

A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity

weekly

# worker



**Lars T Lih asks if Lenin's April theses marked a strategic change**

- Trump and North Korea
- Palestine polemic
- Paul Beatty review
- Livingstone revisited

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10

What a surprise



# LETTERS



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

## Formal end

I feel intense frustration with the Labour leadership of Corbyn, McDonnell, Abbott, Long-Bailey *et al*, and those who seem to have been swept up in the euphoria of both leadership elections. Is this really the best this gets? Is this really the high watermark of leftwing advance in the Labour Party?

It seems that the announced 2017 general election will result in a complete rout of the Parliamentary Labour Party, and then a complete removal of Corbyn and co from the leadership.

The fundamental problem with Corbyn is that no-one, least of whom himself, expected that when he stood in 2015 he would do better than last in the first ballot. Corbyn has since then, and not surprisingly, appeared completely out of his depth and really just along for the ride. It seems that after his surprise election the 'master plan' was to survive for a couple of years, make some necessary changes to the organisation and policies of the Labour Party, and allow a younger and higher-calibre leftwinger to take over.

It is interesting and instructive that Corbyn has been very happy to accept the additional £62,000 salary for being leader of the opposition, on top of his MP's salary of £75,000, to survive for as many months as possible and put away a very nice little nest egg.

Corbyn has lacked energy, flair and commitment in his role as Labour leader. He looked relieved when the 2017 general election was announced, knowing that he would soon be able to retire from the high-pressure cauldron of continuous mass and social media politics. Even when pre-prepared, he was unable to say he thought he could become prime minister, let alone that he wanted to. Diane Abbott, of all people, placed him on 15 months' notice from December 2016.

Momentum appeared for a brief passage of time to represent a new form of political organisation, a possible embryo for an inclusive and unifying mass, democratic, socialist party. Yet we have seen it descend and implode into one of the most traditional and self-destructive faction fights for control and direction.

I am both saddened and angered by the consequence of the actions of the traditional leftists leaving the literally hundreds and thousands who have joined the Labour Party as part of the Corbyn surge high, dry and impotent. If, as expected, the Labour Party gets completely hammered, worse than in 1983, what are the prospects of a complete refoundation and rebuilding of a mass, democratic, socialist party of labour? The trouble is we have been here many times before.

Will this be the formal end of the concept of a British road to socialism via the Labour Party? I hope so.

**Andrew Northall**  
Kettering

## Shock

Theresa May's shock announcement that she will trigger a general election on June 8 must be one of the most amazing U-turns in recent political history. Earlier this year she announced there were no such plans until 2020. This opportunist about-turn may well backfire on the Tories with party members already talking about moving to vote Liberal Democrat because of the hard-line rightwing agenda she is pursuing.

Labour could provide a real challenge to the Tories if it gets its act together and unites behind Jeremy Corbyn's socialist policies.

This general election should be fought against the Tory government's horrendous attacks on working class people: the £30 billion cuts to the NHS that will decimate healthcare, the massive cuts to welfare benefits, the underfunding

of education and the increasing moves towards even more privatisation of public services, putting profit before people.

**Pete McLaren**

Rugby Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition

## Some hope

Given the Labour Party's problem with the media in getting its message out there, a new way must be found to get a lot of new people to resonate with what Labour and the wider left want to do.

Labour needs to diversify its argument to reach more people. Relying on class loyalty/generational/area specific voting only goes so far and will only reach most people at a very low level. The phrase, 'Vote Labour or the Tories will get in', isn't going to be enough.

First, we need to look at Labour's target audience. In theory, this should be working class people - the largest group of voters out there. These are people who are in low-paying, precarious jobs; on benefits, disabled, carers, public-sector workers, etc. Those who don't have much and have a lot to gain if Labour and others get into power. It's not rocket science to identify these people; they are us.

The trouble is how to get our ideas and policies through to these people. Take a lesson from us Greens. In 2015, a blind survey was conducted to see what policies people thought were best when not labelled to a certain party. The Green Party's policies were the most popular, but when it came to the election, where most, it not all, of these policies were seen through the prism of the mainstream media, policies like basic income and a £10-an-hour living wage were too much of a leap to imagine in reality, compared with the other parties - in addition to the inherent media bias towards the neoliberal centre, making our manifesto hard to get through to many people.

There are two ways we can learn from this:

- Tone - hope sells better than fear. The 'leave' campaign relied on hope (in reality, a very misguided version), but hope nonetheless won. The 'remain' campaign peddled fear and lost. Labour's old veiled threats and portraits of what would happen if the Tories remain in power are very much devoid of hope. They need to concentrate on giving their target voters hope that their personal situation will improve if Labour wins. Higher wages, a more secure welfare system, a 100% publicly-funded NHS. Less 'We will defend this, we will oppose that, we will stop this' and more 'We will create this, we will make this better'. Sell hope, not fear.
- Method of delivery. This goes for the whole left. We've always been good at giving the facts, the statistics, etc, and the right has always told stories (whether true or not). We need to combine these methods and wrap our policies in true stories that will hit hard with the right presentation. Ken Loach's film *I, Daniel Blake* worked so well because it told true stories about those dealing with the welfare system. He did the research and brought in real-life experiences that not just tugged at your brain, but also your heart.

With the current prevalence of fake news, the truth is an important commodity at the moment. And we can use it to place our target audience in the shoes of the teller and resonate with aspects of their own lives. We do this in a way where there is as little filter and distortion as possible; the more direct, the better - rallies, public meetings, small group discussions in person and online, talking to people in the doorstep.

The issues with the mainstream media are going to be hard to solve and we can't do it in six weeks. But we can help ourselves.

**Matthew Giles**  
South Tyneside

## Social theft

Over the last couple of years, the word 'socialism' has reappeared in political discourse in the United States in kind of

a big (and positive) way.

Not surprisingly, the more the term is used, the greater the range of meanings attached to it. Recently, I've seen 'socialism' used to describe things ranging from public libraries and fire departments in a capitalist economy to a social welfare system in a capitalist economy; to a 'mixed economy' of private corporations, public enterprises and worker-owned cooperatives; to a planned economy of state-owned enterprises.

We can debate which of these best describes or is really socialism, but, taking a step back from labelling economic systems, I think it's valuable to consider an assumption that is (or should be) at the heart of the modern conception of socialism.

Simply put, in every industrialised economy the production of virtually everything that has value is the result of socialised labour. Whether a product is grown and harvested, extracted and processed, manufactured, assembled or created, the product or its materials and components have passed through many hands. And even those parts of our economy that we may think of as services rather than products are socialised. A teacher teaches in a building made from bricks and beams, using textbooks (or computer screens) manufactured by others. A doctor uses equipment and administers medicines that were designed and made by hundreds and thousands of human beings. And both teacher and doctor learned their craft in institutions of learning that concentrate the work and study and understanding of other human beings.

Everything that has value in an industrial economy is the result of socialised labour. And yet virtually everything that has value in a *capitalist* economy, even though it was produced by all of us, is the property of only very few. Production is socialised, but ownership is privatised.

Any variant of socialism worthy of the name must start from this premise: that what is produced by all properly belongs to all, and that the effort to hold as private property that which has been socially produced is nothing other than theft from society as a whole.

**Peter Goselin**  
Connecticut

## No soviets

One wonders just what is Jon D White's problem with Vanessa Beeley's exposition in the Marx Memorial Library on March 1 (Letters, April 13) and why it took him so long to complain. Socialist Fight and the New Communist Party organised the event and the packed meeting concluded rightly that Aleppo had been liberated from reactionary jihadists in the pay of the CIA and its regional allies. If Jon disagrees, he should say so, instead of demanding a debate without contributing to it himself.

So he thinks that the Marx Memorial Library was "forced" to issue a statement defending democratic rights. That is, they rejected the demands of some imperialist stooges to cancel. The meeting itself was besieged by jihadists bussed in on a luxury coach, as they had been to the Bristol and Birmingham meetings. These jihadists from the Syria Campaign issued death threats and the police had to be called, because, as everyone knows, these are MI6 and CIA-sponsored terrorists and the likely outcome would be that we would be investigated for 'terrorism' for opposing the agents of the west in Syria.

Vanessa spoke very well in exposing the fraud of the White Helmets and the nature of the struggle in Aleppo, what the jihadists had done to the population they held in captivity and the lies of the western media.

The Marx Memorial Library did the correct and courageous thing in holding this very important meeting, and their members, including Eddie Dempsey and Alex Gordon, together with some of our

own supporters, kept the jihadists at bay, although a few did get into the meeting. We thank them for their principled stance - maybe Jon has a problem with that?

One wonders if his sudden concern is related to the false-flag sarin gas attack in Idlib and Trump's Tomahawk attack on Syria and the sudden beating of the drum for war on North Korea? He might also express his concern for the apparent lack of patriotism of Democratic congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, who had the effrontery to refuse to take Syrian president Bashar Assad's guilt on mass-media hysteria say-so and outrageously demanded proof. But those Hawaiians may be as unpatriotic as those at that Marx Memorial Library meeting in refusing to hum hope and glory. There is a small but growing movement for self-determination on those islands.

And how is that 'revolution' going in Syria anyway, now that Donald Trump is on their side at last? Perhaps the most enthusiastic and 'scholarly' supporter of the "revolution" in Syria from a so-called Trotskyist standpoint is Michael Pröbsting of the Austrian-based Revolutionary Communist International Tendency. In a recent post on his website he explains the problems of the "revolution" are that it is opposed by the "great powers" - a perfectly nutty notion that Assad, Putin, Netanyahu and Trump are ganging up together against this great "revolution".

As proof that it is forging ahead, we are told of the marvellous work of the local coordinating committees (LCCs), who organise schools and hospitals in "liberated" areas. These are proto-soviets, apparently, getting there with a few problems, which they will surely overcome shortly. But you might think that the problem cited here is the mother and father of all problems: executive authority belongs not to the LCCs, but to "the militias, among which the petty-bourgeois Islamist forces".

And who are they? The jihadist militias - paid, armed and directed by the CIA, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, etc. So, the "revolution" is organised by the USA and the toothless LCCs must do as they are told under sharia law in administering schools and hospitals, etc. Or get instantly and publicly beheaded.

Michael Pröbsting hilariously tells us: "Yet an additional dissimilarity between the LCCs and soviets is the sharing of power [a minor matter! - GD] between them and the militias in the liberated areas. While the local coordination councils provide the civil administration, the militias - among which the petty bourgeois Islamist forces constitute a strong segment - wield executive power [ie, mass beheading power]. Obviously, this represents a problem, as the militias are less under the direct control of the local population [in fact, they are completely under the control of the CIA and allied forces, but he forgot to say]."

A vehicle for a "revolution" they certainly are not. Organisations more dissimilar to the soviets of the Russian Revolution era it is impossible to imagine. Could we really conceive of imperialism funding the Petrograd soviet led by Leon Trotsky in 1905?

**Gerry Downing**  
Socialist Fight

## Union launch

The launch of South Africa's fourth major labour federation is at last upon us. Over the weekend of April 21-23 the inaugural congress of the tentatively named South African Federation of Trade Unions (Saftu) will be held.

Headed by the 350,000-strong National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) and claiming a membership of about 800,000, the grouping has some 20 affiliates - a number of them breakaway factions of unions affiliated to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu). Numsa itself, in controversial circumstances, was

expelled from Cosatu in 2015.

The launch of this new federation was originally scheduled for March, but was delayed until April 21. The inaugural announcement noted that this "paves the way for the birth of a vibrant, independent, democratic and militant workers' champion". And, with more than a touch of hyperbole, it went on to add that Saftu "will turn the tide against exploitation, mass unemployment, poverty and inequality and take us forward to the total liberation of the working class". As a trade union movement it could certainly make a contribution to these goals, but, in the final analysis, this is the role of a political movement or party.

Trade unions should be, first and foremost, democratic. This means they should unite workers as workers, irrespective of gender, language, ethnic background, religion or political affiliation, with every worker having equal rights and responsibilities. Unions are the shields for worker rights and comprise a massive reserve army that can, when united, press for political and economic change, as well as for better pay and conditions. But they are not, in themselves, the agents of social change.

However, the potential power of the labour movement makes it a prime target for influence and even capture by business interests, political parties and ambitious individuals. The main protection trade unions have against such manoeuvres and manipulation is to be intensely democratic: power must remain with the workers on the shop floor and not be allowed to gravitate to an often self-proclaimed, 'politically conscious' elite, let alone to political or business puppet masters.

The "total liberation of the working class" implies an egalitarian society, a society without bosses, whether of unions, governments or industry; where all managers or coordinators are elected by their constituencies and answerable to, as well as being recallable by, them. In such an environment no-one in elected authority should earn more than the highest paid constituent.

This form of organisation developed to a degree among some of South Africa's emergent and militant unions of 30 years and more ago. It can - and perhaps should - be applied now. However, given the level of bureaucracy that has developed, and the competition that exists between unions, this is unlikely in the short to medium term.

There is also a lot of baggage, both political and personal, that has been carried forward within the labour movement, especially at a leadership level. Besides Cosatu, the two other major federations - the National Council of Trade Unions (Nactu) and the Federation of Unions (Fedusa) - have for years campaigned for unity on the basis of non-party political affiliation. For this purpose, they set up the SA Confederation of Trade Unions as an apparent 'off the shelf' federation for all. "But they just want us to collapse into their new federation," a senior Fedusa official noted. It is a view shared within Nactu, where the largest affiliate is the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union.

Underlying such wariness is the claimed bureaucratic nature of Numsa and the fact that the union - the main driver behind the new federation - continues to refer to itself as a "Marxist-Leninist" organisation, while still maintaining an apparently lucrative investment company.

These and other arguments are certain to surface in coming months, as what promises to be considerable turmoil in the labour movement starts settling down. Will this herald a new era for local trade unionism or will it merely signal the arrival of just another federation in the existing mould - a new wheel or simply a retread? Time alone will tell.

**Terry Bell**  
Cape Town

# IMPERIALISM

## Playing dangerous games

Donald Trump's swaggering brinkmanship is a reminder of the fragility of the global order, argues Paul Demarty

Above all else, the recent contretemps between the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has sharply illustrated the distinction between the eight years of Barack Obama's presidency and the three short months (so far) of Donald Trump's.

Obama is remembered by the left, deservedly, for his failure to live up to his 'prophet of peace' billing. Guantanamo Bay is still open. The US is still, one way or another, entangled in Iraq and Afghanistan, and plenty of other places to boot. His administration saw fit to play games in the South China Sea, and in Russia's 'near abroad' (especially through the promotion of a second 'colour revolution' in Ukraine, which led to secessions, annexations and a tense stand-off that continues to this day between ethnic-Russian and Ukrainian far-right nationalists).

By recent American standards, however, Obama was highly cautious. Sanctions were preferred to war; and endless low-intensity warfare, conducted by means of unmanned aerial vehicles and localised bombing, to boots on the ground. Diplomatic bullying and browbeating achieved much of what the more hare-brained among the neo-conservatives assumed could only be coaxed out of America's enemies in the track-marks of a tank division. Cuba began to come in from the cold; a deal was reached with Iran.

This was all unforgivable from the point of view of Obama's domestic enemies, for whom he was always too soft - or even perhaps playing for the other side. Similar accusations have been levelled at Trump, of course, in relation to his on-off admiration for Vladimir Putin. Soft, however, he definitely is not. A few short months into his tenure, he has already brought forth shocked and almost titillated headlines about the possibility of the first nuclear exchange since World War II. As rumours gathered that the North Korean regime was to mark its annual Day of the Sun public holiday with a ballistic missile test, the rhetoric from the White House got more and more belligerent. An "armada" was despatched, the Carl Vinson strike group; a hellish rain of Tomahawk missiles promised. If the Kim regime continued with its provocations, Trump promised in the preferred euphemism of the mob boss, it would be "taken care of".

The test, of course, was a write-off. At this point, we really have to wonder how it came to pass that this rocket blew up on the ground. Despite the usual bellicose verbiage from the regime's upper layers - "If the US comes with reckless military manoeuvres then we will confront it with the DPRK's pre-emptive strike," vice foreign minister Han Song Ryol told the Associated Press on April 14 - the North Koreans are in no position to fight a war against the United States, if the latter really had a mind to launch one, although it could make the experience unpleasant for America's allies south of the 38th parallel. This way, the regime has managed to avoid a suicidal war without climbing down. After all, accidents happen ...

### Mother of all

It is in this context, also, that we ought to place the first military usage of the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast bomb, or 'mother of all bombs', at roughly the same time, over a cave complex in Nangarhar, eastern Afghanistan, against Islamic State fighters (they do get around ...).

The MOAB is the largest-yield non-nuclear bomb in America's arsenal (the Russians have since built a larger



Missile failure ... a face saver

thermobaric device, though it has not yet been used in anger). It is a wide-radius weapon that delivers death and mayhem to persons and civilian infrastructure in the canonical 'shock and awe' fashion (where once there was a neighbourhood, there is now a hole in the ground, strewn with charred remains), and a successor to the similar daisy-cutter bombs used in the second Gulf War. The Nangarhar device was detonated slightly above the ground, driving chemical fire through the caves like a car engine piston. The death toll was put at 92 after an investigation by the Afghan government; those killed seem to be overwhelmingly what George W Bush would call 'enemy combatants', although at least two civilians were fried to a crisp too.

There can be little doubt that the dropping of the MOAB had as one purpose an experimental character. In order to see it in action, a soft target was needed; IS fighters, far from their shrinking caliphate's borders, fit the bill nicely, in that nobody much will lament their passing, and also in that they are unlikely to be entrenched in concrete bunkers. From that perspective, this is already an operational success - even the most favourable natural terrain, such as these caves that have hosted Islamist insurgents since they were backed by the CIA against the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan government and the Soviet Union in the 1980s, offers no defence against 10 metric tonnes of state-of-the-art fiery death.

Of course, there are other purposes at work, which did not escape former US puppet president Hamid Karzai, who now has a lot of time on his hands and a belated anger at his former sponsors. He condemned "the inhuman and most brutal misuse of our country as testing ground for new and dangerous weapons". Karzai knows well enough what is going on, and primarily that it has nothing whatsoever to do with Afghanistan. This is a warning shot against people the US is not already in a war with, except an endless war of words - Iran and North Korea. It is a threat, moreover, not of 'surgical strikes' against nuclear facilities, but of terroristic carpet bombing.

### Gunboat

A level further down in all this, we meet Trump's real target: the state that acts as North Korea's increasingly frustrated sponsor in world affairs, China.

Though relations have gone up and down in the 66 years since the Chinese Peoples Liberation Army drove the Americans and their allies back, the increasingly eccentric North Korean regime has become ever more reliant on its Stalino-capitalist north-western neighbour. China has dragged its feet over the implementation of UN sanctions, finally ceasing imports of North Korean coal only this February, after the assassination of Kim Jong-Nam (thought by some to be more sympathetic to Beijing than Kim Jong-Un and perhaps a useful replacement for him). Trump's belligerence has sent the Chinese government scrambling to avert a dangerous confrontation on its borders.

This is not the only matter on which Trump has put China on the back foot. After an endless diet of chauvinist accusations on the campaign trail, in particular on the point that the Chinese had kept the value of the renminbi at an artificially low level (probably true, at least during the most acute phase of the Chinese economic downturn in 2015), the notorious White House spokesman, Sean Spicer, is happy to claim victory: Beijing had not "been manipulating their currency since [Trump]'s been in office - that's a fact," he told a press conference on April 17.

In this, as in many things, the policy of the Trump White House is oddly familiar, but sharply different in presentation. It has always been the policy, during American capital's period of hegemony, to foist upon potential competitors 'harder' money, while maintaining absolute liberty of action for the Federal Reserve (whatever the gold-bug cranks of Congress think about the matter), and otherwise meddle in the fiscal regimes of other countries in a manner flatly inconsistent with domestic economic policy. The difference is that Reagan and Bush senior sold that bill of goods 30 years ago to Japan in *apparent* good faith, as part of a coherent (if false) economic doctrine, whereas Trump is *explicitly* an advocate of raw American power and prestige, and his aggression on the matter of China's financial regime is based entirely on its disadvantage to America.

In economics, so in war. Trump is hardly responsible for all the world's instability: we remarked on Obama's relative restraint, but, just as the absence of war does not mean peace, the absence of direct, shock-and-awe US military intervention does not mean the absence of war. In particular, Obama's reliance on indirect support for US proxies via Saudi Arabia has massively increased the instability of the Middle East and many other regions, when it is plain that the Saudis provide practical assistance to the same crackpot jihadi lunatics we are told by the great and the good of the American establishment are 'the enemy'.

Trump contrasts markedly in style; he sends not (only) drones, but Hercules transport planes with MOABs in the back; he sends an aircraft carrier to the Korean peninsula, with a salvo of violent threats. For him, no display of power is too vulgar; he promised the American people not four more years of managing global barbarism, but macho swagger - US imperialism as a big swinging dick. The result is immediately 'the same': more chaos, more state failure; but presentation matters. The risk of a much more serious conflagration is hardly insignificant, in these dangerous times; Trump's threats, bluster and ordnance demonstrations will work in cowering the likes of Kim Jong-Un - until they don't ●

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# ACTION

### London Communist Forum

**Sunday April 23, 5pm:** Weekly political report from CPGB Provisional Central Committee, Calthorpe Arms, 252 Grays Inn Road, London WC1. Followed by open discussion and reading group: study of Ralph Miliband's *Parliamentary socialism*. This meeting: Postscript, section 3. 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).

### Film against war

**Friday April 21 to Thursday May 18:** Film festival, Sands Films Studio, 82 St Marychurch Street, London SE16. A series of classic anti-war films created over the past 80 years: see [www.stopwar.org.uk/index.php/events/national-events/2483-21-april-18-may-rotherhithe-stop-the-war-film-festival](http://www.stopwar.org.uk/index.php/events/national-events/2483-21-april-18-may-rotherhithe-stop-the-war-film-festival).

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

### Drop bass, not bombs

**Friday April 21, 8pm to dawn:** Music event, CLF Art Cafe, Bussey Building, 133 Rye Lane, London SE15.

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

### Stop the Arms Fair

**Saturday April 22, 1.30pm:** Meeting, Friends Meeting House, 173-177 Euston Road, London NW1.

Organised by Stop the Arms Fair: [www.facebook.com/stopthearmsfair](http://www.facebook.com/stopthearmsfair).

### Momentum Teesside

**Tuesday April 25, 7pm:** Action planning meeting, St Mary's Centre, 82-90 Corporation Road, Middlesbrough TS1.

Organised by Momentum Teesside: [www.facebook.com/events/1899812876904370](http://www.facebook.com/events/1899812876904370).

### Labour and the unions

**Tuesday April 25, 7pm:** Debate, room 137a, Goldsmiths University, Lewisham Way, London SE14. With Matt Wrack, general secretary of Fire Brigades Union.

Organised by Lewisham Momentum: [lewishamforcorbyn@gmail.com](mailto:lewishamforcorbyn@gmail.com).

### We are many

**Wednesday April 26, 7pm:** Film screening and Q&A session, Blackburne House, Blackburne Place, Liverpool L8. Followed by Q&A with Murad Qureshi.

Free tickets: [www.eventbrite.com/e/anti-war-film-screening-we-are-many-tickets-33112196471?aff=es2](http://www.eventbrite.com/e/anti-war-film-screening-we-are-many-tickets-33112196471?aff=es2).

Organised by Merseyside Stop the War: [www.facebook.com/MerseysideSTW](http://www.facebook.com/MerseysideSTW).

### Sylvia Parkhurst show

**Wednesday April 26, 7.30pm:** One-woman theatre, Black Swan, 69 Westgate Road, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1.

Hosted by Lynx Theatre and Poetry:

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

### Building the narrative

**Friday April 28, 5pm:** Workshop, Sunderland Software City, Tavistock Place, Sunderland SR1. Creating political narratives through film, with Ken Loach.

Hosted by Talk Socialism: [www.facebook.com/TalkSocialism](http://www.facebook.com/TalkSocialism).

### The struggle for Labour

**Friday April 28, 7pm:** Political discussion, Cock Tavern, 23 Phoenix Road, London NW1. Speakers: Gerry Downing (Socialist Fight), Tony Greenstein (Labour anti-Zionist), Andy Brooks (*New Worker* editor).

Organised by New Communist Party: [www.newworker.org](http://www.newworker.org).

### Blood on the streets of Halifax

**Friday April 28, 5.30pm:** Guided walk through historical sites. Meet Central Library, Northgate, Halifax HX1. With Catherine Howe, author of *Halifax 1842: a year of crisis*. Free - donations welcome.

Organised by Calderdale Trades Council: <http://calderdaletuc.org.uk>.

### May Day events

**Manchester - Saturday April 29, 11am:** Festival, All Saints Park, Oxford Road, Manchester M1.

Organised by Manchester Trades Union Council: <https://mtuc.wordpress.com>.

**Newcastle Upon Tyne - Saturday April 29, 11am:** Assemble, Princess Square, Newcastle NE1, for march to Exhibition Park, Claremont Road, NE2.

Hosted by Tyne and Wear Mayday Rally: [www.facebook.com/tyneandwearmayday](http://www.facebook.com/tyneandwearmayday).

**London - Monday May 1, 12 noon:** Assemble Clerkenwell Green, London EC1, for march to Trafalgar Square, London WC2. Speakers include John McDonnell and Mark Serwotka.

Organised by London May Day Organising Committee: [www.londonmayday.org](http://www.londonmayday.org).

### 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.marx-memorial-library.org](http://www.marx-memorial-library.org).

### Stop Le Pen

**Tuesday May 2, 7pm:** Rally, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Organised by Unite Against Fascism: [uaf.org.uk](http://uaf.org.uk).

### Banners for Spain

**Friday May 5 to Saturday July 8:** Display of socialist/republican banners plus a programme of related activities and events, Islington Museum, 245 St John Street, London EC1.

Organised by Islington Museum: [islington.museum@islington.gov.uk](mailto:islington.museum@islington.gov.uk).

### Critique conference 2017

**Saturday May 6, 9.30am to 5.30pm:** Annual event sponsored by *Critique* journal, University of London student central, Malet Street, London WC1. Speakers include: Savas Michael-Matzas, Hillel Ticktin, Raquel Valera, Yassamine Mather.

Organised by *Critique* journal: [www.critiquejournal.net](http://www.critiquejournal.net).

### 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.

**ELECTION**

# Plans for blue murder

Eddie Ford is not remotely surprised that Theresa May has called a snap election

As we predicted, Theresa May has gone for an early election. Drove of commentators and MPs claim to be “shocked” and “stunned” by the decision, but, if anything, I am slightly surprised that she prevaricated for so long. To its credit, the Labour Party too had expected this to happen sooner or later - having being on a near permanent election standby ever since Theresa May’s crowning.

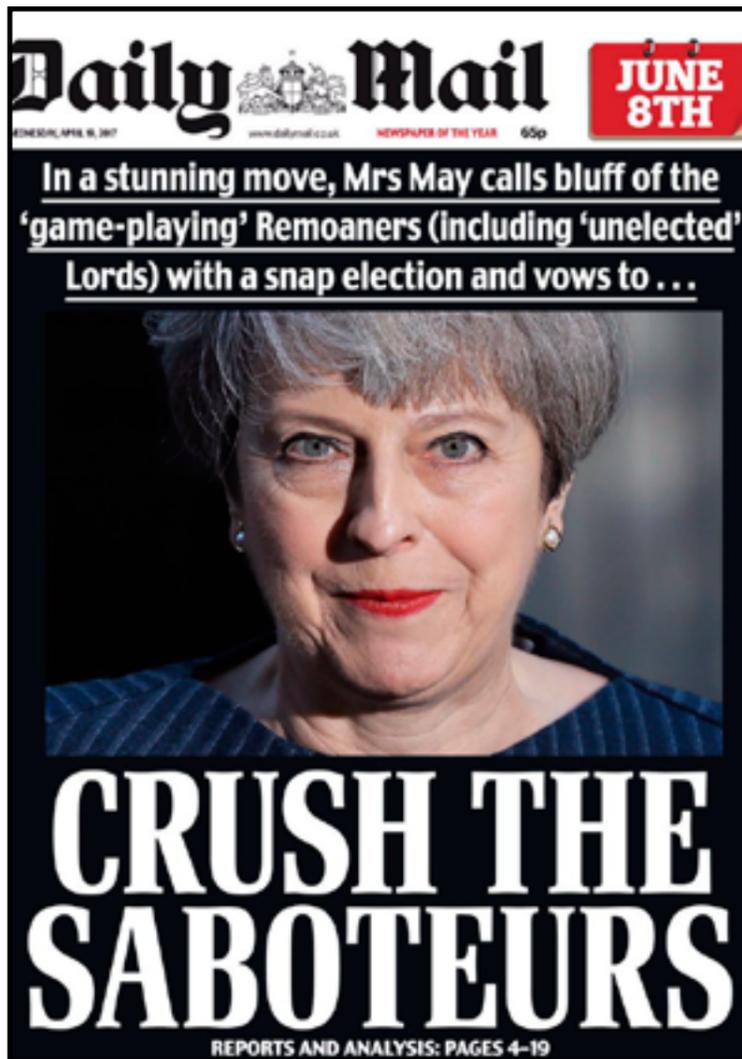
What is a bit astonishing are those, whether on the left or the right, who appeared to actually believe May when she said there would be no early or snap election - were they really that naive? Her constant talk about needing a period of “stability” in order to “deal with the issues that the country is facing”, and so on, was painfully transparent guff - you hardly needed to be a genius to work that out. It was only to be expected that the Tories, inside and outside of parliament, would play along with this charade and downplay the idea of an early general election - pontificating about putting the national interest first, and all the rest of it. But in the end the inevitable happened and Theresa May has chosen to ruthlessly advance the interests of the Tory Party and those whose interests it serves.

In her unscheduled speech outside Downing Street on April 18, the prime minister essentially made the case that she needs to secure a hard Brexit majority. So she wants the June 8 general election to be another referendum on Brexit - just as all the by-elections up until now have been mini-referendums about Europe, whatever the specific local context. She went on to argue that there needs to be an election now because at this particular juncture there was a “one-off chance” to prepare for a successful Brexit, “while the European Union agrees its negotiating position and before the detailed talks begin”.

However, she declared - completely disingenuously - that the “country is coming together, but Westminster is not”. You cannot trust the professional politicians, especially those in the opposition parties - who are out to wreck Brexit in any way they can. But luckily you have Theresa May speaking up for the ordinary working people. Or, as the *Daily Mail* put it rather directly, “Crush the saboteurs” - it praised May’s “stunning move” that “calls the bluff” of the “game-playing remoaners” (April 19). Meanwhile *The Sun* predicted that June 8 will “kill off Labour” in what would be “blue murder” (April 19).

Continuing on the theme of treachery, May declared that “our opponents believe that because the government’s majority is so small, our resolve will weaken and that they can force us to change course” - but this will never happen under her watch. She will fight them on the beaches, in the halls of the parliament and the negotiating rooms of Brussels. Concluding her argument with total hypocrisy, she said June 8 represented a “moment” to show that “you are not opposing the government for the sake of it” or “treat politics as a game” - rather, “it will be a choice between strong and stable leadership in the national interest, with me as your prime minister, or weak and unstable coalition government”. Just as the Tories did in the last general election, May is trying to scare English voters by conjuring up the spectre of a Labour-Scottish National Party coalition government with maybe the Lib Dems thrown in for good measure.

Naturally, Jeremy Corbyn welcomed the opportunity to “give the British people the chance to vote for a government that will put the interests



A prospect to relish ... for hard right

of the majority first” - with Labour offering an “effective alternative” to a government that has “failed to rebuild the economy, delivered falling living standards and damaging cuts to our schools and NHS”. As our readers doubtlessly know, under the 2011 Fixed-Terms Parliaments Act, it requires two-thirds of MPs to vote for the dissolution of parliament and the holding of a fresh election - the prime minister cannot just directly call an election whenever he or she feels like it. But after a 90-minute debate following PMQs on April 19, both Labour and the Lib Dems voted for Theresa May’s motion allowing for the dissolution of parliament on May 3 - with the SNP abstaining on the grounds that it believed in the principle of fixed-term parliaments, although it would not “stand in the way” of an early election.

Interestingly, May has ruled out participation in any TV debates with other party leaders and political opponents - saying rather pathetically that elections were all about “getting out and about and meeting voters” and “knocking on doors”. The truth is that May fears she would come off second best, following Corbyn’s performance in televised debates prior to the Labour leadership elections. Why give him a helping hand, when, as it stands, Labour is heading for a thrashing, thanks to the overt opposition to Corbyn’s leadership from the right of the Parliamentary Labour Party?

It is worth noting that for some the thought of campaigning under Corbyn in a general election was simply too much to bear. Both Tom Blenkinsop and Alan Johnson have announced they will not stand for re-election in June. John Woodcock too, MP for Barrow-in-Furness, has said he “will not countenance” voting for Jeremy Corbyn as prime minister because of

the Labour leader’s stated opposition to nuclear weapons - though he still plans to seek re-election on June 8. A career is a career, after all. Perhaps bringing some joy to the heart of such careerists, Corbyn has said Labour MPs will be automatically reselected as candidates in their constituencies, as there is insufficient time to consult local members before polling day.<sup>2</sup>

## Wipeout

Needless to say, there are several secondary reasons for Theresa May’s decision. For example, there is the fact that a June 8 election will have the useful side-effect of shoving aside the embarrassing expenses scandal that has seen the Crown Prosecution Service and 14 police forces investigate up to 24 Tory MPs for all manner of financial wrongdoings.<sup>3</sup> Obviously, if they were all disqualified - admittedly an unlikely scenario - then May would lose her majority. She also wants to “smash rebels too”, to use the words of *The Sun* (April 19).

But, of course, the number-one explanation has been Labour’s consistently appalling poll ratings. What Tory leader, let alone Tory prime minister, is going to pass over an opportunity to decimate her majesty’s official opposition? Or, as the satirical website, *Newthump*, aptly puts it, “Theresa May announces snap annihilation of the Labour Party.”<sup>4</sup> Two recent surveys have Labour trailing by 21 points.<sup>5</sup> A ComRes poll for *The Independent* and *Sunday Mirror* has the Tories on 46% and Labour on a miserable 25% - with the Lib Dems enjoying a mild renaissance on 11%, the UK Independence Party stuck at 9% and the Greens on 4%. Meanwhile, a YouGov report for *The Times* has the Conservatives on 44%, with Labour trailing on 23%.

Putting things into true perspective, the Labour Party under Ed Miliband had a healthy-looking 13% lead over the Tories in a YouGov poll published at this stage in the electoral cycle - although we all know what happened. And remember, this is all in the midst of Corbyn’s supposed reinvention as a “populist” - which has seen him talk about introducing VAT on private school fees in order to pay for free school meals, increasing the carer’s allowance by £10 a week, more money for the NHS, etc. Also, in this period the Labour leader has kept a near monastic silence about the ‘anti-Semitic’ allegations and smears - thinking if you just keep on talking about the NHS and all things nice for long enough, you will eventually reach peak popularity.

But what has been the result of this ‘populist turn’? Poll ratings that indicate Labour is on the verge of a 1931-style wipeout, which saw Labour reduced to a rump in parliament - at the very least, Labour is heading towards a crushing defeat, especially now that Scotland has been all but lost (not that everything is going the way of the SNP). Some papers would have us believe that there is going to be a massive upsurge of the centre ground, but this is nonsense. The Lib Dems might well double their number of seats ... but so what? The plain, unpalatable truth is that the post-Brexit Tories are in the *ascendancy*, Theresa May winning more voters to her side - partially from Labour, but crucially from Ukip. Indeed, the latter is losing people hand over fist to the Tories - with Diana James, the extraordinarily short-lived former leader of the party, now “considering” running for parliament as a Conservative.

Of course, we don’t even have to wait until June 8 to test out Labour’s popularity - or otherwise - in the real world, as opposed to the mysterious realm of psephology. On May 4 we have the local elections, the widespread expectation being that Labour will lose about 125 councils, whilst the Lib Dems will gain up to 100. Even worse, at least in terms of symbolism, the general betting is that Glasgow - which has been Labour-controlled since 1980 - will be captured by the SNP. That would be *extremely* bad news indeed for Labour.

However, we should not be obsessing about poll ratings - or election results either, for that matter. Even the anarchistic, ‘direct action’ Socialist Workers Party has succumbed to this malady, crazily informing us that one way for Corbyn to save Labour from its “poll quagmire” is by “backing Scottish independence” (*Socialist Worker* April 11). If Corbyn were to be foolish enough to follow the SWP’s advice, Scottish Labour would immediately split in the name of the union. SWP comrades seem to have taken leave of their senses, mixing left Labourism with SNP-style nationalism.

Of course, we call for people to vote Labour, just as the SWP does, but this is not our aim *in and of itself* - that by definition would be capitulation to opportunism. No, first and foremost we must fight to *transform* the Labour Party and, more broadly still, root the idea of socialism and the alternative society in the working class movement, so it becomes a truly *popular* idea - something that ordinary people can understand and want to struggle for. Or, as Keir Hardie splendidly said in 1910, our MPs should be in parliament “not to keep governments in office or to turn them out, but to organise the working

class into a great political power to fight for the coming of socialism”.<sup>6</sup>

Like Keir Hardie, we want to build up an army for socialism - not elect this or that government into office regardless of its leadership or programme. Given our perspective, we are not surprised or horrified by the latest opinion polls - as we do not believe that even the worst Labour government is better than any Tory government, as many on the left seem to take as a matter of faith. What matters is the organised strength and political understanding of the working class ... something not taken forward by those obsessed with electing a Labour government for the sake of a Labour government. Hence, we want Labour to be a *genuine* alternative to the Tories, and the capitalist system as a whole - one that aims to mobilise the working class and does not base its strategy on winning over the likes of the *Daily Mirror*, *Sun* or *The Guardian*. If Labour were to become such a party - a militant opposition working with other forces in Europe - then an electoral defeat need not be at all catastrophic. Rather, it would act as a spur to greater political activity and clarification. And if Labour did become a party worthy of socialism, it would be attacked infinitely more fiercely than anything we have seen up to now - no amount of ‘news management’ or clever-clever presentation would stave off the assaults. Instead, you would be forced to fight fire with fire.

Alas though, a lot of people on the left are looking at these polls and despairing, because they have been fed the story, or lie, from groups like the Labour Representation Committee that if you present a wish list of left reformist demands (more council housing, NHS money, etc) then you will almost automatically become popular. Jeremy Corbyn, the leader dreamed of for so long by these sections of the Labour left, was meant to be a shoo-in - their route to power and the social democratic paradise.

If you really believed all that malarkey, then you are bound to become disillusioned - meaning you either drop out, as some are likely to do post-June 8, or move sharply to the right in the manner of former Trotskyists such as Dave Osler, Owen Jones and Paul Mason. The latter now thinks the opposition parties “should come together to ensure a tactical vote for the best-placed anti-Tory candidate” in order to get a “social justice” Brexit. Mason wants Labour to “promise to lead a coalition” at Westminster with a view to holding a “normal” election in spring 2019 to “ratify any deal the incoming government does” (*The Guardian* April 19). The logical extension of this argument is that Jeremy Corbyn should make way for another leader with more ‘sensible’ politics.

We in the CPGB totally disagree. Labour partisans should redouble their struggle for *independent* working class politics - totally rejecting coalitionism and *critically* defending Jeremy Corbyn from the forces to his right ●

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## Notes

1. www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/04/18/theresa-mays-early-general-election-speech-full.
2. www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-39636918.
3. www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-39635081.
4. http://newthump.com/2017/04/18/theresa-may-announces-snap-annihilation-of-the-labour-party.
5. www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/two-polls-show-labour-trailing-10240623.
6. R Miliband *Parliamentary socialism: a study in the politics of Labourism* London 1973, p29.

# 1917

## 'All power to the soviets!'

Did Lenin's April theses mark a fundamental change in Bolshevik strategy? In this series of articles **Lars T Lih** demonstrates that this was not the case

'All power to the soviets!' is surely one of the most famous slogans in revolutionary history. It is right up there with 'Egalité, liberté, fraternité' as a symbol of an entire revolutionary epoch. In this essay and others to follow, I would like to examine the origin of this slogan in its original context of Russia in 1917.

In Russian it consists of just three words: *vsya* ('all'), *vlast* ('power') and *sovetam* ('to the soviets'). The Russian word *sovet* simply means 'advice', and, from that, 'council'. By now, of course, we are very used to the Russian word, because it evokes a specific set of meanings arising out of the revolutionary experience of 1917.

In this series, I will often use the Russian original of another term in this slogan: namely, *vlast*. 'Power' is not an entirely adequate translation; indeed, in an attempt to catch these nuances, *vlast* is often translated in English by the unidiomatic phrase 'the power' (for example, by John Reed in *Ten days that shook the world*). *Vlast* has a more specific reference than the English word 'power'; the Russian word refers to the sovereign authority in a particular country.

In order to have the *vlast*, one has to have the right of making a final decision, to be capable of making the decisions and of seeing that they are carried out. An effective *vlast* needs firm control over the armed forces, a strong sense of legitimacy and mission, and a social base. Max Weber's phrase, "a monopoly of the legitimate use of force", goes to the heart of the matter.

When, why and how did the Bolsheviks come to adopt this slogan in the spring of 1917? The usual answer to these questions asserts that, in order for the party to arrive at the slogan, it had to be rearmed by Lenin's April theses. The metaphor of rearming was first used by Lev Trotsky in the early 1920s, but today it is by no means restricted to writers in the Trotskyist tradition. Indeed, the rearming narrative is the heart of a broad consensus about the Bolsheviks in 1917 upheld by both activists and academic historians.

Among the basic themes of the rearming narrative are the following:

- Lenin's April theses contained a radical political and ideological innovation. The exact nature of this innovation is vague, with little

agreement among writers, but usually it has something to do with socialist revolution in Russia.

- The April theses represented Lenin's *de facto* acceptance of Trotsky's 'permanent revolution' outlook.

- The April theses 'exploded like a bomb' among the Bolsheviks; they were shocked and scandalised by the theses because of their rejection of 'old Bolshevism' or perhaps even of basic Marxist principles.

- The April theses constituted a sharp change of political line from the 'semi-Menshevik' policies hitherto pursued by Petrograd Bolsheviks, who had earlier shown their confusion and dismay by censoring Lenin's 'Letters from afar'.

- Lenin won over the party to his views in a hard-fought campaign, although a significant portion of the party and its leadership were never convinced.

- The April theses were a necessary condition for the Bolshevik victory in October.

I believe these propositions are all incorrect - or, at best, seriously misleading. As a challenge to them, I argue for what I call the 'fully armed' interpretation of Bolshevik

politics in spring 1917. As opposed to the rearming narrative, which cuts Bolshevism off from its past, I stress the *continuity* with old Bolshevism. The Bolsheviks were *not* flummoxed by the February revolution: they faced the post-February situation with a winning strategy that was based firmly on old Bolshevism's class scenario. The return of Lenin and other émigré leaders to Russia in early April marked an important shift in tactics - but this shift was *not* due to the controversial April theses. Bolshevik *praktiki* who expressed misgivings about the April theses did so *because* they shared the goal of soviet power. The canonical 'All power to the soviets!' was not adopted as a party slogan until early May - *after* the debate over the April theses had been settled at Bolshevik party conferences. My proposed counter-narrative has met a lot of resistance and will no doubt continue to do so. One big reason for this is that it seems to fly in the face of established facts. What about the 'critical support' for the bourgeois provisional government shown by such Bolsheviks and Lev Kamenev and Iosif Stalin? What about the

notorious censorship of Lenin's 'Letters from afar' by the editors of *Pravda*? Didn't the April theses cause great scandal among the Bolsheviks (for example, a vote in the Petrograd party committee rejected the theses *in toto* by a lopsided vote of 13 to two)? Don't Trotsky's writings from 1917 illustrate the rearming narrative? And so on.

These are valid questions, and the aim of the present series is to respond to them in detail. By the end of the series, the tables will be turned, and the defenders of the standard rearming narrative will have a mountain of new evidence to consider. In the meantime, I am heartened by the fact that scholars who have done empirical research on these issues after I first put forth my hypotheses a number of years ago have validated essential parts of my argument, as shown by recent blogs from Eric Blanc.<sup>1</sup> 'Biography of a slogan', the essay that opens the series, will set forth my 'fully armed' interpretation with a minimum of polemic. My heartfelt thanks for the encouragement and support of John Riddell, who has generously provided a home for this extensive series.

# Biography of a slogan

From the days of Lassalle, social democracy had always given a great deal of attention to slogans - watchwords, *mots d'ordre* - as a way of focusing political campaigns and imposing unity on mass action. A history of social democracy in its various national manifestations could be written based on its slogans over the years. 'All power to the soviets!' is assuredly one of the best of these: short enough to fit on a banner, extensive enough to provide a response to almost any issue. In April, Grigory Zinoviev responded to some written questions from factory workers, and one such question was: when will we get some decent cafeteria service in this factory? Zinoviev's response: when the whole *vlast* is given to the soviets.

The political strategy behind the slogan, 'All power to the soviets!', is based firmly on the application of old Bolshevism to the prevailing circumstances in Russia after the February revolution. The heart of old Bolshevism was a reading of the constellation of class forces in Russia in the aftermath of the 1905 revolution - the so-called 'driving forces of the revolution'. This reading gave rise to a political strategy that the Bolsheviks called 'hegemony' (not to be confused with later uses of the protean word). We will examine the hegemony strategy in detail later in the series, but we can summarise it here: the Bolsheviks must strive for a *vlast* based on the workers and peasants that would carry the revolution "to the end" (achieve the maximum of political and social transformation available at the time) - in opposition to the drive of anti-tsarist liberals to halt the revolution as soon as possible.

As soon as the dust had cleared after the collapse of the Romanov dynasty in early 1917, the Bolsheviks had little trouble mapping the hegemony strategy onto the basic political realities of the new situation. The vehicle of the

worker/peasant *vlast* would obviously be the soviets, first in Petrograd and then nationwide. Unlike the prototype soviets of 1905, the Petrograd Soviet of 1917 also represented the soldiers in the Petrograd garrison, and thus, indirectly, the peasants. The anti-tsarist liberals were ensconced in the provisional government and, as predicted, they were trying to take over the leadership of the revolution and put a halt to revolutionary change as rapidly as possible. The implications of hegemony for political strategy under these circumstances were straightforward: worker/soldier soviets must take over the full *vlast* and carry out the revolutionary programme, come what may.

In March 1917, this strategy was given concrete application in March by Petrograd Bolsheviks, including Kamenev and Stalin. Faced with a soviet that, on the one hand, was recognised as an authority by the workers and soldiers, but, on the other hand, had itself ceded state authority to the provisional government, the Bolshevik leaders wagered on an inevitable confrontation between the provisional government and the soviet constituency, since events would rapidly reveal the provisional government's total inability to carry out the demands of the soviet constituency - and indeed its hostile and counterrevolutionary desire to eliminate soviet influence. As soon as the soviets and their mass base grasped these realities (as the Bolsheviks believed them to be), they would take "full and complete *vlast* [*vsia polnosta vlasti*] into their own hands. Insofar as the revolution is going to develop and to deepen, it will come to this: to the dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry".<sup>2</sup>

Although the Petrograd Bolsheviks put the goal of soviet power firmly on the agenda, they refrained from issuing a direct call for it in slogan

form. Two main tactical dilemmas led to this restraint. First, such a call would be perceived as anti-soviet, given its present leadership and majority outlook. Second, a premature call to overthrow the provisional government, prior to acquiring support among the soviet constituency in the capitals and in the provinces, would be extremely disorganising. As Kamenev remarked in March, "*Nevazhno-vziat' vlast, vazhno-uderzhat*" (It's not such a big deal taking power - but keeping it, that's a big deal).

These considerations were not the result of a namby-pamby lack of revolutionary fervour, but rather of some very real tactical dilemmas - dilemmas that caused problems for the Bolsheviks throughout the year (consider the July days). In the meantime, the Bolshevik leaders undertook to hasten the great day by "organisation, organisation and organisation", as well as by setting in motion the standard social democratic technique of an exposure campaign.

A typical campaign of this kind made concrete demands on the ruling elite with the aim of persuading the masses that these demands *would not be met*, as long as the "bourgeois" elite government was in power. A paradigmatic example in 1917 was the demand to publish the secret treaties. This campaign was launched in March before Lenin's return and continued right up to the moment when Trotsky entered the foreign affairs building.

An open call for full soviet power became part of the Bolshevik message in April, along with the crucial proviso that persuading the soviet constituency was an essential prerequisite. This shift (*not* turnaround) in tactics can be ascribed to the return of the émigré leaders, Lenin and Zinoviev (a perusal of *Pravda* in April will quickly reveal Zinoviev's major role), and also to the accelerating political crisis that (as predicted by Petrograd Bolsheviks in

March) deepened the rift between the provisional government and the soviet constituency.

The impact of these various factors should not automatically be assigned to the April theses in and of themselves. Let us take a look at the *Pravda* issue of April 8 that appeared very soon after Lenin's return and the publication of his theses. On page 4 can be found a short article by Kamenev, entitled 'Our disagreements', that contained a critique of Lenin's theses, thus signalling disagreement within Bolshevik ranks and the beginning of an intra-party debate. On the front page of the same issue was emblazoned an extensive article by Zinoviev in a manner that suggested a semi-official statement that reflected a party consensus. This article is a clear, succinct and authoritative exposition of the thinking behind 'All power to the soviets!' - with special emphasis on the 'All' - without, however, anything resembling the actual slogan itself.

As Zinoviev accurately states in this article, "revolutionary social democracy in Russia" (aka Bolshevism) had traditionally seen a victorious Russian Revolution as "a prologue, an introduction to socialist revolution in the west". This perspective imposed a duty upon Russian revolutionaries, which Zinoviev summed up using the time-honoured formula of "carrying the Russian Revolution *to the end* [*do kontsa*]". And how would this goal be accomplished?

Among the Kadets we hear protests that are more and more envenomed against the dual power [*dvoe vlastie*] that now exists in Russia. We protest against the fact that alongside the government of Lvov/Guchkov/Miliukov there exists another *vlast*: the *vlast* of the Soviets of Worker and Soldier Deputies - so say the Kadets.

We also do not want dual power - so we, the revolutionary social

democrats, answer. We also desire that in our country there be only a single *vlast*. And that *vlast* should be the Soviets of Worker and Soldier Deputies.

Zinoviev's article gives us a template for Bolshevik rhetoric throughout the year: take a widely accepted revolutionary goal and point out that it cannot be achieved until the soviets that truly represent the workers and peasants have *all* the *vlast*.

### Theses reception

On April 8, then, we find in *Pravda* both a clear and unambiguous statement of the goal of soviet power in a manner that suggests party unity *and* an opening round in the party dispute over Lenin's famous theses. In order to assess their impact, therefore, we need to take a careful look at the reception they received. Since this document does not present a unified message, but rather sets forth a number of disparate propositions, it is not helpful to speak of a reaction to the theses as a whole. We need to break down the theses in a way that helps us distinguish different reactions to different points.

The reception of the April theses by party activists can be divided into three categories. First are the positions that were not controversial, because they expressed a Bolshevik consensus. The goal of soviet power was definitely one of these widely shared positions, along with the imperialist nature of the war, no confidence in the provisional government, and rejection of 'revolutionary defencism'. These positions - by far the most important - did not lead to any pushback. On the contrary. Here are the words of the most articulate critic of Lenin's theses, Sergei Bagdatev:

Everywhere and always, every day, we have to show the masses that, until the *vlast* has been transferred into the hands of the Soviets of Worker

# 1917

and Soldier Deputies, there is no hope for an early end of the war and no possibility for the realisation of their programme.

Bagdatev used these words in April precisely to explain *why he had misgivings* about some of Lenin's propositions.

Bagdatev's remarks lead us to the next category of the reception of the theses: misgivings about the possible practical implications of this or that proposition. These misgivings were not occasioned by the *goal* of soviet power, but rather by disagreements about the *best way* to attain it. They arose because Lenin was far from clear, both in his elliptical theses and in various other comments made after his return. According to recent news stories, a group of Catholic cardinals have presented Pope Francis with a set of *dubia*, or request for clarification about the implications of some of his pronouncements. These *dubia* are an excellent model for this category of theses reception.

The essential feature of the Bolshevik *dubia* in April 1917 was that they were passionately *pro-soviet power*. Later in the series we will examine the two most extensive critiques - those of Sergei Bagdatev and Lev Kamenev. Although the former is usually placed on the extreme left of the party and the latter on the extreme right, their critiques substantially overlapped - indeed, Bagdatev quoted Kamenev and solidarised with him. There is no mistaking the fervour with which these two Bolsheviks warn against what they consider to be fatal missteps in achieving the goal of soviet power.

The process of clearing up misunderstandings began almost immediately, since Lenin had to provide defensive glosses to prevent misunderstanding in the very article that contains the canonical text of the theses. After repeating what he had earlier made public in speeches immediately after his return, Lenin adds: 'Some people deduce from my theses that I don't support the constituent assembly - what slanderous nonsense!'

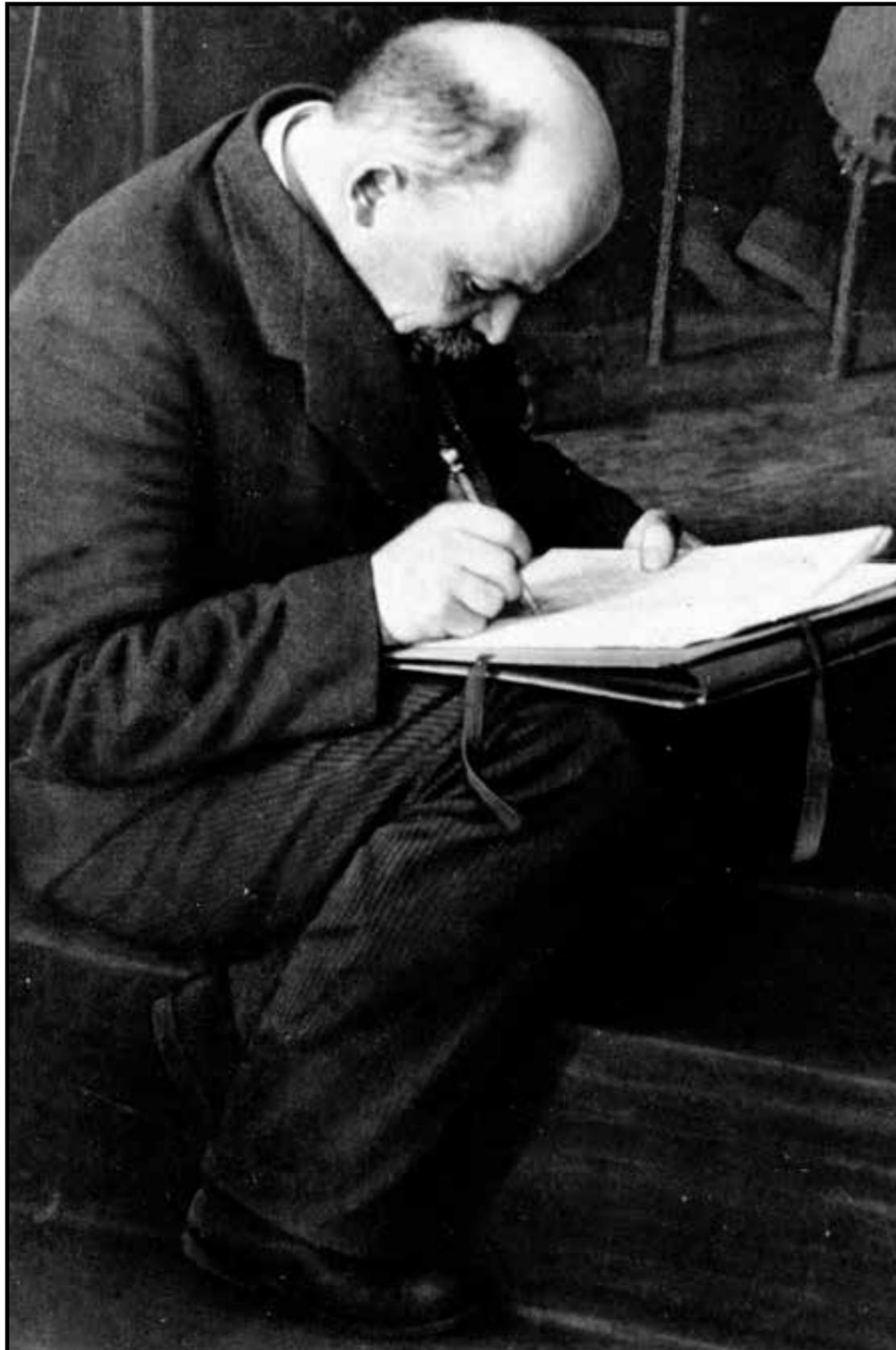
In 1926, the pioneer party historian, Vladimir Nevsky, published the first substantial source-based history of Bolshevism. His book appeared in the brief interval after primary sources had been collected, but before Stalinist orthodoxy ended genuine historical debate. Nevsky himself was active in the Petrograd Bolshevik organisation and therefore speaks with the authority of an eye-witness, as well as of a historian who is still highly regarded today. He makes the following extremely revealing comment about the reception of the April theses:

We must stress that even in the ranks of our party were people who at first understood these theses incorrectly, taking them as a call to an immediate implementation of socialism, despite categorical explanations [to the contrary].

In fact, Lenin's position [in the April theses] was the natural development of the doctrine that he had worked out long ago in the previous periods of the history of our party, since one of the basic propositions of Bolshevism ... was the one put forward already during the first Russian revolution [in 1905]: the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry. This same idea also implied all the conclusions and all the measures inevitably arrived at, as soon as the party was convinced of the necessity and the inevitability of a proletarian-peasant dictatorship.<sup>3</sup>

## Misunderstandings

Later in the series we will look at the response of both Lenin and Trotsky to this particular misunderstanding about socialism. But at present we need to



stress two crucial implications of Nevsky's authoritative remarks. First, misunderstandings were indeed crucial to the reception of the April theses. Of course, Nevsky removes any blame from Lenin for causing these misunderstandings, and no mention is made of the possibility that Lenin himself might have misunderstood the outlook of Petrograd Bolsheviks such as Kamenev.

Even more revealing is Nevsky's firm assertion of the essential continuity between old Bolshevism and the April theses: "Lenin's position [in the April theses] was the natural development of the doctrine that he had worked out long ago in the previous periods of the history of our party." Nevsky sums up the continuity by quoting Lenin's formula about "the dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry", which, when unpacked, is equivalent to the hegemony strategy: a *vlast* based on the workers and peasants in order to carry the revolution "to the end" (achieve the maximum of political and social transformation available at the time) in opposition to the drive of anti-tsarist liberals to halt the revolution as soon as possible. Nevsky knew Bolshevik Party history better than anyone living today and his testimony on this point should be given due weight.

The process of clearing up misunderstandings worked in both directions: having just arrived in Russia from abroad, Lenin himself had misconceptions about the position of the Petrograd Bolsheviks. As we shall see later in the series, probably the most important of these misconceptions concerned the propriety of making 'demands' on the provisional government. Due to his passionate émigré polemics against Kautsky and the social democratic 'centre', Lenin came back to Russia breathing fire and brimstone against the whole idea of making 'demands' - in his eyes, such demands only spread illusions about the possibility of reform. What?! (asked the critics) - do you mean to say we should forego exposure campaigns that make demands such as 'publish the secret treaties'?

A very similar issue was *kontrol*, which is better translated as 'supervision' than 'control': in the present context, *kontrol* means keeping an eye on the government to ensure that they carried out the demands of the soviet. Lenin rejected any talk of *kontrol* for the same reason that he was hostile to making 'demands': any such talk seemed to imply a belief that the provisional government would actually carry out

the programme or the demands of the soviet. But Kamenev and other Bolsheviks wanted to use *kontrol* by the soviet precisely in order to *expose* government failure - like Lenin, they believed there was no chance that the government would actually carry out the policies demanded by the soviet.

The following three comments about the issue of 'demands' from the party conferences in April are a miniature paradigm of the rather messy process of clearing up misunderstandings. According to Lenin,

Our line should not consist of showing that we are demanding the publication of treaties from the government. That would be an illusion. To demand this from a government of capitalists - it's just like demanding that it uncover commercial frauds. If we say that we must reject annexations and indemnities, then we have to point out how this can be done; and if we are asked how to do it, we will say that it is basically a revolutionary step, and such a step can only be taken by the revolutionary proletariat.

Kamenev responded:

Should we, as a political party, take on

ourselves to demand the publication of the secret treaties - announce that this is our political demand? People will say to me: excuse me, you're demanding something impossible. But the demands I make are not founded on the expectation that Miliukov will respond to me and publish the treaties.

The policy of making demands that I am advocating is an agitational device for the development of the masses, a method of exposure of the fact that Guchkov and Miliukov cannot do this, that they do not want the publication of the secret treaties, that they are against the policy of peace. It is a device for showing the masses that if they really want to create a revolutionary policy on an international level, then the *vlast* must be transferred into the hands of the soviet.

After this exchange, Kamenev and Lenin strove to minimise their differences. Kamenev affirmed that he was dissatisfied with Lenin's reports "mainly for technical reasons". According to Lenin, "Kamenev and I are on the same path, except on the question of *kontrol*. Subjectively, he understands this word better than Chkheidze and others." Chkheidze was a Menshevik leader of the soviet, who genuinely hoped that the provisional government would really and truly carry out the programme of the soviet.

One aim of the present series is to make what was apparent to Lenin at the end of April 1917 equally as apparent to readers in 2017 - namely, that Kamenev and others were on the same page as Lenin and *not* on the page of Menshevik leaders such as Chkheidze. For the present, let us note that the Bolsheviks found it perfectly possible to have agitation campaigns about the secret treaties that met the criteria of both Lenin and Kamenev. I am now looking at a photograph that shows soldiers during the April days standing under a banner reading "*Trebuyem nemedlennogo vskrytiia soiznykh dogovorov*" - *We demand the immediate uncovering of the Allied treaties* (emphasis added).

Misgivings about 'demands', *kontrol* and a variety of other topics were not rebutted - they were *cleared up*. Consensus about the April theses was reached not because Lenin changed the minds of the *praktiki* - rather, he made it clear to them that they did not have to change their minds in order to accept his theses.

The final category of the reception of the April theses can be labelled 'Lenin's enthusiasms': those parts that are not in the core consensus, but also were not perceived by his fellow Bolsheviks as antithetical to it. Under this category falls bank syndicalisation, renaming the party and the soviets as a higher form of democracy (in contrast to the soviets as a vehicle for the worker/peasant *vlast*). These proposals were not shocking or controversial as such, but nevertheless people wondered how relevant or helpful they were to the task of crafting a dynamic party message in the ongoing revolution. In the end, these points were not rejected, but simply allowed to drift into the fine print of the Bolshevik message - even as set forth in Lenin's own writings that are directly addressed to the soviet constituency in 1917 (which means that *State and revolution* is excluded, since it was published in 1918).

All three categories of the reception of the theses are exemplified by some remarks by the important Bolshevik activist, Mikhail Kalinin, at the April party conferences. As we recall, the first category consists of fundamental points that caused no controversy. For example, Kalinin specifically endorses Lenin's agrarian policy and refers to his own *Pravda* article from March 17. The basic message of this earlier article can be summarised as 'All power to the peasant committees!' Crucially, in his comments to the conference, Kalinin

also specifically endorses the goal of soviet power: "The Soviet of Worker and Soldier Deputies is for the present moment the only possible *vlast*."

Because of his agreement on these fundamental positions, Kalinin insisted that the April theses did *not* constitute a radical break with the longstanding party outlook: "The method of thinking remains an old Bolshevik one that can handle the particularities of this revolution." Neither did they constitute a break with recent Bolshevik tactics in March: "All you have to do is read our first document during the revolution - the manifesto of our party - and you will be persuaded that our picture of the revolution and our tactics differ in no way from comrade Lenin's theses."

I have stated that the second reception category consists of practical misgivings: 'Has Lenin considered the full implications of this or that point - implications that we *praktiki* believe will hamper the drive for soviet power?' For example, Kalinin did not object to changes in the name of the party *per se*, but he felt that "from practical considerations" the party should go slow when instituting the change. Kalinin shows his awareness that the source of some of Lenin's concerns was émigré polemics: "I understand the comrades who have arrived from abroad, where the phrase 'social democrat' has been so befouled. But that's not the case with us."

To repeat, the final category of reception is acceptance of Lenin's personal enthusiasms without making them in any way a central part of the actual Bolshevik message. For example, one of Lenin's theses insisted on bank nationalisation. Kalinin had no substantive objection to such a measure, but he commented that "the point about the banks doesn't have much practical propagandistic significance". As we saw earlier, Kalinin endorsed the soviets as a vehicle for the class *vlast* of the workers and peasants, *à la* old Bolshevism. Nevertheless, he did not endorse Lenin's own personal enthusiasm about the soviets as a higher type of democracy:

The only thing new in comrade Lenin's theses is the assertion that the Soviet of Worker Deputies is the only [acceptable] form of government. That's not true, but what is true is that the Soviet of Worker and Soldier Deputies is for the present moment the only possible *vlast*. So a correction

is needed here.

In the event, Lenin's rationale about the soviets as a higher type of democracy was certainly not rejected, but it was also not given more than marginal status in the Bolshevik message during 1917. This issue thus illustrates the way Lenin's personal enthusiasms become no more than the fine print of the Bolshevik message.

All in all, we get a more accurate picture of the Bolshevik message throughout the year by reading Kalinin's remarks than by reading the April theses themselves. The core of this message was based on what Lenin and Kalinin had in common: the twin goals of power to the soviets and land to the peasants. But, as accurately foreshadowed by Kalinin, bank nationalisation, the soviets as a higher type of democracy and the party name-change all remained marginal.

## Great slogans found, not made

All in all, the story of 'All power to the soviets!' can be told without mentioning the April theses - nothing essential would be lost thereby. So we return to our regularly scheduled story about the Bolshevik slogan. The thinking behind the slogan derived from old Bolshevism and was never really in doubt. As we have seen, the open call for soviet power as a proximate goal was made in early April, when the debate over the theses had barely begun.

But the canonical slogan itself - *Vsya vlast sovetam!* - is still nowhere in evidence. The slogan certainly does not appear in the April theses. I have looked through the resolutions and proclamations of local party committees in April found in various document collections. On the basis of this evidence, neither our familiar slogan nor any recognisable variant of it was used anywhere during the month. The absence of a pithy formulation of a key demand made itself felt in the various appeals and calls for action issued by local Bolsheviks.

In the resolutions of the all-Russia Bolshevik conference that ended on April 29, the call for "full state *vlast*" for the workers and peasants is an insistent *leitmotif* throughout the text. Yet the wording is not only clumsy, compared to the crisp, canonical slogan, but also unfocused. The most common wording is "transfer of all of the *vlast* into the hands of" - with significant

variation in the identity of the hands involved. Sometimes the *vlast* is placed in the hands of the soviets, but in other places it is transferred directly into the hands of social classes such as "the proletariat". Other "organs of democratic self-government" - even the constituent assembly! - are also mentioned as possible vehicles for the *vlast*.

Who first came up with the exact wording of the canonical slogan? On present evidence, it was some mid-level Petrograd Bolshevik who was involved in the organisation of demonstrations during the April crisis. The first appearance I have tracked down was on a banner that appeared in the streets on April 21 (as reported in *Pravda* the next day). This activist was no doubt summarising what he had been reading in *Pravda*. The banner attracted the attention of Lenin, either from direct observation or from newspaper reports, and he mentions it in his description of events.<sup>4</sup> Lenin liked the slogan well enough to use it himself a little while later in a *Pravda* article on May 2.

Lenin is usually - and incorrectly - associated with the canonical slogan via his theses at the beginning of April. Nevertheless, Lenin does deserve major credit for its adoption. During the April demonstrations at the end of the month, Lenin was perspicacious enough to observe the slogan and note its possibilities. On present evidence, Lenin was indeed the leader who lifted it out of anonymity and made it central to Bolshevik agitation.

The first appearance of the slogan that I have been able to find in an authoritative party document - not just on an anonymous banner or in a signed article by an individual - occurs on May 7 on the front page of *Pravda* in 'Draft of a mandate for use in electing delegates to the Soviet of Worker and Soldier Deputies'. The aim of the mandate was to help the soviet constituency to distinguish a genuine red from an 'Albino' (*A Lousy Bolshevik In Name Only*). As such, this document is a good guide to the meaning of the slogan in the context of 1917. I have therefore appended the entire text of the May mandate to this article. The mandate ends with these ringing words:

All of the *vlast* to the Soviets of Worker and Soldier Deputies! The whole world will believe in it. Only then can we end the war and bring

Russia to happiness.

The mandate goes through the challenges facing the country and argues in each case that soviet power is a precondition for an effective response:

Unless the *vlast* goes into the hands of the workers, soldiers and poorest peasantry - those who genuinely do not want to be predators - we will continue to spill our blood only to serve the interests of a handful of capitalists and landowners.

The mandate calls for state *kontrol* of production and distribution, but also makes clear that this is something the state would be doing anyway - the only question is who will have the *vlast*, who will have the final say about the actual policies. Thus the flipside of 'All power to the soviets' is condemnation of any "agreement" with the capitalists:

All of the *vlast* in the country must belong solely to the Soviets of Worker, Soldier, Peasant and other Deputies (we must include the soviets of the railroad workers and other civil servants). Agreement with the capitalists, leaving the capitalist gentlemen with the *vlast*, prolongs the war and worsens the situation within the country.

The theme of socialism is conspicuous by its absence. Also absent are any of Lenin's personal enthusiasms from the April theses: soviets as a higher form of democracy, shift of focus to the *batrak*, model farms on confiscated estates, bank regulation. Otherwise, the policies advocated by the mandate came from the social democratic "minimum programme" and the common "democratic" platform of the socialist parties: a just peace, land to the peasants, eight-hour day, a universal militia. The campaign against the secret treaties is not forgotten. Even the old slogan of the German Social Democratic Party - 'Not one penny!' - is called back into service. To sum up, the mandate is a concrete application of the long-standing Bolshevik consensus: a *vlast* based on the workers and peasants committed to carrying the revolution to the end by enacting a broad, "democratic" transformation of Russian society.

We conclude our short biography of a slogan with an excellent evocation of the meaning of 'All power to the soviets!', as it was received by the soviet constituency. In his description of a factory rally in Moscow in May 1917, one of the

workers, Eduard Dune, pushes away learned Marxist discourse about types of revolution with some impatience:

How could one know whether the bourgeois revolution was finished or whether Russia was ripe for socialist revolution? The Bolsheviks spoke in a way that was more comprehensible. We must preserve and strengthen the power we had won during the revolution, not give any of it away to the bourgeoisie. We must not liquidate the soviets as organs of power, but transfer power to them instead, so that there would no longer be dual power, but a single revolutionary government ...

For sociologists the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat was more complicated than it was for us. We wanted only one thing: the establishment of a revolutionary government that could be trusted and the strengthening of those practices that had been tried and tested by the experience of the revolution. We were for land to the peasants, for an end to the bloody war, for everything that workers in other countries wanted. There was no revolution anywhere else as yet, but there would be. Foreign soldiers trusted their officers as little as we trusted ours and would soon follow our example. All those who spoke against power to the soviets were enemies of the revolution, hiding the fact that at a suitable moment they would act against the gains that it had brought about.<sup>5</sup>

We could perhaps continue the story of our slogan along the standard lines of a biography of a famous movie star: an early success in the demonstrations on June 18, a period of rejection, confusion and self-doubt after the July days, and finally a triumphant return to star billing in September, ending with a historic performance in late October. But for the present, we here conclude the first chapter in the biography of 'All power to the soviets!' ●

This article was originally published at <https://johnriddell.wordpress.com>.

### Notes

- <https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/category/authors/eric-blanc>.
- Lev Kamenev's *Pravda* editorial, March 14 1917.
- Istoriia RKP(B): kratkii ocherk* 1926.
- VI Lenin, 'Lessons of the crisis' *Pravda* April 22 1917.
- E Dune *Notes of a Red Guard* Campaign 1993.

# Draft of a mandate

## For use in electing delegates to the Soviet of Worker and Soldier Deputies

As we elect our representative to the Soviet of Worker and Soldier Deputies, we give him the job of defending the following views:

### 1. The war

The present war was begun by tsars, crowned kings and uncrowned robber-capitalists; it is a predatory war, bringing only death and destruction to all the peoples of the world, but millions in profits to a handful of capitalists. The secret treaties that Nicholas the Bloody signed with the English and French capitalists have to this day not been published. Yet blood is flowing because of these dark and foul treaties up to the present moment.

Unless the *vlast* goes into the hands of the workers, soldiers and the poorest peasantry - those who genuinely do not want to be predators - we will continue to spill our blood only to serve the interests of a handful of capitalists and landowners.

Ending the present predatory war with a just peace is only possible *against* the will of the present governments, only by tossing out the capitalists and

landowners in all countries. Socialists of all countries must follow the example of Karl Liebknecht, who is sentenced to hard labour because he fought the good fight against 'his' Wilhelm and 'his' capitalists.

### 2. The land

All land - not just tsarist, state and monastery lands, but also those belongs to the landowners - must be transferred without compensation to the peasants.

The peasants must take these lands *immediately* and sow crops right away. We must not wait for the constituent assembly, which has not yet even been summoned. Any delay will put the whole enterprise under threat. To wait would be disastrous! The plan of the landowners is to stretch things out and, if that succeeds, disrupt the whole transfer of the land to the peasant.

The land, along with live and dead stock of landowner estates, must be taken over *in organised fashion, under the supervision [kontrol] of the Soviets of Peasant Deputies and the Deputies from Agricultural Workers*. No disorders should be permitted.

Revolutionary discipline is necessary. Soldiers from the front should send their delegates to the soviets and committees that will have the *kontrol* over the seizure of the land.

### 3. Labour

The eight-hour day must be introduced for all men and women workers in the towns and villages, with increase in working wages that will at least keep pace with the cost of living. We must establish the *kontrol* of the Soviets of Worker and Soldier Deputies over the production and distribution of products. Without this, the country is threatened by famine. Not the '*kontrol*' of the capitalists, but only the *kontrol* of the Soviet and Worker and Soldier Deputies, can give bread to the cities, and cheaper industrial items to the villages.

### 4. The vlast

All of the *vlast* in the country must belong solely to the Soviets of Worker, Soldier, Peasant and other Deputies (we must include the soviets of the railroad workers and other civil servants). Agreement with the capitalists, leaving the capitalist

gentlemen with the *vlast*, prolongs the war and worsens the situation within the country.

No confidence in the 'new' government [the recently formed coalition of socialists and liberals], for it remains a government of capitalists - no support for it, not a penny of money. No confidence in the 'defencist' parties that preach agreement with the capitalists and participation in a government of capitalists!

### 5. The police

Under no circumstances should we permit the restoration of the police. Instead of the police, instead of a standing army, we need a militia, universal arming of all citizens of both sexes.

### 6. Economic collapse and cost of living

A successful struggle with economic collapse and the lack of bread requires: (i) ending the war as soon as possible; (ii) transferring as soon as possible

the entire *vlast* into the hands of the Soviets of Worker and Soldier Deputies. A provisional government that still consists of a majority of capitalists cannot successfully struggle against economic collapse. It preserves the profits of the capitalists and the advantages of the landowners. It does not want to permit the workers to have *kontrol* over production and distribution of products - the *kontrol* that alone can lessen collapse. The provisional government is incapable of the revolutionary measures that alone can save the country from famine.

All of the *vlast* to the Soviets of Worker and Soldier Deputies! The whole world will believe in it. Only then can we end the war and bring Russia to happiness.

*Our delegate is obliged to act in the soviet on the basis of this mandate. Anyone who deviates from this path will be recalled by us, and in his place we will elect another delegate who supports our views* ●

Published in *Pravda* No51, May 7 1917, taking up the entire front page.

**ISRAEL**

# No self-determination

The overthrow of Zionism is incompatible with a Hebrew nation, argues **Tony Greenstein**, in this reply to Moshé Machover

**M**oshé Machover, who I count as a friend and comrade, is a legend in his own lifetime. One of the founders of Matzpen, the Socialist Organisation in Israel, Machover more than any other single person has helped educate a generation of socialists in a Marxist approach to the question of Zionism and Israel.

When I grew up, there was a myth, common amongst the left, that Israel was an example of socialism. The *kibbutzim* were held out as the socialist ideal - a communal way of living and producing. Little did we know that the *kibbutzim* were the pioneers of stockade and watchtower colonisation, that they owned industries which exploited the labour of Arab and Misrahi Jewish workers, that they were Jewish-only organisations and that they provided the officer corps for the paramilitary Haganah and Palmach, which spearheaded the massacres and ethnic cleansing of 1948. But, then again, we grew up with the fable that the Arabs in 1948 fled Palestine on instructions from the Arab leaders in order that they could conquer the country and commit another holocaust.

As a teenager groping my way towards a socialist analysis of Zionism, the first thing I read that made sense on the subject was an article in the *New Left Review* by Moshé, Akiva Orr and Haim Hanegbi, which was reprinted as a pamphlet by the International Socialists (now the Socialist Workers Party).<sup>1</sup> It is therefore with some hesitation that I disagree with my teacher!

Moshé argues cogently and forcefully in his article, 'Palestine and Hebrew self-determination',<sup>2</sup> that without an acceptance by the Palestinians that the Jewish or Hebrew inhabitants of Israel constitute a separate Hebrew nation there can be no resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Only by making this concession and accepting the reality of two nations is it possible to find a solution to the existing conflict.

Firstly let me explain that I agree with Moshé and Matzpen that it is impossible for the Palestinians, *by themselves*, to overthrow Zionism. A solution to Zionist colonisation will not be found within the confines of what was the British mandate territory of Palestine. The balance of forces is such that it would be impossible for the Palestinians to repeat what the black masses achieved in South Africa when they overthrew the apartheid system.

What then is the pathway to a solution? Moshé argues that the *only* agent for change is the Israeli-Jewish (Hebrew) working class: "... the only social force able directly to achieve this overthrow [of Zionism] is internal: the Israeli masses, primarily the Hebrew working class." The Israeli-Jewish working class must be tempted into abandoning the advantages that it presently enjoys, or perceives that it enjoys, in a Zionist state based on Jewish supremacy. How is this to be achieved? By granting it the right to form either a separate Hebrew state or, hopefully, it will be enticed to join a wider socialist federation of the Middle East. This is where Moshé and I part company.

My initial response is that of Martin Luther King when remonstrating with white clergymen, who argued that he should have kept quiet over segregation and racism, allowing the law to take its course:

Lamentably, it is an historical fact



**No national consciousness?**

that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals.<sup>3</sup>

The first thing that should be said is that there is no empirical evidence to support Moshé's theory. It is based on nothing more than an assertion that, in certain circumstances, the Hebrew or Israeli-Jewish working class will abandon Zionism and act as a revolutionary agent of change. Scientific theories are usually based on existing facts, which they then try to explain. Further observations and predictions based on the theory confirm whether the theory is true or not.

## Cross-class alliance

The suggestion that the Hebrew working class is a potential agent of revolutionary change is based on no existing facts, evidence or observations. *Per contra* Israel's Jewish working class is the most reactionary section of the Israeli-Jewish population. The Marxist idea that the working class is the gravedigger of capitalism only applies in situations where the major cleavage in society is between those who live by their labour alone and those who live by exploiting the labour of others.

However, there are certain capitalist societies where life is not so simple. In these societies - ethno-nationalist or based on racial supremacy, primarily settler-colonial societies - an alliance forms between the ruling class and its ethnic counterpart in the working class. Such examples include the deep south of the USA, where the white working class saw its main enemy as the black working class. It is a situation repeated over and over again in the white dominions of Canada, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand. In such situations the Marxist theory of the proletariat did not work.

Lenin observed that in imperialist

societies, the proletariat shares in the oppression and exploitation of the colonised. It is this which is the material basis of the political backwardness of the western working class to this day and the attraction of national chauvinism. Lenin described how:

The Roman proletariat lived at the expense of society. Modern society lives at the expense of the modern proletariat. Marx specially stressed this profound observation of Sismondi. Imperialism somewhat changes the situation. A privileged upper stratum of the proletariat in the imperialist countries lives partly at the expense of hundreds of millions in the uncivilised nations.<sup>4</sup>

If the western proletariat, in the heartland of imperialism, was able to overcome racial/ethnic divisions and extend solidarity to the colonial masses, to at least a partial extent, the settler-colonial working class was totally incapable of reaching out to the working class of the colonised societies. White workers came to the colonies as part of the colonisation process and from the beginning they identified with their own ethnic ruling class rather than the natives. They swapped the oppression they experienced in the mother country for the role of an oppressor in the colonies. Indeed this was the cure for all manner of social ills by colonial reformers such as Edward Gibbon Wakefield, who advocated the emigration of the unemployed to the colonies in order to stave off disorder at home.<sup>5</sup>

Marx envisaged this when he wrote that "the nation that oppresses another nation forges its own chains".<sup>6</sup> Marx was thinking of Ireland, but what he wrote is applicable to any colonised society. As long as British workers supported British imperialism in Ireland, so long would it be in hock to its own ruling class.

Moshé's thesis is a utopian fantasy based on a failure to understand the class nature of the settler society. In particular he fails to appreciate that

one of the principal characteristics of a settler-colonial society is the *intra-class* alliance that is formed between the settler bourgeoisie and the settler working class. That is what makes Israel such a stable and reliable state for US imperialism today.

There are, of course, times when the settler bourgeoisie and the settler working class come to blows. This was true of the seamen's strike in Israel in 1951 and the continued militancy of the Ashdod port workers from the 1960s until today. Indeed the Israeli-Jewish working class has often been a very militant one, even though *at the same time* it has rejected any alliance with the Israeli Arab working class. The major organisation of the Israeli-Jewish working class, Histadrut, was founded on the rejection of any form of unity between the Jewish-Arab working class and it put this into practice with its destruction of the joint Jewish-Arab railworkers union, which had been formed in 1919.<sup>7</sup> Repeatedly Histadrut and the Labour Zionist movement set out to destroy, in the name of Zionism and Jewish intra-class unity, all attempts at Jewish-Arab collaboration.

For example in the postal, telegraph and railworkers strikes that began on April 9 1946 in Jaffa and Tel Aviv, before spreading to other cities, Histadrut exerted every muscle in order to destroy the unity which had seen joint Jewish-Arab pickets outside post offices.<sup>8</sup> Former Hadash MK Tamar Gozansky described how

The extensive joint activity of Arab and Jewish workers was not aborted only by the armed conflict, but, in large measure, by the policy of the Histadrut, the Jewish labour federation founded in 1920, which pushed for separation between Arab and Jewish workers.

Nor was Israel unique in this respect. Repeatedly in Ireland the Orange card was used to prevent the unity of Catholic and Protestant workers and peasants. The most famous example was in Belfast

in the 1930s. The outdoor relief strike of 1932 had been an example of joint Catholic-Protestant working class unity, in which two workers had been shot dead. The strike and riots achieved many of their aims, but the unionist establishment was determined to destroy this unity. In the words of Lord Brookeborough, Northern Ireland's first prime minister, "We are a Protestant parliament and a Protestant state."<sup>9</sup> The fruit of British divide and rule was seen three years later in the sectarian riots in Belfast.<sup>10</sup> In the 1920s Catholic workers had been driven out of the docks in unionist pogroms.

Kevin Johnson describes how, in the Harland and Wolff shipbuilding yards

Even the unskilled [Protestant] men saw themselves as privileged, better off than Catholics. Only twice did the downtrodden workers, Catholic and Protestant, come together to stand against their employers. In 1907, James Larkin held them together for a whole summer, before the call of sectarianism became too great. During the depression of the early 1930s, Protestant and Catholic unemployed managed to stand together for a time. Once again, sectarianism broke through in the end and working class solidarity was deferred indefinitely.<sup>11</sup>

In South Africa too there was a militant settler working class, which staged the armed Rand Rebellion in 1922, marching to the chant of "White workers of the world unite".<sup>12</sup>

But Moshé avoids any analysis of the settler working classes by engaging in the equivalent of a political conjuring trick. He argues that the settlers *as a whole* in South Africa formed an "exploiting quasi-class" - which is to some extent true. But it is equally true in Israel and similar societies. In such societies there is a distinct privileged white/settler-colonial working class, protected by the equivalent of a colour bar, formal or informal, which identifies with its own ethnic ruling class.

It is arguable that socialist ideas made far greater strides in the white South African working class than amongst the Jewish workers in Palestine. Communist councillors were elected and there was even a communist MP, until the Communist Party was banned in 1950 by prime minister Daniel Malan. There was nothing that the Jewish working class in Israel possessed that the white settlers of South Africa did not have - be it language (Afrikaans), separate religion (Orange Free Church) or territory. Arguably a socialist consciousness made far greater strides in South Africa than in Palestine, where Histadrut was viciously anti-communist. In Palestine the major conflict within the Jewish working class occurred in the 1920s between the work brigades, Gdud Ha'avodah, Histadrut and Ahdut Ha'avodah.<sup>13</sup>

## Fatal flaw

The fatal flaw in Moshé's schema is his belief that the Hebrew/Israeli-Jewish working class can be won over from their extreme racism and chauvinism by the prospect of forming their own state. In fact they already believe they have such a state and there is no possible reason to believe that they will abandon their 'Jewish' state for a pie-in-the-sky Hebrew state in a socialist confederation in the future. A racist bird in the hand is far preferable to two socialist birds in the bush!

Moshé's schema is a mechanistic

and economic one. It contends that a political alliance between the Israeli-Jewish working class and its ruling class can be broken by an appeal to the abstract ideas of socialism. I cannot find any more reason to believe this of Israeli-Jewish workers than I can for similar working classes in other settler-colonial societies.

The Zionist movement was quite unique, in that it consciously sought to create a working class under the slogan, 'From class to nation'. The role of the working class in labour Zionism was a nationalist one. It is this which has shaped the political formation of Israeli-Jewish workers.

It is not simply a question of material benefits. No greater advocate of partition and the ideas of Protestant supremacy in Ireland has there been than the Protestant working class. Yet it is a class that has objectively barely benefited at all - it has suffered almost as much as the Catholic working class. Indeed there are some socialist groups - the former Militant Tendency for one - which argued that there was no difference between housing conditions on Shankhill Road and the Falls Road. Sometimes even the tiniest fragment of political and economic advantage over another section of the working class is enough to cement unity between workers and the bourgeoisie. Indeed I would go further: even the *illusion* of power over another section of the working class on ethnic grounds is enough. The history of the British empire is littered with such examples.

Of course, the balance of forces between the settlers and the indigenous population in South Africa and Israel is completely different. In South Africa the whites constituted less than 20% of the population and after the mid-1970s the friendly Portuguese colonies that lay to the north of South Africa had been replaced by the newly independent countries of Mozambique and Angola, which gave sanctuary to the African National Congress. By contrast, conditions could not be less favourable to the Palestinians, politically, militarily and strategically.

In South Africa there was a militant black working class based on the gold and diamond mines, whereas Israel has consciously avoided becoming dependent on Palestinian labour. Faced with hostile Arab regimes of Jordan and Egypt, Palestinians confront a very different geo-strategic situation to that of the South African black working class. That is why the Palestinians, by themselves, are incapable of overthrowing Zionism. To this extent I agree with Moshé. However, the belief that the Israeli-Jewish working class might provide a substitute for the black working class and, with the advent of socialism, throw off the chains of Zionism, if only they are granted the right to self-determination and a Hebrew republic, is more than just mechanistic and economic. It is pie in the sky.

On the contrary, I would argue that until Zionism is defeated socialism will be off the agenda in Israel and the Arab east. Zionism is the guarantee against any unity between the Jewish and Arab working classes.

The utopian nature of Moshé's solution to the Palestine question is summed up in the first of Matzpen's theses, which contends that the conflict can only be resolved as part of a socialist transformation rather than in a "bourgeois democratic" framework. Socialism is part of the living struggle. Palestinians cannot wait until socialism is achieved. On the contrary, it is only with a solution to the problem of the Palestinians and the oppression of the Arab masses that we will see socialism. Contrary to Moshé's argument, the overthrow of Zionism and its reactionary Arab counterparts can only come as part of a bourgeois democratic struggle that produces a regional-wide social movement. But in this the Jewish working class will

play, at least initially, a subsidiary role.

Given that nowhere in the world, since 1917, has there been a successful working class revolution, what Moshé is in effect saying is that the Zionist dispossession of the Palestinians may never be reversed. Waiting until socialism has been ushered in for a resolution of the conflict is a recipe for no solution. This resembles similar arguments over women's liberation.

Israel is not supported because the imperialist countries feel some form of guilt over the holocaust and wish to recompense the descendants of those murdered. Israel is an indispensable ally of imperialism. It was apartheid South Africa's closest ally, an indispensable ally to the military juntas in South America during the 1960s and 70s, and it has acted as a bulwark against revolution in the Middle East, actively seeking to destroy radical Arab nationalism through the Suez War and then the 1967 war, through its interventions in the Lebanese revolution and its support for the reactionary Gulf States and Saudi Arabia, to say nothing of Jordan and Egypt. Imperialism operates through its junior partners in the Arab regimes in the Middle East and Israel is there to ensure that this situation continues - which is the real reason why it wishes to see an end to the Iranian regime. Israel brooks no challenge to its regional hegemony.

It would therefore seem obvious that, if Israel is supported because of its role in supporting reactionary and counterrevolutionary regimes in the Middle East, conversely, it is only with the building of a movement that overthrows these regimes that Zionism itself will be overthrown. The defeat of Zionism through a revolutionary upsurge in the Middle East, which at least initially will take a bourgeois-democratic form, is far more likely than via Moshé's chosen instrument, the poor whites of Israel.

## Hebrew nation?

Moshé is quite correct when he points to the absurdity of the attempt to portray Zionism as a movement of Jewish national self-determination. The suggestion that there is a Jewish nation that crosses all existing national and state boundaries originates in the anti-Semitic idea of a Jewish world conspiracy. A conspiracy based on the idea that, wherever they were to be found, the Jews formed one coherent transnational political body.

Moshé asserts, however, that there is a Hebrew nation. There is no 'clean' definition of what constitutes a nation - it is a metaphysical entity. The best that can be said is that some of the features of a nation include a common language, common economy, common territory and also a sense of self-identity or consciousness. Above all a nation is a political body that is usually, but by no means always, confined to a single state. As Moshé quite rightly says, a state might consist of two or more nations and, on the other hand, a nation may be spread over more than one state: for example, the Kurds.

Israel is quite unique, in that it is a state not of its own citizens, but of the Jewish people - those who live both inside and outside that state. That is the meaning of Israel as a 'Jewish state' or more precisely a 'state of the Jews'. It is quite uniquely a state without a nationality. The dominant nationality is not based on residence, but on the myth of a previous Jewish political presence. The predominant nationality in Israel is based on an imagined ethnicity.

This was made crystal clear in 1972 in *Tamarin v State of Israel*, where the judge stated:

... the desire to create an Israeli nation separate from the Jewish nation is not a legitimate aspiration. A division of the population into Israeli and Jewish nations would ... negate

the foundation on which the state of Israel was established.

The court ruled:

There is no Israeli nation separate from the Jewish people. The Jewish people is composed not only of those residing in Israel, but also of diaspora Jewry.<sup>14</sup>

This decision has more recently been reaffirmed in *Uzi Ornan v State of Israel* 2013. The Israeli state was the creation of the Zionist movement, which consciously saw the state of Israel as the embodiment of its mythical Jewish nation. For a Hebrew nation to exist that nation must, at the minimum, declare itself. It must have a consciousness of itself, yet the supposed Hebrew nation is not a conscious nation. In the Pew Research Centre's 'Israel's religiously divided society' a plurality - 46% - of Israel's Jews saw themselves as Jewish first and Israeli second.<sup>15</sup> The latter corresponds to Moshé's 'Hebrew' nation. Only 35% saw themselves as Israeli first and 20% did not even know. All three religious categories - Haredit, Dati and Masorti - saw themselves as Jewish first. Only secular Jews - Hiloni - saw themselves as Israeli first, by 59% to 20%.

Moshé says that "Obliterating the distinctness of the Hebrew nation was motivated by the need to legitimise the Zionist colonising expansionary project, past and future." I think it is more complicated than that. Zionism has always been predicated on the myth of one Jewish people, of which Israeli Jews are but a component. It was therefore with this in mind that the political separateness of the Israeli-Jewish population was downplayed.

In that sense Israel is unique, because the South Africa whites never considered themselves part of the English or Dutch nation, for example. But the counterpart to this was the conscious eradication of diaspora Jewish language and culture in the *Yishuv* (Jewish community in Palestine). Yiddish, when it was used in a theatre in Tel Aviv in September 1930 with the staging of *Mayn Yidishe mame* ('My Jewish mother') provoked a riot outside of several thousands.<sup>16</sup>

Zionism faced two contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, Jewish Israel could not be cut off from the hinterland, the Jewish diaspora. On the other hand, there was a conscious rejection of the values of *galut* (exile), summed in the foundational idea of the 'negation of the diaspora'.

So how would I describe the Israeli Jews, or Hebrews? They are a settler people, but, being an oppressor group, it has no right to self-determination, either now or in the future. National self-determination means the right to be free from national oppression. What is clear is that what unifies the Israeli Jews or Hebrews is, like other settler groups, their antagonism to 'the other' - in this case the Palestinians. It is those they dispossessed or who exist at the margins of Israeli society - its Arab population - who provide the majority Jewish population with its core identity, albeit as a negative. As Moshé admits, "More than six decades after their state was founded, Israelis still grapple with their identity." Far from being a solidified nation, the Israeli Jews are a people in search of an identity.

That is why if, in a future struggle, Zionism is overthrown, it would be absurd to imagine one could grant the Hebrew population the right to form its own state without rekindling the very ideas of supremacy and struggle that led to the overthrow of Zionism to begin with. In such a scenario, which is admittedly hard to envisage today, such a call would indeed be a reactionary one. If Zionism were overthrown, then Israel's Jews would very likely divide into their politico-religious parts. What holds Israeli Jews together is the Palestinians.

Moshé argues that my refusal to

accept that the Hebrew population in Palestine constitutes a nation must mean that Israel is an exception amongst the exclusionary modes of colonisation. Moshé gave as examples of the latter the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. I would suggest that Canada and New Zealand incorporated the indigenous population rather than excluded them. However, with the exception of New Zealand, where the settlers were unable to defeat the Maoris, all the others decisively defeated the indigenous population, often exterminating them in the process. Clearly in such a situation a settler nation emerged, but again the right to self-determination would be a nonsense, since that nation is not oppressed. South Africa combined exclusion (Bantustan-isation) with exploitation and found it did not work. Indeed it is arguable that an American nation is still a fiction. The mass alienation of its black, former slave, population continues to this day. The existence of groups like Black Lives Matter testifies to the deceit that the American nation constitutes. What does a nation actually mean in such a situation of extreme racial oppression?

What then are the Israeli Jews? It is clear that their ultimate fate is similar to that of the whites of South Africa and the Protestants of Northern Ireland. They are Jewish Palestinians and the Palestinian nation will in consequence be part Arab and part Hebrew.

Moshé argues that a democratic, secular state is a bourgeois liberal idea and therefore should be rejected. No doubt the slogans of liberty, fraternity and equality to which the French Revolution gave birth were equally a product of bourgeois liberalism. However, in the context of the Middle East and Zionism in particular they are revolutionary because they pose a challenge to the existing order of settler colonialism, religious chauvinism and sectarianism. When people in this country ask, as they do, what it is that the Palestinians are fighting for, then it is right to counterpose a secular and democratic state to that of the existing order. Democracy is revolutionary in the context of the Arab countries. The problem of the Arab masses is that they have never had the equivalent of a bourgeois revolution because of the way in which the west has succeeded in freezing the organic development of their society.

## No national conflict

In one sense, of course, the Palestinian Arabs suffer a form of national or group oppression by Israeli-Jewish society, but it is wrong to see the conflict as a national one. It was always a settler-colonial one and the Palestinians were eradicated or expelled as part of the fate of the colonised, as they were in other similar situations. Long before the Palestinians had even coalesced into a recognisable nation they were the subject of the settler-colonial process.

That is why the interpretation of the conflict as one of two clashing nationalities, implying a two-state solution, has been so disastrous. Even were it possible, it would not have been a solution. Partition of Palestine is not and never has been the answer. In that sense the key fight for Palestinians, both on the West Bank and in Israel itself, is for equal rights against the racist regime that subsists. Zionist colonisation was not and never has been primarily a national conflict, but one of settler-colonisation. Whether in the US or Israel, what this meant was the removal, by one means or another, of the indigenous population on a racial, not a national, basis.

Moshé poses his solution on the basis of a hypothetical future situation: viz the existence of a Hebrew people in the future that may experience a form of national oppression. No struggle can be conducted on the basis of a

hypothetical future. If a social and political struggle convulses the whole region, the Israeli-Jewish population may well divide ethnically or politically or indeed religiously. We simply do not know, but if Israel's Jewish population today is only held together by its antagonism to the Palestinians it is not going to unify under such a possible scenario in the future.

Moshé's other argument in favour of a Hebrew nation is that there are tens of thousands of people who are not Jewish, but who are assimilated in Israel's Jewish or Hebrew society. This is true, for example, of the Russian Jews, but also of those converted by non-orthodox rabbis, etc. What is common to these people, however, is that they are predominantly white settlers. All the indications are that their Jewishness will be accepted by various sleights of hand in order that the settler community is not divided.

There are already indications that the orthodox rabbinate's monopoly on conversion is being breached, as is the control of the orthodox rabbis over entrance to the settler community. The *Jerusalem Post* recently reported:

In the latest blow to the religious establishment, the High Court of Justice ruled on Thursday afternoon that non-Israeli nationals who convert in private orthodox rabbinical courts conducted in Israel should be eligible for citizenship under the Law of Return.<sup>17</sup>

It is but a matter of time before the same is accorded to non-orthodox conversions.

One of the ironies of Zionist colonisation is that it created the Palestinian nation from the existing Arab peoples. The other irony is that the settlers themselves, rather than becoming a discrete national group, are themselves, like their white South Africa cousins, non-Arab members of the same national grouping. It is the destiny of the Israeli Jews that they will become Jewish Palestinians with all the rights that attach to such a group ●

## Notes

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11. *The Irish Times* November 29 2008: [www.irishtimes.com/news/sectarianism-and-the-shipyard-1.916936](http://www.irishtimes.com/news/sectarianism-and-the-shipyard-1.916936).
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14. O Kraines *The impossible dilemma: who is a Jew in the state of Israel?* New York 1976, p67.
15. *Tamarin v State of Israel* (1970). Professor Uzi Ornan v State of Israel 2013. 'Supreme Court rejects citizens' request to change nationality from "Jewish" to "Israeli"' *Ha'aretz* October 3 2013: [www.haaretz.com/news/national/.premium-1.550241](http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/.premium-1.550241). T Greenstein, 'Israel's Supreme Court confirms that there is no Israeli nationality': <http://azvsas.blogspot.co.uk/2013/10/israels-supreme-court-confirms-that.html>.
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## REVIEWS

# All form, not much content

Paul Beatty *The Sellout* Oneworld Publications, 2016, pp289, £12.99

Let us hope that the Man-Booker judges were not being condescending when they awarded the 2016 prize to Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*. He would not be pleased if that were the case. Still I am not sure that he was a worthy winner - perhaps it was another bad year for writing?

As a black writer, Beatty adopted a high-risk strategy when he decided to critique his own kith and kin by means of a 'Swiftian' satire, albeit leavened by crude humour (the opposite of political correctness). If you are going to shock your readers, you have to have a clear perspective as well; otherwise the latter will end up being confused and frustrated. That is my reaction anyway. Beatty scatters ideas, mostly taken from a broad spectrum of popular culture, like a radio DJ on speed, the only constant being his frequent use of the f-word and the n-word. He also enjoys doing the intellectual dumbing down thing: "If Stevie had a Latin motto, it'd be *Cogito, ergo Boogieum*. I think, therefore I jam" (p183).

But underneath this ribaldry and the preposterous scenes which he has created, he does manage to raise some serious questions: for instance, how should Afro-Americans define their identity today? The meaning of the latter, of course, is based on a constant struggle for equality and respect against endemic racism and the rule of capital, irrespective of the election of Obama as America's first black president. Should black people react to day-to-day racism and poverty by taking the separatist route? Or should they accept reality - that this is impossible - and try to achieve the same goal via integration? But by what means? The new gospel of political correctness (which dovetails perfectly with the neoliberal agenda)? The trouble with both options, of course, is that they would do little to change the situation in the ghetto (or the hood). They would probably make it worse. Given his privileged, middle class background, and the fact that this is America, Beatty cannot be expected to come up with a socialist solution. But he is in good company here: Bernie Sanders did not do so either!

The plethora of populist images in *The Sellout* are part of the culture industry. They have seeped into the psyche of his black characters after years of watching TV, etc: eg, Bugs Bunny, Betty Boop, Superman, Popeye - even if they are mixed in with black culture too, as with hip-hop movies from the 70s (the fact that they are driven by the corporate mass media is neither here nor there). As a result, his characters appear to confirm Guy Debord's 'society of the spectacle': concretely news/propaganda, advertising and the entertainment industry, which "serves as total justification

for the aims and conditions of the ... system". Along with the internet, it "governs almost all time spent outside the production process itself."<sup>1</sup>

Another problem for Beatty is that he is writing in the age of neoliberalism (Trump or no Trump); therefore the old strategies which he lampoons no longer apply. After having flirted with Keynesianism, the bourgeoisie now prefers to rely on global capital to lower the living standards of the masses (free movement of capital, privatisation, etc) and thereby increase profits. Meanwhile, given their predilection for mass culture, the populace is easily seduced by a 'new' ideology called identity politics. Today emancipation no longer rests on the ideals of 'Liberty, equality and fraternity', but on 'freedom, equality and diversity'! As a result the masses are more atomised than ever. Thus bourgeois society becomes more and more unequal. Last, but not least, neoliberalism, of course, works through the "society of the spectacle".

By focusing on form - an attempted Swiftian satire no less (slave mentality, segregation in reverse: like telling the poor to sell their babies as a food delicacy for the rich) - Beatty makes light of existing reality. Therefore he is in danger of losing the plot. In addition to an overuse of crude humour, he adds a liberal dose of cynicism. This is how he describes the current situation in his prologue:

I stared in awe at the Lincoln Memorial. If honest Abe had come to life ... what would he say? What would he do? Would he break-dance? Would he pitch pennies by the kerbside? Would he read the paper and see if the union he saved is now a dysfunctional plutocracy, that the people he freed were now slaves to rhythm, rap and predatory lending, and that today his skill set would be better suited to the basketball court than the White House? (p4).

Somehow he should have found a way to bring to bring to life the reality of life for millions of Afro-Americans today. It is so bad that now many are less optimistic about the future than their forebears were 50 years ago:

... 42% of black children are educated in high-poverty schools [the highest of all ethnic minority groups] ... the unemployment rate for black high school dropouts is 47%. By comparison, the unemployment rate for white high school dropouts is 26% ... 78% of black Americans live within 30 miles of a coal-fired power plant ... Black mothers are more than twice as likely as white mothers to experience the death of a baby within the first 28 days of life ... 37% of people who are homeless are black ... one in every 13 African-American voters of voting age is disenfranchised because of a felony

conviction, a rate more than four times greater than the rate for the rest of the US population ...<sup>2</sup>

## Badge of honour

'Sellout' - real name Bonbon - is a mixed-up, educated, young black man. He sees the n-word as a badge of honour. He is proud to befriend Hominy, leader of the Little Rascals, a hip-hop group from the 70s - to such an extent that he indulges the old man's plea to be his personal slave:

Been this way ever since we first set foot in this country. Someone's getting whipped or stopped and frisked, whether or not anyone done anything wrong ...

I awoke to Hominy standing in my front yard, shirtless and lashed to the curb side mailbox, demanding that I whip him. I do not know who tied his hands, but I do know that Hominy had tied mine. 'Massa' ... Beat me within an inch of my worthless black life (pp77-78).

The whipping episode will later land Bonbon in serious trouble. Meanwhile he arranges for Hominy to ride a public bus, bedecked with stickers which say, "Seats for whites only", as a birthday treat! On the other hand, Bonbon wants to segregate the city of Dickens, where he grew up (which is threatened with white gentrification) from the rest of Los Angeles county; after which he plans to re-introduce segregation in reverse - 'No whites allowed' - back into the public school system. Black grades will improve as a result, he claims. He and his followers are also worried about the influx of "too many Mexicans".

Bonbon describes the pleasure to be had when he and Hominy erect the sign which is intended to cut Dickens off from the rest of LA:

Hominy and I sat in the breakdown lane appreciating what we had done. The sign was a dead ringer for any of the 'traffic control devices' one sees during the daily commute. It had taken only a few hours, but I felt like Michelangelo staring at the Sistine Chapel after four years of hard labour, like Banksy after spending six days searching the internet for ideas to steal and three minutes of sidewalk vandalism to execute them.

"Massa, signs are powerful things. It almost feels like Dickens exists out there in the smog somewhere."

"Hominy, what feels better, getting whipped or looking at the sign?"

Hominy thought for a moment. "The whip feels good, but the sign feels good in the heart" (p88).

Marpessa is Bonbon's lost love. She is a bus driver. This is where Beatty belatedly recognises that the working class exists; that it is also able to organise in a non-segregated way, in order to defend the interests of everyone (but not without health and safety issues):

Her average workday was filled with fights, purse-snatchings, fare beaters, molestations, public intoxication, child endangerment, pandering, niggers constantly standing on the wrong side of the yellow line while the bus was in motion, and kicking games, to say nothing of the occasional attempted murder. Her union rep said a bus driver in this country is assaulted once every three days ... (pp119-20).

On the other hand, she takes

a regressive step, allowing her No125 bus to provide Hominy with a perverse birthday present:

The wintry day in the segregated state of Alabama, when Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white man, she became known as the "mother of the modern-day civil rights movement". Decades later on, a seasonally indeterminate afternoon in a supposedly unsegregated section of Los Angeles, California, Hominy Jenkins couldn't wait to give up his seat to a white person ...

"Did you get anything good for your birthday?" [asks one of the passengers].

Hominy pointed to the ... signs that lined the front third of the bus: "Priority seating for seniors and disabled, and whites" ...

"That's my birthday present" (pp126-27).

At the same time, Marpessa tells Bonbon what she thinks of him:

You're a sick fuck, and those goddam signs you made have fucking set black people back 500 years....It's the goddam 21st century, people died so I could get this job, and I let your sick ass talk me into driving a segregated bus (p130).

Only she has an inkling of the way forward. But why did she agree to do this?

But Bonbon does not have it all his own way. He is up against a group called the Dum Dum Donut intellectuals (named after a local restaurant where they meet). For them, Bonbon is a sellout, because he is happy with the n-word and believes that black separatism is the way forward, combined with segregation in reverse. Their leader, Foy Cheshire, wants to defend the status quo, as well as banning the n-word and writing cleaned up versions of the classics, starting with Mark Twain (Tom Sawyer now becomes *Tom Soarer*).

Foy Cheshire's faith in the integrationist dream - by means of gradualism - is not much better than Bonbon's direct action; albeit in order to promote his reactionary ideas. This is his answer to the risible argument that blacks were better off under slavery (!):

in the end, the generations of murder, unbearable pain and suffering, mental anguish and rampant disease will be worth it, because some day my great, great, great, great grandson will have Wi-Fi, no matter how slow and intermittent the signal is (p219).

## 'Resegregation'

Beatty's satire here is spot on. But then he spoils his good work with pages and pages of scatterbrain, populist images - as I said, like a DJ on speed. Eventually, however, the story reaches its climax after Bonbon coopts a local principal to introduce his reverse segregation policy to her school ('No whites allowed') "Resegregation," as Bonbon puts it, "was kinda fun" (p224). Why is he such an idiot, one might ask? More cynicism is the answer. Liberals like Foy were

directly responsible for getting a black man elected president and nothing changed ... last week a nigger won \$75,000 on Teen Jeopardy and nothing changed ... in fact things have gotten worse. [We've even got] white boys working in the car wash (p260).

Beatty now resorts to a mockumentary-style re-enactment of the drama at Little Rock High School, Alabama back in the

50s. But instead of five black students, now it is white students who have to be bussed into Dickens under police protection, in order to desegregate the offending school, whose policy is 'No whites allowed'! Foy and his Dum Dum Donut intellectuals organise a public protest in support of the police, singing 'We shall overcome'. He also has a paint-ball gun, filled with white paint to spray on Bonbon and his supporters. Then he shoots him with a real gun, but not fatally. While he is being treated by medics, Hominy blurts out that Bonbon is his "massa". So the police charge him with "involuntary servitude", which Bonbon vigorously opposes. To make a long story short, he takes it all the way to the Supreme Court (the citadel of "constitutional pornography"). The whole country watches "me versus the United States of America" on TV, etc.

The case boils down to a discussion of 'What is blackness?' Bonbon's attorney introduces a stages theory of black identity, which is as much obscurantist as it is postmodern:

1. He/she wants to be anything but black: eg, Michael Jordan's shilling for Nike; Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice lying through their teeth about Saddam's WMD.

2. "Heightened awareness of race", "blackness personified", "whiteness reviled", "black supremacy" (p275).

3. Blackness means "race transcendentalism", a "collective consciousness that fights oppression and seeks serenity" (p276). The examples of Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman and Sitting Bull are given. ("Fuck it, I'm out," says Bonbon.)

4. "Unmitigated blackness" (p277): eg, Abbey Lincoln, Marcus Garvey, Charlie Parker and Bjork. (NB: recently a white American woman 'self-identified' as 'black'. Stick that in your pipe and smoke it, Bonbon!)

Bonbon retires to smoke some good weed. I will leave it there, but suffice to say that on the very last page of the book, entitled 'Closure', Beatty offers a glimmer of understanding, that disintegration and regression cannot possibly offer a way forward:

I remember the day after the black dude was inaugurated, Foy Cheshire proud as punch, driving around town in his coupe, honking his horn and waving his American flag ...

"Why are you waving the flag?" I ask him. "Why now? I've never seen you wave it before."

He said that he felt like the country, the United States of America, had finally paid off its debts.

"And what about the native Americans? What about the Chinese, the Japanese, the Mexicans, the poor, the forests, the water, the air, the fucking Californian condor? When do they collect?" I asked him (p289).

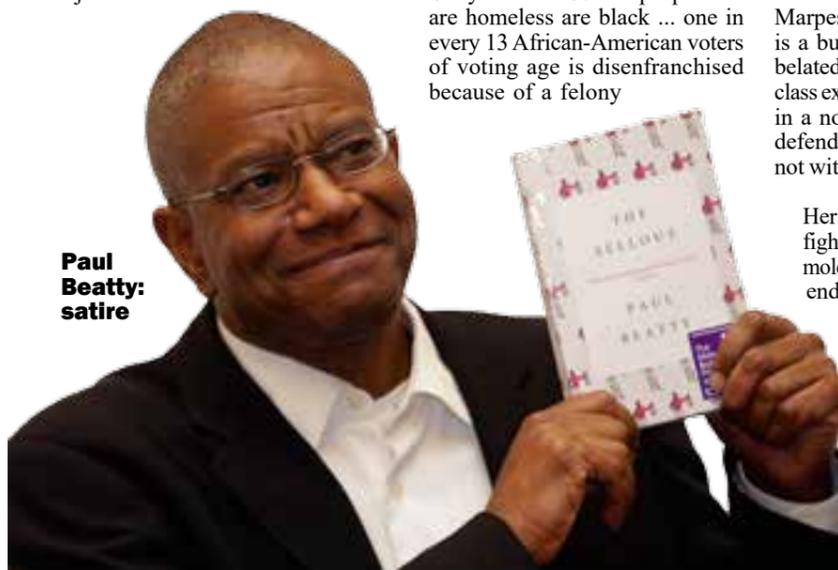
Beatty must be delighted that the critics have compared his novel to Swift's *Modest proposal*. But I think this has more to do with media hype (just look at the blurb on the outside and inside pages - talk about hard sell!). For me, *The Sellout* is all form and not much content. On the one hand, his 'biting' satire is diluted by an endless stream of crude humour, much of it gratuitous, as well as mixing consumerist culture with high culture - so postmodern!

On the other, it glosses over the reality of what it must be like to be black and poor in the United States today ●

Max Grierson

## Notes

1. G Debord *The society of the spectacle* Cambridge MA 1995, p13.
2. www.alternet.org/books/25-statistics-paint-picture-black-america.



Paul Beatty: satire

# 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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Ken Livingstone: decent bloke

# You still can't say it

Ken Livingstone *You can't say that: memoirs* Faber, 2011, pp710, £9.99

The ruling strata in our country have a time-honoured way of dealing with leftwing critics who speak unpalatable truths or make unconscionable proposals - they heap derision upon them. Nothing they can do is ever right. Vilification continues until the threat is extinguished. This treatment has been meted out, over the years, to Aneurin Bevan, Konni Zilliacus, Arthur Scargill, Tony Benn, Ken Livingstone and Jeremy Corbyn - and the two last-named continue to receive it.

It is thus neatly ironic that Ken Livingstone's memoirs, which he brought out in 2011, are entitled *You can't say that*. The title apparently arose out of an incident that occurred while Neil Kinnock was leading the Labour Party. Livingstone reports:

At my first meeting on the NEC we reviewed polling data about why we had done so badly at the polls, but unbeknown to committee members

all the results relating to Kinnock's poor polling figures were withheld. I worried that the sniffy attitude of the media towards Kinnock reflected a long-standing prejudice against the Welsh, but even in Wales I found many local members saw Kinnock as an embarrassment

Most Labour MPs feared we couldn't win with Kinnock, but out of loyalty or ambition wouldn't do anything about it. At a Tribune meeting I said we needed to talk about the standing of the leader, but they wouldn't discuss the matter and, as we left the room, Clare Short said, "I agree with you, but you just can't say things like that."

The first time I raised it at an NEC meeting Kinnock wasn't present and I was told there was no point in going down that road. The second time I raised it Kinnock was present, but this time I was shouted down by Blunkett, who blustered that what I was saying was outrageous. I

found it bizarre that everybody knew Kinnock was a hindrance to winning the next election, but no-one was prepared to act, even though that meant another five years of Tory government (pp304-05).

*Weekly Worker* readers will be pleased to hear that the book is peppered with anecdotes of this kind. Another example:

... during the late 1950s and early 1960s all new Labour candidates were vetted by MI5, who then reported to Labour's deputy leader, George Brown, and national agent Sarah Barker in a London restaurant whether the candidate might be a threat to national security... This secret vetting stopped after the 1966 election, but helps explain why most Labour MPs were so moderate (pp102-03).

And another example:

The home secretary was responsible for the Metropolitan Police, but this 'oversight' was carried out by just one civil servant, with the result that effectively the Met were a law unto themselves (p176).

Dear me, Knacker of the Yard will not have liked that one! There is more, but I won't reveal all, as I don't want to spoil things for those who haven't read the book. However, I can't resist this one:

I knew that if nuclear war was imminent the queen would sign an order suspending democracy and as leader of the GLC I could choose two other members and the three of us would be whisked to safety in a bunker in Essex along with the cabinet and royal family. There, I was to give 'advice' to the military commander administering London under martial law (p214. See also p215).

The book includes a section on the historical relations between the German Nazis and the Zionists, with references to Lenni Brenner's volume *Zionism in the age of the dictators*. It is worth noting that Ken writes: "... the Labour Zionists cannot be blamed for not anticipating that Nazism would become the greatest evil in human history" (p222; for all the relevant text see pp219-23).

Another passage where Ken shows his objectivity is about the Falklands/Malvinas conflict in 1983:

Although the media claimed

Thatcher's re-election was a result of the Falklands war, the polls showed support for her government had started to increase before then, as Britain emerged from recession. I was appalled that so many young men lost their lives over the Falklands and believed the dispute should have been referred to the International Court. Thatcher knew she had no chance of winning such a case, given Britain's illegal seizure of these islands, while people of Latin America were winning their independence from Spain, so she ordered the sinking of the *Belgrano* to sabotage the efforts of the US government to reach a diplomatic settlement (p231).

There is quite a lot of 'inside dope' on Tony Blair and the 'Millbank Tendency', as Livingstone christened them. There is also some amusing coverage of Ken's election as mayor of London. His pugnacity is shown by the fact that he resigned his parliamentary seat at Brent East on becoming mayor, but warned the Labour Party that he would stand as an independent MP if they tried to impose a 'Millbank' candidate on the local party (pp426-27). He also records one success achieved by him as mayor - an increase in bus passenger numbers of 50% (with a parallel decline in car usage - p551). He also usefully quotes Albert Camus (via Bobby Kennedy) to the effect that "I should like to be able to love my country and still love justice" (p591).

Tony Blair's fabled capacity for winning elections takes a knocking on p665 - readers are referred to a book by Robert Worcester entitled *Explaining Labour's landslide*.

Last, but not least, Livingstone records an encounter while canvassing, in which

One young man said he would only vote for me if I agreed to support Israel, right or wrong. As I wouldn't ask anyone to support me, right or wrong, I declined (p134).

All of which goes to show that, from these memoirs at least, Ken appears a thoroughly decent man, despite not being a zealous Labour loyalist right or wrong - or, in other words, to use the phrase coined by the one-time political commentator, Alan Watkins, not being a "paid-up member of Thigmoo" (This Great Movement Of Ours) ●

Chris Gray

## Fighting fund

# Taking us for granted?

The *Weekly Worker* chalked up exactly 3,000 online readers last week, but only one in a thousand of them made a donation to our fighting fund. That's right - three comrades. But that's about the going rate unfortunately. While, of course, by no means all of those 3,000 will be supporters or even sympathisers, it's still a very small proportion indeed.

I think the problem is that many of the comrades who read us regularly tend to take us for granted: they appreciate the ideas we provide and the arguments we make, but that's only what they expect of us. So it doesn't occur to them that we rely on the financial support of comrades exactly like them. This week there were donations via PayPal from FU (£15), JK and WP (£10 each), but that's about it.

There was also a nice cheque for £50 donated by comrade SD, who writes: "Brilliant coverage

of Livingstone!" That's what we like to hear. Finally there were four standing orders totalling £185 - MM's usual extremely generous £75, plus £50 from TB, £40 from TR and £20 from KB. So all that adds up to £270 and takes our running total for April to £837.

Well, I hate to say this, but we're way behind where we need to be at this time of the month. Our target is £1,750, so we're less than halfway there with only a third of April ahead of us. In other words, a bit of acceleration is called for!

Can you help? Were you among the 3,000 last week? How about clicking on that PayPal button?! We need you to translate your support into hard cash. ●

Robbie Rix

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

# weekly WORKER

**New possibilities  
for popular  
opposition**

## 'No' - it's not over yet!

The AKP government is in crisis following the rigged referendum. **Esen Uslu** reports

The shambles that followed the April 16 referendum to amend the constitution confirmed the widely held expectations of the left: president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) failed to gain sufficient support for the amendments giving the president huge powers, and have resorted to wide-scale voting fraud.

Final opinion polls before voting had 'no' on 55% with an error of plus or minus 3%. But the declared results had 'yes' on 51%, with a majority of 1,300,000 votes out of more than 48 million. However, it is estimated that the number of 'yes' votes said to be stuffed irregularly into the ballot boxes amounted to 2,500,000.

The body chosen to provide the result with a thin veil of legitimacy was the Supreme Electoral Council, which oversees all electoral procedures. It consists of seven principal and four alternate judges elected from among members of Supreme Court of Appeals and Supreme Court of Administrative Law. Each ballot box was supposed to be overseen by nominees from four political parties working under a "man of good repute".

The votes are tallied after the voting has closed in the presence of representatives of the political parties, and both valid and invalid votes are recorded. Nowadays, almost all party representatives take a photo of these returns with their mobile phones and send it to their party headquarters, where special teams tally the returned votes and follow up the procedures to ensure that the correct results are entered into the central computers.

This elaborate and cumbersome system is a nightmare in general elections, where many parties and candidates are on the ballot. Many aspects of tallying, returns and computer results are disputed and it sometimes takes weeks or even months to settle all of them. But it was claimed the system would work much more efficiently in a simple 'yes' or 'no' referendum.

### Fraud gates opened

However, with political power concentrated in the hands of the few, and with the blissful ignorance - or cooperation - of the state, the system is open to all kinds of abuse. Electoral fraud has always been a problem, but since the 1946 general election, widespread electoral fraud has not been attempted. In that year, despite huge support the opposition was brutally suppressed and allocated only a handful of seats in parliament. There was no judicial oversight and, while voting was open, counting was done in secret.

And now Erdoğan, armed with emergency powers, has overseen a similar scenario. This time, however, judicial oversight was turned into a mockery by the eight justices appointed by the high courts in the aftermath of the botched military intervention of July 15 2016. Under the pretext of getting rid of secret members of the Islamist Gülen movement said



**Celebrating amid the fraud**

to be entrenched in state institutions, oversight was severely hampered.

Today the independence and impartiality of the judiciary is practically non-existent in Turkey, and this is reflected in the Supreme Electoral Council, which made highly controversial decisions on the hoof. Despite the presence of a clear rule to the contrary in the electoral law, the council decided during counting that unstamped ballot papers were to be deemed valid. There was no need to count them and record them separately. This meant that virtually anything stuffed into the ballot box was deemed a valid vote and in fact more than 1,200 ballot boxes recorded *only* 'yes' votes without a single exception. Around 7,000 ballot boxes contained votes which equalled or even exceeded the number of registered voters and more than 60% of them recorded a 'yes'.

While the electoral roll is supposed to be signed by the person casting their vote, in many instances it carried an identical signature for all voters! In some centres unstamped ballot papers were stamped retrospectively during counting and objections from the electoral observers were ignored.

As you might expect, such a massive fraud has created a huge backlash. Amid the hullabaloo it became apparent that the Supreme Electoral Council had used

the correct procedures for ballots cast abroad, and declared many unstamped ballots to be invalid in countries where the 'no' vote was high. These shameless double standards also resulted in the gross violation of electoral law in Kurdistan. The social media is full of photos and videos depicting armed men - mostly the infamous 'village protectors' - brandishing their weapons outside balloting centres and claiming wipe-out 'yes' votes from among 'their own' electoral districts.

There are also many instances of "erroneous data entry" in regard to the inputting of the returns into the central computer system. Sometimes the figures for 'no' and 'yes' votes were transposed!

### Pots and pans in unison

The main opposition People's Republican Party (CHP) stated that it did not accept the results as valid, and that the extent of the fraud and subsequent cover-up was so widespread that recounting was virtually ruled out. CHP representatives lodged objections at more than 600 balloting centres and the party demanded that the results be declared null and void. Thousands of citizens have been attempting to lodge individual objections and there have been long queues outside

provincial electoral council offices.

In several cities there have been large protest marches - welcomed by the banging of pots and pans from balconies or windows as they passed. This new movement could grow rapidly, provided the different sections of the opposition can act unitedly. During the campaign the left supported the slogan "#No" and now the new slogan on the streets is "#No - it's not over yet!"

The final 'verified' outcome of the referendum will be declared in two to three weeks, but it will not be easy to get the population to accept it. Provided the parliamentary opposition is prepared to go all the way, there are quite important avenues open to it to overturn the result, but if it fails to do so the popular opposition will certainly attempt to force the state to rescind the referendum. The coming days will see a combination of legal battles and mass protests.

### New possibilities

Meanwhile, more than 290 Kurdish prisoners are on hunger strike. The initial group has now reached its 60th day, which means that Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome is likely to set in, leaving permanent damage to the nervous system. However, the authorities are refusing to allow them vitamin B supplements.

In addition, 13 Kurdish MPs, together with dozens of writers, authors and journalists, are still in detention. And virtually the first thing the government did after the referendum was to propose a three-month extension of its brutal emergency rule - the docile parliament rubber-stamped it before going into recess.

But the AKP government is shell-shocked. Despite the coalition formed with the racist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), it is apparent that it cannot win a democratic election. So in the run-up to the 2019 mandatory election it will try to soldier on, looking for opportunities to win back popular support.

The AKP's nationalist-Islamist rhetoric has forced it into a corner - it can no longer hope for support from the European Union. The threat to bring back the death penalty was intended to draw in support from the most backward masses, but it has also resulted in further isolation in the international arena. The only friends Erdoğan still has are in the reactionary regimes of the Gulf.

This situation opens up new possibilities for the popular opposition in Turkey. Will we be able to use it to advance our cause, or will it end in despair? Only time - and struggle - will tell ●

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