

socialist standard



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I put a spell on you



But now
Obama's
magic is
wearing off



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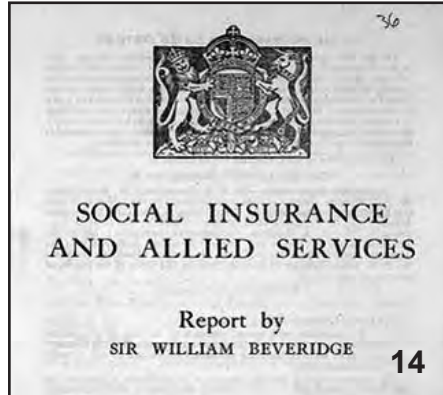
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THE SOCIALIST PARTY OF GREAT BRITAIN

The next meeting of the Executive Committee will be on **Saturday 4 December** 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.

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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

Class war: we're all in it together

THE DETAILS of a long-planned offensive in the class war were finalised and announced by the Chancellor on 20 October. The millionaires who lead the government, backed by the business elite, unsurprisingly decided that the burden of the state debt should not fall onto those most responsible for it, nor those most able to pay it. Instead, it should be used as an excuse for an attack on working-class living standards. If you're not sure if this means you, let us tell you, it almost certainly does. If you rely on the labour market or state benefits for your living, you're working class. If you rely on investments for your living, you're capitalist class. An understanding of this simple fact will cut through no end of political propaganda and put you on the road to the truth.

And the truth is that the capitalist class, represented for now by the coalition government and led by the Tories, has no real interest, despite the rhetoric, in individual freedom or rolling back the state. Despite the cuts, everywhere described as 'savage', state spending will actually continue to rise. As Lex points out in the *Financial Times*, the cuts are "all very radical by the standards of the modern state", but government spending will still rise by a total of 5 per cent over the next three years. This is because the government is not daft. It knows that real-world capitalism can only prosper with the backing and support of the state. The banks and the capitalist class and the businesses that they

own all rely on massive state support to survive. What is not acceptable, to them, is for the working class to rely on similar support. This is an "unaffordable" burden, to be cut out entirely where politically possible, or cut back to the bone where not.

The details of the cuts have been widely reported. They total £81bn, and include a massive £7bn cut in welfare spending, a rise in the retirement age to 66 (French workers at the time of writing are on the street to prevent a raise to 62), and cuts to higher education and council spending. Ruling-class propaganda has been so effective that the government could announce, as if everyone should be pleased and proud of the fact, that the cuts to government departments would not be as severe as expected because it had managed to be especially severe on welfare. Workers who understand their own position and interest will know that there is nothing to be gained from throwing those people who rely on state benefits, even those who really are 'swinging the lead', onto the labour market. Although the capitalist media does its best to whip up resentment against benefits claimants – and what a good job it does – those benefits are exactly what we might all one day have to rely on to survive (let alone live). Unless, of course, you have been thrifty, wise and hard-working enough to avoid being born into a working family, and have taken measures to ensure that in the future you will never lose

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Extracting the Miguel

WHEN THE shift started on August 5 most people had never heard of the San Jose mine, and could barely point to the Atacama desert on a map. By the time the 33 miners were rescued on October 14 the mine was front-page news worldwide and the site tented like Glastonbury with journalists and press photographers.

What happened in between, from the moment the mineshaft collapsed and bottled up the miners in a mile-deep tomb, is a fairytale of capitalism in action, together with feelgood ending.

First, the collapse itself. Maybe somebody's fault, maybe not. Accidents happen, who knows? The mine was already 'crying' rocks from the tunnel roofs so they knew something was wrong, but they went in anyway, being offered double-pay.

"Hopefully this will teach us not to chase money, but to be humble and treasure our friends and family instead," said one miner's sister. Easy to say afterwards, but sometimes to escape poverty people will take big risks. Will it teach the mine-owners not to chase money but to be humble and treasure their families instead? Hardly.

The film-script almost writes itself. Tom Hanks will be down there, gritty and long-suffering, wearing a large moustache and a fake accent. They have air, but only 48 hours rations, the first rescue attempt aborts after another collapse, and nobody's going to reach them for weeks, if not months. Can they survive alone, in the dark and fetid heat? Can they keep together and keep sane, against the odds, until the first pilot drillbit breaks through?

On the surface, drill teams work heroically round the clock, effort and money no object. The President is on hand, the Minister for Industry is camping there permanently, the eyes of the world are helicoptering overhead. A bit of science and diagrams to keep us hooked, nothing too difficult. Will they or won't they make it? We hold our breath.

And then... breakthrough – the first rock deals smash through the rock and scatter among the buried men, followed by a blast of cool, refreshing sponsorship offers. Pretty soon every company who can send a product down a hole in the ground is vying to get a piece into the action and five seconds of on-screen logo time. Yes, trauma or triumph, capitalism knows how to extract the most out of any situation.

And then, up they come, designer sunglasses and media contracts in place, a teary-eyed President on hand to drape them in the flag, sing the national anthem and praise God and all things Chilean as his own popularity rating winches through the roof faster than any bullet capsule. These men are made for life, with a thousand job offers to share among them, and all the nightmares and the PTSD to come might even seem worth it.

So, a rousing saga of how humans pull together to pull out the stops when their brothers need their help, a fairytale of our times, the stuff of legend.

It wouldn't be the stuff of socialism though. Rather than thanking God and their bosses for getting them out, why weren't they blaming God and their bosses for sending them down in the first place? In a

moneyless socialist society those men couldn't have been economically blackmailed into doing anything so dangerous (see *Getting Shafted*). It is highly debatable whether socialist extractive industries would be going to such lengths to extract gold or copper, but even supposing they did, and that machines could not be used instead, the socialist approach would be to make the mine safe first rather than to throw technology at the problem afterwards. As Bernard Shaw once put it: 'it's better to build a fence at the top of the cliff than a hospital at the bottom.' But in capitalism, where the private company has to pay for the fence whereas the state has to pay for the hospital, logic functions somewhat differently. With a wage-slave workforce you don't have to rely on volunteers to walk towards the abyss, and in the event of accidents you can count on victims not being able to afford the kind of lawyers you can buy.

Still, the prolonged tale and likely success guaranteed global media interest so at least the world had a chance to ignore all the thousands of industrial accidents that happen every year without happy outcomes, all the result of capitalism's ruthlessly extractive nature, both of natural and human resources. These 33 miners got out in one piece, and good luck to them, but the carnival of capitalism at the drillhead shouldn't disguise that basic truth. Most workers don't get celeb status for their sufferings, they just get shat on and forgotten.

Getting Shafted

October 2010, China: Explosion in Yuzhou mine in central Henan province kills 37 (*BBC News*, 17 October).

China is responsible for 80 percent of global mining deaths, with more than 2,600 miners dying in accidents in 2009, but major mining accidents in 2010 with dozens of fatalities each have also occurred in Colombia, Russia and the United States, while at least 200 have died in Sierra Leone.

There are no reliable global statistics for mining deaths, but the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM) estimates there are 12,000 fatalities per year.

"A lot of mining deaths aren't recorded. It is really hard to put a number on it. In a lot of countries, management will go to the widows or family and give them money and make them sign statements not to talk about it", said a spokesman for ICEM (*International Business Times*, 11 October).

NB: the good news is that safety standards are slowly improving. Now mining is not considered as dangerous as construction or agriculture, which annually kill more workers.

Sludge funds

Meanwhile, what happens if you mix large amounts of rust, quicklime and radioactive trace metals and then add the Danube? Answer, a hell of a lot of reclamation. While the Chilean President has declared in a moment of unguarded recklessness that legislation on deep mining will be tightened up so that accidents like San Jose don't happen again, over in Hungary there are axes poised over heads as their own mini-Gulf disaster leaves their neighbours seeing red - for miles. Mining companies in Europe are apparently notorious for not spending money on double-walling toxic waste as is standard in other industries (*New Scientist*, 16 October) and there is no legislation in place to make them do it. 8 people died and 100 were injured by this tsunami of red gunk, and it would only have cost the company the price of a second back-up wall to prevent it. But no doubt it was more 'financially astute' to let the state provide hospitals for the victims.



Booking the cooks

Dear Editors

In the August *Socialist Standard* Pathfinders ('Meat In-To Veg') the author asks what will become of the meat and dairy industry in socialism and says: "If socialists expect a large-scale meat industry they will have to face the fact that there is no 'ethical' way to do this." He or she cites in support an article in *New Scientist* which argues that free range farming is the most inefficient and intensive factory farming the only logical choice. But the *New Scientist* article assumes the continuation of capitalist society, with all the constraints and imperatives which it imposes on the sane use of resources when profit is the motive for production. The members of a socialist society would have vastly greater resources to employ – all the resources diverted from the obscene expenditure on arms, the bloated banking system and much, much more.

In an apposite metaphor Karl Marx warned against trying to write recipes for the cook shops of the future. I feel we should take that warning seriously. We don't know what decisions would be taken about food production in socialism and we shouldn't try to second guess them. Personally, I would vote for meat production. I might be on the losing side. A socialist who would vote against needs to recognise that they might be on the losing side instead. But all that should be left for another day, in the interest of creating the broadest base of support for socialism here and now.

Keith Graham, Bristol.

Reply: Fair comment, but Pathfinders is a science column with a focus on the future and that is inevitably going to involve some speculation. In this context it is not unreasonable to say that, if the current evidence suggests that socialism cannot realistically provide a contemporary western meat-based lifestyle for its global population, then some level of meat-reduction would be inevitable – *Editors*.



Disabled or not enabled?

Capitalism sees the unproductive disabled as a drain on profits. Socialism will promote the good life and society for all, regardless of health condition.

IN FEUDAL society, disabled people faced widespread superstition and persecution. However, the rural production process and the extended nature of the feudal family allowed many of the disabled to contribute to economic life. Extended families were able to provide networks of care for their mentally or physically disabled members. But this way of life, which had lasted many thousands of years, was about to change.

The Industrial Revolution

The rise of capitalism forced people off the land. Production for the market began on a scale small enough to be carried out in the home, and therefore disabled people could still play a role. But this gradually became harder. Larger scale machinery concentrated in factories increasingly destroyed the old cottage industries and family structures. People had to find work away from the home or patch of land.

The new factory workers could not have any impairment which would present them from operating the machinery. The profit-seeking need to have efficient machines established being able-bodied as the norm for workers. This undermined the position of physically impaired people within the family and community.

Poor Law officials and an expanding medical profession invented names for the poor who were unfit for employment: the sick, the insane, defectives, the aged and infirm. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries most of the disabled were segregated into workhouses, asylums, prisons and special schools. According to Colin Barnes, this had several advantages over outdoor relief: "it was efficient, it acted as a major deterrent to the able-bodied malingerers, and it could instil good work habits into the inmates" (*Disabled People in Britain and Discrimination*, 1994).

The recent past

Two world wars saw disabled people, who were previously considered incapable of factory work, play a substantial part in wartime production. Large numbers of wounded servicemen prompted legislation to encourage training and employment for disabled people. In practice this largely meant the expansion of sheltered workshops paying below minimum wages.

Medical advances led to disabled people

living longer and some to carry out activities of which they were previously incapable. The disabled began to reject their labelling as deviants or patients and to speak out against discrimination. The Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) argued that disability was a social relationship of oppression, rather than a biologically determined condition:

"In our view, it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society" (*Fundamental Principles of Disability*, 1976).

Contemporary capitalism, with its ageing population and technological advances is very different from its Victorian counterpart. Today the workforce is as likely to suffer from mental stress or depression as from other workplace injuries. People with mental health problems have the lowest employment rates of all impairment categories, at only 21 per cent. Over one third of the total disabled population of working age is unemployed and on state benefits.

The public spending cuts include further attacks on the living standards of pensioners, who comprise the biggest proportion of the disabled, population.

Socialism

The replacement of a society based on production for profit by one based on production for needs will not of course mean the disappearance of disabilities, but it will certainly change for the better the way disabled people are treated.

Whether someone enjoys perfect health or suffers slightly or severely from an ailment of some kind will make no difference to the free and equal access they will have to the goods and services society is able to produce.

Men and women in difference states of health will be able to contribute to the work of society in different ways. They will be in a position to balance the needs of themselves, others, the community and world society with their own physical and mental abilities and tastes.

It may be that a few diehard supporters of capitalism will suffer withdrawal symptoms and even go a bit loony in the new circumstances. Their plight will be treated with care and compassion.

STAN PARKER

The Caspian Sea: oil and gas versus caviar

THE OVERWHELMING focus of mainstream Western literature on the Caspian Sea and its environs is on their vast oil and gas resources – on controlling them, extracting them, and “getting them out” to the European and world markets. Close attention is always paid to the commercial and strategic competition between the Western powers – mainly the United States and the European Union – and their rivals for control over the Caspian region – Russia, China and Iran.

As for the people who actually live in the region, they get a look-in only insofar as they may assist or impede Western business in this worthy endeavour. Nonhuman species, of course, are ignored completely.

A unique ecosystem

And yet the inland sea that we call the Caspian is a unique ecosystem. It once abounded in wildlife, including many marine species found nowhere else (the Caspian seal, the Caspian gull, etc.). Already weakened by over-fishing, untreated sewage, and other human damage, the ecosystem of the Caspian Sea – like those of the Gulf of Mexico, northern Alberta and southeastern Nigeria – is now being rapidly degraded by oil pollution.

Even though oil and gas development is still at a fairly early stage, the worst affected parts of the sea, such as the waters around Baku and Sumgait in Azerbaijan, are already devoid of life. The whole ecosystem is probably doomed. For one thing, the sea level is steadily rising – one effect of the region’s geological instability (as a landlocked water body, its level is independent of that of the world ocean). A rise of 2.5 meters since 1978 has inundated almost 800 rigs. These submerged rigs are a major and ever expanding source of oil seepage.

Recently I translated a series of papers about the Caspian issued by a Russian international relations institute. I was intrigued to discover that the Russian analysts, unlike their Western colleagues, dwell at length on the ecological costs and risks of Caspian oil and gas development.

The caviar factor

It is revealing to consider why this should be so. It does not reflect any general Russian concern with protecting the environment. Russian experts do not seem to worry overmuch about the ecological effects of oil and gas development in Siberia or the Arctic (see MW, September 2007 *Socialist Standard*). Some factor specific to the Caspian must be involved.

That factor is fish – but above all, sturgeon, and especially its roe, known as caviar. As Bystrova points out:

“Even comparatively recently, the Caspian was capable of an annual yield of 500-550,000 tonnes of fish, with the bulk of the catch consisting of valuable varieties (sturgeon, white salmon, etc.). In the 1970s and 1980s the Soviet Union produced 2,500 tonnes of black caviar annually, which was about 90 percent of world output... The biological potential of the Northern Caspian is about

\$37 billion. This sum is comparable with the value of the enormous hydrocarbon deposits recently discovered in this part of the sea. But while Caspian oil and gas will in time be used up, biological resources, if rationally exploited, are renewable and therefore practically everlasting.”

The Russian oil company Lukoil operates in the North Caspian, so Russian hydrocarbon and fishing interests are in conflict here. This makes for a certain ambiguity in Russian policy. Nevertheless, Russia is much more inclined to favour constraints on Caspian hydrocarbon development than are Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, which depend much more heavily on Caspian oil and gas. Iran aligns itself with Russia out of concern for its own fisheries (it has enormous amounts of oil and gas, but not in the Caspian).

Crossing the Caspian

The Russian literature especially emphasizes the real ecological dangers of transporting oil and gas from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan *across* the Caspian Sea, either by tanker or through underwater pipelines laid on the seabed. Russia itself relies on south-north land pipelines and has no need for trans-Caspian routes. However, Western businessmen and politicians seek to avoid routes into Europe through Russian or Iranian territory, so they fund projects that envision crossing the Caspian very appealingly.

Western analysts never seem to mention the environmental problems associated with underwater pipelines. Are they deferring to the enthusiasm of their masters or are they just ignorant? In either case their silence is remarkable, because some of these problems cast doubt on the feasibility of using such

pipelines at all. The Caspian seabed is steeply inclined in many places, consists of loose and crumbly material, and is prone to gas releases, eruptions of mud volcanoes, frequent seismic tremors and occasional earthquakes. Any of these events could easily set off a landslide that breaks and displaces a section of an underwater pipeline.

Again, Russian policy experts have no *general* objection to messing about with geologically unstable land masses. The Yamal Peninsula in northeastern Siberia is every bit as unstable as the Caspian, but that is never given as a reason to stop exploiting its huge deposits of natural gas.

Playing cards

As we see from this example, ecological concerns are not, after all, completely ignored in the game of capitalist politics. Like all other concerns, however, they are constantly reduced to cards in the hands of players in the ongoing competition among sectoral and national sections of the world capitalist class. Each card is played when and only when the player holding it decides that it is convenient and profitable for him to play it. And so it will go on until we gather our strength and intervene, confiscate the cards and close down the game.

STEFAN



Websites

The World Socialist Movement, made up at the moment of active parties in Britain, the US, Canada and New Zealand, has a website at:

www.worldsocialism.org
www.worldsocialism.org/spgb
www.wspus.org
www.worldsocialism.org/canada
www.worldsocialism.org/nz

Forums

The WSM also runs an open discussion forum, to which anybody, socialist or not, can contribute as long as they respect the rules. It has contributors from all over the world:

http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/WSM_Forum

Meetup

Our meetings page is at:

<http://www.meetup.com/The-Socialist-Party-of-Great-Britain/>

Blogs

The SPGB has its own blog at:

[http://](http://socialismoryourmoneyback.blogspot.com/)

socialismoryourmoneyback.blogspot.com/
 Some branches have their own blogs. For instance the Scottish branches here:
<http://socialist-courier.blogspot.com/>

Some individual members have set up their own blogs or websites. We won't list them all as some have proved to be ephemeral or are not kept up, but here's a few. As will be seen, as befits a diary (of which blogs are a variety) the blogs can also contain material about the blogger's musical preferences or the sporting team they support:

<http://mailstrom.blogspot.com>
<http://impossiblist.blogspot.com>
www.theoryandpractice.org.uk

Social Network

Members have set up MySpace and Facebook pages:

www.myspace.com/socialiststandard
www.myspace.com/socialistpartyofgb
www.myspace.com/worldsocialism
www.myspace.com/socialistpartycanada
 SPGB - www.facebook.com/

World Socialist Movement -
 Socialist Party of Canada -
 World Socialist Party U.S. -
<http://www.facebook.com>

Resources

WSM material is also available on other sites. Past articles by three SPGB members can be found on Marxists Internet Archive:

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/fitzgerald/index.htm>
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/hardcastle/index.htm>
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lawrence/index.htm>



Audio

Audio recordings of meetings and debates, some going back to the 1970s and 1980s, can be found at

www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/audio.html
 and on the experimental site at
www.theoryandpractice.org.uk/wsmtemp

Video

A 50-minute video "Capitalism and Kids Stuff" can be found here:

<http://socialist-tv.blogspot.com/2008/02/capitalism-and-other-kids-stuff.html>

Videos of meetings can be found on YouTube but accessed through here:

www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/video.html



Languages

This French site has articles from our publications in various languages (not just French):

<http://bataillesocialiste.wordpress.com/>
limpossibilisme-anglo-saxon

Other language sites are:

French:

<http://socialisme-mondial.blogspot.com>
 and
www.facebook.com/pages/Socialisme-mondial/54629267263?ref=mf

Italian:

<http://socialismo-mondiale.blogspot.com>
 and
www.myspace.com/socialismomondiale

Spanish:

<http://marcos-msm.blogspot.com>
 and
<http://espanol.groups.yahoo.com/group/movimientosocialistamundial>

German:

www.wiederaneignung.blogspot.com

Swedish:

The Swedish section of the Marxist Internet Archive is in the process of publishing all the issues of the magazine and pamphlets published by the Swedish WSM group there in the 1970s and 1980s:

www.marxists.org/svenska/tidskrifter/vs/index.htm
www.marxists.org/svenska/tidskrifter/vsh/index.htm

More articles in French can be found on the SPC site at

<http://www.worldsocialism.org/canada/enfranca.htm>

And in Spanish on the WSPUS site at

www.es.wspus.org/

The WSM site has articles in these and other, European and Asian, languages at

<http://www.worldsocialism.org/othlang.php>



Pieces together

REFORM FAILS AGAIN

“West Africa’s cocoa industry is still trafficking children and using forced child labour despite nearly a decade of efforts to eliminate the practices, according to an independent audit published by Tulane University. A US-sponsored solution called the Harkin-Engel Protocol was signed in 2001 by cocoa industry members to identify and eliminate cocoa grown using forced child labour. A child-labour-free certification process was supposed to cover 50 per cent of cocoa growing regions in West Africa by 2005 and 100 per cent by the end of 2010. But independent auditors at Tulane University’s Payson Center for International Development said in a late September report that efforts have not even come close to these targets” (*Globe and Mail*, 8 October).

HUNGER INCREASES

“UN food agencies said Wednesday that 166 million people in 22 countries suffer chronic hunger or difficulty finding enough to eat as a result of what they called protracted food crises. Wars, natural disasters and poor government institutions have contributed to a continuous state of undernourishment in some 22 nations, including Afghanistan, Haiti, Iraq, Somalia and Sudan, the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Food Program said in a new report” (*Associated Press*, 6 October).

GRIM PROSPECTS

“A million people are expected to lose their jobs in the next four years as a result of the Government’s decision to cut public spending by £83 billion, according to a report out today. Nearly 500,000 jobs are likely to be cut in

the private sector as the Government stops building schools, hospitals and roads and cancels other contracts. This is on top of about 500,000 job losses in the public sector as employers reduce budgets by about a third and lay off civil servants, town hall staff, nurses, teachers and police officers” (*Times*, 13 October).

KICK ‘EM WHEN THEY ARE DOWN

“Disabled people will be hit with more than £9bn in welfare cuts over the next five years, a think tank has warned. Demos suggests the government’s plans will see 3.6m disabled people and carers lose about £9.2bn by 2015. It said moving those on incapacity benefit who were reassessed as fit to work to jobseeker’s allowance would account for half of the losses” (*BBC News*, 9 October).

Contact Details

UK BRANCHES & CONTACTS

LONDON

Central London branch. 2nd Weds. 6.30pm. 2nd Wednesday 6.30pm. Coffee Republic, 7-12 City Road, EC1 (nearest Tube and rail stations Old Street and Moorgate).

Enfield and Haringey branch. Next meetings: Dec 2nd and 16th, 8pm. Angel Community Centre, Raynham Rd, N18. Corres: 17 Dorset Road, N22 7SL. Email: julianvein@blueyonder.co.uk

South London branch. 1st Tues. 7.00pm. Head Office. 52 Clapham High St, SW4 7UN. Tel: 020 7622 3811

West London branch. 1st & 3rd Tues. 8pm, Chiswick Town Hall, Heathfield Terrace (Corner Sutton Court Rd), W4. Corres: 51 Gayford Road, London W12 9BY

MIDLANDS

West Midlands Regional branch. Meets last Sunday of month, 3pm, Briar Rose pub, Bennetts Hill (off New St), Birmingham B2 5RE. Email: tonygluck111@btinternet.com.

NORTHEAST

Northeast branch. Contact: Brian Barry, 86 Edgmond Ct, Ryhope, Sunderland SR2 0DY. Tel: 0191 521 0690. Email: davejewell@bushinternet.com

NORTHWEST

Lancaster branch. Meets every Monday 8.30pm. P. Shannon, 10 Green Street, Lancaster LA1 1DZ. Tel: 01524 382380

Manchester branch. Paul Bennett, 6 Burleigh Mews, Hardy Lane, M21 7LB. Tel: 0161 860 7189

Bolton. Tel: H. McLaughlin. 01204 844589

Cumbria. Brendan Cummings, 19 Queen St, Millom, Cumbria LA18 4BG

Carlisle. Robert Whitfield.

Email: rewcb13@yahoo.co.uk
Tel: 07906 373975

Rochdale. Tel: R. Chadwick. 01706 522365

Southeast Manchester. Enquiries: Blanche Preston, 68 Fountains Road, M32 9PH

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Todmorden. Keith Scholey, 1 Leeview Ct, Windsor Rd, OL14 5LJ. Tel: 01706 814 149

SOUTH/SOUTHEAST/SOUTHWEST

South West Regional branch. Meets every two months on a Saturday afternoon (see meetings page for details). Shane Roberts, 86 High Street, Bristol BS5 6DN. Tel: 0117 9511199

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Luton. Nick White, 59 Heywood Drive, LU2 7LP

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

EAST ANGLIA

East Anglian Regional branch. Meets every two months on a Saturday afternoon (see meetings page for details).

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Cable and capitalism

“CAPITALISM”, THE Business Secretary Vince Cable told the Libdem Conference in September, “takes no prisoners and kills competition where it can.” (*Times*, 22 September). He was of course playing to the gallery, but no minister in the Blair and Brown governments ever dared to utter such harsh words about capitalism. They were too scared even to mention the word “capitalism” for fear of upsetting the business world whose interests they knew they were there to serve.

Not that Cable is against capitalism. He’s merely in favour of government intervention to curb its excesses. As one of the Tory Prime Minister’s aides was reported as saying, “Vince is simply spelling out what happens when you have uncontrolled capitalism”. And, as he himself said, “the Government’s agenda is not one of laissez faire”, adding “markets are often irrational or rigged.”

He – and the rest of the Con-Dem government – are in favour of government intervention to try to get capitalism to work as in theory it is supposed to, with competitive markets keeping prices down and allowing only normal profits to be made in the long run.

If, because of monopolistic practices or rigged markets, some capitalist firms are permanently able to make abnormally high profits this will be at the expense of the profits of the rest of the capitalist class. Not that this will restrain the firms in question – they go for maximum profits, taking no prisoners. So, it’s up to the government to restrain them in the overall interest of the capitalist class as a whole. It’s part of its remit as the executive

committee of the ruling class.

Even so, Cable upset the business world. Richard Lambert, the current director general of the CBI, denounced Cable’s “emotional language”, saying “Mr Cable has harsh things to say about the capitalist system; it will be interesting to hear his ideas for an alternative.” A former CBI director-general, Digby (now Lord) Jones condemned his remarks as “rabble-rousing” and unworthy of a member of the government. The *Times* (23 September) reminded him that “the Business Secretary’s principal task is to help companies to earn profits.” Even the former Labour Chancellor, Alistair Darling, still loyal to business, joined in, criticising Cable for “denouncing business and the City in general” which he said was “extremely damaging to our reputation abroad” (*Evening Standard*, 24 September).

In response, Cable rather cleverly added to the pre-released text of his speech the words “as Adam Smith explained over 200 years ago.”

He was referring to the following passage from part II of chapter X of Book I of Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*: “People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices.”

While Smith provided the theoretical basis for the policy of laissez faire implemented in Britain (by state intervention) in the 1830s and 1840s – and which resulted in children being sent down the mines – he was no uncritical defender of the behaviour of capitalists, as director-generals of the CBI might like to think.

In any event, Cable was not offering an alternative to the capitalist system and is well aware of his duty as Business Secretary “to help companies earn [or, more accurately, reap] profits”. That, in fact, is the duty of all governments.



Tiny Tips

The anti-Semitic Jobbik party captured 16.7 percent of the vote, making it the third-largest party in Hungary, next to the Socialists. Unknown vandals defiled the Holocaust Memorial with bloody pigs’ feet. The television channel Echo TV showed an image of Nobel laureate and Auschwitz survivor Imre Kertész together with a voiceover about rats. Civil servants can now be fired without cause. Krisztina Morvai, a member of the European Parliament for Jobbik, suggested that “liberal-Bolshevik

Zionists” should start thinking about “where to flee and where to hide.”

<http://tinyurl.com/36stz7e>



Krisztina Morvai - coming to a pogrom near you

“These are dark-skinned people, not Europeans like you and me,” said Riccardo De Corato, who is Milan’s

vice mayor. He later added: “Our final goal is to have zero Gypsy camps in Milan.” The campaign here is part of the most intense wave of anti-immigration sentiment to wash over Western Europe in years:

<http://tinyurl.com/2vesbpg>

Some 200 of France’s expelled Gypsies come from Barbuslesti, said Ion Cutitaru, mayor of this town, 60 kilometers east of the capital Bucharest. Not all share the view that life is more bearable back home. Cutitaru, a Roma, said about half have already returned to France or other EU nations where begging brings in more money than the meager social benefits available in one of the EU’s poorest members. Long-term unemployed here receive the equivalent of just €10 a month for each child plus other monthly benefits of around €45.

<http://tinyurl.com/337eeww>

Ricky Baking is hunched over a tomb with a hammer and chisel. After several determined blows, the lid cracks into three pieces. He opens the rotten coffin

to reveal the skeleton of a 65-year-old man, dressed in his burial suit and shoes. Baking steps into the tomb with bare feet, and reaches for the bones. This isn’t a grave robbery – it’s an eviction. Like everywhere else in Manila, the North Cemetery has run out of space. Up to 80 funerals take



place here every day, and demand for plots is so high most people can only afford to rent tombs. If your relatives fail to keep up the payments, another body will take your place. It’s Baking’s job to clear this grave so another coffin can be lowered into it later this afternoon.

He’s done this so often it’s almost mundane to him. Land is precious in Manila, and people are prepared to endure incredible circumstances to claim their own piece. Baking’s family is one of hundreds that have set up home in the cemetery, jostling for space with the dead. “It’s much better living here than in a shanty town,” he assures me...

<http://tinyurl.com/3y9uzhr>

Not disillusioned enough

It is good that so many of Obama's followers are disillusioned. But they are not half as disillusioned as they need to be.

The once fervent supporters of Barack Obama say that they are more and more “disillusioned” with his politics. And the word *should* be apt since so many of them were intoxicated by the illusion that one single politician could transform a rotten social system. It seems, though, that many of those who describe themselves as disillusioned are accusing Obama of breaking his promises, rather than blaming themselves for falling prey to a naïve illusion.

This seems a bit unfair to Obama, who made no secret during his campaign of his “moderate” political outlook. A central theme of his campaign, in fact, was the need for bipartisanship to counter the trend towards politics becoming too “ideological”. Those who now criticize Obama for being yet another spineless Democrat were not paying adequate attention to the statements he made during the campaign. Obama made no secret two years ago of his deeply-held principle of *never sticking to any principle*. He has never claimed to be anything but a “pragmatist”, which is a nicer way of saying “opportunist”.

There was, of course, that promise Obama made about bringing about some sort of *change*, but isn't it a bit unfair to hold him to such a sweeping and vague promise? And things *have* changed – just not for the better. Over the past two years, millions of Americans have experienced the dramatic change of losing their job or home (or both).

Principled spinelessness

Those painful, negative changes might be easier for some to stomach if Obama had cracked down on Wall Street or ended the senseless wars in the Middle East. But instead he has left many Bush Administration policies intact; and even the few important policy changes that Obama has implemented have been tainted with his “principled spinelessness” (most notably, his healthcare

reform that leaves the parasitic insurance companies in place and even presents them with opportunities for expansion). Yet here again Obama has more or less been true to the positions he held prior to the presidential election. Even if we go back a bit further, to his book *The Audacity of Hope*, published in 2006, we see that he proudly displayed his essentially “conservative” politics. Far from making promises to leftwing Democrats or posing as a progressive, Obama was careful to define himself as a political pragmatist, ready and willing to work with the Republicans.

Moreover, one of Obama's traits, as the book reveals, is a concern to not be caught in outright lies. He rarely resorts to statements that directly invert the truth in the style of Bush's “We don't torture” or Nixon's “I am not a crook.” Rather, Obama likes to underscore the complexity of reality and the need for pragmatic solutions.

Wishful thinking

The idea that President Obama has broken his

promises can only seem valid to those who – against all the evidence he provided – fashioned an image of him as the country's progressive saviour. These are the people who helped make *The Audacity of Hope* a bestseller, but one can't help wondering if they got past the first few pages. Anyone who managed to at least read the prologue would have encountered the following passage, which might have given them pause for thought:

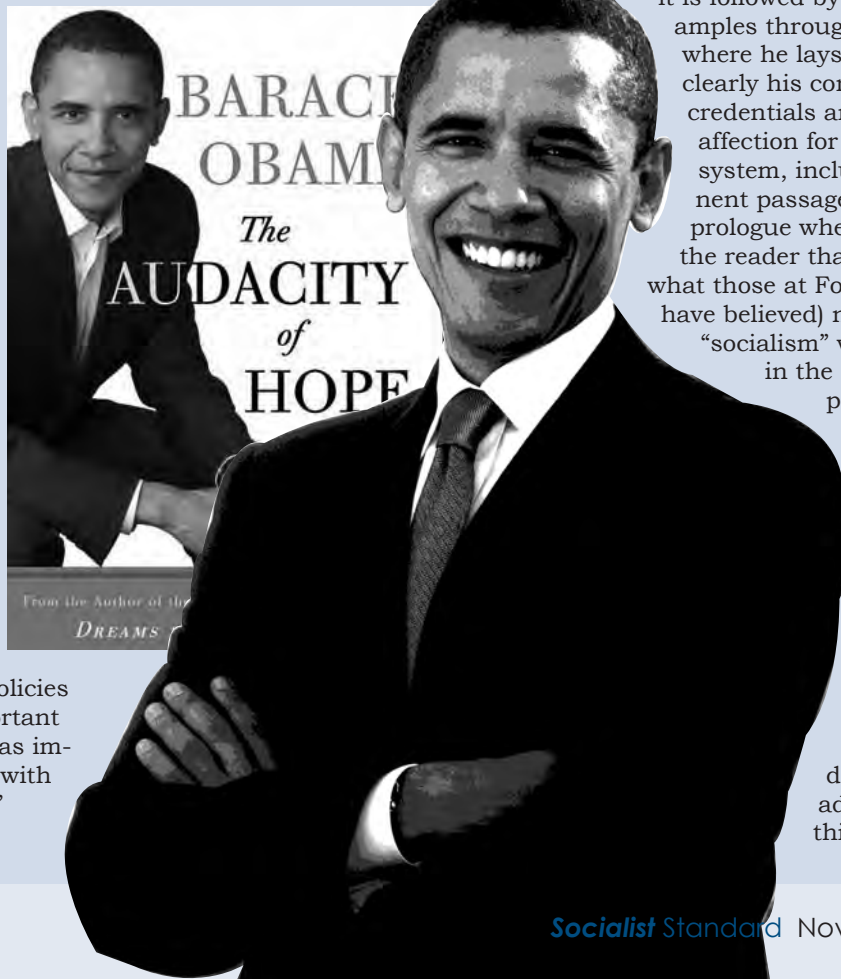
“I am new enough on the national political scene that I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views. As such, I am bound to disappoint some, if not all, of them.”

Had his readers reflected a bit on this insight, they might have questioned whether the “Obama as saviour” storyline was not simply a case of wishful thinking. But perhaps that is like asking someone in love to consider the possibility that the object of their love is not quite perfect.

Obama's warning in the prologue might be easy to overlook, but

it is followed by countless examples throughout the book where he lays out quite clearly his conservative credentials and deep-rooted affection for the capitalist system, including a prominent passage in that same prologue where he informs the reader that (contrary to what those at Fox News might have believed) not an ounce of “socialism” will be found in the subsequent pages:

“I believe in the free market, competition, and entrepreneurship, and think no small number of government programs don't work as advertised...I think America



has more often been a force for good than for ill in the world; I carry few illusions about our enemies, and revere the courage and competence of our military...I think much of what ails the inner city involves a breakdown in culture that will not be cured by money alone, and that our values and spiritual life matter at least as much as our GDP."

Obama "thinks" a lot of things in the book, and surprisingly few of his thoughts are in harmony with the views of his leftwing supporters, who worked so hard to get him elected.

Boots on the ground

Take his views on foreign policy, for example. This is an area where the views of the "anti-war" candidate Obama were thought to differ sharply from the hawkish approach of Hillary Clinton (now his Secretary of State!), not to mention the belligerent policies of Bush and McCain. In fact, Obama made it perfectly clear in *The Audacity of Hope* that he would deploy US troops when necessary, because "like it or not, if we want to make American more secure, we are going to have to help make the world more secure". Rather than rejecting Bush's absurd and counter-productive "war on terrorism", Obama wrote that "the challenge will involve putting boots on the ground in ungoverned hostile regions where terrorists thrive". And lest the reader imagine that such military force would only be used in retaliation, Obama claims that "we have the right to take unilateral military action to eliminate an *imminent* threat to our security". It is something of a mystery how Obama managed to convince so many that he was a foreign policy "dove" while at the same time publishing such views.

But the surprising gap between what Obama himself pledged to do and the sort of president many of his supporters hoped he would become is not limited to the realm of foreign policy. For domestic policies as well, the real Obama has turned out to bear almost no resemblance to the second coming of FDR that more than a few had predicted or expected. At this point, I suspect, many "disillusioned" Democrats would be satisfied with a pale imitation of LBJ.

Yet how can Obama be blamed for those false expectations? In his book, even while recognizing that FDR "saved capitalism from itself" through his New Deal reforms,

"Obama without Bush is a far less compelling act – like a 'straightman' in a comedy duo who decides to go solo"

Obama does not fundamentally criticize Reagan for setting about dismantling aspects of the welfare system. He even says that there is a "good deal of truth" in "Reagan's central insight – that the liberal welfare state had grown complacent and overly bureaucratic". And Obama, not surprisingly, praises Clinton, who "put a progressive slant on some of Reagan's goals," for achieving "some equilibrium" by creating a "smaller government, but one that retained the social safety net FDR had first put into place".

Hardly the stuff of "socialism"

Obama is not so forthright in explaining his own welfare policies, but he implies that welfare should be a bare minimum. We should be "guided throughout," he writes, "by Lincoln's simple maxim: that we will do collectively, through our government, only those things that we cannot do as well or at all individually and private," leading to "a dynamic free market and widespread economic security, entrepreneurial innovation and upward mobility." This is hardly the stuff of "socialism" – or even of West European social democracy.

But there were many, even self-described socialists, who thought that Obama, whatever his statements during the campaign, would be compelled by the economic crisis itself or a growing working class movement, to enact policies similar to the New Deal of the 1930s. This expectation allowed such leftists to adopt the stance of backing Obama in the election without explicitly supporting his politics – adopting the posture of "critical support" of which they are so fond. (I can't help wondering, though, why such "socialists" can't set a goal higher than once again "saving capitalism from itself".)

Yet in the midst of the continuing Great Recession, Obama has not budged from his belief that the solutions to the problems plaguing the United States can be found lying in the middle of the political

road, so to speak, just waiting to be picked up. This is the belief he wrote about back in 2006, and his policies in office have been based on it.

An anti-Bush without Bush

Still, it was understandable that so many were drawn to Obama, despite his relative honesty regarding his own conservatism. Millions were sick to their guts of Bush and the Republicans and it was indeed "time for a change". The cautious, compromising attitude of Obama could even appear principled compared to the reckless pigheadedness of Bush. The charisma of Obama was based on his self-presentation as the anti-Bush. Clearly, Obama appeared at the opportune time, when much of the population was desperate to believe that the country could change for the better, after eight long years when everything Bush touched turned to shit. This was the basis for the foolish – or "audacious" – hope that Obama could, almost single-handedly, set things right.

Obama's once overpowering charisma has faded away, however. Now that few can remember exactly what it felt like to loathe the neocons, he no longer glows in the reflected light of the burning rage against Bush. Obama without Bush is a far less compelling act – like a "straightman" in a comedy duo who decides to go solo.

So people went from the naïve view that Bush is the root of all evil to the equally simplistic idea that Obama could uproot that evil. And now we have a sense of disillusionment due to the persistence of deep-rooted problems despite the election of Obama. Yet the idea that Obama has betrayed us is based on the initial illusion that he could rescue us from problems that are deeply rooted in capitalism itself. This notion, in turn, is no different from the superficial idea that those problems arose from Bush's stupidity or mendacity. It is pointless to transform Obama from a saviour into a new scapegoat.

It is good that so many of Obama's followers are disillusioned. But they are not half as disillusioned as they need to be! Only when millions of people finally give up the illusion that capitalism can be fundamentally reformed to somehow create a more humane world will we be on the road to real social change.

MICHAEL SCHUAERTE

World poverty: cause and effects

How should poverty be measured if at all?

Part of the measure of statistics is that, however well-meant the goal, there are bound to be flaws and weaknesses. Any individual's subjective assessment of their own poverty will likely be quite different from that of an objective report. Over the years different studies have listed different requirements to be included into what constitutes poverty, but how many of these have consulted with the subjects of the report as to their own assessment of their situation? If poverty is to be eliminated, how it is manifested in different parts of the world, how it impacts differently on people of different regions and particularly its causes need to be thoroughly understood.

"Our aim should be to set the poverty line at a level where people can actually have a standard of living which we would consider morally acceptable," says David Woodward in a July/August *New Internationalist* article. The article, based on a report which he co-authored with Saamah Abdallah, (www.neweconomics.org/publications/how-poor-is-poor) explains the pitfalls and openings for misinterpretation of such economic-based poverty lines as the well known dollar-a-day as used in measuring the Millennium Development Goals. At least, he says, the dollar-a-day approach put poverty on the agenda 20 years ago – but the discrepancies in interpretation are so wide as to be almost meaningless and could make huge differences in the numbers of people being either included or, worse, excluded. Woodward proposes instead a Rights Based

Poverty Line' – not based on income but as a starting point for agreed indicators such as economic and social rights, health, education and nutrition. This aims to be a more far-reaching attempt to identify those in need (and to ameliorate their conditions?) – a worthy goal no doubt within the capitalist system and one which will gain the support of many altruistic (dare I add misguided?) folk as they learn of it.

The focus of any of these studies in general is measuring poverty – how many, how much, how little, how widespread? – with little, if any, reference to why it is as it is or how it could be dealt with. If income levels are the problem who's going to agree to raising wages to the necessary level on the scale the studies show to be necessary? If it's social services which are inadequate where is the money to be found to raise them to the required level? No figures are given but it's pretty obvious that any solution in the current structure of the world's order would have to be in monetary terms.

Address the cause or ameliorate the effects?

The question that socialists would wish to see addressed more widely is why should we be expected to declare a position on what is acceptable as a baseline; why should we be discussing minimum adequate shelter, required basic living standards, access to sufficient food, clean water, health care, education and a minimum daily wage? In a world of from each according to ability to each according to need, a world of voluntary work and free access there will be no need to set base lines to keep people from falling below, needs will be self-determined and self-fulfilled with no requirement for money. Yes, we recognise the intolerable level of poverty in the world, the huge numbers with little or no access to clean drinking water,

widespread hunger, the appalling lack of health care, deaths from treatable diseases and the millions caught up in wars and occupation not of their making. We recognise all this and more and we recognise the huge numbers of people worldwide who work hard in the belief that they can improve some of the conditions for some of the people. We also recognise that with all the hard work, time and money injected into so many projects over so many years that whilst there may be some temporary amelioration conditions for the majority are actually deteriorating. Our position is clear. We must address the cause not the effects. This is the big discussion that fails to hit the headlines.

The effects

Statistics may not always be totally reliable, or be biased one way or another, intentionally or not – and they can also put you to sleep – but it sometimes helps to shock us back to reality when we see them presented in an unusual or unfamiliar way. Sometimes it's the seeming impossibility of juxtaposed figures that can bring us to question the accuracy and then recognise all over again the sheer iniquity of the capitalist system. The numbers vary between reports but reveal that 55 percent of India's population, 645 million people, are living in poverty (a new *Oxford University* study); 51 percent of the world's poor, 844 million, live in South Asia and 28 percent, 458 million, in Africa (the *Multidimensional Poverty Index – MPI*); that poverty in eight Indian states exceeds that of the 26 poorest African countries combined; that contrary to the Congress Party-led government's claims that economic growth has been inclusive figures show extraordinarily high levels of poverty among India's castes and tribal peoples; that using the \$2 a day household income benchmark India is home to 828 million (75.6 percent of their population) below the poverty line compared with 551 million (72.2 percent) in sub-Saharan Africa. These millions are all individual people – often the same people in different studies – but they add up to an awful lot of noughts and between them they have pretty well nothing to their names.

The cause

Now for the wealthy. The ones on the right side of the tracks. The year 2010 has so far recognised 49 US\$ billionaires in India who between them have amassed nearly 31 percent of GDP, four times the

global average, which adds up to a staggering \$340,900,000,000 (*Forbes magazine*).

In summing up *How Poor is Poor* Woodward recognises that a global poverty line fixed in monetary terms “is too unwieldy and can give wildly inaccurate results” and goes on to state that no improvements in our understanding of measurements of poverty are of any use “unless effective action is taken not merely for poverty reduction but for a permanent eradication of the blight of poverty in a meaningful sense”. However poverty is measured it is simply another set of statistics revealing effects not causes and is of little benefit to any impoverished persons. To return to my earlier point ‘permanent eradication’ can only come from the worldwide decision to eradicate the cause, the blight of capitalism. We do have that choice and for the world’s vast majority the day can’t come too soon.

JANET SURMAN

Politics in Africa

Political leaders in Africa are reluctant to relinquish power through the medium of the ballot box.

Africa is a vast continent composed of nations which because of their colonial past have different histories, just as they have variegated geographical landmarks that distinguish them. Thus African nations do not share many things in common except the forcible grouping together of tribes regardless of the interaction that existed before colonialisation.

In the attempt to create nations, different ethnic groups have been split between boundaries and the expression of nationalism has therefore not been through the medium of cultural or ethnic identity, but defined within the context of the country in which the language of the colonial master became the lingua franca.

It is imperative to note, therefore, that such a situation in which countries find themselves has made nation building and African unity a difficult task.

The political developments taking place in Zambia today are African in nature and therefore similar and comparable to political events taking place elsewhere. In Africa, parliamentary democracy defined through multi-party politics still

remains a test case today. Political leaders in Africa are finding it hard to relinquish power through the medium of the ballot box. The current political scenario in Zambia may easily degenerate into political violence if left unabated. The Catholic church and some western NGOs have kept on to criticise the ruling MMD government both through the press and privately-owned radio stations. Radio ICENGELO – owned by the Catholic church has become the mouthpiece of the voiceless people on the Copperbelt.

The widening gap between the rich and poor is something the ruling MMD government of President Rupiah Banda does not seem to be concerned about. Indeed, privatisation of the Zambian economic sector can only succeed by strengthening the private- and profit-making social sector, otherwise than defending and safeguarding the economic upkeep of the peasants and workers.

Massive and periodic job losses in the formal and informal sectors of the economy have come to characterise the economic policy of Zambia’s economic liberation ever since the MMD came to power in 1991 to date. During the leadership of Dr. Kenneth Kaunda education was subsidised by the state and every child had a right to free education from primary school to university level. Every year the UNIP government carried out massive recruitments of teachers, doctors, nurses, policemen and soldiers.

The change from Kaunda’s “one-party participating democracy” to multi-party democracy saw the implementation of economic liberalism (defined as privatisation) under the MMD government of President Fredrick Chiluba. This entailed the liquidation of state-owned mining, industrial and financial companies. The privatisation of state-owned companies led to massive job losses – in most cases the retrenched workers have not yet received their retirement salaries.

But we cannot mop up the fact that the UNIP government had experienced economic decline from 1980 to 1991 – the MMD inherited a bankrupt economy as the case may be. But it must be emphasised that the manner in which privatisation was carried out by the MMD was less than transparent.

It was in an attempt to monopolise power that Kaunda introduced a one-party state in 1973 on the excuse that Zambia was facing tribalism under multi-party politics. He introduced the philosophy of humanism in order to weld the different ethnic groups together under

Copperbelt mine, Zambia



“One Zambia One Nation”. He declared a state of emergency – political detentions without trial (political criticism was banned). It is a fact that both the ruling MMD and political opposition have shown no restraint in manipulating the masses through feeding them with prejudices against other tribes in order to win their support. Thus tribalistic sentiments in Zambia originate from politicians or political parties. The voting patterns that emerged from the previous three general elections depict tribal and regional allegiances in the sense that people voted on the basis of ethnic patronage.

Every economic gain achieved under the late President Levy Mwanawasa has been dissipated by the global economic downturn of 2009, making it possible for the PF leader Michael Sata to increase votes in the coming 2011 elections. General elections in urban areas of Zambia are determined by economic factors, especially for food prices, the cost of education and availability of employment. The ruling MMD has concentrated on building roads, hospitals, schools and subsidising peasant farmers in rural areas where the party received massive votes. Working class political consciousness is visibly absent in rural village communities. The failure of African leaders to relinquish power through the medium of the ballot box means that elections in Africa are conducted in a win-or-die situation. The experience of many African nations with regard to their armed forces have been sad in that they have stifled democracy with their intervention, purportedly in their attempt to correct the mistakes of their political bosses also had failed to adhere to the principle of democracy through perceived violations of the constitution. When military leaders come into power, they not only breach the constitution, they become traitors to the oath of allegiance they swore to the nation.

The reluctance of the ruling MMD to accept the PF and UPND as viable future political options is a bad omen for multi-party politics in Zambia.

Socialism is the only practical political alternative to capitalism and our message to the workers of Zambia remains the same – the creation of a classless moneyless and stateless society.

KEPHAS MULENGA

Slums and Slumps: Housing under Capitalism

In 1942 the Beveridge Report identified five giant evils that government social policy should aim to overcome: Want, Disease, Ignorance, Idleness and Squalor. The last of these referred to housing, and more generally to town planning and the environment. The report was, by the standards of such documents, tremendously popular, selling thousands of copies. Newspapers in Nazi Germany were forbidden from mentioning it, on the grounds that it would represent an enormous propaganda victory for the enemy.

Beveridge effectively laid the foundation for the post-war welfare state and the introduction of, among other things, the National Health Service. On the fiftieth anniversary of the report, the academic Ben Pimlott assessed its success. Want and squalor still existed, he argued, with plenty of beggars and homeless people in central London: 'for the majority, there is less hunger and disease than in the Forties, but for the millions in the minority, there is much more' (*Independent*, 1 December 1992).

And despite the decades of legislation, the 'housing problem' indeed remains, although its precise nature varies somewhat over time. The overcrowding and unsanitary conditions that were rife in (say) the early twentieth century are largely, though not entirely, things of the past, but housing is one of the biggest failures of the efforts to slay Beveridge's giants and so shows how reforms cannot banish capitalism's problems.

In some cases, government policies have been a contributing factor to not just bad housing but loss of life and other disasters. The Housing Subsidy Act of 1956 gave local councils bigger subsidies the higher the tower blocks they built, on the basis that this meant more and cheaper homes in a particular area. In May 1968 the

Ronan Point block in east London collapsed after a gas explosion, and four people died. The block had been built using pre-cast concrete panels, which had the 'advantage' of not requiring skilled construction workers. But this method of building was intended to be used for six storeys at most, and Ronan Point had twenty-two.

There are many ways of looking at the effect that the recent rise in house prices has had. Between 1959 and 2009, for example, real earnings rose by 169 percent but house prices rose by 273 percent, making houses

The Ronan Point tower block



less affordable than fifty years ago. For many years the average house price has been around three times the median wage, but by last year it was over six times as high. Many workers are forced to rely on the 'Bank of Mum and Dad' as a way of scraping together a mortgage and getting on the property ladder. Some take on mortgages that they will not pay off until well into their sixties, or put off starting a family because of worries about the affordability of housing. In the current recession, the lesser availability of mortgages means that more are forced to rent (though in no way are they 'choosing' to rent as is sometimes claimed).

The recession has also led to a dramatic rise in the number of repossessions, though in the UK not as yet to the levels seen in the 1990s. In 1991, for instance, 75,000 homes were repossessed, as against 46,000 last year. In the US, there were 92,000 repossessions in April this year alone, an all-time high. Behind each of these cases is a human tragedy of various degrees, from homelessness to far worse housing conditions, along with general financial melt-down. Landlords who went in for buy-to-let in the hopes of an easy return are turving out tenants, sometimes changing the locks so that people are made homeless with just the clothes they are wearing (*Guardian*, 23 June).

In 2000 the government launched the Decent Homes programme to upgrade social housing, with the aim of this being completed by the end of this year. But deadlines slipped so that eventually 2018 was the target year. In the first quarter of this year, just sixty new local authority homes were completed, a figure which reflects among other things the impact of government policy which has emphasised and tried to promote home ownership at the expense of renting. The National

Housing Federation recently warned that waiting lists for social housing are at record levels, and 'an entire generation... would be left with little hope of ever being allocated a social home'. Recent cuts in housing benefit mean almost a million people will lose £12 a week, which is a lot for those on the lowest incomes. Some people, of course, have no trouble finding suitable homes. The W8 postcode in the Kensington area of London is the UK's most expensive, with the average house costing £1.5million. But even that has desirable and somewhat less desirable areas, with Kensington Palace Gardens as the priciest street in the country, properties there averaging £18million.

It is often implied that there is something 'natural' about wishing to own your own house rather than being dependent on renting, but actual housing demand in fact varies widely across a person's lifetime and, indeed, in different places. In many parts of continental Europe, for instance, home ownership is at much lower levels than in Britain, and far more people live in flats as opposed to houses, without this being seen as in any way unnatural.

The number of homes built goes up and down from year to year (425,000 in 1968 for instance, but just 156,000 in 2009) in a way that has nothing at all to do with people's demands or needs for somewhere decent to live. Rather it has everything to do with the market, what property companies can make a profit from and what people can afford. According to one standard source, 'the building industry exists to meet human needs' (David Donnison and Clare Ungerson: *Housing Policy*, 1982). If only this were true! Like all industries under capitalism, it exists in fact to make a profit, which is why capitalism will never be able to provide secure and decent housing for all.

In fact it can sensibly be said that there is no 'housing problem' at all. People know how to build houses, there are plenty of people with the requisite skills and sufficient supplies of materials. But if you can't afford the rent or mortgage, then you don't really count as far as the profit system is concerned. So it's a problem of *poverty* in truth, one that would not exist in a society that aimed at meeting human needs rather than making profits for the few.

PAUL BENNETT

Spending challenge

To prepare the cuts announced on 20 October the Treasury issued a "Spending Challenge" on its website (http://spend_spendingchallenge.hm-treasury.gov.uk/spend-spendingchallenge.htm) for members of the public to suggest savings. Here's a socialist reply.

THE CAPITALIST system has become obsolete for most purposes. It cannot prevent large numbers of the world's population from experiencing worsening deprivation and misery. This includes Britain, where we face deteriorating living standards as the rich capitalist minority require governments to keep cracking down on the working class majority so that their pig troughs are kept as full as possible.

The incomes of the many will keep being squeezed by whichever government is in office so that the incomes of the few on top can be protected and increased. Politicians will tell us all that is needed is better money management, and no doubt, some members of the public will fall for this, and go along with monetary cuts directed against others in their own (working) class.

In reality, what is needed is something that will strike most people as being bizarre and scary when they first here it. A complete end to money, and the outdated capitalist system that requires it! Here's a surprising fact. We, the working class majority, do NOT need money to produce all the goods and services that a modern society requires. Only capitalists need money to carry out their exploitation of those able to work and everyone else.

If we reject capitalism and money, and choose a new system ("moneyless real socialism"), how would the jobs that need doing get done? Well, when we are all the direct collective owners of the means of production and distribution (factories, farmland, power stations, rail systems, sources of raw materials etc) we will also collectively own everything that is produced and provided. The food produced in factories and on farms will be ours. The electricity from the power stations will be ours. The trains will be

ours. Iron ore and all the other minerals mined from the planet will be ours. You do not have to buy what's already your property, and therefore, everything that we have to pay for today will be freely available. Obviously, the work will still have to be done, but by doing so, everyone will have the right to a home of their own, the right to take whatever they need from shops (this

will not result in blind greed because taking more than is needed will then be daft and pointless), everyone will be entitled to free travel, free medical care and education of the highest standard possible, and much more. Won't we have to work far harder?

Absolutely not. The opposite, in fact. In Britain alone, there are millions of people doing fundamentally useless money-related jobs only necessary under capitalism (making money, manufacturing cash machines, sales, insurance, welfare benefits, banking, accountancy, debt recovery etc). When capitalism and money are dumped, all these millions of people will then become available to contribute something of real benefit to society. Furthermore, without money-related problems, arguments and crimes, many more people involved in policing, prison work, social work, solicitors, courts etc will also be freed up to contribute. All these millions of extra people, added to the millions of unemployed not wanted by capitalist employers, will mean that the average working week will be considerably shorter than it is now.

Money is not the answer. It, and the outdated system that requires it, is the problem. We need a new economic system, and moneyless real socialism is the only option.

MAX HESS



Against religion

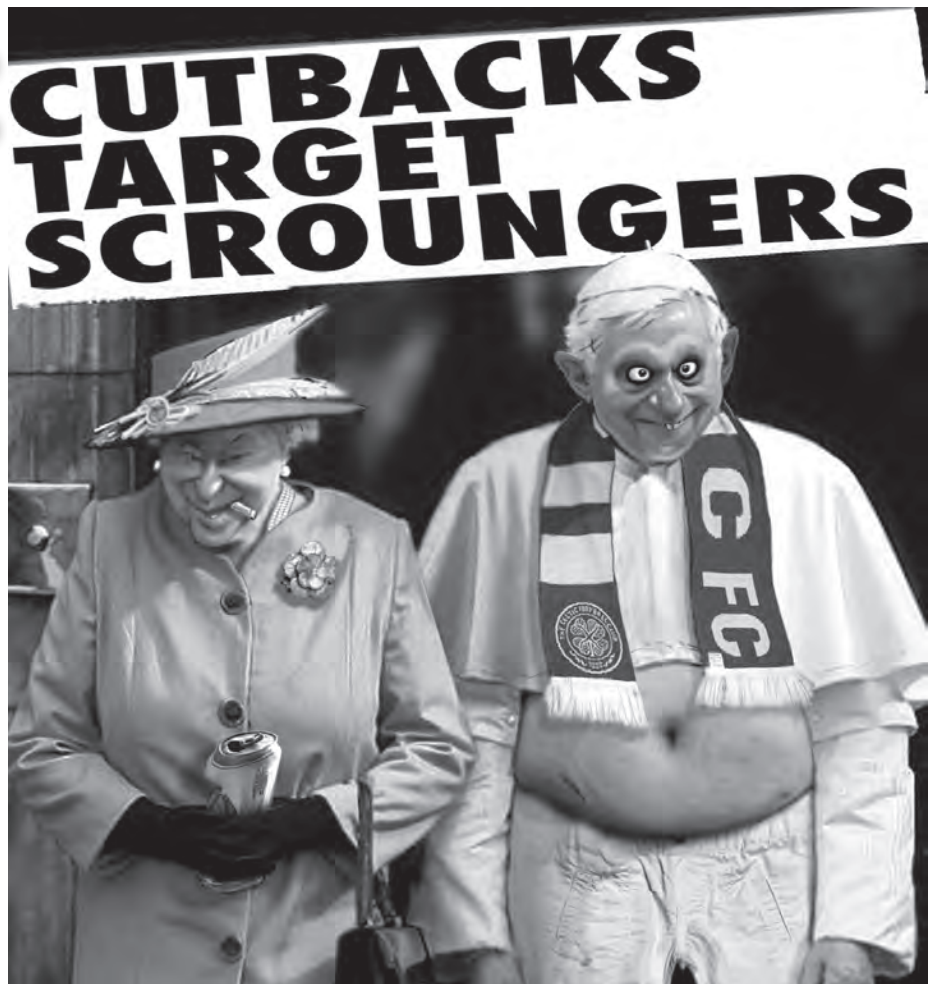
One of the first things the pope did as soon as he got off the plane was to launch into a bitter attack on “aggressive secularists” and “extremist atheists”. Here’s our reply.

The only reasonable position to adopt towards any religion is one of atheism: unbelief. There is a presumption in favour of not believing fantastic claims. It is up to the believer to present proof for the existence of God or life after death. After all, few are agnostic about Father Christmas, fairies or unicorns; we know they don’t exist. The same scepticism should also apply to the extraordinary beliefs of religion. With religious believers, however, there is a willingness to believe despite the lack of evidence. And it is this gullibility which socialists find to be dangerous and objectionable.

Of course religious believers do claim to have evidence, and they cite their holy texts as proof of the infallible word of God. But these writings contain so many contradictions and absurdities that no reasonable person can take them seriously. Traditional interpretations of the Bible, for instance, are highly selective and leave out the inconsistencies. In the Old Testament there are two different creation stories (*Genesis* 1-2, 4;2, 4-24) and two different versions of the Flood (*Genesis* 6,5-9,17). Needless to say, geological evidence does not confirm the Biblical accounts of the Earth’s age or the Earth being flooded to a depth of five miles all over its surface.

Nor do the prophecies fare any better. No unicorns or dragons have been found, as foretold (*Isaiah* 13,22;34,7). God promised the Jewish people that they will never lose their land (*Psalms* 89,3-4), that no uncircumcised man will ever enter Jerusalem (*Isaiah* 52,1) and that Jerusalem will always be a quiet place, undamaged by war (*Isaiah* 33,20).

In the New Testament Jesus is often reported as saying that the



world is about to end, and that the end will come in the lifetime of his listeners (*Matthew* 4,17;10,23,-16,28;24,34). This is why he advocated giving away personal possessions, and forms the basis of the myth that Jesus was an early socialist. There is nothing socialist about making yourself deliberately poor in any case. Jesus is usually portrayed as peace-loving, but he also said: “Think not that I come to send peace on earth: I come not to send peace, but a sword” (*Matthew* 10,34). Carl Lofmark, from whom many of these examples are taken, comments in his book *What is the Bible?*:

“This passage has been useful to army chaplains and church leaders who have had to persuade people that they should go to war in spite of all that Jesus said about peace and forgiveness.”

But if the Bible and other religious texts are not literally true, as many theologians now accept, are they true symbolically? As with the above examples, do they have a “deeper” meaning? The trouble with this line of argument is that it is even more selective in choosing what to believe. It means turning a blind eye to the contradictions and obscurities and choosing to believe something you know is not true.

Once you have rejected the

special authority of the Bible (or whatever text) as the infallible word of God, how do you know that you have interpreted the symbolism in the way the writers intended? Fundamentalists have a point when they say that this changes religion into a form of art appreciation.

Then there is morality. Many who would not describe themselves as religious will, nevertheless, have their children given religious indoctrination at school on the grounds that it will give them a moral education. In this country the law requires that Religious Education be “broadly Christian” in content. But would you want your child to be stoned to death for being disobedient, as God commands (*Deuteronomy* 21,18-21)? This is the morality they keep quiet about. If a husband finds that his bride is not a virgin on her wedding day, then she shall be stoned to death on her father’s doorstep (*Deuteronomy* 22,21). God instructed Moses:

“Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him. But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourself” (*Numbers* 31,17-18).

Not only does God give this approval of the murder and rape of children, but slavery also (*Exodus*

21,1-11). Jesus says that to be a true believer you must hate your mother and father and “yea, and his own life also” (Luke 14,26). For the unbeliever, “thou shalt eat the fruit of thine own body, the flesh of thy sons and of they daughters” (Deuteronomy 28,53). Jesus says that anyone who does not believe him will burn forever in hell (Mark 16,16). It has frequently been said that it is a very sick morality which can punish by sending people to hell. Even Hitler and Stalin only had their victims tortured and killed and then their suffering ended, but God wants the suffering to continue – literally – for an eternity.

Faith is the last refuge of a believer. Religious faith, however, would only make sense if what was believed in were plausible. Neither the existence of a God nor life after death are plausible, though faith in them undoubtedly offers solace to many. It can make the unbearable seem bearable. But why should an all-loving God allow so much suffering, so much pain in this world – including the so-called “Acts of God” – earthquakes, hurricanes, floods and the rest? If God really did exist, we have no reason for supposing that he cares for us.

For some in recent years religion has combined with New Age beliefs, largely at the expense of the traditional religions whose emphasis on personal guilt, sexual repression and the inferiority of women have become unacceptable. This pick and mix approach can combine elements from the New Testament, Buddhism, psychoanalysis, paganism, astrology and various other bits of the occult. So why, the, the persistence of religious belief?

The socialist analysis of religion derives from our basic materialism (not in the acquisitive sense, but how we view the production of wealth in society and the sort of ideas it gives rise to). Historical materialism traces how religions have evolved, from their beginnings in ancestor worship and private property in primitive societies, to established social institutions. Marx hit a number of nails on the head when he described the social psychology of religion:

“Religion is the sigh of the oppressed, the feeling of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people . . . The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about their condition is a demand to give up a condition that requires illusion. The criticism of religion in

therefore the germ of the criticism of the valley of tears whose halo is religion.”

For the materialist, in other words, society is not really under human control and humans really are at the mercy of blind, impersonal forces – in ancient times the forces of nature, in the modern world the economic forces of capitalism. Under capitalism people feel, rightly, that they are governed by forces they can’t control but attribute this, wrongly, to forces operating from outside the world of experience. Churches of all types are then at hand for the sustaining of fear and superstition. For the socialist alternative to our lives being controlled by impersonal forces we must bring about a society in which humans consciously control the forces of production.

It is on this basis that we can say, rather than being abolished, religion can be expected to (as Engels put it in another context) “wither away”. And it can be seen that the socialist case against religion differs

from the usual humanist position: there are rationalist superstitions as well as religious. For humanists, criticism of religion is a process towards the eventual “triumph of reason”. But they ignore the material circumstances which give rise to superstition:

“Consequently, in his worship of the ‘Idea’ the bourgeois freethinker is, like the Christian, attributing miraculous powers to the figments of men’s brains” (*Socialism and Religion*, Socialist Party pamphlet, 1911, www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/pdf/sar.pdf).

Capitalism has many opiates to offer the unwary. Reject the pedlars, reject the product, but above all, reject a society which can create such an unhealthy psychological dependency. On the new basis of material security and social co-operation individuals can gain a sense of meaning in their lives, and hope for a future free from the dead hand of religious belief and tradition.

LEW



Don't believe everything you read...

Housing in capitalism and socialism



Today the very rich own multiple mansions while the very poor sleep on the streets.

Like everything else in capitalism the provision of somewhere to live is determined by money considerations and market forces. The extremes of property prices are astronomical. A penthouse flat in Mayfair was recently sold for £140 million – more than a thousand times the market value of a three-bedroom house in a poor part of the country.

For the working class the question is usually to find somewhere to rent or to buy on mortgage. In both cases money in the form of rent or interest goes to the owners of capital.

Those who own enough capital to live comfortably without having to seek employment (a tiny minority of the total population) can afford to rent or buy the biggest and best accommodation. They can live in only one place at a time, but they can buy 'security' for the others.

Supporters of capitalism like to describe Britain as a property-owning democracy. In recent years they have encouraged 'buy-to-let' – for some a bonanza but for others definitely not. Holding the false belief/hope that property prices can only go up, never down, they have had their financial fingers burned. They have suffered 'negative equity' – the market value of the property has become less than what they owe on it. When the owners cannot keep up the payments, the property has been repossessed by the bank or building society.

Today there are over a million vacant homes in the UK. These are mostly actual homes (houses or flats) and some homes that could be provided in disused commercial property. Some owners cannot afford, or do not wish to afford, to repair them up to a standard for occupation. Sometimes it may be more profitable to leave a property vacant to increase in market value rather than to have it occupied, particularly if the tenant would be difficult or costly to remove.

Money and housing

A number of occupations and organisations exist wholly or partly to deal with the money side of housing. These include:

- Accountants
- Auctioneers
- Bankers
- Bailiffs
- Building societies
- Cashiers
- Conveyancers
- Credit card agencies
- Debt collectors
- Estate agents
- Financial advisers

- Income tax officers
- Insurance
- Loan companies
- Market analysts
- Money lenders
- Mortgage brokers
- Rates officers
- Receivers
- Rent collectors
- Security firms
- Solicitors
- Treasurers
- Valuers

The above and similar others will either not exist in socialism or will change drastically in conditions of production solely for use, common ownership and free access.

Housing in socialism

In what kinds of accommodation, and under what circumstances, will socialists house themselves in the future? The general answer will be in accordance with the meeting of all our other needs for goods and services, based on common ownership (the same as no ownership), democratic control and reasonable free access.

Of course we cannot foresee in any detail what conditions and opportunities there will be for housing people in a socialist world. We can't know (but we can speculate about) what changes will be made in capitalism as we move from a few hundred socialists to a few million.

Traditionally socialists haven't had much to say about housing in the new society. Marx and Morris thought that country life was better than city life, although they wanted to narrow the gap between the two. Ron Cook (in *Yes, Utopia!*) and Rod Shaw (*Socialist Standard*, September 2009) both foresaw a growth in communal hotel-like accommodation. And that's about it.

With unsurprising lack of imagination but admirable democratic intent, socialists often say "the people at the time will decide".

Tenancy

With the ending of ownership, the meaning of 'tenancy' will surely become much wider than in capitalism. It will denote the democratically agreed right to occupy a place for a certain length of time, probably with some attached responsibilities. A tenancy will be granted to one person who wishes to live wholly or usually alone, to a couple, a family or a group of friends. A 'place' may be expected to vary according to size and the number and needs of the tenants.

In the early stages of socialism (if not later) the places available for tenancy will include solid structures that have existed for some time. The larger ones will, no doubt, be split for tenancy purposes. Places like the White House or Buckingham Palace could combine living accommodation with public services like conservation or tour guiding.

The length of tenancies will probably vary considerably. A beach hut in Bognor (if they were still wanted) could be available by the day. A cabin in a round-the-world cruise liner would be for one trip or segment.

The ending of inequality-producing, money-based ownership will open the way for other forms of allocating occupancy. Waiting lists of available places – kept as short as possible by increasing supply to match demand – would mean first come, first registered, first offered tenancy. It could be agreed that some groups, the disabled for example, should be given priority. In cases of very great demand for limited supply, there could be allocation by ballot. Different combinations of these and other

possible methods of allocation could apply by democratic decision in different parts of the world.

Much more could be said about the possibilities of housing when it is removed from capitalist control and arranged according to socialist principles put into practice. There is space here to briefly mention only a few points:

- Avoiding or at least minimising *environmental hazards*. Places to live would not be built in areas subject to earthquakes, floods, tsunamis etc.

- More non-monetary *planning/administration*.

Although there

will be no time and effort spent on buying and selling, it seems likely that the democratic provision and allocation of housing for all will involve a lot of human activity, aided by the appropriate technology.

- People will vary – but not as widely as now – in the amount and type of *possessions* and stuff they keep in their homes.

The case for socialism

Men and women who don't find it too hard to get their head around the idea of common ownership and free access regarding such things as water and public transport should go the extra yard to apply it to the whole of society, including how they are housed. They will help to change history by moving from "It's a nice idea, but..." to "Yes, we can!"

STAN PARKER



Pocket money

"TAXMAN WANTS ALL OUR WAGES. We would just get pocket money" screamed the front page headline in the *Daily Express* (22 September). As the *Times* had explained five days earlier:

"HM Revenue & Customs is considering plans to deduct tax directly from workers' pay packets before salaries reach their bank accounts".

So what's new? Income tax is already deducted before wages reach workers' bank accounts, only this is now done by employers not the government. This in fact is one reason why we have said that, as far as income tax on wages and salaries is concerned, workers don't even pay it. They never see the money. It's paid by employers.

PAYE (Pay As You Earn) was introduced as part of the war-time Beveridge Plan to "redistribute poverty", i.e. to try to ensure that the total wages bill was distributed efficiently, from a capitalist point of view, amongst the working class, so that no worker got either too much or not enough to reproduce their working skills taking into account their family circumstances.

Basically, it involved cutting the take-home pay of single workers or workers whose wife worked as they didn't need to be paid to maintain non-existent dependants. Employers couldn't be expected to do this themselves as their only concern was the quality of the labour power they purchased, for which they paid the going rate irrespective of the family circumstances of its seller. So it was done through the tax system

The Marxian theory of taxes and the working class is one of the most difficult concepts to get over. Sometimes it's mistakenly expressed as "the workers don't pay taxes". The accurate and scientifically correct way of expressing the concept is that "taxes are not a burden on the working class".

Even if workers don't pay the income tax that is deducted from their pay packets before any money reaches their bank accounts, workers do physically pay other taxes. For instance, workers in employment pay council tax in that they themselves have to pay this either in cash or by a cheque or transfer from their bank account.

Workers also pay indirect taxes such as excise duties on alcohol and tobacco and VAT on the goods and services subject to it. These, insofar as they increase prices, increase the cost of living and so the cost of reproducing labour power. This is passed on to employers as higher than otherwise money wages. It is in this sense that taxes on wages and on goods and services workers consume are ultimately a burden on employers.

We're talking here about average expenditure. Only taxes included in expenditure on goods that enter into the general average cost of living are passed on to employers, not all the indirect taxes that an individual worker might pay. Just because a worker spends more than average on alcohol and cigarettes does not mean that economic forces will lead to their employer paying them a higher wage or salary.

So, yes, individual workers can be affected, adversely or favourably depending on their spending habits, by changes in the taxes they pay. Naturally those who end up worse off will complain, but this is not a class issue as an issue that concerns workers as a whole.

Whether income tax is deducted by employers or by the government is certainly of no concern to workers. What's relevant is not the gross pre-tax figure that appears on their pay slip, but their take-home pay as that's what they have to spend on reproducing their working skills. "Pocket money" is rather an apt description of this but surprising coming from a rag like the *Daily Express*.



Socialist housing? A Venus Project modular tower

Planning for plenty

Red plenty. Francis Spufford. Faber, 2010. ISBN: 9780571225231.



This book proclaims itself to be a novel about an idea: the idea of effectively administering communist plenty. More specifically, the idea of plenty as

it manifested in the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 60s when politicians, mathematicians, cyberneticists and economists all took the idea of surpassing American affluence seriously.

The novel unfolds through a series of sympathetic vignettes, in which people living in the USSR deal with the mundane every day pressures of totalitarian government and the failures of the economic system: a woman giving birth without drugs, the poverty of a collective farm, a fixer wheeling and dealing his way through a world of business favours, the cramped living conditions that were nevertheless a step up from the old *communkas* of rooms partitioned by curtains. The highly skilful prose leads us into the minds of the various actors, from Nikita Khrushchev down to a couple living in a Moscow apartment, and shares their aspirations and frustrations. The same skill is applied to the technical details of the workings of a Soviet built computer, scaling down to the electrons racing around in a pentode, up to an explanation of what a pentode is, and how they worked in computers.

Everything is backed up by footnotes. In fact, though, the footnotes are themselves as much a part of the novel as the main text, as they explain the ways in which the author has confabulated characters, contracted time and re-jigged events to make a more convenient narrative. They also give citations and inform the reader of what really happened, and give links to websites for further information. Not only, therefore, is the burden of interpreting the text thrown onto the reader in contradistinction to the normal fictional practice of drawing the reader into the text world and allow them to swallow its reality but also the reader has to decide how to integrate these footnotes into their reading – look up after each page? Read them all at the end? Read them

after each chapter? This makes the text into a critical exercise, appropriate for a novel about ideas and critical thinking.

The story fluctuates around the person of Leonid Kantorovich, a genuine mathematical genius who developed linear algebra solutions while working for a plywood firm. The problem was finding the most efficient way of assigning work to various machines in order to produce outputs in the correct ratios to fulfil the planned targets of finished goods. Although the text does not go into much detail of the precise maths (it does cite various sources that no doubt would) it does illustrate, roughly, his approach to resolving simultaneous equations with unknown variables. From which, he developed an idea of using ‘objectively determined valuations’ in effect opportunity costs, to improve and rationalise on planning. These valuations would be used to derive planned prices. Together with cyberneticist colleagues, Kantorovich tries to get this method applied to Soviet planning to supplant the complicated system of guesswork employed by the planners at the time (which is also depicted in detail).

The story shows the subtle games played between the planners and the managers of plants – up to and including cunning acts of sabotage to get the latest machinery. It also shows how the system, despite its claims to be placing the economy under rational control, in fact made it even more ad hoc and chaotic – Khrushchev ends his days fulminating over his lack of control of the political machine. It is, though, the illusion of control that means the apparatchiks eventually decide they do not want to cede control of planning to a cybernetic machine, and the project is quietly shelved, and the Soviet computer programme is closed down and the decision taken to just buy in US IBMs.

The novel repeatedly returns to the idea that even amidst the Soviet hell there was a utopian core of humane ideas that were continually thwarted by the shortages and chaos of production, the kernel of the idea of abundance. What it helps portray is the immense task of consciously planning a complex economy, and the serious and rational attempts of practical minds to make it work. It is enough to make any socialist think. Helpfully, the exhaustive footnotes and bibliography provide an excellent resource for any socialist who wants to delve in-depth into the question. This includes writings by modern day western cyberneticists who continue

to see Kantorovich’s methods as a means to even surpass pricing and have an economy in kind, and continue the debate.

PS

Things about capitalism

23 Things They Don’t Tell You About Capitalism. Ha-Joon Chang. Allen Lane. £20.



Three things Ha-Joon Chang doesn’t tell you about capitalism. As a form of society it’s only a few hundred years old. It won’t last forever. And it will be replaced when a majority of the

world’s people stop supporting it and organise a better alternative.

The author makes no bones about supporting capitalism: “This book is not an anti-capitalist manifesto...my criticism is of a particular version of capitalism that has dominated the world in the last three decades, that is, free-market capitalism...there are ways in which capitalism should, and can, be made better.”

It takes two pages to list the headings of the 23 ‘things’, in no particular order. Four are on the market: no such thing as a free market; free-market policies rarely make poor countries rich; we are not smart enough to leave things to the market and financial markets need to become less efficient. Three are on economics: greater macroeconomic stability has not made the world economy more stable; we are living in planned economies and good economic policy does not require good economists. Three are on the US: it does not have the highest living standard in the world; its managers are overpriced and what is good for GM is not necessarily good for the US. The 13 remaining ‘things’ can be filed under miscellaneous’.

Ha-Joon Chang knows a thing or two about Marx and Marxism. He understands that Marx “argued that the fundamental problem with capitalism was the contradiction between the social nature of the production process and the private nature of ownership of the means of production”. Unfortunately he equates Marxism with central planning, which he says led to the unravelling of ‘communism’ in the late 1980s.

In his concluding chapter the author offers eight mostly disputable points:

1. "The profit motive is still the most powerful and effective fuel to power our economy and we should exploit it to the full." No – the profit motive applies to and benefits only the tiny capitalist class at the expense of exploiting workers.

2. "We should build our new economic system on the recognition that human rationality is severely limited." No – this is too pessimistic an assessment of human rationality.

3. "We should build a system that brings out the best, rather than the worse, in people." Yes – capitalism certainly doesn't.

4. "We should stop believing that people are always paid what they 'deserve'." Yes – socialists never started believing that.

5. "We need to take 'making things' more seriously." Yes – a system based on making things is better than one based on making money for the minority.

6. "We need to strike a better balance between finance and 'real' activities." No – we need to get rid of finance as an impediment to real activities.

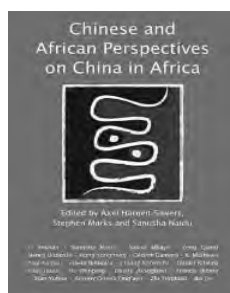
7. "Government needs to become bigger and more active." No – government of persons needs to give way to administration of things.

8. "The world economic system needs to 'unfairly' favour developing countries." Yes – but not in the way the author means it. The world socialist system may at first need to favour populations which have the greatest deprivations.

SRP

Oil out, guns in

Chinese and African Perspectives on China in Africa. Eds Axel Harneit-Sievers, Stephen Marks and Sanusha Naidu, Pambazuka Press £16.95. (Also available as an e-book from www.fahamubooks.org)



There may be a prevalent view of Africa as a continent immersed in poverty, but in fact it is rich in many things, minerals and energy for instance.

Efforts by the wealthiest and most powerful countries to exploit these

resources have carried on since the end of classical colonialism and the coming of 'independence', and these have helped ensure the continuation of poverty for the vast majority of Africans. As China joins the club of developed capitalist states, it also sees Africa as a source of raw materials and a market for exports. This volume gives a wide-ranging overview of China's activities in Africa, with chapters by activists and academics from both China and Africa. Almost without exception, the most interesting essays are those by African authors, with those by Chinese contributors being largely bland and uncritical.

Bilateral trade between China and Africa has increased over the last decade to more than \$US100 billion. As Chinese capitalism expands, it needs to import raw materials of various kinds, and nearly 80 percent of China's imports from Africa are oil and petroleum products. For instance, 500,000 barrels of oil are exported to China from Angola each day, and it is only Chinese companies, with mainly Chinese employees, who carry out this work, so Chinese industry benefits from both the oil and the extraction work. Furthermore, China is a major producer of wood and paper products, but has relatively little by way of forestry resources, hence Chinese companies undertake logging in Mozambique and Tanzania. Minerals such as iron ore, copper and uranium are imported to China from Liberia, Zambia and Niger.

At the same time, China exports finished goods to Africa. In Nigeria, for example, cheap Chinese textiles have undercut domestically-produced goods, increasing local unemployment. Chinese companies export cheap, and sometimes dangerous, goods aimed specifically at the African market, where consumers have little money to spend. Arms sales from China to Africa are also an important source of profits, with Sudan, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe among the purchasers.

The book contains a few pointless policy ideas, such as the African Union playing a larger role in supervising Sino-African relations. Its usefulness lies elsewhere, in showing the extent to which China is acting in essentially the same way as the other capitalist powers, and how the workers and peasants of Africa remain subject to the exploitation and oppression of both 'home-grown' and global rulers.

PB

from page 3

your job, get ill, get injured, get old, or get blown up in one of capitalism's wars. But even if you have taken these elementary precautions, throwing current benefit claimants onto the labour market will just increase competition for jobs, and act as a downward pressure on wages.

There is not, insists the government, any political choice about any of this: the cuts are just inevitable. To their inevitable facts of life, we must pose our own: resistance and socialist education. They started this particularly nasty and vindictive phase of the class war, and we're all in it together whether we want to be or not. But ask not what the class war can do for you. Ask what you can do for the class war.

2009 Socialist Standard Index

For a copy send 2nd class postage to:

The Socialist Party, 52 Clapham High Street, London SW4 7UN

New Socialist Party Pamphlet What's Wrong With Using Parliament? The Cases For And Against The Revolutionary Use Of Parliament



Addresses arguments put by those who desire a classless, moneyless society but who do not see parliament as relevant to achieving this.

To order a copy complete the form on page 7.

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Meetings

East Anglia

Saturday 13 November 2pm
TWO SHORT FILMS - RSA Animate Series

The Empathic Civilisation & Drive
5pm: Specially summoned branch meeting re the Party Poll. The Workshop, 53 Earlham Road, Norwich NR2 3AD.

London

FILM EVENINGS
Sundays 6pm
14 November: "Winstanley" (1975)
Introduction by Adam Buick.
28 November: "Theory and Practice: a conversation with Howard Zinn"
Introduction by Dick Field.
Socialist Party premises,
52 Clapham High St, SW4 7UN
(nearest tube: Clapham North)

Chiswick

Tuesday 16 November 8pm
WHAT'S WRONG WITH USING PARLIAMENT?
Discussion with "Wine & Cheese Appreciation Society of Greater London" (German political group). Committee Room, Chiswick Town Hall, Heathfield Rd, W4 4JN (nearest tube: Chiswick Park).

Glasgow

Wednesday 17 November 8.30pm
SOCIALISM: A SCIENCE OR A DREAM?
Speaker: John Cumming
Community Central Halls,
304 Maryhill Road, G20 7YE.

Manchester

Monday 22 November, 8.30pm
CAPITALISM AND FOOD
Unicorn, Church Street, City Centre.

Right to strike



PATRICK NEARY has been released after spending six weeks in prison. He was the leader of the recent seamen's strike, and was sent to jail because he did not comply with a court order which told him (in effect) to give up all connection with the strike. Some newspapers have claimed that he was imprisoned not because he was a striker, but because he disobeyed the court order. This is to reject the substance and catch at the shadow. The reason Neary went to jail was because he had been elected chairman of the strike committee, and had

therefore emerged as the figurehead of the strike. The shipping companies wanted to remind the seamen of the Merchant Shipping Act, under which any striking seaman can be sent to jail. As far as the mass of strikers were concerned, the companies were perhaps afraid of having them all sent to jail,

for fear of repercussions: and so decided to call in the state machine (which after all they maintain to look after their interests) only against one man, the figurehead, Neary. Therefore Neary has had to endure for six weeks the vile indignities which are the lot of anyone in jail, because he took part in a strike and was elected chairman of the committee which ran it.

And what happened to the protests which we might have expected? The last war (our leaders told us) was fought to defend democratic freedoms. The right to withhold labour is a central democratic freedom. The alternative—sending men to jail because they refuse to work on the terms offered them by the capitalists—is slavery. But our ruling class had no objection to Neary's sentence. Their newspapers applauded it. Let us remember this the next time our rulers want our help to "fight for freedom and democracy."

(from News in Review, *Socialist Standard*, November 1960)

East Anglia

Saturday 27 November 12noon to 4pm
12noon: informal chat / branch business
1pm - 2pm: meal
2pm - 4pm: continuation / agenda
Quebec Tavern, 93-97 Quebec Road
Norwich NR1 4HY
(The meeting takes place in a side room separate to the bar.)
All welcome.

Lancaster

Monday 29 November 8.30pm
WHY SANTA IS A SOCIALIST
Gregson Centre, Moorgate, Lancaster.

Central London

Saturday 20 November 5pm
Launch of new pamphlet *What's Wrong With Using Parliament?*
Speaker: Stair
Housmans Bookshop,
5 Caledonian Road, Kings Cross, N1 9DX
(nearest tube: Kings Cross).

Chiswick

Tuesday 7 December 8pm
EDUCATION AS IT IS AND HOW IT COULD BE.
Speaker: Vincent Otter
Committee Room, Chiswick Town Hall.

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.



Blunt instrument of justice?

IT DID not need George Orwell's *1984* to make us aware that a system of privilege propagates itself through verbal distortions so that war is indeed peace, freedom slavery, ignorance strength and a Ministry of Truth conveyor-belts lies while our security depends on being watched by Big Brother. Consider, for example, this thing called "justice". This is what people are supposed to "get" from a court if they breach the arrangements which are made to protect the pointedly weighted structure by which the lesser mass of people monopolise life's essentials and prevent access to them by the greater mass, no matter how acute their needs. A few years ago, when it was considered necessary for the long-established but mal-functioning Home Office to be split up there emerged from some part of it a new Ministry of Justice, with a number of Ministers to administer its affairs. What kind of match is there between these exalted personages and the protective concept of justice and how devotedly, effectively, do they nurture it in their work in government?

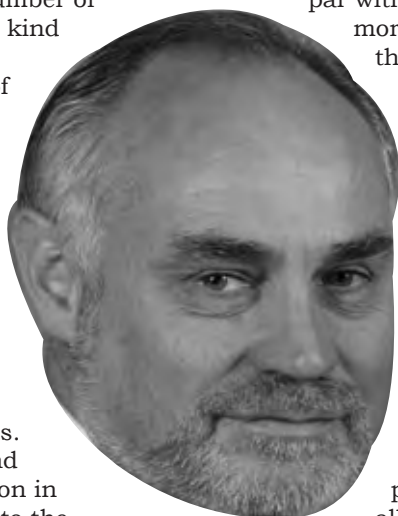
Reigate's Donkey

Step forward Crispin Blunt, since 14 May this year Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Ministry of Justice responsible for, among other matters, prisons and probation. Since 1997 MP for Reigate, notably verdant even among Surrey's leafy constituencies. Educated at Wellington public school and Sandhurst with the inevitable commission in the Army which made him so attractive to the Tories in Reigate after they had de-selected Sir George Gardiner when his Eurosceptic ravings became too strident for them. After Gardiner, Blunt was soothingly reassuring; he was, as the chairman of the constituency Conservative Party put it, "...happily married with two children". It was almost as if Blunt could have held that seat for as long as he wanted, growing stout and bald and querulous on the back benches – had he not revealed a tendency to become famous for particularly embarrassing gaffes. To begin with there was, even before he had been voted onto the green benches, his dismissive assessment of the local electors he hoped would put him there when he reckoned that "You could put up a donkey as the Conservative in Reigate and it would win" – tested out when Gardiner walked a donkey called Crispin along the High Street there. And after the donkey had duly taken his seat in the Commons his style of claiming expenses was shown to be not of the high standards expected of an officer and a gentleman as, after being told he could not claim for a second home because he lived there with his children he bought a larger place, claiming £16,000 for stamp duty and fees then a total of £87,728 second home expenses which included £417 for the repair of a water wheel.

Parties Inside

Meanwhile there was the work of administering the administration of justice whatever that meant. Somewhere along the line Blunt had become converted to the ideas now being espoused by his boss as Minister of Justice and Lord High Chancellor Kenneth Clarke. The theme of this is the "rehabilitation revolution" which is in fact driven by the need to manage reductions in

budgets before any concern for helping prisoners to better cope with life outside the prison walls. In his first speech on the issue, Blunt outraged the tabloids by stating an intention to scrap a ban, imposed under Labour in 2008 after rumours circulated about a wild "horror-themed fancy dress" party in a prison, on any further "inappropriate events". Blunt described the ban in unparliamentary terms as "daft" – meaning unhelpful to the kind of "reforming" regime which prisons exist for – in theory at any rate. But in the predictable hysteria about murderers and rapists having obscene fun "at the taxpayers' expense" Blunt's intention was swept away – almost taking him with it under an effectively public reprimand from Number Ten. As a blunder it was on a par with the donkeys of Reigate. And how many more, his friends and enemies asked, would there be?.



Marriage

They did not have to wait long for an event which was more revealing – and thereby more damaging – than any blunder. Blunt's 20-year marriage must have been as comforting to the Reigate Tories as his love of cricket. Victoria Blunt is a daughter of a wealthy American family who abandoned her career as a banker to support him in his political ambitions. "She gave up everything for him" said one acquaintance "She is the perfect MP's wife and would attend every fete and garden party.." But this, as another put it, "...was all built on a lie" – which became clear in August when Blunt abruptly announced that he is gay and was leaving his family to "come to terms with my homosexuality". In itself this was not particularly shattering but there was more to it for his stated opinions have not been noted for any relaxed attitude towards gays. He voted against giving them the right to adopt and against allowing lesbian couples equal access to IVF treatment. In 1998 he opposed a move to scrap the ban on openly gay men joining the armed forces, pronouncing that "Military ethos has been progressively undermined . Letting overt gays in is another stage in the process" and on another occasion he complained about "a much greater strand of homosexuality which depends for its gratification on the exploitation of youth". Such views, although without any real supporting evidence, must have convinced many constituency Conservatives that they had chosen the right man to replace the reviled Gardiner.

It may be different now among the lawns and trees as around Westminster sharply dressed civil servants suck through the froth on their cappuccinos while offering the very lowest odds on Blunt being shaken out in Cameron's first re-shuffle. Blunt's wife was said to be "...completely traumatised". Well, naturally. But did Mrs. Blunt's lucrative time as a banker not teach her anything about the ruthless cynicism essential to finance and commerce? Did her long intimacy with politician Mr. Blunt leave her vulnerably uneducated about the same atrocious features of capitalist politics? Does she now wonder about the nature of this thing called justice and why an exposed practitioner in deceit should have been in a position to inflict it on us?

IVAN



Voice from the Back

The madness of capitalism

Capitalism is an insane society. Millions die with easily prevented or curable diseases whilst millions of dollars, pounds, euros and yen are spent on new ways to destroy human beings with ingenious methods of military mayhem, but surely capitalism has reached the epitome of madness when some children are trying to exist on less than £1 a day and we can read of the following insanity. "It's simple, but no less appealing for that. Celine's classic box bag may cost a pretty penny but its sleek lines make it among the most wanted bags of the season. Price: £2,150" (*The Independent*, 20 September). Yes, the equivalent of years of nourishment for a child spent by some parasite as a gift of a handbag to his latest girlfriend. Mad, mad, mad.



Pay cheque to pay cheque

The media constantly reminds us how lucky we are to live in an advanced capitalist economy. We should be grateful to our masters that we don't live in a backward third-world economy. The United Kingdom, the USA and Canada must surely be free from the poverty of those third-world nations according to the media – but what is the reality? "The recession may be officially over, but six in 10 Canadians are still surviving from paycheque to paycheque, a national survey showed Monday. Fifty-nine per cent of Canadian workers say they would be in financial trouble if their paycheque was delayed by just a week – the same proportion as last year when the economy was still mired in a downturn, according to a poll of 2,766 people by the Canadian Payroll Association. The survey comes as the OECD today warned that record high debt levels have

left many Canadians vulnerable to any future adverse shocks" (*Globe and Mail*, 13 September). Like our fellow workers in Canada and the USA we in the UK live from pay day to pay day. That is how capitalism operates.

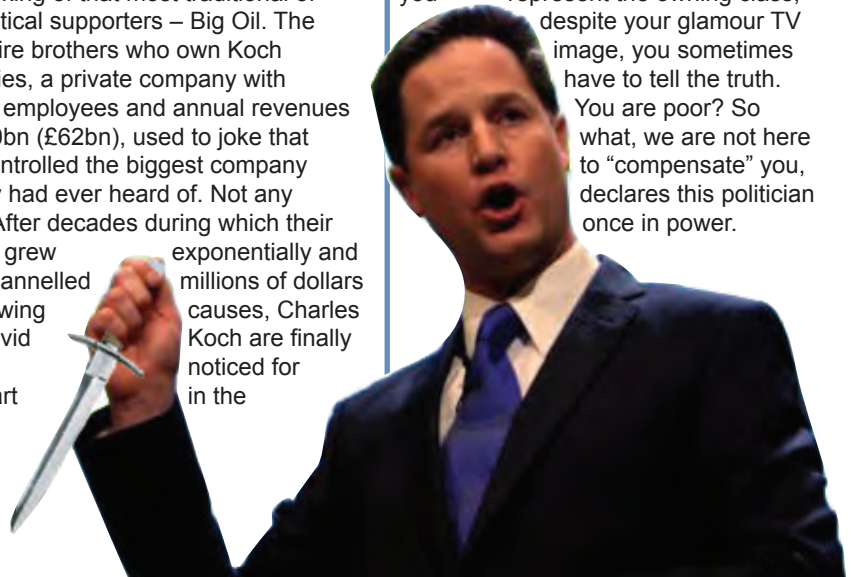
Dollars and democracy

One of the illusions that supporters of capitalism like to boast of is the notion that whatever the failings of the profit system at least it is thoroughly democratic. This is a complete fabrication as by the expenditure of millions of dollars, euros and yen the owning class completely distort any pretence to democracy that capitalism may possess. A recent example of this manipulation by the power of money has emerged in the USA. "It likes to present itself as a grassroots insurgency made up of hundreds of local groups intent on toppling the Washington elite. But the Tea Party movement, which is threatening to cause an upset in next month's midterm elections, would not be where it is today without the backing of that most traditional of US political supporters – Big Oil. The billionaire brothers who own Koch Industries, a private company with 70,000 employees and annual revenues of \$100bn (£62bn), used to joke that they controlled the biggest company nobody had ever heard of. Not any more. After decades during which their fortune grew exponentially and they channelled millions of dollars to rightwing causes, Charles and David Koch are finally getting noticed for their part in the

extraordinary growth of the Tea Party movement. The two, 74-year-old Charles and David, 70, have invested widely in the outcome of the 2 November elections. One Koch subsidiary has pumped \$1m into the campaign to repeal California's global warming law, according to state records" (*Guardian*, 14 October). As Bob Dylan once wrote "Money doesn't talk, it swears."

Behind the rhetoric

Politicians' stock in trade is pretending to represent the whole of society while in fact only representing the owning class. Thus we have Nick Clegg of the Liberal Democrats claiming that he is concerned about the poor and exploited at election time, but in power forced to declare his real aims. "Poor must accept benefit cuts: Clegg on collision course with own party by backing welfare axe. Nick Clegg has waded into the row over welfare reform by warning that benefits should not be there 'to compensate the poor for their predicament'. On the eve of the Liberal Democrat conference, the Deputy Prime Minister backed the Coalition's programme of welfare cuts and dramatically shifted his party's policy on the subject" (*Daily Mail*, 16 September). If you represent the owning class, despite your glamour TV image, you sometimes have to tell the truth. You are poor? So what, we are not here to "compensate" you, declares this politician once in power.



Free LUNCH

by Rigg



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