

Students Against Sweatshops

activists' bulletin



October 2006

iSWEAT - THE TRUTH BEHIND APPLE'S PROFITS

The revelation that Apple iPods, the world's most famous personal music player, are made in Chinese sweatshops shouldn't be surprising. In today's world of corporate power and globalisation, the vast majority of products sold on the high-street, from garments to computers to iPods, are made by workers in countries like China, Mexico, Indonesia and Haiti working long hours for often illegally low wages.

A report revealed that Foxconn - Apple's sub-contracted agent in China - employs 200,000 workers in its mammoth Longhua plant, who work up to 15 hours a day and are paid \$50 a month; well below the average even for China, the sweatshop centre of the world. Shockingly, the report also claims that many of the workers live at the plant in a huge dormitory complex.

This is the barbarity of sweatshop labour on full display; workers paid next to nothing, working incredibly long hours and forced to live at their workplace. Sweatshop labour is, simply, modern day slavery for millions of workers across the world.

Apple first responded to the report in a statement affirming that it was "committed to ensuring that working conditions in our supply chain are safe, workers are treated with respect and dignity, and manufacturing processes are environmentally responsible." But when the report it commissioned predictably gave it a more-or-less clean bill of health, Foxconn launched a \$3.7 million lawsuit against the newspaper that first ran the story in China.

This case contains within it pretty much everything you need to know about sweatshop labour and hyper-exploitation in the 21st century; it shows us that the shops of our high streets remain stocked because of something not very different from slave labour. It shows us how huge corporations cynically hide behind sub-contracted agencies, and that the "reports" and "inquiries" they



The case also highlights the increasing significance of China as a world centre of large-scale production. Its ruling Stalinist clique are aggressively pursuing their project to turn China into a major competitor and a rival to the United States in the global market. Clearly, the number of workers they enslave, brutalise and oppress along the way is of no consequence for them. Independent trade unions and other workers' organisations are still illegal in China.

But the Chinese working-class is fighting back. The acceleration of China's development has been matched by an increase in militancy, with the last few years seeing strikes of tens of thousands of workers, sometimes around explicitly political demands such as the right to independent self-organisation.

Anti-sweatshop campaigners should support Chinese workers not only in their struggles for dignity and justice in the workplace, but also in their struggle for a society in which workers are free to organise.

For more info on sweatshops and class struggle in China, check out the China Labour Bulletin at www.clb.org.hk/public/main

Daniel Randall, Sheffield University

www.studentsagainstsweatshops.org.uk

SOLIDARITY WITH IRANIAN WORKERS AND STUDENTS

Free Ahmed Batebi and all political prisoners in Iran! Protest when Muhammad Khatami visits St Andrews!

Former Iranian president Seyed Muhammad Khatami will be visiting St Andrew's university on 31 October to deliver a lecture on "dialogue among civilisations" and receive an honorary degree from university chancellor and Liberal Democrat leader Menzies Campbell. Meanwhile, Ahmed Batebi, an Iranian student activist arrested by Khatami's regime during pro-democracy protests in 1999 and kept inside throughout his term in office, is seriously ill in jail.

Ahmed was jailed when he appeared, clutching a shirt stained with the blood of one of his comrades, on the front cover of the Economist. He was elected as Honorary Vice-President of NUS as a gesture of solidarity between British and Iranian students. He was released last January but re-arrested in July. Even Hessam Firoozi, the doctor who treated Ahmed in jail and had expressed concerns to the press about his wellbeing, has now been arrested!

At the same time, it is important to remember that Ahmed is only one of thousands of political prisoners in Iran, jailed to expressing even the mildest opposition to the Islamic Republic regime.

Khatami is on the "reformist" wing of the Islamic Republic - which makes him a "moderate" right-wing religious fundamentalist. He is fully committed to the theocratic system which has oppressed the Iranian people, and workers, women, lesbian, gay and bisexual people and young people above all, for the last three decades. During his time in office, tiny modifications to the Islamic Republic's regime of terror were massively outweighed by the stepping up of neoliberal economics and attacks on the living standards of Iranian workers.

We are deeply disappointed that St Andrews Students' Association has declared itself in favour of Khatami's visit, bizarrely dismissing the repression he carried out as "tensions which existed within Iran during his presidency" and claiming that he "adopted a brave stance to promote liberal values in the face of great adversity". This is an appalling betrayal of Iranian students' struggle for freedom.

As students, young people, feminists, LGBT and labour movement activists in Britain, we express our wholehearted solidarity with the democratic and working-class opposition in Iran - against both the US's threat to kill thousands of Iranian civilians in another war and the barbarity of the Iranian regime. We therefore demand that Khatami's honorary degree be withdrawn unless Ahmed Batebi is released. When Khatami visits St Andrews, we will be protesting to express our solidarity with Iranian students and others fighting against the theocratic dictatorship for democratic and social rights.

- ★ Sofie Buckland, NUS National Executive and Education Not for Sale
- ★ Joe Rooney, NUS National Executive, ENS and Young Greens
- ★ David Broder, Students Against Sweatshops
- ★ Keir Lawson, Scottish Socialist Party student organiser
- ★ Jack Ferguson, Scottish Socialist Youth national organiser
- ★ Laura Schwartz, ENS Women
- ★ Sam Lebens, Co-convenor, NUS anti-racism and anti-fascism campaign
- ★ James Alexander, National Union of Students Scotland President
- ★ Stephen Brown, NUS National Secretary
- ★ Joe Rukin, NUS National Treasurer
- ★ Scott Cuthbertson, NUS LGBT Officer (Open Place)
- ★ Veronica King, NUS VP Welfare
- ★ Ellie Russell, NUS VP Further Education
- ★ Aled Dilwyn Fisher, LSESU Environment and Ethics Officer, Young Greens

(All in a personal capacity)

To sign please email sofie.buckland@nus.org.uk

BOLIVIAN MINERS KILLED DEFENDING WORKERS' CONTROL

16 miners have been killed in fights over the control of the Huanuni mine, near Oruro, Bolivia.

The fight was over whether the mine would remain in state hands, or be taken over by a "co-operative" - Bolivian mining "co-operatives" set up in the 80s are essentially private, with a strictly tiered managerial system, no effective workers' control and very low wages for the "salaried workers" employed by the privately controlled board. Union membership is not allowed.

The ownership of the mine has been in dispute for several years, thanks to the 2002 bankruptcy of British owners RBG Resources. The Bolivian state company COMIBOL reluctantly took over control of the mine, but then abandoned it and left management in the hands of the union. The workers, almost all members of the union, enjoy much better pay and conditions than miners elsewhere in the country.

However, British accountancy firm Grant Thornton, acting as liquidator of RBG Resources, decided to make \$2.5 million by flogging the mine to a "co-operative" - even though RBG has already lost any legal claim to it.

4000 "co-operative" miners descended on the mine in order to seize control of it from COMIBOL. About 1000 union miners came to defend their workplace - 16 were killed, hundreds injured in appalling violence between fellow workers. Dynamite was thrown, bullets were exchanged. Only 70 police turned out, and they did not defend the union miners or try to stop the killing.

So-called "socialist" president Evo Morales has not defended the mine from private take-over - instead he has pledged \$130 million support for privately owned mines nationwide.

The Bolivia Solidarity Campaign is holding weekly pickets outside the Euston office of Grant Thornton - for more info visit www.boliviasec.org.uk

FIGHTING FOR MIGRANT WORKERS' RIGHTS

Around 500 people gathered outside the Imperial War Museum on Saturday 7 October for the start of a demonstration for migrant workers' rights - organised as part of a Europe-wide week of action called by the Athens European Social Forum. The march grew out of an increasing awareness among migrants' organisations, the left and sections of the trade union movement that the issues of migrants' rights, immigration controls and trade union struggles are necessarily connected.

It is now well understood that migrant workers are 'super-exploited': working in non-unionised workplaces, often with illegally poor wages and conditions, in fear of speaking out for their rights in case they are deported. This is the reality of Blair's 'flexible labour market'. This is a big step forward from the days when important sections of the British trade union movement adopted a nationalist position hostile to foreign and migrant workers.

The issue of immigration controls is a crucial one. Hence the slogan "No one is illegal" and the idea that "no worker is illegal".

Organising migrant workers is about more than the big unions campaigning for minimum demands. It is about the principle of international workers' solidarity. How can unions organise effectively if they accept that workers in one country and workers in another have opposing interests, or that some workers in our country are illegal and shouldn't be here? With a system of immigration controls that denies 'failed' asylum seekers and 'economic migrants' legal status within this country, internationalism must be applied within the UK as much as with workers' struggles worldwide. The only way of expressing true solidarity with 'illegal' workers is to oppose border controls and call for equal rights for all.

The march on 7 October saw delegations from the TGWU and RMT unions, which have been organising cleaners on the London Underground and elsewhere, alongside a variety of anti-deportation, anti-borders and asylum and immigration rights campaigns, left-wing organisation and bodies such as the Latin American Workers' Association. It was an important step in building a movement that, with a grass-roots focus and the politics of international workers' solidarity, will hopefully be strong enough to take on the government and the capitalist exploiters to win equal rights for all migrants.

Students have a big role to play in such a movement, not just as individual activists, but as organisers on campus helping to reach out to workers employed by our colleges and universities through living wage campaigns and so on. In such campaigns the principle of all workers organising together to support each, regardless of nationality or immigration status, is key.

Becky Crocker, London No Borders



THE CASE FOR SOLIDARITY

No Sweat has released a short film about the international fightback against sweatshop exploitation - now available to download on the web or in DVD format.

Everything you wanted to know about sweatshops, chain stores, workers, and the fight for international solidarity that unites us around the world. All in a bitesized video.

To download the film go to www.nosweat.org.uk

Or, if you would like it on DVD, send an email to admin@nosweat.org.uk

Why not organize a film showing for activists on your campus?

FOR INDEPENDENT TRADE

No Sweat and Students Against Sweatshops believe that independent trade unions and other workers' organisations are the only way to genuinely challenge exploitation by employers. We believe that this is an important - and yet to be won - demand not only for developing world countries, but for all countries, including Britain.

What does "independent" mean? SAS does certainly not argue that trade unions should be "independent" of politics. We want organised workers to have a political voice so that they can fight for reforms which benefit the working-class and working-class struggle - like the right to organise, decent benefits, healthcare etc. (Though different activists in SAS have different ideas about such a political struggle should proceed.) By "independent" unions we mean unions run solely by workers themselves, free of interference from both the employer and the state, which usually acts to limit workers' self-activity on behalf of the bosses.

If, as we say, the best codes of conduct and even laws can only be properly enforced when workers are organised to fight for and defend their rights, then the demand for free trade unions is crucial. It is also a key one for anti-sweatshop struggles, since most countries in the developing world have draconian anti-union laws to prevent workers from fighting back. These range from countries like Saudi Arabia where workers' organisations are completely illegal; to ones like China and Cuba where the "unions" that exist are basically government controlled; to others where there are anti-union laws to limit what unions can do to various extents.

In Mexico, the maquiladora export-processing workers (producing for companies like Nike and Puma) who No Sweat campaigned to help to establish independent unions faced "charros", fake unions run by their employer whose basic purpose was not to represent workers' grievances but calm them down while shopping trouble-makers to the boss! The workers had a slogan "Government, bosses, charros - same old shit" and had to fight hard to build their own independent union.

Even broadly independent unions often become bureaucratised and fail to fight militantly for workers. In Britain, for instance, the majority of unions are not very dynamic or good at standing up for their members' immediate interests, let alone any broader programme of social change. Another example: in Iraq, the largest trade union organisation, the Iraqi Workers' Federation, supports the undemocratic government put in place by the US/British occupation forces. But the fact that these unions are bureaucratically misled does not make them the same as the fake unions which exists in various forms in various countries - like the "unions" that Saddam Hussein used to control Iraqi workers before he was overthrown.



Clearly, "independence" is a complicated question, and workers need to fight to make their organisations responsive to their needs even when they are free from state and employer-control. Nonetheless, independence from the bosses and governments is a key question, a broader political "independence" is impossible.

The issue of anti-union laws and government attempts to control the workers' movement is not just one that exists in the developing world. Every country on earth has anti-union laws, varying according to what the rulers of that country have been able to get away with. Thus unions in France and Italy are freer from external interference than unions in the US and Britain, because in the latter countries the workers' movement has suffered many more, and worse, defeats over the last twenty five years or so, allowing the government to move in for the kill.

In Britain, our unions are relatively free compared to those in somewhere like China. But we still face a whole raft of anti-union laws introduced by the Thatcher and Major Conservative governments and kept in all but minor details by Tony Blair. These include:

- A ban on workers taking "solidarity" or "sympathetic" action, ie striking to back up other workers involved in a dispute. This is a ban on one of the most basic principles of workers' struggle. Thus in August 2005, when baggage handlers at Heathrow airport walked out in support the workers sacked by the multinational catering firm Gate Gourmet, it was illegal.
- A ban on political strikes, so that workers cannot take industrial action against what they regard as social injustice or even against laws that will affect them unless it is a direct question of workplace terms and conditions. It is even illegal for workers in an industry being privatised to strike against privatisation as such.
- A ban on having picket lines of more than six people outside a workplace on strike.

UNIONS EVERYWHERE!

- A ban on "flying picketing", which means picketers visiting other workplaces to encourage them to join the action.
- Laws interfering in the constitutions and internal workings of trade unions, for instance forcing them to have regular elections for officers by postal ballots. This seems democratic but in fact is not. In the first place, it is the role of union members, not the government to enforce democracy in a union. Secondly, postal ballots are deliberately designed to get a lower turnout and to produce less radical, campaigning results than ballots held in the workplace. The government wants to reduce union members to atomised individuals putting a cross on a piece of paper every few years, not people organising collectively together to fight their boss.

These laws make even basic trade union operation very difficult, intimidate workers out of taking action, and gradually produce a culture where most workers have no confidence in the possibility of defend their rights, let alone winning new ones. They make a direct difference to whether struggles are won or lost, and in fact whether they even begin. A good contrast with the Gate Gourmet example is provided by the successful struggle against the CPE law discriminating against young workers which took place in France earlier this year - possible because solidarity and political strikes, through which thousands of French workers showed their solidarity with the student occupations against the law, are legal there.



In Britain, most unions now demand the repeal of the anti-union laws, and in fact major changes, including an end to the ban on solidarity action, are now Labour Party policy - but the New Labour government refuses to carry them out! Over 180 - almost half of - Labour MPs have signed a "Trade Union Freedom Bill" demanding that this changes. Meanwhile, No Sweat and SAS support campaigns for the abolition of anti-union laws in order to win really independent trade unions in Britain, and we support workers who take action to defy the law and make it unworkable.

Ruth Cashman, Newcastle Uni People + Planet

No Sweat Conference 2006

Sweatshops, workers and international solidarity

12pm-6pm, Saturday 25th November at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), Thornough Street, near Euston, London.

- ★ Crèche available
- ★ Plus Saturday evening social
- ★ Plus an activists' training day on Sunday 26th November

Tickets for the Saturday event are £8 (waged) and £4 (students, unwaged). Book your ticket now by sending a cheque (payable to 'No Sweat') to No Sweat PO Box 36707, London SW9 8YA

Name:

Address:

.....

Email:

Mobile:

Union/College:.....

Tick here if you intend to attend the activists' training day on Sunday 26th November too

Or get your ticket online at www.nosweat.org.uk

FEMINIST FIGHTBACK

**Saturday October 21st
11:30-7pm, SOAS, Central London**

A one day activist conference called by ENS Women for anyone interested in the struggle for women's liberation. Speakers include Abby Lee, author of the "Girl with a one track mind" blog on feminism and sexual expression; sacked Gate Gourmet workers; NUS Women's Officer Kat Stark; International Union of Sexworkers; Organisation of Women's Freedom in Iraq; Scottish Socialist women on sexism on the left; health workers on low pay and abortion rights; and many more...

For more details visit www.fightback.org.uk

DEMAND FREE EDUCATION!

Top-up fees will mean the privatisation of our university system, worse conditions for workers in higher education, ever rising student debt, fewer working-class children getting into education and more and more of all students having to work in low-paid jobs to get through.

British universities are becoming more and more like private corporations, making key decisions not in the interests of students' choice or quality of education, or even because of academic considerations, but in order to make a profit. Unprofitable courses, departments and sites are increasingly likely to be closed, while more and more university facilities are used to make money as conference centres, for corporate research and so on. Meanwhile, a two-tier (at least!) higher education system is opening up, with liberal education for a privileged minority at the best-off institutions, while HE is expanded on the cheap and most students are consigned to little more than glorified job training.

Meanwhile the richest universities pushing for the right to charge fees even higher than the current £3,000 cap, with many vice-chancellors insisting that only a fully marketised system, like that which exists in the US, will do. With average student debt now above £20,000 and rising fast, higher fees obviously mean fewer students from a less well-off background getting into higher education, and those who do facing less and less of a choice about which university they go to.

At the same time, the new, semi-privatised university system creates increased pressure for lecturers and other education workers. The recent lecturers strikes and boycott were about resistance to the university employers drive to keep down wages and create a fragmented, market-driven system in which lecturers at different universities get paid widely different amounts and are robbed of the ability to organise effective industrial action on a national level.

And there is also increased pressure for the rising proportion of students who have to work - usually in low-paid, stressful, ununionised jobs such as bar work - to pay for their course and maintenance.

What's the solution? Firstly, the student movement needs to demand free education: an end to all fees and a living grant to support all students in further and higher education through their course. This has to go alongside decent public funding, to end top-up fees and the market-led craziness that is destroying our education.



The government's argument that this can't be afforded is rubbish. It could afford to fund education and all public services decently, without privatisation, if it would tax the enormous wealth and profits wracked up by the rich and business.

Secondly, we need a student movement that fights effectively for these demands. The NUS is at least organising a demonstration this year - unlike last year, when top-up fees were on their way in, but NUS cancelled all action! - but, led by Blairites, it is still unwilling to organise a serious fightback against top-up fees. That's why the Education Not for Sale Network will be organising a distinct contingent on the demonstration, to demand living students grants funded by taxing the rich, and why we'll be seeking to organise direct action such as occupations to protest against top-up fees this term. It would be great if SAS supporters could get involved.

Lastly, we need to support our lecturers and other education workers in struggle (as in the lecturers' boycott) and link up with them by getting involved in the trade union movement ourselves. A powerful trade union movement on campus, uniting lecturers, other university workers and students who work to fight for a living wage and so on is also the force that can stop the Blairite privatisation of higher education in its tracks.

Sofie Buckland, NUS NEC

Read more...

- ★ Education Not for Sale network - www.free-education.org.uk
- ★ The NUS demo is on October 29 - www.nusonline.co.uk
- ★ University and College Union - www.ucu.org.uk
- ★ GMB Union: students can join for £1 a month! - www.gmb.org.uk

STARBUCKS WORKERS FIGHT BACK

The Starbucks ethos of "partnership" guarantees the CEO, managers and workers the same rights and benefits package. Except, of course, that the bosses don't struggle to pay their rent and buy food for their families.

In the USA the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) have started a campaign to unionise Starbucks workers, whose starting wage is a mere \$7.75 (£4.15) an hour. All 'baristas' are part-time, not allowed to become full-timers with better conditions and rights. Despite this, some work enough hours to qualify for health insurance through Starbucks - but often cannot afford it anyway. Health and safety standards are ignored by the company.

The IWW has worked, primarily in Chicago and New York, to give these workers an opportunity to fight back. This year New Zealand's Supersize My Pay group has seen the first ever strike at a Starbucks, and young workers at other fast-food joints organising for the first time.

Starbucks isn't happy at the idea of its workers organising together - the company may be filthy rich, but isn't going to let the people who actually run its cafés get any of that profit for themselves. The bosses have cracked down hard on the IWW Starbucks Union, following the union-busting lead of other big US brands like Wal-Mart and McDonalds.

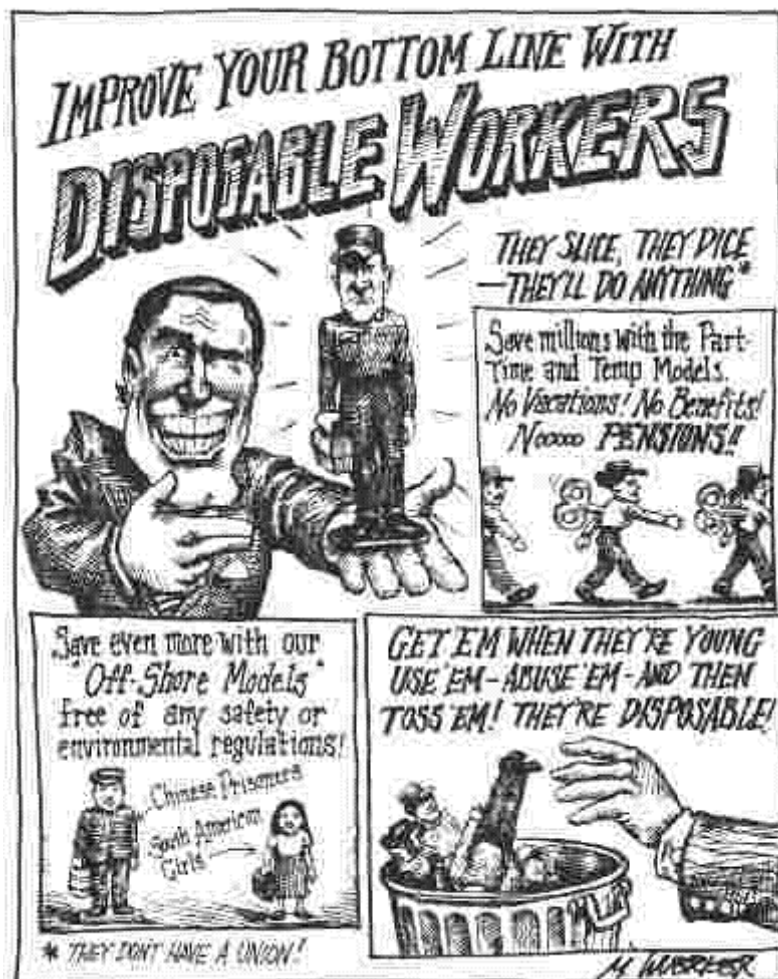
Daniel Gross, who co-founded the Starbucks Union, along with union members Evan Winterscheidt, Joe Agnis Jr and Charls Fostrom, have all been sacked. Thousands of people have written to Starbucks in protest at this attack - the auto-reply claims that the wonderful work environment "makes unions unnecessary at Starbucks."

The IWW took legal action - the company says it will stop the discrimination, bribing and intimidation of Starbucks Union members. But Starbucks still refuses to recognise its baristas' right to join a union.

The movement to organise super-exploited, mostly young workers in cafés and fast-food represents a vital struggle, taking on some of the biggest corporations in the world. Workers and activists in the UK must build this fight.

For more info, visit www.starbucksunion.org

Mike Wood, York University



LINKS://

LabourStart - News website featuring reports on trade union activity worldwide
www.labourstart.org.uk

ENS Women - independent women's caucus within the Education Not for Sale network. For a feminist voice in the student movement.
www.socialistfeminist.org.uk

UK Students Against Coke
A student collective working for workers' rights and social and environmental justice against the abuses of the Coca-Cola company
www.killercoke.org/student.htm

Bolivia Solidarity Campaign
Campaign working to support the grassroots workers' and indigenous movement in Bolivia, fighting against neo-liberal control of natural resources and for workers' and democratic rights.
www.boliviasec.org.uk

Supersize My Pay
Movement to support young workers being exploited by fast food and coffee multinationals. It organised the world's first strike at any Starbucks...
www.supersizemypay.com

Students Against Sweatshops is a student activist network which fights against the bosses of sweatshops worldwide - campaigning in solidarity with exploited workers.

We demand an end to

- Child labour
- Unsafe conditions
- Forced overtime
- Harassment of female workers

We fight for

- A living wage and reasonable hours
- Safe working conditions
- Independent trade union organization

We believe that the way to bring an end to exploitation in sweatshops is to build practical solidarity with workers' and students' organisations, and to work with the anti-capitalist movement in the UK and abroad. Students against Sweatshops support locally organised trade unions in every way possible. We provide financial support by organising fundraising events and we also raise awareness of international struggles for workers rights by building links with union organisers and bringing them to the UK to share experiences and help us learn from the ongoing struggle.

If you would like to submit an article or report for the next issue of the Students Against Sweatshops bulletin, please contact david_broder88@yahoo.co.uk

WHY DAVID CAMERON IS A WANKER

There are lots of reasons why the Tory Party leader David Cameron is a wanker. One of them is his ridiculous views on hip-hop and the role it apparently plays in encouraging violence and crime.

Cameron jumped on a very rickety and very boring bandwagon – driven mainly by rich white people like himself – that asserts that the often violent content of rap lyrics is directly responsible for things like knife crime.

Music that is different in some way from the perceived mainstream has always been attacked by the establishment and blamed for social ills, from Elvis Presley to the Sex Pistols. But the attacks from Cameron and others on hip-hop have a more sinister tone; would he be making such insinuations if many of hip-hop's artists and fans weren't black?

The implication is clear; the reason young black men turn to criminality is not because of their social circumstances (failing public services, crap jobs or no jobs at all, run-down housing that never gets seen to, the list goes on) but because they listen to music that, as Cameron put it, "encourages [them] to carry guns and knives".

The suggestion is that hip-hop fans are stupid, ignorant and willing to jump-to, Pavlov's dog style, at whatever comes out of the CD player. Blaming culture has always been the last resort of purveyors of rotten politics that have no solutions whatsoever to the actually existing problems.

Cameron has also clearly not listened to much hip-hop. The best elements of the UK scene consciously eschew the kind of machismo and glorification of



violence that characterises some mainstream American hip-hop.

At a time when many working-class communities in Britain do face serious problems with crime and drugs, British hip-hop has provided some of the most eloquent artistic responses to it. Rappers like Skinnyman, Plan B, Sway and Roll Deep have something of genuine interest and insight to say about the situation facing young working-class people today. Contrary to Cameron's typical, quasi-racist scare-mongering, hip-hop is part of the solution. The problem is social, and the blame lies squarely at the feet of the very politics Cameron represents.

Louise Gold, Sheffield University

For more information about Students Against Sweatshops, call Laura on 07890 209479, or email laura_schwartz2003@yahoo.co.uk To write an article for this bulletin email david_broder88@yahoo.co.uk Visit our website - www.studentsagainstsweatshops.org.uk