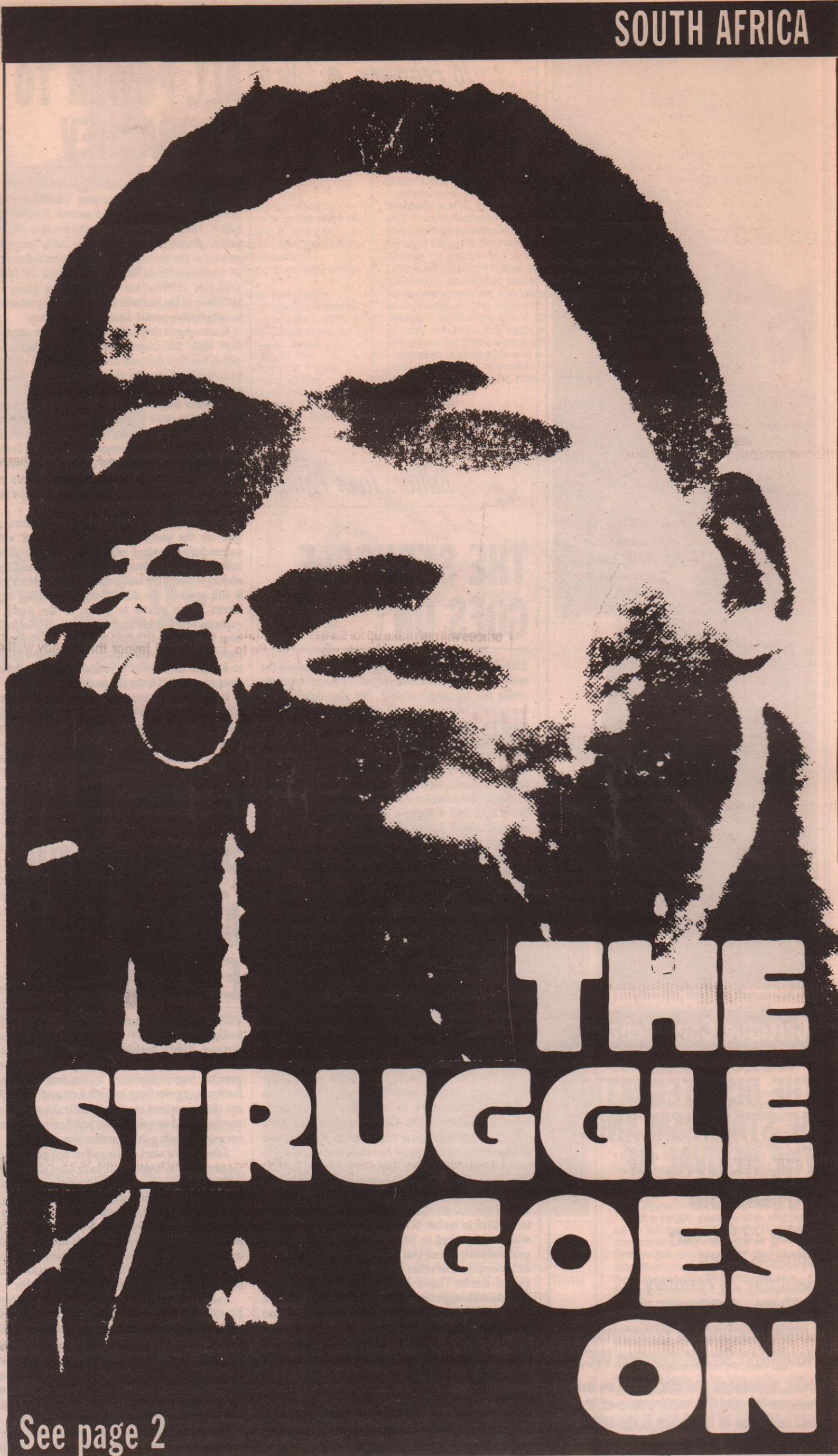


the next step

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Critique Conference

THE DISINTEGRATION OF STALINISM AND THE REVIVAL OF SOCIALISM

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Editorial

16 February • No 6

Editor: Joan Phillips

THE STRUGGLE GOES ON

THE Revolutionary Communist Party welcomes the release of Nelson Mandela, after 27 years of captivity under the apartheid regime. We also demand the immediate release of every other political prisoner jailed for resisting the apartheid system.

Mandela's homecoming is a time for celebration. But it is also a time for sober reflection about the future course of the struggle against apartheid. Amid all the euphoria, we should not forget that opponents of the government are still being killed at the rate of more than half a dozen a day. There is still a hard struggle ahead before the black masses win their freedom from oppression.

Given what is at stake in the struggle in South Africa, it is vital that we have a realistic assessment of what is happening there. In the excitement generated by the release of Mandela, there is a tendency to ignore the problems posed by recent developments. Indeed, there has been little questioning on the left of the process of change initiated by the establishment in Pretoria.

In the West, most people on the left have tended to overplay the impact of the sanctions campaign on the political situation in South Africa. But if there is one international factor which has been decisive in shaping recent events, then it has to be the new thinking in Soviet foreign policy pursued by Mikhail Gorbachev.

As the Soviet Union has sought to improve diplomatic relations with the West, Moscow has gradually abandoned its commitment to former allies in the third world. Gorbachev has done deals with the imperialists over Afghanistan, Namibia and Kampuchea; and Moscow has reviewed its relations with national liberation movements in the Middle East, Latin America and South Africa.

Since the Soviet Union began its retreat from former spheres of influence, the overall global balance has shifted in favour of the imperialists. Movements which had looked to Moscow for assistance in the past suddenly found that they could no longer count on its support. The effect of this global disengagement by the Soviet Union has been to isolate various liberation struggles throughout the third world. As a result, many have become more conservative and conciliatory in their orientation.

FW de Klerk and his government are well aware that the South African Communist Party and the ANC have been shaken up by the new thinking in Moscow. They have deliberately chosen a time when the black opposition is most vulnerable before making their move. Even the ANC leadership acknowledges that it no longer has the capacity to sustain the armed struggle; and it is under pressure from Moscow to abandon it altogether in order to seek a negotiated settlement.

Given that the cards are stacked against the opposition, there is a chance that the apartheid regime will be able to retain control of the transition process. So far there has been little serious opposition to the whole trajectory of entering negotiations in a situation where the liberation struggle is at a severe disadvantage. Yet the danger of the anti-apartheid movement being drawn into an institutionalised framework of negotiations is considerable. In the weeks and months ahead, it will be important not to lose sight of the fact that the black working class is the only force for liberation in South Africa.

ALL POWER TO GORBACHEV

MANY commentators have greeted Mikhail Gorbachev's victory at the recent central committee meeting as tantamount to a second Russian Revolution. His plans to abandon the leading role of the party, dismantle the politburo and increase the powers of the presidency have been hailed as the end of communism in the Soviet Union. In fact, the proposed reforms are an attempt to preserve the influence of the Stalinist bureaucracy by establishing an alternative power-base for Gorbachev.

Gorbachev's dramatic initiative is an attempt to deal with the fragmentation of the bureaucracy which has now become acute. His plan to elevate the presidency above the party is based on the Polish model pioneered by General Jaruzelski. As in Poland, Gorbachev hopes to transfer power away from the party and create a powerful presidential post, which will give him the authority to take executive decisions. His position as party general secretary will decline in importance, as the fulcrum of political power shifts to the presidency. The effect of these changes will be to create the impression that power no longer resides in the party bureaucracy.

The important point is that the bureaucracy can give up the party's monopoly of power without surrendering control of the system. The Stalinist bureaucracy has always exercised its domination of society through the institutions of the state; as long as it still controls the administration and the security forces it can afford to let go of the party. This explains why Gorbachev has moved very deliberately over the past year to separate the functions of the party from those of the state. Gradually, he will begin to assume the role of a presidential statesman and distance himself from the party altogether.

It will only be possible to talk about the end of Stalinism when the power of the bureaucracy has been crushed. As the supreme representative of the bureaucracy, Mikhail Gorbachev is not about to commit suicide. Those on the left who have invested so much faith in him simply expose their lack of faith in the working class. Yet it is this force which will be the harbinger of the second Russian Revolution.

POLITICS RUNS AHEAD OF ECONOMICS

THE headlong rush towards German reunification is being spurred on by political factors. Chancellor Helmut Kohl's decision to accelerate the pace of change by calling for monetary union as soon as possible was precipitated by the fear of losing the forthcoming elections in both East and West. There are clearly serious economic difficulties involved in moving ahead so quickly; but political considerations are now dictating the reunification agenda.

After a slow start at the end of last year, the West German Social Democrats have been making all the political running on the reunification issue. Of all the nascent opposition parties in East Germany, the SPD is best placed to clear up in the elections next month. If it does, this will give a boost to its sister party in West Germany, which is starting to emerge as a real contender. Under the charismatic leadership of Oskar Lafontaine, it could well make a breakthrough in the general election in December.

Even more than the threat of economic collapse in East Germany, it is these political pressures which are bearing down on Kohl. It was notable that his call for currency union came immediately after the same policy had been agreed by the SPD. If he is to give himself a head start in the elections, the chancellor knows that he has to be seen to be in charge of the reunification process, and that he must be one step ahead of his political opponents all the time.

Underlining the speed with which events are now moving, Bonn has suggested a three-stage negotiating process. First, after the East German elections on 18 March, the two German states would draw up unity proposals. Second, these would be presented to a conference of the four wartime allies, America, Britain, France and the Soviet Union. Third, the final plans would be discussed at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe planned for the autumn. At the rate things are going, even this express timetable could be overtaken by events.

The speed at which the unity bandwagon is moving has traumatised the status quo powers. The USA has responded by elbowing its way into the process, in order to keep a grip on events and cement relations with Bonn. Britain, which stands to be the

biggest loser, wants to postpone the inevitable. Margaret Thatcher's demand for massive consultation and a lengthy period of transition reflects her government's fear of being eaten alive by a united Germany towering over the rest of Europe.

THERE IS NO THIRD WAY

THE crisis facing the Social Democratic government in Stockholm is the most compelling refutation of the idea that the Swedish model offers a third way between capitalism and Stalinism.

Last week the government announced its intention to ban strikes until the end of 1991, as part of an austerity package which included a freeze on wages, prices, rents and share dividends. The severity of these attacks surpassed all expectations; one shocked commentator said it was as if Sweden had suddenly become a 'banana republic'.

Ironically, the collapse of the famed Swedish middle way comes at a time when its supposed virtues are being talked up in the East and West. The European left has long trumpeted its support for the mixed economy and consensual politics which have prevailed in Sweden. More recently sections of the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe have looked to Sweden as a possible model for combining the market and socialism.

Even if it is forced to back down on banning strikes, the government's austerity package should discredit once and for all the idea of a third way in Sweden. All that has happened is that the contradictions of the capitalist system have finally caught up with the Social Democrats who are running the system there. As long as the economy was relatively prosperous it was possible for the state to cushion the harsh effects of the market. Now that the economy is in crisis it is not possible to reconcile the needs of the capitalist system with the wants of the working class. This is the market system: there is no third way.

THE CASE AGAINST CENSORSHIP

IRAN'S renewal of its death threat against Salman Rushdie has once again focused attention on the furore over his novel *The Satanic Verses*. The Revolutionary Communist Party has not changed its position since the controversy first erupted a year ago. We are uncompromising in our defence of Salman Rushdie and resolute in our opposition to any attempt to censor *The Satanic Verses*. Our attitude is one of unequivocal opposition to all forms of censorship: this is why we demand the immediate publication of the novel in paperback.

Given the confusion which continues to inform the debate, it is necessary to restate the case against censorship. Unlike Salman Rushdie, our opposition to censorship is not based on any abstract commitment to free speech. In his recent Herbert Read lecture, Rushdie argued that it is necessary to defend literature as a privileged arena in which the writer is free to express himself in any way he sees fit. His defence of *The Satanic Verses* was articulated very narrowly in relation to the preoccupations of the artist.

In contrast, our defence of *The Satanic Verses* has got nothing to do with its literary content; it is motivated by a broader concern to challenge the growth of state censorship. We are opposed to absolutely all forms of censorship: our opposition is based on the understanding that any movement for censorship can only give the state greater powers to suppress opposition and dissent. The ultimate victims of the state's censorious and repressive powers will be the working class, the oppressed and the left.

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LETTERS

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CAPITALISM'S PYRRHIC VICTORY

THE collapse of the Eastern Europe regimes, whether contrived by the ruling bureaucracies or forced by popular action, surely can only mean a return to capitalism.

Who in Eastern Europe is prepared to listen to anyone who talks of 'socialism' or 'communism'? Weren't they the bastards who have been screwing them all these years? Perhaps the young, through their own experiences, will find a need to re-examine the political theories of socialism when, and if, the full history of the past is divulged and when the consequences of capitalist economic contradictions become apparent.

One must realise that Stalin, who was no fool, protected himself from international socialism and kept control of this limbo state by the veil of nationalism. Even Chesterton understood the purpose of this blindfold. Power groups now emerging in the Eastern bloc are quite conversant with these methods and the populace, no doubt in the belief of

their coming freedom, are prone to fall for this opium.

The day has yet to come for the youth and the working class. It may take decades on its own, or it may be awakened by the working class of the Western world earlier, but the day will come and they will be more prepared for the problems arising then.

Nevertheless, the effects of these states going capitalist will have serious consequences for the Western world, for instance Britain and the dominance of Germany. Paul Johnson was quite right when he said that the Western world will always be frightened of the Soviet Union because, if it had been an efficiently economic state, it would have overwhelmed the Western economies. At the moment Western capitalists are in dire need of easy markets, the facts of life will dawn on them eventually. My viewpoint is probably not a Marxist one, only that of a worker who knows which class he belongs to.

Don Hallsworth
Birmingham

BRING BACK CAPITALISM

THE reluctance to see the disintegration of the Soviet Union is due to the lingering remnants of our belief in it as anti-capitalist. If we genuinely believe that Stalinism is a prime obstacle to progress towards socialism, then we should welcome the collapse of its structures, even if it means the return to capitalism. This is one terrible price to be paid for the betrayal of the October revolution.

This clinging to past hopes is the reason many of the old left cannot accept the RCP's analysis: they cannot accept that they have spent most of their political lives up blind alleys constructed by Stalinism and the social democratic leaders of the trade unions and the Labour Party.

If the Stalinist bloc does in fact go, and we return to one capitalist world, it may prove a much more positive thing than we can imagine. It seems more and more unlikely that socialism can ever be built in one country, so that the disappearance of the phoney division between the Stalinist bloc and capitalism may make it easier to develop revolutionary progress on a world scale.

On the question of the non-participation in the Bloody Sunday demonstration that Tim from Nottingham raised, I think this is a correct decision (letters, 2 February). In the past, the left has driven more people away from progressive struggle by demoralisation than the Tories have managed to do! The constant going back on their pledges by Labour governments, the endless ability to snatch defeat out of potential victory of the old trade union leadership have disabled the British labour movement for the past 60 years and more. We must do all we can to break this tradition.

Bill Thorneycroft
Streatham

SECESSION AND THE SOVIET UNION

MIKE FREEMAN is right to insist that calls for secession in the Soviet Union today would further fragment the working class. There is nothing worth saving about the disintegrating Soviet Union, but that doesn't mean we favour the disintegration of the Soviet working class as well. Indeed, it is the only hope that something positive arise out of the present crisis.

The national crisis is the result of the fragmentation of the Soviet system. In general, nationalism is being mobilised by local bureaucrats anxious to secure their own survival through pointing the finger of blame at other ethnic groups. This nationalism contains no liberating impulse directed against oppression. It represents a struggle by a small clique to preserve their privileges through engendering a pogrom atmosphere.

What Mike Freeman doesn't consider are any circumstances where the demand for secession may be justified. The invasion of Baku, one of the Kremlin's episodic bouts of repression, momentarily stimulated popular calls for Azerbaijani secession. The assault was accompanied by an outburst of anti-Muslim chauvinism from Moscow.

In the case of Azerbaijan, Mike from Camden is right to allude to the tendency of Azerbaijani Muslims to vacillate between reactionary pogroms against Armenians (which we oppose) and liberatory attacks upon Soviet institutions (the real reason why Gorbachev sent in the troops), which we would encourage. Moreover, as Rob Knight has pointed out, if Kremlin oppression ever became intolerable we would have to consider qualifying our opposition to secession (*the next step*, 26 January).

However, I would argue that such an occasion has not arisen— even despite the attack upon Baku. Mike from Camden is wrong when he asserts that the only way for Azeris to fight the Kremlin is through the demand for national liberation. His argument that the Soviet working class cannot be united while Azeris are being attacked by Moscow flies in the face of the facts. Russians refused en masse to mobilise when the call-up of reservists was issued by the Kremlin. Other nationalities present in Baku joined with the Azeris in resisting the Soviet advance. This healthy response had the effect of checking the Kremlin's designs against Azerbaijan.

Today, the call for secession of national republics will only form an unnecessary barrier to developing a united working class opposition to the Kremlin and its efforts to foster ethnic rivalries.

Andy Clarkson
London

WHAT DO WE FIGHT FOR?

AS Kayode pointed out in last week's issue of *the next step*, the political climate has changed and the 'What we fight for' column needs updating. Here are some points I would suggest covering:

First, the myth of Thatcherism. The problems we all face, from police harassment to the poll tax, are often seen as the whims of the Iron Lady. If only we could get Thatcher out, the argument runs, everything will suddenly get better. We need to point out that the contradictions of capitalism are the cause of the problems we face, and that the only way to resolve the conflict between human need and private profit is through a social revolution. And that is not extremism but a logical step in man's evolution.

Second, that the only means of achieving this is by the conscious intervention of the working class. The idea that the working class no longer exists is a common view. The images of early twentieth-century workers, cloth capped and dirty, downtrodden but resilient, is just not true. It is possible to want to own a house and be working class. In fact this is precisely the strength of the working class: we have interests too, interests opposed to those of the ruling class.

Third, the question of human nature. We have to challenge the idea that it is natural to be greedy and that anyway we are all individuals and so it is impossible for us to cooperate. We should clearly demonstrate that only communism offers the true expression of the individual. Besides, the concept of individual freedoms is a relatively new idea in the history of the human race. Greed is not a problem. As a communist, I want the best; I do not want to share out the misery.

Finally, we need to take up the idea of individual solutions. Buying Green goods or not banking at Barclays is no solution. In fact it is an apology for capitalism—the system is alright, the problem is my consumption. Not buying a carton of South African orange juice in north London is hardly going to cause FW de Klerk sleepless nights!

One further suggestion: could the party's name on the paper be bigger? After all we are communists and have nothing to be ashamed of!

Michael
North London



ON the 'What we fight for' column: ordinary people must now recognise that paternalistic industrial relations are a thing of the past. Britain's economic decline brings with it the confrontational tactics used by Ian McGregor in the miners' strike, Rupert Murdoch at Wapping and Kenneth Clarke in the ambulance dispute.

In this new era the union bureaucrats and the Labour Party are becoming increasingly irrelevant, as the ruling class is no longer interested in mediators. It is blaming falling profits on the cost of wages and will confront workers head on to cut living standards in order to restore profits.

In this war against workers the state will further divide ordinary people by increasing oppression on greater numbers of us. The RCP believes that workers of every nation must now unite to combat oppression and smash the ruling class along with their bankrupt ideology.

Dave
North London

ROMANIA'S 'REVOLUTION'

IT takes a peculiar notion of reality to argue, as Alistair from south London did, that the Romanian working class must develop revolutionary direction before it takes further action (letters, 26 January). In fact such a development could only be the consequence of the experience of struggle.

The overthrow of Ceausescu had a tremendously liberating impact on a working class trodden underfoot by 40 years of Stalinist repression. Romanian workers realised the power that lay in their hands could be used to fight for some basic rights. It is inevitable in the short term that many will fall prey to anti-communist ideas.

But a larger perspective allows us to be more optimistic. It is only the continuing struggle of Romanian workers that can clarify who their real enemy is—witness how recent demonstrations for further democratisation have been met by state bans and stage-managed counter-protests. The 'revolutionary' National Salvation Front acts in a depressingly familiar Stalinist manner. And don't forget Poland, where the introduction of the 'revolutionary' capitalist market has precipitated a course of working class resistance against the austerity policies that have resulted.

It is during the process of struggling for their rights, not beforehand, that workers learn which forces stand opposed to them. In Eastern Europe, it is becoming obvious that the forces of the state, whoever has their hands on the levers of power, block every attempt by the working class to advance its well-being. The logical conclusion of this experience is that the state's authority must be destroyed.

Richard Bond
London

A recent article by Rob Knight and a letter by Mike Freeman in last week's edition of *the next step* discussed the Revolutionary Communist Party's position on the national question in the Soviet Union. However, it is clear from correspondence to the paper that there remains considerable confusion on this issue.

This is not surprising given that the issue itself is not susceptible to straightforward solutions. The aim of this article is not to rehearse the arguments put forward by Rob Knight, but to explain *why* and *how* the party came to adopt its position on the national question in the Soviet Union.

Division

Many left-wing newspapers have raised the slogan of the right of nations to self-determination in relation to the national conflicts that are now raging in the Soviet Union. For example, *Militant* has argued that the 'right to self-determination, up to and including secession, must be extended to all those who want it' (19 January). The same point is emphasised in an article on the Azeri-Armenian conflict in *Socialist Worker* (27 January).

It is important to bear in mind that in the Marxist tradition, the right of nations to self-determination has never been a universal principle to be upheld at all times.

Lenin argued that support for the right of nations to self-determination was crucial in the relationship between oppressor and oppressed nations. The issue of self-determination acquires its significance in the context of imperialist domination.

According to Lenin, the essence of imperialism lies in its division of the world into *oppressor* and *oppressed* nations. It follows that the struggle of an oppressed nation for national liberation has a democratic content which the working class of the oppressor nation must support:

'Imperialism means the progressively mounting oppression of the nations of the world by a handful of great powers.... The focal point in the Social Democratic programme must be that division of nations into oppressor and oppressed which forms the *essence* of imperialism.... It is from this division that our definition of the "right of nations to self-determination" must follow, a definition that is consistently democratic, revolutionary, and in *accord* with the general task of the immediate struggle for socialism.' (VI Lenin, 'The revolutionary proletariat and the right of nations to self-determination', *Collected Works* 21)

The reproduction of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed in the imperialist epoch provided the point of departure for Lenin's discussion of the problem. The fight against national oppression was at the same time part of the struggle against imperialism: the two are inextricably linked.

Contemporary

Outside of the oppressor-oppressed relationship created by imperialism, the national question is not so straightforward. A few contemporary examples illustrate the complexity of the problem. For example, Lebanon, India and Sri Lanka are all torn by conflicting national aspirations.

In these situations, Marxists must examine the problem in all its aspects and work out a solution that is most harmonious with the overall interests of the working class.

It is clear that the traditional Leninist approach to the question of national self-determination is of little relevance in these instances. Why? Because in the case of India or the Soviet Union, the relations of oppression that exist are not *essential* relations reproduced through material reality as they are under imperialism.

In these situations, ethnic and national conflicts are often fought out between two similar protagonists rather than between a progressive and a reactionary one. This is manifestly the case in relation to the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Any objective analysis would find it difficult to make any major distinction between the two sides. It is certainly not possible to describe one of these nationalities as an oppressor and the

SECESSION AND THE SOVIET UNION

MARXISM AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION

Frank Richards explains how we should approach the problem of the national question in the Soviet Union

other one as an oppressed people.

Having said all this, it is clear that the traditional Leninist demand of the right of nations to self-determination does not provide a useful point of departure for examining the problem of the nationalities in the Soviet Union. Whatever position we take on the national question in this particular context, it will not come through an application of the distinction between oppressor and oppressed nations, which leads to automatic support for the right of nations to self-determination.

Complicit

Historically, the roots of the national question in the Soviet Union go back to the pre-revolutionary period. The Stalinist regime never tackled this problem and at times actively promoted Great Russian chauvinism against some of the nationalities in the Soviet Union. But although the Stalinist regime did not solve the problem, and indeed was complicit in episodes of national oppression, it would be wrong to argue that national oppression is an inherent feature of Stalinism.

The main concern of the Stalinist bureaucracy is to exercise its domination. It has employed different methods of doing this in different republics. In some instances, the exercise of bureaucratic domination has involved national oppression, as in the Ukraine or Moldavia. In others such as Azerbaijan and Armenia, national oppression is not a feature of rule by the Kremlin.

In general the question of national oppression is far from self-evident and requires careful analysis. And there is no direct link and sometimes no link at all between struggling against the Stalinist bureaucracy and for national self-determination.

The recent upsurge of national and ethnic unrest in the Soviet Union has some links with the past. But it is wrong to see these struggles as *old* conflicts recurring in the present.

It is more profitable to situate the present phase of national conflict in the context of the contemporary disintegration of the Stalinist system.

One of the characteristic responses of the Stalinist bureaucracy to the decay of its system has been to territorialise itself.

Party bureaucrats have sought to establish a local or regional base for themselves. As the system fragments even further there is likely to be more and more of an emphasis on regional solutions. The struggle for scarce resources is an important theme that underpins the strife between the local bureaucracies.

Confronted with a problem of legitimacy, the local party bureaucrats have made a conscious decision to promote their national or ethnic identity. From Moldavia to Armenia, local party leaders have attempted to win popular support by playing the nationalist card. Thus a new political relationship between the party bosses and the local nationalist intelligentsia provides the main axis of ethnic turmoil in the Soviet Union.

Discrimination

In passing, it is worth noting that the new nationalist leadership has made a determined effort to neutralise the conflict between the working class and the bureaucracy. Workers who have been mobilised behind nationalist demands are unlikely to put much pressure on their regional bureaucrats. Unfortunately, in many instances workers of one nationality have been mobilised against those of another. In most cases, the national question is not even directed against the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow: it is aimed against another nationality.

In the present context of a disintegrating Soviet Union, the national question contains *no positive potential*.

It does not clarify the issues at stake; on the contrary, more often than not it drives workers into an alliance with their local bureaucracies. Instead of struggling against the Stalinist bureaucracy, the working class ends up unleashing its anger against different nationalities and ethnic groups.

From the point of view of the working class, the national question contains no positive potential at present. However, this does not mean that we are prepared to tolerate any expression of oppression. National oppression is itself divisive and contrary to the interests of the working class. Thus in any situation of oppression, such as the denial of cultural and language rights in Moldavia, Marxists would argue



Armenians defend themselves from an Azeri attack; secession would only serve to,

for full democratic rights. Thus we oppose every form of discrimination.

In the Soviet context, the problem of oppression can best be tackled by opposing all forms of discrimination rather than by supporting the right of nations to self-determination.

The call to abolish all forms of discrimination implies the equal distribution of rights and the ending of any special privileges on the basis of religion, nationality or culture. The best means of guaranteeing these rights is through a federation of self-governing republics.

Anti-democratic

In present circumstances, the demand for national independence from the Soviet Union could have potentially anti-democratic tendencies. Armenian independence automatically calls into question the rights of the Azerbaijanis. In the Baltic republics the demands of the independence movement are often directed against the largely Russian working class. Our essential argument is that the national question in the Soviet Union cannot be resolved through national independence.

National secession generally means the creation of new national minorities and new problems. Each of the 15 national republics in the Soviet Union contains more than one nationality; in fact there are more than 100 ethnic groups dispersed throughout the republics. What would be the fate of the Ossetian people in an independent Georgia? What would happen if demands for independence gained ground in Kazakhstan, where there are over 100 different nationalities? The secession of any of the national republics would be a first step towards a new round of national conflict.

Ethnic

It is obvious that if the demand for secession became a reality the problem of national strife would be far worse than it is at present. It would unleash a wave of ethnic conflict throughout the Soviet Union. Worse still, it would impose new divisions on the working class and postpone the resurgence of the class struggle.

The Marxist perspective on the national question demands consistent opposition to all manifestations of oppression. This



multiply such ethnic conflicts

opposition cannot be sustained on the basis of local nationalist protest. It requires a working class movement that supports all resistance against national oppression through a common struggle against the Stalinist central bureaucracy.

So far we have dealt with the problem of national conflict mainly from the point of view of its effect on the struggle against oppression. But there are other issues at stake too.

Rhetorical

As Marxists we do not in any way support the view that there is anything progressive about the Soviet Union and the existing territorial arrangement of the Stalinist system. At the same time, we cannot be indifferent to the consequences of the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

There is nothing progressive about the Soviet Union which is worth defending. But the fragmentation of the country into its constituent nationalities would necessarily benefit imperialism. The position of the working class internationally would be seriously undermined as a result.

The secession of any territories from the Soviet Union would call into question

all the existing borders from the Caucasus to Austria. It would lead to new forms of conflict and potentially to war.

Very few of the nationalities of the Soviet Union could survive as a nation. This explains why most of the demands for national independence are primarily rhetorical: Azerbaijan is a case in point.

Were any of these regions to secede from the Soviet Union, they would become weak and unviable countries under constant threat of foreign intervention.

From an analysis of the existing global trends, it seems likely that the disintegration of the Soviet Union would lead to a new cycle of colonial annexation. Regional conflict would provide a pretext for foreign intervention and territorial annexation.

Irresponsible

In this light, *Militant's* argument that the 'right to self-determination, up to and including secession, must be extended to all those who want it' is simply irresponsible. In the present conjuncture, the exercise of the right to self-determination would involve the negation of other

people's rights. Ultimately, the call for secession amounts to an invitation to Balkanise the region.

Alternative

Regardless of what we say or do, it seems that the tendency towards the Balkanisation of the Stalinist system is likely to gain strength. The years ahead will not see less but more demands for new territorial arrangements. The trend towards territorial fragmentation represents a major danger for the international working class. It could boost the influence of the new coalition of local Stalinist bureaucrats and the nationalist intelligentsia over the working class and neutralise the class struggle.

Hopefully, this scenario will not be realised. It is precisely to prevent such a development that we are obliged at present to argue against secession from the Soviet Union. We believe that the objective of a federation of self-governing republics would represent a progressive alternative to the status quo and would also assist in preventing the outbreak of a carnival of reaction.

NEW READERS START HERE



WHAT
WE FIGHT
FOR

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) 375 1702.

NAPOLEON GORBACHEV

Mikhail Gorbachev is following the path of Poland's General Jaruzelski, explains Rob Knight

President Mikhail Gorbachev, who has proved himself to be a master of political manoeuvring, is engaged in his most complex game plan yet. The outcome of the recent central committee meeting of the Soviet Communist Party indicates that he is trying to replace one-party rule with one-man rule, with himself in the leading role.

All the main decisions taken by the central committee point in this direction. The committee agreed to increase the powers of the presidency, change the constitution of the politburo and repeal Article Six of the constitution guaranteeing the leading role of the Communist Party.

The proposal to strengthen the powers of the presidency at the expense of the party continues a process which has been under way for some time. Previously, political power has resided in the politburo of the party and its secretariat. However, over the past year in particular the party secretariat has been dismantled and there has been a transfer of power to the offices of the presidency and the council of ministers.

The president is elected by the supreme soviet

rather than the party. The supreme soviet is elected by the congress of people's deputies, which in turn is partially elected from party bodies, but also by secret ballot in public elections. Ministers are now appointed subject to confirmation by the same body.

All this creates the impression that it is a neutral body rather than the party which is running the country.

Gorbachev has also made the congress of people's deputies and the supreme soviet the focus of debate on policy. He also plans to replace the politburo with a larger and weaker body. This will further undermine the party leadership and enhance the position of the president as the sole source of authority.

Gorbachev hopes to follow the example of Poland's General Wojciech Jaruzelski, who has presided over a similar dismantling of Communist Party power. The precarious position that Jaruzelski now occupies, in power only through the grace and favour of Solidarity, indicates the dangers inherent in Gorbachev's manoeuvre.

However, Gorbachev has two big advantages over Jaruzelski. In the Soviet Union, the party itself

launched the reform process; it was not initiated under pressure from a mass movement as in Poland. As a result, Gorbachev has had time to construct an alternative power base. The congress of people's deputies over which he presides has established a degree of credibility among the Soviet people.

Because Gorbachev and those around him have led the reform process, they have managed to keep one step ahead of events. This has allowed them to manipulate the opposition. The demonstration of 200 000 outside the Kremlin on the eve of the central committee meeting was the biggest display of opposition feeling in the Soviet Union since the miners' strikes last year. Yet it was notable for the relative absence of criticism of Gorbachev. Indeed, this outburst of popular pressure gave weight to the changes proposed by Gorbachev.

Gorbachev's second advantage over his counterparts in Eastern Europe is that the state bureaucracy is bigger and more entrenched in the Soviet Union.

Everywhere else in Eastern Europe, the bureaucracies lacked any real social base. They owed their positions above all to the continuous threat of Soviet

intervention. In the Soviet Union, the Bolshevik revolution followed by the Stalinisation process swept away any alternative source of authority. This is why it is possible for the party to fragment without the bureaucracy losing control.

Every level of Soviet society is bureaucratised. The party bureaucracy runs society from top to bottom through the appointment of officials in the administration and managers in the enterprises. As a result, it would require a massive popular upheaval to break the power of the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union. This would also involve confronting the power that the bureaucracy exercises over the forces of state coercion in the army, the police and the KGB.

There are two reasons why Gorbachev has been able to increase his own power so successfully. Every attempt to reform the economy so far has failed, blocked by recalcitrant bureaucrats or workers who reject the higher prices and lower living standards which are the inevitable consequence of radical reform.

It is now recognised at the top level of society that it is not possible to introduce the market with the support of the population. Indeed, what the bureaucracy now favours is the use of coercive powers by the presidency to drive through unpopular reforms.

New capitalists

The second reason for Gorbachev's success is that none of his critics have been able to come up with an alternative solution to the problems facing the bureaucracy. This is why the entire central committee, with the exception of Boris Yeltsin, voted for the changes. The party leadership realises that the old game is up. From now on they will pursue their survival strategy by other means.

In line with the new approach, the bureaucracy has abandoned the perspective of developing a grassroots enterprise culture, such as the unpopular cooperative movement. Instead, it is considering transferring control of the commanding heights of the economy from state ownership to a form of ownership by the bureaucracy.

It is not yet clear how this will be undertaken, but top level bureaucrats have already begun to blur the distinction between state ownership and Western-style joint stock companies. Whatever form this transfer takes, it will require Western investment and cooperation. Ultimately, the bureaucracy hopes to transform itself into a new capitalist class; this process is already under way in Poland and Hungary.

In this unfolding scenario, Gorbachev would act as a bridge between the present command economy and the introduction of the market. In his enhanced presidential role, he would be a Bonapartist figure in the classical sense.

Standing above society and seemingly free from factional or class interests, Gorbachev could preside over the transformation of society, using his power to push through change.

The central committee's decision to abandon the party's monopoly of political power will accelerate the fragmentation of the Soviet Union. Many of the national republics already have alternative parties, such as the popular fronts in the Baltic republics. In Russia itself, those dissatisfied with the slow pace of change may leave the party and set up alternative organisations.

The low popular esteem in which the party is held and its failure to solve the economic problems facing society can only fuel the process of disintegration. Local elections in March will simply confirm the deep unpopularity of official party candidates.

Class unity

But the prospects for establishing an alternative party which could operate across the entire length and breadth of the Soviet Union are not good. The Communist Party is a national party because it represents the interests of the bureaucracy throughout the Soviet Union.

Those political parties which have emerged in the national republics represent the local interests of middle class and nationalist elements. Many of these people are former party members who left in response to the crisis engulfing the organisation. Since these movements are local in character, they are incapable of forming a national party of any kind.

In this sense, the fragmentation of the political system and a proliferation of parties could act in Gorbachev's favour. It would remove the Communist Party as a focus for the historical grievances of the Soviet people. It would also make it much more difficult for any individual or movement to gather enough support to challenge Gorbachev.

The only force which is capable of overcoming the divisions in Soviet society is the working class. The working class exists throughout the Soviet Union as a potentially phenomenal social force. Its interests are antagonistic to those of the bureaucracy, which in the present system or in a marketised one lie in repressing or exploiting the working class.

The working class therefore has an interest in challenging the power of the bureaucracy and the potential to fight as a united force across the Soviet Union. It is only through the establishment of a party which can express the interests of the working class that the power of Gorbachev and the bureaucracy can finally be destroyed.



Gorbachev has borrowed his survival strategy (as well as his sunglasses) from Poland's General Jaruzelski

The working class

TROUBLE AT FORD

WHO'S SCABBING NOW?

The strike by skilled workers at Ford plants shows the need for a new union movement, argues Linda Ryan

As we go to press, 1600 members of the EETPU electricians' union are still on strike at Ford's 21 plants in protest at a 10.2 per cent pay deal which was accepted in a ballot of all 32 000 Ford workers more than a fortnight ago. At Halewood, Bridgend and elsewhere, they have been supported by AEU engineering union members. All these groups contend that the Ford pay and working practices package will erode their status and differentials as skilled workers. However, other unions have refused to support the strike, and indeed have been actively involved in sabotaging it.

Ford is trying to abolish the distinction between craftsmen and workers, to create teamworking on the Japanese model. The proposals in the latest pay deal are the third assault on traditional production line methods of working. They are designed to erode traditional demarcation lines separating production from maintenance workers, unskilled work from skilled work and, eventually, blue-collar workers from white-collar workers.

The strongest resistance to these changes in working practices, and payments associated with them, has come from skilled workers.

They believe that they have borne the brunt of the changes already agreed and this has happened at a time when their status and pay differentials with unskilled workers have suffered. The 1985 pay agreement laid the basis for reducing the number of job classifications from 550 to 52; the skilled grades

strike by electricians. In addition, engineering workers at some plants continued their unofficial action in protest at the settlement. Ford management responded by warning the unions that the strike was jeopardising future investment in Britain by the US parent company. When the industrial action began to threaten production at some plants, the employers brought in staff from Genk in Belgium and contract workers from Germany to break the strike.

However, other Ford unions have done the most damage to the electricians, conspiring with management to destroy their strike.

Transport union national secretary Jack Adams, who is also the lead negotiator for the Ford unions, condemned the EETPU for taking its members out on strike. He accused the electricians of undermining the unity of the unions at Ford. In a conscious move to undermine the strike, TGWU leaders urged their members in a letter to cross any picket line mounted by the electricians.

Other unions have colluded with management by instructing their members to work normally and even to do the work of the strikers. At some plants, including the Dagenham body facility, the effect of the EETPU strike was lessened by a decision to work normally by members of the Electrical and Plumbing Industries Union, the last bastion of influence of the rump of the old British Communist Party.

Backstabbing bureaucrats

Whatever may be said about the scabbing role played by the leaders of the electricians in the past, in this instance the leaders of the TGWU and the EPIU are the real scabs. Not only have they conspired with management to prevent the strike disrupting production; they have also seized the opportunity to poach members from the EETPU. In particular, the EPIU, which broke away from the EETPU after it was expelled from the TUC in 1988, has played all sorts of underhand tricks to steal members from its rival.

It is clear that the bureaucrats who run the unions are incapable of uniting all Ford workers behind a plan of action which addresses all their grievances.

The only thing the union leaders are concerned about is ensuring their own survival: the sabotage tactics employed by the TUC-affiliated unions against the EETPU are designed to destroy a competitor, not to enhance the unity of the workforce at all plants. In this scenario of cut-throat competition among rival unions struggling to survive, the interests of ordinary workers just do not figure.

Nothing better illustrates the need for a new labour movement than the sordid backstabbing between the unions at Ford. There is an urgent need for rank and file workers to start organising independently of the official union machines. Sorting out a package of demands on pay and working

SIMON NORFOLK



Bureaucrats and bosses have colluded to isolate Ford workers

were reduced from more than 40 to two: electricians and mechanical technicians.

The 1987 agreement envisaged skilled workers joining groups of 10 or 12 mainly unskilled workers, which were being set up as part of the company's move to introduce greater group working under group leaders who would eventually replace the old function of foremen. In the latest deal, the company is offering pay allowances of five per cent to skilled workers who agree to join integrated manufacturing teams of skilled and semi-skilled workers. These will be responsible for the maintenance and operation of a specific segment of the manufacturing process.

Although craftsmen such as fitters, toolmakers, welders and plumbers would gain the five per cent by joining the teams, they believe that they could eventually lose more in shift allowances. They are also opposed to the company's next step outlined in the deal: to enter negotiations on the development of a single craft function combining electrical and mechanical skills. In the ballot on the deal, 80 per cent of skilled workers at Halewood voted against accepting the company's offer, and the same pattern of opposition from skilled workers was repeated elsewhere.

After a separate ballot of its 1600 members at Ford, the EETPU leadership sanctioned an official

practices which meets the needs of all workers is one of the preconditions for forging a new rank and file movement.

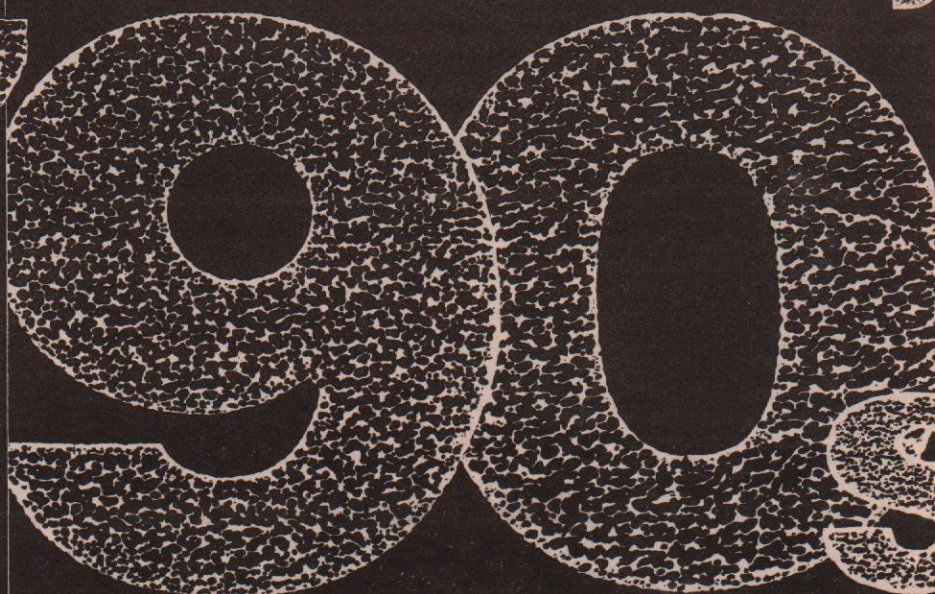
Activists need to approach the issue of differentials with a view to creating the maximum unity. Workers should support any action to improve working class living standards and working conditions, even if it is undertaken by relatively well-paid or privileged workers. At the same time, they should challenge the divisive pay structures which have been manipulated by employers to exacerbate sectional strife among workers.

In order to bring the ranks of labour together, workers should seek flat-rate rather than percentage wage rises. On this basis it will be possible to put forward a claim for decent pay and working conditions which can satisfy the needs of every section of the workforce. And it is pretty clear that despite the ballot result going against strike action, most workers are deeply dissatisfied with their recent pay deal.

The squalid manoeuvrings of the official union leaders at Ford confirm that the old institutions of the labour movement have nothing to offer the working class today. The sooner we start building the foundations of a new movement, the better it will be for the working class in the struggles to come.

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STUDENTS

This Thursday's demonstration against student loans shows the need for a fresh start and a new strategy to stop Tory attacks on higher education. New government plans amount to nothing less than the wholesale privatisation of higher education. But the NUS is still trying to fight last year's battle.

After spending last term doing nothing about the loans, NUS is holding the march as a sop to angry students. But its failure to fight the loans in the first place makes the march little more than a gesture. Pathetic publicity stunts like posting Valentine's cards at Tory offices will not make up for six wasted months.

The Tories have already won the battle to replace student grants with loans. Now they are going all out to reorganise higher education and privatise the system. While the NUS continues to live in the past, the

Tories will be making students pay a proportion of the fees.

In many cases students are already paying for their education. Earlier this year students at Newcastle Polytechnic went into occupation after being forced to pay for course materials. Now college authorities are planning to charge fashion students for lighting and heating after 5pm.

• A two-tier university system

The government wants to separate the funding for teaching from that for research. Research will be funded according to results, which will favour the already well-endowed colleges, such as Oxbridge. The consequence will be the emergence of a number of elite research institutions and the collapse of funding for teaching-only universities.

overseas student market. The Polytechnic of North London is aiming for 35 per cent of its intake to be from overseas, a figure it cynically justifies on the grounds of supporting equal opportunities. Of the 6000 students at Lancaster University, 2000 are from overseas. Salford University only survives because one in five of its students comes from abroad. In

financed by the state through the block grant system. The NUS is the product of a period when the state was willing to invest some money in the education system. Today, when the government has embarked on a general assault on education, it is not possible to fight effectively with the institutions of the past.

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previous years some 12 per cent of students came from abroad; this year the figure is expected to be 20 per cent.

In most cases colleges simply exploit overseas students as fee-fodder. Brunel University has developed a scheme which permits Hongkong students to receive a Brunel degree—while studying in Hongkong. This allows the university to cream off the registration fees, at minimal cost to itself.

• Americanisation of education

Many colleges are introducing American-style course structures in order to provide more intensive teaching and hence shorter courses. Strathclyde University is about to replace the traditional three terms with four semesters. This means shorter holidays at Christmas and Easter. Others are extending college hours from 9am to 6pm. Manchester Polytechnic has abolished the Wednesday sports afternoon to cram in more lectures.

• Interference in union affairs

In this new climate of privatised education, college management is keeping a tight grip on the activities of students' unions in case they put off potential funders. At a number of colleges, management is rewriting the union constitution. At Wolverhampton, a new clause in the constitution reads: 'The students' union shall conduct and manage its own affairs and funds in accordance with a constitution approved by the board of governors and shall present audited accounts annually to the board of governors.'

• Attacks on staff

In a cost-cutting exercise, management has imposed new contracts on lecturers involving a pay cut. When Natfhe took action PNL and Wolverhampton and Birmingham polytechnics cut union members' pay by 20 per cent. Oxford University has 150 unfilled teaching posts. Half of Edinburgh University's cleaners have been made redundant. Nearly all colleges have privatised their catering.

The extent of the government's attack on higher education has left the NUS standing. The Tory assault calls into question the entire politics and organisation of the NUS.

The NUS is part of the old education system which the Tories are destroying. It was established to provide welfare services for students in higher education and is

If we are to stop the Tory onslaught we need a fresh start and a new type of organisation:

• Independent unions

The dependence of students' unions on state funding means that the NUS is unwilling to take any action which might endanger its grant. To be effective students' unions must be free from state and management interference. That means unions should be funded by and accountable to students.

• Political organisations

Today the NUS does little more than dispense welfare services. But to fight for our rights we need to create *fighting* unions which can take on the Tories politically. Student interests—the level of grants, the quality of education,

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the availability of services—can only be defended through political mobilisation and action.

• Involve students

The small clique of activists which runs students' unions prefers to organise student affairs bureaucratically behind the scenes. But we will only have an effective union if we involve as many students as possible in an open debate about how to defend student interests.

• A national organisation

Today student politics is fragmented and uncoordinated. An effective union must organise activists across campuses and nationally.
Lindsay Daniels

FIGHT

government is starting to run universities like Sainsbury's supermarkets:

• Market prices

Education secretary John MacGregor has announced a new system of differential fees. Last year the flat-rate fee for university courses was £607. From 1991 the minimum fee for classroom-based courses will be £1607; laboratory and clinical-based courses will cost £2500; while the fee for clinical courses will be £4500.

Like the introduction of loans, the fee increases are part of a scheme to make students pay for their education. Last year, for every pound which colleges received in fees, they received £10 from central government through the block grant system. By next year this will be down to £1.50. Next the

• Self-financing polytechnics

The government has taken polytechnics out of local authority control and made them responsible for their own affairs. They now have corporate status with governing bodies which include representatives from local industry. The aim is to encourage private funding and make polytechnics self-financing. The Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council has been established to watch over this process. It has the power to cut off funding from any institution which does not meet its standards.

• Cramming in students

Because funding is now largely dependent on the number of students they attract, many colleges have been pushing up the numbers without improving the facilities. This has resulted in a crisis in accommodation and teaching facilities. In Cardiff, students have been sleeping in a Butlins camp; others were put up in the psychology library. At Leeds University, students were forced to live in caravans in the car park.

Middlesex Polytechnic has halved its teaching time for psychology students, replacing seminars with lectures which are often so crowded that students are forced to sit in the aisles or on windowsills. Oxford Polytechnic is holding lectures at 9pm to cope with the numbers.

• Exploiting overseas students

Colleges do very well out of overseas students because their fees are higher than for home students. There is fierce competition for the

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