

# Socialist Worker

FOR WORKERS CONTROL AND INTERNATIONAL SOCIALISM

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## PAY REVOLT HITS SCHOOLS

THE TEACHERS deserve the enthusiastic support of all working people. One of the most damning indictments of capitalist society is the crude exploitation of the dedication of such groups as teachers and nurses. Remember, the teachers are fighting not just for more pay (and they deserve to win: after three years' training, a teacher takes home £13 a week) but for smaller classes, more schools, more teachers and the restoration of the government's cut-backs in education. While almost half the 5-11 year old children in Britain are in classes of 36 or more, thousands of teachers are being declared redundant by local authorities because the Labour government (the party with 'soul') has reduced education grants.

The teachers are part of the trade union movement. They are not a group apart, 'professional' people who are above strike action, as Harold Wilson's sister has claimed. (She is a headmistress who, significantly, is scabbing on the strike.) Like other groups of workers, teachers have learnt that only militant action can win pay increases from the bosses' government. They are fighting for the future of YOUR children. Support them today and every day of strike action. Send messages from trade union branches and places of work. Invite them to speak to your labour organisations. Solidarity will inspire them. Their fight is your fight, too.

### The grass-roots upsurge

by Duncan Hallas President Wandsworth Teachers Association

THURSDAY'S STRIKE by London teachers will close practically all the capital's schools apart from a small number of grammar schools. The National Union of Teachers, with some 12,000 members in the area and the National Association of Schoolmasters with about 2000, are both backing the strike officially.

It will be the biggest of the token strikes by teachers to take place this month. The executives of both unions are preparing to call out selected schools in various parts of the country for 14 days from 1 December in support of the claim for a £135 interim pay award on the basic scale.

The NUT executive meets this Friday (21 November) to pick the strike schools and there will be the usual battle between left and right, with the right trying to restrict the campaign to merely symbolic proportions.

Action is taking place before negotiation with the employers has broken down. The situation is unprecedented.

The grass-roots pressure that has driven the usually ultra-cautious executive of the NUT into such an apparently militant position is due to the absolute decline in the real value of teachers' pay. Teachers today are substantially worse off, in real terms, than they were two and a half years ago.

The salary award which operated from April represented a 6.1 per cent increase on the basic scale over the 1967 award. The rise in the cost of living for that period, according to official figures, was 10.5 per cent. And, of course, the example of the dustmen and the firemen has had its effect on the rank and file teachers.

All this has enabled Left-wing militants to exert a much greater influence on union policy. In fact, the militants find themselves in the unusual position of having the executive outbid them in militancy, in words at any rate.

Of course there is a catch. It is called the Remuneration of Teachers Act. This remarkable piece of legislation provides that, in event of a breakdown in salary negotiations, compulsory arbitration follows. There are three arbitrators, one nominated by the unions, one by the employers and a chairman

nominated by the real employer, the Department of Education and Science. The decision is binding on the unions but not on the Secretary of State. He can alter an arbitrated settlement to suit the Treasury and this was done in 1963.

This is why the right-wing majority on the NUT executive have allowed themselves to go as far as they have. They know very well that in December a breakdown will be declared on the Burnham Committee (the negotiating body) and that compulsory arbitration will follow.

Then they will turn round and say 'We have made our protest. Now our hands are tied. You can't fight the law'. And it has to be added that, on past form, the 'lefts' will content themselves with verbal protests and will not carry a serious fight among the membership.

It is a very significant fact and one that has not been reported to the members, that the executive meeting on 10 November rejected by a large majority a motion to call a Special Conference before 31 December. The point is that at such a conference, militant local associations will try to commit the union to refuse to nominate an arbitrator or to present arguments to the arbitrators and to continue with a campaign of prolonged strikes. The executive committee knows that given the feeling in the union, such proposals stand a very good chance of being carried. They are trying to delay calling a conference until after the issue is decided.

#### Radical transformation

Everyone who has been active in the union over the years recognises that there has been a radical transformation in the consciousness of the ranks. This time there is a hard core of militants who have no illusions and some influence. For the first time ever there is growing unity between NUT and NAS militants at 'shop-floor' level.

One thing is certain. The campaign has proved to teachers that militancy pays. In the spring the executive assured the membership that not another penny could be obtained from the employers. Fortunately they were voted down and the mere threat of action produced an offer of £50. This offer is sure to be increased before the final breakdown.

This is decisive for the long-term outcome. The illusions that were harboured by many teachers that genteel, 'professional' attitudes made them in some ways superior to other workers are on the way out.

This radicalisation gives the promise of important successes for militants in the years ahead.



### Victory to the NLF!

March for defeat of US imperialism in Vietnam.

Sunday 23 November Hyde Park 1.30pm to  
Trafalgar Square via US Embassy and Downing St

### Rugby violence in Swansea

APPALLING VIOLENCE came to Swansea last Saturday when police and rugby vigilantes acted so viciously against Anti-Apartheid demonstrators at the Springboks' match that a government enquiry was ordered. The crowd of students, trade unionists and townspeople was a militant one, shouting 'Paint 'em black and send 'em back', 'Jack-in-the-Boks' and 'Swansea Shame'.

It was impossible to say how fighting broke out, but what is certain is that the 1000 police and the rugby fans who pitched in with them acted like hired thugs against a crowd that had no protection from their brutality. The Deputy Chief Constable punched a girl in the face and said it served her right for being on the demonstration. People were invited out of the crush by the police and then dropped in the path of rugby fans arriving for the match, with predictably violent results.

Girls were weeping with shock and anger at what they saw. The only reason we weren't trampled by police horses was because the road was too narrow. Thirty people were taken to hospital and more than 200 injured.

When 100 or so demonstrators bravely rushed on to the pitch just after half time, the brutality of police and grinning vigilantes was even worse. People were kicked, punched time and time again then pulled by the hair and thrown over the railings. Police were dumping demonstrators into clumps of vigilantes, saying 'Who wants this one?' A demonstrator had a spike rammed

in his chest.

After this bloodbath 67 people were held in the Guildhall for hours and eventually charged, most of them with assault or threatening behaviour! The press, who swooped on the violence like vultures, hardly bothered to report the injuries to the crowd and onlookers until an enquiry was ordered and concentrated instead on the 'stabbing' of a policeman who was later said to be not stabbed and not even seriously hurt. In fact he was injured with a wooden banner, probably because of the force with which the police rammed into the crowd.

We are treated this brutally when we demonstrate against one of the most repressive regimes in the world, one headed by ex-Nazis and operating with utter savagery against the mass of its people. Some of the policemen said they agreed with Anti-Apartheid but must carry out their orders. We would remind them that many Nazis, including Adolf Eichmann, argued the same way.

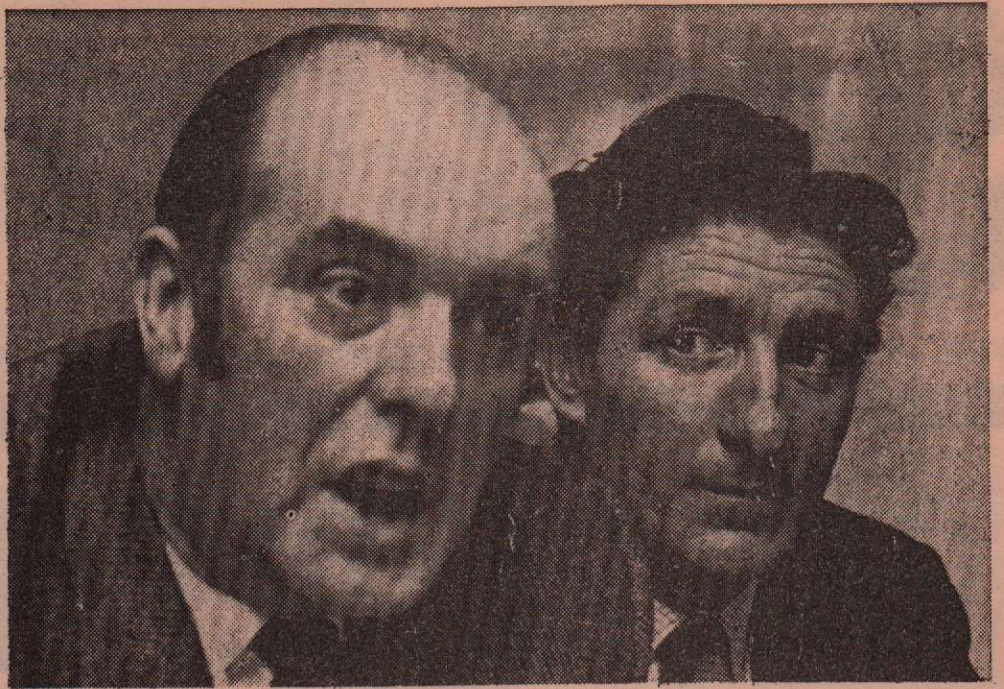
There comes a time when you must either say 'No' to what is the law of the land or lose your humanity. Demonstrate to stop the tour. Send this white South African team back to their racist fatherland knowing just how disgusted we are by their acquiescence in apartheid and the authorities that protect them here.

THIS SATURDAY: demonstrate at Twickenham against the Springboks. Assemble 1.30 pm Twickenham station, match starts 3 pm.

### Christmas Cards

STORMING OF THE WINTER PALACE  
'SANTA' KARL MARX/Lenin (1970  
anniversary card) 1s (inc envelope) each  
or 10s a doz. Cash with orders to  
Socialist Worker, 6 Cottons Gardens,  
London E2.

# EETU: the union where the militants have to wear masks...



Cannon (left, but only in the picture) with Mark Young, EETU man at Ford

## by an electrician

WITH the elimination of rank and file control over the employment of full-time officials, the selection of trustees and the executive's domination of the appeals committee, the leadership of the Electricians' and Plumbers' Union (EETU/PTU) has succeeded in reasserting its absolute control after the setbacks to its authority at the delegate conference earlier in the year.

The Isle of Man conference — the first one held by the new amalgamated union — saw the plumbers' section resolutely rejecting the rules revisions proposed by the executive. With the support of the old ETU left wing, all the proposals were rejected.

The Les Cannon leadership immediately announced that it would ignore the conference decisions and hold a postal ballot of the membership. Free from collective discussion and decision, a majority of the members who voted in the ballot gave Cannon and co the power to appoint officials and trustees instead of electing them by the rank and file.

Members who are now expelled by the executive can appeal to an appeals committee made up of the executive minus the president and secretary!

In its conference statement on In Place of Strife the executive said, 'It is the function of trade unions

in society to check the abuses of management powers and it is essential to retain the complete independence of workers' organisations' (my emphasis).

Contrast this with the real situation in the contracting industry where the executive's policy of integration with the bosses has been carried to its logical conclusion. Following the executive's acceptance of the Joint Industry Board agreements, electrical contracting is now run by a joint board of seven employers and seven 'trade unionists'.

## BLACKED

The board has the power to fine workers for 'unconstitutional action' — any action against the bosses' interests — and has a policy of blacking militants. Because of their union's intervention, some electricians have been unable to obtain work for the last two years.

In the union at present all criticisms must be anonymous or the executive withdraws the card and thus the livelihood of the critic. Demonstrators have been forced to wear hoods before going to their headquarters to lobby their representatives and militant shop stewards have had their credentials withdrawn for the flimsiest of reasons. The very clause in the rule book designed to protect the union against blacklegs is being used as a weapon to expel militants.

The EETU/PTU is held up by the ruling class and

**Cannonpride**

**A JIB PRODUCT**

GRADED SPARKS MAKE FINER PROFITS

publicised through the mass media as a 'model' union. While the bosses peddle productivity deals and their philosophy of speed-up and redundancy, their collaborators in the Labour government redouble their efforts to shackle the unions.

One thing is certain: In Place of Strife need never have been written if all the unions were like the EETU/PTU. The sooner all trade unions are like the EETU/PTU the happier the bosses will be. In fact to help this process along they are willing — as in the case of the JIB — to agree to substantial pay rises if the unions will voluntarily step into the chains and 'sell' the hard-earned conditions

of work that are the heritage of a hundred years of struggle.

A pay rise now in return for the men sacrificing the ability to fight for a pay rise in the future is seen by the bosses as a good investment.

All supports of this newspaper will agree that the only way of 'maintaining a working class independence' is to have a revolutionary leadership in the unions.

But this can only be achieved through a long, hard struggle around a consistent proletarian programme. As yet the seeds of this struggle have not even been planted in the EETU/PTU.

The existing underground opposition in the union is a small, amorphous, Communist Party dominated group calling itself the Joint Action Committee. But its lack of influence is not due only to the CP's deplorable record in the union.

It has no will to fight for a real change. Its only programme is to 'smash the right' and it sees the solution to the vast problems as being merely a change in personnel.

It is the looseness of the JAC, the fact that it has nothing new to offer the membership, that restricts its influence. The struggle to provide an alternative to Cannon and a different conception of the union can only be carried through by consistent and co-ordinated intervention around a clear programme for the union.

**TASK**  
Given the tradition of militancy in the ETU that even Cannon has been unable to destroy, the urgent task now is to democratise the union. The main content of any programme for the EETU/PTU must necessarily be a 'bill of rights' for the membership.

The JAC and all socialists inside the union must demand:  
The return of area committees.

The election of all officials and trustees.

That the executive be mandated by conference policy decisions.

That shop stewards' credentials can only be withdrawn by the members who elected them.

That no political group be barred from office.

That all delegates (and not just the executive) have the right to bring amend-

ments to rule before any conference.

That no delegate can be barred from industrial conferences, which must be held regularly and be mandatory on the executive.

That a full discussion, with all views fairly represented, be instituted on the concept of the union as an independent working-class organisation and on whether it should be a craft, industrial or general union.

That whenever the whole of a union shop takes strike action, official recognition will be granted and that all officials are elected subject to the members' right of recall.

**ISSUES**  
Of course, any programme will have to go beyond this bill of rights. An anti-bureaucratic stand is not sufficient.

There are many issues on which socialists must take a stand in the union. We must have a position to put on the questions of organisation of youth in the union, the relationship of the union to the Labour Party, the role of the union press and propaganda and many other points which are being raised by the rank and file members.

It is important that we do not oppose the right-wing leaders with a similar left grouping. The growing opposition must be organised around a programme which ensures that the union will be controlled by the politically conscious workers and not bureaucrats of a different shade.

Finally, if we are to have a perspective of change in the EETU/PTU we must look at the proposed amalgamation with the General and Municipal Workers Union.

Clearly the matter is still in the balance, but with the Labour government giving Cannon the enthusiastic

support that it usually reserves for people like Weinstock and mergers in other fields, we should not be surprised to find ourselves members of a reactionary general union in the near future.

This new union combine would have several obvious advantages for the ruling class. Not only would more than a million workers be consigned to the forced passivity of the 'model' union, but a right wing block vote bigger than the AEF's would make its welcome appearance at conferences.

A secondary advantage for the employers would be the ease with which they could carry through labour rationalisation in the supply industry.

The virtual certainty of this merger poses major questions for socialists in the union. Should the Left continue an internal fight or should the struggle be to build a new union on a democratic basis—a struggle that would get support not only from the many militants who are already raising the idea but also from a large block of quite backward, craft-minded members.

**STRATEGY**  
There can be no immediate answer to this question of strategy. There are still too many unknown factors. Most socialists would be unwilling to give up the fight in a million-strong union for the backwaters of independent unionism.

It is possible that the merger will have a radicalising effect on the GMWU membership or bring a change in personnel which would assist our struggle. On the other hand, it is conceivable that a strengthened and entrenched bureaucracy would leave us no alternative but to start again.

Either way, our immediate task is to build a strong base within the EETU/PTU so that in the future we can pose a real alternative to Cannon and the 'model' union.

# Socialist Worker

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CAPITALISM has nothing to offer mankind but exploitation, crises and war. The ruling classes of the world—a tiny minority—subordinate the needs of the vast majority to the blind accumulation of capital in the interests of competitive survival.

Imperialism, condemnstwo-thirds of mankind to famine and calls forth movements of national liberation which shake the system and expose its essential barbarism. The constant and mounting preparations for war and the development of weapons of mass destruction place the survival of humanity itself in the balance.

The increasing intensity of international competition between ever-larger units drives the ruling classes to new attacks on workers' living standards and conditions of work, to anti-trade union and anti-strike laws. All of these show capitalism in deepening crises from which it can only hope to escape at the cost of the working class and by the destruction of all its independent organisations.

The only alternative is workers' power — the democratic collective control of the working class over industry and society through a

# WHERE WE STAND

state of workers' councils and workers' control of production.

Only thus can the transition be ensured to a communist society in which the unprecedented productive forces thrown up by capitalism can be used to assure an economy of abundance. Only the working class, itself the product of capitalism, has the ability to transform society in this way, and has shown its ability to do so in a series of revolutionary struggles unprecedented in the history of all previous exploited classes.

The working class gains the experience necessary to revolutionise society by constant struggle against the

ruling class through the mass organisations thrown up in the course of that struggle.

To overcome the unevenness with which this experience is gained, to draw and preserve the lessons of past struggles and transmit them for the future, to fight against the pressure of bourgeois ideas in the working class, and to bond the fragmentary struggles against capitalism into a conscious and coherent offensive, a revolutionary Marxist party of socialist militants is required, embracing the vanguard of the working class.

The struggle to build such a party is only part of the wider struggle to create a World Revolutionary Socialist International, independent of all oppressors and exploiters of the working class, whether bureaucratic or bourgeois.

International Socialists therefore fight for:

Opposition to all ruling-class policies and organisations.

Workers' control over production and a workers' state.

Opposition to imperialism and support for all movements of national liberation.

Uncompromising opposition to all forms of racialism and to all migration controls.

# International Socialism 40

The American working class

Italy in crisis

Early history of the British Communist Party 'Orthodox Trotskyism': Socialist Labour League

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# VIETNAM

by Stephen Marks

THE WAR in Vietnam continues. But in recent months an easy but false impression has gained ground that all is over bar some admittedly murderous shouting.

The papers have given heavy coverage to reports of American troop withdrawals. Few have noticed or have been told how many of these were regiments due for withdrawal in any case at the end of their term of duty, or how many were halting half-way at the convenient staging point of Okinawa.

True, the papers have been filled with reports of the massive demonstrations in the United States itself for the withdrawal of the troops. But the support these demonstrations received from sections of the US establishment, including senators and congressmen, encouraged some to the easy view that the war was all but over.

Few of these respectable gentlemen could have supported the demonstration's official demand to withdraw American troops immediately. Nor had any of them taken any steps to stop the war even within the limits of the official parliamentary game, such as voting against funds for the war or, perish the thought, impeaching the President. But none of this stopped them from jumping on the bandwagon of the growing movement against the war.

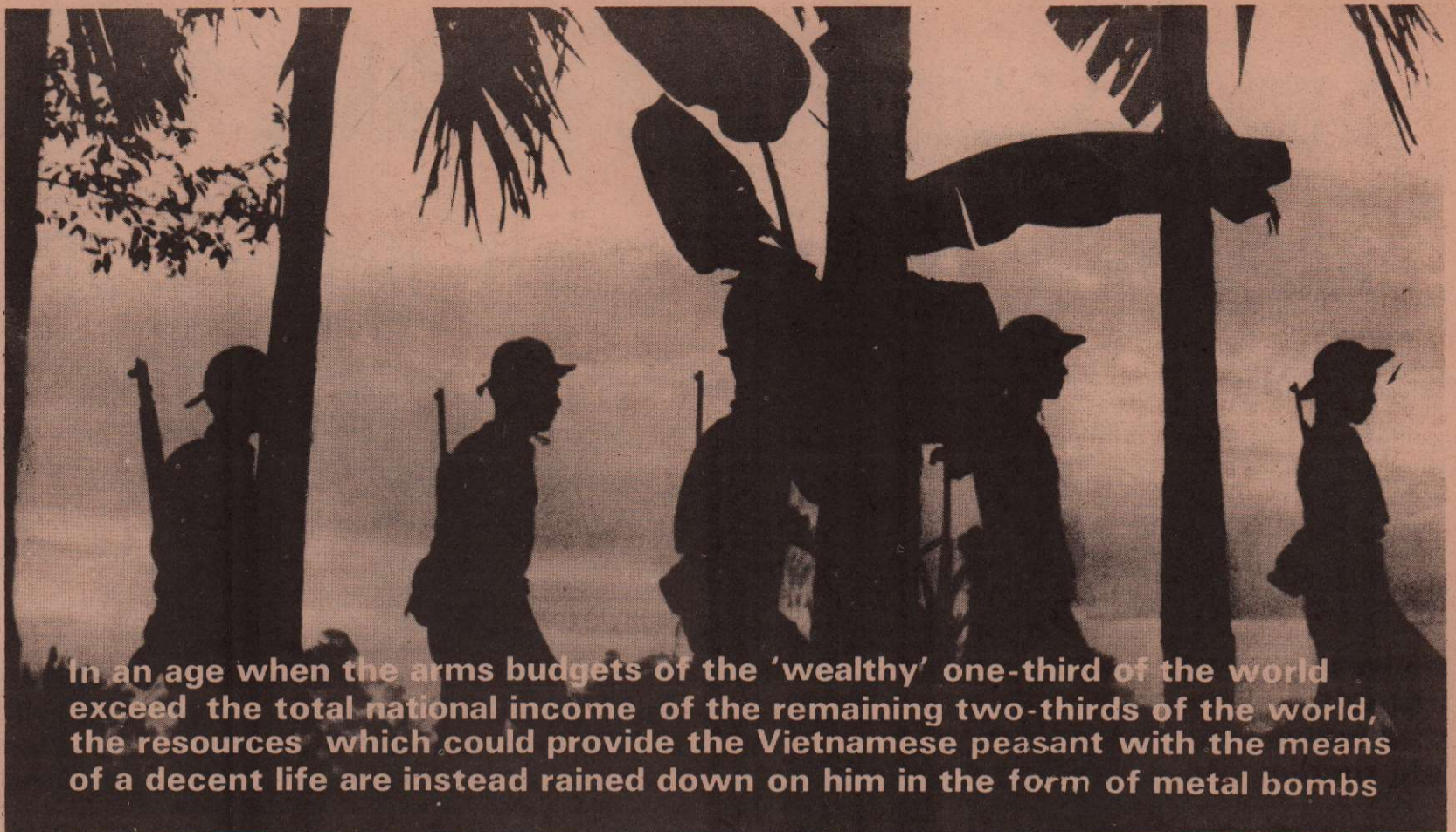
The growing chaos the war has produced within America itself, the black rebellion and the campus revolt, increase the pressure on America's rulers to try and find a way out.

## Real situation

But even without Nixon's latest speech and the disappointment it gave to the 'doves' in the American ruling class, a closer look at the real situation gives us reasons for rejecting this view. At the present rate of run-down, it will take until February 1972 before the number of US troops in Vietnam falls as low as 250,000 from its present total of more than 500,000, without counting the level of other troops such as Australians, Thais, South Koreans, etc.

The US government's real motives seem political. Fifty thousand young men due to be drafted in November and December have had their call-up postponed and with General Westmoreland touring West European countries to examine all-volunteer armies, the probability is that the Americans have merely shifted their strategy to one of reducing call-up and casualties to what they hope will be a politically 'safe' level by reducing the number of troops and going over to a 'defensive' strategy.

Not that this 'defensive' posture will lead to any let-up in the obscenity of the war: of the bombing of the South which is currently running at a level equal to two Hiroshimas a week; of the chemical poisoning of thousands of square miles



In an age when the arms budgets of the 'wealthy' one-third of the world exceed the total national income of the remaining two-thirds of the world, the resources which could provide the Vietnamese peasant with the means of a decent life are instead rained down on him in the form of metal bombs

which will remain uninhabitable and uncultivable for decades; and of the systematic destruction of whole villages with, at best, the resettlement of their people in concentration camps.

All this means is that the direct involvement of American ground troops in the fruitless effort to eradicate a force which can not be distinguished from the mass of the people themselves, is to be scaled down, lest the domestic repercussions get out of control. But the central objective of American imperialism in Vietnam will remain: to prevent anything that can be presented as the defeat of the most powerful country history has known, by a people it has made into one of the poorest.

In itself and in isolation Vietnam would not be essential or even important for American imperialism. What America is fighting against is the effect of a complete defeat in Vietnam on the stability of her world position. Not only would revolutionary forces everywhere feel heartened by such a victory, and not only would the forces of order feel weaker.

Aside from such factors of morale, it would become almost impossible politically for America's rulers to pretend on any future occasion that another such war could ever be engaged in with the slightest hope of victory. And the immediate economic effect within South East Asia would be considerable on American puppet regimes in such places as South Korea and Taiwan, which have undergone an unreal phantom boom on the strength of the economic 'fall out' of the war and the tremendous market it has created for various precarious mushroom-industries.

Though these stakes are high, some might argue that their consequence need not be to force America to pursue an impossible 'victory' in Vietnam, but rather to settle for a 'decorous' withdrawal that can be presented as something less than a complete rout. Even such an outcome as this would represent an immense and

obvious defeat; but in any case a 'respectable' way out cannot be found.

For a further contradiction in which the Americans are caught is that a prerequisite for withdrawing without loss of 'face' is a new 'government' in Saigon. But so scanty and unstable are the few corrupt hangers-on that America can find in South Vietnam, that any attempt to replace the present clique will almost certainly lead to a total collapse of the Southern



regime, which is precisely what America wishes to avoid at all costs.

Though in passing we might note that the pretence that the United States is in Vietnam at the invitation of a local 'government' received its final blow when, in response to a request from Senator Fulbright of the Senate's Foreign Relations' committee to see the document in which such a 'request' was made, a State Department official told the Washington Post that 'we could not find a specific document' and there was no 'formal diplomatic request' for the troops.

The war therefore will continue for the foreseeable future, until the strains it has produced have become even less bearable. It will continue to affect us all through its effects on the world monetary system and on the economic and social stability of the world's most powerful capitalist country.

The considerable military interests involved in the war are in any case those which have enabled America's economy to enjoy its generation of unprecedented boom, based on the massive diversion of otherwise unemployable resources to the production of arms and to the consequences of this spending on the rest of the economy not only directly but through its effect on the rate of technical innovation in the most advanced sectors of industry. The chickens of war-economy imperialism are coming home to roost.

In an age when the arms budgets of the 'wealthy' one-third of the world exceed the total national income of the remaining two-thirds of the world, the resources which could provide the Vietnamese peasant with the means of a decent life are instead rained down on him in the form of metal bombs, burning jelly and chemical death. His stubborn refusal to accept the verdict which this perversion of man's productive forces represents has called the whole seemingly unalterable set-up into question, and disrupted the 'stability' which was based upon the preparation of his destruction.

But this perversion-based stability affects the peasant of Vietnam in other ways than by confronting him with its murderous foundation. It has also muted the expression and stunted the development of the only alternative to capitalist barbarism on a world scale — the organised political strength of the working class.

Such a force was created out of the world's only successful workers' revolution in Russia in 1917 — the Communist International. When Russia's few and isolated workers lost power in the aftermath of the isolation of the revolution and their new bureaucratic rulers divided the world with Western imperialism at Yalta in 1945 the foundations were laid of the new burst of capitalist expansion whose products the Vietnamese are resisting and defeating

today. And this affected the course of their own revolution.

The Vietnamese are a peasant people. Traditionally organised in autonomous village communities, they have throughout their history shown a great ability to defend themselves and resist attacks from foreign invaders and from domestic tyrants. But their fragmented way of life has meant that like peasants anywhere, they could only be welded into a force capable of taking political power at a national level by some outside force.

In their almost continual history of struggle against Western imperialism, they were at first led by elements of the old mandarin class, who welded them together behind a programme of a return to old times. The defeat of these traditional movements at the turn of the century meant that the leadership could only be taken by one or other of the new classes created in the towns by French colonialism: either the new urban working class, or else, as the French deliberately prevented the growth of a native business class, by the new and growing lower-middle class of government functionaries, civil servants and others. Their interests were opposed to those of an imperialism which limited their future by preventing an independent growth of the national economy.

## Main basis

Under either leadership the peasants, with their unbelievable heroism and initiative, would form the main basis of the revolution, would have won national independence and would have carried through a rural revolution by abolishing landlordism and breaking up the big estates. But under the leadership of the workers the possibility would exist of going further, of establishing a revolutionary democracy based on workers' and poor peasants' councils and in devoting the main strength of the new regime to the spreading of the revolution to other countries, without which a poor country like Vietnam can find no lasting solution to its problems in a hostile capitalist world.

This was the course taken by the Russian workers and peasants in 1917. Unhappily the strength of Stalinism in Vietnam, in the last analysis a function of its world strength, ensured that the programme of the movement led by the Vietnamese Communist Party under Ho Chi Minh was quite different.

The programme of the Vietminh addressed itself to 'rich people, soldiers, peasants, workers, intellectuals, employees, traders, youth, women' — in other words to all those whose interests were opposed in any way to imperialism, and under the leadership not of the working class but of a party hierarchically organised from the top down and with a programme not

of world revolution but of the independent development of the Vietnamese economy in a still capitalist world — an aim that could only be achieved in the last analysis by a ruthless exploitation of the workers and peasants themselves.

Thus when in 1945 the Vietminh leaders believed that such a goal of an independent development of the Vietnamese economy could be obtained by compromise with France, they concluded an agreement with the French and allowed their troops to return to Vietnam. This followed their seizure of power in the vacuum of Japanese defeat, in which the Vietminh allied themselves with the parties of the local ruling class and suppressed the workers of Saigon when they tried to prevent the landing of allied troops.

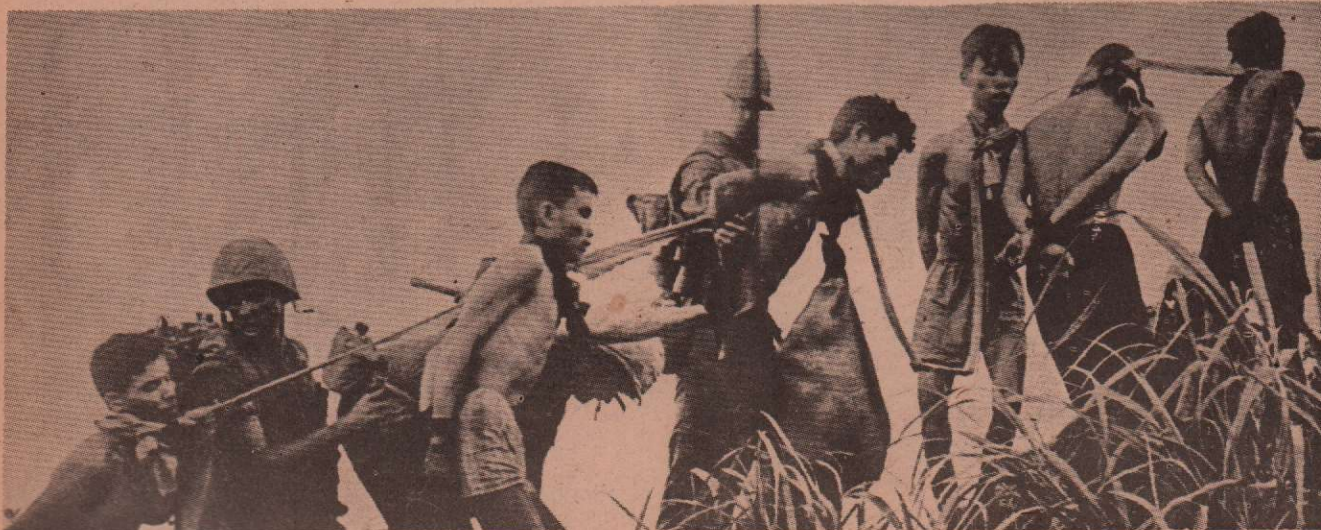
## Broke their word

At this time those, mainly the Vietnamese Trotskyists, who stood for a continuation of revolutionary struggle were denounced as 'fascists' and 'provocateurs' and ultimately murdered by the Vietminh leaders. Only when the French broke their word and attacked the Vietminh did the independence struggle begin, and only then did the Vietminh leaders resume the revolutionary mobilisation of the peasants.

This record, as well as the North Vietnamese ruthless suppression of the peasant revolt in 1956, shows us the uselessness of unfounded illusions in the nature of the Hanoi regime. It is not socialist but nationalist. The fact that an independent national development in the present era requires state ownership of property to be effective does not alter the radical difference in the nature of the state developed by a worker-led socialist revolution and that built by a petty-bourgeois nationalist regime such as that in Vietnam, or for that matter in China or Cuba.

The fact remains nonetheless that a victory for the Vietnamese people even under their present leadership would represent a great gain for revolutionaries everywhere. By defeating the biggest and most reactionary capitalist power in the world it will deal a blow at our common enemy and deter it from new repressions against popular movements elsewhere, whatever their character.

And for the peasants of Vietnam it will mean an end to landlordism and a removal of the oppressive burden of foreign exploitation. Why then raise the question of the nature of the Vietnamese leadership at the present time when all should be united against the common enemy? This ignores the fact that among the most important effects of the Vietnamese struggle has been the mobilisation through the anti-war move-



NLF prisoners chained like animals by American troops

# Social security: the workhouse has been abolished but its spirit lingers on...

by Jim Kincaid

AT THE BEGINNING of November the old age pension was raised by 10s to £5 a week for a single person. Married pensioners are now to get £8 2s a week between them.

In fact these are only paper increases that do little more than restore the purchasing power of the pension eroded by rising prices over the past two years.

In announcing these changes, the government made it clear that pensioners need look for no further pension increases for another two years. Mr Richard Crossman, the minister responsible, has recently been making a great many speeches about pensions but neither he nor any other member of the government has explained how old people are expected to manage on such a pitifully low income.

In fact since the present national insurance scheme was set up in 1948 there has not been a single official enquiry to establish whether income levels among the elderly are sufficient to allow an adequate diet or to heat a home properly. No survey has stated what necessities cannot be afforded on £5 a week.

## Poverty line

Anyone with an old age pension and no other income to live on is in fact below the government's official poverty line and would qualify for a supplementary allowance.

But contrary to what the readers of the Daily Express are encouraged to believe, the Supplementary Benefits Commission is not the 'last of the big spenders'. The single pensioner with no more than the basic £5 will get a supplementary pension that is only large enough to pay the rent and give him an extra 6s a week.

A married couple get even less: rent plus 5s a week (5s a week between them, not 5s each).

Last year, out of a total of seven million old people, nearly two million had to apply for supplementary pensions to bring their income up to the poverty line. Furthermore, recently published figures show that if the poverty line were only £2 a week higher (ie rent plus £7 6s a week for a single person) then three out of four of all pensioners in the country would qualify for supplementary assistance.

If the poverty line were only £1 a week higher, then four out of five of all widows over the age of 60 would be entitled to an income supplement, which is another way of saying that the vast majority of old people have to exist on incomes at the poverty line or only a shade above. Only a minute four per cent of old people have incomes that reach the average earnings of manual workers

in industry, currently £24 a week.

The Supplementary Benefits Commission is not the most friendly and approachable of official agencies. Recently, for example, the government has admitted that the average time people have to wait for attention in these offices is 2½ hours. The means tests used are not quite as ruthless as in the inter-war period but still the general assumption is that the applicant is a potential swindler until he can prove otherwise.

The applicant is liable to severe penalties, including imprisonment, for giving false information to the Ministry. But the Ministry is not penalised for mistakenly holding benefit.

Indeed, it is impossible for an applicant to know whether or not he has been given less than he is entitled to, since the detailed rules governing entitlement are not made public by the Ministry. The same Official Secrets Act which guards the nation's atomic secrets also applies to the rule book used by the Supplementary Benefits officers.

Even the number of people employed by the Commission is kept secret from the public. A good guess would put the figure as high as 25,000.

Nearly two million pensioners can only achieve a bare subsistence income by claiming supplementary benefit. This involves filling in complicated forms and being interviewed and means-tested by a category of civil servant allowed more freedom of individual decision than any comparable group in the public service.

An appeal can be made against a decision of the Ministry but only to a local tribunal meeting in secret and not to any national court. No individual cases concerning supplementary benefit can be raised in the law courts or in parliament. The government maintain the convenient fiction that no Minister of the Crown is directly responsible for the operations of the Commission.

## Formed a union

After 150 years of struggle, most employers in Britain have been forced to accept the right of workers to organise themselves and negotiate through representatives such as shop stewards or unions. But the Ministry of Social Security insists on dealing with each applicant as an isolated case.

Millions of people who are partly or wholly dependent on the social security system for an income because of old age, or handicap, or other incapacity for work, are refused any right to pool experiences or bargaining strength. So far as the Ministry of Social Security is concerned, an applicant does not negotiate — he gets told. The workhouse has long since been abolished but its spirit lingers on.



Recently in Birmingham a large group of people depending on social security have formed a union to help claimants secure their rights, not just to money that is desperately needed, but to a little respect as well. This is a welcome development, deserving the support and encouragement of every socialist. But a tough struggle lies ahead before there is an effective and powerful claimants' union covering the whole country.

Reports from Birmingham suggest that local social security officials are taking the same line as employers did in the 19th century when faced with the rise of workers' organisations — refusal to recognise the unions' right to exist and refusal to negotiate with the whole country.

For people above retirement age, the welfare state amounts to this: They qualify for a pension but this can be reduced if they continue to work and earn. The pension awarded on retirement is well below even the stringently-defined poverty line but to achieve a bare subsistence income two million old people must apply for supplementary benefit.

Most serious of all, and not surprisingly, there are also large numbers of old people who choose to stay away from the Poor Law atmosphere of supplementary benefits. Surveys suggest that something like 400,000 pensioners live below the poverty line because they are unwilling to apply to the Ministry or are unaware of their rights.

The inadequate living standards inflicted on the old go largely undiscussed

by the capitalist press. The impression created by the mass circulation newspapers is that the typical client on supplementary benefit is a man in good health who is too lazy to hold down a steady job.

The facts are very different. 70 per cent of all supplementary allowances go to old people, another 12 per cent to men who are sick or disabled, and nine per cent to fatherless families, mainly widows with young children.

## Vast majority

Only eight per cent of supplementary allowances go to men who are unemployed and research studies have shown that the vast majority of this group are elderly men, often handicapped and mainly living in areas of high unemployment where the jobs are hard to come by even for men in their prime.

Far too many people are taken in by the absurd theory that the living standards of millions of old people and widows can be improved by toughening up on benefits supposedly handed out to largely mythical scroungers. Last year the Ministry held a much-publicised drive to weed out the scroungers. Out of nearly three million applicants they managed to find only 88 cases in which legal proceedings were taken and prison sentences were obtained for only 17 men.

Given the pitiful living standards which are inflicted on millions of old people, the government's complacency is almost unbelievable. Legislation is being introduced in the present session of parliament to change the whole basis of

the existing state pension scheme.

When the new pattern comes into operation, people are to get a pension that will be higher or lower depending upon the level of their earnings throughout their working lives. The new system will have certain merits as well as a number of disadvantages over the present scheme. These will be analysed more fully in future articles.

What needs to be stressed again and again is that the new pension scheme offers absolutely nothing to existing pensioners. They are completely excluded from benefit under the new earnings-related principle. The basis of the proposed legislation is that a person will get a bigger pension than at present only to the extent that he has built up a bigger record of contributions.

Future generations of pensioners will have somewhat larger pensions simply because they will have paid more into the scheme. The new legislation represents a further move away from the welfare principles that people benefit to the extent that they are in need. What underlies the Crossman plan for social security is the capitalist principle that people should get only what they have paid for.

Under this strict logic, the existing generation of pensioners do not qualify. They have not handed over enough hard cash during

their working lives to justify any increase in the level of pensions currently being paid.

Mr Crossman has proclaimed his National Superannuation Bill as a revolution in welfare provision, a social advance equal in significance to the introduction of the Beveridge Scheme in 1948.

In socialist terms, Crossman's scheme is in fact a skilfully disguised retreat. Under the technical complexities, the earnings-related pension scheme marks a reversion to the principle that governs commercial insurance. A worker's pension will be determined not by the degree of his need in old age, nor by the contribution he has made to society by his skill and effort over the years. Only one sort of contribution will count, the amount of money which the government will take from him and from his employer week by week throughout his working life.

## What consolation?

The government claim is that an adequate pension will be paid when their scheme comes fully into operation in 1992. What consolation does this prospect offer to the present generation of old people, or to anyone else who cares about their fate?

And what political forces can be mobilised to force a change in the order of priorities dictating the policy of the present government?

# VIETNAM

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ment of hundreds of thousands of young people who have gone on to take up a position of opposition to the whole system that produces the war.

The future political development of this generation is of crucial importance to the future of the world socialist movement. Those who believe that the present leadership of the Vietnamese movement must inevitably turn against what is now its mass base have a duty to prevent the disillusion which this development will undoubtedly produce.

It is our duty to make plain that we support all movements against imperialism whatever their leadership or nature. Those who sow unfounded illusions about the nature of regimes with limited options in the name of 'not dividing the movement' can only weaken the revolutionary movement in the future in the same way that uncritical Stalinists did in the 1930s.

## British duplicity

If the war is to continue so must our opposition to it. The demonstration called for 23 November is an important opportunity to bring home to people in Britain that the war continues and so does our struggle against it. The emergence of a would-be 'dove' element within the American establishment will make it easier for the Labour government to cover up the facts of British duplicity by cheap and empty statements of support for 'men of good will' in Washington.

This makes our task all the more important. Of course mass demonstrations are not the only form that solidarity action can take. Our duty to be in solidarity with the Vietnamese is based on the fact of their continuing struggle, and does not therefore alter over time.

However to deduce from this that the form our action takes must be equally unchanging is as unreal as the opposite error on the Left, which is to assume that the best help we can give the Vietnamese is the revolution in Britain, no

special action on the Vietnam question is required, or is even a diversion.

As the survey conducted by New Society showed the vast majority of the 100,000 on last 27 October's VSC demonstration marched not only from solidarity with the Vietnamese but from a general opposition to capitalism.

It is the duty of revolutionary militants to point out the continuing relevance of solidarity action to a continuing war and to point out to those on the streets last October that if mass demonstrations are not an end in themselves they are still an essential part of an ongoing total strategy.

## Tide of protest

This can best be done not only by activity specifically related to the 23 November demonstration but also by raising the question of the demonstration, and of the important rising tide of protest in the USA.

That the numbers mobilised on the single issue of Vietnam will fluctuate with the apparent intensity of the crisis in that country as presented by the ruling class press is not surprising. If the perspectives of this article are correct, the future will see, if not more spectacular events on the lines of the Tet offensive, though this cannot be ruled out, then a continuing and deepening morass for American imperialism, in which the direct connection of Vietnam with the heart of the general crisis of the system will become more and more evident.

With the prospect of rising industrial struggle here at home, this must be the perspective of the solidarity movement in Britain. But since it is never enough to rely on the ruling class to make our connections for us, a massive turnout for the 23 November demonstration is the most immediately relevant way in which we can give expression to the intimate connection of the struggle of the people of Vietnam and the struggle of all those fighting for revolution throughout the world.

## BERT the socialist worker

by TJH

