

No. 1240 December 2007

■ in depth

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socialist standard

December 2007 Vol. 103 No. 1240 £1

Journal of The Socialist Party - Companion Party of the World Socialist Movement

Murder by degrees



Capitalism turns up the heat



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Saturday, 1 December 2007

Editorial: Workers have no country

Whether Polish plumbers, Portuguese hop-pickers or Chinese cockle-pickers, migrant labour in the UK is undoubtedly higher profile now than it has been for many decades. The focus groups and private polling used by the major parties are confirming immigration as the No 1 issue for voters at the moment.

In some parts of the UK the influx may well have resulted in increased unemployment for existing workers and appears to be putting a downward pressure on wages in some sectors.

It's worth noting that there has been an enormous effort made to vilify, criminalise and erase racist language and ideas over the last few decades. World socialists have not opposed these developments but we have argued that racism - like other the so-called "hate" crimes - is usually fuelled and ignited by poverty and fear, and therefore cannot be removed until the cause is.

For workers fighting over crumbs in lower wage unskilled jobs, the temptation to blame your unemployment or wage level on foreign labour may be strong. But nevertheless such views are false. The blame lies elsewhere. In order to stay profitable, UK employers are demanding cheap labour. It makes good business sense to welcome cheap labour from overseas - you didn't have to pay for its education, and after you have exploited it for a lifetime, you still won't have to pay its pension.

In many ways the government is only repeating at the national level what has been happening at employer level for many years with out-sourcing of staffing costs.

And while the free movement of labour is restricted, capital is of course expected to roam the globe looking out for ever better rates of exploitation, sniffing around the sweatshops for signs of harsher working conditions or longer hours. But if these chickens come home to roost - if little pockets of the third world's poor actually have the gumption or bravery to start popping up on our doorstep - then our local administrators of capitalism start to get a bit edgy

As with so many issues, politicians are slowly realising that governments must simply accommodate to capitalism with regard to migration and accept it. They can only try to control it but if they are to have any hope of effectively securing borders and finding those who slip through they must expend vast sums as on ID cards and the like.

The World Socialist Movement didn't get its name for nothing. Unique amongst all political parties left and right we have no national axe to grind. We side with no particular state, no government, no currency. We have no time for nationalisation or privatisation, for border controls or for migration incentives. The world over, workers must do what they can individually and collectively to survive and resist capitalism. In many parts of the world that means escaping the tyranny of political terror or economic poverty. Politically however, workers should try and resist taking sides in the battles of the economic blocs who just happen to be named on the front of your passport. You must not blame another worker for your poverty. Instead we would argue that workers should recognise that - whether migrant or not, whether illegal or legal.

Pathfinders

Christmas Crackers

Two of the biggest science news stories of the year, and possibly of the decade, broke in late November. One was the derivation of multi-purpose or 'pluripotent' human cells from simple skin (BBC Online, 20 November). Until now, the only known way to extract stem cells, cells which have the capability to turn into any of the 220 cell-types in the human body and thus potentially grow or

repair any bodily organ or tissue, was from aborted human embryos. The moral issues around this have mired the science in controversy and, especially in the United States, have all but throttled research. Already a small culture of former skin cells has been grown into heart tissue which has begun beating. The consequences, if this technique works, are hard to exaggerate for many otherwise untreatable conditions, or for those people with little chance of a life-saving transplant, or for those with a successful transplant but facing a lifetime of immuno-suppressants and at risk from the mildest infection.

Of course, it might not work, but if does, it would take the worst kind of Christmas Scrooge to point out that this is rich-country technology to cure rich-country people, and which doesn't do a whole lot for the several million kids who die every year because their mostly corrupt governments won't spend one lousy dollar on their healthcare.

The other story concerns a Californian surfer and part-time snowboarding instructor, named Garrett Lisi, whose curious hobby just might make him as famous as Einstein (*New Scientist*, 17 November). For Garrett, when not surfing in Hawaii, moonlights as a theoretical physicist, and has just come up with an idea that might, from a physicist's point of view, be the answer to life, the universe, and everything. The 'standard model' of physics has for the last thirty years or so made reliably accurate predictions about everything from the minutest particle to the largest galaxies, using its two main propositions, quantum mechanics and Einstein's general relativity. The problem has been that these two propositions have never fitted together. While quantum mechanics describes three of the four fundamental forces in nature, electromagnetism, and the strong and weak nuclear forces, gravity is the odd one out, and can only be understood using relativity. Logic dictates that there must be an underlying law which unites the behaviour of these four forces, and intuition suggests they might even be aspects of the same thing, but despite all kinds of highly elaborate ideas, such as string theory and loop quantum gravity, nobody has managed to connect them.

What Garrett has done is to take a known, 8-dimensional mathematical pattern with 248 points, and map all the 40 known particles in their various 'identities' to one or other of those points, uniquely including particles representing gravity. Rotating the pattern then gives known and observed relationships between these particles, but also throws light on new unsuspected relationships. In addition, having 20 points left with no particles to put in them, Lisi has posited the existence of 20 new particles which, tantalisingly, might be found next year when the Large Hadron Collider comes online at CERN in Switzerland. If the LHC finds the missing particles, physics will have found its holy grail, a theory of everything, the greatest advance for thirty years, and Lisi, at the very least, will surf his way to the Nobel Prize. Lisi has even devised a curious video animation which you can watch here: <http://tinyurl.com/25DPF9> [1]. It doesn't explain anything very well, but it's quite fun to watch.

Of course, the theory still might be wrong, but if it isn't, it would take the most miserable seasonal grouch to point out that the greatest advance in physics for three hundred years still wouldn't mean a damn thing if we've killed our planet off because of our collective inability to spend one lousy brain-cell on our social and planetary healthcare. And several YouTube cynics, after watching Lisi's bizarre 'confetti' video, make precisely this point. One particularly concise offering sums them up: "All I want to do is figure out how to make a living without having to go to work. Is that too much to ask?" Well, too much for theoretical physicists, anyway. Pity they aren't asking socialists that question.

However, 2007 hasn't been groundbreaking in every department, and there have been a fair collection of silly stories around this year. Two now sadly untraceable stories seen this year involve, on the one hand, the invention of 'space money' for all those space tourists of whom the likes of Richard Branson are rubbing their greedy hands together in anticipation, and the intriguing suggestion that NASA's proposed crewed moon-base, due to be ready in 2020, won't use money because internal trading would be seen as divisive in the colony. Extreme efforts to locate this story have turned up nothing, so perhaps it was, after all, a figment of a fevered mind.

On firmer ground, there is the continuing argument over online copyright issues. On the progressive side, the band Radiohead recently released an album online with an invitation to 'pay what you like'. With some paying nothing, but many paying approximately a 'fair price' and one clearly disturbed enthusiast paying over £700, other bands are likely to follow this innovation. As this column has previously noted, the fight to preserve copyright online is viewed by many as a lost cause, and many

entertainers now seek to recoup through live appearances and promotions instead of through the music. Elsewhere, a wonderful initiative by a Canadian student resulted in thousands of previously unobtainable and out of copyright musical scores being placed online, for any budding pianist to have a go at. But, like the proverbial turd on a bowling green, an Austrian company has appeared on the scene with an international, and unprecedented lawsuit which, on the mere suspicion that there might somewhere be one manuscript still under copyright, has succeeded in closing down this free resource and depriving musicians everywhere of harmless fun (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/7074786.stm> [2]).

Anyone who has ever sworn at a Satnav device will be interested in two conflicting stories, one of which asserts that Satnav is better and safer than using maps (*New Scientist*, 4 August), the other reporting a litany of building damage and road bridge demolitions resulting from large lorries being sent down totally unsuitable roads by their 'eye in the sky' (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/south_west/7088105.stm [3]). It might be wise to see in this perspective the breathless predictions of one robot engineer that humans will be marrying robots within the next 40 years (David Levy, *Love and Sex with Robots*, publishing date 6 November). Jaded socialists will conclude from the above stories that the human race is going off track in more ways than one.

Lastly, of more interest to those socialists interested in the science/religion debate, the second Beyond Belief conference of concerned scientists has just taken place at La Jolla, California. *New Scientist* (10 November) takes a surprisingly disparaging view of scientists like Richard Dawkins who refuse to accord respect to religion, and this may of course be due to their high-minded moral impartiality. Or it may be the fact that they have started taking two-page advertisements from the religious Templeton Foundation, that organisation which, as Dawkins has noted, are prepared to pay huge amounts of money to 'any scientist willing to say something nice about religion'. *New Scientist* would presumably have no comment to make on what must be the oddest news story of the year (BBC Online, 14 September), in which, after huge protests, the Indian Government withdrew a report to the Supreme Court which dared to claim that a rocky formation lying between the Indian coast and Sri Lanka was not in fact a bridge built by the god Ram and his army of monkeys but was a natural geological feature. Work on the shipping canal project was disrupted for months and the Interior Minister's resignation was demanded. Who said there's no fun in fundamentalism?

Letters

Living outside capitalism?

Dear Editors

In talking about freeganism (*Socialist Standard*, October), much of the media has focused on food and lifestyle, which is what plays best in a society obsessed by spectacle. Most freegans I know are very politically motivated, which some of the articles touch on. Many of us are involved in grassroots and direct action projects, and I'd say a lot of our work would fall into the "deep ecology" category.

Although the NYC-based group started as an offshoot of an anarchist collective called the Activism Center at Wetlands Preserve, there is no party line among freegans. As of 2003 many people across the world already thought of themselves as freegans; the freegan.info website gathered lots of existing info and resources on the subject. Some of us are primitivists, many others are not. There are freegans who are animal rights activists, liberal ecologists, Christians, and various flavors of leftists.

But we are united in our desire to boycott capitalism and its products to the greatest extent we can. Most of us believe that global industrialism, and its drive towards an ever multiplying glut of unneeded commodities, does great harm to all living things. We don't believe humans have a right to all of the world's resources, even if we shared them equally among us. We do not see socialist governments doing a better job with it - look at what's happening in China, for example.

We realize that our practice is seen as extreme, but we don't think turning one's back on mass consumer culture has to be a marginal activity. We're seeing lots of people inspired to reduce their consumption - take a look at the book *Not Buying It*, the internet support groups called The Compact, writing by Colin Beavan (aka No Impact Man), the "freegan experiment" recently undertaken by journalist Raina Kelley in *Newsweek*, a very mainstream US magazine. Even without political analysis or motivation, we think the consistent practice of not-buying, refusing to let your relations and life be mediated by commodities, is powerful in itself, and leads people to see the world differently.

And yes, we use the internet, we use phones, many of us have jobs, many of us pay rent or own our homes, some of us own motorized vehicles. These are clear contradictions. Our goal is to live outside of capitalism to as great an extent possible, but as you note, capitalism is very much the dominant force. Like many activists before us, our aim is to create a new world in the shell of the old.

Here's to dialogue among those of us working for social change!

Madeline Nelson for freegan.info

Reply:

If you want to try and "boycott" and "live outside of" capitalism, that's up to you. We don't think it's very practical or a way of ending capitalism. Capitalism can only be done away with by the conscious political action of a majority of the population with a view to making the world's resources the common heritage of all. In such a socialist world the wastes of capitalism (advertising, packaging, consumerism as well as armaments and everything to do with buying and selling) would be eliminated and the overall consumption of resources per head reduced while still allowing people to consume better food, housing, health care, and the other things needed (desperately needed in many parts of the world) for a decent life.

We are not "primitivists" and reject the idea that it is industrial production as such that has caused the problem of wasted resources; this is caused by the misuse of industrialism in the cause of profit. Industrial production is in fact essential if the reasonable needs of the world's population are to be met. It's the same with "globalization": there is nothing wrong with a more united world; the problem is capitalist financial globalization.

We don't think China is socialist, so what's happening there is irrelevant as an argument against socialism. The Chinese government is a capitalist government (a "socialist government" is a contradiction in terms) presiding over the development of capitalism there with all its attendant problems - *Editors*.

Global warming - what is it?

Global warming is an increase in mean global temperature, which is an average of temperatures taken in various parts of the world at near surface level on land and sea. It's now about 14.6° Celsius (about 58° in old money). On a mild December day in Britain it could be more or less that temperature outside. But of course this is a pure coincidence. In most other parts of the world the temperature today will have been quite different. That's because it's an average. Actually, the absolute figure is pretty meaningless, which is why commentators generally fix a base year and compare changes since that year.

More or less reliable statistics have existed only since 1880 and these show that the average global temperature in 2000 was 0.5°C higher than in 1900. But this was not a continuous rise. It rose from the 1900s to 1940s, then fell in the 1950s and 1960s, and has been rising since the 1970s. The average temperature in the 70s was 14.01. Today it's about 14.6, a rise of 0.6°. So, while it is not accurate to say (as some do) that temperatures have been rising since 1900 or since the industrial revolution, the world does seem to be currently warming - even though a century, let alone a few

decades is the equivalent of a second in geological time over which changes in global temperatures (Ice Ages and Warm Periods) are measured.

Changes in the Earth's temperature also mean changes in the Earth's climate or, rather, since there's no such thing as a single Earth climate, in the climates of the different parts of the world. When the Earth warms up this means, for instance, that the polar ice caps decrease in size and that glaciers everywhere retreat. Which is happening now.

So, it can be accepted that we are living in a period when the Earth is warming at least temporarily and that this is resulting in climate change.

The big question is: what is causing this? We know that in the past the Earth has warmed and cooled and that this has been due to natural phenomena such as volcanic activity, changes in the intensity of solar radiation or changes in the Earth's tilt towards the Sun or its orbit round the Sun. Some scientists are suggesting that this is the case now, that the Earth is just warming up after the "Little Ice Age" that lasted from 1500 to 1850 and which may partly have been caused by a reduction in solar radiation.

But the majority of scientists take the view, to quote from a recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) which groups hundreds of scientists, specialists in their field, from all over the world:

"Most of the observed increase in globally averaged temperatures since the mid-20th century is very likely due to the observed increase in anthropogenic greenhouse gas concentrations".

Burning fossil fuels releases the greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide (CO₂), into the atmosphere. CO₂ is called a greenhouse gas because, though it does not prevent heat from the Sun reaching the Earth, it prevents some of it from radiating back. Which is a good thing actually, since we need this. Without any greenhouse gases in the atmosphere the average world temperature would be minus 18C.

At the time of the industrial revolution and for thousands of years before the average amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere has been estimated as about 280 parts per million or ppm (in other words, out of every million molecules in the air 280 were CO₂, not much: 0.00028%). In 1958 when this was first measured (as opposed to estimated from other data) it was 315. In 2000 it was 367. Today it is near 380 – and rising. A word of caution is in order here. CO₂ is not the only greenhouse gas in the atmosphere. There are others, especially methane (which is a product of agriculture). Total greenhouse gas presence in the atmosphere is measured in terms of CO₂ equivalent. Today this is about 430 ppm. And this is the figure that is generally referred to in discussions on the subject. It's as well to be aware that when this figure is quoted not all of it is made up of CO₂, but is a figure for all greenhouse gases. CO₂ equivalent is about 15 percent higher than the figure for CO₂ alone.

Socialists are not scientists so all we can do is to exercise critical thinking while taking into account what the majority of scientists in the field have concluded, knowing that they could be wrong.

The majority of scientists in the fields involved have concluded that the undeniable rise in average global temperatures has been caused since at least the 1970s by the rise in the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere due to the burning of fossil fuels. In other words, that it is man-made or "anthropogenic" as they put it in their language.

What is not clear – scientists are still arguing about it – is what precise temperature rise is caused by the emission of a given extra amount of CO₂. This of course is a key ratio since more and more CO₂ is being released into the atmosphere by the continued burning of coal, oil and gas.

If you assume the "climate sensibility" of CO₂ to be low, then the rise in average global temperature at particular levels will be low. If you consider its "climate sensibility" to be high, then by 2100 the rise could be 2, 3 or 4°C. A 3 or 4°C rise could cause huge problems: sea levels rising by a third to a half a metre (one or two feet), more stormy weather, more forest fires, more droughts and desertification.

So, without necessarily subscribing to the higher figures put forward by the more engaged scientists, it can be accepted that it is desirable to cut back on CO2 emissions. The question we look at in this issue is how likely is this to happen under capitalism given its competitive and anarchic nature?

The politics of climate change

The links between governments and business are inextricable, often murky

Fundamentally there are three elements to the climate change debate, elements of dissimilar weight and influence: first there are the governments and the economy to which they are bound; second is business and the corporations, including the media; and third are the citizens.

There is deliberately no mention here of the planet, the environment, changing weather patterns or natural catastrophes as the planet itself is in no imminent danger. The Earth will continue to survive in one form or another. Humans are not destroying the planet, merely hastening its change and their own demise if they destroy and poison the environment that supports human and other animal species.

Perhaps it is more pertinent and pressing to address the question, why is so much said about global warming and climate change? See this year's IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) reports, Al Gore's highly publicised film and world tour, George Monbiot's book. Yet at the same time, why is so little done to implement a halt, a reversal, a slowing of the trend?

Governments

A look at the first element: governments and the economy are connected by an umbilical cord with the sustenance free flowing, but starve one and you starve the other, although which is the mother and which is the offspring is impossible to tell. Which kind of government is immaterial. This is a truism and not cynicism. China or the US - both with vast economies and influential governments; tiny Monaco and Oman; totalitarian, appointed, partial or universal suffrage, all run to the same rules of capitalism.

According to Neil deMause in the US media report *Extra!* (August 2007), "Tony Blair's government has long been an outspoken advocate of cutting carbon emissions to forestall climate change", with no comment on subsequent (non)action. The Bush administration is well known for withdrawal from the Kyoto Agreement and for weak Environmental Protection Agency reports. The overriding mission of governments and politicians is to stay in place, to remain in control of the agenda, enriching themselves and their cronies and furthering their ambitions for the future.

Business

The second element is business. We live in a homogenised, corporate world, run entirely on capitalist principles. Simply put, everything has to turn a profit at each stage of the line, otherwise it is worthless, expendable. Raw materials, service, investment, packaging, transportation, advertising, marketing, point of sale, with labour at every step, all need their profit in order for a transaction to be viable. Media, run on these same lines, have to toe the line by necessity, not choice, so it is illogical to expect independent, impartial coverage of any topic which may expose inconvenient truths and embarrass important clients. Climate change deniers and sceptics are hired by industry, foundations and government think tanks in order to denounce or reduce the impact of scientific reports of global warming, i.e. to put a positive spin on a negative subject. The *Chicago Tribune* had their chief business correspondent report on "investments in companies likely to benefit from new, stricter environmental laws".

People

The third element to this climate change argument is people, the workers, the workless, the citizens. Along with natural environments and all kinds of plant and animal life, the human species faces a grave threat, although this could be easily missed when listening to politicians and business leaders. It seems, in general, that ordinary folk pay more heed and give more credence to the real authorities when they get the opportunity to hear from them. Hence the growing “green” movements around the world, community self-help groups, pressure groups and the like. Politicians, happy to pass on the responsibility for action rather than tackle it themselves at the root, encourage citizens to turn off lights, TV sets and computers and share cars to work. Businesses talk comfortingly about self-regulation, green up their corporate image and spend inordinate amounts of money yet create ever more emissions from advertising campaigns designed to increase sales of bio-fuels, low energy light bulbs etc. and attempt to assuage consumer guilt with spurious carbon-trading schemes. The onus is put squarely, but not fairly, on the consumer’s shoulders.

It is immediately apparent that these three elements don’t operate in isolation, but are related in various ways. The links between governments and business are inextricable, often murky. The IPCC issued three reports between February and May 2007. This was a joint project between the UN and the World Meteorological Organisation, offering evidence of likely consequences and avoidance of the most catastrophic events of global warming. At the same time the *Guardian* (2 February) reported that the Exxon Mobil-backed American Institute “had offered \$10,000 apiece for scientific articles contradicting the IPCC’s findings.” In April the *New York Times*, whilst reporting negative effects of global warming – heatwaves, floods, storms, fires and droughts – was also keen to balance this with the positives, “some benefits to health such as fewer deaths from cold” and “the greening of cold areas.” One link noted by informed, independent media is that of the ever-revolving-door syndrome, enabling easy passage in either direction between government and business. Much commented on and much complained about examples in the US include the huge K Street lobbying industry, the movements of both unelected appointees, governmental advisors and elected politicians from or into the oil, energy and arms industries board rooms. This has included Rumsfeld, Rice, Cheney and the Bushes themselves. Some parallels in the UK are John Major and the Carlisle Group, Geoffrey Robinson, Peter Mandelson and the Powergen/Enron scam and Walmart’s acquisition of Asda with a little personal help from Tony Blair. (Thanks here to Greg Palast for *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy*.)

Regarding the differing stances taken by the print media, *Extra’s* July/August 2007 investigation into the IPCC’s reports backs up their contention that in this instance the UK media covered the reports more thoroughly and accurately than the US. For example, with regard to the second report, the *Daily Telegraph* and *Guardian* noted such details as government interference, alterations made at the behest of several government delegations to state that millions rather than billions would be at risk from coastal flooding, and that China and Saudi Arabia insisted on diluting some of the wording. But US media (*New York Times*) were criticising China’s influence on the dilutions in the report while at the same time commenting positively on the US’s mostly constructive role. Compare this with the UK *Times’* report that the following statement “North America is expected to experience substantial ecosystem, social and cultural disruption” was removed at the insistence of the US delegation leader Sharon Hays, a White House science aide. Following a number of these insistences of changes to the report several scientists, including one of the co-authors, walked out of the drafting session, refusing to have any more truck with it.

Following the final report in May, media in the US, still clearly in thrall to big business, cite economists and experts linked to the Cato Institute and the American Enterprise Institute who argue that, counter to all the scientific evidence, climate change would actually be good for the US economy. (Bring on the disaster – it’s great for GDP.) It’s often a fine balance for governments needing to be seen and heard to be concerned for the people’s welfare whilst keeping corporate business happy. On this issue a lot of the noise they are making is about cost, monetary cost. Here, with the revolving door in evidence again, is a former power-industry lobbyist, now White House environmental advisor: “there is no leader in the world that is going to be pursuing a strategy that would drive their economies into a deep recession.” So, let’s look at the cost of acting, advise the politicians. Not ‘let’s act’, not ‘let’s ask our populations what they want’, not ‘let’s put humanity first in the frame’. Insurance companies, likewise, are busy assessing and projecting the likely costs of the future.

The third link to be considered, that between corporations and citizens is of a purely commercial nature. Citizens (workers) are a necessary part of the transactions all the way along the line. They are essential as labour for extraction, transportation, production and marketing, etc. and they are also vital as end users, consumers. If they can fill one of these requirements, fine – two, even better. However, for the millions who have no chance of factoring into this equation there is no place at the bargaining table either. They are surplus to requirements, superfluous, not worth considering apart from their use as an example and clear warning to those “fortunate enough” to be inside the loop. In the developed world prisoners are more valuable to business than are the flotsam and jetsam of human society living on the edge in some of the hardest of all places to survive. These are the ones initially who, in great numbers, will bear the brunt of the effects of global warming. To whom can *they* look for protection – recognition even? Corporations have no interest in nil returns, only in repeat business. And loyalty is as long-lived as profit, corporate allegiance to which will trump allegiance to any flag.

As to what can be done, should be done, will be done . . .

It’s easier to say what won’t be done by corporations legally bound to put the profit motive above the public good and by governments dismissive of the collective aspirations of their electorate. Without a doubt certain sections of world society deserve their own speedy demise. People, collectively, have the power to bring about that demise. Governments and corporations are made up of individuals who are, in the main, diametrically opposed to and totally disinterested in the views and opinions of most of the world’s people. But it will be the people, who, by sheer weight of numbers, will end the tyranny that is being waged now by international capitalism on their habitat. People everywhere are shouting *Ya basta!* “Enough!” and are beginning to realise that *their* loyalty is to each other and to the maintenance of a protected, sustainable world environment, not just for now, but for all future generations.

Saving Earth or Saving Profits?

The environment is not under threat from industrial production as such, but from this in the service of profit-seeking.

All forms of vegetable and animal life are part of a network of relations called an “ecosystem” in ecology. Normally this system is self-regulating to the extent that, if an imbalance develops, this is rectified spontaneously, either by the restoration of the previous balance or by the establishment of a new balance.

The problem is that there’s been the industrial revolution: the pollution of water and the ground due to the massive disposal of toxic or non-recyclable wastes and to the use in intensive agriculture of chemical fertilisers, nitrates and pesticides; the pollution of the oceans due to the increase of maritime traffic, the flow from polluted rivers, the shipwreck of oil tankers (70 alone in 1996!), the discharge of toxic, chemical and radioactive waste, desludging at sea, etc; overfishing; the pollution of the air due to the massive use of fossil fuels, the development of the individual motor car, and the clearance by fire of forests (despite these being the lungs of the planet!); industrial accidents (Seveso (1996), Bhopal (1984), Chernobyl (1986), Toulouse (2001)); the emission of greenhouse gases (CO₂) by petrol vehicles and factories, deforestation, leading to global warming and its consequences (rise in the sea level due to the melting of the icepack and of polar and continental glaciers, floods, desertification, storms); acid rain; extinction of living species; introduction of GM organisms; storage of nuclear waste; expansion of towns (where now more than half the world’s population live).

And for a good reason! No State is going to implement legislation which would penalise the competitiveness of its national enterprises in the face of foreign competition. States only take into account environmental questions if they can find an agreement at international level which will disadvantage none of them. But that’s the snag because competition for the appropriation of world profits is one of the bases of the present system. Attempts at international cooperation have already

been made: the League of Nations, then the UN, for example, were set up to “maintain” peace. But the 20th century saw the most devastating and murderous wars in history!

No agreement to limit the activities of the multinationals in their relentless quest for profits is possible. Measures in favour of the environment (and the far-reaching transformation of the productive apparatus and transport system these imply) come up against the interests of enterprises (and their shareholders!) because by increasing costs they decrease profits.

Humans are capable, whatever the form of production, of integrating themselves into a stable ecosystem. That was the case of many “primitive” societies which coexisted in complete harmony with the rest of nature, and there is nothing whatsoever that prevents this being possible today on the basis of industrial technology and methods of production, all the more so that renewable energies exist (wind, solar, tidal, geothermal, waves, biomass, etc) but, for the capitalists, these are a “cost” which penalises them in face of international competition.

So it's not production as such (i. e., the fashioning of nature to meet human needs) which is incompatible with a stable balance of nature, but the application of certain productive methods which disregard natural balances or which involve changes that are too rapid to allow a natural balance to develop.

The preservation of the environment is a social problem which requires humanity to establish a viable and stable relationship with the rest of nature. In practice this implies a society which uses, as far as possible, renewable energy and raw material resources and which practises the recycling of non-renewable resources; a society which, once an appropriate balance with nature has been formed, will tend towards a stable level of production, indeed towards “zero growth”. This does not mean that changes are to be excluded on principle, but that any change will have to respect the environment by taking place at a pace to which nature can adapt. But the employment by capitalism of destructive methods of production has, over two centuries, upset the balance of nature.

Whether it is called “the market economy”, “economic liberalism”, “free enterprise” or any other euphemism, the social system under which we live is capitalism. Under this system the means of the production and distribution of social wealth – the means of society's existence – are the exclusive property of a dominant parasitic minority – the holders of capital, or capitalist class – for whose benefit they are inevitably managed.

As a system governed by economic laws which impose themselves as external constraints on human productive activities, and in which enterprises are in competition with each other to obtain short-term economic gains, capitalism pushes economic decision-makers to adopt productive methods which serve profitability rather than concern for the future.

So it is not “Man” but the capitalist economic system itself which is responsible for ecological problems. In fact, not only have workers no influence over the decisions taken by enterprises but those who do have the power to decide – the capitalists – are themselves subject to the laws of profit and competition.

Of course capitalism has sooner or later to face up to the ecological problems caused by the search for profit, but only afterwards, after the damage has been done. But the ecologists, so critical of “liberal” capitalism, accept, like all the other varieties of reformism, the economic dictatorship of the owning minority since they don't understand the link that exists between the destruction of the environment and the private ownership of the means of production. That is why the Greens were forced to make concessions when, from 1997-2002, they were part of the Jospin government: over the authorisations given by this government of the “plural” Left, in November 1997 and July 1998, for transgenetic maize, over nuclear questions and other matters, not to mention their complicity over “social” questions such as the suppression of 3100 jobs with the closure of the Renault factory at Vilvord or the repression of the occupation of employment offices by the unemployed in 1997, the closure of the naval shipyards in Le Havre in 1998, the calling into question of retirement at age 60 with a full pension, or the suppression of 10,000 hospital beds in the Ile de France in 1999, etc.

Because by definition capitalism can only function in the interest of the capitalists, no palliative, no

rearrangement, no measure, no reform can (nor ever will be able to) subordinate capitalist private property to the general interest. For this reason only the threat of a socialist movement setting down as the only realistic and immediate aim the establishment of social property (hence the name socialism) of society's means of existence so as to ensure their management by (and so in the interest of) the whole community, would be able to force the capitalists to concede reforms favourable to the workers for fear of losing the whole cake.

So it is for building such a movement that we launch an appeal to all workers who understand the opposition and incompatibility of their interests with those of the capitalists, to all those who, concerned about the ceaseless attacks of which we are the victims and of the dangers to which the capitalists are exposing our planet, want not to patch up but to end existing society. Our numerical superiority allows all hope.

It is only after having placed the means of society's existence under the control of the community that we will be able to at last ensure their management, no longer in the selfish interest of their present owners, but this time really in the general interest.

Only then will we be in a position to achieve a world in which the present system of rival States will be replaced by a world community without frontiers, the rationing of money and the wages system by free access to the wealth produced, competition by cooperation, and class antagonism by social equality.

We can only "cure the planet" by establishing a society without private productive property or profit where humans will be freed from the uncontrollable economic laws of the pursuit of profit and the accumulation of capital. In short, only a world socialist society, based on the common ownership and democratic control of natural resources, is compatible with production that respects the natural environment.

- translated from a leaflet distributed by socialists in France.

Cooking the Books 1: Buying to leave empty

In the 1970s Centrepont, a 32-storey office block in the centre of London at the junction between Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road, was the centre of a scandal. It had been built with money put up by a notorious property tycoon of the time, Harry Hyams. Once built Hyams kept it empty for many years because, with a boom in the property market, its value rose constantly – but only as long as it remained empty; if it had been let the rent, and so its value, would have been fixed for 10-15 years. A classic case of property speculation.

At the same time homelessness was becoming a problem and people, quite rightly, asked why was a building with the amount of space that Centrepont had being kept empty when more and more people had to sleep on the streets or in hostels. It became a symbol of what Edward Heath, the Prime Minister of the time, called in another context "the unacceptable face of capitalism". There is still a housing charity pointedly called "Centrepont".

Today the same problem has arisen again, though not in such a spectacular fashion. According to an article in the Bricks and Mortar section of the *Times* (19 October) there are over a "million vacant homes" in the UK, made up, according to the Empty Homes Agency, of 840,000 actual homes (houses and flats) and 420,000 homes that could be provided in disused commercial property.

One reason is that some owners can't afford to repair them. But there's another reason:

"Another factor is speculation, where a buyer has bought a property for its investment potential but does not wish to find tenants. David Ireland, chief executive of the Empty Homes Agency, says that this is a growing problem, especially in the new-build market, which has attracted 'buy-to-leave' investors who take the view that keeping the property empty will extend its new-build premium.

House prices in recent years have made this worse, as generous capital appreciation has reduced the need of some buyers to secure rental income.”

So, once again, there is homelessness alongside empty homes because market conditions make it more beneficial for the owners to keep them empty rather than let them.

This is par for the course under capitalism where houses are not built primarily for people to live in, but are commodities produced for sale with a view to profit. This is why people have to buy or rent their homes, so realising a profit for the building firms or the landlord – and the middlemen such as banks, building societies and estate agencies.

Houses are different from other commodities in one important respect: they last a long time and are fixed on land. It was in fact the price of the land on which Centrepont was built that went up, not that of the building itself. It's the same with the buy-to-leave-empty houses. And it is this that allows owners, big and small, to speculate on rising land values.

The price of land is “irrational” in the sense that, land, not being the product of labour, has no value in the Marxian sense. Its price depends purely on supply and demand, a pure monopoly price which an owner is able to extract from the rest of society simply because they happen to have a legal right to a piece of the Earth's surface. But then, as a system geared to making profits instead of satisfying needs, the whole capitalist system is irrational from the human point of view.

Respect - in retrospect

We look at the shipwreck of yet another attempt to organise a left-of-Labour reformist party.

Respect – acronym for Respect, Equality, Socialism, Peace, Environment, Community, Trade unionism – was set in January 2004 by George Galloway and the Socialist Workers Party to try to make political capital out of the widespread opposition to the Iraq War.

The SWP is a Leninist vanguard party and as such is always on the look-out for protest movements to take over with a view to recruiting more members and followers for itself. Before the Iraq War the front organisation which the SWP pushed, in a bid to create a left-of-Labour political party it could influence, was the “Socialist Alliance”. But they had been thinking about “playing the Muslim card” since the time of the first Gulf War.

According to “author and academic” Jamal Iqbal, writing in the *East London Advertiser* (8 November):

“Leading figures in the SWP had been advocating the alliance with religious groups for some time. In the 1994 pamphlet, *Prophet and the Proletariat*, Chris Harman – then as now one of the SWP's chief ideologists – argued that the party should make common cause on the issue of ‘anti-imperialism’ with Islamists, in part as a way of recruiting their members”.

Much to the annoyance of others who had participated in the project, the SWP decided to pull the plug on the “Socialist Alliance” so that its members could concentrate on building up and controlling Respect. For a while the strategy of building up Respect as a left-wing alternative to Labour seemed to be working. In the 2004 European Parliament and London Assembly elections Respect polled over a quarter of million votes. Then, in the General Election the following year, Galloway scored a spectacular victory in the Bethnal Green and Bow constituency in the East End of London over the sitting Labour MP, Oona King, becoming the first left-of-Labour MP to be elected at a General Election since 1945.

Galloway's victory was followed by an equally spectacular breakthrough at local level, when 12 Respect councillors were elected to Tower Hamlets borough council where they became the official opposition to Labour ahead of the Tories and the Liberals. Some on the left saw this as the beginning of an electoral challenge to Labour from the left which could spread. But they overlooked two things.

First, that all 12 Respect councillors were of Bangladeshi origin and had been elected, not as leftwingers, but on the basis of Muslim “communalism”, of playing the Muslim card to win the Muslim vote. Second, that not far away in Dagenham there was another spectacular result: the British National Party with 11 councillors emerged as official opposition. Their votes had been obtained by playing the “white working class” and “anti-Muslim” card – and there are more “white workers” in Britain than “Muslims”. What Respect and the SWP were doing was splitting the working class on religious and communalist lines and in effect opening the door for the BNP.

Now the whole thing has blown up in their face. In September Galloway issued a circular denouncing the SWP’s stranglehold on Respect. He and his supporters began to organise to put the SWP in its place. The SWP responded by expelling some of its members who refused to break with Galloway and then provoking a split in Respect.

At local level, in Tower Hamlets, this took the form of four councillors breaking away from the Respect group and forming a new “Respect (Independent)” group on the council. Their leader was Councillor Oliur Rahman who, as Respect candidate in Poplar and Canning Town at the 2005 General Election, had come third, polling a respectable 6573 votes or 17 percent. According to the local paper, their press conference on 29 October to announce the breakaway “was overseen by John Rees, the main man in the Socialist Workers Party and still currently the national secretary of Respect” (*East London Advertiser*, 1 November).

In a letter in the local paper the following week, expelled SWP members Ken Ovenden and Rob Haveman revealed that two of the breakaway councillors were card-carrying members of the SWP. Their letter was also revealing in other respects as it was written by two people who until a month or so ago had been leading SWP “cadres” (even though, as Galloway’s parliamentary assistants, their salaries are paid out of his expenses as an MP):

“It is extremely regrettable that a fundamental division has occurred in the Respect between the leadership of a very small organisation called the Socialist Workers Party and almost everyone else in Respect. The SWP acquired a stranglehold over our organisation, which has caused a deep rift at national level. Our MP George Galloway (Bethnal Green and Bow) raised criticisms of the direction the national organisation was heading in August. Instead of a reasoned response from senior SWP members, the criticisms were met with growing hysteria. This has finally come to a head, with the SWP leadership seeking to undermine the democratic structures of Respect and abusing many of its leading members. The SWP has also sowed the seeds of division which have seen four Tower Hamlets councillors turn their backs on Respect after trying to stage a coup against the democratically-elected group leader. Two of these councillors are SWP members and the other two are the SWP’s closest allies. If they had any principles, they would stand as SWP candidates – but know they would get no votes.” (*East London Advertiser*, 8 November).

Respect’s annual conference was to have been held on 17 November. What happened was that two conferences were held that day, one organised and controlled by the SWP and the other by Galloway and his supporters. Respect has split into two rival organisations. It remains to be seen what the political fall-out will be.

There are a number of lessons to be learned from this.

First, the dishonest tactics of Leninist groups such as the SWP which set up front organisations to attract the support of well-meaning people concerned about some issue. The honest approach would be to say “we are the SWP, this is what we stand for, join us if you agree”. But this is not how Leninist organisations operate. For them, workers are not politically intelligent enough to work things out for themselves and so need to be led – by them. They see themselves as leaders and discontented workers merely as foot soldiers to be used to further their political influence and, ultimately, to help them into power. They really are officers looking for infantry.

Second, as workers are not that stupid, they eventually get found out. This happened once before, in the 1970s, when the SWP (and its predecessor IS) managed to obtain considerable influence over the rank-and-file shop stewards movement of the time. They thought they were using the movement for their own Leninist ends. The shop stewards went along with this because they welcomed the

research work done by SWP academics and students and the printing facilities the SWP provided. At some point the SWP leadership decided to tighten its control. The shop stewards demurred and eventually a whole section of the SWP was expelled for syndicalist deviationism.

Third, playing the Muslim card always was playing with fire. The Islamist groups the SWP worked with and hoped to influence were never going to be manipulated by secular Leninists. Once again it was a question of who was using who and of when those who the SWP thought they could manipulate would turn on them. The SWP – together with Galloway and his supporters – must take a heavy responsibility, having encouraged a split in working class in Britain on communalist lines. The SWP might now try to take up a more secularist position, but the damage has been done. Not only have they burnt their own fingers, but they have left a legacy which genuine socialists will have to undo by re-asserting the need for working class to organise on class, not communal, lines.

Cooking the Books 2: Cameron's hindquarters

Last month Tory leader David Cameron was in Manchester. His speech-writer reminded him of that city's past associations:

"Manchester became great in the 19th century when the words 'Manchester liberalism' stood for free trade and capitalism. And of course the city inspired another idea – Friedrich Engels lived here for many years and he wrote about the dark side of the industrial revolution".

Cameron was there to launch what some might regard as a contradiction in terms: the Conservative Co-operative Movement. After saying he thought it was a shame that the co-op movement had been associated with the political left, he explained:

"there have always been people on the centre-right concerned about the effects of capitalism on the social fabric. Men like Carlyle and Disraeli, following the tradition of Edmund Burke and Adam Smith himself, who recognised at the outset of the industrial revolution that profit was not the only organising principle of a healthy society" (news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7084865.stm).

He also repudiated one of Thatcher's most notorious sayings by admitting that "there is such a thing as society – it's just not the same thing as the state".

The free-marketers at the Adam Smith Institute must be cringing and "to the right of Genghis Khan" might be a more accurate description of the views of Thomas Carlyle than "centre right".

Carlyle (who invented the term "the cash nexus" to describe how capitalism was reducing the relations between people to money ones) and Disraeli (who wrote a novel about there being "two nations" in England) were prominent members in the 1840s of a group of Tories who called themselves "Young England". Engels did not just write about the dark side of the industrial revolution. He also wrote about "Young England", in the *Communist Manifesto* he drafted with Marx:

"Owing to their historical position, it became the vocation of the aristocracies of France and England to write pamphlets against modern bourgeois society. . . In order to arouse sympathy, the aristocracy were obliged to lose sight, apparently, of their own interests, and to formulate their indictment against the bourgeoisie in the interest of the exploited working class alone. Thus the aristocracy took their revenge by singing lampoons on their new master, and whispering in his ears sinister prophecies of coming catastrophe. . . The aristocracy, in order to rally the people to them, waved the proletarian alms-bag in front for a banner. But the people, so often as it joined them, saw on their hindquarters the old feudal coats of arms, and deserted with loud and irreverent laughter. One section of the French Legitimists and 'Young England' exhibited this spectacle".

No doubt, as a Tory Toff who went to Eton, there will be a feudal coat of arms somewhere on Cameron's hindquarters, but much more prominently displayed will be the words "Opportunist Professional Politician" – which workers should equally greet with loud and irreverent laughter.

Booms and Slums

Anyone who has read Frederick Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England* will long remember much of what it says. Page after page describes the lives of workers in the big cities in 1844. Two boys in London, for instance, were arrested for stealing a half-cooked calf's foot from a shop: the magistrate discovered that their mother had sold or pawned all the family's possessions in order to buy food. Many others had little or no furniture and slept on the floor, covered in rags.

The accounts of slum dwellings are sometimes hard to believe. Perhaps the worst was the Little Ireland area of Manchester, where four thousand people lived in overcrowded, unsanitary, decrepit cottages and the filth and stench were all but intolerable. Similar conditions were found in Liverpool, Leeds, Bradford, Glasgow, and so on. It is difficult to disagree with Engels' statement that working people were enduring 'a condition unworthy of human beings'.

In 1971 Robert Roberts published *The Classic Slum*, an account of his upbringing in Salford in the early twentieth century. In 1910, he records, his mother cajoled their landlord into installing a cast-iron bath (which meant an extra shilling a week in rent). Several neighbours came to look at the bath, its taps and so on: they had never used or even seen a bath before. Workers scrimped and saved to afford a rag rug and a couple of framed pictures, let alone 'luxuries' such as a watch or a bike. Getting by from week to week often relied on pawning their Sunday best clothes. In looking back at his childhood and the lives of his neighbours, Roberts refers to 'the spoiled complexions, the mouths full of rotten teeth, the varicose veins, the ignorance of simple hygiene, the intelligence stifled and the endless battle merely to keep clean'. Such were the good old days amid the flourishing of the British Empire.

And is it all just in the Victorian and Edwardian past? While homelessness and bad housing still exist, can it be said that slums — crowded, filthy, nasty — are no longer the lot of most? Mike Davis' book *Planet of Slums* describes a world where one in three of the urban population, mainly in the 'Third World', live in slums. It goes without saying that slum life is bad for your health and life expectancy. Landslides, floods and earthquakes threaten those who live in shoddy housing in marginal areas. Fires, whether accidental or deliberately set by property developers, can spread so fast that nobody can escape.

Sanitation is another disaster area, with the situation having changed little since Engels' day. Sewage systems are virtually non-existent in many cities: Davis cites one slum area in Nairobi which had just ten working toilets for forty thousand people. But there is hope for the future, as in some places pay toilets have become a hugely profitable growth industry — though of course they're not so convenient for the millions who cannot afford to use them.

Profiting from poverty is widespread. Such is the population density in slums that landlords make plenty of money from even the poorest neighbourhoods. Many cities in Asia and Africa are effectively owned by small numbers of landlords, and those who rent from them are the most powerless of all. Squatting becomes increasingly difficult as vacant land is developed and forcible evictions increase: over three-quarters of a million evicted in Harare in 2005, for instance. Slum-dwellers often have little choice but to fight back by building their own homes or resorting to food riots.

Cities like Manchester in Engels' time were essentially the result of the Industrial Revolution. But in contrast, Davis argues, the growth of megacities and hence of megaslums over the last twenty years or so has been marked by deindustrialisation, as factories have closed in places such as Mumbai, Johannesburg and Sao Paulo. Like Mexico City and Jakarta, these have enormous populations but far smaller economies. The new slums are also mostly on the peripheries of the cities rather than in inner-city areas, and so usually lack any half-way decent transport infrastructure.

The financial institutions of global capitalism have played a major role in maintaining the regime of slum living. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have helped finance slum

'improvement' programmes in city after city, via privatisation of housing supply and the ending of food subsidies. The result has not been to eradicate slums, of course, but to spread 'informal' employment which lacks contracts and bargaining power. Along with this has come an expansion of child labour along the lines recorded by Engels and Dickens.

The development of capitalism, then, has not done away with the horrors of slums. Inadequate housing continues to exist in 'advanced' countries, with an estimated 100,000 homeless people in Los Angeles and one child in seven growing up in bad housing in the UK. Perhaps two million American families will lose their homes over the next couple of years, as the sub-prime crisis bites. Worldwide, as many as one billion people live — or do their best to create some kind of life — in slums. While the rich reside in their gated communities, the poor dwell in conditions of scarcely-imaginable squalor, marginalised in terms of work and family life. A Socialist society would face a tremendous task in replacing slums with decent housing, but that is a problem that capitalism can never tackle let alone solve.

Connecting the dots

Remember the "Good Old Days" before Nintendo, when the cutting edge of gaming technology was a page full of dots and numbers in some comic or magazine? Starting at 1 a line was drawn sequentially through all of the numbered dots and gradually a pattern emerged until eventually we were presented with an elephant or some other familiar creature, building or wonder of engineering. Sometimes the compilers of these dot-pictures were pretty clever and by adding background or texture they could keep you guessing for ages before the brain sorted the apparently random outline into a recognisable pattern. Most times it was possible to catch on really quickly and the general response was an immediate loss of interest and a move on to the next page of dots and numbers where the pattern would be repeated, over and over.

Understanding capitalism, our answers to it as Socialists and why it's so important for us to spread awareness of Socialism is, I find, a bit like joining the dots.

The capitalists want to keep everyone on Join the Dots Book 1; get up - open the book - pick up pencil - start - get up - open the book - pick up pencil - you get the picture. The pattern on each page is obvious, easy to see and unchangeable. Getting a little bored? Another chocolate, episode of Big Brother or shopping trip for stuff you don't need or really want will keep you docile and pliable. Oh! and don't forget to keep turning the pages and joining a few dots, there's the rent or mortgage to pay, remember?

As Socialists we've moved on from Book 1. We've got beyond the "Well, I know the system's not perfect, but what else is there? There's nothing I can do" stage. Some of us might still be joining background or texture dots, and we may not have sussed the complete picture yet, but it's certainly not that same old, tired elephant and, in fact, it's looking more and more like an albatross.

We workers in the developed world are still slaves to capital, despite some outward appearances. The actual chains and leg-irons may have disappeared but their virtual equivalents are still there in the form of the need to exchange our labour power for the means of survival and to meet our responsibilities to our families.

Think about it. What a clever dot-picture capital has created; in the beginning the slaves were chained to the galley oars and the masters beat the drum and wielded the whip. But how to enjoy the fruits of their labours when every hour was taken up with thumping the drum and keeping the slaves in line? The answer was simple enough, unchain a couple of slaves from the oars, give them status, a title (overseer or manager), and a whip. They would need a set of virtual leg-irons (do the job right or you'll end up down there with the slaves again) of course, but otherwise capital has got itself a very useful ally and can now retire to the yacht in Cannes secure in the knowledge that someone else's labour will pick up the tab for the Pimms, canapés and roulette chips.

The ruse is simple and is presently working well enough; if enough of us are kept reasonably satisfied with our lot and reminded often enough of the dangers of bucking the system (loss of income, loss of status, debt, homelessness), if we allow ourselves to be anaesthetised by capital's drugs of consumption, trivialisation and obsession with personalities, then the future is indeed bleak for the majority of our world.

Moving beyond Book 1 is not a matter of education or intelligence but *is* a matter of awareness. Understanding the big spin-off for capital from its strategy of divide and conquer, and doing something to counter the lies and propaganda is what *our* job is all about. In the developed world many think they stand above the majority of humankind, as a foreman or manager, totally failing to realise that there is a common cause among all workers, whatever we earn.

How often do we hear the opinion, amplified in the capitalist media, that "I've had to work for everything I have" or "I don't pay my taxes to give hand-outs to parasites and illegal immigrants" or "Bloody foreigners, taking all our jobs"? The list is endless. Us against Them, except it's the wrong "Them". How can we be so stupid that we eulogise about Bill Gates giving away millions to the poor and desperate of the world, without a single question being raised about why the poor and desperate are in that state in such numbers and about the role played by the likes of Gates and his ilk in their condition?

This illusion that we are not in shackles will take some cracking; people earning a wage or salary can't see them as the chains of capital. They feel so free that they actually think that *they* are paying taxes for the good of *their* country when in actuality wages, taxes, social insurance, etc. are all simply an overhead of capital, an overhead well worth carrying in order to buy off unrest and perpetuate the divisions between the workers of the world.

Our challenge as socialists is to help others move on from Book 1 to Book 2 and beyond; to help people see through the mind-numbing illusions to the reality of what Capitalism is; what it's doing to them and what it's doing for the capitalists. We need to be bridges for people, helping them to shake off their conditioning, enabling them to find out more for themselves. In the process they'll join up more dots - and so will we.

Book and Film Reviews

Routine and complex labour

How to make opportunity equal: race and contributive justice. By Paul Gomberg. Blackwell, 2007.

The author of this slimmish book is a black American philosophy professor. He discusses race or racism on nearly every page, at one point making the extreme claim that "Race is class made visible and vicious." But race is arguably not the main theme of the book. Gomberg believes that "we need to share labor, including the boring work most of us like to avoid, if everyone is to have an opportunity to develop all of their abilities."

The good news is that the author knows something about socialism and appears to like the prospect: "Imagine a society without markets and their insistence on productive efficiency. Production may be oriented toward meeting needs, not producing whatever can be sold profitably to those with money." And "We each benefit from the production of needed things because we each receive from the common stock."

But the bad news is that other passages in the book reveal his confusion about what socialism means: "Market socialism does not abolish this norm [that each advances economically by their own efforts] but shifts the locus of responsibility from the individual to the worker-run firm." And Gomberg writes about "large working-class socialist and communist parties" in Europe, parties that may be given those labels but actually support some form of capitalism.

Gomberg writes much about what he sees as the division between routine and complex labour, but leaves us unclear about what this distinction is and how it affects society. At one point he says the "division between the organization of labor tasks and the execution of those tasks is the division of society into a class society of laborers and those for whom they labor." - in short, a society divided into workers and capitalists. But elsewhere he claims that "the division between complex and routine labor is primarily a division within the working class."

This contradiction can be resolved only if we accept that within capitalism there are two kinds of distinction: between the owners and non-owners of capital and a distinction (perhaps better described as a gradation) between those who supply routine or complex labour, unskilled or skilled, at lower or higher rates of pay, giving orders to other workers or not doing so.

Gomberg's front cover features a black worker sweeping the stairs. Socialists living in the capitalist world often have to do unpleasant work in oppressive conditions to get money to live. When work is done to meet the needs of people not capital there may be some horse-trading about who does what and for how long. But sociable volunteering, not monetary compulsion, will be the name of the game.

STAN PARKER

Gods, ancient and modern

UFO Religion. Inside Flying Saucer Cults and Culture. By Gregory L. Reece. IB Tauris. 2007. £11.99

Why should socialists be interested in UFOs? Well, if they really are alien spacecraft then all humans should want to know the truth about them. UFOs should really be called UAPs - unidentified aerial phenomena rather than unidentified flying objects - since there undoubtedly are unusual aerial phenomena that do need explaining, and generally can be in terms of weather balloons, reflections, optical illusions, etc. To call them "flying objects" is to beg the question.

Reece is not really interested in those he calls the "nuts and bolts" ufologists - those who seek to employ scientific methods to gather verifiable evidence that they are alien spacecraft - even if he thinks that haven't had any success in this. His interest is those who believe in all sorts of weird and wonderful stories about them - the abductees, the contactees and those who say that aliens built the Pyramids and lived in Atlantis.

His is a book about why some people believe these things in the same way as others believe in the myths propagated by the various religions. Hence the book's title. His style is gently mocking. For him, those who claim to have been abducted and experimented on or had sex with aliens are either hoaxers, fantasists, attention-seekers or in need of psychiatric help.

It's the "contactees" - those who claimed to have met aliens and to have come back with a message from them - who really interest him. In the 1950s and 60s the message they reported was that the visiting aliens wanted us humans to achieve world peace and harmony and to stop testing atomic bombs in the atmosphere. Those who think that aliens built the Pyramids and the like also saw aliens as higher beings trying to help us.

Reece's conclusion is that these imagined aliens are "modern gods" with a modernised version of what the god(s) of traditional religions are said to teach. Like them, they are the creation of the human mind, a reflection of a human aspiration for a world of peace and harmony.

He is concerned, however, that, in recent years, some of these new gods have turned out to be as nasty as the old ones. He instances Scientology and the Heaven's Gate cult, both of which preach, in a modernised form, the old anti-human dogma that our bodies are evil and that the aim of life is to prepare for our "souls" (considered by these two cults to have come from outer space) to leave them so that we can progress to a higher dimension. I hadn't realised before that the Mormons believe

that their god was originally an extra-terrestrial. One now wants to become the US President as if the present incumbent didn't have nutty enough religious views.

ALB

Popular change

Thinking Allowed. A Manifesto for Successful Political Change in Britain and the World.

By Sarah Young. Northern Sky, PO Box 21548, Stirling FK8 1YY.

This short, 30-page pamphlet criticises capitalism for treating us as passive consumers, denying us any control of our lives. The author rejects us following any of the "revolutionary parties of the left" as a supposed way-out, precisely because they too are organised on a top-down basis and only seek passive followers, discouraging popular participation.

She sees the embryo of a popular, participatory revolutionary movement in the voluntary activities, "vocational work" (people seeking "to serve the common good by taking on jobs in education, health or other socially related work, and often on low pay") and single issue campaigns that thousands are already engaged in.

While accepting that these show that people are capable of organising (and should organise) themselves without leaders (whether career politicians or professional revolutionaries), we have to say that she exaggerates the potential of such activities and seriously underestimates the need for any do-it-yourself revolutionary movement such as we favour too to be consciously revolutionary.

ALB

Sicko

Film written and directed by Michael Moore.

What a devastating indictment of the US health care system this film is! Fifty million Americans have no health insurance, and eighteen thousand die because of this each year. The focus of the film, however, is on those who do have such insurance — and are therefore not the most badly off — but find it of little use when they need it most.

The insurance is with health maintenance organisations or HMOs, though they should really be called wealth maintenance organisations, as they are most concerned about the wealth of their owners and top executives. People pay for health insurance or have it provided by their employer but, when it comes to the crunch and they fall ill or have an accident, the HMO will try every trick in the book to avoid paying up. Surgical procedures may be categorised as experimental and therefore not covered, or people may be denied treatment because they did not disclose some prior medical condition or even failed to diagnose it themselves.

It is the individual cases Moore presents that give the film its impact. One child died because the HMO insisted she be treated in one of their own establishments rather than the hospital that the ambulance had taken her to. A man who had lost the tips of two fingers in an accident with a saw had to choose which one should be replaced, as he could not afford both. A sick and disoriented woman was dumped in the street by the hospital when she could not pay her bills.

Moore contrasts the American system with those in Canada, Cuba, France and the UK. He makes great play with the fact that the cashier in an NHS hospital doesn't receive payments from patients but instead pays out, reimbursing some of them for their travel expenses. The original NHS idea of free treatment is trotted out, courtesy of Tony Benn, but disappointingly there is no discussion of the

extent to which it no longer applies. Further, there's little if any investigation of the real quality of health treatment in these countries.

All in all, though, this is a forceful attack on the idea that medical treatment should be based on considerations of profit. And just before the end comes a refreshing thought, that society should be more concerned with 'we' than with 'me'

PB

50 Years Ago: Sputnik Lunacy - Let's Live on the Earth First!

The sound made by the Sputniks is, in fact, not of man triumphant over nature but of one nation gaining prestige against another. Nobody knows whether Sputniks are weapons or not, but that isn't the point anyway. The big bangs, the bomb tests and the other push-button horror displays are the nations making muscles, like boys preparing for a fight that each hopes to scare the other out of; and now the Russians have made the biggest muscle of all, the visible proof of incredible technical development.

The implications go farther than to America and Britain. The "uncommitted" nations - i.e., those which have not declared or had to give allegiance to the western powers or to Russia - have to take notice. The Sputniks, flashing in the Russian shop-window, have made the American one suddenly dull by comparison. The conception of Russia as a backward, semi-barbaric nation has been pushed aside for one - equally mistaken of a great atomic-age civilization. Inevitably the competition has intensified: America now must have satellites at all costs. Did any space-fiction writer envisage a race to the moon?

There is, indeed, kudos to Russia all along the line, most of all because the Anniversary celebrations served to underline the fact that there were only forty years between the fall of the Czars and the launching of the Sputniks. To keep things in perspective, it should be realized that the development of Russia has been only that of a huge nation in the upsurge of capitalist growth. Within the limits of an earlier time, the growth of Britain in the nineteenth century was equally remarkable; or Germany between 1870 and 1914, from a collection of three-halfpenny states to a great power.

(From front page article by R. Coster, *Socialist Standard*, December 1957)

Greasy Pole: It's Nice to Have Friends



[4]

In Saudi, helping the police with their enquiries can mean systematic torture in a room described by a British man roped in in 2001 as having "...years' worth of blood on the floor that nobody bothered to clean".

As a TV spectacle it was some way behind *Coronation Street's* Sarah Platt and Jason Grimshaw navigating their way through a chaotic, unpromising wedding. The other soap opera, at Buckingham Palace, had a cast of hundreds, rather more expensively dressed than our Sarah and Jason and making their way to the banquet through a corridor of bowing flunkeys. At their head the Queen strode as grimly as if she was flouncing out of (or should that be into?) a session with a top society photographer. Prince Philip's face hinted that he might have been reviewing his stock of undiplomatic racist quips. And there was the king of Saudi Arabia otherwise known as The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Abdullah Bin Abdul Azaz Al Saud, whose very presence reveals a lot about that country - for example the fact that he is one of his father's 37 sons.

About Saudi Arabia more later. Of more pressing interest about the guests at that banquet to welcome the 82 year old dictator of that brutal., oil rich country was Gordon Brown parading rigidly encased in white tie and tails, perhaps trying to hide his embarrassment in submerged conversation with a wide-eyed, scuttling Lord Chancellor Jack Straw, similarly garbed. What did they find to talk about, so intently? Was it the fact that Brown always made a point of refusing to get himself up in the manner demanded by the etiquette of such occasions - like the London Lord Mayor's Mansion House banquet? Brown's stand on this matter - he once let it be known it was all to do with principle - would cause not a few crimson robes to rustle and not a few chains of office to jangle, in disapproval. His going back on what he called principle was an indication that this was an event far more important than any gathering of over-fed, over-rich City grandees slapping each others' backs and their own comfortable stomachs.

Oil

Saudi Arabia means oil, which also means the attention, and wherever possible the intrusion, of capitalism's great economic and military powers. Crucially, Saudi oil lies close to the surface, which enables it to be extracted faster and cheaper. The first concession to get at the black, vital stuff was granted to a British company in 1933; another, to the American firm Standard Oil Company, in 1934. Symbolically, the company's name was changed in 1944 to ARAMCO - Arabian American Oil Company - and as larger reserves were found other companies came in with capital investment, effectively exerting a stranglehold on the country. Predictably, other American companies were commissioned by ARAMCO to develop the country's infrastructure - the giant Bechtel imported their mammoth plant to lay down roads, ports, power plants and the schools and hospitals to support them. TWA provided a passenger air service, the Ford Foundation advised (which may not be exactly the correct word for what they provided) on administration; and the US Army Engineers set up a TV and broadcasting service and helped develop Saudi Arabia's "defence" industry. The first great oil boom in the early 1950s dramatically altered the country from a bleak, infertile slab of the Middle East, enabling royals who, for all their exalted status, had been able to do little better than live on local dates and milk from camels, to swan around the flesh pots of the Mediterranean in their gleaming yachts and to practically take root in the casinos. This was a startlingly abrupt change, overwhelmingly to the benefit of the ruling families; at a recent air show in Dubai a billionaire Saudi prince ordered a personal luxury version of the Airbus 380 which, with a few essential extras, will set him back somewhere in the region of two hundred and thirty million pounds.

Common Values

At the banquet in Buckingham Palace the Queen took the opportunity to inform the Saudi royal about her esteem for his country and the comfort she takes from the close ties between Saudi and Britain: "It is a great pleasure to welcome King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, to London once more....We have shared values that stem from two great religious traditions...we must continue to work together to promote common values..." Harping on the same happy theme was Kim Howells, who during the 1960s was a left wing student firebrand, then official in the National Union of Mineworkers during the 1984 strike and is now Labour MP for Pontypridd and Foreign Office Minister. Howells is famous for speaking his mind no matter what the consequences; for example as Minister of Culture he felt free to lash out at the Turner Prize candidates as "cold, mechanical, conceptual bull". He is also on record as describing the royal family as "all a bit bonkers" but this did not prevent him agreeing with the Queen about Saudi Arabia as he rhapsodised about those same "shared values" .

We have not yet been told by either the Queen or Howells what they meant by the phrase .Was it the fact that Saudi Arabian women are treated as rather lower than second class, forbidden to go out unless with a male under pain of being beaten up by the uniformed thugs of the chillingly titled Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice? Perhaps they hope that Britain copies the penal system in Saudi, where helping the police with their enquiries can mean systematic torture in a room described by a British man roped in in 2001 as having "...years' worth of blood on the floor that nobody bothered to clean". Or the extravagant use of the death penalty for, among other offenders, actively gay people or anyone having extra-marital sex. According to Amnesty International there have been 124 executions so far this year. These have been mostly by beheading and sometimes in public; an official executioner has set the grisly scene by assuring everyone that he keeps his sword razor sharp and that his children learn to grow up into good Saudis by helping him clean it. "People" he tells us proudly "are amazed at how fast it can separate the head from the body".

In fact it would probably be difficult to find anyone to take seriously that nonsense about "shared values". What connects the ruling elites of Britain and Saudi Arabia is much harsher - the fact that so much of the world's oil is under Saudi control (one estimate puts it as high as 25 percent] and the existence of a mouthwateringly massive export market, including one for billions of pounds worth of armaments, all nourished through an artery of bribery. This is yet another example of human debasement driven by capitalism's profit motive justifying untold lies, cruelty, corruption, murder. It can also persuade Gordon Brown to dress up for an evening out with a pitiless international gangster.

Voice from the Back

CALIFORNIAN NIGHTMARE

The dreadful fires in California that led to death and destruction were well reported in the British press, but what was hardly covered was the plight of the immigrant workers. "Out of the burning brush, from behind canyon rocks, several immigrants bolted toward a group of firefighters, chased not by the border police but by the onrush of flames from one of the biggest wildfires this week. ... Immigrants from south of the border, many illegal, provide the backbone of menial labor in San Diego, picking fruit, cleaning hotel rooms, sweeping walks and mowing lawns. The wildfires, one of the biggest disasters to strike the county, exposed their often-invisible existence in ways that were sometimes deadly. The four bodies were found in a burned area in southeastern San Diego County, a region known for intense illegal immigration. ...Terri Trujillo, who helps the immigrants, checked on those in the canyons, urging them to leave, too, when she left her house in Rancho Peñasquitos ahead of the fires. Ms. Trujillo and others who help the immigrants said they saw several out in the fields as the fires approached and ash fell on them. She said many were afraid to lose their jobs. 'There were Mercedeses and Jaguars pulling out, people evacuating, and the migrants were still working,' said Enrique Morones, who takes food and blankets to the immigrants' camps. 'It's outrageous.' Some of the illegal workers who sought help from the authorities were arrested and deported." (*New York Times*, 27 October) What a comment on capitalism, some workers live in such poverty and insecurity they give up their lives in an attempt to keep a menial weekly wage.

WALL STREET SHUFFLE

We are always being told that capitalism is a competitive system that rewards success and punishes failure, but what are we to make of the following? "Merrill Lynch's directors may be weighing E. Stanley O'Neal's future, but one thing is already guaranteed: a payday of at least \$159 million if he steps down. Mr. O'Neal, the company's chairman and chief executive, is entitled to \$30 million in retirement benefits as well as \$129 million in stock and option holdings, according to an analysis by James F. Reda & Associates using yesterday's share price of \$66.09. That would be on top of the roughly \$160 million he took home in his nearly five years on the job. Under Mr. O'Neal, Merrill moved aggressively into lucrative businesses like the packaging of subprime mortgages and other complex debt securities. ...But those big bets appeared to go bust this week. Merrill announced an

\$8.4 billion write-down, raising questions about whether Mr. O'Neal will keep his job. One thing that he surely will hold onto, though, are the giant paychecks he has collected. 'I lay the blame at the foot of the board,' Frederick E. Rowe Jr., a money manager and president of Investors for Director Accountability. "He was paid a tremendous amount of money to create a loss that is mind-boggling, and he obviously took risks that should never have been taken.'" (*New York Times*, 27 October) He managed to lose \$8.4 billion for the company and can claim \$159 million for his efforts. Who says capitalism isn't crazy?

THIS IS COMMUNISM?

"The United States has more billionaires than any other country: 415 by the last count of Forbes magazine. No. 2, and closing fast? China. A year ago, there were 15 billionaires in China. Now, there are more than 100, according to the widely watched Hurun Report. Forbes has documented 66. ..As much as the bounty of billionaires is a source of pride, it is also a potential cause for concern in a nominally Communist country. Per capita income in China is less than \$1,000 a year." (*New York Times*, 7 November) China is a fast developing capitalist country and just like any other capitalist economy the gap between the rich and the poor is immense.

CHINESE STATISTICS

One of the effects of the rapid expansion of Chinese capitalism is the pollution of the atmosphere and drinking water. This has led to these horrendous statistics. "40% - Percentage by which birth defects among Chinese infants have risen since 2001, according to a government report, which linked the rise to environmental pollution. 460,000 - Number of Chinese who die prematurely every year from exposure to pollution and dirty water." (*Time*, 12 November) This expansion may be leading to the creation of more billionaires, but it is also producing more corpses.

Free Lunch cartoon



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