

WORKERS

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ON BOOTS AND
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BEHIND THE FIRE STRIKE



WORKERS

“ First thoughts

AT A RECENT conference in the Caribbean, Cuba denounced as “racist” the demand that only non-white delegates could discuss slavery and reparations to their descendants. Those who called for the exclusion of non-black delegates were from the largest delegation present — from Britain.

At the same time the US city of Chicago deemed that any company wishing to tender for work must be able to demonstrate that they never profited, owned or traded in slaves. How pious.

Slavery throughout history has been about the brutalisation of economic relations between people. Skin colour is but one aspect — one that is ignored by those who still perpetuate this barbarity in Africa to this day. Slave owning societies were replaced by wage-slave societies. Slavery in the USA was abolished 140 years ago, but the working class of the Americas — north and south hemispheres — still faces abject wage slavery.

The key to slavery is class, not race, whether the slaves are Britons resisting the Roman Empire or Irish deported to the Caribbean in the 17th century, or Jews and

Soviet citizens in Nazi Europe or the millions drawn to the Tiger economies of the Pacific Rim.

The unravelling of the human genome last year has damned those who would divide humanity into so-called “races” to the dustbin of history — there is more genetic variation within ethnic groups than there is between them. So there is but one human race, and it is divided by class, not colour.

The nonsense of the perpetual victim guilt trip of those who would seek reparations as a remedy to the evils of the world would trap us into having to put up with those evils forever. We are not to be mesmerised by slavery, starvation, ignorance, homelessness, ill health, inequality, discrimination, denial of human dignity.

We are not going to grovel at past events and shriek and wear sackcloth and ashes for past wrongs. The brutality imposed on populations of the world stems from the economic system of capitalism. Permanently ending that system is the only way to hush the ghosts of past inhumanity and the only way to prevent future repetition.

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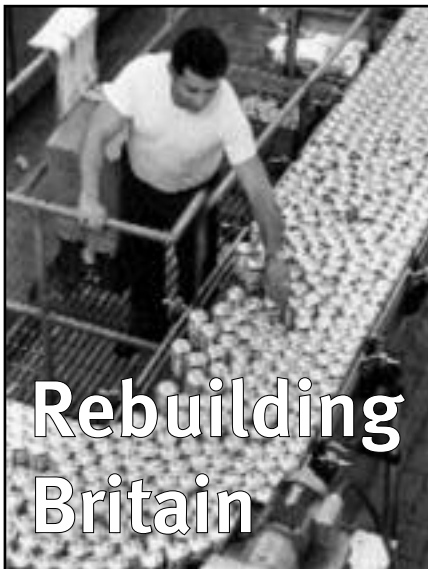
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**LONDON****SLOVAKIA****CUBA****HEALTH****FISHING****POST OFFICE****FINANCE****WHAT'S ON****NEWS ANALYSIS**

Walkouts over Weighting

EU interference

Students boycott Bacardi

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Europe vs Switzerland?

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What price EU stability?

London Weighting walkouts

THURSDAY 14 NOVEMBER saw unprecedented joint action across higher education in London as workers went out on strike over a claim for London Weighting of £4,000 a year. Every university across the capital was affected as 10,000 workers in AMICUS, AUT, NATFHE and UNISON – librarians, lecturers, administrative and technical staff – all took action.

Several university sites were completely closed while most saw all formal classes cancelled. Student unions across London supported the action

Picket lines were staffed from early morning by members of all the unions and then staff assembled for a demonstration and march in Central London, followed by a strike rally at the TUC at 2pm. Despite torrential rain spirits remained very high.

The strike was part of a concerted plan of action which began in July when joint unions recommended rejection of an offer. Ballots for strike action across the unions saw between 70% and 75% votes in favour of strike. All unions are now working closely on plans for further action in December and January.

Meanwhile, Tuesday 5 November saw widespread industrial action in further education colleges involving the teachers' union NATFHE and administrative staff in UNISON in their campaign for pay parity between schools and further education.

Nationwide, one in five colleges were completely closed, and two-thirds faced major disruption. More colleges were involved than in the earlier stages of the dispute.

Suddenly, on 19 November, education secretary Charles Clarke announced an extra £1.2 billion for further education. The employers have now agreed to return to the negotiating table to discuss pay and other issues. As a goodwill gesture the third strike day, planned for 5 December, has been suspended.

Paul Mackney, general secretary of NATFHE, said: "This is a much needed boost which should enable colleges to close the disgraceful pay gap between lecturers and school teachers' pay by 2004."

All FE branches of NATFHE have been advised to remain vigilant and many will attend a special national FE Sector conference on 7 December to monitor progress.

VETTING

Bureaucratic failings

THE VETTING of criminal records for those who work with children or vulnerable adults has revealed a nightmare of bureaucratic failings. Though the Criminal Records Bureau was first mooted by the Tories in 1996, and planned to be up and running by 1998, it is now estimated that it will probably be summer 2003 before all backlogs are cleared. This has had an impact on a wide range of workers from school staff to care home nurses.

Quietly released internal audits now reveal that 80% of the information on the Police National Computer contains errors. A further audit by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary reveals error rates across England and Wales at anywhere between 16% and 65%. No wonder that Government statistics on crime are met with such cynicism.

PROBATION SERVICE

Conference calls for stoppage

NAPO, the Probation and Family Court staff union, is to ballot its members in the 42 Probation Areas over workload protection agreements. NAPO has been seeking such agreements since early 2001. Though positive noises have been forthcoming from Government ministers, little has translated through into practice.

Frustration at talk and no action saw an emergency motion being tabled by NAPO's NEC at its annual conference in October. This was carried by 500 votes to 3 and calls for a one-day stoppage in January 2003, with selective working to rule and other local sanctions.

If you have news from your industry, trade or profession we want to hear from you. Call us or fax on 020 8801 9543 or e-mail to rebuilding@workers.org.uk

STUDENTS

Boycott on Bacardi

STUDENTS AT MIDDLESEX University in North London have voted to stop selling Bacardi rum in the Students' Union bar and to stock Havana Club instead.

The motion, proposed by the union's Cuban Solidarity Campaign Group and passed by 285 votes to 3, is a first step in a campaign to publicise the role of the Bacardi Company in its war against Cuba (see feature, p14). Its activities have included organising and financing terrorism, promoting the Helms-Burton Law, attempting to prevent Cuba exporting its highly successful rum Havana Club and, having failed in this, even distributing a rum in the United States called Havana Club which Bacardi makes in the Bahamas. The Helms-Burton Law extends US sanctions to any firm trading with Cuba and is internationally illegal.

The Cuban rum Havana Club has rapidly acquired an excellent reputation by combining the quality inherent in Cuban skills, the flavour of the island's sugar cane and strong marketing by the French firm Pernod Ricard. This has hit the virtual monopoly previously enjoyed by Bacardi who lost \$25 million in sales in 1995.

Middlesex CSC students plan to take the debate to the National Union of Students conference.

HEALTH

Professions unite on regulation

ALL THE BODIES which regulate health practitioners in Britain — including nurses, midwives, doctors and pharmacists — have formed themselves into an alliance of 10 UK health and social care regulators, to be known as AURE.

This new body, in what was effectively its first joint action, has successfully opposed the imposition of the new EU draft directive that would have seen unregulated practitioners working in Britain for months at a time.

Under the proposal, health care professionals from any EU country would have been allowed to work in Britain for up to four months a year, every year, without being registered with a UK regulator.

In practice this would have meant that if there was a problem with the care a person received the UK regulators would have no powers to take action against the individual. Nor would there have been any means of preventing the same problem from happening again with other patients.

The EU has now agreed that health



Threatened: Aberdeen Harbour, home to many of Scotland's fishing boats

EU ultimatum to Scottish fleet

THE EUROPEAN UNION'S fisheries commissioner, Franz Fischler, did not bother to attend the crisis talks on 18 November that may deal a death blow to much of Britain's white fish fleet. Instead, he sent along two officials to outline a stark choice: a moratorium on all catches, or trawlers being tied up in port for 80% of the year.

This unprecedented curb on an otherwise potentially thriving industry could result in over 20,000 jobs being lost throughout the British fishing industry. Mike Park, president of the Scottish White Fish Producers Association, said that the EU had treated the fishing industry with "total contempt". He said that the additional hurdle of restricting the capacity of the remaining catches meant that the Scottish fleet faced total destruction.

The president of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation had been left "totally depressed" by the talks. He had warned the commission that his industry would be doomed if either course were to be imposed. His clear impression was that the EU was intent "on putting us out of business. They seem hell-bent on getting the job done, whatever the costs."

Meanwhile, the industry is getting scant support from weak politicians in both London and Edinburgh as they kowtow to the EU. Only a handful of voices from their ranks raise a protest. Struan Stevenson MEP called the prospects "catastrophic", denounced the possible 20,000 job losses and pointed to £1 billion losses to the British economy.

A long list of communities face devastation, from Peterhead and Arbroath in the north to those several hundred miles south, such as Eyemouth, one of the few safe landings in south-east Scotland, with a fishing harbour dating back to the 13th century. The 200 local fishermen who stand to lose their jobs in Eyemouth would not be the end of it — associated industries employ over 1,000 workers in boat building and processing. The town's harbourmaster pointed out that the fleet was "being punished for other countries' failures".

practitioners will be exempted from the directive. This joint action is seen as a victory for patient safety and a victory for sovereignty.

EUROPEAN UNION

Naughty Germans

ONE BY ONE the countries in the eurozone are facing economic crises brought about because of the rules imposed by the Maastricht Treaty. Now Germany, once the powerhouse of Europe, faces penalties from the European Commission.

Member countries are forbidden to carry budget deficits in excess of 3% and severe penalties are available to force compliance. In this case, the Commission

has launched an "excessive deficit procedure" against Germany, which could result in a fine of 10 billion euros or £77 for every German citizen.

At the same time, unemployment rose by 24,000 to 4.12 million and is projected by the Government's own economic committee to rise further to 4.17 million next year. German unemployment has increased by 330,000 since the start of 2001. Meanwhile, growth is stagnant at just 0.2% this year and is projected to rise to no more than 1% next year.

These threats from the Commission are forcing the German Government to make health cuts and consider tax rises. Over 15,000 health workers protested in Berlin against health cuts. Economists have warned of a "double-dip" recession.



Taking to the streets: the fight for London Weighting (see article, p3)

Post workers see off Securicor

ROYAL MAIL and Securicor have abandoned their plans to outsource the Post Office's Cash Handling and Distribution (CHD) division in the face of determined opposition by the union. Securicor had to ditch its original plan to take over the whole of CHD last week after it was referred to the Competition Commission, but came back with a new bid for the Post Office's network of secure cash depots, thought to be worth a cool £350 million in stock alone. The cash centres employ approximately half of the 3,000 workers originally threatened.

The union responded with a plan to carry out a pre-Christmas stoppage in the cash handling depots. 95% of the CHD members had voted in favour of the action, which could have spread to other sections of the union.

The union believes Royal Mail had lined up the sale of its network of cash centres as an expedient measure to generate a £350 million cash injection for the loss-making business by realising the value of currency and stock they protect.

John Keggie, the union's deputy general secretary, said, "In the event of surpluses anywhere in Royal Mail our members have the right to transfer into other parts of the business or take enhanced voluntary redundancy terms. Had they been transferred to another employer they would have ceased to enjoy this protection."

FINANCE

Brown demands sanctions

GORDON BROWN is apparently demanding punitive sanctions against the Banking Gnomes of Zurich. These sanctions are to be implemented no later than 2010, unless the secretive Swiss banks reveal details of all EU citizens holding accounts in Switzerland. This is supposedly an EU initiative to deal with tax evaders. It is a well known fact that the average EU citizen who can afford to squirrel money away in secretive Swiss bank vaults falls under a limited number of headings: Mafioso – old country; Mafioso – new style Albanian Kosovo terrorist; ex-Nazi or capitalist – nationless globetrotter!

Brown wants to dictate financial controls over independent non-EU nations. He is seeking restrictions on the movement of Swiss capital and businesses. This is not

unlike the sanctions the USA applies to Cuba. The Swiss are furious over this unprecedented interference in their sovereign nation, especially after they have consistently refused to be part of the EU.

But it goes further, as what Brown and EU tax commissioners can dream up for one country, can be applied anywhere. This would include the murky dealings of the City of London or any stock exchange. The pressure on Switzerland is a feint to distract too close a scrutiny of the banking practices in London, Frankfurt and other EU centres.

The Swiss laundered Nazi gold and finances before, during and after the last war. Even now the full revelations of their dealings are secret. The US State Department used the Swiss as their conduit to negotiate with the Nazis. Perhaps the US will use the Swiss as their banking outpost surrounded by the new EU Empire as the US and EU square up to each other?

WHAT'S ON

Coming soon

DECEMBER

Wednesday 4 December, 11am - 4pm
Students march against the Government's plans for fees
The march will assemble in Malet Street, London WC1, before setting off at 12pm for a rally in Kennington Park. For more information, see the NUS website at www.nusonline.org.uk.

Wednesday 4 December, 11am - 4pm
Stop the War National Coalition Conference
Details from www.stopwar.org.uk, email office@stopwar.org.uk, or call 07951 235 915

Tuesday 10 December, 3.30pm - 5pm
TASC National Members Meeting
London Irish Centre, 50-52 Camden Square, London N1 9XB
Members of Trade Unions against the Single Currency will hear reports on activity from around the country and discuss an action plan for the coming year.

EUROPEAN UNION

Nuclear blackmail

ONE OF THE European Union's aims in the enlargement process has been to get the candidate countries to close their nuclear power stations, which means they would become dependent on western suppliers instead.

The Commission has put forward a series of propositions on "nuclear safety" to deal with the eighteen reactors which will be in EU territory. The EU has already demanded the closure of three nuclear stations arguing that they are "incapable of being modernised"; Bohunice in Slovakia, Kozloduy in Bulgaria and Ignalina in Lithuania. Closures and dependency will be achieved by including clauses in the accession treaties to force countries to close these power stations.

But this, apparently, is not enough. The EU wants "a global approach" to the issue, and to have the power to survey all the nuclear stations in the new member states. It also expects new members to cough up the money to dismantle these stations if they should suddenly prove financially unviable. According to the energy commissar, Loyola de Palacio, all this is being done "to make a re-launch of nuclear power in Europe possible".

What price European Union stability?

THE EURO ZONE'S famous Stability Pact, designed to safeguard the stability of the euro, is rapidly taking in water. France has partly told its colleagues on the Euro-group which unites the finance ministers of the eurozone that it is going to spend money on its military, rather than reduce state borrowing, as the Stability Pact requires.

The French Finance Minister, Francis Mer, was in a minority of one at the recent Luxembourg meeting. France is thus the only country which has refused to reduce its structural budget deficit ("real" deficit whose figures are not adjusted for cyclical reasons) by 0.5% a year — and is naturally coming under attack for daring to assert its own sovereignty. All other 11 euro states have made this undertaking, although the finances of Germany, Italy and Portugal are also in a parlous state from the point of view of the Pact.

Paris has now said it will not start applying this rule until 2004. Mer confirmed that France intended to remain at the level of 2002 in 2003. France's position on this drives a coach and horses through the earlier informal compromise suggested by the commissioner for monetary affairs, Pedro Solbes. On 24 September, two days after the German elections, Solbes had said that he would delay from 2004 to 2006 the date by which euro member states had to have balanced their budgets completely. In return, he suggested the 0.5% per year reduction in the structural deficit.

France does not expect to balance its budget now until 2007, and the reaction shows how far EU interference in nation states has progressed. Even Solbes' suggested delay was rejected by most euro states: Austria, Spain, Finland and the Netherlands refused to accept it.

The Greek chairman of the meeting said that the legal position was that the budgets would be balanced by 2004, since this is what had been formally agreed by ECOFIN, the European Council of Finance Ministers. He also took pains to underline that France was isolated on this matter.

"All ministers with the exception of one," he said, "have accepted that all euro countries must reduce their structural deficit by 0.5% per year and that this must start in 2003."

Attacked

France is now being attacked by other euro states as a free rider — that is, as a country which benefits from the protection afforded by the euro but which is not prepared to make the sacrifices necessary to make it work.

Mer responded to criticism by drawing attention to the fact that France's deficit is not the highest. Portugal's deficit is 4.1% of GDP and Germany's 2.9%, as against France's 2.6%. Germany's deficit is in severe danger of going over the 3% ceiling next year. But France's determination has shattered the illusion that the eurozone states are coordinating their economic policies.

Mer said, "If there is not to be a reduction of deficits in 2003, this is because we have decided that we have other priorities, for instance increasing military spending. We live in a Europe where the budgetary policy and policy generally of member states remain under their control. I believe and we believe that Europe needs a credible and more autonomous defence capacity than that which we have today and that if France and the United Kingdom do not lead by example, then Europe will never be credible militarily."

Any nation that is serious about
plan and implement an animal h

Keeping Britain's farm

BRITAIN IS PAINFULLY learning the lesson that animal health is intimately connected with human health. The organisms that cause disease do not often discriminate between the species they infect. One of the classical examples of a disease that crosses such barriers is the rabies virus, recently in the news when European bat lyssavirus was suspected to have been passed to a human by the bite of a bat. There are many other such conditions, such as West Nile virus, recently a focus of concern in the United States, cat scratch disease and Weil's disease.

And the considerable economic importance of animals, as a food source, or a source of clothing and textiles, cosmetics, chemicals, pharmaceuticals and fertilisers means that attention to animal health can be economically important, too.

Foot and mouth

This cannot be better illustrated than by the cost of Britain's 2001 foot-and-mouth epidemic, estimated by the National Audit Office to have cost around £8 billion. Around 10 million animals were slaughtered, it now appears.

In addition, animals can be used by scientists in vital research on pharmaceuticals, development of household products, weapons and psychological research. Animals also perform important entertainment and recreational functions, sometimes in parallel with more serious scientific purposes as in zoos and wildlife parks, or more frivolously on television and in films, in circuses and competitive racing of species such as dogs, horses and camels.

the health of its human population does well to health strategy — so where does that leave us?

ns safe



‘Britain’s ability to deal effectively and quickly with threats such as foot and mouth is compromised...’

Nor should we forget that animals themselves can perform labour, with or on behalf of a human worker. Animals can be used in defence and security, as guide dogs for the disabled, for transport and in tracking and sensing. And there is a growing amount of evidence that relationships with animals may offer health benefits to humans, both psychological, as in the use of pet therapy with the elderly and disabled, but also in promoting exercise and reducing stress.

For all these reasons, animal health has a direct impact on human health. And any nation that is serious about the health of its human population does well

to plan and implement an animal health strategy.

In Britain we have certain natural advantages in developing such a strategy. We are an island, so our borders are easily secured against disease in ways which continental countries cannot, when borders are lines on a map rather than impassable geographical features such as the English Channel.

We also have experience developed over centuries of handling sudden epidemics. In the 19th century British veterinarians led the world in disease control, surpassing the continental approach to animal plagues such as rinderpest, and applying these lessons worldwide through the colonies in the days of empire.

The Northumberland report into the 1967 foot-and-mouth outbreak defined two strands to disease control: slaughter of affected animals and exclusion of potentially infected animals from meat and meat products.

Split

After the 2001 outbreak scientists proposed an open scientific enquiry along the same lines as Northumberland, in vain. The Government split the task among a series of enquiries that rose into double figures, many of them run by placemen.

The second strand of control proposed by Northumberland — exclusion of potentially infected carcasses from the food chain — would fly in the face of the Treaty of Rome, which requires free movement of animals over the whole of Europe. Britain’s ability to deal effectively and quickly with threats such as foot and mouth is compromised, not only by the extraordinary and unnecessary increase in animal travel, but by the emasculation of the State Veterinary Service.

The service’s manpower was halved in the Thatcher years, and its decline has been prosecuted with just as much zeal by the Government since 1997, with reorganisation upon reorganisation upon restructuring and so on. It now faces a

further threat in a new Animal Health and Welfare Strategy to be announced next spring. The Government has made it know that yet again it will revise the systems of surveillance and local veterinary inspectors.

Privatisation

Neither has the major diagnostic service, the Veterinary Laboratories Agency, been free from such interference. Changed from the Central Veterinary Laboratory into one of the "Next Steps" agencies, a form of semi-privatisation, the agency has battled to maintain surveillance of foot-and-mouth disease, bovine tuberculosis, and diseases such as BSE in cattle and scrapie in sheep.

The Royal Society pointed out in its report on infectious diseases in livestock research and surveillance that the fight against diseases affecting animal and public health requires increased investment on a national basis. Yet the Government’s response to the enquiries, announced by Margaret Beckett in the Commons in early November, makes no mention of any such increase, although it claims to accept “virtually all” the recommendations of the enquiries.

Read the small print, and a great deal of qualification is added: recommendations are accepted “in part”, “in principle” or are “to be given further consideration”. The Royal Society enquiry recommended that £250 million be invested over the next ten years.

The Government’s response consists of £25 million over five years, and makes no commitment beyond that. Further, it tries to duck the issue by claiming that responsibility for funding research and surveillance should rest with the EU not with the British Government. So it has committed a tenth of the amount necessary.

There are also new threats emerging. Bluetongue, a disease that affects all ruminants, is particularly difficult to control because cattle can carry the disease without showing any symptoms.

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Continued from page 7

Bluetongue is on the increase, and heading our way. It has occurred in nine Mediterranean countries in the past three years, including four countries that had never previously experienced the disease. The growth of the long distance movement of animals, the increasing density of livestock populations and the effects of climate change all mean that Britain could be at risk of bluetongue.

Worse, rinderpest or cattle plague, which our Victorian forebears were so keen to protect us against, was present in Turkey seven years ago. The last case in Britain of this scourge was in 1877. Rinderpest, unlike foot-and-mouth, kills nine out of ten animals in a herd and is still endemic in Asia and Africa. EU enlargement will mean more risk of disease and greater numbers of ill-

‘The sorts of controls that would be necessary are anathema to a Government that has sold our borders away...’

controlled movements of animals.

Foot-and-mouth disease can also be brought into disease-free areas through meat and meat products. The Government now seems unwilling or unable to control the growing trade in bush meat smuggled in from West Africa. Bush meat, the trade

in illegally killed wildlife carcasses, from species such as monkeys and antelope, poses a threat not only to British animal health but to human health as well, with the dangers of infection with Ebola virus and Marburg disease, highly dangerous haemorrhagic diseases and immune system disorders such as SIV, the monkey form of HIV/AIDS.

Customs officers could easily prevent such smuggling if they were allowed to: but the sorts of controls that would be necessary are anathema to a Government that has sold our borders away. And so such meat can be seen offered for sale in London markets

Illegal

Contrast the ease with which drugs, illegal meat, or even people can enter Britain with the strict controls imposed by Australia, another, albeit larger island. If Australia can keep such sudden sporadic epidemics at bay, why can Britain not? Yet the Government’s Animal Health Bill, which received Royal Assent on 7 November, tightens up the powers of the Government to enter farms.

There was no need for new powers: existing powers were quite adequate for these purposes, and existing powers would also be quite sufficient at our ports and airports, if they were but used.

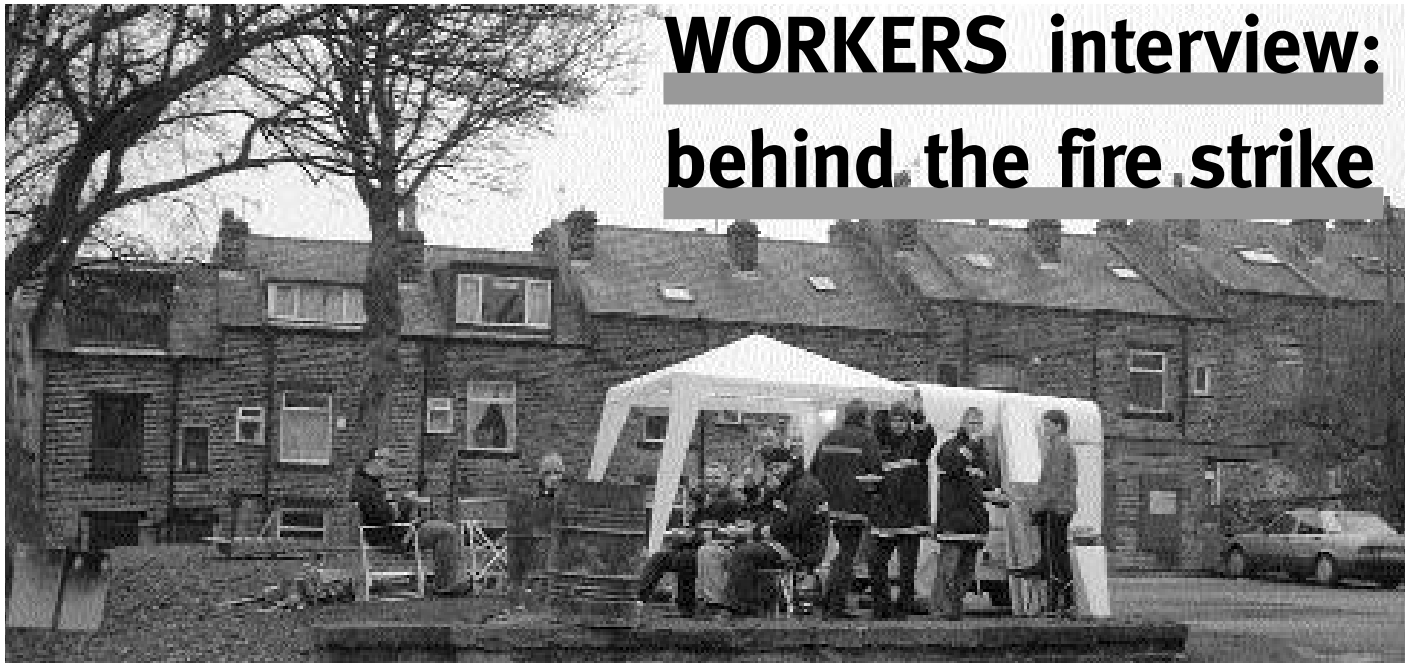
Trafficking

For the European Union, animals are simply a commodity to be trafficked freely the length and breadth of the community through the free movement clauses of the Treaty of Rome, which also require labour to be transportable throughout the EU. Neither animal welfare nor disease control plays any part in their considerations, and the result is huge ill-controlled movements of animals.

All those concerned with animal health — those who work with animals, farmers, veterinarians — know the risks the Government is running with our economy, with our animals’ health and with our own health. We need to write and enforce our own plan for the protection of our animal health and for a future for farming.



WORKERS interview: behind the fire strike



Out to win: the picket line at Shiley, constituency of Christopher Leslie, fire safety minister, soon after the start of the first 8-day strike

WITH NATIONAL industrial action in the fire service, **WORKERS** talked to FBU member Josh Smaller, a firefighter in Croydon Fire Station, south London, who had just come off the picket line on the first day of the 8-day strike.

Firstly, Josh explained how he came to be a firefighter. After leaving college with a degree he tried various jobs, but once he joined the fire service that is where he has stayed, for the last nine years. "It's fantastic," he said. "Incredibly hard work, physical and mental. The 26 weeks' initial intensive training — learning to use the equipment, how to work in a team, learning to work under great pressure, and getting to know all the legislation — was the hardest thing I've ever done."

Firefighters who make the grade qualify after four years and reach full pay. The next rise comes after 15 years. Josh has been at Croydon Fire Station for a year, as a member of one of four watches of 12 firefighters, with two tenders, overseen by one station commander.

Bain report

Josh feels that the Bain report was written in reaction to the planned industrial action, whereas the issues of pay and developments in the service should be treated as separate. "The term 'modernisation' sticks in our throats — it's just being presented as a way of saving money," he says.

Two Bain proposals would have important implications for fire cover in London, where at present all stations are full time. Two possibilities are being put forward: that stations could remain fully staffed during the day, but at night either close or become "retained" — as in rural

areas, where retained firefighters do other jobs but carry buzzers to be on call to an incident. Bain's argument for this is that there are fewer calls at night, so this could be an efficiency saving for some suburban stations and inner city stations where the population drops at night when people go home from work.

Firefighters feel adamantly and "of one voice" about this, says Josh. Response times to a call — at present

'Anything we can do to help save lives is a good thing, but it must be done properly in a professional service...'

very fast — would become much slower. Most deaths in fires tend to happen at night when people are asleep, and nobody can predict when a fire will happen. The population of London is increasing. Closure or part closures of fire stations are bad for the public.

Professionalism

Another Bain proposal is for a new graduate or senior entry level into the fire service, with fast tracking to higher levels of command. Yet a great strength of the present service is that all station commanders and chief officers have been firefighters themselves whose professionalism is based on a thorough knowledge of the service and the job. This does not mean that people in senior

administration would not benefit from a broadening of that experience, according to Josh this could further strengthen effectiveness of the service.

On the possibility of changing shift patterns, Josh feels that there could be some useful variations, for instance, employing some firefighters to work day shifts only, to make life easier for parents. Should fire crews carry defibrillators? "Anything we can do to help save lives is a good thing, but it must be done properly in a professional service. With increasing pressure on ambulance crews, fire engines tend to arrive sooner at the scene of an incident, but we are not ambulance workers. Any changes in roles should be funded properly and carried out properly, not as a cost-cutting exercise."

The future

How would Josh like to see the service develop? "I'd like to see more money put in to help us make London a safer city. Over the past few years we have turned increasingly to work on community safety — now we need more resources put towards fire prevention, in schools, community groups, public buildings. Inner city areas have higher levels of deaths and serious injury from fires — especially among people such as ethnic minorities — and promoting the use of smoke alarms and escape plans, often talking to children to get at their parents, can really have an effect.

"Firefighters are committed people who want to serve the public, but our high level of training and responsibility are not reflected in our wages. We want a decent standard of living. Enough is enough."

Never mind who's hogging the headlines. It's the state of organisation on the ground that really matters...

The guerrilla fight against privatisation



September 2002: housekeepers in Bury St Edmunds celebrating their victory after their long fight to return to the NHS

WHILE THE self-proclaimed “awkward squad” of newly elected union general secretaries are keen to draw attention to the prospect of industrial action taking place in a range of industries, a legitimate question at present is whether there actually is any more struggle over basic issues than hitherto at national level. Are we overlooking significant developments at local level which deserve more attention?

Undermined

In many areas of public service, particularly the NHS, privatisation of services over many years has undermined the capacity, and desire, of workers to fight for pay. Indeed, some trade union branches even ceased to organise once workforces were privatised, on the grounds that the fight against privatisation was lost, and the

consequences were not the responsibility of the union which had fought to prevent privatisation in the first place. Such immature thinking has now largely been overcome and there are signs that progress is being made in some areas.

UNISON has recently begun to look afresh at organising private contractors, beginning with a limited number of the largest private contractors in the Health Service.

A national meeting of branches and organisers dealing with the largest NHS contractor, ISS Mediclean, was organised by UNISON on 30 September. Unsung and without great fanfare, genuine struggle is taking place, and is making genuine progress.

In the absence of national pay negotiations between ISS and UNISON, local claims have been submitted in a

number of regions, around the core demand that nationally negotiated NHS pay scales should be adopted by ISS Mediclean. Negotiations and, inevitably, disputes are now developing.

ISS has no negotiating machinery, no sick pay, no holiday pay and no pension scheme — this is one of the best employers in the health service! What on earth must the others be like?

Strike

On 27 September a one-day strike took place in two Swansea hospitals, where ISS have contracts to provide ancillary services. This UNISON branch has doubled in size, with nearly 100% of the workforce, and the number of shop stewards has gone from 2 to 10. Two further days of strike action scheduled for 7 and 8 October were called off after the employer agreed to move closer to

NHS pay rates.

Separate but related disputes with ISS Mediclean were lodged in NHS trusts in East London and in East Kilbride— a truly national dispute to civilise Britain. In Swansea, the rate went from £4.35 to £4.62 an hour; in East London, at Whipps Cross, the dispute continues, with the local community group condemning ISS's rate for cleaners of £4.30 an hour; while in East Kilbride a deal means that rates will rise to £5 an hour, and improved conditions such as sick pay will be phased in over the next 18 months.

Guerrilla

Big, set-piece political battles have always been the favoured route of those keen to cry "sell-out" when they almost inevitably fail. Local, guerrilla action in different contracts in pursuit of the same objective is a far more realistic option for a union with uneven levels of organisation and development. And which union coping with privatisation isn't in that situation?

Forcing recalcitrant companies to embrace national NHS pay and conditions is the first step to the re-acquiring of sick pay and, a far harder battle, the establishment of proper pension provision.

If and when these objectives are met, many companies like the Danish-owned ISS will have to decide whether running NHS contracts is still profitable for them. Company profits come almost entirely from the absence of proper pay and provisions, and if we can drag these payments from the company then many contracts will inevitably be surrendered back to the NHS.

This is the way to deal with privatisation — union organisation on the ground, local struggles over national demands, with sound leadership both local and national.

It is also crucial to set privatisation in proper perspective. Some say it is more important than it is, while others say it is irrelevant and to be ignored. As with many issues, the way to find its

proper significance is to eschew both such extremes.

To begin with, the view, usually from the Labour Party, is that only by utilising the resources and management of the private sector can Britain be even partially rebuilt. This presupposes that we can't do a decent job of work without capitalists.

It is a counsel of despair, lacking confidence in our ability to rebuild the

'Local, guerrilla action in pursuit of the same objective is a far more realistic option for a union with uneven levels of organisation and development...'

infrastructure of the public services built by earlier generations of British workers. We are even more capable now of building a health service than was the generation that had to labour through massive post-war shortages. What we lack is the drive, the political will to see the job through.

On top of this, the private sector is bringing little in the way of new resources — after all its reason for taking on these contracts in the first place is to take money out of the public service in the form of profit! As for management skills, most of the managers in most big PFI schemes have been transferred from the NHS.

Mistaken

On the other hand there are those who assert that privatisation is the beginning of the end of the world, that it is the biggest attack we have faced in Britain since the Blitz, and as a result everything in the public sector has to be

defended as if our lives depended on it. This too is a mistaken view.

Thatcher's use of privatisation both to bolster up private companies and help get round public sector borrowing requirements shouldn't blind us to the fact that her primary assault was on manufacturing, as is Blair's now, and on the consequent erosion of national sovereignty. The transfer of assets to the private sector comes a pretty poor third behind these Thatcherite attacks.

Transfer

In any event the transfer of assets to the private sector has been much overblown, by both proponents and detractors. Only a small fraction of what was in the public sector 20 years ago is in the private sector now.

It's not privatisation that has driven down terms and conditions of workers, it's bad trade union organisation. The view that the only thing to be done about privatisation is to prevent it has led directly to the disastrous idea that nothing can be done after the workers have been transferred, leading in turn to neglect and turning away from our unions, our only means of defence, more necessary than ever after privatisation.

Successful union organisation, driving up wages and improving conditions, will ultimately drive out the contractors, as has recently been seen in the magnificent example of the Bury St Edmunds UNISON members reported in the last issue of WORKERS (see photo).

Indefensible

That is the real way to defeat privatisation. The fear of all things privately owned can easily be turned into a defence of the indefensible excesses of Labour councils unprepared to get workers to work better to provide services people really need.

We know that this is not a view shared by some active in the labour movement, although more popular than many would like to admit. Write to WORKERS and let us know how you feel.

A recently published book shows the link between rum and politics...

Bacardi's war on Cuba

IN 1996 BACARDI distributed 96 cases of a rum they made in the Bahamas, which they called Havana Club, the brand name of the highly successful Cuban rum marketed by the French firm Pernod-Ricard.

Their act was the latest of their many attacks against Cuba since the revolution. These have included attempts to block its trade with all countries and the use of money and ultra right wing alliances to make US legislation extreme in its anti Cuba stance. One year before the revolution Bacardi left Cuba and registered its trademark in the Bahamas for tax purposes. It has distilleries and large offices in Miami where it controls Florida politics.

With Bacardi's power and influence has grown their arrogance and exposed to the US and world public their activities. The Colombian writer Hernando Calvo Espina has written a brilliant exposé in his book BACARDI THE HIDDEN WAR, first published in French in 2000 and this year in English by Pluto Press. And now, people in Britain are starting to take notice, with the launch of a boycott campaign in student unions (see News, p4).

Terrorists

Bacardi owners and directors have close connections with US politicians, right-wing think tanks, the CIA, the Mafia, anti-Cuban terrorist groups and links with UNITA, the Contras and Pinochet's assassination squads. They protect convicted terrorists like Orlando Bosch and Louis Posada Carriles who were arrested in Venezuela for the blowing up in mid-flight of a Cuban passenger plane killing 73 people. They are also alleged to have been involved in the assassination of Allende's former minister Orlando Letelier and his US assistant in Washington in 1976.

The success of Havana Club not only hit Bacardi profits and its virtual world wide monopoly, it also was a blow to their hopes that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba would also collapse. So certain had they been of this that

they had detailed plans for the auctioning off of the island to US and Cuban-American corporations using the Helms-Burton Act with the US Cuba Business Council coordinating the privatisation. Cuba showed resilience and an ability to forge links and trade throughout the world including attracting investment.

This resilience led to more and more extreme attempts to tighten the blockade of Cuba by extending control on other countries. So was created the Helms-Burton Act, a product of the Cuban-American extreme right written by Bacardi lawyers. The act seeks to treat Cuba as the property of US-Cuban

'Bacardi's influence really grew during the Reagan period. Reagan wanted to expand the terror activities not only against Cuba but also Nicaragua and in Africa...'

capitalists and threatens businesses that trade with Cuba or invest there. As Burton stated; 'Businesses that are ignoring our embargo and dealing with Fidel Castro will lose their shirt when that country becomes free. They need to realise this...' The contents and aims of the act effectively attempt to annex Cuba to the USA.

The first two titles (articles) of the Act detail what Cuba must do in order to obtain a US designation as a democracy. It demands that the Cuban leadership must be dismantled together with the Communist Party, grassroot organisations and everything to do with the current system. This would be followed by a 'transition' period during

which a new kind of state and society to the liking of the US President would be created. He and he alone may decide if 'democracy has arrived in Cuba and the proof that he would need is confirmation that all nationalised property belonging to US citizens or companies had been returned or compensated for, including those of Cuban-American magnates.

Nationalisation

Titles 3 and 4 of the act deal with firms who trade, invest, share out, manage, use or deal with confiscated property and treats them as traffickers subject to US sanctions. Despite the attack on Cuban sovereignty, it is the last two articles that have caused most international reaction. It is recognised in international law that the nationalisation by the Cuban government was legally constituted and followed expropriation procedures that existed in Cuba prior to its transformation into a socialist state.

The US Supreme Court in 1964 recognised this in the case of the Cuban National Bank v Peter F L Sabatino. Compensation was allowed for, and has consistently been refused by, the US government and corporations. Indeed 25% of the revenue from sugar sales to the US was set for compensation. The US stopped buying Cuban sugar in the same month.

Initially the EU protested and took the case to the World Trade Organisation but when the US said it was not a matter of trade but 'national security' the EU caved in. In the Birmingham agreement the EU recognised the Helms-Burton Act, provided the 'claims' against nationalised property are 'supervised' by the EU. In this way, EU companies can share in the loot of the Cuban people's property. At the time the EU, US and many transnationals were campaigning to implement the Multilateral Investment Agreement, which sought to make privatisation irreversible, ban nationalisation and restrict sovereign control over multinationals.

To ensure passage of the Helms-Burton Act when the Clinton government



Cuba survives: here, old men play dominoes in the afternoon (photographed on a visit earlier this year by a delegation from Derby)

was worried about political isolation, Bacardi paid the Basulto brothers to enter Cuban airspace in US-based aircraft. They did so repeatedly until the Cuban airforce shot down two planes. In the political climate thus created, Clinton ratified the 'Liberty and Democratic Solidarity with Cuba Act' better known as the Helms-Burton Act.

While Helms-Burton cited Bacardi's political aims it was not sufficient to protect its profits from the success of Havana Club since it had not been nationalised, having left Cuba before the revolution, and Cuba had registered the brand name in the US.

They found the Arechabalas, a family in Spain who were descendants of Basque immigrants who had produced Havana Club in Cuba in the 19th century. The firm had been bankrupted ironically by competition from Bacardi at the time so the brand name passed to the public domain.

Bacardi's influence on US politics has grown since it linked with the CIA. In the 1960s Bacardi's top boss Jose Pepin

Bosh decided to bomb the nationalised Cuban oil refineries. He bought a B-26, the plane that the CIA favoured when attacking Cuba through paid Cuban mercenaries.

The plane and its rockets were photographed in Costa Rica before it took off and facing scandal the plane had to return to the US. After the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion Pepin Bosh decided to organise mercenary emigrés for a second invasion and created the Cuban Representation in Exile (RECE in Spanish).

Assassination

During the investigation into the murder of President Kennedy and CIA plans to murder leaders in other countries (together with the Cosa Nostra and Cuban emigrés) it came out that Pepin Bosh offered to contribute \$100,000 of the money required by the mafia to assassinate Fidel and Raul Castro and Che Guevara.

Bacardi's influence really grew during the Reagan period. Reagan wanted to

expand the terror activities against not only Cuba but also Nicaragua and in Africa, but the terrorist activities of the Cuban emigrés and their links to drug traffic made them vulnerable to public opinion so he launched 'Project Democracy' which was to increase war activity but manage its propaganda at the highest level. They formed an ultra-right wing, well financed, structure — the Cuban American National Foundation. Jose Pepin Bosh, Jose Bacardi and several other prominent Bacardi family and firm executives were part of the governing council of CANF.

Cynthia Thomas, a US policy analyst, has published a list of political contributions by CANF to influence Washington politics. She showed the extent to which rich Cuban emigrés control US policy towards Cuba and domination of Florida. But money talks only when people stay silent and don't act. The signs are that many people in the US, Britain and many other countries are acting. Good news for democracy and good quality Cuban rum.

Even as a new gallery in Northampton Central Museum and Art Gallery, the Northamptonshire manufacturers of Doc Martens, has moved production to China. Workers takes a look inside the museum...

The town that stood on other men's legs

"THE TOWN OF Northampton may be said to stand chiefly on other men's legs...the most and cheapest, if not the best boots...in England are to be bought in Northampton." So said Thomas Fuller in 1660. Northampton has always been a shoe town - reflected in the name of our football team - the Cobblers.

It is ironic that even as a new gallery in Northampton Central Museum and Art Gallery opens, Griggs, the Northamptonshire manufacturer of Doc Martens, has decided to move production to China. The shoe industry has been part of Northamptonshire for about 900 years, but in only 40 years it has been reduced to a small core of quality producers.

The gallery itself is a wonderful trek through the history of shoes and shoemaking from Egyptian examples to the Vivienne Westwood's green "mock croc super elevated ghillie shoes". It takes in developments in manufacturing processes as well as the social and cultural side to footwear.

The museum is crammed with fascinating facts. Did you know for example that a cobbler is only a man who mends shoes? It is insulting to call a shoemaker by this term! Shoemakers were skilled craftsmen, who served apprenticeships. Some shoemakers could hand sew seams with 40 stitches to an inch.

Central

The central part of the museum tracks the history of shoemaking in Northamptonshire. Sited in the middle of the country, but near enough to the London markets, the key factors in the county's success lay in the availability of raw materials and the clay soil

(containing minerals essential in the tanning process). Leather came from local cattle skins, and there was water and oak bark for the tanning process. As early as 1213 King John purchased a pair of boots for 9d and his son ordered 150 pairs for the poor. A guild was set up in the 15th century to regulate the industry.

Early shoemaking was done in small workshops with simple hand tools: knives, awls, a hammer, a lapstone and leather band and pad to hold the shoe firm. Shoemakers sat on benches and worked on their laps.

From the middle of the 19th century the workshops faced a threat from new machinery. In 1857 closing machines, which joined the soles and uppers, were invented in the USA. In 1858 the Northamptonshire Boot and Shoemakers Mutual Protection Society formed to fight the introduction of machinery and there was a strike in 1859 over feared job losses.

It was impossible for workers to prevent the coming of the factories; and they disliked the loss of independence and such traditions as "Cobbler's Monday" (Monday was a drinking holiday). A trade union was formed in 1874, which became known as the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives. In 1887 there was a dispute over piece-work rates and in 1895, 46,000 workers were locked out across the



Boots and banners: the shoe gallery in Northampton Central Museum and Art Gallery pays homage to an industry under threat.



Gallery opens, s decided to move

country over wages.

The industry continued to thrive, producing 23 million pairs of army boots during the First World War. The rot set in after the Second World War when the British Shoe Corporation, which controlled the cheap high street shops, started selling imported shoes. There is a depressing list of major Northamptonshire manufacturers in the gallery, most of which have now closed, been taken over or have shrunk in size.

This gallery is certainly worth a visit, as is the adjacent section dedicated solely to shoe fashions. It is well laid out, with a separate section containing machinery and reconstructions of workshop benches.

You can see the enormous boots worn by Elton John in Tommy and Queen Victoria's white satin wedding shoes. There is a section on shoe fetishes and another with tiny Chinese shoes for bound feet. Did you know the average person takes about 18,000 steps a day? Or that 70% of foot problems are caused by poorly made shoes? There are also things for the children to do — they can measure their feet, try different types of fastenings on giant shoes, or shine shoes.

Losses

Workers in Northampton are just starting to think about how to combat the huge job losses in manufacturing we have seen in the last few years. Statistics show that in the 1990s the British bought about five pairs of shoes a year for every man, woman and child and four out of those were imported — China accounting for one of those pairs. Conditions in factories in places like Brazil and China are poor and wages low — Brazilian workers get about 4p in every £ of the sale price.

We need to make sure that the gallery isn't just an exercise in nostalgia, but a wake-up call to preserve the industry and skills that have made Northampton the town it is today.

WHAT'S THE PARTY?

We in the Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist), and others who want to see a change in the social system we live under, aspire to a society run in such a way as to provide for the needs, and the desires, of working people, not the needs and desires of those who live by the work of others. These latter people we call capitalists and the system they have created we call capitalism. We don't just aspire to change it, we work to achieve that change.

We object to capitalism not because it is unfair and unkind, although it has taken those vices and made virtues out of them. We object because it does not work. It cannot feed everyone, or house them, or provide work for them. We need, and will work to create a system that can.

We object to capitalism not because it is opposed to terrorism; in fact it helped create it. We object because it cannot, or will not, get rid of it. To destroy terrorism you'd have to destroy capitalism, the supporter of the anti-progress forces which lean on terror to survive. We'd have to wait a long time for that.

We object to capitalism not because it says it opposes division in society; it creates both. We object because it has assiduously created immigration to divide workers here, and now wants to take that a dangerous step further, by institutionalising religious difference into division via 'faith' schools (actually a contradiction in terms).

Capitalism may be all the nasty things well-meaning citizens say it is. But that's not why we workers must destroy it. We must destroy it because it cannot provide for our futures, our children's futures. We must build our own future, and stop complaining about the mess created in our name.

Time will pass, and just as certainly, change will come. The only constant thing in life is change. Just as new growth replaces decay in the natural world, this foreign body in our lives, the foreign body we call capitalism, will have to be replaced by the new, by the forces of the future, building for themselves and theirs, and not for the few. We can work together to make the time for that oh-so-overdue change come all the closer, all the quicker.

Step aside capital. It's our turn now.

How to get in touch

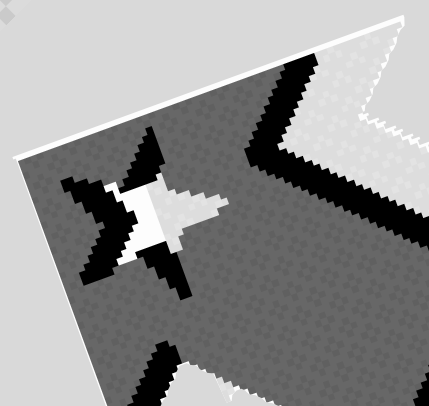
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Back to Front – Fresh blood

‘No one with even a passing acquaintance with European history can fail to be puzzled as to why anyone would want the armies of Estonia and Lithuania to be modernised...’

THERE WAS some footage of Tony Blair in Budapest last month, walking on his own up some steps, looking for a banquet. He appeared to be a little lost, as if unsure about where he was, or why. In fact, he was taking part in the NATO meeting that granted membership to a string of Eastern European countries: Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria.

Just this once, Blair might be forgiven for being a little confused. Actually, the whole of the sane world found the event confusing. Why should NATO be extended to include these countries? What exactly is their role in defending Western Europe, and from whom? (Come to that, why have NATO at all?)

As if membership itself were not bad enough, it emerged later that the US (to give NATO its proper title) is insisting that these countries modernise their armies, and spend a lot more of their GDP doing it. (Broke Lithuania has been told it must spend \$240 million a year.)

Now, no one with even a passing acquaintance with the history of Europe can fail to be puzzled as to why anyone would want the armies of Estonia and Lithuania, for example, to be modernised.

These states, dragged into the modern era by the Soviet Union, briefly allowed to subside into feudal barbarity during the Second World War (in Lithuania, they did not wait for the advancing Germans to start massacring Jews), now freed from the Soviet “yoke”, are bywords for reaction and oppression. Who are they to fight against (if not their own people)?

Slowly, answers are emerging. Modernisation — as ever, it seems — is the key. These countries must buy modern military hardware, that is, hardware from Boeing, Lockheed and the rest of the US military-industrial complex. If you want to join NATO, you must buy American. (Coincidence: the president of the US’s committee on NATO is a former vice president of Lockheed...) But there is also a blood price.

NATO was set up half a century ago to unite capitalist Europe against the Soviet Union. For most of its life it claimed to be “keeping the peace in Europe”. And there was peace in Europe, though this was not the result of NATO.

The peace in Europe was actually kept by the Soviet Union. Anyone who doubts this should reflect on what happened in Europe, the wars that erupted, after the downfall of the Soviet Union.

And with that downfall, NATO has claimed a new role, that of the US’s global policeman — or rather, global private security agency. When there are wars to be fought around the world, the US wants other countries’ young men to die for it. Now it has a nice little source of fresh Eastern European blood.

How anyone could pronounce themselves pleased with the NATO expansion is beyond belief, but Blair managed it. Did Blair really know what he was doing in Budapest? Perhaps the fact that Bush wanted it was enough for him. For the rest of us, the whole saga should make us ashamed that we ever let Blair go abroad to represent us.

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