

LISBON:

What part of NO does Cowen not understand?



THE IRISH political establishment were left reeling after the Lisbon vote but they are now trying to pick themselves up again.

They have started a chorus to overturn the decision of the Irish people.

One political commentator with close connections to the political elite, Stephen Collins from the *Irish Times*, even called on Dail Eireann to ratify the treaty – despite the people's vote.

The Fianna Fail Senator, Mary O'Rourke, says that the Dail should ratify parts of the treaty but her party colleague Dick Roche signalled the real strategy: he wants a second referendum.

The Labour Party has also re-joined this chorus. In the

aftermath of the referendum when a majority of Labour's own voters said NO, the party leader Eamonn Gilmore said there should not be a second referendum.

But now they are sending out signals that if a few extra 'protocols' are added to the Lisbon treaty, Ireland can vote again.

There is absolutely no excuse for this contempt for democracy.

The Lisbon Treaty was explicitly framed so that all the EU countries had to sign up for it. The Euro elite were so worried by this legal requirement that they denied the people of every other country except Ireland a vote.

These countries pushed a Yes vote through parliaments even though many of their populations were

against the Treaty.

The failure of the political establishment to accept the NO vote shows that they only believe in democracy when people assent to their rule.

It shows that democracy under capitalism is only a cover for corporate rule.

Over the next few weeks, everyone who voted NO needs to send back a simple message to the establishment:

If they try overturning the NO vote with the second referendum, this country will face a constitutional crisis.

Any attempt by the Dail to propose a new referendum should be met with mass protests on a scale that has never been seen before.

PAY: NO PAY FREEZE

BRIAN COWEN is trying to stabilise his government by getting the union leaders to agree to a new partnership deal.

But the pay deal on offer contains a wage freeze and gives increases which are well below the rate of inflation. It is unacceptable because working people are facing huge increases in their household bills.

The price of natural gas has just gone up by 20 percent, affecting 500,000 households. The average tank

of home heating oil will increase by €800 this year. Last month, the ESB pushed up prices by 18 percent and further rises are due in the coming months.

Even before these prices rises, one survey found that a staggering 17 percent of Irish people were suffering from fuel poverty. In other words, they sometimes had to choose between keeping warm and having food.

Cowen and the employers' organisation IBEC ignore these realities

because their only concern is to shore up profit margins. They have no right to look for pay cuts from workers.

Last week, TDs received a pay rise of €2,500 a year to bring their salaries to more than €100,000 a year. Cowen himself got a pay rise of €7,000.

A recent study of CEO salaries showed that they got an average basic pay rise of 12 percent last year – and an astounding 30 percent increase in their overall 'reward packages'.

The top Irish CEOs - who

run smaller companies than their counterparts in Britain - are getting bigger pay hikes. Yet they lecture workers about tightening their belts.

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions have recommended that every worker below €38,000 put in a pay claim for a flat rate increase of €30 a week.

There is little point urging workers to do this – if the union leaders are not willing to fight.

Tragically ICTU leaders like David Begg have already started to start to

back slide from this claim. Begg told RTE News that the unions 'might accept a pay rise below the rate of inflation'.

Begg lost his mandate to speak for workers when he joined the political establishment in urging a Yes vote to Lisbon.

We need to rid ourselves of back-stabbers in the unions and organise a real fight to defend our conditions during the recession and to win the pay increases we deserve.

China's century?

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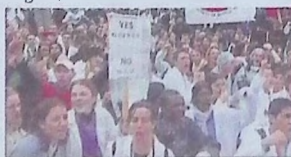
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Cherrywood eviction battle



Joe Cunnane and his four young children

THE BATTLE to stop the eviction of single father Joe Cunnane and his four young children continues.

Joe and his children received a court order to vacate their family home on August 1st due to mounting rent arrears to the tune of €35,000.

Joe's partner and mother to his four children died suddenly and tragically aged twenty-nine, in the Cherrywood home in 2006 from a heart condition.

At this point Joe moved into the Cherrywood home and took full responsibility for raising their children

on his own.

Rent allowance that had previously been allocated for the Loughlinstown address under the deceased mother's name has been denied to Joe.

Despite himself and his kids surviving solely on unemployment assistance and children's benefits. The HSE and DLRC refused to intervene to offer support in this young family's ever increasingly desperate situation.

Since contacting the PBPA, Joe's case has received an enormous amount of publicity.

After speaking on RTE Radio 1

only days before the eviction date, a private donor has come forward and offered €15,000 to aid with his rent arrears.

This staggering gesture of good will has been welcomed by his landlady and it has been agreed that this money is enough to wipe the slate clean between them.

What is crucial now is that we get a commitment from the H.S.E that they will pay Joe's rent from this day forward. If this commitment is made then the landlady will allow Joe and the kids to remain in their Cherrywood home.

Reinstate our bus service

THE PEOPLE Before Profit Alliance along with the local residents of Loughlinstown are calling a public meeting on Thursday August 21st in Loughlinstown community rooms to discuss and demand the reinstatement of the evening bus service back into the community.

In March of 2007 Dublin Bus decided to withdraw its service into Loughlinstown after 7pm because of what it describes as anti social behaviour. Since the curtailment of the evening service in March 2007, the People Before Profit Alliance, together with residents in Loughlinstown have been campaigning to have the service reinstated.

Earlier this year Hugh Lewis of the PBPA attended a meeting with Dublin Bus along with representatives from the Gardai, DLRC, SIPTU and the NBRU. At that meeting two potential solutions were proposed by Hugh:

- That the buses stop using Loughlinstown as a terminus and simply drop people off and pick people up on the way to and from Cherrywood.
- That security personnel are occasionally placed on buses

coming into Loughlinstown in the evenings.
Both of the proposals came after consultation with the people of Loughlinstown.
At this meeting a commitment was made by Dublin Bus and the Trade Unions involved that a ballot put to the drivers on whether to reinstate the late evening service. The ballot was taken recently and was rejected by the drivers; the ballot did not include either public proposal.
Hugh Lewis, local representative for the PBPA says:
"The decision by Dublin Bus to withdraw its service into Loughlinstown after 7pm back in March of 2007 has had a profoundly negative effect on the local community. In many cases the restricted public transport services have led to a sense of isolation and prohibited many residents' mobility."
"The time for the reinstatement of this vital service is long overdue, quality public transport is an integral part of any community. We will not rest until we see our buses return."

For more info contact: Hugh Lewis 087-327-6267

LISBON TREATY: Galway says 'No means No'

IN SEPTEMBER the Dail will be recalled for a debate on the Lisbon treaty referendum which resulted in a resounding NO vote by the Irish electorate on 12th June this year.

The "Galway No to the Lisbon Treaty" campaign will be reminding Irish politicians that "NO still means NO".

Each Galway City councillor, Galway West TD, and local MEP will be contacted by the group during August asking them to sign a pledge.

The pledge is an agreement for each of the individual politicians to respect the Irish NO vote on the treaty, and it further requires them to uphold that

vote and not try to overturn it in anyway.

Detle Mc Loughlin of "Galway No to Lisbon Treaty" said that the responses to the exercise will be made public, adding, "Wo, the people have a right to know which politicians will uphold the results of our democratic vote and oppose any proposal to hold a second Lisbon referendum."

"If all member states of the EU do not ratify the treaty it does not come into force, therefore if the authorities in Ireland and other EU states accept and respect the verdict of the Irish people then they must declare the Lisbon Treaty a dead issue."

—Detle McLoughlin

Migrant workers face registration fee hike

By MELISA HALPIN

THE GARDA National Immigration Bureau (GNIB) announced in August that the registration fee for non European Economic Area (EEA) nationals has increased by 50%.

Up until last week all non EEA nationals (not including refugees or minors) who intend to reside in Ireland for more than three months had to pay €100 euro to the GNIB - this fee has now gone up to €150.

This fee applies to all migrant workers and students from outside the EEA. Not only are these migrants being treated as second-class citizens, with different rights according to their country of origin, their earning power or their skills - they are also being charged for the privilege.

It is an absolute disgrace that revenue

should be generated off the back of migrant workers and students who are already struggling to make ends meet in some of the lowest paid jobs in the country.

This change in fee coincides with the mandatory fingerprinting of those who register. Their fingerprints are embedded in a biometric chip in their photo registration card that they are obliged to carry with them at all times and produce on the request of a Garda.

The fingerprinting of a section of the population is a policy that all of us should oppose. It is a basic infringement of human rights and is used by our rulers across the world to criminalise immigrants.

These changes to GNIB procedure are just part and parcel of the current Government's policy of discrimination of migrant

workers, refugees and asylum seekers.

The last 10 years have seen huge changes in Ireland. We have moved from being a country of net emigration to one of net immigration. This change is one that socialists welcome. The mono cultural, mono religious Ireland up to the early 90's is not an Ireland we want to return to.

While the Celtic Tiger boomed the issue of migrants was rarely a subject of major debate. As the boom turns to bust it is likely we will see a rise in racism as our rulers move to blame migrants for unemployment, lack of housing and all the other day to day problems that working class people will face.

The government has prepared itself for this by putting in place laws that give different rights to Irish workers and migrant workers and also different

rights to different types of immigrants.

Laws such as the Habitual Residency Clause, which means that most migrant workers cannot avail of Social Welfare unless they have been resident for 2 years, the lack of an automatic right to family reunification on top of mandatory fingerprinting and carrying of ID cards for some migrants - all create resentments and divisions and set migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers apart from Irish workers.

Socialists fight and argue against all divisions in the working class whether gender, race, sexuality or religion. Migrant workers now make up 16% of workers nationally. If we want to resist pay cuts, redundancies and welfare cut backs we will need to stand together and oppose any attempt to divide us.

WHAT THE SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY STANDS FOR

Capitalism is wrecking the lives of millions and endangering the planet.

A new society can only be constructed when the workers take control of the wealth and plan its production and distribution for human need and not profit.

REVOLUTION

The present system cannot be patched up or reformed. The courts, the army and police exist to defend the interests of the wealthy.

To destroy capitalism, we need to remove the present state structures and create a workers' state based on much

greater political and economic democracy.

AGAINST IMPERIALISM AND WAR

War is a constant feature of capitalism today as the imperialist powers try to dominate the earth.

Bush's "War on Terrorism" is a crude device to attack any country which threatens US military, strategic or economic dominance.

END RACISM AND OPPRESSION

We oppose all forms of oppression and racism. This divides and weakens the

working class.

We are for full social, economic and political equality for women.

We oppose immigration controls which are always racist.

FOR WORKERS' UNITY IN THE NORTH

We stand for workers unity against the Assembly politicians and Blair government.

Like great socialist James Connolly, we believe that partition has brought about a 'carnival of reaction'

We want to see an Irish workers republic where all

workers gain.

Our flag is neither green nor orange but red!

FOR A REVOLUTIONARY PARTY

To win socialism socialists need to organise in a revolutionary party.

This party needs to argue against right-wing ideas and for overthrowing the system.

We call for co-operation between left-wing parties and the formation of a strong socialist bloc.

We stand for fighting trade unions and for independent rank and file action.

Join the Socialists

Fill in the form and send to
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Pipeline protests stepped up as Shell brings in the Navy

By BRID SMITH

AS SOCIALIST Worker goes to press local people in the Kilcommon parish of north Mayo are stepping up protests against Shell's attempt to lay its gas pipeline at sea.

Eight years after protests first began against the Corrib Gas project and Shell, the spirits are high among local protesters and supporters from the Solidarity camp.

The expected arrival of *Solitaire* the biggest pipe laying vessel in the world is the current focus of protesters. *Solitaire* has been anchored off shore in Killybegs in Donegal for almost a month and its expected arrival has met with escalating protests in and out of the water. It has also been met with the arrival of two navy gunboats, the LE Orla and the LE Aoife. A navy spokesman has said "This is the first time in our history we have mobilised against civilian protesters."

Along with the navy gunboats are up to 60 of Shells private security, between 60 to 80 Gardai and the Gardai water unit. As one local man told Socialist Worker, "Before Shell arrived in the area we had only one Garda in the whole parish of Kilcommon and most of the time he wasn't needed. Now we have hundreds". This is the biggest ongoing Garda operation in the state and Garda overtime alone has cost the state over €11 million. This is expected to exceed €15 by the end of the year.

Patrick O'Donnell is a local fisherman who is opposed to Shell laying its pipeline through Broadhaven Bay. He spoke to Socialist Worker.

"Shell have tried to buy off the local community one by one and have tried divide and rule tactics



Gardai confront protesters, (right) Navy warships LE Orla and LE Aoife

among us. Some of the fishermen settled with Shell recently and have agreed to remove their fishing gear from the way of the pipeline. There are eight of us who won't take the corporate shilling. My fishing gear is out in the bay and I and other fishermen have a legal right to keep our property in these waters. Shell say they have a legal right too but they cannot touch or damage my gear.

If the gardai arrest me it will be an unlawful arrest. Neither the Gardai or Shell have any lawful authority to touch my property

in Broadhaven Bay and even if they take me out the pots remains. If there is any threat of criminal damage to my fishing gear every Garda is legally obliged to protect that property. My son Jonathan has lodged an injunction with the Courts to prevent Shell bringing the *Solitaire* into the waters and threaten our fishing gear and our livelihoods.

The campaign has once again united everyone in the area and all those who have come in to show solidarity and protest alongside us. We are now one enemy against

Shell. Everyday there are at least 50 to 60 protesting at Glengad or in the water. Since this all started eight years ago we have tried to deal reasonably with Shell but its obvious that Shell and the Government prefer conflict rather than peace."

Patrick and Jonathan O'Donnell were jailed in July '07 as a result of peaceful protests. Like many local fishermen they depend on the sea for their living and if the Shell pipeline contaminates the waters, their future in the area will be uncertain.



The Great Gas Giveaway

THE COST of energy is soaring across the globe. Oil prices have risen and forced up the costs of transport, food and household utilities.

An Bord Gais announced a 20% increase in household gas bills from September with another 20% likely in January. The ESB have pushed up electricity costs by 17.5%.

In the face of these huge price hikes and an economic recession, it is an act of madness that all of the gas to be extracted from the Corrib Basin by Shell and Statoil will be literally given away by the Irish State.

In 1987 the Energy Minister Ray Burke (disgraced Fianna Fail criminal) gave new terms for oil and gas exploration to the giant oil multinationals engaged in exploration off the Irish coast.

The terms couldn't have been more favourable - exemption from all royalty payments and a 100% tax write-off against profits on expenditure and the abolition of further state participation in oil and gas development.

Five years later the Finance Minister Bertie Ahern (another disgraced corrupt politician) cut the oil industry corporation tax to 25%. And there was no opposition from the opposition. This is why oil industry bosses have declared "the Irish terms are the best in the world".

But the Irish people are paying heavily for this great gas giveaway. We will have to pay the full market price for gas from our own gas fields and will have no control over prices, even in emergencies. The people of Norway will gain more from our gas - their state owned company Statoil has a 30% share in the Corrib basin.

There is an estimated 11 trillion cubic feet of natural gas in the Corrib basin - this is roughly the equivalent of 2,000 million barrels of oil in energy equivalence.

No wonder Shell are fighting the local people with all their might - there's an awful lot of profit out there for these greedy multinationals. Their record on environment and community relations is outrageous.

The legacy of Shell in the Niger Delta is graphically recorded as whole communities were destroyed, vegetation and all other life forms eliminated and activists like Ken Sara Wiwo slain by the state on behalf of Shell.

The Irish State with the collusion of Green Party Ministers are behaving little differently to the Nigerian state.

This issue shows why we urgently need to build a political alternative in Ireland that will put people and environment before the profits of the greedy multinational fat cats.

FESTIVAL OF WORLD CULTURES

Celebrating an Ireland of colour and diversity

By NIAL SMYTH

AUGUST SAW Dún Laoghaire once again stage a spectacular global carnival weekend, the Festival of World Cultures, in which over 800 musicians and artists and over well over 250,000 spectators descended upon the seaside town to take part in 150 live gigs, performances and events throughout the town.

The festival which is now in its 8th year has gone from strength to strength and is a real celebration of the new Ireland in which we live, a country of exciting colour and diversity.

The festival has hosted over the years has a variety of world artists in local clubs and bars and on free open air stages around the town and this year was no exception.

Friday night saw Orchestre Nationale De Barbes (ONB), a multi-ethnic multi-instrumental troupe named after the North African immigrant community of Berbers in central Paris play an electrifying set to a packed Party Kitchen. With hardly room to move or breathe, ONB stormed through a fantastic set of songs, fusing Arabic rai and North African rhythms with funk, rock, reggae and jazz.

Throughout their performance they made a point of stressing a strong anti-racist message speaking to the plight of asylum seekers and migrants throughout Europe and the world. It was definitely one of the highlights of the weekend. Other acts to play that night in Dún Laoghaire included: Ethiopiques, who played to a sold out crowd in the Pavilion and Erik Noon & Txaranga who played in the Kingston Hotel. Friday also saw for the fourth year running the annual under-14s International Soccer



Part of the parade at the Festival of Cultures in Dun Laoghaire

Tournament, featuring 8 teams from five different countries including Japan, Sweden and Holland, with Roy Keane's Sunderland competing for the first time.

Despite the downpour on Saturday, crowds who braved the elements were treated to such acts as Andy Irvine, Liam O Maonlai, Brazil's Seu Jorge of "City of God" fame, an unusual but delightful Samba da Rua & O'Neill Pipe Band, mixing a Monaghan pipe band and Spanish Street Samba and many more artists. Saturday also saw a number of workshops taking place throughout the town from Bollywood dance, Capocira, basket weaving and even soap making classes. Stalls throughout the weekend sold clothes and ornaments from across the globe and the food stands catered for everyone's tastes.

The 3rd and final day, Sunday, saw

performances from Dublin's North Strand Klezmer Band, the Balkan Beat Box, Nigerian band Ojamba and many, many more. The highlight of the day though was Sergeant Gacia, who played on the Newtownsmith stage to a massive crowd. The highly political artist dedicated songs to the "Zapatista and to peoples in struggle around the world" and his style and sound echoed that of Manu Chao.

The Festival is something everyone should pencil into their diary. With a huge amount of free events and a very family-friendly atmosphere of parades, face-painting, puppet making and variety of other activities for the kids throughout the weekend the Festival of World Cultures has established itself as one of the events of year in Dublin if not in Ireland.

The SWP held a successful stall at which the Love Music Hate Racism

initiative was promoted and the Irish Anti War Movement were present too.

Looking forward to Festival of World Cultures 2009 already!

Irish troops committed to EU battlegroups

THE IRISH defence forces have committed themselves to sending troops to two EU battlegroups over the next four years.

The government is considering doubling Ireland's contribution by joining a German-led battlegroup in addition to the Nordic force.

In April of this year the Minister for Defence, Willie O'Dea, met with the German defence minister, Norbert Darabos, to discuss Irish



By AIDAN DALY

IDEAS OF racism and racial hatred belong in the long distant past! Whenever and wherever they are dragged up they need to be smashed back down again.

Love Music Hate Racism uses the positive energy of the music scene to fight back against racism, and has been having great success in opposing the racist filth being peddled by the BNP in Britain.

"We are now organising anti-Nazi gigs, raves and club nights up and down the country. Wherever the Nazis

try to divide us, we'll be there - black and white united - to fight back against their lies and hatred"

In Ireland we don't want to see similar organisation of racist ideas. Neither do we want to see scapegoating of immigrants or migrant workers in this country.

We will be organising the first of the Love Music Hate Racism events in the very near future... We will keep you posted!

Visit <http://www.myspace.com/lmhireland> Email lmhireland@gmail.com

participation in the battlegroup. There is further meeting scheduled this month.

The battlegroup will involve troops from Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic Croatia and, possibly, Ireland.

Ireland is already part of the Nordic battlegroup, involving troops from Norway Sweden, Finland and Estonia, which was on standby for the first six months of this year.

The Irish government recently confirmed that two

Defence Forces personnel had been stationed with other EU battlegroups officers in Norwood, a London command centre which is being used to direct operations in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

EU battle groups came into effect under the Nice Treaty.

The Lisbon Treaty, which was rejected by Irish voters, would have allowed for the further militarisation of the EU and seen Ireland drawn ever closer into military alliances.

COMMENT

Can the assembly ever be taken seriously?



Floods in Belfast

By SEÁN MITCHELL

Northern Ireland was recently hit with some of the worst flooding it has seen in years. The consequences of the heavy rain were widespread.

There were 3,000 calls made by people to flood help lines, roads were like rivers, and the new Westlink underpass filled up with so much water that it looked like the Olympic swimming team could have a new base for 2012.

Many people mentioned that the heavy rain was part of wider trend, that the wetter summers can be linked to the ongoing process of Global warming, and that tackling the immediate issue must be done as part of a fight against this.

This seems like an altogether reasonable argument, the dangers of global warming have been widely documented.

Not for the Northern Ireland Assembly: the man they have put in charge of the environment, Sammy Wilson, says that he doesn't believe that global warming is happening, that it is a fabrication of "sandal-wearing, tree-huggers".

A little rich one might think coming from a man who has a background in naturism, but nevertheless a very dangerous situation.

This backward thinking on the part of MLAs is not just confined to the environment. It turns out that the chair of the NI education committee Mervyn Storey, is advocating creationism and the belief that the world is 6000 years old, should not just be taught in science at school, but that it would be his preference as the sole explanation for the existence of the world.

Mr Storey has the right to believe what he wants, but I seriously pity the teacher that would have to explain to pupils that despite all scientific evidence, evolution doesn't exist and dinosaur fossils were put here to test our faith.

Whilst this may seem laughable, the truth is that these politicians are in positions of power to pursue their reactionary views. This was made clear when Iris Robinson made her comments about gay people. She has a platform to spew her hate, and gets national TV and radio time to do so. These people shouldn't be anywhere near ministerial positions.

What's even worse about this is that other people in the Assembly refuse to take a stand.

Instead parties like Sinn Fein prefer to focus on the ongoing community versus community saga, who gets what commemoration and where being the favourite. Sinn Fein has said it may collapse the assembly if policing and justice powers aren't devolved. They weren't so vociferous when it came to defending gay rights.

What is abundantly clear is that any "shine" that may have been on the Assembly has now gone. People are sick of the nonsense, whether it's homophobia, climate change scepticism, denying women's rights or the green-orange merry go round.

The gap between the beliefs and aspirations of our politicians and ordinary working class people is huge. 15,700 people signed an online petition to Gordon Brown calling on him to do something about Iris Robinson.

When 7,500 people turned out at gay pride they were effectively sticking two fingers up to our government.

The event was young, vibrant and colourful, in absolute contrast to the dreary dinosaurs in Stormont. People like Sammy Wilson and Iris Robinson represent the old Northern Ireland, but we are seeing the emergence of a new one and in direct opposition to them, long may it grow.

Abortion: Is this the moment for Northern Ireland?

By GORETTI HORGAN, Alliance for Choice

WHAT PERCENTAGE of people in Northern Ireland believes in creationism or that "it is the duty of government to implement god's law"? Probably no more than ten percent. Yet, because of the nature of government here, this small minority has a veto on social progress in the region.

British PM, Gordon Brown, has been making deals with the DUP to block abortion rights for women here, in return for its nine MPs voting for 42 day detention for 'terrorist' suspects.

Nonetheless, Diane Abbott MP has tabled an amendment to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill to extend the Abortion Act to Northern Ireland.

The amendment should be debated in October but, if it is to have a chance of being passed, we need a lively, militant campaign on the streets of the North to let Westminster know that the politicians do not represent the majority of people here when it comes to abortion rights.

The leaders of the four main parties wrote to all Westminster MPs saying that there is 'no support' here for abortion rights - this despite the fact that they know that abortion is already a reality in NI; 40 women a week leave here to travel to Britain or Europe to end unwanted pregnancies.

Across the North, pro-choice activists are organising. Alliance for Choice public meetings are being held in Belfast, Derry, Dungannon/Cookstown, Coleraine, Enniskillen and Newry.

The idea is to mobilise the silent majority who are fed up of the way the "new Northern Ireland" feels more and more like de Valera's old Southern



Ireland.

Women - and men - here have the same kind of sex lives as people in Britain or the South. Even the most effective contraception has a 2% failure rate. Inevitably, there will be women who become pregnant when they simply cannot go ahead with the pregnancy.

At present, there is one law for the rich, another for the poor: women with money can hop on a plane and get a private abortion without any fuss.

For some, there is a desperate scramble to get money together

quickly enough to be able to end the pregnancy in England or Europe.

For the poorest third of women - those living on benefits or very low wages - abortion is unavailable. They are forced to continue pregnancies they very much do not want. This includes women pregnant as a result of rape and sexual abuse.

All our largest unions support extension of the Act. In most cases, this policy has been voted on at branch level and then endorsed by Irish or NI regional conferences - a more democratic

approach than that of the political parties who stand for election on sectarian lines and then tell us we've voted for their position on abortion.

When the Brook Advisory Centre was established in Belfast, the fundamentalists said they would close it down. It's still there and has extended its services to other parts of the North.

Those who opposed the introduction of civil partnerships could not sustain a campaign once the law was passed.

There is a growing feeling that this may be "the moment" when things can change in NI. This year's Gay Pride parade in Belfast was the biggest ever - with lots of very young, mainly heterosexual, people, howling with rage at the bigots who run this dysfunctional state.

It reminded me of the marches in Dublin during the X case: young people saying this is not the kind of society we want to live in.

There is an awareness among a lot of especially younger people that, if we do not act now to take on those who would have us live in a theocracy, it will soon be too late.

The political parties have been told that abortion will be devolved along with criminal justice in the next few months. After that, there is little chance of women here ever having the right to abortion.

The challenge for socialists within Alliance for Choice is to build the biggest and broadest campaign possible in support of extension of the Abortion Act while at the same time linking the fight for abortion rights to all the other class issues bubbling up in NI society. Given the clear class nature of the abortion issue in Ireland, North and South, that should not be too difficult.

THOUSANDS AT PRIDE IN BELFAST



Gay pride in Belfast last month

Photo: Paula Geraghty

By GERRY CARROLL

OVER 7,000 people took to the streets for Belfast's gay pride march, which proved to be one of the biggest and best prides the city has ever seen. It was big, colourful, vibrant and also angry.

There was off course an added reason for people to get on the streets for this year's pride - namely Iris Robinson's homophobic comments. Those at pride stated that they were frankly 'disgusted' and 'outraged' by her comments.

Visible throughout pride was the feeling of anger towards Iris Robinson's statements - some had stickers

condemning her, there was a float depicting her as the wicked witch of the west, whilst thousands more signed the petition calling for her resignation.

The media instead preferred to focus its attention on a stunt pulled when the pride march was passing by city hall and also on the ever dwindling number of right wingers in attendance at Belfast Pride.

By doing this they failed to point out that pride was the biggest in recent years and also was very dynamic. Importantly there was a large number of young people at the event.

There was a significant attendance from Amicus, Unison, other trade unions, Amnesty International, Socialists and other community groups at gay pride itself.

Throughout the week there was a whole range of events, including a series of talks and the showing of the film Stonewall, which showed the outbreak of the gay liberation movement in New York in 1969.

Pride this year was not just a celebration of diversity and sexuality but was a militant showcase of resistance to the bigots and their representatives in the

Iris Robinson meeting

MORE THAN 80 people attended a meeting during the gay pride festival week in Belfast city centre entitled 'Make Bigotry History. Iris Robinson must go'.

Everyone showed up to express their anger toward Iris Robinson, the Stormont Health Committee chair who stated that homosexuals could be 'cured' by her psychiatric friend and also that homosexuals were 'worse than child abusers'.

With regards to the statements it was clear that the only supporters Iris had was her party colleagues and a handful of individuals outside the assembly. Petitions showed thousands of people wanted her to resign, a Belfast Telegraph poll showed that over 71% of people supported the call for her resignation.

Eamonn McCann who spoke at the meeting pointed out that the comments by Iris Robinson where nothing but bigoted and supported the call for her to resign from office.

A member from Unison LGBT group, Eatin O Kane highlighted how dangerous comments such as these can be on young people who are already experiencing homophobia.

Goretti Horgan from Alliance for Choice emphasized how the Stormont assembly is not only terrible on the issue of gay rights but in relation to women's rights they are just as bad and pointed to the struggle lying ahead to extend the 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland.

From contributions from the floor it was clear that everyone agreed to the call for Iris Robinson to resign and wanted to get involved whatever way they could to help give the bigot the boot from office.

EAMONN McCANN

Will Sinn Fein collapse Stormont?

To paraphrase John Lennon: Suppose they gave a crisis and nobody came?

Should everybody in the North be trembling at an imminent possibility of the Stormont institutions tumbling down?

Will Sinn Fein walk out and collapse the Executive if the DUP doesn't agree an early date for devolution of policing and justice?

At first sight, it seems insane. What crucial difference would devolving policing make? Amid all the complaints about drugs, anti-social behaviour, joy-riding and the like, you rarely hear anyone sighing that what's really needed is devolution of policing.

In the North, as everywhere, Ministers, whether direct rule or devolved, don't dictate the way policing works. And, after all, the crack of a baton on the skull or the chest-spasm from a taser won't feel different for being administered by an officer mandated under devolution rather than direct rule.

When and if policing is devolved, it's doubtful whether the man or woman on the Shantallow bus would notice if the move wasn't reported in the papers.

So, what's the big deal? Why did the SF press office distribute the text of a speech by Caoimhghin Ó Caoláin declaring that the party might have to pull out of the Executive if the DUP didn't move sharply towards devolution of policing? Why, after Peter Robinson emerged from purdah to accuse Sinn Fein of play-acting, was Alex Maskey sent out to pull back from the position adopted by Ó Caoláin and to call instead for talks with the DUP to resolve the issue?

Sinn Fein had not threatened to pull out of the Executive, insisted Maskey. But they had. Ó Caoláin's words were: "If we are forced to conclude that change will not be forthcoming from the Executive, then we will have no option but to pull out our Ministers and seek to put pressure where responsibility ultimately lies, which is on the British Government in London."

The uncertainty of Sinn Fein's performance took many aback, and made it no easier to work out whether the crisis was real and, if it was, how and why it had arisen.

The reason for the confusion may be that it's not about the normal stuff of political exchange or reportage, not about personalities or practicalities, but about ideology.

In the end, all policing is political. The fundamental role of every police force is to defend the State in whose name it operates and whose authority it symbolises and enforces. From time to time, all police forces defend the State against discontented citizens.

Even in calm times, the police force is the State institution with which citizens are most likely to have politically abrasive contact. You might deal with the tax authorities or the health or planning services on a regular basis for years and get no inkling of the nature of the State. But a single contact with the cops can clue you up in an instant.

It's when you accept the police force that you've accepted the State. Herein lies the reason the Sinn Fein ardheis which last year gave the go-ahead for acceptance of the PSNI added a condition: that control of policing be transferred from Westminster to Stormont from British to Irish politicians, the Irish politicians including as a crucial element representatives of Nationalism in the shape of Sinn Fein Ministers.

To back the police without securing a share in control for Nationalists would be to accept the authority of a State defined by Britishness, not a State which could be represented as being in transition from Britishness to Irishness.

This is what makes devolution of policing a critical issue for Sinn Fein. Which, in turn, raises another intriguing question: why didn't SF negotiators at St. Andrews insist on the issue being tied down?

They complain that the May "deadline" for devolution has not been met. But the statement by the two Governments which they are relying on "It is our view that the implementation of the [St. Andrews] agreement published today should be sufficient to build the community confidence necessary for the Assembly to request the devolution of criminal justice and policing from the British Government by May 2008" falls a mile short of a deadline.

One school of thought has it that the SF negotiators had an off day at St. Andrews.

But it could be that what happened is that they misread their own rank-and-file's adherence to the ideology they'd fought the war on.

Government cuts attack the poor and low paid



By KEVIN WINGFIELD

GOVERNMENT CUTS are set to hit the poor and low paid. And the government is signalling that agencies designed to protect people's rights face being curtailed and merged.

Minister for Finance Brian Lenihan has begun implementing an across-the-board 3 per cent cut in payroll costs.

Minister of State for Finance Martin Mansergh confirmed that this would mean a freeze on recruitment and not filling vacancies that arise in the state sector.

Most badly hit will be services and supports for the disadvantaged and low paid.

Despite a previous government pledge to eliminate consistent poverty by 2016, around 300,000 people are living in consistent poverty, which is the equivalent of living on an income of around €11,000 for a single person and being unable to afford essentials such as two pairs of shoes or a winter coat.

Latest figures indicate that more than one in 10 children are consistently living in poverty and deprived of essentials such as proper winter clothing.

The government made a commitment to introduce a new child benefit payment which would be targeted at low-income families and those reliant on social welfare. However, it was recently revealed that Minister Mary Hanafin's office has stalled progress on the payment citing incredibly "difficulties in identifying families who are most at risk of poverty".

Prices of basic foodstuffs in Ireland have soared above the headline rate of inflation. Flour prices are up 46%; bread is up 23%; milk is up 33%; eggs, butter and biscuits are also more expensive. These items have a disproportionate effect on the budget of low income families.

Kevin O'Kelly, acting director of the Combat Poverty Agency noted, "It is people on low incomes who are being

hit hardest by increases in the price of food and fuel. There will need, for example, to be above-inflation increases in welfare payments in the next budget."

But the government has given no guarantee that this will happen.

Instead the Minister for Social and Family Affairs Mary Hanafin decided to shoot the messenger, signalling that the Combat Poverty Agency's continued independent existence is in doubt.

The persistence of some of the highest levels of poverty in Europe which Combat Poverty has highlighted has been a growing source of embarrassment to the government. But instead of increasing provision the government is cutting back.

According to the Vincent De Paul the social welfare spend for 2008 is down 35% from 2007 Budget and child income support spend for 2008 down 20% from 2007 Budget.

The effect on low income families is devastating.

A worker in the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) is Dublin told Socialist Worker, "The situation is very bad. Some people are desperate. We have seen a doubling of our workload. People are losing jobs and getting in trouble with their bills. Sometimes they are missing bills to pay for school uniforms. In some cases people are getting into the hands of money lenders."

The World Health Organisation recently reported that 17 per cent of households in Ireland are "fuel poor".

It defined fuel poverty as an inability to heat one's home to an adequate temperature due to low household income and low energy efficiency

This month parents of 190,000 children need a state subsidy to equip their children for back to school expenses. Barnados estimates that its costs €405 to equip a junior infant pupil and €880 for a second level pupil. But social welfare and HSE grants

only amount to €200 and €305 respectively.

As a result Vincent De Paul are reporting a 20% increase in applications for help from parents unable to cope or whose income is marginally above the threshold for back to school grants.

The Dept of Education is demanding schools cut of at least 3% in their payrolls for the School Completion programme. The programme is designed to assist disadvantaged youngsters complete their secondary education. Many such students are at risk of leaving school before their Junior Cert and the programme is supposed to provide additional supports, one-to-one monitoring, help with reading, early bird clubs for vulnerable children. The cuts were condemned by the TUI which said, "It is shocking and abhorrent that the most vulnerable in society would be targeted in this manner."

Lack of government action on social deprivation and health inequality costs up to 5,400 premature deaths a year according to a recent report. St Vincent de

Paul spokesperson Stuart Kenny commented, "It's an issue we have raised for some time back with Government and we have been making the case for access to health services on the basis of need as distinct from affordability.

"It's of serious concern that it's not been taken on board."

Community Platform, slammed government plans to merge the Equality Authority, the Irish Human Rights Commission and the office of the Data Protection Commissioner in a single agency, and the threat to the future of the Combat Poverty Agency, saying, "This puts into question [the Government's] commitment to equality, anti-poverty and justice at a time when it is critical to keep them at the core of policy development and implementation".

On the other hand, the commitment of the government to the lowest corporate taxes in old Europe is unwavering. The refusal to make the corporate sector and Ireland's rich pay their share is directly leading to the misery of Ireland's poor and low paid.

Public Health Service Campaign
 - For a First Class Public Health Service -
 Dublin Council of Trade Unions
 ICTU Youth Committee
 Patients Together

Your Health – Your Protest

For a First Class Public Health Service!
 No Cutbacks in Health Spending!
 No Privatisation of the Public Health Service!

March & Rally
 2 p.m. Saturday 11th October 2008
 Garden of Remembrance,
 Parnell Square, Dublin

Speakers from Health trade unions, patients' organisations,
 medical professionals, hospital campaigns

Contact: Public Health Service Campaign, Manilla House, 44 Lower Gardiner Street, Dublin 1
 Phone: 087 4116357 Email: healthcampaign@gmail.com

US versus Russia: The New scramble for the Caucasus

By SINEAD KENNEDY

IF YOU have been following the media coverage of the conflict over South Ossetia you could be forgiven for thinking that the events of the past week are akin to a rerun of the Prague Spring. The media line is that the conflict is all about "Russian imperialism" and the "Cold War" mentality of Vladimir Putin, former Russian president, now turned prime minister.

It is certainly true that Russia has imperial designs and would like to dominate the US client-state of Georgia but the current war in the Caucasus is as much the product of US imperialism as it is of local conflicts. Indeed, the current conflict is intricately connected to the US-led "war on terror" which is raging in Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia – and which now threatens to engulf Iran.

But the hypocrisy of the ruling class appears to know no bounds. US vice-president Dick Cheney, dutifully echoed by British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, declared that "Russian aggression must not go unanswered". George Bush condemned Russia for having "invaded a sovereign neighbouring state" and threatening "a democratic government". Such an action, he insisted, "is unacceptable in the 21st century".

The faithful corporate media parrot the same line, readily characterising Russian expansionist military moves as "imperialist", while promoting the US occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq as exercises in democracy. They then effectively airbrush out the role that US is playing in this conflict, by seeking to incorporate Georgia into NATO as part of an arc of military outposts and alliances stretching from the Middle East to Central Asia.

Background

South Ossetia has been ruled since 1992 as a de facto independent satellite of Russia, following the collapse of the old USSR. However, it is also claimed by Georgia as official Georgian territory. In 2006 South Ossetians voted in an unofficial referendum to press their demands for complete independence, a call that is now supported by the Russians.

Georgian President, Mikhail Saakashvili, has vowed to bring South Ossetia and another breakaway region, Abkhazia, back under full Georgian control. By contrast, Russia stepped up ties with the separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia following an announcement by NATO in April of this year 2008 that Georgia would be allowed to join the alliance at some point.

In a similar manner to how the US used the nationalist movement of Kosovar Albanians to carve out a now-independent Kosovo as an outpost of NATO in the Balkans, the Russians are backing the Ossetians' and Abkhazians' drive for independence to weaken Georgia and pre-empt its entry into NATO.

Then, last week, Georgia launched an aerial bombardment and ground attack on South Ossetia on Thursday 7 August. Russia responded by pouring thousands of troops into South Ossetia, and launching bombing raids both over the province and on targets in the rest of Georgia.

A new Cold-War?

Since Georgia emerged as an independent state, successive US administrations, Republican and Democrat, have worked to fashion Georgia into a US client state in the heart of the volatile Caucasus region.

The US aided the 2003 "Rose Revolution" that catapulted Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili into power. However, the man portrayed by the media as a gallant democrat standing up to Russian imperialism has become highly contentious.

His government has been plagued by



Desolate amid the rubble of war

serious allegations of political corruption and late last year he endorsed a series of brutal police attacks on peaceful protesters. The International Crisis Group recently described the Saakashvili government as "increasingly authoritarian", violently cracking down on opposition dissent and independent media.

The CIA has also been closely involved in Georgia since the Soviet collapse and its involvement has intensified under the Bush administration. Georgia's forces are armed and trained by the US and Israel with the US recently involved in training Georgian troops in the Pankisi Gorge bordering Chechnya.

The collaboration works both ways with Georgia having sent 2,500 troops to Iraq, the single biggest contingent in the occupying forces after the US and Britain – hence the US need to airlift 800 of them back to fight the Russians at the weekend. Saakashvili's links with the neoconservatives in Washington are particularly close.

The main foreign policy advisor to the US Republican candidate John McCain, Randy Scheuemann, has been paid nearly \$900,000 by the Georgian government since 2004. He worked as their paid lobbyist in Washington and only recently quit to take up his post with McCain.

The US is courting both Georgia and the Ukraine with the possibility of NATO membership. They have also installed missile defence systems in Poland and the Czech Republic, a move supposedly to ward off threats from Iran, but obviously aimed at Russia. Georgia supports these moves and has indicated its wish to be part of this US regional missile defence shield.

The aim of these US policies in the region has been both to safeguard the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, that runs from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean, and increase the political and military pressure on Russia in the south.

It is not clear whether the US, or the neo-con faction within the Bush administration, gave Georgia the green light to attack South Ossetia.

In any case it seems to be a serious miscalculation that has given Russia the excuse it has been looking for to not only to occupy South Ossetia, but also Abkhazia. It also appears that Russia will use the situation to smash the Georgian military that the U.S. has tried to build up and reassert Russian power in the region.

The US also appears to have made a serious mistake. Oil-rich Russia has spent the past decade re-asserting its military power and its own imperial agenda.

While it has become more assertive in the face of Nato's expansion, its geopolitical position has been much weakened since the end of the Cold War. It was powerless to prevent the US from recognising Kosovo's independence from Serbia last year – a move that many people predicted would destabilise other disputed regions around the world, stoking up more conflicts and wars. Now Russia has used the "war on terror" as an excuse to brutally crack down on separatist forces within its own borders – notably in Chechnya, which lies near Ossetia and shares a border with Georgia. It seems that Russia sees the current crisis as an opportunity to draw a line in the sand against US forays into the region.

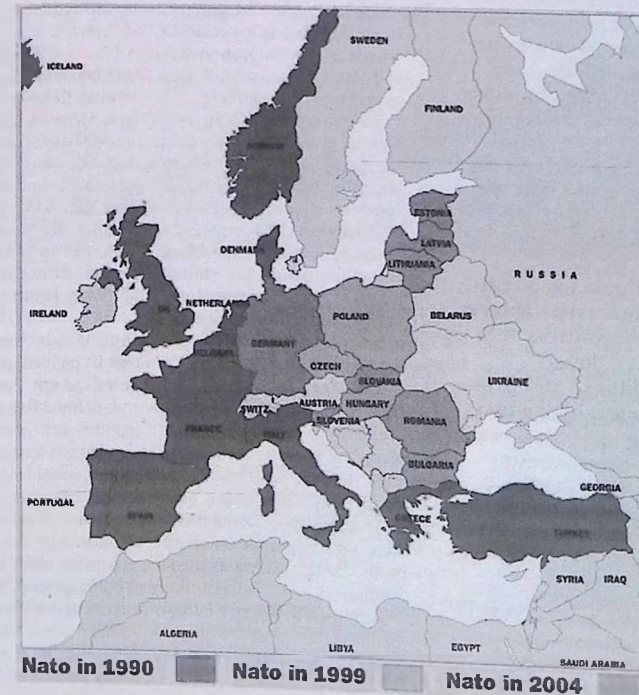
Georgia and Azerbaijan both possess strategic importance in the region. Part of the reason the US has been so determined to have presence in the region is due the \$3.2 billion Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline. Throughout the 1990s the

US lobbied hard for its favoured route for the pipeline on the grounds that it would lessen dependence on Russian and Middle East oil. The US favoured route passes through a highly seismic landscape and is twice as long as the alternative route of Baku-Tbilisi-Suspa, which would have concluded in the Russian port on the Black Sea.

The US government went on to grant \$823m to Turkey for this project, amounting to more than a fifth of the total cost. The advantage of the BTC root pipeline is that it connects Baku, the source of oil, with the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan in Turkey, without the need to go through Russian territory. During the present conflict, the Russian air force has repeatedly tried to hit this pipeline, so far without success. But in attempting to do so, Russia is sending a clear message to NATO and the US member states that the BTC pipeline is vulnerable.

What happens next?

What will happen next is a little unclear.



It is clear that Russia's war in Georgia does signal a new, dangerous phase in global politics that is already dominated by war and economic crisis. Battered down in both Afghanistan and Iraq the US government is not in a position to commit any troops to the region. There is a real fear within the US ruling class at the moment as the wars and occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan are spiralling out of control, triggering instability across the region.

The Western ruling class is split over whether or not to turn up the heat on Russia.

The "hawks" in the "war on terror", such as US vice-president Dick Cheney, want the US to keep up the pressure and escalate the conflict further. "Russian aggression must not go unanswered," he insisted, arguing that the US should support the "democratically elected government" of Georgia against a threat to its "territorial integrity". Georgia has undoubtedly been the neo-cons' pet regime in the Caucasus, which explains why many Western leaders have blamed Russia for the current conflict.

But there are some, particularly in Europe who think that Georgia has overplayed its hand by invading South Ossetia, leading to division among Western rulers about the way forward.

They are concerned that Europe would be in the front line of any Russian military advance and that any conflict involving Russia would threaten the large swathes of European industry that relies heavily upon Russian oil and gas supplies.

There is also a real threat that this conflict could further escalate as the Ukraine's pro-Western President, Viktor Yushchenko, has just announced his intention to restrict the movement of Russian ships in and out of their Crimean base in Sevastopol.

It seems that western capitals can do little now except hope that a popular backlash in Georgia, which is bound to follow Saakashvili's blunder, does not lead to his overthrow and replacement by a leader who is not as determinedly US/Western friendly as he is.

The only thing we can be certain is that a new scramble for oil has begun in the region and will cause terrible suffering. The only thing that can stop that is a movement for the withdrawal of both empires from the region and a respect for the right of people to determine their own future.

The two weeks of corporate-sponsored flag-waving has come to an end. The Olympics was a corporate driven event. Corporate sponsorship for the Beijing games was double that of the games in Sydney in 2000 and three times more than those in Athens in 2004. Spending on billboards and outdoor advertising topped \$2.7 billion.

McDonalds provided the official Olympic eating place in Beijing while Coca-Cola was the official drink of the games. Meanwhile one million migrant workers were encouraged to leave the city. There's nothing new about this. The Russians cleansed Moscow of dissidents in 1980. Four years later Los Angeles cleared homeless people off the streets. Barcelona's Roma were banished from Olympic areas in 1992.

Western corporations profit from the cheap labour that China's repressive regime delivers, but China's rapid economic growth is also destabilising the existing global balance of power. Measured by market exchange rates, China's share of global national income has risen from 2.6 percent in 1980 to around

6 percent today.

On another measure that is better at capturing the absolute size of national economies, China's share is more like 11 percent. This is still way below that of the US which, on the same two measures, accounts for 25 and 21 percent of global economic output. Nevertheless, China's economic rise is reshuffling the relations between states.

Third World states producing raw materials needed by China no longer need to go cap-in-hand to the US-dominated World Bank for loans and accept intrusive "conditionalities" that require them to reshape their economy and policies along neoliberal lines.

Western leader's criticism about China were motivated less by concern for human rights, or Tibet or the environment, but by fear of Chinese power.

But things have changed. US power is now in decline. The West faces challengers increasingly confident of their own strength. If they're pushed too hard, then, as the fighting in the Caucasus shows, they'll bite back.

Winners and losers in China's boom

John Gittings was The Guardian's China correspondent for many years. His book *The Changing Face of China* was published this year by Oxford University Press



Iconic picture of the 1989 protests

QUESTIONS ABOUT China's future have begun to multiply after a long period when—bizarrely for a country of such size and importance—it had drifted off the map of global concern. On the one hand China's role in the dominant international economic structures has become more visible especially following its entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

China now consumes steel, coal, oil and other primary products on a scale which dictates prices on those markets while, after years of obtaining a mammoth share of global foreign investment, it is beginning to export its own capital on a significant scale.

The economic boom promoted by the late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping to divert his people from the trauma of the Tiananmen Square massacre has entered its second decade and, however unevenly its material benefits have been distributed, it shows no sign of slackening.

As Mao Zedong forecast 60 years ago, the comparative advantage offered by cheap Chinese labour has become irresistible to Western capitalism and because of its greater scale can easily outbid alternative sources of such labour elsewhere in Asia.

On the other hand even those who champion the Chinese "economic miracle" most loudly have to acknowledge that it has been achieved at a heavy price for social equity. The gap between rich and poor, town and country, entrepreneur and workers is widening with alarming speed.

The previous Chinese premier, Zhu Rongji, made regular references to the "Gini Coefficient" which measures that gap—and is higher in China than in any other major developing economy—in his last three years (2000-02) in office. His successor, Wen Jiabao, has identified tackling rural poverty as a top priority.

Two recent health scandals—the spread of HIV/AIDS through contaminated blood collection in Henan province, and the SARS crisis which only by good fortune did not become a national epidemic—have focused attention on the collapse of rural medical health since the collective era.

The Chinese media has more latitude now in covering widespread abuses such as punitive rural taxation, under-payment of wages to

peasant migrants, mine disasters and other industrial accidents. The most sensitive issues such as protests by laid-off urban workers are still out of bounds.

An affluent elite has emerged whose wealth derives mainly from asset-stripping of state industry and property in urban China, or, in the rural areas, from speculative dealing in what is still in theory collectively-owned land.

Whether it is the rural township cadre who use hoodlums in police uniform to enforce the collection of illegal taxes, or the urban entrepreneur who builds luxury housing on land from which municipal tenants have been cleared with inadequate compensation, corruption plays an essential part in ensuring the conversion of public to private wealth.

These stark contrasts in contemporary Chinese society have led some to the conclusion that before too long a classic Maoist contradiction is going to be resolved in a classic Maoist way. Once again "the countryside will surround the town" and the peasant masses, in alliance with an army of alienated workers, will overthrow the "new power-holders" who have usurped the people's mandate.

It is a tempting but, in my view, mistaken analogy with a past where for the vast majority there was "no way out" other than revolution.

In spite of today's extremes of wealth and poverty, the picture today is much more blurred and is constantly changing. Vastly improved transport communications and increased social mobility mean that,

except in the most remote areas, there are no "independent kingdoms" of the kind which provided sanctuary both for warlords and for revolutionaries in the last century.

Nor can the gap between rich and poor be equated so easily as before with the divide between the eastern coastal provinces and those of the interior. Wealth differences have spread in ink-blot fashion throughout the country, with inland cities beginning to replicate on a smaller scale the lifestyle of Shanghai and other coastal cities.

The climate of entrepreneurship (which, it is taken for granted, must depend on having the right "connections" with the Communist Party to prosper) is now widely diffused and those who benefit from it, even in the smallest town, are relatively numerous.

This is not to minimise the extent of rural poverty, but the question is whether these alienated forces are likely to reach a critical mass capable of organising themselves effectively. To a large extent this depends on the skill of the ruling Communist Party in defusing protest by a combination of appeasement and repression. Protest is now so frequent—partly because it can often gain results—that many Chinese barely give it a glance when they encounter it in the street.

If there is a prospect of more radical protest against the government, then it is most likely to come from the armies of laid-off workers whose despair is so well documented by the China Labour Bulletin.

Though China officially claims

that there are still 900 million "peasants", a third of this number have become urbanised and at least another 100 million are semi-permanent migrant workers. To some extent migrant labour is performing the role once played by military service when ex-army conscripts returned to the villages with new skills and ambitions. Working conditions vary widely from the worst kind of sweatshop to factory complexes with clinics, schools and entertainment.

In the poorer rural areas, a recent survey by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences shows that the focus of peasant activism has shifted from tax disputes to property rights, as local governments, who can no longer levy such high taxes, seek to compensate by lucrative land sales. Thus, over 20 years after the People's Communes were dissolved, the key neglected issue of who owns the land, which remains nominally in collective ownership, is at last being confronted.

Progress towards democracy and towards freedom of press are the standard Western yardsticks to judge how China is developing politically. It is certainly true that there is a huge imbalance between (to use terms no longer used in China) the rapid development of the economic base and that of the political superstructure.

We owe it to the students and Beijing citizens who were suppressed in 1989, and to a succession of jailed and persecuted advocates of democracy since then—notably those who attempted to set up the China Democracy Party in 1998—not to

belittle its importance. Many ordinary Chinese lament the absence of a multi-party system although many also accept the government's argument that "social stability" comes first.

However, while the repressive apparatus of the state continues to jail dissidents, ban publications and block websites, the parameters of argument also continue to widen. There has been a wide-ranging debate at the academic level since the mid-1990s on China's future (summarised for English readers by Chaohua Wang in *One China Many Paths*, Verso, 2004).

The more outspoken sections of the Chinese media continue to muck-rake and expose in spite of periodic purges, airing such sensitive issues as discrimination against migrant workers, mishandling of toxic waste, culpable negligence in industrial disasters, and even questioning the use of the death penalty.

I believe that capitalism in China is raw and often ugly but, like capitalism elsewhere, has enormous staying power, and that it will continue to evolve.

The main threats which China now faces are those shared with the world to which it now belongs. A collapse of the global market would throw out of work the bulk of the migrant labour force and increase levels of urban unemployment which are already critically high. Global warming will exacerbate shortages of water and the effects of deforestation on the Chinese environment which is already under heavy strain.

China's workers: Exploitation and resistance

IN MAY last year a scandal involving slave labour shocked China. Over 500 workers, many of them children, were freed from forced labour in the brick kilns of Shanxi province after an investigation by a TV station from the home province of many of the victims. The children had been kidnapped from railway or bus stations and sold to the kiln owners, those who attempted to run away were beaten and tortured.

The youngest was reportedly just eight years old. It is clear that such widespread abuse could not have been possible without the collusion of local communist party officials.

This may be an extreme case, but exploitation and mistreatment of workers has been the basis for China's much heralded economic miracle from the start. A recent report by the Hong Kong based China Labour Bulletin highlights the hidden problem of child labour. Children under the legal age of sixteen work predominantly in the factories of the southern boom towns producing commodities such as toys, clothes and luggage.

Their wages are much lower than adults' but their working hours are not. Some are even sent by their desperately under funded schools on summer "work-study" programs to pay their tuition fees.

The employment conditions of adult workers in the "sun-belt" industries are often illegal too. The sweatshops of southern China are generally small scale affairs, sub-contracting to western multinationals such as Wal-Mart, Disney or McDonalds. The power of these corporations allows them to play one off against another, driving down their profit margins.

The sweatshop owners respond by pushing their employees as hard as pos-

sible for as little as possible.

Compulsory overtime means working days of 12, 14 or more hours, seven days a week, far more than the average 40 hour week stipulated in China's labour law. Wages for many are well below the legal minimum and are often unpaid for months at a time, also illegally. Conditions in the factories are unhealthy and hazardous, last year over 127,000 workers died in workplace accidents.

The government clearly intended its labour laws to regularise industrial relations and so reduce the burgeoning level of strikes and protests. But, with the law observed more in the breach, it has had the opposite effect.

Workers have learnt that the only way to ensure anything approaching legal working conditions is to take action themselves. So, often the disputes are consciously framed in the terms of the labour law, making it difficult for the authorities to refuse their demands, and many of them win.

The government has to some extent played along with this, accepting a certain level of strikes as long as they remain within individual enterprises and remain focused on economic issues.

The official trade unions have a role in this too. Chinese trade unions are not genuine unions, they are an arm of government, acting as a safety valve for discontent. They assist workers with individual grievances, work to settle strikes as quickly as possible and try to prevent any independent or cross enterprise action.

They aren't always successful though. There have been a number of cases where individual cities have seen waves of strikes. But the biggest explosions of working class discontent occurred among laid off workers in Daqing and Liaoyang

in 2002. A recent study interviewed participants in the Liaoyang protests, which involved tens of thousands of workers. In China social welfare payments to laid off workers or pensioners are the responsibility of the work unit, but with the rampant corruption of recent years, these have often disappeared into the pockets of officials and managers.

The resentment of workers who have lost a lifetime's investment was explained by one interviewee: "The value of our labour was accumulated in the state and in our enterprises through all those years of low waged labour."

The study by Ching Kwan Lee gives a fascinating glimpse into how these protests were organised across workplaces: "We did not mobilize other factories, but we used open letters as a way of encouraging more Liaoyang people to join us".

Years of campaigning had built up a layer of activists: "All factories had their worker representatives because of all these years of petitioning the government... These representatives from other factories sought out the specific dates and times of our action and would spread the news to their own factories. People who wanted to come would know when to show up."

As with the smaller scale actions, these protests were suppressed and some of the alleged leaders jailed, but concessions were made too. While the vast majority of actions remain within individual workplaces, communist China has never before seen this persistent level of strikes and protests. There are rumours too of underground networks of labour activists emerging. Small beginnings perhaps, but the potential is there for a mass workers movement that can lead the struggle for political and social change in China.

An ancient civilisation

FOR MUCH of human history Chinese civilisation was far in advance of Europe's. As late as the eighteenth century it was seen as a peer that had much to teach Europeans. Only in the nineteenth century, with the development of a much more aggressive imperialism, did it come to be viewed as a stagnant, backwards society. The once proud Chinese empire was brought to its knees by British gunboats in the notorious opium wars. And it is only now beginning to recover its international position. How was it then that, in Tawney's phrase, "China ploughed with iron when Europe used wood, and continued to plough with it when Europe used steel?"

The essential features of the form of society that would dominate China until the beginning of the twentieth century were put in place by the establishment of the Qin dynasty in 221 BC. Until then the region was divided between a number of 'warring states', the legacy of an earlier division of the land into numerous aristocratic fiefdoms by the conquering Zhou.

As the multitude of petty kingdoms gobbled each other up in increasingly ferocious wars, new larger states came to dominate.

The need for effective military strength prompted a re-organisation of state structures. Access to Government positions came to depend less on the privilege of the landed aristocracy, and more on individual merit.

Land ownership was privatised, undermining aristocratic power, but giving the central state access to the labour of the farmers. In the state of Qin, the ultimate victor, this labour was mobilised for huge water control projects that, by increasing agricultural productivity, allowed larger armies to be put into the field.

The first emperor Qinshihuangdi sat at the apex of a new type of bureaucratic

state. He used his new found power to order the building of the first great wall and his vast mausoleum, which included the famous terracotta warriors. But his ambitions strained even the enormous resources of his new state. The suffering of ordinary people is epitomised by the legend of Meng Jiangnu, whose husband was press-ganged for the construction of the wall. Meng is said to have travelled hundreds of miles only to find him dead and buried, like many others, under the wall itself.

The Qin were overthrown soon after the first emperor's death. But the subsequent Han dynasty established bureaucratic rule on a firmer footing. Confucianism was adopted as the official ideology, emphasising the responsibilities of those in power as well as respect for authority.

The option of overthrowing an undeserving emperor was legitimised in the notion of the 'mandate of heaven'. Later, under the Tang dynasty, recruitment to the bureaucracy was refined by the introduction of an examination system that, in theory at least, opened the privileges of official service to all walks of life.

This society was very different from European feudalism. European society was dominated by an aristocracy owning large landed estates, whereas in China the bureaucracy adopted various measures to limit the size of land holdings. Land was inherited by all the sons of a family leading to its constant fragmentation.

When this wasn't enough the state would simply break up and redistribute larger estates.

European peasants were tied to the land, forced to labour for the lords. Chinese land owners of all sizes paid a uniform land tax and the state could call on their labour power in the form of the periodic corvée. In mediaeval Europe

the state was relatively weak and often tiny; the Chinese state dominated all aspects of life.

For long periods this bureaucratic state was able to promote economic development, and with it a technology and culture incomparably more advanced than that of 'dark ages' Europe.

There were periods of dynastic collapse where the land was again divided among several states, but central rule was always re-established. One consequence of this growth was an increase in trade.

But this did not lead, as it did in Europe, to the emergence of a new privileged class, the bourgeoisie, with the potential to reshape society in its own image. Trade was regulated by the government and some of the most lucrative trades, salt and iron for instance, were state monopolies.

Although agriculture continued to develop right up to the nineteenth century it didn't become capitalist agriculture, the priority in China was to increase the productivity of land, which was in short supply, rather than labour which was not.

Not only did China not develop the social forces necessary for an indigenous bourgeois revolution, neither was there a section of the ruling class capable of pushing through a revolution from above in response to the imperialist threat. So imperialism destroyed traditional Chinese society without creating the forces that could replace it with something new.

When the Qing dynasty finally collapsed in 1911, the group of modernising intellectuals who initially assumed power were rapidly pushed aside by Yuan Shikai, a former Qing general. China entered a devastating period of warlordism, intermittent famine and foreign invasion that was only ended by the Communist victory in 1949.



China's century?



The Tibetan Uprising



THE PROTESTS which rocked Chinese occupied Tibet earlier this year were the most widespread to date. They started in the Tibetan capital Lhasa, initiated as in the past by Buddhist monks and nuns. Heavy handed repression by the Chinese police sparked a virtual uprising and spread the protests outside the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) to the Tibetan areas of the surrounding Chinese provinces Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan.

At one point the movement even threatened to spread to the Muslim Uighur peoples of Xinjiang, to the north of Tibet. The Chinese justify their occupation by claiming that Tibet is an integral part of China and that the communist victory liberated the Tibetan people from centuries of "feudal" oppression. Chinese government has brought prosperity and modernisation to a people apparently otherwise incapable of breaking with the past.

This sort of thinly veiled racism is familiar from an earlier era of imperialism, the 'white man's burden' used to justify nineteenth century European empires.

The insistence that Tibet remain part of China whatever Tibetans might want, by force when necessary, has only served to unite Tibetans of all classes in their hostility to the occupation.

Although Tibet has nominally been a part of the Chinese empire for centuries, Chinese authority was very limited. The last, Qing dynasty for instance maintained only a token presence in Lhasa. When the Qing collapsed in 1911, successive regimes were incapable of maintaining control over the former empire and Tibet achieved de-facto independence. However it suited the western powers to keep up the fiction that the country was still a part of China.

Tibetan society at this time was certainly not the sort of spiritual utopia that we are sometimes led to believe. A small, aristocratic ruling class closely allied with the Buddhist hierarchy ruled over the mass of impoverished peasants. The monasteries themselves were riven by class differences with the wealthier, property owning monks using the poorer ones as servants. The major monasteries fought each other for power, often calling on outside forces for assistance.

However, when the communists came to power they did not attack this 'feudal' ruling class, but attempted to work with it. In return for formal acceptance of Chinese rule they refrained from implementing the social reforms that were being introduced elsewhere. At least that was what happened in central Tibet, the newly designated

Tibetan Autonomous region. But important Tibetan regions such as Kham and Amdo lay inside the surrounding provinces.

Here traditional social structures came under attack provoking armed rebellion. As refugees fled into Lhasa the revolt spread to the TAR too and in 1959 military rule was imposed.

Periodic rebellions have continued since. During the Cultural Revolution attacks on the "four olds" became an excuse to destroy most of the Buddhist monasteries, provoking armed resistance. Again, in the late 1980s a series of demonstrations organised from the monasteries shook Lhasa and fed into the democracy movement of 1989.

The fact that the resistance is led by monks and nuns has led some on the left to see it as a regressive attempt to restore the old order. But it is inconceivable that an independent Tibet in the 21st century could simply revert to 'feudalism'. In fact religion and politics in Tibet have been inextricably linked for hundreds of years and the monasteries provide the only place where any sort of independent organisation is possible.

Not surprisingly there are different strands of thought within Tibetan society. For instance, the Tibetan exile Tsering Shakya has described both a modernising cultural movement and a more conservative traditional one.

Another slur cast on the Tibetan opposition is that it is a tool of Western imperialism. The essential attitude of the Western powers towards Tibet was shown by Bush and Brown's reaction to events in the spring.

The butchers of Iraq and Afghanistan could, without any sense of shame, denounce Chinese repression in Tibet. But when an Olympic boycott was suggested they quickly backtracked. In other words, Tibet is a useful rhetorical stick to beat China with, but its business is too important to risk destabilising a region that is of little real interest. Material assistance to the resistance is minimal or non-existent.

Support for national independence struggles within the Marxist tradition has never depended primarily on either historical arguments or the politics of the movements. The aspirations of oppressed people and a desire to weaken the world's major powers are the key factors. Marx argued that "A people which enslaves another people forges its own chains." So support for the Tibetan struggle is about opposing a brutal oppression, but it is also about breaking the chains that bind China's workers to their rulers.

Mao, China and Socialism



Mao's victory parade in 1948

By CHARLIE HORE

MAO'S VICTORY in 1949 was one of the turning points of 20th century history. The millions-strong peasant Red Army drove out the warlords, landlords and moneylenders who had bled China dry for decades.

The vast majority of the population welcomed the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the promise of peace and a better life that it held out.

Internationally, it was the worst defeat that US imperialism ever suffered before Vietnam. From 1945 to 1949 they spent billions of dollars propping up the old nationalist regime, only to see it comprehensively beaten.

For people fighting imperialism elsewhere, China became a beacon. If the Chinese could do it, so too could they. National liberation struggles across Asia and Africa drew hope and inspiration from Mao's victory.

1949 was a genuine revolution, in which the old ruling class was permanently dispossessed. But it was in no way a socialist revolution.

For Marx, socialism necessarily involved the self-emancipation of the working class. Yet China's workers were peripheral to the revolution. As the Red Armies entered the cities, the working class simply lined the streets and applauded as spectators.

In this they were following the CCP's explicit instructions - as the Red Armies approached the cities they sent ahead messages calling for the police and local officials to stay at their posts, and for workers to work as normal.

Nor was it a peasant revolution. The Red Armies were as hierarchical as any Western army, with the soldiers obeying officers' orders without question.

Indeed in 1949 even the CCP didn't call it a socialist revolution. Instead they called it a 'new democratic' revolution led by a bloc of four classes; peasants, workers, the middle classes and 'patriotic' capitalists. The importance of this was to underline the nationalist nature of the revolution.

In 1952 the CCP simply declared that China was now 'socialist'. The patriotic capitalists were dispossessed and their factories nationalised, though this was more about cementing the CCP's power than changing workers' lives.

The CCP, as China's new rulers, were less remote from the population than the old rulers, but no more democratic. There were no real elections. The workers didn't control the factories, nor the peasants the villages.

Despite this the early 1950s saw real improvements in the lives of most Chinese. In the villages, land

was redistributed. In the cities, the government brought inflation and unemployment under control. The 1952 Marriage Law broke the absolute power of husbands over women's lives.

The CCP's plans were more ambitious, however. They wanted to build China into a strong industrial power capable of competing with the world economy. The elimination of landlords, moneylenders and other parasites allowed them to better exploit the peasants to accumulate the capital they needed for this.

The process drew together a ruling class of officials, factory managers and army chiefs, linked by the CCP machine. They were bound together as a class both by their control over the economy, and by their necessarily antagonistic relationship to the mass of Chinese. If accumulation was to be the central goal of the economy, meeting basic human needs clearly came second.

The new regime was a form of bureaucratic state capitalism, like Russia or the regimes that Russia imposed on Eastern Europe after World War 2. And like those regimes it was concerned above all with meeting the competition from the West. But as China was poorer and more backward, the pressure to accumulate was even greater.

That pressure lay behind the disaster of the Great Leap Forward

in the late 1950s. From the early 1950s onwards the CCP moved to impose collective working in the countryside to boost production. In the early years they moved slowly and sensitively, trying to get the consent of at least a minority of peasants.

But in the late 1950s that caution vanished, and the entire peasantry was dragged into the 'people's communes'. The government set utterly unrealistic targets for production, which were then increased as local officials simply lied about what had been achieved.

In 1960 and 1961 famine returned on a scale not seen since the 1920s. Between 25 million and 30 million people died of hunger as harvests failed.

Far from expanding the economy, the 'Great Leap' cost China about a decade's worth of economic progress. Yet the same pressure to stimulate economic growth led Mao to launch the Cultural Revolution, which plunged China into even greater economic and political chaos.

Though the death toll was far less than the Great Leap, the economic damage was even worse. The Cultural Revolution ended for good the CCP's belief that they could develop the Chinese economy in isolation from the rest of the world.

The Chinese economy did grow under Mao. Agriculture recovered

to produce enough to feed the population without imports, and heavy industry grew both in the old cities and new industrial zones. But much of the investment was duplicated or wasteful, and by the mid-1970s the economy was falling even further behind the competition.

Following Mao's death in 1978, the new leaders of the CCP junked his strategy for economic growth by opening up to foreign investment. Central state control over all aspects of economic life was abandoned in favour of a free market for agriculture and small-scale industry.

China today is a world away from the poverty and stagnation of the Maoist years. And yet China's dazzling economic growth over the last twenty years owes much to the economic development that took place under Mao.

Mao's regime was a brutal and murderous one, yet it was still an improvement on the utterly corrupt nationalist regime which it replaced. Life expectancy increased, minimal health and social services came to most villages, and (after 1961) the threat of famine was abolished. But China's workers and peasants came no nearer to controlling their own lives - 1949 saw one ruling class replaced by another, and one system of exploitation becoming less vicious but more efficient. Real liberation was as far away as ever.

As the oil companies rake in huge profits while increasing their prices, Simon Basketter and Simon Assaf look at how "black gold", capitalism and conflict are intertwined

OIL DRIVES the global capitalist economy. It is a vital ingredient in everything from transport through to petrochemicals and agriculture. A handful of massive corporations and producer countries control the global oil and gas industry.

They are some of the richest and most powerful forces on the planet.

States have backed the multinationals to the hilt, organising coups and wars in the pursuit of profit and power.

The discovery of oil in 1859 in the US was a major event in the development of capitalism.

This "black gold" soon transformed the world economy. The industry developed through the increased use of oil lamps and heating but expanded as it stimulated the growth of the automobile and chemical industries.

The early swarm of small companies quickly gave way to giant corporations, above all JD Rockefeller's Standard Oil.

Rockefeller said, "God gave me my money. Having been endowed with the gift I possess, I believe it is my duty to make money, and still more money, and to use the money I make for the good of my fellow man, according to the dictates of my conscience."

Cutthroat Rockefeller was a cutthroat US capitalist who built his oil monopoly in the decades after the 1861-5 American Civil War using methods akin to that of the Mafia. He employed private armies to break strikes.

As he once said, "I would rather earn 1 percent off a hundred people's efforts than 100 percent off my own efforts." This vicious worldview made him the richest man on earth.

As he quietly bought up smaller oil competitors, Rockefeller entered into secret – and illegal – agreements with railroad magnates who gave discounts as off the books rebates to his growing oil monopoly.

This drove the smaller refiners out of business. By 1879 Standard Oil controlled 90 percent of the US's oil refining business.

When the US Supreme Court finally forced Rockefeller to disband Standard Oil as a monopoly in 1911, the damage was already done.

The break-up doubled the value of his stock and gave birth to oil conglomerates Exxon and Mobil (now Exxon-Mobil), Arco and Amoco (now part of BP), Pennzoil (now part of Shell) and Chevron.

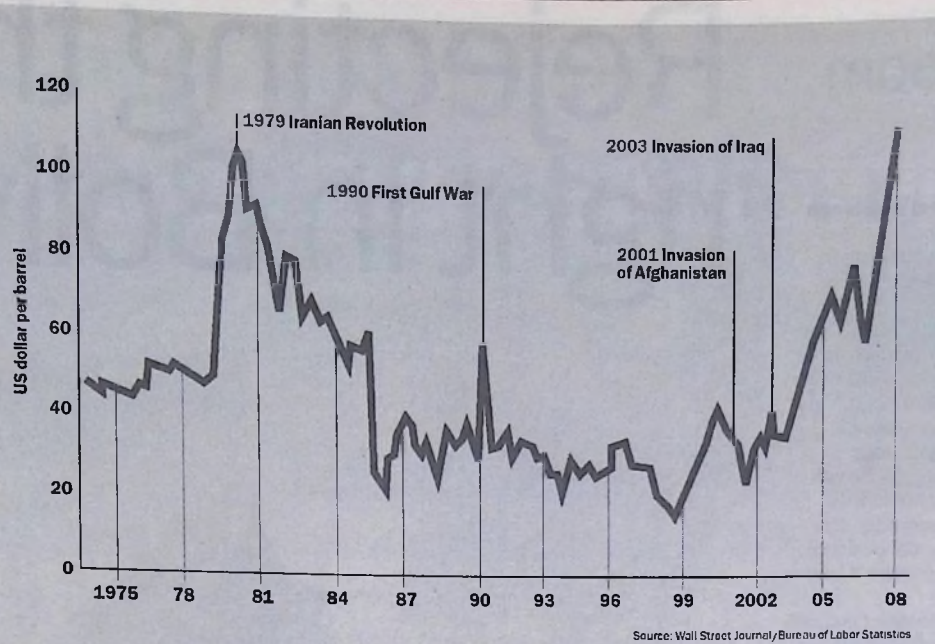
The major rivals to the US companies grew up within the British Empire.

Shell developed out of a merger of British and Dutch companies in 1907. BP started as the British Persian oil company. Both exploited the oilfields and markets of empire.

It got a monopoly of Iranian oil on the back of a £20,000 deal. The carve up culminated with secret agreements between the major companies to ensure their profits.

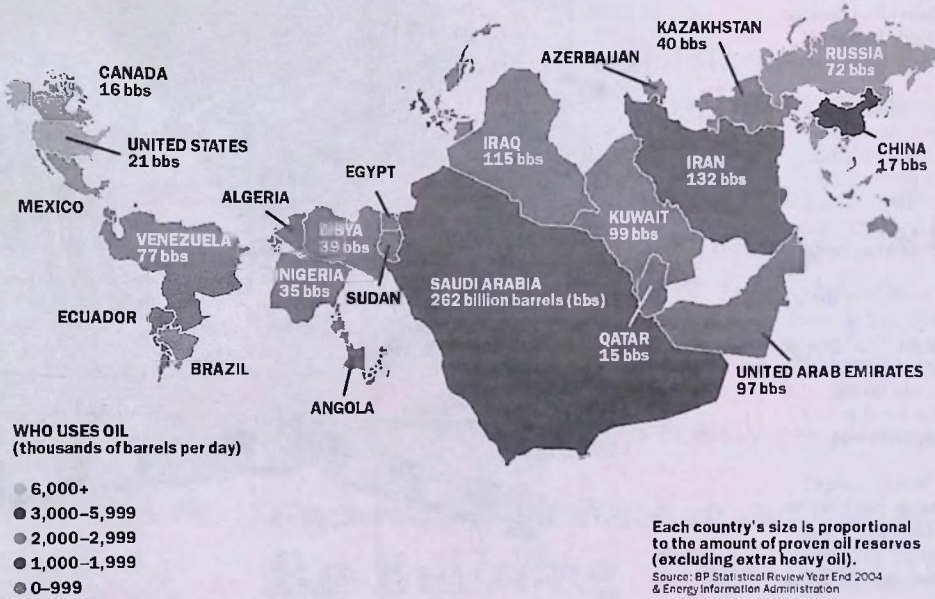
The US and Britain's domination of oil was central to their victory over Germany in the First World War.

Vicious After the war the oil companies



The table shows the price of oil as measured by the value of the US Dollar in 2008. Following the global panic caused by the Iranian revolution in 1979, the oil cartel Opec opened the taps, taming prices for a decade.

This was interrupted briefly by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the subsequent Gulf War. Prices began to rise steeply again following the invasion of Iraq in 2003.



WHO USES OIL
(thousands of barrels per day)

- 6,000+
- 3,000-5,999
- 2,000-2,999
- 1,000-1,999
- 0-999

Each country's size is proportional to the amount of proven oil reserves (excluding extra heavy oil).
Source: BP Statistical Review Year End 2004 & Energy Information Administration

THE OIL INDUSTRY: CAPITALISM & CONFLICT

continued to be involved in vicious competition while carving up the world's supplies and markets between them.

They paid minimum sums to local rulers for concessions giving them control of areas thought to contain oil.

The most notorious and long-lasting was the 1928 "as-is" agreement backed by the world's seven biggest oil companies – Standard Oil, Shell, BP, Gulf, Chevron, Mobil and Texaco. They were dubbed the seven sisters.

Middle Eastern oil was cheaper to

extract than the older US supplies. The companies fixed prices at the US rate.

From time to time the companies' thirst for profit even clashed with the interests of the states they sponsored.

Texaco was caught supplying oil to Nazi Germany during the Second World War.

Shell boss Henri Deterding was a convinced fascist. Adolf Hitler sent a wreath to his funeral in 1939.

But the oil companies were too firmly dependent on the military and economic power of the US and Britain

to carry this too far. After the Second World War they continued to carve up the oil fields between them.

Most of the refining and almost all of the distribution of oil is still controlled by the giants.

The companies have merged along the way. But they, and the Western states behind them, continue to dominate the world.

Their desire for profits and control has led to the disaster of imperialist intervention and wars in crucial parts of the world, particularly the Middle East.

Are there alternative sources of oil?

HIGH DEMAND for oil is pushing the US Congress to rip up legislation that protects the Alaskan wildlife reserve, which holds between 5.9 billion to 13.2 billion barrels of oil.

The US consumes over 20 million barrels a day.

Bush, and whoever succeeds him, also wants to drill in the so-called Outer Continental Shelf – the sea beds off the US coast.

Congress banned all offshore drilling as part of a programme of environmental protection in 1981, when oil was cheaper to import.

But with an estimated reserve of 86 billion barrels – the equivalent of ten years' supply of US oil needs – the US elite is tempted to overhaul the ban.



Both projects threaten delicate ecosystems and would do untold damage to the environment.

Another possible source of oil is tar sands – also known as extra heavy oil. High prices mean that the extraction of this crude is becoming more viable.

Tar sand is a solid form of crude oil that is strip-mined. The deposits held in Venezuela and Canada alone are each equivalent to the global reserves of conventional crude oil.

Processing this heavy crude into fuel releases up to three times as much greenhouse gas as the production of light and sweet crude. This would be an environmental catastrophe.

And to process tar sands into gasoline or diesel would require a huge investment in refineries.

According to the Wall Street Journal tar sands require so much heat in the processing that one French oil giant "briefly floated the idea of building a nuclear-power plant" near Canada's major reserve.

Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Iran and Iraq (see map above) hold the majority of the world's reserves of cheap, sweet crude.

For this reason the Middle East is the most important source of cheap oil – and control over these reserves remains the obsession of imperialism.

Ruthless and corrupt drive to make oil dominant

THE OIL industry has been ruthless in its pursuit of markets. But a combination of state backing and corruption were at the heart of the industry's dominance.

While the US railroads were built through private investment, the roads were built for free by federal, state and local governments, massively aiding the rise of the oil and car companies.

network of highways that was built and for the widening of the roads.

Billions more dollars in public money came in 1956 with the Federal-Aid Highway Act funded the construction of 41,000 miles of highway.

The bill passed under the pretext that the US needed a freeway network in case of a possible invasion from Russia.

The post-war boom saw the rise of

the "automobile-industrial complex" – the car, oil, steel, glass, rubber, highway construction, trucking and real estate industries connected to urban sprawl.

One consequence of this vested interest was the systematic smashing of the US public transport system.

General Motors, Standard Oil of California (Chevron), Phillips Petroleum and Firestone formed National City Lines.

This was part of an organised campaign to buy up and destroy electric rail systems operating in US towns and cities.

After buses replaced trams and trains the bus systems were often wound down too.

From 1936 to 1950 the National City Lines bought out and dismantled more than 100 systems in 45 cities – including New York, Detroit, Baltimore, Philadelphia,

St Louis, Salt Lake City, Tulsa, Minneapolis and Los Angeles.

Officials were frequently given Cadillac for aiding the company plans.

In 1949 the corporations were acquitted of conspiring to monopolise transportation services.

The companies behind National City Lines were each fined just \$5,000, while each of their directors paid a \$1 fine.

COMMENT

Climate: No room for reform

By HUGH LEWIS

Global warming is the single biggest challenge humanity has ever faced.

The prolific Jonathan Neale's latest publication, "Stop Global Warming, Change the World", is intended to do just as the title suggests.

He begins his book with a look at the science behind what exactly is causing abrupt climate change. It is estimated that we have approximately just twenty to thirty years to cut our carbon emissions by up to ninety percent, in order to prevent a catastrophic cycle of events that would threaten our planet.

Despite such sobering initial reading, Neale emphasises immediately that we already possess the technology to prevent abrupt global warming. His trademark humour combined with factual evidence sets this book apart from the pack and make it hard to put down once you've picked it up.

Neale sets out to deconstruct the reformist and market based solutions that are offered and championed here in Ireland by the likes of the Green Party. He argues that schemes such as our governments own 'Power of One' campaign are in fact counter productive and are designed not only to instil a false sense of achievement, but to shift the cost of ecological vandalism away from capitalist industry and onto society as a whole. The idea that voluntary individual change can significantly reduce carbon emissions to a level that can prevent abrupt global warming is both naive and dangerous.

Neale vehemently argues against schemes such as carbon trading, which effectively allow the worlds richer states continue polluting at an ever increasing rate while buying carbon credits from poorer states such as the Ukraine, whose industry collapsed back in 1990. A policy that was demanded and hammered out by the U.S. during the process of drawing up the Kyoto protocol.

What we need Neale argues is the mass of ordinary people across the planet to force change and run society in a different way. We cannot rely on the capitalist class to solve the problem from the top. It will require a global radical movement that is already taking shape and recently demonstrated in the hundreds of thousands across the world to coincide with climate change talks in Bali.

Stop Global Warming-Change the World compellingly argues that the solutions needed do not have to mean profound sacrifice by the working people and poor of the world. Instead it can mean the simultaneous alleviation of poverty and the creation of millions of jobs across the globe.

This book is a must read for socialists to engage with the issues around global warming and is a wake up call for us to act and act now!

Afghan insurgency builds and moves on Kabul

By SADIE ROBINSON

THE UPRISING against the Nato occupation of Afghanistan has gathered pace over the summer.

Fighting has spread across a number of regions – and is now moving towards the capital Kabul.

Over 3,400 people have been killed in fighting in Afghanistan this year. Over the last week, deaths were announced on a daily basis.

In mid-August 12 workers at a US military base in Khost were killed in a bomb attack – 75 miles east of Kabul. That same week ten French troops were killed 30 miles east of Kabul.

Three aid workers from the International Rescue Committee were also killed when their vehicle was attacked in Logar province, 30 miles south of Kabul.

Suspended
The charity has suspended humanitarian aid duties in Afghanistan as a result – after over 20 years

of working in the country.

Reports from the United Nations (UN) and aid agencies give the lie to claims that Nato forces are "winning" in Afghanistan.

According to the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office, insurgent attacks are up by 50 percent in the first half of 2008 compared to the same period last year.

The UN produces "accessibility" maps that show the level of risk for UN workers. Almost half of Afghanistan is now classified as "extremely risky".

This classification did not appear at all on the maps just three years ago. Kabul is now surrounded by "high risk/volatile" areas. Aid groups say 19 NGO workers have been killed in the first seven months of this year.

Sending in more troops as proposed by US Presidential candidate Barack Obama will not bring peace to the country. The only chance of peace in Afghanistan is to end the occupation.

Rejecting the right in Bolivia



BOLIVIA'S RECENT referendum showed the deep divisions inside the Latin American country, reports James Norrie in Cochabamba

It is impossible to visit Bolivia and not be marked by the heady atmosphere of solidarity and popular political engagement. These elements continue to dominate the mass of the oppressed majority.

Cochabamba is Bolivia's third largest city and the site of the heroic struggles against big businesses' attempt to privatise the region's water supplies in 2000. Every day its Plaza 14 Septiembre is transformed into a public forum of political discussion and debate.

This process reached fever pitch in the run-up to the recent recall referendum on radical president Evo Morales and eight opposition governors of Bolivia's regions.

Labour militants addressed thick and eager crowds with defiant demands for economic transformation while local social projects maintained public information panels and free evening classes in radical social analysis.

As the vote approached, a tangible excitement developed as the population anticipated ejecting their hated regional governor, Manfred Reyes Villa, a fierce neoliberal politician with a shady past in Bolivia's former military dictatorship.

"Tomorrow is in your hands and in your minds," announced one board in Cochabamba, "together we can create a changed Bolivia, united, strong, and for all."

Travelling through Bolivia's Altiplano and the poverty-stricken deserts of the south the consensus would seem clear.

It is impossible to drive past a cluster of the most modest homesteads and miss the huge murals in support of Evo

Morales.

"¡Evo, Si!" is the slogan of almost every village and town in the west, while in Cochabamba each wall on every street is plastered in left wing graffiti.

But there is also some frustration with Morales' government.

Simply making your way around Bolivia in this period can be hard as striking teachers, impatient as Morales' promises on pensions and reform dissipate, blockade the roads for whole days at a time.

Bus passengers have been forced to spend nights out in the open, in temperatures well below freezing.

And yet, to our astonishment, when we asked some of these Bolivians whether they sympathised with the teachers, they said yes.

Solidarity

It is this level of solidarity that has caused Bolivia's neoliberals such problems in the past. The struggles of the future can only draw strength from it.

In the eastern lowlands, however, there is another story. Around the region administered by Santa Cruz, which controls wealth through its fertile agriculture and natural gas reserves, the political influence of the small European-descended elite is constant.

They preside over an unbroken chain of colonial oppression that stretches back five centuries and places the indigenous majority in conditions of misery.

Before the referendum chilling stories seeped through. In Sucre a group of small farmers are forced to set fire to the flag of the indigenous movement and read out abuses against Morales.

When voting day came, the streets of Cochabamba were deserted.

Everything was closed and people only travelled to vote. Those in the student and social movements were considering how to respond to governor Manfred, who has vowed to ignore his revocation if it is pronounced by the electorate.

The most radical elements began to consider occupying Manfred's headquarters.

The results of the referendum were a resounding confirmation of Morales' national mandate, and a rejection of Manfred and his right wing allies in La Paz.

It was not long before fire crackers were being hurled into the air and revelers arrived at the plaza chanting pro-Evo slogans and threats to Manfred.

Socialists should join in these celebrations as a blow against the right. Yet it must be recognised that Bolivia's political divisions remain – the elites of Santa Cruz are as entrenched as ever – and retain support locally for political autonomy from the capital La Paz.

They still maintain their grasp over privatised energy resources which impede the country's hopes for reform.

Equally problematic is the relationship between the left wing Mas government and the social movements.

The immense, and often unconditional, loyalty of poor farmers and other progressive element to the government inhibits political autonomy from below.

Mas reforms from above cannot deliver the economic and social transformations required to deliver dignity and agency to the majority of the population. Even after the election results, this sadly remains Bolivia's political trajectory.

Only independent organisations of the working class and the peasantry are capable of defending and advancing the interests of Bolivia's working poor and breaking the current impasse.

COMMENT

Are banks the problem?

By RICK KUHN

From the Dublin to the City of London to Sydney to New York people are screaming blue murder against banks.

The sub-prime crisis in the United States drove interest rates up and house prices down across the world. Everyone who is in debt has suffered, those paying back mortgages doubly, as the value of their homes plunged. In this tense climate, worries about shortages of oil and food led their prices to spike threatening millions with starvation. Now the economies of all the larger developed countries and most of the smaller ones are slowing into recession.

Many conservative and social democratic politicians, along with the mainstream economists whose advice they take, blame banks or the financial system. There are even neo-liberals who want government regulation to ensure "greater transparency" in the operations of financial institutions. They don't like the way many banks have hidden their dodgy investments in "off the books" holding companies. In March, Michael Mandel, the editor of Business Week, argued that

The most striking thing about the current problems is just how much money the banks and the investment banks have lost. They apparently had no idea of how risky their own exposure was. The supposedly smart guys were simply stupid.

The former head of the US central bank, Alan Greenspan, wants the government to manage failed financial institutions differently. The CEO of the Deutsche Bank asserted that 'We need concerted action by governments, central banks and market participants to help stop this wave.'

Fine tuning the financial system, they hope, will lead to economic stability and growth.

More radical critics of the financial sector, like David Harvey, have said that there has been 'a power shift away from production to the world of finance'. Others have talked about 'financialisation' which sustained economic growth from the 1970s but has now created the credit crunch.

Harvey has claimed that more state control over private capital, to an extent that would horrify the fine-tuners, could prevent the whole capitalist system from crashing. The most radical opponents of 'financialisation', who believe that radical income redistribution and state expenditure to benefit the majority could save capitalism, think like Harvey, that such a shift in policy is unlikely.

These ideas aren't new. In 1910, Rudolf Hilferding a leader of the dominant centre current in the German Social Democratic Party argued that industrial capital and the banks had fused, under the dominance of the banks. The resulting finance capital controlled industrial cartels in its own interests.

Henryk Grossman, pointed out in 1929 that, at low levels of accumulation industry once did rely on funds from outside, mobilised by banks. But, at higher levels of accumulation—when the ratio of business expenditure on machinery, equipment and raw materials had grown compared to outlays on wages—industry became increasingly about to fund investment out of its own profits.

Finally in a third phase industry finds it progressively more difficult to secure a profitable investment, even of its own resources, in the original enterprise. The latter uses its profits to draw other industries into its sphere of influence', by means of the money market. Industry dominates the banks.

During the 1920s, Hilferding was twice Germany's Finance Minister. He and other prominent social democrats asserted that capitalism could be 'organised' to avoid economic crises through state control of banking. This would be part of a transition to socialism.

Grossman argued that business becomes increasingly involved in speculation when returns from productive investment decline. Falling rates of profit in the real economy are the underlying problem, while the forms of speculation may vary.

In the late 1990s, there was a surge in gambling in dot.com shares on the stock exchange before that bubble burst. Sub-prime lending was just a sophisticated form of punting on real estate. While house prices were rising, it didn't matter if borrowers defaulted because the lender got the building and land. The ultimate zero sum game—where some players' gains balance out others' losses—is still rampant: betting on future movements in exchange rates, raw material prices and even indexes of prices, through hedge funds.

Regulation of this gambling isn't much use if it doesn't address the reason for businesses in all sorts of sectors see speculation as offering higher returns than new investment in producing useful commodities.

There are only two real alternative to solve the current crisis. One accepts the logic of competitive capital accumulation and responds by boosting profit rates, through cumulation and responds by boosting profit rates, conditions and never-ending, neo-liberal attacks on wages, conditions and public spending on the health, welfare and education of ordinary people. The other mobilises resistance to those attacks and other symptoms of capitalism into struggles to get rid of the system altogether.

Rick Kuhn's Henryk Grossman and the recovery of Marxism won the 2007 Isaac Deutscher Prize

Grassroots Shop Stewards & Union Activists Gathering



Saturday 20th September UNITE Hall, Middle Abbey St Dublin

AGENDA

11.30 to 1pm: Pay claims, social partnership and re-building our unions

Speakers: *Jimmy Kelly, Regional Secretary UNITE*
Owen McCormack, Busworkers Action Group
Dick Roche (TEEU National Executive)
Break

2pm – 3.30pm: Public sector cuts and outsourcing: How do we resist?

Speakers: *Jo Tully, nurse*
Bernard Lynch ASTI
John Kidd (SIPTU Convenor, Dublin Fire Brigade)

3.30pm – 5pm: Recruiting to the unions: How we organise

Speakers: *Paul Hansard, President SIPTU Construction Branch*
Speaker from UNITE organising unit.

All speakers in a personal capacity

Entrance Fee €5 (to cover running costs)

For further information contact: 087 2839964 or email: kallen@iol.ie

Grassroots Shop Stewards and Union Activists Conference Re-Building Trade Union Activism

The trade union movement needs a radical change of direction. For twenty one years it backed social partnership deals and this has led to the weakening of the grassroots of the movement.

But at the first sign of recession, the employers' organisation, IBEC, told us that workers cannot get the wage increases we deserve. Wages had to be cut – and not profits! Those who gained most from the boom now want us to pay for the recession.

There is a real danger that employers will try to destroy hard fought-for conditions. Outsourcing and agency working have become the new weapons that are used against workers.

We have to resist.

But the present model of union organising will not serve us well for the battles



head. Some of the union leaders have become too close to the government and do not know how to fight.

One result of the failed strategies of the past, is that union density has fallen. Ten years ago, more than one in two workers was a member of a union. Today it has fallen to one in three and, amongst young workers, only one in four.

We need a return to grassroots trade union activism to tackle this.

We would, therefore, would like to invite fellow shop stewards and union activists to a national gathering to discuss a new way forward for our unions.

This gathering is inspired by a few simple ideas:

- That we need strong unions that can take on the employers and win real gains

for workers.

- That union leaders must show leadership in this fight – and not be messengers for the government or the employers.
- That we need a strong shop steward organisation that is able to mobilise its members to take action.
- That we should be willing to use all weapons at our disposal, ranging from publicity battles to industrial action. We must do what it takes to win.

That our unions need a strong political voice and that we cannot be tied to one political party, which jettisons our interests.

This conference will be a practical, working conference that will bring together grassroots activists from a number of unions.

Our aim is to spread the power of good examples, to learn from each other and to build solidarity.

We, the undersigned, support this Grassroots union conference and urge you to attend.

Signed:

Kieran Allen (President, Education Branch SIPTU), Paul Hansard (President Construction Branch SIPTU), Joe Moore (CWU National Executive), Des Derwin (President Engineering Branch SIPTU), Tommy Hogan (Regional Committee UNITE), Kevin McGaley (President

Killarney Branch SIPTU), Doreen Fitzgerald (Shop Steward, Health Professional Branch SIPTU), Niall Smyth (Branch Secretary, Dublin City North Branch, INTO), John Kidd (SIPTU Convenor Dublin Fire Brigade), Mick Scanlon (Shop Steward Cork No 3 Branch SIPTU), Tony Greene (SIPTU area shop steward, Construction Branch),

Brendan Begley (Shop Steward, SIPTU Education Branch), Eugene McDonagh (NRBU Executive), Rory Coleman (shop steward Harristown Bus garage), Tony Kelly (Convenor Waterford Crystal), Mary Ryan (TUI Dublin County Branch Committee member), Alice Sheridan (PSEU Branch Committee member), Dick Roche (TEEU shop steward &

President of Waterford Trades Council), Helena McNeill (Siptu Shop Steward, Community Sector Branch), Breege Scanlon, (Nurses Rep)

(All signatories are in a personal capacity and the descriptions are not used to indicate anything other than the signatories are union activists)

FILM

Batman: Taking the Dark Knight back into the shadows



As the new Dark Knight film is released Sasha Simic looks at the enduring popularity of Batman

THE LATEST Hollywood superhero blockbuster, *The Dark Knight*, has broken all box office records, raking in almost \$160 million on its first weekend in the US.

This bleak incarnation of Batman is heavily influenced by writer and artist Frank Miller's reimagining of the character in the 1980s.

That had an apocalyptic feel and showed the contradictions in the central character – not to mention the right wing implications of his obsessive hunt for justice.

But Batman has not always appeared this way. The character is pulled in different directions, from back alley brutality at one extreme to the camp 1960s TV series at the other.

Batman made his debut in *Detective Comics* in May 1939. The strip, created by artist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger, was grim and violent, owing much to the brutal heroes of the popular pulp adventure magazines such as *The Shadow*, who dispensed rough, bloody justice in the Depression-wracked US.

The Batman strip reflected a society imperilled by social collapse and war.

In this world the corrupt police could not be trusted. Only an outlaw vigilante like Batman could protect ordinary people from the grotesque villains who terrorised Gotham City.

Unlike most other superheroes, Batman

had no super powers. He relied on his Sherlock Holmes-like detective skills, and an ability to instil terror into his enemies.

He was shown as a damaged character, taking revenge on the criminal underworld for the murder of his parents during a robbery.

Superman on the other hand represented the safe self-image of the US. His secret identity was mild mannered Clark Kent. Such an everyman alter ego would not do for an nightmarish outlaw figure like the early Batman.

For the comic to be acceptable he had to show faith in the American dream at some level. And how better than by revealing his real identity as Bruce Wayne, playboy industrialist with a mansion and a butler?

When Batman first appeared he was armed with a gun and used it to dispatch his foes.

But a year into the comic's run – in what was to become a recurring process – the character was mellowed. His gun disappeared to be replaced by a sidekick. Robin, the Boy Wonder.

This change was part of an attempt to dissipate the bleak atmosphere, and resulted in a near doubling of the comic's circulation.

Through the 1950s and 1960s, as US capitalism boomed and the bad dreams were put aside, Batman himself became ever more camp and comic.

Batman moved from being a driven vigilante who passed for a normal member of

society, to a rich playboy, whose philanthropy was furthered by dressing in a funny costume and playing with gadgets.

Oddities

A whole stable of other bat characters joined him, including Bat-Hound and Bat-Mite, while the grotesque villains became merely bizarre.

This was the version that inspired the comic TV series.

The unsettling darkness was to reappear in the early 1970s, during the period of the radical upsurge against the Vietnam War. Years of bat-kitsch were discarded and Batman was restored to his roots as a driven vigilante with an ambivalent relationship to the law.

It was Frank Miller's extreme take on this version of the character that inspired director Tim Burton's 1989 film *Batman*. It was enormously popular, but the sheer perversity of the character was a problem for Hollywood.

In the third film in the sequence Burton's dark vision was jettisoned for a slicker, glossier and less edgy version. By the fourth, *Batman and Robin* (1997), the descent into kitsch was complete. The slickness had an initial appeal, but no sense of conviction and its popularity soon waned.

It is as though the artistic needs of the character are constantly overridden by the desire to make Batman palatable to the widest possible audience.

Dark Knight is a sequel that builds on 2005's *Batman Begins* – another journey back to the story's roots.

TREVOR GRIFFITHS:

Celebrating Sedition and Tom Paine



Trevor Griffiths

Acclaimed radical playwright Trevor Griffiths spoke to *Socialist Worker* about his work on the life of the revolutionary Thomas Paine.

PAINE, WHO was charged with treason for publishing *The Rights Of Man*, was an active participant in both the American and French revolutions.

In 1987 Griffiths began working with Richard Attenborough on *These Are The Times*.

The title is taken from "These are the times that try men's souls," the opening lines of Paine's book *The Crisis*, written during the American Revolution.

The film has still not been made due to lack of Hollywood finance, a process Griffiths describes as, "On a scale of ten I'd say the frustration level is 12."

Griffiths says that perhaps part of the reason the film has not come to fruition is because "Paine's root-and-branch attack on monarchy and the British state guaranteed he and his ideas would be marginalised by the mainly reactionary academic establishments that have held sway over cultural and historical judgments on what should endure and what should not."

"Paine's refusal to allow himself to be absorbed and

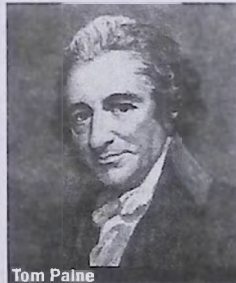
incorporated into the structures of ruling class thought and practice made it certain that he would be severed from 'mainstream' political-cultural discourse."

The contemporary resonances of Paine ring through the script. Griffiths says, "The political elites are now pretty well self-perpetuating."

"We have to continue to find ways of writing them off, cutting free from them, learning again the arts and crafts of self-government. Who was it who said, 'One man's anarchy is another man's order'?"

"My writing has always been governed by a basic axiom of the Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci – 'It is a revolutionary duty to tell the truth.'"

It is a motto that equally applies to Paine. According to



Tom Paine

Griffith, "It's Paine who first points up the huge importance of demanding a revolution not just in politics but in the very foundations of our human civilisation."

The script for the film finishes with Paine reading from his pamphlet *Agrarian Justice*, with Paine calling for "revolution in the state of civilisation."

YOUSSEF CHAHINE:

Remembering Egypt's greatest film maker

Dalia Said Mostafa celebrates the life of Egyptian director Youssef Chahine

THE DEATH of Youssef Chahine on 27 July means that Egypt has lost the last great director from the 1950s generation. Chahine is Egypt's best-known director and producer internationally, in 1997 he was awarded the lifetime achievement award at the Cannes Film Festival.

His films introduced groundbreaking techniques as well as avant-garde themes revolving around the issues of freedom, equality, identity and justice. He fought unrelentingly against commercial cinema and the use of propaganda in cinema. Throughout his career, Chahine was an example of the avant-garde artist whose art came to represent as well as critically engage with society's concerns, contradictions and problems.

After the defeat in 1967 in the war with Israel, together with the massive worldwide student demonstrations of 1968 his cinema became bolder, more critical and more aggressive against authoritarian and oppressive powers.

His films often depicted the daily life of the marginalised, the peasants, and the urban poor, paying great attention to the detail of their circumstances. As a result he was a headache for the authorities in Egypt and his films were often subject to censorship.



Youssef Chahine

However, he never made compromises for the sake of the state, and continued to be highly critical of corruption and of any dictatorial rule or regime in general.

In 2000 he took to the streets of Cairo in support of the second Palestinian Intifada (uprising) and in 2003 he joined street protests against the war on Iraq. Again in 2006 he participated in demonstrations against the Israeli war on Lebanon.

He continued to make films until the last breath. His last film was *Heya Fawda* (Chaos) addressed the brutal crackdown on freedom of expression in Egypt and the chaos and oppression caused by those who abuse power and authority.

He introduced a new cinema and has had a great impact on generations of film-makers in Egypt and the Arab world.

MAHMOUD DARWISH:

Death of a poet

IN MANY ways, Mahmoud Darwish's life summarizes the Palestinian journey of suffering. He was born in Palestine and was forced out of his home by Israeli occupation troops.

When he returned his village was among the hundreds razed to the ground and erased from the map by Israel. He did not grow up a radical but Zionism pushed him towards radical politics.

He joined the Israeli Communist Party when many Arabs continued to harbour hostility to a party that called for recognition of Israel.

He was comfortable in Hebrew and had relations in Israeli society. But as an Arab Palestinian in a state based on religious supremacy and privileges, he could only stand at a distance.

His next stage in life was a reflection of the true nature and cruelty of Zionism. The state of Israel put this young Palestinian poet under house arrest and his poetry was banned. But Darwish would not be muzzled.

His standing among the category of what was called "the poets of the occupied territories" only grew and his poetry travelled across borders. People began circulating his poems and Arabic newspapers avidly published them and people felt that a new energy was sweeping the Arab population in Israel.

Darwish gained international stature and



Mahmoud Darwish

unlike other Arab poets did not seek the Nobel Prize in literature nor tailor his positions or his poetry to suit the sensibilities of the Nobel committee. In that, Darwish was free.

After 1982, Darwish relocated to Paris and became better known in the West. One reads Mahmoud Darwish and one reads a history of Palestine. American obituaries of the man missed the entire picture.

As if they were talking about another person, *The New York Times* implied that his village was razed by unknown assailants, and glossed over the fact that the Israeli government arrested him for his poetry.

But Darwish's poetry did not only express romantic celebration of Palestine. It also celebrated the resistance, and it will continue long after his death.

As'ad AbuKhalil

TELEVISION:

REVIEWS

The Wire: The unmissable show that no one is watching



IF YOU are not familiar with the television show *The Wire* don't be too surprised by yourself. If you have heard of it the chances are you read an adulatory newspaper column rather than actually seen it.

This is because the *Wire* is a television show famously more written about than watched.

The show was recently described by the *Sunday Times*' resident intellectual Bryan Appleyard as part of "America's national theatre".

Ross Anderson, in the *Times*, summed up the euphoria that has surrounded the broadcast of the show's fifth and final season: "In its praise, critics have summoned Shakespeare, Dickens, Tolstoy and the Greek tragedians."

It is a drama so rich in character and nuance and so powerful in its anger and painful with its humour that it has been compared to the darkest classics of literature.

It is surely no coincidence that some of America's most accomplished novelists, such as George Pelecanos, Denis Lehane and Richard Price have all written for its first four seasons.

Nor was it a surprise when the *New York Times* wrote: "If Charles Dickens were alive today, he would watch the *Wire*, unless that is, he was already writing for it". The difference with *The Wire*, however, is that no kind old gentleman enters at the end and sets everything right.

Rather the greatness of *The Wire* comes from a combination of themes - the life of a city seen through char-

acters allowed to breathe and expand, through plots which unfold in deadly waves of doomed human motive, blind circumstance and economic force, and in luxurious amounts of time accorded by the TV show format.

The audience is immersed into the lives of drug dealers, cops, politicians, stick-up artists and junkies and we experience their plight in such palpably real terms that we often find ourselves in the midst of our own moral crisis.

The first three seasons of *The Wires* focus on the ruthlessly efficient Barksdale/Bell drug crew. The pair are all Machiavellian charm and bootstrap capitalism. By the end of season three they have so much cash that they resort to buying up huge swathes of expensive property.

This prompts one of the police detectives to observe: "So Stringer and Avon are worse than drug dealers; they're property developers".

However, the most compelling character in show has to be Omar Little. Barack Obama recently named Omar as his favourite character in his favourite show.

But like the astute politician that he is, he added carefully "That's not an endorsement. He's not my favourite person but he's a fascinating character."

One of the reasons that Omar is such a compelling character is because amid all the show's vicious drug dealers, corrupt politicians and compromised cops,

Omar is the only figure who adheres

to a strict, if perverse, moral code. For example, he robs a shopkeeper of his drug stash - then pays him for a packet of cigarettes, taking care to check he's given the correct change.

On the streets of Baltimore, where the show is set he cuts an almost Wildean figure. He swaggers through the streets like a gun-toting dandy in his long coat and fancy headscarves. He rarely loses his temper and never swears.

Indeed his language is almost poetic, as he laces his dialogue with old-fashioned, incongruous phrases like "indeed", "do tell" and "I think not".

Omar's defining scene comes in season two when he appears in court to testify against a gang member accused of murder. He waltzes into the courtroom ostentatiously toying with the tie he has casually looped around his neck for the occasion. "What exactly do you do for a living?" asks the state's attorney once he's taken the stand. "I robs drug dealers," he grins proudly. She asks how someone in his line of work could stay alive for so long. "Day at a time I suppose," he shrugs.

Then comes his cross examination at the hands of corrupt gang-lawyer Maurice Levy. "You are amoral are you not? You are feeding off the violence and the despair of the drug trade. You are stealing from those who themselves are stealing the lifeblood from our city. You are a parasite who leeches off the culture of drugs..." Omar interrupts him: "Just like

you, man." The lawyer stops in his tracks and splutters. "Excuse me? What?" Omar leans forward. "I got the shotgun, you got the briefcase. It's all in the game though, right?"

As you can imagine from the above scene *The Wire* bears no resemblance to any cop show you have ever seen before where no matter how cutting edge they claim to be [think *Hill Street Blues* / *NYPD Blue* / *Homicide: Life on the Streets*] the bad guy is always delivered up for his punishment at the end of each episode.

The Wire offers no such comfort. As David Simon, the show's creator commented, "the point of [these cop shows] is to validate their point of view and the point of view of society. So, you end up with the same stilted picture of the underclass. Either they are the salt of the earth looking for a break, and not at all responsible, or they're dangerous and evil and need to be punished."

Simon is not interested in good versus evil, he is interested in "institutions and how they seek to preserve themselves even when they are crumbling". In this world the job of the cops, however good or bad they may be, is to defend the status quo.

The filmmaker Elia Kazan once said that "I feel that today film-makers who make films that have social significance... make metaphors. They say: 'It's a Western but it's really about Vietnam' or 'It's a gangster story but it's really about the difficulty of speaking the truth in America,' etc. In other words, they make substitute

pictures."

Now there's nothing inherently wrong with genres or metaphors, but our reflexive expectation of them as a frame around contemporary reality reveals something important about the internalised reality that dominates almost all of US culture: whenever you confront the national reality, don't forget about the national dream.

The Wire understands that there is no reassuring barrier between the underworld and Our World. In this show the social fabric encompasses everything from the corner to the classroom, the mayor's office to the strip bar, the union hall to the funeral parlour.

The junkie is as wise as the major, the state senator as much in need of redemption as the stash lookout.

But this is not some affair of simple cross-cutting. There are no rhyming arias of despair as in *Crash* or *Babel*. We are spared the usual "we're all human-under-the-skin" number because in this world of capitalism unbound, ruthless self-preservation will always trump peace, love and understanding.

The system under which we live guarantees numerous lives lived in abjection or murderous disengagement. In this universe nothing but the moral luck of the draw separates us from the homeless addict Bubs, or Namond, the teenager with no heart for the game.

The genius of *The Wire* is that it understands there really is no such thing as 'them'. There is only us.

EDUCATION IS A RIGHT NOT A PRIVILEGE

THERE IS every chance that students starting their college courses this month may yet face college fees before the end of their degrees, with one university president describing fees as 'inevitable' in the short term. While education minister Bat O'Keeffe claims that fees would be restricted to those earning more than €100,000, it is clear that this is simply an attempt to bring in fees by the back door. Like in Britain, it would only be a matter of time before this threshold was dropped and the vast majority of students would again be paying fees.

A previous minister, Noel Dempsey, when he pitched a similar idea indicated that this restriction of fees to high-earners would see fees only netting €15m. In fact, it would cost more than this to set up and run a system of means testing.

A recent survey shows that even with a no-fees system the average cost of a three year college education is to €34,000 (includes Registration Fee, accommodation, rent, books, bills, food etc). If the Minister has his way the average cost of going to college will rise to €70,000, making higher education an unaffordable luxury for most average families.

We only have to look at the experience of higher education in Britain and Northern Ireland to see what the government's real agenda is.

In Britain and Northern Ireland Higher education has

been transformed and is increasingly being harnessed in the interests of big business on an unprecedented scale.

The re-introduction of fees has already meant that people, particularly those from working class backgrounds, are less likely to even apply to go to college. There has been a 4 per cent drop in college applications in the past three years.

There has also been a large increase in the number of students dropping out of college, with the NUS reporting that debt in the most significant factor in a student's decision to drop out.

Fees have meant students working longer hours at part-time jobs, which in turn has led to more stress and lower grades.

A recent report showed that 68% of student's work at some time during term time and 83% work during the summer when no financial support is available.

Overwhelmingly students work in part time low paid work mainly in retail, catering and bar work. Pizza Hut employs 11,000 people 60% of whom are students.

The average student now works 15 hours per week with 25 percent of students working 20 hours a week.

The experience in Northern Ireland and Britain shows that once fees come in, they will only go up and more and more people will be charged. This year some of the leading Universities were calling on the government to charge between £6000 and £10,000 a year.

As socialist we believe in equal access to education for everyone and that nobody should be forced out of

education because they can't afford it.

Clearly there is shortfall in education funding but there is a solution to this: tax the rich. As it is the Irish rich pay virtually no tax while corporations pay a meagre 12 percent on multimillion dollar profits.

It is also important to understand that the proposed re-introduction of fees is part of the government's wider agenda of privatising the university sector

RESISTANCE CAN WIN

There has already been widespread opposition to the re-introduction of fees.

The National Union of Students have launched a major campaign for the forthcoming academic years and it is important that all students and trade unionists get involved.

We can take our lead from the French high school and university students who succeeded, after a spectacular protest movement in 2006 with the support of the trade union movement, in defeating the draft CPE law which would have allowed employers to sack workers aged under 26 without explanation in their first two years of work.

A campaign that involves students, lecturers and trade unionists can force the government's hand and would represent a major victory in the bigger campaign that is needed to fight the corporatisation and privatisation of our education system.

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China's century?

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The New scramble for the Caucasus

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Grassroots Shop Stewards & Union Activists Gathering

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The oil industry: Capitalism & conflict

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Pipeline protests stepped up as Shell brings in the Navy



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