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RELAY

JANUARY / FEBRUARY 2005

A SOCIALIST PROJECT REVIEW



**LABOUR'S CRISIS * OVERTIME
GRANDFATHER CLAUSE * PSAC STRIKE
WALMART * LABOUR IN VENEZUELA
VERA DRAKE * THE TAKE**

\$2

RELAY

Relay, A Socialist Project Review, intends to act as a forum for conveying and debating current issues of importance to the Left in Ontario, Canada and from around the world. Contributions to the re-laying of the foundations for a viable socialist politics are welcomed by the editorial committee.

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About the Socialist Project

The Socialist Project does not propose an easy politics for defeating capitalism or claim a ready alternative to take its place. We oppose capitalism out of necessity and support the resistance of others out of solidarity. This resistance creates spaces of hope, and an activist hope is the first step to discovering a new socialist politics. Through the struggles of that politics – struggles informed by collective analysis and reflection – alternatives to capitalism will emerge. Such anti-capitalist struggles, we believe, must develop a viable working class politics, and be informed by democratic struggles against racial, sexist and homophobic oppressions, and in support of the national self-determination of the many peoples of the world. In Canada and the world today, there is an imperative for the Left to begin a sustained process of reflection, struggle and organizational re-groupment and experimentation. Neither capitalism nor neoliberalism will fade from the political landscape based on the momentum of their own contradictions and without the Left developing new political capacities. We encourage those who share this assessment to meet, debate and begin to make a contribution to a renewed socialist project in your union, school and community. For more information on the Socialist Project check our web-site at www.socialistproject.ca or e-mail us at socialistproject@hotmail.com.



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Labour's Crisis: The Challenge of Neo-liberalism

Socialist Project Labour Committee

These are not good times for the Canadian labour movement. In spite of the relentless onslaught of neo-liberalism, we remain stuck in defensive mode.

This isn't exceptional: it is also the case in most of the developed world that the labour movement has been unable to challenge the basic premises of neo-liberalism.

Underlying the defensiveness of labour is a series of critical weaknesses and challenges:

Lack of Political Struggle

In the wake of the Ontario Social Contract in 1993 a new opening for the left in the labour movement appeared. In a number of unions, there were fissures in the limiting of politics to electoral support for social democracy and it seemed that new forms of working class politics would be considered. There were important traditions and new experiences to build upon, such as the 1988 anti-free trade campaign; the mass demonstration for jobs in 1993; the Ontario Days of Action and the Anti-globalization movement. In each, a whole generation of labour activists gained experiences with more radical and participatory forms of political action. In the CAW, a Taskforce on Working Class Politics was struck, which actually opened up space – for the first time in over 40 years – to consider new political approaches and orientations. Now, the labour movement has returned willy-nilly to the “new” NDP of Jack Layton. While this party puts forward a program defending social programs and modest but progressive reforms and may, for the time being represent the only electoral option for the left, its

focus is not to build a movement with the capacity to challenge the power of capital. In government, it has implemented the same neo-liberal policies as the Liberals and Conservatives; it remains fundamentally an electoral machine, rather than a mobilizational instrument; and like its social democratic cousins in Europe it has continued to distance itself from labour and traditional working-class identities.

With the new funding limitations contained in campaign finance reform legislation, labour took hesitant steps to develop independent “issue-oriented” electoral campaigns in the recent federal election. The content of these campaigns was thin and offered limited strategic perspectives – such as calling for corporatist alliances with employers, as a way to guarantee the survival of different economic sectors. Politics within the labour movement has remained “business as usual”, at a time when this is clearly no longer adequate.

Lack of unity

Divisions within the labour movement remain deep-seated. At various times, debates over these differences have played a vital role in creating openings for the left. (Recall the debates over the Rae days, progressive competitiveness, the role of the public sector, lean production and the role of “empowerment”, labour funds and the role of electoral vs. extra-parliamentary politics). To the extent that such divisions reflected differences in political orientations between unions, such debates were vital to moving labour ahead. More recently, however, differences appear to be more about competing jurisdictional interests, with

debates over political orientation and strategies for challenging neo-liberalism receding in importance. Private and public sector struggles remain separated, as well.

Even more, petty, sectarian divisions amongst unions have stood in the way of labour being able to develop common strategies for organizing the unorganized. Mass organizing of key unorganized sectors requires the collective efforts of unions working together with a common project. This is not happening. On the contrary, unions are competing amongst themselves for potential new members. For the growing number of workers in precarious and low-paid employment, this has had a devastating effect.

Lack of an organizing focus

Although there have been organizing successes all too much of the growth of individual unions has been through mergers. While mergers are often necessary and positive, there have been few real organizing *breakthroughs*. Labour needs to develop new and bold organizing initiatives involving collective efforts to bring the majority of workers into the movement. This can only happen if labour sees organizing as part of building a working class rather than adding members, and integrates ‘organizing’ into a larger vision of what kind of unions we are bringing workers into.

Lack of debate

The terrain for debating real differences has shrunk, both inside individual unions and within the labour movement as a whole. Conventions, conferences and councils within un-

ions are important democratic spaces where real debate has historically taken place. All too often real debate has all but disappeared as a new generation of left dissidents has not yet developed the confidence or experience to raise difficult issues, all the more so in the face of a growing intolerance of real differences by leaders. At the same time, in larger labour movement forums, open debate is often discouraged in the name of keeping a paper unity, worked out in advance behind closed doors.

Most important, the crisis labour faces in terms of *external* attacks is also a crisis *within* labour. Real debate and the search for new ways of challenging employers and the logic of capitalism, is a necessary condition for moving forwards.

Weakness of the left

Real, constructive challenges to the status quo depend upon the existence of a strong, well-placed and active socialist left. This clearly does not exist today. New and creative strategies, ideas and criticisms seem to come from isolated individuals (marked by the mixed clarity and limited effectiveness of people working by themselves) and small groups of leftists operating independently of each other. Most workers today have no exposure to left ideas, as left political movements remain small and new. But at least we are seeing the beginnings of new left movements working inside the labour movement, starting again the process of rooting left ideas and orientations inside the working class.

The crisis of labour is part of a more general crisis of the socialist left. Finding new and creative ways to address challenges such as globalization and neo-liberalism and linking up with the leading elements of the working class movement are important ways to rekindle, once again, hopes and dreams of an alternative social system.

Fighting Concessions and Political Challenges

We are living in a moment where the chickens are coming home to roost, as the effects of neo-liberal reforms are beginning to be felt in sectors where they have been held off for decades. Today, the desire to resist – as important as it is – isn't enough. Opposing concessions is absolutely essential, but the structural power of employers is so strong that it forces us to organize, educate and mobilize



against them and put forward alternatives which challenge the logic of competitiveness in each sector. The trade union movement – still tied to social democratic approaches – is left without serious political strategies to use as a basis for putting forward alternatives. Many trade union leaders talk about fighting back. But even those that have held to the most consistent anti-concession stands in the past increasingly find themselves in concession bargaining situations today because of their inability or unwillingness to politically challenge the structural power of employers. Instead, we see them capitulating to the “realities” of competitiveness – realities that flow from the logic of neo-liberalism.

Similar trends have emerged in the public sector. In BC and Newfoundland neoliberal projects have at least temporarily succeeded in defeating public sector union efforts to challenge

them. The HEU strike is still being hotly debated amongst left-oriented labour activists. Whether one concludes that the BC labour movement missed an important opportunity to build, or bargained the best possible retreat under the circumstances, it is clearly a major defeat for the labour movement and an opening for neo-liberal governments with similar goals.

While there have been some

important struggles against employer-initiated restructuring over the last few years in many sectors, labour's fight back has been extremely uneven. Where labour leaders did initiate or participate in broader political activities such as the Ontario Days of Action, the anti-globalization and anti-war movements, they displayed a disappointing pattern of inflated rhetorical flourishes, coupled with limited mobilizational or educational commitment.

Certainly, there is opposition to continued attacks on social programs and further plans to privatize and deregulate existing state assets and programs. And, there remains a willingness to fight employers and resist takeaways. On the other hand, there is little desire or ability to challenge the ideology of competitiveness or the logic of globalization and neo-liberalism. This has helped to create →

a crisis in the ability of the labour movement to respond to the progressive deterioration of the working conditions and job security of their membership. Today, key struggles that do seek to resist employer offensives need orientations which challenge competitiveness and regulate or limit the competitive environment in the sector. If not, all too often, such struggles today end in resignation and frustration.

A Network of Left Activists in the Union Movement

It is in this context, that the Socialist Project initiated efforts to build networks of activism based in workplaces and communities. In November 14th we organized a successful conference that is summarized in this issue of *Relay*. It provided a forum to discuss the overall crisis within the

movement; heard reports from representatives of networks and engaged in general discussions about their reports. The group agreed to meet every 6 weeks for the foreseeable future to discuss key issues facing the labour movement, produce pamphlets and engage in regular communications through *Relay*, and other means. ■

Labour Conference Report

Dan Crow

One of the core features of neo-liberalism is the fact that competitive pressures are pushed onto workers, who are constantly expected to diminish expectations in order to protect jobs. Forces of competitiveness have had distinct negative effects on workers' incomes, working conditions, hours of work and job security. Unions, although still the most effective means by which workers can defend their interests, have not been immune to these pressures, being forced into defensive postures for much of the past 25 years.

It is in light of these pressures on unions (and the need to develop strategies to challenge them), that the Socialist Project Labour Committee organized a well-attended one-day conference on November 14, 2004. The conference brought together labour activists from across Southern Ontario, representing workers in both the public and private sectors. The conference was divided into three panels, with discussions covering the auto sector, municipalities and the public sector, health care, and workplace environment issues.

Sam Gindin opened the meeting with a statement of the goals of the conference, which were twofold. First, the conference was intended to bring forward and discuss union strategies that have been successful at combating competitiveness. These strategies occur in the workplace, in the community and in the broader political system at all levels of government. The second goal of the confer-

ence was to establish an ongoing network of labour activists, not only to rebuild and strengthen the culture of resistance within the labour movement, but also to develop strategies that will put in motion a socialist strategy for labour.

As all conference participants agreed, competitive pressures have had negative effects on the ways in which unions operate. Union executives are feeling greater pressures to enter into partnerships with management to protect jobs. Such partnerships can take the form of union/management lobbying for subsidies for capital, as has happened in the auto sector. But partnerships and defensive strategies can also take the form of local executives and stewards taking on management roles in trying to lower the expectations and pressuring their own members to limit breaks and work faster. In private sector workplaces, the underlying threat is capital flight; in the public sector the threat is that work will be privatized in one form or another.

Although on the defensive, workers and their unions have not been completely paralyzed. Panellists highlighted several strategies that have been successful at mobilizing members, challenging employers and fighting for greater union democracy, while combating neo-liberalism at workplaces and in the public sphere. Furthermore, discussions touched on specific proposals that could be used to protect jobs and living standards, as well as build a labour movement more capable of organizing workers for so-

cial and economic change.

Strategies of resistance have covered traditional union strategies, like the highly organized work-to-rule campaign by CUPE local 4400 workers in Toronto schools used to demonstrate how essential these workers are to the running of education. Yet successes have come through strategies that have been less widely used by unions, such as the broadly based coalition to defend the public ownership of Hydro in Ontario.

A number of other issues were raised in the discussion, covering the range of concerns that left union activists face in the current context. Amongst others, they included: the need for greater space for debate and organizing within their unions; the role of leadership in challenging competitive pressure and organizing resistance; the difficulties of small numbers of left activists in creating an alternative current in their unions and locals; balancing the concerns of workers from different sectors within larger, "general" unions, and a number of other issues.

The conference concluded with unanimous agreement that it is essential to continue organizing to build a long-term network of left and socialist labour activists. This network will include regular meetings, beginning January 16th and occurring every six weeks, to share strategies, create communities of support, and build the left within the labour movement. ■

Declining Working Conditions, Worker Solidarity, and the “Grandfather Clause”

Sarah Rogers

Having worked at a Dominion supermarket for twelve years, I have witnessed the working conditions in the retail grocery industry deteriorate with each new collective agreement. Since the 1970s, Ontario’s retail grocery industry has undergone dramatic restructuring and the impact upon workers has been tremendous. The 1990s were extremely destructive to the quality of employment in Ontario supermarkets. Workers saw little improvement in their working conditions in this decade and any new hires were hit especially hard by the introduction of a wage tier. The labour standards in this industry have rapidly declined to the point where the unionized and non-unionized workplaces are almost indistinguishable in terms of pay, benefits and working conditions. For many of today’s grocery workers, there appears to be almost no benefit to being a unionized worker in this industry.

Comparing my own wage and working conditions to someone who is hired under a new contract puts these deteriorating conditions into perspective. When I was hired, I knew that I would receive a raise within three months, again in six months, and continually until I reached the top rate of pay for part-timers. With each year that passed, I earned more money and more seniority, which meant more control over my working conditions. Compared to many jobs in the service sector, my hourly rate of \$16.00 per hour is striking. I also don’t have to worry about dental, medical or optical costs because of my benefits package.

For new part-time workers, working conditions are not so good. In fact, they are extremely precarious. Most new part-time workers (who are predominantly youth and women) start at minimum wage. After EI, taxes, and union dues are deducted, these work-

ers actually take home *less* than minimum wage. New workers have little seniority, so if they work an average of ten hours per week, they won’t reach the top rate of \$12.50 for at least ten years. Even though in their 2001 contract part-time workers “won” a pension like their full-time counterparts, the low wages and small amount of hours these workers get doesn’t translate into any real financial gains for them.

Unless workers have put in five years seniority, they can’t count on any particular amount of hours which means they never know how much money they will earn. This also means that workers are constantly wondering if they will meet the hours requirement each year, to be able to collect benefits in the following year. There is a seniority system for these workers, but seniority rights are rarely exercised or acknowledged. Rather, hours are allotted to workers who are most flexible and although this is a violation of seniority rights, many workers are too afraid to exercise seniority for fear of being “punished” by having their hours cut further. New workers are also forced to make themselves available for work on Sundays because their collective agreement states that Sunday is a “regular” working day.

Newly hired full time workers don’t have it much better. They’re working alongside people doing the same job for almost five dollars more per hour. Many full time workers put in a six-day work week to compensate for their low hourly rate of pay (which is approximately \$16.50). Many of these workers also supplement their incomes with a part-time job. Skilled full-time workers such as bakers or meat cutters are watching “just-in-time” production de-skill their work as product is delivered pre-cut or pre-

made. This deskilling is then used to justify the low wages paid to new full-timers.

As a union steward and activist, I often talk with workers about our working environment. Many people point out that there’s little incentive to work in Dominion stores or in the retail grocery industry in general. A hot topic right now is the collective agreement established between the UFCW and Loblaws Inc. In 2003, Loblaws announced plans to restructure and successfully implemented a collective agreement with the UFCW that mimics the labour standards found in non-unionized places like Wal-Mart. As Dominion’s main competitor, Loblaws stores usually set the standard for bargaining between Dominion and their unions. Many of us predict that Dominion stores will argue that they need to compete “fairly” with Loblaws by implementing similar labour standards. Given this trend in the past, workers’ fears are certainly understandable.

What is alarming to me is the ease with which grocery companies have succeeded in restructuring. As a shop steward and union activist, I am concerned with the fact that there has been little resistance to this restructuring. Why has it been so easy for companies to restructure? Why haven’t workers organized collectively, through their union, to reverse the declining working conditions? While these questions require a more thorough discussion than what I can provide here, I want to discuss one practice that helps to explain the success of restructuring in this industry – the “grandfather clause”. This term refers to provisions in a collective agreement that dictate the wages and working conditions for workers who will be hired *after* the date of a →

collective agreement ratification vote. Introducing these clauses has allowed grocery companies to restructure successfully because there is no significant impact upon, or resistance from, voting workers. Essentially, at bargaining time, workers' votes are swayed by the impact the contract will have on their individual working conditions. The grandfather clauses don't affect voting workers and consequently, a vote of "yes" translates into poor working conditions for new workers.

By implementing grandfather clauses, grocery companies do more damage than ensure poor working conditions for new workers. They also succeed in dividing workers from one another, which means that the likelihood of organized resistance and solidarity is low. While the retail grocery industry has always had a somewhat "fragmented" solidarity among workers - because the industry is comprised of many different "types" of workers such as full-time, part-time, skilled and unskilled, stopgap workers and long-time workers - the grandfather clause keeps workers divided from one another by forcing them to consider their own needs at the expense of others. And this is what concerns me. I often wonder why the unions would even consider accepting grandfather

clauses. They may not be "concessions" in the typical sense whereby presently employed workers' conditions are affected, but they are still concessions. What's confusing to me is that unions understand that concessions in one collective agreement help to impose a downward pressure on labour standards in the entire industry. And unions also understand that once concessions are made, it's difficult to win back what was lost. But I'm sure that the issue is complicated, and the fact of the matter is that these kinds of clauses don't seem to be going away. It seems to be up to the rank-and-file to resist them.

So if it's up to the rank-and-file to address the relationship between declining working conditions, worker solidarity, and this grandfather clause, the question becomes how workers can develop and act upon a collective consciousness in light of an agenda that promotes individualism and division. One of the few ways workers can exercise agency and solidarity is by voting but it is during voting where the divisions among workers is so apparent. On one hand, I understand that workers are often in such a desperate state that any provision that appears to improve their working conditions will be appealing. Workers' individual needs are often the primary influence

upon the outcome of their voting decision. On the other hand, I wonder how we can accept collective agreements that determine the working conditions for workers who aren't even hired yet. If this reasoning has little influence upon workers, then perhaps they might consider the long-term impact that this kind of restructuring has upon individuals, families, communities, and entire sectors of the Canadian economy. Perhaps they might consider the working conditions of their future family members or the fact that with each collective agreement that includes these grandfather clauses, companies grow stronger at the expense of workers who become more and more divided from one another.

Dominion stores are currently in bargaining with CAW Local 414 and workers are anxiously waiting to see what provisions might be included in their next collective agreement. A number of conversations around this contract involve concerns about pensions, rates of pay, benefits and seniority rights. However, little has been said about grandfather clauses although a few activists are trying to mobilize workers around this issue. It's my hope that as workers become more aware of the impact of these clauses, they will work collectively to resist them. ■

ANTI-IMPERIALISM AGAINST EMPIRE: SOCIALIST SCHOOL IN TORONTO

Scott Forsyth

A successful Socialist School was held in Toronto, October 8 and 9, 2004, at the Steelworkers Hall. The event, centred on the theme Anti-imperialism against Empire, was co-sponsored by the Toronto branch of the Socialist Project, the Toronto Marxist Institute and the International Socialists.

The School began Friday evening with reports about anti-war and anti-imperialist resistance and organizing in Iraq, Palestine, Venezuela and New York. A lively discussion underlined the importance of resistance to the intensification of imperialist aggression worldwide. The workshops all

day Saturday were the most appreciated part of the School. Sessions were held on a wide range of themes: gender and imperialism, the economics of imperialism, the imperialist legacy in the Middle East and worldwide, socialist organizing in the thirties and forties in Canada, debates in the anti-war movement, Canada in the imperial order. Sessions were set up to allow educational discussions as well as sharp debate; most were packed.

More than 100 people registered for all, or part, of the School, most from Toronto but many from as far as Windsor. Speakers from a wide range of progressive and socialist or-

ganizations were featured, including the Latin American Bolivarian Circle of Toronto, Palestine Right to Return Group, the International Socialists, the New Socialists Group, the Trotskyist League, the Communist Party, Socialist Voice and the Socialist Project. Feedback to the organizers was very positive. Many participants felt the School allowed the organized and independent left an opportunity to learn, discuss and debate in a positive and creative atmosphere.

The organizers will be discussing the possibility of making the Socialist School an annual, and even bigger, event for the Toronto Left. ■

The Price You Pay

Jay Johnston

I'm a worker at the Cami plant in Ingersoll. Over the past seven years we've seen two indefinite layoffs cut approximately 700 workers from our ranks. The rest of us have been subject to rotating layoffs for several years.

This spring most of our workers saw their economic situation vastly improve. We have a new product that's selling faster than we can build it. For most of us it means all the overtime we could want. Unfortunately, the condition of around ninety of our brothers and sisters hasn't improved at all because they are still on layoff.

Not surprisingly, of late there's been much talk on the floor and in the newsletter about overtime - there hasn't been much agreement though. Maybe that's because overtime, in itself, is neither good nor bad. An hour or four, here or there, to clean or do repairs is a great thing. Other than bargaining time, it's the only way we as workers have, to get ahead financially. But like everything in life there's always a price to pay. When we start getting into the amount of overtime that's been offered lately, when we start working overtime to cover people for entire shifts, that price can be pretty high.

Whether or not you work in a plant that's in a situation like Cami's, when workers work large amounts of overtime, all workers pay a price.

Most of us are aware of the price we pay personally. Besides our own time, we sacrifice the time we have to spend with our families. We also lose the ability to have a life outside the plant, have hobbies or interests.

But our communities also pay a price. We also threaten our own future security and that of our children.

Many people ask why a company would pay overtime instead of hiring more people. The usual answer is flexibility and not having to pay benefits.

That, however, can't be the full reason. Benefits don't cost as much as overtime. The rest of the equation comes down to supply and demand. If there are more people working overtime, there are fewer people employed. More people looking for work means people settle for lower wages and poorer working conditions. A surplus of workers means labour is worth less.

This isn't just economic theory; it's the reality of today. If you doubt me do some research into union density and industrial wages in the U.S. Everyone I know who has a child entering the job market talks about the lack of good paying, full time jobs. The other day a co-worker said that he hoped Cami would be hiring students next year. Cami

can't hire students while we have workers waiting to come back and Cami won't bring those workers back if they can fill their spots through overtime.

I said that overtime was a way to get ahead. Most of us, however, have limits on what we'd do to get ahead. We realize that our actions can negatively effect other people, and that their actions can like wise harm us. For that reason most of us wouldn't lie, steal or cheat to get ahead. Our laid off brothers and sisters have a right to be called back if there is work available. There is work available; it's just not being offered to them - it's offered as overtime.

The intent of this article isn't to judge or lay a guilt trip on anyone. Whether you accept overtime is a personal decision. I'm sure that many people have quite valid reasons for accepting overtime. Another reason that no individuals should feel guilty for working overtime is that it's a problem that can't be solved individually. Why would you turn down overtime when the person next to you is going to accept it?



The only way our local will bring back our layed off brothers and sisters is, if we, as a local, collectively decide that the price of overtime is too high. On a larger scale, corporations will only stop using overtime to exploit workers when we as a union and thebour movement as a whole deal with this issue. Until we educate our fellow workers on the effects of their choices, until we place limits in our collective agreements on how and when overtime can be used, corporations will use overtime to divide workers and devalue their labour. Until that day, the decision is yours, but think of the cost; to yourself, your family, your future, your children's future, and your brother's and sisters. ■

The CAW's Union in Politics Conference

Richard Harding

Port Elgin, Ontario,
October 15-17, 2004

Last summer, activists and members of local executives learned that the national executive board of the CAW was planning to introduce a new Union in Politics Committee. The rationale behind this initiative was to create space outside of the NDP-oriented Political education committees for political organizing, and other activities at all levels of the CAW. My impression was that there would be room for open discussion and debate around politics in our union, especially between rank and file members and the leadership; the October conference leaves me...wondering.

The opening day featured speakers Buzz Hargrove, Jim Stanford, Judy Rebick, and Luc Desnoyers (CAW/TCA Quebec Director). I missed Hargrove Stanford's initial statements, but I caught Rebick. She spoke about her experiences in community organizing as the Gindin Chair at Ryerson. She also mentioned the anti-globalization movement (in the present tense, which had me wondering if something was going on with that movement that I was unaware of) and its critique of the "mainstream" media and the need for the creation of an independent media. Rebick outlined, with a bit of detail, what neoliberalism was (is) all about. While I applauded Rebick's speech, I could not help but wonder out loud why the word 'capitalism' had not been mentioned. By the end of the day I had the feeling that a social democratic fix was in.

The following morning featured Carlos Granos (president of the Brazilian Metalworkers union) on labour's relationship with Lula's PT. The speech was great, but - unless some-

thing was lost in the translation - in the midst of the talk about the relationship between the workers and the party not one word was mentioned about fighting capitalism in that country. This was to prove a potent setting of the stage for the morning's workshops.

I was immediately struck by the average age of the participants in the session I attended; besides me, and perhaps three others, no one (as far as I could tell) was under the age of forty.



Not that age should be an indication of political effectiveness, but the fact that most of the attendees of the conference were members of their local executives was a glaring indication of the lack of youth in positions of leadership in the CAW. The workshop began with introductions and individuals naming three issues that were important to them. The standards were there: health care, education, health and safety laws, pensions, free trade, corporate responsibility etc. The border infrastructure issue came up as

well, with a member of Local 444 calling for improved infrastructure to expedite trade between Canada and the US, especially through Windsor. Again, I was astonished with the lack of discussion around the capitalism's fundamental disempowerment of workers or a strategy to break free from its limitations. While "the issues" were (are) no doubt important, I felt the emphasis was on explaining them through an abstract concept of "politics" instead of naming and dealing

with the prevailing economic, social, and political system; this semi-conscious ducking the real issue was social democracy/liberalism at its best. The afternoon promised discussion and debate around our relationship with the NDP (which Buzz (a co-facilitator) repeatedly referred to as "our party" [that was, repeatedly, news to me]); I could hardly wait.

Following lunch, Carmella Allevato from Vancouver's Coalition of Progressive Electors (followed by the CAW's Loretta Woodcock) spoke

about the struggle for progressive change in Vancouver's politics. While the efforts of these municipal politicians to reform the municipal system and provide services for those in need were very laudable, it was striking to hear statements like "the national government is not as powerful as it used to be" and "think globally, act locally" from them. Given the events since 9/11, one would think that falling back on these slogans of the anti-globalization movement, which has been a non-factor in the face of recent actions of nation states, would be anachronistic. Peggy Nash, Buzz's assistant, spoke about her experiences running for the NDP in Toronto. I'm a big fan of Peggy's; however it was difficult to get excited about running for "our party". The afternoon workshops were next.

The theme of the afternoon session I attended was "Talking to Other Workers about Politics". It was no se-

cret going into this conference that many workers are turned off by politics and politicians; there was no shortage of participants who mentioned this problem. Nash was a co-facilitator and she brought up the CAW Youth and Woman to Woman campaigns as examples of success in involving workers on political discourse. It was not long before the NDP came up. If I believed there was to be a debate about our relationship with the party that afternoon I was soon to be disappointed. The promising workshop fell quickly into getting people to think about the difference between "our party" and the others. Once again, there was no mention of the severe constraints on worker empowerment that the system imposes.

So, do I have anything good to say about the UPC founding Conference? Yes. In the course of his speaking, Buzz mentioned the conservative nature of the labour movement. He

went so far as to describe the role of labour in Venezuela in the coup attempt against Hugo Chavez in April 2002 to prove his point. Additionally, despite the amount of leadership present, I had the distinct feeling that there was space opening up (especially on the local level) for politics outside of the NDP, and was surprised by the opinion of many younger workers that this UPC initiative was about independent political action outside of the NDP.

While the above was certainly inspiring, space, and opinions in favour of change, will quickly close and change if the socialist left in the CAW does not exploit them quickly and imaginatively. As is true of the terrain of the Canadian state, it is not the time to surrender the CAW front to social democracy, or (neo) liberalism; in fact, it's time to put up the fight of our lives. ■



The PSAC Strike of 2004

Donald Swartz

On Tuesday, October 12, 130,000 members of the Public Service Alliance of Canada walked off their jobs to back their demands for a new collective agreement with their employer, the federal government. This was the union's first 'general' strike since 1991, involving several bargaining units representing the vast majority of the union's members directly employed by the government, as well many of those working for quasi-separate state agencies like the Canadian Revenue Authority (CRA). It followed a year of fruitless negotiations, and two months of rotating strikes and other job actions by various groups of members, in particular those who worked for Parks Canada. Overall, there was

solid support for the strike by the union's membership, although the picket lines were a bit uneven at first due mostly to the challenge of organizing such a massive, countrywide strike. This show of determination, together with an extensive media campaign to build support among the public, prompted the government to respond and following some intense negotiations it tabled what it called its final offer. While the offer was accepted by the representatives of some bargaining units, it was rejected by others, notably those from the union's large female-dominated and lower paid bargaining units representing almost two-thirds of those on strike. In the end, the PSAC leadership decided to put the

offer to its members without any recommendation, and on October 15 it called off the strike pending the outcome of a ratification vote.

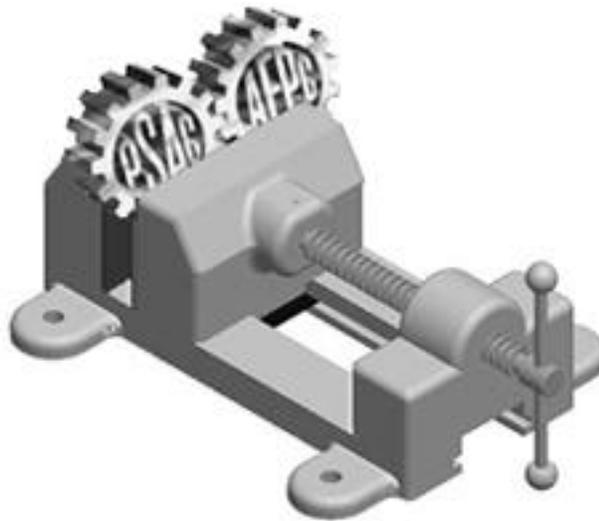
Certainly, the strike led to real gains. It led the government to increase its financial offer from 6% over 3 years to 10% over 4, to offer a substantial pay adjustment for skilled tradespersons whose wage rates had fallen well behind those of their counterparts in the private sector, and to convert a significant percentage of term jobs into permanent ones at the CRA. The government also agreed to further discussion of the PSAC's demand for a Social Justice Fund. Despite these gains, the strike was far from a victory. The union's →

demand for a catch-up increase, given that its members' wages had been frozen from 1991 – 1997 and had since increased only marginally (well below inflation), were simply dismissed, with the government claiming that these were prohibited by legislation. The wage settlement itself is unlikely to increase real wages at all, given the expected rate of inflation over the next few years. The government's final offer also included a number of rollbacks. Several thousand workers, mostly men, will lose various types of allowances, often worth more than a thousand dollars annually. And the settlement did not apply to some 7000 predominantly women workers who saw their wages frozen for as much as 3 years.

Undoubtedly, several factors account for the modest gains and ambiguous end to the strike, but two are central. The main one was the fact that the threat of 'back to work' legislation hung like a sword over the heads of the union. The government made it clear to the union that it was ready to use such legislation to end the strike and the union had no reason to doubt them. Various governments have used such legislation to end legal strikes over 40 times in the last 15 years and, since being returned to office in 1993, the Liberals themselves have used it 5 times, including against PSAC members in 1999. Moreover, governments now routinely dictate the terms of the agreement in this legislation, and the union had no guarantee that these would include its 'final' offer. The government's readiness to coerce PSAC members' back to work reflected its determination to ensure that the wages and conditions of federal workers not lead those of similar workers in the private sector. This especially affected women working for the federal government, particularly those in the numerous, lower paid clerical jobs, since most of their private sector counterparts toil in the unorganized service sector.

The second factor concerns the PSAC itself; the complexity of the issues it faces and its organizational deficiencies. The union encompasses

more than 200 different bargaining units, whose members include clerks, prison guards, customs officers, tradespeople, various types of technicians & program managers spread across the country. The diverse circumstances under which its members work gives rise to an extremely large set of issues to be addressed, issues that are extremely important to some yet not readily understood by others. At the same time, the union's political structure isn't built around these bargaining units; it is built around 'Components' which correspond to particular government departments & agencies. Members of



the same bargaining unit in the same city thus are split into several locals depending on the department in which they work, and typically, these locals include more than one bargaining unit. The result is a confusing structure that blurs lines of accountability, creates obstacles to participation and to solidarity.

In its early years bargaining was highly centralized and fragmented; union staff handled the negotiating with little input from members and collective agreements for most bargaining units were negotiated separately. This began to change beginning with Clerks Strike in 1981. Despite the opposition of the government, the union has managed to increase the coordination across bargaining units. Collective agreements now cover sev-

eral units and this round involved the more or less simultaneous negotiation of 7 collective agreements covering the vast majority of the union's members. Equally significantly, bargaining has been extensively democratized, and in these negotiations, the bargaining teams for these agreements were composed of members elected from the corresponding bargaining units.

However, real problems remained unresolved. Although the bargaining teams brought representatives from different bargaining units together, these representatives were basically preoccupied with the particu-

lar demands of their own units – since it was to its members that they were responsible. The PSAC leaders were linked to the different bargaining teams through Coordinating Committees and this ensured that priority demands arising from the union's Convention such as the Social Justice Fund were pursued in all sets of negotiations. These

committees also had some success in getting the bargaining teams to focus on certain demands. But this was limited and many bargaining team members just stuck to the demands of those they represented rather than uniting around a few priorities ones where gains might have been made.

Finding a way to make the PSAC more effective while preserving the democratic advances in the union won't be easy, but this at least lies within the power of its members. The challenges posed by the lack of unionization in the private service sector and the threat of back to work legislation are another matter. To begin to address them will require significant changes in the broader labour movement. ■

Canada Bushwacked?

Carolyn Watson

When US President George W. Bush made a brief and hastily planned trip to Canada on 30 November, he was met by more than 5000 protestors in Ottawa and 7000 in Halifax the following day. Protestors gathered to tell President Bush that he was not welcome in Canada. They also wanted to express their opposition to US foreign policy all over the globe, especially in Iraq, and the ballistic missile defence program that involves putting weapons into space. However, the Canadian progressive and democratic sectors failed to massively demonstrate their rejection of US foreign policy, especially its policies toward Canada. Riot police, strategically placed around the city, however, ensured that neither the President nor the Prime Minister were distracted from their discussions on security and trade, although they failed to resolve trade restrictions on Canadian beef or softwood lumber.

Prior to President Bush's visit, Foreign Affairs Minister Pierre Pettigrew was convinced that the President would set out "clear commitments on the part of the United States" for reopening the border for Canadian beef. In spite of George Bush's apparent delight in announcing at a dinner with Prime Minister Paul Martin that Albertan beef was on the menu, discussions between the two leaders failed to expedite negotiations on the issue of Canadian beef. The US closed the border to Canadian beef in May 2003 when a single cow was diagnosed with BSE. President Bush had previously announced a process to reopen the border to Canadian beef at the Asia-Pacific Summit earlier in November that would take six months to implement fully. The implementation of that process will mean that Canadian beef will have been banned from its main market for two years. Talks with the Prime Minister in Ottawa, however, failed to result in any kind of commitment. President Bush only said that he could do no more than push a new regulation to open the border through the US bureaucracy - it would then need to go through Congress to be activated.

The fruitless discussion on the beef issue made it clear that more than trying to resolve disputes between Canada and the US, Prime Minister Martin used the President's visit to make a public gesture to western cattle ranchers in solving the beef ban in an attempt to boost support for his minority government. The fate of softwood lumber was not even discussed and remains equally unresolved.

The main topic of discussion and indeed focus

of attention during President Bush's visit was security. The two leaders discussed border control and the need to maintain friendly relations, providing the President with the opportunity to raise the issue of Canada's support for the US ballistic missile defence program. In spite of the President's assurances that the program does not include the militarization of space, plans for the program suggest this type of evolution and the Pentagon is planning a research and development project to put interceptor rockets into space. Currently, the existing system uses detection devices only in space to locate enemy missiles. Ottawa approved the use of these detection devices as part of the Canada-US North American Aerospace Defence Command in August, without putting the issue to a vote in the House of Commons. Interceptor rockets that would destroy incoming missiles, however, are ground-based in this limited composition. What the Pentagon wants, though, is a space weapon that can be used against "a small number of high-value targets" on this planet. What exactly are "high-value targets"? Natural resources? Social transformations? Would the Prime Minister give the House of Commons the option of voting down such a plan or would he arbitrarily sign on to the American's defence plan? These are questions that Paul Martin has not been asked.

The Prime Minister's willingness to consider the US missile defence plan comes in spite of strong opposition from the NDP and the Bloc Québécois, as well as many in his own party, over concerns that it will start an arms race in space. But exactly which nations could contribute to such a build-up of weaponry besides the US and for what purpose? Are they concerned, for example, with Russia or China?

Leader of the opposition Stephen Harper was more concerned with the business end of the ballistic missile defence plan. "What we want to know is the nature of our proposed involvement, the costs of any obligations we would incur and the nature and value of any benefits." As long as taxes will not be raised and Canadians will not be inconvenienced, Mr. Harper seems willing to consider the ways in which such a plan could benefit Canada. What he fails to acknowledge, in addition to the issues already raised surrounding the ballistic missile defence plan, is that US plans that seek Canadian support for their implementation rarely result in benefits for Canada or Canadians. NAFTA is the most recent example. ■

Grocery Industry Armageddon - Is Wal-Mart Really Our Biggest Threat?

Angelo DiCaro

For months now I have been hearing the muffles of an impending wave of reform set to hit the Canadian grocery industry. As a shop steward for Local 414 of the Canadian Auto Workers (one of North America's most heavily dominated retail Locals) I am privy to all of this hearsay and get a solid dose of it weekly. All from the "did-you-hear?" – type questions about who's buying out who, which foreign interest group has had talks with which major North American retailer, the secret agendas that are under construction for the next round of collective bargaining negotiations and to the clandestine reasoning behind why my hours have "really" been cut as of late. Any further probing I have afforded to these claims has continuously led me to one response: Wal-Mart.

It appears there are no two more frightening words (separated by a hyphen) in the English language. At this time, the panic has become an epidemic across Ontario amidst the recent mid-term amendments negotiated by fellow retail union compatriots, the United Food and Commercial Workers, and the Loblaw Corporation. (Although highly unpopular, this is an acceptable practice under section 58(5) of the Ontario Labour Relations Act, which allows amendments to be made to an existing collective agreement through mutual consent of both union and employer – a process not mandated by membership ratification)

For those who do not know (yet), the Loblaw Corporation announced a decision, in December of 2002, to end construction of conventional grocery stores bearing the 'Loblaws,' 'Zehrs,' and 'Fortino's'

banners. The company has shifted its business strategy towards the sole development of non-traditional Real Canadian SuperStore (RCSS) formats in Ontario. The benefits that these new superstores will provide Loblaw include: the space to house 35% department store-type merchandise, the ability to reduce direct wage costs and indirect benefit costs from its operating budget and create a franchise-type system for individual store operations, a goal set to be attained by the year 2008.

most coveted retail sales market of southern Ontario.

What is most concerning about all of this is that the fight doesn't involve Loblaw.

Wal-Mart's expansion into Canada began in 1994 when the American retail giant bought out Woolco Stores and have been in the business to eat up retail market share north of the border ever since. That was ten years ago. Ten years later we are on the verge of watching Wal-Mart's 'Sam's Club' ware-



And why did all of this occur? Answer: Wal-Mart. (Notice the trend forming here?)

The threat of an impending 'Wal-Martian' invasion on everything sacred and good and peaceful in the Canadian grocery industry has struck fear into the hearts of anyone and everyone (or so I'm led to believe). The movement, reshuffling and panic of the Loblaw Corporation, presumed to be the prime victim of this assault, has set the stage for a gruesome and (fiscally) overwhelming battle between two of North America's retail behemoths, in an attempt to lay claim to Canada's

house stores open up all across the province (15 are slated to open in the year 2004) and while they do offer a variety of 'pantry', non-perishable and frozen grocery items, their position in Canadian retail is set to tighten up the competition of other non-traditional warehouse club stores, like Costco, that cater to the needs of small business members and, only recently, the general public. Realistically, Costco should be the ones rolling up their sleeves preparing to do battle with Wal-Mart. What, then, does this have to do with a traditional grocery store chain like Loblaw?

CIBC World Market analyst Perry Caicco released a report in 2001 that stated the arrival of Sam's Club warehouse stores can be seen as the foreshadowing of a subsequent incursion of retail grocery-focused Wal-Mart Supercentres moving into Ontario over the next few years. These same Supercentres have rocked the United States grocery industry, driving many small market competitors out of business. However, as Caicco stated, "Wal-Mart Supercentres in this (Canadian market) would struggle." The Canadian grocery industry maintains a stronger price advantage over its U.S. counterparts; it remains strong with "low-priced discount or 'box' stores and plenty of fresh, modern assets, even in the most rural of markets...and populated by large stores full of tremendous perishables and strong private-label programs." Wal-Mart currently holds 5% of grocery market share in Canada, and in the worst-case scenario, at the present growth rate of Sam's Club stores, "the combined impact on the grocery industry would be a 1.53% grab of consumer food-market share by 2009," as reported by Caicco.

The only 'real' threat, which has the potential to cause Canadian retail Armageddon, is if Wal-Mart decided to take a stab at a relatively rigid grocery market dampened with a number of well-established competitors using its Supercentre banner. According to President and CEO of Wal-Mart Canada, Mario Pilozi, "there are currently no plans to open Supercentres in Canada," but did not rule out the possibility. Even if this war were destined to take place it would happen at no time in the near future.

Yes, Wal-Mart has proven itself quite villainous to the Canadian labour movement during its residency. Its notorious anti-union policy has been illustrated through the Windsor, Ontario organizing drive of the mid 1990s by the Retail Wholesale/United Steelworkers of America (which led to the advent of

Mike Harris' legendary Bill 31) and the Thompson, Manitoba organizing drive of 2003, nearly a victory but thwarted by the evil and iniquitous 'vote-tainting' CBC minivan parked conspiringly close to the line of workers waiting to cast their ratification vote...

...Or so the company claimed.

By no stretch of the imagination does Wal-Mart pride itself on the longevity and stability of its exclusively part-time associates by paying them an 'astounding' \$9.65 hourly rate after ten years of service and having them pay for the bulk of their own benefits.

But everyone has been well aware of that since 1994.

Why is all of this being deemed a threat only now? Why not ten years ago?

Why propose to interrupt a collective agreement in mid-term to resolve a problem that has not yet started?

With no successor rights guaranteed for unionization on new Real Canadian Superstores, and on the cusp of a potential confrontation with a company operating without a unionized contingency, why provide the union with an ultimatum to bargain concessions behind closed doors without a union vote? Why not simply proceed without the union?

Why, as one of the largest private sector unions operating out of Canada, do they agree to mirror the working conditions of non-union competitors? Wouldn't it be more

beneficial for the labour movement, as a whole, to direct resources and energy into organizing these low-waged, unorganized workers?

Is this whole situation really a pre-empted stance against an impending threat of market loss or a calculated manoeuvre to utilize an ephemeral threat in order to reengineer the internal labour force of a company that has been known to have a markedly higher 'Cadillac-style' compensation system and richer collective bargaining agreement relative to its major competitors in the grocery industry?

We'll never really know until something actually happens.

Waiting patiently, arms in hand, until the war begins.

For the rest of us in the retail grocery industry the pattern for collective bargaining has been set and the chaos has already begun...

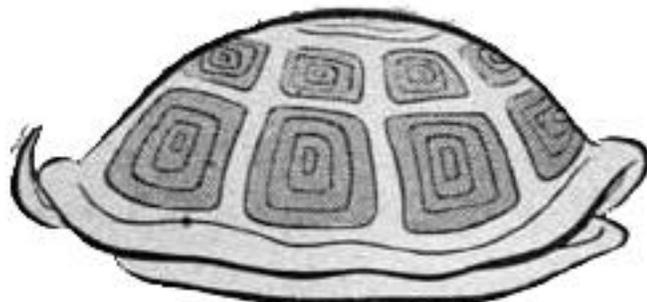
...And it has nothing to do with Wal-Mart. ■

For source information please read:

"Battle of The Giants" by Zena Olijnyk in Canadian Business November 23, 2003.

"A Sweetheart Deal" by Hugh Finnamore at www.ufcw.net/articles.html

"Evil Empires of The Canadian Grocery Industry" by Perry Caicco.



Wal-Mart's Global Order:

North American Labour takes on the Retailing Giant

Charles Smith

In the past decade, Wal-Mart has come to dominate the retail trade in North America, becoming the largest private sector employer in the United States with over 1.5 million employees. The success of the company is unparalleled in contemporary retail capitalism, as it has reached annual revenue of \$258 billion in 2003, surpassing \$9 billion in total net income. According to a report released by the Democratic Committee in the US House of Representatives (*Everyday Low Wages: A Report by the Democratic Committee on Education and the Workforce, February 16, 2004*) in 2003, 138 million US shoppers visit Wal-Mart every week, with 82 percent of all American households making at least one purchase at a Wal-Mart. To put those numbers in some context, Wal-Mart's total revenue has grown to encompass a colossal 2 percent of total American GDP. The company has achieved this position through a reliance on extremely low labour costs and a complete dependence on free trade agreements within North America, Europe and throughout Asia and Latin America. This dependence has led to a radical reinvention of production and exchange within the retail sector which is characterized by an aggressive global supply chain stretching from its home base in Bentonville Arkansas to retail outlets and production centres throughout the world.

The rise of Wal-Mart's market power has largely occurred because of the trends associated with current pat-

terns of deindustrialization and the decline of well paying industrial jobs within the core capitalist countries. In short, Wal-Mart's success has occurred because of the entrenchment of neo-liberal globalisation in the 1980s and 1990s. The Wal-Mart model of expansion has consisted of penetrating local markets with extremely low cost consumer goods in both the retail and grocery sectors while squeezing suppliers to cut wholesale costs in order to sup-



ply inexpensive commodities to consumers. Late last year, the *Los Angeles Times* accused the hyper competitiveness of the Wal-Mart model as adding significant pressure on U.S. manufacturers to relocate industrial jobs overseas (November 23, 2003, Pg. 1). This has led to what some observers have termed the 'Wal-Mart effect' in local communities, as workers throughout the service sector are subjected to ever increasing downward pressures on wages, ben-

efits and working conditions because of vicious competition from an existing (or future) Wal-Mart store.

Increasingly, the 'Wal-Mart effect' has been the catalyst behind major unionization drives by some of the largest unions in the service sector, including: the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), the United Steel Workers of America (USWA) and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Yet, to date, there has been little success in securing a collective agreement for Wal-Mart employees in either the United States or Canada. Given the importance which Wal-Mart has come to play within the retail sector (and the economy as a whole) it is important to explore why Wal-Mart remains largely union free.

The United States

Few commentators would argue that the latter half of the 1990s and early 2000s were not a period of significant growth within the American economy. Most analysts argue that this boom was fuelled by extensive financial investment in the technology sector, which was driven by companies such as Microsoft and Northern Telecom. Yet, Warren Buffett, the financial investment guru on Wall Street, has argued that it was low cost consumer goods pushed by Wal-Mart that fuelled the significant growth of the American economy in the latter half of the 1990s (*Wall Street Journal, April 7, 2004*). If this is true—and in examining the sheer expansion of Wal-Mart in

the same decade (1,478 discount department stores, 1,471 Supercentres, 538 Sam's Club and 64 Neighborhood Markets as of 2003) it is entirely likely that it is—then all American workers should be worried.

According to the American Bureau of Labour Statistics, the average hourly earnings for a Wal-Mart employee in 2003 was \$7.84. Of those working full time, this worked out to roughly \$13,861 per year which fell below the \$14,630 per year poverty line (for a family of three) set by the American federal government. Yet even the dubious distinction of working full time for below poverty line wages was out of reach for many Wal-Mart workers, as average working time in most Wal-Mart stores fell below the 32 hours per week needed to reach the status of full time 'associate.'

Under such conditions, Wal-Mart should be an ideal organizing target for American labour unions. Initially, the large service unions appeared to be up to the challenge. Between 1998 and 2002 the National Labour Relations Board filed more than forty complaints against Wal-Mart managers. These violations have ranged from firing union supporters, intimidating workers, threats to close stores if workers successfully unionize, gender discrimination and sexual harassment. More recently allegations have arisen that Wal-Mart was illegally employing immigrant workers to clean stores after hours. In some cases, immigrant workers were locked in the stores, unable to leave until the store was opened in the morning.

Yet despite the employment atrocities committed by Wal-Mart and the tacit support which the NLRB has given to Wal-Mart organizing drives, unionization has largely failed.* In order to explain this failure, some have pointed to the weakness in American labour law (and the NLRB in particular), which is unable to limit the ability of employers to threaten or strategically move supporters of a union as a key variable in explaining the failures to unionize the retailing giant. If this is true, than the Canadian union drives should

be evidence of greater success, given the restrictions which Canadian labour law applies to employer threats during a unionization drive.

Canada

Canadian workers face similar competitive pricing pressures from the expansion of Wal-Mart into the country. The company has made clear from the beginning that it was not interested in dealing with labour unions, as its initial push into Canada in 1994 consisted of gobbling up 122 non-unionized Woolco stores while passing on 22 other locations, 10 of which were Woolco's only unionized stores. Since 1994, the company has expanded to include 241 stores, including an aggressive expansion of the Sam's Club format. Wages in the Canadian stores remain comparatively low, ranging from \$8.00 to \$8.50 per hour in various provinces. In comparison, workers in unionized grocery stores can earn upwards of \$12.00 to \$14.00 dollars per hour. Perhaps because of these wage differentials, the 'Wal-Mart effect' has placed increased pressure on Canadian retailers, who are increasingly pushing their labour force to concede to wage concessions in order to compete with Wal-Mart.

These wage pressures have forced retail unions to aggressively pursue Wal-Mart campaigns. In Ontario, the unionization campaign first broke through in a 1997 victory by the USWA in Windsor. After much employee intimidation by Wal-Mart, the labour board ruled that the union should be certified and the Windsor location became the first unionized Wal-Mart in North America. Shortly thereafter, company legal tactics and employee turnover diminished the bargaining unit and the union was decertified. Since that time, the unionization of Wal-Mart's have been overtaken by the UFCW. They have initiated unionization drives in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec. To date, the union has only had one successful bid, in Jonquiere Quebec, which was certified by the

Quebec labour board in August of 2004. Already, Wal-Mart has indicated that the Jonquiere location may not be profitable and has threatened to close its doors, something that Canadian labour law is no longer capable of stopping.

Problems for the Future: Challenging the 'Wal-Mart Effect'

For the UFCW, then, 7 years of organizing at Canadian Wal-Mart's has had limited success. In the United States, unions have faced similar obstacles, often in a much more difficult political environment. To be sure, the sheer magnitude of Wal-Mart's market strength makes the task of unionization extremely difficult and expensive. Indeed, Wal-Mart's hyper competitiveness model of low cost goods is entirely dependent on a global low wage workforce, which unionization would obviously challenge. In this regard, North American unions begin every union drive with its back to a wall—a wall, more than likely, supplied by material that has been distributed by Wal-Mart. Yet, there is still popular dissatisfaction with the 'Wal-Mart effect' throughout both Canada and the United States. Even the Democratic Party, which has not been an overall friend to labour in the past decade, has recognized the detrimental consequences that Wal-Mart has for the local communities (*Everyday Low Wages: A Report by the Democratic Committee on Education and the Workforce, February 16, 2004*). Historically, such levels of dissatisfaction have been a rallying point for massive unionization drives in sectors with equally large employers, including: auto, textiles, steel and in the public sector. The question, then, is why has the USWA and the UFCW been so unsuccessful?

While the answers to these questions are complex, part of the problem seems to be an inability of the UFCW and the USWA to connect the organizing principles of unionization with an overarching challenge to Wal-Mart's global competitiveness model. Indeed, the Canadian branch of the UFCW's overall strategy has been to hire →

ex-Wal-Mart employees, fight the corporation at the labour relations board and then, if unsuccessful, to continue to litigate in the courts. While such a strategy may be the logical outcome of an industrial relations system built on the principles of legal compromise, there is little evidence that provincial labour law can halt Wal-Mart's ability to stall and ultimately defeat unionization. Thus, while the Canadian UFCW promises the laudable goals of better wages, benefits and workplace conditions for Wal-Mart workers it also publicly accepts the market power which Wal-Mart has attained. This acceptance has forced the same union's leadership in Ontario's Local 1000A to unilaterally open an existing collective agreement with the grocery giant, Loblaw Corporation, rolling back wages and benefits specifically because of the 'Wal-Mart effect.' In this context, the UFCW's narrow vision for all retail workers seems to be a tacit acknowledgement that the best the union can offer is a wage increase in good times, and if necessary, concessions to sustain corporate competitiveness. Judging by the long-term failure of such a message, however, this will not prove a successful strategy to break into

Wal-Mart. In the current economic environment, it is too easy for the company to bury organizing drives in the courts, threaten to abandon communities or layoff employees over certain amounts of time. Put more simply, union organization has to challenge Wal-Mart's entire corporate model of low cost competitiveness. This includes challenging the Company's take over of local communities rather than focusing on simple pocket book issues of potential members. This would require greater political organizing, community outreach and a long term vision of challenging Wal-Mart's global market power. This is certainly no easy task, but one that we can no longer ignore.

*A small meatcutters local in Jacksonville, Texas was successfully unionized in February of 2000. The unit has since been 'restructured' by the company. The meatcutters appealed the restructuring to the federal court. The court agreed with the workers and ordered the move illegal. True to form, Wal-Mart appealed the decision and vowed to continue fighting in the courts. ■



Bakunin's Passion

Matt Fodor

Mark Leier spoke at Ryerson University in Toronto in October on the subject of the great nineteenth century anarchist thinker Michael Bakunin. Leier, a historian at Vancouver's Simon Fraser University who specializes in working class and left-wing political movements, recently completed a biography of Bakunin, *The Creative Passion*, to be released in 2006. After 9/11, left-liberal and conservative writers alike have argued that Bakunin, perhaps best known for advocating "propaganda by the deed", is the father of modern-day terrorism. Leier argues that Bakunin advocated violence against institutions, not the individuals that maintain them; and furthermore, the violence that has been committed by anarchists is invisible when compared to the violence committed by capital and the state. The state, Bakunin argued, is founded by violence and maintained by the same means. Leier also discussed the famous rivalry between Marx and Bakunin. Controversially, Leier contends that their views of the state are much more similar than many believe, as Bakunin essentially agreed with Marx's claim that the state serves as the "executive committee of the bourgeoisie". ■

The Impact of Public Service Liberalisation on European workers

Roland Atzmüller and
Christoph Hermann

Political debates on the privatisation or contracting out of public services have focused, for the most part, on the quality of services and their accessibility to all citizens. Not as much attention has been paid to privatisation's impact on employment. This is somewhat surprising as the quality of public services depend to a large degree on good working conditions and the satisfaction of employees – especially in positions where in person contact is high, such as health care. With the rise of neoliberalism public sector workers have gradually lost much of their leverage and public services have become one of the main battle grounds in a far-reaching process of economic and social restructuring. The liberalisation and privatisation of public services are an important element in what can be called neoliberal *Standortpolitik* (politics of location) and the competition-oriented restructuring of the state.

The main strategies with regard to the reform of labour and employment practises are well known from the restructuring of the private sector (e.g. downsizing, benchmarking). The same policies' introduction to the public sector have been distinguished by the speed, brutality and economic irrationality of their application. In this column we want to summarize some results of a study on the impact of liberalisation and privatisation of public services on employment, working conditions and labour relations (Atzmüller/Hermann 2004a and 2004b).¹ We look at their effects for employment and wage levels, working conditions, and the union movement. Although the situation in Europe is certainly different than in Canada, we think that many will find the broad strokes of the picture disturbingly familiar.

The neoliberal employment regime and the liberalisation of public services

Neoliberal employment policies have essentially two purposes: lowering wage costs and the increasing the flexibility of labour. The manner of achieving these objectives differ considerably according to the sector, and a society's social and economic structure. In the labour intensive sectors (postal services, local public transport) the reduction of costs is primarily achieved by reducing the numbers of employees and by lowering wages. Increasing the flexibility of labour, is the first step in disposing of 'excess' workers, which is a necessary first step before opening up service provision to market forces.



The level of employment. From the neoliberal perspective 'inefficiencies' in public services are the result of overstaffing (or overpayment). Consequently the scaling back of employment is a central aim of neoliberal restructuring. In our study we found corporations used two methods of reducing employment: layoffs and 'socially responsible' reduction. Which method

was pursued depended mostly on the strength of unions, the system of industrial relations, labour law, and public opinion. In the case of 'socially responsible' reductions, employees leave the company 'voluntarily'. They are expected to take advantage of early retirement schemes, compensation payments ('golden handshakes'), and promises of retraining. However, the voluntary character of such measures is doubtful. The general insecurity that accompanies restructuring, job and location transfers, and more work for fewer employees leads to growing frustration. This leads many employees, often women and older workers, to retire or change jobs.

With the exception of the United Kingdom, outright layoffs are rare. The threat of layoffs are nevertheless regularly used to pressure unions to agree to concessions in the restructuring process. In countries with strong business-labour-government partnership traditions, employees that are displaced are reassigned to in-house employment agencies or to organisations for continuing training to prepare employees for the external labour market. In some cases – including DB services of Deutsche Bahn (German Railways) – temporary work agencies are set up that contract out 'redundant' workers to other companies.

As a result, employment in certain sectors (electricity in the UK, railways in Germany) was more than cut in half in the first ten years following liberalisation or privatisation. Moreover, careful tracking of employment within Deutsche Bahn have shown that since the start of restructuring in the early 1990s between 75 and 90 percent of the railway personnel have been replaced. In the course of our study we found no proof for the oft-stated →



claim that the loss in employment in the public sector is more than made up by new service providers in the market as stated in the European Commission's Green Paper on Services of General Interest (EU 2003: 4).

Labour and wage costs. Neoliberal restructuring also attacks alleged rigidities and elevated wages in public services. Highly-unionised employees, according to this line of argument, can win above market equilibrium wages because of their protected positions in public services. Our study found that liberalisation and privatisation have only in exceptional cases led to a direct cut in existing basic wages. Instead long-term reduction of wage costs were achieved by restricting wage increases, and by flattening the wage hierarchy. In some cases new employees are paid lower entry wages than their older colleagues received, and the reduction of benefits and pensions is widespread. Wage reduction strategies overlap with attempts at flexibility.

Flexible working hours are used to avoid fully paying employees for their work. The company averages

working hours over the pay period. The excess working time during the applicable period (within certain limits) does not count as overtime. Payment of overtime bonuses and weekend premiums are avoided by so-called 'all-in-employment contracts' that include a prefixed amount of overtime hours for which no premiums are paid. Other strategies to push down wages are performance-based wages, and pay schemes that vary with the individual. We also found the re-emergence of older employment practises, such as piece rates in postal delivery and a sort of day-labourer system in the Swedish bus sector.

The pressure on wages was accompanied by an attack on collective agreements. New suppliers are often covered by worse (or no) collective agreements. The extension of part-time work and temporary work and the outsourcing of certain services such as cleaning to private suppliers can also be seen as indirect form of income reduction.

Working conditions. According to the neoliberal critique public services are characterised by extensive bureaucratisation, rigidity and inefficiency. The maximal use of employees and a strong concern for customer-satisfaction are believed to ensure a high degree of flexibility and efficiency. In the restructuring of public services, improvements in efficiency, if they take place at all, are almost always based on the deterioration of working conditions. The pace and extent of job cuts in almost all cases results in a significant intensification of work, as fewer workers must do the same or increased amounts of work. From our interviews with employees it is clear that they are under increasing stress and work harder in less time. The effects of this are felt in their private life and on their health.

Even if there is no immediate extension of working hours, the reduction of employment has led to a dramatic rise in overtime in some sectors. In other cases there is also an erosion in company working-time regulations (cuts in holidays, a higher retirement

age). In labour-intensive sectors breaks and rest periods have been reduced so that the so-called productive proportion of the working day – that is those periods for which customers pay for services – is increased.

Aside from the intensification of work, restructuring is often followed by a changing the nature of the labour force, by transforming traditional jobs and qualifications. Thus, new sorting centres in postal services, results in the deskilling of labour. Most sectors have also seen a dramatic reduction in the number of apprenticeships and programs for qualification upgrading.

Industrial relations. From a neoliberal perspective, trade unions are a main cause of the alleged rigidity of public services. This is supposed to be true for wage costs as well as labour processes. In some countries (UK) liberalisation and privatisation therefore were explicitly put on the agenda to weaken union organisation in public services. In all countries and sectors unions have accepted liberalisation and privatisation, if only after putting up a lengthy fight. Unions have decided to cooperate with governments and management so to prevent lay-offs and secure a 'socially responsible' restructuring. Unions have often focused on the preservation of rights of the existing workforce at the expense of the rights of incoming employees or those working for new service suppliers.

Privatisation and liberalisation has led to significant decentralisation and fragmentation of collective agreements. Often this is accompanied by a reduction or erosion of workers' participation rights, weakening the possibilities of labour representation. Disagreement over the union response has led to division within the labour movement. Many unions no longer pursue broader political and social objectives such as nationalising basic industries or securing free access to basic services. Instead they limit their efforts to the representation of their members' interests. In short, liberalisation and privatisation have put unions on the defensive and narrowed their activities to concession bargain

ing. Unions' acceptance of varying work and employment conditions for different groups of workers and concessions in the reorganisation of labour processes undermines the solidarity of workers and weakens the union movement.

Conclusions

With the alleged objective of improving efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of public services, the neoliberal work and employment regime was gradually extended to the public sector within the last couple of years. Consequently, meeting social needs as well as the universal provision of public services has increasingly become subject to the overall aim of profit maximization. Profits are maximized at the expense of those men and women who deliver the services in their daily life. As a result liberalisation and privatisation have led to a massive reduction in employment, widespread decline in wages and labour costs, as well as a deterioration of working conditions and workers' participation rights. The ultimate goal from the perspective of profit-maximisation is not an improvement in the quality and efficiency of services – in fact the quality of services often worsen as a result of liberalisation and privatisation – but weakening unions and increasing control of the labour process.

From a socialist perspective, experiences with state-controlled public services and nationalised industries are controversial to say the least. The statist-bureaucratic character of the public sector blocked many initiatives for a more progressive and radical democratisation and transformation of the economy and society (as voiced by the new social and newly radicalised labour movements in the 1960s and 70s). A strategy that has the potential to challenge neoliberalism must therefore address the problem of statism and bureaucracy in the production as well as the delivery of public services. The answer must be a far-reaching process of democratisation. Only if we succeed

in developing new ways in which interests of service providers as well as service users are democratically articulated and satisfied, we will be able to rebuild an alternative emancipatory political and social project (Hirsch 2003). Subordinating the provision of public services to the market and to the law of profit-maximisation is no solution. The result will not only be a deterioration of employment and working conditions but also a restriction of access as well as a worsening of the quality of services because of growing levels of exhaustion and frustration among service providers and because of lack of resources needed to fulfil individual needs and wants of all service users, regardless of their income and of the commodity-character of the service delivered. ■

1 The study is based on primary analysis (data collection and interviews) regarding the development of public services in Austria, and summaries of existing studies as well as additional information from Germany, Sweden and UK. Following sectors are included: Railway, local public transport, electricity, natural gas, postal services and water. The study was commissioned by the Austrian Chamber of Labour and conducted by the Working Life Research Centre/FORBA in Vienna (www.forba.at). The final report is available from the Chamber of Labour (www.arbeiterkammer.at). We would like to thank the sector experts and especially Werner Raza at the Chamber of Labour and our colleagues at FORBA for their support.

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The Crisis of the Trade-Unions in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine

David Mandel

In this excerpt from his talk to a Socialist Project public forum on November 30th in Toronto, David Mandel discusses his new book, "Labour After Communism: Autoworkers and Their Unions in Russia". Mandel is a leading Marxist authority on post-Soviet labour. He teaches political science at the University of Quebec, Montreal.)

The book revolves around the issue of "class independence." That is a strategic orientation whose starting point is the antagonistic relations of labour and capital, labour and the state. From that it follows that the labour movement's priority is to build a correlation of forces increasingly favourable to labour and that the basis of labour's strength is the solidarity, consciousness, and active commitment of workers, their confidence in their collective capacity to effect positive societal change.

"Class independence" stands in opposition to "social partnership," the dominant strategy in the former Soviet Union and the world today. "Social partnership" takes different forms, but at bottom it is based on the view that labour and capital share a fun-

damental interest in the success of the given enterprise and of the economy as a whole. Serious conflict is viewed as a failure of communication or the refusal of the parties to understand their long-term interests. Under "partnership," negotiations backed by real force are replaced by "concertation," pseudo-negotiations based on wishful thinking.

By embracing "partnership," the post-Soviet labour movement sealed the workers' defeat. And it has been crushing, with its living standards falling by two thirds; the comprehensive economic security of the Soviet period eliminated; and a major decline in education and culture. Even political rights, the principal gain from the fall of the old system, have been eroded. There is still considerable freedom of association and press but none of the countries can be termed a bourgeois democracy, that is, a relatively law-based state which allows free, if unequal, political competition, as long as the bases of capitalism are not threatened.

Of course, "class independence" would not have guaranteed victory. Objective circumstances were highly unfavourable. Nevertheless, the

losses suffered could at least have been much smaller. Most unions did not make use of the resources they had, to fight.

The most unfavourable condition was the legacy of totalitarian rule which did not allow workers to organize independently. As a result, they entered the new period without experience of collective action or free discussion. Anyone who still sees the Soviet system as "socialist" must fit that into their analysis. The Soviet labour movement did play an important role in undermining the dictatorship, once Gorbachev created the initial opening. But it could not develop the needed organizational or ideological independence and served as a battering ram for forces hostile to its interests. Events moved too quickly for most workers to gain the experience necessary to develop independent analyses and organizations.

The international context was also unfavourable. It was a period of capitalist offensive. Socialism, even as a theoretical option, was everywhere in retreat. Soviet workers thought they had already experienced socialism and believed liberal ideologues who told them that

only capitalism was “normal.”

“Shock therapy” was another objective obstacle. It was conceived to disarm potential opposition to capitalist restoration subordinate to Western interests. Overnight, the social system was turned upside down, disorienting workers and throwing them into heightened insecurity.

The auto and farm-machinery sector, the focus of the book, lost two thirds of its

ism” but by “social partnership”.

In most plants, there was no resistance to the all-out attack on rights and living standards by the state and management. Where workers resisted, they received no substantive support from other local unions or from the national level. To be fair, the national union was starved of resources. But that only reflected the abysmal level of

unions to try to organize the employers, hoping that their organization would negotiate a national agreement with them and impose it on the individual plants. Of course, nothing of the kind happened.

Politically, the federation, to which the autoworkers’ union is affiliated, formed electoral alliances the directors’ organizations, which failed miserably. In 2000, the federation joined



workforce in Russia between 1991 and 2003. About 90% of those who remain belong to the union inherited from the Soviet period. It includes management, often even the plant director. At the plant and national levels, it embraces “partnership.” In practice, the affiliated local unions continue to function as junior personnel departments. This is no longer justified by “social-

solidarity, a logical consequence of “partnership,” which teaches workers to show solidarity with their bosses rather than with “competing” workers.

In conditions of industrial collapse, local struggles could achieve little. But on the sectoral level, the watchword was also “partnership.” Magical thinking led the national leaders of the metalworking

Putin’s party. It was back to the future under the secure wing of the same state that is leading the offensive against workers.

The only bright spot is that some independent unions formed in the early 1990s have survived — though they represent only a few per cent of total union membership — and have shifted to the political →

opposition, adopting at least social-democratic positions.

The Ukrainian autoworkers' union was different, in that it elected a committed socialist and supporter of "class independence" as president. He actively supported local struggles, holding them up for emulation. He cajoled the local leaders to amend the constitution to exclude management. Through education and a national paper he reached out directly to the rank and file. He got the union's constitution changed to ensure rank-and-file workers were represented in elected bodies. He tried to organize other national leaders to depose the federation's conciliationist leadership. His union supported the left-social-democratic Socialist Party of Ukraine.

But he could not generate enough support to wean most plant presidents away from the idea of "partnership." As a result, he could not obtain a share of the dues that would have allowed him to reach more of the rank-and-file directly. Meanwhile, the industry was being destroyed even faster than in Russia. It lost three quarters of its jobs between 1991 and 2003.

After ten years, he stepped down as president to

try changing things "from below," becoming director of the School for Worker Democracy. This rank-and-file education has yielded real, if limited, results, despite its meager resources.

In Belarus, the issue of "class independence" played itself out differently. Here the rank-and-file of the union was

cent between 1991 and 2002, to about 150,000.

After Lukashenko became virtual dictator in 1996, the union turned to outright political opposition, and eventually pulled the federation behind it. In the 2001 presidential elections, the federation's president was the candidate of the democratic opposition.

But the union's position in the plants was more ambiguous. After the 1991 strike, some plants elected independent leaders, but the pressure from below was unable to dislodge most conciliationists. The national leaders at first appeared determined to do what they could to support rank-and-file forces for "class independence." But gradually, they made peace with subservient plant leaders. This occurred as they focused most of their energy on political



more active with a significant current opposed to partnership, thanks, in part, to a month-long general strike in 1991 that shook things up. The union elected a national leadership committed to "class independence." And, thanks to the government's rejection of "shock therapy"—most plants are still nationalized—employment fell by only twenty per

struggles.

This seemed to make sense—after all, the state was the ultimate employer. But in practice, it was a self-defeating strategy, because subservient plant leaders refused to mobilize workers for actions against the government. They refused because their directors told them to. As a result, the national leadership could not

build a correlation of forces against the government. Its active support among workers continued to fall.

Another problem was its failure to offer workers a programme that they could support against the government. In 1992, it created the Labour Party, on the face of it a step towards "class independence." But the party's programme was ambiguous, calling for a strong welfare state but also for "economic freedom" for the enterprises. Bylorussian workers were well aware of the effects of liberal economic policy in Russia and Ukraine. Despite his dictatorial rule, Lukashenko was perceived by many as defending Belarus against "shock therapy." The workers' misgivings were only heightened when the Labour Party entered an electoral alliance in 2001 with liberal parties under the aegis of the US embassy.

When the showdown came after the presidential elections, Lukashenko had little trouble getting rid of the union leaders, who were unable to call on significant rank-and-file support. Today, there is only a very small independent union movement in Belarus, though it keeps on fighting against very harsh odds.

What is the responsibility of leadership for these defeats? Most leaders will say that it was hopeless to mobilize demoralized, scared

workers against management. "Partnership" was their only option. Yet, a minority of leaders in all countries opted for independence, and the workers in their plants put up active, often heroic, resistance. What set the workers in these plants apart was the quality of their leaders, since the rank-and-file were no different from the sizable minority of workers, in all three countries, who showed they were ready to actively resist. But in most workplaces this minority was too weak to force a change in leadership. Had there been a leadership willing to lead and unite the active minority behind a realistic strategy based on "class independence," they may well have awoken the others, the demoralized majority, to join the struggle. Certainly, the most probable outcome occurred. But it was not the only one possible, and especially not the enormous scale of that defeat. The leadership cannot evade its responsibility for what happened.

A final point on socialist trade unionists: A consistent strategy of "class independence" must have socialism as its ultimate goal. Unions that strive for independence from management but accept capitalism as unavoidable, end up trapped in their own contradictions. To posit socialism as the strategic goal is to reject the legitimacy of capital's power in the enterprises and in the state. It is to view capi-

tal's power as a usurpation that is tolerated only because workers are too weak to challenge it frontally. But the long-term perspective is to build the correlation of forces to the point where labour can realistically challenge the very existence of capital as a social and political power against labour.

It is unlikely that unions, except in extraordinary circumstances, can be won over to socialism. But the role of socialists is to promote "class independence" within unions, to win over workers and to organize them politically. Difficult as that is today, that strategy alone offers the perspective of successfully resisting capital's already quarter-century offensive and eventually mounting a counter-attack. The crisis of organized labour is at bottom a crisis of political representation: workers today have no party to represent them politically, on the level of "class against class."

In the region of the former Soviet Union, there is no socialist movement of any significance, though workers are losing their allergy to socialist ideas. As noted, the independent elements of the labour movement are shifting leftwards. As always, there is hope. But things would be a lot easier if labour in the West could score some important victories. This would open up ideological space for an independent labour movement in the former Soviet Union. ■

The day after the US election

Bill Fletcher, Jr.

I am writing this the morning after the US Presidential election and the results are not completely settled, though it appears that Senator John Kerry is preparing to concede the election to President George Bush. The following represents personal observations on the election and the apparent results.

The election was as close as everyone had anticipated. The percentage breakdown is about 51% for Bush and 48% for Kerry. This is not the makings of a mandate. If one factors in that approximately 25% of the US electorate has been polled as being politically reactionary, that means that the key question is what motivated the other 25-6%. Additionally, what can one make of who turned out in support of Kerry and who did not?

Overall, there have not been major changes from the 2000 election. In other words, despite the significant voter turnout, the US electorate appears to remain deeply divided politically. The terrorist attack of 11 September 2001, along with the Bush campaign's religious calls for 'moral values' seems to have been the main motivating force for the Bush supporters. In other words, the issue of domestic security overrode many other concerns that the US electorate has had with President Bush. It is critical, therefore, to keep in mind that Bush is a deeply unpopular President, though he is the sitting President during a time of war.

Senator John Kerry made a strategic decision to focus his campaign largely on attempting to compete with President Bush on the matter of national security. His message came down to something akin to: I can make you safer; Bush has bungled the situation. Now,

while it is obvious to most sober observers that Bush has bungled issues of national security and has launched the US into a war of aggression against Iraq, a worried electorate will not necessarily decide to change course unless some of the fundamentals of the thinking and actions of the sitting President are challenged. Thus, Senator Kerry was criticized by the Bush campaign for so-called "flip-flopping" on Iraq. Kerry attempted to explain his positions but ended up confusing many people. He could have simply said something along the lines of that he had made a mistake in believing what President Bush had said about Iraq. This line of argument would have immediately undercut the charges of flip flopping and would have put the burden elsewhere.

The Kerry campaign, as well as many liberal and progressive supporters, believed that the newly registered voters, and particularly the youth vote, would make a decisive difference. As of this writing it appears that the youth vote remained more or less what it was in the 2000 election, i.e., about 17%. This is deeply disappointing for Kerry supporters given that so much time was put into registering new voters and voter mobilization efforts. It also appears that the newly registered Republican voters did turn out in higher numbers.

There are certain points that are worth considering:

- The Bush campaign focused on fear and religious values in order to advance its neo-liberal agenda. It was quite noticeable that the Bush campaign had no defense of its domestic agenda. Nevertheless, using the shield of post-11

September fear plus the concern in sections of the population about so-called moral values, the neo-liberal agenda has been advanced. To put it another way, millions of people are prepared to accept a neo-liberal agenda, despite or irrespective of its consequences, because they have accepted the Bush administration's arguments about national security and morality.

- The Democratic Party's approach of attempting to compete with the ultra-Right on its own terms continues to fail. The notion that an appeal to moderates by accepting precepts of the Right simply undermines the base of the Democratic Party. While Kerry challenged the Iraq war, he was actually late in doing so, but also never challenged Bush's approach to the so-called war against terrorism.

- The ultra-Right within the Republican Party is very well organized and ideologically solidified behind an agenda. There is nothing comparable on the Left and Progressive side within the Democratic Party. The leadership of the Democratic Party continues to advance notions about moving the Party further to the Right, but this demoralizes the base rather than energizing it.

- Fear, appropriately manipulated, can lead people to vote against their own interests. ■

Bill Fletcher, Jr. is a US-based activist who has had a long time involvement in the labor movement and international issues. The views expressed here are his own and do not represent those of any organization with which he is affiliated.

The Indispensable Ken Loach – at the video store

Scott Forsyth

Ken Loach is an indispensable filmmaker for socialists. Of course, Loach does not fit the cynical right wing times, he is the master filmmaker of the working class, and his militant socialism has never wavered. His films are not making the local megaplex but a radical film lover will want to put together a Loach festival; many of his classic films and all the most recent should be available from the video store – you will be rewarded and challenged.

His extraordinary body of work over 40 years – *Cathy Come Home*, *Kes*, the magisterial series *Days of Hope*, *Hidden Agenda*, *Riff-Raff*, *Ladybird*, *Ladybird*, and *Land and Freedom*, to name just a few – offers a panoramic but intimate exploration of working class politics and everyday life, particularly in the British isles, but always internationally conscious as well. Loach's films have powerfully addressed the politics and betrayals of unions, strikes and revolutions, the painful daily struggles with family, sexuality, race, housing, poverty, drugs and alcohol, the contradictions and inhumanity of the welfare state, the solidarity and oppression of the workplace; every aspect of working class life intrigues this humane realist. These classics take us from the British General strike of 1926 to state terror in Northern Ireland, from the Spanish Republic's defeat to the small agonies of work and family in everyday England. Loach's career has survived the censorship battles that marked so many of his early television films and he has remained a critical realist, intent on

communicating deeply with a wide audience, outlasting the sectarian academic theorists who dismissed his popularization of radical issues. Loach's is a cinema, unabashedly, of both emotion and analysis, sometimes didactic (and that is not always a bad thing), always brutally honest. In these films, victories are few and far between, triumphs often solely of working class spirit against overwhelming odds.

Over the last decade, Loach's films have repeatedly come back to the ravages of, and struggle against, the ruling class offensive known as neo-liberalism. The attack on working people's living standards, wages and unions, the relentless erosion of the social, health and educational provisions of the so-called welfare state, the polarization of rich and poor, the familiar mantras of privatization, deregulation, free market magic are all too well known. If this onslaught is still emblemized by Thatcher and Reagan, it is now generalized as blatantly imperialist globalization, borne by the World Bank, the IMF and American military might. Loach's films of the last few years have looked prismatically at where working people stand in this epochal transformation, what the restructuring of class relations is from the workers' eyes.

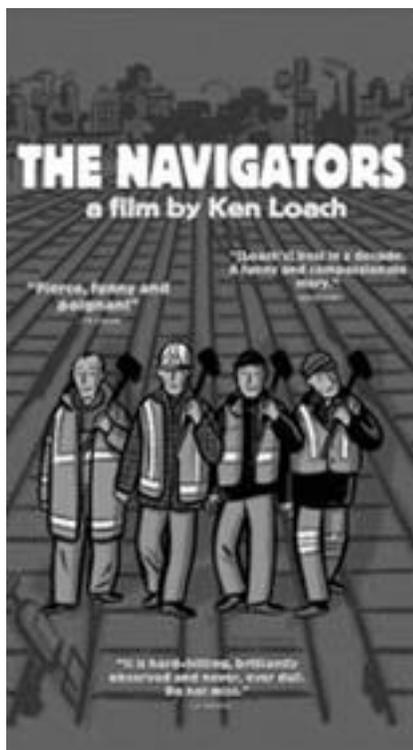
Bread and Roses (2000) is set within a recent victory, at least partially, for working class struggle: the successful organization and strike by janitors in California, largely illegal Mexican immigrants. The film, an interesting foray outside the British Isles for Loach, is a

celebration of class militance against the brutal new conditions of low-pay contingent service work, but characteristically Loach focuses as much on the personal costs and pain of that struggle.



The Navigators (2001) takes us right within the heart of Thatcherite Britain, to the grim opposite of the California optimism of the janitors' limited triumph. The film offers a series of tableaux among the workers of a British Rail maintenance crew. The narrative spine is provided by the privatization of this public corporation, a legacy Blair has continued to pursue despite years of accidents and scandals. The film centres on the relationships among the men and a few women in the workplace. Written by a former rail worker, the stories give viewers a privileged access to what the day's work is like, what these workers talk about, how they act with each other, how they fight and joke. But this goes beyond a simple idea of naturalism. Indeed, the scenes of banter, debate and anger in the cafeteria are marvels of editing and camera movement; this constructed style of realism makes us feel the camaraderie and the unstated e →

motions. This is exhilarating but, poignantly, dissipates as the privatization takes its apparently unstoppable course. We watch the painful layoffs and buyouts, the absurd and dangerous contracting and sub-contracting of work, the ruthless profiteering of a succession of owners, finally turning workers against workers in desperate competition for work, any work. We reach a painful climax in a terrible accident but Loach's concern is as much what has been lost among the men, what sad individualistic stratagems they are now left with. We



gradually realize that the film resonates with an almost complete absence of political and union discourse – no one presents an analysis, an articulate protest, a courageous last stand for what previous generations had won. The trade unions are absent, as powerless as the isolated workers. This is what makes the privatization seem so unstoppable, this subtle ideological and organizational indication of the depth of crisis and defeat. If the film's comic energy belies this pessimism, we still know that the class

confronts a profoundly changed and daunting class terrain.

Sweet Sixteen (2002) presents yet another angle on class conflict and day-to-day struggles. It is set in Glasgow in a working class area once home of the great Clyde shipyards and, though never acknowledged in the film, the heart of the famously radical Scottish trade union movement. The area is now largely poverty-stricken projects, product of de-industrialization and decline, and this painful coming of age tale follows young Liam's adventures in the drug trade. The film, which won Best Screenplay at Cannes, immerses us naturally in this world with a thoughtful



narrative structure, evocative casting and rapid-fire dialogue – some viewers will use the sub-titles for this intensely Scottish story. Loach, a masterful actor's director, elicits wonderful performances, particularly from the young inexperienced actors. As in many American films, dealing drugs is presented as an entrepreneurial response to, and embodiment of, the neo-liberal times. For the immiserated lumpens left behind by Thatcherism, drugs seem to offer solace to some. To others, dealing offers economic survival, and the only route to class mobility still open. Liam's motives are painfully ironic and touching; as so often in Loach's films there is a difficult and complex family history. He is trying to get enough money together so his Mom, in jail taking the rap for

her no-good drug dealer boyfriend, can start a new life with Liam when she gets released...on his sixteenth birthday. To raise the money, Liam has to show a real talent for dealing drugs, betraying his friends and manoeuvring with the refined but ruthless "rich cunts" who really run the business. Even with his success at this dirty business, Liam finally has to confront the fact that his idealized Mom does not want the life he imagines for them, does not want to be rescued. Even, especially, our loved ones may not be just what we want them to be. So there is no stirring rhetoric to answer the film's bitter ironies and unresolved contradictions. The film concludes sadly, with futile vio-

lence, and Liam staring out at the cold grey sea, trapped, with nowhere to run. There are no epiphanies, no slogans; beyond a seething inchoate class-consciousness, there is again no political discourse at all. Perhaps, there is an optimism of the spirit in the feeling that this memorably alive Liam could still make his own story in this perilous place and time.

Loach offers us clear-sighted and un sentimental, but deeply emotional and generous, pictures of how contemporary capitalism is making and remaking class – and how working class people, heroes of a kind, sometimes fight back, sometimes just endure. ■

A different version of this essay appeared in *CineAction* 62, Spring 2003.



Vera Drake

Reviewed by Doug Williams

British filmmaker Mike Leigh's new film, *Vera Drake*, is about a factory worker and mother who, in defiance of the law, gives free abortions to women. As usual with films about British working class life, it's also about the tyranny of the British class system. And, if you look a little closer, it's about a deeper theme that is close to Leigh's heart.

Vera is a saint-like figure in a bleak mid-20th century working class community - a devoted home maker, revered by her family and all who know her. By day, she tests and packs light bulbs; in her off hours, she cleans the houses of the middle class. She also ministers to the elderly and infirm, never asking anything in return.

But there is a secret side to Vera's life - helping women terminate unwanted pregnancies. In a memorable series of vignettes, Leigh portrays the main rea-

sons women have abortions: poverty, rape, pregnancy-out-of-wedlock, and, in one poignant scene, sheer maternal exhaustion. Vera is competent and cheerful in face of her clients' despair, anxiety and fear. But her necessarily primitive methods court danger - inevitably, one of her charges gets infection and nearly dies. The police are notified. Vera is charged, tried and sent to jail for 28 months.

Leigh and his production team depict the narrow confines of postwar working class life with breathtaking beauty and economy: the narrow tenement passageways, the dingy cafes, the shabby close quarters where people perch like trapped birds - seemingly content with endless cigarettes and cups of tea.

However, Leigh's real subject is class oppression through language and thought control. It's a theme Leigh has dealt with before, notably, in his film *Naked* ('93). In a brilliant depiction of a worker driven to the edge of madness by poverty and his own insights into the nature of class society, Leigh examines the flip side of the Vera Drake character: a marginalized man who understands well how the world works and who is considered a raving lunatic for talking about it. The film's a tragi-comic tour-de-force. With *Naked* and, now, *Vera Drake*, Leigh has created important works about what George Orwell perceived as the relationship between politics and language.

Leigh has never shied away from the comic side of working class existence: his humane intention is so obvi-

ous that there is no hint of condescension. Doubling as script writer, he creates scenes that are highly entertaining in their depiction of workers faced with a poverty that is profoundly cultural as well as material. At times I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

But my ambivalence turned to anger as Leigh's portrait of workers - kept almost infantile in their awe, respect for and fear of class and police authority - snaps into focus. This is a world ruled by a particularly British form of terror: the police are gentle in their procedures, the legal process is refined and subdued. As the voice of a ruling class utterly confident in its position of superiority, the judge's lecturing of Vera for "the extreme seriousness" of her crime is infuriating.

The film takes place in 1951 (sixteen years before abortion was legalized in UK), just 2 years after Orwell published 1984. It's easy to forget, →

that, while ostensibly writing about a dystopia decades in the future, Orwell was commenting on contemporary Britain as well. In the novel, one of the Newspeak engineers says, “[we’re] cutting the language down to the bone . . . Newspeak is the only language in the world whose vocabulary gets smaller every year,” and, “In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it.” Confronted with the fact of Vera’s flouting of an antiabortion law passed in 1861, the family is utterly shamed and humiliated by their mother’s transgression. But, apart from a few “How could you do it, Mum?”s, there is no discussion, nor questioning of the law, nor rage at their multi-layered oppression. Instead, Vera weeps with childlike shame. At her sentencing, her inability to utter a single word in her defense is devastating.

In prison, Vera meets two abortionists like herself. They have no analysis - no “Women’s Right To Choose” slogans are uttered here - just a grim determination to carry on: both are “in” for the second time. But Vera takes no comfort in their minimal posturing: she has been denied the vocabulary to express anger, defiance and will to help her sisters.

Some critics have dismissed Vera’s saintly silence as unbelievable. An eloquent self-defense might have satisfied an audience eager for a “feel-good” ending, but such a device would have been a denial of history and of Leigh’s central theme.

The British have made an industry of self-hatred - it’s been a cultural mainstay since the loss of the Empire. It would be easy to dismiss (or faintly praise) Vera Drake as a rehash of familiar “Isn’t the class system terrible!” themes. But Vera Drake exposes an aspect of class rule that inspired Orwell to produce his brilliant satire. The trivial conversations, the lack of books or newspapers - even among the middle class - the complete lack of perspective beyond their humdrum daily concerns, make for scenes that are flawless in their depiction of a people utterly bamboozled by one of the oldest, most experienced, highly-skilled and subtly vicious ruling classes on the planet.

Vera Drake provides an artful look at a chapter in British working class life in which - despite the sacrifice and promise of two world wars - little had changed since Engels wrote *The Conditions of The Working Class In England*, in 1892. Contemporary British popular culture, too, is hobbled by a nearly-complete absence of serious intellectual, mass-circulation publications. Rather, it is driven by a familiar mix of sports, celebrity and a perpetual media uproar focused on scandal. The reasons, according to Leigh and Orwell, are clear. Class rule continues to degrade public discourse and marginalize serious criticism in an era when the very forces that create the heroic Vera Drakes of the world are again on the march. ■

Taking on ‘The Take’

Reviewed by Corvin Russell

In 2001, after a long period of intensive neoliberal restructuring of the Argentinean economy and state, Argentina entered a period of severe economic and political crisis. The state was no longer able to meet its external financial obligations. Pressure mounted as corporations and wealthy people, fearing a meltdown, exported capital. Government spending was further slashed, after a decade of severe cuts and wholesale privatization. Personal accounts were frozen. Middle and working class protesters thronged the streets along with existing movements of the poor and unemployed, forcing the resignation of President Fernando de la Rúa and his Economy Minister, Domingo Cavallo. Eventually, the peso was severely devalued, wiping out the peso-denominated savings of many Argentines. A succession of short-lived administrations followed. In the sequel to this crisis, the economy continued its sharp contraction, and many workplaces were closed.

This crisis, following on the dotcom bubble, 9/11, and worldwide anti-globalization protests, contributed to the rapid discrediting in Western media circles, and in many Western capitals, of extreme neoliberalism as an explicit ideology (as distinct from a social, political, and practical reality). It also offered lessons, both negative and positive, for the broad left. Avi Lewis and Naomi Klein have made a new movie that showcases one of the more inspirational stories to be found in the implosion of the “Argentinean miracle”: the story of the “*fabricas recuperadas*” or “occupied factories”, abandoned factories taken over, managed, and returned to productivity by their workers. *The Take* tells the story of one group of workers trying to reclaim the Forja auto parts factory as a worker-owned cooperative, after the owner has left it derelict.

Several things are impressive and important about the movie. First, there is the tremendous respect the filmmakers show their principal subjects, the working people taking over and running these factories. The workers are given time to tell their stories, are shown as having complex and contradictory feelings, and struggling with the difficulties of the experiment they are undertaking.

Secondly, the movie is important because it undercuts the myth of capitalist ideology everywhere that owner-bosses are essential to production. *The Take* does this with humour and the lightest of touches.

The film is also enjoyable as a human tale of trial and triumph, populated by well-chosen, likeable characters.

Finally, the movie gives hope to people, including people in North America who are without hope and deeply pessimistic about the possibility of alternative social arrangements, that things do not have to be the way they are.

But I fear that the film sets these hopes up to be disappointed by the reality that the occupied factories will face in the coming years. Without an understanding of the historical setting and the broader political context that makes sense of the challenges faced by the occupied factory movement, setbacks and defeats may be more demoralizing than they would be had we never had unrealistic hopes; and an understanding of the successes may be too flawed for us to learn from them. In this sense, I think the film sells itself short, and is even irresponsible.

There is next to no historical context provided, certainly not the context needed to draw appropriate political lessons from the movie. Avi Lewis, the film's director, attended the screening I saw, and owned up to the absence of any context. This didn't stop him from presenting the *fábricas recuperadas* as a

model or template that we could somehow import to Canada. Lewis talked about how vibrant the worker co-op movement was in Canada, and compared it to the occupied factory movement in Argentina. I work at a worker co-op and am fully supportive of the idea and the practice of worker co-ops, but I would not characterize the worker co-op sector here as a "movement", let alone as analogous to the *fábricas recuperadas* in any political sense.

To take the occupied factories as a template to be emulated in other countries, especially countries like Canada, one has to ignore the most salient facts about the Argentinean situation. To start with, there is a much deeper history of worker co-operatives in Argentina and Uruguay, much of it connected to the Communist Party, that the film never touches on. Many of the leaders of the co-operative movement were killed during the junta, but there is still a deep social experience of the cooperative economy in Ar-

gentina, and the occupied factories don't come out of a vacuum. Too, the political challenge of the *fábricas recuperadas* is qualitatively different from the worker co-op movement in Canada: in Argentina's recent crisis, workers challenged the basic right of private property of existing factory owners. Is he really suggesting that workers in Canada would be able to challenge the ownership of their factories under the prevailing conditions of social and political order? Even in the revolutionary context of Argentina presented in the film, the process of occupying factories depended on the largesse of politicians and the juridical apparatus of the state.

Second among the salient facts whose importance the film does not contend with: Argentina underwent a total economic collapse, with a lot of deep despair and a complete loss of legitimacy at the political level. How often has this happened in an "advanced" industrial economy in re-

cent times? It's far from obvious that things which happened in that context offer lessons that can be transferred to the far stabler context of Canada. More in tune with the Canadian situation are questions like this one from an audience member: "Where can we get start-up capital for a co-op?"

It's not that Lewis and his film-making partner Naomi Klein aren't aware of the



loss of legitimacy of the Argentinean political system. On the contrary, rhetorically, the film takes up the refrain of "que se vayan todos"—it underlines how "all the candidates are more or less the same" in the Argentinean presidential election, and how five of them are Peronists. The film's depiction of state politics is resigned, without an argument, that this is the *only* way state politics could be, that it must inevitably be so. The case of Venezuela, however problematic, certainly suggests otherwise. What the audience doesn't hear in the film is the specific historical reason for the absence of an organized, compelling political left in Argentina: during the junta, 30,000 leftists, community activists, and intellectuals were tortured and killed under the military dictatorship, wiping out generations of knowledge, experience, and leadership on the left. So when there was a total crisis of legitimacy in Argentina, there was no organized political force on the left to step →

into the vacuum. (In Marxist cant, there were the objective, but not the subjective, conditions of revolution.) Instead, the forces of neoliberalism have had a chance to consolidate their hold on the state because there was no credible organized challenge to them. It is an impoverished analysis that takes this as an affirmation of the strength of a new post-state leftist politics, and not the fundamental weakness of the Argentinean left in a moment of crisis.

Inadvertently, the film itself hammers this point in. What is striking is that the examples of occupation they show, while touted as “extra-state” action, in every case shown in the movie require sanction from the state, either the courts, or the legislature. (So if you want to occupy your factory here, what lesson does this suggest? How much luck will you have?) Furthermore, these sanctions are temporary and subject to review after two years in most cases. Meanwhile, as already mentioned, neoliberal forces have regrouped and consolidated their hold on the state and civil society. Has the number of occupations continued to grow or stagnate? What power really supports them? An uninformed audience watching *The Take* would be ill equipped to hazard an answer to these questions.

In their zeal to dismiss the old left in favour of a vision of vision of anarchistic, spontaneous direct democracy, Lewis and Klein don't spend much time examining the practice of democracy and power in the factories, nor the question of the relation of each factory to the economy as a whole. They also gloss over the question of the role of leadership and ideology in bringing about the occupations. It's quite obvious, and Lewis admitted it at the film screening, that one of the Forja leaders was already politicized. Is this typical? Would the Forja occupation have taken place without this leadership? And if we are about recognizing the value of work, is not the work of achieving political consciousness, which is the hard work of many years and many dangers, also work to be valued and not ignored, or held in contempt?

The rhetoric of the movie fits with Naomi Klein's political orientation: a distrust of government and the state; as a vector for progressive social change; a distrust of unitary ideologies, strategies, and movements; a distrust of structured relations of power and responsibility, which goes along with an uncritical attitude towards informal relations of power and responsibility; and a conception of “bottom-up” alternatives sprouting and somehow supplanting the established order of capitalism, chaotically and without any common political project or organization. But far from being the best argument for this conception of progressive politics, the example of Argentina in recent years is the clearest and best argument against it. The example of the fabricas recuperadas does nothing to challenge what the evidence suggests: that the notion of pockets of autonomy outside the state is illusory (as with the fabricas), unsustainable, or marginal and parasitical, in the absence of broader, more strategic political projects and collectivities.

The Dirt of Pretty Things in *Dirty Pretty Things*

Tanner Mirrlees

Dirty Pretty Things (2003), directed by Stephen Frears and written by Steven Knight, is a realist narrative of set in the cosmopolitan global city-scape of London in the period following Thatcher's neo-liberal re-structuring. The film explores the black-market traffic of human body parts and immigrant labor flows, examines the survival struggles of legal (and illegal) immigrant workers, and performs a subtle critique of class relations in the era of global capitalism. A brief synopsis follows. *Dirty Pretty Things'* protagonists are two illegal immigrant workers that share a romantic relationship. Okwe (Chiwetel Ejiofor) is a Nigerian ex-doctor that labors as a taxi-cab driver and as a desk clerk at the Baltic Hotel. Senay (Audrey Tautou) is a Turkish Muslim that labors as a chambermaid at the Baltic Hotel and as a machine operator in a garment sweatshop. After successfully dodging the British state's immigration officers with the help of Juliette (Sophie Okonedo) a black prostitute, Ivan (Zlatko Buric), a Russian bellhop, and Guo Yi (Benedict Wong), an over-skilled South Asian morgue attendant, Okwe and Senay reveal that Sneaky (Sergi Lopez), the manager of the Baltic Hotel, is exchanging fabricated citizenship passports with impoverished illegal immigrants for their kidneys. Sneaky's disgusting black market scheme of selling extracted immigrant kidneys to wealthy English consumers for a steep price is foiled by Okwe and Senay, who eventually gain two fabricated passports and then depart from London (and each other) toward uncertain and unpredictable futures.

On first glance, the film's title “*Dirty Pretty Things*” appears to be an oxymoron, the combination or alignment of contradictory terms. On closer examination of the film's narrative, however, the title's articulation of “dirty” to “pretty” to “things” actually works on a number of interesting semantic, thematic, and ideological levels which reveal and critique rather than conceal and naturalize the fetishistic and reified working conditions of global capitalism.

Fetishism and Reification at the Baltic Hotel

For Marx, social relations in capitalism are fetishistic and reified. Fetishistic, because the market's attribution of commodities and services with an exchange-value or price mystifies the value of labor and unequal so

cial relations inherent to the sphere of production; reified, because the market reduces all sensual, natural and human life to an exchange-value, to an object that can be sold, bought, and owned, thus making unequal relations between people appear as equal relations between things. In affluent 'postmodern' consumer societies such as North America and Western Europe, the bulk of the culture industry's advertisements, television programs, and media commodities conceal the unequal relations of production between people, construct "the good life" as one defined solely by over-consumption, and represent human freedom, politics, and cultural identity as an "effect" of consumer choice and market behavior. Unlike the representations of these media-commodities, that either naturalize the exploitative relations of exchange inherent to the sphere of production or mystify the reality of wage-labor and social classes, *DPT* is about the "dirty work" of waged-laborers, the "dirty" side of the global market, and the social class divisions that underlie (and facilitate) the production of all the world's spectacular "pretty things." This theme is encapsulated by the Baltic Hotel's customer service motto: "our guests leave dirty things, we make them pretty things." Indeed, behind the pretty façade of the Baltic hotel—its delectable chocolate truffles, its after-hours gourmet room service, its crustless white bread, its pristine rooms and clean white sheets—exist dirty labor-relations and dark and dirty secrets. Housemaids are scrutinized by immigration officers, sex workers are hired and beaten by wealthy white tourists, insomniac desk clerks fish devalued bloody organs out of flooding toilets while happy patrons dine, relax, and sleep. By concentrating on the "dirty" elements of hotel production and reproduction, the work process, and the class divisions between destitute workers and wealthy tourist-consumers, *DPS* de-fetishizes this reality. The film reveals the "dirty" side of service-labor that are typically concealed or mystified by the "pretty" world of commodity exchange, market pleasure, and pre-packaged leisure. The narrative's climax epitomizes the film's attempt to de-fetishize and reveal the dirt of capitalism's pretty things. Okwe, after being asked "how come I never see you people?" by a wealthy English consumer who expects to purchase a kidney from Sneaky, responds: "because we are the people you don't see. We drive your cabs, clean your rooms, and suck your cocks."

Unlike the wealthy consumers that prefer not to see and not to think about the "unfree" social relations of exchange which underlie and support their sexual, tourist, and commodity fantasies in global cities, *Dirty Pretty Things* concentrates on the reification of human beings as wage-laborers, the unfreedom of wage-labor work, and the reduction of humans to exchangeable objects that are circulated on (and consumed by) the capitalist market. Throughout the narrative, racialized and sexualized bodies (and body parts) are objectified as exchange-values and consumed by the market. Flows of chamber maids are objectified by the panoptic gaze of hotel surveillance cameras as they enter

the workspace. Immigrant children sweat it out for an Indian garment contractor in scenes that highlight the conflation of (what were traditionally distinguished as) "first world" and "third world" labor practices. The bodies of women are transformed into exchangeable sex-service commodities that are used, in Juliette's case, by any man that can pay, and in Senay's case, by Sneaky and the pig-like sweatshop owner to avoid being reported to immigration officers. *Dirty Pretty Things*' most graphic illustration of the market's transformation of humans into exchangeable objects occurs in scenes in which kidneys are extracted from immigrants, transformed into commodities, and put up for sale on the market. The reification and consumption of immigrant bodies (and body parts) by the capitalist market, which *Dirty Pretty Things* represents as one way by which each immigrant-worker survives and attains basics sustenance, covertly alludes, in allegorical form, to Marx's description of the capitalist market as a vampire: "the capitalist [market] devours the labour-power of the workers and appropriates their living labor as the life-blood of capitalism."



Agency and the Politics of Cultural Identity

Though *Dirty Pretty Things* represents the brutalization of immigrant laborers, it does not reduce its protagonist workers to passive victims, to pure ideological "effects" of dominant capitalist structures. Gou, reflecting on the mechanical and mind-numbing routine of mortuary production, states: "A kidney for \$10,000! For that some people take risks. If I had the courage, I would sell my kidney just to get out of here. Just to save my brain." Here, Gou's reflections on the active choice to mutilate and sell his body parts,—to become a body-merchant—though terrible and desperate, provides an alternative to the sale of his labor-power and alienating conditions of his work place. While Gou's reflection—and the kind of worker "agency" it implies—does not, in any fundamental and collectively efficacious way, challenge the alienating structures of production that he is fettered to, it de-stabilizes an interpretation of the film which construes the immigrant →

workers as only as passive objects and inactive victims. Hence, *Dirty Pretty Things* represents workers as *objects* that are conditioned, affected, and in many ways, entrapped by dire institutional and material structures, it also represents workers as active *subjects*, as agents that make choices, react against their oppressors, and struggle to transform and reproduce their situations and lives in different ways. In many moments, characters refuse to perform (and materially reproduce) specific kinds of labor, and by refusing to perform specific kinds of labor, they refuse to become (and ideologically reproduce) particular kinds of people. For example, by refusing to labor as Sneaky's black market butcher qua "doctor," Okwe not only sabotages the productive capacities and efficiency of Sneaky's operation, but also, refuses to become like Sneaky—a self-interested and individualized neo-liberal subject that capitalizes on the plight and tragedy of others, a subject that selfishly "wills to power" with no ethical or moral consideration of the wider consequences his actions. Likewise, by refusing to labor as the Indian sweatshop contractor's whore (by "biting" while performing oral sex), Senay not only interrupts the smooth reproduction of the capitalist sweatshop and its patriarchal production, but also, refuses to accept that that she is only a pure instrument or rationalized object of exchange. By refusing to heed the morally bankrupt and ethically perverse business ventures of self-interested middle managers, by struggling to preserve and demonstrate some degree of control over their individual bodies and minds, Okwe and Senay work together, within and against, the structures and institutions that seek to reduce them to machines.

In *Dirty Pretty Things*, cultural identity both limits and enables each character's agency and struggle. On first glance, ethno-cultural identities act as fetters on each character's mobility, as disciplinary and ideological constructions that contribute to each character's subordination and oppression. Okwe, for example, is an ex-doctor framed by the Nigerian state for murdering his wife; Okwe is on the run from state authorities and this ideological construction of his identity. Senay is a Muslim woman whose "god no longer speaks to her"; she seeks to escape the religious and sexual limitations of this historical construction of her identity. In the narrative's present temporality, Okwe and Senay's cultural identities—racialized, sexualized, and classed as inferior "others" by the dominant ideological structures of the British state and society—are not, as many multi-cultural scholars would contend, something to be redeemed and made functional to the evaporation of a variety of oppressions, marginalizations, and humiliations once they are socially recognized, acknowledged, and embraced for all of their "otherness" and de-centering "difference." On the contrary, the past and present-ness of Okwe and Senay's racialized, sexualized, and classed cultural identities are constituted by and constitutive of their social subordination; the social and governmental recognition of Okwe and Senay's cultural identities (as illegal immigrants) would not result in their liberation and acceptance, but rather, their

deportation, imprisonment, and in Okwe's case, execution. Okwe and Senay thus struggle against the constructions of their past and present cultural identities and seek to appropriate ideologically legitimate ones in the form of fabricated citizenship passports. Okwe and Senay's struggle for a new identity and their negotiation of the oppressive effects of the ones they inhabit is the underlying conflict that drives *Dirty Pretty Things*' narrative forward. Cultural identity is thus constitutive of each character's past and present subordination and oppression; it is *also* the condition of possibility that orients each character's struggle to build and move toward a different future.

Okwe and Senay's common struggle to survive,



and moments of identification between immigrant laborers in *Dirty Pretty Things*, is exemplary of forms of temporary solidarity and allegiance that both cut across and are definite products of ethno-cultural and sexual differences and similarities. Though DPT stages moments between characters which give credence to "the politics of ethno-cultural identity" and "ethno-cultural solidarity," the film avoids an essentializing, sentimentalizing and romanticizing view of the characters, which would imagine shared ethno-cultural identity as the *only* basis for solidarity and identification. Okwe, for example, refuses to remove the kidney of a Nigerian woman, despite her pleas and attempt to hail him as her Nigerian "brother." Rather than inhabiting the subject-position constituted by the female patient's discourse ("Nigerian brother") and performing the kidney-operation (an act which would imply that Okwe and the female pa-

tient's "common" ethno-cultural identity as Nigerians was the basis for their social and political solidarity), Okwe replies: "put on your clothes." By depicting the characters both identifying and dis-identifying with the ethno-cultural subject-positions that are constituted for them by the particular discourses of others, along with broader historical, geographical and material determinants, *Dirty Pretty Things* puts fourth a complicated and anti-essentialist interpretation of ethno-cultural identity and solidarity. At the same time, DPT, unlike some work in postmodern cultural studies, is careful not to envisage the simple presence of different ethno-cultural identities and different ethno-cultural meanings (ie. non-white, non-Anglophonic, non-heteronormative, etc.) as a sign of radical politics, "opposition," or revolutionary fervor. Actually, DPT's performs a subtle critique of the banality and political limitations of different cultural meanings. While sewing up the jacket of a dead South Asian in the hospital morgue, Guo Yi, as if to entertain himself during the alienating moments of late-night labor-time, dispassionately contemplates the multiple and cross cultural connotations and meanings of buttons as they circulate between and through different "cultural" (religious, national, ethnic, etc.) contexts. Here, the appreciation of different cultural meanings becomes a mode by which laborers cope with being alienated by their relation to production rather than acting as the catalyst for engaging them in a political struggle over their relation to work.

Class Solidarity Without Class Struggle

DPS intimates that the most meaningful form of solidarity between its worker-protagonists is not ethno-cultural, but economic. Throughout the film, immigrant workers empathize with each other's experience of selling labor-power and toiling in oppressive conditions; characters identify with each other, not because they are Nigerian or Muslim or Russian or Spanish, but because they are workers, members of a social class that share a similar work experience. Furthermore, it is in the sphere of work, of service-production, that the film's worker-protagonists interact, help each other out, and develop a silent consciousness of themselves as a social class. Okwe beats a John after he gets rough with his friend Juliette, a local prostitute. Guo allows Okwe to sleep in his office at the hospital morgue when he is deprived of shelter. Hospital workers allow Okwe to steal surgical supplies and medicine, so that he can save the life of a destitute Nigerian male who has been butchered by the kidney doctor, and also, so that he can treat taxi-cab drivers that are suffering with various STDs. When Senay returns to work, the plans of immigration officers to arrest her are foiled by Ivan, the bell hop, who stops her from entering the Baltic hotel's lobby; and as the immigration officers flash Senay's picture to the Baltic hotel's other maids, in hopes that they will recognize Senay and turn her in, they simply ignore the image. All of these moments in which workers "help each other out" to ensure their sur-

vival and basic reproduction, paint a picture of what Marx would call a working class-in-itself (meaning that workers are conscious of their similar objective relation to the structure of capitalism as exploited wage-laborers), but not a working class-for-itself (meaning that workers are conscious of their revolutionary 'interest' to transform their relation to the structure of capitalism). Hence, DPS represents moments of working class solidarity and identification that unfortunately don't add up to an organized working class



struggle. The workers are dis-organized.. Their struggle for basic sustenance trumps the struggle for freedom, which appears, by the end of the film, illusory —another spectacular product of the Hollywood culture industry. Okwe, trying to de-mystify Senay's indulgence in the "American Dream," her hopes to immigrate to America, where she imagines gaining new freedoms and opportunities once having attained a new passport, states: "For you and I, there is only survival. It is time you woke up from your stupid dream!"

Though DPS reveals certain elements of global capitalism that are typically concealed by the bulk of culture industry media commodities, the film is not politically tendentious or didactic. It does not offer imaginary resolutions to the class contradictions and conflicts its narrative represents. After all, DPS is just a consumable media-commodity, one that cultural critics such as I often rely on to cope with the contradictions and conflicts of are own predicaments. Though the culture industry may produce media-commodities whose narratives and texts point, in fantasy form, to the class contradictions and conflicts of global capitalism, we should not rely on it to pose solutions, to provide answers, and to transform these problems. These tasks are for socialists and socialist organizations. But if the culture industry and its symbolic producers wish to join us in this struggle by producing and distributing films like *Dirty Pretty Things*, in which the narrative contains an imaginary representation of the dire realities of wage-labor and fragmented social classes in the era of global capitalism to de-mystify liberal fantasies about the market, then we should welcome the popular consumption of these 'ideological' reflections. ■

For Steve Earle, 'The Revolution Starts Now'

Len Bush



"The most important presidential election of our lifetime was less than seven months away and we desperately wanted to weigh in, both as artists and citizens of a democracy."

Steve Earle, liner notes.

This is possibly Steve Earle's most overtly political CD to date. Hurriedly recorded and released, Earle's liner notes indicate that most songs on the album were written and recorded within 24 hours, so as to be released prior to the US election - and sometimes it shows. While the majority of songs are quite strong there a couple that should have probably been given a little more time to develop. Many will find the hook heavy anthems a bit over the top - though I tend to be a sucker for them. The album delivers enough musically to be considered very good.

As to whether it works politically is a far more interesting question. A good number of the songs focus on the war in Iraq which provides a lot of grist for his musical mill. Still, I wonder if, in the effort to help defeat Bush, he has avoided topics considered too hot by the Democrats. In particular, his songs in opposition to the death penalty are missing. On past releases these have tended to be his strongest and emotionally powerful offerings.

Earle is at his best when singing from the perspective of the poor, the working class, or the outsider. His songs about prison and the death penalty ring with an urgency that is lacking on many of the tracks of the 'The Revolution Starts... Now.' The song 'Home to Houston' is a notable exception. Perhaps one of Earle's best songs ever it tells the tale of an American trucker in Iraq who promises God to give up trucking if he can return to Houston alive - set to a great trucker tune.

"When I pulled out of Basra they all wished me luck / Just like they always did before / With a bulletproof screen on the hood of my truck / And a Bradley on my back door"

Still you can't simply put Earle in the 'vote Democrat and the world will be alright' camp. As he wrote in the liner notes, "the day after the election, regardless of the outcome, the war will go on, outsourcing of our jobs will continue, and over a third of our citizens will have no health care coverage whatsoever." Like many American activists, Earle sees beating Bush as an important struggle but hardly a panacea.

Earle, who has described himself as an American Marxist, has been emerging as one of the most interesting political artists in decades. Having performed shows at the FTAA protests in Miami, at anti-death penalty events and vigils, and, most recently, on the streets in New York during the street protests outside the Republican Convention, he is breathing new life into the musty old protest singer stereotype. Recently he has started hosting a Sunday night radio show on Air America (called 'The Revolution Starts Now' - www.airamericaradio.com/show_earle.asp).

"The revolution starts now / When you rise above your fear / And tear the walls around you down / The revolution starts here"

Two years ago he raised the ire of the American right wing and the Nashville radio establishment with his 'John Walker's Blues'. Written from the perspective of the American youth who went to fight with the Taliban he attempted to humanize someone that the US establishment was going out if its way to demonize (while using the case to target 'liberal' parents). The album was banned from some station's playlists and attacks on Earle in the press became commonplace. Earle, along with unlikely activists 'The Dixie Chicks', confronted the backlash head-on and were hence able to emerge even stronger artists and performers.

"I can say anything I wanna say / So fuck the FCC / Fuck the FBI / Fuck the CIA / Livin' in the motherfuckin' USA"

That the Nashville music establishment would go

after Earle, and that he could withstand the attack, demonstrates another way he differs from other political performers in the US - he has mainstream appeal. Similar to the group Spearhead, Earle performs in a musical genre that reaches out to a large number of radio listeners. Most political artists have established themselves in very narrow musical niches intended for, at best, a small market. This is music written about and for the working class and, in all likelihood, would set their toes-a-tapping - even if they disagreed with the lyrics.

"Now he's got a rifle in his hand / Rollin' into Baghdad wonder' how he got this far / Just another poor boy off to fight a rich man's war"

Despite the anti-war message none of the songs on this CD will spark as much controversy as the 'John Walker Lindh Blues'. This may be a positive thing. The themes explored on the CD come right out of the 6 o'clock news and may very well help many put the days headlines into context. To paraphrase Bruce Springsteen, some people

learn "more from a three minute record than we ever learned in school."

Musically he could be loosely tagged as a country rocker or, the more trendy, alt-country. There is enough jagged guitar work on this album to keep the most dedicated roots music devotee happy - and enough politics to make a lefty's heart pound along with the drums. And Earle's sense of humour shows in songs like 'Condi, Condi' and 'F the CC'. I can even imagine a few Republicans getting an illicit chuckle out of his lusty latin ballad to Condoleeza Rice.

"Sweet and dandy pretty as can be / You be the flower and I'll be the bumble bee / Oh she loves me oops she loves me not / People say you're cold but I think you're hot"

The Revolution Starts ...Now' is a good album with some rough edges. Steve Earle is an artist that will continue to make waves throughout the music industry and merits a good listen. ■



"Canada House", a new two-act play by J. Karol Korczynski, November 24th-28th, 2004, Theatre Passe Muraille Backspace, a production of The Canada House Cooperative

Directed by Graham Cozzubbo, featuring: Wendy Thatcher, Brian Marler, Daniel Kash

"Canada House" is first production of the newly-formed The Canada House Cooperative, an artistic workers' cooperative in Toronto. The cooperative's stated intention is to make 'dangerous theatre', and Canada House (the play) has the cooperative well on the way to reaching that goal.

This two-act play pulls no punches in its raw, booze, drug, and poverty-filled portrayal of Skid Row, Toronto.

Hanging over the events of the play, is a big strike at Dominion Fiberglass that had the dual effect of breaking the union, and forcing Dominion into bankruptcy. The three characters were all touched by that strike, and frequent the same run-down watering hole. Louis (Daniel Kash) the former head of the local, absconded with the strike fund, and has slipped into petty thievery to survive and feed his alcohol habit. Sally (Wendy Thatcher), is a former union activist who now supports herself as a phone sex worker for 'Karol's Kinky Kunts'. As fate would have it, one of her most faithful customers is Ray Bigwell, son of the former owner of Dominion Fiberglass a sunglasses-at-night-wearing and epitome of an evil conscienceless capitalist. Ray's favourite phone-sex fantasies are about 'pain and sadness', which he beats off to while partially asphyxiating himself with a plastic bag. →

Ray is trying to regain his family fortune as an up and coming member of the Social Market Foundation ('cheaper, faster, lesser') which is a cross between a secret society, the Rotary Club, and the mafia. He recruits his drinking buddy, Louis to help win the Foundation's "Time and Motion Award". Louis himself haunted by his memories of the assembly-line, sees the Foundation as his ticket to wealth. Their Award entry is the manufacture of methamthydamine by a kidnapped slave worker. After Ray's first slave dies, in a chemical accident, he enlists Louis to drug and kidnap Sally. Sally saves herself from a hopeless situation by burning off her hand in a phosphorous solution to escape her chains.

The second act picks up the story 11 years on. The economic crisis has reached the boiling point, with work and food riots, and a strict curfew enforced by a large security apparatus. Sally has become a begger, who earns pocket change by showing off her disfigured hand that she keeps in a shoebox. Ray's new Foundation project is 'social robotics', a way of producing the new working man: "Workers who will do what you want without question". His project, Louis, rejects his programming and regains his hu-



manity in time to refuse Ray's order to murder Sally. Ray now runs an ad-hoc crematorium in which he incinerates those workers he has murdered. Sally pluckily escapes death once again and after learning that Ray is her old phone sex customer, tells him the story of the union 'victory' at Dominion Fiberglass. Ray finds this story both so sad and arousing that he asphyxiates himself with the plastic bag. Sally has phone sexed him to death. The play ends with her sitting with Louis, with the revolution underway in the streets. Sally tells Louis and the audience that she, "Knows what folks can be".

The Production

The play for all its rawness is one of hope and determination. Sally never gives up the struggle of "sticking together to not be a slave", and this spirit keeps her alive.

Canada House is welcome in a theatre scene that often deals with poverty and oppression as sanitized versions as in the musical *Urinetown*.

The Backspace is particularly suited to the staging of this production. The space is very narrow, about 20 feet across, but with ceiling height of 25 feet, there is a sense of the characters being trapped in a pit. The set itself was Spartan; for most of the play consisting of a bar, a table, a few chairs and stools, and a karaoke booth. This minimalism suits both the subject matter and the slice of life that Korczynski and Cozzubbo stage. The lighting work was similarly appropriate; most of the time the stage was very dimly lit, punctured by a spotlight once and awhile.

Thatcher's performance as Sally deserves special mention. She brings her character alive, playing it so realistically that she succeeds in forging a crucial empathetic link with the audience. The writing and playing of the two male characters falls somewhat sort. We never really get a convincing view of what makes Kash's Louis tick, and Marler is cannot rescue Ray from what is nearly a caricatured two-dimensional antagonist. In fairness, Ray's character is meant to be a trope, manifesting capitalism in its most extreme form, and therefore is difficult to play.

Art as Social Commentary

Korczynski shows us a side of capitalism that is all too familiar to the underclass who are the most exposed to its brutality. Sally and Louis are best sited to know the true nature of the system. His choice of the underclass as political subject begs some questions: How do we go from extreme oppression to revolution? The predatory capitalism that Korczynski portrays is clearly ripe with social unrest, as well as possibilities for change. But where the playwright succeeds in painting Sally and Louis as victims, it is less clear is how they metamorphose into agents of change. At a time where the broad majority of the working class in Canada has not yet been immiserated, is the underclass where we place our hope for revolution?

As Sally and Louis have nothing to lose, the choice for revolution is an 'easy' one. How to convince those who feel that they have a stake in the system, without simply waiting for the dystopia Korczynski sketches to become generalized? I think most important for art that is to be dangerous, is that it help us make sense of the complexities of daily life, that the audience to relate to the play. Personally, I found it difficult to relate to the characters, and I suspect that others did too. In another two-act play, Arthur Miller's *The Death of a Salesman*, everyday life is the horror, and it is that everyday life that is also so recognizable to the audience. Art needs to help us pull back the veil and understand the world we live in, as well as how it needs to be changed. Canada House does the first part admirably, but the second less developed. That said, the play is an commendable first production for the collective. I can't wait for future productions. ××× (3 stars out of four) ■

Labour, the left and the crisis in Israel-Palestine

Sid Shniad

Israel and its Zionist sympathizers have created the myth that opposing their policies is tantamount to hatred of the Jewish people, that criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic. This charge is unsupportable.

In Israel/Palestine, one of the world's strongest militaries is using its unfettered power to occupy and oppress another people, in defiance of countless United Nations resolutions. Instead of addressing the concerns of those who criticize this behaviour, Israel and its defenders choose to label the country's critics as anti-Semites. (If the critics are Jews, they are deemed to be "self-haters.")

Progressives concerned with human rights violations generally, and those occurring in occupied Palestine in particular, cannot allow themselves to be silenced by these scurrilous charges. To distinguish between opposition to Israeli actions and anti-Semitism, it is necessary to take a brief look at anti-Semitism.

Western hatred of Jews dates to the earliest days of the Christian Church. That is when the establishment practice of channelling popular outrage against social and economic injustices into anti-Jewish attitudes and violence began. Later, in Eastern Europe and Russia, where anti-Semitism reached its pre-Hitlerian height, pogroms, organized and encouraged by reactionary governments and supported by Church establishments, became regular occurrences. This hostile atmosphere provided a major impetus for Jewish immigration to the United States and Canada in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The phrase anti-Semitism was coined in the late 19th century by German Jew-hater Wilhelm Marr. Marr transformed the linguistic term "Semite", which refers to a linguistic

group including Arabic and Hebrew, into a racial construct used to support the theory that Jews possess unattractive, even dangerous racial characteristics. His intention was to deny Jews' European heritage and to show that they constituted a threat to European Christian society.

The Nazi Holocaust was the ultimate manifestation of Marr's anti-Semitism. The effects were devastating, particularly the death and torment that Nazi persecution caused – not only to Jews, but to millions of others, including Gypsies and homosexuals, who were also slaughtered in death camps.

The trauma of the Holocaust has had an enormous effect on postwar society. Some Jews interpret it as a definitive refutation of the longstanding hope that they could escape persecution in societies where they were a minority of the population. Consequently, many Jews who originally had little interest in Zionism concluded that the Zionists were right – that Jews would always be at risk, and that pogroms and forced exile could start again unless they had access to refuge in a Jewish state.

I disagree with this view of the world. The threat of resurgent anti-Semitism cannot be adequately addressed via an unquestioning embrace of Israel as a haven for the world's Jews. Ironically, there are few places on earth today that are less safe for Jews than Israel, thanks to that country's mistreatment of the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza. Real security can only be achieved and sustained through vigilance and cooperation with allies who are determined to combat all forms of hatred and oppression, regardless of whether these are based on religion, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.

Defenders of Israel point to anti-Jewish sentiments in Arab and Muslim

societies to validate their treatment of Palestinians. While racism of any kind is intolerable, it is essential to note that anti-Jewish attitudes are not endemic to these societies. They have arisen in a specific context, when characterized by Israel's displacement of the Palestinian people, the occupation of their land, and relentless belligerence with respect to the other peoples of the Middle East.

An unfortunate fact is that the only exposure that many Arabs have to Jews is with reactionary Israeli political leaders, soldiers, settlers, and North American Zionists who voice racist and hawkish views with respect to Arabs while expressing unqualified support to Israel's actions. Those who are serious about addressing the issue of anti-Jewish attitudes in the Arab world must change the context in which those sentiments have arisen.

It is wrong to insist that opposition to the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, to the rejection of Palestinian refugees' claims resulting from conflicts dating back to 1948, or to Israeli laws that give Jews more rights than non-Jews, is rooted in antipathy toward Jews. To counteract the regressive reflex which characterizes all criticism of Israel as anti-Semitism, activists working for a future in which Palestinians and Israeli Jews can live together in mutual respect, peace and security, must take the fight against anti-Semitism out of the hands of those who exploit the issue in order to stifle debate about Israel's racist and oppressive policies. Furthermore, while confronting real anti-Semitism, progressives must simultaneously confront those who dishonour centuries of Jewish persecution by defending racist policies that are antithetical to the pursuit of justice for all victims of oppression and injustice.

Fortunately, the ranks of progressives who are →

promoting this approach are growing, both inside and outside Israel. Ilan Pappé, a senior lecturer of Political Science at Haifa University and the Academic Director of the Research Institute for Peace at Givat Haviva is one outstanding example. When he spoke at McGill University in 2003, Pappé delivered a lecture entitled “Israel, a State in Denial,” in which he shed light on contradictory interpretations of the events surrounding the birth of Israel in 1948.

In the process of fulfilling their dream, Zionist forces destroyed five hundred villages, eleven towns and forced 750,000 Palestinians from their own land. “In the collective Israeli Jewish memory,” says Pappé, “very few people remember or want to remember this less pleasant side of this story.”

While Israel’s media, educational, and political systems refer to the events of 1948 as the “Day Of Independence,” or the end of the 2000-year Jewish exile, they ignore the side of the story which involves the systematic uprooting of another people, the destruction of the local population, and the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. He explains that this history has been systematically erased from Israelis’ collective memory.

Israeli textbooks, media outlets, and politicians have replaced this history with a version that portrays the Jewish State in a highly selective, romantic light. It was not until the late 1980s, with the work of Israeli historians like Pappé and Benny Morris, that Israelis and the rest of the world began to hear the version of the story that has been told by Palestinians since 1948.

Pappé notes that Israelis are in denial about several crucial issues, including the events of 1948; the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip since 1967; the reasons for the Palestinian uprisings; the reality of Palestinians’ suffering; and Israel’s central role in contributing to that suffering. Pappé argues that house demolitions, expulsions and killings have, from the beginning, characterized the extremely brutal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. But he insists that denial of these

facts has so fundamentally distorted Israelis’ perceptions that many of them choose to see the occupation as an act of benevolence that is bringing enlightenment and progress to the Palestinian people.

In the second Palestinian uprising, beginning in October 2000, elicited a renewed, intensified denial among Israelis. Pappé explains that the occupation which existed between 1967 and 2000 was characterized by the collective abuse of Palestinians’ rights. The conditions faced by the Palestinian population have undergone a further, serious deterioration since October 2000.

Pappé makes the case that despite this human crisis, Israeli society is even less willing to face reality than it was in the 1967 to 2000 period. He argues that this state of denial generated the destructive consensus within Israeli society that brought Ariel Sharon to power and which was responsible for his re-election.



The final stage of denial, which dominates in Israel today, began with Israel’s military incursion into the West Bank in April 2002, designed to crush Palestinian resistance. He believes that this denial prevents Israelis from understanding that the Palestinian people have been living under constant curfews and closures and that they have suffered pervasive malnutrition since that date.

The mistreatment of Palestinians at the hands of Israeli soldiers, which has now become systematic, is exemplified by soldiers’ behaviour at military checkpoints. Pappé cites an incident at one of these checkpoints where an Israeli TV station crew filmed Israeli soldiers playing Russian Roulette – with Palestinians. When

this incident was aired on Israeli TV, the station received many letters of complaint – not about the soldiers’ outrageous behaviour, but because televising such behaviour would help the “enemy.”

Despite his bleak message, Pappé is ultimately an optimist. He draws hope from the fact that sources of information are accessible which provide an alternative to those which have traditionally dominated. Furthermore, he notes that while only five Israeli soldiers refused to serve in the Occupied Territories in October 2000, there are now more than 500.

He acknowledges that the protest movement within Israel is still very small. Nevertheless he concludes that if someone like him can abandon the prevailing state of denial, others can, as well. He stresses that progressive activists can help in this process by bringing reinforcement from the outside to empower forces within Israel that are opposed to the occupation and to exert economic, cultural and political pressure on the Israeli state.

Progressives, unionists and activists of every stripe have a responsibility to take up Pappé’s challenge by insisting that Israel be held to the same standards of law and morality as any other state. Only that approach can yield positive results for Israelis and Palestinians alike.

Trade unionists have a vital role to play in all this. The executives of the Canadian Labour Congress and the Vancouver and District Labour Council as well as the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the BC Government Employees’ Union and the Canadian Union of Postal Workers have all joined with unions in Britain and Europe to take a strong position on the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. Our task is to get this issue in front of other Canadian unions and ensure that these policies are backed up with organization and action. ■

Sid Shniad is a founding member of the Trade Union Committee for Justice in the Middle East (TUCJME). For further information about TUCJME, please contact tucjme@telus.net.

Labour in Venezuela Today

Marcella Maspero

This speech was given by Marcella Maspero, leader of the Union Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT) of Venezuela, in Toronto, November 28, 2004.

As a Venezuelan worker, it is an honour for me to be here with this group of Canadian workers, especially at this quite historic moment, when it's very important for us in Venezuela to have the understanding and solidarity of workers around the world. In my presentation this evening, I would like to talk a bit about the background, about how the union movement was before the government of President Chavez, the current political situation, and some of the political issues we were facing leading up to the birth of the U.N.T., and how things stand now.

The largest trade union central for many years in Venezuela was the Confederacion de Trabajadores de Venezuela, the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers, (CTV), and it fought many important battles, especially during the years of the dictatorship. Over the years, it started to lose credibility, however, because of positions it took, which were very pro-government and because of its many agreements with management and the government, which were reached behind the backs of the workers. The CTV saw the need to democratize itself and renew its credibility which led to an approved vote in 1995 undertaken by all rank-and-file members. This was agreed to at a convention and that was how I managed, in that last phase, to get onto the executive board of the CTV. But we were very disappointed when we joined the new executive to find out that the whole idea of democracy and renovation was not really going to materialize.

When we look at why the CTV began to lose credibility, in addition to all the agreements that were made behind the backs of workers with government

and business, there was also a sense of the privilege that those labour officials had, and especially those labour officials who were involved in some of the financial institutions that were supposed to be benefiting workers, such as the Workers' Bank. Lately that institution was the source of a major scandal and a number of the leaders, the members of the board of the Workers' Bank of Venezuela, had warrants out for their arrest and a lot of those financial institutions ended up not actually meeting the needs of rank and file workers although the people who sat on the boards of these financial institutions, supposedly represented workers. They actually were there to only line their own pockets.

For us, the democratization of the CTV did not happen as was planned and I can speak from my experience as a member of a private sector union. When we tried to form a group of people to make up a slate to run against the current leadership, we found out that the CTV was very powerful and many of the people who dared to form an opposition slate were either fired by their companies or brought up on charges by the union itself.

The political moment was one when the International Monetary Fund was wielding a big stick in Venezuela and our government was basically on its knees doing whatever the large international financial institutions wanted. I'm referring to the period of the last Presidency, the one before President Chavez. During that period, the CTV and the Federation of Chambers of Commerce, formed what they called a "tri-partite movement" with the government and this is one issue the International Labour Organization (ILO) talks a lot about a "tri-partism". We really reject their view of what trade unions should be doing in terms of forming agreements. What happened was, that the top leaders of our labour movement,

joined up with the Chamber of Commerce and the government, to hatch a plan to completely transform the social benefits and the whole regime of unemployment benefits and fringe benefits that workers had enjoyed. It was supposed to be based on improving benefits, based upon seniority and a living wage package, social security for everyone.

People had a lot of hopes during this period. But it didn't turn out that way at all and the failure of this so-called "agreement" to improve the lives of Venezuelans led to an even greater loss of credibility for the CTV and again there was a very low expectation on the part of workers that their union organization would do anything positive for them.

This led to the national elections in December, 1998, in which people felt betrayed by the traditional political parties; they felt betrayed by the government that was in power and workers in particular felt betrayed by the CTV. There was really a lack of credibility in all the major institutions of our country and it was at that moment people started listening to Hugo Chavez who was a candidate for the Presidency and who talked of building a better society. I actually believe people voted for Chavez without any direction from their trade unions about how to vote or any particular ideological orientation, but rather they were seeking solutions to their problems and what Chavez was promising at that point was to clean up the corrupt institutions, to bring in a new constitution and to change the way government operated.

When he assumed power, his first major programme was to set up a national constituent assembly to develop the new constitution. This was something that began in the middle of 1999 as a process which involved large numbers of people and the resulting →

constitution was a document that definitely did improve the social and labour rights of people. It was also a real switch from a kind of representative democracy as had been structured before, to something that we could now call participatory democracy. The new constitution included a number of clauses that were very new, such as a requirement for social oversight of all state agencies and a co-responsibility, which involved evaluation of all government policies by the people.

The trade union centrals and the political parties participated in the constituent assembly. The goal was to bring the top decision makers together, to reach some agreement about the legal instruments that would re-structure trade unions from that point forward, especially with respect to a legislative bill that was called "The Union Democratization Act". This Act had a number of elements, a number of which the ILO has complained about as being too "interventionist", but I would like to say that the very contentious measures that were in the union democratization bill, were written partially by the trade-unionists themselves. My organization participated in the writing of those rules and we felt that was the way we wanted to do it. One

of the important elements of this law was that unions would produce their financial statement, their accountability statements, and present them to a national body, where they would show where they got their money and where their money was going.

The people who had participated in this high-level discussion were the top leaders of the CTV. These were people who historically had enjoyed some of the highest level of privileges of anybody in Venezuela. Some of these trade-union leaders are richer than some business owners and the government

functionaries who had lined their own pockets. These are people not without their own financial interests. And this led to a lot of confusion.

However, the government implemented a rather large outreach programme. All the trade union centrals participated in the discussion about how the new law would be structured to ensure there would be trade union democracy, or at least a move towards a more democratic trade union movement and the top leaders were involved, although I was not, as I was an alternate at that point.

An agreement was reached to have a referendum on the unions. This pro-

vision that they made internally and not one that was imposed by the government. Rank-and-file votes took place in all the work-places; all the labour centrals were involved in them, except for two which did not participate.

After these agreements were accepted, all the unions had to run their elections and present their results to a national electoral council, which had the power of oversight over all the trade union votes in the country. Each union set up its own electoral council to internally oversee its own votes and to establish their own rules. The CTV unions participated in this, as did the General Confederation of Labour (CGT).



posal was also questioned by the ILO, because this was a referendum that was to be put not only to members of trade unions, but before all the Venezuelan people who would be able to vote on whether the trade unions should go through the democratization process and re-confirmation of their leaderships. After the CTV reached an agreement that this was the process they would undergo, they then got rid of all their current leaders and put in place some boards to go through this democratization process. This was not the way it was supposed to be, but it was a deci-

These union elections led to a renewal of leadership. All I can tell you is that there were some unions that had had the same secretary general for forty years. And they never had had local elections where the rank-and-file could vote, so this was a real democratizing process. There was participation, there was real participatory democracy and that process changed workers and of course the leaders of the federations did change during the process.

Sadly, the CTV then took an unfortunate route. Although they may have held elections wherever they had

a base, forty-eight percent of the reports of their election results were never filed with the national electoral council and this cast a shadow of doubt over the whole process about whether it had been fair and about who had actually won these elections. When they presented their slate of their new board of directors, the new executive of the CTV, President Chavez was put in a difficult position. He said, "I don't know if these people have won or didn't win. I can't sign off on this because you haven't presented the papers that you were supposed to present on completion of the elections." So there was a new leadership of the CTV; it was renewed in some way, but it didn't match what the election results had been and it wasn't done according to the rules that they themselves had agreed to and this led to more loss of credibility for the CTV.

At the same time there were organizations within the CTV, different currents within the CTV, that were very much in favour of deeper changes, more transformation of the way the labour movement operated in our country. I, for instance, participated as a member of an organization called the Bolivarian Labour Forces, we were members of the CTV, and before the elections within the CTV, we had major discussions about whether we should participate in these elections. Many of us felt it was good to challenge from within and it was good to carry out a fight that would cause an internal debate. We felt we should go forward with this and if it would change the CTV from inside, it would avoid further fracturing of the labour movement, which we felt would be very good. We had four labour centrals at the time, of which the CTV was the largest. The activists believed in working inside the CTV.

Around this time, the National Assembly was discussing forty-nine pieces of enabling legislation that would really change the way government operated and we wanted to be part of that. For instance, one of the forty-nine pieces of legislation was the Fisheries Act that had special provisions for those inshore fishers who were casting nets close to the shore and it protected their

rights to have a livelihood.

Another one was the land-reform act that was commonly and erroneously known, although it was not, as an "appropriation act", something of which internationally we have been accused. We have a country where there are a lot of people who are hungry and there is a lot of land that is not being farmed. And the purpose of the Land Act was to ensure that any land that was not in use and could be farmed, would be farmed. And the land that was not in use could be turned over to peasants so that they would farm the land and develop food security for our country.

There was a lot of social context in these pieces of legislation. There was a micro-financing law for example; there was also a law on the public service. There were some things about the Act when it was first presented with which we didn't agree. We had a big debate about it; changes were made to it and we were much more satisfied with the resulting legislation. However, the CTV on the other hand, took the position that this was the exactly wrong direction for the country to go in and together with the Federation of the Chambers of Commerce, called a strike in December of 2001. I don't know, but this may be the only strike in the world where the people showed up for work, were sent home and were paid their salary to be on strike against their companies.

Things started to really heat up in the streets. There was a lot of opposition from those people who had the most privilege to the fact that we had land reform and poor people had access to credit. A lot of people, who traditionally held positions of privilege, didn't like the way things were turning out. And in 2002, these people who didn't like the new direction of the government, got together and led a coup against President Chavez. This was also a work stoppage. Many of the presidents of the various trade union federations, in the electrical sector, in the oil sector, in the public sector and private sector unions, were against the work stoppage that led up to the coup. We could see that the only purpose of it

was to overthrow President Chavez. There were no worker demands behind this work stoppage at all, it was really just meant to paralyze the country and throw the President out.

This time when the work stopped, nobody got paid. But what did happen was that President Chavez was thrown out of office and for forty-eight hours he was not able to govern the country. The people came out on the streets in a massive way without any particular programme except that we wanted our president back. With one stroke of the pen, the interim government wiped out the new constitution and all the very important changes that we had worked so hard for and had built a consensus around, the idea of having the people's involvement in determining policy. This was a big mobilizing issue during the forty-eight hours when the interim government took over from President Chavez. The representative national assembly and even the Supreme Court were wiped out by these people, so when President Chavez came back, some people thought there should be some very hard measures taken against those people who plotted the coup. But what happened instead, was that President Chavez called for a round table and a national dialogue.

I was fortunate to be one of the workers' representatives at that national table. There were four worker representatives. I was still with the CTV at that time and there were representatives from a number of sectors, including the media, university workers, business leaders; the whole purpose was to develop some kind of consensus. This round table dialogue didn't last very long, but when it looked like it was moving towards a consensus that was very progressive, some of the reactionary people who had been involved in this dialogue, started to pull out. Why did they pull out of the process? Because these were the people with privileges who thought that their privileges would be taken away or certainly not guaranteed.

We formed a team internally in the CTV to have a dialogue with our rank-and-file, with small companies →

and with the government, to talk about how to make the country work better, how to make things more productive. For instance we took part in a discussion around an industrial strategy for the auto sector and we arrived at an agreement between the unions and the business sectors. It was an industrial policy which balanced the need to have jobs with the need to have productivity and to put in place a policy to make sure that our auto assembly plants would stay in the country, and they have, to this day, been able to generate not just bigger sales of automobiles, but also more jobs.

We were lucky that President Chavez was interested in convening the round tables. We had some large meetings, for instance, at the Ford plant and the President actually signed on as a guarantor of the agreement on our Auto Pact that was also signed by the Ministers. It was very important to us that the President was close to these discussions in the various industrial sectors, which also took place in the textile and electrical sectors. At this time, the state electrical company seemed to be on the verge of a major privatization and that well-known strategy was being used where they try to run down the state-owned company, to make it look really inefficient and claim that it is not working and then turn it over to private hands. When we brought this to the attention of President Chavez, he became the number one opponent of privatization and he said so in all his speeches and he said that he would not only oppose privatization, but he also proposed co-management with the workers to make sure that the state-run electrical company would operate efficiently.

Obviously, the CTV's open role in the coup, led to a lot of friction within the labour movement and in September of 2002, a national meeting of work-

ers took place, lasting two days, in which we put forward the proposal for the organizing of a new trade union central, the UNT. We invited President Chavez to attend. We had a long list of demands we wanted him to hear. That was our founding meeting, December, 2002, which also coincided with the next attack on the Chavez government, a work stoppage and sabotage that began in December and continued to February of 2003. This time our Federations acted from a class perspective and from a worker's perspective and we went right to the plant gates and stood at the gates and we said, "Open these

were able to restart the operations at PVDSA.

During that disruption, people sometimes had to line up for twenty-four hours to get gas. This was even true for the state owned trucking companies that were bringing important supplies into the cities from around the country. But the people really pitched in to help, people would share food or whatever they had. We wanted to have our country back.

People outside have said about Venezuela that there is no freedom of expression, that the press is being coerced, that people have no right to information, but I can tell you that over the seventy days of the strike, the President of the CTV and the Federation of the Chambers of Commerce were on the air ten hours a day giving their war reports every five minutes about how well the strike was going and what was happening in this or that place and "to hold on, people of Venezuela, we will win. Keep those stores closed; keep those businesses closed!" And you know, they never ever said it was over. Even when it was over, they never admitted that it was over. And their strike had a huge damaging impact upon the economy of the country.

You may have heard about the 18,000 workers who took their complaints to the ILO about how they were fired. Well, these weren't just 18,000 ordinary workers. They were the managers. They're the ones who sat across the table from us in collective bargaining, but they were also members of the union. They were the ones who were actively sabotaging the oil company; you don't hear much about the 100,000 people who those same managers fired and who can't get their back-pay nor get their jobs back.

So at this point during this chaos in the country, a lot of trade-unionists



gates; these workers want to work!" And again, it was a work stoppage called by the Chambers of Commerce and the corrupt leadership of the CTV; with no workers' demands whatsoever. Its only purpose was to get rid of President Chavez.

The major target of this work stoppage was the PVDSA, the national petroleum company, the largest in the country, and we said, and the labour movement said it generally, workers want to work and it was the workers — and many of you may know this from the reports — it was the workers who

were asking: “why should we stay in the CTV?” We then formed the UNT which has a much more horizontal structure. We registered our leadership with the Ministry of Labour, even with some incomplete by-laws, but we are still building on them. But it did allow us to begin to concentrate our struggle. We have had a good start, our principles are laid out, we have our ethics and an analysis of the situation. We have formed twenty-four regional bodies of the UNT. We represent all the major sectors, the private sector, the electrical, the petroleum, construction sectors and the public sector, in health and a number of other sectors. Some of these unions have come straight over from the CTV to the UNT and others are new unions in the process of being formed now.

Outside our country, some people claim the UNT doesn't really exist and doesn't negotiate contracts. The fact is we have been negotiating on behalf of workers. We have been at the bargaining table in almost all the important sectors. The UNT has developed a position on autonomy; we believe we have to be autonomous of government, even though many of our positions are in favour of the government.

We support the process to create a Venezuela that has social justice, and that has also a participatory approach, but we need to be free of any forces upon us that would distort our responsibility of representing workers and meeting their needs. It doesn't mean that we never protest; we go out all the time on mobilizations and demonstrations against particular government officials who we feel are not doing what they should. It is our right as a trade union to exercise that tool.

We have also opposed some of the measures that have been put forward such as “work flexibility” and privati-

zation in the public sector. We also oppose the rule of the IMF over our country and also those policies that favour imports over the re-development of our domestic industry. We were very, very active in the referendum process that culminated in August. As trade unionists, we felt that was a struggle that did have a worker's agenda. So we were there, not just in favour of the government, but in favour of the kind of transformation that this government promises to make for workers and is making every day, such as a job security law and increased wages, both of which were opposed by the CTV and the Chambers of Commerce.



The new job security law that we did get, over the protests of the CTV, is not a full guarantee of employment for everyone, for ever and ever, but it makes sure that workers will not be punished when they displease their bosses. It will not be so easy for them to be punished for their politics.

The other thing that our government has done is to foster co-management; I mentioned the exciting example of the electrical sector. In that case, two union leaders were named to the co-management of the electricity system and they have successfully fought off privatization. Similar things are happening in the area of culture.

We have seen, not just an increase in the minimum wage, but also an in-

crease in the social wage and the government has established a number of parallel programmes that ensures access to health and education. Over eighteen million Venezuelans have benefited from programmes which are known as the “missions”, which include getting food at low cost. We think that these are measures that help workers. They are pro-worker measures. They help build a society where there are jobs and it helps to reduce the gap between those rich people who seem to be getting ever and ever richer and the poor people who seem to be getting ever and ever poorer. These processes are more participatory. We believe we need to see less polariza-

tion and movement away from an approach of confrontation to an approach of appreciating what everyone can contribute to the process.

In conclusion, I would like to express my thanks to all the organizations that have come together to organize this event, especially Sheila Katz and Steve Benedict from the Canadian Labour Congress who recently visited us in Venezuela and got a chance to understand what we are going through. And now they know who we are and that we are struggling on behalf of workers.

We will be holding a constitutional meeting in February of 2005 which will let all our members decide on the structure of our new UNT. We had to postpone the meeting for a while because it was not convenient for some workers. Before we vote for the UNT we wanted to make sure that everyone had a voice in the structure and constitutional by-laws of the new organization. So again, the workers will decide and we need all of your organizations, both internationally and in our country, to help us we can learn from each other and also to make sure that the unions have support. Thank you very much. ■

The Call of Caracas

Greg Albo



The Left today confronts several hard realities about the political terrain that has unfolded over the last two decades: the neoliberal project that the New Right put forward in the early 1980s is not simply fading from the political or economic scenes under the weight of its internal contradictions; the social and income polarisation that has devastated the working classes and peasantries the world over has now an embedded logic that is integral to world accumulation; the organizations of the Left – particularly trade unions and socialist parties – are either at an impasse or in disarray; and the ruling classes across a complex of social formations and states keeps laying the organizational framework of the world market in a way that reinforces neoliberalism and the relations of domination of imperialism rather than challenging them. This is a sobering accounting.

It puts into perspective the commonly-expressed declaration of the social movements that ‘another world is possible’. Of course, many worlds are possible. A neoliberal world was often – and still is – declared to be impossible, although it is very much a reality. But, what kind of world with what kinds of social relations and forms of government is possible today? What organizational forms will propel a socialist project forward? Why has the ‘politics of chaos’ put forward by more than one sage of the anti-globalization movement disappeared as quickly as it appeared? How will political and state power be struggled over as opposed to only being resisted? These pressing questions have been put to the side over the last decade as a politics of spontaneity has swept across what remains of the Left (paralleled

by recitals of deepening radicalism and impending crisis of neoliberalism from quarters of the Left that should know better).

The Caracas Encounter in Defence of Humanity on 1-4 of December 2004 placed these issues squarely on the table. With over 350 delegates from 52 countries, such hard questions were being addressed across ten working tables, ranging from alternatives to liberal trade integration, to popular participation to struggles over the media and mass communication and global inequality. The contributors ranged widely from Left intellectuals such as Tariq Ali, Marta Harnecker, Saul Landau, Ernesto Cardenal, prominent academics such as Atilio Boron, James Petras and Mike Lebowitz, and political leaders, notably the FSLN leadership of Nicaragua and key figures from Cuba such as Ricardo Alarcon. Amidst all the chaos that is Venezuela today in the midst of a transformative project (the ‘Bolivarian’ government of Hugo Chavez has gained a portion of the state and political power, but has by no means yet gained control of the state administration or dislodged the capitalist class), there was overwhelming enthusiasm and energy, except from a few not yet willing to face the consolidation of neoliberalism and that the Left now needs to explore new organizational forms. The conference worked through two days of discussions at the tables, interspersed with visits to the social missions and new co-operatives that the Venezuelan government has launched, cultural events and rousing anti-imperialist speeches from Chavez (including a jaw-dropping 6 hour open question period with all the delegates – in contrast to the 30 minute scripted press conferences that

Bush and Martin give us in North America). The Nobel peace prize winner from Argentina, Adolfo Perez Esquivel, read the final Caracas Declaration, which argues for a global front of resistance to neoliberalism and imperialism, and in particular the unilateralism of the United States and the global economic institutions that have doggedly implemented neoliberalism around the world. Who can imagine another place in the world and another political leader today that would have supported such a gathering?

The informal mandate of the Encounter, however, entailed a great deal more than the formal signing of intellectuals and artists a declaration of their outrage at neoliberalism. At a global level, the agenda of the Chavez government has been to piece together a grouping of countries against American hegemony and neoliberalism. This is necessarily a messy business of often dealing with the devil that is the inter-state system and the structures of power at the global level. It has involved both the Venezuelan efforts to bolster OPEC and their diplomatic missions to a scattering of countries such as Iran, Russian, China, and India (not all of which has been well-calibrated by the Venezuelans for the Lefts struggling in these regions). It also includes efforts to re-spark Latin American solidarity networks across Europe and North America after their virtual disintegration through the 1990s. More proximately the encounter was a public statement of a Cuban-Venezuelan political pole in Latin American politics against American imperialism and, with hardly a word being said, a challenge to the Centre-Left governments of the southern cone on the political accommodation to

neoliberalism. This could be seen as an effort to reform a revolutionary tendency across Latin America, albeit with none of the markings of the singular centre of the years of armed struggle, which would be the real mark of the resurgence of the Latin American Left. But this last point may be reading far too much into what remains a very fluid set of forces in an unfor-giving political conjuncture.

The Encounter also placed on the table more immediate challenges. This was clear in the centre-place debate in the final plenary reviewing the Declaration. Would the global social justice movement and the social forum process organizationally move beyond holding annual social justice fairs and build new organizations capable of leading and linking struggles? This pitted – although not uniformly or dog-matically – Cuban and Venezuelan delegates against Ignacio Ramonet and Bernard Cassen of *Le Monde Diplomatique* and key figures behind the World Social Forum. But even the latter two conceded that the processes such as the WSF were at an impasse and some deeper organizational develop-ments were necessary (especially with the relationship of the Workers Party in Brazil to these processes be-coming more unclear by the day).

Chavez proposed to fund a per-manent structure to keep building such a ‘network of networks’ and to push for national organizations and agree-ments for action. Can the Bolivarian revolution Chavez is leading move from forming Bolivarian Circles of defence and support to building wider national organizations of political strug-gle against neoliberalism linked across the international state system? As Chavez closed his remarks to the En-counter, “Let’s put the ideas concluded at this forum to work, let’s make it a reality.” This seems to meld precisely with the challenges the Left can no longer avoid in Canada. ■



Reflections on the Referendum in Venezuela

The Presidential recall referendum in August of 2004 in Venezuela and the chal-lenges posed by neoliberalism for the government of Hugo Chavez were the topics of the evening in a well-attended public meeting at the Ottawa Public Library at the end of October. The evening began with a showing of Marta Harnecker’s most recent video on Venezuela. The video is a vivid dissection of the political and social divisions in Venezuela, the events leading up the Presi-dential referendum and some of the anti-poverty policies that the Chavez gov-ernment has pursued. Nicolas Lopez of the Toronto Bolivarian Circles outlined the political forces that have come together across Venezuela to push for radical social transformation, and some of the obstacles they have confronted. Greg Albo of York University recounted his experiences as one of the official Interna-tional Observers for the referendum, and some of the challenges that he felt would confront further democratization processes from entrenched ruling classes in Venezuela and US efforts to discredit the government. The meeting was sponsored by the Ottawa Socialist Project. Many meetings have been organized across the country by a wide number of groups helping build a new anti-imperi-alist Latin American solidarity network. ■

If you are interested in further information on the struggles in Venezuela, please contact us at socialistproject@hotmail.com.



Few scholars have contributed as much to the analysis of socialist politics and resistance in Africa, and few Canadians have added as much to solidarity work in support of the liberation of Southern Africa (through the Toronto Com-mittee for the Liberation of South Africa and the magazine *Southern Africa Report*), than John Saul. The above-titled conference at York University in Oc-tober of 2004 was the occasion to celebrate these contributions and a career working in pursuit of socialism, democracy and scholar-activism. The two days of discussion brought together some of the most important names in contem-porary socialist thought and the study of African politics – Pablo Idahosa, Giovanni Arrighi, Ato Sekyi-Out, Trevor Ngwane, Colin Leys, Leo Panitch, Himani Bannerji and many others. The discussions ranged widely over the present de-velopment impasse in Africa, and the many new forms and movements of resist-ance that have been springing up. The lines of debate pivoted around the ques-tion of how the next phase of Africa’s struggle for liberation might be inter-preted and supported. John Saul would, of course, have it no other way: looking toward a future of new possibilities, alliances, political breakthroughs. The in-tersections in the conference represented much of what needs to be reconstructed on the Left – conceptual questions linked to current struggles, open debate about how to confront neoliberalism, and connecting the Canadian Left to anti-impe-rialist struggles. ■

THE MEXICAN LEFT
AND THE CRISIS:

FROM CHIAPAS TO
MEXICO CITY

WEDNESDAY
FEBRUARY 9
7:30 PM

LOCATION TBA



WHOSE VIOLENCE?

The State and The Left

A Socialist Project public forum with

Leo Panitch
and
Govind Rao

Wednesday January 19, 7:00 pm
Victory Café, 581 Markham Street