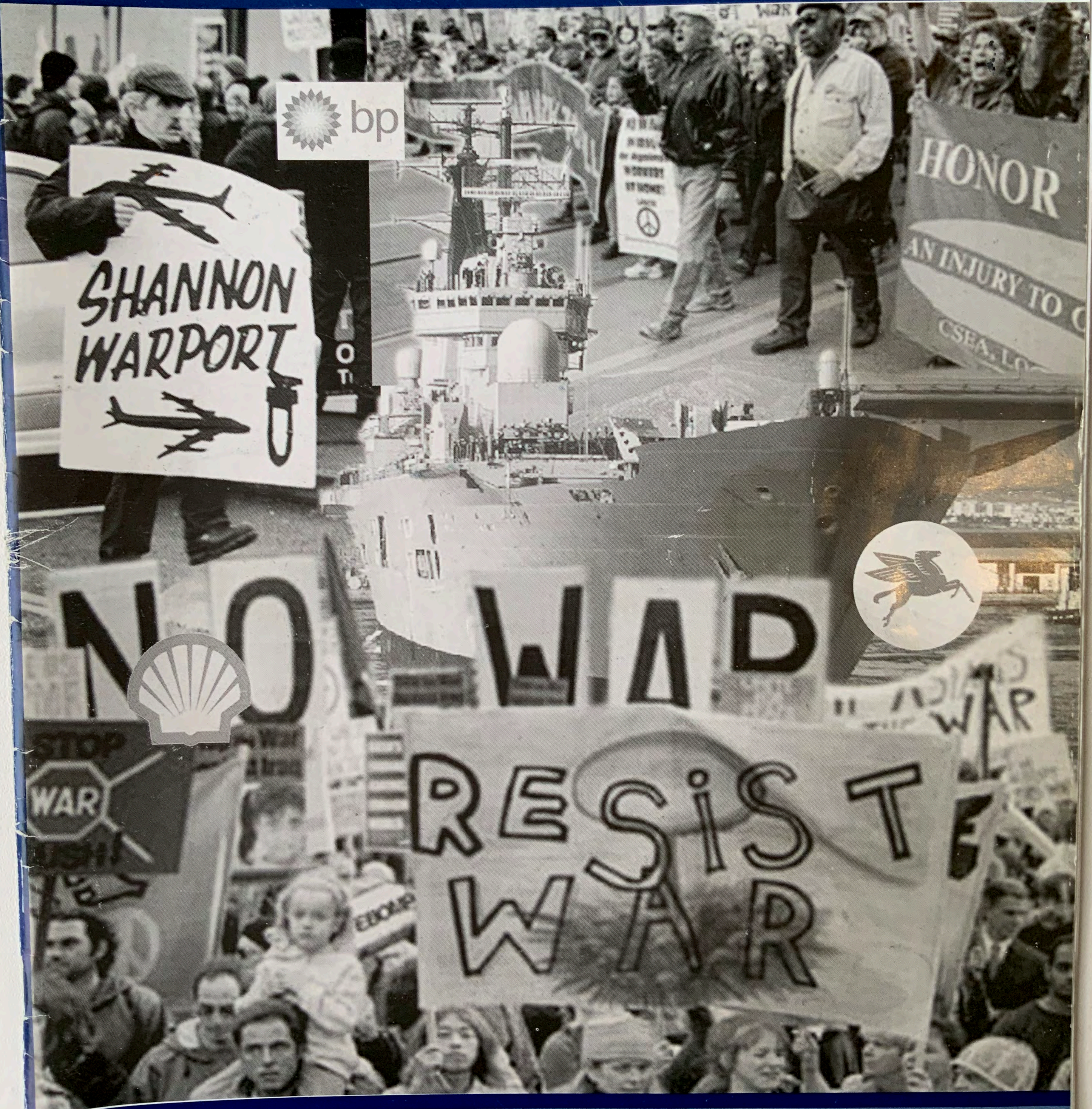


Socialist VIEW

POLITICAL JOURNAL OF THE SOCIALIST PARTY

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• **Bush and Blair waging war for oil** •

Socialist View is the political journal of the Socialist Party, the Irish section of the Committee for a Workers' International

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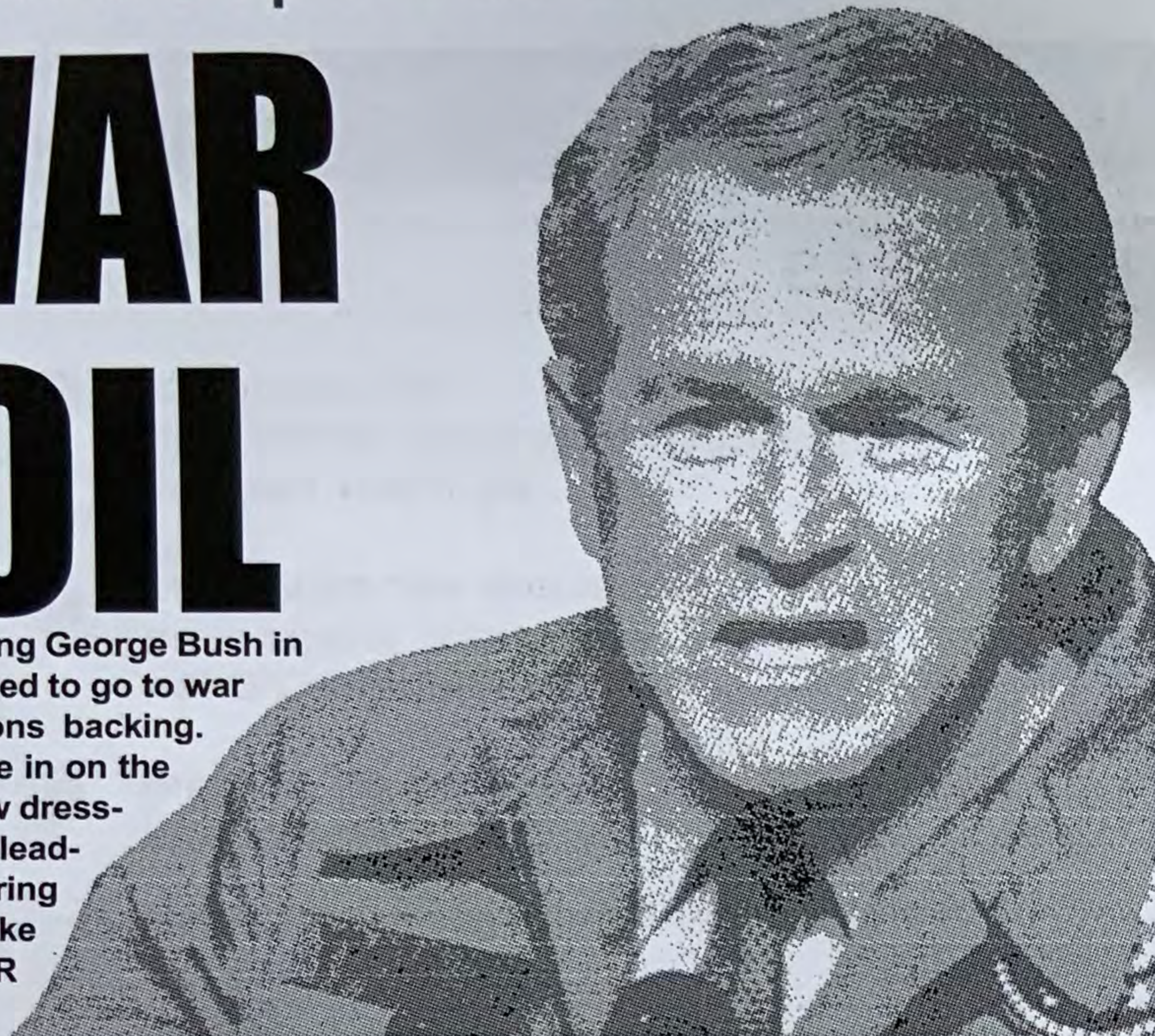
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NO WAR FOR OIL

The right wing cabal surrounding George Bush in the White House are determined to go to war with or without United Nations backing. Tony Blair is also determined to be in on the act. Take away the political window dressing, the recent statements by both leaders, particularly Bush's warmongering State of the Union Address, make their intentions clear. By PETER HADDEN



More eloquent and less ambiguous is the huge military juggernaut headed for the Gulf. By late February there could be up to 200,000 US troops assembled on the borders of Iraq, backed by around 30,000 from Britain.

The very presence of this huge force points to war as virtually certain and probably in the short rather than in the long or even medium term. This is a hugely costly exercise being conducted by a US administration that has just cut \$300 million of federal heating subsidies from 438,000 poor families and a so called "Labour" government in Britain that cannot come up with a decent pay rise for firefighters. The cost of maintaining 150,000 US troops in the Gulf - less than the numbers that are likely to be sent to war - has been estimated at \$1 billion per week.

For George W., the political cost of not using this force once it has been assembled would be much higher. Having militarily eyeballed Saddam Hussein he cannot afford to play the Grand Old Duke of York and march this force away leaving Saddam in power. The loss of prestige would leave him a wounded President, only able to limp through to the next election now just over a year and a half away.

The only possible alternatives to war, that Saddam would take up the offer of exile and flee with his entourage, or that a section of the military would decide to save their own bacon and topple him in a coup, seem very unlikely. The US have for years been trying to encourage a section of the regime to

overthrow Saddam, with no success. As other options close, war becomes the only way the objective of "regime change" can be achieved.

Opposition to war

While Bush and his lapdog Blair are prepared to go it alone or with a "coalition of the willing", that is a coalition of those most subservient to the whims of Washington, they would prefer to have the diplomatic cover of United Nations backing. Opinion polls in Britain consistently show that more than 70% of people are opposed to Britain going to war without the UN. This, plus the opposition to Blair in Parliament and even in his own Cabinet, where a majority have expressed reservations about a go it alone strategy, give him very little room to manoeuvre. Should a war fought without the UN go wrong, Blair could find himself removed. In the US, there has also been massive opposition to the war and especially to a war not supported by the UN. Polls carried out by CNN/Time and the Brookings Institute at the end of January show 57% against unilateral action. Even the masters of political insensitivity who make up the Bush administration, people who feel they have a god given right to bludgeon their will upon the world, have been forced to take some note of these figures and of the hundreds of thousands who have taken to the streets of Washington, San Francisco and other cities.

So, as is generally the case, the route to war has had to be through the detour of diplomacy, with Bush and Blair first seeking a UN mandate. Even the hawks in the Bush administration have had to check their impatience to allow the UN exercise of weapons inspection to be played out.

WMD charade

All this is a charade since the real reasons for the war have nothing whatsoever to do with Iraq's supposed weapons of mass destruction. Whatever chemical and biological weapons the regime once had were supplied by the West when Saddam was an ally against the fundamentalist regime in Iran.

Iraq's chemical and biological weapons have long since either degraded or been destroyed. Whatever may be left poses little threat. The idea that Saddam would launch a chemical, biological or nuclear attack on the US or its allies when he is well aware that the US is the one country that not only possesses weapons of mass destruction in abundance but would be prepared to respond to such an attack by using them, is absurd.

The sending of the weapons inspectors placed the Iraqi regime in a no win situation. Whatever the Inspectorate reported back to their UN masters would be used by the US as a pretext for war. If any weapons were found, be they smoking, smouldering or just plain

rusting, this would be held up by Washington as proof that the Iraqis were lying and that further weapons must exist. If the Inspectorate found nothing, this would be cited as proof that the regime did not co-operate.

Similarly, the Iraqi regime cannot defend itself against the assertion that it has links with Al Qaeda. Never mind that there is no evidence for this claim - quite the reverse since the secular regime in Baghdad is no friend of fundamentalism. When you fight a "preventative" war, not against what an enemy has done but what they "might do", unsubstantiated allegations are all that is needed to provide the wafer of justification that is enough for Bush and Blair.

This pre war propaganda battle is an attempt to swing public opinion behind the war and also to get the UN to provide a cover for what is in reality an American invasion of Iraq. Meanwhile the military juggernaut trundles on and the countdown to war has begun.

This juggernaut moves relentlessly because it is driven by the real reasons for this conflict which have nothing to do with weapons of mass destruction or Al Qaeda links. While there is no fundamental difference between the Democratic and Republican Parties and their Presidential candidates in the US - both represent and uphold the interests of US Imperialism - there can be differences in the way they set about their business. Bush's victory represented a shift, placing the reins of power in the hands of an extreme right wing section of the US establishment.

His administration has close links with the big Texan oil interests, with the armaments industry as well as with sections of finance capital such as those who ran the now bust Enron corporation. Bush himself is a failed Texas oilman: his own company, Arbusto, was on the point of bankruptcy when it was bought out, eventually by the Harken oil firm that kept him on the Board in order to make use of his father's contacts in the industry. Vice President Dick Cheney was the chief executive of the world's largest oil services company, Halliburton. Security Adviser, Condoleezza Rice, sat on the Board of Chevron. Commerce Secretary, Don Evans, was the chairman of a Denver oil and gas company, Tom Brown Inc. Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, the Dr. Strangelove of the administration, was chief executive of pharmaceutical company, G.D.Searle. And so it goes on...

In terms of foreign policy, these people represent the more unilateralist and interventionist wing of the ruling class. Long before Bush's victory, the

various right wing think tanks to which they had links were advocating direct action against so called "rogue states": those countries that they thought might challenge or in some way threaten the interests of US capitalism. They favoured bringing the US's political influence across the globe into line with its overwhelming military hegemony. What is the point having a military force greater than that of the 15 next largest armies combined if you do not use it?

September 11th was a blow to the prestige of Bush and the right wing cabal surrounding him in the White House. His response in Afghanistan was in large part aimed at restoring that prestige and demonstrating to the masses throughout the ex colonial world what the consequences of messing with Uncle Sam would be.

Similarly, the coming war against Iraq is also about prestige and about making Saddam Hussein to encourage other regimes to fall into line with US policy.

War for oil

But the more fundamental reason for this war is economic and was in place before September 11th. Essentially, this is a war for oil. Saudi Arabia is presently the world's largest oil producer and sits on by far the largest known reserves, some 261 billion barrels. Next in terms of output is the United States, which produces over seven million barrels a day. Nonetheless, its domestic output falls far short of consumption and the US now has to import over ten million barrels a day.

However, domestic reserves are dwindling as the Texan and Californian oil fields begin to dry up. Known reserves are only 30 billion

barrels. In 2001, the US Energy Department issued a report on this question, the Cheney Report, written by the current Vice President. This projected that oil imports would have to rise to 16.7 million barrels per day by 2020. The fact that some three quarters of oil consumed in the US will soon have to be imported means that its ability to guarantee these supplies is now a key strategic concern.

The four main suppliers to the US today are Saudi Arabia, Mexico, Canada and Venezuela. Of these, only Saudi Arabia and Venezuela have known reserves greater than those of the US. The Venezuelan supply has just been disrupted for seven weeks because of the lock out by oil producers trying to bring down the populist Chavez government. There are grave fears within the US administration that



200,000 US troops have gone to the Gulf region.



More than 700 wells were destroyed during the Gulf War, setting oil fields ablaze for nine months.

the hated Saudi royal family could be overthrown and that another fundamentalist regime, this time with an anti western character, could take its place.

Fadel Gheit, an investment specialist with the New York brokerage firm, Fahnestock & Co., told the Guardian: "Of the 22 million people in Saudi Arabia, half are under the age of 25 and half of them have no jobs. Many want to see the end of the royal ruling family and, whether it takes five months or five years, their days are numbered. If Saudi Arabia fell into the hands of Moslem fundamentalists and the exports were stopped, there is not enough spare oil anywhere else to make up the shortfall."

This is why the Bush regime are tearing up environmental treaties to allow them to open up exploration in Alaska. It is why, expecting that 25% of US imports will come from African countries like Nigeria, Angola and Equatorial Guinea by 2015, they are exploring the possibility of setting up a military base in the Gulf of Guinea off the East African coast. It is also why they are trying to strengthen their inter-

ests in the Caspian region.

But above all, it is why Iraq, with the second largest known reserves of oil in the world, some 112.5 billion barrels, is such a glittering prize for US Imperialism. Iraq has long been of key importance to the main capitalist powers because of oil. During the British mandate, the oil was divided between US, French and British interests with companies like Shell and BP having an important stake.

The oil industry was nationalised in 1974. Only after Saddam's humiliating defeat in the Gulf War and especially after the introduction of the UN food for oil scheme at the end of 1996 were foreign companies able to come in and sign lucrative exploration deals. Now the Bush administration wants to go all the way, seize the oilfields and hand them over to his backers in US big oil.

In preparation for the aftermath of a military victory, Dick Chaney and officials of the State Department have been holding meetings with representatives of ExxonMobil, ChevronTexaco, ConocoPhillips and his old company, Halliburton. On the agenda is the tak-

ing over of the Iraqi oil fields and a programme of investment which, over five years, it is hoped would quadruple exports from the present 1.5 million barrels per day to at least 6 million. The aim would be to drive a huge pipeline through the OPEC cartel, dramatically lower oil prices and, in this way, boost the ailing world economy.

As one of Bush's economic advisers, Larry Lindsay, put it: "When there is a regime change you could add three to five million barrels (per day) to world supply. The successful prosecution of the war would be good for the economy."

The character of this war - a war for oil - will not change if it has UN backing or if it is supported by a "Coalition of the willing" that includes key European states like Italy and Spain. It is not just US capitalism that has an interest in Iraqi oil. According to the International Energy Agency's World Economic Outlook for 2001, the total value of the oil contracts signed by Saddam with foreign companies and governments is \$1.1 trillion.

Economic interests

Of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, two, the US and Britain, have been gung ho for war for some time. The other three have a direct economic stake in the conflict. A consortium of Russian companies, led by the state owned Lukoil, have a 75% stake in the West Qurna oilfield in the south of Iraq which holds up to 20 billion barrels.

French company, TotalFinaElf, has an agreement to develop the Nahr Omar and other fields close to the Iranian border. The China National Petroleum Corporation has reached an agreement to develop the Adhab field. Companies from Spain, India and Canada have also struck oil deals with Saddam.

The concern of these rival powers is that, after the war it will be a case of "to the victor the spoils", and that, if the US does go it alone (apart from its British poodle), they will revoke existing contracts and hand the oil fields over to US companies. These concerns give the US some leverage in their negotiations at the United Nations. The behind the scenes bargaining to achieve agreement for war will have little to do with weapons of mass destruction and a lot to do with whether existing oil contracts will be honoured in a post Saddam Iraq.

In purely military terms, this war is a one-sided affair. The US will have aer-

ial supremacy from the outset and will use it to bombard Iraqi positions with cluster bombs, huge daisy cutter bombs and other weapons of battlefield mass destruction. They have threatened to use as many cruise missiles in the first three days of the conflict as they fired in the whole of the last Gulf War. On top of all this there are new weapons, recently developed microwave bombs for example, that Rumsfeld and his military top brass are keen to try out.

Easy victory?

This does not necessarily mean that the war will be a push over, a re-run of Afghanistan where the rag-bag Taliban militias disintegrated and were routed, or like the last Gulf War which saw 200,000 Iraqis killed against an official toll of only 148 "allied" troops.

Following the victories in the Gulf, Kosovo and Afghanistan, a myth has grown up that wars can be won from the air with only proxy forces directed by "experts" needed on the ground to mop up what is left of the enemy. Those who believe this have forgotten the lessons of Vietnam where the US had control of the skies and used this to carpet bomb the Vietcong and their supply lines with bombs that may not have been as "smart" as the present crop but were not much less destructive. Yet years of bombing did not cow or defeat the Vietcong.

The key factor in Vietnam was the determination of the population to fight for social as well as national liberation (see article). In Afghanistan the hated Taliban regime had very little social base of support among the population. In Iraq it may be the case that the people, the 300,000 strong army included, have little inclination to give their lives to save the brutal dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

Certainly among the Kurdish population in the north and among the Shiite Muslims - who rose in rebellion against Saddam after the 1990-91 war - there is likely to be little active support for the regime in Baghdad. The mood of the Sunni population in the centre of the country cannot be so easily determined from the outside.

It may be that hatred of America and an understanding that this is not a war to "liberate" them, but a rapacious drive for oil, may outweigh their dislike of Saddam. If there is a mood to resist, especially among the 90,000 Republican Guard the war may turn into a more protracted and bloody affair than the Pentagon chiefs hope.

In particular, if Baghdad is defended,

the US and British troops could end up in a battle, fought at close quarters among the ruins and in the sewers, where the edge of aerial power and smart weapons makes less difference and where victory has to be won by combat troops on the ground. Then, the outcome could be like Grozny, where the Russians were able to take the city by reducing it to rubble but at a terrible cost.

War, by its nature, creates instability. There can be all sorts of unexpected twists, even in events far removed from the immediate battlefield which can affect the course it takes. An invasion of Iraq could re-ignite the smouldering conflict between Israel and Palestine. Saddam could launch an attack on Israel in order to provoke retaliation and allow him to paint the war as a US/Israeli offensive against the Arab world. It is also possible that the newly elected Sharon government might try to use the cover of the war to invade Gaza and try to crush the organised Palestinian resistance that is centred there.

While the exact course and outcome of the war may be uncertain the one thing that is not in doubt is that it will create more instability worldwide. The idea that a post war Iraq will be reconstructed and stabilised by a huge injection of aid is fanciful.

Over \$4 billion dollars was promised to rebuild Afghanistan's shattered infrastructure and economy. Only a tiny fraction has been delivered. Afghanistan is a state in name only. The rival warlords who briefly united behind the Northern Alliance now control much of the countryside and some are preparing to take on the government in Kabul.

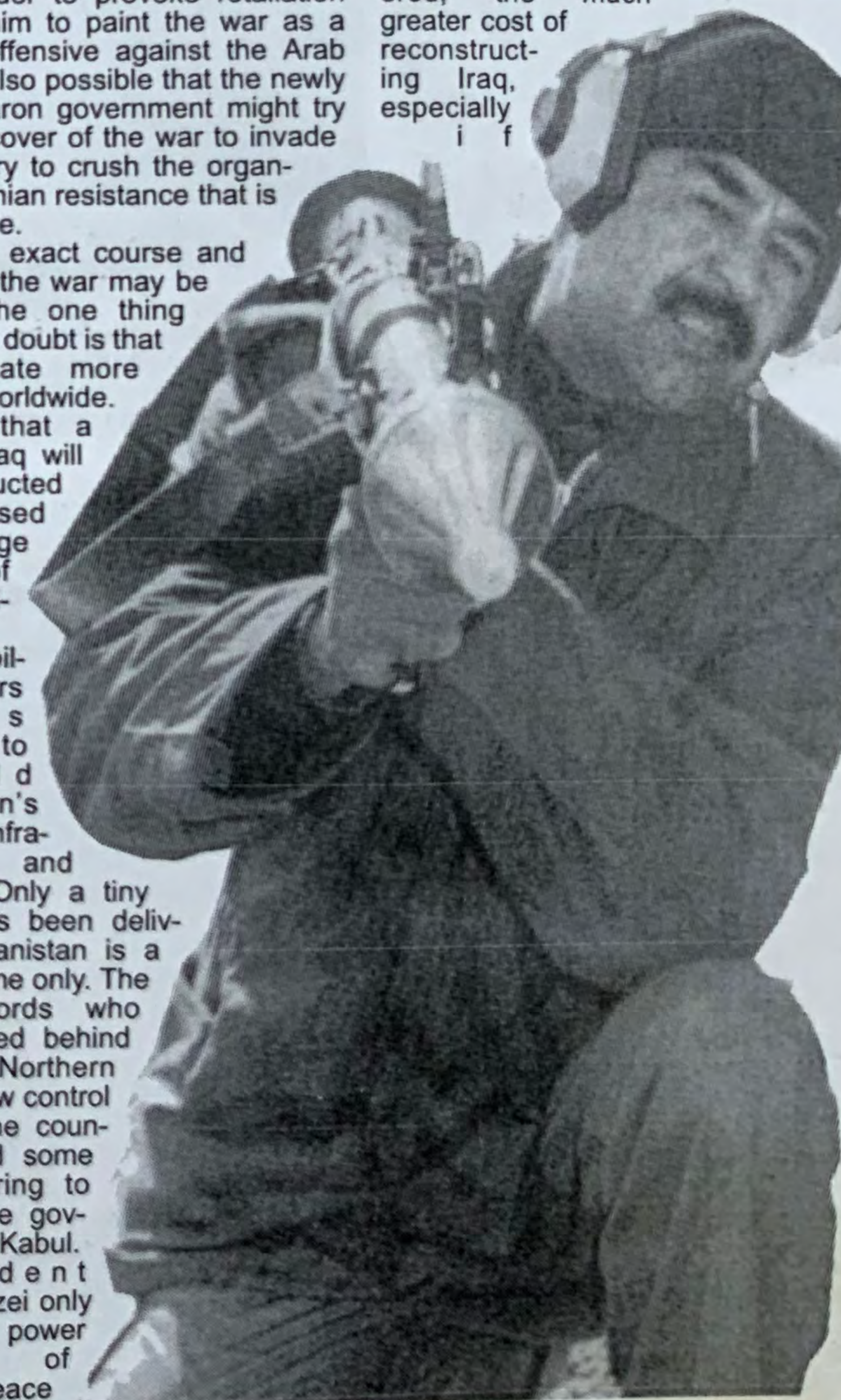
President Hamid Karzei only remains in power courtesy of 12,000 "peace

keeping" troops, especially the 4,000 who patrol Kabul. After the assassination of two Cabinet members and an attempt on his own life, his personal security is now in the hands of a private US security firm.

Meanwhile the Taliban and Al Qaeda have started to regroup and there are regular attacks on the mainly US "peace keepers". There have even been open battles in the mountainous southeast with US planes routinely responding with 500lb and 2,000lb bombs.

Iraq's future

If the relatively small sums needed to rebuild Afghanistan could not be delivered, the much greater cost of reconstructing Iraq, especially if



there is a protracted war, will not be found. After the 1990-91 conflict, Japan, Germany and other countries paid 80% of the \$80 billion cost. This time the costs, which some estimate will be more than \$200 billion, are likely to be borne by the US and by Britain.

War will strengthen the secessionist tendencies within Iraq: among the Kurds in the north and the Sunni population in the Basra region and along the border with Iran. Saddam has used brutal military methods to instil a fear of Baghdad and keep the country intact. A crushing defeat for the Iraqi army would remove much of this fear and encourage revolt.

A break-up of Iraq would have huge implications for the whole region, especially Turkey with its large Kurdish population. Fearful of regional destabilisation, the US want to preserve the Iraqi state as it is, offering only some measure of autonomy to its minorities. This is why they would have preferred a coup to oust Saddam or a limited war that would have left the core of the army intact.

They will more likely face a situation where the only force capable of holding Iraq together will be the victorious US troops. All the attempts to cobble together a credible post war government from the diverse Iraqi opposition groups have so far failed. The alternative is for the US military to take direct charge; as they did when General MacArthur became ruler of Japan in 1945.

Even if some Iraqi toadies are found to front an administration, they will only provide a fig leaf of cover for what will be US military rule. The US administration is preparing for the long term occupation of Iraq by at least 75,000 troops at an estimated cost of over \$16 billion a year.

This will eventually turn into a running sore for Washington. The presence of a US military garrison, and the plunder of the country's oil wealth will lead to open opposition, probably to military attacks, sabotage of oil pipelines etc. How quickly such opposition will develop would depend in part on what happens in the war, but the present situation in Afghanistan gives a glimpse of what the reality of a post war Iraq would be like.

The instability caused by this war will extend far beyond the Iraqi borders, and far beyond the immediate region. The Arab world will be shaken and the fate of many of its rulers, who in practice have bowed in submission to US pressure, will hang in the balance.

Living standards have fallen drastically across the Arab world. The World Economic Forum estimates that, because of population growth, the region needs a 5% annual growth rate



War on Iraq will enrage the Arab masses and threatens the dictatorial regimes in the region.

just to prevent unemployment rising. Over the last decade the average growth has been less than 1% and per capita income has fallen below the 1980 level.

Islamic fundamentalism

Anger at poverty, at the war, at the double standards of the western world over Israel and at the corrupt and undemocratic client regimes at home could, in the first instance, express itself in a growth of fundamentalism. In Saudi Arabia, where a survey last year found that 95% of 25-41 year olds support Bin Laden, the war might accelerate the collapse of the ruling royal family. The coming to power of an extreme anti western fundamentalist regime in the country with the largest output and largest reserves of oil could trigger another "war against terror" to bring it down.

An invasion of Iraq could strengthen the fundamentalist opposition in Afghanistan. Across the border in Pakistan, the Islamic opposition, who were runners up in the last rigged election, could emerge as the first party, threatening the possibility of an Algerian style civil war.

For the Bush administration, even an outright victory in Iraq will still leave unfinished business in the form of the others who dare stand in the way of outright US military and political hege-

mony. There is the problem of North Korea, with its abundant weapons of mass destruction and with a million strong army stationed just a few miles from Seoul and from the 37,000 US troops already garrisoned in South Korea.

The build up to war in Iraq and the difficulties of intervening in a conflict complicated by China's ambition to emerge as a regional superpower forced Bush to put his dispute with Pyongyang on the back burner.

For the people of the western world, especially those countries that back Bush in this war, this instability and upheaval is likely to be felt closer to home in the form of further terror attacks. It is not just the masses in the ex colonial world, but ordinary people in the west, who will pay the price.

Working class people may also have to pay an economic price. They already do so in that billions that could be spent on houses, hospitals, schools and other services that would improve people's lives are being wasted on weapons of mass destruction. But there could be a greater cost.

World economy

The world economy is teetering on the brink of a major crisis. The very factors that led to a prolongation of the boom of the 1990s are now threatening to aggravate the economic hang-

over. Above all, the world economy has been kept afloat by the willingness of consumers in the US to go into debt and act as "buyers of last resort" for world capitalism.

They borrowed against the perceived wealth of shares, but a three-year fall, which has seen US shares drop to half their peak value, has brought this to an end. More recently people continued to borrow against rising house values but this also appears to have reached its limits.

Economists fear that the US and European economies could now fall into a deflationary trap similar to that which has snared the Japanese economy for more than a decade. Some argue that a short war, which ends with the flooding of cheap Iraqi oil onto the world market driving down oil prices, will provide a lifeline for world capitalism.

This is likely to prove overly optimistic. The real uncertainty felt by the financiers and capitalists as the countdown to war proceeds has been shown by the jitters in the stock markets and investment decisions being put off. On the most optimistic scenario of a short war and the opening of the Iraqi oil taps, oil prices could fall for a period. But given the overall problems of world capitalism this would most likely result in a short term boost to the profits of the oil barons and of big energy consuming companies rather than offer a way out of the underlying crisis of the system.

The more likely immediate effect of the war will be to drive oil prices up,

perhaps even dramatically. If the war is prolonged, or if the Iraqi oil wells are sabotaged and go up in thick black smoke before elite US troops can seize them, the rise in prices could be longer lasting and could be the final trigger plunging Europe and the US into recession.

Falling living standards, political upheaval and war - these are not some temporary aberration; rather they are the expression of the true face of capitalism in crisis. The revolt that will develop against this war needs to look beyond the plumes of smoke that will rise over Iraq to uncover the real causes of this devastation and begin to provide an alternative.

What is needed is a movement that not only opposes war for profit but also challenges the system that breeds such conflicts. It is understandable that the anger of the peoples of the ex colonial world should be directed against the West. But the idea of a war directed against all the people of the advanced countries represents a dead end for the masses of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Terror attacks such as the atrocity committed on September 11 are completely counterproductive.

The victims of such attacks are overwhelmingly working class people who are not responsible for the crimes committed by their rulers. Far from weakening capitalism and imperialism, they provide an excuse for military intervention, as September 11 gave Bush the pretext to attack Afghanistan and in part also to invade Iraq.

Similarly the ideas of Islamic funda-

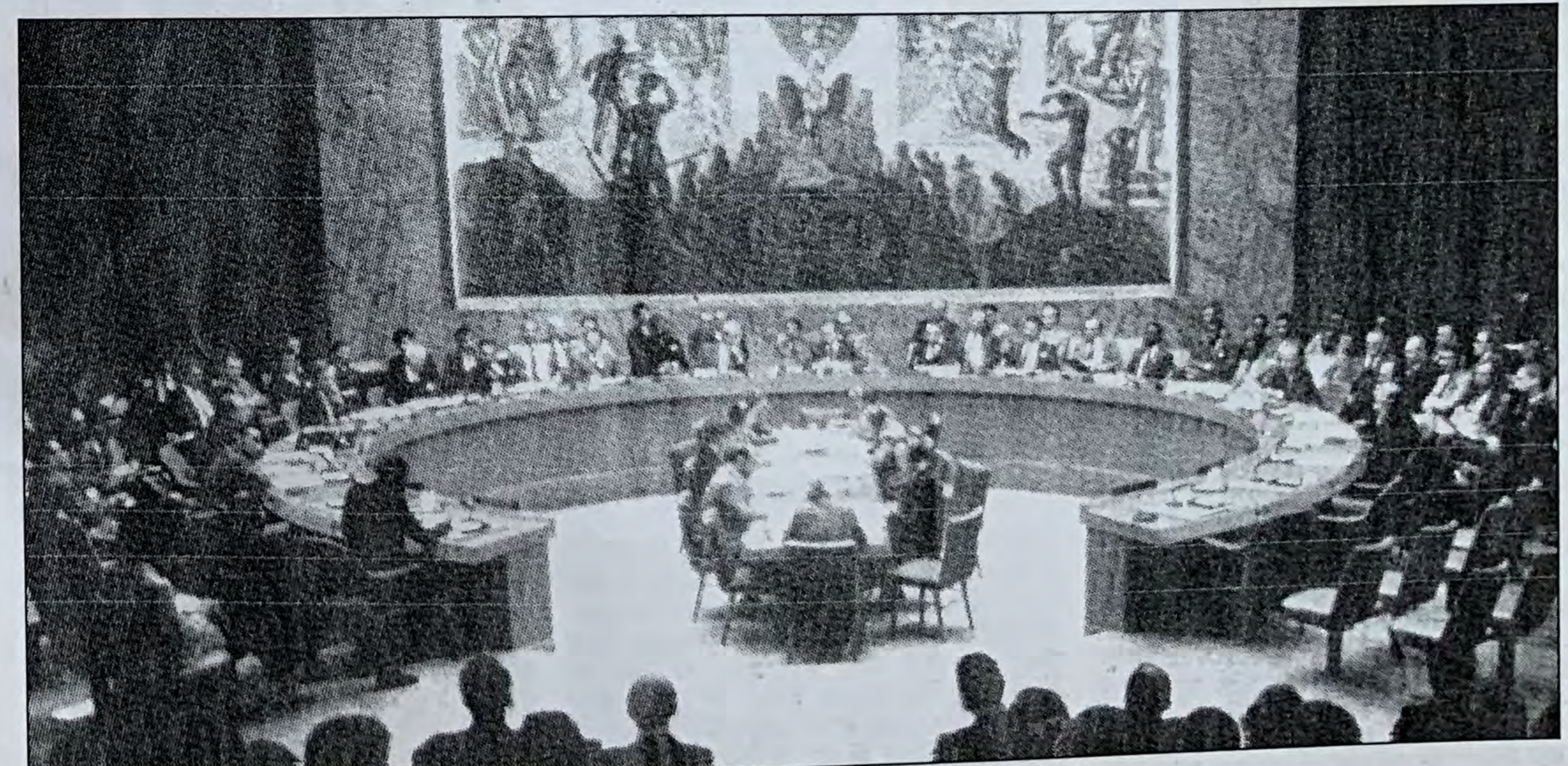
mentalism offer no way out from the poverty and misery caused by Imperialist exploitation. Fundamentalism in power in Iran, Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia has meant only ongoing poverty and brutal repression.

Although the living conditions of the oppressed masses in the ex colonial world and the working class in the advanced countries may be different, both have a common interest in getting rid of this rotten capitalist system.

What is needed is a world struggle, uniting the working class across national boundaries in the fight for a socialist system in which oil, water and the other resources of the world would be publicly owned, democratically managed and shared between all the peoples of the planet.

The task of getting rid of tyrants such as Saddam Hussein, as well as all the pro western dictators in power across the ex colonial world, is down to the people of those countries. The working class movement in the West should give every practical assistance in this. Similarly, the task of getting rid of George Bush is a job for the US working class. They too should be given every help and assistance from workers around the world.

Tens of millions across the globe will take to the streets against this war. It is possible to see in this the outlines of a new movement of the working class and the oppressed that could not only stop the warmongers but could put an end to the system that breeds them.



The United Nations - ultimately pursuing the interests of the US.

A GLOBAL ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT

On 15 February, the international day of protest against the war, we witnessed the biggest anti war demonstrations in history. Globally, it was the biggest anti war manifestation since the international protests organised by the Labour and Social Democratic parties in the run up to the First World War.

By Michael O'Brien

While recent wars in the Gulf, Serbia and Afghanistan were sold to the broad mass of people in the West as necessary to take on despots and ethnic cleansing, the credibility gap facing Bush, Blair and Co. over this war has meant that demonstrations globally have already involved millions of people before any ground invasion has even begun. The effect of sanctions on the civilian population of Iraq alongside pure disbelief that the Saddam Hussein regime poses a "clear and present threat" to the West has pushed a broader than usual strata of society into the anti war camp.

In the UK, no other issue has seen Blair so isolated, not just in terms of public opposition to war in general but even within his own Cabinet on the question of supporting a US led war without UN approval. Against the backdrop of cuts in education and local authority services, many are looking askance at the diversion of millions of pounds into the war effort. This has driven many union leaders into an anti war position, although many share the same flawed view as the 100 or so "anti war" Labour MPs, that a UN sanctioned war would be acceptable. The scale of the demonstrations in Britain can also be attributed to the mass mobilisation of the muslim community.

Whereas in the past, many people in the South of Ireland would have regard-

ed such wars as remote events, the use of Shannon Airport by the US military along with the South's general drift towards military alliances and its recent participation on the UN Security Council makes it an accessory to this war for oil. A feature of many people coming around the anti war movement, particularly in the South, is their disgust with the legal breaches of neutrality and the marginalisation of the UN.

Socialists would not subscribe to the notion of neutrality, insofar as it is necessary to take sides in conflicts from the point of view of what serves the interests of ordinary working people and poor. However, we recognise that the idea of Irish "neutrality" being breached that has spurred many into anti war activity derives more from an opposition to Southern Ireland participating in military alliances. While legal breaches of neutrality are an avenue that can be pursued by anti-war TDs in the Dáil, it will be more useful to highlight how dispensable the constitution is for the Southern Irish establishment when imperialist interests are at stake. Parliamentary debates on the war in Iraq will be a mere side-show compared to what will take place on the streets around the world if and when war begins.

United Nations

As for the UN, its support for sanctions in Iraq, causing the deaths of over a million ordinary Iraqis, has opened the eyes of many. It is now hard to believe that many on the anti war side argued in favour of sanctions back in the early nineties as a peaceful alternative to war. In reality, they have proven to be the biggest weapon of mass destruction.

Opposition to war at UN level, if anything, is a pale reflection of the pressures building up from below in many countries. Blair is the exception on this point. The scale of the military build up alongside Blair's statement that the opposition of individual countries at Security Council level will not be regarded as an impediment to war demonstrates to all what a sham the UN is and that the argument of some for a "strong UN" is meaningless.

The international demonstrations on 15 February served as an event through which those that, until now, have passively opposed war can now make their opposition active. For those already moving into activity for the first time, it is an opportunity to become an organiser for the event by using anti war material and making the arguments in their workplace, homes, schools and colleges.

The questions now posed are where to next after 15 February for the anti war movement globally? What will it take to seriously impede the war effort?

Direct action or mass action

The mass turnout on 15 February provides a conclusive answer to the so called "direct action versus mass action debate" which has been played out over the last few months among anti war activists. The view taken by anarchist influenced groups is essentially that mass demonstrations, particularly in capital cities are useless and that we should instead focus on high profile gestures such as occupying airport runways or damaging planes as has taken place at Shannon Airport for example.

Socialists don't see direct and mass action as mutually exclusive. For



instance, Eoin Dubsy breaching the fence at Shannon and spray painting a war plane proved invaluable in focusing attention on the issue of the US military presence. Likewise, the publicity received by the peace camp in the run up to the 18 January demonstration in Shannon contributed to the mass turnout on the day itself.

The Socialist Party would argue for the political pressure of a mass movement to be coupled with direct action.

When two train drivers in Motherwell, Scotland, refused to transport munitions, they did so knowing that their union Aslef had an official anti war policy and participated on the steering committee of the Stop the War Coalition in Britain. They would have been confident of public support which manifested itself in opinion polls but more importantly mass demonstrations including the 400,000 that turned out in London last September. The authorities in Britain are so shaken by this and afraid that it will catch on that they officially denied any knowledge of the incident at all! This is a

back handed admission that the people of Britain and the organised working class in particular are with the two train drivers.

Industrial action to impede the war is vital. Workers who personally object to facilitating the war need to feel that they are not isolated but have support from both their union and the public. This begins by arguing for an anti war policy within the trade unions at every level from the local branch right up to the executives of the various unions. In the South, the Irish Examiner newspaper and the Morning Ireland radio programme reported on the mood for a boycott of the US warplanes amongst sections of the Shannon Airport work force. However, when the question of a boycott was put to SIPTU leader Joe O'Flynn he denied any official approach being made to the union but that it was union policy to oppose war unless it had UN backing! Hardly an encouraging answer from the point of view of the workers. They will derive encouragement from further mass turnouts in Shannon and Dublin but the

trade unions in the South have the power to stop the US war planes from using Shannon Airport and the trade unions in Britain have the power to severely hamper and even stop the shipment of arms and military equipment to Iraq.

Mass mobilisations have another benefit in the effect they can have on the morale in the ranks of the armies. This was a factor in the collapse of the US war effort in Vietnam. In the early stages of the war before the anti war movement took off, individual US soldiers opposed to being in Vietnam felt isolated and were more likely to shot themselves than rebel against their officers. Later on as the death toll mounted and opposition in the US grew, the feeling of isolation was dispelled and organised opposition grew in the ranks of the army with anti war soldiers undermining the war effort from within.

Mass opposition to the war within the US and Britain has already reached a pitch that compares well with the days of Vietnam. In Germany and France mass opposition is a serious impediment to even sending large-scale troops. That is not to say that the mood against war will grow and grow without opposition. For example the Bush and Blair regimes could launch the war and go on a propaganda offensive at home along the lines of "whatever your misgivings about the war it has now begun and don't be letting our brave men and women on the ground down". While this may have a temporary effect on a layer within the anti war movement, the death toll on both sides and the background of cutbacks in public services and the diversion of resources into the war will ultimately lead to a growth of opposition.

"War on terror"

With that in mind, Bush and Blair want a quick victory in Iraq to cut across the movement against the war. While we can't be sure how long a war will last, there is a serious question mark over Bush's capacity to continue the "war on terror" elsewhere post Iraq as was his administration's expressed intention in the immediate aftermath of September 11. The limits to this "war on terror" can be attributed in part to the scale the anti war movement has reached.

Naturally, further terrorist attacks in the West are more likely if a war does take place and this poses a question for the anti war movements. It just takes one attack to put the question on the top of the news agenda and the minds of ordinary people. The overwhelming majority of people in the West are opposed to terrorism, the likes of which we have seen in New York and Bali. If terrorist attacks occur the pro war lobby and their friends

in the media will attempt to label the anti war movement as soft on terrorism. If the anti war movement in the West is to galvanise behind it the broad mass of the population who fear terror attacks then this question must be addressed. In the event of terrorist attacks by organisations such as Al Qaida, the Socialist Party will argue that the anti war movement must take up and answer this issue.

A debate around this question has already taken place within the Stop the War Coalition in Britain. The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in particular, argued against taking up the question of terrorism. The SWP argues that to incorporate opposition to terrorism into the campaign's propaganda would be putting terrorist groups on the same footing as US and British imperialists. Furthermore, they argue that a stated opposition to terror will prevent the anti war movement from mobilising the Muslim community! Apart from the patronising content to this argument, it is also dishonest.

Socialists should not duck any questions that arise amongst the working class. If terrorist attacks occur, then they must be taken up by the anti war movement. Socialists need to explain the conditions of economic and political oppression which give rise to terrorism but also need to point out clearly that terrorism does not undermine imperialism. In fact, it has the opposite effect of strengthening it. The September 11th attacks have been used as a smokescreen by US Imperialism to impose its will militarily around the globe, and is being used as a cover for its war for oil in Iraq. People in general who are opposed to the war

have the sophistication necessary to see that opposing these terrorist acts does not take away from the main responsibility for instability in the Arab world which lies with global capitalism and local despots.

In the Arab world, a key feature of the anti war movement is the need to overthrow the pro US rulers and fight for democratic demands. These points were taken up in the Cairo declaration, which was produced in the wake of a gathering of anti war and anti globalisation groups in the Arab world. However, achieving even the most basic of democratic reforms in this part of the world poses the need for a break with capitalism which is incapable of delivering any security for people regardless of how it is reformed.

Anti-war programme

Within the anti war movement, the Socialist Party and the Committee for a Workers International (CWI) promotes a programme which, while it won't be adopted by the movement as a whole at this stage will win over those people who draw the most far reaching conclusions; conclusions about war being inevitable under capitalism and that the only way ultimately to end war is to overthrow the capitalist system and to replace it with democratic socialism.

The slogan of "No War for Oil" exposes the real reasons behind Bush and Blair's drive to war. During the war itself more concrete and specific issues will be raised and need to be dealt with by socialists. The Socialist Party will also be campaigning around the slogan of US and British troops out of the Gulf.

The Socialist Party and the CWI will

argue within the anti war movement for the right of self defence for the ordinary Iraqi people when they are attacked. This necessitates the arming of the Iraqi people and the organisation of defence committees on a democratic basis. At the same time as completely opposing the US and British invasion of Iraq, the Socialist Party also argues for the right of the Iraqi people to struggle to overthrow Saddam Hussein and to fight to drive US and British imperialism out of Iraq.

Our programme on this war also fundamentally includes supporting a struggle of the Iraqi masses for the building of a socialist Iraq, linked to a struggle throughout the Arab world for a socialist confederation of the Middle East: For the public ownership of Iraq's oil industry and the right of self determination for the Kurdish people and the Shiite Muslims.

This war will politicise and radicalise millions of working class people around the globe. Its lasting effects will not only be seen in the political ramifications for Iraq and the whole of the Middle East, but will also be manifested in an increase in the numbers of people internationally who will join the struggle for international socialism.

Anti war movement: lessons of VIETNAM

The defeat of the most powerful army in the world in the jungles of Indochina was a turning point in world history. The US ruling class has been haunted by the memory of this defeat ever since.

By Ciaran Mulholland

Since the last of its troops were airlifted out of the American embassy in Saigon in 1975, the US has been reluctant to intervene where the risk of American casualties was more than minimal. The defeat of American imperialism in Vietnam holds important lessons for today's anti-war activists and should be considered carefully. The US intervened in Vietnam to prevent the victory of the National Liberation Front (NLF) which fought a long guerrilla war backed by the Stalinist North Vietnamese regime.

By 1968, 500,000 US troops were stationed in Vietnam. The US dropped eight million tons of bombs, more than twice the total dropped during World War II, and sprayed 20 million tons of the toxic defoliant Agent Orange. In total, 2.8 million US troops fought in Vietnam and 58,202 died there.

Despite this commitment, the US was defeated, above all else by the Vietnamese people's determination and fighting spirit. Perhaps three million Vietnamese died in wars against Japanese, French and US imperialism between 1945 and 1975. The NLF's program of national liberation from imperialist domination, land to the peasants, and a decent life for workers inspired the most astonishing support, self-sacrifice, and willingness to fight to the death.

"Hey, hey, LBJ. How many kids did you kill today?"

The war was also lost on the home front. The anti-war movement started as a small minority, with student sit-ins and demonstrations. When the bombings began, a Boston Commons protest attracted 100 people. This grew to a massive 100,000 by October 15, 1969 when two million in total protested across the country.

By 1969, there were 500 underground newspapers in high schools, and protests had been held on 232 college campuses. The media has attempted to portray the anti-war movement as being mainly made up of well-off students. However, with working class youth on the front lines in Vietnam, opposition to the war was actually strongest in working class communities.

Eventually, mass opposition developed within the armed forces themselves. With African Americans disproportionately represented in the army, the effects of the civil rights movement was a key factor. There was a clear class divide in the army. Low income soldiers were three times more likely to die than high income soldiers. Of the 43,000 soldiers with the rank of Major or above only 201 died. In 1970, there were over 50 underground newspapers on military bases. By 1971, 17.7% of US soldiers were listed as AWOL.

The situation facing the generals was summed up by Col. Robert D. Heinl Jr. in 1971: "By every conceivable indicator, our army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and non commissioned officers, drug-ridden, and dispirited where not near mutinous." The most powerful army in the world disintegrated. As the economy ran into difficulties, there was an increase in the number of strikes. The state began to fear a coming together of workers in struggle, young people protesting against the war and revolt in the ghettos.

America erupts.

In 1970, national guardsmen shot dead four students at the largely working class Kent State University and mass occupations of colleges erupted. FBI director Hoover declared that one of the murdered students was "nothing more than a whore anyway." Young people, minorities and important sections of the working class were in open revolt. Between 1965 and 1967, 130 people were killed in uprisings in the ghettos. By 1972, one million blacks considered themselves revolutionary.

Important sections of big business concluded that it was better to end the war rather than suffer further social explosions at home. In 1973, Nixon was forced to

withdraw all US troops.

Since then, the spokesmen and politicians of big business have been trying to re-write history. They argue that the US never really lost the war, but just failed to conduct it energetically enough. These same elements believe that their quick victory in Afghanistan has shown that determined military action can overcome all obstacles.

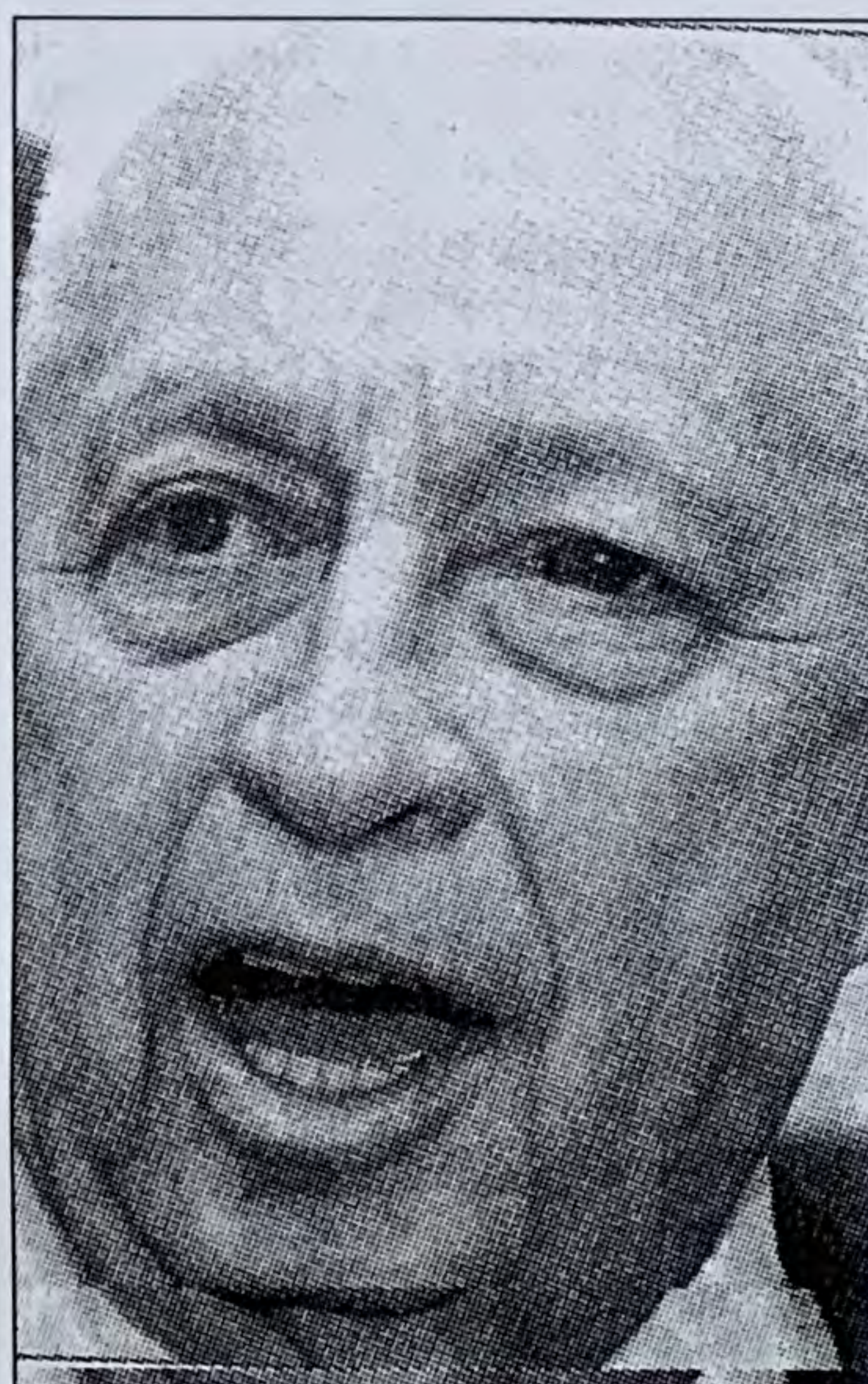
Bush and those around him believe that the Vietnam War should have been won and that the troops were let down both by weak politicians and the anti-war movement. The enormous worsening of social conditions in the semi-colonial countries will force workers and peasants into struggle in the coming years. The US will attempt to throttle these movements. But any military intervention in a revolutionary situation, like in Vietnam, would force the US once again to put hundreds of thousands of ground troops into the field of battle, risking significant US casualties. In a situation such as this, air power means very little. As US army Chief of Staff from the 1960's, General Harold K. Johnson, argues "if anything came out of Vietnam, it was that airpower couldn't do the job."



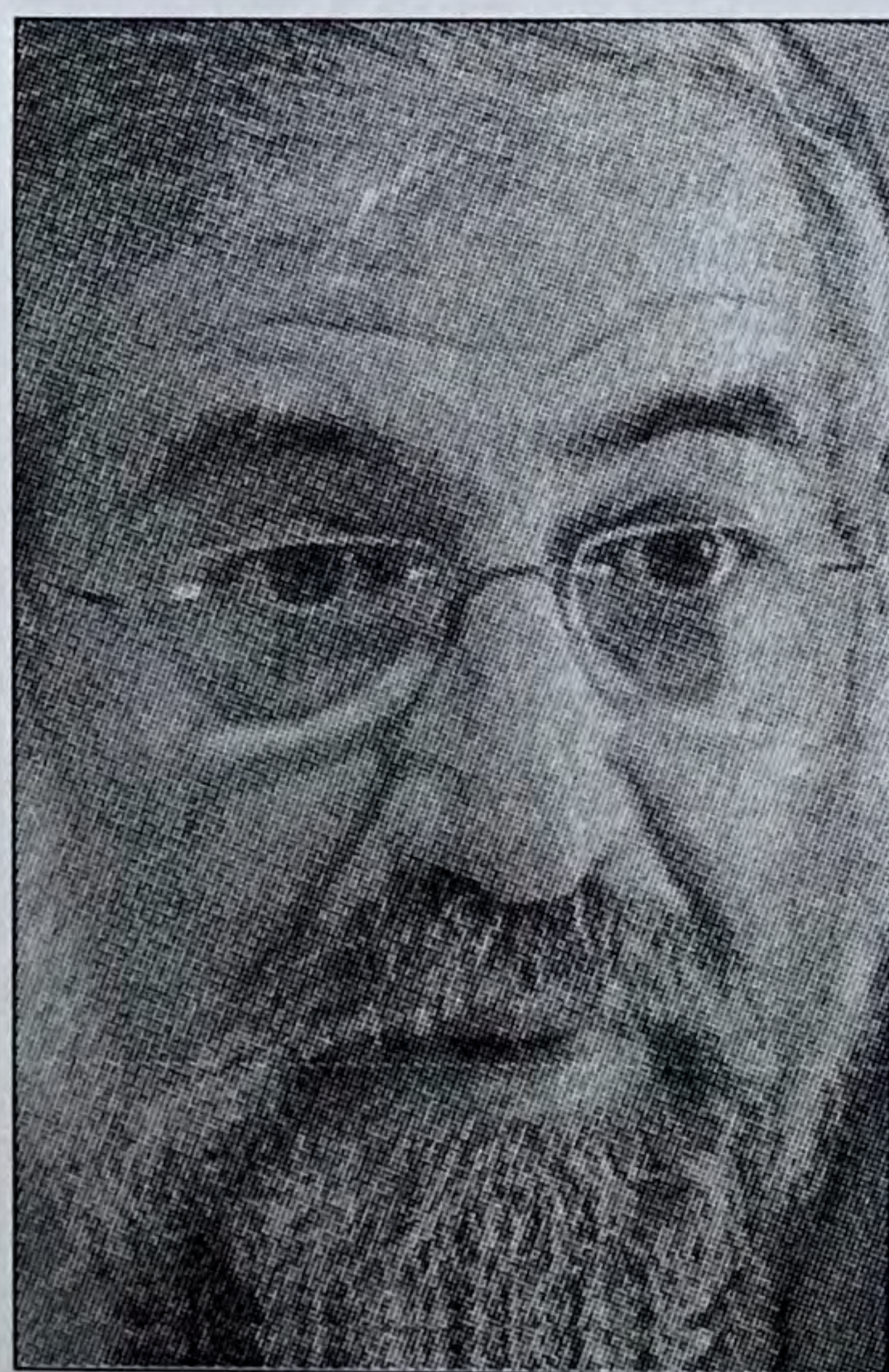
The Vietnam war spurred an open revolt amongst young people, minorities and important sections of the American working class.

Israel/Palestine

LIKUD'S VICTORY SHARPENS STRUGGLE



Ariel Sharon



Amram Mitzna

The final results of the Israeli elections are a clear victory for Prime Minister Sharon's Likud, which won 38 seats, up from 21 in the outgoing Knesset (Parliament), and double the number achieved by Labour, the traditional party of the Israeli ruling class. The superficial observer would see this major victory as a guarantee for a more stable second term government led by Sharon and Likud, but this is clearly not on the agenda.

By Ariel Gottlieb,
Ma'avak Sozialisti (CWI Israel)

The combination of a severe and deepening economic and social crisis and a continued bloody conflict with the Palestinians creates enormous instability and effectively rules out any government completing its four-year term.

This is clearly understood by most Israelis, as a pre-election survey shows: 29% said they expect the next government to last up to one year, another 34% said it would last around two years, while only 17% believed it would complete its full term. Most Israelis also see that no change (at least for the better) is forthcoming. This lack of hope, or rather widespread despair, together with a generalised crisis of confidence in political parties, can explain the poor turnout - 67.8%, the lowest result ever in elections for the Knesset and down from 79% in 1999.

While a little more than three million Israelis unenthusiastically went to the polling stations in "the only democracy in the Middle East", around the same number of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip were subject to tight closure, with most cities under a complete curfew for several days. This was justified by Israeli spokespersons citing alerts for attempts to disrupt elections through armed attacks inside Israel, but the fact remains, for every Israeli exercising his or her right to vote, there was a Palestinian denied freedom of movement. The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) also carried through large-scale land operations in the Gaza Strip, stopping short of a full invasion of the area, which could prove costly in terms of Israeli casualties.

The Labour party, the ruling party for the first 29 years of Israel's existence, suffered a severe blow, going down from

26 to 19 seats, its worst result ever. In part, this is the price Labour has paid for tail-ending Likud in the "national unity government"; sharing in the responsibility for the government's economic and other failures but without benefiting from the tendency of Israeli Jews to support "a strong leader" when threatened by frequent suicide bombings inside Israel. However, the collapse of the liberal-reformist Meretz Party, tumbling from ten to six seats after being in opposition, provides another important reason: Labour and Meretz have been the parties most strongly identified with the Oslo peace process, which has disintegrated under the pressure of the second Intifada and Israeli repression. These two parties, besides failing to provide a real alternative on economic issues, still offer variations on the Oslo theme as the only solutions to the national conflict. Although most Israelis do not yet understand that the Oslo process was doomed to collapse because it was a capitalist deal made at the top, with no regard to the interests of ordinary Palestinians (and Israelis), they do recognise the corpse of Oslo when they see it, and reject parties attempting to revive it.

The clear support for Sharon shown by the Bush administration also played a role. In the 1992 elections, the administration of Bush Senior demanded a freeze on settlement building as a precondition to the US giving guarantees for the large loans Israel needed to finance the absorption of the large numbers of immigrants from the former Soviet Union. When Shamir, Likud Prime Minister at the time, refused to accept the conditions, the administration quite openly switched its support to Labour and Rabin, and that had an effect in assisting Labour's victory. This time round, the Bush Junior administration made public its willingness to provide similar guarantees to support Israel's depressed economy just a few days before elections took place in a clear show of support for Sharon.

Corruption scandals

During the general election campaign corruption scandals involving Likud candidates and Sharon were exposed by the media. They uncovered that one candidate was backed by a crime family who

owns several casinos abroad. Another was a mobster, Musa Alperon, a well-known king of the underworld with many convictions in his past. The third was formerly part of Alperon's gang, collecting debts. This person was a member of a group of Likud activists who took over the Ramat Gan branch, the finance minister's branch.

Today, it seems, he or the Party has ties with (and perhaps owns a part of) a security firm that has won a fat contract from the state, guarding the country's border checkpoints. He also has ties with one of the Prime Minister's sons, who during and before Sharon's term in office, advised him on foreign as well as home issues.

In order to try and deflect the voters away from these scandals, Likud pushed the issue of a war against Iraq high up on to the election agenda. As Maariv (Labour backers) headlines were shouting "Corruption", Yediot (Likud backers) cried "War".

Initially the polls put Likud a bit closer to Labour, but still without any hope of a Labour victory. The reason becomes clear at a deeper glance: most people polled by Haaretz daily answered that Labour and Likud were equally corrupt! Lack of trust in the political system has become generalised (with lack of trust in the media almost on the same level).

The biggest scandals of all involve Sharon. The Greek Island affair and the story of his dealings with South African millionaire Cyril Karen involve bribery and both show clearly the link between big business and politics.

The Greek Island affair features David Appel, an Israeli millionaire implicated in several past scandals, as well as Greek politicians (including the Mayor of Athens), Sharon's second son and Ehud Olmert, Mayor of Jerusalem (also a prominent figure in Likud).

The Karen affair concerns a loan of some 1.5 million Shekels (£200,000) to one of Sharon's sons by the South-African tycoon in order to cover a debt incurred during Sharon's campaign in the previous Likud primaries (the limit on a single donation to a political party is 1,800 Shekels or £250).

A further investigation by a reporter for a Jerusalem local paper revealed that Karen also illegally exports "bloody diamonds", that is diamonds mined in areas of African countries in a state of civil war and sold to finance the activities of armed groups there.

Sharon has entangled himself further when his answers to these accusations included obvious half-truths and omissions. Acting on his advisers' counsel he eventually held a special TV address. He gave a very nervous performance, blatantly attacking his political rivals and

"persecutors" without providing real answers. Eventually he was dramatically taken off the air on the orders of judge Hashin, head of the Central Electoral Commission (Israeli election law prohibits the broadcasting of "election propaganda" in the immediate period preceding elections outside designated time-slots).

A reason why these scandals didn't have a lasting effect on support for Likud was the widespread perception that "they are all corrupt" and that Labour in particular isn't any better. The only significant change produced by these events was the rise in support for Shinui. This party has extreme right wing economic policies, and of its ten first candidates for Knesset there is only one who is not Ashkenazi (European Jew), and of course no Arabs. Shinui's campaign fed on the campaign run by Shas, the ultra-orthodox Sephardi (Oriental Jew) party, and vice versa. Shinui supposedly opposes religious coercion and privileges to religious organisations, but in practice spreads communal hate of the worst kind. The party openly calls itself "the party of secular people and the middle class", and talks almost exclusively about the ultra-orthodox "leeches" who do not serve in the army and live "at our expense".

Despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that it has almost no serious platform other than a national unity government without the religious parties, it made the big leap from 6 to 15 seats, coming third and only four seats behind Labour. This success also resulted from the voters

being fed up with Labour and from the lack of a real alternative.

No mood for elections

It's important to understand that there was never a more anaemic election campaign in Israel. Party activists were rarely seen on the streets, and very few cars had stickers on. Israel during elections used to look like a political marketplace, with stickers on almost every car, posters hanging on many balconies and leaflets handed out on the streets. All this was gone this time round.

The lack of enthusiasm was clear both among Likud voters and among those supporting its opponents. The overall results were obvious more than a week before election day, and the parties only kept fighting over the leftovers with their closest competitors.

One People

The workers' party, One People, dominated by the Histadrut (trade union federation) bureaucracy led a very conventional advertising campaign, focusing on its leader's moustache and claiming the title of "the only social party". It had no reference to the Likud scandals, perhaps in order not to appear left wing. While Meretz used the slogan "we have the energy to separate capital from government", this "workers' party" kept silent on these issues. Nevertheless, the acute social crisis and the fact that most parties ignored it enabled the party to make some gains, going up from two to three



IDF imposed a siege on all Palestinian areas during the elections.

seats. What was missing was someone who could stand up and say that the system is to blame, that the scandals are not exceptions and that all capitalist parties are run this way. This is the role of our organisation, Ma'avak Soziaisti. Such a message can have a real impact, and it's clear that if we were bigger and had more influence in the labour movement, it would have found a ready audience.

Not so long ago the idea of "separating capital from government" was considered by activists as extreme or irrelevant, but today its clearly on the public agenda. Corruption scandals have helped more see this link and, to a more limited degree, the effect of the rule of capital on their own lives.

The invasion of well-known mobsters into the ruling party, which is still under police investigation, has scared some people into looking for an alternative, if only an electoral one at this stage. The Green Leaf Party (a green party advocating cannabis legalisation) got more than one percent and came close to entering the Knesset. Its voters are mainly young, and tend to think "they're all rubbish, so let's vote for someone who will make a mess in the Knesset".

Despite decisions by the Central Electoral Commission to ban one Arab party and one Arab candidate for Knesset (decisions which were later overturned by the Supreme Court), provoking some radical protests, turnout among Israeli Palestinians was even lower than the general turnout. In the Arab towns and villages, there were campaigns by Abnaa ElBalad (Sons of the Village, a left-nationalist movement) and the radical wing of the Islamic Movement calling for an election boycott. Significantly, the only Arab party which made substantial gains was Balad (National Democratic Alliance, a secular Palestinian and Arab nationalist party), which faced the most vicious attacks from establishment politicians and the Jewish media.

Forming a coalition under the shadow of war

Sharon can now form a narrow right wing coalition, but prefers another "national unity" government with Labour that would be more acceptable both to the US and EU. This kind of government is also needed in order to push through the next round of budget cuts (estimated at 8 to 15 billion Shekels or \$1.6 to \$3 billion), beyond the cuts already approved in the budget for 2003. According to finance ministry plans, the largest part of the cut will come from an unprecedented attack on the public sector, with up to 9% of the work force (60,000 workers) being

made redundant, and a wage cut of up to 10% imposed on the remaining workers. This will necessitate breaking the collective wage agreements which still defend most public sector workers, and is bound to provoke resistance even from the fossilised bureaucrats controlling the Histadrut (TUC), whose members are mostly from the public sector. With this in mind, it is clear why Sharon, as well as the Israeli ruling class, is almost desperate to patch together as wide a coalition as possible in order to minimise opposition to these brutal austerity measures, at least in Parliament.

The problem is that Labour leader Mitzna seems to understand that support for his crushed party could only be rebuilt in opposition. The capitalists can easily dictate policies to Labour politicians, but forcing them to commit political suicide is a different matter. Sharon's last ace is the planned US war on Iraq, which he plans to use as a justification to drag Labour (and the Liberal/anti-religious Shinui party, with its 15 seats) into an emergency grand coalition. It is quite likely that Sharon plans to stall the final negotiations until hostilities in Iraq begin.

Effects of war on the conflict with the Palestinians

War in Iraq would undoubtedly have an impact on the "low intensity war" in the occupied Palestinian territories. With the eyes of the world turned to Iraq, there is a possibility of Sharon's government trying to finally crush the second Intifada. Possible scenarios include a full invasion of the Gaza Strip, one of the last strongholds of Hamas and Islamic Jihad; the deportation or otherwise removal of Arafat, especially as a response to a major suicide bombing; or even the forced expulsion of parts of the Palestinian population, providing a suitable pretext can be found.

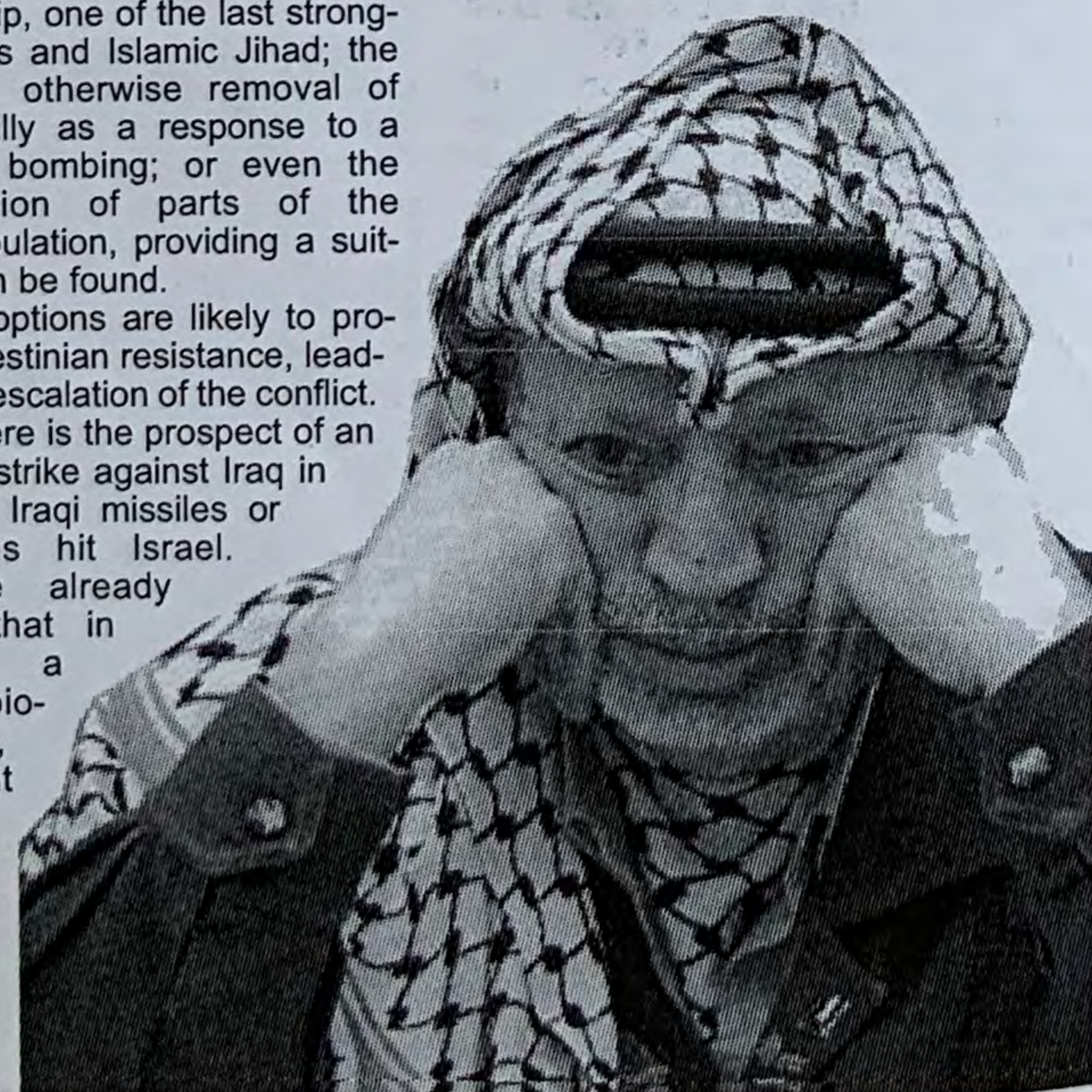
All of these options are likely to provoke mass Palestinian resistance, leading to a further escalation of the conflict. Additionally, there is the prospect of an Israeli counter strike against Iraq in the event that Iraqi missiles or other weapons hit Israel. Threats have already been made that in response to a chemical or biological attack, Israel might resort to a nuclear strike, thus irrevocably setting back the chance for a future reconciliation in the

region.

Sharon probably believes that in the aftermath of a short and "successful" war in Iraq conditions in the region will allow some kind of a political settlement of the Palestinian question, a settlement even more biased towards the interests of the Israeli and American ruling class than the Oslo accords. A Palestinian mini-state might be granted to an even more servile leadership after Palestinian "regime change" has been accomplished, with most or all Israeli settlements staying in place.

But even in the highly improbable event that "all goes according to plan", such a solution will not provide even the temporary respite of the Oslo years. Either way, the coming months will see the new government fighting wars on two fronts competing for dominance: the war in Palestine and the class war against Israeli workers.

The socialist alternative put forward by Ma'avak Sozialisti for a socialist Israel and a socialist Palestine existing within a socialist confederation of the region can be brought about by building a powerful socialist movement amongst Jews and Palestinians to fight for it.



Arafat could be expelled from the West bank.

The British and Irish governments are scrambling to get agreement between the North' sectarian politicians in advance of possible fresh Assembly elections in May. Can they save their discredited

PEACE PROCESS

On Friday 30 October 2002, 30 members of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) stormed into Sinn Fein's offices at Stormont. This action led immediately to the withdrawal of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) from government and the institutions of devolved government were suspended for a third time.

By Ciaran Mulholland

The PSNI claim that they have been investigating an alleged IRA espionage operation for over a year. If this is so why did they act in October?

The answer can only be that the raid was politically motivated. The upper reaches of the British state must have authorised this action. It had been crystal clear since the UUP Council meeting two weeks before the raid that the writing was on the wall for the Executive and the Assembly. Understanding this, the British government may have decided on one last throw of the dice.

On a best case scenario for the state, Sinn Fein, or a section of Sinn Fein, embarrassed and desperate to stay on the political road from which they benefit, would begin to break with the IRA, allowing Trimble to rally support in the UUP and to stay in government. Further the British government may have hoped that their highly public attack on Sinn Fein would dent the party's image and strengthen the SDLP whilst at the same time protecting the UUP from further DUP pressure.

The actual result was to bolster Sinn Fein's position as most Catholics resent the raid and blame unionism and the British government for the collapse. The DUP crows that they were right all along and they, together with the anti-agreement wing of the UUP, are firmly in the ascendancy. While the DUP may not overtake the UUP at the next Assembly elections it is certain that anti-agreement unionists of various hues will have a majority over the pro-agreement unionists.

The Northern Ireland Secretary John Reid suspended the institutions in the hope that they can one day be resuscitated. Immediately a blame game began. Each side of the sectarian divide is loudly denouncing the other as the culprit. According to Sinn Fein the problem is that unionist politicians (and their allies in

the British establishment) really do not want "any Catholics about the place". Many Catholics accept this argument. The evidence is however that a narrow majority of Protestants reluctantly lined up behind Trimble and initially gave the Agreement a chance. The reality is that the majority of Protestants are now against the Agreement and Trimble's room for manoeuvre has consequently long gone.

According to unionist politicians the problem is that Sinn Fein have not broken from their past and remain wedded to the dual strategy of bomb and bullet. Most Protestants accept this argument. Whilst the Republican Movement retains its armed wing there is no evidence whatsoever that it intends a return to war against the forces of the state-in this sense its ceasefire is genuine.

An Agreement Based on Division

As the Socialist Party has pointed out since the beginning of the peace process, it is not lack of goodwill or an inability to compromise by the politicians that has brought us to this point. The problem is that the whole basis of the agreement has been flawed from the outset.

The agreement is based on an acceptance that division is permanent. It is an agreement to differ and an attempt to govern through compromise at the top and an uneasy peace on the ground. The Agreement has actually strengthened division. As the Executive and the Assembly took their first tentative steps the long-standing war of attrition over territory intensified, initially around the issue of parades. The political process is now simply catching up with events on the ground.

Prospects for the Election

Holding elections in the present climate will only worsen the situation but the British government has few other options. Officially all the major parties are in favour of an election on 1 May 2003. Sinn Fein and the DUP have good reason to be as they expect to make major gains. The UUP and the SDLP have less reason for confidence but are loathe to

admit so publicly.

If the election is to be postponed legislation must be passed before the end of March, giving little time for further negotiations. Talks are continuing but this is proving a fruitless task - rather like trying to put Humpty Dumpty back together. Trimble's declared bottom line is the disbandment of the IRA. A far reaching statement from the IRA is possible, but unionists are not likely to be satisfied with words or partial deeds and the republican leadership are hesitant to go too far without guarantees from Trimble that he is not in a position to deliver.

Behind the scenes a deal of sorts is probably on the table. This would involve the IRA scaling down its activities in various ways, for example by ending recruitment, training, targeting and arms buying. It would also involve further decommissioning. In return Sinn Fein is demanding progress on demilitarisation and on the "equality agenda."

Agreement between the Republican Movement and the British Government is one thing. The UUP signing up to the deal, with a hard fought election only weeks away, is another. As ever any deal will be half open, half hidden and couched in vagueness and generalities. Trimble needs a simple message from the IRA, that it will disband, for the unionist electorate and he is unlikely to get one.

A comprehensive deal is thus unlikely before late March, though a half-hearted deal may be accepted by some parties to the negotiations. The election may yet be postponed but will probably go ahead. Its aftermath will make the political situation even more precarious and prone to fracture. Hammering out a deal when Sinn Fein is the majority nationalist party and a majority of unionists are anti-agreement will not be easy.

Nightmare Facing Working Class

The nightly shootings resulting from the present inter-loyalist feud are just one manifestation of the nightmare situation facing the working class. There is only one way out - the building of a movement of working class people on both sides of the peace lines which rejects both unionism and nationalism in

favour of a shared future and which fights against sectarianism, poverty and unemployment. The question is what can working people expect from the political parties represented at Stormont who will soon be touting for votes? The answer is not a lot.

The main unionist parties, the UUP and the DUP, may differ on the issue of the Agreement but they do not differ on economic and social issues. The same holds true for the various splinter anti-Agreement parties.

Despite all of the talk of "post-nationalism" the SDLP is based entirely on one section of the population and always will be. Its position is under serious threat from Sinn Fein and to counter this threat it is taking a more stridently nationalist tone. This approach is allied with a neo-liberal approach as illustrated by their stewardship of the Finance post on the Executive.

Sinn Fein will almost certainly continue to eat into the SDLP's support and have already captured the majority of the vote amongst the young and the working class in Catholic areas. This does not mean that they are to the left of the SDLP in any sense. Sinn Fein is a right wing nationalist party which thrives on the division of the working class. Indeed it maintains and deepens this division through its policies.

The record of Sinn Fein in power speaks for itself. Bairbre de Brun presided over a health service in crisis

and Martin McGuinness refused to sanction a decent wage for term time staff and is busily implemented the Private Finance Initiative in our schools.

A Socialist Alternative

The sectarian parties base themselves on division and act to strengthen division. Ultimately they must be challenged in elections. The potential is there.

Up to 100,000 people took to the streets of Northern Ireland on 18 January 2002 in a massive demonstration against sectarian attacks and intimidation. This was a hugely important event. There is a growing recognition amongst working people that sectarian polarisation is increasing and may lead to widespread and escalating violence. Workers have been given a glimpse of an alternative to deepening sectarian division. Those who reject the drift towards division now know they are not alone and have at least an inkling of their potential power if they act together with confidence.

The lessons of 18 January remain good. All threats and attacks must be met immediately by determined action. Strikes and rallies are a visible and effective method. These actions however need to be followed up. Initiatives in the local communities are the key. The trade unions must link up with genuine local community representatives to discuss attacks and threats, especially against those who provide vital services to the

community. Committees on either side of the peace lines should then link up.

It is most important that the campaign retains its independence from the politicians and the employers. The lesson of 18 January and of the rally in Belfast in August 2002, which was small and ineffective partly because it allowed sectarian politicians to come to the fore, is that an effective campaign must keep its distance from the sectarian politicians.

It is not possible to tackle sectarianism head on without raising the issues of poverty and unemployment. And how can we do so in alliance with the employers who sack workers when it suits them? How can we do so in alliance with the main political parties who are implementing privatisation policies and cuts?

Where does the political future lie? It would be a grave mistake to assume that things will necessarily continue on as they have in the past even though the middle ground has narrowed, and the Agreement copper fastens sectarian division by its very nature. There is a real basis for the development of a new political alternative in the natural unity of workers in struggle, a unity seen in the fire fighters dispute.

A socialist alternative, and ultimately a mass party of the working class in Northern Ireland, must be based on this unity, not on hopes alone. In 1996 the Labour Coalition came from nowhere and won two seats.

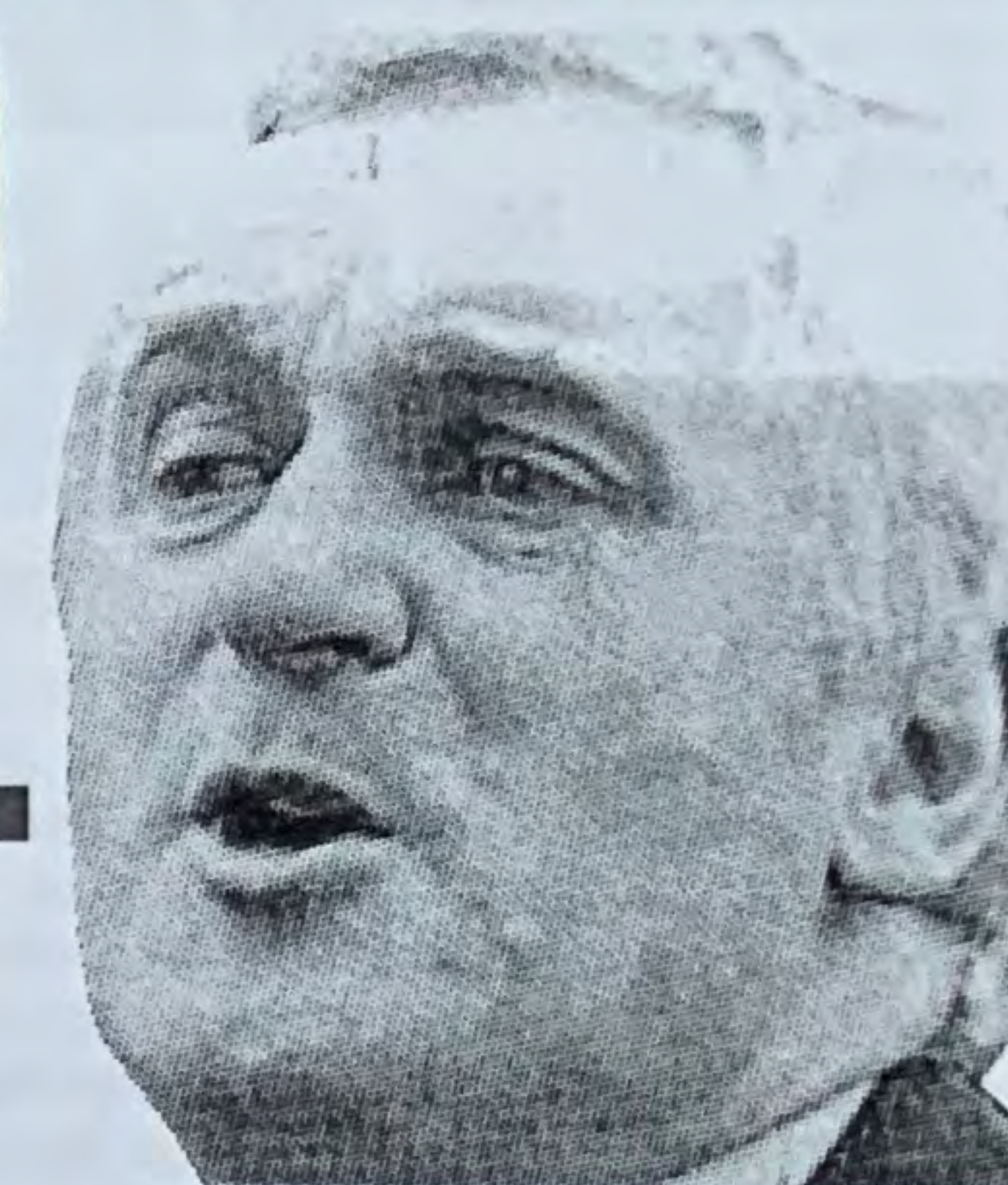
Hospital campaigner Raymond Blaney won a seat on Downe District Council at the last council elections. Against a background of a world economic recession, a war for oil in Iraq, the implementation of right wing policies by the Executive and an upturn in class struggle (such as an increase in the number of strikes) mounting a serious socialist challenge is needed at the next Assembly elections.



Blair and Ahern amongst the last of the believers in the peace process.

As the Irish economy continues to decline and heads into recession, the Fianna Fáil and PD government have launched their new offensive

CUT BACKS AND PRIVATISATION



"The share of capital relative to the share of labour has risen. The division of social wealth between capital and labour has become still more unequal.....The material position of the worker has improved, but at a cost of his social position. The social gulf that divides him from the capitalist has widened." Karl Marx

By Kevin McLoughlin

This quote from Marx is a good summation of the economic boom in the South and what it meant for working class people. Not only is Marx long gone, so too now is the "Celtic Tiger". In 2000, Gross National Product grew by 8.7%, the estimate for 2002 is just 1.2%!

Such a dramatic downturn in the economy is bound to have a profound effect on all aspects of Irish society. Working class people are concerned about the economy and what changes are on the horizon.

The sharpest expression of these changes has been seen already in the steep decline in the government's finances. As a result of this decline, Fianna Fáil and the PDs have launched into a series of attacks on the working class through cutbacks and their proposals for widespread privatisation in the public sector. The government have embarked on a generalised, neo-liberal offensive, and the tempo for the implementation of these changes has sped up since the budget.

Ahern and his government exude an air of confidence. They are taking comfort from the fact that the official opposition are ineffectual and in a shambles. The government also believes that they have the measure of other opposition forces, i.e. the trade unions, who despite the government's neo-liberal offensive are signing up to a new social partnership agreement. The government are moving swiftly to implement these attacks in order to take advantage of the weak opposition and they hope that they can recover from any political fall out in time to fight the next election with the backdrop of a recovering economy. However, Bertie Ahern and Mary Harney have no real understanding of the depth

of the anger and disgust that is bubbling under the surface of Irish society.

Neo-liberal agenda

The government is scrabbling to make cuts and implement privatisation and wage restraint in an attempt to seriously curtail public expenditure. The list of proposed cuts, price hikes and new charges seems endless. However their offensive is not only on the economic front, they are also moving to restrict democratic and political rights in a number of very important areas and enhance the autocratic powers of the state.

Harney has proposed new restrictions on immigration. Her claim that restricting work permits will defend Irish jobs is laughable. The ruling from the Supreme Court denying immigrant or refugee families who have an Irish born child the automatic right of residency, is a significant weapon that the establishment will use in the future. In the context of an economic crisis, the establishment parties will use a divide and rule tactic to scapegoat immigrants for rising unemployment and public spending cutbacks.

Within months, new draconian legislation for local authorities and service charges will be enacted. This legislation allows for councils to refuse to collect the bins of people who don't pay the bin tax. This is a very serious attack on the anti-service charges campaigns and must be met with a concerted campaign of opposition. This legislation will also take the power to decide local charges (taxes) and local authorities' waste management strategy out of the hands of the elected councillors. From now on, bin tax charges will be set by unelected local authority managers. They will also have the right to decide to build waste incinerators, and the location of dumps without consulting the councils. Many establishment politicians will cry foul over these changes, but privately they will be delighted, hoping that they will no longer be blamed for the rising cost of these local charges.

In February, the Garda Special Forces and the army was sent into Shannon Airport. These two events have occurred without any serious opposition or much discussion about the implications of such actions. The feud between rival gangs in Limerick and the so-called "dangers" posed by the incidents at Shannon Airport were blown out of proportion by the media and the government and facilitated these unprecedented measures. The Irish Army is now in effect protecting the transfer of US troops to the Gulf for the war against Iraq! While it is very unlikely that the state will try to repress the anti war movement at this stage, these developments are part of a trend by the state over the last couple of years to take a more repressive approach to workers and political activists. A potentially dangerous precedent has been established. They have been able to put armed Gardai on to the streets of Limerick even though there was considerable controversy about the killing of John Carthy by these same special forces at Abbeylara. They are also moving to impose new restrictions on the Freedom of Information Act.

These neo-liberal attacks, the weakening of democracy at local authority level, and the use of the armed forces of the state are not in fact indications that this is a strong government confidently moving forward. The reality is the opposite. This government has less actual support and authority in society than any previous government in the history of the Irish state. At this stage, they are able to get away with these measures and legal changes because of the generally low levels of political activism and struggle and the lack of a strong political alternative which represents working class people. However, the change in the economic situation and in a more immediate sense the war on Iraq, will create the

conditions in which there will be an increase in struggle which will be a real challenge to the Irish capitalist establishment.

Economic crisis

The Irish economy is in a very weak position. Gross Domestic Product, the value of all goods and services produced in Ireland grew by 5% - 6% in 2002. However, the Gross National Product (GNP) figure of 1.2% growth is more accurate because it takes into account money transferred into and out of the country. Given that the multinational corporations repatriate a huge amount of profits, this is a truer picture of the wealth in the country. The latest figures from the Central Statistics Office show that GNP for the third quarter of last year actually declined compared to the same quarter in 2001. If that trend continues it would mean that the domestically owned economy had slipped into recession, which would be a dramatic change after years of substantial growth. At this stage this would mainly indicate the decline in the key markets to which Irish companies export. It would also reflect the increasing cost of Irish exports due to the increase in the value of the euro.

More so than before, consumer spending and the continuing growth in credit for mortgages, are playing an important role in the economy. However, both of these would be cut across quickly if there was a sustained loss in jobs. The number of job losses has grown in the last year. If the economy remained sluggish this year and certainly if the domestic economy went into recession, job losses would be likely to increase rapidly and would further increase the economy's problems.

The perspectives for a new social partnership deal must be set against this background. Even if a new deal were

agreed, a deterioration in the economy would put it under considerable pressure. A 7% pay rise over 18 months in the private sector is below inflation and will only be accepted by the majority of workers reluctantly. It is now likely that many employers will cite inability to pay because of the changes in the economy. In addition, the deal contains binding arbitration in order to attempt to curtail the ability of workers to force employers to pay up.

The state may find it harder to renege on its 7% pay award and the benchmarking awards. Still, with a recession on the offing, government finances will be hit hard. Major new changes are proposed in the public sector and the government will use them to cut public sector expenditure at every turn. In the new economic situation, social partnership will not be able to stop industrial struggles occurring in the defence of jobs, wages and working conditions.

Vacuum on the left

Political parties are now focused on the local elections due in the summer of 2004. Most of them are assuming that there will not be a general election before then. However, there are many banana skins that this government can slip on. In particular, given the anger that has built up over the years during the "Celtic Tiger", a series of struggles by workers could fundamentally undermine this government, who have a weak base of support and an early election could be forced upon them.

Sinn Féin, the Greens and now Labour under the leadership of Pat Rabbitte are trying to position themselves to make gains in the local elections. Although they will increase their number of councillors,

there is an ever growing vacuum in which genuine left forces can develop, in particular the Socialist Party.

It will be a feature of the new political and economic situation that Sinn Féin, the Greens and Labour will actually find it increasingly difficult to respond to and reflect the demands of the class struggle as its tempo increases. These parties are fundamentally rooted to the idea of the capitalist market and they lust for power. Coalition and ministerial jobs will influence their political direction far more than the needs of the working class.

While it is not yet a generalised mood in society, it is instructive that many activists involved in the anti-bin charges campaign are quite disgusted with Sinn Féin. These activists clearly see that Sinn Féin talks about radical opposition to the bin tax, but that on the ground they haven't been prepared to build the anti bin tax campaign. Sinn Féin have an important base in some working class areas but they will be incapable of leading the new struggles of the working class when they arise in the coming period.

The decline in the conditions for the economy will result in the creation of the political and social conditions within which the idea of building a new mass party to represent working class people will mature. That will represent a very important development in the workers' movement and the Socialist Party will be a key player in the processes leading to the development of this party. In the weeks and months ahead there will be big opportunities to build the genuine forces of socialism in the South of Ireland.

Latin-America STRUGGLE AGAINST NEO-LIBERAL AGENDA

The last three years have seen a storm of political upheaval sweep through Latin America. Country after country has experienced mass protests against the 1990's neo liberal offensive which resulted in a sharp increase in inequality. 5% of the region's population own more than 50% of the wealth, while mass unemployment, rampant corruption, and wholesale privatisations have wrecked public services.

By Michael Murphy

These mass movements have also resulted in the election of people like Lula in Brazil, Guitierrez in Ecuador and Chavez in Venezuela. Parties associated with capitalism and the ruling elite have suffered an erosion of their support.

It is highly fitting that these movements against neo liberalism are taking place in Latin America. Throughout the 1990s, this region was held up as an example of how the twins of "democracy and the market" would transform the lives of people and reduce the age old problem of poverty. In reality, the inequalities have been accentuated in that period.

There are 17 million people unemployed in Latin America, the highest level since the 1980's. The unemployment rate is 9.2%, up from 8.1% in 2001. Only one in three workers have any access to a social security system.

Minimum wages are falling three times as fast as they grew in 2001. The cono-

my grew 0.5% in 2001 but shrunk by 0.8% in 2002!

As the world economic slowdown deepens, the offensive by the bosses will intensify as workers are made pay for this crisis. The inspirational struggles of the people of Latin America have valuable lessons for workers internationally.

Economic collapse

In 2002, the world watched as over one million Argentinians took to the streets in a protest which became known as the "cacerolazo" or mass banging of pots and pans against a litany of austerity measures implemented by the then President, de la Rúa.

After three years of public spending cuts, labour reforms, tax rises, and recession, de la Rúa was forced to resign by the mass movement. Over the course of the next 12 days, four more Presidents would be kicked out and the country would default on a \$95 billion loan, the largest debt default in history. The current President, the Peronist Duhalde, has managed to cling to power but faces elections in April of this year.

Some commentators are claiming that the recession which has gripped Argentina for over four years is coming to an end because there have been three consecutive months of economic growth.

However, economic production for 2002 was down 12%. Unemployment is

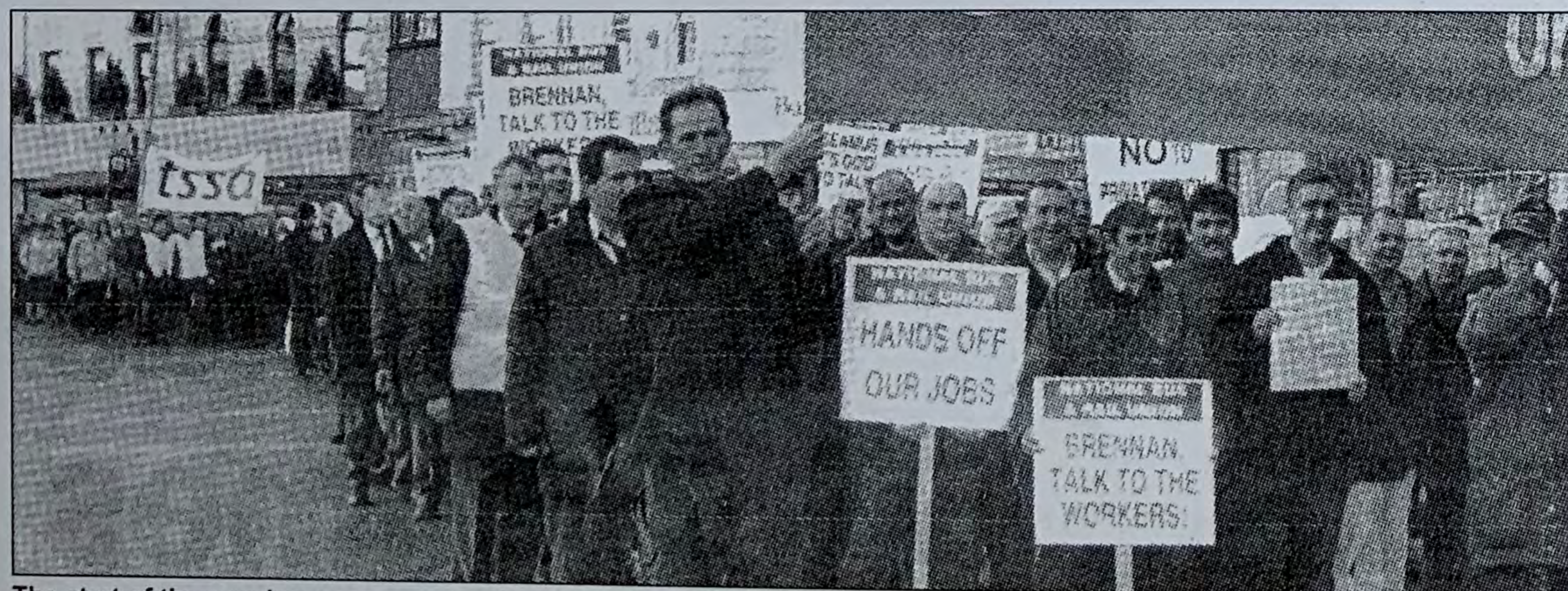
running at 20% and 58% of the population or 19 million people live in poverty. From May to October 2002, the number of poor increased by 9%. 27 children die every day of hunger in a country which the IMF held up as a miracle of economic growth, a model of the riches that awaited the poor nations that opened up their economies to foreign investment.

As 2002 opened with the Argentinian poor and working class mobilising to defend their existence; 2003 opened with the election of a new left wing President, Lula, in Brazil and the populist President Chavez under siege from right wing opponents in Venezuela.

Lula's victory

Brazil is the most important economy in Latin America as it occupies a land mass comparable with the United States and has a population of 160 million and it is also the world's 10th largest economy.

In October 2002, Lula, the Workers Party (PT) candidate received the largest vote in Brazilian history. He received 52.7 million votes (61.7%) in a landslide victory over Jose Serra the candidate for the outgoing right wing coalition government of Cardoso who was backed by big business and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The PT also increased its representation in the congress and state legislative assemblies from 59 to 91 seats and doubled its senate representation from 7 to 14 and now has the biggest



The start of the year has seen a spate of protests by transport workers, building workers, students,... against government policy.



parliamentary representation in states such as Sao Paulo.

The victory of Lula is an enormous step forward for the Brazilian working class and represents a defeat for the capitalist class in Brazil and internationally, who had conducted a campaign against him. It opens up a new stage in the class struggle in Brazil. This overwhelming victory also represents the enormous desire for change among the Brazilian masses.

Eight years of Cardoso's neo liberal offensive has resulted in a country where 54 million people live in poverty and 30 million in conditions similar to sub Saharan Africa. Unemployment is at 7.3%, violent crime is rampant, public services have been wrecked due to privatisation, and the vast majority of the land is in the hands of a tiny minority.

The IMF has given Brazil a loan of \$30 billion negotiated with Cardoso just before the election. Lula has since committed himself to honour this and all other debts. Brazil's public debt jumped from 30% to 60% of GDP in 2002. The reliance on foreign capital means the threat of debt default hangs over the country. It was precisely this situation which sparked the Argentinean crisis in early 2002. 80% of the total debt is held by domestic creditors. If the government defaults on the debt, banks and businesses will collapse. A moratorium (debt default) by Brazil was only avoided by the IMF loan.

However the situation is unsustainable. The IMF deal ties the government to a minimum of 3.75% budget surplus with 6% being the real figure sought. This will mean hard choices for Lula if he is to achieve this level of budget surplus against a background of the world economic crisis. It will mean there will be limited finances available for social spending.

High expectations

It is against this very difficult economic background that Lula has come to power but there are enormous expectations among the Brazilian masses.

Everywhere he goes he is met with massive crowds wanting to see him. At the moment, he is undertaking a "Misery Tour" whereby he is bringing his 30 cabinet ministers on a tour of the poorest regions of Brazil to give them a dose of reality. This type of tour will only further heighten expectations.

In one of the shantytowns in northeast Brazil, Irma Dulce, people carrying placards welcomed the new President bearing slogans like "The only hope we have left in the world is in God and in Lula". 77% of Brazilians expect the new gov-



Protests continue on an almost daily basis throughout Argentina.

ernment to be "excellent or good". This gives a glimpse of the sheer weight of expectations on Lula to deliver a new era for the poor of Brazil.

He has taken some positive steps, including the announcement that a \$450 million deal to purchase 12 new jet planes for the Brazilian airforce would be postponed and the money put towards the government's "zero hunger" campaign instead. The new government has also announced cuts of almost \$177 million in defence spending. The "zero hunger" programme aims to feed the 46 million Brazilians who survive on a dollar a day. In two pilot projects, 700 families will receive €14 per day in a social welfare type payment. \$500 million has been earmarked for the "zero hunger" programme. The target is to extend the programme to 1.5 million families by the end of 2003.

However, Lula has already begun to dampen down expectation by telling people to be patient. At the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre this month, he told the crowds gathered that "running a government is like running a marathon. You can't rush otherwise you'll end up panting at the first street corner". These words may buy him some time but this honeymoon has a limited lifespan.

PT moves to the right

Lula is playing a dangerous game. On the one hand, attempting to deal with the massive expectation that he will sort out Brazil's problems, while on the other trying to prove to international capitalism that he is no threat to their system. He will only be able to straddle these two horses for a limited period. Initially the anger of Brazilian workers and peasants may turn against international finance capital. However Lula's inability to deal

with the deep problems facing Brazil if he refuses to break with capitalism will mean the anger of the masses will eventually turn against him.

Founded in 1980 against the backdrop of the struggle to overthrow the military dictatorship, the PT won a mass base very quickly developing deep roots amongst the Brazilian working class; its anti capitalist positions made the party a pole of attraction for the combative left in Brazil and throughout Latin American.

In the 1989 presidential election Lula lost out narrowly to Collor, a corrupt capitalist politician. This defeat coupled with the collapse of Stalinism throughout Europe and the former Soviet Union and the defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua marked the beginning of a turn to the right, which characterised the PT leadership throughout the 1990's. In 1992, the Collor government was toppled by a mass movement but instead of demanding new elections, the PT leadership supported the then Vice President Itmar Franco. This gave the bourgeois time to reorganise and launched the "Real Plan" with Cardoso as their candidate for President. Cardoso went on to win in 1994 and 1998 by bringing about a certain economic stability and the reduction in hyper inflation which was running at 5,000% in 1994.

However the "success" of reducing inflation from that high to 10% was achieved through massive spending cuts and a sharp rise in inequality which laid the basis for the victory of Lula and the PT. The authority of the PT over the masses in Brazil is still very high and the expectations enormous but Lula will not deliver. There is a need for the building of a genuine socialist alternative to the left reformist programme of the PT leadership in order for the Brazilian working

class to end the rule of capital which is responsible for the poverty and deprivation which plagues their country.

An embattled president

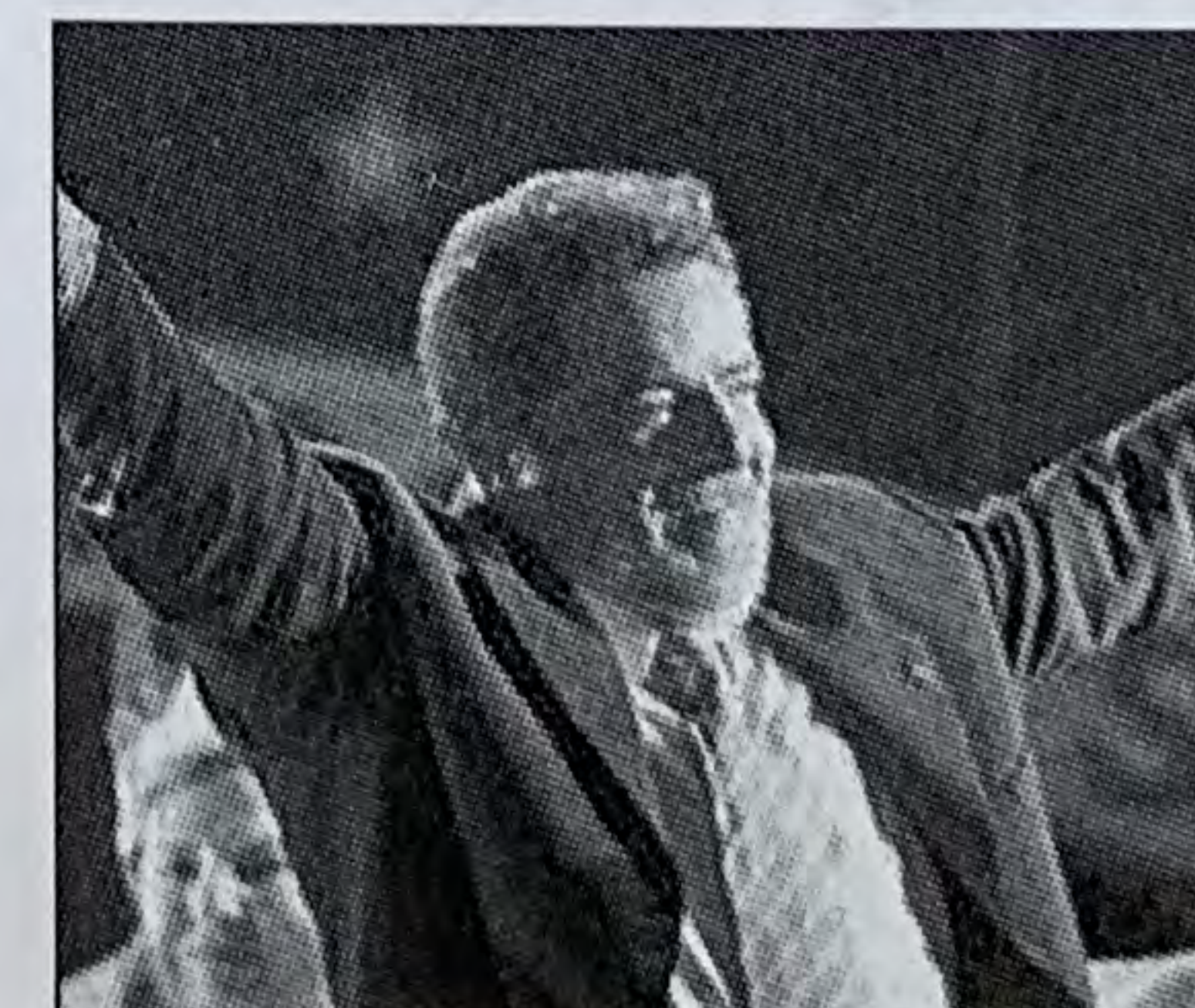
Events in Venezuela demonstrate the difficulties which face the PT. Capitalism is based on the ownership of the wealth and means of production by a tiny minority whose profits are accumulated at the expense of the working class and the poor. The demands for ordinary people for a decent life cannot be satisfied with-

out breaking that stranglehold.

Under the guise of a strike by oil workers, the ruling class and big business interests in Venezuela have attempted to overthrow the democratically elected government of Hugo Chavez. This is the second attempt in the space of a year to oust Chavez. The first, a coup in April last year assisted by the US government, was defeated by a spontaneous mass movement of the poor from the shanty towns, many of whom are organised in committees called "Bolivarian Circles".



The election of Lula has created huge expectations amongst the Brazilian workers and poor.



Some 30,000 of these circles, incorporating up to half a million Venezuelans, exist and have the support of sections of the army rank and file.

Hugo Chavez, the populist President of Venezuela, came to power on a wave of popular support following a landslide election victory in December 1998 and won a further six years in office in 2000.

The current "strike", which has been ongoing since late November last year, is organised under the umbrella of the "Coordinadora Democratica" which is made up of older capitalist politicians, the

employers' organisations, Fedecamaras, the Catholic Church hierarchy and the corrupt CTV trade union leadership. The key demand of the "strike" is for a referendum on Chavez's right to be President. The Venezuelan constitution allows for a recall vote half way through a President's term, which in Chavez's case would be August of this year.

The CWI's prophetic warnings after the April coup attempt, that the counter revolutionary forces in Venezuela aided by the national ruling class and US imperialism would regroup and come back, has been borne out graphically by the current "strike". Unfortunately, instead of seizing the initiative after the coup to organise a mass movement against the conspirators, Chavez tried to placate the ruling class. Chavez is repeating mistakes that have been made by many in his position, particularly Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973.

After an attempted coup to overthrow Allende, he invited the military, including General Augusto Pinochet, to join the government, who then proceeded to plan a successful coup three months later. This paved the way for a vicious and bloody campaign against the Chilean people over the next two decades.

Chavez, unfortunately, has not learnt these lessons. Following the April coup he reinstated the sacked director of the state oil company PUVSA and even removed some of his own supporters! The oil "strike", which is more like a "voluntary lockout" as employers have continued to pay the wages of those on strike has been joined by sections of the middle class, some skilled workers and by some other workers such as dockers.

The "strike" has crippled the already weakened economy. Venezuela is the world's fifth largest exporter of oil. Oil output dropped from just over three million barrels per day at the start of December to just 400,000 barrels per day at the height of the "strike". This had increased to one million barrels per day by mid January due to an intervention by the military and Chavez supporters. Oil provides 70% of export revenue and half of government earnings.

Economic crisis deepens

It is predicted that the Venezuelan economy could contract by up to 40% in the first quarter of 2003 and by 9% for the year as a whole. The bolivar has tumbled 32% against the US Dollar since 1 January. Inflation has soared to 30%, unemployment is 20% and 70% of Venezuelans live below the poverty line.

There has been a massive flight of capital from Venezuela with \$8 billion taken out of the country in 2002 alone.

This represents about 8% of the Venezuelan economy.

It is this economic nightmare that is assisting the "strike" leaders. They have been able to exploit the economic crisis to mobilise sections of the middle classes against Chavez.

There have also been marches in defence of Chavez. Because of this and also some support by the newly elected PT President in Brazil, Lula, Chavez has managed to hold on. There have been indications of cracks beginning to appear in the "strike". Many retail outlets reopened over Christmas, not wishing to miss out on the Christmas spending bonanza. The leaders of the "strike" announced on 2 February that they would ease the "strike" to prevent business bankruptcy. However the "strike" at the state oil company is to continue.

Having come to power with such popular support, Chavez's popularity now stands at 30% in the polls which, even allowing for some inaccuracy, is a significant drop. Among the most oppressed layers in the shantytowns and the poor he retains mass support, it is among the middle classes that his support as been eroded.

He has moved against corruption, introduced reforms including the distribution of unoccupied land to the peasants, built thousands of new schools and introduced free places at universities. He has taken steps to root out corruption, which is a huge issue not just in Venezuela but throughout Latin America. However, he has not been prepared to break with capitalism and adopt a socialist programme based on a nationalised and democratically planned and controlled economy.

Masses must be mobilised

April's coup gave a warning, this "strike" is the second shot across his bow. Polarisation is now so pronounced that there is a real danger of a civil war developing. Many of Chavez's supporters amongst the poor are determined to fight the attempts to remove him. This determination must be given concrete expression if the right-wing is to be defeated. If it is not organised and does not find a clear revolutionary socialist expression, this mood of defiance could eventually evaporate when faced with a decisive blow from the right-wing.

It should be remembered that only one week before Pinochet's coup, 500,000 marched demanding arms. When the decisive moment arrived, however, the workers' movement was left paralysed because of the failure of its leaders to carry through the necessary preparation and action to defeat the coup.

The class polarisation in Venezuela

may yet force Chávez to take further radical steps in the short term. The army has been used to break open a Coca-Cola bottling plant closed by the management. Soldiers distributed bottles of water and drinks to the poor. Chávez has ordered military units to take similar action against companies guilty of "hoarding goods": "Those who attempt to deprive the people of food and then complain that Chávez is arbitrary are traitors to the nation", he declared.

This has frightened capitalist commentators: "US corporations with interests in Venezuela are facing increasing risk of government intervention, or even expropriation, as President Hugo Chávez moves to confront a general strike and consolidate his position, business leaders warned yesterday" (Financial Times, 20 January 2002).

A socialist Venezuela

There is an urgent necessity for independent action and organisation by the working class. The Bolivarian Circles, set up by Chávez, must be expanded and strengthened to include elected representatives from all the workplaces, shantytown dwellers and rank-and-file soldiers. Armed defence detachments must be created in each local area. The Bolivarian Circles must also be linked up on a local, city-wide and national basis, and a national congress convened with the aim of forming a democratic government of working people with a socialist programme that will break with capitalism.

An emergency programme for the economy needs to be established. The basis of the programme would be the nationalisation of the major companies, banking and finance, controlled and managed democratically by the working class. The call should go out for skilled workers and the middle class to join the struggle to rebuild the economy; planning it to meet the needs of the mass of the population and not just the rich elite which exploits the middle class as well as the workers and oppressed.

The establishment of a democratic, socialist Venezuela, if linked to an appeal to the masses of the whole of Latin America for solidarity action and to overthrow capitalism and landlordism, would win massive support. It would gain the backing of "latinos" in the USA and, through them, the North American working class. Ultimately, it is the only way to defeat US imperialism and capitalist reaction in Venezuela.

If Chávez succeeds in riding out this crisis, the current social and political issues will remain. There will be other attempts to overthrow him, including the



President Chavez under siege from the Venezuelan ruling class backed by US imperialism.

possibility of a military coup. This would provoke massive turmoil throughout Latin America. The situation is not the same as the 1970s however. There is a profound hatred of military dictatorship following the experience of living under the "iron heel" of the likes of Pinochet. In Argentina, where in many respects conditions are ripe for military intervention, even the armed forces have opposed taking this road at this stage.

This does not mean that it is excluded, but that it will be more complicated than in the past. Despite the fact that Chávez's radical regime has not brought about significant economic gains for the poor, he retains enormous support. Chávez is seen as the only one "who speaks for us and cares about us". The poor in the shantytowns are aware of what a return to the old dynasty would mean for them and remain resolutely opposed to it.

The stormy events in Venezuela are at the heart of the social and economic crisis which is now unfolding throughout Latin America. They illustrate, above all, the need to build new independent mass parties of the working class with revolutionary socialist policies in Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil and throughout Latin America as the only way out of the impasse which exists under capitalism.

WAR PLAN IRAQ by MILAN RAI

"Give peace a chance and buy this book. It explains why Bush's proposed war against Iraq has little to do with Saddam's tyranny and everything to do with Washington's infinite greed for oil and power" Mike Davis.

By Katia Hancke

That is what the cover announces about the content of the book. Does it live up to the expectation? This book is not a worked out analysis of the background to Bush's drive for war, rather it is a handbook for opponents to war, full of useful facts and information.

The main part of the book, "Phase II - Iraq", is by far the best and most convincing section. Before very efficiently exposing the ten most used pretexts for war, Rai goes over US and British policies towards Iraq since 1991.

He starts with the US administration's attitude to the UN weapons inspection agencies and reports accurately how it did its best to destroy them. They were infiltrated by US spies and used to gain intelligence on Iraq's leadership and facilitate a high-level coup attempt. UNSCOM was manipulated to create an atmosphere of confrontation and then instructed to withdraw in December 1998, days before heavy bombardments of Baghdad started. The US administration's attitude to UNMOVIC, the second UN weapons inspection agency, has not been any different.

Next Rai deals with the detail of exactly how Bush Senior and Co. not only stood by, but actively supported, Saddam Hussein in crushing the uprisings inside Iraq immediately after the Gulf War. He correctly concludes from that experience that the US does not want regime change in Iraq and even opposes it with all means possible. What the US wants is "leadership change", i.e. a more reliable local stooge than Saddam, and he documents it well.

"Ten reasons against war on Iraq", the core chapter of the book, deals in a matter-of-fact and sharp way with the flimsy pretext for this war and the potential consequences of it. Some of the points very sharply expose US (and British) foreign policy: the humanitarian disaster this war is certain to trigger; the destabilisation it will cause in Iraq and in the entire region; the fact that this war is not about regime change but about merely "cloning Saddam"; the lack of any proof of a build up of weapons of mass destruction; why there is no link with Al Qaeda; the massive worldwide opposition to this war.

In addition, the less relevant point, much discussed in the media, about the illegality of this war is discussed along with the more important issues of the military complications and the potentially disastrous consequences for the world economy. The last chapter in the book deals with the media bias in reporting on

the war preparations and the anti-war movement.

On top of that, there is a chapter written by Noam Chomsky, not really relevant to what the book has set out to do, but obviously meant as a sales pusher, more facts and figures and appeals from "11 September relatives" opposing war.

So, does the book do what Mike Davis promised us on the cover? Not really, as Rai doesn't really set out to discuss the real reasons for a war on Iraq - control over the vast oil reserves and US prestige and power in the region and across the world. He also doesn't endeavour to look at the underlying reasons for war - the unrelenting drive for profit at any cost which drives the capitalist system.

But what this book does is to very effectively rebut the media propaganda regarding this war. It will convince anyone in their right mind that this war is wrong and will have grave consequences. All in all a useful instrument to strengthen and transform anti-war sentiments into active opposition to an unjust war.

War Plan Iraq - Ten reasons against war on Iraq, by Milan RAI, published by Verso, 2002

WAR ON IRAQ by SCOTT RITTER

Scott Ritter, former UN weapons inspector, worked with UNSCOM, the United Nations Special Commission, between 1991 and 1998 when he resigned due to the manner in which the Commission was being controlled by the US as an intelligence gathering operation. In an interview format, Ritter describes how he and UNSCOM tracked down, detected and destroyed Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

By Alan Lee

He clearly outlines that "since 1998 Iraq has been fundamentally disarmed: 90-95% of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction capability has been verifiably eliminated. This includes all of the factories used to produce chemical, biological and nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles". Combined with the UN sanctions that have been in place since the last Gulf War, Ritter claims that Iraq hasn't has the ability to obtain the neces-

sary equipment etc. to produce new weapons.

He also describes how even if chemical or biological material was hidden from UNSCOM by the Iraqis, due the fact that they destroyed the infrastructure necessary to produce them and such material has a shelf life of three to five years "what they're now storing is nothing more than useless, harmless goo" and "sludge."

Ritter has now been branded a traitor in the US by the government and the media. He has been vilified as an agent of Israel and Iraq as well! Due to the fact that the truth of this war has not been exposed to the majority of the US population, someone of Ritter's prestige speaking the truth is a thorn in their side.

What makes this book even more interesting is that Ritter, far from being a liberal or to the left, is a member of the Republican Party and voted for Bush in the 2000 US presidential elections. He

sees Bush's war on Iraq as a catastrophic event that will destabilise the entire Middle East and could even lead to a nuclear exchange with devastating effects. On this point, he is not wrong.

However, Ritter does not draw any conclusions from this. He sees WMD as the key reason Bush and Co. are going to war and dismisses oil as any motive for the war, claiming that "Oil is everywhere in that part of the world. We can get all the oil we want from Iraq." Ritter therefore misses the very essence of this war - the control of the oil reserves by the US.

"War on Iraq - What team Bush Doesn't want you to know", by Scott Ritter and William Rivers Pitt, published by Profile Books, 2002

THE HISTORY OF THE TROUBLES (ACCORDING TO MY DA)

BY MARTIN LYNCH

This black comedy, which is currently touring across the country, is an entertaining swipe at a host of Northern Ireland characters, many of whom are instantly recognisable.

By Colin Devine

Written by Lynch, and assisted by Conor Grimes and Alan McKee, both well known Belfast actors, the play is full of comedic references and deals with how the big events impacted on the lives of ordinary people.

It is narrated by Ivan Little, a well known face in Northern Ireland for his work as a journalist with Ulster Television over the last 20 or so years.

The play opens with the Belfast riots of 1969 as Gerry Courtney awaits the birth of his first child. The action soon moves on to the aftermath of those events, with the advent of internment and the incarceration of the three characters in the same wing of "Long Kesh".

Fireball, whose presence is felt from the opening lines, is a hospital porter at the Royal, where Gerry's missus is having their child. He is the kind of character who has a great ability to completely blot out what is going on around him.

His innate ability to live in a fantasy world goes hand in hand with his enthusiasm for his favourite sport- darts. He constantly rabbits on about darts, much to the annoy-

ance of big Gerry (Ivan Little) who can't stand darts.

Indeed, the three lads were scooped in a pub where Fireball had gone to organise a darts match and the other two were going to enquire about joining the IRA.

The play is interspersed with the music of the time, and of course, Gerry does a great Mick Jagger impersonation to the sound of "Satisfaction" Other well known songs of the era are also featured, and the passage of time is very cleverly put across.

The third character, Felix, played by Alan McKee, bursts onto the set on several occasions, declaring that the "balloon is up". Internment, the hunger strikes and other momentous events are all greeted with this time-honoured phrase.

Over and above the originality of the script, and the way Lynch attempts to get across the feeling of what it was like to be in the thick of it in the '70s and '80s particularly, credit must be given to McKee and Grimes.

Both of them play a multitude of characters, male and female. These characters go a long way toward painting an authentic picture of life in '70s and '80s Belfast.

The action goes right up to the ceasefires, the visit of Clinton and the various shenanigans of the Assembly over the last number of

years. While not attempting to make any overtly political points,

Lynch's play is as much a sociological observation of how the Troubles affected people's thinking, as anything else. The approach taken perfectly shows the diversity in how different individuals dealt with the entire situation.

Fireball, for example, would probably still have been obsessed by darts if he had lived in Saigon in the early 70's, and not Belfast. And Lynch's ability to get the blackest of black humour from a difficult situation is once more strengthened by this, his latest production.

It was a sell-out at last year's Cathedral Arts Festival in Belfast and it's two-week run in the Grand Opera House has also drawn full houses virtually every night. This black comedy is well worth seeing, if it comes your way, make no mistake about it, your understanding of working class Belfast culture will be all the richer for the experience.

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Belfast.*

The Socialist Party in Ireland is part of the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI). The CWI has affiliated parties and organisations in 35 countries on all continents.

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