

A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity

# weekly **worker**



**Corbyn's office: the hiring of Steve Howell and the origins of Straight Left**

- Letters and debate
- Zionist bans
- NHS demonstration
- Turkey referendum

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Towards a Communist Party of the European Union

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Grassroots  
Momentum:  
don't be a  
fan club

# LETTERS



Letters may have been shortened because of space. Some names may have been changed

## Face it

If there has been a problem with Jeremy Corbyn, it is this: he has put party unity above principle, when he should have gone to war with the party right and put his own uncompromising socialist programme forward. He should never, for a start, have switched to a pro-European Union position and campaigned for 'remain'. Forty years of Labour left opposition to the EU and its predecessors was ditched overnight to placate the Blairmainers.

Corbyn was fortunate that Brexit won anyway; otherwise Labour would already be finished and the UK Independence Party would be the popular opposition to a Cameron/Osborne Tory government.

Let's face it: in 2020 Labour will be down to 40 or 50 seats, maybe fewer. All those seats will be held by the more leftwing MPs because nobody is going to vote for the New Labour coup plotters, knowing they would refuse to form a Corbyn-led government in any case. That is going to happen, so Corbyn might as well start fighting now and then, after 2020, the Labour Party can be rebuilt on a principled, radical socialist basis.

**David Ellis**  
Leeds

## Mad?

In a recent online discussion about a mentally ill comrade, I argued that actually the mentally ill get their opinions from the same sources as we do and usually come to much the same conclusions. It is their behaviour and rhetoric that separate them out. In this particular case, when you reduced the rhetoric of the disturbed comrade to 'normal speak', he was broadly in agreement with the Brexiteers and Trump voters: the working class needs protecting from foreigners (even though the foreigners are working class) and socialism has nothing to offer humanity.

You can hardly describe the viewpoint of millions of people as the product of mental illness, even if the result of Brexit or Trump will not produce what they expect. Which brings us back to the common source of information: TV, radio and the press. Are they mad or deliberately propagating false information without being challenged by competing sources? You would be toying with insanity yourself if you were to go down the 'mad' route. Yes, there are occasions when straight untruths appear in the media, but this is not what distinguishes it.

What distinguishes it is a viewpoint that sees everything in a similar light. A consensus based on a lot of evidence, but biased in its interpretation by self-interest: the self-interest of capitalism. Typically neither the journalists nor others in the media (except for the owners) are bourgeois. But they support those owners politically and share their ideology. It is not just a question of who pays the piper. Most politically conscious working class views are largely unheard. Historically, at least in Europe, the left has had mass-circulation national papers, but no more. We need an independent voice that only the Labour Party can supply.

The free movement of people means, to capitalists, lower wages and higher unemployment - not the right to flee poverty, but, in practice, to spread it. You can't blame the Brexiteers for noticing the obvious and rebelling. The media never mentions the need to create full employment - in this country, let alone in places like Poland and Lithuania - but, if we want to protect the working class right to free movement, then we also need to campaign for full employment right across Europe and to propose a way of making it happen.

The European Union is a bosses' club and we should get rid of it. But not retreat to our 'own' bosses' club here in Britain. We need a democratic, working class United States of Europe. We need

to unite with our class comrades and take the fight to capitalism.

I mentioned in passing the refusal of the Labour Party to create an independent working class voice. The right wing has no wish to. It consciously rejects socialism and is part of the middle class, pro-capitalist, class alliance. Corbyn and Momentum are involved in a hopeless task to find a common position with the majority in the Parliamentary Labour Party and, as for winning the next general election... dream on! Labour policy must consist only of shifts in emphasis compared to current Tory policies. Promises not to be quite as beastly aren't what the circumstances demand - especially as they leave the impression that Labour won't be quite as competent, let alone united.

Rank and file opinion has moved sharply to the left in the Labour Party, but the Parliamentary Labour Party hasn't - who believes that Corbyn will still be leader after the next election? No, what the rank and file in the Labour Party needs to do is take control, so that it can defend the class in what promises to be tough times ahead.

**Phil Kent**  
London

## Fraud

In response to René Gimpel (Letters, March 2), my point is not the *Weekly Worker's* criticism of the major politics of leaving the EU, but the ongoing praise of the EU state and how wonderful it all was. If the majority of writers in the paper take that position, why didn't it call for a 'remain' vote rather than a boycott? My point is that it is a total contradiction to call for a boycott and then moan that we left.

The EU is a deeply undemocratic structure. Voters do not vote for policies or politics and no government or programme is elected. Instead, MEPs go basically as individuals and represent no-one but themselves. They have no popular mandates on anything.

The ministers are appointed, the commissioners are self-appointed and they in turn dance a jig to the tunes of the EU bank and the IMF. By what democratic mandate did the EU and the bankers abolish democracy in Greece or force the abolition of key features of social welfare and pensions and workers' rights and conditions? The EU is not a democracy and isn't meant to be.

The British parliamentary system is a fraud too, of course. It also dances to the tune of international capitalism, but the 'out' vote wasn't their agenda. As you say, 'out' wasn't supposed to win, and they could still, by fair means or foul, block it. In this sense people feel they have exercised control and not simply done as they were told by our betters.

**David Douglass**  
South Shields

## Percentages

Eddie Ford wrote: "Yet what did [the Liberal Democrats] get in the by-elections? In Stoke, their vote only went up 5.7% (to 9.8% - at least they saved their deposit this time) and it was pretty much the same in Copeland - only increasing by 3.8%, putting them on 7.3% of the total vote" ('Tories winning Brexit battle', March 2).

That is not right. In Stoke the Liberal Democrat vote share went up by 5.7% points, which is not the same as 5.7%. In fact, their vote share rose from 4.1% to 9.8%, which is actually an increase of their share of their vote of 139%. Similarly, in Copeland their vote share rose by 3.8% points, but this is an increase in their vote share of 109%.

**Arthur Bough**  
email

## Budget for rich

We have now had austerity for nearly 10 years, and it is devastating people's lives. This week's budget deepens the attack on our services, jobs and quality of life. It is disgraceful and will cause even more suffering to those already unable to cope in Tory Britain.

The £2 billion extra announced for social care, spread over three years, is far too little, far too late. The 2% rise in national insurance contributions for millions of often low-paid self-employed workers will push more people into poverty, whilst raising the higher rate tax threshold to £50,000 is a giveaway to the top 15% of earners. National health service cuts have not been reversed and there is no extra help for cash-strapped schools.

Whilst ordinary working people, the poor and the vulnerable lose vital services, the bosses of Britain's largest public companies enjoyed a 10% pay rise in 2015, according to the High Pay Centre, while wages for workers rose just 2%. Leading company bosses now typically earn 129 times more than their employees. The wealthy can cope with service cuts - the rest of us can't. They are not affected by austerity.

There is no need for austerity: it is a political choice. There are other ways of dealing with the country's deficit, including a 5% wealth tax on the richest 10%, which, alone, would resolve the country's debt. Governments could reclaim the £120 billion per year of unpaid tax that rich individuals and companies avoid or evade. Banks and building societies could be nationalised, and their massive profits could be used to maintain and improve public services.

Looking at public services in detail shows the true state of affairs:

**Education:** The Tories can find an extra £340 million to build 140 new free and grammar schools - selective schools disproportionately filled by pupils from wealthier backgrounds (only 3% on free school meals compared to 15% in other state schools), whilst state schools report a £3 billion shortfall in funding with less money per pupil, shortage of teachers and crumbling buildings.

**Welfare:** There have been massive cuts to benefits over the last five years, including cuts to personal independence payments to save £3.7 billion by ensuring fewer claimants qualify. Child benefit and most universal credit rates have been frozen: with inflation rising towards 3%, these are real-term cuts. Rugby Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition sees the suffering locally on a regular basis outside the job centre. **Government departments** have been told to cut 6% to save £3.5 billion. Hundreds of thousands will lose their jobs. Services will be further decimated.

**Local government budget cuts** have already led to the closures of libraries, and 25 million fewer books than in 1996; fewer disabled children can get council help; cuts to domestic violence refuges; closures of youth clubs, fire stations and children's centres; more people sleeping rough; adult eligibility to social care has been restricted; far fewer elderly people are eligible for care at home.

**Social care** is in financial turmoil with 23,000 allegations of abuse against carers working in people's homes due to cuts to council budget, according to the UK Homecare Association.

**Health:** £30 billion to be cut by 2020 through 'sustainability and transformation plans' - we know that is going to decimate health provision locally and nationally.

Basically, local councils are close to insolvency. Health services cannot cope, hundreds of thousands will lose their jobs and those who cannot work, including the disabled, are being pushed into abject poverty through benefit cuts and sanctions. None of this was mentioned in today's budget - a budget which does nothing to address these facts and, in many ways, will make the situation worse.

**Pete McLaren**  
Rugby Tusc

## Heroes

BBC news this week rewrote history in its coverage of the events of March 7 1987, when the Herald of Free Enterprise ferry overturned in the Belgium port of Zeebrugge and 191 passengers and crew members lost their lives. According to the state broadcaster, the deaths were the

result of a crew member failing to close the bow doors, as it departed from the port. This led to water flooding into the ferry and overturning it.

So no mention of the fact that the ferry owners, P&O, had ruthlessly reduced the turnaround times between docking the ferry and its return to Dover, with crew members forced by management to work to an almost impossible time schedule. All, of course, designed to cut costs and boost profits. The ferry - and others operated by P&O - often departed with its bow doors closing rather than departing after the doors had been fully closed. The result was a tragedy, in which it should not be forgotten that many crew members - including plenty who died as a result - were heroes, as they ignored their own safety to rescue as many passengers and fellow crew members as possible. The BBC coverage must have left those crew members who are still alive today extremely hurt. It left me feeling very angry.

P&O, of course, expressed regret for the tragedy, but nevertheless pushed on with trying to maximise their profits by cutting jobs, lengthening the remaining workers' hours and cutting their pay. On February 6 1988, 2,300 seafarers, all members of the National Union of Seamen, began strike action against a company that had just announced record profits of £51.7 million. For almost two months P&O ferries lay idle. But when the NUS leadership were threatened with an injunction of the union's funds if they balloted all its 21,000 members for strike action, they climbed down.

Then, during Easter 1988, the company announced that it had derecognised the NUS and was pulling out of the industry's National Maritime Board agreements. Sealink NUS members in Dover, recognising that this was an attack on the union in general and the rights of seafarers to defend themselves, decided not to cross the P&O picket lines.

It was thus Sealink management who took the NUS to court for secondary picketing, as NUS Sealink members across the country escalated their actions and all Sealink ships came to a standstill. The key now was to stay out and get others out. Flying pickets were needed to take the message to all ports throughout the country.

The courts ordered the sequestration of the NUS assets. At first, with his members supporting him, NUS leader Sam McCluskie threatened not to comply, and the potential for mass defiance of the anti-trade union laws opened up.

But, after just nine days - and only three days after a 2,000-strong supporters' march in Dover - the union purged its contempt and ordered Sealink workers

back to work. Sealink workers reluctantly agreed, leaving P&O workers on strike on their own. The workers were not prepared or able to disobey their union leadership.

Ultimately, this was the key point in the strike as a threat to all ferry operators in Britain became replaced by a dispute between an increasingly isolated workforce and a confident anti-union, international employer, supported by the government, police, media and courts.

Strikers continued picketing, money continued to be raised for families and to maintain the support kitchens operating in the Dover area; speakers continued to raise the issues at meetings and demonstrations. Yet the strategy to win the dispute remained absent. Indeed, many strikers seemed reluctant to even ask 'how to win?' as the dispute dragged on until it was formally abandoned by the NUS after 16 months. A few years later, in 1991, the P&O executive chairman, Sir Jeffrey Stirling, was made a baron in Margaret Thatcher's resignation honours list. He still sits today in the House of Lords.

**Mark Metcalf**  
email

## No prosecutions

Stop prosecutions for solidarity with Palestine and for opposition against the military dictatorship in Egypt!

We are aware that a group of deputies of the Freiheitliche Partei, an extreme rightwing racist party led by HC Strache, has initiated a parliamentary inquiry against the Austrian section of the Revolutionary Communist International Tendency, as well as against the leading organisation of the Egyptian migrants in Austria.

Referring to solidarity slogans chanted at an anti-racist demonstration in Vienna on November 26 2016, in support of Palestine, as well as slogans which supported the resistance of the Egyptian people against the military dictatorship, the parliamentary deputies of the Freiheitliche Partei have called for the federal ministry of the interior to officially investigate these two organisations with a view to taking legal steps against them. Irrespective of our perspectives about the future of the Palestinian, as well as the Egyptian people's struggle for liberation, we protest against holding a parliamentary inquiry and we also oppose any state investigation and prosecution against these organisations.

Please send a short protest letter by email to the Austrian parliament (medienservice@parlament.gv.at) as well as to the Austrian ministry of interior (pressstelle@bmi.gv.at). Please forward this email also to us: rcit@thecommutists.net.

**Laurence Humphries**  
RCIT in Britain

## Fighting fund

# Just as good!

**O**ur fighting fund got a big boost last weekend in London, when our supporters raised a magnificent £680 for the *Weekly Worker* at the March 4 demonstration to defend the NHS. Our comrades were busy at stalls at both ends of the march, as well as mingling with the demonstrators in between.

A number of marchers handed over a fiver in appreciation of our paper, which not a few said they regularly read online. Comrade PB actually gave us £30!

I know I'm always complaining about the failure of so many of our website readers to make a donation online, but, if they do so when they see us face to face, that's just as good!

We also received a number of standing order donations this week - thank you, SW and CG (£30 each); RK and GD (£25); DV

(£20); AC (£15); and DG, SM and TK (£10). That came to £175, while comrade PM with his £15 was the only PayPal donor out of 2,780 online readers (he obviously wasn't at the demonstration!). Finally both GF (£25) and FW (£20) added a little something to their subscription cheques.

So, all in all, we raised a fantastic £915 in a single week, taking our running total for March up to £1,147. The target is £1,750. So this time I really am confident that we can make up the rest of January's shortfall - and a lot more too! Please help us do that ●

**Robbie Rix**

Fill in a standing order form (back page), donate via our website, or send cheques, payable to *Weekly Worker*

# MOMENTUM



Jeremy Corbyn: we should aim to be critical

## Don't be a fan club

William Sarsfield of Labour Party Marxists calls for a serious fight to transform Labour

The dramatic events in Momentum over the past few months have revealed the crassly undemocratic ethos that informs the approach of Jon Lansman - effectively the 'owner' of the organisation. Predictably, the right's victory in the February opinion poll-turned-plebiscite, used to justify the imposition of a bureaucratic constitution, has prompted a wave of demoralisation, falling numbers at Momentum meetings and a growing atmosphere of denunciations and restrictions on debate directed against "the enemy", as the Momentum left is now being dubbed by some - with the blessing of the national centre, it seems.

This anti-democratic farce has been well documented in the pages of this paper, plus in the bulletins and general commentary of Labour Party Marxists. The question now is: what does the left do about this? How do we fight back?

The omens do not look good, if we are to judge from the agenda and discussion papers produced for the dissident gathering of the Momentum left in London on March 11 - convened as the "Momentum Grassroots networking conference". The comrades organising this national meeting appear utterly clueless about what to do next in relation to Momentum and - like the 'official' Momentum - the work that needs to be undertaken in the Labour Party itself. So the organisers (the previous conference arrangements committee, plus the old steering committee majority before both committees were abolished by Lansman) have issued a document "as a starting point" for the discussion on what the Grassroots of Momentum is and what it should fight for.

Sensibly, it recognises it would be wrong to "split from Momentum", but equally it would be a mistake to "waste unnecessary energy fighting a battle that can't be won", given the Lansman clique's stranglehold over the apparatus and the backing he enjoys from the likes of Jeremy Corbyn and Diane Abbott. There is also a nod in the direction of the tasks of "democratising and transforming the labour movement" and "fighting ... unjust suspensions/expulsions/exclusions" from the Labour Party.

However, the meat of the campaigning work that this draft sets out for Grassroots is the standard left fare of:

- Fighting austerity.
- Defending the NHS - "including supporting national demos" and "Labour

days of action, local campaigns and industrial action by health unions to smash the pay cap".

- "Defending migrants' rights".
- Supporting "workers in struggle", joining picket lines, etc.
- Supporting the popularisation of Corbyn's "10 pledges".
- Mass council house building and renovation.

In other words, precisely the sort of activities that the local units of the Labour Party itself should be (and often are) involved in. What exactly would be the point of the small Grassroots campaign if it tried to substitute itself for the campaigning life of a mass party?

Ironically, the same sort of surrogate impulse hangs around the Lansman organisation. After all, the Grassroots founding document cited above makes clear that the campaigning work it commits to encompasses "all previous campaigns" agreed to by the official organisation, including the ones listed above.

In this context, there is an interesting *Guardian* article by Momentum/'The World Transformed' organiser Deborah Hermanns that notes that Momentum branches around the country have been "making an effort to build community" in areas devastated by cuts. She cites film screenings in "halls and community centres", donating the proceeds to local food banks and homeless shelters, etc. Far more needs doing, she concedes - "social spaces, cinema clubs, food banks and sports centres ... providing the space and security people need to build their own, unique political and cultural identities".

But it is on a "limited scale" due to the "shoestring" budgets local Momentum organisations are able to deploy. The real point is *the Labour Party itself*, she correctly writes:

Corbyn's Labour, with thousands of branches across the country, millions of pounds in its coffers and a membership of more than half a million, could flood key areas with resources, ideas and activists to support and get projects going that actually help out the community.<sup>1</sup>

Quite right, and a vision this paper has championed for some time. But, for that to happen, Labour itself must be radically transformed - the parliamentary party subordinated to the mandate of

the membership as part of a democratic revolution within Labour; the pro-capitalist right wing excluded; bans and proscriptions on working class political organisations overturned, etc. In short Labour must be transformed into a mass movement for socialism that unites the trade unions, co-ops, leftwing societies, socialist and communist groups and parties.

This is the key, defining task that Grassroots comrades should commit to. An uncritical 'support Jez' stance is worse than useless, because *Corbyn's* game plan is useless. Unsettlingly, the right honourable Lord Daniel Finkelstein, Tory peer and associate editor of *The Times*, appears to have a more realistic grasp of what is required than Grassroots, the official Lansman organisation or the Labour leadership team itself:

His only hope must be as a subversive challenger, relentlessly organising to take over the party and talking about his efforts to do so. He should come out with huge, earth-shaking, radical leftwing policies and not care that Yvette Cooper and I both think that they are bonkers ... He should organise to deselect critics and win selection contests for his people.<sup>2</sup>

This internal battle for the heart and soul of the Labour Party is the key link to grasp in this period. As Corbyn supporter Matthew Turner notes in a March 6 posting on *The Independent* website, "an authoritative and relentless streak" needs to be developed and "the democratic right of CLPs to reselect and deselect their parliamentary candidates" is crucial "to ensure that young, up-and-coming, 'fire in the belly' leftwingers replace those who are actively seeking to undermine the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn."

The shared weakness of the Turner and Finkelstein commentaries is that both make this change reliant on a change of heart on the part of Corbyn himself as an individual politician. In fact, the real starting point for the left of the party is to organise on the basis of a bold, principled and strategically clear perspective ... and to refashion the Labour Party from top to bottom on that basis. That is what Momentum Grassroots needs to discuss and vote on ●

### Notes

1. *The Guardian* March 7.
2. *The Times* February 28.

# ACTION

## London Communist Forum

**Sunday March 12, 5pm:** Weekly political report from CPGB Provisional Central Committee, followed by open discussion and reading group. Calthorpe Arms, 252 Grays Inn Road, London WC1. Study of Ralph Miliband's *Parliamentary socialism*. This meeting: chapter 10 ('The sickness of Labourism'), section 2: 'Paralysis as ideology' (continued).

Organised by CPGB: [www.cpgb.org.uk](http://www.cpgb.org.uk); and Labour Party Marxists: [www.labourpartymarxists.org.uk](http://www.labourpartymarxists.org.uk).

## Radical Anthropology Group

**Tuesday March 14, 6.45pm:** 'How womankind got torn in two: an Amazonian myth'. Speaker: Chris Knight.

Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: <http://radicalanthropologygroup.org>.

## Heroes of the Spanish Civil War

**Saturday March 11, 1pm:** Public meeting, Red Shed, Vicarage Street, Wakefield WF1. Speaker: author and campaigner Granville Williams. Admission free, including light buffet.

Organised by Wakefield Socialist History Group: [www.theredshed.org.uk/SocialHist.html](http://www.theredshed.org.uk/SocialHist.html).

## We are many

Film screening

**Sunday March 12, 11am:** Bolivar Hall, 54 Grafton Way, London W1.

Organised by London Socialist Film Co-op: <http://socialistfilm.blogspot.co.uk>.

**Monday March 13, 7pm:** Redhills, Flass Street, Durham DH1.

Organised by Stop the War Coalition: [www.stopwar.org.uk](http://www.stopwar.org.uk).

## Armed with film

**Monday March 13, 6pm:** Anti-war film night, Truthout Cinema, Arts House, 108A Stokes Croft, Bristol BS1. An evening of films and discussion to learn more about the local arms industry and what we can do to challenge it. Free entry, but donations appreciated.

Organised by Truthout Cinema:

[www.facebook.com/TruthoutCinemaBristol](http://www.facebook.com/TruthoutCinemaBristol).

## Social histories of the Russian Revolution

**Thursday March 16, 6.30pm:** Discussion, Birkbeck, University of London, Malet Street, London WC1. 'The radical right and the Russian Revolution'. Speaker: George Gilbert.

Organised by Social Histories 1917: [socialhistories1917.wordpress.com](http://socialhistories1917.wordpress.com)

## March against racism

**Saturday March 18** National demonstration. Assemble 12 noon, (BBC) Portland Place, London; 11am, Holland St, Glasgow; 11am, Grange gardens, Cardiff.

Supported by the TUC.

Organised by Stand Up To Racism: [www.standuptoracism.org.uk](http://www.standuptoracism.org.uk).

## Labour Heritage

**Saturday March 18, 1.30pm to 5pm:** AGM, followed by public meeting, Conway Hall (Brockway room), 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. Sessions on 'Reflections on Aneurin Bevan'; '100 years of the Cooperative Party'; 'The Labour Party in the 1920s'.

Organised by Labour Heritage: [labourheritage45@btinternet.com](mailto:labourheritage45@btinternet.com).

## By Marx's graveside

**Sunday March 19, 2pm:** Annual oration at Karl Marx's grave, Highgate Cemetery, Swain's Lane, London N6. Oration by Venezuelan ambassador Rocio Maneiro.

Organised by Highgate Cemetery: <http://highgatecemetery.org>.

## Remember JD Bernal

**Friday March 24, 6pm:** Public meeting, Marx Memorial Library, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1. A celebration of John Bernal - socialist, scientist and peace campaigner.

Organised by Marx Memorial Library: [www.marx-memorial-library.org](http://www.marx-memorial-library.org).

## Global terrorism and peace

**Saturday March 25, 10.30am to 5pm:** Conference, Wesley's Chapel, 49 City Road, London EC1.

Registrations and other info: [vijay@vmpeace.org](mailto:vijay@vmpeace.org).

Organised by Uniting for Peace: [www.unitingforpeace.com](http://www.unitingforpeace.com).

## Race to war?

**Tuesday March 28, 6.30pm-8pm:** Public meeting, Old Fire Station, 84 Mayton Street, London N7.

Organised by North London Stop the War:

[www.facebook.com/nlondon.stwc.7](http://www.facebook.com/nlondon.stwc.7).

## Another Europe is Possible

**Saturday April 1, 11am to 5pm:** National conference, Museum of Science and Industry, Liverpool Road, Manchester M3.

Organised by Another Europe is Possible: [www.anothereurope.org](http://www.anothereurope.org).

## Remember Tony Benn

**Sunday April 2, 7pm:** Remembrance night, Seven Dials Club, 42 Earlham Street, Covent Garden, London WC2.

Organised by Let's Celebrate Corbyn's Birthday:

[www.facebook.com/Lets-celebrate-Corbyns-birthday-278287529172743](http://www.facebook.com/Lets-celebrate-Corbyns-birthday-278287529172743).

## No to war

**Saturday April 22, 10am to 5pm:** Stop the War Coalition annual conference, Arlington Conference Centre, 220 Arlington Road, London NW1.

Organised by STWC: <http://stopwar.org.uk>.

## Marx Memorial Library

**Monday May 1, 10am to 3pm:** Open day, Marx Memorial Library, 37A Clerkenwell Green, London EC1.

Organised by Marx Memorial Library: [www.marxlibrary.org.uk](http://www.marxlibrary.org.uk).

## CPGB wills

Remember the CPGB and keep the struggle going. Put our party's name and address, together with the amount you wish to leave, in your will. If you need further help, do not hesitate to contact us.

## LABOUR

# What was Straight Left?

Lawrence Parker investigates the political origins of Jeremy Corbyn's director and deputy director of strategy and communications

When Jeremy Corbyn's campaigns chief Simon Fletcher quit last month, it was widely interpreted as a victory for Seumas Milne. Fletcher was known to have heated exchanges with Corbyn's director of strategy and communications on a range of issues, including Brexit. Now, Corbyn has signed up Steve Howell to be Milne's deputy. Howell's official job description is to help "oversee the leader's media strategy and to implement the communications grid". He is taking an indefinite leave of absence from his lobbying agency, Freshwater, to take up his role in the Labour leader's office.<sup>1</sup>

There are unlikely to be heated exchanges between Milne and Howell not least because they are old friends and old Straight Leftist comrades. Andrew Murray, chief of staff for Unite and yet another former SL member, recently left the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain to join Labour and is also thought to be in Corbyn's inner circle.

## Origins

Straight Left's origins lie in the left, pro-Soviet oppositions that emerged in the Communist Party of Great Britain in the 1960s. In this period, a definite 'party within a party' existed, with figures such as Sid French, district secretary of Surrey CPGB, becoming key leaders. The general critique that came from this faction was a concern over the CPGB leadership distancing itself from the Soviet Union (such as around the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968) and other 'socialist' countries; a preference for a more 'workerist' identity (for example, the faction would have been happy with the CPGB's paper remaining as the *Daily Worker* in 1966) and a concentration on workplaces/trade unions; and a sense that the party was squandering its resources in futile election contests and alienating the left of the Labour Party, with whom it was meant to be developing a close relationship on the *British road to socialism (BRS)*, the CPGB programme.

However, a significant part of the faction felt that the *BRS* was 'reformist' and 'revisionist' in all its guises from 1951, counterposing a revolutionary path to the parliamentary road to socialism envisaged in the CPGB's existing programme. This stance was clouded in ambiguity in many sections of the CPGB's left, with the default position usually being expressed in a preference for the 1951 version of the *BRS* that had been overseen by Stalin, as opposed to later versions modified by a 'revisionist' CPGB leadership. This opposition suffered a major split in the run-up to the CPGB's 1977 congress, with Sid French taking away 700 or so supporters to form the New Communist Party (after French realised that the CPGB's leadership was intent on a reorganisation of his Surrey district, which would have deprived him of his organisational bridgehead).

The rump left opposition in the CPGB coalesced around Fergus Nicholson (other key figures were John Foster, Brian Filling, Nick Wright, Susan Michie, Pat Turnbull and Andrew Murray), who

had been the CPGB's student organiser until 1974. The *Straight Left* newspaper was launched in 1979, it was edited by Mike Toumazou and had Seumas Milne as business manager. Later a theoretical magazine, *Communist*, appeared. Membership figures are impossible to guess. However, judging from *Communist*, the faction did have a wide national infrastructure beyond London through the 1980s and was certainly on a par with, if not in some places more deeper rooted than, the other oppositional stream around the *Morning Star* (see below).

## Factional infighting

The Straight Left group provoked a lot of enmity from its factional rivals in the CPGB. Thus, Mike Hicks, who was involved in the Communist Campaign Group (CCG), set up after the rebellion of *Morning Star* supporters against the CPGB leadership in the mid-1980s, and later the first general secretary of the 1988 Communist Party of Britain split (both criticised and opposed by the Straight Leftist faction), said in the late 1990s: "Straight Left was neither straight nor left."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, a CCG document complained: "The individuals grouped around Straight Left have their own newspaper, their own organisation and their own objectives."<sup>3</sup>

I have been told anecdotally by CPGB activists of the time that Straight Left was thought to have three circles: an inner 'Leninist' core; a broader circle of sympathisers in the CPGB; and the 'softer' Labourite and trade unionists grouped around the *Straight Left* newspaper (non-CPGB trade unionists such as Alan Sapper and Labour MPs such as Joan Maynard were on its advisory board). Certainly, the majority of the content of the newspaper was hewn from the same, dry 'labour movement' template used by the *Morning Star*, with little indication that it was the work of communists, apart from its commentary on the Soviet Union and other international matters. (The *Communist* journal, obviously aimed at CPGB sympathisers, was much more orthodox and harder Marxist-Leninist in tone, with a lot of very interesting commentary on inner-party CPGB matters.)

So Straight Left was a faction and did indulge in political camouflage, but in this it was merely of its time. For example, the CCG's disavowal of Straight Left's factionalism was merely an attempt to throw people off the scent from the CCG's own factionalism (the CCG unconvincingly complained it was not a faction at all; just a group that wanted to follow the CPGB's rules - which fooled nobody). The CPGB was riddled with factions in the 1980s, not least those grouped around *Marxism Today* and the party machine.

Similarly, on Straight Left's broad left camouflage in its newspaper and other forums, this was the *modus operandi* of nearly the whole far left, from the *Morning Star* to various Trotskyist groups: ie, communists clothing their politics in everything from trade unionism to feminism and concealing their true aims in the pursuit of mass influence. Again, in hindsight, Straight Left does not strike one as very exceptional in this regard. In retrospect, the enmity aimed at it on these counts stands revealed as the product of mere factional rivalry.

However, another area of criticism aimed at Straight Left may have more mileage in terms of a lasting judgement. The group was deemed by its CPGB factional rivals (both in the CCG and the small group around *The Leninist*, forerunner of the *Weekly Worker*) to have a 'heads down' approach to CPGB work. In the words of the CCG, such an approach

counsels caution and compliance with the authority of the [CPGB's] executive committee. It says that if there is disagreement and dissatisfaction with the Eurocommunists [the faction then dominating the party's leadership], then opposition must be expressed and conducted via the normal party channels. That is to say, we must try at successive congresses to defeat and remove the Eurocommunists.<sup>4</sup>

This led to such notorious moves as Straight Leftists walking out with the CPGB leader, Gordon McLennan, when he closed down a London district congress in November 1984 that threatened to become a point of opposition to the party leadership. Mike Hicks, in the chair of this meeting, later contemptuously observed that Straight Left "ended up selling *Marxism Today* [the CPGB theoretical journal much despised by the party's left in the 1980s for its Eurocommunist proclivities] instead of the *Morning Star* because the executive told them to".<sup>5</sup>

However, what this Straight Left strategy of avoiding open conflict eventually led to, in the context of a CPGB that was being set on a liquidationist course, was it being left somewhat high and dry. SL had built a considerable base in London by the end of the 1980s "by showing a willingness to take on responsibilities at a time when few candidates were to be found".<sup>6</sup> This was to be a very hollow victory indeed, given that the CPGB was soon to pass into oblivion and the succession of congresses to win was coming to an end.

## Labour Party

In terms of the Labour Party, Straight Left took the *BRS* injunction of developing an alliance with Labour to effect radical changes to its logical conclusion by arguing that the CPGB should affiliate to the Labour Party and - more controversially for both the left and right of the CPGB - that the party should end its independent electoral work. Thus a typical article in *Communist* argued:

... it is difficult to see there being much movement against the exclusion of communist trades unionists from the Labour Party until our electoral strategy is based on non-sectarian principles and imbued with a thoroughly consistent and positive attitude to the Labour Party.<sup>7</sup>

Thus Straight Left picked up clearly on the attitude of the pro-Soviet CPGB opposition of the 1960s, which consistently drew attention to the political impact of declining electoral votes on the avowed Labour-communist strategy of the party. However, this opened up Straight Left to jibes of 'liquidationism' from both left and right in the CPGB<sup>8</sup> and, in retrospect, isolated the group further.

## Soviet Union and 'socialist' countries

The Straight Left group, again showing its origins in the CPGB's pro-Soviet left of the 1960s, took an extremely uncritical view of the Soviet Union and other 'socialist' countries, and regarded the actions of the CPGB as a 'national' sin against the 'internationalist' probity of the Soviet Union's camp. Straight Left publications were filled with reprints from Soviet agencies such as Novosti and other agencies from the eastern bloc.

Thus, an article in *Communist* argued:

Communists in the capitalist world are not, in general, in a position to make the judgements that the CPSU is obliged to. Was it right or wrong to intervene in Afghanistan in 1979 to block the spread of counterrevolution? Is it right or wrong to withdraw the Soviet army from there today? The CPGB does not have to answer those questions. Our views are unimportant, and we do not have to live with the sharp consequences of the answers. The CPSU has to make those judgements, and it has the right to expect support and understanding in making them.<sup>9</sup>

Neither did this stance seemingly allow criticism of even the most crisis-stricken and sickly military dictatorships of countries such as Poland in the early 1980s. Straight Leftist Charlie Woods, complaining bitterly of CPGB criticisms of the Polish regime in 1983, said:

After all, how would our [CPGB] leadership take it if the over two-million-strong Polish United Workers Party took time off from trying to solve the problems of socialism to remonstrate with our 16,000-member party's failure to achieve it at all?<sup>10</sup>

The implication of this little homily being, of course, that those British communists really should not venture to criticise their Polish brethren at all.

## Straight Left and gays

The group does not appear to have produced any significant material or statement on what would now be called LGBT questions (and an appeal from myself to its members to produce such a statement to clear this issue up, when this article originally appeared online, yielded nothing).<sup>11</sup> Members of the group have claimed that calling their newspaper *Straight Left* was a boxing metaphor (and some of its members certainly knew a thing or two about physical tussles with gay protestors); while others have suggested that it was recycling an old *Sunday Worker* slogan from the mid-1920s, when the CPGB was involved with the National Left Wing Movement: 'Labour's Straight Left'.

If it was the latter, it was a significant abuse of the slogan. The CPGB had this slogan to differentiate itself from traditional Labour lefts such as George Lansbury and the like: ie, those who were not 'straight', who would potentially disown communist allies and cosy up to the Labour right. It was not a slogan that covered the kind of homogenous 'broad left' that the likes of Straight Left advocated.

However, slogans can change their meaning with time. To call a newspaper *Straight Left* when your main factional opponents in the CPGB, the Eurocommunists, are keen on promoting gay rights, only invites some uncomfortable questions about your *modus operandi* on such issues. It is quite inconceivable that Fergus Nicholson and company were not aware that the name would be interpreted in this negative sense, particularly when it was the production of staunch advocates of the Soviet Union - a state with a problematic relation to homosexuality, to put it mildly.

To call all Straight Left members homophobic would be over-egging the pudding; to state that this group was one that had pronounced problems with homosexuality would not be stretching the truth ●

## Notes

- Howell founded Freshwater in Cardiff in 1997 after working as a news reporter and producer for BBC Radio Wales. The 19-strong public affairs and PR agency now has offices in Cardiff and London. According to the APPC register, the firm's most recent clients include the multinational building materials company Tarmac and the personal injury lawyers Thomsons.
- F Beckett *Enemy within: the rise and fall of the British Communist Party* London 1998, p234. The accession of a group of ex-Straight Leftists (including Andrew Murray and Nick Wright, who had split from Straight Left to form Communist Liaison in the early 1990s) into the ranks of the Communist Party of Britain contributed to a bitter faction fight in the organisation, in which Hicks was eventually deposed as general secretary, and a strike by *Morning Star* staff.
- Communist Campaign Group *The crisis in the Communist Party and the way forward* (no date but circa 1985).
- Ibid.*
- F Beckett *op cit.*
- W Thompson *The good old cause: British communism 1920-1991* London 1992, p205.
- '40th congress of the Communist Party' *Communist* September 1987.
- For the right wing of the CPGB, see Dave Cook in the pre-congress discussion of 1981 (*Comment* October 17 1981); and, for the left, see Alan Stevens in the same context (*ibid.*).
- H Sanderson, 'Socialism today' *Communist* September 1988.
- C Woods *The crisis in our Communist Party: cause, effect and cure* 1983. Woods was a miner and party veteran from county Durham, who was expelled for writing this pamphlet - although he was very much viewed as a 'fall guy', with Fergus Nicholson or Brian Topping thought of as the more likely authors.
- This article originally appeared on the *Hatful of History* blog in October 2015. We are reproducing it here - in slightly amended form.

Three of a kind: Seumas Milne, Andrew Murray and Steve Howell



**BANS**

# Zionist attack on free speech

The Palestine Solidarity Campaign must oppose bogus definitions of 'anti-Semitism', argues Tony Greenstein

In the past two weeks Palestine societies on university campuses in Britain have been organising activities around the annual Israel Apartheid Week. This year, however, the right to organise such events has come under systematic attack from university authorities.

Two weeks ago Jo Johnson, the universities minister, wrote to Universities UK demanding the suppression of Israel Apartheid Week as a way of combating "anti-Semitism".<sup>1</sup> Apparently holocaust denial leaflets had been distributed at Cambridge University and swastikas found at Exeter University. *Ipsa facto* this meant that the responsibility lay with supporters of the Palestinians! A classic example of the McCarthyite guilt-by-association technique, combined with the big lie.

At least three universities have reacted by either proscribing Israel Apartheid Week or severely limiting its activities. At the University of Central Lancashire it was banned outright. The university spokesperson justified this by saying that, because the government "has formally adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's new definition of what constitutes anti-Semitism", a talk which the organisers intended to arrange "contravenes the new definition and furthermore breaches university protocols for such events, where we require assurances of a balanced view or a panel of speakers representing all interests".<sup>2</sup> In the best style of Orwellian newspeak the university spokesperson went on to explain that "our procedures determined that the proposed event would not be lawful". Quite how procedures can determine anything was not explained.

At Exeter University a proposed mock-up of one of the hundreds of checkpoints that the Israeli government use to control and hinder Palestinian movement in the West Bank was banned. Presumably reconstructing reality was also deemed 'anti-Semitic'. At Sussex University IAW was not banned, but the vice-chancellor wrote to students warning them that the proposed activities could be construed as anti-Semitic. Meanwhile at Kingston University the Prevent programme was used to place security guards inside a Stand Up To Racism meeting featuring former Guantanamo prisoner Moazzam Begg (Sussex University had also tried to do the same thing) and to insist that people speak only in English!

## Weaponisation

This attack on freedom of speech began at Oxford University Labour Club in January 2016, when the chair, Alex Chalmers, resigned after the club had narrowly voted to support Israel Apartheid Week. Apparently this meant that members of the OULC were anti-Semitic. Chalmers was later shown to have been an intern with the Israeli propaganda organisation, BICOM (Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre).

However, a subsequent report for the Labour Party by Baroness Janet Royall found that there had been no anti-Semitism at the club. Even the *Jewish Chronicle* reported that "The two members of the Oxford University Labour Club who were accused of engaging in anti-Semitic acts in front of Jewish students have been cleared by party officials."<sup>3</sup>

In the succeeding year we have had a continuing campaign by the apostles of Zionism to equate opposition to Zionism and the Israeli state with anti-Semitism. And, of course, anti-Semitism was weaponised inside the Labour Party as a stick with which to beat the left leadership. Unfortunately Jeremy Corbyn, despite his long record of support for the Palestinians, collapsed in the face of the attacks. Instead of differentiating between genuine anti-Semitism and the



Zionism has been put on the back foot

weaponisation of 'anti-Semitism', Corbyn simply retreated, mouthing that he wasn't an anti-Semite. The anti-Semitism he was talking about and the Zionist version are not one and the same thing.

If you repeat a lie long enough, then people will come to believe it, regardless of the truth. So it is the case with 'anti-Semitism' in the Labour Party. There has been a media broadside aided by organisations such as the fake 'charity', the Campaign Against Anti-Semitism. Jackie Walker, the vice-chair of Momentum, was suspended twice by Labour and has just had her investigative hearing. Jon Lansman, aided by the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, removed Jackie as vice-chair in October last year - a move which encouraged the Labour Party bureaucracy to suspend her. The AWL, whose own members have been targeted in the Labour Party, has managed, thanks to its pro-imperialist and Zionist politics, to find itself on both sides of the witch-hunt.

In October 2016 the House of Commons home affairs committee published a report entitled 'Anti-Semitism in the UK',<sup>4</sup> in which it supported what was termed the International Holocaust Remembrance Authority definition of anti-Semitism. This was the old European Union Monitoring Committee Working Definition on Anti-Semitism (WDA), which the EUMC's successor body, the Fundamental Rights Agency, had junked in 2013, removing it from its website.

When the WDA was first introduced, it led to massive opposition by organisations such as the University and College Union and the National Union of Students. This controversy was what led to the WDA being dropped. However, the Zionists have continued to push this definition and it has now resurfaced. Like Dracula's undead, it has been reborn as the IHRA definition.

It is very easy to define anti-Semitism. It is, as we wrote in a letter to *The Guardian* in December 2016, hostility to Jews as Jews.<sup>5</sup> Dr Brian Klug of Oxford University, an acknowledged expert on anti-Semitism, explained in a lecture to the Berlin Jewish Museum that it would be more accurate to define anti-Semitism as

a form of hostility towards Jews as Jews, in which Jews are perceived as something other than what they are. Or, more succinctly, 'hostility

towards Jews as not Jews'. For the 'Jew' towards whom the anti-Semite feels hostile is not a real Jew at all. Thinking that Jews are really 'Jews' is precisely the core of anti-Semitism.<sup>6</sup>

The problem for the government and the Zionists with the above definition - which is six words, as opposed to the IHRA's nearly 450 words - is simple: it does not mention Israel! The IHRA definition is what is called "new anti-Semitism": ie, hostility to the 'Jewish' state or what used to be called the 'Jew among the nations'.

Those who put forward the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism are saying that hostility to Israel exists not because of what that state does - not because of the Jewish settlements on the West Bank, the apartheid nature of Israeli society, its demolition of Arab homes to make way for Jewish ones or the multiplicity of ways in which Palestinians, inside and outside Israel, are discriminated against - but because Israel is a 'Jewish' state. We oppose Israel because it is made up of Jews.

It is as if our calls to boycott South Africa because of apartheid were directed at white South Africans because they were white rather than because of the political system of racial supremacy that apartheid represented. Those who seek to associate Israel, the 'Jewish' state, with Jews outside Israel are consciously trying to bring about the very anti-Semitism that they say they deprecate. We oppose Zionism because of what it represents and does, not the racial/religious composition of its adherents. In actual fact the main proponents of Zionism historically have been Christian fundamentalists and dispensationalists, who have combined anti-Semitism and Zionism in equal measure.

We see this replicated today in the United States, where Donald Trump's open courting of white supremacy with his appointment of Breitbart's former CEO, Steve Bannon, as his strategic advisor coincided with a wave of attacks on Jews and Jewish cemeteries. The response of the Zionist Organisation of America and the Israeli government was to welcome Trump to power, because he was pro-Israel.<sup>7</sup>

Anti-Semitism has become the anti-racism of the British and European ruling classes. It is the false anti-racism of the right - a depoliticised form, but

an ideological arm of imperialism. It is anti-racism in alliance with reaction and as such has nothing to do with anti-racism as commonly understood. It is no accident that among the 31 states that came together to propose the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism are the regimes of Hungary, Poland and the Baltic countries - all of which are far-right with heavy anti-Semitic tendencies.

That definition was proposed last year by a select committee report that did not even bother to take evidence from those it attacked, such as Malia Bouattia, president of the National Union of Students. The Committee had no terms of reference and it saw an alliance between the Labour right (Chuka Ummuna, David Winnick) and the Tories, all of whom consciously used the report on 'anti-Semitism' as a means of engaging in a naked political attack on Jeremy Corbyn and Shami Chakrabarti. The report was savaged by David Plank, a former government advisor to the House of Commons social services committee, for its selective evidence base and skewed analysis.<sup>8</sup>

Jeremy Corbyn has continued his and Seamus Milne's brilliant strategy of surrendering to the Zionist lobby as a means of deflecting their attacks. As Ben White put it, "By limiting criticism of Israel, Theresa May's new definition of anti-Semitism will do more harm than good."<sup>9</sup> The only people who will benefit from the conflation of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism are anti-Semites. When everyone is attacked as 'anti-Semitic', then genuine anti-Semites are able to slip under the radar by claiming that criticism of them is because of their views on Israel.

## Campaign needed

The Brighton Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) held a meeting of nearly 80 people two weeks ago with Jackie Walker, Michael Deas (former organiser of the European Boycott National Committee) and myself as speakers. A large number of Labour Party members attended. The message was clear: anti-Zionism is not anti-Semitism.<sup>10</sup> We need to replicate these meetings up and down the country.

However, the national PSC, under the misleadership of Socialist Action, has made it clear that its 'strategy' to combat these attacks on the movement is to do nothing. But others are not so reluctant to combat the attack on the movement.

The British Committee for Universities of Palestine (Bricup), which campaigns for an academic boycott of Israel, organised a letter from 250 academics to *The Guardian*, which stated:

... the government has 'adopted' the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of anti-Semitism, which can be and is being read as extending to criticism of Israel and support for Palestinian rights, an entirely separate issue, as prima facie evidence of anti-Semitism. This definition seeks to conflate criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism.<sup>11</sup>

We need to rebuild the campaign that defeated the WDA. First and foremost, this means getting the trade unions to oppose the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism. We have to take the argument into Momentum and the Labour Party. What we have in our favour is that most people, outside the ruling class and the establishment, understand very well that criticism of Israel is not anti-Jewish. It is a simple notion, but those who seek to wrap imperialism in an ideological comfort blanket will continue to peddle dishonest definitions of anti-Semitism.

One of the organisations which has been most active in this respect is the fake far-right 'charity', the Campaign Against Anti-Semitism. It has demonised anyone who supports the Palestinians and opposes Zionism as anti-Semitic.

I and others have submitted objections to its registration as a charity and there is a petition up at the moment on the website Change.org,<sup>12</sup> which the CAA has tried unsuccessfully to get taken down, calling for the Charity Commission to deregister it. I have no illusions that the Charity Commission, which is led by far-right ideologue William Shawcross, will do anything, but we intend to focus the spotlight on this nasty McCarthyite 'charity'. But because I have campaigned to have it deregistered I have also been attacked.<sup>13</sup>

If we do not get rid of this bogus definition of anti-Semitism, then we can look forward to the IHRA version being incorporated into legislation, which would then effectively outlaw the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement in this country. In France BDS has been made illegal. That is why the PSC's refusal to campaign against the definition is criminal ●

## Notes

1. See, for example, 'Universities urged to crack down on anti-Semitism ahead of Israel Apartheid Week': [www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2017/02/24/universities-warned-anti-semitism-ahead-israel-apartheid-week](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2017/02/24/universities-warned-anti-semitism-ahead-israel-apartheid-week).
2. [www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/university-cancels-israel-apartheid-week-event-1.433123](http://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/university-cancels-israel-apartheid-week-event-1.433123).
3. [www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/oxford-labour-2016/1.753413](http://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/oxford-labour-2016/1.753413).
4. [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/136/136.pdf](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/136/136.pdf).
5. [www.theguardian.com/society/2016/dec/16/new-antisemitism-definition-silences-israels-critics](http://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/dec/16/new-antisemitism-definition-silences-israels-critics).
6. [http://freespeechonisrael.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Klug\\_brian\\_collective-Jew.pdf](http://freespeechonisrael.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Klug_brian_collective-Jew.pdf).
7. See [www.haaretz.com/world-news/u-s-election-2016/1.753413](http://www.haaretz.com/world-news/u-s-election-2016/1.753413).
8. 'An ex-government adviser just gutted the anti-Semitism report that vilified Jeremy Corbyn': [www.thecanary.co/2016/11/14/ex-government-adviser-just-gutted-antisemitism-report-vilified-jeremy-corbyn](http://www.thecanary.co/2016/11/14/ex-government-adviser-just-gutted-antisemitism-report-vilified-jeremy-corbyn).
9. [www.independent.co.uk/voices/anti-semitism-theresa-may-new-definition-jewish-council-holocaust-society-israel-criticism-palestine-a7470166.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/anti-semitism-theresa-may-new-definition-jewish-council-holocaust-society-israel-criticism-palestine-a7470166.html).
10. The meeting can be viewed online at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5PKI\\_M14k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5PKI_M14k); and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsL4MvujITU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsL4MvujITU).
11. [www.theguardian.com/education/2017/feb/27/university-wrong-to-ban-israeli-apartheid-week-event](http://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/feb/27/university-wrong-to-ban-israeli-apartheid-week-event).
12. [www.change.org/p/the-charity-commission-to-get-the-charity-commission-to-deregister-the-zionist-campaign-against-anti-semitism-u/19616495](http://www.change.org/p/the-charity-commission-to-get-the-charity-commission-to-deregister-the-zionist-campaign-against-anti-semitism-u/19616495).
13. See <https://antisemitism.uk/tony-greensteins-attempt-to-shut-down-campaign-against-antisemitism-showcases-the-similarities-between-far-left-and-far-right>.

**NHS**

# Huge demo boosts fightback

After the 'biggest ever' pro-NHS event, writes **Peter Manson**, what we need now is winning politics



The huge March 4 demonstration to defend the national health service undoubtedly came as a big boost to both the vast majority of workers who depend on the NHS and those who are employed within it.

In my opinion the organisers, Health Campaigns Together, were almost certainly correct when they described the event as the “biggest ever march to defend the NHS”<sup>1</sup> - a sentiment echoed by one of the main participating groups, the People’s Assembly, which called it the “biggest NHS demo in history”<sup>2</sup>.

Exactly how big was, as usual, subject to a variety of estimations, ranging from 100,000 (Socialist Party in England and Wales) to 250,000 from most of the rest of the left, as well as many mainstream commentators. Against a background of almost daily reports of NHS funding shortfalls, cancelled operations, proposals to introduce charging to see a GP, etc, etc, here is a subject on which the Tories clearly feel vulnerable. Hence the size and militancy of this demonstration matters. And, of course, for every trade unionist, medical student, doctor, patient and local activist who turned out, there are dozens who share their anger and frustration at the continued undermining of the NHS.

Philip Hammond’s budget came four days later on March 8 - and he made a number of concessions to the views of those millions of workers. So we were told that there would be an additional £325 million for the government’s so-called ‘sustainability and transformation plans’ (STPs) and a further £100 million for A&E departments. On top of that there will be £2 billion over three years for councils to spend on social care, meaning that doctors will get some small relief when it comes to the ‘bed-blocking’ of elderly patients. However, as the British Medical

Association warned, the promised funding of STPs fell well short of what is needed. The BMA’s Dr Mark Porter said that the plans required £9.5 billion if they were to be successfully delivered. So the NHS will be continued to be starved of the funds that are needed and the Tories will continue with their privatisation by stealth.

Both Jeremy Corbyn and his shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, were among the dozens of speakers on the Parliament Square platform. In line with his current practice Corbyn said nothing that might raise critical eyebrows among the Parliamentary Labour Party right wing, confining himself to pro-NHS statements with which none of them would disagree. The health service is “in crisis because of underfunding”, he said, stating the obvious. What is more, “The money is there.” So all we have to do is “collect taxes properly to fund it”.

For his part, McDonnell sounded more militant: “We will not stand by when they seek to destroy our NHS. We will take them on.” And apparently this confrontation will take place “on the streets”. For a moment it almost seemed as though he was about to advocate the taking up of arms, but instead he asked rhetorically: “Why?” and answered: “Because they’re our streets.” But at least that gave the chairs an opportunity to vary the chants between speeches: instead of calling out, “Whose NHS?” - to which the assembled thousands responded “Our NHS!” - they shouted, “Whose streets?”

It is true that Corbyn’s speech in particular was less than inspiring, but he still received the overwhelming and enthusiastic support that we have come to expect from such working class and labour-movement audiences. No doubt the PLP right will have noted that - but, of course, it is relying on the mass of largely

non-political voters to follow the lead of the bourgeois media and echo its criticisms. Even if they decline to give Labour their votes, come the general election, resulting in the loss of many of those MPs’ seats, well, at least that will provoke Corbyn’s downfall and enable Labour to launch a comeback, following a return to ‘sensible’ policies - ie, those only marginally to the left of the Conservatives’. Of course, a

campaign run by Labour-owned media outlets in favour of *pro-worker* policies is a totally alien idea for such people.

It goes without saying that Corbyn-style pro-NHS sentiments were forthcoming from all the platform speakers, including trade union leaders - Len McCluskey of Unite, Dave Ward from the Communication Workers Union and - in a welcome first speech following his heart transplant - Mark Serwotka of the Public and Commercial Services union.

Unite, along with Unison and the GMB in particular, had mobilised their members for the demonstration (although the extent of that mobilisation was uneven, often depending on the militancy and political views of local officials). But it seemed to this writer that the majority of demonstrators were trade unionists, and it was this that accounted for its militancy.

However, while there exists a strong desire for radical change, there is no clear lead coming from above - exemplified, at the present, by the current unwillingness of Corbyn to go beyond standard 1945-type platitudes. And that, surely, is the problem - even in relation to immediate demands concerning the NHS. Unless they are viewed as part of an overall package aimed at challenging the rule of capital, at the very least on a European scale, it hard to see how those demands will become a reality. The capitalist class is in no mood to grant substantive concessions under present circumstances and - unlike in 1945 - the working class has not just experienced a prolonged and bitter world war ●

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## Notes

1. www.healthcampaignstogether.com.
2. www.thepeoplesassembly.org.uk.



**Philip Hammond’s budget came four days later on March 8 - he made a number of concessions but nowhere near enough to meet health needs**

## IRELAND

# Historic moment or business as usual?

Kevin Bean looks at the possibilities for Sinn Féin following the assembly elections

Following last week's elections, Northern Ireland is once more back in the media limelight after almost a decade away from the national headlines.

As this paper goes to press, crisis talks are already underway, as ministers from London and Dublin joined Sinn Féin and Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) leaders in an attempt to cobble together a new power-sharing executive and resume what passes for 'business as usual' in Northern Ireland. As the various parties assemble for preliminary negotiations, political commentators are pouring over voting figures and patterns to try and make sense of a number of surprising electoral developments with possibly profound implications for the political and constitutional future of the region.

Variably described as "historic", a "watershed" and "a brutal result for unionism", the unexpected surge in support for Sinn Féin has transformed the political landscape in the Six Counties.<sup>1</sup> The bald headlines tell the story: whilst remaining the largest party in the assembly with 28 seats, the DUP is now only one seat and 1,168 first preference votes ahead of Sinn Féin. For the first time in the history of the Northern Irish state, unionists no longer hold a majority at Stormont. Significantly this shift in the balance of power is not just a product of the Sinn Féin surge: a handful of small centrist or 'non-sectarian' parties, such as the Alliance Party and the Greens, have also eaten into the unionist vote.

Another noteworthy feature of the election noted by many commentators and politicians was the increased turnout - 10% up on the 2016 election - with some of the biggest increases in areas where unionists suffered unexpected losses. Increased turnout in 'traditional' nationalist constituencies was also a significant factor in the 3.9% growth in Sinn Féin's first-preference vote.<sup>2</sup> As one commentator put it, the nationalist base was so energised by the election mood that it was "as if they thought they were back on the civil rights marches again".<sup>3</sup> This sudden surge in electoral participation, which appears to have swept across the board, ends a decade-long decline in voter turnout, fuelled by a growing cynicism about and disaffection from 'post-agreement' politics in the region.

Before the election many had expected this pattern to continue, predicting a further decline in turnout and deepening voter estrangement from the two dominant parties, the DUP and SF. Sinn Féin, in particular, had lost ground in the 2016 assembly elections to People Before Profit Alliance (PBPA), which not only topped the poll in West Belfast, but also gained a seat in Derry. This time around a number of commentators confidently suggested that the success of the PBPA would be not only repeated, but perhaps even bettered.

The PBPA conducted a well-organised and effective campaign which, in the early stages at least, seemed to justify both their own and the media's predictions of an increase in seats. Many Sinn Féin activists on the ground in West Belfast believed they faced a significant challenge from the left, as the PBPA capitalised on widespread disillusion with the political status quo and Sinn Féin's role in government.<sup>4</sup> However, these expectations and hopes were confounded by an apparently re-energised nationalist electorate, which turned out in greater numbers to vote for Sinn Féin. The PBPA's first preferences in West Belfast fell



Michelle O'Neill (SF leader in the north) and Gerry Adams

from 8,299 to 5,999 (or from 22.9% to 14.9%). Eamon McCann lost his seat due to the reduction of seats in each constituency from 6 to 5. He came 6th in 2016.

### Arlene the arrogant?

The cause and the significance of this increased turnout and surge in the nationalist vote have become central questions for post-election analyses. The personal unpopularity of DUP leader and first minister Arlene Foster amongst nationalist voters has become a popular explanation. For many, Foster's attitudes and behaviour appear to be the epitome of unreconstructed unionist bigotry and arrogance. Her original role in setting up the controversial 'green energy' scheme that precipitated the election, combined with her aggressive response in the face of calls to 'step aside' and submit to an enquiry, reinforced Foster's image as an intransigent unionist from the bad old days. Taken together with her disdainful attitude towards the legal recognition of the Irish language, Arlene Foster found herself labelled as the main recruiting agent for Sinn Féin in the election.<sup>5</sup>

Others, including SF leader Gerry Adams, have argued that Brexit was a significant factor in bringing out nationalist voters. The DUP was the only major party to back Brexit, in a region where 56% of voters backed 'remain', and, in the months following the referendum, Sinn Féin has placed calls for Northern Ireland to be given special status in the European Union at the centre of its demands. Fears about a return of a 'hard border' and concerns about the economic impact of Brexit across the whole island are strong amongst the nationalist population, especially in border areas.<sup>6</sup> These fears may have contributed to Eamonn McCann's loss of his seat in Derry: in its election leaflets Sinn Féin hammered home its own pro-EU stance and reminded nationalist voters that the PBPA's left Brexit position aligned the group with the DUP, unionist hardliners in Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) and Eurosceptic Tories.<sup>7</sup> Taken at face value, these explanations for the increase in the Sinn Féin vote suggest that an increasingly polarised society in the north and a rising tide of republicanism are but the first steps that would ultimately result in the reunification of Ireland.

We have been here before. Since the signing of the Good Friday agreement in 1998 and the creation of a 'power-sharing' government there have been a series of crises that have either ostensibly threatened the peace process or portended dramatic shifts in the 'new dispensation'. From the very beginning instability and choreographed crises have been built into the institutions and politics of the 'new Northern Ireland' that emerged

after 1998. Indeed politics in the region were conducted as a series of crises and threatened breakdowns of the devolved institutions. Innumerable walkouts by the political parties and suspensions of the executive and assembly, followed by round-table talks and high-level interventions by American presidents, British prime ministers and Irish *taoisigh*, have become the established script of Northern Irish politics over the last 20 years.<sup>8</sup>

This almost permanent sense of crisis reflects the unresolved political conflicts and uncertainties that lay at the heart of the peace process. The Good Friday agreement was designed to manage conflict, not transform it. Thus the central issue of Northern Ireland's constitutional status - should it stay as part of the United Kingdom or be reunited in an independent Irish state? - not only remained unresolved, but was kept open in a system defined by communal competition between unionists and nationalists, and structured by coercive participation in the power-sharing institutions set up by the agreement.<sup>9</sup> For both the British and Irish governments managing these inter-communal conflicts has proved increasingly difficult and the 'solutions' adopted increasingly more short-term in the years that followed.

So what is new now? Have the basic dynamics of this system been fundamentally altered as a result of the elections?

### Managing the conflict

Central to any assessment of these changes is an understanding of the communal politics of both the unionist and nationalist electorates. From the late 1960s, the challenge to the state from the nationalist population took various forms, beginning with the civil rights movement and reaching a peak in the ballot paper and Armalite strategy of Provisional republicanism.

These struggles were eventually contained by the British, with the result that from the mid-1980s militant republicanism became increasingly institutionalised and incorporated, culminating in Sinn Féin's participation in the government of a state it was once pledged to overthrow. Thus Provisionalism ceased to be a revolutionary movement and became instead a communal representative party, initially of just a section of northern nationalists, but after 2001 the dominant voice of its 'community'. This transformation from "insurrection to parliament" also reflected the changing relationship between the British state and the nationalist population as a whole.<sup>10</sup> As a result of conscious British social and economic policies, "nationalist alienation" and grievances were increasingly addressed after 1985, opening up the possibility of further political concessions from the state. This was to bear fruit in the 1990s during the

peace process, which gave nationalists a place in a power-sharing government.<sup>11</sup>

In these 'new politics', Sinn Féin, like their counterparts in the DUP, acted as 'ethnic tribunes' - becoming the loudest and most effective voices in defending and advancing communal interests. In the case of the Provisionals they still rhetorically adhered to the republican cause and reassured their supporters that taking seats at Stormont was a new phase of struggle and part of the transition to a reunited Ireland. In practice this transition increasingly receded into its role as a party of government.

However, it could never be entirely comfortable in this establishment role, because the inherent instabilities in Northern Irish society and politics surfaced periodically to challenge the new dispensation. Taking part in the *management* of communal conflict frequently meant actually taking an active part in the conflict itself. The rules of the political game determined Sinn Féin could do no other if it was to retain its position as the dominant party of the "nationalist community": in order to lead "its community" it sometimes had to follow it. On occasions this necessitated a series of manoeuvres reminiscent of the Grand Old Duke of York: sometimes provoking crisis and mobilising opposition amongst its supporters, whilst at other times making concessions to its opponents and "stretching its base". In part these political dynamics between the Sinn Féin leadership and its supporters explain both the "crisis" that prompted the election and the growth in support for the party.<sup>12</sup>

Where is it leading? In this context, how will the crisis be resolved and what will be the longer-term outcomes for politics in Northern Ireland? Does strengthening of the nationalist vote signal the "breakdown of the Good Friday agreement" or a rebalancing of the power dynamics, followed by an (eventual) return to business as usual - crisis management of a Northern Ireland that teeters permanently on the brink?<sup>13</sup> There are a number of destabilising factors in the wider political landscape, which could possibly alter the configuration of British, European and international politics. These factors range from Brexit and the possibility of Scottish independence through to the protectionist/isolationist turn in US policy and growing geo-political tensions.

Although often seen as a place apart, Northern Ireland has never been immune to the impact of external political forces, as the development of the peace process has shown.<sup>14</sup> Closer to home, the UK government's austerity programmes may threaten the £10 billion annual subvention which keeps the Six Counties afloat. Any reduction of the Northern Ireland's financial life support will have a dramatic impact - not only on the living standards of the population at large,

but also in limiting the options open to political parties in the region, whatever their political colour.<sup>15</sup>

In an era of unpredictable election results, it is also worth considering the 'mood' of the nationalist and unionist electorates. Sinn Féin has clearly captured a mood of disaffection towards the status quo, but what does that mean? Is its vote a rejection of the Good Friday agreement itself or an impatience with the political gamesmanship which characterises the drift and stasis of post-agreement politics? The history of nationalist voting patterns and support for the agreement since 1998 suggests the latter.<sup>16</sup>

This electorate was voting to strengthen its communal position under the Good Friday agreement, not for reunification, let alone militant republicanism (which was not on the ballot paper anyway). In any event, Sinn Féin's inclination to engage in extended negotiations with the possibility of a return to direct rule will inevitably lead a further retreat from any semblance of mass politics to its favoured ground of secret diplomacy and backroom negotiation. Sinn Féin will undoubtedly feel much more comfortable around the negotiating table than engaging with a re-energised but somewhat inscrutable electorate - suggesting that an extended period of talks involving a psychologically weakened DUP and interlocutors from Dublin and London will surely prove the most appealing scenario. Likewise flying kites about a referendum on Irish unity or demands for special status in the EU only really makes tactical sense for Sinn Féin as part of this protracted negotiation.<sup>17</sup>

This type of long, game-combining attention-seeking, brinkmanship, crisis talks and tactical one-upmanship has served Sinn Féin well throughout the peace process as a way of advancing the party's position, whilst reassuring the base that it remains committed to the struggle.<sup>18</sup> It will not be abandoned now by the party in the months of endless talks and political manoeuvres that lay ahead. Balancing Sinn Féin's image as both "outsider" and "insider" in order to win further concessions for the nationalist community in the north, while enhancing its potential as a "responsible partner" in coalition in the south, is a proven strategy - and it looks set to be Sinn Féin's most likely course for the foreseeable future.<sup>19</sup> ●

### Notes

1. See, for example, [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-39166355](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-39166355); and [www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/assembly-election-2017/northern-ireland-a-remarkable-election-in-some-respects-but-gridlock-remains-1.2998540](http://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/assembly-election-2017/northern-ireland-a-remarkable-election-in-some-respects-but-gridlock-remains-1.2998540).
2. [www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/ni-assembly-imminent-prospect-of-brexit-causes-shift-in-attitudes-1.2998278](http://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/ni-assembly-imminent-prospect-of-brexit-causes-shift-in-attitudes-1.2998278).
3. [www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/assembly-election-2017/ni-assembly-nationalism-felt-it-was-poked-in-the-stomach-and-it-snarled-back-1.2998485](http://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/assembly-election-2017/ni-assembly-nationalism-felt-it-was-poked-in-the-stomach-and-it-snarled-back-1.2998485).
4. The PBPA is affiliated to the Socialist Workers Party in Britain and the Anti-Austerity Alliance-PBPA south of the border.
5. [www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland-assembly-election/ni-election-seeing-off-uup-will-not-absolve-dups-arlene-foster-from-being-a-recruiting-agent-for-sinn-fein-35500118.html](http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland-assembly-election/ni-election-seeing-off-uup-will-not-absolve-dups-arlene-foster-from-being-a-recruiting-agent-for-sinn-fein-35500118.html).
6. *Financial Times* March 7 2017.
7. For copies of assembly election leaflets see the Irish Election Literature website: <https://irishelectionliterature.com>.
8. B Hayes and I McAllister *Conflict to peace: politics and society in Northern Ireland over half a century* Manchester 2013.
9. [www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/the-end-of-northern-ireland-not-so-fast/19537#.WMA1NW\\_yjcs](http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/the-end-of-northern-ireland-not-so-fast/19537#.WMA1NW_yjcs).
10. T McKearney *The Provisional IRA: from insurrection to parliament* London 2011.
11. K Bean *The new politics of Sinn Féin* Liverpool 2007, pp16-50.
12. *Ibid* pp91-131.
13. *The Irish News* March 3 2017.
14. B Williams *The Northern Ireland peace process and the international context* Pneuma Springs 2010.
15. *Financial Times* March 2 2015.
16. B Hayes and I McAllister *op cit*.
17. Editorial *Financial Times* March 8 2017.
18. *The Irish News* March 8 2017.
19. *Irish Times* January 26 2017.

## RUSSIA

# Mayakovsky and the avant garde

What was the truth about Soviet art? **Rex Dunn** looks at the real reasons behind its decay

Just as we must expose 'fake news', so we must also combat 'fake history'. Of course, in the year of the centenary of the October revolution we are getting distortions and lies aplenty. If we do not challenge this, then we shall even closer to Orwell's dystopian nightmare of 1984, whereby the truth is constantly being rewritten.

Consider the fate of the Russian avant garde (1917-32). Two months into the revolution's centenary year, we had Sophie Pinkham's piece in the *London Review of Books*.<sup>1</sup> Dealing with two recent biographies about the life and death of Vladimir Mayakovsky, what she writes is based either on misinformation or lies - not so much about Mayakovsky, but about the role of the Bolshevik regime and the relationship between Bolshevism and Stalinism. This was contradictory, to say the least. But if we take an abstract approach - which focuses solely on events within Russia - then it becomes possible to blame the Bolshevik regime for everything: it was repressive by nature; therefore Stalin's terror state was the logical outcome. In other words, imperialism had no role to play in the degeneration of the revolution at all!<sup>2</sup>

I disagree with Pinkham's argument for two reasons. Firstly, for her, the repression of artistic freedom in Russia begins right from the start of the revolution. Logically therefore, Stalin continued where Lenin left off. In other words, we are dealing with an entity without constitutive contradictions, which might affect its development towards its final end (socialism and communism), particularly if this is interrupted by external accidents (imperialist intervention, the failure of the German revolution).

Secondly Pinkham argues that

the Bolsheviks had little interest in either the avant garde or art free from state control ... [they] supported Proletcult, the workers' organisation that promoted the transmission of revolutionary messages in realist form accessible to the proletariat.

This suggests that the Bolsheviks were disposed towards suppressing artistic freedom, because they favoured Proletcult and its utilitarian approach to art. She is wrong on both counts. The Bolsheviks looked forward to a future when improvements in the material conditions of Russian society would allow for all kinds of art to flourish (both experimental and utilitarian). But this could not be achieved overnight. Apropos Proletcult, they were forced to intervene against the latter's utopian sectarianism, which was to have disastrous consequences, both for itself and for Soviet art as a whole.

Proletcult was a movement based on the idea that the revolution presented artists with a *tabula rasa*. Therefore a new proletarian art could be created from scratch. Hence the art of the past, especially bourgeois art, should be either shut away or destroyed.<sup>3</sup> It was also divided between its intellectual wing - eg, the supporters of the futurist, pro-Proletcult movement, later known as *Lef* - and a worker-based Proletcult wing, which was a mass movement. Both exhibited a sectarian attitude, which soon led to a war between the two, as well as with other art groups. Supporters of *Lef*, which included Mayakovsky, espoused new forms for art, based on the new technologies of mass reproducibility: eg, the use of dadaesque photomontage images to illustrate books or posters.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, the worker-based wing of Proletcult emphasised the need to continue with conventional forms of realism.

## Counterrevolution

A deeper analysis of the revolution reveals that the fate of the Russian avant garde was bound up with that of the revolution itself. Its aim was to replace capitalism

with socialism. But this had to spread from Russia across the whole world. For, as Marx says, this is the only way that a communist society can be achieved, wherein "the associated producers regulate their interchange with nature rationally, bring it under their common control, instead of being ruled by some blind power", which at last establishes the material basis for "the development of human power which is its own end, the true realm of freedom".<sup>5</sup> But after such a revolution comes the inevitable counterrevolution, because the old ruling class is not going to give up without a fight.

The counterrevolution was initiated both from without and within. The first phase was triggered by an attempt to assassinate Lenin. Soon Russia was invaded on several fronts by all the major imperialist powers, whose sole aim was to smash the revolution at all costs. This centred around a classic Trojan horse strategy: ie, imperialism's backing of the White armies inside Russia, whose barbarism cannot be overlooked. In this regard, the Red Army responded in kind. At the same time, proletarian democracy was replaced by an "iron dictatorship": ie, the Bolshevik Party and its newly created Red Army. For Lenin and Trotsky, this was a necessary, albeit temporary, measure - a holding operation - in the expectation that the revolution would succeed in the west. In 1937-38 Victor Serge attacked Trotsky for his role in the suppression of Kronstadt in 1921 (although this came right in the middle of the latter's campaign to defend his old Bolshevik comrades in the face of Stalin's infamous show trials). A beleaguered Trotsky struck back, arguing that the Bolshevik government had the right to defend itself and impose iron discipline:

I do not know ... whether there were any innocent victims [at Kronstadt] ... especially as I have no data at hand. I am ready to admit that civil war is not a school of humanist behaviour. Idealists and pacifists always blamed the revolution for 'excesses'. The crux of the matter is that the 'excesses' spring from the very nature of revolution, which is itself an 'excess' of history.<sup>6</sup>

The counterrevolution from within centres around the victory of the Stalin faction over Trotsky's Left Opposition: ie, during the period 1924-28. By 1921 the failure of the German revolution was clear. This was a serious setback for the twin pillars of Bolshevism: proletarian democracy and proletarian internationalism (which was the only way to ensure the goal of true democracy in Russia: the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' or rule by the majority, the workers and peasants, as the direct producers of surplus value. Otherwise the bureaucratic degeneration of the revolution would continue and capitalism would be restored in Russia. But, given its backwardness, this would necessarily have had to assume a fascist form, which would be infinitely worse. Arguably Stalin's 'terror state' was just as bad (thus today Marx's idea of a communist society is

dismissed as utopian).

Stalin's faction won the power because the international revolution was defeated. This meant that the scarcity of materials and skills would continue, which had to be overseen by an increasingly centralised bureaucracy, within both the party and the state. Top-down rule suited Stalin, for whom power was everything. But he needed to 'legitimise' his succession before the expectant masses. Hence he invented the cult of Lenin and himself. (If Lenin had known that his mummified body would be interred in a mausoleum, that his portrait would be seen everywhere, alongside that of Stalin's, he would have been horrified!)

In this regard, there is a direct link between events in the political and the cultural sphere. Clearly Stalin favoured a utilitarian approach to art, at the expense of the experimental.

The regime continued with the 'iron dictatorship', albeit for its own ends, not proletarian internationalism. On the one hand, it resorted to a policy of ruthless autarky (socialism in one country), combined with the revival of great Russian chauvinism. On the other, this also required the attempt to achieve peaceful coexistence with the west. (But, as Trotsky later said, not only was this a betrayal of the revolution: it was also utopian. History would soon prove him right: ie, the final defeat of the German revolution in 1933, which ensured Hitler's victory and ultimately the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941!)

Thus the counterrevolution from within was now complete. Of course, the Russian masses had to pay an unacceptable price: Millions were sacrificed for the sake of Stalin's five-year plans, mostly arbitrarily. Hence the need for the GPU secret police, the gulag, the firing squad, the great purge of 1937-38, etc.

## Growth and decay

Despite the vicissitudes of the civil war, the Russian avant garde actually flourished during this period, which is indeed remarkable. Moreover, Lenin and the Bolshevik Party welcomed this (albeit his own preference was for 'tendency' art, or art in the service of the revolution). At the same time, they insisted on the right of the party to keep control of artistic movements. This was important in the light of the furious debates that were raging at the time.

On one side, there were the 'acmeists', who wrote metaphysical poetry. They opposed the revolution, along with western influence; in particular the ideas of the enlightenment (such as rationalism and materialism, which led to the 'virus' of Marxism). On the other side, there was Proletcult. But it was deeply divided over the question of the freedom of artists to experiment with new forms, as against the utilitarian demand that artists restrict themselves to conventional forms - art had to make itself accessible to the masses.

Both the futurist pro-Proletcults and the larger worker-based Proletcult movements competed against each other for the state to prescribe their own brand of proletarian

art as the official form in the Soviet Union. But the party refused. Now both wings demanded complete independence from party and state. Therefore, as early as 1920, the Bolshevik government was compelled to intervene - via the newly created Narkompros (Commissariat for Education, under the leadership of Lunacharsky) - because these sectarian struggles were jeopardising the interests of the revolution, which was engaged in a life-and-death struggle for its survival. Thus it was imperative to establish peace between the warring factions.

As Gérard Conio says in his afterword, 'Towards a proletarian culture' (sic), in *The futurists, formalists: a Marxist critique*, Lenin was opposed to the idea of Proletcult's independence from the party in order to serve its own sectarian ends. He was sceptical of the futurist pro-Proletcult's shared hatred of the past or their desire to wipe the slate clean; their nihilism in connection with everything and anything inherited from bourgeois culture; their determination to destroy their artistic and literary heritage and to clear the way for an entirely new era, the era of proletarian culture. He therefore drafted the following resolution for the October Proletcult congress, which he succeeded in persuading the latter to adopt:

1. No particular ideas but Marxism.
2. No interventions on the new proletarian culture, but the development of the best traditional models, of the outcome of existing culture from the standpoint of the Marxist world-vision and of the conditions of life and struggle of the proletariat during the phase of dictatorship.
3. No breaking of links with Narkompros.

On the other hand, "Lenin and the other Bolshevik leaders (Trotsky, Bukharin, etc), while concerned to establish party control in every sphere, never dreamt of interfering with writers' and artists' freedom of creation and expression."<sup>7</sup>

Given its propensity for a utilitarian art that the masses could understand, the Proletcult movement continued to grow. Lunacharsky's old pre-revolutionary organisation, which advocated the gradual supersession of bourgeois culture by a proletarian one, was forced to give way to the rise of the 'leftists', who were even more sectarian, such as the 'Rappists' - the Russian Association Proletarian Writers (RAPP in Russian). The latter denied that anybody not of proletarian origin was entitled to write at all, and they conceived of literature as being by the proletariat or not at all. This, paradoxically, was to serve as the pretext for the dissolution of the organisation in 1932 and vesting control over culture and the literary affairs of the party. It was in the name of literature that Stalin, in founding the Writers' Union, dealt literature its death blow.<sup>8</sup>

Little by little, RAPP managed to eliminate its rivals. Under the direction of its arch-bureaucrat, Leopold Averbakh, it instituted a veritable reign of terror in the world of letters. This reached a peak in 1930, at the Congress held in Kharkov, where its line triumphed utterly and succeeded in having all other tendencies condemned, especially those that aspired to harmonise their 'modernist' and formalist conception of art with revolutionary faith. Mayakovsky's battles with these proletarian poets towards the end of his life are well-known - having spent himself struggling against them in vain, he went over to them shortly before his suicide.<sup>9</sup> In other words, Mayakovsky was an early victim of the 'crime' of formalism.

The growing attacks against him coincide with the final defeat of Trotsky and the Left Opposition in 1927-28, which was followed by his expulsion from the Soviet Union. Thus the problem of how

to win the majority of the peasantry over to the side of the revolution - most of whom were poor and illiterate - was left in the hands of Stalin and his acolytes: eg, Andrei Zhdanov. Hence in 1934, in his capacity as Stalin's number-one bureaucrat, Zhdanov enunciated the policy of socialist realism at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in Moscow. It was neither socialist nor realist!

Such a reactionary turn required the services of artists, as "engineers of human souls" in spheres of art and agitprop. But now their function was to disguise what was going on in the real world: that is, the failures and increasing barbarism of Soviet life, arising from the first five-year plan (1928-33): eg, slave labour in the factories and mines, the Gulag and, above all, the man-made famine which was responsible for the deaths of an estimated seven million peasants between 1932 and 1933. These were the bitter fruits of 'socialism in one country'.

## Strangled

Thus the necessary material conditions for the revolution, upon which the future of art depended, were not established. The full flowering of artistic freedom in the Soviet Union was subsequently strangled: ie, the freedom to experiment, unconstrained by the need for art to play its part in making the ideas and policies of the revolution accessible to the masses. The point is that it was not strangled by Bolshevism, but by its antithesis: the Stalinist bureaucracy, the 'grave-digger of the revolution'.

We owe it to today's generation, who hopefully will create a better future for all, to tell the truth about what happened in Russia after the October revolution. Based on an in-depth approach to the period, which also takes the negative impact of the counterrevolution into account (both from without and within), it is imperialism itself which bears the greatest responsibility for the destruction of the Russian avant garde. After all, the former started the civil war, which Trotsky himself described as "disgusting barbarism".

That, of course, is where everything began to fall apart. Add to this the Proletcult's own Achilles heel - utopian sectarianism - which played into the hands of the Stalinist bureaucracy. As Trotsky later wrote, under the rule of Hitler or Stalin the fate of art was the same. Artists were now "reduced to the status of domestic servants of the regime, whose task was to glorify it on order, according to the worst possible aesthetic conventions".<sup>10</sup> In Russia, if they refused, they were given a one-way ticket to the Gulag or they were shot. The destruction of the Russian avant garde undoubtedly played a part in Mayakovsky's suicide in 1930 ●

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## Notes

1. 'When were you thinking of shooting yourself?' *London Review of Books* February 16 2017.
2. Sophie Pinkham is an American writer who specialises in Russian and Ukrainian culture and politics.
3. We can see the same distortions - lies, in fact - *vis-à-vis* this relationship in the current exhibition at the Royal Academy: *Revolution, Russian Art, 1917-1932*.
4. Compare the rise of postmodernism a half century later, which claims to be a new epoch for art, as opposed to modernism, based on the new mass media. However, (i) it is a continuation of both Dada and conceptualism; (ii) it is indubitably market-driven.
5. Compare Kazimir Malevich and the suprematists. They also created new forms based on 'abstract non-objectivity'.
6. K Marx *Capital* Vol 3, Moscow 1966, p820.
7. I Deutscher *The prophet outcast* (part 3 of his Trotsky trilogy) London 2003, p354.
8. G Conio, 'Afterword' in C Pike (ed) *The futurists, the formalists and the Marxist critique* London 1979, pp243, 247-48, 248-49.
9. *Ibid* p243.
10. *Ibid* p253.
11. L Trotsky, 'Manifesto towards a free revolutionary art' in *Leon Trotsky on literature and art* New York 1970, p117.

**Vladimir Mayakovsky: futurist and hugely talented poet**



# 1917

## How women's protest launched the revolution

'1917: the view from the streets' - leaflets of the Russian Revolution, No5

One hundred years ago, on or about March 6 (February 21), the Petrograd Mezhrayonka (Interdistrict Committee) distributed the following leaflet regarding International Women's Day (IWD).

Although the origins of IWD were in the United States, German Social Democrat Clara Zetkin proposed in 1910 the annual celebration of the holiday on March 8 (February 23 in Russia). The holiday was first celebrated on this date in 1911 in Germany and several other European countries. Russia followed with a small demonstration in 1913, but IWD was overshadowed by May Day and the anniversary of Bloody Sunday (January 9 1905).

In 1917, Russia's various socialist groups failed to unite behind common slogans for



**End the imperialist war by ending the autocracy**

International Women's Day and therefore were unable to carry out a joint action. Without a printing press at the time, the Bolsheviks did not issue any leaflets.

According to historian Tsuyoshi Hasegawa,<sup>1</sup> the Interdistrict Committee intended

the leaflet below to educate workers rather than provoke rebellion. None of the male socialists expected that, on this holiday, women workers would provide the catalyst for the February revolution, which would topple the autocracy.

The Interdistrict Committee members wanted to rally all revolutionary Social Democrats in order to present a united socialist front against the war, the autocracy and liberal attempts to draw workers into a patriotic effort to support the war. During 1917 the Interdistrict Committee fused with the Bolshevik current.

International Women's Day was preceded by food shortages. Then, on the morning of March 8 (February 23), a fuel shortage in Petrograd stopped bakeries from working. Women (or their children), who had stood in line

for hours, had no bread to buy. Anticipating the cries of their children hungry for food, women workers reached the limit of their patience. Women textile workers went on strike and appealed to metalworkers to join them. Radical socialists quickly decided to add slogans against the autocracy and war to the calls for bread.

In this way, unexpectedly and on a commemorative day that most radical leftists treated as of minor importance, the February Revolution began ●

This series is edited by **John Riddell** and the leaflets have been translated and annotated by **Barbara Allen**.<sup>2</sup>

### Notes

1. T Hasegawa *The February revolution: Petrograd 1917* Seattle 1981, pp215-18.  
2. See also BC Allen *Alexander Shlyapnikov, 1885-1937: life of an old Bolshevik* Chicago 2016.

### Russian Social Democratic Workers Party

## Proletarians of all countries, unite!

**W**orking women comrades! For 10 years, women of all countries have observed February 23 as Women Workers' Day, as women's 'May 1'. American women were the first to mark this as the day to review their forces on it. Gradually, women of the entire world joined them. On this day, meetings and assemblies are held, at which attempts are made to explain the reasons for our difficult situation and to show the way out of it.

It has been a long time since women first entered the factories and mills to earn their bread. For a long time, millions of women have stood at the machines all day on an equal footing with men. Factory owners work both male and female comrades to exhaustion. Both men and women are thrown in jail for going on strike. Both men and women need to struggle against the owners. But women entered the family of workers later than men. Often, they are still afraid and do not know what they should demand and how to demand it. The owners have always used their ignorance and timidity against them and still do.

On this day, especially, comrades, let's think about how we can conquer our enemy, the capitalist, as quickly as possible. We will remember our near and dear ones on the front. We will recall the difficult struggle they waged to wring from the owners each extra rouble of pay and each hour of rest, and each liberty from the government. How many of them fell at the front, or were cast into prison or exile for their brave struggle? You replaced them in the rear, in the mills and factories. Your duty is to continue their great cause - that of emancipating all humanity from oppression and slavery.

Women workers, you should not hold back those male comrades who remain, but rather you should join them in fraternal struggle against the government and the factory owners. It is for their sake that war is waged, so many tears are shed and so much blood is spilled in all countries. This terrible slaughter has now gone into its third year. Our fathers, husbands and brothers are perishing. Our dear ones arrive home as unfortunate wretches and cripples. The tsarist government sent them to the front. It maimed and killed them, but it does not care about their sustenance.

There is no end in sight to the



**Petrograd street demonstration in early 1917: banner reads 'Long live the workers' soviet'**

shedding of worker blood. Workers were shot down on Bloody Sunday, January 9 1905, and massacred during the Lena Goldfields strike in April 1912. More recently, workers were shot in Ivanovo-Voznesensk, Shuia, Gorlovka and Kostroma. Worker blood is shed on all fronts. The empress trades in the people's blood and sells off Russia piece by piece. They send nearly unarmed soldiers to certain death by shooting. They kill hundreds of thousands of

people on the front and they profit financially from this.

Under the pretext of war, owners of factories and mills try to turn workers into serfs. The cost of living grows terribly high in all cities. Hunger knocks at everyone's door. From the villages, they take away cattle and the last morsels of bread for the war. For hours, we stand in line for food. Our children are starving. How many of them have been neglected and lost

their parents? They run wild and many become hooligans. Hunger has driven many girls, who are still children, to walk the streets. Many children stand at machines doing work beyond their physical capacity until late at night. Grief and tears are all around us.

It is hard for working people not only in Russia, but in all countries. Not long ago the German government cruelly suppressed an uprising of the hungry in Berlin. In France, the police are in a

fury. They send people to the front for going on strike. Everywhere the war brings disaster, a high cost of living and oppression of the working class.

Comrades, working women, for whose sake is war waged? Do we need to kill millions of Austrian and German workers and peasants? German workers did not want to fight either. Our close ones do not go willingly to the front. They are forced to go. The Austrian, English and German workers go just as unwillingly. Tears accompany them in their countries, as in ours. War is waged for the sake of gold, which glitters in the eyes of capitalists, who profit from it. Ministers, mill owners and bankers hope to fish in troubled waters. They become rich in wartime. After the war, they will not pay military taxes. Workers and peasants will bear all the sacrifices and pay all the costs.

Dear women comrades, will we keep on tolerating this silently for very long, with occasional outbursts of boiling rage against small-time traders? Indeed, it is not they who are at fault for the people's calamities. They are ruined themselves. The government is guilty. It began this war and cannot end it. It ravages the country. It is its fault that you are starving. The capitalists are guilty. It is waged for their profit. It's well-nigh time to shout to them: 'Enough! Down with the criminal government and its entire gang of thieves and murderers. Long live peace!'

Already the day of retribution approaches. A long time ago, we ceased to believe the tales of the government ministers and the masters. Popular rage is increasing in all countries. Workers everywhere are beginning to understand that they can't expect their governments to end the war. If they do conclude peace, it will entail attempts to take others' land, to rob another country, and this will lead to new slaughter. Workers do not need that which belongs to someone else.

Down with the autocracy! Long live the revolution! Long live the Provisional Revolutionary Government! Down with war! Long live the democratic republic! Long live the international solidarity of the proletariat! Long live the united RSDWP ●

**Petersburg Interdistrict Committee**

**Translated from AG Shlyapnikov Semnadtsatyi god Vol 1, 1923, pp306-308**

## TURKEY

# All or nothing

Erdoğan is going for bust in an attempt to cling onto power, writes **Esen Uslu**

The winds of change sweeping the turbulent waters of Turkish politics have been pounding president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rocking and rolling *caïque* and driving it towards a shipwreck on the Kurdish mountains. Erdoğan, the hapless coxswain, has been abandoned by many a supporter and is fully aware that his time is up, but is trying desperately to cling on, doing almost anything to avoid losing power.

Erdoğan and his clique within AKP (Justice and Development Party) have enlisted every ally in the wider Islamist political circles in an attempt to curb the powers of the military and civilian bureaucracy over Turkey's political life. Some liberals have been called upon to support the AKP in its quest to end military tutelage, and even a considerable section of the left has been accommodating to Erdoğan's undemocratic use of the security forces and judiciary.

Erdoğan has managed to give the Islamist Gülen movement a new lease of life after years in the wilderness - the militants following founder Fethullah Gülen had suffered regular repression since the formation of the republic. But when the Gülenists were unleashed out of military and bureaucratic tutelage by the AKP, they quickly became the most important group within Islamist politics. This led to a rapid flourishing of their influence within the state security bureaucracy and judiciary, as well as in academia, the media and various municipalities, often through blatant nepotism. For a while they were presented as the role model for moderate Muslims to follow, in an age where 'Islamist terrorism' has become the number one enemy for many in the west.

Erdoğan has been keenly aware of the allure of a 'charismatic leader' - he himself has been described in that way when it comes to the AKP. However, his 'charisma' is pale in comparison to that of Fethullah Gülen. Gülen, the *Hodja Effendi* (respected scholar), has taken over the experienced and well organised Nur (Divine Light) movement of the cold war era, attempting to transform it into a model suitable for the 21st century.

However, the movement's tightly knit underground organisation was not well suited to open political work. It has no chance of winning over the mass of conservative and centrist Islamists to form an independent political party in a short space of time. Working under the cover provided by an established Islamist party, such as the AKP, seemed to be serving it better.

Erdoğan was quick to realise that an eventual showdown with the Gülenists had to come and if he waited too long they would have a better chance of organising as an independent political party. In doing so they would take over at least a sizeable chunk of the AKP organisation, including some MPs. Such a split would be a disaster for Erdoğan's clique, and would surely deprive it of any viable opportunity to hold on to power.

The first veiled contest came in the shape of the famous corruption enquiries. Erdoğan was obliged to sacrifice four of his ministers, who resigned after receiving guarantees of immunity from prosecution. Through that sacrifice he prevented the inquiry delving into the murky dealings of members of his own family.

The next episode in the power contest came when members of MIT national intelligence organisation were arrested on charges of aiding and abetting Islamist terrorists in Syria - they were caught red-handed with vehicles leased by the MIT and laden with illegal armaments.

The Gülen movement wanted charges brought against the MIT director, but Erdoğan resisted. This contest, while sufficient to tarnish Erdoğan's invincible image, failed to dislodge him. However, the writing was on the wall.

## Turnaround

The only option for Erdoğan was to change course rapidly. A new set of allies were desperately needed, yet the only powerful ones available were those arch-enemies of yesterday: the military bureaucracy. It is undoubtedly bruised and weakened, but still represents a considerable force. And its members were keen to act against the Gülen movement following the latter's role leading up to and during the show trial of officers.

The price to pay by Erdoğan was the abandonment of the peace process with the Kurds that he had championed. He abruptly kicked away the peace table, despite negotiations having progressed to an advanced stage. Open warfare against the Kurds followed, starting from their power bases in the cities developed during the period of the truce. No mercy was to be shown - the hands of the military and paramilitary police forces would not be tied by legal niceties. The brutal war utilised devastating firepower on those urban districts known to be hot spots of the Kurdish resistance.

The war helped develop a compact with the MHP, the nationalist-fascist parliamentary political party. Erdoğan's gambit also drew in the so-called social democrat Republican People's Party (CHP), a member of the Socialist International. Both parties' statist instincts and well-entrenched anti-Kurdish politics shackled them to the Erdoğan camp.

The president was now almost ready to pounce on the Gülen movement. He had secured a workable majority and brought the military and bureaucracy onside, appointing officers to important posts in the cabinet. The Gülen movement was now between a rock and hard place. It had to act, but its actions had to be in line with its 'moderate Islamist' façade and acceptable to the US and other western allies.

Erdoğan's involvement with Islamist terrorists in Syria was the Gülenists' trump card, while the widely accepted corruption of his clique was also an asset. They hoped to take over power through an 'orderly coup', presented as the actions of a united military command. They calculated - or were led to believe - that such a united and orderly coup would be seen as a temporary nuisance, but something of a relief, by the international powers. The Gülenist leaders seemed to believe in their persuasive powers over the top brass.

They were mistaken in their calculations. Erdoğan was well set to foil the July 15 attempted coup after it was set in motion. It failed despite the actions of some junta units that had been prepared to shed innocent blood, and bomb and strafe city centres.

After its defeat Erdoğan unleashed a wave of terror against the Gülenist movement, using the powers given to him under the emergency rule legislation to issue edicts without parliamentary scrutiny. And the terror against the Kurds was upped through a large-scale foray into northern Syria across the Turkish border under the pretext of fighting Islamist terrorism.

The edicts were used to suppress the liberal opposition, including some members of his own party. Thousands of intellectuals, academics and journalists, as well as trade unionists and well known



Pro-PKK demonstration

leftwingers were targeted, some having to face sham trials. Thousands of state employees were sacked overnight. Their travel documents were confiscated; their professional certificates and licences annulled. Many faced destitution and thousands were jailed. The judiciary was cleansed to such an extent that even the judge nominated by Turkey to the International Criminal Court was jailed.

## Referendum

While he was in the political ascendency, Erdoğan opted to go for a constitutional amendment. Under the new presidential system he would be immune from prosecution with all powers of governance centred on himself.

Members of his clique were ready and willing to allow him to become the hegemon of Turkish politics despite the fact that they would be losing their minimal control over political events. The bulk of the parliamentary MHP followed the leadership line of backing Erdoğan. Very soon parliament had passed a constitutional amendment of 16 points. However, what was lacking was the required two-thirds majority to put the amendment into effect. Which means that the amendment approved by parliament will now have to be agreed by a referendum to be held on April 16.

At first the draconian measures adopted seemed to sway popular opinion in Erdoğan's favour. However, gradually it became apparent that, while a sizable section of the population remains undecided, proportionally the 'no' camp is larger than the 'yes' camp. The electoral history of Turkey strongly suggests a defeat for the president.

So once more desperation has set in with Erdoğan and his clique. They are aware that a negative outcome would mean the end of the current regime. He would not be able to control his own party or maintain its unity. And now the actions of Erdoğan and his party have become more and more desperate. The recent row with Germany is an example. There is an attempt to create the aura of 'victimisation by the imperialist west' - a ploy employed many times to galvanise support within the regime's power base.

Recent speeches have reflected this desperation. They attempted to paint a picture of "terrorist organisations", such as the Gülen movement, the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), together with

smaller and larger leftwing groups, acting in unison to bring about a negative outcome in the referendum. So a 'no' vote is a vote for terrorism!

But soon the clique realised that such statements were counterproductive, alienating even the moderate Muslims, who say, 'I would not grant such draconian powers to my own dad!' More drastic moves are needed to sway the votes. And the opposition in Turkey believes that such drastic action is more than possible - Erdoğan is quite capable of pulling a rabbit from his hat when needed.

But global political uncertainties are not helping him - unlike in 2008, when the quantitative easing policies of the imperialist centres allowed Erdoğan to cruise through the crisis with little damage. This time, however, he does not have such luck.

Since the US elections in November, the Donald Trump 'tidal wave' caused the currencies of the 'emerging market economies' to lose value, and then only partially regain some of their losses. But the Turkish lira has performed worst of the lot, losing 18.5% of its value since November 2016.

To combat the decreasing exchange rate and inflationary pressures, while maintaining a semblance of control, the Erdoğan government has done away with the independence of the central bank. That much cherished independence was one of the cornerstones of banking reform and budgetary control imposed with the assistance of the International Monetary Fund after the 2001 crisis. But the new measures will inevitably lead to turmoil in the real economy, resulting in plant closures, bankruptcies and unemployment, and eventually negative growth.

There is now a new expansionist monetary policy, which it is claimed will assist the small traders and manufacturers who form the power base of the AKP, and prevent a sharp downturn before the referendum. However, the economic crisis has begun to bite. Considering the loss of revenue from tourism and declining export markets due to Turkey's involvement in the Syrian war, there is now an economic tidal current tossing Erdoğan's *caïque* in every direction.

## Anti-Kurd

But it is not the only one. The Erdoğan government's grandiose foreign policy aimed at assuming the leadership of the

Islamist world has failed miserably. The desperate foray into Syria - dropping Islamist targets and putting the Syrian Kurds firmly in the military's sights - seemed to be progressing well in the early stages: there was only a sham war, because by tacit or real agreement Islamic State withdrew its forces to the city of Al-Bab.

It took five months for anti-IS forces to reach the outlying areas of Al-Bab, as the so-called Free Syrian Army, the Sunni Islamist militia, has proved to be unreliable. Increasingly the Turkish army was required to do the job itself - new troops were committed and consequently the number of casualties has increased.

However, the situation reached an impasse: Al-Bab is controlled by Turkey and its Sunni Muslim allies, while the road passing through the outskirts of the city is in the hands of the Syrian army and the Shia militia. So Turkey's desire to use its army to help relieve Raqqa seems a long way off. One of Erdoğan's proverbial rabbits refuses to be pulled from his magic hat.

And then, the night before International Women's Day, a strange and unheard of meeting took place in the Turkish city of Antalya, where military personnel from the US, Russia and Turkey met. According to the official communiqués, they discussed how to demarcate their positions to prevent an unintended clash between their forces, which were located in close proximity.

All observers, on the other hand, believe that the US and Russia were trying to curb the unwanted intervention of Turkey. The US has attempted to butter up Erdoğan by letting his forces stay in the territory occupied for the time being, while at the same time maintaining its own bases in Turkey, which are quite important for its effort in the field. For its part, Russia is defending its own interests in the region, while representing the Syrian government, and consequently Iranian interests.

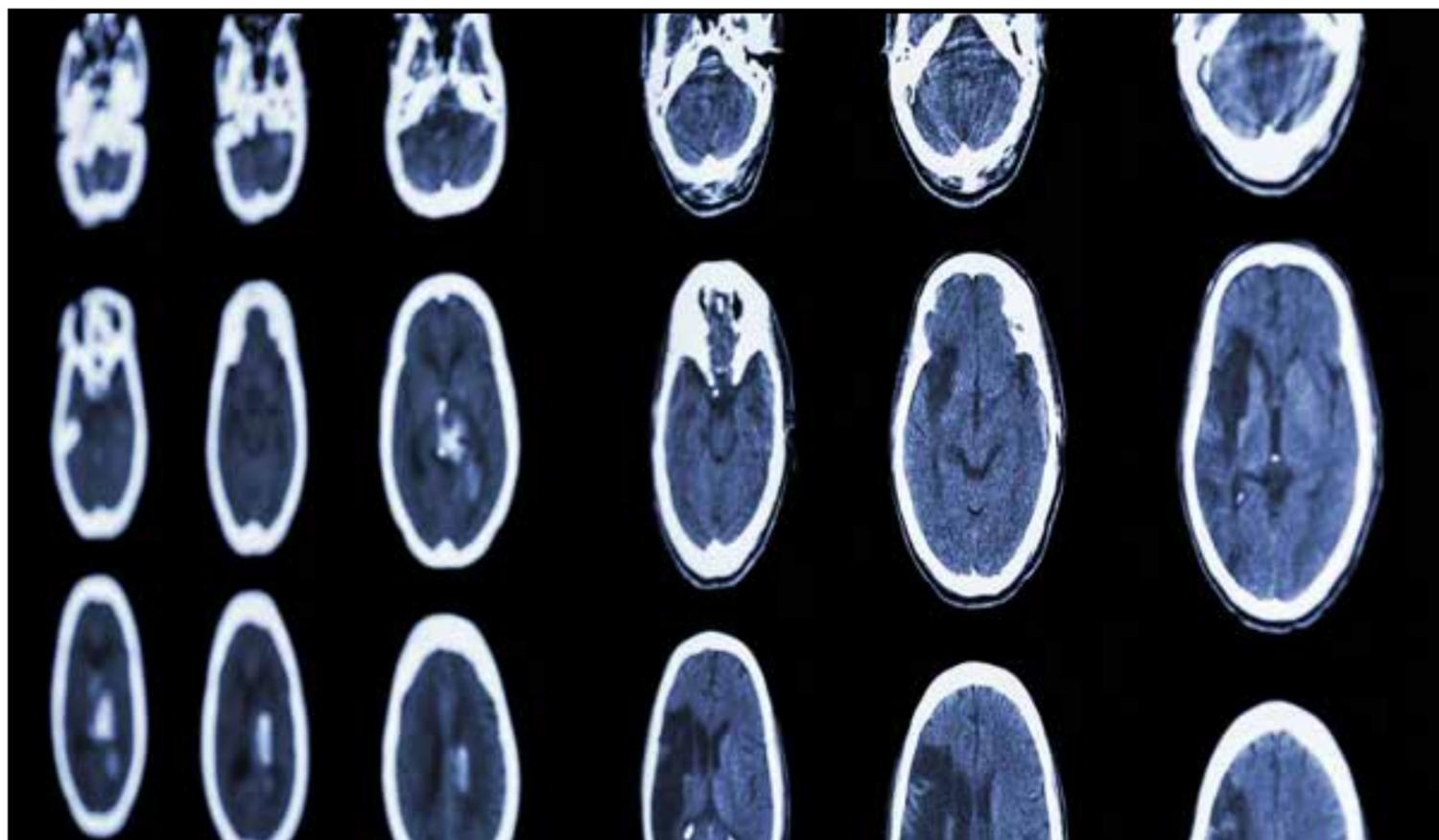
Meanwhile, Turkish armed forces have been staging operation after operation against Kurds within Turkey, as well as inside Iraqi territory. They are also attempting to bring Masoud Barzani and his Peshmerga into an openly anti-PKK stance that may lead to bloodshed.

In response Barzani-backed Kurdish political organisations in Turkey have declared that they will not vote in the referendum, since the constitutional amendment does not deal with Kurdish autonomy. This has been interpreted as a ploy by Erdoğan intended to divide the strong 'no' forces in Turkey's Kurdish provinces.

Barzani's involvement could provide an opportunity for Erdoğan to launch a desperate attack in Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan), which is controlled by the Kurds following the heroic defence of Kobanê, in order to open a corridor towards the Iraqi town of Sinjar through a *fait accompli*, without obtaining agreement from other forces in the region.

That would mean an unpredictable escalation of the war. However, Erdoğan's regime is in such desperate straits that this cannot be completely dismissed. He would not win such a war, but it might give him enough kudos. He might secretly be hoping that an international intervention will stop such a foray, but in the meantime his claimed position of making a stand against the imperialist-Christian west may gain more credibility. At the same time as fighting IS, he would assume the mantle of a defender of Islam, which he hopes may be sufficient to win the referendum ●

REVIEW



Night work: affects the brain

# Toilet-paper labour

David Macaray *Night shift - 270 factory stories* CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2015, pp360, \$17.99

David Macaray's most enjoyable and very readable *Night shift* is an exquisite study of industrial work in a US manufacturing site between the mid-70s and the mid-90s. Being a marvel of industrial sociology, it avoids the managerialist dehumanisation of factory workers and of management studies that turn them into academic research objects.

To those trapped in the management orbit, it is a stark reminder that those who actually work on the factory floor are not 'human resources', assessed through head counts, or disposable commodities, but people of flesh and blood - individuals. Macaray uses the fictional name "San Remo" for the paper factory where he was working, but in reality it is Kimberly-Clark - a \$20 billion multinational Fortune 500 corporation with 40,000 workers, best known for producing Huggies and Kleenex.

More than 150 years ago, Karl Marx predicted that, wherever capitalism goes, a working class will emerge and, wherever a working class emerges, there will be organisation. This applies to 'San Remo' as well. Very soon after Macaray started working there, he became a shop steward and eventually president of the local trade union, the Association of Western Pulp and Paper Workers. As a consequence, *Night shift* is as much a workplace story as it is a trade union story, and at the centre of Macaray's study there are the men and women working on the shop floor.

At times this gripping book is funny, while at others it is very serious - when, for example, describing the fundamental changes in workplace culture between the mid-70s and mid-90s. Despite managerialism's claims about positive organisational culture, these changes were not for the better - apart for the fact that better trained managers became less authoritarian and dictatorial.

For some reason, at San Remo, toilet paper was not known by that name. It was called "bath tissue", while nobody talked about "faeces, excrement, stool. Human waste was called insult". On the other hand, working in manufacturing means noise in the form of up to "100-125

decibels [and] paper dust smelling like a combination of boiled flannel and liniment" - which leads Macaray to comment that it reminded him of "Robert Duval in *Apocalypse now*: I love the smell of napalm in the morning". Like being at war, there was a distinct separation between workers and management. Macaray writes: "they were management; we were union. They were officers; we were enlisted ... salaried and hourly".

And management ruled over workers except when forced by the strength of the union to negotiate or seek compromises. But despite the rather common 'human resource management' (HRM) rhetoric of not having three or four strike rules, at San Remo disciplining workers consisted of: "informal reprimand; 3-day DLO (disciplinary layoff); 7-day DLO; and termination". Often union stewards were part of the process, mediating and avoiding harsh punishments for workers. Next to punishment rules, "the company's idiotic zero-tolerance policy" was also a major concern for workers and the union.

Like many workers and trade unions, Macaray experienced many negatives from HRM: for example, when observing that the "guys running HR [were] odious and vindictive". Based on Macaray's two decades of experience in working with HRM, he came to the conclusion that "asking HR to save your operation is like asking a bartender to save your marriage". Like so many places, San Remo also saw changes in personnel management: "in 1971, human resources was still called 'industrial relations'. Then, a few years later, IR was renamed 'employment relations'. Then, a few years after that, it became the present-day HR", marking the distinct anti-union trend away from industrial relations.

The move towards macho-management came with two-tier bargaining. This received an initial push, when the United Automobile Workers' two-tier system (often called "concession bargaining") arrived at San Remo. Macaray writes:

people currently on the payroll get to keep their wages and benefits, but new-hires will be consigned to a lower tier. But the worst part - besides

exploiting new-hires and causing resentment on the floor - was that management didn't keep their word.<sup>1</sup>

This is shown in Macaray's detailed descriptions of "contract negotiations" of collective bargaining.

Macaray also writes about absenteeism, workers being late for work, high turnover, workplace violence; sex and sex scandals ("nude pictures circulating the company") and "sexual promiscuity" in a mixed male/female workplace; as well as drug problems, alcoholism ("what amazed the executives board was how productive these people could be, even when drunk", as well as the different treatment managers received, compared to workers - a manager "was given a full year off at full pay to overcome it"); promotion ("moving up the chain of command") and demotion; industrial accidents ("safety had always been a major concern at San Remo"), workplace deaths; and termination. On the latter, Macaray comments: "... if the company wants to fire somebody, fine, let 'em do it, but they can't do it on whim, and they can't do it without due process". Macaray also illuminates internal HR and management affairs as well as internal union affairs, when noting on the union side that "bad stewards came in three forms: lazy and ignorant stewards; angry stewards because they have not been hired into management; and borderline psychopaths".

On his own union, Macaray also emphasises that "by far the biggest complaint was that we defended too many bad workers. In truth, "we represented them; we rarely defended them". Management had its fair share of good and bad managers, about which Macaray tells the eagle and chicken story: "if you throw an eagle up in the air enough times, it'll eventually fly; you throw a chicken up in the air enough times, it'll eventually shit on you".

On the management/HR side, Macaray faced a "racist HR rep [who was] cunning like a rat, but did not have many problem-solving skills and creativity - he was a bigot and proud of it". There was also another "racist and homophobic HR rep [who] liked to boast that he was so virile,

he could identify a homosexual on sight". These are bosses that workers and the union did not like. However, Macaray notes that "most of us appreciated a strong, predictable boss ... what we wanted to see in a boss was consistency".<sup>2</sup>

The company operated on the "daylight-12 (7.30am to 7.30pm) and the graveyard-12 (7.30pm to 7.30am)" - as if a toilet paper factory needs a night shift (the title of Macaray's book). As a manufacturing place it also had many "high-speed, machine-paced jobs". Meanwhile, the factory experienced "executives travelling the country on cost-cutting missions". Macaray notes that "the word 'team' entered into our bloodstream in the mid-1980s" - cost-cutting, sweetened by teamwork. Not surprisingly, he writes, "generally speaking, the biggest complaint the union had about management personnel was their hypocrisy".<sup>3</sup>

Macaray closes with an epilogue directing our attention to the changes in organisational culture - most of the fun has been leached out, while "the mill descended into industrial fascism". In the meantime, "the manufacturing sector has been marginalised and debased [but] none of us saw it coming ... we honestly believed [American industries] would last forever".

For those remaining manufacturing industries in the USA and elsewhere, Macaray's *Night shift* is a magnificent study of work, industrial relations, trade unions, the changes in organisational culture, HRM, management, and perhaps even of the new(ish) ideologies of managerialism.<sup>4</sup>

Thomas Klikauer  
<https://klikauer.wordpress.com>

## Notes

1. See P Thompson, 'Disconnected capitalism: or why employers can't keep their side of the bargain' *Work, employment and society*, 17(2), 2003, pp359-78.
2. S Marglin, 'What do bosses do? The origins and functions of hierarchy in capitalist production' *Review of Radical Political Economy* 6(2), 1974, pp60-112.
3. R Macklin, 'The morally decent HR manager' in A Pinnington et al (eds) *Human resource management - ethics and employment* Oxford 2007.
4. See T Klikauer *Managerialism - critique of an ideology* Basingstoke 2013.

## What we fight for

■ Without organisation the working class is nothing; with the highest form of organisation it is everything.

■ There exists no real Communist Party today. There are many so-called 'parties' on the left. In reality they are confessional sects. Members who disagree with the prescribed 'line' are expected to gag themselves in public. Either that or face expulsion.

■ Communists operate according to the principles of democratic centralism. Through ongoing debate we seek to achieve unity in action and a common world outlook. As long as they support agreed actions, members should have the right to speak openly and form temporary or permanent factions.

■ Communists oppose all imperialist wars and occupations but constantly strive to bring to the fore the fundamental question - ending war is bound up with ending capitalism.

■ Communists are internationalists. Everywhere we strive for the closest unity and agreement of working class and progressive parties of all countries. We oppose every manifestation of national sectionalism. It is an internationalist duty to uphold the principle, 'One state, one party'.

■ The working class must be organised globally. Without a global Communist Party, a Communist International, the struggle against capital is weakened and lacks coordination.

■ Communists have no interest apart from the working class as a whole. They differ only in recognising the importance of Marxism as a guide to practice. That theory is no dogma, but must be constantly added to and enriched.

■ Capitalism in its ceaseless search for profit puts the future of humanity at risk. Capitalism is synonymous with war, pollution, exploitation and crisis. As a global system capitalism can only be superseded globally.

■ The capitalist class will never willingly allow their wealth and power to be taken away by a parliamentary vote.

■ We will use the most militant methods objective circumstances allow to achieve a federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales, a united, federal Ireland and a United States of Europe.

■ Communists favour industrial unions. Bureaucracy and class compromise must be fought and the trade unions transformed into schools for communism.

■ Communists are champions of the oppressed. Women's oppression, combating racism and chauvinism, and the struggle for peace and ecological sustainability are just as much working class questions as pay, trade union rights and demands for high-quality health, housing and education.

■ Socialism represents victory in the battle for democracy. It is the rule of the working class. Socialism is either democratic or, as with Stalin's Soviet Union, it turns into its opposite.

■ Socialism is the first stage of the worldwide transition to communism - a system which knows neither wars, exploitation, money, classes, states nor nations. Communism is general freedom and the real beginning of human history.

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# weekly worker

**Lib Dems are a  
blood-splattered  
imperialist  
party**

## Divisions over unity

Squabbles in the British anti-Trump campaign say much about the forces involved, reckons Paul Demarty - and little of it good

I have written often of America's colourful (in an orange sort of a way) new president in these pages: indeed, with four-odd years to go, I am beginning to get tired of him already.

In doing so, I have repeatedly expressed caution about the sort of forces lining up to depose him, not all of whom (to put it mildly) have the best interests of humanity at the core of their vision of the beautiful, good and true. This is a danger somewhat more present for the American left than it is for the British, however; for, while a number of do-gooding celebrities, bourgeois journalists and mainstream politicians have professed their disgust with Donald Trump, both the state core and government seems to acknowledge that the United States is an indispensable sponsor, no matter who occupies the White House, with such choppy diplomatic waters ahead.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the left has been allowed a freer hand to pitch in to the anti-Trump activity in this country, with the Tories mostly absent and the Liberal Democrats (more of whom anon) still at a low ebb after their well-deserved 2015 humiliation. The British establishment's anti-Trump faction is weak enough to need the tireless activity of the left to make things happen - just about. Thus it tolerates the Socialist Workers Party placards, the prominence of Corbynite die-hards, and so on.

The left, however, is the left, and so divisions must inevitably open up. These divisions are, from our point of view, not without interest.

### Keeping up with the Joneses

Our story begins a month or so ago, when - in the midst of the chaos of Trump's travel ban - a London demonstration was called by various organisations of the left via their respective single-issue front campaigns, on February 4.

Conspicuously *not* attending was a certain Owen Jones, the rightward-tumbling journo-activist, who announced to his vast and increasingly restive Twitter following that he objected to the leading involvement of the SWP (through its Stand Up to Racism front): "a cult which covered up rape".<sup>2</sup>

We do not intend to recapitulate the details of the SWP rape case here (briefly, for neophytes: in 2012 the organisation took the disastrous decision to hand over a rape charge against a long-time leader to its internal disputes committee, with the result that evidence was trampled over and the 'defendant' 'acquitted' by an obviously biased 'jury', leading to a protracted political and organisational crisis.) It seems a little unfair to call the SWP a cult, since it lacks a charismatic leader, although it has cultish features. Jones is otherwise - alas - a little too close to the truth for comfort.

He is nonetheless being cynical, since he has demonstrated in common with the SWP many times in the intervening four years since the SWP scandal broke. What has changed is ... Owen Jones. For the reality of the leftwing capture of the Labour leadership of which he dreamed

for so long has dawned; and he is now busying himself with who-knows-what games to make the Labour Party 'electable', at the cost of its leader if necessary. He is, in short, wholly captive to the political mainstream at this point; his far-left past<sup>3</sup> and associations were useful to him in his period as officially designated voice of the radical youth, but retain utility today only inasmuch as he can disavow them for effect, as he did here.

If SUTR is not to lead the anti-Trump tidal wave, however, then what is? Jones's answer at that point was ... another demonstration (*quelle surprise!*), titled 'Stop Trump', on the day (February 20) parliament was to debate the visit. That demo has now spawned its own front organisation, the Stop Trump Coalition.<sup>4</sup>

If that name sounds familiar, then it probably should - plainly the model in a certain sense is the Stop the War Coalition (ironically, a co-organiser of the protest boycotted by Jones), which was founded after 9/11 to resist British involvement in Afghanistan and achieved its apotheosis a year and a half later, with the millions-strong march against British involvement in the then looming Iraq war. Comrade Jones and I, alike, are of the 'Iraq generation' of British leftwingers - yes, *we were there*, in various stages of late adolescence, in Hyde Park.

### All's Farron love and war

The concordances go further, as a perceptive article by Sarah Sachs-Eldridge in *The Socialist* notes:

The list of names Owen has gathered for his coalition includes Tim Farron MP, now leader of the Lib Dems, which formed the vicious Con-Dem government with the Tories ...

In 2003, then Lib Dem leader Charles Kennedy spoke to the millions-strong February 15 anti-war demo. But it has since been made clear that neither he nor his pro-capitalist party was anti-war. Against the objections of the Socialist Party representatives on the Stop the War Coalition committee, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and its allies unfortunately pushed the decision through the committee to give a platform to Kennedy without any public criticisms.

They also refused to allow any speaker on behalf of a socialist organisation. This undoubtedly helped

to build up the Lib Dems' 'radical' image, contributing to Cleggmania and the formation of the Con-Dem Coalition.<sup>5</sup>

This is all well-observed. The *appearance* of a Liberal Democrat anti-war policy certainly contributed to the Lib Dems' young-skewing popularity in the mid-to-late aughts, though they had - as a 'sensible' bourgeois party - essentially suspended all practical opposition after British forces were actually engaged.

Are we in a similar situation now, with a similar profile of political risk? The answer, on the face of it, is *no*: the Lib Dems went into 2003 with a sizeable parliamentary party, who could plausibly hold the balance of power if the Tory vote seriously revived (as it did in 2010); and the divisions in the ruling class, though sharp, were essentially tactical, whereas today nothing less than the global hegemony of the United States is at stake, immediately (and incredibly!) due to the voluntary action of the US itself, and more generally due to the long-standing decline of US power, like Britain before it.

Though Trump's new era is yet to spill much blood, there can be no doubt that the era is new, and these are dangerous times. The outcome of February 15, even to us *naifs* who were on our first or second demonstration, was clear - either we would stop the war, or we would not. What bizarre consequences would ripple out from Trump's impeachment or resignation? What will follow, even, if he *stays*? We need not fear the consequences if we set out in good order to shape them; the trouble with handing the leadership of the movement over to Tim Farron (or, frankly, Owen Jones) is, in the first instance, that it is an abdication of

responsibility for the consequences.

Yet does the SWP/SUTR *really* differ from Jones on this point? It so happens that Tim Farron has pitched up with Jones, but would the SWP turn him away? Not on the historical evidence (as comrade Sachs-Eldridge reminded us earlier, it was *the SWP* that got Charles Kennedy his prime-time slot in 2003), nor on more recent evidence either. Here is 'Kevin B', in the SWP's February 6 *Party Notes* bulletin, reporting on the anti-Trump demo boycotted by Jones:

Speaker after speaker called for unity against Trump. This is important in general, but particularly so in light of the attacks on Saturday's demonstration made by Owen Jones. The lesson from history is clear. If the anti-racist movement fails to unite, it's the racists who win.<sup>6</sup>

We note, *inter alia*, that this is the sole mention of Jones's views in the bulletin - the fact that the "attacks on Saturday's demonstration" were *specifically against the SWP* was apparently beneath notice to the SWP's mere members. Yet the real point is clear - the unity of the 'anti-racist movement', taken in its full breadth, would unite Maoists with corporate HR departments, Whitehall 'diversity' consultants, and certainly Tim Farron. Only such unity will stop "the racists" from winning, so diabolically powerful are they!

Comrade Kevin does not bother to name the historical precedents on his mind, but, since everyone is so fond of throwing words like 'fascism' around these days, it seems pertinent to revisit the most notorious disunity of 'anti-racists' in history - that which preceded the triumph of Hitler in 1933. The Communist Party of Germany typically cops the blame for this,

captured as it was in the scholastic fantasy that there was no meaningful difference between the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Nazis.

There is no doubt that the KPD deserves the contempt of posterity for its shameful role in this calamity, yet the SPD all too easily escapes criticism, being thought of as merely the victim of a lunatic trend in world communism. In fact, it equally despised the idea of unity with the communists, pursuing instead an alliance of parties loyal to the Weimar constitution, to defeat Hitler and avert any revolutionary overthrow on the left. That policy, we must be clear, was equally disastrous, for it was the very 'allies' sought by the SPD *that put Hitler in power*. Their loyalty to 'democracy', even in the degraded form of the Weimar polity, was highly conditional. At bottom, it was conditional on *class interests*, as they manifested at a time of acute social and political crisis.

Nothing so awful as a new Hitler regime is immediately before us; but (sorry, Kevin) the lesson from history is clear. Unity is valuable only if it is unity *for something useful*. Capitalist society, in its particular present convulsion, produced the atomised resentment which in turn produced the election of Trump. Truly defeating Trump - which is to say, defeating him without bringing forth another Bonapartist creep in his place - is impossible if we lash ourselves to the parties who defend the system from which such degenerates spring ●

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### Notes

1. The counter-example here is Christopher Steele, whose Russia dossier excited so many in January, but has rather been outstripped by events - *Après Chris, le déluge* ... We have no way of knowing how close he remains to MI6, except that he did not leave through the same door as Kim Philby. Regardless, the overall picture is one of discretion overcoming valour.
2. <https://twitter.com/OwenJones84/status/827500089430175746>.
3. Jones first became known to our good selves when, as a very young man, he would turn up to Communist University assuring us that the revolution could only come through the transformation of Labour Party apparatuses into soviet-type institutions, after the fashion of his teacher, Graham Bash; he popped up all over Labour's Marxist far left before he published *Chavs* and found himself - as much to his surprise as anyone else's, we assume - a media darling.
4. [www.stoptrump.org.uk](http://www.stoptrump.org.uk).
5. [www.socialistparty.org.uk/issue/938/24805/01-03-2017/debates-on-building-the-anti-trump-movement](http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/issue/938/24805/01-03-2017/debates-on-building-the-anti-trump-movement).
6. <http://cpgb.org.uk/assets/files/pn060217.pdf>.



Owen Jones: unity with Lib Dems is fine, but not with SWP

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