

the next step

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Special issue

RUSHDIE
STINKS



The
Rushdie
Affair

The Satanic Verses

RUSHDIE

AND THE

AYATOLLAH

**INSIDE:
THE ISSUES**

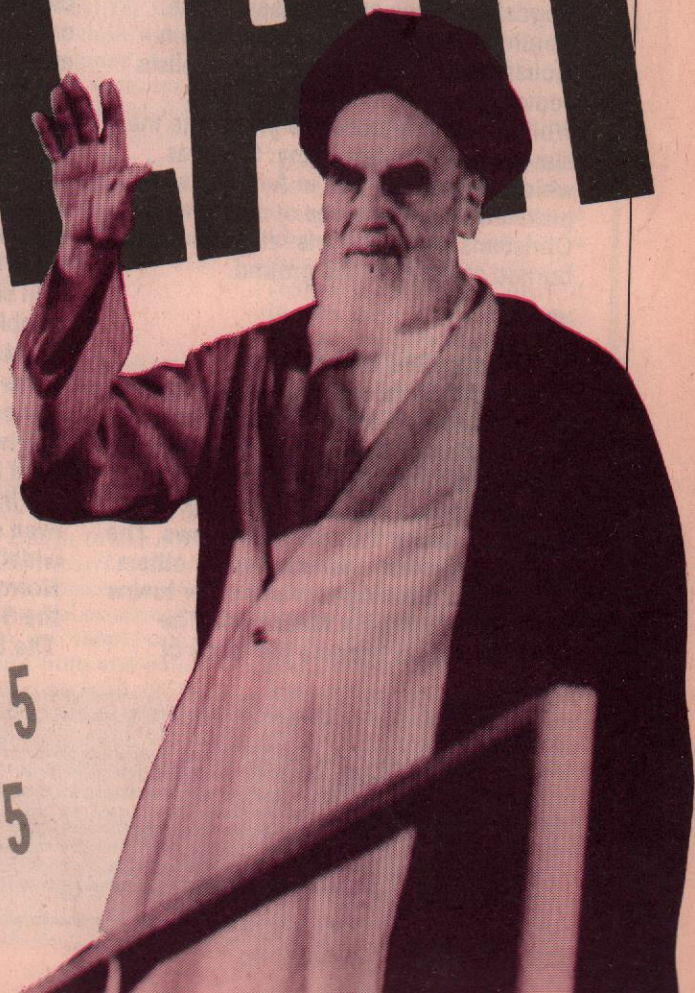
Defend Salman Rushdie—page 3

Resist the racist backlash—page 2

Fight censorship laws—page 4

British censors burn books—page 5

Islamic fundamentalism: made in the West—page 5



editorial

24 February • No 7 • Editor: Joan Phillips

SATANIC FLAMES IGNITE BRITISH RACISM



IT IS instructive to contrast the reaction of officialdom to the Islamic furore over Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* to the reaction of officialdom to the Christian uproar over Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Such a comparison will reveal that the central issue at stake in the Salman Rushdie affair is not fundamentalist religion or freedom of speech, but the strength of anti-foreign chauvinism in British society.

In August 1988 25 000 Christians demonstrated outside the Hollywood HQ of Universal pictures in protest against *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The controversial film showed Jesus hallucinating about having sex with Mary Magdalene while on the cross. In the month before the film came to Britain thousands of Christian fundamentalists demonstrated in London, and Mary Whitehouse threatened to prosecute the film-makers for blasphemy. Cinemas which showed the film in America were picketed by angry mobs of chanting Christians, while in Paris religious bigots burned cinemas to the ground.

In January 1989 1500 Muslims marched in Bradford and burned copies of *The Satanic Verses*. The book was condemned for denigrating the Prophet Muhammad, his family and Islam. Muslim leaders called for the book to be censored under the blasphemy laws. The Bradford protest was followed by others in London, Birmingham and other towns and cities in Britain. Meanwhile *The Satanic Verses* became the focus of

violent demonstrations in India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Iran and other Islamic states where it had already been banned. Exactly one month after the row erupted on to the streets of Bradford, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a death sentence against Salman Rushdie for blaspheming Islam.

There are many similarities between these two controversies in the Islamic and Christian worlds. But there is a world of difference between the official reactions to the two scandals. The significance of the row over Scorsese's film was that the Christian fanaticism it engendered received no censure from officialdom. Indeed, the cranks you would expect to be up in arms about any film involving Jesus and sex were joined by more mainstream allies from the political and media worlds. This low-key response to a rabid display of religious fundamentalism shows that the establishment is prepared to tolerate religious and moral fervour when it suits its purposes.

In stark contrast, every section of the establishment has united to condemn the Muslim outcry over *The Satanic Verses*. Some commentators have obviously exorcised the scenes of mayhem that greeted Scorsese's film from their memories. Thus an editorial in the *Independent* had the gall to say that even such a provocative film as his was widely shown without general outrage. Norman Stone stated with equanimity in the *Sunday Telegraph* that the makers of *The Last Temptation* would never have

dared to go ahead if the film had been about the life of Muhammad because cinemas would have been bombed. In contrast to the apparently civilised traditions of Christianity, Islam was depicted as barbaric, irrational, intolerant and fanatical.

The contrast in the official response to these two religious controversies should alert us to the fact that there is something more sinister at work than theology in the present row. It would be wrong to imagine that the furore over *The Satanic Verses* is a conspiracy on the part of the establishment. It is clear that the government would have preferred that it had never happened, given the breach it has effected in its carefully nurtured diplomatic relations with Iran. But the speed with which a religious controversy was spontaneously transformed into a racist crusade reveals the extent to which chauvinism shapes political life in Britain.

It did not take long for the flames of *The Satanic Verses* to ignite nationalist fervour against Iran. The British media dredged up every epithet of abuse from its chauvinist stockpile to hurl at the Iranians. Khomeini was condemned as a crackpot, an infidel, a tyrant, a mad mullah and simply 'a vile old swine'.

The central theme of the media and political response was that Islamic fundamentalism represents a threat to freedom in Britain. The press drew parallels between fundamentalism under the Ayatollah and fascism under Hitler, and, summoning up the spirit of the Blitz, declared that the freedom of the British people was imperilled by the dictator in Tehran. The *Sun* as usual led the pack in baying for foreign blood. Its editorial 'We will blast back' was nothing short of a declaration of war against Iran.

We are resolutely opposed to book-burning and death threats. But we should question the motives of the British press and politicians who now pose as defenders of freedom against dictatorship. Whatever we might think of Khomeini, he is not a threat to liberty in Britain. The threat to freedom here comes from the Thatcher regime, whose record of censorship and repression has earned it a reputation for tyranny to rival that of many third world dictatorships.

Britain is also a major threat to freedom in the Middle East. The media has been full of horror stories about the atrocities committed by the Khomeini regime against its political opponents (while ignoring British complicity in handing over names of Iranian leftists for execution). But the crimes of the Iranian regime are nothing in comparison to the horrors inflicted on the peoples of the region by the agents of imperialism. The Western powers and their local proxies have carved up the Middle East, butchered its people and reduced cities like Beirut to rubble in their attempt to keep a grip on an area of vital strategic importance.

It is obvious that the government is not motivated by any concern for the welfare of Salman Rushdie, a man who in any other circumstances the *Sun* would denounce as a member of the loony left. It is equally clear that the furore has nothing to do with defending the principle of free speech, given the government's flagrant disregard for the right to free expression in every other instance. If we scratch the surface of the row over *The Satanic Verses* all that we find is a torrent of anti-Iranian chauvinism.

Our response must be to point out that the role of imperialism in the Middle East is a thousand times more reactionary than the influence of Islamic fundamentalism. Indeed, it is impossible to understand the reaction to *The*

Satanic Verses in the Middle East except as a reaction to the barbarism of Western domination. The outpouring of hatred against the Muslim world which we have witnessed in recent weeks can only serve to legitimise further imperialist intervention in the region. Our priority must be to challenge this chauvinist tirade, and persuade people to take sides with the masses of the Middle East against the real dictators in the West.

At home, too, the controversy has acquired a racist character, and provided a platform for all those who want to have a go at foreigners. Many commentators have proclaimed that Britain is now paying the price of allowing too many immigrants into the country. 'It is becoming disturbingly clear', declared an editorial in the *Sunday Telegraph*, 'that immigrants, anyhow from Islamic countries, are going to constitute the biggest concentration of religious fanaticism and sexual and social reaction that this country has experienced for many centuries'. In other words, most foreigners are fanatics who threaten to undermine British culture and civilisation, and the only way to stop the descent into barbarism is to close the door on them.

We have heard nothing but lectures about the need to defend civilised British traditions of tolerance against the excesses of heathen foreign savages. This sort of bigotry was not confined to avowed racists like Peregrine Worsthorne of the *Telegraph*. In his regular column in the *Times*, former Labour Party MP Robert Kilroy-Silk indulged in similar chauvinist outbursts. He complained that too many concessions have been made to ethnic minorities, with the result that British traditions, culture and laws have been corrupted by uncivilised foreigners. He is incensed that the reading habits of the British public should now be dictated 'by the tastes of non-English speaking Muslims, many of them not long out of the villages of Bangladesh'.

While we are unequivocal in our condemnation of book-burners, we are equally forthright in our condemnation of the racist slurs which have been hurled at the Muslim community. We need to resist all attempts by press and politicians to use the row over *The Satanic Verses* as a vehicle for fomenting chauvinist sentiment.

Unfortunately some on the left have fuelled the racist hysteria by denouncing Islamic fundamentalists as fascists. 'Islamic fundamentalism', said the *New Statesman and Society* last week, 'embodies a dogmatism unparalleled since the Nazi proclamation of Aryan superiority'. There is little to distinguish this from anything that the gutter press could have written. We cannot afford to make any concessions to the purveyors of racism and reaction. The target of our anger should be the racist dogmatists who are responsible for making life intolerable for Britain's black community.

The controversy over *The Satanic Verses* shows how important it is never to approach any debate on the terms in which it is presented by the establishment. The central issue for us in the whole affair is the way it has stoked the fires of British chauvinism. It exposes the central influence of nationalism in British politics and its corrosive effects in stifling the emergence of an independent working class outlook on every question from imperialism to censorship. Until we tackle this problem, and challenge the prevalence of chauvinist ideas in our movement, we will not be strong enough to resist the mounting assault on our democratic rights.

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letters

NUCLEAR POWER DEBATE

IT may be true that 'nuclear power is less dangerous than any other form of electricity production', but as John Gibson admits, this is no more than a 'rational assessment' of a subject shrouded in secrecy, not a 'definitive statement'. John makes this outspoken claim for nuclear power to point out that all industry under capitalism is dangerous, and that nuclear power is not special. But this is not an abstract debate: the question of closing down nuclear power plants is at the centre of it.

It is true that this question is a scientific one. But there is an additional social factor that prevents the question being openly discussed—the secrecy that shrouds nuclear research. Miners do a job that might well be more dangerous than working in a nuclear plant; but they have a clearer idea of the dangers and are in a better position to work out their demands for safety. I would say nuclear power workers and potential victims

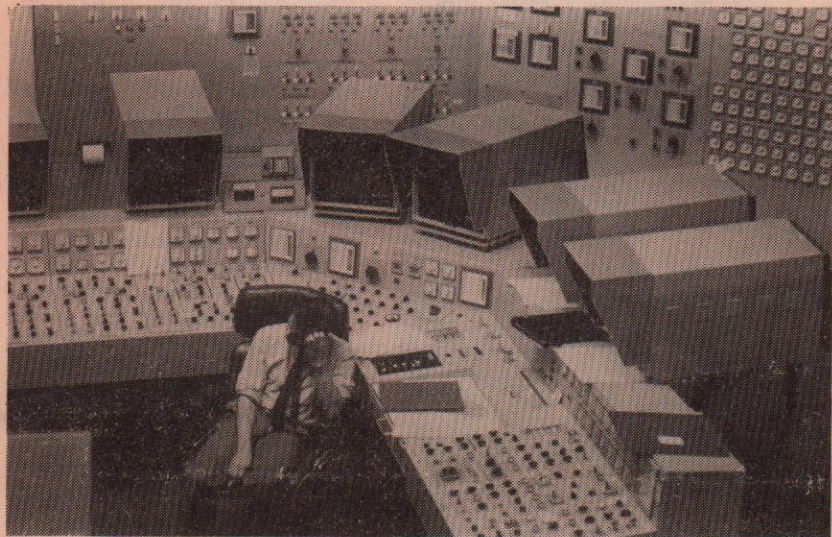
of nuclear disaster are in a very different situation.

Of course it's only a matter of degree, but I think it is an important degree. Because we are so ignorant about nuclear power it makes sense for plants to be closed down until society can discuss them in the same way as other industries. If similar problems apply to debate about chemical plants due to secrecy, then they would be a special case too.

Toby Banks
London

JOHN GIBSON'S article on nuclear power (*the next step*, 3 February) pointed out the difficulties of assessing how dangerous nuclear power really is under capitalism, and exposed the dangers of left-wing attempts to argue for cost-effectiveness on capitalist terms. However, the article was not specific about what the RCP calls for at present. After Chernobyl *the next step* argued for the immediate shutdown of nuclear power stations, although I noticed that this position was not made explicit by Gibson. Was this to polemicise against the latest consensus on the left or has the RCP's position changed?

Gavin Collins
London



Does secrecy make nuclear power a special case?

FOR AND AGAINST SANCTUARY

I FIND it odd that you refer to the Viraj Mendis Defence Campaign only once in your article on sanctuary (*the next step*, 3 February). Instead you concentrate on the sanctuary movement which, although very important, is but one plank of support within the broad-based VMDC, which enjoys the support of working class, community, communist, anarchist, lesbian and gay groups, together with political parties and trade unions.

VMDC continues to fight for Viraj Mendis as it has always done, within the context of opposition to all deportations and against all immigration controls. Even a cursory glance through the pamphlet *Sanctuary* by Manchester VMDC Religious Support Group would reveal that many members of the sanctuary movement take the same stand.

Your contention that the sanctuary movement 'selects cases which are deemed to be deserving' is contradictory. As you point out later, although the home office

constantly reiterated the fact that Viraj is a communist (and therefore in its eyes 'undeserving'), the sanctuary movement's support for Viraj has remained, as has liberal opposition to his deportation.

It is precisely because Viraj is a communist that the home office was so determined to deport him. This was the reason, rather than the fact that he went into sanctuary. Indeed, taking refuge in a sanctuary is both an effective strategy against deportation—as the cases of Rajwinder Singh and Seema Begum show—and, given the increasingly draconian nature of immigration laws, is becoming the only strategy left to black people fighting deportation.

I find it very sad that a communist newspaper should join the bourgeois press in attempting to undermine the sanctuary movement and VMDC by printing so distorted an account.

Ann Dorey
Oldham

GARY CLAPTON cites the successes of the Viraj Mendis Defence Campaign to refute Kenan Malik's argument that sanctuary is not a viable strategy for fighting racism (*letters*, 17 February).

As Clapton himself acknowledges, sanctuary was the final option for Viraj Mendis in his attempt to avoid deportation. There is no point trying to make a virtue out of a necessity, and pretending that sanctuary can be anything but a last resort. The problem with the sanctuary campaign is that it elevates an act of desperation into a political strategy. Thus Clapton argues that the Viraj Mendis campaign should become the model for fighting deportations in the future.

But why should we seek to find some merit in a strategy born of desperation? The fact that people have been forced to look to the church for protection against deportation is surely an indication that there is something seriously wrong with the anti-racist movement. Yet instead of confronting the political problems which have contributed to the weakness of the anti-racist movement, Clapton prefers to find illusory strengths in the sanctuary movement.

Clapton informs us that the strength of the

Viraj Mendis Defence Campaign 'was the alliance of communists with respectable opinion'. The campaign certainly managed to attract the support of a broad array of respectable opinion, but only at the expense of adjusting its political focus to exclude anything that might offend potential allies in the church. Even this respectable and moderate approach failed to sway the government and avert the deportation.

It is not an abstract truism to say that the working class is the only force with a direct political stake in fighting racism. It is a fact of life, and the sooner the left comes to terms with it, the sooner we will be able to build a movement which will make sanctuary a thing of the past.

The problem is not that the working class has sold out or been smashed; the problem is that the left has never seriously tried to challenge racist ideas in the labour movement. The success of the George Roucou campaign shows that if we tackle the racist arguments head on, working class people can be won to the fight against racism, and can be decisive in stopping a deportation.

Nick Johnson
London

RUSHDIE

STINKS The
Rushdie
Affair

We are unequivocal in our defence of Salman Rushdie's right to publish *The Satanic Verses* and resolute opponents of any attempts to burn, ban or censor it. But we would go further than most defenders of the book, in stating our opposition to censorship of any sort, whether it be directed against books, films, videos, tapes, magazines, paintings or sculptures, and regardless of their artistic, political or moral content.

All sorts of people have advanced all sorts of arguments in their defence of Salman Rushdie against those who have burned his book, demanded its suppression and called for his assassination. Some have said simply that it is necessary to defend freedom of speech, others freedom of artistic expression, some freedom of religious criticism, others freedom of the individual to read whatever he or she wishes.

As Marxists we are in favour of the fullest possible freedom of artistic, intellectual and political opinion.

But our opposition to censorship is not based upon a commitment to any abstract principle of freedom of expression. It is based on the understanding that any call for censorship can only give the state greater authority to define what is acceptable and greater powers to suppress that which it considers unacceptable.

In reality there is no such thing as absolute freedom of expression in capitalist society. As the central agency for preserving the power and privileges of the capitalist class, the state defines the boundaries of freedom according to the needs of the system at any particular time.

Confusion

As long as its rule is secure the capitalist class can afford to tolerate a relatively free flow of critical expression. When it feels its power threatened the ruling class will impose all manner of restrictions on our liberties. Today the state is assuming increasing powers to control through censorship what we see, read and think. As their system slips further out of control, the authorities are seizing every opportunity to strengthen their grip over society by promoting stricter measures of social control.

The willingness of the authorities to outlaw even the most feeble manifestation of dissent today shows us what we can expect when the establishment faces a serious challenge to its authority in the future.

The ultimate victims of the state's repressive apparatus will be the working class, the oppressed and the left.

The only guarantor against further incursions on our rights is the vigilance of the working class, and the ability of our movement to resist the advance of state repression. This is why we cannot afford to have any confusion about the question of the state and the issue of censorship.

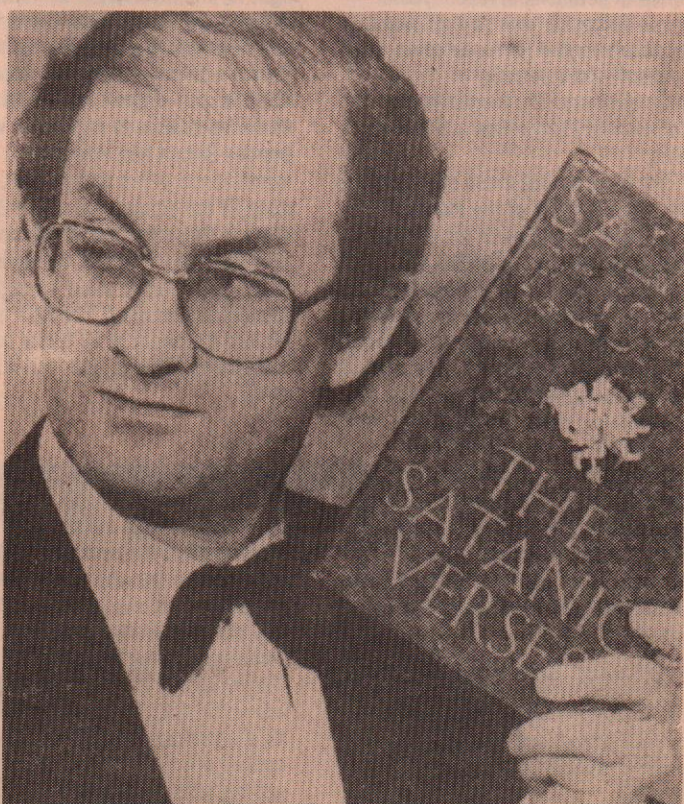
Unfortunately there is a great deal of confusion on these matters on the left. There is a widespread belief that state institutions such as the courts can be used to protect the downtrodden and the oppressed. This faith in the state's powers to do good has often led left

Defend The Satanic Verses

SAY NO TO CENSORSHIP

A central issue raised by the controversy

over The Satanic Verses is what our attitude should be to censorship



We would defend the devil himself against state censorship

wingers to demand that the state takes measures to censor material which they consider to be offensive.

But our attitude towards censorship cannot be determined by what we find to be offensive or otherwise. Our defence of Salman Rushdie has nothing to do with his views on the Prophet Muhammad, his family or Islam.

The question at the heart of the debate about The Satanic Verses is how to resist the drift towards censorship in Thatcher's Britain.

We should defend *The Satanic Verses* against all those who call for it to be banned, in the knowledge that the state censors, the police chiefs and the judges will use their powers to deal with any dissent against their system. Today the state considers posters which champion the cause of Irish freedom as offensive, and launches prosecutions under the Public Order Act.

Obscene

This should be the starting point for any discussion about censorship. Thus we would oppose the commonplace calls from left wingers for tougher laws against pornography. There have been various attempts by the left to ban newspaper nudes, restrict the representation of obscene, violent or sexual material on television, close down sex shops, censor pornographic films and outlaw pornographic material of any sort.

While pornography is undoubtedly degrading to women, we cannot support any call for it to be banned. Getting rid of page 3 would do nothing to challenge women's oppression, but it would strengthen the

state's hand in imposing more extensive censorship. More censorship would particularly affect lesbians and gay men, whose sexuality is already considered obscene by the authorities.

Many radicals are also in favour of state censorship of racist, anti-Semitic and fascist material. We would not support prosecutions against *National Front News* or any other far-right publications. Nor would we go along with calls for a ban on the tape-recorded speeches of Louis Farrakhan, the American Black Muslim leader whose anti-Semitic outbursts have won him some favour among far-right extremists.

Precedent

These racist and anti-Semitic views will be offensive to anybody committed to the cause of liberation. They need to be politically confronted and discredited by the left, not outlawed by the same state institutions which are responsible for making racism respectable.

We would oppose any demand for the state to censor racists and fascists, for the simple reason that such a move can only set a useful precedent for the authorities in helping to legitimise wider repressive measures.

From this perspective it is obvious that opposition to all forms of censorship is the only position consistent with a defence of our rights against state repression. We should oppose all calls for state bans because we are not prepared to aid our enemies in diminishing our freedoms, and because our objective is to dismantle the state machine, not to add to its repressive apparatus.

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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 left on censorship SILENCE, EQUIVOCATION AND CONFUSION



British racists cannot be silenced by British laws

The left has responded to the row over *The Satanic Verses* with silence, equivocation and confusion on the question of censorship.

While many left wingers have kept silent about their attitude to censorship, some have been outspoken in calling for Salman Rushdie's book to be banned. The controversy exposes the deep confusion which prevails on the left about the role of the state and of censorship.

Max Madden, the Labour MP for Bradford West, tabled an amendment to a Tory early day motion deploring the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. His amendment went further than the Tory censure, however, demanding that the blasphemy laws be extended to protect Islam.

Madden, a left-wing supporter of the Tribune group, argues that the blasphemy laws are discriminatory because they apply only to Christianity. He argues, too, that in a multicultural society like Britain the authorities must support all faiths and religions and afford them equal respect. These arguments have wide currency on the left. Madden's early day motion won the support of left-wing MPs such

as Bernie Grant and Brian Sedgmore and of Labour education spokesman Jack Straw.

It is ironic that people who would not normally favour measures of state censorship should suddenly discover some virtue in such practices.

Max Madden, a member of the National Union of Journalists, berated the government for trying to gag the media over the SAS killings in Gibraltar. Brian Sedgmore lambasted the government's campaign against *Spycatcher*. Jack Straw defended the staging of Jim Allen's play *Perdition* against those who wanted it banned on the grounds of anti-Semitism. Why are they now calling on the state to extend its censorship laws?

Madden and the rest are correct to point out that the blasphemy laws expose the racist character of the British legal system. Britain is a deeply chauvinist society whose political culture and official institutions are imbued with a hatred and fear of foreigners. It should come as no surprise that the blasphemy laws are based on Christianity and not Islam, since every aspect of the legal system upholds the values of Britishness against those of alien cultures.

But it is a grievous error to think that extending the blasphemy laws could challenge racism. Indeed, such a move could only strengthen the institutions which enforce the second class status of black people. The call for an extension of the blasphemy laws to eradicate racism fits in with the left's traditional approach of looking to reactionary institutions to do its job for it. The consequence of this perspective has been to give the state greater powers to wield against the working class, the oppressed and the left.

It is reprehensible that the left should be seeking to reinforce repressive legislation that should have been abolished a long time ago.

These archaic laws are supposed to protect the position of the established church against those who blaspheme against the official faith. But they have never been used against Satanists. In fact the foremost victims of the blasphemy laws have been religious dissenters, political agitators such as the Chartist, women's rights campaigners, and other radicals. By arguing for the reinforcement of these laws the left can only encourage religious mysticism and state repression.

Pretext

There has been a long established tradition of the left looking to the state to outlaw racist publications, organisations and marches. In the thirties the left agitated for the introduction of the Public Order Act to keep fascists off the streets; the authorities first used the law against striking miners. The left failed to draw the obvious conclusion: that giving more powers to the state, whatever the pretext, only invites more repression.

In the sixties the left campaigned for the Race Relations Act to outlaw racist views that could lead to offence, discrimination and violence. The act was first used against radical black leader Michael X, who was banned from coming to Britain because the state decided that his views would cause offence. In the seventies the left campaigned for new public order legislation in response to the rise of the far right.

The 1986 Public Order Act has so far been used with a vengeance against black youth, Irish activists, striking workers and political demonstrators.

Every time the authorities have acquired new powers they have used them, not against the racists, but against the enemies of the state. Far from fighting for yet more censorious legislation, we should be fighting to have it scrapped, and organising resistance to state interference in our affairs.

Kenan Malik

If we are to believe what we read in the press, freedom of speech is a precious British tradition, and the right to publish is the cornerstone of Western civilisation. Ever since a copy of *The Satanic Verses* was burned during a demonstration in Bradford, the British media have contrasted the Islamic practice of book-burning with the British tradition of tolerance. In fact Islam has no monopoly on book-burning: it is now a time-honoured British practice.

The British authorities may not go in for public displays of book-burning. But then, they don't need to. Who needs bonfires when you've got a panoply of official restrictions that do the job far more effectively? If the government gets its way there will be no books to burn once the new official secrets bill becomes law.

Excuses

In the same week as the Ayatollah's pronouncement on *The Satanic Verses*, the publishers Harrap withdrew from publication Fred Holroyd's book about Northern Ireland, which was about to blow the lid on MI5's dirty tricks campaign and the SAS shoot-to-kill policy against Irish republicans. The excuse? The publishers were worried that the book might infringe the Official Secrets Act.

Censorship in Britain

BOOK-BURNING BY ANOTHER NAME

The pulping of Holroyd's book is only the latest in a series of cases where government restrictions have taken out of circulation books and films which contain embarrassing information.

In October 1988 the government banned members of Sinn Féin and the IRA from the airwaves. Since then the broadcasters have extended the ban to include anyone who expresses sympathy with the Irish struggle. The broadcasting ban was the culmination of 20 years of censorship of views which contradict the official version of the Irish War. In 1985 the government caused a furore when it forced the BBC to withdraw a documentary about Sinn Féin councillor Martin McGuinness in its *Real Lives* series.

British troops regularly disrupt the distribution of Sinn Féin's

newspaper *An Phoblacht/Republican News*. Apparently the precious British tradition of freedom of speech does not apply to those who support the cause of Irish freedom against British colonial rule.

Venom

The government has gone to extraordinary lengths to suppress information about state security issues, hounding former MI5 spycatcher Peter Wright and intrepid *New Statesman* whistleblower Duncan Campbell with equal venom. In 1987 the Tories prevented the broadcast of the BBC radio programme *My Country: Right or Wrong* which included interviews with members of the intelligence services. A year earlier they had slapped a ban on the BBC series *Secret Society* which included

a programme on the Zircon spy satellite project. The police raided the BBC office in Glasgow and seized all material relevant to the series, as well as the home of journalist Duncan Campbell and the offices of the *New Statesman*.

Some critics of Islam's strict moral code have pointed out how it infringes the rights of women and homosexuals. In fact women and homosexuals are accorded no rights whatsoever in many Islamic states. But Iran does not need any lectures about morality from a regime which institutes alternative measures of censorship to reinforce the inferior social position of women, lesbians and gays. In Britain the Thatcher government routinely outlaws any material that transgresses its moral code.

Every year British customs and excise incinerate some 137 000 books—mainly of gay material—because they are judged to be obscene.

In 1984 customs officials swooped on London's Gay's the Word bookshop and seized large numbers of books which were later incinerated. The courts recently upheld the right of customs officers to prevent the importation of material which they believe to be obscene. Section 28 is a classic case of censorship based simply on disapproval of what is being said: it bans the public promotion of homosexuality.

The recent formation of the Broadcasting Standards Council to regulate sex and violence on TV is symptomatic of the growing clamour for censorship on moral issues. Graham Bright's bill to impose censorship on video recordings became law after a year of hysterical reports about the corrupting effects of video nasties on the nation's children. Radio One banned George Michael's single 'I want your sex' until after 9pm. The *Sun* said 'it's not censorship but sheer common sense'. According to this perverse logic, what is censorship in the Middle East becomes common sense in Britain.

Bludgeons

We have no desire to defend Islamic book-burners, but we should expose the hypocrisy of those who pretend that it doesn't happen here. 'Book-burners in Britain', wrote Anthony Burgess in last week's *Independent*, 'shame a free country by denying free expression through the vindictive agency of bonfires'. A regime which bans Irish republicans from speaking out against injustice, suppresses material which exposes the state's secrets, bludgeons any expression of dissent, and enforces a rigid moral and sexual code on society has no right to pontificate about freedom to others.

Why is Islam so fundamentalist?

THE WEST IS TO BLAME

Ayatollah Khomeini's death sentence against Salman Rushdie has provoked a storm of outrage against Muslim fanaticism in the British media. 'Only the historically ignorant can miss the echoes of Hitler's Germany in the ugly book-burnings of Bradford, in the Ayatollah's fanatical exhortations, and in the fist-punching devotion of his followers.' This verdict from the *Observer* was repeated ad nauseam by every British paper.

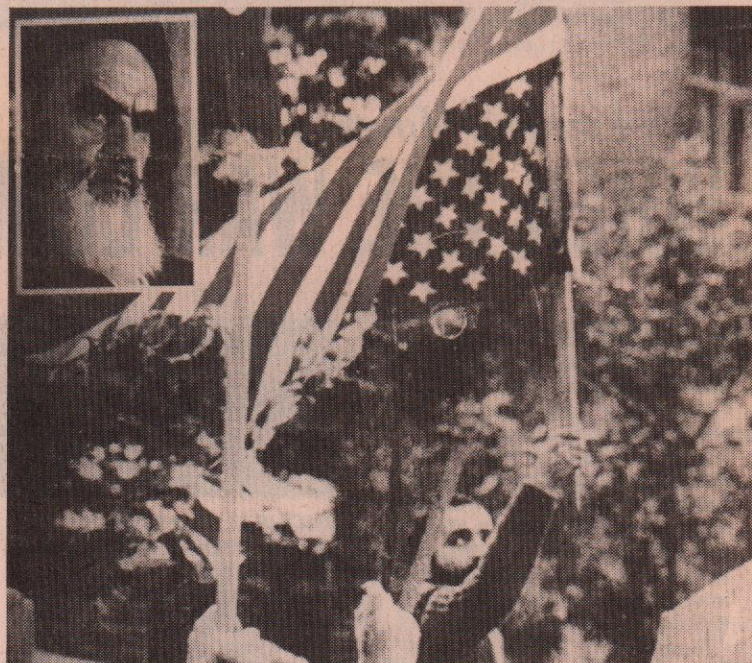
We have to reject this portrayal of Muslims as irrational, blood-thirsty fanatics. People who have been forced to suffer at the hands of imperialism as the peoples of the Middle East have suffered can be expected to get carried away in their hatred of the West. There is nothing any more fanatical about Shiite Muslims waving their fists outside the British and American embassies than about American citizens cheering Colonel Oliver North for his terrorist exploits in the Middle East. Islamic fundamentalism can only be understood as a response to Western intervention against the third world.

Fanatics

In battle-scarred Lebanon thousands of Arab and Palestinian people die each year, victims of the turmoil created by the West's carve-up of the Middle East. Hundreds of Palestinians have died by Israeli bullets since the start of the *intifada* (uprising) against Zionist oppression. For 40-odd years the West has maintained control over the region by sponsoring America's proxy Israel to terrorise the Arab masses. The real terrorists are in London, Washington, Bonn and Paris. But when their victims in the Middle East vent their anger against the symbols of imperialism they are branded as fanatics.

In the absence of revolutionary politics the role of radical Islam is to give expression to the legitimate anti-imperialist sentiments of the masses.

In many cases radical fundamentalism only came to the fore in



Flag-burning: Islamic fundamentalism is a reaction to Western domination

response to Western intervention. Radical Muslim groups grew in strength in Iran and Lebanon after the West blocked any means of democratic expression. In Iran the West gave full backing to the Shah's dictatorship. In Lebanon the West helped its Christian allies block any attempt to democratise the rabidly sectarian state it had originally created.

Insult

Iran has good reason to feel sensitive about anything it perceives as a Western insult. After the Shah was overthrown the Western powers encouraged Iraq to attack Iran and then helped sustain eight years of bloody war. The despatch of the Western task force was the culmination of a process of increasingly direct Western intervention against Iran. The consequence of this imperialist adventure was the shooting down of an Iranian airliner with 300 people on board.

Iran's mullahs use the language of Islam to rally the Iranian people against the West. Even the most backward expressions of Islam,

such as forcing women to wear the veil, are a reaction to Western influence. Today Khomeini's edict against Rushdie is perceived as a defiance of the West in general. That is why Hojatolesham Hassan Sanai, an Iranian cleric who backed Khomeini's call to assassinate Rushdie, offered \$1m 'to anyone who will punish this mercenary of colonialism for this shameful act'. It also explains why crowds gathered outside the British embassy in Tehran chanting 'death to Britain' and 'death to America'.

Although Iran has suffered particularly badly, the third world has a common experience of Western domination.

Until recently most third world countries were colonies of the imperialist powers. Today they are still in thrall to the Western powers. Hostility to *The Satanic Verses* spread across many countries with a long and bloody history of Western domination. India and Pakistan suffered nearly 200 years of barbaric British rule, and the conflict resulting from Britain's enforced division of the sub-continent left about 250 000 people

LIVING MARXISM

The March edition of *Living Marxism* is on sale now. The new issue focuses on the debate about civil liberties and constitutional reform. Frank Richards looks at how Margaret Thatcher has exploited the historical strengths of the British establishment and the weaknesses of its opponents to monopolise modern politics. Mike Freeman raises some important problems with the opposition's response to the Thatcher dictatorship.

Plus: Whither Scotland? A round-table discussion with some prominent figures in Scottish politics; The British monarchy; What's gone wrong with the German Greens?; 'Safe sex' and abortion booms; The killing of Marie Kane; An ozone-free zone?; Interview with That Petrol Emotion; Rent boys: victims or villains? and much more.

Living Marxism
The dictator in Downing Street

● *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.

dead. Here people took to the streets to express their hatred, not against a book which nobody had read, but against a system of imperialist tyranny which everybody despises.

Reaction

The expression of anti-Western feeling in the language of religion is not peculiar to Islam. In Latin America supporters of liberation theology combine fundamentalist Catholicism with radical nationalism. An important component of their beliefs is hostility to the USA's domination of Latin America. In Ireland Marx pointed out how the experience of British domination forced the Irish people into the arms of reaction. The suppression of the Catholic church by the British Crown forged a close identification between Irish republicanism and Catholicism.

The West is happy for backward

ideas to flourish among oppressed people. A closer look at some of the countries that have banned Salman Rushdie's book is revealing. Britain does not object to regimes in Pakistan, Malaysia, Egypt or Saudi Arabia imposing a strict Islamic code on their populations. The West also provided aid and guns to fundamentalist groups battling against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. It is clear that Britain and other Western regimes are prepared to support Islam when it suits their purposes, and only object when it articulates radical anti-Western sentiment.

Western leaders would be perfectly content for people in the third world to live in the dark ages. When they fulminate against Muslim fanaticism what they are objecting to is not Muslim customs but militant resistance to imperialism.

Daniel Nassim

The war's not over yet

LEBANON COMES TO AFGHANISTAN

When Lieutenant General Boris Gromov crossed the River Oxus on 15 February the nine-year Soviet occupation of Afghanistan came to an end. More than 1m Afghans are dead, 8m have fled to Pakistan and Iran, cities and villages are in ruins, the countryside is devastated and people are starving. Boris Gromov may have been the last Soviet soldier to leave Afghanistan, but the war which has torn the country apart goes on.

The mujahideen resistance forces threatening the capital city of Kabul are not on the verge of a military takeover. The faction-ridden mujahideen appear hopelessly incapable of forming anything resembling an alternative government. The *shura* (council meeting) of the seven Islamic groups which make up the mujahideen was meant to last three days but fell apart after 40 minutes. Aware that the worst is yet to come, 200 000 more Afghans have left the country in the past fortnight.

Veterans

Western commentators have emphasised the blow that withdrawal represents to the Soviet Union, and are keen to draw analogies with the US defeat in Vietnam. But Mikhail Gorbachev has been able to pull back his troops with a minimum of embarrassment. The return of the *Afgantsi*, the name given to Soviet veterans, has sparked criticism of the occupation within the Soviet

Union. But Soviet society is not about to suffer the Eastern equivalent of the Vietnam Syndrome, the crisis of foreign policy which afflicted the USA in the years after its humiliation there.

Ironically, the Soviet retreat has proved to be more of an embarrassment for Washington than Moscow.

Having spent nearly 10 years hailing the mujahideen as freedom fighters against Soviet tyranny, US diplomats did not hang around to welcome the would-be liberators at the gates of Kabul. In scenes which were indeed reminiscent of the ignominious scramble out of Saigon in 1975, US representatives closed down their embassy in Kabul and got out of the country at the first sound of gunfire outside the city.

Vietnam

With the country in a shambles and the mujahideen immobilised by internal divisions, the USA can hardly hold up the Afghanistan settlement as a glowing example of the West bringing peace and stability. The attempt to invent an Afghanistan Syndrome for the Soviet Union has led many to ignore the broader significance of the Soviet withdrawal. The fact that the USA has very little to celebrate should tell us that a setback for the Soviet Union in this case has not necessarily meant a triumph for the USA.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 became the symbol of the new Cold War between the two superpowers. US

support for détente was already waning, and Afghanistan was a tangible example of Soviet aggression. As such it seemed to give some substance to Washington's warnings about a growing Soviet threat. This was an invention to justify US interference in the third world after the debacle in Vietnam and the fall of its client regime in Iran in 1979.

The myth of the Soviet menace was also a useful device for marshalling the USA's Western rivals to fall into line behind Washington's role as world policeman.

Immediately after the April 1978 coup which toppled Afghan president Daoud, the USA was not keen on supporting the mujahideen. But its loss of influence in South-west Asia after the downfall of the Shah in Iran meant that Afghanistan grew in strategic importance. Up until 1985, Washington gave minimal aid to the mujahideen, but from then on funding doubled every year. The introduction of US-made Stinger anti-aircraft weapons in March 1986 made the

mujahideen a much more serious threat.

Ronald Reagan used the war in Afghanistan as raw material for his Evil Empire rhetoric, and the funding of pro-American proxies like the mujahideen became a key component of the Reagan Doctrine. As with the Contras in Nicaragua and Unita in Angola, Reagan backed mercenaries and death squads while claiming they were freedom fighters. The mujahideen held a special place in his heart: they received 10 times more aid than the Contras.

The US-backed mujahideen certainly caused problems for the Soviet Union. But the Soviets were never defeated militarily. In the end, the cost of sustaining the war was proving too great a strain for the stagnant Soviet economy. Above all, the decision to withdraw from Afghanistan reflected the new direction of Soviet foreign policy. Gorbachev has proved his willingness to make substantial concessions to the West, in Angola and Kampuchea as well as Afghanistan, in return for lessening the

Soviet Union's isolation and gaining access to more Western technology.

US policy-makers were no doubt hoping that Gorbachev would not meet the 15 February deadline for withdrawal.

But Washington's mohaired mullahs, armed with three Stingers each, proved incapable of causing enough of a disturbance to mess up Gorbachev's timetable. It was yet another victory for Gorbacharm, since nothing impresses public opinion in the West more than a politician who keeps his word. Afghanistan was certainly a defeat for the Soviet Union, but Gorbachev's skilful diplomacy minimised the blow, and the USA proved singularly incapable of exploiting Moscow's discomfort.

Ominous

After much deliberation US president George Bush declared that he would continue to back the mujahideen. 'It would not be fair', said Bush, 'for lethal supplies to be left behind and then cut off the resistance'. Most US arms have been distributed via the CIA to the radical fundamentalist faction led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. The irony of US arms going to those mujahideen groups who want to set up an Iranian-type Islamic republic only highlights Washington's lack of control over the Afghanistan situation.

The situation in Afghanistan today is in many respects more unstable than it was in 1979. The fractious divisions among the mujahideen tribes, each laying claim to different parts of the country, are an ominous sign of a possible Lebanonisation of Afghanistan. The Afghanistan War has yet to be played out. But what started as a Soviet error may well turn out to be an acute embarrassment for the USA.

James Malone and Sue Nichols



The mujahideen can't agree how to divide the Afghan spoils

Irish Freedom Movement conference

WHEN THE WAR COMES HOME

MORE THAN 300 people came along to an Irish Freedom Movement conference in London last Saturday to discuss the impact and significance of the Irish War in British politics. The theme of the event was the importance of uniting resistance to state repression in Britain with a movement demanding an immediate withdrawal of British forces from Ireland.

Speakers at the opening plenary included Micheal MacDonnacha from Sinn Féin; Errol Smalley of the Guildford Four Campaign; Denis Ryan from the Holloway Road 30 Defence Campaign; Janet Clarke from the Broadwater Farm Defence Campaign; Tim Gopsill, editor of the *Journalist*; Anthony Jennings, barrister and author of *Justice Under Fire: The Abuse of Civil Liberties in Ireland*; and Julius Alexander, under threat of deportation from Britain's racist immigration laws.

Democracy

In his closing speech to the conference, Mick Hume, editor of *Living Marxism*, stressed the need to link the demand for self-determination in Ireland with the growing concern over the government's attacks on civil liberties in Britain: 'Democracy is not divisible; we cannot oppose the Thatcher government's dictatorial methods over here if we ignore the continuation of military occupation and oppression in Ireland. The demand for Irish freedom must be the cutting edge of any campaign for civil liberties in Britain.'



MICHEAL MacDONNACHA
'The political climate I believe is now more receptive than ever to the message of Irish freedom. That's the reason why the British government has introduced all these repressive measures, in particular the media ban.'



ANTHONY JENNINGS
'The administration of justice in Northern Ireland is like a space invaders machine. Once one fearsome method of repression rears its ugly head and is knocked down, another one quickly comes to take its place.'



JANET CLARKE
'We all know what the police stand for in this country: they're here to oppress black and working class people. If you fight for basic human rights they will use the full weight of the law as their weapon.'



ERROL SMALLEY
'There were no eye-witnesses, no ID, no forensic evidence; just the forced confessions. The case couldn't have been brought in Scotland, it couldn't have been brought in America, it couldn't have been brought in Russia; but it was brought here.'



JULIUS ALEXANDER
'I want to express my support for the Irish people to govern their own affairs...I've been victimised not because I'm an illegal immigrant but because I'm black, and all black people have been singled out as troublemakers.'



TIM GOPSILL
'The Irish have a role to play in the liberation of Britain because the struggle of the Irish people is the strongest resistance there is to Thatcherism and we should look to them as our strongest ally.'

After Hirohito RETURN OF THE EMPEROR

The \$74m funeral of Japan's Emperor Hirohito will be one of the biggest political extravaganzas in years, with representatives from 150-odd countries, including 55 heads of state, coming to pay their respects. But behind the pomp and ceremony of the funeral lies a serious political purpose. No doubt visitors such as the USA's George Bush and the Philippines' Corazon Aquino will be engaging in frenetic funeral diplomacy. But more important than this is the re-emergence of the emperor as a symbol of a more assertive brand of Japanese nationalism.

Hawkish

Japan's education ministry has just unveiled a new national curriculum, which will stress 'veneration of the emperor' and 'instilling a sense of Japanese identity' among pupils. Raising the *Hinomaru* (rising sun flag) and singing the *Kimigayo* ('the reign of our emperor') national anthem will become compulsory in all schools. These measures reflect a growing national preoccupation with the emperor. More hawkish elements in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party are arguing for the new emperor Akihito to play a more upfront role in the Shinto rites leading up to his enthronement ceremony in November 1990.

To understand the centrality of

the emperor to Japanese nationalism we need to examine two key moments in the country's history. The first is the 'Meiji restoration' of 1868 when modern Japanese capitalism was established in the name of 'restoring' the emperor. Most Japanese were hardly aware of the emperor's existence before then. But in the decades following the Meiji restoration the establishment consolidated a nationalist consensus with the emperor at its core.

Divinity

The second turning point was the US occupation which followed Japan's defeat in the Second World War. US General Douglas MacArthur, the effective ruler of Japan at the time, forced Emperor Hirohito to renounce his divinity and break his links with the Shinto establishment. MacArthur wrote a new constitution for Japan which embodied the reduced status of the emperor and put strict limits on Japan's sovereignty. The revised constitution was a potent symbol of Japan's acceptance that America was the world's leading power.

Today MacArthur's post-war constitution is increasingly at odds with Japan's emergence as a major world power. The Japanese right are determined to enhance the status of the emperor as a way of promoting a more assertive brand of nationalism.

Daniel Nassim

It is evident that existing forms of student organisation and action are outdated and ineffective in countering the government offensive against higher education. The NUS has become heavily bureaucratised and operates entirely within the limits set by the authorities. It is time to consider more appropriate forms of organisation to counter the Tory attacks. The aim of our charter for students (see page 8) is to provide a focus for mobilising students who want to fight behind an effective strategy.

The official campaign against student loans has highlighted the problems with the present ways of organising. Instead of providing an effective leadership for the tens of thousands of students who are angry about the government's plans, the NUS has pleaded with banks, written letters to MPs and demobilised its members. Its failure to mount a hard-hitting campaign against the loans is not simply the result of ineptitude: it arises from the nature of the NUS itself. The NUS is a bureaucratic organisation which depends on the passivity of its membership.

Authority

The NUS enjoys a natural monopoly in representing the interests of all students, a right that has been conferred, not by the assent of its members, but through government fiat. Becoming a member of the NUS involves no commitment whatsoever; it simply involves being handed a student union membership card. Joining the NUS is not a political act, but a technical matter of receiving a card. For an administrative service like a library this is not a problem. 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 has to engage its membership in active participation.

The very life of a union and ultimately its authority depend on

NUS: no use to students?

THE STUDENT UNION WE NEED

Pandora Anderson



Angry students need a fighting union

its ability to win the hearts and minds of its members. Any union must learn to win 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.

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 remain passive.

The majority of student union members are either ignorant of

union policies or disagree with them. Many union meetings rely on the apathy of the membership. Whenever students turn up in large numbers and throw out union policy, 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.

Most student 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 is vital for the survival of the union bureaucrat. That is why bureaucrats are so hostile to left-wingers who want to create a

fighting union. When students took to the stage at an anti-loans demo in Birmingham to criticise the chaotic organisation, the bureaucrats turned off the PA and switched on a disco. So fearful have the bureaucrats become of any criticism from their members that they have now taken to hiring private security firms for protection on their own demonstrations.

Any debate about mobilising students to take action threatens the cosy world in which the bureaucrats live.

Since the NUS doesn't have to convince students of the need for student unionism, so it does not have to rely on student support for its existence. Indeed, the bureaucrats depend on student passivity for their survival. The corollary of this is that when the NUS faces problems it cannot look to its membership for support.

Challenge

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 which provides its funding. This relationship gives the NUS financial stability but deprives it of any independence. On many occasions student unions have been prevented from making donations to striking workers by regulations imposed by the state. Newcastle Polytechnic docked part of the union's block grant for next year as a result of a student demonstration which damaged college property. 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 as a focus for political mobilisation. For student unionism to be effective in mobilising its members means making the provision of services the function of the education system rather than the job of the NUS. A student union should be a

forum for representing student interests and nothing else. The NUS's lack of independence means that even when it takes action it does so on a bureaucratic basis, rallying respectable opinion rather than angry students.

Divisive

The main focus of this week's activities against the loans is getting students to lobby MPs and bank managers. To expect a capitalist bank to fight for the rights of students is absurd. But what is far worse is the lack of interest in student mobilisation which underlies this approach. Indeed, the NUS seems to be terrified of letting students play any role whatsoever. It blamed the trouble which broke out with the police during the last anti-loans demonstration on the fact that too many students had turned up to demonstrate.

The NUS's search for respectability deprives students of a political role and turns them into a passive audience.

Even student activists have become more preoccupied with winning respectability than with engaging in political debate. There is even an undercurrent which believes that politics are inherently divisive and damaging to student unity. Thus activists at Warwick University have argued that it is impossible to get students involved in the campaign against the loans, and have organised a campaign instead on the issue of car-parks! This sort of approach can only depoliticise student politics even further.

We will only create effective student unions by actively fighting to win support from members and by upholding the independence of our organisations from the state. Fighting to win the allegiance of students will politicise the student environment, create real support for our campaigns and provide the basis for organising an effective fightback.

Linda Ryan

The Royal Ulster Constabulary likes to promote itself as an impartial upholder of law and order in Northern Ireland. Thus it seized on concern about sectarian killings to conduct a public relations exercise: 'The police are absolutely determined impartially to bring to justice all terrorist criminals, and are doing their utmost with the support of the Army to prevent a vicious cycle of violence and counter-violence.' In fact victims of sectarian killings are overwhelmingly Catholic, and the RUC is a vicious sectarian force which is responsible for setting up Loyalist attacks and committing sectarian atrocities itself.

Colonial

There is no truth in media reports about an upsurge of tit-for-tat sectarian killings. The British authorities are keen to present the troubles in Northern Ireland as a tribal feud between Catholic and Protestant communities in order to disguise the true nature of the conflict as a war between the forces of the British Crown and the IRA. But the IRA has always rejected sectarian attacks, and organised its armed campaign against the British state: the Army, the RUC, prison officers, judges and other enforcers of colonial rule. Attacks on Protestants, such as that by the Irish People's Liberation Organisation on a bar in the Shankill area of Belfast, are rare, repudiated by the republican movement, and always a reaction to Loyalist sectarian attacks.

Loyalist paramilitaries, however, exist solely to organise random terror against Catholics. So far this year four Catholic nationalists have been gunned down by Loyalist

Royal Ulster Constabulary 'Impartial sectarians'?

Phil Murphy



The RUC: partial to terrorising Irish nationalists

assassins. Some of them were set up for execution by the RUC, the official Loyalist militia, acting in collusion with the paramilitaries, the unofficial wing of the British war machine in Northern Ireland. Not surprisingly, the RUC's attempt to pose as an anti-sectarian police force protecting society from the violent extremists has no credibility among Irish nationalists.

The RUC was complicit in the recent assassination of Irish solicitor Patrick Finucane. Loyalist sources revealed that members questioned by the RUC had been told that Finucane and other Catholic solicitors were helping to keep the IRA out of prison. When Tory minister Douglas Hogg made the same point in parliament Finucane's fate was sealed. The

RUC's biggest grudge against Finucane was his recent success in winning a ruling that RUC officers involved in the shoot-to-kill campaign in Armagh in 1982 would have to appear at the inquests of three of their victims. Now that Finucane is out of the way, three more nationalist lawyers have been warned off the shoot-to-kill inquests after receiving death

threats from Loyalists.

There is strong evidence to suggest that the RUC was also involved in the killing of Sinn Fein councillor John Davey. Sinn Fein councillor Lughaidh Mac Giolla Bhrighde has disputed the official version that Loyalist assassins were acting on their own: 'At the time he was shot, his car was stationary with the headlights switched off and the handbrake on, giving rise to the belief that he stopped at what he thought may have been a checkpoint on his own laneway. If he had been ambushed while driving up the laneway, as the RUC have suggested, then the car would surely have swerved out of control and crashed into the side of the road.' Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams confirmed suspicions that the RUC or the Ulster Defence Regiment, or both, had lured Davey into a Loyalist death-trap.

Torture

Far from being an unbiased defender of an impartial legal system, the RUC is employed by the Crown to crush resistance to British rule by brutalising the nationalist community. This has led to embarrassing allegations of torture against the force in the past and successive attempts to clean up its image. But as a recent report by the United Nations Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights makes clear, cases of assault and torture of nationalists undergoing police interrogation are just as rife today. Because it exists as the armed defender of a sectarian state, the RUC can never be anything but a force for terrorising those who have no stake in the sectarian system: Irish nationalists.

Andy Clarkson

the next step

Revolutionary Communist Party Weekly • 24 February 1989 • No 7 • 40p

£1 solidarity price

Afghanistan
falls apart -
see page 6

Our Charter for Independent Student Unionism is designed to provide a focus for those students who want to fight, resist and experiment.

A CHARTER FOR INDEPENDENT STUDENT UNIONISM

1 Student unionism must be free from 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 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 political and social 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 prevents activists from putting across a clear message.

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 the 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 making any concessions.

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

7 Independent student unionism is anti-bureaucratic. It aims to influence students through arguments and political struggle. It is opposed to 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 ends of 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.



IS THERE A
FIGHTING
FUTURE IN
THE NUS?
—SEE PAGE 7