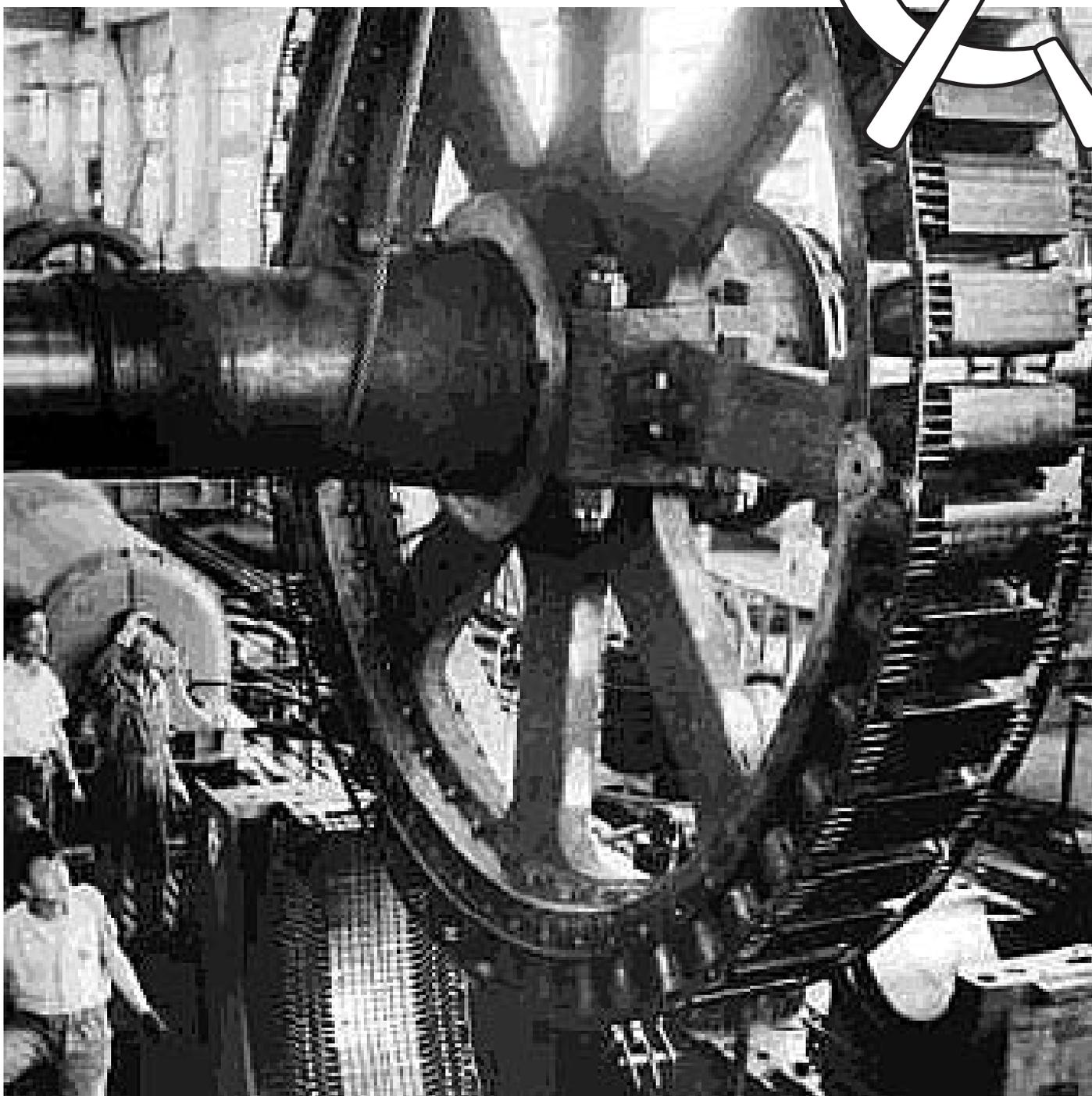


Challenge

Issue 1 October/November Price £1



Inside this issue –

Socialism, the environment and petrol duty

Also:- ● *Cuba, Bacardi & the NUS* ● *Spanish Civil War*
● *National culture and the European Union* ● *Bertolt Brecht*

YOUNG COMMUNIST
ycl
LEAGUE

What We Stand For

The Young Communist League is the youth wing of the Communist Party of Britain.

It is organisationally autonomous and decides its own policies, priorities and activities.

The YCL is a democratic organisation based on the principles of Marxism-Leninism. It is directed by a National Committee whose members are elected at the annual YCL Congress, and it is building branches across the country.

The YCL aims to develop the political consciousness of young people and to increase their involvement in politics both nationally and internationally.

The YCL seeks to become the communist wing of a wider youth movement.

The YCL seeks to defend and strengthen the welfare state, and campaign for its extension as a step towards creating an equal and just society.

We believe that public transport should be viewed as part of this system.

The YCL demands free and inclusive secular education for all, including nursery care, schools, universities, community colleges and adult education centres.

The YCL believes that a redistribution of wealth through progressive taxation can pay for this. The economic demands of big business are starving our welfare system, which Britain, one of the richest states on earth, could certainly otherwise afford.

The YCL opposes the overwhelming power of big business, and opposes the European Union because this is a vehicle for promoting the interests of big business at the expense of democracy and equality, and its institutions are undemocratic, corrupt and unaccountable.

The European Union also threatens to introduce ever more racist foreign policies, as shown by the Schengen agreements, which Britain has largely signed up to, and the moves to create a single European army.

The YCL aims to help establish a socialist society based on public ownership and democratic control. We believe that in Britain at the moment social change can be achieved by peaceful means. However, we defend the right of the oppressed to resort to armed struggle when this is the most practical way of liberating themselves.

The YCL believes that no one should be unfairly discriminated against in any way on any basis, including sex, race, sexuality, disability or religious beliefs.

The YCL supports the right of women to free and easily available abortion.

The YCL recognises the Irish people's right to self-determination.

The YCL supports the cancellation of all 'third world' debt.

The YCL works in solidarity with sister organisations throughout the world, and supports the struggle of people everywhere for socialism. The YCL declares its support for the world's socialist and progressive countries.

The YCL opposes all anti-trade union laws.

The YCL does not believe that Britain needs a nuclear arsenal, and campaigns for unilateral, immediate and unconditional nuclear disarmament.

The YCL recognises that religion has been used in the past to keep working people in drudgery and exploitation, but also acknowledges and works with progressive religious currents and all religious people prepared to fight for social change.

The YCL demands a secular state, and supports freedom of worship and of religious and atheist propaganda.

The YCL realises the urgency of protecting the natural environment. We hold that most environmental damage is caused by the wilful neglect of major corporations and governments, and that this can be changed through socialism.

The YCL supports the Morning Star as the only daily socialist newspaper in Britain and does its utmost to aid the circulation of the paper.

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Challenge is edited by Ben Chacko and Ed Griffiths. Articles are contributed as named. The views espoused in signed articles are not necessarily reflective of the views of *Challenge* as a journal or of the Young Communist League as an organisation. Thanks to Jim Gledhill, Gawain Little and Emily Mann. Especial thanks go to Leigh Arnold for chasing and chasing and nagging and nagging a certain person in an attempt to extract an article. His efforts were unfortunately in vain due to the extraordinary reluctance and disorganisation of this potential contributor, but we appreciate them all the same.

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This is the first edition of *Challenge*, the new journal of the Young Communist League. This journal is made up of contributions from YCL members and sympathisers, and succeeds the old *Young Communist* as the chief organ of the organisation, reverting to its original name.

The launch of this bimonthly publication was deemed necessary in the light of the fact that the YCL is growing and it needs a regular journal to help co-ordinate the organisation's activities across the country, and inform a wide audience of its views and principles. The journal will be vital for members of the YCL, in keeping them up to date with the very latest developments within the national and international movements of progressive youth. However, we also hope it should prove interesting and informative to those who do not belong to the organisation, either because they are not young or because they are not communists. In the latter case we hope we may persuade them otherwise; but even if not, *Challenge* should provide a most exciting and challenging read.

Challenge was built upon the old *Young Communist* and recognises that it bears a great debt to that publication, and indeed is in many respects a similar journal. However, we also believe we have improved upon our older model substantially, and that *Challenge* is more than just the *YC* with a different name. Our aims remain unchanged – the purpose of this journal is to develop political consciousness among young people, to 'educate' (in the broadest sense of the word) and inform our members and sympathetic comrades, and to win new recruits for the Young Communist League. We also believe that the publication is an essential debating ground for ideas in the YCL and in the wider youth movement.

But the journal itself is considerably different from its

predecessor in several respects. We have introduced an entirely new layout and style. We have added more regular features, such as pages on culture and theory. There is more of an opportunity for you to make your opinions clear with a letters page. We also hope that the journal will be published more regularly. All in all, issue no. 1 of *Challenge* is issue no. 1 of *Challenge*, not issue x of *Young Communist*.

This issue contains a very wide range of subjects within its sixteen pages. In 'In the News', we report, among other things, of the dangers threatening British education and the revolutionary currents in the third world. In our cover story, we explore the solution of the People's Government of Laos to combining environmental friendliness with economic progress. Reports on frightening developments in the NUS are followed by some thought-provoking articles on other matters – a look at some poems by the great German communist Bertolt Brecht, the question of the 'Socialist Soul' and a reminder of the largely forgotten communist contribution to the fight for democracy in the Spanish Civil War, which ultimately ended in defeat. For other inspiring tales of communists losing wars, why not buy *The African Dream*, Che's records of the unsuccessful Congolese conflict which is reviewed in this issue? The issue is rounded off with an article from our comrades in Denmark.

This edition is also important because it will be current at the time of our Red November celebrations in honour of our victory in Russia 83 years ago now. Full details are included in this issue, so no-one has an excuse not to turn up to this excellent occasion. Remembering our prestigious past will stir us to action in the future. The example of Russia's liberation was a fine one, but failed to establish world socialism in the last century. As the youth of the labour movement in 2000, it will be our role to establish it in the century that lies ahead. *Ben Chacko*

Battlefield of ideologies

- ★ A poll conducted for the Vatican's World Youth Day revealed that some young Italians think protestantism was founded by... Karl Marx.
- ★ The Times reports the fascinating new discovery by anthropologists that early humans lived in a society of "primitive communism". Well, it's only 116 years since Engels made the same point in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*...
- ★ According to an opinion poll, 61% of Romanians think life was better under the Socialist Republic.
- ★ A committee of the House of Commons declared that Nato's war against Yugoslavia broke international law. Better late than never, chaps.

IN THE NEWS...

Another compromise on student funding

The National Union of Students has again watered down its commitment to campaign for free and accessible post-school education. Labour Students succeeded at the NUS Conference in passing a resolution which drops the demand for the abolition of tuition fees and a return to a liveable grant – still the only policy which could genuinely give working-class students an equal chance in higher education. Instead, the NUS will campaign for the Cubie compromise (largely adopted in Scotland), whereby students will repay their debts after graduation, thus adding yet more to the mountain of debt which already deters applicants from low-income backgrounds. Much of the responsibility for this step backwards rests with the ultra-left within the NUS, whose excessively “rrrrrevolutionary” sloganeering ensured the defeat of all the left’s amendments. Once again, it is clear that neither the Blairites nor the ultra-left can defend the real interests of working-class young people.

Ending the injustice of colonialism

The victory of President Robert Mugabe’s left-wing Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF) party in Zimbabwe’s parliamentary elections gives an unshakeable democratic mandate to the country’s drive to redistribute land seized under British colonialism. Much of the best agricultural land in Zimbabwe is still in the hands of a few thousand white commercial farmers, while millions of Zimbabweans live in poverty. The impetus to solving this major problem came from veterans of the liberation struggle which overthrew Ian Smith’s white-minority regime in 1980, who occupied white-owned land throughout the country. The election saw an increase in support for Morgan Tsvangirai’s opposition Movement for Democratic Change, which is backed by Britain and the IMF, but Zanu-PF retained its majority, which will hopefully allow the land question to be solved peacefully, by government action. Since the election, more than 3,000 farms have been selected by the National Land Acquisition and Redistribution Committee, and will be redistributed to the landless. If successful, this will mark a dramatic shift of wealth and power away from the commercial farmers and towards the poor peasants. The policy has brought howls of protest from the British right-wing press, but landless peasants in other former British colonies are watching with interest, and progressive leaders in Africa have defended Mugabe’s land reform programme. In particular, Joaquim Chissano, Mozambique’s president and the leader of the progressive Mozambique Liberation Front (Frelimo) party, slammed former colonial powers who think they still have a right to interfere in Africa. Mugabe has told white commercial farmers whose land is redistributed to apply to the British government for compensation.

Family values?

Both the ruling Labour Party and the Conservatives are fond of declaring their adherence to ‘family values’, despite the debatable

standards of sexual morality within the leaderships of those parties. ‘Family values’ and the virtues of marriage are now to be government policy – and, of course, taught to us in schools, in case the existing content of our ‘Personal and Social Education’ lessons isn’t enough to send us to a well-earned sleep in the middle of an exhausting school day. Communists remain as divided as ever on the issue of the family and marriage; the wide gap between Alexandra Kollontai’s ‘sex should be as casual as drinking a glass of water’ and the pro-family stances which most Communist governments took up after the lava of revolution had cooled is still unbridged. But most have condemned these latest moves, not particularly because of disagreement, or the fact that from the mouths of our current leadership it may seem hypocritical, but because it is time that young people stopped being force-fed morality in lessons. Our morality should not be external, concrete and rigid, but simply based on what brings the greatest benefit to people. Whether young people want to marry or not is up to them; and a governmental tilt towards marriage may well bias people against that institution, rather than incline them in favour. Either way, the effect is the same: the judgement of youth is clouded by the unwanted intervention of the government. Our aim is that people should marry when and if they want – without being pressurised by a moral code which does more harm than good. In addition, the kind of family values the government has in mind are dismissive of homosexual relationships, turning young minds against single parents and the many forms of relationship that do not fit the ‘model family’, if any such thing exists.

“Peaceful social revolution” set to continue

Venezuela’s voters gave their left-wing nationalist president, Hugo Chavez, a landslide victory in the first elections to be held under the country’s new Bolivarian constitution, named after the Latin American independence hero Simón Bolívar. Chavez, a former paratroop general who staged a failed coup attempt in 1992, has said he is leading a “peaceful social revolution” in favour of Venezuela’s poor. His supporters, a coalition of progressive groups (including communists) ranged around his 5th Republic Movement, also won a majority of provincial governorships. The right, supported by the US, had resorted to classic “Red scare” tactics in the run-up to the election, including the ludicrous claim that 1,500 Cuban agents were working in Venezuela to support Chavez – Cuban President Fidel Castro promptly offered a large cash reward to anyone who could provide evidence for this. Chavez has become a vocal critic of the US’s “Plan Colombia”, a massive investment of arms and money designed to help the regime in neighbouring Colombia crush left-wing rebels. The level of US involvement in Colombia has already led many to warn that we are witnessing the beginning of a new Vietnam War. The Venezuelan leader’s sympathy for the Colombian rebels, his friendliness with socialist Cuba and his refusal to go along with the policies of the IMF have made him a favourite whipping-boy for the US; one diplomat from the supposed champion of democracy memorably complained that they kept looking for a leader, but all they got in Venezuela was more elections and more referenda. The scope for US intervention in Venezuela is limited, however: Chavez’s military background makes the standard tactic of encouraging a right-wing coup (like the one which brought General Pinochet to power in Chile) unlikely to succeed, and Venezuela’s membership of the oil export cartel OPEC gives it more economic clout than most developing countries. After the election, Chavez declared that the re-legitimisation of Venezuelan democracy which was his first goal has now been achieved. He now plans to set out on “the economic phase of the revolution”: breaking the economic power of the old élites as he has already broken their monopoly on political power. Given the strength of the Chavez vote in the recent elections, the way looks set for this peaceful revolution to continue. In the Venezuelan president’s own words: “Tremble, oligarchs!”



Robert Mugabe

Free at last

More than sixty communist former political prisoners were given an emotional reception in People's Korea, after their release from South Korean jails. Most had spent decades in prison, and one had been inside for 45 years. Although they had been tortured, they had consistently refused to give up their socialist principles. One 75-year-old released prisoner said that, despite 33 years in horrific conditions, hope had never faded: "I have always believed that I would return to the north one day." This return has finally been made possible by the negotiations between the two Koreas which took place over the summer: the People's Korean leader, Kim Jong Il, is reported to have insisted that the political prisoners be allowed to go to the north.

No fairness for young workers

Campaigners and trade unionists have attacked the government's failure to guarantee workers – especially young people – a living wage. The national minimum wage is being raised by a mere 10p to £3.70 an hour; and young workers still won't even get that. Those aged from 18 to 21 will receive a minimum of £3.20 an hour, and 16- or 17-year-olds will have no statutory minimum. The cost of living is no lower for people under 22: the lower minimum wage is simply an excuse for employers to get away with paying less. Pressure must be put on the government to meet the trade union movement's demand for an end to poverty pay: a minimum wage at half male median earnings (about £5 an hour), rising as earnings rise, paid to all workers without exceptions.

Lurking Menace of Segregation

The Labour government of Tony Blair has shown its anti-working-class tendencies in many areas – and education is one of the most obvious. The YCL has been at the forefront of campaigns to abolish tuition fees, the first massive attack on Britain's educational system by this government, which, despite its many faults, has provided almost everyone with free and in most cases thorough (at least academically speaking) education for many years. But another attack is on its way. Having denied our right to free higher education, Education Secretary David Blunkett has unveiled plans to reintroduce single sex education in core subjects at many schools across the country, in the hope that it may balance out exam results between the sexes, as girls are doing considerably better than boys. Critics have pointed out that Blunkett's claim (that separation will improve academic results) is probably false. It is based on statistics of the era when mixed schools were a rarity, but fails to take into account the many disadvantages girls suffered in those days – they were usually able to take fewer subjects, frequently being forced to concentrate on skills such as cooking, while boys pursued 'heavier' academic studies; and originally university admission was far more difficult for them. The dangers of resurrecting such a system should be obvious; and we can already see in speculations as to whether boys and girls think in different ways, and pressure to adapt teaching to this, the seeds of a system in which some subjects become 'cut off' from one or other gender, or in which boys and girls are treated differently by their schools. But the real reason that we must oppose this scheme is because of a fatal narrowing of the system, which is already too narrow – for example, education is almost purely centred on academic and mental abilities, while equally important skills such as cooking and productive or practical work suffers. This move, communists have claimed, is an example of the same narrow academic attitude. Education is about enabling young people to be successful in life.

Just as practical work broadens the experience of young people, so too does co-education. Separation contributes to chauvinism, sexism and childishness. The presence of the opposite sex allows people to mature faster. It relaxes the atmosphere in schools (which is probably what Blunkett hates). It broadens all topics of discussion, and helps to overcome timidity and shyness which are often discernible in those entering puberty. There is no evidence

either that single-sex education improves academic results or makes them worse. But that it would have a detrimental effect on education as a whole is beyond doubt.

... and while we're talking about education

The Labour government has also proposed that the term system in operation currently should be abolished – that is, rather than three terms in each academic year, approximately thirteen weeks each, with two two-week holidays and one six-week summer holiday (with minor variations across the country) splitting term from term and year from year, we would instead have six short terms, with a two-week holiday in between each. At first glance, this seems like the A-level reforms beginning this autumn – a pointless and mildly irritating change which makes the Government appear to be doing something about education when in fact they aren't. Actually it is more serious, because it flies in the face of mass public opinion. Pupils and students across the country are not underperforming because of the term system, which is similar to almost all foreign systems, and most abominate the idea of tearing up our summer holiday ("a traditional part of childhood" claimed an adult commentator) and sorting it into bite-sized portions. That we would be forced to work in the blazing heat of August is one valid objection; that there would be no complete break from school, with room for summer camps, foreign holidays, and general relaxation free from all thoughts of school is another. Any pupil will tell you that two weeks is not enough time to get school thoroughly out of your system and properly relax. As to claims by the Ministry of Education that after two weeks people are 'bored of holidays', well... who did the Ministry interview to come up with that statement? Or perhaps 'interview' should be replaced with 'bribe'?

Believing in Debt

With the next election perhaps just around the corner, the various parties are setting out their stalls in a spate of "pre-manifesto" policy documents. The Tories' contribution, a far-right wish list entitled *Believing in Britain*, spells out a programme which would take Margaret Thatcher's breath away. Among the xenophobia and the free-market frenzy, though, it does at least mean that we can finally see what the Tories actually think about higher education funding. (They've kept it quiet for as long as they could, to try to cash in on student opposition to new Labour's fees-not-grants line.) *Believing in Britain* makes it clear that William Hague's solution to how to finance post-school education is – privatise it. The Tories would give each university a one-off "endowment" to invest as they liked, and then cut off all government money. Indeed, they threaten to withhold even the endowment from universities which wish to charge higher fees. Some universities have suggested similar ideas. This is an attempt to copy the higher education system in the US, where colleges are funded by a mixture of investments, private and corporate donations, and fees (up to £20,000 a year). If the Tory proposal were implemented, universities would rush to hike their fees to whatever level they thought the market could afford. There would be a massive and widening gap between rich and poor universities, and between rich and poor students. The best facilities and the best educational opportunities would be found at the universities which had the biggest investments – and the highest fees. Students from working-class families would probably be forced to compete for corporate scholarships – a company pays your fees if you guarantee to work for it once you graduate – or to settle for a cheaper education. This would be another massive step towards transforming education into nothing more than training for capitalism. What's more, universities would increasingly focus on the more profitable research side of their work at the expense of teaching: fee-paying students would become little more than a source of cash. Of course, this ultra-Thatcherite nightmare is so far nothing more than Tory party policy; but the last three years have taught us that there can be a very thin line between Tory party policy and new Labour government action. Those who support democratic, inclusive and publicly funded education (including students, parents, lecturers and trade unionists) must unite to make sure Hague's plan never drifts into Blair's programme.

Socialism, the environment and petrol duty

Ed Griffiths

They said it couldn't happen here. But only days after politicians had stopped congratulating Britain for not sharing the 'syndrome' which makes the flighty French block roads and picket fuel depots, it did. September's fuel protests proved once and for all that ordinary British people are still capable of taking to the streets to defend their interests against the new Labour government.

That's the line, anyway – shame about reality. Because the truth about the fuel protests is rather different. Far from being an inspiring display of grassroots activism, the crisis which brought Britain close to a standstill was just one more show of corporate muscle. And the ones to gain if the government gives way and cuts fuel duty (when *Challenge* went to press, the protesters had given Blair and Co. until the middle of November to comply) won't be the people of Britain: they'll be the oil bosses, who recently gave themselves a 65% pay rise.

The oil companies could have got petrol to the pumps throughout the protests if they'd wanted to. During the 1984-1985 miners' strike, refineries were blockaded by thousands at a time, and the lorries still got through: drivers were simply told to smash through picket lines and force their way out. This time, faced by a mere handful of protesters, the companies told their drivers not to bother. The reason is clear: they want to pressure the government into reducing the price of petrol – so people will buy more of it and use public transport less – without taking a penny off their extravagant profits. The oil bosses win, and people who rely on publicly funded services like the NHS lose.

But there is an even more important reason why the government should not back down: the environment. Car exhaust is one of the biggest sources of the 'greenhouse' gases which cause global warming. If present trends continue, the world's surface will be up to 3.5C hotter by 2100.¹ This would melt some of the ice at the North and South poles, and raise the sea level by as much as 90cm: tens of millions of people who live and work on land near sea level in countries like the Netherlands or Bangladesh would be made homeless. Tropical diseases would spread. Weather systems would be distorted by the warmer climate, leading to more and fiercer storms and floods – but also to droughts and the spread of deserts.

This is not just scientific forecast: it is already happening. An expedition to the North pole this year found water, not ice, at the pole itself: something previously unheard of. The natural disasters which have devastated Mozambique, Venezuela and other countries in recent years are a direct consequence of pollution, pumped out mainly in the industrialised capitalist countries. In the 1960s there were 16 large-scale

climate-related disasters: in the 1990s, there were 70.² Without dramatic cuts in greenhouse emissions, this will be just a foretaste of what is to come.

But when world leaders met a couple of years ago in the Japanese city of Kyoto, they singularly failed to come up with the decisive action needed. Despite being warned by United Nations scientists that they would have to cut emissions by at least 60% if they were to stabilise the earth's climate, they eventually reached an agreement to make a cut of only 5%³ – and even that won't be done until 2008-2012. In fact, this pathetic figure is itself based on a fiddle. Each country has been given a quota for its greenhouse emissions, based on the 1990 figure: so the US will have to make a 7% cut, but 'third world' states are allowed some room for expansion. The countries of the former USSR, which have experienced economic collapse since 1990, today produce around 30% less than the total of their quotas. But the industrialised capitalist countries will be able to 'buy' surplus quotas from the 'third world' and the former Soviet Union instead of making real cuts themselves. Only capitalism could come up with a system this absurd: not only does it make notional pollution a desirable commodity, but it simultaneously encourages the industrialised states to bribe the 'third world' not to develop its own competing industry.

Too often, those who point out the inadequacy of these fudges are manoeuvred into opposing any industrialisation or development. This is not helped by the tendency of some 'green' activists to embrace an anti-industrial agenda: the claim that "to be green" is "really very simple... Consume less. Share more. Enjoy life"⁴ might be relevant to the rich in the West, but it has little to say to the billions of people who live in desperate poverty. The 'third world' countries are likely to regard the spurious idea that economic growth "is not the answer... it's the cause"⁵ of their problems as sheer Western hypocrisy. Less development can never be the solution to the world's problems, including the environmental crisis. To coin a phrase: better more, but better.

An example of this 'better' development can be found in the socialist countries. It must be admitted that the historical record of many socialist states on the environment is extremely disappointing, particularly in Eastern Europe – this reflects a political and scientific failure to see the importance of making development ecologically sustainable. But once this importance is realised, socialism offers the scope for solutions. Whereas capitalist development takes place for profit in a 'free' market, socialist countries plan their economies – environmental considerations can therefore be

included at every stage of economic decision-making.

An inspiring example is the small Asian country of Laos. Since the 1975 Revolution established a socialist system of government, the country has made tremendous strides in creating healthcare and education systems, and has begun to redress the damage of generations of colonialism and underdevelopment. But there is still a long way to go, and further development will require an improvement in Laos's energy supply – many rural communities still have no electric light. If the Lao economy were governed by the market, it would probably develop its electricity infrastructure either by importing oil to burn (and therefore joining the ranks of countries pouring out greenhouse gases) or by cutting down its rain forests – destroying vast natural habitats in the process. Capitalism would go down one of these routes, because in the immediate term they are more profitable.

The people of Laos have chosen a different path to development. The country has embarked on the construction of hydropower dams across the Mekong (Maekhong) river, which will soon provide all the electricity Laos needs to develop – without producing a gramme of pollution. Laos will even be able to export this clean power to its neighbours, such as Thailand.⁶

This is made possible because Laos is a socialist country: economic plans are formed by a government committee and ratified by the democratically elected National Assembly, after extensive consultation with the people themselves. If development is to serve social and ecological needs rather than private profit, it must be taken out of the hands of capital – only socialist planning can reconcile economic progress and environmental sustainability.

This is true in transport policy as well. The agenda of the oil companies' fuel protests is to continue the disastrous status quo of ever more cars and ever more pollution. But people only need to use their cars because public transport is so bad, especially in rural areas. The car is still king – but any rational transport policy must see it dethroned. A combination of fuel duties to make pollution more expensive and a good public transport system would clear the way for a major reduction in car use. At present, however, only one half of this policy is in place – petrol is taxed, but public transport is inefficient and chaotic, with the people's tax money subsidising colossal profits for the privatised firms' shareholders. A safe, reliable and affordable transport system is possible, but it must be planned at a national level. That means the restoration of public ownership, combined with a massive investment of government funds into improving the infrastructure. This is what communists and environmentalists must demand, not a reduction in petrol tax.



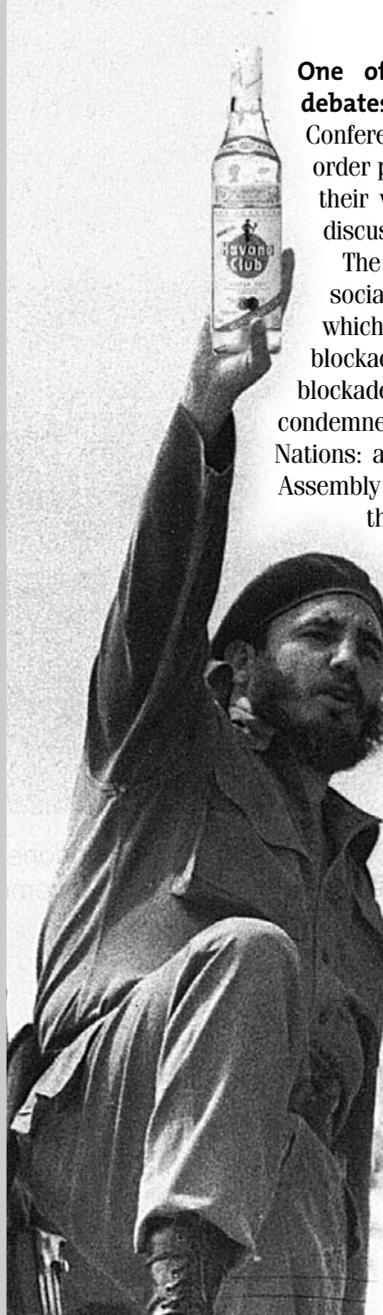
The environment is often seen as something to be dealt with on an individual basis, by recycling household waste or reducing personal energy consumption. This is a valuable contribution to alleviating the ecological crisis, but it cannot solve it – that can only be done by concerted government action. A mass campaign of direct action and protest for that cause would really be a reason to celebrate the British people's ability to fight for their long-term interests – and the world's.

Notes.

1. Source: UN Framework Convention on Climate Change information sheets.
2. Source: Christian Aid.
3. All figures are as against 1990 levels.
4. Kemp, P and Wall, D.: *A Green Manifesto for the 1990s*.
5. Icke, D.: *It Doesn't Have to be Like This: Green Politics Explained*.
6. Source: *Bulletin de Laos*.

Cuba, Bacardi and the National Union of Students

Gawain Little



One of the most interesting debates at this year's NUS Conference never even made the order paper and, if some had had their way, would not have been discussed at all.

The matter in question was socialist Cuba, a small island which is the subject of a unilateral blockade by the USA. This blockade has been repeatedly condemned as illegal by the United Nations: at the most recent General Assembly it was supported by only the USA and Israel, with a total of 157 member states against.

One of the strongest advocates of the blockade is the drinks company Bacardi. This company originally had its distillery based in Cuba, but left the island in 1959. A year later, the distilleries were nationalised by the Cuban government. Since then, on repeated occasions, Cuba has offered Bacardi compensation, which it has refused. Bacardi has become involved in the blockade at various levels, including making its lawyers freely available to help draft the Helms-Burton Law (the legislation that allows prosecution of foreign companies which

trade with Cuba - frequently referred to as the 'Helms-Bacardi Protection Act'). Also, it has admitted donating money to CANF, the Cuban American National Foundation. This is an ultra-right-wing organisation which has sponsored kidnappings, bombings, assassination attempts and other terrorist acts in Cuba, and was also the instigator of the lawsuit to try and keep Elián González in the USA, separated from his father.

At the recent NUS Services Ltd (NUSL) convention, the purchasing and promotions committee submitted a report recommending that NUSL (who supply the majority of student bars in the country) should give sole-supplier status for white rum to Bacardi. This deal, worth half a million to

NUSL over the next three years, would mean that all NUSL-supplied bars would only be able to stock Bacardi white rum, unless their student union has passed a boycott of Bacardi in a general meeting.

This raises many questions about student union democracy, not to mention the ethical concerns with Bacardi, which have caused eight student unions to boycott them entirely and over 50 to stock white rum alternatives (something they would not be allowed to do under the terms of the NUSL-Bacardi contract). The problem lies in the fact that the boycott must be passed in a general meeting which, in most universities, has a quorum of 300-500, due to the size of the campuses. Some universities have not had a quorate general meeting for over six years, and therefore have open ethics meetings with a lower quorum to discuss these issues. In the end, it is not up to Bacardi, or even NUSL (which is a limited business), to decide how student unions govern themselves and organise their internal structures. This is something only the students concerned should do.

What was most worrying, though, was that the vast majority of students had not even heard of these plans.

When NUSL received a motion at its last Annual General Meeting, proposed by Sheffield University, to boycott Bacardi, its ethical committee undertook an investigation - but took evidence only from Bacardi. It comes as no surprise that, a year later, Bacardi are offering NUSL huge sums of money to sign a three-year deal.

So, with these issues in mind, St John's College, Oxford, submitted an emergency motion calling on the NUS to "put pressure on NUSL not to accept this report," while further investigation was done into the ethical concerns surrounding Bacardi. However, I arrived at Conference only to find that the motion had been ruled out on the grounds that it did not "significantly affect the work of NUS over the coming year."

After lodging several appeals and requests which were "lost" by the right-wing steering committee, we finally found a loophole in the constitution which allowed Anneliese Dodds (Oxford University SU President) to make a one-minute speech in which she outlined the deal, the problems it raised and the allegations against Bacardi itself. This got a standing ovation from a Conference shocked to find out what its leadership was attempting to do behind its back and, at the end of the session, most people leaving the hall took a leaflet explaining the issues and urging them to support Cuba and boycott Bacardi.

Since the Conference, NUSL has signed the deal with Bacardi, who now have sole-supplier status for white rum. Following several complaints, the Office of Fair Trading has launched a full investigation into Bacardi's monopolistic behaviour: we now wait to see whether the OFT will succeed where the NUS's Blairite leadership failed.

Still something to celebrate

On 7th November 1917 (25th October according to the old calendar, hence the name October Revolution), Russia's working people overthrew Kerensky's capitalist government and set about creating the world's first socialist society. This event inspired workers, socialists and anti-war campaigners throughout the world as much as it terrified imperialists and capitalists: here was a government which promised its people peace, bread and land; which gave women the vote on an equal basis with men; which withdrew from the First World War and opposed colonialism; which was based not on a tiny ruling class but on the working people themselves.

Soviet Russia, the state born out of the October Revolution, collapsed in 1991. But millions of people in the former USSR and elsewhere believe that the anniversary of the Revolution is still a date worth celebrating. On that day 83 years ago, the claim that "socialism's a nice idea but it could never really work" was disproved once and for all. The former Russian Empire, previously a backward absolutist monarchy with a largely illiterate population, began to be transformed into an industrialised socialist country. Despite the corruptions, crimes and wrong decisions which came to disfigure Soviet socialism (and which led in the end to its downfall), it was for the first time in world history a society in which economic progress was planned for the common good rather than taking place only for the profit of a few rich people. The socialist countries of today, like Cuba and Vietnam, as well as the communist and workers' parties throughout the world, are still inspired by the October Revolution - and still guided by the Marxist-Leninist theory which made it possible. Throughout those 83 years, no other kind of party has ever succeeded in abolishing capitalism and setting a country on the road to socialism.

The Young Communist League believes that the best way we can commemorate the liberation of Russia from capitalism and war is by working to do the same in Britain. That's why, each year, the YCL hosts Red November - a conference of socialist debate and discussion in celebration of the October Revolution. This is the only event run by and for young people which offers the chance to discuss the issues that matter with high-profile figures from across the range of socialist campaigning. Last year's conference heard from leading trade unionists like Jackie Johnson (president of the lecturers' union NATFHE) and Bob Crow (deputy general secretary of transport union RMT), peace campaigners like Rae Street (vice-chair of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) and a host of others.

This year's Red November promises to be even better. There will be sessions on education funding, opposition to the euro, young people in work, socialist culture, the fight against racism

and other topics. This edition of Challenge went to press before the speakers could be confirmed, but we can guarantee that they will be well worth listening to. Red November will be held in Conway Hall in London on 11th November, the nearest Saturday to the anniversary of the Revolution. It will be followed by a social event. If you are interested, complete the form and return it to YCL, Unit F11, 787 Commercial Rd, LONDON E14 7HG.



I would like more information about Red November

Name

Address

Postcod

Tel:

E-mail

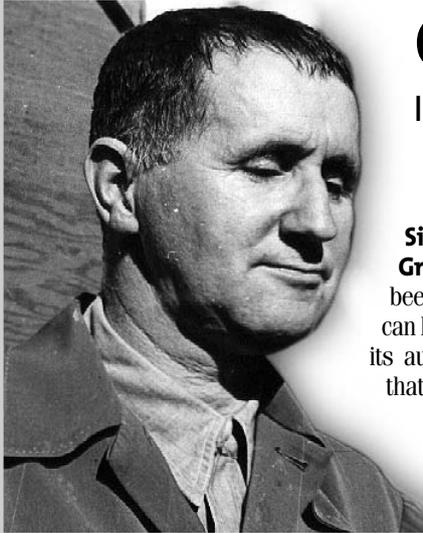
Return to: Young Communist League,
Unit F11, 787 Commercial Rd, London E14 7HG



Red November 9

Don't suspend your disbelief an introduction to the works of Bertolt Brecht

Introduction & Translation by Ed Griffiths.



Since the time of ancient Greek tragedy, it has been recognised that drama can have a profound effect on its audience. Aristotle¹ wrote that witnessing tragic events on the stage can lead to a catharsis, or cleansing, of the spectator's emotions; and almost everyone has experi-

enced the sense of being completely bound up in the characters and events unfolding before them.

For the great German communist playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), this was exactly what the theatre must avoid. His plays aim to alienate the audience from the action: you never forget that you are sitting in a theatre watching actors, and you never completely identify with any of the characters. Where traditional drama leaves spectators with the feeling that the problems have been resolved in the only possible way, Brecht set out to create an 'epic theatre' which would leave the audience aware that nothing has really been settled, impatient to get to grips with changing things. He even encouraged his audiences to smoke in the theatre, believing that this would help them to maintain a critical distance from the play.² He writes about problems which cannot just be wrapped up with a simple theatrical ending: war and the people who profit from it in *Mother Courage*, whose heroine needs war for her business even as her children are one by one killed in the fighting, or crime and poverty in *The Threepenny Opera*, with music by Kurt Weill (including such famous songs as 'Mack the Knife' and 'Pirate Jenny').

Exiled from his homeland by the nazis and harassed in the US for his communist sympathies, Brecht returned to East Berlin after the war and set up a theatre company, the Berliner Ensemble, which put on both his own plays and Brechtian productions of classic works by playwrights including Shakespeare. His productions of the classics aimed to bring to the forefront tensions which are normally eclipsed: he said of traditional Shakespeare productions that the spectators who "saw King Lear give away his kingdom in pieces pitied honest Cordelia, who didn't get one of the pieces, not the thousands of people who were thus given away."³ The Ensemble, which achieved worldwide fame, is now being closed down (at least in its present form) – supposedly for lack of funds. Perhaps the former German Democratic Republic's new rulers are still scared of a theatre which threatens to make people think about changing the world.

As well as being a playwright, Brecht was one of the 20th century's great poets. The poems I have translated here give a flavour of his talent: a talent which was always at the service of the working class.

My brother was a pilot

My brother was a pilot
His orders came one day
He packed his bags and so
To the South he made his way.

My brother is a conqueror
Our race, as you may read
Has always dreamt of winning
The living space we need.

The space my brother conquered
Is where Spain's hills are steep
It's one metre eighty lengthways
And one metre fifty deep.

Questions asked by a worker who has been reading

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?
In the books you can find the names of kings.
Did the kings lug the stone themselves?
And Babylon, destroyed so often
Who rebuilt it all those times? Whereabouts
In Lima, blazing with gold, were the workmens' houses?
That evening when the Great Wall of China was finished,
Where did the stonemasons go?
Great Rome is full of triumphal arches. Who put them up?
Over whom did the Caesars triumph?
Did everyone in much-sung Byzantium live in a palace?
Even in famed Atlantis, when the sea covered it, the
night was loud with the bellowing of the drowning calling
for their slaves.

Young Alexander conquered India.
On his own?
Caesar beat the Gauls.
Didn't he even take a cook with him?
Philip of Spain wept when his fleet
Went down. Was no-one else weeping?
Frederick the Second won the Seven Years' War.
Who won, besides him?

Every page a victory.
Who cooked the victory dinner?
Every ten pages a great man.
Who paid the expenses?

So many reports.
So many questions.

Last farewell

Here's what the last monument will say,
The broken one, the one no-one will read:

The planet is burst to fragments.
It bore us, and we annihilated it.

For living together we could only come up with capitalism.
When it came to physics, we were more successful:
We worked out a way of dying together.

1 Aristotle: *Poetics*

2 Brecht, *B. Brecht on Theatre*

3. Quoted in Heinemann, *M. How Brecht read Shakespeare*

LETTERS



We Welcome Letters to Challenge. Please send them to CHALLENGE, Unit 11, Cape House, 787 Commercial Road, London E14 7HG.

Dear Comrade,

I believe it is essential that Communists continue to fight against tuition fees in universities, and I am delighted that the Young Communist League have made it clear that this is one of their priorities. At sixty-eight, well do I know that that which is old and established is more difficult to crush. Tuition fees are no longer new, so many will give up the fight.

In addition, it has come to my aged ears that the students who are Labour and Conservative are going against their own interests to support them, or twist the issue and evade the question, in order to gain the favours of their Party and help their future as budding Ministers.

Therefore, vigilance! We must work and fight together to abolish this evil.

A. YORRAM YORKSHIRE

Dear Comrade,

Did it ever occur to you that Robin Hood was a socialist?
QUENTIN FORM NOTTINGHAM

Dear Comrade,

I was worried by the condemnation of Saddam Hussein in the last issue of *Young Communist*. It detracts attention from the criminality of the Western leaderships, compared to whom he is a saint. His government has made important strides forward in health care and education, and is under constant attack from the chiefs of the capitalist world.

HASHA SÚRRI LONDON

Dear Comrade,

I, like many, have been worried by the instant reaction of the left, including its youth wing, against the protests against fuel duty that have gone on. That millions of ordinary people are bankrupted paying 300% tax on things like petrol and cigarettes is a disgrace. Indeed, of every £1 we spend on petrol, 70p is tax. If this tax were used to create a better public transport system it would be something, but in fact all our government does as far as transport is concerned is privatise. It won't help the environment to squeeze every penny out of drivers while they have no decent alternative to driving. The way to help the environment, public transport, and other welfare state branches such as the NHS is to tax the rich, not the poor. Any taxi driver or family man or woman will know that we need our cars, and that we cannot afford to spend so much on petrol. In addition, had Blair given in to mass demand for lower petrol prices, he would have maintained his credibility as a premier who listens; now, in many polls he is being overtaken by Conservatives in popularity. And if they win the next election we'll be back in the shit we endured for eighteen years.

FRED CANE LONDON

Dear Comrade,

Much as I appreciate their support, as a pensioner I do not believe that the Young Communist League will attract many people by fighting for a pension linked to earnings. The Young Communist League can concentrate on issues directly relating to its members, like tuition fees. This will give it much better standing among youth. We pensioners can fight for a decent pension ourselves. The Party, which links young and old, can fight for both.

ALGERNON JENNINGS BARNSELY

Dear Comrade,

I was distressed at the minimum wage campaign I saw in the last issue of *Young Communist*. Quite frankly a minimum wage for youth is needed, but '£5 now' is a ridiculous and thoughtless slogan, with no link to reality. Why should a firm employ young and inexperienced workers if they are as expensive as older ones? A minimum wage of £3 an hour for 16-18 year olds is sufficient, rising to £4 an hour overall. £5 an hour is a good wage, and would increasingly encourage employers to lower the wages of people who are in fact experienced, full time workers. The cost of living is higher when you are supporting yourself, and higher still when you have a family. It is unreasonable to suggest that people who are seventeen (like me) and live with their parents, not needing to pay for accommodation, food or even clothes quite often, should get the same as a twenty nine year old living on his own.

JOE HALL MANCHESTER

Dear Comrade,

I was disappointed to discover a lack of interest in the issue of the legalisation of cannabis in the *Young Communist*. This is an issue being considered by our Labour government, and a very important one too. Does the YCL actually have a stance on this?

OLIVER WINNER GLOUCESTER

Dear Comrade,

I believe that the *Young Communist* could do with a change of name. The new style of the latest issue [Spring 2000] is good but lacks several things. Firstly, I think a change of name - 'Young Communist' is drab - would be advantageous. 'Red Hope' or something like that would be better. Secondly I think a decisive symbol of Communism would be good on the front - the clenched fist, hammer and sickle, red star, or something of that sort. All in a spirit of constructive criticism, of course.

ROB JONES PLYMOUTH

A Socialist Soul?

Lenin said: ‘Communism means Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country.’ Lenin had pointed out two aspects of the socialist revolution which were to comprise the main force of Soviet socialism – political change, in the form of socialist democracy organised and led by the Communist Party, and economic change, which was the more significant – for the political change was chiefly needed in order that progression from capitalist modes of production to socialist ones should be achieved. The emphasis was so much on economic change that many Communists regarded the NEP as a refutation of Bolshevism.

Socialism in the USSR and in Eastern Europe largely confined itself, as far as the state was concerned, to these two problems. Slogans in the 1920s of ‘building new man’ and the rest were increasingly forgotten by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union towards the end of the Stalin era, as the emphasis switched from revolution to traditionalism. Khrushchev’s democratisation did not tackle this problem head on, and thus in the middle 1960s the Soviet premier, Aleksey Kosygin, declared in simple terms that “Communism means the raising of living standards.”

He struck upon a sore point; because there were many, particularly outside Russia, who believed there was far more to Communism than this. But from another point of view, his position was easily justified; in Russia it would have been felt by many that less slogans of grand changes in man’s intrinsic nature and more simple work towards the raising of living standards was necessary. In any case, it could be claimed, the Revolution was by its very nature intended to raise living standards above all else; why, if it failed to do this, would proletarians in other countries bother to support socialism?

Che Guevara claimed that moral incentives are more effective than material incentives. Most adherents to the capitalist order would disagree. So, if we are to look at Soviet policies in the 1960s and 1970s, would Kosygin, who encouraged wage incentives as a way of lifting the economy once more. But should a socialist society need such incentives?

According to Mao Zedong, there is a third aspect to the change which comes about with socialist revolution – the moral change in human beings; and it is more significant than either political or economic change, because people are more important than things, so a change in the people is more important than a change in the things they possess or use.

To many, such a position seems attractive; but to others, it would seem pointlessly idealistic. Few working people are going to join the Revolution through desire to change their souls; more will join because they wish to improve their economic position or right injustice. Essentially, if a socialist system provides lower living standards than a capitalist system would in similar conditions, it is useless, because it has failed in the task it was set up to do – in almost all cases. Because of this, it is very important to compare living standards in socialist nations with those in the same nation before socialism, or where appropriate after socialism, to see the difference, rather than comparing the living standards of Russia or China with the advanced nations of the

West. Again, using this basic tenet, we can tell that socialism did improve living standards in almost all cases.

This does not rule out, however, a genuine change in the characters of most people who are living in a socialist society. This may well be a corollary of reduced injustice or better security against the ever-changing realities of life; it is hard to believe that it is the improving nature of Communist Party tutelage which does this. In both Russia and to a larger extent China this was traced in a willingness of many to work voluntarily in their spare time on occasion – significantly, in Russia this died out on a large scale after the 1930s, and in China after the 1950s, although it re-emerged temporarily in the Cultural Revolution.

To take another example, crime is supposed to be reduced in socialist societies – according to Marx. Most Westerners would say this is another idealistic piece of nonsense. But, interestingly enough, it seems to be true.

Levels of crime in the USSR, Eastern Europe, China, Cuba and the rest were far, far lower than in the USA, Western Europe, the UK, and other capitalist countries. Of the little crime there was in the USSR in the 1970s, drunkards who did not know what they were doing committed 80% – which makes the level of conscious crime in socialist countries still lower.* Even the most reactionary daily newspaper in Great Britain, *The Daily Telegraph*, of such venerable capitalist credentials as to have been personally denounced by Karl Marx himself, admitted recently that Cuba is a much safer place than Britain – not only in crimes such as burglary but in less economically related ones like rape or abduction. It is a fact that societies which draw people out from an early stage – and both Cuba and Mao’s China are excellent examples of this – result in fewer loners than Western societies. Without a long period of mental isolation in which to dwell on sick fancies, far fewer people would turn out to be serial killers or paedophiles; and this is backed up by the lower levels of crimes of that sort in socialist countries.

So, capitalism’s evil cannot merely be traced in underpaid workers or poverty, or even in the countless wars that it causes; but in every vile crime committed by every vile individual. Capitalism’s mark characterises every single aspect of our society – and every single aspect must be changed. B.P.C.

Notes:

*G. Hosking, *A History of the Soviet Union 1917-1991*, Fontana Press 1992; see Chapter 13, *Soviet Society Under ‘Developed Socialism.’* See J. Robinson, *The Cultural Revolution in China*, Penguin Books 1969; also *Mao*, by Ross Terrill, Stanford University Press, 1999 edition.

For Lenin’s comments on this see *A Great Beginning*, which can be found in the Lawrence & Wishart Selected Works, pp478-496.



National culture and the European Union

Signe Hermann

According to UN human rights standards, it is forbidden to discriminate against people on the grounds of their origins, sex, race, colour, language, beliefs, political stance, sexuality, nationality or social origin. But if you look at the European Union's version of human rights – which is coming to take precedence over the UN's, due to the supreme authority of the European courts – you will see that EU treaties give us the same rights, except for the following: it is not forbidden to discriminate against people on grounds of language, social origin or political stance. So here culture raises its head. It's fine to discriminate against people on the grounds of their culture in the EU.

So why does the EU talk so much about culture?

What the EU is talking about is the formation of a 'single European' culture, through measures such as teaching children European history in school. They hope thereby to make all us Europeans inside the EU feel that we're one people. They want us to see the EU's Europe as one country, which may have been formed in an immensely undemocratic way but which is now our country, so that we will feel a kind of subconscious need to defend and preserve it. Beyond that, we will come to form a common front against all non-Europeans, to feel that people from France, Germany and Spain are 'us' and that people from all the countries outside the EU are 'foreigners', 'from outside'. This single European culture therefore amounts to an ideological strengthening of the EU, but it is also a weakening of EU countries' own cultures. It would not be an exaggeration to say they want a thousand years of traditions and standards to disappear in a few years. But why does the EU want its member states to give up their own cultures in exchange for some flattened-out, artificial European culture, with no knowledge of its history or cultural heritage? If we can get rid of 'cultural differences', there will be one less obstacle to the free movement of labour: but there's more to it than that!

If this project succeeds in making us forget who we are and regard ourselves for better or worse as Europeans, what then? Then we might soon stop regarding the EU as an occupying power, which exercises undemocratic influence over us from Brussels. We will not understand that it is a breach of sovereignty when we are no longer ruled by ourselves, the people of Denmark, but are just one set of Europeans ruled by other Europeans. We will not see ourselves as a clearly defined group, who have been made to surrender power to a foreign institution. We will face great difficulties campaigning against the EU, because it will seem as though we are trying to get people to vote themselves out of the society to which they belong. In any case, the level of people's political

consciousness will be much lower than it is at the moment.

"A weakening of our national culture" – Pia Kjaersgaard¹ could have come up with that for herself. And all this talk about culture is something we're used to hearing from the right. But it's vital to bear in mind that the right uses culture in a totally opposite way. The right isn't interested in what a culture is, it just shouts all the louder that culture is threatened. From outside. By the foreigners. In their universe, culture is just something that's forever on the point of being 'swamped', 'drowned' or 'undermined' by the dreaded foreigner, of whose culture the right generally doesn't have the slightest idea – although it's happy enough to spread scaremongering lies about it. Used in this way, culture becomes a weapon in the hands of xenophobia and then racism. 'We still haven't defined it or understood it, but we're not going to let those foreigners come here and wreck it' (if you don't even bother to analyse the present dominant culture, you certainly can't claim it'll suffer any damage in a multi-ethnic society). And if people feel threatened by 'enemies' coming from outside, and they can see the whole social welfare system giving way, and they buy the idea that inadequate resources are to blame rather than inadequate political will, then there's a kind of logic in the belief that it's too many immigrants stopping the scarce resources reaching the 'proper' Danes. Culture in itself can be used either for progress or for reaction – but whatever it is used for, it is a powerful weapon.

There is nothing which does so much to strengthen popular culture as the experience of outside occupation. We would find it hard to identify quite what Danish culture is, but a Kurd, for instance, could easily explain to you what Kurdish culture is. But we, too, are under occupation, in that Denmark's sovereignty is being eroded, and our rights and duties are determined elsewhere. Of course, the attack against us does not come in the form of rifles and bombers, and the object is more political power than Denmark's wealth and raw materials, but we are still in a situation where we need our culture. We need to strengthen our feeling of ourselves as a group, our sense that it is wrong for another power to rule us. The struggle against the EU will be a huge ideological battle, and it is here that remembering our culture can greatly strengthen us. But if they succeed in making us forget our culture before we see just how oppressed we really are, then we may lose sight of the fact that we are under occupation. And forgetting that fact in the struggle against the EU would really be shooting ourselves in the foot.

Translated by E.P.G. This article first appeared in Til Kamp, journal of the Communist Youth in Denmark.

¹ A Danish politician of the extreme right. (Translator's note)

Bursting the boundaries of the world

Jim Gledhill looks at the role of young communists in the Spanish Civil War

"It was born from everywhere at the same time, it filled all space like light," wrote the Scottish communist poet Hugh MacDiarmid in his poem "Major Road Ahead", shortly after the end of the Spanish Civil War. Like many others, he had been inspired by the solidarity shown by people from a number of different countries, who volunteered to fight for the Spanish Republic and its elected socialist government against a rebellion by pro-fascist generals, led by Francisco Franco. Today, however, many received ideas about the war have been revised in order to fit into the framework of a post-Cold War Western interpretation of 20th-century history, where "causes" are regarded as outdated leftovers from a bygone age of idealism. The notion of one glorious romantic failure, encased for all eternity in one quixotically noble but ultimately futile decade, informs many people's attitudes to the fate of the Spanish Republic. Elsewhere on the political spectrum, it seems that George Orwell's account of the war in *Homage to Catalonia* has been accepted by many as the gospel truth, if such a crude representation of events as Ken Loach's beautifully distorted film *Land and Freedom* is anything to go by. The great Orwellian hymn to a revolution betrayed by Stalinism has always had its advocates; but in the present climate of post-Soviet historical revisionism, it is more vital than ever that we remember the role British communists played in defending Spanish democracy.

The participation of literary figures such as Orwell and W.H. Auden has led some mistakenly to portray Spain as a kind of literary adventure. In reality, 95% of those British who volunteered to fight in the ranks of the anti-fascist International Brigade were drawn from working backgrounds in the factories, coalfields and shipyards of industrial Britain. Moreover, one of the most important aspects of the Spanish conflict was that for many working people it signified their own intellectual realisation and fulfilment. This formed part of a process which had begun long before Franco and his fellow right-wing rebels launched their armed uprising against the Spanish Republican government in 1936. Through a combination of trade union activity and discussion groups organised by both the Workers' Education Association and the Young Communist League, young working people were able to learn theory, engage in debate and develop a new political consciousness. Given that the average school leaving age for most was 13 or 14, for many young people this ad hoc learning environment acted as a substitute for higher education.

Churchgoing and older values had declined in the wake of the First World War, which had resulted in a significant sea change in working-class consciousness. The outbreak of civil war in Spain therefore symbolised the culmination of over a decade of struggle, which had begun with the General Strike of 1926. The Strike exacerbated class polarisation in British society and, as the historian Hywel Francis has argued, generated new moral attitudes to political activity which lay outside the constraints of parliamentary politics. Similarly, involvement in the National Unemployed Workers' Movement and the hunger marches provided an important training ground where young political activists could acquire discipline and organisational skills. Participation in the mass trespasses of the 1920s, such as at Kinderscout in Derbyshire, led many YCL members to be jailed for incitement to civil unrest. The General Strike had produced a culture of militancy and self-sacrifice which would convince many to volunteer to fight in Spain.

The battle against hunger and unemployment, combined with the communist-led opposition to Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, heightened the sense of international class consciousness among many British working people. As a consequence, the threat to Spanish democracy was seen in terms of national radical traditions dating back to the 1819 Peterloo Massacre and the 17th-century English Revolution. Through its

attachment to the Communist International, the British Communist Party was able to provide a lens through which to view the international class struggle. The Comintern was also the catalyst for the formation of the International Brigades.

With the Labour Party seemingly unwilling to provide any significant parliamentary solution to the problems of mass unemployment and the rise of Mosleyite fascism, the CP was widely perceived to be the only effective defence against both. In the aftermath of Franco's uprising, the Labour Party leadership stuck to the Conservative Party's policy of Non-Intervention. While Hitler and Mussolini poured in military support for the Spanish fascists, Western "democracies" sat on their hands and refused to help an elected government. Labour was thus heavily criticised in the pages of the *Daily Worker*, the predecessor of today's *Morning Star*, which experienced a massive increase in circulation during the period of the Spanish Civil War. From the outset, the CP organised the transportation of volunteers to Spain across the Pyrennees via Paris, and it continued to do so successfully from the underground even after volunteering to fight in Spain was declared illegal by the British government in February 1937. More than 2,500 people from Britain and Ireland volunteered to join the ranks of the International Brigades, and of this total nearly half were members of the Communist Party or the Young Communist League.

Shortly before the last major anti-fascist offensive of the war, which culminated in the battle of the Ebro in April 1938, the General Secretary of the British CP, Harry Pollitt, made his final visit to Spain. He gave a speech to the troops, in which he urged them to fight on to give the rest of the world time to prepare for the onslaught of fascism across the whole continent. Though the party had lost many of its most able cadres, including promising intellectuals such as Ralph Fox, John Cornford and Christopher Caudwell, it had provided dedicated leadership and highly effective organisation for the British contribution to the Republican cause. Furthermore, Spain should be viewed in context, as part of a continuing struggle for democratic rights in British society as well as internationally. Although the anti-fascist forces were defeated in Spain (Franco ruled as dictator until his death in 1974), they inspired a generation to continue that struggle.

If communists and their comrades in Spain lit a torch for the rest of the world to see by, then that torch burned brightly into the post-WWII world. The heightening of international class consciousness brought about by the cause of anti-fascism, and the decisive intervention by the Soviet Union in the Second World War, meant that Clement Attlee's 1945-1951 Labour government had little choice but to grant working people some of what they had demanded throughout the previous decades of struggle. The complacency and fear of change which had characterised pre-war British society were shattered by

the fight against fascism: this created a climate of increased expectation and the hope for an alternative society after 1945. Hugh MacDiarmid described the Spanish Civil War as "An imperishable honour to Man; One of the great glories of human life/At the greatest turning point in human history/When mankind was faced with the sign: MAJOR ROAD AHEAD".

By mounting an effective opposition to fascism both on the home front and in Spain, British communists helped to steer us in the right direction down that road.



"The Popular Front of Madrid to the Popular Front of the world. Homage to the International Brigades." Issued by the International Brigades.

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An epic of failure

Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. The African Dream: The Diaries of the Revolutionary War in the Congo. The Harvill Press, London, 2000. £12.00. ISBN: 1-86046-764-4.

In her foreword to this book, Guevara's widow Aleida Guevara March writes, "He begins by saying: 'This is the history of a failure.' ... But personally I think it was an epic." The belated publication of Che's own record might help more people to judge for themselves the failure and the heroism of these battles in a revolution which had to wait another thirty years for victory.

The story starts in 1964: Congo's charismatic and progressive independence leader, Patrice Lumumba, had been assassinated by the CIA, and the country was under the unsteady control of a right-wing junta backed by South African mercenaries. Then as now, the direction taken by this huge and resource-rich country was critical for the whole of Africa. In the context, Guevara felt his revolutionary duty was clear. He travelled to the Congo in disguise, with a small group of Cuban fighters, and offered his services to the revolutionaries who still held a strip of territory in the east of the country.

The expedition was plagued with difficulties from the outset. The Congolese, who had experienced particularly harsh colonial tyranny at the hands of the Belgians, were suspicious of any foreigners seeming to tell them what to do. The revolutionaries were disorganised, ill-disciplined and superstitious, believing that a magical preparation called *dawa* could make them immune to bullets; and the peasants had little understanding of what they were being asked to fight for. The Cubans failed to appreciate the strength of tribalism, and (unlike the South Africans) often acted as if a Congolese national consciousness was an established fact rather than a goal to be fought for. Che is bitterly critical of the failings of both the Cuban and Congolese revolutionaries: the book was written to help the leaders in Havana avoid similar mistakes in the future. Some of his harshest criticism is reserved for Laurent Désiré Kabila, a 26-year-old whom he saw as the only one of the Congolese revolution's squabbling leaders who could really mobilise the masses, but who spent most of his time in the safety and relative comfort of Tanzania.

In 1965 the Cubans were forced to withdraw, and the grip of neocolonialism on the Congo was secured only five days later when the army chief General Mobutu seized power in a *coup d'état*. He was to rule the country, which he renamed Zaïre, until 1997, and to steal an estimated US\$5bn from its treasury in the process. Since he allowed Western (mainly French) corporations to exploit Zaïre's vast natural resources unchecked, and had no truck with radical national liberation movements elsewhere in Africa, he was fêted in the capitalist world as a model African leader.

When the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaïre finally overthrew Mobutu in 1997, its leader was proclaimed President of the new Democratic Republic of Congo. His name was Laurent Désiré Kabila.

After 1965, Kabila had begun his own critical analysis of the Congolese revolutionary movement. The seven key weaknesses he had identified by 1967 were close to those

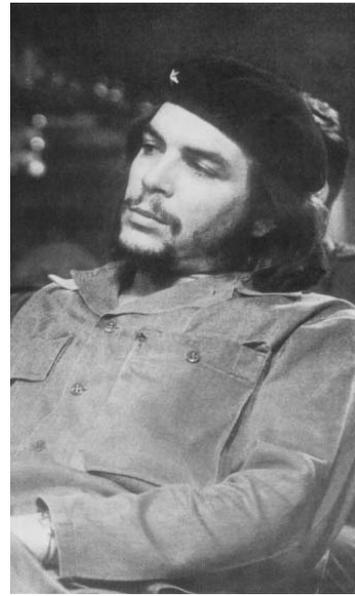
pinpointed by Che: lack of political education; too much dependence on foreign help; neglect of the role of the peasantry; tribalism; lack of discipline; lack of co-operation between the fighters and the people; the absence of a revolutionary party. Based on this analysis, he had painstakingly rebuilt the movement around his own Party of the People's Revolution, which became a key component of the Alliance. It took 32 years

of military and political preparation before the revolutionary movement was strong enough to topple Mobutu, beginning its fight in the same region where Che had been defeated three decades earlier.

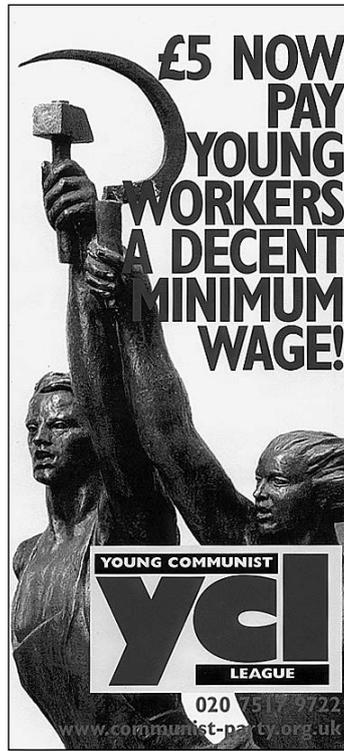
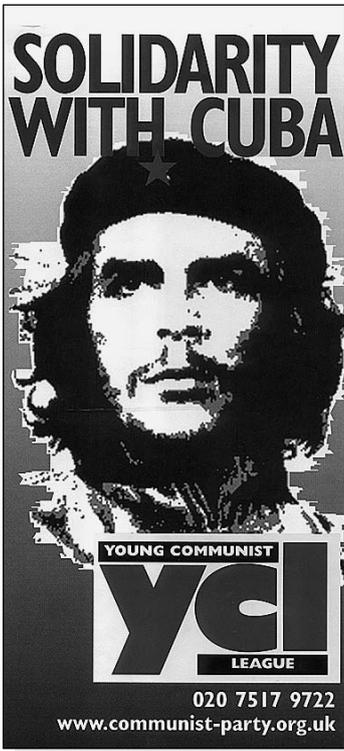
Although Kabila was able to exploit the contradictions between rival US and European imperialists in the course of the struggle for power, both sides were frightened by the success of the revolution in central Africa's largest and wealthiest country. As a result, the US's puppets in Uganda and Rwanda have been encouraged to invade part of Congo's territory. Despite military assistance from other progressive African governments, Congo has yet to defeat this aggression.

The war, however, has not stopped the revolutionary government embarking on a radical programme of change. Kabila correctly perceived that Congo could only build revolutionary democracy on a completely fresh basis, rather than trying to reform the dictatorial state machinery. The core of the new system is the Committees of People's Power, which organise the people (basically the poor peasants) from the street or village upward. As Kabila himself points out, the peasants themselves are much more likely to get on with repairing a collapsed bridge, installing electricity cables or disciplining an exploitative trader than a parliament in the distant capital Kinshasa would be. But the significance of the Committees of People's Power is much more than making government more honest and efficient: through them, millions of poor peasants are being given the opportunity to take control of their own destinies and gain practical experience of administration and collective action.

The young Congolese revolution still faces the immense problems of war and underdevelopment. Guevara's closing speculation as to whether Kabila would learn from his mistakes, however, has been answered with a clear affirmative (although, apparently, not enough to satisfy Richard Gott, who writes the book's Introduction). The Congolese struggle did meet with failure in the 1960s: but it is made epic not only by the heroism of those who took part, but by the fact that it inspired today's revolutionaries. Anyone interested in Che Guevara's thought, or in the revolutionary movement in Congo and throughout Africa, will find this book a valuable resource, and Che's direct and human style makes it a gripping read. (E.P.G.)



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