

the next step

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Is there a
fighting future
in the NUS?

See pages 4 and 5

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THE massive price increases announced by water companies expose the Tory plan to privatise the water industry as the get-rich-quick swindle it really is. The 29 water companies that are already in private hands say that they intend to put up prices by up to 70 per cent. Environment secretary Nicholas Ridley was forced to concede that, despite government promises that privatisation would not raise prices, private companies could charge 'what they liked'.

At the same time as opening the floodgates to the rip-off merchants, the Tories have absolved them of responsibility for maintaining safety standards against pollution. Ridley has announced that water companies will be exempt from prosecution unless they have not followed the 'recommended procedure'. Given that British regulations are the most lax in Europe, this should not unduly trouble the new water barons. The Water Bill is simply a licence to make brass out of muck.

Government ministers feigned surprise at the extent of the price increases. Tory environment minister Michael Howard pretended to be concerned and summoned the companies to Westminster to explain the rises. Howard obviously has a very short memory. Management consultants Ernst & Whinney, who advise the water companies, revealed that the department of environment encouraged them to implement the maximum possible rises this year. And just last week DoE officials agreed to a massive 43 per cent increase from the West Kent Water Company.

This display of money-grabbing might have been a show-up for the government, but it was certainly no surprise. The whole of the Tory privatisation programme has involved handing over state assets at knock-down prices to Thatcher's friends in the private sector.

The Tories claim that privatisation will help clean up water pollution. It might help their chums clean up the profits but for the rest of us it will mean dirtier water and lower safety standards. Already Britain flouts most EEC regulations on water pollution. The amount of nitrates allowed in British tap water, for example, is double the maximum permitted by the EEC. Last year the dumping of 20 tonnes of aluminium sulphate into the water at Camelford



in Cornwall led to the poisoning of the local population and the death of over 100 000 fish. Once water is in private hands such 'accidents' will become commonplace.

Tory water privateers promise...

PRICE RISES AND POLLUTION

The row about water privatisation has proved embarrassing for the Tories. Thatcher's much-vaunted popular capitalism might be popular in the boardrooms, but it is becoming decidedly unpopular with most people who will suffer price rises and pollution problems. The government was forced to guillotine the parliamentary debate on water privatisation to cut short the public discussion about their sordid plans.

But once again the Tories are likely to get away with it thanks to the failure of the opposition to capitalise on the government's difficulties. It's hardly surprising that a Labour leader who cannot even impose his authority against a squirt like Austin Mitchell, cannot stand up to the most ruthless government in post-war Britain. The sooner we organise our own opposition, the sooner we will get some results.

editorial

10 February • No 5 • Editor: Joan Phillips

WHO WILL FIGHT THE NHS CUTS?

THE government's attack on the health service (outlined on page 7) begs the question of who will fight and what for? Labour Party health spokesman Robin Cook has given his answer: 'I am seeking urgent meetings with the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Nursing, the health unions and the community health councils, to discuss how we can best work to save the NHS.' Cook made it clear that Labour's campaign would not be directed at defending the people who work in the health service: 'This is a campaign to protect the people who depend on the NHS.' The Labour Party's focus on saving the NHS may be popular, but is it what we need? And Cook's alliance may be broad, but is it useful?

Even before the government's plans were published, opposition spokesmen stressed that they presaged full-scale privatisation of the health service. They counterposed the wonders of an efficient public service providing equal healthcare for all, to the nightmare of a privatised service dispensing treatment to those who could afford to pay for it. Ever since Clement Attlee's government set up the NHS in 1948, the Labour Party has held up the idea of a health service available to all, free at the time of use, as an historic achievement. 'A model of socialism in practice' is deputy Labour leader Roy Hattersley's verdict.

In fact the health service is a capitalist not a socialist institution, set up as part of the post-war reorganisation of welfare services to provide the levels of health, education and living standards required for the reconstruction of the capitalist economy. The application of market forces in the provision of healthcare is not a radical departure from past practice. From the start, market forces have influenced everything from the scale of funding to the allocation of resources, levels of pay and the two-tier system of healthcare in the NHS.

The only principle involved in the creation of the NHS was to provide a basic service at as low a cost as possible. The Attlee government cut back spending before the service even opened, and a year had hardly passed before health minister Aneurin Bevan was moaning about the pill-guzzling British public. Bevan said he shuddered 'to think of the ceaseless cascade of

medicine which is pouring down British throats'. In 1951 Labour introduced prescription charges for false teeth and spectacles. In 1966 Harold Wilson's Labour government boasted about abolishing prescription charges, then quietly re-introduced them two years later. The 1974-79 Labour government initiated a more stringent programme of cuts, resulting in decisions to close 143 hospitals between January 1976 and October 1978.

A striking feature of the NHS is the way it is run by paying its workforce poverty wages. From the fifties black, Irish and women workers were brought in and paid peanuts. Today ancillaries, nurses, technicians and others who staff the health service are still suffering the scourge of low pay. Employees working long hours for poverty-line wages, in the service of patients confined in ramshackle hospitals cobbled together from old workhouses and prefabricated extensions, aptly sums up most people's experience of the National Health Service.

Over the past 10 years the Tories have continued the cuts which Labour started. Scores of hospitals have closed, wards have shut by the thousand, waiting lists have grown inexorably, prescription charges have risen by 1300 per cent, and charges for eye and dental check-ups have been introduced. In the heat of the debate about the government's new proposals many people have lost sight of how far the health service has been transformed into a charity over the past decade. Ten years ago it would have been unthinkable for essential medical services to be run largely on fundraising. But today top personalities front charity appeals and the nurses are reliving the experience of the thirties by going back on to the streets with begging bowls.

Alarmist talk about privatisation underestimates the extent to which the private sector now impinges on the provision of healthcare. Admissions to the private sector increased by 57 per cent between 1981 and 1986. And it is estimated that about 30 per cent of non-urgent operations, such as hernias and hip replacements, are now carried out in the private sector. It is commonplace for private hospital operators to perform operations on contract for health authorities. As well as this intrusion of

the private sector into the public, many state hospitals are increasingly having to sell their services to subsidise their costs. The Royal Devonshire hospital in Buxton announced recently that it would be selling hip operations for £1250 to raise cash from other health regions despite a six-month waiting list locally.

It is striking that a service run on a shoe-string budget has nevertheless managed to discriminate against those most in need. It is a well-known fact in east London that if you are middle class and pregnant you will more than likely be referred for treatment to the prestigious London teaching hospital in Whitechapel which has a reputation for standards of medical excellence. If you are working class and pregnant you will more than likely be shunted off a few miles down the road to Mile End hospital which has a reputation locally as a delapidated nationalised workhouse with funds sufficient to provide only a second-rate service. Far from meeting the oft-quoted principle of 'equal care for all', the NHS has always had an institutionalised bias towards the better-off.

In this sense scare-stories about impending privatisation are a red herring which ignore the extent to which the health service has always benefited the privileged at the expense of the poor. By bringing market forces to bear more rigorously, the Tories intend to extend the two-tier system of healthcare that already prevails. By counterposing its commitment to efficiency in the state sector to the introduction of market forces, the Labour Party simply ends up trying to reconcile people who work in the health service to continued impoverishment, and people who use the health service to more of the same shoddy services.

While we are resolutely opposed to any attempt to dismantle the health service, we cannot be satisfied with a struggle to defend the status quo. As the government forges ahead with plans to create a US-style system of healthcare, it is simply not good enough to defend the British-style system of workhouse welfare provision. Our campaign must be based on the fight for the wages, conditions and services that meet the needs of the working class in the nineties. This brings us to the second question of whether Robin Cook's alliance of the BMA, the RCN, the CHCs and the health unions can lead the fight against the cuts.

The government's assault on the health service has undoubtedly provoked a great deal of angst among such august bodies as the BMA. The sense of shell-shock in the medical profession (like the teaching and legal professions before it) at this challenge to vested interests from a Tory government is palpable. But as a bastion of corruption whose opposition to the government's plans is based above all on a concern to defend its privileged status, the medical establishment can never be an ally in the fight for decent pay, conditions and services.

Originally coaxed into the nationalised service because Nye Bevan 'choked their mouths with gold', the elite of the profession have certainly maintained their reputation as money-grubbers. Most consultants spend as much time as possible lining their pockets in the private sector and leave their junior doctors to provide a skeletal service for

those who cannot afford to pay for their health. Hence their outrage at even the modest proposals in the white paper to make them more accountable to patients. These consultants are willing to see standards of patient care suffer, so long as their status and specialist departments are not affected. A profession which has for years tolerated and even encouraged the ultimate in privatisation—the trade in human kidneys—cannot be expected to lead the resistance to the Americanisation of British healthcare.

What about the other organisations which make up Cook's broad alliance against the white paper? The RCN is best-known for its no-strike policy and its willingness to make concessions to the government. The other health service unions have a reputation for stabbing health workers in the back, after they effectively sabotaged the campaign for decent pay and conditions last year. Community health councils are renowned for nothing at all.

The problem with these organisations is that, like the medical professionals, they too are motivated more by a concern to preserve their status in the health service than by a determination to defend the interests of those who work in it and depend on it. Thus the starting point for the health union leaders in last year's pay campaign was not how to win a decent pay rise for their members, but how to keep their own niche in the pay negotiating structure.

Above all, this meant getting public opinion on their side to force the government back to the negotiating table. In their concern to appeal to middle class sympathy and project a respectable image, the union leaders downplayed the issue of pay and renounced strike action. Instead they made the issue of funding the focus of their appeal, and assembled nurses on protest lines to improve their image. This futile series of publicity stunts made no impact on the government, but it badly dented the morale of health workers. Union leaders who cannot even organise a pay campaign cannot be expected to mount a struggle against the cuts.

It is plainly a problem that criticism of the government's health policy is being led by the top men in the medical profession, with the top bureaucrats in the labour movement tagging along behind. As we have seen, the medical establishment has no desire to take on the Tories in a battle against the cuts, and the official labour leaders have no capacity to do so.

But Cook's list of allies is notable for its explicit exclusion of a million health workers, whose collective numbers could mobilise the biggest force West of the Red Army. If these forces were mobilised behind a clear political strategy and an effective campaign of action, our ability to resist would be considerably enhanced.

We cannot afford to entrust the fight against health cuts to the medical establishment or labour bureaucrats. We need a campaign which is independent of the narrow concerns of these self-interested parties and aimed instead against all cuts in wages, working conditions or facilities in the NHS. To be successful such a campaign must begin by involving workers from every part of the health service, and demanding solidarity from the millions who need health facilities.

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letters

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POLICE PROVOCATEURS ATTACK GAYS

USING the time-honoured practice of agent provocateurs, police in Nottingham recently conducted a series of raids on public toilets, arresting over 30 men during one week alone. In 1981 such activities by police in Huddersfield were enough to arouse widespread condemnation and the transfer of the national Gay Pride march from London to Huddersfield in protest. Today these attacks are commonplace and pass unnoticed.

The use of agent provocateurs in the arrest of gay men, a practice in which the police literally create a crime of which there is no victim other than the supposed criminal, illustrates well the points that Don Milligan made in *the next step* (27 January) concerning police attitudes towards anti-gay violence.

We can expect no protection from the state. The 1967 Act, regarded by many left wingers as having legalised homosexuality, merely redefined our oppression. Since 1967 any action that identifies us as gay in a

public place puts us at risk of arrest on the basis of gross indecency or behaviour likely to cause a breach of the peace. British courts have justified our murderers with verdicts of justifiable homicide. How can we expect justice or protection from the state which treats us as second class, illegal citizens?

The absence of an organised response to state-sponsored violence is hardly surprising given the defeat of the anti-Clause campaign and the demoralisation which followed. However, this defeat had a positive aspect to it. It showed the inadequacy of the traditional gay/liberal/left politics, it exposed the dangers of being defensive and apologetic, of begging for tolerance from the establishment that benefits from our oppression. It is up to us to assert that the only realistic strategy in future is to fight for the total decriminalisation of homosexuality.

Mike
Nottingham



LIES ON LIBYA

IN the last few years America has focused the attention of the world's media on Libya. The media has given credence to the accusations levelled at Colonel Gaddafi, who is accused of supplying arms and Semtex explosives to terrorists, and of conspiring to cause the bombing of a Berlin discotheque. All the evidence suggests that there was no Libyan connection in either of these matters.

When the Americans shot down an Iranian airliner in the Gulf, the media again backed up US lies, claiming the aircraft appeared to be a potential aggressor. When this was shown to be untrue, the Americans claimed the Iranian pilot had deliberately sacrificed the lives of his passengers to score a propaganda victory. Now they claim the Rabta chemical factory is producing toxic gases for chemical warfare. Despite offers to inspect the plant, America continues to issue disinformation to justify aggressive acts against Libya.

The British people must consider all the facts before they support US terrorism against the people of Libya and other small defenceless nations like Nicaragua.

M-Al-Gidal
HM Prison Gartree
Leicester

NUS WITCH-HUNTS LEFT

CARDIFF UNIVERSITY NUS executive showed its true colours by banning left-wing groups from selling their papers at the local anti-loans demonstration last November. The decision was justified on the grounds that the mere presence of paper sellers might discourage students from participating.

Next, the executive summoned two students to a disciplinary hearing, for taking part in an occupation of the stage at the national NUS conference after a heated debate on the poll tax was guillotined by the executive.

If this wasn't enough, the Cardiff executive has extended its witch-hunt against the left to include the banning of paper selling on the university steps, and is trying to prevent the Revolutionary Communist Society affiliating to the union. NUS is not just a barrier to effective action: it is out-doing Thatcher in attacking socialists.

Ele
Cardiff

THE MIDDLE CLASSES: BACKBONE OF THE NATION

JILL DUNNE says she knows plenty of professional people who consider themselves to be resolute opponents of the Tory government (letters, 3 February). No doubt they do consider themselves to be resolute opponents, but whether they are or not in reality is a different matter: it depends on the political strategy they put forward to oppose the Tories.

As a social class the middle classes are spineless because, unlike the working class, they do not have a distinctive historical role. There is no possibility of building an independent middle class political movement against capitalism, and an anti-capitalist movement is the only thing that can challenge the Tories. Anything short of this will only replace Thatcher with an imitation, as Mike Freeman's article pointed out.

The choice is a political one: middle class politicians appear spineless when they oppose Thatcher, but they don't have any



qualms about attacking the working class. Members of the professional classes who want to fight not just Thatcher but also her politics, can do so as socialists, just as a lawyer called Lenin did. The congenital defect of spinelessness which Jill refers to does exist—it afflicts every political project based on middle class disquiet, and it is called supporting capitalism.

Mary Ward
North London

The rise of the far right

SHOCK WAVES FROM BERLIN

Fenna King reports from West Germany on the rise of the racist far right

Many people have reacted with shock, confusion and some trepidation to the results of the recent elections in West Berlin. The ruling coalition of conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) and liberal Free Democrats (FDP) ended abruptly, with the CDU vote plummeting to 37.8 per cent and the FDP being all but wiped out. The euphoria of the Social Democrats, who scored 37.3 per cent, and the Alternative Liste, West Berlin's Greens, which polled 11.8 per cent, was short-lived, as all eyes focused on the party that stole the show. The strong showing for the Republicans, who took 7.5 per cent of the vote after campaigning on an anti-foreigner ticket, overshadowed all else.

Stormtroopers

Founded in 1983 in Bavaria as a more reactionary alternative to the right-wing Christian Social Union there, the Republicans are keen to disown the extremist label. This is not easy since the party chairman is Franz Schönhuber, a former officer in Hitler's SS who lost his job at Bavarian TV after writing a book which glorified the stormtroopers. Initial analyses show

speed up plans to tighten and extend the law against foreigners, which have been on ice since last year. Chancellor Helmut Kohl's administration is trying to pose as a government of the 'democratic centre', prepared to 'neither shift to the left nor the right' (*Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, 3 February). But at the same time as demarcating himself from the far right, Kohl has shown willing to make concessions to the right-wing CSU.

While the CSU insists that the constitution should be changed to keep out asylum-seekers, the coalition government can project a moderate image by leaving the constitution as it stands for the moment. But regardless of the constitution, a new wave of deportations has begun against 'asylum cases'. While the media conjures up images of a nightmare return to the Weimar Republic, the menace of state racism today is ignored.

Hammered

In some ways the polarisation brought about by the election result is a positive development. Having been shaken up by the recent events, many people are demanding explanations for the resurgence of xenophobia which go beyond superficial electoral

like the peace movement could come together.

But an all-class alliance such as the peace movement, stretching from conservatives and churchmen to liberals and the left, cannot provide a coherent political challenge to state racism. The most ominous development is the willingness of the embryonic *antifa* alliance to appeal to the state to take action against the far right.

Respectable

One SPD politician has called for state surveillance against the far right, and for more stringent use of the *Berufsverbot*, which outlaws from many jobs anybody deemed an extremist. The Greens have called for a tightening up of the postal laws to prevent the mailing of extremist literature. The United Socialist Party (VSP) has accused the government of refusing to 'draw at least one lesson from the Weimar experience: the ban on fascist organisations under article 129 of the Basic Law [the German constitution]' (*Soz*, 2 February). The SPD left Voran urged the government to use article 129 of the criminal law against the fascists.

Appealing to the state which is locking up foreigners, deporting asylum-seekers and framing harsher immigration laws to legislate against racist extremists is not just naive.

It overestimates the threat posed by the far right and underestimates the problem of state-sponsored racism. Furthermore, it surrenders the struggle against racism to state institutions which have made anti-foreign sentiment respectable, and consigns anti-racists to acting as a pressure group on the state. Finally, the left itself will be the loser if the state is given sanction to increase its repressive powers. The *Berufsverbot* has only ever been used against the left, and article 129 is the legal instrument which has landed many left wingers long



Thomas Ritter

Four hundred people attended an anti-racist conference in Bremen last weekend under the slogans 'Live and love' and 'Give hatred no chance'. Such moralising won't stop the racists. Only a campaign against state racism can defend foreigners in Germany.

that the Republicans picked up most support from traditional SPD strongholds like Nukölln and Wedding, and from skilled workers as well as older nationalist zealots and the police force.

It would be wrong to go too far in seeing the far-right breakthrough as a major political departure from the traditions of the mainstream establishment parties. As Alfred Dregger, the chairman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary fraction, put it, there is nothing very new in the Republican programme: 'Most of it they have copied from ours.' (*Frankfurter Rundschau*, 3 February)

The significance of the election result is that it has put the issue of racism at the top of the political agenda, and has a dramatic impact on all other political forces.

The CDU/CSU responded immediately with a pledge to

factors. There is also much spontaneous anger: within 24 hours of the election result, 10 000 people marched in Berlin shouting 'fascists out—foreigners stay'. It is imperative that in this new, more politicised climate the reasons for the far right's success are hammered out; the opportunity for building an anti-racist movement has never been better.

The left, which has long been looking for a way to overcome its political isolation, has been galvanised by the election outcome.

It has reacted by stressing the fascist threat, against which a broad alliance of all those concerned about a re-run of 1933 should be mobilised. At a conference to launch a national *antifa* movement, Joachim Riess of the Bremen Greens said that it should provide a common roof under which a new alliance

stretches in prison.

The Initiative Against Racism group has argued for a different perspective in fighting the growth of racist reaction. 'We have to confront this problem not with bans but with the development of an anti-racist movement which is directed not only against neo-Nazis, but against all forms of hatred against foreigners.' Within three days of the Berlin elections, Lutz Wiegand of the Darmstadt Initiative addressed an audience of 150, arguing that the far right can flourish because the establishment parties have created a climate in which racism has become respectable. The key to stopping the rise of the far right is a movement which can challenge the respectable racism which underpins every aspect of establishment politics.

what we fight for

New readers start here

THE WORKING CLASS in Britain and throughout the West has suffered a series of setbacks in recent years. These setbacks have strengthened those who argue for moderation, 'realism' and a strategy of defensiveness. The Revolutionary Communist Party takes a different view.

We believe that these setbacks are the responsibility of the old parties and union machines of the official labour movement. In Britain the Labourist tradition has exhausted itself and can no longer relate to even the most modest aspiration of the working class. The exhaustion of Labourism in no way undermines the potential of the working class to change the world.

The RCP is committed to the construction of an independent working class movement. Only a movement which recognises that the interests of the workers are irreconcilably opposed to those of the employers can fight effectively in the struggles ahead.

For the RCP, working class politics cannot be reduced to trade unionism or the affairs of the workplace. Workers must take a stand on every issue and express an independent point of view if we are to liberate ourselves. The fatal flaw of British Labourism is that it restricts workers' horizons to economic matters, while it allows the employer class to monopolise political debate. Workers must define every problem from our point of view and fight for the rights of every section of society if we are to constitute a politically independent class.

While the RCP supports the fight for real reform or improvements in the lives of the working class, we believe that no durable gains can be won within capitalism. The RCP argues that the overthrow of capitalism provides the necessary precondition for the liberation of the working class and of society as a whole.

The British state exists to protect the wealth and privilege of the capitalist class. The RCP aims to destroy the state, which maintains the conditions for exploitation. We believe that the state cannot be used for progressive ends. Any attempt to use the 'soft' side of the state, such as local government, inner-city partnership, or police authorities, lends legitimacy to the entire state apparatus. It can only strengthen the authority of the capitalists' coercive machine.

The RCP believes that workers have no nation. British workers share the same interests as the exploited in other countries. British workers have nothing in common with the employers and must resist the appeals of patriotism and chauvinism. As internationalists we recognise that the enemy is at home. Since Britain remains an imperialist power around the world, the only international role it can play is that of the oppressor.

The class struggle is inextricably linked to the struggle against imperialism. The RCP supports all anti-imperialist struggles. Workers who live in the imperialist heartland have a

special duty to back those fighting against the British oppressor. Thus we fight for the immediate withdrawal of British troops from Ireland and for Irish self-determination. We opposed Britain's colonial war in the South Atlantic, and support the return of the Malvinas islands to Argentina. We oppose British and Western interference in the Middle East. We support the destruction of the Zionist state in Palestine and of the apartheid regime in South Africa. We uphold the same principles in every struggle against imperialism. The RCP is a fervent opponent of all forms of British militarism, nuclear, and 'non-nuclear' alike.

The RCP believes that the fight against oppression is central to the construction of an independent working class movement. Workers must defend the oppressed if we are to fight for our own liberation. This is why the RCP is wholeheartedly committed to the fight against racism. The struggle for the emancipation of women is another fundamental issue for the working class. We unreservedly oppose any form of discrimination against lesbians and gays and call for the decriminalisation of homosexuality. Workers must take a stand on these issues, not out of altruism, but because it is in our class interest to fight for the fullest extension of democratic rights.

Workers need combat organisations capable of defending our interests. The existing organisations of the labour movement are singularly unsuited for this task. The RCP believes that the Labour Party is a bosses' organisation that should be fought and exposed. Despite its working class constituency the Labour Party has always followed the dictates of the capitalists. Whenever Labour has been in office, it has always betrayed the hopes of workers. The RCP is against giving any electoral support to Labour. Workers need a party that is 100 per cent our own and only responsive to proletarian interests.

The existing trade unions are heavily bureaucratised and incapable of representing the aspirations of their members. The RCP argues that rank and file trade unionists should fight to take control of the movement. Trade unionists should organise across the workplace and industry and demand that we run our own affairs. Rank and file committees organised on an industry-wide basis could ensure that the unions truly belong to their members.

The RCP's aim is social revolution in Britain and internationally. We believe that this perspective is no less essential in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union than in the West. Only the working class has the capacity to liberate humanity. Our job is to contribute practically to the realisation of this objective.

If you would like to discuss these issues further, please write to: RCP, BM RCP, London WC1N 3XX, or phone (01) 729 0414.

The Revolutionary Communist Party's recently published Charter for Independent Student Unionism (see below) has provoked considerable controversy and discussion.

Some partisan students feel that any criticism of the National Union of Students is unforgivable. For them the publication of the charter is a great betrayal of the NUS tradition. Others agree with some or all of the arguments in the charter but suggest that at the end of the day the NUS is all we have to organise students. From this point of view they regard any proposals which suggest an alternative way of organising as unrealistic and unhelpful.

Many of these fears are understandable given that the role of the NUS as the only focus for student mobilisation has never before been open to question. The appearance of the charter has changed all this. In the light of the concern and confusion which have greeted its arrival, it is worth spelling out what the charter stands for.

Our main motivation in formulating the perspectives contained in the charter was the need to develop the most effective strategy for mobilising students against government attacks on higher education. The problem of working out an effective strategy is of immediate relevance for anybody who is concerned with the offensive against higher education, the decline of student activism and the general depoliticisation of student politics.

This must be the point of departure for any serious debate on the way forward for student activists. It is this consideration

which lies behind the charter's criticisms of the NUS style of student politics.

The RCP has no ulterior motive for criticising the NUS, only a strong desire to transform student politics and establish an effective forum for rallying resistance to the government. In so far as the NUS is an obstacle to developing student activism then it becomes part of the problem.

The main problem with the NUS is that it devalues the meaning of student unionism.

The NUS enjoys a natural monopoly in representing the interests of all students. This right to represent students has not been conferred on the NUS by the assent of its members. In fact the NUS exists as a wing of the system of higher education which students automatically join.

Becoming a member of the NUS involves no commitment whatsoever; it simply involves being handed a student union membership card when you register for a college course. Joining NUS is not a political act, but a technical matter of receiving a card.

It follows that NUS membership involves passive acceptance and that is all. For an administrative service like a library this is not a problem. Students join the campus library because they have to and the question of political identification never arises. For a union, however, a purely administrative concept of membership can be lethal.

If a union is to become more than a bureaucratic device it must of necessity engage its membership in active participation.

The very life of a union and ultimately its authority depends on its ability to win the hearts and

The RCP and the NUS

Linda Ryan

replies to critics of the Revolutionary Communist Party's charter for students

minds of its members. Putting it simply we are saying that any union must learn to recruit its members. In the course of struggling to recruit members, arguments are had out, support is won and authority is earned. The process of recruitment activates supporters and politicises the student environment. It gives union membership real meaning.

The bureaucratic style of the NUS means that the union represents only its official leadership and is accountable to nobody but itself. It cannot count on the support of the vast majority of its members. As a result, the NUS can only function as long as the majority of its members remains passive, regardless of the intentions of the union leadership.

Charter for Independent Student Unionism

During recent years the Thatcher government has implemented a series of measures designed to transform institutes of higher education in line with the Tories' more general objectives.

Universities and polytechnics are now organised around the principles of market economics. Education has become subservient to the needs of the capitalist system. Access to education is considered a privilege and students are to pay for their polytechnic and university courses. The long-term aim of the government is to make higher education even more elitist.

The further commercialisation of education has been paralleled by growing state interference in the political life of campuses. Government ministers now dictate how student unions should spend their funds and what forms of protest are to be allowed. Government supervision and the pressures of economic life have had a stultifying impact on campus life. The atmosphere at places of higher education has become intolerant and conservative. Experimentation and dissent are frowned upon and a series of petty regulations is used by the authorities to police students.

It is evident that existing forms of student organisation and action are outdated and ineffective in countering the government offensive. The NUS has become heavily bureaucratised and operates entirely within the limits established by the authorities. It is time to consider more appropriate forms of organisations and policies to counter the government offensive. The Charter for Independent Student Unionism is designed to provide a focus for those students who want to fight, resist and experiment.

1 Student unionism must be free of state interference. One of the elementary principles of independent student unionism is freedom of action from state regulation. Nobody but students should have the right to decide how they use their funds, which cause they support, and how they express solidarity.

2 Student unionism must be political if it is to be effective. Attempts to turn student unions into welfare associations are misplaced. Services ought to be provided by the authorities in the same way that libraries and sports centres are made available. Student interests—the level of grants, the quality of education, the availability of necessary services—can only be defended through political mobilisation and action. The welfare emphasis of existing student unions only distracts members from organising in defence of their interests.

3 Student unionism ought to defend that which is in the interests of its members. At the same time it is clear that although students have common interests they do not constitute a homogeneous group. It makes little sense to appeal to all students all of the time. The important social and political conflicts that prevail in society are reproduced in the student world. To gain everyone's agreement would mean passing worthless resolutions that mean nothing. To oppose government attacks, students should not tone down their objectives in order to win the support of the most conservative layers of students. The attempt to mobilise around the lowest common denominator makes arguments diffuse and incoherent and holds back activists from getting a clear message across the campus.

4 Student unionism cannot allow itself to become a special interest group concerned only with the affairs of higher education. As members of wider society, students cannot stand above the conflict between classes and between oppressor and oppressed. Independent student unionism is wholly devoted to the cause of progress. It opposes all forms of state repression and violations of democratic rights. It opposes economic exploitation and supports the struggles of workers against the capitalist system.

5 The attempts of the state to manipulate public opinion through the promotion of reactionary views are of special concern to students. Racism and chauvinism in all its forms and anti-women and homophobic ideas must be combated resolutely without any concessions.

6 Independent student unionism opposes imperialism. It defends all people from imperialist intervention—whether in Nicaragua or Ireland.

7 Independent student unionism is anti-bureaucratic. It aims to influence students through argument and political struggle. It is actively against the behind-the-scenes approach of NUS bureaucrats and encourages an atmosphere of open debate. It is far better to debate critical issues than to pass resolutions bureaucratically as is now customary.

8 Independent student unionism seeks to organise activists across campuses and nationally. The present fragmented state of student politics only serves the bureaucrats. Student activists remain cut off from each other and their action remains local, uncoordinated and isolated.

9 Independent student unionism fights for universal and free access to education. It fights for a system of grants that provides all students with an adequate living standard and financial independence.

INDEPENDENT STUDENT UNIONISM

Any student activist will know that the majority of student union members are ignorant of union policies or otherwise disagree with them. Many union meetings rely on the apathy of the membership. Whenever students turn up in large numbers and throw out union policies, the standard excuse of the activists is that 'the right mobilised'. In fact all that happens is that the cosy world of the bureaucrats and the activists is invaded temporarily by students who have never been addressed or politically confronted.

It is revealing that most student union bureaucrats would rather have a small meeting that passes the right motions than risk the outcome of a large assembly of unpredictable students. Avoiding debate on the campus is critical for the survival of the union bureaucrat. Unfortunately, all too often activists fall into the same trap and rely on the union rule-book rather than on political argument to get by.

Our criticism of the NUS style is not based purely on a principled rejection of bureaucracy. We are against bureaucratic politics because they can never be effective in mobilising students. The short-sighted administrative methods of the NUS are an obstacle to the politicisation of student life. So what is the Marxist alternative?

The main objection of Marxists to the NUS tradition is that because it is an administrative style of organisation it never has to convince students of the need for student unionism. Consequently, the NUS does not have to rely on student support for its existence. The corollary of this is that when the NUS faces problems it cannot count on the support of its membership.

The fragile relationship between the NUS and its membership means that its main source of support is the system of higher education and ultimately the state.

Like other institutions of higher education, the NUS is funded by the state. The NUS does not need to convince students to provide

financial support since it automatically receives money from student unions, who in turn get their funds from the state. This relationship gives the national union financial stability, but it puts to question the independence of the NUS.

The union's financial dependence on the state means that it is not free to act as it would wish. On many occasions student unions have been prevented from making donations to striking workers by regulations imposed by the state. Should the NUS ever challenge the interests of the state in a decisive way it could have its funds cut off altogether.

The administrative orientation of the NUS means that it acts as a provider of services rather than a focus for political mobilisation. The acceptance of this confusion of two separate functions—the provision of services and political mobilisation by activists—is the fatal flaw of British student unionism. The attempt to play both roles necessarily means that the capacity of the union to mobilise students is severely undermined.

Marxists argue for the separation of these two functions. The services provided by the NUS should really be the function of the system of higher education. Just as the universities and polytechnics provide sports centres and libraries so they should make available all the other services that students require.

Student unions ought to be organisations for representing student interests and nothing else.

The NUS's lack of independence means that even when it seeks to mobilise it does so on a bureaucratic basis. Instead of relying on the

mobilisation of students, there is a tendency to rely on respectable pressure group politics. For example, in Scotland the University of Glasgow Student Representative Union is organising a march to Clydesdale Bank to hand in a petition asking it not to implement the government's system of loans.

This focus on winning the backing of a capitalist bank illustrates the general orientation of the NUS. To expect a capitalist bank to fight for the rights of students is absurd. But what is far worse is the lack of interest or faith in student mobilisation which underlies this approach. In this scenario student action has an entirely symbolic function while the real business is conducted behind the scenes by bureaucrats, bank managers and other worthy dignitaries.

The search for respectability which is the hallmark of NUS politics is not just self-defeating, it also deprives students of a political role and turns them into a passive audience. In political terms the problem is even worse: student activists have become more pre-occupied with winning respectability than with engaging in political debate.

There is even an undercurrent of opinion which believes that politics are inherently divisive and damaging to student unity. This perspective has made a significant contribution to the depoliticisation of student politics.

Many left-wing activists argue that the RCP's approach is idealistic and even ultra-left. They claim that it is essential to defend the NUS because, at the end of the day, the NUS is all we have.

While we agree that the NUS should be defended from government attacks, we believe that a defensive strategy is inappropriate, and cannot challenge the government offensive.

The narrow perspective of uncritical defence of the NUS is a recipe for defeat. It is precisely the NUS tradition of politics that

limits the effectiveness of student action. Its bureaucratic style and pressure group diplomacy guarantee that students will remain passive and moderate. It is only through popularising the necessity for independent student action that unions can become effective weapons for fighting the government.

Some left-wing activists have demanded to know whether the charter is an attempt to establish alternative red unions. At the moment we do not believe that setting up new student unions is an issue. In principle we have no objection to new unions. In France the student movement is divided along political lines in separate unions. But it is no less effective than the NUS for all that.

The aim of the charter is to encourage political support for independent student unionism. Our objective is to transform student unions from their present bureaucratic orientation towards an activist approach. To achieve this goal it is necessary to challenge many of the traditions associated with British student politics.

1 Our point of departure must be to force the unions to actively engage the student body. It is far better to lose resolutions but win a significant minority to action than to abide by the present practice of passing paper motions behind the backs of the majority of students. A minority of politicised students can be far more effective than relying on resolutions which enjoy passive acceptance.

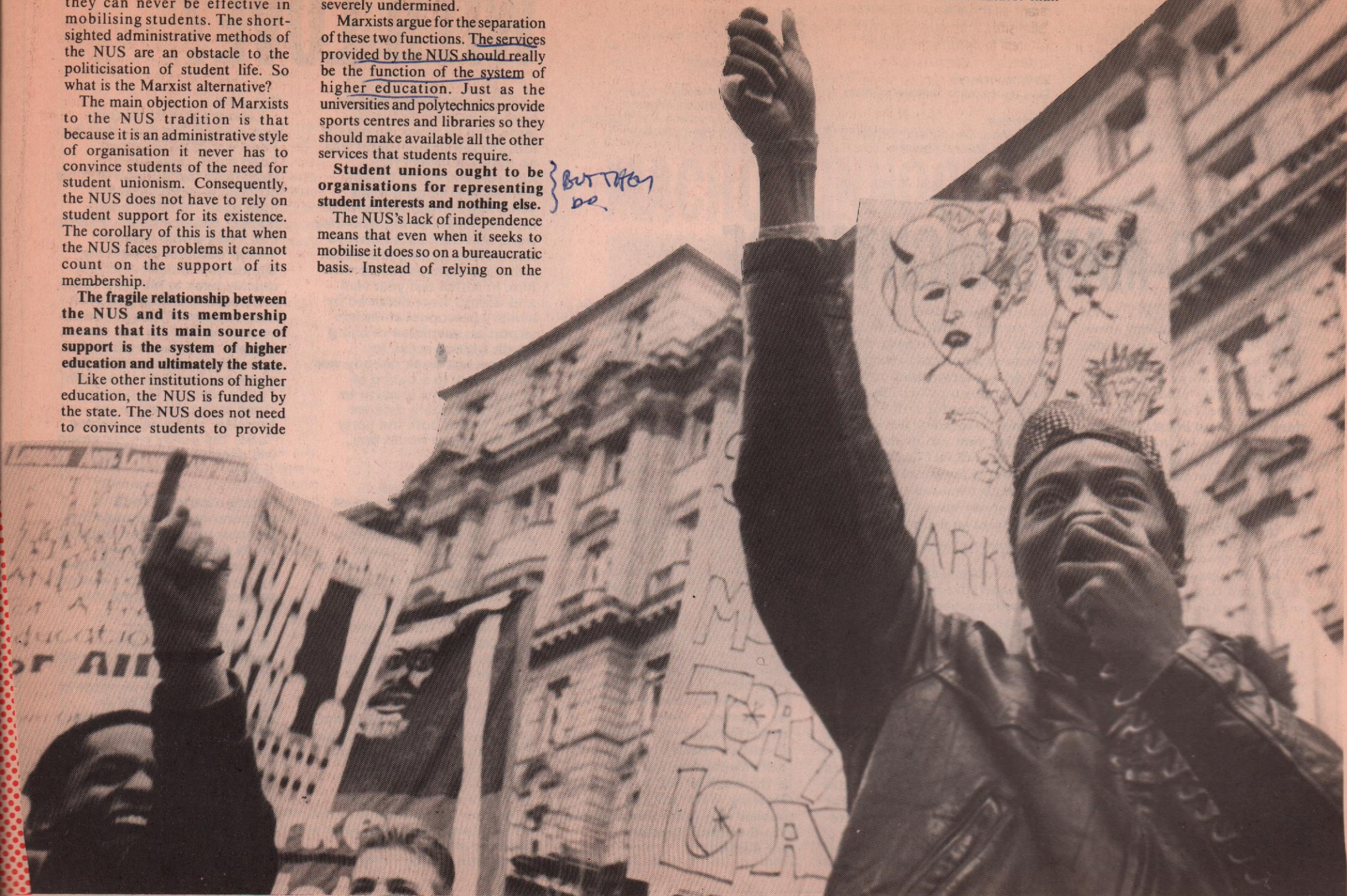
2 The perspective of seeking a consensus on the basis of the lowest common denominator is counter-productive. Such an approach never brings issues out into the open and does not force students to take sides. At present activists spend more time accommodating to what they consider to be the common denominator than

in fighting for support for effective action. A lively climate of political debate can only favour the left. Even if we lose motions in the short run, a politicised environment creates the potential for student radicalisation.

3 We need to uphold the independence of student unions from the state. Student unions must act according to the needs of their members regardless of what the state demands. Financial considerations do not constitute an argument against any form of action—they simply represent continued subservience to the state. If necessary the NUS should be forced to fight for financial support from its members. Winning financial backing can itself serve as an index of support and provide a focus for establishing the principle of independent unionism.

4 Finally the goal of moderation and respectability is unworthy of student unionism. Nothing meaningful can be gained through pressure group diplomacy. Militant action backed by effective mobilisation is the key to defeating government plans for student loans. If the NUS bureaucracy continues to sabotage such actions students must begin to organise themselves. Such a grassroots response will not only make student unionism more effective, it will also help to transform the NUS into an organisation worthy of its members.

Students defy the NUS and march against the loans scheme: militant action under our control is the key to defeating the Tories



As the last Soviet soldiers are airlifted out of Kabul, Moscow is making full use of political divisions among the mujahideen guerrillas to help offset the humiliation of its military failure. Opposition to the Soviet presence was the only cement holding the guerrilla factions together. Now the tanks have departed, a power struggle has broken out.

The mujahideen alliance comprises two main factions. The traditional wing comprises former khans (lords) like Pir Sayed Gailani and aims to restore the exiled King Zahir Shah. The fundamentalist wing wants to establish an Islamic republic rather than a monarchy, but beyond that cannot agree on anything. Each fundamentalist group comprises a multitude of families grouped under a local warlord. The USA, Pakistan, China, Saudi Arabia and Iran sponsor different fundamentalist groups. Religious (Sunni, Shia) and ethnic (Pathan, Tajik and Uzbek) differences compound the divisions. By December last year, rivalries between the khans and fundamentalists had broken out in virtual civil war in 'liberated' areas like Kunar province in eastern Afghanistan.

Diplomatic

In an attempt to resolve mujahideen squabbles and fill the political vacuum left by the retreating Soviets, the various factions have been pressurised by their foreign sponsors into holding

Afghan power struggle as Soviets leave

THE KNIVES COME OUT IN KABUL

a *shura* (consultative council) this weekend. While they may well elect a leader to please their financial backers, he is unlikely to be anything more than a token figurehead.

The fundamentalists prefer a weak central regime so they can retain a free hand in their own areas.

The khans are the only mujahideen force that possesses the semblance of a national strategy. They hope to overcome their military weakness by lining up with non-party Soviet supporters in Kabul, euphemistically termed 'Good Muslims', to strengthen their position against the warlords. This almost coincides with Moscow's preferred option of installing a neutral regime composed of a broad front of moderates ranging from the ruling Parcham faction of the Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan to the khans, all under the formal leadership of King Zahir. The Kremlin is devoting its considerable diplomatic resources to winning Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto to this strategy.

Given the West's continuing efforts to establish an anti-Soviet regime in Kabul, and the bitter divisions among the mujahideen, such a scheme seems unworkable.



The closer they get to Kabul, the more the mujahideen fall out

Moscow may have to fall back upon a 'Lebanese' option. This would aim at stirring up rivalries between all the contending groups and may even involve reviving the left-wing Khalq faction of the

PDPA, out of favour since it was ousted from power by the Soviet invasion of 1979. Any resulting regime in Kabul would be too weak to pose a threat to the Soviet Union's Muslim region. Either

way, Moscow is set to exploit the political incoherence of the pro-Western mujahideen to soften the blow of its military defeat in Afghanistan.

Jackie Reynolds

WHEN THE WAR COMES HOME

The Irish War in British politics

Irish Freedom Movement
Conference
Saturday 18 February 10am-6pm
Sir William Collins School
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The Irish Freedom Movement has organised this anti-repression conference because we believe that there is much to be learned from the Irish experience—and much to be gained from uniting resistance to state repression in Britain with a movement demanding an immediate withdrawal from Ireland.

CONFERENCE AGENDA

Speakers include:

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- Janet Clarke, Broadwater Farm
- Tim Gopsill, editor of *The Journalist*
- Holloway Road 30 Defence Campaign
- Speaker from Sinn Féin also invited

Morning Plenary: State repression in Thatcher's Britain

- ##### Workshops:
- The Prevention of Terrorism Act
 - Britain's political prisoners

- The law and the Irish War
- Is Ireland a training ground?
- The wall of silence
- Kitson's counter-insurgency warfare
- Political policing in the eighties
- The Falklands Factor in British politics

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Labour's defence policy

FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE?

LABOUR Party trips abroad have a tendency to turn to farce, and its latest diplomatic foray to the Soviet Union was no different. When Neil Kinnock and Denis Healey went to Washington three years ago Ronald Reagan had trouble remembering who they were, and the Labour envoys had trouble getting more than a three-minute audience with him. In Africa last year Neil and Glenys were detained by military personnel at Mutare airport on suspicion of being South African spies. In Moscow last week nobody was keen to talk to a bunch of nonentities on a mission to find a marketable defence policy which both the party and the voters would buy.

Maestro

Kremlin officials were noticeably reluctant to meet Messrs Martin O'Neill, the party's defence spokesman, Gerald Kaufman, shadow foreign secretary, Ron Todd of the Transport and General Workers Union and Tony Clarke of the Union of Communication Workers. Out of courtesy Alexander Yakovlev gave them two hours of his time. As head of the Communist Party's international department, Yakovlev is hardly a household name even in the Soviet Union. Yet in his concern to talk up his team's talks, Kaufman claimed indignantly that Yakovlev was 'reputedly the third most powerful man in the Soviet Union'. Even the party's publicity maestro Peter Mandelson couldn't make

this stick.

Labour's visit to Moscow was made in the hope that Ron Todd would be disarmed. Todd embarrassed the leadership last autumn with his promise to 'fight, fight and fight again' to retain a non-nuclear defence policy. Fearful that Todd would make a similar outburst in Moscow, Mandelson chauffeured him quickly back to his hotel room after each meeting, and even took to doorstepping Todd as he approached his car. 'Todd gagged' reported the British press. But Labour's elaborate measures had little to do with Todd's silence. 'My personal views are irrelevant to the exercise', said a self-effacing Todd, 'the policy review group will decide'.

Battle

Having disarmed Todd temporarily, Labour used the Moscow trip to garner support for its policy of rearming Britain. Yakovlev duly obliged by saying that Britain's nuclear weapons should be put into international arms negotiations and not renounced unilaterally. Thatcher could indeed be right when she says Labour's new defence policy will be made in Moscow. But it will be in Bournemouth that the battle over future policy will be fought out on the floor of the Labour Party conference. Todd may not be so obliging then, but having kept schtum in Moscow, dissent in Bournemouth will be but a rhetorical flourish.

Jon Hann

The Soviet economy

AN AD-MAN'S NIGHTMARE

Saatchi & Saatchi's latest commission, handling advertising for the Soviet media, should provide Margaret Thatcher's favourite ad-men with an even stiffer challenge than presenting the Tories as the best thing since sliced bread. Their job, surely unique in the world of advertising, is to promote goods which are not on sale in the Soviet Union. In the fifth year of *perestroika*, Mikhail Gorbachev's reform programme has promised much but has failed, literally, to deliver the goods.

The 1988 grain harvest missed the planned target by 40m tonnes, and was down on the previous year by 16m tonnes. The production of fruit, potatoes and other vegetables fell, and these are now rationed in some areas. Consumer goods like televisions, cars and washing machines are as scarce as ever. To add insult to injury there is also a shortage of washing powder. Gorbachev has tried to compensate for the shortages by raising imports. But this reduces the amount of hard currency available to purchase foreign technology and exacerbates the lack of investment in the consumer goods sector.

The Soviet leadership wants to

solve the problems of the economy by cutting defence spending, in order to free resources for the consumer sector, and by stimulating the private sector. Both strategies have run into difficulties. Gorbachev's plans for a 19.5 per cent cut in arms spending this year, and a 14 per cent cut in the defence budget overall, face fierce resistance from within the armed forces. And such is the chaos of the economy that nobody knows how much is being spent on defence anyway.

Entrepreneurs

Despite official encouragement, the cooperative movement, as the authorities euphemistically call the private sector, has grown very slowly. There are now about 60 000 cooperatives employing two million people out of a total workforce of 119m. Despite providing superior services, few people can afford private sector prices which are up to five times those found in the state-run shops. The government last week reimposed price controls in the cooperative sector, further dampening the enthusiasm of budding entrepreneurs.

Potential foreign investors are biding their time. Western capi-

talists are put off by their inability to repatriate profits because the rouble cannot be converted on the international currency markets. Frustrated at the lack of progress, some Soviet economists are calling for a return to the market: in other words the restoration of capitalism. This is not an option for the Soviet leadership, since the introduction of market forces on a wide scale would threaten the bureaucracy's hold over society. In any case, given the public hostility to co-operatives, there is likely to be widespread resistance to the prospect of higher prices which the introduction of the market would entail.

Attempts to reform the economy are doomed because any real change poses a challenge to the position of the bureaucracy. The key problem is that the bureaucracy has no central means of organising the economy. Only a return to market forces, or the establishment of workers' control, could provide such a mechanism, but both would be the death of the bureaucracy. Glossing over this particular problem may prove too much for even the Saatchi brothers.

Rob Knight

The Tories say that by introducing market forces into the health service they are putting the needs of patients first. But their grandiose claims for the market are nothing more than a cover for another round of health service cuts. Let's look at what the proposals in the white paper will mean for patients and health service workers.

'The government remains determined that patients must be able to exercise a real choice between GPs.'

By 1991 about 1000 group practices servicing a quarter of the population will be managing fixed budgets according to the number of patients on their books. They will buy hospital care for their patients by shopping around for the cheapest treatment, from an NHS hospital, one of the new trust hospitals or from the private sector. At the end of the year they will be able to keep 50 per cent of any money they have not spent.

Downward

Choice is one thing which will be denied to many patients under this system. GPs will be encouraged by market forces to refuse to treat the elderly and chronically sick. Having too many of these patients on their books will be a drain on scarce resources. In practice the market will ensure that those in most need of healthcare will be the ones who suffer most. Those who do manage to get on the books will face another problem: their doctor will have an incentive not to refer them to a specialist since this will be another drain on the GP's fixed budget.

'The objective of this scheme [a fixed drugs budget] is to place downward pressure on expenditure on drugs...but without in any way preventing people getting the medicines they need.'

The white paper complains that the drugs bill is a drain on health service resources, which accounted for £1.9 billion of health spending in 1987-88. The aim of the fixed drugs budget is to change the present state of affairs in which doctors have no direct interest in the cost of the drugs they prescribe. Family practitioner committees will be given powers to impose financial penalties on GPs who continually overspend. Tory ministers say that doctors will have a positive incentive to stay within their budget because they will be able to spend half of any savings on schemes to improve primary healthcare.

Freedom

Only the perverse logic of a cost-cutting government could equate controls over drug bills with good primary healthcare. Controls over drug expenditure will put GPs under considerable pressure to prescribe drugs according to cost and regardless of need. The average prescription costs £5, but H2 blockers for stomach ulcers cost £200 per treatment, and hypolipidaemic agents for heart patients can cost £1000 per treatment. With the government breathing down their necks, doctors will be under pressure not to prescribe these more expensive drugs.

'The government proposes to give NHS hospital trusts a range of powers and freedoms.... Greater freedom will stimulate greater enterprise and commitment, which will in turn improve services for patients.'

Under this scheme more than 300 of the biggest NHS hospitals will be able to opt out of health authority control. These trust hospitals will have to earn their keep by selling services to health authorities, GP budget holders and private patients.

The primary freedom available

Tory policy on health

NHS PLC



David Rourke

Under Tory plans, who can afford a hospital bed?

to trust hospitals is the freedom to raise their own funds on the market. This will have two important consequences. First, trust hospitals will be less likely to take

patients needing urgent treatment. An urgent treatment, by definition, cannot wait for health service administrators to hunt around for a trust hospital that will do the cheapest job. Trust hospitals are also unlikely to be interested in treating the chronically sick because of the difficulty in setting a price for an open-ended treatment. They will be keen to carry out non-urgent operations like hernias, hysterectomies, hips and cataracts.

By specialising in glamorous treatments, trust hospitals will be able to provide higher standards than their NHS-run counterparts. This is because they will be able to attract fee-paying private patients as well as NHS patients who top up the fee paid by their health authority. Given the choice between waiting 12 months for the NHS to carry out a non-urgent operation and paying extra for a referral to a trust hospital, all those who can afford it will choose the trust hospital.

This is what the white paper means when it says in an unusually candid passage that 'hospitals which prove more popular with GPs and patients will attract a larger share of NHS and other resources available for hospital services'. In other words a select number of prestige hospitals will flourish for the benefit of the few, while most will be left to go to rack and ruin providing cheap-skate services for the many.

Benefactors

As Britain's first and only independent hospital, the children's unit set up six years ago at Tadworth in Surrey is a good example of how trust hospitals are likely to operate. Tadworth remains heavily dependent on charity. In 1987-88, 13 per cent of its income, a whopping £258 000, came from appeals, donations and legacies. Tadworth is able to raise this amount of charity because it is a specialist unit led by the Spastics Society whose emotional appeals have persuaded thousands into giving money. But tin-rattling for a hospital looking after geriatrics is unlikely to be so successful.

To enhance its funds Tadworth has had to raise a considerable amount of money from fees: £292 000 in 1987-88. Its dependence on fees means that Tadworth is unlikely to accept children who cannot find wealthy benefactors. The hospital's chief executive, Barry Hassell, explains that 'we have never refused admission to any of our on-going, older patients because of a lack of funding'. In other words the hospital hasn't kicked out any of the non fee-paying children who were there

before the hospital went independent. But the effect of going independent was made clear when Hassell explained that 'we are much stricter with new patients' (*Guardian*, 28 January).

'The government intends that NHS hospital trusts should be free to settle the pay and conditions of their staff, including doctors, nurses and others covered by national pay review bodies.'

Freedom to set their own rates of pay means the freedom to exploit market conditions by paying health workers even less than the pitiful wages they now get. On becoming independent Tadworth hospital immediately withdrew negotiating rights from trade unions representing the 190 staff and pulled out of the nationally negotiated pay scales. Giving trust hospitals the power to fix their own pay scales is the thin end of the wedge in pushing through the government's long-cherished plan to break up nationally negotiated pay agreements for all health workers.

Shoe-string

It is striking that few of the government's critics have commented upon this particular aspect of the white paper. Yet it represents a substantial threat to the wages and conditions of all health workers. If the government succeeds with this objective it will intensify the divisions which it foisted on the workforce through the clinical regrading exercise.

The NHS has always been prey to the sway of market forces, and has always operated a two-tier system of healthcare with an inbuilt bias towards the middle classes (see page 2). Over the past 10 years the Tories have turned a shoddy service run on a shoe-string into an institution run largely on charity and subject to the increasing incursion of the private sector. The effect of the government's reforms will be to institutionalise this two-tier system by hiving off whole areas of the NHS to the private sector and leaving the rest to rot.

Jon Hann

THE LIVING MARXISM WEEKEND

Setting the Marxist agenda for the 1990s
Saturday 18 and
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The Living Marxism Weekend comprises two days of discussion and debate on the relevance of Marxism in analysing new issues and problems. Inspired by the launch of our monthly political review, *Living Marxism*, the weekend is an opportunity to discuss the arguments with the authors. Sessions on

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The Austin Mitchell affair

MACHO KINNOCK?



The man who took on a nobody—and lost

The outcry over the sacking of Labour frontbencher Austin Mitchell, for his decision to accept a £30 000 job with Sky TV's *Target* news programme, is another blow to Neil Kinnock's faltering leadership. It ought to have been an unremarkable event: 'The story is that a nobody has

been dismissed from a non-job that no one ever realised he had in the first place', said Mitchell. Instead the affair finds Neil Kinnock under fire from all sides, facing accusations of machismo from inside the party, and jibes about attacking free speech from outside it.

Kinnock compounded his inepti-

tude by sowing confusion about the reason for the sacking. Labour left MP Bob Cryer first raised the demand, arguing that Mitchell should not be working with *Target*'s co-presenter Norman Tebbit. The partisan press, the *Sun* and the *Times*, presumed the sacking to be a vendetta against Sky TV's owner Rupert Murdoch. Kinnock settled on the explanation that it is inappropriate for one frontbench spokesman to interview another on TV. Whatever the whys and wherefores, the clumsy dismissal was a gift to the Tories. It allowed the party of censorship to claim the mantle of the most ardent defenders of free speech.

Kicking

Meanwhile, Labour's Clare Short, still smarting from being forced out of her frontbench position last year, renewed her allegations against Kinnock's macho style of leadership, saying that 'playing the big tough leader and kicking everyone around is the mistake he's been making'. The myth of Kinnock's macho leadership has been built up by left wingers in the party, the only people he has ever dared to kick around. Kinnock has tried to satisfy media demands for strong leadership not by standing up to Margaret Thatcher, but by beating down the left.

Mitchell's estimation that even a speculative venture like Sky TV offers better prospects and perhaps a bigger audience than a career in Kinnock's party is a telling comment on the state of the official opposition.

James Heartfield

the next step

Revolutionary Communist Party Weekly • 10 February 1989 • No 5 • 40p

£1 solidarity price

Who will fight
the health cuts?
See page 2

Satellite TV comes to Britain

THE GREAT HYPE IN THE SKY

Rupert Murdoch launched the 'satellite revolution' last weekend amidst a lot of hype and a decidedly mixed reception back on Earth. Murdoch's Wapping press—the *Sun*, the *Times*, *Today*, the *Sunday Times* and the *News of the World*—thought that Murdoch's Sky TV was the best thing to hit broadcasting since *Neighbours*. Liberal commentators were scandalised by Sky TV chairman and *Sunday Times* editor Andrew Neil's boast that Sky amounted to 'ITV without the public service broadcasting bits'. As for the punters, they were largely in the dark about the whole affair. Only a handful had the technology to enable them to tune into Murdoch's brave new world. Alan 'Amstrad' Sugar has not got his gear into the shops fast enough for anybody to catch Austin Mitchell and Norman Tebbit giving luckless interviewees the third degree.

LIVING MARXISM

The February issue of *Living Marxism* is devoted to the issue of the environment. It includes an interview with Petra Kelly, Green MP in West Germany, and articles on: Can capitalism go Green?; The Greening of British politics; and Nuclear power: no thanks?

Plus an interview with Bernadette McAliskey; an eye-witness account of the Spanish general strike; sackings in the City; football fanzines; tabloid TV and much more.

● *Living Marxism* costs £1.50, or £15 for a 12-month subscription. Available from all good newsagents or from Junius Publications at BCM JPLtd, London WC1N 3XX. Cheques payable to Junius Publications Ltd. Phone (01) 729 3771.

The lack of public interest in the new venture is not surprising. Satellite TV appears bewildering in its complexity. To receive all 12 of the channels that are due for launch this year, you'll need to lay out a cool £1000 for a dish, a 'squarial' and a descrambler. Even then you won't be able to watch Sky while recording one of British Satellite Broadcasting's rival programmes. Not for nothing has WH Smith, itself the organiser of two satellite channels, set up a special company to guide viewers through the jungle of competing technologies and standards that now surround satellite broadcasting.

Both Murdoch's forecasts of two and a half million dish-owners by next year and BSB's estimate of three million subscribers by 1991 are wildly optimistic. Sky could lose £150m a year during start-up, and BSB's backers—Anglia TV, Granada, Pearson (owners of the *Financial Times*), Reed International and Next, among others—could wind up spending £1 billion before their company breaks even in 1993.

The satellite TV bosses are banking on the fact that British capitalists increasingly rely on advertising to shore up their profit margins. By 1995 advertisers will lay out £2 billion on TV commercials. But advertisers

will not be interested in a service with no viewers; there is unlikely to be enough advertising revenue for both satellite systems to survive. Satellite investments today represent a huge gamble on the chance of revenue tomorrow.

For the Tories Sky TV provides the opportunity to continue their crusade to turn the BBC into a government information service and to emasculate the broadcasting unions.

In the eighties the 'public service broadcasting bits' of state-controlled channels have become less public broadcasting and more government service. Number 10 today determines BBC director general Michael Checkland's every move. Last October's ban on interviews with Sinn Féin, and the pillorying of Thames TV's *Death on the Rock*, is more the style of public service broadcasting in the future.

By portraying the new-style media barons as the progressive, hi-tech, consumer-oriented face of television, the government will put more pressure on the BBC to fall into line. With the appointment of the neanderthal lords Rees-Mogg and Chalfont as chief censors at the Broadcasting Standards Council and the Independent Broadcasting Authority, terrestrial TV is feeling the government squeeze.

The Tories also aim to use satellite TV to continue their campaign of union-busting. From Eddie Shah at Warrington to Rupert Murdoch at Wapping, the media barons took on and broke the power of the print unions. Now they are turning their attention to television.

Last April the Tories gave notice of their intention to smash what Thatcher called 'the last bastion of restrictive practices', and referred to the Monopolies Commission work practices in the television and film industries. Murdoch's decision to dispense with unions altogether at Sky has now forced other TV companies to respond. Last week ITV companies scrapped all agreements with broadcasting trade unions. The spirit of Wapping is now well and truly entrenched in television.

'You'll never again say there's nothing on the box tonight' boast the promotional ads for Sky, but satellite TV will provide little choice even for those viewers who can receive the transmissions. Tony Blackburn, Frank Bough and Derek Jameson beamed down from a satellite 23 000 miles above Zaire do not look or sound very different from Tony Blackburn, Frank Bough and Derek Jameson beamed from the Crystal Palace transmitter. Speed the day of the first the next step broadcast. That really will be a satellite revolution.

Gemma Forest



Frank Bough and Andrew Neil show off the dish you won't have which lets you watch the stars you can already see.