

How not to fight AIDS

George Davey Smith reviews 'The Truth About the AIDS Panic' by Dr Michael Fitzpatrick and Don Milligan (Junius, £1.95), and 'AIDS: The Socialist View' by Duncan Blackie and Ian Taylor (SWP, 90p)



AIDS victim in Africa

BOTH THE right and the left have been thrown into confusion by the advent of AIDS.

Reagan finally advocated public education about safe sex, then stated that this must be purely about how to say no. In the UK, a seemingly explicit information campaign was initiated well ahead of the US, with leaflets through every door. At the same time the government announced that if parents or governors objected to sex education in schools it could be dropped.

Meanwhile, almost every conceivable response has come from the left. The pamphlet from the 'Revolutionary Communist Party' (RCP) illustrates the confusion.

'The Truth About the AIDS Panic' identifies AIDS as being fundamentally a moral panic — yet another stick with which to beat gays.

For this purpose, it has been overplayed as a disease. Unless you are a homosexual man in London or an intravenous drug user in Edinburgh or London, AIDS is "not at present a serious health problem". You have "a higher chance of being run over by a bus than contracting AIDS".

These conclusions stem from arguments that AIDS is very difficult to transmit heterosexually, and anyway has caused a trifling number of deaths in the UK — 350 up to February 1987, compared to 190,000 from heart disease per year. Consequently it is not much of a prob-

blem and, unless you are in a high-risk group, the practice of safe sex is "quite unnecessary".

This oversimplified reasoning is unfortunately legitimised by the reassuring presence of a GP as an author. Medical knowledge regarding AIDS is still very limited, and the most active researchers are willing to admit their uncertainty as to the future course of the disease. Naturally no such worries trouble the authors of this book: they appear to know things which people who have spent years investigating the disease can only speculate about.

This book contains the truth about AIDS, after all. But how does the current evidence measure up to the RCP's 'truth'?

There is definite evidence of two-way transmission of the AIDS virus by vaginal intercourse, although this does not seem to occur as readily as through anal intercourse. The rapid spread of AIDS through Africa is largely through heterosexual contact.

Although malnutrition and co-existing infectious diseases may accelerate it, in some parts of Africa the disease first became established among the relatively affluent sections of the population.

The second cause of confusion concerns the impact of the disease. AIDS seems to pale into insignificance compared to heart disease as a cause of death, but this is very misleading.

AIDS generally affects younger people, whilst heart disease often occurs at the end of a long life. Therefore the total years of life lost because of a particular disease are a more useful measure

of its impact on a community.

Calculations based on one District Health Authority in London, Lewisham and North Southwark, suggest that by early next year AIDS will be the second biggest cause of years of life lost, ahead of lung cancer, breast cancer, road traffic accidents and strokes. By 1990, it seems AIDS will be the major cause of lost years of life.

The basis upon which the arguments of this book rest is seriously flawed. The future course of the disease is uncertain. True, it may not become established among heterosexuals, and the number of cases may stop rising. It is also true that the threat of AIDS can be overplayed and manipulated for reactionary political and social ends.

However, simply denying the importance of the disease is an inadequate response to the biological, political and moral repercussions of AIDS.

One way of downplaying the significance of AIDS as a disease (as opposed to a moral panic) is to ignore the horror of its spread through Africa. Therefore this book barely mentions AIDS outside the USA and UK, neglecting the areas where it causes most harm.

The fundamental misunderstanding shown in this book renders it at best useless and at worst dangerous. This is unfortunate since increased mobilisation against repression of gays is rendered vital by the onset of AIDS. AIDS is being used to control and harass gays.

The Public Health (Infectious Diseases) Regulations 1985 allow local authorities to perform forced

medical examinations on people "believed to be suffering from AIDS" and to have them detained in hospital.

The media feel increasingly free to attack gays in the grossest fashion; Tory politicians have advocated everything from enforced isolation to "putting 90% of homosexuals in the gas chamber", while Labour's paper policy against discrimination has become increasingly muted.

This book suggests that denying that AIDS is a threat to the heterosexual community will stem the increasing homophobia generated by the disease. The logic of this is not clear since when AIDS was seen as an exclusively gay disease there was a widespread belief that this 'gay plague' was somehow a punishment for deviant sexual behaviour.

The book's train of thought crystallises around the notion that "for the majority of gay men who are forced to pursue their homosexual encounters furtively, campaigns for safe sex are useless. The clandestine and chancy circumstances in which most gay men conduct their sexual encounters make it difficult for them to follow the government's guidelines".

Therefore it is the "oppression of homosexuals that allows HIV infection to spread among gay men". This is entirely consistent with the idealism inherent in the RCP's ultra-leftism.

The material reality — in this case the virus — becomes irrelevant. Once the structures of capitalist society are smashed, AIDS — together with women's oppression, racism, gay oppression, etc — will instantly and automatically disappear.

So long as you vote for your Red Front candidate, you can forget about AIDS and safe sex.

After the entertaining lunacy of the RCP, the pamphlet from the SWP is a duller but more worthy affair.

Unlike the former pamphlet, it correctly devotes space to the devastating epidemic in Africa and discusses the way AIDS will be used to increase racial, as well as anti-gay, discrimination. However, it mirrors 'The Truth...' in having no time for uncertainty.

This time the authors are sure that AIDS is the black angel's death song writ large. It outdoes the government's campaign when outlining the potential devastation of the UK by the disease. One article about AIDS in Socialist Worker was illustrated with a picture of the Grim Reaper, complete with grey cassock and scythe, waiting to take us home; whilst another suggested that all the people carrying HIV in Africa would go on to develop the disease.

There are dangers in presenting AIDS as threateningly as this. Irrational fears are developing — the reports of suicides of people believing themselves infected, and of fire-bombings of houses of

AIDS sufferers, must only reflect the tip of the iceberg in this respect. Furthermore, merely emphasising the threat of a disease is not effective in encouraging health-protective behaviour, especially if the message is based on uncertainty, as in this case, and is liable to be changed.

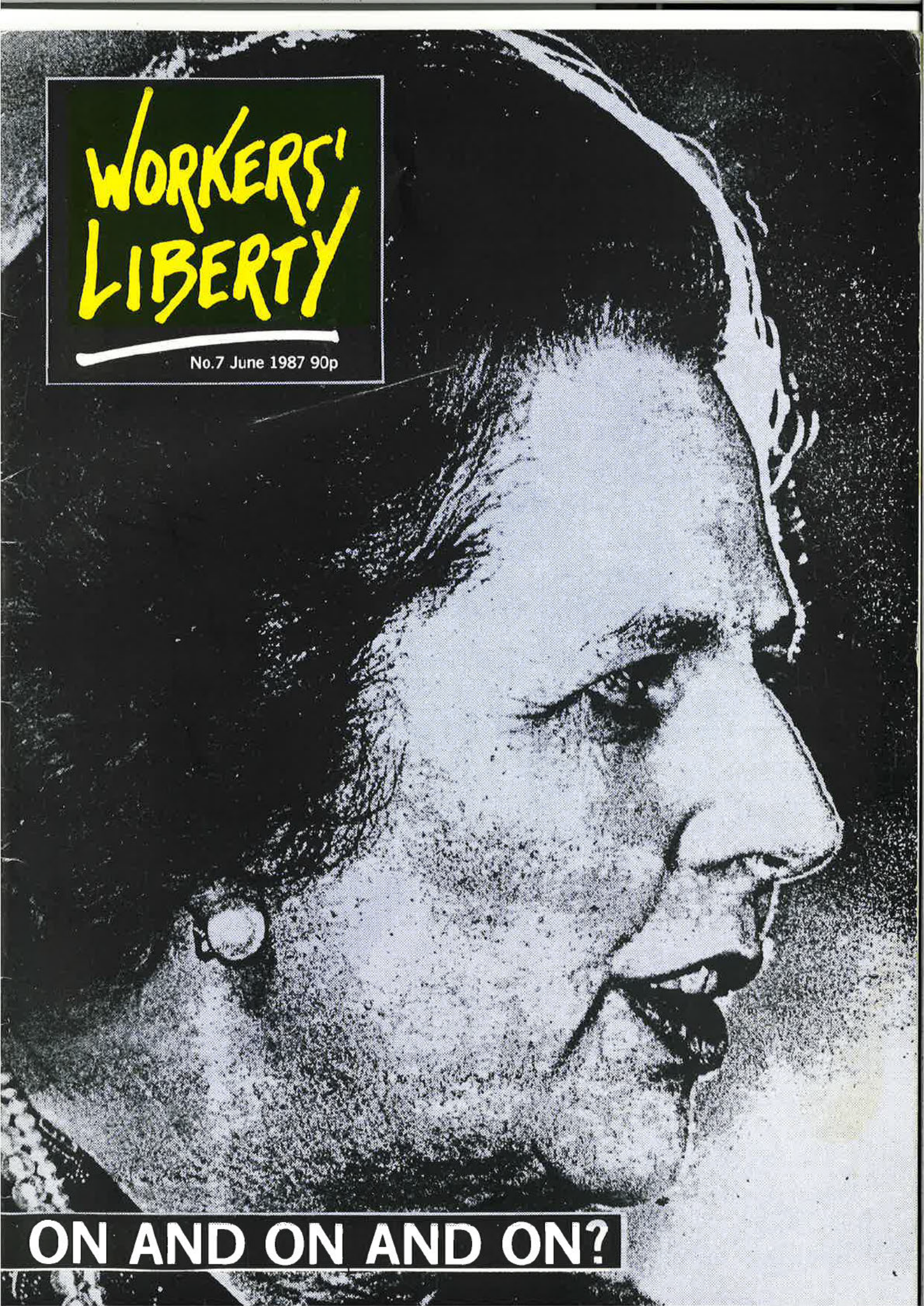
Naturally this pamphlet ends with a photograph of the main cause of AIDS — Neil Kinnock. Unfortunately excising his malignant presence from the labour movement won't by itself eliminate AIDS. Nor will making abstract propaganda for breaking with reformism and building the revolutionary party. However, this is what is counterposed to searching for a vaccine or treatment, which is dismissed as ultimately unimportant, together with that old scapegoat "attempts at reform by governments".

In fact, rather than being opposed, social change and scientific advance are intimately linked. Implementing a successful vaccination programme in the Third World and western countries is as much a political as a technical activity. The direction and nature of research into disease control is just as political.

Nixon's war against cancer declared in the late 1960s was, together with the space race, a useful cover for the disintegration of Lyndon B Johnson's 'Great Society'. Giving money to the Public Health Services laboratories and for AZT has been used as a pre-election softener in Britain.

On a worldwide scale there is a necessary connection between the struggle for social liberation and measures against all diseases, including AIDS. Safe sex and pharmaceutical companies will not finally control AIDS, but neither will the repetition of abstract slogans or the pretence of certainty where uncertainty exists.

² George Davey Smith is a medical doctor.



**WORKERS'
LIBERTY**

No.7 June 1987 90p

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