

BRITAIN is passing through a new stage of working-class political struggle.

It was mass revulsion against the way capitalism affects people's lives that brought down the Tory government in 1997. Millions of people rebelled against the strangulation and destruction of their rights. There was a growing bitterness at health and education cuts, at the treatment of the sick, the disabled and the deprived; at the increased wealth at one end of society and poverty at the other.

Thatcher, followed by Major and a reactionary crowd of monetarists attacked what they described as the "nanny state". They said it must now truly be their state and its assistance must go first and foremost to maintaining capitalist profit. While cutting welfare benefits they assisted the profitable ventures and the speculative excursions of the rich and very rich.

Today we are witnessing the further development of this mass anti-capitalist sentiment, but now against New Labour. The fatal contradiction of Blair's government is that, while it was elected on a rising wave of discontent with "Thatcherism", it accepts completely the ideological base of the Tories and the policies arising from that. In his book, *Hidden Agendas*, John Pilger rightly says about New Labour:

"Theirs is a ruthlessness known only to the ideologically born again as their attacks on even disabled people make clear. The Blairites have become the political wing of the City of London and the British multi-national corporations and, in natural order, the trusted servitors of European 'central bankism' and American economic and military hegemony."

This has led to increasing collisions between the government and the wishes of large sections of the population. Nevertheless New Labour arrogantly expects traditional Labour voters to continue to give their support!

Millions of Londoners looked on in disgust as Blair gerrymandered the votes inside the London Labour Party to ensure his own candidate (supporting London Underground privatisation) against Ken Livingstone in the election for mayor. The joy when Livingstone was elected as an independent anti-privatisation candidate was increased tenfold because the New Labour government had got a bloody nose (came fourth!) *Financial Times* journalist Brian Groom declared: "Britain is in the grip of a new form of politics". He was right.

Throughout the capital and throughout the country there was a growing "get Blair" mood. Since then, in the fuel crisis we witnessed the overwhelming majority of people supporting the blockade mounted by road hauliers and small farmers because it was directed against New Labour. And so powerful was the pressure of millions of elderly people for the state pension to be earnings-linked that New Labour was defeated at its own conference by the trade union block votes.

Significantly the majority of delegates from Labour's constituency parties supported Blair against the pensioners — a sign that this is now overwhelmingly a party of social climbers and would-be parliamentarian careerists. A growing number of "old Labour" members have been expelled or have abandoned it in disgust.

Such "old Labour" workers and supporters as well as other social campaigners, realising that they are not represented by New Labour are now deciding that they must represent themselves. A significant indication of this is the standing of independent workers' candidates in defence of social and public services. Independent candidates have

already appeared in local elections — e.g. in Tameside where six sacked care workers stood as *Defend Public Services* candidates, and in Kidderminster against the hospital closure. In the London elections 11 tube workers stood as *Campaign Against Tube Privatisation* candidates. Independents are now almost commonplace.

However, finding themselves isolated, deprived and without representation a section of the poorest workers have cast their votes for the racist British National Party. Pushed lower and lower down the social scale by New Labour's continuing cuts in housing, education and health, and sent into casual low paid jobs by New Labour's so-called employment policy, many become easy prey to the gutter press which makes scapegoats of asylum seekers. They are encouraged in this by New Labour's racist immigration laws and by police attacks on black people.

The way that the vast majority of workers show their disgust is by refusing to cast their vote in elections. This abstentionism is not a sign of indifference. It is a sign of anger. Workers feel they are being treated as idiots. Alongside this there is a mood to take the struggle onto the streets. There is growing support for the environmentalists' direction action. Masses of people are deeply worried about the future of their children and grandchildren in this capitalist system. "People before profits!" is now on the lips of millions.

- One year on from the Paddington rail crash, when 31 people died and many others suffered horrific physical and mental injuries, the anger remains. The government and privatised British Rail still refuse to implement the recommendations of the Southall rail crash inquiry (five years earlier) to fit to the trains the most advanced and reliable safety system.

- Previews of the report of the inquiry into "mad cow" disease, due out at the end of October, reveal that Thatcher, her ministers, subsequent governments and civil servants covered up scientists' warnings that the disease had entered the human food chain. For months after the disease was diagnosed slaughtered cattle were sold to the retailers!

The crisis in society brings forward, not only problems of immediate struggle against attacks on the weakest sections, but general conditions in relation to democracy, culture, privilege, corruption, polarisation of wealth and the destruction of nature. It raises the necessity for workers to unite internationally against the global companies. Above all it brings up questions of control and power over the lives of the mass of the people.

As "the trusted servitors of American economic and military hegemony" New Labour shamefully continues the ten-year bombing raids on Iraq, even long after the French "socialist" government has withdrawn from these aggressive acts. It was Blair who used his influence to present the butcher of the Chechen people, Vladimir Putin to the world as a respectable politician. In every sphere of foreign policy New Labour's Robin Cook upholds and represents imperialism.

Millions internationally are now looking for new ways to express their anti-capitalist opinions, and within this the working class in Britain is now beginning to reassert itself. A mass movement developed the general trade unions and built the Labour Party at the beginning of the last century. The movement today will also find its political expression.

It is against this background, and moved by these developments that the

Britain: a new stage in working-class politics

Socialist Alliance: stepping forward

This is PART ONE of a joint statement of the International Socialist League and Workers International (Britain). PART TWO will set out our proposals for the Socialist Alliance general election programme

(English) Socialist Alliance (SA) held a 400-strong members' conference in Coventry on 30 October and decided upon a protocol to stand candidates in the general election, in collaboration with the Scottish Socialist Party and the Welsh Socialist Alliance.

In the early 1990s Socialist Alliances were initiated by the Socialist Party with the aim of bringing together a number of socialist groups, individual socialists, ex-Labour Party members, direct action and environmental groups. It is the strength of the SA that its various parts maintain their differences, but work on an open, democratic and federal basis.

Most of the groups in the alliance understand that the working class needs its own new party, and realise that the central importance of the discussion on the new party does not rest on their actions alone, but can only come out of important movements in the working class and those wide sections of the population who are looking into the abyss. There they see the prospect of a descent into a grim future in regard to employment, health, education, old age and security. New Labour has effectively deprived this majority of the population of their political expression.

The beginning of the end for many

loyal and active members of the Labour Party, who are now turning towards the Socialist Alliance as a way forward, came at the 1995 annual conference, when Blair was able to abolish Clause Four of the party's constitution and prepare the way for big-business support for his 1997 general election victory.

This clause was added at the end of the 1914-18 war under the impact of the Russian Revolution, and partly to divert support from Lenin's Bolsheviks. It was based upon a resolution carried by a Labour Party conference in 1905, when it still had the name of Labour Representation Committee, which said:

"The annual conference of the LRC hereby declares that its ultimate objective shall be the obtaining for the workers the full results of their labour by the overthrow of the present competitive system of capitalism and the institution of a system of public ownership of all the means of production, distribution and exchange."

For decades the right wing of the Labour Party conducted a battle to remove Clause Four. In the 1950s, Hugh Gaitskell's campaign to abolish it was soundly defeated. But Blair and his New Labour supporters were determined to remove the last vestige of socialism from the party. More than that, they wanted to destroy the Labour Party as a party representing the working class and remove any trace of its origins as a party coming out of the struggle of exploited and oppressed masses of people for political representation.

With the removal of Clause Four, National Union of Mineworkers' president Arthur Scargill published his "Future Strategy for the Left" — a discussion paper stating that New Labour had "abandoned socialism and any commitment to common ownership". In response to his call for a new socialist party of Labour, the Socialist Party proposed to develop the alliance to initiate a widespread discussion throughout the labour movement, allowing the existence of different tendencies within such an organisation.

However, Scargill rejected this. He and others founded the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) and many former Labour Party members and active trade unionists joined. But it turned out that Scargill's method of organisation owed more to Stalin than Lenin and Marx. The SLP has dwindled to a handful. Hundreds of members have been expelled or have simply given up in disgust.

Failing to convince Scargill of the necessity for an open, democratic alliance building towards a new party, the Socialist Party continued with the SAs. Today most of the socialist groups are in the SA, but, more important there is a growing number of campaigning groups and former members of the Labour Party and the SLP. (This month three Labour councillors in Preston and one in Burnley, with

their supporters, left the Labour Party and became Socialist Alliance councillors). Common work has already been tested in the Euro elections, the London and other local elections and a number of by-elections. The Greater London Assembly elections brought the biggest of the socialist groups into the alliance — the Socialist Workers Party.

The Coventry conference revealed differences of approach. The Socialist Workers Party (which believes that it is already the party of the working class) supported by most of the socialist groups, proposed that all organisations in the Alliance must put "Socialist Alliance" on the general election ballot paper. The Socialist Party and most of the campaigning groups proposed that any organisation that agreed to the common SA election programme and was prepared to advertise their support for the SA, could nevertheless stand under their own name and still be part of the SA. We agreed with the Socialist Party that there should be no obstacles put in the path of such organisations. Unfortunately this position was lost by 206 votes to 176.

However the conference was a step



Reflecting growing bitterness at the treatment of the sick, the disabled and the deprived, care workers in Tameside, Greater Manchester, stood their own candidates in local elections

forward, and we urge the local organisations and campaigns disappointed by that vote to remain in the SA to fight for a change in this decision. Another proposal from the International Socialist Group to remove rights (in the general election campaign) from political groups within the SA was heavily defeated. Also by a narrow 196 to 193 it was decided that the liaison committee (comprised of representatives from all affiliated organisations and local alliances) will co-ordinate the election campaign. This was against the proposal for a more exclusive body.

The new forces are beginning to ensure that political discussion and forms of organisation are, and will remain open and widespread. The SA is now an important initiative turning towards the millions who are seeking an alternative to New Labour. Its success, and the possibility of it assisting the development of a new workers' party depends on those millions turning towards it.

No doubt at the SA conference, scheduled for February 2001, to decide the election programme there will be a tough fight over political differences. But this should and must come after a period of widespread discussion going far beyond the present membership. Also the final decision on a basic platform for the general election will neither end the discussion, nor will it exclude the publication of the policies of the various groups and campaigns within the alliance. Standing in the general election will only be useful if it assists the widespread discussion necessary for the working class to build its own independent party.

Political conflict is not a problem for workers. What they reject is the subjective sectarian squabbling that has wracked the socialist groups for decades. But the source of that debilitating situation was Stalinism with its attack on workers' internationalism through its deadly policy of "socialism in one country". This has now collapsed. So has the Labour Party's reformism.

Pressure from millions of pensioners, represented (right) by retired transport union leader Jack Jones and supporters, led to a humiliating defeat on pensions for Blair at the Labour conference. (Below) Fire-fighters campaign against job losses and service cuts



A new stage of working class politics is growing, not only at the workplace but in the framework of a wider anti-capitalist movement. Within this is the collective experience of the struggles of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s is strong. The big battalions of workers — in steel, shipyards and engineering, in the mines, docks, print and shipping — fought to defend the historic gains of the working class, especially trade union rights. The leaders who handed them over to Thatcher and big business then are not forgotten or forgiven as was shown in the 1995-98 Liverpool dockers' dispute.

The new stage of working class politics in Britain is explosive, it is unpredictable, it is more and more bound up with international workers' struggles, and it will take to the streets. At their peril will any political group in the Socialist Alliance seek to elevate the interests of their own organisations above the interests of the working class.



Labor for Mumia — Letter to Janet Reno from US trades unions

From: www.mumia2000.org

The following Labor for Mumia 'Letter to Janet Reno from US Trade Unionists' demanding justice for Mumia and a background piece framing the case for union members is available at <http://www.aspenlinx.com/labor> for download and/or as a hard copy. Initiators of the letter have set an initial goal of having 10,000 signed letters completed as soon as possible.

The letter offers union activists a tremendous opportunity to reach out to the rank and file with some literature that helps to broaden awareness of Mumia's case as well as the broader questions raised by the case. We appeal to every union member to consider the possibility this offers to you to help your union do the right thing.

If your union already supports the

case, there should be no problem including the letter and background piece in the next mailing to the membership. There could be a report at the next union meeting with an appeal for members to sign the letter and take some back to those not attending. An article could be prepared for the next issue of your union newsletter or local labour publication. Where possible the letter could be reprinted in your union's national newspaper and/or website.

Whether your union is "on board" or if you're having trouble getting "official" support, this campaign offers an opportunity to carry on this discussion among the rank and file. If sufficient support can be gathered, a committee can be established to assist in this process. Every situation will be different. We're more than happy to dialogue

with you regarding the particular challenges you face.

An e-mail version of the letter is included below. We prefer that you send in signed copies, but if that's not realistic, please complete the information and e-mail it back. Feel free to pass the letter along via the 'e-mail trail.'

Though we have not set a time-frame on the campaign, we request your input as soon as possible. If you'd like us to mail hard copies, please let us know. Send your request to 'Labor for Mumia' c/o San Francisco Labor Council, 1188 Franklin St., suite 203, San Francisco, CA 94109.

In Solidarity,
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Letter to Attorney General Janet Reno and the Department of Justice from US Trade Unionists

We trade unionists demand justice for our union brother, award-winning journalist and National Writers Union member (UAW Local 1981), Mumia Abu-Jamal.

Abu-Jamal has been on death row for the last 18 years, convicted of killing a Philadelphia police officer and sentenced to death in a trial that can only be described as a travesty of justice:

Abu-Jamal was denied a competent defense, refused the right to represent himself, and even barred from the courtroom during much of the proceedings.

African-Americans were systematically excluded from the jury. Witnesses were intimidated and coerced by the police. Vital evidence was falsified or suppressed.

The trial was presided over by a judge who has sentenced 33 people to death (all but two of them people

of color), more than any other sitting judge.

In the sentencing phase, the prosecutor, in arguing for the death penalty, cited Abu-Jamal's writings, in effect, condemning him for the expression of his beliefs.

In short, it is clear that Mumia Abu-Jamal was denied his basic Constitutional rights. He was targeted for this treatment because, as a Philadelphia journalist, he stood up for poor and working people.

He was spied on and harassed as a part of the illegal government COINTELPRO operation against Black and other anti-establishment organizers, even though he had never been convicted of breaking any law.

In spite of new evidence indicating Abu-Jamal's innocence, including witnesses recanting their original testimony, Abu-Jamal's right to a fair trial has been consistently denied in the

courts. This is a situation all too common for people of color on death row, a product of the racism and class bias in the criminal justice system.

The injustice that has been done to Mumia Abu-Jamal — the denial of his Constitutional rights — is an injustice and a threat to us all.

Attorney General Janet Reno, justice demands that you intervene to guarantee the rights of Mumia Abu-Jamal. We demand that you guarantee Abu-Jamal's right to a new trial. We demand justice. Anything less would amount to your complicity.

Sincerely,
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