trade unions are not finished. And Labour is riding high in the polls.

Socialist Organiser wants a Labour government. We also want more people to join the Labour Party, to build it as a real fighting force, organising people into campaigns that can beat the Tories — on their new laws for housing, education, the poll tax, and every other bit of miserable reactionary legislation they think they have the

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authority to inflict upon us.

If there is a real, active movement behind the next Labour government, especially if it is one that remembers the last one, and is determined for history not to repeat itself, we can start to change society for the better.

CAPITALISM IS AN international system. As time goes by it becomes more and more international, more impatient with the old-fashioned nation state. So we are seeing '1992 and all that' — the extension of the Common Market into more aspects of our lives.

It is neither possible nor desirable to hold back this process of 'internationalisation', although some on the Left have often wished they could. Socialism also has to be an international system. As Karl Marx put it, 'Workers of the world, unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains!' Workers of different countries have more in common with each other than they have with the bosses of their own country.

Capitalism has linked the world together as it was never linked before in all of human history. But it has not brought with it international peace and co-operation, or only sometimes, and only very, very partially. The history of capitalism is mainly the history of wars — genocidal wars on an unprecedented scale and with the dead

outnumbering the world's population in previous centuries — of national hatreds, racism, imperialism.

The history of capitalism includes the brutal conquest of Africa, the slaughter of entire peoples in what is now called the 'Third World', the slave trade, two world wars, the deaths of six million Jews and others at the hands of the Nazis — Nazis who were openly admired by capitalist politicians, inside and outside Germany, before the war broke out — and the nightmare inflicted on the people of Vietnam by the United States.

Capitalism has presided over terrible famines in the Third World which it has considered uneconomical to take seriously: said one US politician: "to give food aid to people just because they are starving is a pretty weak reason."

Conquering and enslaving 'non-European' peoples abroad, capitalism has brought racism into its own metropolitan centres.

In Britain, over the Thatcher decade, we have witnessed a growth of racism, of racist attacks, of official state racism, especially in the form of immigration controls that inhibit the entry into Britain of people who are not white, and almost exclusively them. Right now, the Tories are stirring up a racist furore over the prospect of Chinese people from Hong Kong, who under British rule have been deprived even of a vote, making use of their

**We
stand
for
workers'
liberty**

British citizenship and coming to live here.

The labour movement has often failed to combat racism very effectively. Indeed the 1968 Immigration Act was brought in by a Labour government panicked by the prospect of a few thousand Kenyan Asians coming here. Instead of fighting the racists like Enoch Powell, the Labour government went along with them.

The Palestinians have the right to a state of their own. But the Israeli Jewish nation also has the right to a state. The Irish Catholics have the right to be part of a united Ireland. But the Protestants have the right to as much autonomy within that united Ireland as is possible.

This approach should govern the labour movement's policy on national questions. We are for the right of self-determination not because we like nationalism or nations: ultimately we want nations to die out, replaced by an international community. But nations won't disappear just because we want them to; especially, nations survive when they feel under threat.

Full, consistent democracy between nations — no one infringing on the rights of others — is the way to make a world where people stop caring if they are Israeli or Arab, German or French, Russian or British. There will be a new idea of community, not trapped within such narrow horizons.

Socialist Organiser supports genuine national liberation struggles, or struggles for democracy and freedom around the world. We support, of course, the struggle of the South African people against apartheid.

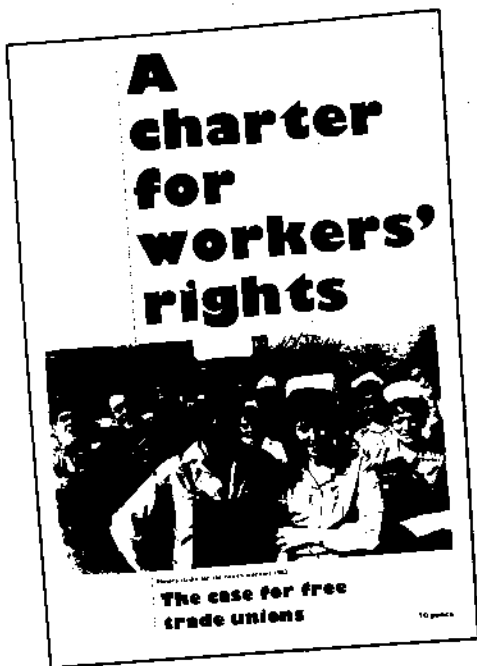
And we don't think a socialist paper fulfils its role well if all it does is cheer

The Workers' Charter

This year, 1990, the North-West and London regional Labour Party conferences, and the NALGO union conference, have voted to support a wide-ranging Charter of Workers' Rights, centred round the right to strike, picket and take solidarity action. 'Labour Party Socialists' and the Socialist Movement Trade Union Committee have taken up the campaign for this Workers' Charter, and it will be a big issue at the 1990 Labour Party Conference.

This agitation is the result of a campaign waged over the last four or five years by *Socialist Organiser*. Simply demanding the status quo ante — trade unions' so-called legal "immunities" — is no longer, we've argued, an adequate answer, now that the Tories have made British labour law the most illiberal in Western Europe.

We have published and publicised different drafter charters, and encouraged readers to promote them in the Labour Party and trade unions. Without papers doing that job, a fight back by the rank and file on labour law would be ten times harder.



these struggles on. We especially want to help independent working class movements, where they exist, and socialists active within them. We have given particular support to the independent trade unions in South Africa, and to socialists to the Left of Nelson Mandela's African National Congress.

Solidarity, we believe, has to be combined with constructive criticism if it is to mean anything. We try to apply that approach to all national and international issues. We don't just take people's word for what they are: we try to examine and analyse each situation.

And we judge movements by whether their struggle really advances the cause of democracy and socialism. We have never gone along with those on the Left who think you judge a movement by who else says they are for it, or who is against it. We never supported the USSR in Afghanistan just because the United States opposed it; we never opposed Solidarnosc in Poland just because Thatcher said she supported it; we didn't support the Argentinian junta just because it was fighting Thatcher. We believe a socialist movement has to be able to make its own assessments, and work out its own criteria.

SINCE THE 1980s, Western capitalism has seen big changes. Some of these changes, in technology, the international integration of the system, and so on, have been 'automatic' — the result of capitalist development itself. But there have been huge **social** changes, changes in social attitudes, that have been brought about to a large extent by the actions of political movements.

The black civil rights movement in the United States, challenging the virtual apartheid system that existed in parts of the country, ushered in a period of intense struggle for greater equality — for blacks, and for women, and for homosexuals — which had repercussions all across the world. In Britain, for example, women do enjoy more legal rights than they did thirty

years ago; racism is still rife, but there has been some change in what is 'socially acceptable'; male homosexuality is no longer illegal (lesbianism never was, in so many words).

But there is a long, long way to go in these and other spheres, and all the time the Right try to wipe out the gains we have made. The labour movement should stand firm on all matters of equality, and fight to liberate all oppressed sections of society. *Socialist Organiser* regularly features articles on all these subjects, and campaigns for the labour movement to fight harder and more consistently on them.

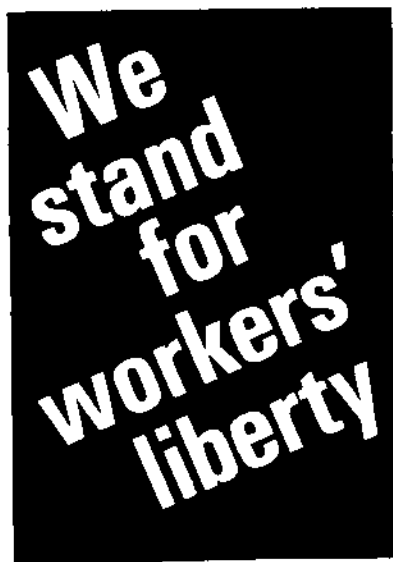
Our aim is to unite the working class. It should not be a question of different 'interest groups' coming together as a temporary 'coalition'. Any section of the working class has the right to organise independently — but in the cause of greater unity in the long run.

The Labour Left's approach, especially in local government, has often been quite diverse in practice. Lobbies for women, or blacks, or lesbians and gays — or sometimes for black women, lesbians independently of gays, and so on — have **competed** for diminishing crumbs from the local government table. Instead of a powerful movement, there has been infighting and disunity.

We can overcome this disunity. As the Tories slip on one banana skin after another, losing popularity by the day, the breadth of opposition to them increases. A united labour movement, a labour movement united around the demands for a better health service, better pay, decent jobs for all, a home for everybody and no poll tax, equal rights, an end to discrimination, civil liberties, and real social justice internationally — such a labour movement could **rout** Thatcher, or Heseltine, or whichever half-wit bigot the Tories choose next.

From a socialist point of view, winning the next election is only one battle in a long class war. Other battles are going on now, and will go on whoever is elected. The war for socialism is waged in a thousand little struggles, all over the world, every day of the year. Every time the oppressed and exploited resist, every time ordinary working class people refuse to be walked upon by the rich and powerful, part of the war for socialism is fought.

Socialist Organiser exists to help make sure that there is a victor in the class war, and that exploitation and oppression become, one day, no more than a distant memory.



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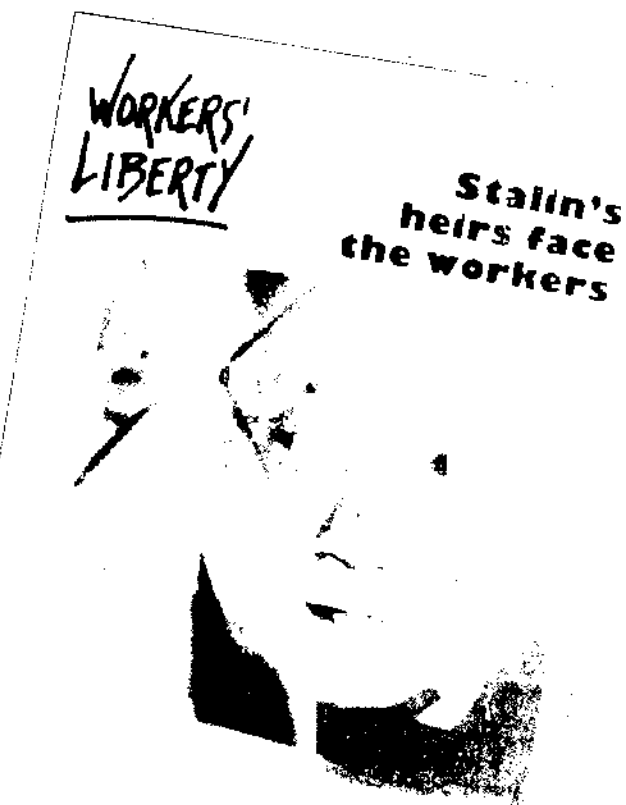
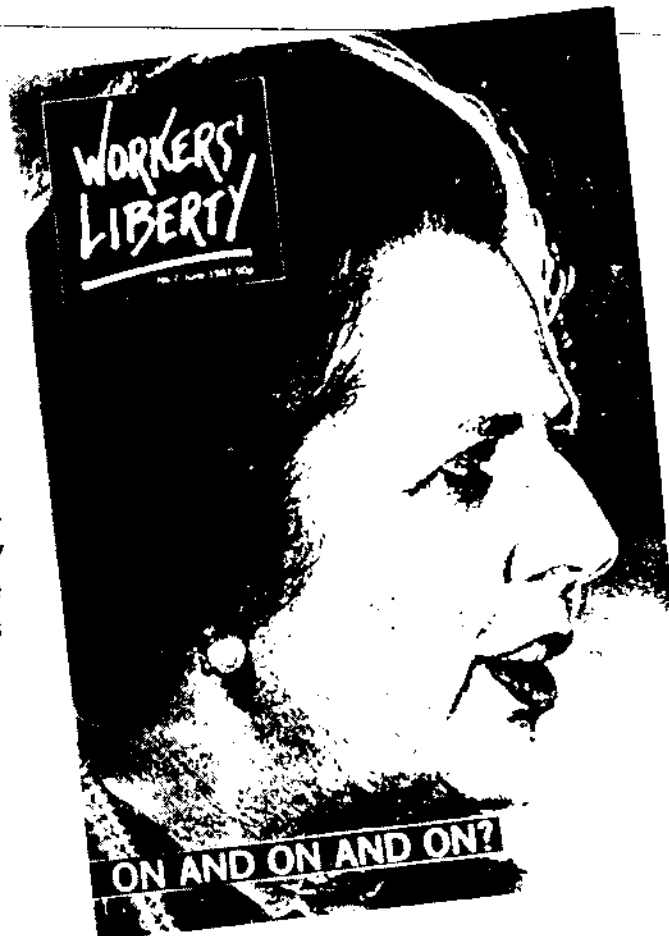
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FOR

SOCIALIST ORGANISER

THE VOICE KINNOCK WANTS TO SILENCE

On 25 July 1990 the Labour Party National Executive banned *Socialist Organiser* — without giving us charges, without evidence, without a hearing.

Neil Kinnock and his cronies want to silence *SO* now to help make a future Labour Government safe from left-wing challenge. Their plans to keep almost all the Tory anti-union laws have the same motive.

But *SO* will not be silenced! We'll fight the witch-hunt! With others, we have set up the 'End the Ban' campaign.

We need money to fight the witch-hunt: to do mailings, leaflets, meetings. 'End the Ban!' is appealing for cash, but *SO* will have put money into the broad campaign as well as into our own efforts.

Your donation will help us both to defy our ban and to defend the general right of socialist dissent in the Labour Party.



SIXTEEN PAGES

SO is responding to Kinnock's ban by expanding to 16 pages from September.

Already we have a broader range of features than other left and Labour papers — Les Hearn's science column, regular film and TV reviews, a lively letters page and Paul Whetton's miner's diary, as well as industrial, Labour Party, and international reports. Sixteen pages will enable us to have more features, less crammed, better presented.

More pages mean more bills. A price-rise — our first for 4½ years — will help cover these bills. But we also need donations. We have no big advertisers, no rich backers.

FOR WORKERS' LIBERTY EAST AND WEST

Socialist Organiser has campaigned consistently in support of working-class and democratic organisations in the Eastern Bloc. It has publicised and supported the Campaign for Solidarity with Workers in the Eastern Bloc since it was set up in 1987, and more recently CSWEB's 'Support the Socialists' appeal to raise money for the new socialist groups in Eastern Europe.

Those East European socialists also want information and ideas from Western socialists. We've been mailing dozens of copies of the paper to Eastern Europe each week, and sending people to get reports from Eastern Europe and discuss with East European socialists.

All that costs money. Please help.

DEBATE, DIALOGUE, DEMOCRACY

Only in *Socialist Organiser*, and in the magazine associated with it, *Workers' Liberty*, have the different views on the left about Ireland — ranging from those who defend the existing Northern Ireland unit to those who identify entirely with the Provisional IRA — been debated 'face to face'.

Only in *SO* have different views on Israel, Palestine, Zionism and anti-Zionism — ranging from the left of official Israeli politics through to those who back Arab conquest of Israel — found space in the same columns for an ongoing debate.

SO has its own editorial views on these issues, controversial and forthright. But it also has a commitment to open debate. Other major debates have covered the nature of the Eastern Bloc; Labour and Europe; the Falklands war; local government politics; and the Labour Party reform movement.

The debate we carry is a service even to those who disagree with our editorial conclusions. It is a service necessary if a new, critically-thinking left, one that learns the lessons of past experience, is to be built in the labour movement.

If you value open, critical, debate, contribute to our appeal so that *SO* can continue to provide a forum for that debate.



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