

## PERSPECTIVES

By Phillip Frazer

**L**AST MONTH GENERAL Electric notified 400 workers in Charleston, S.C., that its plant there would be closed and all jobs terminated by June 1985. The facility makes equipment for nuclear power plants, the demand for which has collapsed. For several weeks after receiving that notification the workers and their union—United Electrical local 1202—campaign against the GE plan. “We lambasted GE on the tax breaks they got,” says Lance Compa, Washington representative of the UE, “and we argued that there was still demand from conventional power plants. But,” he adds, “it was all a defensive, oppositional-style campaign.”

That was before Compa attended the first International Economic Conversion

campaign was mostly rhetorical,” Compa reports. “The value of conversion is that it puts it on a positive footing. Now we’re not just analyzing why the company is a bunch of bastards, we’re analyzing what the plant can do. Our leaders and our members have real tasks instead of hopelessness. We’re putting forward proposals and pushing them.”

No one knows how many such tales of conversion have flowed—or will flow—from that Boston conference. But this may be just one of many to come from the gathering of 750 peace activists, unionists and academics from the U.S. and 19 other countries. In all, more than 100 people came from Europe, Asia, Canada and Africa, adding to an already exciting mix of labor and peace people—half of them women—engaged in a rare outbreak of solidarity and networking.

Among those invited by conference organizers Suzanne Gordon and Tony Mulvaney were 15 British municipal govern-

ment Labour Party councils. At the Boston conference Phil Asquith, who is principal Product Development Engineer for the Sheffield City Council, drew a packed house and a standing ovation when he recounted his experiences as a co-drafter of the Lucas plan. Asquith is now running a program in Sheffield to utilize the local unemployed, and an abandoned factory, to manufacture dehumidifiers from the 93,000 Council homes infested with a rotting black mold. Sheffield used to be a thriving steel-producer, and while the city’s vast unemployment—and the mold—are not directly military-related, “conversion” has been expanded to include any worker or community initiated program to redirect production to fill social needs.

“What we want to do,” Asquith says, “is create, in microcosm, a viable local economy that bypasses the most pernicious effects of the kind of market economy that exports unemployment, disenfranchises poor and working-class citizens and spends more money developing weapons of destruction than satisfying human needs. This working economy,” he hopes, “will serve as a prototype that can be elaborated upon and replicated when a sympathetic national government takes office.” Asquith, who is a youthful-looking, articulate politician, was, of course, addressing himself to the British situation.

## Reverse conversion.

Since employment rates and profits have been declining through much of Europe for most of the past decade, governments have increasingly been funding industry to “reverse convert,” from highly competitive civilian product lines to arms manufacture.

At the Blohm and Voss shipyard in Hamburg, Germany, workers led by their union have distributed conversion plans to management, the media, and to local government—in hopes of pre-empting plans to “reverse convert” to production of naval vessels. Their plan is to design and build windmills on ships anchored offshore in order to generate enough energy to replace the 700 megawatt nuclear power plant that now serves the city.

Similar efforts are underway in Italy, Austria, the Netherlands, France, Scandinavia and Canada. The London City Council (which Prime Minister Thatcher wants to abolish) has instituted a program that invests \$42 million annually in rehabilitative industrial projects, retraining, research and planning and public education.

The Boston conference brought many of the principals in these and other European initiatives into direct contact with members of such American unions as the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE), United Steelworkers of America, United Autoworkers (UAW), International Union of Electronic, Electrical, Technical, Salaried and Machine Workers, Communications Workers of America (CWA), the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)—30 in all, as well as 19 foreign unions—and local peace activists.

Machinists President William Winpisinger delivered a brief pep talk on the necessity of building for conversion from the shop floor up. His union recently surveyed its members—many of whom hold military-related jobs—so as to identify the “shopfloor inventors” in their ranks. The results showed, according to Winpisinger, that “we can probably undertake local economic conversion—alternative production planning projects—without corporate or professional engineering and management help.”

For their part, national disarmament groups such as the Freeze, SANE, Clergy and Laity Concerned, the American Friends Service Committee, Jobs with

Peace and the Mobilization for Survival have all recently endorsed policies of promoting conversion whenever they address the issue of cutting the Pentagon budget. A recent notice mailed to all branches by the National Committee of the Freeze declared that “the National Freeze Campaign supports income and retraining benefits for workers and alternate production planning by labor, industry and the community.”

Presently, two bills to provide federal assistance for conversion initiatives are before the House—HR4805 sponsored by Nick Mavroules (D-MA) and HR425 written by Ted Wein (D-NY). Both Mavroules and Weiss addressed the Boston conference where Mavroules was given a

## *The Machinists union is surveying its members to develop local conversion plans based on their own experience.*

longer-than-average standing ovation for his successful pressuring of the State Department to gain admission for the 100 European invitees deemed politically undesirable by the Reagan administration. (Both the French and Italian governments also intervened to force the U.S. to issue visas to the 10.)

Addressing the House last February 8, Mavroules recalled how, at the end of the Vietnam defense spending spree, 44 percent of his New England constituency’s aerospace workers lost their jobs. His bill calls for:

- One year’s warning by the Defense Department to communities affected by a planned defense contract cut-back.

- A grant of up to \$250,000 to communities hit by reductions of \$10 million or more, to be used for worker retraining and to fund planning for plant conversion.

- Income guarantees for up to two years for laid-off defense workers, to encourage them to stay in their communities and help build alternative industries.

Mavroules argues that his bill would cost no new federal dollars. “According to the Congressional Budget Office,” he says, “the cost...for one lost contract would be about \$1 million.” This for a contract that would have added \$9 million to the government deficit. “Compared to the compensation Rockwell received in 1977 for the lost B-1 bomber contract (\$750 million),” Mavroules told the House, “\$1 million is not much to ask for the defense worker and his community.”

The Weiss bill is generally perceived to have more teeth—and less chance of passing. It contains many of the Mavroules provisions as well as providing for:

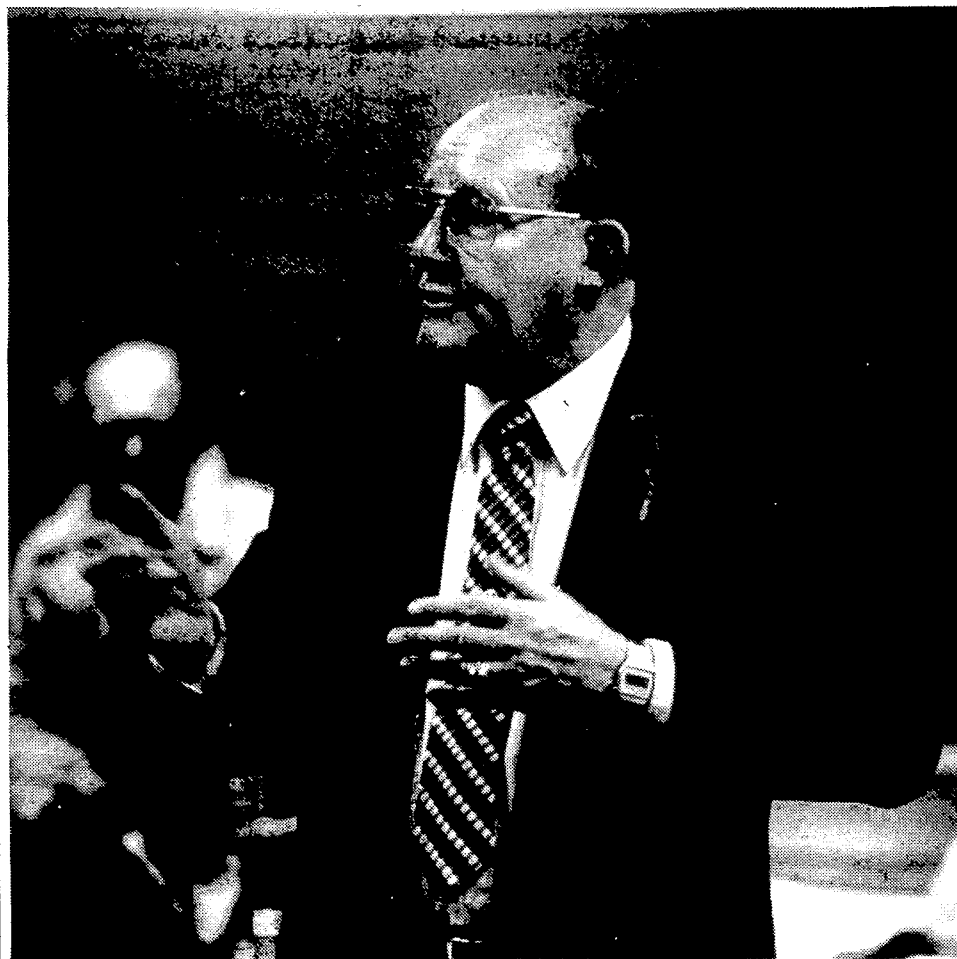
- Ongoing alternative use committees in military-related facilities to develop detailed conversion plans—including representatives of labor, business and the community; and

- A Federal Defense Economic Adjustment Council to provide conversion guidelines, resources and overall coordination—with a mandate to prepare for non-defense public projects “addressing vital areas of national concern,” such as transportation, housing, education, health care, environmental protection and renewable energy resources.

In the Weiss plan, defense contractors would be required to contribute 1.25 percent of their contract revenues to a fund to pay for the program.

As economic advisor to the German Green Party Joachim Muller told the Boston conference: “You cannot get far in conversion without some government funding, but you must keep control in the hands of the workforce and the community if you are to go beyond the old options of wage-slavery or lemon socialism.” ■

# *American unions are thinking about local conversion*



William Winpisinger, Machinists union president

Conference at Boston College June 23-24. “Conversion” means the re-casting of a factory and the retraining of its workforce to produce “socially-useful” goods instead of military-related output.

At that conference Compa heard several speakers from Europe recounting their efforts to prevent plant closings by proposing alternative uses for the facilities. One of those speakers was Bill Niven, director of the London Conversion Council. And in the days following the conference Niven flew with Compa to South Carolina and addressed the executive board of the union local as well as the factory workforce. His tales of workers who had taken their future in their own hands in Europe inspired his listeners to form an alternative use committee. It is now preparing a skills and equipment assessment of the plant in the hope that they’ll be able to use the otherwise doomed equipment to produce products their community needs.

“Up until now our opposition cam-

ment and union members, 15 German, 13 Italian and several French labor organizers, as well as representatives from Austria, Greece, Japan, Sweden, India, Canada, Australia and South Africa. The movement to confront the jobs-for-bombs tradeoff blackmail practiced by militaristic governments worldwide is just beginning in this country, but there have been some landmark victories in Europe.

## The British example.

Thousands of workers at Lucas Aerospace plants in England in 1975 responded to the threatened closure of their worksites by drafting a plan to convert production toward socially useful goods. Lucas was, and still is, Europe’s largest aerospace equipment manufacturer. Although Lucas finally rejected the workers’ proposals, the confrontation came to be seen as the birth of the movement. Several leaders of the Lucas workers’ committee are now running “enterprise boards” for British municipalities with



By Alexander Amerisov

**T**HE EXTENT OF PARALYSIS on the left in the advanced capitalist countries, especially the United States, is reflected in the lack of reaction to the pain and suffering of tens of thousands of Soviet and Eastern European dissidents. Academic Andrei Sakharov and his family are a case in point.

The movement for greater democracy has existed in the Soviet Union for the last 20 or so years. Thousands of courageous and selfless people have been jailed, exiled internally, forced abroad, dismissed from their jobs and publicly ostracized. As an open dissident for 20 years Sakharov had been a shining example of individual dedication to this cause. A "father" of the Soviet hydrogen bomb, Sakharov stopped his work in the late '60s and turned his energy to a struggle for world peace and democracy. Ever since, he has been a pariah to the Soviet establishment. One by one, dozens by dozens, thousands by thousands, Soviet dissidents have been led to prisons or labor camps. Many were beaten, humiliated or exiled to foreign lands. Through all of this, the voices of socialists abroad had been almost silent.

Right-wing elements of capitalist countries are the main contingent that have given support to Soviet dissidents. This support comes, not as a result of their great love for freedom and democracy,

this socialism exists not as a classless and self-governing society, but one that is class-divided and despotically ruled.

The establishment and growth of antagonistic classes in Soviet society was taking place virtually from day one, but it took the appearance of a new type of opposition to make this clear outside the country, even though the existence of class differences has long been understood by the vast majority of Soviet people.

The appearance of the Soviet democratic movement in the '60s was the turning point, not only in the internal development of that society, but also in the world socialist movement. The people who make up the present Soviet democratic movement represent not only themselves, but also much broader social interests and groups. They are the torchbearers of social progress in the Soviet Union. This movement for greater democracy represents a new, radically different stage of development of "presently existing" socialism. There should not be any doubt as to its potential longevity. Even if the KGB is able to crush the present contingent of the movement, it will only temporarily be stopped. A new wave of dissidents will arise, and it will be better organized and more determined.

To understand Soviet society properly, you must live abroad. Inside that country objective research is not possible. Access even to such historic and once publicly available documents as Stalin's, Trotsky's, Bukharin's and other "disgraced"

## PERSPECTIVES

# A Soviet socialist exile sees the Cold War stifling dissent

to real "rights" and "freedoms." Material progress has no meaning in itself for socialists. Creation of conditions for the fullest realization of the great potential of every individual and of society as a whole—symbolized most clearly in the slogans "Liberty," "Equality" and "Fraternity"—is the end for which improvement of economic conditions is only the means.

### Peace and democracy.

The movement for democratic rights and freedoms is inevitably linked to the movement for peace. It is linked not only because democracy itself is impossible during war, but also because war is impossible between two really democratic communities.

Real democracy does not exist, nor can

it exist on the basis of monopoly capitalism or presently existing state socialism. This does not mean, however, that capitalist and state socialist nations have the same motives for peace and war. In fact, if both superpowers stopped interfering in the internal affairs of other nations, victory would almost automatically go to state socialism.

Under the present conditions developing countries don't have much choice. The Soviet Union need not intervene abroad for the spread of state socialism to continue, because placing the meager means of production backward countries possess in the hands of the state—so to strengthen their ability to compete with advanced capitalist countries—is a "natural" solution to their problems of underdevelopment.

The Soviet Union has nothing to gain by waging war for expansion of its "sphere of influence," though certain circles in that country benefit from global tensions. This tension is their reason for existence and the source of continuation of their privileges and positions in that society.

The new problems of the Sakharovs and the multitude of other dissidents are closely linked with the international rise of tensions. The struggle for peace, and its most important task of removing Reagan from the presidential office is at the same time the struggle for real democracy in the Soviet Union. And the struggle for democracy in the Soviet Union is at the same time a struggle for the real socialism world-wide.

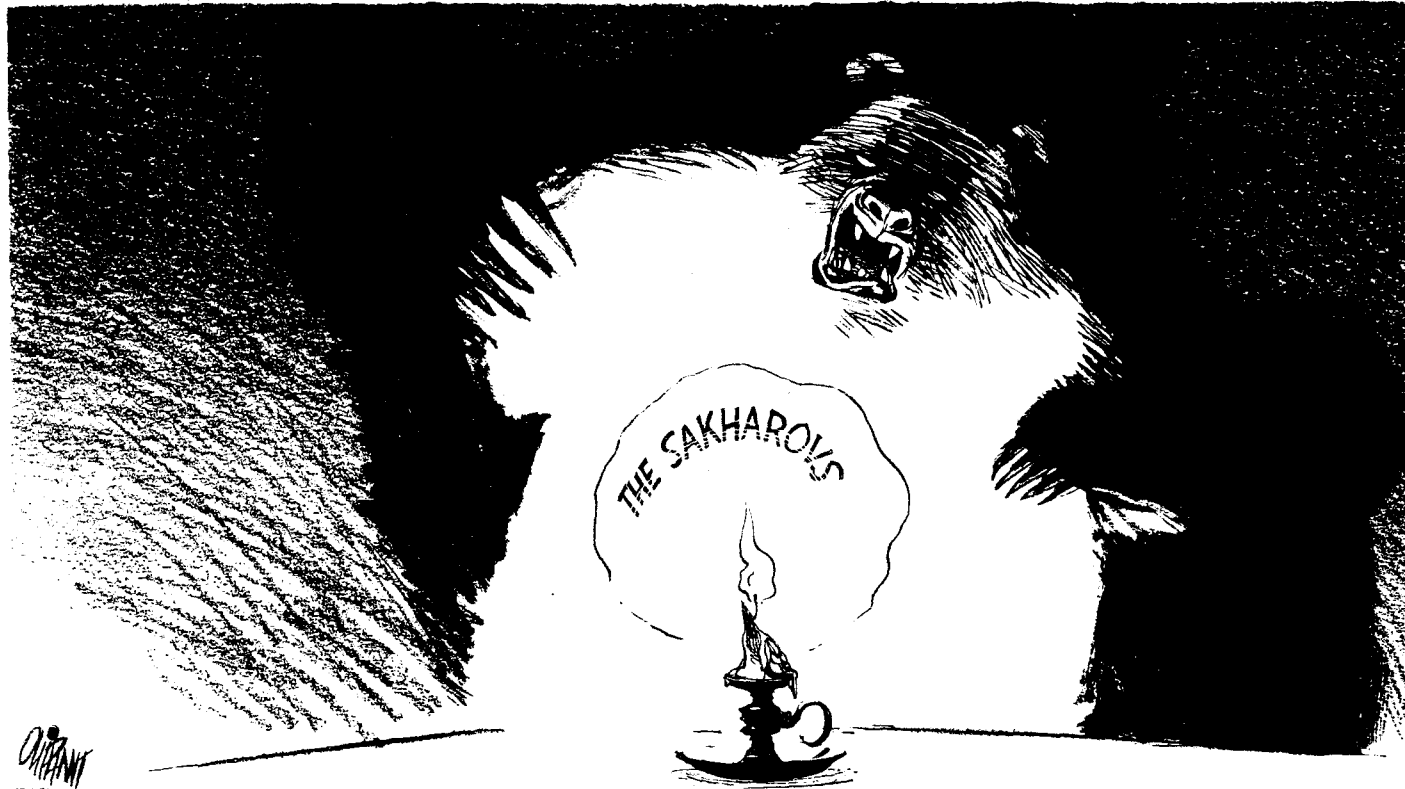
Socialists now face several tests. First, how much must we do to get Reagan out of office? Second, what and how much do we do to enable the democratic movement in the Soviet Union to keep fighting for greater freedoms and against the party-state? Third, what and how much do we do for international solidarity of working peoples world-wide, and especially between the working classes of the Soviet Union and the U.S.?

Unfortunately, if the first and third areas are more or less "saturated" with socialists, the second area, assistance to the democratic movement in the Soviet Union, suffers greatly.

We should establish a socialist pen club to correspond with democratic socialists in the Soviet Union and other countries of "presently existing" socialism. We should condemn the treatment of the dissidents in those countries at every opportunity. In doing so, we must not forget to underline that beside being democratic, our criticism is also socialist—pointing out class divisions in that society and inequalities on which repression is based. We should assist the movement financially and by providing logistical aid in producing and delivering socialist literature for distribution.

If we limit demands for workers' power, for real democracy, only to capitalist countries and overlook the total disregard and flagrant violation of basic democratic and human rights in countries of "presently existing socialism," we will undermine the strength of the socialist ideal by stripping it of its most powerful element—universality. Socialism can't exist in one country or a group of countries. It can exist only as a universal phenomenon. Let's not forget it. Stand up for the Sakharovs!

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FEAR OF LIGHT.

but because of their never ceasing hostility to anything socialist. Is it surprising to anyone, then, that having nobody on the left to turn to for help, most of the opposition movements in the Soviet Union have turned to the right, thereby undermining their own position with a Soviet public that sees no benefit in the restoration of capitalism, and at the same time creating doubts in the minds of Western socialists as to the dissidents' true intent?

For many decades after the Russian Revolution, socialists on the whole defended the new republic, willingly overlooking numerous expressions of despotism in that society.

The first socialist society deserved such support as long as its external and internal enemies consisted primarily of former ruling classes trying to re-establish their privileged positions. And, in fact, the Soviet Union has done a remarkable job of rebuilding and defending itself. At the cost of tremendous sacrifices the Soviet people have accomplished spectacular progress in all aspects of their social and economic life and deserve the admiration of all progressive humanity.

But nothing remains the same. What was once reactionary and old rejuvenates through revolution, blood and tears. In its turn it may become old and reactionary. In the Soviet Union the threat of restoration of capitalism has long passed. Socialism (unfortunately, a despotic socialism) has firmly established itself. But

historic figures' writings is only by special permission. The same goes for books and articles of many foreign authors. Even some of the official Soviet statistics known in the West are hard to get there. On the other hand, studying any country from outside has its problems. Money, time, proximity to a major library that carries such literature are the minor technical difficulties. Disconnection, which is fraught with the danger of formalism and lack of sufficiently intense debate are some of the other more fundamental barriers.

Nonetheless, Marxists should never lose sight of our main goal—the fullest possible human freedom, equality and international brotherhood of working people. No economic achievement is worth an ounce of human freedom, even though freedom itself is not possible without economic prosperity. In conditions of poverty and unemployment there cannot be any freedom other than freedom for the few and despotism for the many. For democratic socialists, however, as soon as the most rudimentary material needs of the society have been fulfilled, the fullest and the broadest possible freedom must become the slogan of the day. By emphasizing the material gains of presently existing socialism, some on the left allow themselves to forget that it is not some specific economic achievement that is our goal, but the creation of material conditions that lead

*The Soviet Union has nothing to gain from war for expansion, but ruling circles benefit from global tensions. It is a source of their continued privileges. The Sakharovs' and other dissidents' new problems are closely linked to the international rise in tensions.*