

**We're with you...
are you with us ?**



Top Row (left to right): Vaclav Havel, Otka Bednarova, Petr Uhl, Jarmila Belikova, Jiri Nemecek.
Bottom Row (left to right): Ladislav Lis, Jiri Dienstbier, Dana Nemcova, Vaclav Benda, Vaclav Malý.

Petr Uhl and the jailed Chartists in Czechoslovakia

Introduction

By JOE SINGLETON

The imprisonment of five leading members of the Charter 77 civil rights movement in October 1979 focused the attention of the entire labour movement in the West on the struggle for democratic rights in Czechoslovakia. On this first anniversary of the arrests, which took place in May 1979, **Socialist Challenge** publishes this short pamphlet in solidarity with our comrade Petr Uhl and all the other Charter members who have been unjustly prosecuted and imprisoned by the Czechoslovak regime.

All five jailed Charter 77 leaders — Petr Uhl, Vaclav Havel, Vaclav Benda, Otta Bednarova and Jiri Dienstbier — were members of the Committee to Defend the Unjustly Prosecuted (VONS), a civil rights body very similar in function to the NCCL in Britain. They were accused of subversion on the grounds that their public statements about illegal actions of the police and the courts 'threatened to undermine the Republic'. Yet at the trial the prosecution didn't even attempt to disprove a single allegation by VONS. The sentences were condemned by the entire left in Britain and by Socialist and Communist Parties throughout Europe in an unparalleled international outcry.

Born in 1941 Petr Uhl qualified as an engineer and, at the time of the Prague Spring, was a teacher in the Prague Technical College. Between 1965 and 1968 he spent considerable time in France where he became actively involved in student politics and in the movement that led up to the May general strike. As an activist in the CP-dominated student union in Paris he first came into contact with the ideas of the revolutionary left and became a supporter of the Fourth International.

After the Soviet invasion in August 1968 and the disintegration of the reformist leadership under Dubcek it was the small current of revolutionary Marxists associated with Petr Uhl that offered the first organized resistance to the occupation and developed a programmatic alternative to the policies of the Dubcek party team. The Movement of Revolutionary Youth (MRY), of which he was a founder and leading member, was formed in November 1968. But

before the invasion this current had already begun to organize during the Prague Spring.

In June 1968 a meeting of about one hundred people, organized by Uhl, Zbynek Fiser and various sympathisers of the Western revolutionary left, launched a **Discussion Bulletin (Informacny Materialy)** of which Uhl was editor and announced the formation of a left communist group which called itself the Prague Club. The June 24th issue of **Informacny Materialy** published excerpts from the Fourth International's Manifesto of May entitled 'For a Government of Workers' Councils in Czechoslovakia', as well as an account of the May events in Paris, an interview with Rudi Dutschke and an article by Fiser on workers' councils. The Club also published a Programme for Socialist Democracy which called for the removal of the Novotnyites from all positions of power, the establishment of workers' self-management and reliance on mass activity as the only guarantee for the establishment of socialist democracy. When Uhl returned from a trip to France he brought with him a copy of the famous Open Letter of the Polish oppositionists Kuron and Modzelewski which he translated. In June the student parliament of Charles University in Prague published 1,000 copies of this Open Letter which was very influential among the students.

Although Uhl was on the Committee of the teachers union and through this participated in the union's national activities, it was the student milieu that provided the base for his activity after the invasion. This small current of revolutionaries organized the big student strike of November 1968 and it was out of this strike that the Movement of Revolutionary Youth was formed. The strike was launched within days of the November meeting of the Party Central Committee which officially accepted the Moscow protocols. The strike, which was also an occupation, soon spread from the philosophy faculty into all the other faculties and into the high schools and lasted for one week. It established links with the unofficial trade union committees which were being formed especially with the Metal Workers Union. The MRY, although it had only 100 members in Prague, had a very wide influence among the students and among sections of the working class. Of the 30 members of the Student Council of Prague University 6 were members of the MRY and another 12 were sympathisers. Prominent leaders of the Metal Workers Union and the factory committees were also members. Its founding Manifesto called for the destruction of the bureaucratic state machine, the establishment of a system of self-management and a mass working class struggle for socialist democracy.

On the first anniversary of the invasion, in August 1969, the MRY distributed 100,000 copies of an Appeal (To All Young People) and, under the name of the Revolutionary Socialist Party of Czechoslovakia produced a Manifesto which clearly differentiated itself from the reform communists:

'We do not believe in the Action Programme of the Czech CP. We know that it is humane, that it is written with the best of intentions, and that we can agree with it in many respects, but the August invasion demonstrates that this

programme is not correct, for it is unworkable. We no longer believe in the system where the leadership, even when it is as humane as Dubcek, decides for the workers without them, for only the workers themselves have the right to decide their own destiny.'

In December 1969, as the MRY was preparing a demonstration to mark the anniversary of the death of Jan Palach, Petr Uhl and 25 other leaders were arrested. Tried in March 1971 he was sentenced to 4 years' imprisonment, with other members receiving lesser sentences. The repression broke the organization of the MRY but it did not succeed in breaking the continuity of the revolutionary current which Uhl represented.

Released in 1973 he organized the first public political protest to take place after the consolidation of the Husak regime — a petition of protest which solidarized with the working class struggle in Chile against the military junta and which, at the same time, criticized the hypocrisy of the Czechoslovak lawyers' association for its hollow expression of concern for the lack of civil rights in Chile.

Just as the organization of the MRY in 1969 paved the way for the organization of the reform communists in opposition so now also in 1973 the Chile protest demonstrated the possibility of a form of open political activity under Husak and paved the way for the Charter 77 movement. Uhl was a founding and leading member of Charter 77 and editor of its **Information Bulletin**. In the autumn of 1977 he initiated the Committee for the Defence of Unjustly Prosecuted Persons (VONS), a citizens' initiative within the civil rights movement which aimed, as stated in its programme of April 1978, 'to monitor the cases of persons who are being prosecuted or imprisoned for the expression of their convictions, or who have fallen victim to arbitrary police or judicial action'.

Between then and June 1979 VONS produced 114 communiques making public such cases of arbitrary and unjust prosecution. This small committee (22 members before the arrests) penetrated with its activity a large number of provincial towns in Bohemia and Moravia, defending ordinary people whose cases otherwise would never have come to the attention of the public. From the autumn of 1977 Petr Uhl was under constant surveillance by members of the Czech political police. He is now serving a five-year sentence under 'strict regime'.

The campaign launched in the Western labour movement at the time of the trial must now be stepped up to demand the release of Petr Uhl and all the imprisoned Charter members from prison and to defend the right of all such groups in Czechoslovakia to function freely without harassment and prosecution by the state.

Interview with Petr Uhl

The following is part of a longer interview with Petr Uhl which was conducted in Prague in January 1979. The full interview will be contained in a collection of Uhl's writings to be published later this year by Alternatives in Eastern Europe. The interview was conducted by Joe Singleton.

When did you become a Marxist?

I became a Marxist while I was still at college. I was very much influenced by the courses on Marxism, especially those of Professor Jiri Hermach, who was professor of Marxism. This was 1958-63. It is interesting for me that today Professor Hermach is one of the signatories of the Charter.

At the beginning I was a reformist. I had a critique of the bureaucratic system but I thought that the faults could be overcome gradually. I was very politicised by my experiences in France during the 1960s. I was there for two months in 1965, then again in 1967, and 3 times in 1968. In Paris in 1965 there was this internal crisis and debate in the student union, the UEC. There were three tendencies, a 'pro-Italian' (Togliatti) tendency, the Trotskyists and the Stalinists. The pro-Italian tendency was, of course, reformist and polycentric (i.e. Moscow is no longer the centre, national roads, etc.). The leader of this tendency was a person called Kahn. This is where I first met Alain Krivine, the leader of the Trotskyist tendency. I took part in all the big battles. I prepared myself for the discussions and I intervened. I also took part actively in their work. I used to hand out leaflets with the pro-Italian tendency.

I could speak French much better then than now. I knew Paris, the country, its culture, art and so on. For me Paris is the second city in the world after Prague.

In the struggle of tendencies I met many comrades like Krivine and I knew and discussed with the comrades of the JCR [La Jeunesse Communiste Revolutionnaire]. I brought back with me from France the famous letter of the Polish dissidents Kuron and Modzelewski.¹ When the Prague Spring, the democratisation process, began in Czechoslovakia in 1968 I translated it into Czech and the Student Parliament in Prague published it and distributed it. We made about a thousand copies. It was possible to do that then; the bureaucratic structures were loosening up. There was an office in every faculty where we could distribute such things. The letter was sold for only 5 crowns, during the invasion it cost 10 crowns! The translation and publication of the Kuron letter was my first important political act.

What were you personally involved in in 1968?

In Prague, in the spring of 1968, there was a left-wing discussion club organised by Zbynek Fiser (a philosopher, poet, at the time a Maoist, a propagandist of the Peking line, but also in favour of self-organisation and workers' councils). This question of self-organisation and workers' councils was in fact the main issue of discussion in the club. I played an active role in this club and was the editor of its Information Bulletin (which was called, by the way, **Informacni Materialy**). The club was really an amalgam of the far left, the Stalinists, a few Khrushchevites, and so on. We had about one hundred in Prague, more in the provinces. The club disintegrated at the time of the invasion.

I was also active in the trade union movement. At the time I was a teacher in the Prague Technical College. There was a Trade Union Committee of 8 people elected by the college and I was elected to this Committee in April 1968. Through my position in the union structure I was able to participate in union activity at a national level. I was a delegate to national conferences, for instance, and was able to intervene at this level. After August I looked for a new milieu to work in. The club had disintegrated. My union was far too weak and also too reformist to offer any real possibility. I was a teacher, and not in industry, so the question of workers' control didn't arise in such an immediate way in my union. At this point I linked into the student milieu. I had many friends in the Arts Faculty and also in my own faculty from student days. I played an active role in the student strike in November 1968 and out of this strike we formed the Movement of Revolutionary Youth (MRY).

Could you describe what happened in November 1968.

The November resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party made too many compromises between, on the one hand, the progressives (Dubcek leadership) and on the other hand the Soviet leaders with the Czech conservatives. The resolution says we are behind the Action Programme and behind the Moscow Protocol. Until this November meeting of the Central Committee the Moscow Protocol had not been officially accepted by the Party. When the session of the Central Committee was over, I remember I was in the Audi-Max in the philosophy faculty. There were a few hundred of us there. Then two people came in to speak to us and made a report on the Central Committee meeting. One was the Dean of the Faculty, Kladiva, and the other was Professor Kosik. They both spoke for 10 minutes. Kladiva said this is a compromise but we must accept it. It is a solution, we may not all agree, etc. but let's be realistic. Then Kosik spoke. Kosik is one of the best known Czechoslovak philosophers. Kosik said the resolution was a catastrophe. Referring to Jakes, one of the Stalinists who had made a very conservative speech at the Central Committee meeting, Kosik said he and Jakes couldn't be in the same party. Today Jakes is head of the Control Commission of the Central Committee of the Party. After a year both Kladiva

and Kosik were out of the Faculty and **both** out of the Party. It was at this session in the Auditorium Maximum that the student strike was in effect decided — it was the student reaction to the decision of the November resolution. The Philosophy Faculty was the first to strike but within 2-3 days all the other faculties had joined in. It was a protest strike but at the same time it raised many demands of a democratic character, for instance, against censorship, against the occupation and against the normalisation process. It was 11 days after the plenum that the strike began.

On 7 November, in the Engineering Faculty, there was a public meeting held outside the building. Müller came and spoke. There were three speakers on the platform, myself and two others. And when Müller intervened he said, we are all for Dubcek, and that is why now we have to be against Dubcek. Because Dubcek isn't the same thing anymore. You see, Dubcek had become a kind of symbol. The conservative Stalinist wing of the bureaucracy knew where it was going. They were clear what the Central Committee resolution meant. But the workers were confused. After we had spoken the Dean and the President of the Faculty answered. It was the Dean who spoke first. In the meantime, in order to see and hear better, one of the students had climbed onto a roof. So the first thing the Dean said was: 'He shouldn't sit there. He should come down.' But the student refused to come down. Then Müller intervened and he said that the student on the roof was the symbol of their activity. He is resisting the rules so that he can hear better. That is what we must do. This was on 7 November.

On 17 November we set up an Action Committee in the student movement in Prague. The 17 November was an important date for us because on that date in 1939 some students in Prague had been executed by the Nazis. Ever since then 17 November is International Students' Day. The International Students Union was founded in Prague. Around 1955-58 Pelikan was Chairman of the IUS. He had two deputies. Do you know who they were? — They were Berlinguer and Honnecker. Anyway, on 17 November we set up an Action Committee and we were meeting in a cafe discussing what to do about the November 7 resolution. We were about 30 people from different faculties in Prague. Then two students from Nitra came in. Nitra is a small provincial town in which there is only one college, an agricultural college. And they said to us, in Nitra all the students are already on strike. How come in Prague you are hesitating? Well, that decided us. The next day was the strike.

The strike lasted for a week. The atmosphere created, not only in the Philosophy Faculty, but also in Engineering and other Faculties, was very similar to the atmosphere in Paris in May '68. It was an occupation-strike, that was also the term we used then. The students stayed there 24 hours. There were at least 100 students in the building every night. We held conferences on political themes. The same happened in Brno. There are eleven faculties in Brno and Sabata gave lectures and spoke to most of them, about 9 out of 11. Many people from outside were invited in to speak, political people, writers, intellectuals. The seminars were organised thematically. For instance there

were 5 seminars on the New Left movement in Western Europe. I gave a seminar on the situation in France. Delegations came from the factories. Müller and others had made this famous contact between the student unions and the workers' committees. First it was with the workers in the machine-construction industry but it spread. There were also people from foreign countries and many different languages were spoken. In the student centre, self-management was put into practice. It wasn't all organised or decided by some small committee. There were always at least 20 or 30 people constantly there making suggestions, preparing decibaus, and so on. I must say that we had created a very revolutionary atmosphere but in what was overall a counter-revolutionary situation. The strike spread into the secondary schools as well. In November a red flag went up over the Philosophy Faculty in Prague. Just to indicate to you the kind of atmosphere created, I remember one day I walked into the Philosophy Faculty and I saw the red flag. There were two very young female students there and I went over and said, 'what is this?'. And one of them answered with complete naiveté, 'But it is a symbol of revolution!'

Of course the strike was not a success. But in the consciousness of the students it played a very important role. The link created between the students and the workers' movement was also very real and important. In April 1969 the same thing was repeated, though not on the same scale because some of the students had become a little bit worn out or tired. In April the strike lasted for a few days. in the Science Faculties a Committee was formed in April of about 100 people, which also included delegates from the factories and in which our comrades from the MRY played an important role. When Husak took over we called a mass meeting which was chaired by two people. In our milieu we referred to it as the Petrograd Soviet and the two chairpersons played the role of Lenin and Trotsky. Out of this strike we set up a Co-ordinating Committee and this committee worked for a whole year after that, even after many of us were already in prison. It is not so easy to break people. But of course the work had to become more and more conspiratorial.

What role did you play in the creation of the MRY? What were its activities and how did the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) develop out of it?

I played a very central role. My comrades were generally about 24-25 years of age. I was 28, experienced, had been abroad, knew the revolutionary movement in Western Europe, had read, and so on. So I had a prestige *plus élevé*. In the beginning the MRY was a discussion group. It was open; its manifesto was distributed publicly, read publicly at student meetings. But we also formed a **parallel** club with about 80 members which we called the Club for History, Sociology and Futurology. This was a legal club. It was public and met openly once a week. Remember this was in the autumn of 1968 and it was the repression which made us use this tactic. The link between the Club and the MRY was, of course, secret. But it provided us with a legal basis and it made discussion of the political and social system a bit easier than it would have been in the openly Revolutionary Youth Movement.

But gradually it became more and more clear that we couldn't appear publicly at all. The club lasted for about three months. We produced at this time and distributed a 100-page document which was mostly extracts from Trotsky, Bukharin, 3 or 4 articles from Czech Marxists, the Praxis group, Djilas and so on. These all dealt with political, social and philosophical questions and the goal of this action was to promote discussion on the nature of the political and social system. This was done by the MRY and done clandestinely.

The MRY had no stable structure. It was very spontaneous. We attempted to form cells but that failed. In June 1969 we discussed what we would do for the first anniversary of the invasion in August. Some tracts of a nationalist character already existed so we decided that we would prepare a Marxist tract. There was no committee which decided this, it was a result of very spontaneous discussions in the group. But under which name could we produce such a tract? It wasn't possible for us to publish it as the MRY because everyone knew who we were and the police would know who to go for. So we picked on the name Revolutionary Socialist Party as a cover-name for the MRY. So RSP was really a synonym for MRY. So our tract, or Manifesto, was published in the name of the non-existing Central Committee of the non-existing Party. There were two tracts produced, a Manifesto and an Appeal to Youth.² I was the principal author of the Manifesto. When it was finished there were a few people who were not happy with it. They then wrote the Appeal to the Youth. But the Appeal was actually a very good text. It was less ideological, but good.

After August 1969 the brutality of the police was so great, and was increasing, so we decided to establish an illegal movement. It was still not a party, but we were much more rigidly organised. We had cells, a co-ordinating committee, a division of labour and of responsibility. We were very much against spontaneism but we didn't yet make any attempt at democratic centralism. We were about 100 people. We had a clandestine journal and in the autumn of 1969 we were able to distribute leaflets. But the political situation was generally very unfavourable. Because we were clandestine we were penetrated by the police. One of our members was an informer. His name was Josef Cechal. The police discovered more than half our membership. Soon 19 out of 100 were in prison.

The trial lasted for 3 weeks. There was international solidarity. In Paris, Alain Krivine held a press conference on the premises of the Czech Embassy. There were other actions as well. I got 4 years.¹

What kind of balance sheet would you make now of the MRY(RSP) experience?

It was a very positive experience. It was one whole year of concentrated political activity, political activity in a free movement, freely associated. This was something extremely important for us. All our organisations before that were controlled by the state, just as they are now once again.

We were also a very important stimulus within the rest of the opposition. We were in fact an opposition within the opposition. In our Manifesto of August 1969 we made criticisms of Dubcek and the Dubcek leadership. The intellectuals from the Prague Spring began their opposition much later than us. We were the first. Ours was also the first trial, except for some individual cases. It was important, and interesting to note, that it was in **solidarity with us** that the ex-CP opposition first began to organise. The first or second leaflet of the Socialist Movement of Czechoslovak Citizens (the organisation of the ex-CP opposition) was in solidarity with us.

But it was, nevertheless, wrong to found this clandestine organisation in August 1969. Not because of the danger of prison, but rather because this clandestinity, this exceptional and 'sensational' manner of existence, can only lead to sectarianism, passivity and isolation. I don't say that clandestinity is wrong in general, or that it is always wrong in the states of the Eastern Bloc. But clandestinity is a phenomenon linked to the retreat or the defeat of the revolutionaries. Positively it can conserve revolutionary consciousness. But in the 20th century, in the bureaucratised and degenerated states of Eastern Europe, it is not possible to wage an effective struggle against the political system if we exist in clandestinity.

In the MRY in 1969 you were no longer, shall we say, of the 'pro-Italian' tendency of 1965, but you were a Trotskyist, a revolutionary Marxist. How did you come to Trotskyism?

Already during the Prague Spring in 1968 I was a revolutionary Marxist and I said so openly in the Club. I wasn't a member of the Fourth International but I received all the documents of the F.I. and my best friends were in the French Section, the Ligue Communiste. Also, shortly before 1968, in 1966-67, I had read Trotsky in Czech. Of course, I couldn't buy Trotsky in the shops here but his books had been published in Czechoslovakia before the Second World war, and were still to be found in the libraries of many individuals. I read **The Revolution Betrayed** and a collection of Trotsky's writings from 1927-28. But most important for me were his histories of the Russian Revolution, both 1905 and 1917. Those two works are a great 'school of revolution'. For instance, the question of the trade unions in Russia, Kronstadt, the Workers' Opposition and so on, are still today the key issues for us. We face the same questions today. I am not a nostalgic Trotskyist. I make a critical analysis of what Trotsky has written and done. There can be no question of idolatry in revolutionary Marxism.

Actually I don't like the word Trotskyism and I prefer to speak simply of revolutionary Marxism. It is wrong to say that there are two antipodes, Trotskyism and Stalinism. I am part of a movement which opposes capitalism and imperialism and **consequently** I oppose Stalinism. Historically, in Russia, Trotskyism took the form of anti-Stalinism, but in essence it is anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism.

In my discussions here in Czechoslovakia with the comrades of the Charter 77 I always underline the situation of the workers in Western Europe and in the third world and I underline the necessity of overturning the social and political system there. Trotskyism emerged in Russia as an anti-Stalinist opposition, and that history is very important, especially for us here. But it is my anti-capitalism which is the basis of my political consciousness, and it is this anti-capitalism which takes me to Trotskyism. The other members of the Charter are also anti-capitalist in the sense of social justice, egalitarianism, but they have many illusions in the democratic structure of bourgeois society. But I am totally against this capitalist system and I maintain that the only solution to the Czech situation is not bourgeois democracy, although it has more freedoms than we have here now, but a completely different social system, based on self-organisation, with the political structures of a direct democracy, with a real emancipation of the working class, of youth, of women. The development of a direct democracy is only possible in a democracy of workers; it is not parliamentarism, but a democracy of the producers which makes the transition to direct democracy possible.

When I speak here of organs of direct democracy, of self-organisation, this does not mean I am against parties. What I am against is a system where people cannot make their own decisions but someone else makes decisions for them. I am in favour of political parties, with clubs, papers, radio and television, agitation and propaganda and the freedom for parties to make proposals, suggestions, present political alternatives which people can choose to follow if they wish, not only follow but participate in. Parties are a means of politicisation, of education. But they are not organs or exercisers of **power**. Power must be in the organs of the working class and not in the parties. The workers in the councils, in the organs of direct democracy are not responsible to any parties but only to those who elected them.

I am not an orthodox Trotskyist. I think the Leninist theory of the party, the vanguard party that 'represents' the working class is open to discussion. Of course one can't reduce Leninism to this theory of the party which 'represents' the class. Leninism for me is a clear analysis of the state, a clear knowledge that all institutions of bourgeois power must be destroyed, the old apparatus, and that a new structure must be built, based on the working class.

The idea that the party takes power on behalf of or instead of the class is perhaps conditioned by the situation that existed historically in Russia in 1920. But today in Europe and in Czechoslovakia it's not the same. The vanguard I see as more of an ideological, intellectual grouping or layer which represents and defends best the interests of the labourers. It is not a vanguard by saying so; it **becomes** the vanguard through how in practice it represents and defends the interests of the labourers. But this vanguard cannot have **power**. Power does not belong to the party or parties, but to the councils of workers.

What was the dispute inside the Charter in September 1977, and what is the significance of the new committee which was declared publicly, the Committee to Defend the Unjustly Persecuted (VONS)?

In the Declaration of the Charter it is written that the Charter has no organisational structures. Soon, however, we found—I personally and some others—that the absence of an organisational element is negative for the Charter. Especially if we are to have political action. So, since the summer of 1977 we discussed this. Many suggestions were made, but turned down by the conservatives and by the less active members. Finally, after a long struggle, we succeeded in getting the 'working-group' principle accepted and written into the communiqué of September '77. We also had a long struggle to get accepted that there should be three spokespersons for the Charter. For months it had been Hajek alone. Those were the main issues of dispute in September.

So in September-October we already set up this Committee to Defend the Unjustly Persecuted (VONS). It wasn't declared but it was already functioning. We gathered information on people in jail: we brought cases to the attention of Amnesty International and we used to pass on information to the Charter spokespersons. That's why from the end of 1977 to April-May 1978 there were many communiqués concerning such cases. We often prepared those texts for the spokespersons. We were 5-8 people, about another 20-30 knew who some of us were, but the Committee was not public. We weren't 'secret' in the total sense, but we were not a declared Committee. We never said who the members were. We had discovered that the Charter spokespersons were being heavily influenced by people who didn't want everything widely publicised, who were more oriented to doing things behind the scenes. So in April 1978 we finally declared ourselves.

There was a big discussion at first around the question whether we should or should not be a committee of the Charter. We knew we couldn't be completely independent — after all, we were all Charter signatories. But **formally** we are not an organisation of the Charter, because we are an organisation, with members and rules. We have good relations with the Charter spokespersons and often sign communiqués jointly with them, but we are not a Charter organisation. It was hard at the beginning and some people said we would not succeed. But we have functioned openly now for 9 months and it's working.

Now there are other groups that will perhaps declare themselves as well. They are already organised and doing things, for instance, on ecology, on conditions of work, on unions, on rights of children (there is already a document on childrens' rights). There is also now a committee handling the relations between Charter 77 and the Polish Social Self-Defence Committee - KOR. I am naming now, of course, only the initiatives that **defend** human rights. There are many other initiatives that **realise** those rights in practice by their own activity, for instance, in music, culture, papers, literature, theatre, etc.

I think the most important such initiative concerns work in the trade unions. We are having a discussion tomorrow on the possibility of an independent trade union, and the day after tomorrow we will form such an independent trade union. We have already had correspondence with the ILO, CGT, etc.

How would you sum up your conception of the Charter?

The Charter is a human rights movement. It is a citizens' movement, a kind of permanent citizens' initiative, with sub-initiatives. The Charter, for me, is a protection for those initiatives which realise human rights in practice, in culture, etc. Charter 77 protects these. Thus it can't be an organisation but it must have organisational elements. These organisational elements cannot be obligatory for all Charter signatories, but only for those who want them. Charter must in no case be united around a political platform.

Chile and Czechoslovakia

The following letter, signed by thirty former Czechoslovak political prisoners, was addressed to the official Union of Czechoslovak Lawyers. The text is taken from the October 31 1974 New York Review of Books.

On 14 June 1974 the Czechoslovak press published a resolution of your Union of Czechoslovak Lawyers protesting events in Chile. The document stated that the Union follows with great apprehension the daily flow of news concerning illegal measures and the escalating terror directed against all progressive and patriotic forces in that country. It further stated that the Union condemns the persecution, torture, and mass executions of Chilean patriots. In its resolution, the Union of Czechoslovak Lawyers called for the restoration of constitutional and democratic freedoms in Chile and observed that leaders of the Chilean people are quite deprived of their civil rights and legal protection. The Union demanded that it be allowed to participate in the defence of Luis Corvalan, and of other patriots, during their trials.

We believe it is a matter of all progressive people all over the world to do all they can for Chilean revolutionaries and democrats and to offer full material and moral support to their just struggle for a democratic society and for socialism. We can say so only now, however, for many of us had no earlier opportunity. We declare at this time that we, former political prisoners of Czechoslovakia during the Seventies, are in complete solidarity with the struggle of Chilean progressive forces, and that we unequivocally and energetically condemn the terror of the fascist junta.

We feel we have the full right to express such solidarity; for we are linked with progressive Chileans through common ideals, common goals, and frequently through common fates. However, we deny the right to express such solidarity to you, gentlemen of the Union of Czechoslovak Lawyers, for we are not aware of a single instance in which your Union would have come forth in defence of human rights, civil liberties, or adherence to legality in your own country — Czechoslovakia. Or do you perhaps really believe it correct, from the point of view of justice and its role in society, that dozens of thousands of our fellow citizens have in recent years been forced out of their positions and had to take jobs incommensurate with their training and qualifications?

Do you believe it correct that children of so-called 'rotten' parents may not study at high schools and colleges?

Do you believe it correct that numerous fellow citizens have been vilified in the press for their recent political activity (i.e. during 1968-69), with no chance to defend themselves?

Do you, gentlemen from the Union of Czechoslovak Lawyers, really believe that in your own country there exist ample guarantees of freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly and association, the freedom of movement, even of leaving one's own country and coming back, the freedom of scientific inquiry?

Do you believe it correct, from the point of view of criminal justice and its role in society, that in Czechoslovakia, the death penalty may be meted out to those who conduct 'especially dangerous activity against the foundation of the Republic ... if it results in particularly detrimental consequences', especially in the light of recent experiences which demonstrated that any political activity not favoured by our ruling group can be interpreted as dangerous to the order of the Republic?

From the point of view of the role of criminal justice: is it really proper that in the summer of 1972, 47 communists and socialists were sentenced to long years (up to six and one-half) in prison, in line with stipulations that were more moderate than those prevailing today? The defendants included Milan Hubl, the former President of the High Party School, University Professors Jaroslav Meznik and Antonin Rusek, Regional Communist Party Secretaries Alfred Cerny, Jaroslav Sabata and Jaroslav Litera, Jan Tesar, the historian, Jiri Muller, the student leader, and many others.

Are you confident, gentlemen, that these trials were conducted in strict accordance with the law, that during investigation, the secret service applied no psychological pressure, and that physical torture was not applied in a single instance? Are you satisfied that stipulations concerning the participation of the public in such trials were met? Are you sure that no foreign lawyers from democratic associations requested to take part in the hundreds of political trials that have taken place since 1969, and that if they did, such requests were granted?

Are you satisfied that the conditions for incarcerated communists and socialists meet the standards set by law (although it was amended in 1973 to give more power to the jailers), that political prisoners have no stricter a regime than criminals have, that they are being fed adequately, do not suffer from avitaminosis, enjoy full medical care, that their elementary educational needs are taken care of, and that, conversely, they are not being hermetically isolated in order to liquidate them through mental breakdowns?

We all live in the same country, and are all aware of the real state of its affairs. Though every one of its citizens is responsible, your responsibility is greater by virtue of your greater knowledge, and by virtue of your greater capacity to change or alleviate the situation. Besides, we feel, on the basis of numerous personal experiences, that your organisation is hardly representative of the bulk of Czechoslovak lawyers.

Your resolution in defence of civil rights in Chile and in opposition to the Chilean fascist junta is hypocritical, and your voice rings false. We, Czechoslovak political prisoners of the first half of the Seventies, are indeed linked by tight bonds of solidarity and affinity or proximity in ideology and action with Chilean socialists, communists, revolutionary Marxists, Christians, and other democrats, in line with our own diverse political orientations.

You, however, have nothing in common with them, and hypocritical words can hardly mask that. Your own task is merely to defend, through propaganda, the situation in your own country, complete with the lively trade between Czechoslovakia and the Chilean fascist junta, and with Czechoslovakia's refusal to offer political asylum to Chilean refugees.

We have confidence in the future victory of the just struggle of our Chilean comrades, friends, and brothers against fascism and terror, for democracy, freedom and socialism. We want them to know that in Czechoslovakia, they have many true allies.

Signed by former political prisoners, of the years 1969-74:

Karel Bartosek, Rudolf Battek, Ivan Binar, Jan Dus, Karel Fridrych, Ladislav Hejdanek, Jiri Hochman, Karel Kaplan, Vavrinec Korcis, Anna Koutna, Bohumir Kuba, Vit Lepil, Jan Lestinsky, Vladimir Nepras, Jan Schopf, Josef Stehlik, Jaroslav Suk, Jan Svoboda, Jan Sabata, Vaclav Sabata, Anna Sabatova, Pavel Sremr, Zdenek Sumavsky, Petruska Sustrova, Alex Richter, Zuzana Richterova, Petr Uhl, Zdenek Vasicek, Premysl Vondra, Radko Vyoralak.

Appeal to the Western Revolutionary Left

The following letter to the Western left was written in March 1977. It is taken from Labour Focus on Eastern Europe. Translation is by Mark Jackson.

Comrades!

The revolutionary left, especially in the bourgeois democratic countries, often displays an aversion to the defence of civil rights and democratic freedoms which flows from their opposition—often justified—to the reformist movements whose first and sometimes only aim is to achieve at least partial improvements in the area of social relations, most frequently through a so-called dialogue with the state power.

We well know that the free development of society, based on the free development of each individual, is realisable only in a classless society, and that this is the result of a long process of the development of democracy opened up by the proletarian social revolution. But it is the common belief of all of us Marxists and revolutionary socialists that already the first revolutionary phase of communist development must bring to every member of society more rights and freedoms than can be assured by even the best bourgeois democracy — especially in the light of a critical analysis of those proletarian revolutions which have taken place up until now, and all aspects of their degeneration.

This opinion—if using other phraseology—is shared with us by all the reformists and recently their latest component, the Eurocommunists. In distinction from them however, revolutionaries do not suffer from the illusion that socialism and the liberation of humanity and society can be achieved through the gradual democratisation of bourgeois society, retaining capitalist relations of production, or with their gradual removal. Neither do they suffer from the illusion that a fascist or any other totalitarian power is likely to concede any extension of civil rights or democratic freedoms, or will be ready to engage in a dialogue on this theme.

But we can also understand that many of those who struggle for human rights against regimes of an autocratic kind or military, bureaucratic or other dictatorships are as aware as us that their efforts cannot lead to the results that they publicly demand. At the same time, however, they know that the **demands themselves** for democratic freedoms and civil rights which cannot be realised under dictatorships can arouse the working class and other important layers of the working population, can heighten their fighting power, and shake the very foundations of the dictatorship. The example, near to us all, of Spain, is proof of this.

The pro-capitalist illusions and reactionary myths that may guide this struggle initially weaken to the extent that the self consciousness and self-confidence of the working class are raised. I think that the role of revolutionaries is to stand at the head of the struggle, to fight against illusions and myths, and at the same time to remember that no struggle for human rights, even if led by the Communist Party of Spain, can replace the revolutionary activity of the masses, transforming social relations from the bottom up, as history demands.

A struggle for human rights, however, is one of the roads that leads to revolution; it is one of the ways in which the subjective preconditions for the social and political revolution can be created. While it is certainly possible to doubt that such a strategy is suitable for the countries of bourgeois democracy, it is evident that it is useful and sometimes the only strategy under military and bureaucratic dictatorships and fascist regimes.

Everyone in the milieu of the revolutionary left recognises this when it is a question of evaluating a struggle for civil rights in the countries which belong to the so-called Western sphere of influence. They have reservations if they are evaluating such a movement in the countries of Eastern Europe. It seems to me that the difference, and sometimes confusion of the approach of the West European and American extreme left to this problem flows from a different, often superficial or even wrong, analysis of the social and political systems in this part of the world.

I can well understand, as an opponent of parliamentarism and other junk of bourgeois democracy, that the Charter 77 appeal—and Charter 77 is in deadly earnest and I identify myself with it—can have a repellent effect on Marxists when its sets as its one aim the effective introduction of principles contained in international agreements about civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights, and that these pacts, ratified, legally enacted and published by the Czechoslovak state power — are the basis and starting point of its activity. (A side remark: the Czechoslovak workers do not have such a firmly negative attitude towards bourgeois democracy as I would like; in this they proceed from their own experience of Stalinism and the autocratic regime.)

It might also put people off that the rights codified in both pacts are insufficient, aimed rather at the interests of intellectuals than workers; that both pacts have only a declarative value, as was the case with the old Universal Declaration of Human Rights; that they are expressions of efforts towards class reconciliation and of such a conception of peaceful co-existence as temporarily enables the survival of social and political formations doomed to destruction by history, involving not the peaceful co-existence of peoples but of state formations and confederations.

I would have liked to have written more about this, also about my opinions on the social and political system in Czechoslovakia, but the problem is that if I were to write something untrue, or rather something which the authorities found to be untrue, I could be imprisoned for it for up to 3 years. And if you

do not believe me, comrades, look at Article 112 of the Czechoslovak criminal code. And precisely because of this, I think that both pacts have their significance for the workers of Czechoslovakia and other countries and that it makes sense to refer to them since they have been legally enacted and published by the state authorities.

I do not see this significance in the fact that in a year or two I will be able to write without risking imprisonment—then I will still not be able to—but in the fact that collective 'legal' (I use quotation marks because you cannot visualise what such 'legality' is like) struggle for the realisation of the principles contained in both pacts arouses the workers, who can see their own interests contained in this activity, and raises their self-awareness and self-confidence.

But I have already written about this, when I evaluated the struggle for civil rights and democratic freedoms under military and bureaucratic dictatorships. For reasons which I have mentioned, I am, of course, far from designating Czechoslovakia as a bureaucratic dictatorship.

Charter 77 is not a political opposition nor does it wish to become one. It is too politically heterogeneous for that, and its aim—to struggle for civil rights and democratic freedom on the basis of international pacts, which are part of the Czechoslovak legal regulations—is too narrow. It is nonetheless the most significant movement in this country in recent years and has had significant resonance amongst the workers. It expresses their interests, even if not fully nor directly.

The clause in the pact on social, economic and cultural rights which says that workers should have the right to build trade union and other organisations in defence of their interests without any hindrance, and that they should have the right to strike could perhaps be the starting point of the road which leads to the emancipation of the workers, which they will achieve **themselves** by means of **their own** organisations.

When I say the starting point, I am thinking of the subjective preconditions of that road, and I do not share any illusions about a reformist 'dialogue' or even some spontaneous way leading to the achievement of these rights. And as to what that road might be if it is not the road of reformism, a revolutionary Marxist, burdened as he is by the threat of 3 years—in this case in fact 10—must not mention. The active and passive support which is shown in one way or another to Charter 77 by workers—mainly by young workers—is the promise of this road.

It is likewise not possible to accept the idea that the propagation of the ideas of Charter 77 and the publication of information about the deprivation of human rights in the countries of Eastern Europe distracts attention from the economic crisis, unemployment and other problems of the universal crisis of capitalism. The apologists of bourgeois society certainly try to divert attention from these problems—and will use anything for the purpose—but the supporters of socialism and progress have quite different motives for solidarity with the struggle for human rights in Eastern Europe.

There is only one world, and the boundaries of class and the class struggle pass across every society without paying any attention to the borders of states, and there are good reasons why it is not possible to offer the arrangement of Czechoslovak society as a model to the workers oppressed by capital. To be silent about the problems of Czechoslovak society would mean to be silent about the rich experience which the Czechoslovak workers have accumulated over the past 30 years.

Only truth is revolutionary, lies and the concealment of facts are counter-revolutionary. And just an aside: nobody in Czechoslovakia complains when the official press publishes long articles about unemployment, the crisis and the infringement of human rights in the West. Even in the majority of foreign news is made up of such articles—which was not the case before 1 January 1977—even if they are distorted and tendentious—if, for example, a lot is written about a particular social and political conflict, but when it works out well for the workers then only a little or nothing at all is written; even if sometimes they are downright funny when compared to Czechoslovak reality—as for instance concerning the possibility of controlling the secret service in West Germany—the Czechoslovak workers accept this information with interest and sympathy, as information about serious problems of the capitalist world.

Nobody complains that this distracts attention from domestic problems, whose very essence frequently remains hidden. The time will certainly come when the Czechoslovak workers will not only be better informed, but will have the same or other problems to solve along with the workers of the European and other countries.

For these reasons, I ask all comrades to help Charter 77 and to solidarise with it in whatever way you can. It is clear that the international problem of human rights and their infringement, or the existence of countries where the fight for democratic freedoms in the framework of the system brings serious and immediate consequences, is a matter of concern to us all, revolutionary Marxists, Christians, humanists, and reformists; I know that it is also the concern of Charter 77 which is at this moment fighting for its very existence, to acquaint the Czechoslovak workers with the problems of the infringement of civil rights in capitalist countries.

Help can be very concrete. Three signatories of Charter 77 have been in prison since the middle of January of this year; a spokesman for the Charter, writer Vaclav Havel, another writer Frantisek Pavlicek, and a journalist Jiri Lederer. With them in prison is the director Ota Ornest.

Even though they are accused of other political crimes of a verbal character—I have already shown you the Czechoslovak legal code—it is clear that their imprisonment is a direct, and until now the most vicious act of repression against Charter 77. The cases of two young technicians are analogous: Vladimir Lastuvka from Decin and Ales Machacek from Usti nad Labem, who are also

imprisoned in connection with the Charter 77. Only international solidarity can help here.

As in other similar cases each will choose their own forms of protest and measures, according to their possibilities and habits. In Czechoslovakia these possibilities are very small, being basically confined to verbal protests, and even these are very risky. In countries where workers are organised in trade unions and political organisations, which are independent of the state power, the forms of solidarity and protests can be more effective.

Free Vaclav Havel, Frantisek Pavlicek, Jiri Lederer, Ota Ornest, Vladimir Lastuvka and Ales Machacek!

Free the Czechoslovak political prisoners!

**Petr Uhl
Prague**

3 March 1977

Support for the Berufsverbot Victims

The Berufsverbot is a West German law banning Marxists and people sympathetic to Marxism from being teachers, civil servants or postal workers. This 'Open Letter to Citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany Hit by the Berufsverbot' was first published in the West German liberal daily, Frankfurter Rundschau, on 25 October 1977. All the signatories are people who have signed the Charter. Doctor Jaroslav Sabata was First Party Secretary in Brno, second largest Czech city, during the Prague Spring of 1968. He was imprisoned in 1972 for his activities in the socialist opposition and was released in 1976 after serving 5 years of his six-and-a-half year sentence. He was arrested again in October 1978 while attempting, with other Charter members, to meet a delegation from the Polish opposition group KSS-KOR. He was sentenced in January 1979 to 9 months for insulting a policeman and in May 1979 was sentenced to 18 months. Petr Uhl is married to Anna Sabatova, daughter of Dr Sabata. Anna Sabatova is a prominent leader of the Charter movement and was imprisoned in 1972 for her opposition activities.

We address ourselves to you as people who are under attack in your country just as we are in Czechoslovakia. The majority of Charter 77 signatories, of citizens who refused to criticise it and of people who were caught distributing it will be barred both from jobs in line with their qualifications and capacities and also from occupations which can provide a reasonable wage. With such measures all work possibilities are controlled, since our whole economy is managed by one central body.

Furthermore, there are some thousands of citizens in Czechoslovakia who were sacked from their jobs because they openly opposed the military invasion of the country in 1968. Even to this day they have not been able to return to suitable employment. And those citizens who have close relatives in emigration cannot occupy jobs above a certain level of responsibility.

Almost all citizens of the CSSR apart from members of the Czechoslovak CP are unable to hold leading positions in enterprises and other institutions, since Party decisions require the overwhelming majority of such posts to be occupied by Party members only. Many people are restricted by all kinds of measures such as the so-called 'cadre-ceilings'. The number of people persecuted in this way has become larger since school and university leavers are chosen according to the origins and jobs of their parents, their religious convictions, etc., rather than their abilities.

In this situation no one can have any security, either legal or otherwise. The press in the CSSR attacks individual people whose views are different from its own; on no occasion has our press informed its readers about citizens subjected to our *berufsverbot* (employment discrimination). In the Czechoslovak mass media we can hear about the German Federal Republic's *Berufsverbot* but unfortunately without explanation of what it concretely involves and what kind of people are affected by it. It is clear that in the majority of the cases it involves members of the DKP (West German Communist Party). But information about other currents affected is not obtainable in the CSSR. Therefore, could you please give us the necessary information about such cases? Finally, we give you full authority to protest in our name in the newspapers of the German Federal Republic against the fact that these newspapers occupy themselves with the persecution of Czechoslovak citizens while keeping quiet about their own problems.

You have certainly understood from this letter that the Czechoslovak mass media misuse the issue of the *Berufsverbot* to cover up domestic grievances and not to declare their solidarity or to provide concrete assistance. We therefore ask you to take a stand against this state of affairs — the best way would be to send an open letter to the Czechoslovak mass media.

We are sure that in the future we will be able to find a common oppositional platform. If, for whatever reason, the solidarity actions that we propose are impossible, we would ask you to take this letter as an expression of our solidarity.

Ivan Medek, Janackovo nabr.49, Prague 5.
Dr Jaroslav Sabata, Krizkovskeho 43, Brno.
Jiri Pallas, Mikulase z Husi 16/341, Prague 4.
Jan Lopatka, Vlasska 10, Prague 1.
Jiri Nemecek, Jecna 7, Prague 2.
Anna Sabatova and Petr Uhl, Anglicka 8, Prague 2.

Open Letter to Heinrich Böll

The 'Open Letter to Heinrich Böll' first appeared in the Frankfurter Rundschau, 30 November 1977. The translation is by Patrick Camiller.

Dear Heinrich Böll,

Allow us to express our sympathy and esteem for you in the period you are now living through. We value your literary work for its artistic worth and humanism, which spring from a deep experience of society. In the same way, we value your humanitarian stand as a citizen wherever human freedoms and civil rights, including those of dissidents, are threatened.

We are standing up for human rights in Czechoslovakia and so we are naturally opposed to individual terror as a means of solving political arguments or social conflicts. We consider terror as a degenerate phenomenon with extremely negative consequences not only for those directly concerned but also for the whole of society, whose public life is traumatized by acts of terror. But we are at the same time very disturbed at the efforts of certain circles to treat terrorism as a welcome opportunity to launch, under cover of the search for terrorist sympathisers, a witch-hunt against people to whom terrorist methods are completely alien and distasteful.

On no account will we approve the demand of these circles to 'open the hunting season' in order to silence free-thinking citizens who inquire into the underlying causes of negative social phenomena. These citizens support the view that society should not be placed in a position where it defends itself against abominable terrorist activities only through surgical operations. It is the duty especially of scientists and artists to discover the roots of these social aberrations if society is to create enough anti-bodies against their regeneration. We know very well from the experience of our own country what follows from silencing opinions through obstruction, amalgam and anathema. We are all the more disturbed in that you and other humanists are slandered as terrorist sympathisers as a result of approaching the problem in the way we advocate.

Just as you support us in our efforts, so do we now stand by your side. Continue to count us as your friends in solidarity.

Yours,

Karel Bartosek, historian; **Jiri Dientsbier**, journalist; **Jiri Hajek**, political scientist, ex-Minister of Foreign Affairs; **Milan Hübl**, historian, ex-rector of the Party college; **Jaroslav Hutka**, musician; **Vlasta Chramostova**, actress; **Zdenek Jicinsky**, legal scientist; **Vladimir Kadlec**, economist, ex-Minister of Religious Affairs; **Ivan Klima**, writer; **Pavel Kohout**, writer; **Klement Lukes**, social scientist; **Stanislav Milota**, cameraman; **Venek Silhan**, economist; **Ludvik Vaculik**, writer; **Petr Uhl**, technician; **Jirina Zelenkova**, doctor.



Photo: Ivan Basta (Palach Press)

Charter 77 spokesperson, Zdena Tominova.

Conditions of Imprisonment

By OLIVER MACDONALD

How are the Charter 77 political prisoners being treated? What are the regulations governing their conditions?

The answer is that we cannot know. The most terrible feature of political imprisonment in Czechoslovakia is the fact that the regime has a complete grip on all the institutions of society outside the prisons and this gives it an almost completely free hand inside its prisons and camps. There is no independent scrutiny of any sort in relation to prison administration, there is no opposition press or independent press able to protest against injustices, and the regulations laid down for prison administration are state secrets not revealed either to the prisoners or the public.

The only two points of contact between the prisoner and the outside world are letters to next of kin, which are systematically censored, and very infrequent visits from next of kin which can be blocked by the regime which take place in front of guards and which can be terminated at any moment. Thus, for example, Petr Uhl, who is serving a 5-year sentence as a second category (strict regime) prisoner is allowed one visit every six months and that visit can last no

longer than an hour. He is also allowed to write one letter a fortnight, but these letters can be stopped by the authorities if they contain anything that they feel should not be publicly revealed. Thus his wife was unable to receive any letters during February. This gives the regime tremendous scope to break political prisoners physically and mentally, particularly during the early months and years of jail sentences.

As to formal regulations there is a law on imprisonment which declares, for example, that 'all persons deprived of personal freedom shall be treated in a humane manner and with respect for the dignity of the human being'. But under Husak the letter as well as the spirit of this law is routinely flouted. Thus the law (Article 15, para.3) says that 'The convict can obtain legal aid by a lawyer', yet in practice prisoners are banned from obtaining a lawyer in a conflict with the administration. The real regulations for prisons are those of the Minister of Justice's Code on Imprisonment in Correctional Educational Categories — a secret document. The Minister of Justice can make all manner of secret directives for specific groups of prisoners. Thus, although the regime officially refuses to recognise the category of political prisoner, it used just such a category after the wave of 11 political trials in 1972 when a secret directive ordered especially harsh new rules for political detainees.

Most of what we know about the real conditions in Czechoslovak prisons comes from a very detailed document issued by Charter 77 in 1978 (Charter Document No.16). This document reveals that since 1969 when Husak came to power, the regime has severely undermined the previous rights of prisoners. For example, the right to wear one's own clothes has been abolished, the duration of exercise has been shortened, rules on correspondence and on the receipt of parcels have been radically stiffened. Visits to prisoners have been limited to one hour and will be terminated if discussion strays beyond 'family matters'. Punishments of prisoners have also become much more severe and are especially common for failure to achieve work output norms. This is met with a cut in food rations, designed, presumably to produce a further weakening of the prisoner's work capacity. Since the early 1970s certain prisons, including those where Petr Uhl and his comrades sentenced in October of last year have been sent, have had special political isolation cells set up by secret order of the Ministry of Justice. These are designed to hit the prisoners' physical health. In general, the Charter 77 document reports, political prisoners are treated to a harsher regime than other prisoners.

Among the regulations designed to be deliberately humiliating or harmful to the prisoners' health, we can mention the following: in some prisons, the prisoners are banned from sleeping on their backs; women prisoners can change underwear only once every 10 days and are banned from washing their underwear in the meantime; leaning against the wall or sitting on the floor even when there are insufficient stools can be banned; political prisoners are banned from reading political literature except for Marxist or pseudo-Marxist texts and Marxist political prisoners are banned even from reading Marxist works.

Rules are framed in such a way as to endanger prisoners' health. Thus, they are allowed to see a doctor only once a week on a specific day and if unwell on a different day they can be subject to disciplinary action for missing work if the doctor declares them unfit for work. In Mirov, where Petr Uhl is held, sugar is not available in the canteen and in 1972 a prisoner there died of blood poisoning because his fellow prisoners were unable to gain the attention of the guards during the night. In the same prison, a prisoner called Betak was left to die as a result of a hunger strike in the early 1970s. Prison regulations stipulate that a temperature of up to 38 degrees is no grounds for unfitness to work. The list of measures used to break political prisoners' physical health could be extended for pages.

So far we know the following facts about the Chartists sentenced last October: *Petr Uhl: his chronic bronchitis has become acute as of April partly as a result of the bad food and especially because he has to carry heavy weights of up to 40 kilos up 67 steps. He is allowed no written material whatever — no letters from his wife or children for example, nor even the notes he made at his work place concerning the fulfillment of his work norm. He is not allowed photos of his wife and children. Because of a previous sentence of 4 years for his political resistance to the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, he is classed as a recidivist and, unlike his comrades, is in a second category strict regime prison camp. He is serving a 5-year sentence. His first visit will be between May and July.

*Vaclav Havel is serving four-and-a-half years in Hermanice prison camp, working in a steel works. A world famous writer, Havel is banned from any writing except the regulation letter to his next of kin. A one hour visit from his wife and brother in February was frequently interrupted by the warden to ensure it was confined to discussing family matters.

*Vaclav Benda, serving 4 years in Hermanice. Though allowed to write every week to his wife only two of his letters have been sent to her by the authorities. He has not received a single one of the 6 letters sent by his wife. He works in the steel works.

*Jiri Dienstbier is serving 3 years in Hermanice and is also working in the steel works. He is suffering from severe back pains and is being given injections for this.

*Otta Bednarova is serving three years in Opava prison. Already very sick and on an invalid pension before her arrest, her health has deteriorated considerably during her time in detention. She has a swelling of her legs, a painful swelling of her lymphatic glands, serious gall bladder problems and deteriorating eye-sight as well as loss of weight. But she has not been classified as unfit for work in prison.

*Jaroslav Sabata is, until December of this year, serving the remainder of a sentence he received in 1972 for his resistance activity after the Soviet invasion. He has had two heart attacks and has a tumour of the pancreas. He is in an isolation cell in Litomerice prison. His letters are heavily censored, his reading matter is severely curtailed. Because of the severe restrictions he faces nothing is known about his work and other conditions in prison.

Under the repressive conditions of Czechoslovak society defence of the prisoners is very difficult. It is precisely the labour movement in the West that can do the most to defend them against the regime. The sensitivity of the regime to the criticism and protest from the Western labour movement is the prisoners' only defence.

Letters and resolutions in support of the prisoners should be sent to the Czechoslovak Embassy at 25, Kensington Palace Gardens, London W8.

Also send letters of support to the prisoners, whose addresses are as follows: Petr Uhl (8.10.1941), PS 1/6 789 53 NVS MS Mirov.

Vačlav Havel (5.10.1936), NVU Hermanice, p.u. 13 prikr 2, 71302 Ostrava 13.

Vaclav Benda (8.8.1946), NVU Hermanice, p.u. 13 prikr 2, 71302 Ostrava 13.
Jiri Dienstbier (20.4.1937), NVU Hermanice, p.u. 13 prikr 2, 71302 Ostrava 13.

Otta Bednarova (18.6.1927), Ustav SNV-CSR, BS 115-0, 74649 Opava.

The information in this article was made available by Palach Press Ltd.

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Charter 77 Defence Committee Launches Campaign Against Prison Conditions

At a public meeting in Oxford on 22 May, the Charter 77 Defence Committee launched a campaign to protest against the prison conditions faced by Petr Uhl and other jailed Charter 77 civil rights campaigners in Czechoslovakia.

The Committee has called on labour movement organisations to bombard the Czechoslovak Embassy with resolutions of protest. They urge in particular that such resolutions should stress that it is intolerable that socialists and civil rights activists whose imprisonment was condemned by the entire left in Britain and by socialist and communist parties throughout the Western world should be subject to the most degrading treatment as dangerous criminals.

It is urging labour movement bodies to take the following steps:

- *pass resolutions condemning the conditions of imprisonment of Charter 77 supporters.
- *send these resolutions both to the Czechoslovak Embassy and to the prisoners themselves.

- *include in the resolutions a demand that the Czechoslovak authorities should grant a labour movement lawyer from Britain the right to visit the prisoners and discuss their situation with them in private.

- *if possible send trade union and Labour Party branch delegations to the Czechoslovak Embassy to impress their views upon the Ambassador.

- *local labour movement bodies should request that their national leaderships take up the issue and pursue it with the Czechoslovak authorities.

- *send a donation, however small, to the Charter 77 Defence Fund to aid the families of political prisoners.

The Charter 77 Defence Committee is a socialist organisation established last June and sponsored by the long-standing Committee to Defend Czechoslovak Socialists, active since 1972 and now called the Socialist Committee for Democratic Rights in Czechoslovakia, by the Eastern Europe Solidarity Campaign and by Labour Focus on Eastern Europe. It has led the campaign in Britain for the release of the Charter 77 leaders jailed for subversion in October of last year and campaigns for the release of all political prisoners in Czechoslovakia.

* Please send copies of all resolutions to:
Charter 77 Defence Committee,
14 Elgin Court, 16 Montpellier Rd., London W5.

* If you would like a speaker on the situation in Czechoslovakia, please contact the committee at the above address.

* Donations for the families of Charter 77 political prisoners should be sent to:
Charter 77 Defence Fund,

Hon. Treasurer Reg Race M.P., 133 Crierson Rd., London SE23.

a
socialist challenge
pamphlet

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