

# RED RAG

## WHAT'S LEFT IN EXETER

### TO VOTE OR NOT TO VOTE?

#### GEOFF BARR REPLIES TO ARTICLES ON THE COMING ELECTION PRINTED IN RED RAG 1

Tim Price and Eddie Pitman have written two interesting but contrasting pieces on what to do about the election. Here are a few other thoughts.

In 1867 probably about 10% of the people had the right to vote. Riots by workers in London opened the way to a democratic franchise and it was downhill all the way. Tim tells me that voting is accepting the system, my family say that they wish it was all over. Everybody thinks I'm mad because I watch party political broadcasts. Surely the lords and ladies of the last century had it right. The poor shouldn't have to trouble themselves with all this politics business. Leave it to those who have the leisure and interest.

And yet I still worry. All that effort to get the vote for working men and then for women. Why did they bother?

I think that the answer is that our forebears wanted the vote so that they could control some of the big things in their lives. The Chartists in the 1830s and 1840s knew that democracy would benefit the working class.

So what has gone wrong? Well, the working class progressively gained the vote from 1867 and it constructed parties to ensure that its votes counted. Generations have put their energies into the Labour Party since 1906. Now we see Labour's relationship with the working class is similar to Asda's or Tesco's. Your market dictates your product to some degree at least. Appeals to the poor are necessary to win some sales (sorry I mean votes).

To some extent Tim Price is right to say that large scale youth abstention indicates a lack of confidence in bourgeois democracy. This rejection of the key mystifying device of capitalist rule fits ill with Tim's belief in the long-term future of capitalism.

This seems to point to abstention. But there is more to it than that. Firstly, Labour still includes (in spite of itself) many socialists. Their tongues are almost bitten through, but there are some left. Secondly, the institutional support of the unions matters - unions are the core of the British working class. Thirdly, despite the cynicism, elections do raise interest. Urgings to abstain seem to say to people that their interest in politics is not legitimate nor is it our concern - but it is. I suspect that calling for spoilt papers adds little of substance. Thus overall, abstention does not seem to be much of a policy.

Against this we have to say that to some extent time has passed the old left by. Calling for a vote for Labour on the assumption that it will expose them seems a bit odd. Lots of those engaged in radical campaigning don't need us to tell them that Labour is a reactionary Party. Labour plans no serious reforms just a few more cruel blows to working people on behalf of global capital. Eddie Pitman puts great store by the minimum wage. But it will probably be low; the Government will take very

little action to impose it; high unemployment will mean that lots of workers will work below the minimum. Don't kid yourself this is some socialist measure. Most developed capitalist states have a minimum wage and capital is not threatened. Eddie also tells us that Labour will release the money from council house sales. However, this will be done very gradually and will, at best, produce a small revival in the building industry - not quite the new Jerusalem. As to all these youth Eddie thinks will be offered jobs and hope - this is illusion. They will be offered cheap schemes. Blunkett's compulsion and threats will not be very different from Shepherd's. Eddie tells us about the great constitutional reforms. Probably very little will come of it, except some form of devolution for Scotland. Even then all they aim to do is to re-arrange the way that a capitalist state is run. These ideas are not designed to produce any increase in freedom - Jack Straw would make a fine successor to Michael Howard.

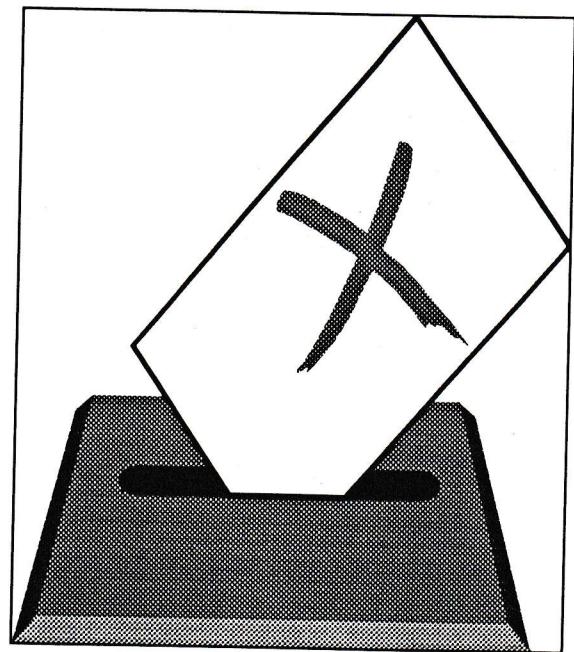
How do we resolve the matter? The prime point is that there is no socialist advance through parliamentary reform. As revolutionaries, whatever we say about tactics, we should keep this elementary proposition to the fore. Alongside this we have to do more than naively express our own feelings. Our revolutionary politics either live in the class or they are meaningless. Crucially we have to ask how our activity assists the growth of understanding of the need for a revolutionary transformation of society. Our peculiar difficulty is that for some workers a Labour Government is important. They still think that Labour aren't quite as bad as the Tories. The experience of Blair in office could help here. Against that, others (especially younger activists) know full well what Labour has to offer. Any appeal to vote Labour cuts us off from these activists.

The social revolution needs all parts of our class. There is no segment of the movement that can stand, in some way, for the whole class.

Clearly we cannot unify around a single strategy. Perhaps, in these circumstances, we should abandon hope for a systematic policy. Maybe we ought to say something like this: where serious candidates stand against Labour from the left we back them. Where there is no such candidate we urge a vote for Labour with the qualification that we expect only to get the Tories out and demonstrate that Labour are no

better. I am aware that such a policy seems to lack a guiding principle. It is messy and it could lead to an odd pattern of which candidates we support and whom we don't.

In my defence I can only say that our principle is that we utilise the election to promote our politics, whoever we say should be supported. Elections are important in politics and the negative idea of abstention has little to commend it unless elections are clearly rigged from the beginning. While elections are important they are not all-important.



Our overall activity in the class struggle is more important than whether we have the right answer on election day.

I have a feeling that someone is shouting: 'but how will you vote Geoff.' I must answer. I suspect that I will end up voting Labour. In part this is because I need to be counted against Adrian Rogers. However, for the first time in my life I don't feel sure that I will vote Labour. Maybe when the time comes either a better candidate will turn up or I

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SHOULD BE SENT TO:**

THE FLYING POST, PO BOX 185, EXETER, EX4 4EW

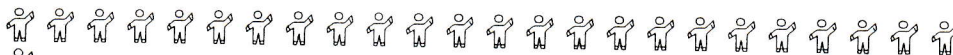
WE CAN BE CONTACTED HERE AS CAN;

EXETER CLAIMANTS - FIGHT THE JSA!

EXETER AFA - FIGHT THE FASCISTS!



Congratulations to the Fairmile protesters. Adrian Rodgers' comments about gassing or starving the tunnellers out have been taken down and will be used against him at a later date.



**SMALLS**

In **South Korea**, unions plan more strikes later in February if the government refuses to revoke vicious anti-union laws introduced in December.

In **Columbia** public sector workers have won concessions from the government after an eight day strike over pay and opposition to privatisation.

In **Niger** electricity workers brought much of the country to a halt with a two-day strike against government plans for privatisation.

In **Britain** a policeman blurted out that Microsoft Word documents are encrypted



with secret detection software which identifies the registered user or PC used.

Some web sites to check out for those with **internet** connections.

- [galt@sylum.cs.utah.edu](mailto:galt@sylum.cs.utah.edu)
- <http://www.junis.co.uk>
- <http://jefferson.village.Virginia.edu/~>



# EUROPE - A SUITABLE CASE FOR TREATMENT

By Richard Anthony.

After the nonsense in the last issue, perhaps we should discuss what will be the main event in the coming General Election - namely the European Union. This has been a virtual no-go area for left-wingers ever since the campaign in the Labour Party against joining the then EEC before the last referendum.

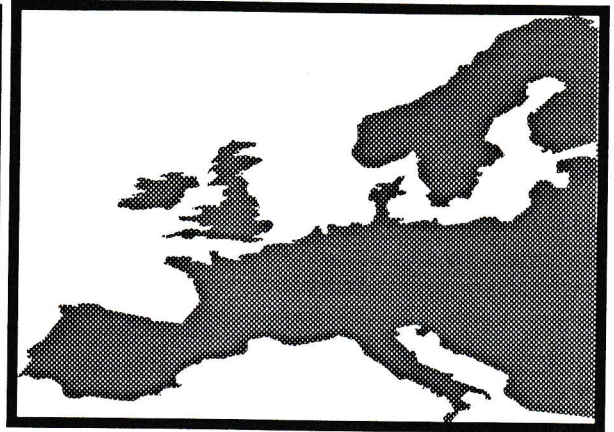
That campaign saw an unholy alliance of Trots, constitutionalists and nationalists coming together to fight off the monster from Brussels. As someone who has considered myself a European citizen since I was a language student, I was puzzled by this. Though I did allow myself to be won over to siding with my political allies against "the Europe of the capitalists", my heart wasn't in it.

Since then it has become obvious that this attitude, which few dared to contest then or since, was bullshit masquerading as ideology. The reality is that their resistance to Europe was based on ignorance, lack of analysis and a fear of losing "the reins of national power".

For the left in this country, the last is pathetic though sadly still common. The dream persists of a Labour government being forced onto a pre-revolutionary track by "real socialists". Marx and Engels could be forgiven for believing in this possibility, but their heirs don't have the excuse of inexperience. How can any future 'socialist government' take control of a state when the capital it wants to command can be removed virtually overnight by a small group of bankers and speculators with computers and satellite dishes? How can workers organise against them?

Capital has been trying to organise itself internationally and intercontinentally for over a century. Since 'free trade' and 'deregulation' have gained ascendancy once more, 'globalisation of capital' has gone into overdrive. The process is far from complete, but it's a lot further forward than any international labour movement to combat it.

Even given our normal insularity, the lack of any attempts to meet the capitalists on this new playing-field is astonishing. We've been in the EC for two decades and there's still no such thing, that I know



of, as transferable union membership for migrating workers, let alone anything resembling a European trade union.

For the benefit of those who may be aware of the existence of international trade federations, the two main groupings of these were firmly in the grip of the CIA and the KGB respectively from, at least, the end of WW2.

How the hell can the working class organise world-wide, if it can't even get its act together on this continent? We continue to be divided in our own countries, while the Labour Party and union leaders have shamelessly used nationalism to pit workers against each other across frontiers that mean nothing to their bosses.

There are two issues here. One is the refusal of the British Left to take membership of the European Union seriously. The other is a lack of discussion of what structures can help workers within a global economy - of which the EU is a major part.

The most obvious means workers have to hand are trade unions. Now, it's a widely-held belief in the UK that trade unions are finished. Here in the South West, it would be truer to say that they never really got started.

For all their obvious failings, unions are how working people defend themselves against the bosses. Unions have also been crucial in the fight to create the liberal democracies on which our current standards of living and human rights are based. Lousy as these may be, we're better off with

than without them at this time.

Neither is it any good dismissing unions as 'reformist'. If there's one lesson of the last 80 years, it's that without reformist structures as a starting point there's little chance of any socialist revolution succeeding.

Meanwhile reformists look to the European Parliament and the European Court to protect our interests against a resurgence of 'free' capitalism. This shows their ignorance, when it's only workers' power, as expressed through industrial strength, which makes those legal safeguards possible.

I'm not saying that unions will necessarily save us, but it's too soon to write them off. Look at their militancy and strength in newly industrialised parts of the planet. Even those in France, Italy, Germany and elsewhere are proving hard to crush, despite feeling the same pressure their British counterparts did under Thatcher. The left here rhapsodises about or derides a return to May '68, while slagging off 'Europe' and doing nothing to promote real international contact between workers. How many British lefties have a second language??

Nor am I saying that we should concentrate on building a solely European working-class identity. We don't want to see a new kind of nationalism based on 'co-prosperity spheres' - the Council of Ministers has already begun constructing 'Fortress Europe'. But the effect of the left's Euro-scepticism has been to let nationalists and fascists set the agenda. We don't yet have the BNP running local or national government, as their counterparts do in France, Belgium, Holland, Italy, Austria, Serbia, Croatia and wherever else, but there's nothing to be complacent about. With Conservatives like we've got, who needs fascists?

What is else is on offer? The international links of small left-wing parties? 'Communities of interest'? Although I'm wholly in favour of people organising on the grounds of shared interests, how do we form such communality between people who are continually indoctrinated about their national (and so-called 'racial') separateness? In recent years, the people who've given a lead in thinking and acting internationally, have been environmentalists, not socialists.

With rare exceptions, the only British workers who've regularly shown any international solidarity have been dockers (the seamen having long been smashed). The present struggle in Liverpool may be the last expression of that tradition. But, now the Labour Party is abandoning the ruins, it may be time for building again. Internationalism used to be our badge. Revolutionary or not, this is not the time to reject reformism or interim stages towards 'global consciousness'.

Whatever means are used, unless we start to deal with actualities and to provide a real alternative to the isolationism and nationalism being fostered amongst ordinary people by currency speculators and their friends in the media, we're stuffed.

## THE CASE FOR A SINGLE CURRENCY

Should Britain join the single currency? Yes. The European Union was formed to create and maintain political and economic stability. My argument for joining the single currency is that political stability is intrinsically linked to economic stability. A single currency is the logical progression towards this. Britain would benefit economically in the following ways:

A stable exchange rate would help industry which at present has to react to a fluctuating pound.

It would mean a permanent reduction in interest rates and would reduce the national debt.

It would attract foreign investment.

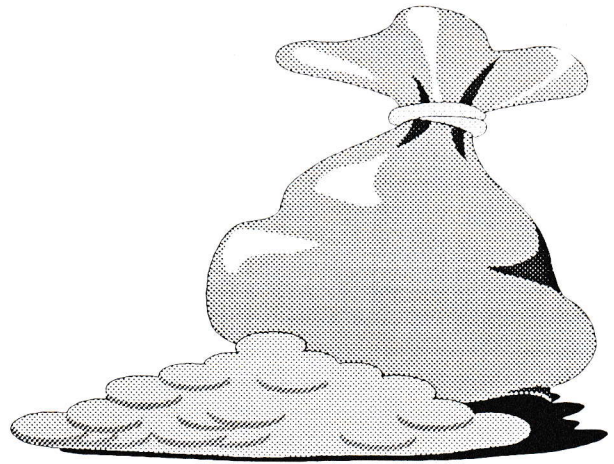
It would offer protection against currency speculators.

The debate on the single currency in this country talks about the issue as if we have a choice between the status quo and further integration with Europe. This choice does not exist. Shortly after 1999 the status quo will cease to be. The world is changing, a new monetary reality, the Euro, is going to shape the future. We may use our opt-out clause to wait and see who joins the Euro in the first wave and see how successful that is, but if after that we still don't join then we will in the long-term leave the European Union. The debate in this country is, therefore, not about the single currency but whether we should be part of Europe at all. To be europhobic is to be like those who rioted in 1752 when they thought that parliament was taking away 11 days of their lives when we switched from the Julian calendar. If Britain doesn't join the single currency it will try to

remain competitive by using devaluation as a weapon but there will be little to say or do when inward investment drops and companies like Sony, LG Electronics etc say goodbye. Foreign investors will want access to Europe AND the Euro.

The single currency is an OPPORTUNITY for Britain. What are we going to lose by joining? I really want to know.

Angela Vinelott



# ACTION NOT ELECTIONS

By Dave Parks.

The point is not just to understand the world but to change it -- Karl Marx

Should we vote Labour or campaign for the spoiling of ballot papers? These were the two opposing views expressed in the first issue of Red Rag regarding the next election. Personally I think these views are wrong but I am very pleased to see them both expressed and hence encouraging a dialogue and debate on the issue. In a way this sentiment expresses my view on the subject, namely, that Left Unity and the forging of working Left alliances is far more important than the issue of how we advocate that people should vote at the next election.

The argument given for advocating a Labour vote is that 17 years of Tory rule really is enough and it doesn't matter how appalling the Labour Party has become it must be the lesser evil to yet another Tory term. This is a view that I think nearly everyone on the Left has some sympathy with, but it is significant that the argument is only expressible now in terms of anger at continuing Tory rule and almost no expectation of any real improvements from a Labour Government. If Tory policies are carried out by a Labour administration then at least we have got rid of the Tories; those that don't advocate a Labour vote are correspondingly viewed with anger because they may marginally aid the same policies to be carried out by a Tory Government. This seems to me to

be the essence of the situation and I have met very few Left advocates of a Labour vote that have really come out with any positive reasons than the "lesser evil" argument. Arguments based on vaguely progressive Labour policies (e.g. minimum wage) are put with very little conviction that they will actually be carried out in any meaningful way that will actual benefit anyone.

In a way I think the article advocating a policy of spoiling ballot papers reflects well the other side of the same coin. In my view the Left in Britain has suffered major setbacks which are reflected in the fact that we have the option of Tory policies offered by the Tory Party or pretty much the same policies offered by the Labour Party. For this reason we have the defeatist argument that we should support "New Labour" and urge working class people to vote for it however reactionary it has become. In these circumstances of Left retreat it is all the more mad to advocate a mass boycott campaign. I agree that at least a boycott campaign has the advantage of siding with those who are angered with the right wing policies of the Labour Party to such a degree that they no longer see any difference between the major political parties, and no longer intend to vote; I have heard estimates that 50% of youth under 25 years old and apparently 80% of blacks - I have not seen these figure in print so don't quote me. I am not opposed to electoral boycotts in principle, I think it is a tactical question, namely, how do we best advance the interests and the consciousness of the working class. Personally, I have been of the view that advocating a Labour vote was

necessary in the past, but now I think there is such an obvious gulf between the Labour Party and the interests of the working class that this really can not be seen as a valid argument anymore.

So, why do I oppose a boycott campaign? The answer is simple. The electoral situation presently reflects the fact that the Left has undergone defeats and is in a weak position (in my view this is likely to be a historically temporary state of affairs). Boycotts have a resonance when there is a strong movement of the working class and a comparatively well organised Left that reflects this. At present we have neither! When we called for a boycott of paying the poll tax we had left organisations in place (anti-poll tax groups) with large sections of the working class prepared to fight. Today we have neither, by analogy I think a campaign to spoil ballot papers is about as likely to take off as a call for workers to boycott income tax. A call that would have great sympathy but frankly almost zero response - a very few might take part on individual moralistic grounds rather than as a mass movement. Besides, if the balance of forces was in our favour then surely we would have alternative options such as standing our own candidates. After all, I do recall that this was discussed by Exeter Anti-Poll Tax Union as a possible option for the local elections back in 1990 - it was rejected in the end because the group was evenly divided on the issue. Those that supported standing candidates argued that Labour was against us, we had the support in the working class to run a reasonable campaign and we had the organisation to sustain a serious campaign. In some other parts of the country candidates were actually stood in these kind of circumstances with some relative success - many came close to defeating Labour in working class areas. Following this experience Independent Socialist candidates stood in many areas in protest at the right wards march of the Labour Party. In the SW Glen Burrows came within 7 votes of being elected as an Independent Labour candidate in local elections in Somerset a few years ago. At the last general election, Dave Nellist came very close to being elected in Coventry for the Militant backed Independent Labour. It strikes me that it would be absurd to advocate a ballot spoiling campaign in such cases; it would only be seen by the working class as being sectarian and do nothing to further socialist consciousness. At the same time a campaign which actually succeeded in mobilising a serious ballot spoiling campaign

would only be feasible in similar circumstances of working class support.

So if I oppose advocating a Labour vote and I oppose advocating a boycott, then what do I advocate? Well, firstly I advocate voting for the Socialist Labour Party or any independent socialist candidates where there are such candidates, but most crucially I think the important question is not the election at all but the building of a Left alternative that can help the working class organise politically to fight to defend its interests against whoever forms the next government. Gordon Brown has already promised to use the same financial criteria for dealing with the public sector which implies that there really will be NO DIFFERENCE if there is a Labour Government in terms of cut backs, and attacks on public services and working conditions. The important thing is whether or not we have Left organisations in place to help to coordinate the defence of our interests regardless of whether the attacks come from a Tory or Labour administration. I feel here that I ought to defend myself against the accusation of ultra-leftism: I would simply say that this would be a fair argument against someone who has always argued against voting Labour, but I would point out that the leadership of both the Labour Party and the Tory Party feel the Labour Party has changed so much that they both refer to it now as "New Labour". To use Marxist terminology the Labour Party has changed qualitatively and it is now absurd to refer to the Labour Party as being a party of the working class. Those who point to the trade union link are surely missing the dynamics of the Labour Party; the trade union link is as good as dead and it is obvious that it is merely a matter of time as to when the link is formally broken. In this sense I don't see a difference anymore between advocating voting Labour and advocating Liberal Democrat (or Tory for that matter). In some areas the Lib Dems will actually now be less reactionary than Labour, surely the issue has got to be now the political independence of the working class which means struggling to build political organisations that represent the working class. This must be the priority and in my view all socialists should join the Socialist Labour Party and join in the process of starting to build a party political alternative for the working class. The SLP in my view is far from ideal, but if enough socialists join it we can make a go of creating a decent socialist alternative. At the same time we should support all initiatives that bring socialists together across parties in order to discuss issues and work together. If I may paraphrase Marx, I would say it is not who you vote that is important, it is changing things that matters - GET INVOLVED!

PS. The official position of the SLP on electoral policy is unclear although in the SW the majority position is

## Book Review

### Letter to Daniel - Despatches from the Heart by Fergal Keane.

By Richard Knott

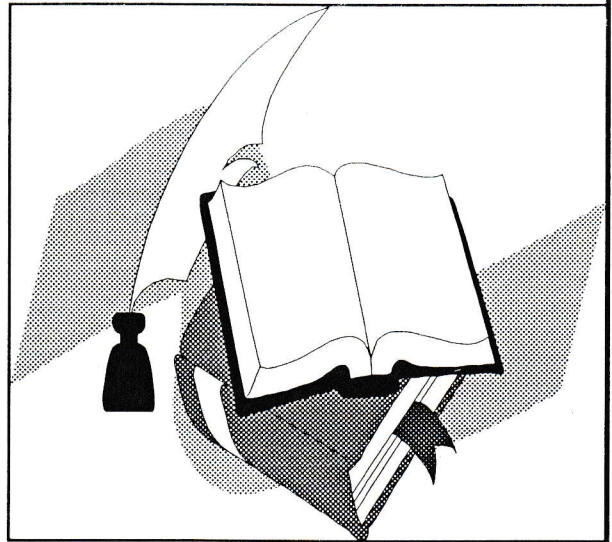
Fergal Keane is a BBC correspondent. Letter to Daniel is a collection of his articles, mostly reports from Africa and Asia.

Keane's style is intensely humanistic and exudes a spiritual optimism despite the many awful events he reports on.

The piece Letter to Daniel is written by Keane to his newborn son and in it he talks about the father he never really knew and about the events which have haunted him as a foreign correspondent, particularly what he saw in Rwanda.

The accounts in this book range over a large number of countries including South Africa, Hong Kong, Burma, Angola, Australia, Sri Lanka, Ireland and more. Keane is always concerned with the effects of political events on ordinary men and women and a passionate opposition to oppression and racism runs through the book. He also exhibits a firm grasp of the history and political dynamic in each country and he combines his emotional and objective impressions in a straightforward and incisive commentary.

However, it is his reports of the Rwandan killings which leave the greatest impression. One million died in one hundred days, genocide by any other name. What Fergal Keane's reporting does best in these pieces is clearly highlight that this was, almost without exception, completely misunderstood or ignored by the rest of the world. He draws a parallel with the rise of Hitler and makes it clear that this was not a 'tribal' dispute between blacks always ready to kill one another but a deeply political and economic situation with its roots in the colonial past. Keane makes it clear that the massacre of the Tutsis had been planned and organised for by the Hutu leadership and military for many years. Without the fightback and victory of the Rwandan Patriotic Front the number of victims would undoubtedly have been much higher. As far as I know, the left in this country dealt with the Rwandan massacre in much the same way as



the bourgeois media dealt with it, strange things happening in a far away country about which we know little. No previous analysis of the Rwandan genocide that I have seen comes close to the power and understanding in this book. Next on my book list is Fergal Keane's Season of Blood, devoted to this issue.

Keane's insights are sharp and intense but he clearly is not a socialist let alone a marxist. Although he strongly opposes oppression he does not conclude that this is primarily the result of the capitalist system.

But what this book shows above all else is the decay inherent in world capitalism. From Rwanda to Burma, from Australia to Zaire, the obscene disparities in wealth between and within countries are graphically illustrated but his remedy is less easy to see.

This book is more than good journalism, it mixes accurate reportage with an historical narrative and greatly increases the reader's understanding without