

## BRITAIN

# Lucky Jim puts out the firemen

By Mervyn Jones

LONDON

**T**HE FALL OF 1977 SAW BRITISH trade unions—both individually and by majority vote at the Trades Union Congress—proclaiming a return to free collective bargaining and rejecting the Callaghan government's 10 percent ceiling on wage claims. An uncomfortable winter seemed more than likely. But, with the phenomenal luck that has smiled on him since he became Prime Minister, Callaghan has escaped any effective challenge. Even the mild weather this January seemed to be part of the Lucky Jim syndrome.

The sole outright challenge has come from the Fire Brigades Union, on strike since Nov. 14. It was an awkward moment; public support for the firemen was strong and there was a distinct feeling among property-owners that the country couldn't carry on without effective fire protection. The toll has indeed been heavy—last week, a major hotel in Glasgow burned to the ground (fortunately without loss of life). But, making a cool calculation, Ministers reckoned that the strike could not be won by a small union like the FBU.

The union has no strike fund, and sympathetic donations from the public have proved no substitute. Over Christmas, firemen found themselves in grave financial difficulties. Tough action by welfare authorities increased the strain. Wives and families of strikers are entitled to welfare aid, but the amounts are discretionary and the bare minimum was handed out.

The strike could have been won only through firm support—in the dual form of political pressure and financial aid—from the TUC. The FBU appealed to the TUC to launch a campaign against the 10 percent ceiling, to which of course it is officially opposed. It was easy to translate this appeal into the two words: "Help us." The General Council of the TUC declined, showing that its opposition to the wage freeze would remain theoretical.

The strike demand was for a 30 percent raise. The government offered 10 percent, plus a promise that firemen's wages will be raised in stages to reach parity with skilled workers by November 1979 and will be maintained at that level thereafter. Firemen saw this offer as pie in the sky, especially because Tory spokesmen soon made it clear that if their party is in office by 1979 it won't be bound by the Callaghan pledge.

The offer was rejected at local meetings and also by the FBU executive. But the TUC's attitude, and firm statements by Ministers that it was their last word, forced reconsideration. TUC general secretary Len Murray made a speech describing the offer as fair and urging the firemen to accept it. On Jan. 6 the FBU executive bowed to the inevitable, announcing that it was summoning a delegate conference at which it would recommend acceptance.

Half a century has passed since the General Strike, but the effect of that historic defeat remains: no TUC leadership will face a showdown with a government determined to stand firm. We learned that in 1971, when the TUC refused to back a strike by postal workers (also a small union without a strike fund) despite paper denunciations of the anti-labor policy of the Tory government then in power. After struggling on for three months, the postmen had to give in. Now the firemen are in the same spot.

A legacy of deep bitterness is certain, and there are reports of firemen all over the country leaving the service to seek other jobs. For Callaghan, that will be

The firemen were forced to settle when the trade unions didn't want a showdown with James Callaghan's Labour government. With a miners strike unlikely, Callaghan is riding high.

easily outweighed by the political triumph.

## Miners don't strike.

Meanwhile, the threatened strike by miners—and that would have been a far more formidable challenge, since the National Union of Mineworkers is a major and a wealthy union—has also been averted. The miners had voted to reject the Coal Board's offer of a graded productivity bonus related to output, and to press for a substantial across-the-board wage increase. The way of escape for the Board was this: the majority in the ballot was secured by heavy votes in the big districts (Wales, Scotland and Yorkshire) but a majority of *districts* voted for acceptance.

So the Board—with the connivance of some NUM leaders in no mood for a strike—went ahead and introduced the bonus scheme where it was locally acceptable. The effect was to set one district against another. Miners in Nottingham pits, for instance, were soon putting an extra 23 pounds (\$40) a week in their pockets by meeting the productivity conditions, while those working in Yorkshire a few miles across the county line (including men who live in the same villages) were stuck at their old rates.

Miners at a large Scottish pit, where the seams are easy and extra output presents few problems, rebelled against their district leadership and demanded a produc-



tivity deal. Scotland's NUM leaders, who are Communists and a regular target for the press, had to reverse their stand. Wales has followed suit. In Yorkshire, the militant district secretary, Arthur Scargill, has declared that he still detests the productivity plan but won't allow his members to take home lower wages than miners elsewhere. But a strike for a wage increase by Yorkshire miners alone, with other pits still working and meeting demand, would clearly be ineffective.

The long-term consequences of the productivity system, especially on health and safety, may well be unhappy. The unity of the miners, based on national wage rates, is jeopardized; we may see a return to the old days when miners migrated from county to county in search of better wage-packets. The next NUM conference will surely produce a fierce dispute, since the leaders have clearly reneged on a ballot decision. But again, the news is good for a government whose purpose is to restore its weakened authority and to survive until a favorable moment for an election.

For Tory leader Margaret Thatcher, the news is as bad as it could be. She has to watch a Labor government keeping the workers in line with a success of which she can only dream. Recently the political commentator of the arch-Tory *Sunday Telegraph* rammed home the lesson

with this heartless verdict:

"Labor includes in its ranks a significantly higher proportion of rulers with an instinct for government than does the Conservative party... Labour looks now both steady and astute, realistic and ruthless."

Thatcher has reacted by announcing her belief in free collective bargaining. A Tory government, she has said in a recent speech, would set no wage ceilings and would not intervene in negotiations between employers and unions, confining itself to limiting the money supply. We are all laughing. This policy, unlikely in the nature of things to win over left-wing voters, is equally unlikely to be popular with employers and the business community, who know that in modern conditions they need the authority of the state to check union strength.

Callaghan is now saying for public consumption that he has no plans for an early election. But a by-election in a London district narrowly held by Labour (it would have produced a Tory triumph in the dark days of 1976 or early 1977) is due in March. If the result is satisfactory, it could influence Callaghan to call a national poll. An astute leader knows how to seize the occasion. Luck has held so far, but things can always go wrong. ■

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## SPAIN

## Basque nationals take to streets

By Barbara Mann Franck

**T**HE BASQUE REGION OF NORTHERN Spain is once again the scene of violence and strikes, which have followed rapidly upon a Dec. 30 government decree granting limited home rule to the heavily industrialized region.

On Jan. 12, the *Guardia Civil* shot and killed two members of the separatist ETA organization (Basque Homeland and Liberty) during an intensive search for those responsible in recent ETA bombings and attacks on police headquarters. Early press reports stated that police killed the youths by firing on them point-blank after they had fallen wounded.

A government minister later censored all newspapers carrying this unofficial version of the incident, in which a policeman was killed.

A busy session of the Spanish *Cortes* (parliament) broke up when word of the incident reached it. In succeeding weeks, Basques responded with strikes, work stoppages and frequent demonstrations to protest police action. Demonstrators chanted "ETA, the people are with you," and "The fascists are the terrorists," as

they ran through the capitals of Spain's four Basque provinces.

The Basque nationalist movement is well integrated into the working class struggle here. Basque capitalists, unlike most of their Catalan counterparts, are centralists and were among Franco's most important backers. The nationalist struggle coincides with the struggle against economic oppression and enjoys broad working class support among the Basques.

ETA attacks and bombings are timed to prevent innocent victims. Their usual targets are police and capitalists. Accompanying statements normally call for the dissolution of Spain's repressive forces, Basque self-determination and an end to economic and political injustice.

Although *ETA militar* (sometimes called *ETA-V*, for the Fifth Assembly of 1966 and 1967 from which it developed) is small and its tactics are denounced by most left political parties, the Basques have demonstrated unified, militant opposition to all police repression and violence. A massive amnesty campaign last spring obtained the release (into exile) of most Basque political prisoners, many of them ETA activists.

Funerals for the two ETA members attracted crowds of 2,000 and 7,000 to the

small villages of their birth, where 13 priests—including the brother of one of the dead youths—said one of the funeral masses. The latter referred in his sermon to "those who have fallen in the struggle."

But in contrast, only 1,000 persons and six priests attended the funeral mass for the policeman. The despised *Guardia Civil* is purposely composed of non-Basques and functions like an occupation force.

The Basque autonomy decree establishes an executive council headed by a president to be elected by council members—and not appointed by Spanish premier Adolfo Suarez, as was the case with Catalonia's President Tarradellas. The council will eventually take on some of the functions of the provincial ministries of the central government.

Except for a more democratic selection of the region's president, the Basque plan differs little from Catalonia's. In both cases the central government reserves the right to suspend regional governments for "security reasons." Basques and other regions have complained they are unable to go beyond the outlines of the Catalan decree in their negotiations with the government. ■

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## ETHIOPIA

## With the Eritrean Popular Front

*GERARD CHALIAND WENT TO ERITREA LAST spring and wrote a report on his stay there. Chaliand is author of the recently published **Revolution in the Third World** and of books on Vietnam, the Palestinians, and Angola. In the first part, Chaliand sketched the historical background; in the second part he describes what he saw in Eritrea. The translation is by Helene Ibert.*

On the Eritrean side of the border with Sudan, there is hardly any problem in entering Ethiopian territory. The Popular Liberation Front of Eritrea (FPLE), which dominates the area, takes charge of visitors, who needn't even climb down from their Land Rovers to give their name and nationality. After going through this formality at night, we were able to drive about 12 miles an hour and arrived the next morning in the heart of the Province of Sahel, where the rear-line base of the FPLE is located. The base is surrounded by a landscape of deep valleys and massive totally eroded mountain chains, ochre under a blue sky, where nomads herd their camels.

The base is spread over 18 miles, and is divided into different sections. All housing is dug into the mountainsides and supported with stones, so that it is invisible 60 yards away. Perhaps a thousand refugees live in four villages reconstructed and hidden under a forest of eucalyptus. These underground houses, built by the guerillas themselves, are clean and furnished with wooden beds. Adults and children alike take classes in writing and the history, geography and politics of Eritrea. In one kindergarten, several hundred war orphans are divided into two age groups. Near there, in a school, some hundreds of girls and boys from seven to 15 years old listen to classes in first, second and third level Tigrinya and Arabic.

#### Well-furnished caves.

In another valley, a thousand young girls and boys constitute the "avant-garde" camp. All are literate and receive military training and political education, as well as general education courses. They organize a small party for us and present several different dances as proof of their desire to integrate all the elements of the Eritrean ethnic mosaic. Most of these young people joined the Popular Front around 1975, when the organization founded in 1970 as a left splinter from the Eritrean Liberation Front (FLE), got its second wind. The majority left for the mountains in the wake of the terror that the Ethiopian army spread in Asmara and its surroundings in 1974 and early 1975. Many of them did so without their parents' knowledge.

Young women, Muslims as well as Christian, are very numerous and participate in every activity. Contrary to most of the liberation movements, which often have only a symbolic contingent of female militants or "heroines," the FPLE counts nearly a third of its troops in women. Within a climate of puritanism and camaraderie, sexual equality is always emphasized.

The military also offers a 5,000-volume library where one can find from the card files all the classics of political literature in English, Arabic, Italian and French, as well as several encyclopedias, among them the *Britannica*. The Department of Information reproduces four monthly reviews that are distributed internally as well as sent abroad. One of the Front's five hospitals, with 14 doctors, 60 trained nurses and 500 medical assistants, is also located on this base.

Almost 1,000 guerilla laborers work in well-furnished caves here. A metallurgy section manufactures all kinds of parts,

and a smelter treats aluminum scrap from destroyed airplanes and copper from old bullets. Aluminum filings are also collected here. The Eritreans' ingenuity, concern for wasting nothing, and determination to be self-sufficient remind one of the Vietnamese. The arsenal also has a workshop where the guerillas repair gun butts and rebuild or check material captured from the enemy—bazookas, mortars and machine guns.

Carpenters build all kinds of school furniture, and operating room tables. A sewing department, with 25 sewing machines and five whip-stitchers, is in charge of making uniforms using thousands of yards of material deposited in a nearby warehouse. Meanwhile, leather-workers manufacture carrying kits and belts. Another workshop specializes in radio, electronics, and time-keeping equipment.

Dozens of transmitters, transistors and watches are spread out at each work station. Qualified professionals, workers given rapid training over the last 18 months, and apprentices, all work ten hours a day.

#### Nacfa siezed.

Nights are cold in Nacfa, at the very center of the province of Sahel, on the heights of the northern mountain range. The cave where we slept was full of war booty—and fleas. In the morning we could see the big town, abandoned by its inhabitants since the beginning of a six-month long siege, lying at the bottom of the valley, 2 miles long and 1.5 miles wide, overhung by two large hills and a small one.

Retrenched on these mountain heights, the Ethiopians, who number about half a thousand, under the command of a colonel, have kept up a bitter resistance against the soldiers of the Popular Front. But their position fell in spite of the fact that their provisions were assured by airlifts, and the fresh troops that were parachuted in about 20 miles away.

The troops never got to Nacfa. Many of the paratroopers were captured. The battlefields have been cleared out, and only a few machine gun cartridge cases and M-14s remain in the trenches. In one corner, there is a Bible in Amharic.

A few days after the decisive battle of March 22, Radio Baghdad announced the seizure of Nacfa by the FLE, rival to the FPLE and supported by Iraq. After more than three weeks of silence, Lt. Col. Mengista Haile Mariam, Ethiopia's chief of state, was forced to declare that Sudanese tanks had overrun the position.

#### "Ethiopian government will deny everything."

A long line of 200 Ethiopian prisoners in olive drab uniforms comes down the mountain. They sit down in front of us, circled by 15 guerillas armed with kalachnikovs. Speaking Amharic, a member of the Front explains to them that we are making a film for West German television. My partner in the project, Gordian Troeller, asks if anyone speaks English or French and would be willing to answer our questions. One of the prisoners gets up and answers in French. "I am Lieutenant Haile Shibeshi, of Debre Zeit, Shoa. I was taken prisoner March 21, 20 miles from Nacfa. They told us we were



Young woman member of the Popular Liberation Front of Eritrea. Among the FPLE, sexual equality is emphasized and nearly a third of its troops are women.

going to fight against bandits, and that we had to protect the population. We discovered that there were only old people and children in the villages and that everyone was against us.

"I didn't know that Eritrea wanted its independence. We thought that Eritrea belonged to Ethiopia. They told us that the bandits were supported by the Arabs, who wanted the Red Sea, and that it's a religious problem between them and us. Then I understood that it was a matter of nationalism.

"We are well treated and I didn't expect that. The Ethiopian government does not recognize the existence of Ethiopian prisoners taken by the enemy. Our situation is very delicate. If we were to be freed, we would probably be court-martialed."

When we asked Lt. Haile Shibeshi, who graduated from Saint Cyr, if the other prisoners shared his opinion, he translated the question and everyone agreed. One of his companions, Lt. Hagos of the 15th Battalion, stands up: "I don't feel secure at all. I have five children and I don't think we'll be able to leave Eritrea as long as we don't have any guarantees. Otherwise we'll be considered traitors." Corporal Getachew Tasew, also of the 15th Battalion, asks to speak: "Even with your testimony, the Ethiopian government will deny everything."

The Red Cross has been informed of the existence of these prisoners, but has never been authorized to intervene by the government of Addis Ababa. So they remain in the hands of the FPLE. Many of the illiterate among them learn how to read and write, and all of them are given classes on the Eritrean problem. The political lectures are given by women.

Later we will see another camp with 200 prisoners. On the whole, almost 600 Ethiopian military are in the hands of the FPLE, among them the Commander of Afabet, Colonel Abora Tabori.

#### Afabet falls.

The stronghold of Afabet in the south of Sahel Province fell April 6. It was in vain that some 20 escapees from Nacfa came to the aid of the garrison. We arrived there 36 hours after the fall of this small town. A few corpses, scattered around, haven't yet been buried, and the smell, intensified by the noonday sun, is unbearable. The guerillas gather up material from the wrecked trenches, cluttered with letters, pictures, books, shoes, empty containers, and U.S. AID grains. Here and there, an arm or a leg protrudes from the overturned earth.

Around the trenches, we see thousands of empty cans used by the Ethiopians to warn of the approach of the guerillas during the night. Here more than 200 of the besieged have been killed and another 170 made prisoner.

Three days later, the Ethiopians gave up Elabaret, a military post situated 12 miles from Keren and 35 miles from Asmara, without firing a shot. Their departure gave the FPLE control of the strategic route between Asmara and Keren, and as a result Sahel, one of the country's nine provinces, found itself completely "liberated."

#### Postscript

In later months, after we left, the Eritrean nationalist movement has made much progress. The FPLE has taken Dekamare, the fifth largest city in Eritrea, and Abovol, the second largest. Keren, which was held by 4,000 Ethiopian troops also fell. At present, the Ethiopians are holding only three cities, Asmara, As-sab, and Massawa. The capitol, Asmara, is surrounded by Eritrean nationalists.

At the end of October, the two movements—the FLE and the FPLE—published a communique announcing the formation of a united front. ■