

# socialist standard

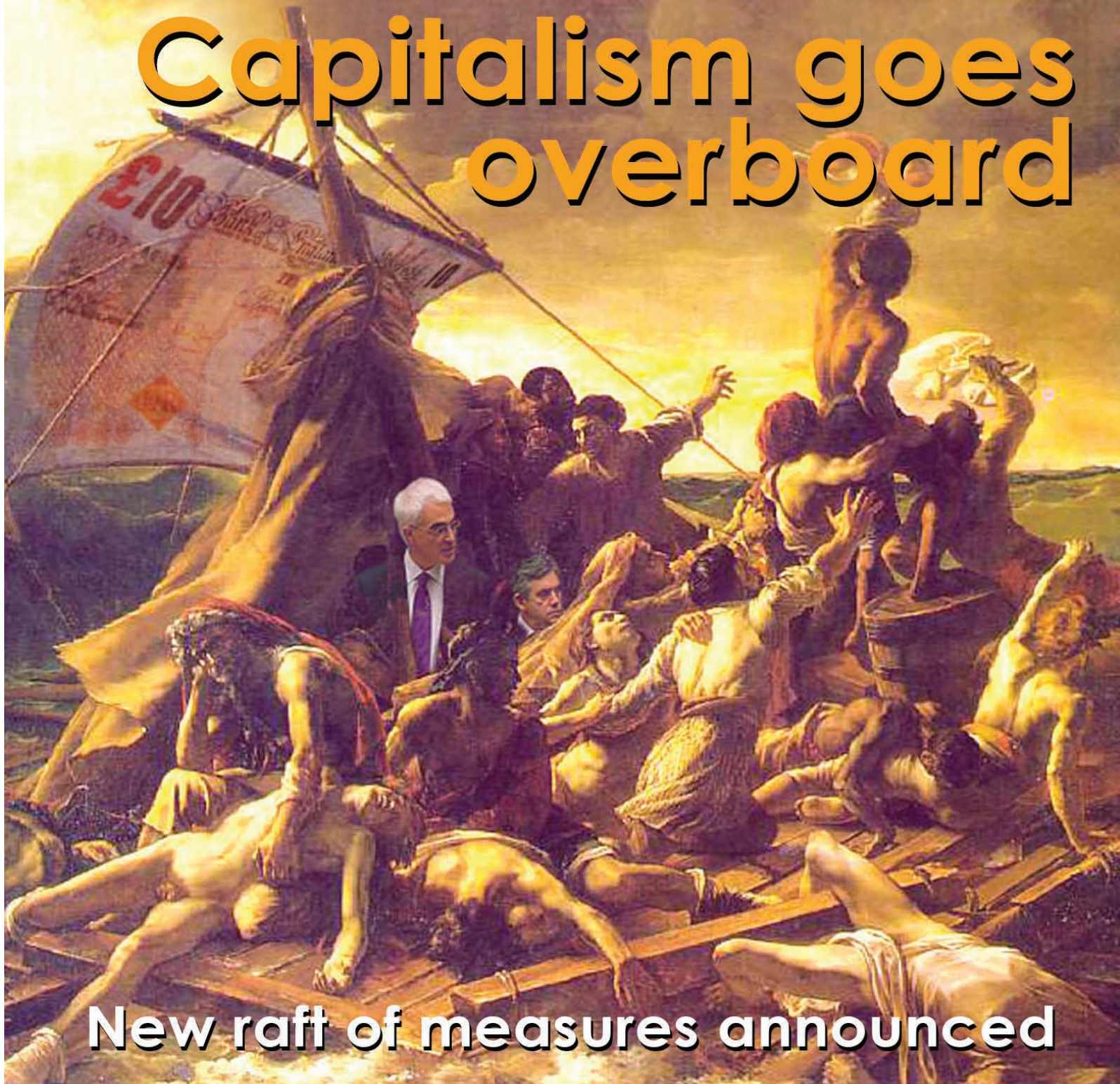


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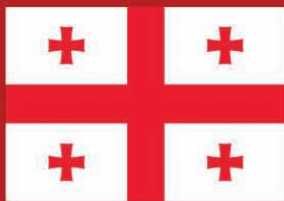
September 2008  
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Journal of The Socialist Party of Great Britain - Companion Party of the World Socialist Movement

## Capitalism goes overboard



### New raft of measures announced



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#### THE SOCIALIST PARTY OF GREAT BRITAIN

The next meeting of the Executive Committee will be on **Saturday 6 September** at the address below. Correspondence should be sent to the General Secretary. All articles, letters and notices should be sent to the editorial committee at: The Socialist Party, 52 Clapham High street, London SW4 7UN.  
**tel: 020 7622 3811**  
**e-mail: [spgb@worldsocialism.org](mailto:spgb@worldsocialism.org)**

## Introducing The Socialist Party

The Socialist Party is like no other political party in Britain. It is made up of people who have joined together because we want to get rid of the profit system and establish real socialism. Our aim is to persuade others to become socialist and act for themselves, organising democratically and without leaders, to bring about the kind of society that we are advocating in this journal. We are solely concerned with building a movement of socialists for socialism. We are not a reformist party with a programme of policies to patch up capitalism.

We use every possible opportunity to make new socialists. We publish pamphlets and books, as well as CDs, DVDs and various other informative material. We also give talks and take part in debates; attend rallies, meetings and demos; run educational conferences; host internet discussion forums, make films presenting our ideas, and contest elections when practical. Socialist literature is available in Arabic, Bengali, Dutch, Esperanto, French, German, Italian, Polish, Spanish, Swedish and Turkish as well as English.

The more of you who join the Socialist Party the more we will be able to get our ideas across, the more experiences we will be able to draw on and greater will be the new ideas for building the movement which you will be able to bring us.

The Socialist Party is an organisation of equals. There is no leader and there are no followers. So, if you are going to join we want you to be sure that you agree fully with what we stand for and that we are satisfied that you understand the case for socialism.

## Editorial

### The Cold War re-heats

ACCORDING TO Clausewitz, the oft-quoted 19th century general and military strategist, war is "the continuation of policy by other means." The recent brief – if brutal – conflict in the Caucasus is yet another example of the everyday nature of capitalism continuing by other means.

The conflict in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which appears to have claimed thousands of lives has been a rare eruption, exposing the tectonic-like political and economic pressures shifting below the surface.

These recent events have been a wake-up call to those still deluded into thinking that the ending of the cold war (which was never an ideological battleground anyway) would mean an end to stand-offs between superpowers, with the ultimate potential for World War 3.

The Cold War has just been re-heated then: but this time round the battle-lines are clearly not drawn on grounds of some supposed ideological differences. There are no great ideological or moral issues at stake here. The protagonists (US and Russia) and their allies are simply rival capitalist economies, eager to secure strategic advantage, access to resources and regional influence.

In particular, in attempting to diversify its oil sourcing away from troublesome regions such as the Middle East, the US is relying on a new pipeline via Georgia which taps into relatively secure sources in Central Asia while avoiding Russian territory.

There are other considerations however. The failure of the centralised command economy version of capitalism as practised by the Soviet Union till its demise almost 20 years ago did not end the cold war, it merely changed the front.

As the economic and political basis for the Warsaw Pact crumbled, the regional military pact NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) has been expanding far beyond its original "north Atlantic" scope, with the states of the former Soviet Union strategically-attractive targets of its recent recruitment drive, as it expands its sphere of influence.

Military conflict is an unavoidable consequence of the everyday conflict of property society. In capitalism all productive resources – most explicitly oil production and distribution – have to be owned and controlled by someone. Modern warfare – with all the waste, devastation and atrocities it brings in its wake – is a problem of capitalism. In contrast, in a moneyless, wageless, classless and stateless socialist society no-one will own any productive resource to the exclusion of anyone else. There will be no laws, rules or coercive forces to administer or police such monopolisation.

The World Socialist Movement is unique as a political movement in clearly and consistently expressing its opposition to war throughout the last hundred years. This is not selective: we oppose all wars, and have done so from World War 1 to Gulf War 2. Our opposition has a simple basis: war is fought over issues of interest to employers, landlords and bosses – the capitalist class, in short – while it is workers, in uniform or civilian clothing, who are the cannon-fodder. The overwhelming majority, the global working class – whether from Georgia (Caucasus) or Georgia (USA), have no interests at stake worth shedding a drop of blood over.

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# Machine, Heal Thyself

ISN'T IT annoying when you approach a red traffic light and have to sit there waiting for it to turn green, despite the fact that there are obviously no other cars or pedestrians coming from any direction? What if the traffic light itself was equipped with a bit of intelligence and could decide to turn green if it was safe, all the while talking to its friends across town, collectively regulating traffic flow according to prevailing conditions? Apart from the shortening of journey times and the saving in carbon emissions, it would be an example of something we are likely to see more and more in the future, the self-configuring network.

An engineered system implies by definition an engineer who entirely understands and controls that system, at least in its initial state. But relying on permanent factory settings in a dynamic system is almost never efficient, and today's production systems are so complex and involve so many parameters that engineers often have no idea what will happen if one detail is altered, or how best to solve a problem that arises. One approach to this problem of complexity is to get the system itself to devise its own solution.

## How to drive in a competitive (w)edge

In 2005 the Socialist Party produced a video entitled *Capitalism and Other Kid's Stuff*, in which the contention was made that if as an experiment you take a group of kindergarten kids and deprive all the children of their toys, giving everything to just one child, some very hostile and competitive behaviour will be the result.

Though this was more argument by analogy than rigorous scientific hypothesis, a recent study appears to have confirmed this proposition by performing exactly this experiment, with the predicted consequence (Who ever said that girls aren't competitive? *New Scientist*, June 28). A group of pre-school boys and girls were observed, first with enough toys to go round, then with all the toys taken away so that only one child was left with any possessions. The objective of the experiment was to find out if girls would be as competitive as boys. The study showed that there was a marked increase in competitive behaviour in both gender groups, differing in expression between boys and girls yet equally aggressive in their own way. Boys tried to grab the toy, or chase the child with the toy, while girls punished the owner with more subtle ploys including social exclusion, whispering and hiding.

What is curious about this experiment is not so much the result but the interpretation placed on it. The study focussed entirely on the gender characteristics of competitive behaviour without appearing to consider what

crowd of people, an open doorway or a doorway with a large obstruction in front of it? Perhaps surprisingly, it is the doorway with the obstruction. It turns out by experiment that with an open doorway everyone rushes at it in a mad stampede, whereas an obstruction regulates the flow, leading to a more orderly and efficient passage for everyone. In a similar way, there is a perceived inverse ratio between motorway traffic density and speed of throughput, but this can be wrong. As density increases, drivers change lanes less often, and throughput thereby actually increases rather than decreases. The point of this is that intuition can take you the wrong way when devising organised systems.

In one car production system (*New Scientist*, Aug 9) efforts to assign assembly robots in the most efficient way failed, until the robots themselves were given the task of organising their own work via a bidding system. The result was an unpredictable and counter-intuitive ad-hoc schedule devised by the robots which was more efficient and saved \$1m per year.

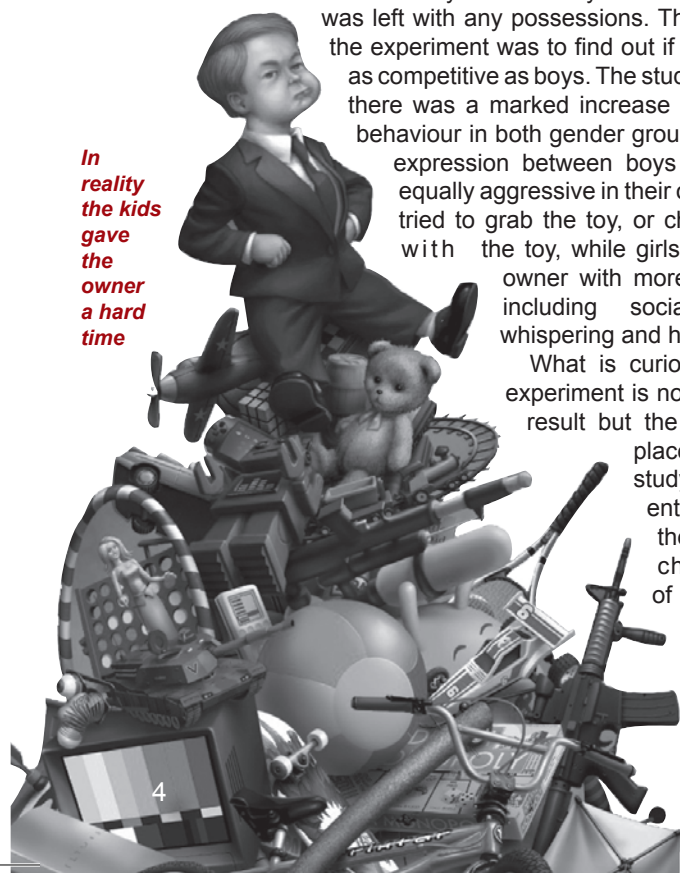
There is an important principle here that socialists can use. One of the more ingenious arguments against socialist theory is that, without the mediating agency of money, a highly complex socialist production system would be hopelessly incomprehensible, involving so many parameters that no central plan or design could realistically manage it. Leaving aside the audacious hypocrisy of critics who are perfectly at home with the savage chaos of their own economic system, as well as their tendency to overstate the complications of a steady-state economy with no booms, busts or advertiser-driven consumer faddism, such complexity as would exist does not really present us with a problem. Just like an intelligent traffic flow system, we could devise a 'smart' resource system, using throughput, usage and energy information to optimise itself, reconfiguring whenever necessary.

Thus, our answer to our critics' objection that we could never consciously regulate socialist production. We don't have to regulate it, so long as it regulates itself.

It may be the fault of the journalistic news item rather than the study, but the impression created is that boys and girls are a priori competitive, not that boys and girls become competitive if you do unusually mean things to them. In this view, the experimenters actually created the very behaviour they thought they were 'discovering'. What is missing is any account of the children's behaviour before the toys are removed, but one can reasonably assume a greater level of cooperative play. Socialists would draw a quite different conclusion from all this. Instead of showing that girls are as competitive as boys (and why wouldn't they be?), the study demonstrates effectively that private property is a hugely divisive social factor, even among four-year olds. The significance of this can scarcely be overstated. In the one interpretation, we are innately and will always be competitive, implying the inevitability of social models built on that behaviour. In the other, such behaviour is provoked in us only when an outside agency actively dispossesses and disempowers us, implying the desirability of developing a social model which avoids doing this to us.



In reality the kids gave the owner a hard time



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### Teeshirts:

Blue with polar bear and 'If you were a polar bear, you'd be a socialist' plus party website address.

Yellow, with blue and green globe 'The world is a treasury for all' plus party web site address on.

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### Pens:

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 Red and white, with blue ink 'Workers of the world unite' plus party website  
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# War in Georgia

**T**he war in Georgia seems to be over. How it began is still not clear. The first major military action was Georgia's bombardment of Tskhinval, but some claim that this was itself a response to escalation in the low-intensity fighting in the villages of South Ossetia that has been going on for many years. In any case, the Georgian assault on South Ossetia gave Russia a golden opportunity to pursue its own goals under cover of humanitarian intervention (see last month's Material World).

In general, both sides have excelled in hypocrisy. Russia as the protector of small peoples – after Chechnya? The United States as the champion of national sovereignty against foreign aggression – after Iraq? And yet there are always people prepared to take such guff seriously, or pretend to.

## Three levels

The context of the war needs to be understood at three levels:

Level 1: the struggle within Georgia for control over territory, waged by ethnically based mini-states (Georgian, Abkhaz, Osset).

Level 2: the confrontation between Georgia and Russia.

Level 3: the renewed great power confrontation between Russia and the West, especially between Russia and the U.S.

The West in its propaganda stresses Level 2, casting Russia as aggressor and Georgia as victim while obscuring its own role. Russian propaganda stresses Level 1, casting Georgians as aggressors and Abkhaz and Ossets as victims, and also Level 3, casting the U.S. and its allies as aggressors and Russia as their victim.

Only by focusing on Level 3 can we grasp what the war is really about.

## Reclaiming a sphere of influence

The rulers of great powers often regard the areas immediately beyond their borders as their rightful "sphere of influence." Thus, the U.S. calls Central America and the Caribbean its "backyard," while Russia refers to other parts of the former USSR as its "near abroad." They are especially concerned to prevent military ties between outside powers and states in their sphere of influence. Recall the

Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

After a period of weakness, Russia is now reclaiming great power status and a sphere of influence. In the military field, the main goals are to prevent Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO and block the deployment of ABM systems in Poland and the Czech Republic. In addition, Russia will not allow post-Soviet states to cooperate with the U.S. in any attack on Iran.

The Russian operation has succeeded in keeping Georgia out of NATO for the foreseeable future: it has demonstrated the risks involved and several of the existing European member states are unwilling to take those risks. Another Russian goal – not yet achieved – is to oust Saakashvili, who is rightly viewed as an American client. (The "rose revolution" that brought him to power in 2003 was funded by the U.S. government, through such agencies as the National Endowment for Democracy.)

## Western ruling class deeply divided on Russia

It would be a mistake to interpret even the knee-jerk support of the American media for Georgia as indicative of unequivocal support. The U.S. and its allies (with Israel playing a major role) did create the conditions for war by encouraging their client and by arming and training his forces. However, it appears that Saakashvili started major hostilities on his own, without seeking prior approval from Bush, who was enjoying the Olympics at the time. This evidently caused some annoyance. The U.S. refused him the practical support on which he was counting. Like many ambitious but inexperienced politicians before him, he overplayed his hand.

We must bear in mind that the Western ruling class is deeply divided concerning policy toward Russia. Certain forces, especially in the U.S., are upset that Russia is no longer subservient to the West and regard it once more as an adversary. Other forces have a more realistic view of the shifting balance of world power, are wary of making too many enemies and fighting too many wars at once, and want to maintain a more cooperative relationship with Russia. These forces are particularly strong in West European countries that are dependent on Russian gas.

## Not worth war with Russia

The dominant view among our masters, fortunately, is that they have no interests at stake in Georgia worth the risk of war with Russia. They have only one really important economic interest in Georgia: the pipelines connecting the Caspian oil and gas fields with Turkey's Mediterranean coast (Baku – Ceyhan), which pass through the south of the country. Significantly, although Russia bombed many valuable assets in Georgia care was taken not to bomb these pipelines. Perhaps secret assurances were given that the pipelines would not be damaged.

The Russian rulers too have no really vital economic (as opposed to strategic) interest in Georgia. Abkhazia has long been their favorite vacation spot and still has considerable tourist potential. Western Georgia is a traditional source of tea, tobacco, walnuts and citrus fruit.

## Shared responsibility

Our hearts go out to the many thousands of ordinary working people who have borne the brunt of suffering in this war, as they do in every war – cowering terrified in basements as the shells burst above them, jumping to their death from burning buildings, trudging along the roads tired, hungry and thirsty in the summer heat ...

And yet we also have to say something that must sound heartless in the circumstances. The majority of these ordinary working people – of the adults among them – share responsibility for their current plight. Because it was they who demonstrated and voted for the politicians who ordered the shelling and the bombing. And most of them, it appears, are still ready to demonstrate and vote for the same politicians. Because they still believe that the location of state borders matters more, infinitely more than their own lives or the lives of their children. Because they still view as their enemy ordinary working people who happen to be of different descent and speak a different language. These delusions, for so long as they persist, guarantee that this will not be the last war.

**STEFAN**

# IRE OF THE IRATE ITINERANT



IT'S THE WAY THE BIG FISH SWALLOW THE LITTLE FISH, SO WE END UP WITH NOTHING BUT A HANDFUL OF CHAINSTORES, FRANCHISES, MAKING EVERY HIGH STREET IN BRITAIN LOOK EXACTLY THE SAME.



WE KNOW WHY THINGS ARE SO CHEAP. WE KNOW ABOUT THOSE SWEATSHOPS IN ASIA, WE KNOW ABOUT CHILD LABOUR, WE KNOW ABOUT EXPLOITATION...



WHERE'S THE REAL COMPETITION THERE, WHERE'S THE CONSUMER CHOICE? OH YEAH, THINGS ARE CHEAPER, PERHAPS. AND WE ALL LOVE A BARGAIN, RIGHT? BUT... IT'S A SHAME THAT NICKLING FEELING OF GUILT SPOILS IT...



AND, C'MON, THIS IS THE REAL WORLD, WE ALL KNOW ABOUT MONOPOLIES, CARTELS, EVEN OLIGOPOLIES. THEN THERE'S 'LOSS-LEADERS' IN THE SUPERMARKET 'DUMPING' TO WRECK THE COMPETITION. IT GOES ON. WE ALL KNOW IT.



SHAME HE'S BEEN DRIVEN OUT OF BUSINESS BY THE OUT OF TOWN SUPERSTORE...



BUT, WHAT ABOUT DEAR OLD ADAM SMITH'S 'INVISIBLE HAND'? REMEMBER, IT'S NOT THROUGH OUR BAKERS NATURAL ALTRUISM THAT WE OWE HIM OUR DAILY BREAD. APPARENTLY IT'S RATHER HIS 'ENLIGHTENED SELF INTEREST'. HMM. LET'S GO AND ASK HIM!..



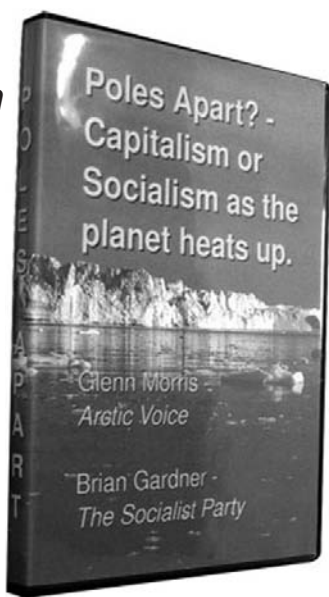
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"As we face \$4.50 a gallon gas, we also know that alternative energy sources — coal, oil shale, ethanol, wind and ground-based solar — are either of limited potential, very expensive, require huge energy storage systems or harm the environment. There is, however, one potential future energy source that is environmentally friendly, has essentially unlimited potential and can be cost competitive with any renewable source: space solar power. Science fiction? Actually, no — the technology already exists. A space solar power system would involve building large solar energy collectors in orbit around the Earth. These panels would collect far more energy than land-based units, which

are hampered by weather, low angles of the sun in northern climes and, of course, the darkness of night. Once collected, the solar energy would be safely beamed to Earth via wireless radio transmission, where it would be received by antennas near cities and other places where large amounts of power are used. The received energy would then be converted to electric power for distribution over the existing grid." (*New York Times*, 23 July)

### BEHIND THE BRAVADO

"Washington - More than 22,000 veterans have sought help from a special suicide hot line in its first year, and 1,221 suicides have been averted, the government says. According to a recent RAND Corp. study, roughly one in five soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan displays symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, putting them at a higher risk for suicide. Researchers at Portland State University found that male veterans are twice as likely to commit suicide than men who are not veterans. ...The VA (Veterans Affairs) estimates that every year 6,500 veterans take their own lives. The mental health

director for the VA, Ira Katz, said in an e-mail last December that of the 18 veterans who commit suicide each day, four to five of them are under VA care, and 12,000 veterans under VA care are attempting suicide each year." (*Yahoo News*, 28 July)

### WHAT CREDIT CRUNCH?

"A mysterious Russian billionaire has trumped his big-spending rivals and broken a world record by splashing out 500 million euros (£392 million) on one of the most sumptuous villas on the French Riviera. (*Times*, 11 August)

### CALIFONIAN NIGHTMARE

"Stockton has become known as Foreclosure Town, USA. With one in 25 houses in foreclosure, there are more properties with mortgages in default here than anywhere in the country. And it is not as if there isn't some stiff competition for Stockton's dubious accolade in other corners of California, and indeed in the rest of America." (*Observer*, 10 August)

## Contact Details

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#### LONDON

**Central London branch.** 2nd Weds. 6.30pm. 2nd Wednesday 6.30pm. The Printworks, 113/117 Farringdon Road, London. EC1 (Nearest Underground/Thameslink: Farringdon 0.2 miles).

#### Enfield and Haringey branch.

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#### West London branch.

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**Redruth.** Harry Sowden, 5 Clarence Villas, Redruth, Cornwall, TR15 1PB. Tel: 01209 219293

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Richard Layton, 23 Nottingham Rd, Clacton, CO15 5PG. Tel: 01255 814047.

**Cambridge.** Andrew Westley, 10 Marksby Close, Duxford, Cambridge CB2 4RS. Tel: 07890343044

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**West Lothian.** 2nd and 4th Weds in month, 7.30-9.30. Lanthorn Community Centre, Kennilworth Rise, Dedridge, Livingston. Corres: Matt Culbert, 53 Falcon Brae, Ladywell, Livingston, West Lothian, EH5 6UW. Tel: 01506 462359 E-mail: matt@wsmweb.fsnet.co.uk

#### WALES

**Swansea branch.** 2nd Mon, 7.30pm, Unitarian Church, High Street. Corres: Geoffrey Williams, 19 Baptist Well Street, Waun Wen, Swansea SA1 6FB. Tel: 01792 643624

**Cardiff and District.** John James, 67

Romilly Park Road, Barry CF62 6RR. Tel: 01446 405636

### INTERNATIONAL CONTACTS

#### AFRICA

**Kenya.** Patrick Ndege, PO Box 56428, Nairobi.

**Swaziland.** Mandla Ntshakala, PO Box 981, Manzini.

**Zambia.** Marxian Education Group, PO Box 22265, Kitwe.

#### ASIA

**India.** World Socialist Group, Vill Gobardhanpur. PO Amral, Dist.

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### COMPANION PARTIES OVERSEAS

**World Socialist Party of Australia.** P. O. Box 1266 North Richmond 3121, Victoria, Australia.. Email:

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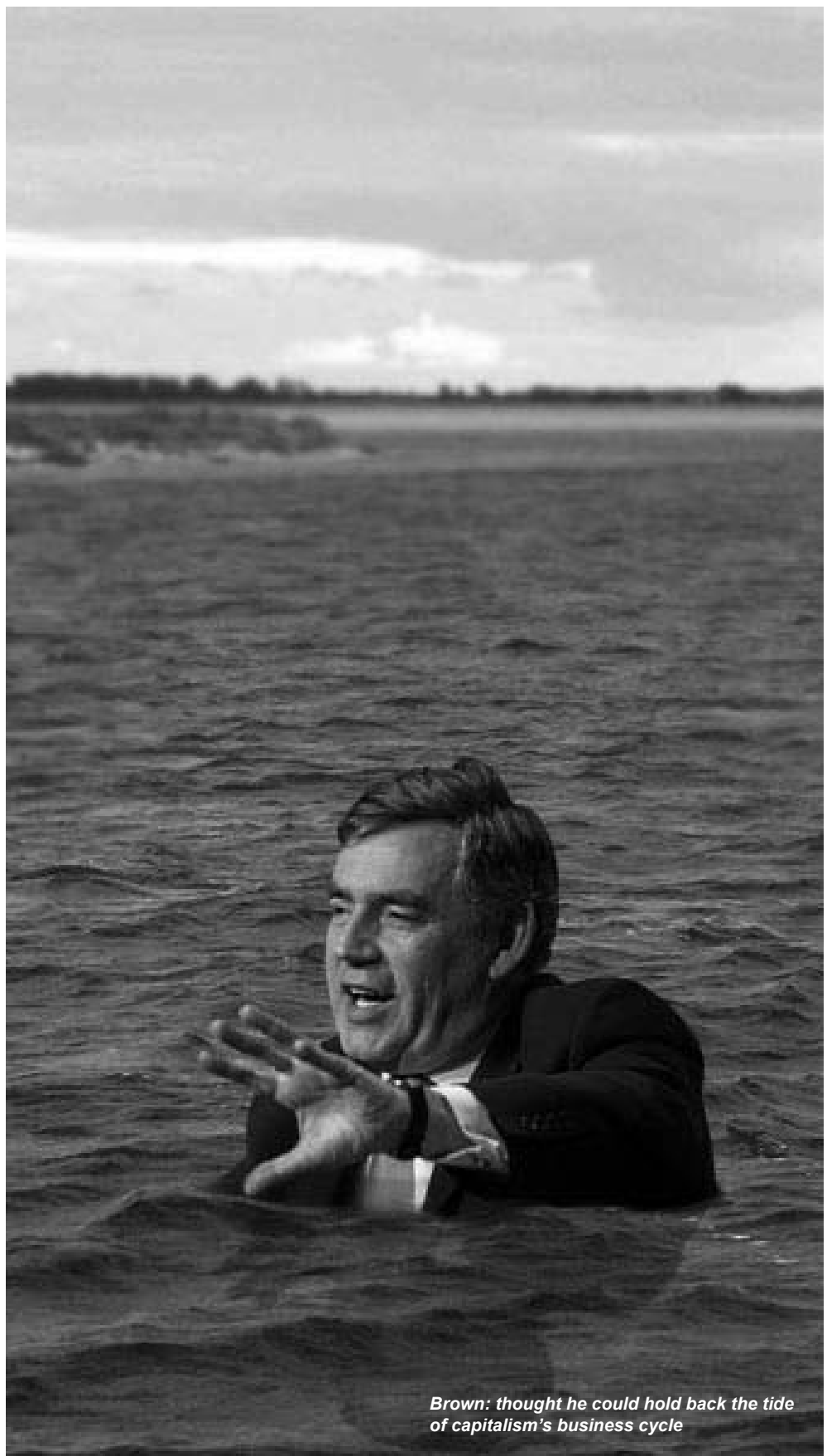
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# All at Sea

*The indications are that the economy is heading for a recession, which no government can prevent.*



*Brown: thought he could hold back the tide of capitalism's business cycle*

**T**he idea that the market economy can progress steadily, providing for ever-rising levels of growth, trade and employment, is a fantasy dreamt about by every Chancellor of the Exchequer and most politicians generally. This was never more the case than with the former Chancellor Gordon Brown who claimed repeatedly that year-on-year economic growth was the unique product of his prudent and circumspect economic

management of British capitalism.

The prudence of the erstwhile Chancellor – and now Prime Minister – is suddenly in doubt as the economy, according to most commentators and analysts, heads towards a recession his government seems powerless to prevent. No longer in command of everything he surveys, Brown's frailties are suddenly all too apparent, even to many of his former supporters. Indeed, it is interesting that many of

the commentators who saw little to question in Brown's outlandish claims over the last ten years were also most often the cheerleaders for a housing market bubble they said would never burst, and which now provides them with endless column inches of hard-hitting prose now that it finally has.

Before the housing market crash began and when the politicians and mainstream press were still in denial, we had, in the May 2007 *Socialist Standard*, a different perspective: 'past history demonstrates that sooner or later, the current housing bubble will end in tears. When asset prices become completely disengaged from what is happening in the real economy where wealth is produced and value created, and are only sustained by ever increasing amounts of indebtedness, it cannot last – capitalism just does not work that way'. According to the *Financial Times* (9<sup>th</sup> August) this debt has now risen from 100 per cent to 170 per cent of household income under New Labour (the highest in the G7 countries) and 80 per cent of this has been secured on property, a perilous situation for the housing market in particular but also for the economy as a whole.

### **Business cycle**

Growth in the market economy (in the housing sector and more generally) does not proceed in the manner of a straight upward line as imagined on a Treasury graph. Its general direction is upwards over the long-term, but growth tends to be uneven, unpredictable, and prone to periodic wild gyrations. For very good reasons this is the way it has always occurred in capitalism and there is nothing about the system, or the politicians who oversee it, to suggest it will happen any differently in future.

In the nineteenth century the concept of capitalism's ever-recurring trade cycle was well-known, the most coherent and in-depth analysis of it being developed by Karl Marx. As prescient now as it was then, Marx summarized his view in the following terms:

'The factory system's tremendous capacity for expanding with sudden immense leaps, and its dependence on the world market, necessarily give rise to the following cycle: feverish production, a consequent glut on the market, then a contraction of the market, which causes production to be crippled. The life of industry becomes a series of periods of moderate activity, prosperity, over-

production, crisis and stagnation' (*Capital*, Volume 1, p.580. Penguin Edition).

There are two related factors which drive this boom/slump cycle. Firstly, the fact that production takes place with a view to realising a monetary profit. Without this prospect of profit, production will not take place. Needs without the ability to pay are left unrecognised, whether that be housing for those unable to get a mortgage or food for those unable to pay for it. Secondly, this profit-seeking is conducted by hundreds of thousands of competing enterprises whose ultimate aim is to increase market share, increase production, and through doing so

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## **“There is little doubt that capitalism in most industrialised nations is long overdue a recession”**

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increase profits. The problem is that the drive to compete for these enterprises is their only tangible reference point to one another. What they do is not co-ordinated and planned, and not linked to the demands of other companies and industries. Instead, there is an anarchy of production which periodically leads to key sectors of a booming economy over-expanding in relation to existing market demand.

That this situation occurred in the US housing market from 2006 onwards, and has since been transmitted to many other property markets including that of the UK, is now obvious even to most of those who vehemently denied it would happen.

### **Defining a recession**

The Treasury and Bank of England (along with their counterparts in the United States) officially define a recession as 'two consecutive negative quarters of economic growth'. By this they mean half a year of economic contraction. The way that statistics are necessarily compiled (especially considering the time-lag factor) it is not always evident that a recession has been happening until after the event. In 2001 it was assumed that the United States was in a recession, but after the event it turned out that

this wasn't (quite) so based on this definition.

Marx claimed that for a recession (depression or slump – depending on your preferred terminology) to occur, overproduction for particular markets had to spread and 'grip the principal articles of trade' (*Theories of Surplus Value*, p.393). In practice, sometimes this generalisation of overproduction will occur through a 'knock-on' effect when there is clearly disproportionate growth and overproduction in some industries that spreads more widely, but at other times it doesn't spread sufficiently to cause a noticeably wider downturn. Furthermore, even when it does spread there are usually industries that do well in an otherwise declining economy, as was the case in the major 1930s slump when motor car manufacturing, for instance, continued to grow while other industries contracted.

There is little doubt that capitalism in most industrialised nations is long overdue a recession of sorts – the last widespread one was in 1990-92 and the boom since then has been far longer than the historic average. In this period capitalism has survived the Asian crisis of 1997, the collapse of the world's biggest hedge fund a year later (the ironically named Long Term Capital Management), the spectacular bursting of the dot-com bubble with its various corporate scandals, the attacks on the World Trade Centre and other major political crises, and the massive 2000-2003 bear market in equities, all without officially entering recession in either the US or UK.

This time there are two significant forces propelling it in the direction of recession, however: the aforementioned property market crash which has seen the biggest monthly house price falls in both the US and UK in history, and the serious 'credit crunch' that has developed from it. The latter has occurred because so many investment products have been based on low-grade ('sub-prime') housing debt and as the housing market falls and people cannot pay their mortgages much of this debt has to be written off. It was recently enough to turn what would have been a six monthly profit for the Royal Bank of Scotland of in excess of £5 billion into a loss of £691 million instead, and has led RBS and many other banks to re-capitalise themselves through issuing more shares; in the US it nearly led to the complete collapse of one of the largest investment banks, Bear Stearns.

The main problem is that no-one, sometimes not even the banks themselves, know where all of these problematic sub-prime investments are or how much needs to be written off. It is this that famously led to an almost unprecedented reluctance among the banks to lend to one another last year as they did not trust what was on (or rather not on) each other's balance sheets. Irrespective of what central banks have done with base interest rates, it has led to inter-bank lending rates being pushed up to comparative historic highs (the spike in LIBOR – the London Inter-bank Offered Rate – is what put paid to Northern Rock's meteoric rise as it was hugely dependent on borrowing on the money-markets).

The credit system and the money markets associated with it are what oil capitalism's financial machine. When they become dysfunctional the entire system can suffer; banks are reluctant to lend either to industry or to individuals, lines of credit dry up and companies getting into difficulty find that their one possible lifeline has been cut off. Indeed, it is the credit system that tends to act as a key transmission mechanism spreading problems in some sectors of the economy to others.

#### Lead indicators

The extent to which the combined effects of the housing market crash and the resultant credit crunch will lead to a recession is currently hotly debated by analysts, though it clearly has the potential to be very serious indeed. Hard data in the coming months should prove conclusive one way or the other as, in truth, there are few genuine 'lead indicators' of a slump that can tell us definitively that one is about to happen, or how deep it will be. For example, production tends to fall most noticeably once the slump is already underway and unemployment is another lagging indicator, only rising when companies have started cutting back on staffing levels in response to difficult trading conditions.

Falling stock markets are better lead indicators of a recession; this is because at the level of individual companies it is their interim and preliminary company results along with quarterly trading statements that typically give advance clues as to what is happening on the ground, and stock markets are usually quick to react, as they have been this time. Nearly all major stock markets have at some point fallen 20 per cent or more from their peaks since the

credit crunch started, technically entering 'bear market' territory. The problem with stock markets, however, is that they can fall in the short-term for all sorts of other reasons too and also have a tendency to over-react to events. When UK shares lost about 50 per cent of their value in the 2000-3 bear market (and US shares almost as much) this reflected little that was happening in the real world of the underlying capitalist economy of production and trade.

Some economists and analysts have argued that the best indicator of an impending recession is what is called an 'inverted yield curve' on the money markets. This means a situation whereby short-term interest rates are above long-term rates (the inverse of the usual relationship) and in these circumstances banks have little incentive to lend long-term to industry when selective short-term lending is both safer and more profitable. In practice, an inverted yield curve is indeed almost always a precursor of recessions. Unfortunately, like falling stock markets, inverted yield curves can happen at other times too (the US had a significantly inverted yield curve in 2000 and had a curve that flattened and threatened to invert in 1998, yet there was no recession on either occasion). This time around, the US yield curve inverted in 2006-7 and has since switched to being positive; the UK yield curve inverted in the wake of the credit crunch starting last summer, and has recently started to flatten out again.

#### Mine's A Baltic Dry

Arguably the best lead indicator of a recession exists as a measurement of what is happening in the 'real' economy of production and trade in capitalism rather than its financial superstructure. This is a curious and little known gauge of economic activity called the Baltic Dry Index. It covers dry bulk shipping rates and is managed by the Baltic Exchange in the City of London.

Each day the Baltic Exchange establishes average prices for shipping various cargoes around the world, whether it be 100,000 tons of iron ore from Brazil to the UK or 100,000 tons of soybeans from the US to India. Essentially, the index is a barometer of activity amongst shipbrokers involved in shipping those raw materials that are typically the precursors to production around the world, and it measures the demand for shipping capacity versus the supply of bulk carriers.

It is a useful index because dry bulk mainly consists of commodities that act as raw material inputs into the production of other goods such as electricity, steel and food. Also, demand for these is variable and elastic whereas the supply of dry bulk shipping is inelastic, changing little in the short-term because of the length of time needed to build new tankers. This means changes in the index tend to principally reflect changes in demand. Fluctuations in the index have historically proved to be amongst the best lead indicators of economic activity in the market economy there is.

This has been demonstrated over the last few years, when the Baltic Dry Index surged on the back of the booming global economy and the demand for industrial and agricultural commodities led by China, India, Brazil and other emerging markets. Interestingly, despite a continuation of much of this activity, the index has in more recent times faltered. From the beginning of 2005 until the start of 2008 the index more than doubled, but after some volatile movement has since fallen from a peak of nearly 11,800 reached in May to around 7,000 at the time of writing, a fall of around 40 per cent. If this fall continues into the autumn and beyond, then a widespread, serious recession is more than likely as it will be reflective of a massive decline in the demand for raw materials required for the world economy.

Quite how severe the economic downturn proves to be is no small matter of interest as it will affect the lives of hundreds if millions across the globe, leading to falling production, falling property prices, rising unemployment and acute financial distress for many. And this is far more significant than the distress that is being caused for a Prime Minister in Britain who swore that this would never happen and who thought he could hold back the tide of capitalism's business cycle through his financial management skills – a man who has been left looking ever more like King Canute instead, staring out to sea with the waves already lapping well above his ankles.

**DAP**





# The Irish 'No'

*A socialist in Ireland looks at the vote there to reject the EU's proposed Treaty of Lisbon.*

**O**n the 12th of June, voters in the Republic of Ireland rejected a constitutional proposal to ratify the Lisbon Treaty. The rejection has caused ripples across Europe and provoked a lively and continuing discussion in the letters pages of the newspapers and in radio phone-in programmes. It is a quintessential example of what passes for 'politics' under capitalism with heated debate amongst the protagonists and yet the result is as irrelevant to most people as the composition of government here after the next election. Closer inspection of the campaign and its aftermath reveals all the pointlessness, chicanery and opportunism of mainstream politics.

The European Union (although that wasn't its name at the time) was founded by six, reasonably like-minded European countries by the Treaty of Rome in 1957. The aim then (and still now) was to make capitalism more efficient throughout the continent by organising it on a pan-European scale. The basic tenets of permitting the free movement of capital, goods and 'labour' (people in the real world) between member states had the intention of giving capitalists the opportunity to conduct their business in the most profitable location at any moment in time. Over the last 50 years the Union has grown so that it now has nearly 30 member countries ranging from the Mediterranean, to the Nordic states and includes most of the pre-1990 Eastern bloc. In fact most countries in Europe are now either members, candidate members, associate members or at a minimum aspirational members. Like any organisation, as it has evolved over time, its governing rules require continual amendments and the Lisbon Treaty is the latest such initiative. The main thrust of all these successive amendments has been to put flesh on and develop the principle of free movement and free trade within Europe.

The problem for the EU is that there is no longer unanimity amongst what may be termed the European capitalist class as to how the Union should develop and what are the appropriate rules for possibly completing structures for it. The Irish referendum debate and result is a manifestation of this and illustration of how the governing ideas in society are those of the capitalist elite. One section of the capitalist class, controlling large multi-national enterprises that are involved in international manufacture and tradable services are extremely concerned about global competition from the USA, China, India, South America etc. They want to see more integration of capitalism within Europe by the dismantling of any remaining national barriers in order to strengthen their position with respect to these external competitors. Some of this programme would involve having a uniform tax base throughout Europe and a 'Services Directive' whereby capitalists in any country in the Union would have open access to markets in all the other countries and not be hindered by any local labour or other regulations. Broadly this section of the capitalist class has the

approval of the Brussels Commission, the ruling administration of the EU. Furthermore as part of this programme, they are prepared to accept a stronger social element to the EU in terms of certain aspects of workers rights to in effect partly compensate workers for the increased competitive environment in which they will have to sell their labour. This political philosophy usually goes by the name of Christian or Social Democracy where capitalist engage with the organised labour movement taking a long term view of the benefits to profits that stem from stability and social cohesion. As against that there is another rival section to the capitalist class. These generally operate smaller businesses acting in predominately

national markets or trading almost exclusively with individual countries outside Europe such as the USA. They see no real need or advantage to be gained from deeper collaboration and are at a minimum, suspicious or completely opposed to these developments. To them other capitalists within Europe are as much a threat as those outside the EU. They also tend to be more resistant to the social aspects of Europe viewing it as a cost that confers no particular advantage to them.

Within Ireland, this uncertainty or confusion in the ruling circles of Europe also manifested itself. On the Yes or pro-treaty side was an uneasy and in parts unlikely alliance consisting of most of the important political parties, the employers' umbrella organisation IBEC, the corresponding labour organisation, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and important sectional groups such as the Farmers organisations. The political parties, although they spend huge time and effort in ritualistic attacks on each other, basically share the same Christian Democratic ethos which fits in with the EU philosophy and explains their support for the Treaty. Given the predominance of multi-national companies in Ireland's industrial portfolio (who located here specifically to take advantage of membership of the EU), it was no surprise that IBEC also solicited a yes vote. The unions' governing body, the ICTU was won over by the social concessions in the Treaty and a desire to be in line with the mainstream labour movement on the continent.

The anti-Treaty side was even more motley in terms of its make-up and consisted of two entirely disparate streams (one from the Right and one from the Left) each in turn containing a myriad of sub-organisations. From the right of the political spectrum were prominent businessmen such as Ben Dunne (retail), Ulick McEvaddy (airlines) and most prominently Declan Ganley (communications). Joining them were a variety of free-market commentators, staunch and unchanging Europhobes and some reactionary populists. The main plank of their opposition to the Lisbon Treaty could be summarised by the lessening of Ireland's influence within Europe due to the proposed loss of automatic national Commissioners and less ability for Ireland to set independent tax and national macro-economic policies. This Rightist element of the No campaign also included a curious assortment of very traditional and conservative nationalists and extreme Catholics worried about threats to Ireland's sovereignty and ability to set independent (i.e. Catholic) social policies. The Left side of opposition to Lisbon also had a multitude of identifiable sub-groups each with its own grievance. Although the Green Party is part of the government, a dissident wing of the Green Party opposed the centralising tendencies inherent in the Treaty. Sinn Fein claimed to be concerned about the effect on the position of Irish workers of unrestricted access to the Irish market by foreign capitalists and also were unhappy with the increasing role of a potential European army and its effect on Ireland's traditional neutrality. The Greens and Sinn Fein were joined in their opposition

by a large number of small groups of Leftist, Trotskyite, Anarchist, 'Anti-War' and some bizarre single-issue protest organisations (Rural Hospitals, Palestinian Solidarity, etc.).

Most of the debate was ridiculous. The Yes side warned of economic meltdown if the Treaty was rejected when everyone knew an economic recession was already underway caused by factors nothing to do with the issue. Sinn Fein (an organisation responsible for over half of all deaths in the 30-year Troubles through its former armed wing, the IRA) claimed to be worried about growing 'militarism' within Europe. The Left groups opposed the Treaty on the longstanding and remarkably persistent misapprehension that capitalism organised on an international basis is something reprehensible while if the same society exists on a national basis, then that is something tolerable. This presumably stems from their aspiration that national capitalism can be more easily converted into state capitalism than if it has an international character. In fact some of the claims, mostly by the No side, made about the EU were so conspiratorial that they had the air of a UFO crank convention.

In any event, the Treaty was rejected by 53 percent to 46 percent on a relatively healthy turnout of over 50 percent. While both elements of the No campaign claimed credit for the result, the real winner out of the debate is the mysterious Mr. Declan Ganley who in the space of a few short weeks went from being an unknown figure to being the perceived architect of the Irish rejection. He is a self-made millionaire who made his money through his close contacts with senior members of the American Bush administration which yielded a number of lucrative defence contracts with the US military authorities. Prior to that he had advised a number of former Communist countries in Eastern Europe on the implementation of 'privatisation' of state assets and interests. He set up the campaigning organisation, Libertas which provided the bulk of the resources of the No side in terms of flyers, posters, billboard and newspaper advertising. The generous funding of this body is mysterious and under electoral rules does not have to be disclosed until next year. Also because it is not a political party, the level of disclosure about its donors is less stringent than it would be otherwise. There are rumours (denied by Libertas) that the organisation is financially supported by right wing elements in the Republican Party in America who see a growing and more integrated EU as a future threat in the same way as they now view China. He is now the toast of Euro-sceptics throughout Europe (at least those of a rightist persuasion) and has become a leading standard bearer of trans-European opposition to the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty. He has been glowingly endorsed by the British euro-sceptics, UKIP and the Tory right.

**“Private money now dictates the campaigns and success usually goes to the best funded groups and not those with the best arguments”**

It is clear that Libertas outspent all the other bodies involved in the campaign. They were helped in this by a court ruling, a decade ago in connection with another referendum which made it illegal for the Government to spend public money on advocating a Yes vote. At the time this ruling was viewed as a progressive measure (levelling the playing field in referenda campaigns) but all it has led to is the American situation where private money now dictates the campaigns and success usually goes to the best funded groups and not those with the best arguments or greater support. The practical effect of the ruling is that the Government parties had to spend their own party money and resources to encourage a yes vote. This led to a very token campaign on their behalf as the

party loyalists were hardly going to be enthusiastic about selling a 260-page technical document to the electorate. Although the main opposition parties (Fine Gael and Labour) were nominally supportive they clearly decided against spending money to obtain a result that the government would ultimately claim as a victory for itself. There is nothing unusual about that; most political parties only spend real money on getting their own members elected in sufficient numbers to give them access to power where the prospects of enrichment and rewards are tangible. Spending money to change peoples' minds for its own sake is not a priority. All in all this has left the Irish government with a headache they could have done without. They are under pressure from the leading integrationist countries such as France and Germany to resolve it before other countries with a history of cold feet about European federalism such as Britain, Denmark and the Czech Republic join the No bandwagon. At the same time they are hemmed in by the justifiable taunts of ignoring the peoples' sovereign will if they ignore or try to legally finesse the outcome of the vote.

What the future holds for this issue, time will tell. Inevitably it will be resolved by some compromise and the System will continue. In five, ten or twenty years time, people will look back and marvel at the heat and dust that it has raised and maybe wonder whatever became of Declan Ganley. For Socialists such tinkering with the system are of no real concern. Given that the Treaty itself is mainly technical in nature and independent studies show it will not make a huge change to the day-to-day operation of the EU, whether it is ratified or not will not significantly impact on our lives. Only when the over 90 percent of the world's people, who make a meaningful contribution to life on earth, realize that their interests need a new outlet, can politics become real and meaningful.

**KEVIN CRONIN**



# The Scottish Question

*The SNP's victory in the Glasgow East by-election has kept this irrelevant pot boiling. The Labour Party has always claimed to represent the interest of the worse off majority but now finds itself deeply unpopular to the point of facing a crisis.*



Labour has had untrammelled power for over ten years, and yet now finds itself rejected because it has failed so spectacularly. Bernard Shaw once wrote that any government that robs Peter to pay Paul can count on the support of Paul. Labour has failed to achieve even this modest level of vote buying.

Part of their problem was that Peter is just too strong to let himself be robbed – the organised ranks of capital and the disorganised might of the market are strong enough to see off any challenge that doesn't seek to

remove them entirely from the picture. Labour tried to accommodate itself with business in order to achieve modest social goals – but this simply left it prey to the mood swings of the market, with Paul's position unchanged.

One noticeable change Labour did manage to get through was devolution. We've discussed in these pages before how this was as much jobs for the boys and girls – as well as providing a handy redoubt for Labour forces for when they would eventually lose Downing Street. Their colossal votes in Scotland and Wales would make them the permanent natural party of government in those areas, and would allow them to circumvent to rock solid Tory core in the English south east. It would, they hoped, stymie the challenge from Welsh and Scottish nationalists to their dominance in those areas.

After all, they believed that the desire for the retention of the United Kingdom is strong. Hence why Gordon Brown has tried to wrap himself in Britishness – a neat bit of stealing Tory clothes to win their supporters over, while his own supporters have nowhere else to go. At least, that's the theory. The problem is, however they were wrong about the Nationalists – the voters found they could go to them.

In 2007 Labour lost control of the Scottish parliament. They had never had a full majority there (the proportional electoral system they introduced makes that an unlikely event) but they had been the biggest party. It was a close run thing, but they were beaten into second place by one seat (and about 20,000 votes). Not only that, but a new PR system for local government meant the smashing of the old Labour family run fiefdoms throughout Scotland, with almost all councils falling to no overall control.

A part of all that was the demise of the Scottish "Socialist" Party, one of the most successful leftist parties of the last fifty years. It had had six seats in the Scottish Parliament, before it had imploded over the behaviour of its charismatic leader Tommy Sheridan suing the *News of the World*

over allegations on his private life (plus a touch of SWP skulduggery). It had latched on to regional nationalism, as a successful means to electoral success.

The Scottish Nationalists had tacked left, making social democrat noises to pick off Labour supporters. There is nothing intrinsically left-wing about nationalism. Being a nationalist does not necessarily commit a person to any particular reforms or economic principles. Indeed, technically, the SNP is a one-issue party – for

an independent Scotland. Their history, though, is marked by debates between the minority of hardliners wanting to stand for nothing but independence, and the dominant pragmatists who want to win political power by offering to administer the current situation, and knocking the maximum demand into the long grass. This allows people to safely vote for the party of independence without necessarily voting for independence. In truth, they stand for no principle different than the other parties, offering to represent and work hard for “you”.

Having formed a minority government, they plan to use events in their favour. Just as Labour’s first British government dressed up in Ruritanian Privy Councillor’s costumes to prove that they weren’t revolutionists, so too the Nationalists have accepted political responsibility within the Union to try to show that they are trustworthy and to win people to their cause while in power. Of course, they generate heated debates between themselves and Westminster, and try to provoke controversy. Of course, they intend to legislate for a referendum on independence – but only after they have been in office some while. So, even if that is rejected, they have a fair chance of holding onto their jobs.

What some commentators look to, though, is after the next UK election. It seems increasingly likely the Tories will end up ahead of Labour. It is even possible, after the Glasgow East by-election result, that the SNP could take a majority of Scottish seats. Following the death of John MacDougall Labour MP for the Fife town of Glenrothes there will be another by-election in the autumn. This is another Labour safe seat, and losing again may be fatal for Gordon Brown’s premiership – and spell almost certain disaster at the next general election.

David Cameron has announced that he believes that Scottish MPs should not be able to vote on legislation in England just as English MPs cannot vote on Scottish issues (because those matters are devolved to the Scottish parliament). Considering that his party won a majority of English seats at the last election, he would say that. If Scotland breaks away this would make Labour’s return to power in Westminster that much harder, and the SNP would have their cherished dream.

The indications are, though, that Scottish voters will not opt for independence. At heart, then, the SNP, like Labour, has achieved political success at the expense of its core project. At heart, in both cases this is because they have sought power by telling people they agree with what they think, rather than trying to change minds. The quick route to power is to buy people’s votes with popular policies – but the danger in that is that you attract people who support those policies, but not necessarily your wider aims. They’ll simply up and leave when someone offers them something better. Political time, effort and consciousness are wasted arguing to and fro on such nonsense.

Ultimately, such baubles are thrown around by the political hacks in order to win for themselves the major prizes. Workers have nothing to gain from the redrawing of the boundaries, but regional entrepreneurs and bureaucrats certainly do have a chance of making good if only they can persuade the electorate to back them. Capitalism knows no boundaries, money has no accent. Yet the Scottish question continues to play a major part in the ongoing passing show of UK politics.

**PIK SMEET**



## The coming purge

Is it a depression or just a recession? According to the Penguin *Dictionary of Economics*, a recession is “an imprecise term given to a sharp slow-down in the rate of economic growth or a modest decline in economic activity”. This is distinct “from a slump or depression which is a more severe and prolonged downturn”. Government statisticians register a recession when GDP falls for

two successive quarters.

On this definition Britain is not in a recession – not yet. But most economy-watchers expect that this stage will soon be reached. Gary Duncan, economics editor of the *Times*, even writes that this would not be such a bad thing:

“If Britain is to succumb to recession we need to remember that such periods are a virtually inescapable feature of even the most successful capitalist economies, even a necessary one to purge the system of past excesses, inefficient practices and the weakest links among businesses” (21 July).

That’s what Marx said, but it’s not what the economics textbooks teach (they still cultivate the illusion, relayed by politicians, that governments can engineer a steady growth of GDP, i.e. can avoid such periodic “purges”).

For Marx the accumulation of capital, which is the engine of economic growth, proceeded in fits and starts, a series of cycles of moderate activity, boom, crisis, slump, recovery, moderate activity, boom, crisis, etc. Booms eventually created the conditions for the next following slump while slumps created those for recovery.

One thing that happens during a slump that helps recovery is that capital is destroyed. Not just in the physical sense as

when machinery is scrapped or factories pulled down but also in terms of the depreciation of capital with the physical elements in which it is embodied not being affected. This is the purge Duncan talks about. Marx explained:

“Values used as capital are prevented from acting again as capital in the hands of the same person. The old capitalists go bankrupt. If the value of the commodities from whose sale a capitalist reproduces his capital was equal to £12,000, of which say £2,000 were profit, and their price falls to £6,000, then the capitalist can neither meet his contracted obligations nor, even if he had none, could he, with the £6,000 restart his business on the former scale, for the commodity prices have risen once more to the level of their cost-prices. In this way, £6,000 has been destroyed, although the buyer of these commodities, because he has acquired them at half their cost-price, can go ahead very well once business livens up again, and may even have made a profit. A large part of the nominal capital of the society, i.e., of the exchange-value of the existing capital, is once for all destroyed, although this very destruction, since it does not affect the use-value, may very much expedite the new reproduction” (*Theories of Surplus Value*, Part Two, p. 496).

“This fall in the purely nominal capital,” Marx went on “State bonds, shares etc. . . amounts only to the transfer of wealth from one hand to another and will, on the whole, act favourably upon reproduction, since the parvenus into whose hands these stocks or shares fall cheaply, are mostly more enterprising than their former owners.”

As Britain heads for a recession (in whatever sense) the parvenus are already gathering to buy up failed and failing business at bargain prices. As well as laughing all the way to the bank they can justify their unpopular activity as performing a necessary function in capitalism’s business cycle. As indeed they are.

# Will Belgium survive?

*No permanent government has emerged from the elections held in June last year. Does this matter to the working class there?*

**B**elgium is a patently artificial state inhabited by people speaking two different languages. It survived for many years with one of them (French) as the dominant language because it was the language of the ruling class. Now that this has ceased to be the case, and Dutch (Flemish) has also become a language of a part of the capitalist class as well as of the state, Belgium is beginning to show signs of coming apart at the seams. Revision of the constitution — How much autonomy should the regions be given? Should or should not Belgium become a federal state? How far out should the limits of Brussels (basically a French-speaking city surrounded by Dutch-speaking communes) go? — has become an issue preventing other issues being dealt with.

Belgium is a state which the then Great Powers allowed to be set up in 1830. Before that the territory that is now Belgium had formed part, first, of the territories of the King of Spain, then of those of the Emperor of Austria. After the French Revolution Belgium became, in 1792, part of France and remained so until after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815. While part of France the Napoleonic code of law, which swept away feudal remnants, was introduced and manufacturing industry began to develop in the South. This, together with strategic considerations, was one of the main reasons why in 1815 Belgium was detached from France: not only were the frontiers of France to be moved further back from the Rhine, but France was also to be deprived of a nascent industrial base. Belgium became part of a kind of Belgian-Dutch federation under King William of Holland.

In 1830, in what Belgian history books refer to as a “national revolution”, the wealthy classes of Belgium broke away from those of Holland and set up an independent State. Though Holland protested, the Great Powers let this change happen as it still left the territory of Belgium detached from France.

The circumstances which led to the establishment of Belgium are worth recalling in that they have shaped the Belgian political scene to this day. Holland was essentially a trading and agricultural country and as such its ruling groups tended to favour free trade. The nascent industrial capitalist class in the south of Belgium, however, wanted tariff walls as a protection against British competition. The Dutch government did make some moves to accommodate them but not enough. In the end the Belgian capitalists decided to break away. This was not too difficult in view of the loose, almost federal character of the Belgian-Dutch State; in addition, the population of Belgium was greater than that of Holland. But the nascent Belgian capitalist class in the South needed support in the Dutch-speaking Northern part of the territory. This they managed to do, despite being French-speaking and anti-clerical in the tradition of the French Revolution, by an opportunist alliance with the Catholic Church over the schools issue. The Dutch government wanted to introduce a system of



universal state education. The Catholic Church, (the majority religion in Belgium, unlike Holland which was a Protestant State), vehemently opposed this, insisting on its exclusive right to “educate” Catholic children.

The capitalists got their state. The Belgian constitution of 1831 was a model of bourgeois-liberal government. Power was in the hands of a parliament elected only by wealthy property-owners; the king (a minor German princeling imported specially to fill the post) was a mere figurehead. Their language, French, became the official language of the new State, despite the fact that a majority of people in its territory spoke Dutch.

But there was a price to pay: the power of the Catholic Church, and its control of its own schools, had to be respected. From a short-term point of view, the lack of a modern education system had certain advantages for the Belgian capitalists: they were able to extract very long hours of work for very low rates of pay, to such an extent that Marx once described Belgium as “a capitalists’ paradise”.

The industrialisation of Belgium, apart from Antwerp and Ghent in the Dutch-speaking North, almost exclusively in Wallonia, the French-speaking Southern part, brought into existence an industrial working class and, inevitably, working class attempts at political and industrial organisation. A Belgian Labour Party (*Parti Ouvrier Belge*) was set up in 1885, along the same lines as was later the British Labour Party except that the co-operatives rather than the trade unions provided the bulk of the members and funds. A deliberate decision was taken not to call it the “Belgian Socialist Party” on the grounds that the word “socialist” was unacceptable to many workers. With a start like this, the POB was destined for a pitiful career of gradualism and reformism. The POB was never really even a social-democratic party in the sense that the German SPD was; it never accepted Marxism as its ideology; in fact it had a contempt for theory altogether, concentrating on trying to get piecemeal social reforms for the working class; it was in short a simple “Labour” party.

In its early years the POB was at least militant on one issue of importance to the working class: the right to vote. The general strike of 1893, which forced the Belgian parliament to extend a vote to adult males, was a magnificent episode in the history of the Belgian working class. The strike did not achieve “one man, one vote”, since the rich and educated were given more than one vote, but it did force the members of the Belgian



**ABVV-FGTB**  
*Ensemble, on est plus forts*  
**Samen sterk**

parliament, in which there was not a single POB representative, to do what most of them were opposed to: grant a vote to adult (male)

workers. Later strikes to try to get plural voting abolished were less successful, but by then the POB had its own members of parliament and had begun to get involved in parliamentary manoeuvres with its new-found allies, the radical bourgeois Liberals.

In fact the Belgian Labourites tended to be, at this time the tail-end or left-wing of the Liberal party. After more than twenty years of Catholic party rule, the Belgian Liberals were feeling left out in the cold, but they realised they were unlikely to get power again without support from the POB. Accordingly, in preparation for the 1910 election they launched a great anti-clerical campaign and attempted to get the leaders of the POB involved. This was easy, as the POB leaders were anticlerical themselves (and indeed many were freemasons). It is quite clear that had the occasion arose (which it didn't, because the Catholic party won the election) the POB would have supported a Liberal administration and would probably have gone so far as to have formed an anti-clerical coalition with them. This no doubt would have caused a stir in the Second International, to which the POB was affiliated along with other Labour and Social-Democratic parties. After the First World War, of course, all the Social-Democratic parties were prepared to take power within capitalism and accept responsibility for running it, but it is a measure of the depth of the reformism of the POB that they would have been prepared to do this in 1910 when their fellow reformists still had some doubts.

The Belgian Liberals were, by and large, French-speaking and anticlerical. As in practice their leftwing, the POB shared these characteristics, with unfortunate results for the development of the Belgian trade union movement, which took place mainly after the founding of the POB and partly under its auspices. As the industrial centre of Belgium was in the French-speaking South it was natural that the trade union movement should be strongest there, but it was by no means inevitable that this movement should have been dominated by an anti-clerical political party, thus cutting itself off from workers of catholic origin.

It would be wrong to put the entire blame on the POB for the present split in the Belgian trade union movement into two main groups, each with about a million members: the Labourite *Fédération Générale du Travail de Belgique* and the self-explanatory *Confédération des Syndicats Chrétiens* (which is in fact the larger). The Catholic Church shares an equal blame; they combatted the POB before the first world war by organising rival co-operatives, sick clubs — and trade unions. Their trade unions didn't have much success before the first world war, but grew rapidly between the wars as industrialization spread to the Northern part of Belgium. Employers preferred to deal with the less militant Catholic unions than with the "socialist" unions and their talk of the class struggle. But the Catholic unions also took up a very real grievance which the Labourite unions tended to neglect: the position of the Dutch language, spoken by workers in the North of Belgium.

French was the official language of Belgium after 1830. It was the language of the State and, even in the Dutch-speaking area, the language of the bourgeoisie. Thus in Northern Belgium a Dutch-speaking working class faced a French-speaking capitalist class. The Labourite unions, perhaps for the very good reason of

not wishing to split the working class on linguistic lines, did not chose to exploit this situation, but it was taken up to some extent by the Catholic unions.

Today there is virtually no difference except in ideology — the FGTB is, on paper, committed to "the disappearance of the wages system", while the CSC denounces the class struggle— between the two rival trade union groups. In practice both act as pure-and-simple, bread-and-butter unions negotiating over wages and conditions of work; on the political field their leaders are reformists, being supporters either of the Belgian Socialist Party (as, unfortunately for us genuine socialists, the POB has been called since 1945) or of the catholic political party.

The other great division in the Belgian working class besides the catholic/anti-clerical one is of course language. As stated, despite being the minority language, French was made the official language of the Belgian State set up in 1830. Dutch in fact has only been given completely equal status with French since 1932. Since the last world war the centre of economic gravity in Belgium has tended to shift from Wallonia, the French-speaking South, to Flanders, the Dutch-speaking North, and the numerical superiority of Dutch-speakers has began to make itself felt on the political scene.

The man who must share a great responsibility for side-tracking the French-speaking part of the Belgian working class on the language issue was a militant trade union leader in the Liège engineering industry, André Renard, who died in 1962 and who is still something of a myth for many militant trade unionists in Belgium, Towards the end of the *grande grève*, the general strike of 1960-1 over the government's attempt to cut workers' living standards, Renard suddenly introduced the quite unrelated political issue of "federalism". Claiming that the workers in the French-speaking south, where the strike was virtually solid, had been betrayed by the Dutch-speakers in the North (where the Catholic unions, following a lead given by Cardinal Van Roey in his Christmas message, urged their members to stay at work), Renard argued that if Wallonia had the power to pass its own laws on economic matters it would be able to carry out various "anti-capitalist structural reforms". He called for Belgium to be converted into a loose federation which would give Wallonia this power, virtually a demand for independence of course. This demand, and the reformist strategy behind it was supported by both the so-called Communist Party (which, under proportional representation, had a handful of members of parliament) and the Trotskyists (including, conspicuously, their international leader, Ernest Mandel, who was from Belgium).

The effect of this appeal was to heighten language-consciousness amongst French-speakers. In the years that followed French-speaking federalist groups increased their representation in parliament. So, on the other side, did the Dutch-speaking federalists, organised in a series far right parties. Today, it is the Flemish federalists and separatists who have been making the running,



Ernest Mandel

continued on page 22

# The Homer of the Cesspit

*A hundred years ago this year Emile Zola's remains were transferred to the Pantheon in Paris.*

On 4 June 1908, a horse drawn hearse carrying a coffin containing the six years dead corpse of novelist Emile Zola was led through the streets of Paris. Hundreds of police and troops were drafted in to control the huge hostile crowds. After lying in state overnight, the bones of the 'maître' were interred in the Pantheon, the resting place of the great and good of France. The ceremony was solemn and dignified, but immediately afterwards violence again broke out with a determined assassination attempt made upon a certain army officer who had become a close friend of the dead man. The violent and bitter sentiments which had accompanied Zola's life continued after his death.

Emile Zola is principally famous in Britain for his obscenity. Indeed Zola was the only writer to have his works outlawed in this country in the nineteenth century. In the parliamentary debate leading to the ban Samuel Smith, MP for Flintshire commented: "Nothing more diabolical has ever been written by the pen of man; they are only fit for swine, and those who read them must turn their minds into cesspools." Even in his own country Zola was equally loathed: "No one before him has ever created such a heap of filth. That is his monument, the greatness of which no one can contest. Never has a man made such an effort to vilify humanity, to insult every aspect of beauty and love, to deny all that is good and decent" wrote Anatole France in 1887. A casual reading of a selection of Zola's novels would indeed give this impression. Some of the scenes in his books are as bawdy and shocking as they were when written in the supposedly repressed nineteenth century. Yet the graphic sex and violence serves a purpose. For Zola was a man with a social conscience, not a revolutionary certainly but certainly a radical reformer, which is reflected in his writings. And it is as a propagandist that Zola must be primarily of interest to the socialist.

Born in Paris in 1840 but raised in the small town of Aix en Provence (portrayed as Plassans in many of his novels), Zola was the son of a civil engineer of Italian origins. His father died when he was just small and thereafter the family had little spare money. When he was 18, Zola moved to Paris. A failure as a student, Zola got a miserable job as a clerk, which he soon gave up to devote his life to poetry. Zola attempted to dedicate his life to romantic poetry but found there was no possibility of earning a living from it – indeed at this point in his life he was living in a ramshackle garret trapping and eating sparrows to survive. Instead he turned to journalism from whence he learned the value of sensationalism and the importance of the exposé.

Zola however had not given up the literary life and

within a few years had written his first novel. His earliest novels were a form of experimentation in 'materialism' - demonstrating supposedly 'scientific' theories through literature. *Madeleine Ferat* (the 'imprinting' of a woman with first lover) and the racy *Thérèse Raquin* (the predetermination of events by innate 'temperaments') date from this time. In fact there was nothing scientific at all about these novels as the evidence was, as indeed it would be in a novel, manufactured and the theories mere pseudo-scientific garbage.

The main product of Zola's literary career was the twenty volume Rougon-Macquart cycle, begun in late 1870 and finished a quarter of a century and 2,500,000 words later. Basically the series was intended as a hatchet job on Louis Napoleon and his Second Empire as experienced by the respectable Rougon family and the unmentionable Macquarts. The collapse of the Empire within a year of the commencement of the cycle did not however render the works of mere historical interest, because social and economic conditions did not materially alter under the Third Republic and thus the Rougon-Macquart became a general condemnation of contemporary

society. The Rougon-Macquart is the first great family saga in literature but each novel can be read individually and many readers are not aware that there even is such a series.

The first few volumes were badly received, despite the literary merits of for instance *La Ventre de Paris* ("The Belly of Paris" known as *The Fat and the Thin* in Britain). Only with *L'Assomoir* (published under various titles in Britain, including *The Dram Shop*) in 1876 did fame arrive. This classic tale of the effects of alcohol was meant as a criticism of the slums ("My novel is simple enough. It relates the downfall of a working-class family ruined by its environs") but struck a cord with the public and became a perennial hit with the temperance movement. The use of slang and the real attempt to portray working class life was inspirational ("If you wish to have the same sources of inspiration as the ancients, if you wish to rediscover the breadth of the heroic ages, you must study and depict the common people") and a real eye catching novelty.

In 1880 Zola followed up this success with *Nana*. With its graphic depictions of high level prostitution, *Nana* made Zola not merely notable but truly notorious. Yet this was a deeply moral book with a high purpose. A puritan in real life (even his mistress seems to have been acquired with the sole purpose of reproduction) Zola uses the book as a warning against vice among the leaders of a nation, as a cause of military defeat and destruction both



*Emile Zola*

personally and nationally. The intention was to make plain the disgusting hypocrisy of the regime.

In 1885 came the most notable of Zola's books to the modern reader and one which has pride of place in every worker's library, the classic *Germinal*. Written from 2 April 1884 to 23 January 1885 and originally to be called *Red Harvest*, *Germinal* tells the tale of a strike in the coal mining area of north east France as seen through the eyes of Étienne Lantier, an outsider. Very violent and explicit in places, *Germinal* brilliantly depicts the effects of the vast impersonal force that is capitalism and the misery and oppression it brings to everyday life. Zola made his intention in writing the book clear: "everything must follow on logically, starting from little factual details, from the original unhappiness and suffering, the cause of which is universal, and traceable to the unknown social factor, the god Capital, crouching in its temple like a fat, gluttoned beast, monstrous in satiety; all that taking place not by the desire of the masters that I show on the stage, but arising from a state of affairs beyond their control and determined by the age." As with other works he did not suggest remedies but regarded his mission as merely to publicise the problem: "*Germinal* is a work of pity, and not a work of revolution". Long acknowledged as one of the great classics of French literature, *Germinal* is the only work of Zola to be continuously in print in Britain. Interestingly *Germinal* was not the best selling of Zola's novels at the time coming sixth after *Nana*, *La Terre*, *La Débâcle*, *L'Assomoir* and the dreadful *Lourdes*.

In *La Débâcle* of 1892, Zola virtually invented the war novel as the earlier *La Bête Humaine* had the railway murder story. *La Débâcle* was a well-researched story of the Franco-Prussian war. Its treatment of the Communards was, given Zola's radicalism, surprisingly

negative and very far from objective.

The following year saw the conclusion of the cycle and Zola at the height of his literary fame. A contemporary noted that the publication of a new Zola was "a boulevard event looked forward to for days previously. On the mornings of publication huge piles of the yellow-backed volumes may be seen heaped up on the stalls of booksellers, and by noon the boulevard is flecked by yellow spots as people hurry along, each holding in his hand the eagerly purchased volume."

Zola, having completed the Rougon-Macquart, was at a bit of a loss of what to do next. A series of controversial anti-clerical novels followed. However he was most famous at this time for his role in the Dreyfus case. Essentially Dreyfus, an upright but standoffish Jewish army officer, was made a scapegoat by aristocratic army officers unjustly accused of espionage. Zola liked a good fight and had an eye for self-publicity but the Hitchcockian scenario of a man accused of a crime he had not committed would have appealed to his humanitarian sentiments. The series of deliberate forgeries and the extensive cover up by the military revealed the extent of anti-semitism in France and Zola's forthright support of an unpopular cause made him the most hated man in France virtually overnight. The death threats and persistent mobbing sent Zola into temporary exile but Dreyfus was ultimately exonerated although Zola never regained his former popularity.

The experience further radicalised Zola, perhaps because of the staunch support given Zola during the Dreyfus case by the French leftwingers, and within a few years he became viewed as a socialist. His political views in this period can be particularly seen in *Travail* (work). Based on the Fourierist (utopian socialist) ideas he came into contact with at the turn of the century,



## It's the System, stupid

"£1 a Litre? BASTARDS!" So reads a recent Class War sticker (well, actually, not so recent, as petrol is now well over a £1 a litre). Amusing but typical of the populism they go in for. People don't like having to pay more for their petrol, so blame the petrol companies for putting up the price. It's the same with their campaign against the estate

agents, Foxtons. People don't like estate agents, so let's target the one with the worst reputation.

But is this the message that people who are supposed to be against capitalism as a system should be wanting to get across? Calling the petrol companies "bastards" suggests that their decision to raise prices is a personal one on the part of those in charge of them; that they had some other choice, but deliberately chose this one. But did they? They are probably not very nice people (nobody who has clawed their way to the top of a corporate hierarchy is likely to be), but, whatever their personal traits or views, they are acting in this context as what Marx called "functionaries of capital". As people in charge of capitalist corporations, they have to seek to maximise profits, in this case by fixing the price of petrol at what they judge the market will bear.

What does Class War expect them to do – or rather, what is the interpretation those who see their sticker and share its sentiment are likely to give it? That it would be nice if the petrol companies sacrificed this chance of maximising their profits?

That this is an option within the capitalist profit system? That it wouldn't be such a bad system if only capitalist corporations wouldn't behave as bastards?

The campaign against Foxtons, too, gives a wrong message. Foxtons have acquired a reputation for sharp practice. Targetting them gives the impression that what is being criticised is not the capitalist system as such but only the excesses which some capitalist firms engage in. If these excesses were eliminated or suppressed then things would be OK.

Both main parties have played this game, and still do. The Labour Party used to criticise certain capitalist firms for "profiteering", i.e. making too much profit, being too ruthless in pursuing profits. Presumably if only they'd be satisfied with normal profits, that would be alright. And it's what Ted Heath did when, as Tory Prime Minister, he described the behaviour of Tiny Rowlands – a particularly predatory capitalist – as the "unacceptable face of capitalism". Which suggests that there is an acceptable face of capitalism. Which of course is what he believed – and which, unfortunately, is the same message that the Class War campaigns will convey to people.

Robert Tressell got it right in *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* when he wrote:

"They all hated and blamed Rushton. Yet if they had been in Rushton's place they would have been compelled to adopt the same methods, or become bankrupt; for it is obvious that the only way to compete successfully against other employers who are sweaters is to be a sweater yourself. Therefore no one who is an upholder of the present system can consistently blame any of these men. Blame the system" (chapter 21).

*Travail* is Zola's only work of science fiction and depicts a harmonious society without government or classes, where free love reigns and religion has died away. *Travail* is far from being the French *News From Nowhere* however. Zola's brave new world originates in local experiment rather than revolution and is based on the voluntary (!) cooperation of capital and labour. Unlike earlier utopian socialist schemes, the *Travail* commune is based on a steelworks rather than agriculture but the Fourierist origins are still rather obvious – the commune is termed the Crêcherie, not much different from Fourier's five fingered phalanstery.

Zola was found dead of carbon monoxide poisoning in his flat in Paris on 29 September 1902. There have been persistent rumours of a deliberately blocked chimney and the death was certainly odd. If it was murder, demise at the hands of the anti-Dreyfusards in the cause of justice would have been no shameful death.

Zola's work is difficult to summarise. Despite the self-applied labels of 'Realism' or 'naturalism' there is much that is unrealistic and unnatural about his novels. But art is not a mirror and the ability to create characters larger than life and the extensive use of allegories and symbolism inject an epic tone into the drab real life world comparable with the Coen Brothers films. The melodrama and seemingly endless descriptive passages are perhaps not much to today's taste, but are preferable to the insipid 'chick lit' of modern times. Although some of his work was created purely for entertainment purposes, Zola's main aim was to use the form of the novel to raise awareness of social problems: "My novels have always been written with a higher aim than merely to amuse. I have so high an opinion of the novel as a means of expression that I have chosen it as the form in which to present to the world what I wish to say on the social, scientific, and psychological problems that occupy the minds of thinking men" (quoted in EA Vizetelly's *Zola in England*). As such works such as *Germinal* were greatly successful at the time, although are perhaps now a little dated. Perhaps the main lesson to be drawn from Zola is that the best form of propaganda is that which is not seen as propaganda – a maxim we would all do well to pay attention to.

**KAZ**

## To Dream the Impossible Dream

***The Impossibleists. A Brief Profile of the Socialist Party of Canada.***  
By Peter E. Newell. Athena Press. 2008.

The SDF in Britain was a reformist organisation with a revolutionary minority (which eventually broke away). The Socialist Party of Canada was the opposite: a revolutionary party with a reformist minority. Formed in 1905 as an amalgamation of parties from the different provinces of Canada, it sought to be "impossibilist", i.e. not to seek reforms of capitalism but to advocate only the capture of political power for socialism.

However, it couldn't avoid the reform issue as it won a few seats in elections. It therefore had to decide what these elected socialists should do. Inevitably (and sensibly) it decided that they should use their position not just to propagate socialist views, but also to try to "advance the interests of the working class and aid workers in their class struggle against capitalism". The trouble was the SPC's councillors had not been elected by socialist votes alone but, precisely, as people workers considered would stand up and speak for them. When the reformists broke away from the SPC in 1911 (to form the Social Democratic Party of Canada) the SPC's three British Columbia legislative assembly members left to join them. One, Charles O'Brien in Alberta, stayed. One of his speeches in the legislature was published as a pamphlet (which can be found at [www.worldsocialism.org/canada/proletarian.in.politics.htm](http://www.worldsocialism.org/canada/proletarian.in.politics.htm)), but he lost the next election.

The similar position taken up by the SPGB on this issue was undoubtedly influenced by that of the SPC (even though a minority of SPGB members disagreed, arguing that Socialist MPs should never vote for any reform measure). The Canadian party probably also influenced the SPGB's policy of writing "Socialism" across the ballot paper when there was no socialist candidate standing. This was already being advocated in 1903 by the Socialist Party of British Columbia.

On another issue the very early SPC took up a position that was never that of the SPGB. The editor of its paper, the *Western Clarion*, E. T. Kingsley, argued that the

trade union struggle was not part of the class struggle, but only a "commodity struggle". This was not the view of all SPC members many of whom were active unionists. Later, some were to be jailed for their part in organising the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike. Other SPC members were instrumental in founding the One Big Union in 1919; which was not, as its name might suggest, a "syndicalist" union as the SPC was always strongly insistent on the imperative need for the working class to win control of political power before trying to change society.

Like the SPGB, the SPC had no hesitation in opposing the First World War from day one – and the SPC, with some 2000 to 3000 members would have been ten times bigger than the SPGB – but the Russian Revolution unhinged it. The members of the party's Dominion Executive Committee took the view that the working class had won control of political power in Russia in November 1917 (even though they recognised that socialism could not be the outcome, conditions not being ripe for this). This was a view shared by most members; which made them an easy prey for Bolshevik propagandists who deliberately set out, on orders from Moscow, to win over the SPC. They did not succeed, as a referendum rejected the 21 conditions laid down by Lenin for affiliation to the Third International. Those in favour of this then formed the Workers Party which many former SPC members joined (including the future Leader of the Canadian Communist Party, Tim Buck, who had even also been a member of the short-lived Socialist Party of North America whose declaration of principles Newell mentions was based on that of the SPGB). The SPC staggered on for a few more years but disbanded itself in 1925.

Newell records all these events, basing himself on secondary sources which he usefully summarises.

In 1931 some former members of the SPC decided to reconstitute it, accepting as its platform the object and declaration of the SPGB. There has been some controversy as to whether the new SPC was a continuation of the old. Newell argues that it was, even though other ex-SPC members went into the Communist Party and various Labour parties. Most of the members of the new SPC had been members of the old one, including a former editor of the *Western Clarion* and a former member of the Manitoba Legislative

Assembly. However, two other ex-members more well known on this side of the Atlantic – Charlie Lestor and Bill Pritchard – got involved in reformist politics and did not become impossibilists again till they left Canada, the one for Britain and the other for the US.

The new party was much smaller and had far less impact than the old SPC, but it continued to publish a journal (the present one is *Imagine*) and to contest elections (the last in 1978). Newell describes not just the SPC's external activity from 1931 but also its internal life and controversies. These happened and shouldn't be disguised, but a whole chapter on an organisational dispute in the 1960s, which raised no question of theory or policy, is possibly too much in a "brief profile".

Newell's book is not just a chronicle of events. It also covers such matters as reforms, religion, Russia, war, trade unionism and so also gets across the socialist case as well as bringing together historical research.

**ALB**

## Loud-Mouthed Upstarts

***Who runs Britain? How the Super-Rich are changing our lives.* By Robert Peston, Hodder & Stroughton. 2008.**

According to Peston, currently the BBC's business editor, it's the new super-rich of private-equity and hedge-fund capitalists. They run the country in the sense that the present Labour government feels the need to kow-tow to them for fear of them taking their businesses elsewhere:

"Much of this book is about how New Labour in Government has never flinched from the view that economic disaster for the UK and electoral disaster for Labour would be inevitable if the super-wealthy ever felt their interests were under attack in the UK. Blair and Brown are true believers in one of the main commandments of the Book of Globalization: 'Thou shalt not be seen to use the tax system to take from the well-heeled, for fear of driving them and all their valuable capital into exile'".

A number of these capitalists have been given knighthoods and peerages and – this came first of course – have made very generous contributions to the Labour Party amounting

in total to millions of pounds. In fact, they – rather than the trade unions – funded Labour's last three successful election campaigns. Peston's chapter on the dealings between Blair, Brown, Lord Levy and those he call's Labour's "plutocratic benefactors" can only confirm disgust and contempt for the leaders of the Labour Party for the lengths they are prepared to go just to stay in power.

The new super-rich come across as a bunch of loud-mouthed upstarts who buy companies, "rationalise" them at the expense of the workforce, and then sell them, pocketing a huge personal profit for themselves. Their profit is personal because they own their own companies outright and so have a much freer hand to do what they want, not having to comply with the normal company law that applies to "public", shareholder-owned companies.

Although he criticises them for not paying their fair share of taxes and as a potential threat to political democracy, Peston cannot disguise his admiration for them, seeing them as fulfilling an essential role within capitalism of channelling capital into the most profitable lines of activity (instead of it stagnating in long-established businesses run by stuffy ex-Etonians). He wants the managers of pension funds to behave in the same ruthless way towards the companies they've invested the funds in, so as to bring in more money for present and future pensioners.

His chapter on pensions – and the run-down of final-salary company pension schemes – is instructive. Employers originally set these up to retain the loyalty of their salaried employees, but over the years governments have imposed so many obligations on them (frozen pensions, pension transfers, taxes, etc) that it has become no longer worth their while keeping them going. So they have been disposing of them to, among others, private-equity capitalists who hope to make a profit out of investing their funds.

In other words, reforms aimed at protecting people's pension rights have had the opposite effect. Employers have walked away, leaving workers without the desired protection. Another lesson in the futility of reformism.

**ALB**

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## Meetings

### South West

Saturday **13 September**, 2.00 till 5.00pm  
Should socialists go out of their way to live a greener lifestyle?

Village Pub, 33, Wilton Road, Salisbury.  
Further information contact Ray Carr ray.carr1@ntlworld.com Phone 01202 257556 or Veronica Clanchy veronica.clanchy@hotmail.co.uk, Phone 01202 569826.

Please Bring some food to be held in common.

### Chiswick

Tuesday **16 September**. 8.00pm  
The Judeo-Christian-Islamic Religion  
Speaker: A. Alan  
Chiswick Town Hall, Heathfield St, W4 (nearest tube: Chiswick Park)

### East Anglia

Sunday **21 September**, 12 to 4pm  
Lunch at 1pm  
Conservatory of the Rosary Tavern, Rosary Road, Norwich.

### Manchester

Monday **22 September**, 8.30pm  
The Shock Doctrine and Disaster Capitalism  
Unicorn, Church Street, City Centre

### London

Saturday **20 September**, 6pm  
Which Way the Revolution - What are our differences?  
Ian Bone (Class War) and Howard Moss (Socialist Party)  
Forum followed by open discussion.  
Chair: Bill Martin (socialist Party)  
52 Clapham High St, Lodon SW4 (nearest tube: Clapham North)

A Season of Free Film nights from Sunday **14th September** to Sunday **23rd November** at 52 Clapham High Street, London. All films start at 4 p.m.

Sunday 14 September: *Animal Farm*  
**Sunday 28 September: Who Killed the Electric Car?**  
Sunday 12 October: *Judgement Day: Intelligent Design on trial*  
**Sunday 26 October: The Corporation**  
Sunday 9 November: *Zeitgeist*  
**Sunday 23 November: The War on Democracy**

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**p16:** Map of Belgium - www.umsl.edu.  
**p17:** Ernest Mandel - source: www.marxists.org/nederlands/mandel/index.htm, GNU Free Doc

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reflecting the fact that Flemish capitalists don't want to continue to pay for the state benefits received by workers in Wallonia where heavy industry (coal, steel, engineering) has been considerably run down since Renard's day.

That the working class in Belgium should be divided on linguistic lines is, from a socialist point of view a matter for regret, but it also confirms the correctness of our opposition to "leftwing" groups in that they should be partly responsible for it.

Whether Belgium will eventually split up, or at least become a federal State of some sort, remains to be seen, but one thing is clear: this constitutional issue is of no consequence whatsoever for the working class of the area. Whatever the constitution it will be that of a capitalist State and the working class will remain propertyless sellers of labour-power to the minority who own and control the means of production.

ADAM BUICK

## OBITUARY

### Valentine McEntee

IRISH COMRADES report the sudden death in May of Val McEntee. Val joined the Islington branch of the party in London in 1982 as a young man in his mid-twenties. At the time this was perhaps the party's most dynamic branch and Val was one of its active members. He worked in the accident investigation department of British Rail, and was a keen photographer, building up a collection of photos of party speakers at Hyde Park and elsewhere as well as tape-recording meetings. In the mid-90s he moved to Ireland, in a sense back to Ireland since though bought up in England he was of Irish traveller origin, to live in a small village in Co. Limerick where he earned a sort of living as a professional photographer. In Ireland he took part in the leafletting and other activities of the members there. His death was sudden and, with the authorities unable to contact any relatives, he was buried in the local Catholic church, even though the priest later told a member that he thought he was an Anglican, no doubt because of his English accent and because he didn't attend mass. The member decided that discretion was the better part of valour and didn't tell the priest the truth: that he had buried a non-believer in consecrated ground.

## The Conflict in the Middle East



Another Middle East storm has developed. This time it is the Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq that occupy the centre of the stage, with Kuwait also stirring. Again oil is the mainspring of the eruptions and clashing interests. The struggles concern the rich oil lands and the routes to those areas, with other economic advantages for the privileged seeping in.

The revenues from oil are in the region of the fabulous. They are cherished by the privileged possessors, and sought after by privileged non-possessors who want a larger share of the plunder. The toilers who make these revenues possible have no share in them. They only receive the customary payment for the work they do; some of the Arab workers receive hardly enough to buy the necessities of life.

In spite of the numberless pronouncements on peace, with which we have been deluged for decades from all quarters, armed force, or the threat of it, is always

the final resource when capitalist sections feel that their sources of revenue are threatened.

The present flare-up, just as the recent Suez dispute, concerns oil and the interests of the mammoth oil companies. There is no secret about this. Reports, articles, and pronouncements concentrate on this aspect.

(...)

It is an old off-repeated story; littered with indecision, broken pacts, duplicity, intrigues and wars. In the final chapter the privileged always occupy the seat of power and the mass of people remain in subjection. It will be the same in the Middle East after the present turmoil has come to an end. At best the most the mass of the people there can obtain is a standard of wage slavery that is equivalent to what obtains in the so-called advanced countries.

(from leaflet reproduced in *Socialist Standard*, September 1958)

## Declaration of Principles

*This declaration is the basis of our organisation and, because it is also an important historical document dating from the formation of the party in 1904, its original language has been retained.*

### Object

**The establishment of a system of society based upon the common ownership and democratic control of the means and instruments for producing and distributing wealth by and in the interest of the whole community.**

### Declaration of Principles

The Socialist Party of Great Britain holds

1. That society as at present constituted is based upon the ownership of the means of living (i.e., land, factories, railways, etc.)

by the capitalist or master class, and the consequent enslavement of the working class, by whose labour alone wealth is produced.

2. That in society, therefore, there is an antagonism of interests, manifesting itself as a class struggle between those who possess but do not produce and those who produce but do not possess.

3. That this antagonism can be abolished only by the emancipation of the working class from the domination of the master class, by the conversion into the common property of society of the means of production and distribution, and their democratic control by the whole people.

4. That as in the order of social evolution the working class is the last class to achieve its freedom,

the emancipation of the working class will involve the emancipation of all mankind, without distinction of race or sex.

5. That this emancipation must be the work of the working class itself.

6. That as the machinery of government, including the armed forces of the nation, exists only to conserve the monopoly by the capitalist class of the wealth taken from the workers, the working class must organize consciously and politically for the conquest of the powers of government, national and local, in order that this machinery, including these forces, may be converted from an instrument of oppression into the agent of emancipation and the overthrow of privilege, aristocratic and plutocratic.

7. That as all political parties are but the expression of class interests, and as the interest of the working class is diametrically opposed to the interests of all sections of the master class, the party seeking working class emancipation must be hostile to every other party.

8. The Socialist Party of Great Britain, therefore, enters the field of political action determined to wage war against all other political parties, whether alleged labour or avowedly capitalist, and calls upon the members of the working class of this country to muster under its banner to the end that a speedy termination may be wrought to the system which deprives them of the fruits of their labour, and that poverty may give place to comfort, privilege to equality, and slavery to freedom.



# Westminster Punch And Judy

“PMQs are another example of the corruption of politics”

When the MPs pack their sun cream and head off for their long summer break they may leave behind a number of people who are anxious that the country is uncared for, unprotected, ungoverned. There are others who may simply resent being deprived of their weekly fix of Prime Ministers Questions. These last have unusual tastes, suggesting that they will not be easily diverted onto a substitute, however proper. They will not be consoled by suckling on an ice cream, on the beach at Blackpool or Margate or Southwold, contentedly watching a Punch and Judy Show.

Prime Ministers Questions (or PMQs) is an institution promoted as evidence of the virility of British parliamentary democracy. As a regular, important part of House of Commons procedure it began in the 1950s, since when it has not been immune from the juggling and manoeuvring customary to our leaders in Westminster. In 1997 Tony Blair announced that New Labour would not only abolish poverty, introduce open government and run an ethical foreign policy but also replace the two 15 minute sessions of PMQs on Tuesday and Thursday with one of a half hour on Wednesday. The first question of each session must be directed at the Prime Minister, asking about arrangements for the day; parliamentary procedure then demands that the same person must reply to all other questions, whatever the subject. By this ruse the Prime Minister is prevented from avoiding inconvenient questions by passing them on to some inadequately briefed underling squirming nervously on the front bench.

## Ineffective

The word “answer” must be allowed a loose interpretation in this context because what is recorded as an “answer” is very often little more than an evasion -- perhaps a reply to a question which has not been asked -- or a denial, or a straightforward lie. All of which is perfectly understandable for if the Prime Minister were to deal truthfully with questions about how their government was fumbling with the typical problems of capitalist society -- like the current “credit crunch” -- it would reveal how utterly ineffective they were. And that is not supposed to be what PMQs is about.

More usually, far from being an opportunity to openly examine a government’s record, PMQs is treated by the MPs as encouragement to behave like excessively unruly children. While a party leader is speaking there is a line of compliant sycophants on the bench behind, nodding like demented marionettes at what they wish us to believe are crucial and conclusive points of argument. The feeblest of jokes -- like Vince Cable’s famous sneer about Gordon Brown transforming himself from Stalin to Mr. Bean -- has the MPs in paroxysms of helpless laughter. The most ineffective reply to a question -- like Brown endlessly reciting statistics which have been cooked up to show, in the face of cruel reality, that his government has us all wallowing in prosperity -- will be

bolstered by a thunder of approval.

When he became leader of his party in 2005 David Cameron promised that, as part of his drive to change the face of politics for the better, he would end the Punch and Judy aspect of PMQs. However as it dawned on him that Gordon Brown was not as formidable an opponent at the Despatch Box as he had feared he forgot his promise and emerged as an enthusiast participant in the knockabout. On a recent *Today* programme on Radio Four he admitted that “I will absolutely hold up my hands and say this is a promise I have not been able to deliver...The quieter tone I’d hoped we might be able to have, the better discussion of politics at Prime Minister’s Questions, doesn’t work”. He did not say whether breaking this promise,

comparatively unimportant as it was, should encourage confidence that he will in future robustly keep his word on more vital matters, or whether the affair exposes him as a trickster no better than the ministers he so zestfully attacks.

Anyone who doubts that PMQs are little more than just another example of the corruption of politics need only consider the tradition of the Planted Question. These are asked, usually to a storm of jeering from the opposition and of approval from the government side, by a back bench member who has an assurance that their compliance will not

exactly damage their promotion prospects. A typical style would be “Would my Right Honourable Friend (that’s the Prime Minister) agree that in spite of what the brainless rabble on the other side think this is the most caring, competent and effective government this country has ever...” A particularly instructive example was in July, when Richard Burden, MP for Birmingham Northfield -- who is not famous for toeing the party line -- got dutifully to his feet to ask whether Britain’s current problems are not caused by economic contamination from abroad. The resultant protests were so noisy that the Speaker told Burden to shut up before he had finished. This snub did not prevent Gordon Brown answering the partial “question”, although he might not have been able to hear it. Eagerly joining the Punch and Judy show he had promised to abolish, Cameron cuttingly commented that “You don’t have to finish a planted question to get a planted answer” -- which ignored the fact that in the past Tory governments were happy to use the same deception.

No part of our lives can be untouched by the corruption bred into the property basis and the class relationships of capitalism. The politics of the system, played out by the parties in the seats of government, are immutably shaped by it. At times this corruption is so blatant that it almost seems the only proper response is outraged, incredulous laughter. Just as it is when we watch Mr. Punch beating up Judy. Except that that is just a bit of harmless fun at the seaside.

IVAN





# Voice from the Back

## Stay At Your Desk, Slave

Now and then a wonderful product comes along that the owning class just love. This may be one of them. "The maker of a new product that combines a treadmill and computer workstation is banking on the notion that companies will invest in products like the "Walkstation" as a way of keeping health care costs down and improving overall fitness levels. The device allows people to work on their computers while walking on a treadmill at a slow speed of up to three kilometers (two miles) per hour, enabling small amounts of movement that supporters say have the potential to reap big health benefits." (*Yahoo News*, 13 July) Now all we need is a "Feedstation" that shovels food into your mouth while you work. Oh, Charlie Chaplin already envisaged that in *Modern Times* didn't he? How about the "Bedpanstation"? Too much perhaps?



## What's Ethics Got To Do With It?

"European and US defence companies will this week kick off talks on a joint code of ethics to cover arms sales. Representatives from the industry's leading trade bodies will meet at the Farnborough Air Show in the UK on Tuesday. European companies have recently developed an anti-corruption code in a bid to improve the industry's reputation, which has suffered in the wake of allegations of bribery and corruption in connection with some of its biggest players." (*Financial Times*, 13 July) As

these guardians of morality meet to discuss whether it is more ethical to kill a child with poisonous gas, napalm bombs or good old fashioned high explosives we ask ourselves what do sellers of death know of ethics. They are money grubbing killers.

## Chinese Workers Wake Up

"Doing business in China is beginning to cost real money. Not that Chinese workers are buying second homes or anything like that: Their average wage is still a little short of a dollar an hour. But so many Chinese have now left their villages for the factories that the once bottomless pool of new young workers is beginning to run dry, and the wages of assembly-line employees are rising 10 percent a year." (*Yahoo News*, 15 July) We should echo the sentiments of an old song, probably banned in China now. They occur in *The Red Flag* - "Arise like starvelings from your slumber" Let's hope so!

## Health And Hypocrisy

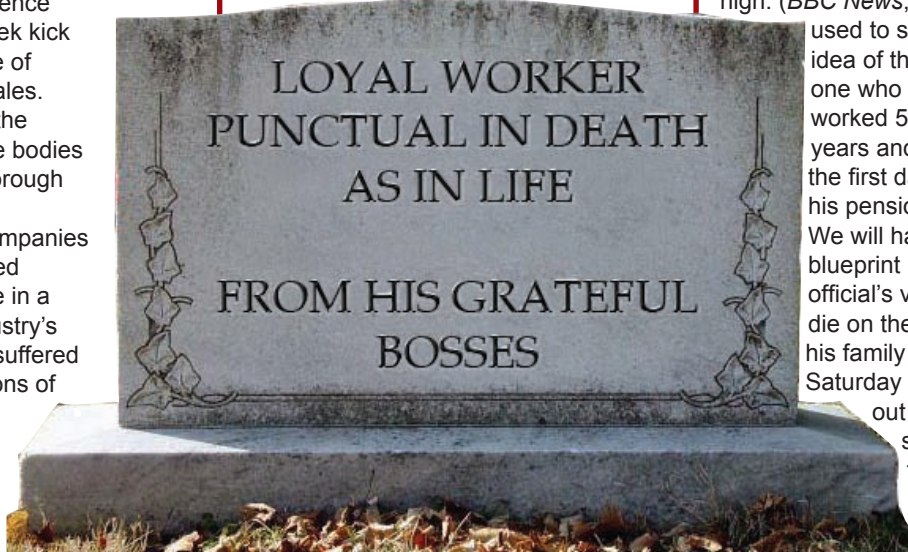
The following announcement caused a storm of controversy in the media.

"Patients cannot rely on the NHS to save their lives if the cost of doing so is too great, the Government's medicines watchdog has ruled for the first time. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (Nice) has said the natural impulse to go to the aid of individuals in trouble – as when vast resources are used to save a sailor lost at sea – should not apply to the NHS. The disclosure follows last week's controversial decision by Nice to reject four new drugs for kidney cancer even though they have been shown to extend life by five to six months." (*Independent*, 13 August) To socialists the announcement is far from shocking. That is how capitalism operates - if you are rich you have access to the best food, clothing, shelter, education and recreation. Why should it be so shocking to learn that if you are poor you cannot afford the best of medicine either?

## The Perfect Worker

"A Ugandan official has suggested to MPs that funerals should be limited to Saturday afternoons to stop people taking time off work to attend them. Speciosa Kazibwe, a former vice-president who now heads a state development agency, noted that Uganda's death rate was very high." (*BBC News*, 25 July) Socialists

used to say that the capitalist's idea of the perfect worker was one who left school at 15, worked 50 weeks a year for 50 years and dropped down dead the first day he went to collect his pension at the post office. We will have to amend this ideal blueprint in view of the Ugandan official's view. Ideally he would die on the Thursday so that his family could attend his Saturday funeral without missing out on a day producing surplus value for the owning class.



## WSM FORUM

- Want to talk about what you've just read?
- Can't make it to a meeting?
- Discuss the questions of the day with Party members and non-members online.

Join the forum via [www.worldsocialism.org](http://www.worldsocialism.org)