

# weekly **worker**



**Talking About Socialism and  
CPGB: perhaps imitation is  
the sincerest form of flattery**

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Towards a mass Communist Party

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# What you need to know about Hamas and going beyond



## LETTERS



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

## Hamas empathy

Having read Moshé Machover's piece, 'Oppression breeds resistance' (October 12), I was left with a bad taste in my mouth.

Why on earth is Hamas described as a "deeply reactionary" organisation? It feels like Machover has swallowed Israeli *hasbara*; he thinks himself Jewish and so appears to be allowing Zionist propaganda to pollute his mind. He ought to read *Hamas* by Khaled Hroub or *Hamas: unwritten chapters* by Azzam Tamimi before next he puts pen to paper on this matter.

He also ought to spend time with Muslims, as I have. I spent six months in Muslim countries and can count many Muslims as friends, and it depresses me when a newspaper like the *Weekly Worker* stoops to parroting our depraved media. The word 'reactionary' means "opposing political or social progress or reform" and the fact that the *Weekly Worker* sees Hamas in these terms is to fundamentally misunderstand why it exists. It does not exist in order to reform Muslim life; its name is an acronym of *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya*, which means 'Islamic Resistance Movement'. It draws its strength and philosophy from Islam - a subject which Machover appears to know little about.

That is unfortunate. Once you have lived amongst Muslims, you begin to appreciate the fundamentally peaceful nature of their religion. Note they sheltered Jews for 1,400 years from Christian attacks before the rise of Zionism and nowadays happily accommodate Christians - Jesus is one of their prophets, after all. Muslims were building hospitals and universities and inventing algebra in the 9th century, whilst we were in the dark ages, brutally slaughtering one another, as our warlords wrestled for power in Europe.

Arabic life is conservative - but with a small 'c' - they do not approve of public displays of affection between men and women; they frown upon displays of the flesh - this is common to most religious movements. But does Hamas "oppose political or social progress or reform"? By its very existence it aims for political progress; it works along lines that we in the west can barely fathom - so poor is our understanding of Islam.

I myself am atheist, but if I were to choose to get a religion I would choose Islam - it is a deeply reflective, humanistic movement. Most Muslims deplored Isis - and don't forget that Islamic State does not like Hamas. One of Hamas's main crimes, Islamic State argues, is its participation in Palestinian elections, which Islamic State views as putting man-made law above god's law. This ought to indicate to Machover that Hamas are committed to democracy. He ought to be also promoting their most recent communiqué of 2017, where they make clear their commitment to abide by the democratic will of a new Palestine - one that includes their oppressors, on the understanding that they cease their Zionist aspirations.

The nonsense that Biden and the media spread about beheading babies has been completely debunked; the brave Hamas fighters have been demonised by Israel and its friends. Why the western world continues to accept Zionist *hasbara* is a reflection of the Islamophobia which runs deep; after the example of how the Israelis

denied responsibility for killing US citizen Shireen Abu Aqla, one would have hoped that Israeli claims of being the perpetual victim (she was "armed" with a camera, wasn't she?) were running thin. However, Biden and the west are only too happy to play to the Zionist lobby's tune. The western world is deep in the grip of admiration of a racist colony intent on expansion, appalled at the loss of Israeli life, but far less so at Palestinian slaughter. Unfortunately, Machover seems to have absorbed some of these Islamophobic attitudes in condemning Hamas as "reactionary".

I was hoping for a more enlightened view on Hamas from the *Weekly Worker*; this is a resistance movement that has grown out of community work, after all - its origins lie in promoting childcare, education, community facilities; its disgust at corruption is why it was so popular and why it won the last Palestinian elections of 2006. It repeatedly asks for fresh elections, which Fatah refuse to allow - because, if they were held, Abbas knows Hamas would win all over again. Hamas refuses to recognise Israel and is committed to dismantling it - they see it as the Zionist entity, which it most surely is. This is what distinguishes it from Fatah. Any sane person should join with them in condemning Zionism as a supremacist, racist movement and calling for its end.

One final point: whilst we were horrified that Hamas killed civilians, one ought to remember that every Israeli 'Jew' except for the highly Orthodox Jews is a 'reservist' - every such Israeli, male and female, is there to fight to preserve their racist colony. All are therefore enemy combatants. And this is war.

It would be great if the *Weekly Worker* could show more empathy to Hamas and less snootiness in condemning them - presumably for not being Marxists.

**Pete Gregson**  
One Democratic Palestine

## Fascist crime

Hamas invaded Israel and killed civilians. This is a fascist crime. But why did they attack Israel in the first place? After all, Hamas could not fail to understand that the forces are not equal, Hamas had to be defeated. It has only 45,000 fighters against 130,000 Israeli soldiers, and no aviation, decent artillery or armoured vehicles. Israel responded in kind, killing civilians in the Gaza Strip, including children. That is, it also committed a fascist crime.

The world is divided into two parts: one half denounces the fact that the bloodthirsty and insidious Hamas treacherously attacked poor Jews, who are all victims of the holocaust: they are god-chosen and listed in the *Red Book*, and the whole world owes them at least for World War II, and even for ancient centuries. Another part of the world is denouncing the fact that Israel has killed civilians. Powerful demonstrations in support of Palestine have taken place in the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, the UK and even the USA. Rallies in support of Palestine were held in France and Germany, where the authorities banned such rallies. 98% of the Chinese population is on the side of Palestine. Beijing called Israel's actions disproportionate and called on Tel Aviv to stop the collective punishment of residents of the Gaza Strip.

Meanwhile, moronic, exalted leftists are screaming that the people of Palestine have rebelled against Israeli oppression. Absurd - nothing like that has taken place! Today numerous morons in the

USA are screaming in the streets, "Intifada! Revolution!" In the same way, the cretins from Black Lives Matter screamed about the rights of blacks, who have nothing to do with Marxism or the movement against racism - they are just servants of the US Democratic Party.

Hamas was created in 1987 as part of the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood organisation, which is funded and controlled by the CIA. At the time of its creation, Hamas was funded by the UK. It was supported by the Israeli secret services in order to weaken Yasser Arafat's Fatah. Former US Congressman Ron Paul noted that Hamas was created by the Israeli government in order to oppose Yasser Arafat and a former Israeli expert on interaction with the Arab population, Colonel David Hakam, noted that Israel's support for extremists like Yassin is an original sin - but then no-one thought about the consequences.

The modern patrons of Hamas are Turkey and Qatar, not Iran! And here's what the White House Strategic Communications coordinator John Kirby is lying about: "We must honestly admit the fact that Iran is certainly involved in this. They have been supporting Hamas for many years, training them and funding them. There is no doubt that they are state sponsors of terrorist groups like Hamas."

Kirby is lying, because Iranians are Shi'ites and Hamas is a Sunni movement. Iran's goal is the lifting of sanctions, the development of nuclear energy, the suppression of protests in Balochistan - but not the liberation of the Gaza Strip. The United States finds Iran guilty in the same way as it previously did with Osama bin Laden, who had nothing to do with September 11.

Hezbollah did not enter the war after the Israeli attack on the Gaza Strip - it did not even react to the killing of children by Israel Defence Force bombers. Hezbollah did not seek to support Hamas. However, Tel Aviv did everything to draw Hezbollah into the war. Israeli planes bombed Hezbollah strongholds in Lebanon - a completely different country, unrelated to Hamas. Why? In the hope that Iran will support Hezbollah, and then the United States will at least threaten to attack Iran.

In response, Lebanese Hezbollah fired at Israeli positions in the north of the country. In addition, the Israeli army has hit the airport in Aleppo in Syria several times in order to further embitter Hezbollah. And Tehran, which stresses that it does not want to take part in the conflict, has already promised that if Israel launches a ground operation in the Gaza Strip, Iran will be forced to intervene. For Netanyahu, all this is extremely beneficial - the protesting demonstrators have left the streets. For Israel, the destruction of the Gaza Strip is extremely beneficial - Israel thereby gets its hands on the gas shelf.

For the American Democrats, this is also extremely beneficial, in view of the crisis in the US government system. Washington and Tel Aviv want to kill at least three birds with one stone. Tel Aviv and the United States did not care how ordinary citizens in different countries of the world would react to the fact that Israelis are killing not just peaceful Arabs, but their children.

The failure of Mossad, Shabak and the IDF looks too suspicious. Secondly, two US aircraft carriers went to the shores of Israel. It is impossible to quickly assemble an aircraft carrier group, but the first

group went immediately! That is, it was ready in advance, before the Hamas attack. Thirdly, the tactics of Hamas this time were very different: they were rather the tactics of Isis.

Israel's budget for 2024, which was announced long before the Hamas attack, includes financing the construction of the Third Jerusalem Temple on the site of the Al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount. This construction involves the preliminary demolition of this third most important shrine of the Muslim world. That is, it assumes control over this territory by Israel, which is what the Hamas attack serves.

This is another fact in favour of the argument that the successful Hamas attack on Israel was planned by Tel Aviv - with the support of Washington.

**Roland Laycock**  
email

## Iran link

I hope the Israeli-Hamas conflict isn't going to be used as a justification to attack Iran, which has been linked to the Hamas offensive.

There's already mainstream news calling the recent aggression 'Israel's 9/11'. Disinformation was circulated at the time of 9/11, linking Saddam Hussein to al Qa'eda to justify the attack on Iraq. It was generally acknowledged some years later that there were no such links, but that didn't fit the narrative at the time. We'll see how well the BBC's disinformation team process these claims against Iran, albeit with cognisance of past government practice: it's whether they'll be a sounding box for established power and state propaganda, or whether they'll objectively report the issue.

The allegations that Iran helped plan the attack and supplied weapons to Hamas is one issue; whether it justifies a Nato attack on Iran, with the resulting death toll and destruction, is another. It's whether the issue will be put into its proper context (which 'weapons of mass destruction' never was). Weapons sales are endemic around the world. Believe it or not, the UK supplies weapons and military training to less than salubrious countries - Turkey

and Saudi Arabia, for example. These states are hardly beacons of freedom and liberal democracy in the world. As for the USA ... well, I mean, who doesn't the USA supply arms to? Which military dictatorships has the USA not supported?

**Louis Shawcross**  
Hillsborough

## Not an ally?

On Israel and Palestine, most people in Britain are indifferent, many others are profoundly ambivalent, and most of the rest again are strongly pro-Palestinian. Yet almost all politicians, and the entire media, belong to a tiny fourth faction: the fiercely Zionist, which barely featured until there was a prime minister whose constituency happened to have a wildly untypical ethnic profile, but which did not become dominant even under her. That dominance arose in a window of perhaps half a generation - between the retirements of the British mandate veterans and the emergence of the mass anti-war movement.

Israel is not a British ally, yet we are expected to make its (often undeniably unpleasant) enemies our own. Israel armed Argentina during the Falklands war, yet its ambassador to London accompanies our foreign secretary when he visits her country. No-one else gets that treatment, and if it were to cause bombs to go off in Britain, well, somehow that would prove that it had been right all along.

'Not just today, not just tomorrow, but always' is not the stuff of grown-up relations with *any* foreign state. None, including Israel, would say such a thing about Britain. Nor should it.

**David Lindsay**  
Lanchester

## Grotesque

In a mixture of jibing hubris and sickly smugness, Benjamin Netanyahu announced to the Israeli population that his regime - one freshly unified in the 'national interest' - will be continuing its onslaught upon its "enemies" in Gaza and amongst the West Bank Palestinians. Evidence, if ever it were needed, that neither he personally nor the variously ranged

## Online Communist Forum



Sunday October 22 5pm

**A week in politics - political report from CPGB's Provisional Central Committee and discussion**

Use this link to join meeting:  
[communistparty.co.uk/ocf-register](http://communistparty.co.uk/ocf-register)

Organised by CPGB: [communistparty.co.uk](http://communistparty.co.uk) and  
Labour Party Marxists: [www.labourpartymarxists.org.uk](http://www.labourpartymarxists.org.uk)  
For further information, email Stan Keable at  
[Secretary@labourpartymarxists.org.uk](mailto:Secretary@labourpartymarxists.org.uk)

A selection of previous Online Communist Forum talks can be viewed at: [youtube.com/c/CommunistPartyofGreatBritain](https://youtube.com/c/CommunistPartyofGreatBritain)

Zionist elites within Israel as a whole recognise or understand how 'actions create reaction'.

In this specific scenario and current outbreak of capitalistic barbarism and undiluted bestiality, seemingly with no awareness anywhere whatsoever in the soul of these creatures, they're provoking (indeed, nigh-on guaranteeing) a bringing down upon their heads of the very forces of anti-Semitic hatred and persecution they purport to be defending against. A memory held, both from Nazi days and far longer past history, that all Jews with entire and profound justification dread to see a repeat of.

Maybe all that can be said in communistically enlightened recognition is this: it's bizarre times that humankind is experiencing. In fact, surely more: these are times and a world that are corroded, diseased, hybridised fascist/dystopian - immeasurably beyond grotesque!

**Bruno Kretzschmar**  
email

## More bunk

Comrade Andrew Northall continues to fail to address the issues I have raised. This may be because he is afraid of criticism of Marx. He writes that I am confused and get "into a terrible tangle trying to prove that the concept of 'dictatorship' within Marxism is somehow opposed to the achievement of true democracy for the working class". But I have never argued that the concept of dictatorship in Marxism is opposed to the achievement of true democracy for the working class. I am also aware that Marx meant working class power when he used the term, 'dictatorship of the proletariat'.

Nor did I argue that Marx's use of the term meant that he was anti-democratic. What I am arguing is that it was wrong because he used an anti-democratic term to refer to the democratic rule of the working class. Marx was wrong to adopt Blanqui's terminology. Anyone who uses an anti-democratic term to describe democratic rule is wrong.

It is necessary to understand that the working class is not the only class who wants socialism. A

section of the petty bourgeois strata also support socialism. Also, in the *Communist manifesto* of 1848, Marx points out how a section of the old ruling class sides with the revolution. It is primarily these bourgeois elements who describe socialist rule as a dictatorship. They use the term as a cover for their own bureaucratic rule. They turn the rule of the working class into the bureaucratic rule of the bourgeoisie, as Mao was right to point out.

To describe the democratic rule of the working class as a 'dictatorship' is wrong theoretically, politically, strategically and morally, and gives 'liberal capitalism' an important ideological weapon to fight socialism. The term is not used in the *Communist manifesto*. It was Lenin who turned it into the essence of Marxism, but, even if Marx regarded it as the essence of the struggle for socialism, it would still be wrong to use this term. If dictatorship means a suspension of democracy, rule untrammelled by law, how can it be used for socialist rule?

This is not an issue that I am raising with comrade Northall alone. I am addressing this issue to the international communist movement. The question is: should we be talking about working class dictatorship, or the democratic rule of the working class - in other words, democratic socialism?

Andrew says he suspects I am opposed to the concept of working class rule, of the political and economic power of the working class - socialism. The very opposite is the case. What history has shown is that there are two main tendencies on the left: those who represent democratic socialism and those who represent bureaucratic socialism. The class basis of this is the contradiction between the working class and the bourgeois strata. But it is important to point out that this contradiction is not an antagonistic contradiction, but a non-antagonistic contradiction which can be resolved on the basis of socialism.

Andrew says that socialism was built in the Soviet Union, but he fails to see that this wasn't democratic, but bureaucratic socialism. A

bureaucracy taking over after a socialist revolution is an inevitable process without democratic socialism. And it can still happen with democratic socialism as well. But at least in the latter case workers and others will have the right to criticise and control it. Where Trotsky went wrong wasn't criticising bureaucracy when he lost power. Even Lenin and Stalin criticised bureaucracy without developing a theory about it. Stalin's response to Trotsky's book, *The revolution betrayed*, warning that bureaucratic rule would lead to the restoration of capitalism, was to launch a purge against the bureaucracy in the 1930s. Trotsky's mistake was claiming that the bureaucracy coming to power resulted from backwardness and that a political revolution was needed to remove it.

Andrew rejects the argument that Trotsky began to move towards democratic socialism after he lost power. But the fact that he started to adopt a more democratic approach after being defeated is undeniable, based on the literary evidence.

Another point is that, since there is no classless democracy, the concept of democratic socialism must refer to working class rule, unlike those who support bureaucratic socialism. Andrew points to the necessity of dictatorship during the Russian civil war when the Bolsheviks had to fight off 14 armies from the imperialist powers. But I have constantly pointed out that dictatorship may be necessary in an emergency situation. What I oppose is dictatorship as a principle in the way it is presented by Leninism. Lenin began his actual transition to totalitarianism not during the civil war, but after, when he banned factions in the party.

Andrew argues that a sovereign power can't be constrained by any law, because the sovereign power makes the law. So we are back to feudalism. If a sovereign power can't be constrained by law, what is the use of a constitution? Oblivious to the collapse of Marxism-Leninism in the former Soviet Union, he resorts to dogma and accuses me of having a reformist approach. He totally rejects Trotsky rather than having a critical approach. He is unable to see that Trotsky wasn't all wrong or all right and that this applies to Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao.

There is no point in arguing with Andrew about the Moscow trials. Those who claim to have uncovered the evidence against the accused were themselves later shot. Besides, similar accusations were made against Lenin and the Bolshevik Party by the Kerensky government. On the basis of fiction, Andrew condones the most severe punishment for Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin and Trotsky: execution. Andrew can uncritically support the Stalinist narrative if he wants to, but this doesn't make it true. Khrushchev would know what I mean.

Until he recognises that it was bureaucratic rather than democratic socialism that was built in the former Soviet Union, Andrew will fail to understand the real reason for its collapse, rooted in Leninist totalitarianism. The collapse was brought about not by Gorbachev, but by the coup attempt of the pro-bureaucratic, conservative elements within the Communist Party.

The last point is that Andrew misrepresents my take on the energy crisis. I am not arguing that the energy crisis will automatically lead to the collapse of capitalism. I argue that, if a *suitable replacement* for cheap oil is not found, the energy crisis will lead to the collapse of capitalism.

**Tony Clark**  
For Democratic Socialism

# ACTION

## Take action on empty homes

**Friday October 20, 3pm:** Protest, assemble outside ministry of justice, 102 Petty France, London SW1. Followed by a sleep-out to highlight the scale of homelessness. Demand the MoJ leases 28 empty ex-prison flats to Islington Council for families in need, as already agreed! Bring your sleeping bag. Organised by Islington Homes for All: [www.facebook.com/IslingtonKillTheHousingBill](http://www.facebook.com/IslingtonKillTheHousingBill).

## Middle East on fire: how can Palestine be free?

**Friday October 20, 6.30pm:** Public meeting, Indian YMCA, 30 Fitzroy Street, London W1. Israel's assault on Gaza has already killed thousands of Palestinians and could become a second Nakba. Speakers include Tariq Ali, Laura Pidcock and John Rees. Registration free. Organised by Counterfire: [www.facebook.com/events/649529000655875](http://www.facebook.com/events/649529000655875).

## Stop the war on Gaza

**Saturday October 21, 12 noon:** National demonstration. Assemble Marble Arch, London W1. March in solidarity with Palestine and demand an end to the brutal bombardment of Gaza. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign and Stop the War Coalition: [www.facebook.com/events/1717095438714151](http://www.facebook.com/events/1717095438714151).

## Protest the BBC - complicit in Gaza genocide

**Saturday October 21, 1pm:** Protest outside the BBC, MediaCityUK, Broadway, Salford M50. The BBC is guilty of spreading lies, promoting Zionist propaganda and dehumanising Palestinians. Organised by Manchester Palestine Solidarity Campaign: [www.facebook.com/events/686122456562106](http://www.facebook.com/events/686122456562106).

## What it means to be human

**Tuesday October 24, 6.30pm:** Talks on social and biological anthropology. Daryll Forde seminar room, Anthropology Building, 14 Taviton Street, off Gordon Square, London WC1, and online. This meeting: 'On the human revolution'. Speaker: Camilla Power. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: [www.facebook.com/events/807768621029326](http://www.facebook.com/events/807768621029326).

## The current stage of the capitalist crisis

**Wednesday October 25, 7pm:** Online and onsite lecture, Marx Memorial Library, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1. Speaker Michael Roberts will analyse the current phase of the world capitalist crisis and Britain's place within it. Admission £5 (£3). Organised by Marx Memorial Library: [www.marx-memorial-library.org.uk/event/439](http://www.marx-memorial-library.org.uk/event/439).

## Reform, revolution and opportunism

**Thursday October 26, 10pm:** Online book launch. *Reform, revolution and opportunism* is a collection of debates at congresses of the Second International (1889-1914), edited by Mike Taber. Additional speakers: David McNally, Anne McShane and Tom Alter. Organised by Haymarket Books: [www.facebook.com/mike.taber.315](http://www.facebook.com/mike.taber.315).

## Latin America solidarity day

**Saturday October 28, 10am to 4pm:** Speakers, films, music and information, Unison Regional Office, 24 Livery Street, Birmingham B3. Briefings on Cuba, Nicaragua, Chile and Bolivia. Free admission, includes lunch (booking required). Organised by Birmingham Cuba Solidarity Campaign: [cuba-solidarity.org.uk/events](http://cuba-solidarity.org.uk/events).

## No more police killings or state violence

**Saturday October 28, 12 noon:** March: assemble Trafalgar Square, London WC2. Demand justice for those killed in custody. Organised by United Families and Friends Campaign: [www.facebook.com/UFFCampaign](http://www.facebook.com/UFFCampaign).

## Stop Telford's arms fair

**Thursday November 2, 8.45am:** Day of action. Assemble Southwater Square, Telford TF3. Then march to the SDSC fair entrance at Telford International Centre. SDSC exhibitors are linked to surveillance, repression, drone bombings and killing of civilians. Organised by Campaign Against Arms Trade: [caat.org.uk/events/stoptelfordarmsfair](http://caat.org.uk/events/stoptelfordarmsfair).

## Acknowledging Israel's apartheid

**Saturday November 4, 9.30am to 3.30pm:** Conference, Temple of Peace, Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff CF10. Examining the origins and intentions of the Israeli state and how to bring freedom and justice to Palestinians. Speakers include Beth Winter MP and Naomi Wimborne-Idrissi (Jewish Voice for Labour). Registration £20 (£5). Organised by Amnesty International and Palestine Solidarity Campaign: [www.acknowledgingisraelsapartheid.com](http://www.acknowledgingisraelsapartheid.com).

## Stop Braverman, stop the hate

**Saturday November 4, 12 noon:** Protest outside Home Office, Marsham Street, London SW1. Challenge the divisive rhetoric coming from Suella Braverman and the Home Office - refugees welcome. Organised by Peace and Justice Project: [www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=702421131922954](http://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=702421131922954).

## Revolution festival

**Friday November 10 to Sunday November 12:** School of communist ideas, Friends House, 173 Euston Road, London NW1. Training the revolutionary leadership required for the struggle ahead. Tickets from £15 to £40. Organised by Socialist Appeal: [revolutionfestival.co.uk](http://revolutionfestival.co.uk).

## Revolutionary ideas: the working class is back!

**Saturday November 11, 11am to 6pm:** Socialist festival, Adelphi Hotel, Ranelagh Street Liverpool L3. Discuss and debate how revolutionary ideas can change the world. Entrance £20 (£10). Organised by Socialist Alternative: [www.facebook.com/events/793705639001069](http://www.facebook.com/events/793705639001069).

## 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.

## Fighting fund

# Double, not quits!

In sharp contrast to last week, the *Weekly Worker* fighting fund shot up by a very substantial £809 over the last seven days, taking our running total for October up to £1,370 towards our £2,250 monthly target. Well done, everybody!

Two comrades in particular stand out for their generosity - by coincidence they both contributed exactly the same amount: a fantastic £170. In the case of PB, it seems this originated in a misunderstanding - she thought her £70 monthly standing order had been cancelled and so paid us £100 by way of compensation. But the very next day that £70 landed in our account - although PB insisted we can keep both payments. Thanks, comrade - and to comrade KB too, the donor of the other £170!

Then there were two other £100 payments - from comrades GB and BK. When it comes to BK, by the way, in order to encourage other donors, he's promised to match any monthly excess to the fighting fund over the next few months, up to an overall maximum of £500!

In other words, if you fancy contributing, what you donate might be doubled! Excellent stuff.

Other standing orders/bank transfers came from MM (£75), TR (£40), CG (£24), SS (£15), CS and JL (£10 each). Meanwhile, US comrade PM (£50), together with TB (£30) and MZ (£10), made their donations via PayPal. Finally, comrade Hassan handed his usual fiver to one of our comrades.

So now we need another £845, with (as I write) 13 days of the month left. We can definitely do it. Please send us a cheque, make a bank transfer (sort code 30-99-64, account number 00744310) or click on that PayPal button on our website ([weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/donate](http://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/donate)).

Let's see if we can exceed that £2,250 target for October, and then it'll be a case of 'double' (not 'quits!'), thanks to comrade BK! ●

**Robbie Rix**

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

## PALESTINE

# What you need to know about Hamas

Eddie Ford looks at the history and politics of what is a deeply reactionary organisation and how we could win the battle of ideas

All eyes are fixed on Gaza since the surprise Hamas attack into Israel on October 7, which saw its fighters take out Israeli border posts and police stations and, despite claimed instructions to the contrary, kill hundreds of civilians at a music festival and a kibbutz near the border - taking hostages as well.

There are some who find it hard not to be suspicious about the nature of the 'intelligence failure' which allowed it to happen, given that it was a large-scale operation that must have been planned over a relatively long period of time. We are now reliably told a whole year! Then on October 18 many hundreds more died in Gaza's Al-Ahli Baptist hospital in what was either an Islamic Jihad misfiring rocket attack on Israel or an atrocious Israeli airstrike. Either way, angry protests swept across the Middle East, but especially in the West Bank. Palestinian Authority security forces in Ramallah fired teargas and stun grenades to disperse protestors throwing rocks and chanting slogans against the PA's president, Mahmoud Abbas. He was forced to cancel a planned meeting in Jordan with Joe Biden the following day.

Rearranging his schedule somewhat, the US president held a joint news conference with Benjamin Netanyahu, embracing him at Tel Aviv airport and later meeting the Israeli war cabinet - symbolism that is bound to further inflame the Arab/Muslim world.

Of course, ever since the initial Hamas attack, the world has been anticipating an Israeli ground offensive on Gaza. And now there are stories that Israel might be planning "something different" to a ground offensive, or considering "other options", as it prepares for "the next stages of the war" against Hamas.

Readers will well know who and what Hamas is. We should certainly dismiss any notion that Hamas is just a small or isolated terrorist group - it is certainly not the Palestinian equivalent of Islamic State or al Qaeda, whatever some sections of the western media might stupidly suggest. Whether you like it or not, it is deeply rooted in Palestinian society and, though now headquartered in Gaza City, it has a significant presence too in the West Bank. That is where its secular rival, Fatah, exercises political control, thanks to Israeli largesse - though that is now in danger of disintegrating following the Gaza war that has highlighted long-simmering Palestinian anger against Abbas for coordinating with Israel on 'security' in the territory. The broad masses undoubtedly regard him as a quisling.

Historically, however, Hamas has not been some bottom-up organisation surviving on 'the pennies of the poor'. On the contrary, it had rich backers, receiving hundreds of millions of dollars in 'grants' from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states such as Qatar. In the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections - the last to be held - Hamas, contesting under the list name of Change and Reform, did convincingly well, winning 44.5% of the vote and 74 of the 132 seats, as against Fatah's 41.4% and 45 seats. Testifying to the considerably weakened position of the left, the 'official communist' Alternative list - which included the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Palestinian Peoples Party - managed to secure only 3% of the vote and two seats.



Israel wreaks revenge: no women, no civilians, no children killed, that is for sure

In February 2006 the newly elected Palestinian Legislative Council met for the first time and the Hamas leader, Ismail Haniya, was nominated to form a new government - leading to months of intermittent talks between the big players - Fatah and Hamas. Eventually there was an agreement to form a national unity government. But that did not last very long. The Battle of Gaza erupted the following year. This resulted in the dissolution of the unity government and the *de facto* division of the Palestinian territories into two entities: the West Bank, governed by the Palestinian National Authority, and the Gaza Strip under Hamas.

### Origins

What are the origins of Hamas? Shortly after the outbreak of the first intifada against Israel in 1987, Hamas was formally founded by Palestinian imam and activist Ahmed Yassin, with the objective of destroying "the Zionist entity". Hamas emerged out of his Mujama al-Islamiya that had been established in Gaza in 1973 as a religious charity closely involved with the Egyptian-based Muslim Brotherhood.

The organisation started to offer clinics, blood banks, day care, medical treatment, meals, youth clubs, and so on - providing a welfare system, given the near complete absence of anything else on offer. Mujama played an especially important role in providing social care to those living in refugee camps.

Hamas became increasingly involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by the late 1990s - it opposed the Israel-PLO 'Letters of Mutual Recognition', as well as the Oslo Accords, which saw Fatah renounce "the use of terrorism and other acts of violence" and recognise Israel in pursuit of a so-called two-state solution. Hamas continued to advocate Palestinian armed resistance, envisioning a single Palestinian state on all of the territory that belonged to the British Mandate for Palestine (that is, from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea in which Israel Jews would have religious but not national rights).

In 2005, Hamas signed the Palestinian Cairo Declaration, which reaffirmed the status of the PLO as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people" through the participation in it of all forces and

factions according to "democratic principles" - including Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Some argued that by agreeing to let the PLO handle talks with Israel, Hamas was tacitly accepting a truce with Israel and the 1967 borders - ditto with the 2006 Palestinian Prisoners' Document, which Hamas also signed. But that was before the Battle of Gaza, of course, so could be a mistaken assessment. Similarly, many believed that the Cairo and Doha Agreements in 2011 and 2012 respectively, and the 2017 updated/revised Hamas charter implicitly accepted the 1967 borders, but others strongly disputed this. It may be the case that some in the Hamas leadership regard Israel as a *fait accompli* - an unfortunate reality - but will never recognise its right to exist as a state morally or politically.

What is vitally important to emphasis is the profoundly reactionary nature of Hamas, as quickly revealed by any examination of its roots in the Muslim Brotherhood, and, more specifically, in its main institutional embodiment since the late 1970s - the Islamic Centre (al-Mujamma al-Islami), located in the Gaza Strip. Its anti-Zionism and anti-imperialism, insofar as you can call it that, is programmatically counterrevolutionary. Or, to put it another way, Hamas represents a reactionary ideology of the oppressed - opposed to any genuine idea of universal human liberation.

Between 1948 and 1967, Jordan and Egypt ruled the West Bank and the Gaza Strip respectively - shaping the development of the MB. During the 1950s, the MB maintained a policy of essentially 'loyal opposition' to the Hashemite regime in Jordan - participating in all the elections and official political life in general. Both the Hashemite monarchy and the MB shared an ideology of social traditionalism, which in practice meant they rejected the *modernistic* Arab nationalism of the revolutionary-talking Gamal Abdul Nasser and his co-thinkers - desperate to pull the Arab world into the 20th century by any means necessary.

What then of Egyptian-ruled Gaza? Under its administration, the MB's activities in the Gaza Strip were either tolerated or repressed - fluctuating in line with Egypt's policy towards the MB's mother movement in Egypt itself. There was a short-lived honeymoon from

1952 to 1954 that saw the MB flourish in the Gaza Strip. But then a new ban inaugurated a long period of brutal repression, forcing it to go underground in Gaza. Nasser's repressive policy reached its peak in the aftermath of the alleged coup attempt in 1965, which led to the arrest of thousands of MB's activists in Egypt and the execution of leading figures.

One of the most important of its martyrs was Sayyid Qutb, widely regarded as the father of Salafi jihadism - the religio-political doctrine that underpins modern jihadist organisations such as al Qaeda and Islamic State. His writings are still studied by militant Islamist groups across the world.

It is impossible, however, to understand Qutb without recognising the massive intellectual debt he owed to the Islamist ideologue, Sayyid Abu'l-A'la Mawdudi (1903-79). Qutb synthesised, developed and turned into popular-accessible form the teachings of Mawdudi - particularly inspired by Mawdudi's virulent aversion to secularism and democracy, not to mention his fanatical misogyny.

By all accounts, Qutb 'saw the light' after visiting the United States in 1948 - appalled by what he saw as the 'outrageous' freedoms enjoyed by American women. Even more so by the fact, as he saw it, that American men *allowed* their women to be so free. For Qutb any display of female sexuality was anathema. Qutb was also virulently anti-Semitic, genuinely believing in the existence of global Jewish conspiracies - which he outlined in his 1950 book, *Our struggle against the Jews*.

### Frankenstein

On this basis Hamas can only deliver oppression, tyranny and suffering - first and foremost against Palestinians themselves. Historically, the first manifestations of Hamas violence were directed not against Israeli occupation forces, but rather leftist rivals in the Gaza Strip and women for not wearing the veil.

But then, of course, the Israeli authorities were quite happy to give Hamas space and toleration. They considered it a far lesser evil to the PLO, and believed that dividing the Palestinians would serve the interests of the Jewish state. Indeed, Mujama al-Islamiya was recognised by Israel as a charity in 1979, allowing the

organisation to expand its influence throughout Gaza. Eventually, however, Israel came to realise that it had created a Frankenstein's monster.

In the Battle of Gaza and the subsequent division of territory in 2007, Israel took out various Hamas activists, because it was now regarded as a non-collaborative force, unlike Fatah, which had done a deal. But it was too late, as Hamas had gone from strength to strength.

So what is the situation now? Possibly the Israeli war cabinet has been thinking about enacting a final solution to the Palestinian problem and driving the entire population out of Gaza (to be followed by the West Bank sooner or later). Though Biden does not seem to be keen on that at the moment, he already has enough on his plate with Ukraine, the South China Sea and a gruelling election campaign pending, it is a real and present danger. Demonstrations throughout the world, especially in the immediate vicinity, expressions of solidarity with the oppressed Palestinians, boycotts of arms deliveries going to the IDF war machine, forcing rulers to break diplomatic links - all can help.

But obviously more is needed. Economic calls for working class unity are bound to fall on stony ground. Israel is a colonial-settler state united around blood and soil Zionist ideology, it is closely allied to the US global hegemon and the Israeli-Jewish working class constitute a labour aristocracy.

Palestinian national oppression has to be overcome: democratic opinion cannot allow them to share the dreadful fate of other first nations subject to settler-colonialism. However, the Palestinians cannot save themselves from national extinction through their own efforts alone. The present crisis in Gaza graphically, horribly, illustrates the true balance of forces. It is David versus Goliath. Israel is, of course, not David armed with nothing more than a sling and shot ... and in spite of the biblical myth Goliath usually wins in such conflicts.

The way forward lies neither in a 'one-state' nor 'two-state' bourgeois solution. Neither is realistically deliverable. The answer can only be regional and that relies not on petro-monarchies, corrupt family dictatorships, army-based regimes ... or Hamas and other would-be theocrats. No, it relies on working class leadership of the Arab revolution: to begin with, perhaps, a socialist federation of the Mashiq, which would sweep away all existing regimes, along with all the post-World War I Anglo-French borders, and guarantee all national minorities, crucially the Israeli-Jewish Hebrew nation, the right to self-determination.

This aim is itself a powerful weapon in the battle of ideas. It can certainly help overcome the fear that the poles of oppression would simply be reversed, even the fear of being driven into the sea. True, that would mean renouncing Zionism, dismantling Israeli apartheid and breaking free from the US orbit.

However, such a perspective, such a strategy, could conceivably, win over the majority of Israeli-Jewish workers, who would, after all, have the prospect of becoming not second-class citizens in a capitalist Palestinian state, but part of the ruling class ●

LABOUR

# Don't mention apartheid

Sir Keir bans Labour banners at Palestine demonstrations, Jeremy Corbyn appeals to 'international law', while the Campaign Group of Socialist MPs sticks to empty platitudes, reports **Carla Roberts**

A few short years ago, Labour Party conferences were awash with Palestine flags. In 2018 and 2019 in particular, there was a sea of hundreds of them, many handed out by Labour Against the Witchhunt. In both years, there were also motions passed that were highly critical of the Israeli government.<sup>1</sup>

Even in 2021 - when Sir Keir had already been in charge for over 16 months - a motion was passed that heavily criticised the "ongoing Nakba in Palestine", "the deadly assault on Gaza" and the "de facto annexation of Palestinian land". Furthermore, the motion contained this interesting formulation: "Conference also notes the unequivocal 2021 reports by B'Tselem and Human Rights Watch that conclude unequivocally that Israel is practising the crime of apartheid, as defined by the UN."

Fast-forward two years. The Liverpool conference could not have been more different. In the run-up to the stage-managed event, Labour HQ unilaterally removed the words "end apartheid" from the title of a fringe event organised by the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, leaving the title 'Justice for Palestine' in the conference guide.<sup>2</sup> The PSC protested, but to no avail, and was eventually told that using the word "apartheid" - a formulation also used by that radical leftie group, the United Nations (!), to describe Israeli policy<sup>3</sup> - is now "detrimental to the party".

As an aside, it depends, of course, on how you define 'apartheid'. The situation in Palestine is entirely different from the former apartheid regime in South Africa, where a small white ruling class massively exploited the black population. Israel's aim, however, is not exploitation - more like mass expulsion. It wants to ethnically cleanse the occupied territories and get rid of all Palestinians.

Funnily enough, among the speakers at the PSC event was former shadow chancellor John McDonnell, a keen defender of the policy of 'zero tolerance'. He and Momentum founder Jon Lansman were the key people in Jeremy Corbyn's team responsible for the disastrous tactic of trying to appease the right by apologising over and over again for the myriad of false and weaponised claims that the party was overrun by anti-Semites. The PSC meeting went ahead with the shortened title, but it would have been very ironic if McDonnell had become a victim of the anti-Semitism smear campaign after all.

It is, of course, not just Keir Starmer who has bent over backwards to the pro-Israel agenda of the establishment. Unite general secretary Sharon Graham allegedly tried to force the cancellation of a Unite Palestine solidarity conference fringe event. But, because she did not seem to have the guts to have her name attached to such an attack on free speech, the meeting went ahead unchallenged.<sup>4</sup>

## Touching calls

After conference, Starmer and his enforcer, general secretary David Evans, turned up the heat some more. On October 11, Starmer stated that he backs Israel's decision to cut water, food and medicine supplies to Gaza - "Israel has that right", he repeatedly said, before 'clarifying' that, "obviously everything should be done within international law,



LAW fought the witch-hunt from the beginning

but I don't want to step away from the core principles that Israel has the right to defend herself".<sup>5</sup> Well, you can't have it both ways. Punishing a civilian population is clearly a war crime, as defined by the Geneva Convention. But international law is clearly very stretchy.

Jeremy Corbyn too has issued almost touching calls for "peace", "moral principles" and for politicians to "defend international law universally and equally".<sup>6</sup> He seems to believe in some form of neutral and just 'international law' that stands above all the squabbles in the world. If only it was enforced properly. No, Jeremy, just think about who has written 'international law' or indeed enforces it and to what purpose. The war against Iraq was entirely legal - they just made up a bunch of lies to make it just about acceptable at the time. The US government, the EU and virtually all western imperialist governments are unequivocally supporting Israel - and have been for decades. Why on earth appeal to such laws and organisations?

Then, on October 13, Labour general secretary David Evans sent an email to all constituency and branch secretaries warning that MPs, councillors and other representatives should not take part in any of the pro-Palestine demonstrations that were taking place the next day:

Elected representatives have been given strong advice not to attend any of these events, and I would urge you to exercise similar caution. Not only is this in the interests of our members' safety, but also to avoid placing colleagues in a position where they may share a platform with, or are close to, individuals that threaten to undermine the values and principles of the Labour Party.

In the event that individual members are in attendance at these protests and demonstration, I ask that no Labour Party banners are taken along. Individuals will not have the ability to control who they will be photographed alongside, and this risks threatening the Labour Party's ability to campaign against any form of racism and discrimination.

The email further outlines that "attempts to table motions at meetings that are prejudicial or grossly detrimental to the Labour Party and risk infringing the Labour Party's Codes of Conduct on Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia" will, "consistent with previous precedent, be ruled out of order".

And, just to make sure that nobody gets away with any such nonsense or has posted something online "detrimental to the party", the email reminds the snitchers of just

how to snitch: "If you or someone else considers that a Labour Party member has breached our rules, this should be reported to us here ..."<sup>7</sup>

It was, of course, under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn that such 'guidance' emails started to come in thick and fast. His general secretary, Jennie Formby, was so keen to be seen to implement the demands of the pro-Zionist lobby that she sent out numerous emails 'advising' members not to pass motions, for example, against the witch-hunt or in support of Chris Williamson, who was the only Labour MP who dared to stand up to the vicious campaign to conflate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism. Overly eager branch and CLP secretaries and regional officers (most of them on the right, although there were not a few official 'lefts' among them) were only too happy to interpret the advice as outright 'bans'. Labour Against the Witchhunt did a good job explaining the facts,<sup>8</sup> but many members were too scared to stand in solidarity with their smeared and vilified comrades. That was the point of it all, of course: self-censorship.

And, boy, does it work! It worked under Corbyn, when Labour left campaigns like the short-lived Don't Leave, Organise and Howard Beckett's even shorter-lived Labour Left for Socialism refused to associate publicly with anybody who had been expelled or suspended from the party. Needless to say, this policy helped to lead to their quick demise, especially after people like Beckett were themselves suspended.

And it continues to work now: I have not heard of a single Labour MP addressing any of the Palestine demonstrations around the country. They all seem to have toed the party line. A bunch of cowards the lot of them - especially the so-called Campaign Group of Socialist MPs. Their only effort so far has been an early day motion condemning Hamas and echoing calls for a humanitarian ceasefire. We know many of them are strong supporters of Palestine, but they probably feel even stronger about their own careers.

And, because the campaign to smear all criticism of Israel as anti-Semitic was so successful in the Labour movement, it quickly spread beyond it. It was not designed to get rid of Corbyn - that was just a very welcome side effect from the point of view of the Zionist lobby. The key aim was always to prepare for exactly the situation we are currently witnessing: Israel's campaign of ethnic cleansing going into overdrive.

But the campaign in the Labour Party and the left's appeasement certainly helped to prepare the ground for today, where critics of Israel can be gotten rid of in record

time. Innocent until proven guilty? Forget it. Now the smallest whiff of alleged anti-Semitism (actually anti-Zionism) is enough to get people suspended, sacked, their livelihoods ruined.

Just in the last week, there have been dozens of examples that show how the right to free speech has been hollowed out in the attempt of the establishment to back Israel hook, line and sinker:

## More victims

■ Cartoonist Steve Bell has just lost his job at *The Guardian*. The paper confirmed that it "will not be renewing his contract" after he submitted what they claim is an anti-Semitic cartoon of Benjamin Netanyahu. It shows Israel's leader operating on his own stomach with boxing gloves on: the cut is in the outline of the Gaza Strip. Bell says his artwork was inspired by a famous cartoon of David Levine showing US president Lyndon Johnson with an operation scar on his belly in the shape of Vietnam. *The Guardian*, however, does not believe him. Oversensitised like all bourgeois media outlets, it has taken the cartoon to be a reference to the Jewish moneylender, Shylock, in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, who demands "a pound of flesh" of Antonio's if a loan is not repaid within three months. That seems to be quite a stretch, to put it mildly.

■ On October 16, former British ambassador and journalist Craig Murray was arrested at the airport by UK security forces under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, on his return from Iceland. His phone, laptop and other electronics were seized and he "doesn't expect he will get them back". He said he was questioned about his attendance at the Palestine demo in Iceland. He was also questioned about his involvement in the Assange campaign and "whether he is paid for such work".<sup>9</sup> Inconvenient campaigners and journalists like Kit Klarenberg have similarly been detained in recent months.

■ Ofcom has just suspended its online safety director, Fadzai Madzingira, after the vile website, *Guido Fawkes*, published screenshots from her private Instagram account, in which she called Israel an "apartheid state" and wrote: "As if it wasn't bad enough already, the UK is also set to participate in the ethnic cleansing and genocide of Palestinians. Shame on this vile colonial alliance. #freepalestine."<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to imagine that any employment tribunal would not dismiss these posts as a valid form of free expression. But Madzingira's career prospects are certainly looking gloomy after such an exposure.

■ After a fire alarm went off during a pro-Palestine rally at the School of Oriental and African Studies, the university suspended a number of students who took part in the demonstration. Later, members of the Palestine Society "that were not present at the rally were issued formal warnings through disciplinarys by the university, demonstrating this is a targeted act of political repression against the Palestine Society".<sup>11</sup>

■ Even more seriously, counter-terrorism police in Brighton have arrested Palestinian Hanin Barghouti, an elected women's officer at the University of Sussex students' union, for the speech she gave at a pro-Palestine demonstration the day after Hamas's attack. This is what she said:

Yesterday was a victory. For freedom fighters to break out of a 15-year blockade so successfully under the inhuman genocide of Israel was so beautiful and inspiring to see. It shows the world that we will always fight and always resist and we need to celebrate these acts of resistance, because this was a success. Revolutionary violence initiated by Palestinians is not terrorism - it is self-defence.<sup>12</sup>

Communists would disagree with calling the Hamas attack "a victory" or particularly "beautiful" - but clearly, this is a young Palestinian woman deeply moved by what has just happened in her home country. It would be absolutely appalling to charge her with 'an act of terrorism'.

However, worse is probably still to come. Immigration minister Robert Jenrick has announced his plans to "withdraw visas and deport anybody who commits hate crimes or supports Hamas".<sup>13</sup> Seeing as "aggressively waving" or "wearing" the Palestinian flag could - according to Suella Braverman's letter to the police<sup>14</sup> - now be constructed as proof of support for Hamas, that is a pretty low threshold. Some backbench MPs have called for pro-Palestine demonstrations to be banned altogether, "as in other countries" - though Braverman and co will probably be aware that that would guarantee a record turnout at such events ●

## Notes

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**USSR**

# The nature of the beast

Could the Soviet Union be described as a 'workers' state' of any type? Drawing on the groundbreaking work of Hillel Ticktin, Yassamine Mather says that the only serious answer must be an emphatic 'no'

The collapse of the Soviet Union was inevitable and was, of course, intricately linked to decades of opportunistic and, at times, contradictory international policies that contributed directly or indirectly to the downfall of allied parties and states around the world.

By 1989, many of these once-prominent parties and states had become mere shadows of their post-war glory. The largest communist parties in the Middle East and Europe paid a costly price for adhering to Moscow's directives. The Soviet Union vacillated between supporting and opposing third world leaders, issued contradictory recommendations to 'brother' communist parties, sometimes aligned with nationalist dictators, and at others advocated united fronts against dictatorships alongside bourgeois opposition forces. At times, they even suggested cooperation with these very dictators - sometimes turning a blind eye to the subsequent persecution and execution of socialists and communists by the thousands.

It is, therefore, disheartening that, when faced with a new conflict between Vladimir Putin's Russia and the western world over Ukraine, some on the left display nostalgia for the 'good old days' of the Soviet Union. Others have taken a position of apologetics for contemporary Russia, and by extension the former USSR. In doing so, they often invoke the theory of the 'deformed workers' state' - a concept intrinsically tied to Leon Trotsky and the Trotskyist tradition that followed him.

## Degenerate

According to this theory, the USSR at its core was fundamentally a workers' state - the pivotal moment being the Bolshevik Revolution, when the proletariat assumed political power. However, this newfound power was quickly overshadowed and dominated by a bureaucratic elite. Consequently, instead of evolving into a genuine socialist democracy that represented the workers' interests, the state underwent a degeneration under the bureaucratic elite, leading to the label, 'degenerate workers' state'.

The perspective of Hillel Ticktin and *Critique* counters this traditional understanding in several ways and on the 50th anniversary of the journal it is important to remind everyone of some of the basic arguments.

**Inherent contradictions:** One of *Critique's* primary arguments revolved around the innate contradictions embedded within the Soviet Union's socio-economic fabric. Rather than acknowledging the USSR as a workers' state - albeit a degenerate one - Ticktin visualises it as an entity constantly grappling with its inherent contradictions. For him, the Soviet Union was perpetually teetering on the brink of crisis due to these internal tensions.

**Ambiguous mode of production:** the Soviet Union's mode of production defied conventional definitions. It deviated from capitalist norms, as the pursuit of capital accumulation was not its central tenet. At the same time, it could not be labelled 'socialist' either, given that workers lacked control over the means of production. Ticktin introduces the concept of "vended production" to describe the USSR's system, where production occurred without clear, market-driven objectives or a cohesive plan



**First five-year plan: quantity, not quality**

catering to societal necessities.

**Pervasive bureaucracy:** Instead of perceiving the bureaucracy as a mere distortion superimposed on a workers' state, Ticktin attributes a more intrinsic role to it within the Soviet structure. For him, the bureaucratic apparatus was not just an external, parasitic entity, but was deeply woven into the USSR's foundational framework. It essentially acted as the counterbalance, continuously managing and mitigating the system's internal contradictions.

Ticktin argues against the conventional notion that the Soviet bureaucracy was merely a deformation or distortion imposed on what was meant to be a workers' state. He maintains that bureaucracy was not an aberration, but an essential component of the Soviet system. This perception rejects the notion that the bureaucracy was an unnatural overlay on a proletarian state.

**Counterbalance:** The Soviet bureaucracy did not merely administer or implement policies, but acted as a vital counterbalance within the system. It navigated through the system's internal contradictions, such as disparities between planning and actual production, or between the workers' needs and the outputs of the planned economy. The bureaucracy, in essence, worked to continuously manage, reconcile and mitigate these contradictions, ensuring the survival and stability of the system, despite its inherent flaws and inefficiencies.

**Managing contradictions:** Ticktin argues that the contradictions within the Soviet system were not incidental, but were intrinsic and perennial. These were often the outcome of the mismatch between ideological aspirations (like a classless society) and the pragmatic socio-economic realities (like the need for expert management and control) that unfolded. The bureaucracy, with its intricate structures and processes, managed these contradictions by mediating between different interest groups, controlling resource allocation and ensuring that the system did not implode due to its own incongruities.

**Maintaining control:** The bureaucracy also functioned as a control mechanism to sustain the power structures within the USSR. It perpetuated a system where power

was concentrated, and decisions were centralised, despite the rhetoric of workers' control and proletarian dictatorship. This bureaucratic apparatus ensured the stability and continuity of the authoritarian regime, maintaining a semblance of order and control amidst the economic and social disparities.

**Economic role:** In terms of the economy, the bureaucracy was tasked with the orchestration and execution of centrally planned economic models, trying to align them with the Soviet ideological framework, while navigating through practical, on-ground challenges. This often led to scenarios where the bureaucratic structures, in their attempt to fulfil plan targets, would manipulate or massage data, further propagating systemic inefficiencies and a disconnection between planning and actual economic realities.

## Social level

**Social impact:** On a social level, the pervasive bureaucracy influenced the everyday lives of the Soviet populace. It established a system wherein the individuals were often bound by rigid bureaucratic norms and processes. This system, while providing a measure of stability and predictability, also stifled innovation, individual agency and flexibility. It created a paradox, where the state - while being the supposed representative of the proletariat - was often distanced from the actual needs and aspirations of the people due to its bureaucratic maze.

**Political implications:** Politically, Ticktin emphasises that the bureaucracy, despite its contradictions and inefficiencies, was effective in ensuring the longevity of the Soviet system. It played a crucial role in suppressing dissent, maintaining a unitary state ideology and ensuring the centralisation of power. The bureaucracy was both a vehicle and a barrier: a vehicle in propelling and sustaining the Soviet state; and a barrier in actualising the Marxist ideals of a stateless, classless society.

The degenerate workers' state theory operates on the assumption that a workers' state was initially formed, only to be misappropriated, misdirected and mismanaged by the bureaucratic elite, but despite that it continued to be a workers' state.

Ticktin, however, challenges this foundational premise, arguing that what materialised was a transitional entity, straddling the boundaries between capitalism and socialism.

**Defining a workers' state:** Ticktin challenges the very essence of what constitutes a workers' state by emphasising that the USSR, despite its socialist rhetoric and proletarian banners, did not substantively establish a state that was genuinely controlled and operated by the workers. The idea of a workers' state is grounded on the principle that the working class itself has authentic control over state mechanisms - something that Ticktin argues was noticeably absent in the USSR.

**Nature of USSR:** In summary, the Soviet Union is perceived not as a deformed workers' state, but rather as a transitional entity that hovered ambiguously between capitalism and socialism. This perspective views the USSR neither as a true representation of socialist ideals nor as a capitalist entity, but as a unique socio-economic formation, having characteristics of both systems, while being neither in essence. It incorporated elements of capitalism, such as bureaucratic hierarchies and centralised control, while also adhering, at least nominally, to socialist principles like state ownership and planned economy. This hybrid structure was not on a stable trajectory toward socialism, but was persistently locked in a 'transitional' state.

**Perpetual crisis:** Ticktin also emphasises the notion of 'perpetual crisis' within the Soviet system. The intrinsic contradictions and the imbalance between the bureaucracy and the proletariat led to continuous crises, preventing the system from stabilising and evolving into a sustainable socio-economic model. The bureaucracy perpetually worked to navigate through and manage these crises, further entrenching itself as an indispensable entity within the system.

**Political alienation:** The political structures led to an alienation of the workers from genuine political power. While the state purported to represent the interests of the working class, the reality, was one of political exclusion and marginalisation for the proletariat, negating the fundamental principles that define a workers' state.

**Ideological discrepancy:** The juxtaposition of socialist ideology against the *Realpolitik* within the USSR illuminates the discrepancy between the ideological commitments towards a workers' state and the actual implementation of policies that prevented such a state from materialising.

**Impending collapse:** In an extension of his critique, Ticktin's analytical lens foresaw that the USSR's intrinsic contradictions would precipitate its downfall. The eventual disintegration of the Soviet Union reinforced his argument, challenging the idea of the USSR as a durable, even if distorted, workers' state.

## Characteristics

The vast majority of what transpired in the USSR remains undocumented, making a comprehensive understanding crucial for any accurate and meaningful discussion. This does not negate the possibility of referencing factual content from Soviet materials. Indeed, one can often cite them for validation.

In his original writings in *Critique* Hillel Ticktin delved into what he perceived as the primary paradox within the Soviet political economy. Following that, he explored the methods of societal regulation in the USSR - or, alternatively, the techniques utilised to navigate societal disputes.

Tony Cliff, Paul Mattick and others did highlight accumulation as potentially the most significant element of Soviet political economy. However, their analysis seems to veer off track - the primary oversight is attributing the entirety of accumulation to defence concerns.

It is widely accepted that non-defence investments in the Soviet Union were not negligible. One of the more reliable estimates suggests the military applications accounted for roughly three quarters of the total engineering output. This figure surpasses that of the US, but still indicates room for other forms of investment.<sup>1</sup> Under this umbrella are repair, replacements and general capital goods, including construction. Clearly, this points to the pivotal role of non-defence accumulation.

However, even if one were to argue for a larger defence-centric perspective, two critical questions would still need addressing. There existed a significant shortcoming within the Soviet economic framework. When defence spending diminished during particular times, notably after World War II, after the Korean War and following Khrushchev's departure, the dynamics of no-nonsense investment underwent noteworthy changes.

It is quite striking that, while 60% of a Soviet family's budget was needed for food - in comparison to the UK's 25% - the agricultural sector still saw limited investment. This anomaly is further accentuated by the fact that Soviet farms were not lacking in agricultural machinery and equipment. Yet basic necessities like meat, dairy and fruit remained elusive in many Soviet localities. This situation underscores the fact that, despite the growth in non-defence investments, living standards largely remained stagnant.

Additionally, the defence sector was not without its inefficiencies. The reliability of Soviet engineering machinery, including that for defence, is questionable - malfunctioning at a rate three to four times that of their US counterparts. This inefficiency resulted in a peculiar situation where more personnel in the USSR were engaged in repairs than in actual production.

Revisiting the topic of accumulation, the overwhelming investment in non-military sectors is bewildering, to the point where it seems to eclipse consumer goods.<sup>2</sup> Despite the robust growth of the engineering sector, surpassing light industry, there was little to no improvement in the average citizen's quality of life. The important issue here is not merely the rate of growth; it is the continuous struggle for food and the challenge of cramped living spaces (colloquially compared to the dimensions of a coffin!). This unchanging predicament, spanning over 40 years, points towards a foundational issue in Soviet economic strategy.

The long-standing dynamics of the Soviet system hinted at an inherent force, which, through a Marxist lens, could be termed as a 'law'. Historically, industrialisation shifted the population from

rural to urban areas. Along with collectivisation, it decisively reduced the political significance of rural regions. By the 1970s, while 40% of the population lived in villages, just under 30% earned their livelihood from agricultural activities. Given the gender imbalance in rural areas, the actual number of families fully dedicated to farming was even less. Latter-day concessions to the agricultural community are more about the cities' need for food rather than addressing any rural discontent. Through industrialisation and collectivisation, the political clout of the Soviet peasant was effectively dismantled, giving rise to the Soviet elite or bureaucracy. However, inadvertently, they set up a system with several of its original characteristics preserved. Although the production goods sector's massive scale perhaps offered better manageability and necessitated a larger bureaucracy, this seemed to be a secondary consideration.

Despite the Soviet elite's repeated declarations of an increase in consumer goods production, on the ground the reality remained unchanged. For instance, at the 17th party congress in 1934, there were promises to significantly enhance consumer goods production and improve quality. The 19th congress in 1952 echoed similar sentiments, emphasising the enhancement of living standards.<sup>3</sup> During the goods shortage era of the 1920s Marxist theorists like Yevgeny Preobrazhensky emphasised the importance of boosting consumer goods output to stabilise the USSR's economy. Though he and Nikolai Bukharin had disagreements over the desired growth rate of heavy industry, they concurred on the necessity for timely returns. In this light, Preobrazhensky's 1931 caution about excessive accumulation appears prescient.<sup>4</sup>

## Societal principle

Despite the genuine intentions of Soviet planners to enhance consumer goods production rapidly, they were partially hindered by the arms race and, to a significant extent, by the inherent characteristics of the USSR's internal system. Given there was a clear desire to reform this system, but tangible change remained elusive, we must look for the presence of a deeper - almost immutable - societal principle that goes beyond individual or collective will.

One of the most evident flaws in the Soviet economy was its profound inefficiency. This waste not only drained resources, but also inflated defence costs far more than what would be required in a more rational economic setup. Whether under a capitalist or socialist model, any well-organised system would reduce such wastefulness, particularly in the military sector.

Additionally, the inferior quality of the produced goods stood out as a significant concern. It is not merely that Soviet consumer items had a reduced durability compared to their western counterparts, or that they often did not meet expectations. The real issue was the magnitude of this quality problem - evidenced by the need to construct dedicated storage spaces for the overflow of faulty or below-standard items that found no takers.

In an economic landscape where machinery repair personnel outnumbered those producing consumer goods, the persistent challenges with product quality became glaringly evident, despite the planners' continual push and decades-long quality improvement efforts. This sentiment was echoed in a *Pravda* article of March 23 1972, which concentrated on the

agricultural machinery domain and the challenges arising from substandard parts.

The article drew attention to the considerable tally of faulty components, hinting that the real count could be even more staggering. This discrepancy often stemmed from the reluctance to return defective parts, or significant delays in doing so, to avoid situations where returns might not have happened at all. With an already pronounced rate of equipment failures, there was a conspicuous shortage of spare parts.

Adding to the woes was the inadequate quality of the repairs themselves. Rather than specific, precise repairs, machines underwent complete overhauls even for minor glitches. For example, when it came to tractors, official data unveiled the fact that maintaining a tractor over its eight-year life could cost about two and a half times its initial price. This heightened the need for repairs and, in turn, escalated the demand for spare parts. While the unavailability of these parts would have curtailed repair costs, it led to recurrent operational hitches across the economy.

According to the *Pravda* article, further exacerbating the situation were tractor operators, who misused the machinery: filling them with unsuitable fuels and oils, or using them for non-agricultural tasks, such as personal transport. Intriguingly, it was emphasised that this was not a case of uninformed usage: operators were well-trained and even enjoyed a revered position in the farming world. The crux of the issue, thus, was more profound and formed the primary thrust of the article.

To sum it up, the USSR's struggle with sub-par production resulted in an ever-growing demand for products, a ceaseless need for spare parts and a self-sustaining repair industry riddled with inefficiency and inflated costs. Some attributed this to the Soviet workforce being predominantly peasant-based. However, considering that by the 1970s 40 years had passed since the start of the first five-year plan, it is questionable if descendants of that era could still bear that label. The Soviet workforce did not handle machinery or uphold quality based on mere historical roots. Rather, the true problem was embedded in the economic system itself.

## Inefficiencies

A notable inefficiency in the USSR resulted from the tardy adoption of emerging technologies. Ernest Mandel championed the idea that socialist systems have an innate advantage in quickly assimilating technological advances, referencing the USSR as a case in point.<sup>5</sup>

Although this perspective might fit an envisioned socialist model, it starkly contrasted with the actual Soviet experience. In reality, the USSR presented a discouraging framework that deterred technological advancement. This pattern, while essential for scholars of the Soviet economy, offered crucial insights.<sup>6</sup> As the dominant measure of success continued to hinge on either tangible output or profits, introducing innovative technologies disrupted this status quo. Every new product or method faced initial challenges when transitioning to large-scale production.

While in capitalist economies, such risks often lead to commensurate rewards or are balanced by the acceptance that not all ventures will be successful, the USSR lacked a parallel incentive to mitigate these challenges. Although various bonus schemes were initiated, their volatile impact on production indicated that a consistent incentive framework was missing, especially when core output

indicators, either physical or value-driven, were in play.

Furthermore, a significant hindrance was the potential interruption in production, which led to factory directors losing out on their bonuses. The frequent transitions of these directors between roles made it clear that a forward-thinking and ambitious leader might be hesitant to adopt new technologies. This reluctance was also evident in the hesitation to incorporate new fixed capital. Such conditions meant that the adoption of newer methodologies or fixed assets usually occurred out of sheer necessity, often due to inescapable administrative decisions.

Older techniques and products often fell short in quality when stacked against their contemporary equivalents. This quality gap widened when there was no renewal of fixed assets. As a result, production in the USSR became more expensive than in capitalist countries - never mind what should be expected of a genuine socialist economy. A notable example was the defence sector, where the USSR's consumption of metals for engineering products was estimated to be a third more than in the US.

The economy's third glaring inefficiency related to the extensive number of people who were underutilised. In 1970, the party's central committee advocated the expansion of the Shchekinskii redundancy strategy, wherein workers were transitioned to other roles. Yet, without overturning the existing dismissal laws, this initiative had limited impact. Moreover, there was ongoing discourse about encouraging women, who made up 90% of the workforce, to remain at home to care for their families, thus reducing the working population. Besides this, actual unemployment persisted.

A fourth area of inefficiency pertained to the underexploitation of both existing and potential capacities. This was mainly due to an uneven distribution of resources because of persistent shortages, causing enterprises to over-request, irrespective of their genuine needs. For instance, there was a surplus of tractor spare parts stored at various collective farms. These parts were often left unused - either because farms liked to maintain a surplus or there was simply no inventory tracking in place. Additionally, operational capacities were often hampered due to unforeseen disruptions - be it supply shortages or in-plant machinery breakdowns, reflecting both poor quality and poor planning.

The 'dissipation of resources' - caused by plants and machinery taking much longer to construct or install than intended - led to a situation where mills were being produced for the sake of more mills, meaning that, in order to complete existing plants, additional plants had to be constructed.

As the centre had little real information and only its most detailed and explicit instructions were actually followed, enterprises by and large simply followed the logic of the bonus-indicator social reward system.

Even though a lower output may have been required by the centre, overfulfilment automatically arose wherever it was possible and was duly rewarded, while the consumer goods sector, being at the end of the chain, did not receive the necessary resources. The extra parts and goods available were immediately absorbed either by plants waiting or by storage depots of the enterprises in case of short supply in the future. There would then be a further clamour for new plants to produce goods in short supply.

Workers with lower targets would work at lower rates. Apart from the dozen or so indicators set by the centre, such as steel, coal power, etc, the rest of the centre's job was largely organisational: to see that the economy did not collapse or that it ran more smoothly. Its information was poor and salaried personnel of various enterprises, who were only interested in maximising their own personal welfare, would fulfil the formal instructions, although that often resulted in an absurdity. Faced with a situation where it was to their benefit to maximise an indicator, whether it was called profit or anything else, they would wrongly inform the centre as to their potential and produce a product mix most suitable to themselves.

When prioritising sheer production numbers, businesses produced a large volume of low-quality items. If the emphasis was on total sales, they could be inclined to produce high-priced, yet low-quality, goods, particularly when there was little to no competition. When profit took centre stage, businesses would likely opt for the cheapest materials and shortest production times, focusing on products that fetched high prices and sold quickly, even if it meant compromising on quality. This could result in the creation of sub-par items like poorly crafted icons or shoes with minimal leather, while neglecting slower-selling products like books. While staff within these enterprises were aware of optimal production standards, the prevailing system often did not cater to their true interests.

## Critical lens

In the grand scheme of things, the economy leaned more towards being 'administered' than genuinely 'planned'. Evsei Liberman pointed out in the 60s that the earlier economic strategy had been efficient at consolidating resources to cater to immediate national requirements, emphasising quantity over quality. These challenges remained, and simply incorporating profit into the equation did not address the core issues.

An authentically planned economy needs vigilant management by the majority's democratic representatives - the working class. In the absence of this, interests clash, resulting in only selective adherence to central directives, and planners often operating on misleading information. This veers away from the true intention of planning: creating an organised economic structure.

That is why positioning the USSR, based merely on its planning approach, as a socialist or workers' state is a misunderstanding. It leans more towards an overseen or managed economic structure, with vast parts running autonomously.

Historically, the economic organisation, occasionally amounting to little more than structured terror, paved the way for industrialisation. Yet, as it evolved, the system began accruing increased waste, even with elites striving to stem this tide. A sophisticated, modern economy demands meticulous accuracy in timing and quality. While the early industrialisation stages were marked by immense wastage, a contemporary industrial economy mandates detailed refinement.

The burgeoning waste stemmed from a core discord between the societal urge for a structured economy and the individualistic ambitions of the elite and the intellectual class. Arguing in terms of a dichotomy between planning principles and market forces is an oversimplification. The initial frictions, emerging during the New

Economic Policy phase, mirrored the social stratifications of that epoch.

To infer that latter-day Soviet planning mirrored that of the past is to insinuate that a workers' state existed until 1989. Instead of a strict 'planning' paradigm, it is better to discuss a 'law of organisation', echoing the elite's quest to uphold its privileges through seamless economic operations.

As Hillel Ticktin pointed out in 1972:

Mandel's proposition - that "the bureaucracy can't synchronise its interests with the productive mechanisms that grant their advantages"<sup>7</sup> - warrants scrutiny. In reality, the elite, fulfilling their roles across diverse sectors, did bolster production.

Overlooking certain terminologies for a moment, the claim seems questionable. When the elite perform their roles as managers and administrators, be it in economic, political or military sectors, they do actively contribute to the advancement of production.

The planning system in the USSR was inherently strict, largely due to the workers' tendency to easily reduce their efforts rather than amplify them. This adaptability ironically led to greater inefficiencies across the board. Further complicating the situation, workers were hemmed in by numerous constraints, including the internal passport, labour documentation, covert files and the ever-watchful eye of the KGB at their workplaces and homes. Equating this level of oversight with that in capitalist societies is misleading, as the depth of control in the USSR was unparalleled.

While workers in the USSR produced a surplus, much of it was rendered ineffective. The interaction here was often termed as 'wage labour coupled with surplus-value extraction', implying a two-way exchange. Yet, it was more akin to a coerced union in production, where the benefits for all parties remained ambiguous. Drawing parallels to wage-labour surplus or even feudal systems does not capture the nature of this dynamic.

The USSR's elite clearly did not prioritise the working class's wellbeing. Any leeway given to workers, such as relaxed production guidelines, was a calculated move, knowing full well that the workers would not compromise further. Their fight for rights mirrored the methods of western trade unions, relying heavily on passive resistance or overt strikes.

Ticktin's analysis of the USSR provides a significant departure from more orthodox Trotskyist interpretations, offering a complex and critical lens through which to understand the intricacies and paradoxes of the Soviet system ●

## Notes

1. Joint Economic Committee, Congress of the United States *Economic performance and the military burden in the Soviet Union* Washington 1970, p218-19.
2. In 1966 74.4% of investment in industry was for producer goods - this figure had increased every year from 1946 (*Narodnoe Khozyaistvo v 1970g* Moscow 1971, p23). In 1972 investment in producer goods again increased at a higher rate than in consumer goods (*Pravda* January 30 1973).
3. *KPSS v Rezolyutsiyakh i Resheniyakh* part 2, Moscow 1953, p1116.
4. A Erlich *The Soviet industrialisation debate, 1924-28* Harvard 1960, p179.
5. E Mandel *Europe vs America* London 1970, p31.
6. LM Gatovsky, at a meeting of the USSR academy of sciences held in December 1965, specifically stated that there was too little connection between research and industry, and that there was not enough new machinery in enterprises (*Vestnik Akademii Nauk SSSR* February 1966).
7. *International Socialist Review* June 1972.

**PRISONS**

# Not tough on the causes

The prison system is in deep trouble. Mike Macnair suggests that there is more to it than bad government

Last week we were given the striking news that the UK is about to run out of prison space - no doubt with a view to increasing pressure on the government to take quick decisions about how to deal with the problem, the leak-briefings given to the press produced headlines like 'Don't jail rapists and burglars - our prisons are too full, judges told' (*The Telegraph* October 11), 'Convicted criminals could avoid jail from next week because prisons are full' (*Sky News* October 12).

The story is striking, but not particularly surprising. Warnings that prison spaces were running out have been repeated, and Tory promises to build large numbers to add to them have had a peculiar history of announcement, modification and very limited actual change.<sup>1</sup>

The government's response has been a series of ad hoc ideas. They are keen to avoid (at least in the run-up to the 2024 general election) the expedient applied by the Blair government in 2007 - administrative early release of prisoners<sup>2</sup> - though in March they announced a substantial extension of 'electronic tagging' parole.<sup>3</sup> A kite flown at the Tory Party conference was to rent prison cells overseas.<sup>4</sup> Last weekend we saw the suggestions of the use of prefab 'rapid deployment cells'; the return of cell-sharing; and delays to 'non-urgent maintenance work' to allow continued use of cells that would otherwise be under repair. (I put scare-quotes round 'non-urgent', because it is all too familiar that delaying 'non-urgent' maintenance results over time in the need for urgent, and massively more expensive, repairs.) On October 16 it was added that deportation of foreign offenders will be brought forward from within one year of end of sentence to 18 months, and that there may be a prohibition of 'short' sentences.<sup>5</sup>

Lord chancellor Alex Chalk's statement on Monday includes all of these options, plus more prison building (without any explanation of the non-delivery on promises of this sort since 2015); plus a series of steps that would increase pressure on the prison population, such as removing the usual remission for good conduct from rapists.<sup>6</sup> The *Times* headlines its report of Chalk's speech, 'Violent convicts may be freed this week to ease pressure on jails' (October 17), while the *Mail's* version is 'Hundreds of offenders including violent prisoners to be set free early, as prisons reach bursting point, government announces'; and the *Telegraph* goes with 'Prison sentences under a year to be scrapped for most criminals'. Evidently the editors don't believe most of Chalk's story.

## Too many

Chalk's statement, after starting with proposals to give longer sentences to certain "serious and violent" crimes, and the spin about prison-building, contained an idea with which communists agree: too many people are being sent to prison for not very serious crimes. In our *Draft programme* the CPGGB states:

■ Too many people are unnecessarily in prison. A high proportion of prisoners lack basic literacy skills, have mental-health issues or suffer from an alcohol or drug problem.

■ Prison should always be considered a last resort.<sup>7</sup>

The press release for Chalk's statement says that



**Doubled-up and locked-up for 23-hours of the day: hardly conducive to rehabilitation**

... despite the overall reoffending rates falling by almost a quarter since 2010, the public are being failed by short prison sentences that result in some of the lowest-risk offenders getting trapped in a revolving prison door. He pointed to the fact these short-term sentences often lead to offenders who could otherwise be turned away from crime losing their jobs and family ties, making them more likely to reoffend.

He noted that reoffending rates are far higher for offenders in prison for under 12 months, and higher again for those in for under six months. While the overall reoffending rate is 25%, the rate for people who spend fewer than 12 months in prison is over 50%. This goes up to 58% for those who serve sentences of six months or less.

This is also far higher than the 23% for a suspended sentence order with requirements, 38% without requirements, or 34% for those given a community order.

It is, of course, not just communists who agree with these points. They have been being made by UK criminologists for at least 40 years. Over the same period, they have been resisted with equal persistence by the Tory party and the Tory press, by middle management at the home office, and - for different reasons - by the judiciary and the criminal bar.

For the Tories and their press and the home office cadre it is an article of faith that 'prison works'. For the judiciary and criminal bar, the problem is that the sentence of imprisonment is the 'money' of crime and punishment - the universal equivalent that enables comparability of punishments relative to crimes. How is the severity of a sentence of imprisonment to be compared to that

of a 'community order'?

The two issues are somewhat interlocked. For the judiciary, robbery of £25,000 is considerably more serious than an assault occasioning actual bodily harm that would attract £25,000 in tort (civil compensatory) damages - as is apparent from Sentencing Council guidelines.<sup>8</sup> In consequence, sentencing for violence inevitably appears 'soft' by comparison, providing the ground for Tory press campaigns about 'soft sentencing'. Sentences tend to be 'bid up'.

This bears on Chalk's actual proposal to reduce the use of prison. This also needs a long quote for clarity:

In order to end the merry-go-round of reoffending the government will legislate that there should be a presumption against prison sentences of less than 12 months. Instead of going to prison these offenders can be punished in the community, repaying their debt to society by cleaning up our neighbourhoods and scrubbing graffiti off walls. By remaining in the community these offenders will also be able to better access the drug rehab, mental healthcare and other support that properly addresses the root causes of their offending ...

Judges and magistrates will still be able to send offenders to prison for less than 12 months if deemed appropriate, such as prolific repeat offenders, as well as anyone unwilling to obey the strict requirements of the sentence - such as breaking curfews, cutting off a GPS tag or breaching a court order to clean up the neighbourhoods they've damaged.

When these caveats are added up, the 'presumption' against prison sentences of less than 12 months will at best, *hopefully*, change nothing. The reason is that *the courts* have in recent times moved in the direction of using prison only for violent, serious and repeat offenders. This is visible in a report from the (rightwing) Civitas think-tank already in 2017; it is confirmed for January-March 2023 by the ministry of justice's 'Offender management statistics bulletin': "Most prisoners under an immediate custodial sentence have been convicted of violence against the person (31%), sexual offences (20%) or drug offences (17%)".<sup>9</sup>

I say '*hopefully*' change nothing, because there is a possibility, given the dynamics between the judiciary and the Tory press discussed above, that creating a presumption of non-use of sentences of less than 12 months imprisonment will lead judges to the view that, where custody is 'appropriate', 12 months should be the *starting point*. This would then drive up the duration of all sentences, for the sake of maintaining the scale of 'proportionality' in the sentencing council guidelines. It would thus make the problem worse.

Also in our *Draft programme* in the section on crime is: "End the war on drugs. Recreational drugs should be legalised and quality standards assured. People with a dependency problem should be offered treatment, not given a criminal record." In fact the 17% of prisoners held for drug offences comes to around 12,000 prisoners - quite a lot of prison space that could be freed up for other offenders. 'But they are dealers, not users' is true, as the Civitas report points out. But our proposal is to *fully legalise* recreational drugs, so that 'drug dealers' would be no different from tobacconists, publicans or off-licence operators.

Indeed, it could reasonably be expected that fully legalising recreational drugs would reduce the extent of 'gang violence'. This is partly related to the enforcement of contracts in the field - which under our policy would become ordinary judicial business. It is partly related to competition between suppliers; this has to take the form of fighting over territory, *because* the enforcement of contracts depends on personal violence at a level below the state violence which, in the last analysis, enforces ordinary contracts.

## No money

On October 9 Andrea Albutt, president of the Prison Governors Association, used her demitting-office speech to the PGA's conference to blame the prison places crisis on a "lurch to the right" by a government that promoted locking up more and more people.<sup>10</sup> The problem is that this complaint could equally be made of the Blair government, with its "tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime" rhetoric. Indeed, the logic of alternating moral panics about crime (leading to increased severity of sentence) and about inhumane punishment (leading to measures of amelioration) goes back certainly to the 1690s and possibly to the early 1300s and the panic then about 'trailbaston gangs'.

Moreover, it is not just the prisons. The Tory conference saw discussion of an 'epidemic' of shoplifting, and police minister Chris Philp suggest that the police "can't be everywhere" and that people who see shoplifters

should make citizens' arrests (a suggestion widely deprecated).<sup>11</sup> *The Times* reported on October 16:

The average time taken to bring a case to charge or summons rose from just over two weeks in 2016 to six weeks this year ... The situation is much worse for sexual offences, with the investigation time rising from an average of 110 days to 247 days.<sup>12</sup>

You might expect a Tory government to spend heavily on 'law and order'. But this has not been the characteristic of the post-2010 administrations. 'Austerity' has outweighed traditional Tory priorities. It has not gone away, even though Osborne's 'austerity' *spin* has gone.

Nor is it just - as it plainly is, in part, in relation to the national health service - a matter of starving the service in order to make a privatised alternative more attractive. While October 18 saw a splash about a private security firm prosecuting a shoplifter,<sup>13</sup> this is not really a novelty, since such prosecutions were commonplace in the 1970s.

Liam Byrne, chief secretary to the treasury under Gordon Brown, on leaving office when Labour lost the election in 2010, left a note for his successor: "I'm afraid there is no money." Byrne later apologised.<sup>14</sup> But in reality, his letter told a fundamental truth, which governments ever since have been spinning their way around. The UK is an offshore centre with a moderately large 'real economy' attached. It depends on borrowing to pay for imports, and on a larger scale on financial services. Unlike the US, it cannot run a radical deficit policy - witness the Truss government. Equally, however, it cannot sharply raise direct taxation, which would scare away the hot money that keeps the UK afloat.

So infrastructure and public institutions have to be starved of funds ●

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## Notes

1. [prisonreformtrust.org.uk/blog-unpicking-the-governments-prison-building-plans](https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/blog-unpicking-the-governments-prison-building-plans).
2. 'Blair: I regret early release of 25,000 prisoners' *Evening Standard* June 18 2007.
3. [insidetime.org/new-early-release-scheme-unveiled-by-government](https://insidetime.org/new-early-release-scheme-unveiled-by-government).
4. 'UK could rent space in foreign jails to ease shortage of cells' *The Guardian* October 3.
5. *The Times* October 16; [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-67116658](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-67116658).
6. [www.gov.uk/government/news/prison-reforms-will-cut-reoffending-and-put-worst-offenders-behind-bars-for-longer](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prison-reforms-will-cut-reoffending-and-put-worst-offenders-behind-bars-for-longer).
7. [communistparty.co.uk/draft-programme/3-immediate-demands-section-3.17, 'Crime and prison'](https://communistparty.co.uk/draft-programme/3-immediate-demands-section-3.17-Crime-and-prison).
8. See [www.sentencingcouncil.org.uk/crown-court](https://www.sentencingcouncil.org.uk/crown-court).
9. [www.civitas.org.uk/research/crime; www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-january-to-march-2023](https://www.civitas.org.uk/research/crime; www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-january-to-march-2023).
10. 'Prison places in England and Wales are 'bust', says governors' union chief' *The Guardian* October 9.
11. Philp to Policy Exchange's panel: 'Shoplifting, violence and abuse: confronting the crime epidemic faced by retailers and shop-workers' (policyexchange.org.uk/conservativepartyconference). On criticism, see, for example, [www.lawgazette.co.uk/commentary-and-opinion/citizens-arrest-a-tool-or-a-trap/5117519.article](https://www.lawgazette.co.uk/commentary-and-opinion/citizens-arrest-a-tool-or-a-trap/5117519.article).
12. 'Suspects and victims now waiting much longer for charge decision'.
13. [www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12642667/Britains-private-police-suspected-burglar-court-shoplifting-spree.html](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12642667/Britains-private-police-suspected-burglar-court-shoplifting-spree.html).
14. "I'm afraid there is no money" - the letter I will regret for ever' *The Guardian* May 9 2015.



REPLY

# Getting in touch

Jack Conrad takes up the offer made by Will McMahon and Nick Wrack about talks and joint work towards creating the basis for a mass Communist Party

Looking at the Talking About Socialism website was somewhat a strange experience. If the *Weekly Worker* had not existed for 30 years, if the Communist Party of Great Britain name had not been rescued from the Eurocommunist misleadership in 1991 - that after a fierce 10-year polemical war conducted by *The Leninist* against all forms of liquidationism - if there was no Provisional Central Committee, no CPGB *Draft programme*, no CPGB members, no CPGB committees and no CPGB co-thinkers abroad, TAS would have to be greeted with three resounding cheers by any worthwhile communist.

While, for example, I do not by any means agree with the TAS 'Who we are' statement - there are too many vagueries, too many fudges, too many opportunist escape clauses - I could certainly accept it as the *initial* basis for collaboration.<sup>1</sup> However, to make the obvious point, the *Weekly Worker* does exist. So does the Provisional Central Committee of the CPGB, our members, committees, co-thinkers, etc, and our four decades of open, tireless and undeviating struggle for a mass Communist Party.

So those who drew up, agreed and finally published the TAS statement on April 4 2023 were not intrepid pioneers, the bringers of a new message. But that is how it is designed to read. They really seem to expect those coming across their website to believe that TAS alone has discovered the necessity of a "serious democratic organisation", uniting around "the aim of building support for socialist/communist ideas and for the construction of a mass socialist/communist party", which has members in every city, town, school and workplace, with the aim of winning a "majority in society".

Their joint *Weekly Worker* article talks about overcoming "narrow sect interests", "layers" of individual Marxists and "the larger Marxist groups, such as Socialist Appeal, the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party".<sup>2</sup> Yet, nowhere is the CPGB mentioned and, therefore, nowhere do they set out their points of agreement and points of disagreement with the CPGB, which would, of course, be the only serious - the only honest - thing to do, especially when writing in the *Weekly Worker*. Despite that, the two of them have the nerve to lambast the confessional sects for ignoring "each other, pretending that they are the only band in town, insulating or inoculating their members against the ideas of other Marxists".

## Imitation

Perhaps it is true: "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery that mediocracy can pay to greatness" (Oscar Wilde). Nonetheless, we should not forget that imitation that does not attribute, does not acknowledge, is nothing less than crude plagiarism. In the world of commerce and intellectual property, such "flattery" can land you in deep financial trouble. But in the world of Marxist politics and Marxist intellectual scrupulousness, it invites tough questioning - if not outright mockery and scorn.

TAS comrades (I do not hesitate to use the term) have been on a journey. With some of them, well, that has been in the right direction;

with others, though, it has been in the wrong direction. Take Will McMahon. Unless I am mistaken, he was a member of the International Socialist Group (the Mandeliste Trotskyites in Britain). We first came across him in the Socialist Alliance. If I remember correctly, comrade McMahon was by then an Independent Socialist and a modestly useful broad-front ally of the Socialist Workers Party leadership of John Rees and Lindsey German. A nice enough guy, but, yes, with much to be modest about. I do not know anything about him after that, till a couple of decades later he resurfaces as a born-again communist. So why not contact the CPGB? Why not engage with us? The problem lies, I believe, with what Lenin famously called "opportunism in matters of organisation" (*One step forward, two steps back* 1904).<sup>3</sup>

Opportunists in matters of organisation advocate a "diffuse, not a strongly welded, party organisation"; they are hostile to the "idea (the 'bureaucratic idea') of building the party top downwards", starting from the highest, the best organised, the most authoritative; they advocate lowest-common-denominator politics, horizontalism and building bottom upwards; they are fearful of vigorous debate, binding votes and unity in action ('being told what to do'); they recoil from the demand that every party member be active in one of its organisations and makes a regular, meaningful, financial contribution; they tend to limit themselves to innocuous discussion circles and a platonic commitment to communism; they pander to freelance individualism, as against democratic centralism - in short they go for the sort of founding statement being currently peddled by TAS.

Then there is Nick Wrack. Undoubtedly he has a colourful backstory. Comrade Wrack rose through the ranks of Militant Tendency at a pace of knots and for a short while served his master as editor of *Militant* (true, always a crushingly boring, economic, advertising sheet). He broke with Peter Taaffe for unknown reasons. In the Socialist Alliance comrade Wrack was one of the leading Independent Socialists and another useful ally of the John Rees-Lindsey German SWP power couple. Hence, unsurprisingly, he went along with the SWP's decision in 2005 to close down the Socialist Alliance, which possibly had genuine potential, and instead go for the 'big time' with George Galloway, Yvonne Ridley, Ken Loach, Salma Yaqoob and the popular front with the Muslim Association of Britain - otherwise known as Respect. Our Nick (over)enthusiastically, chaired Respect's first conference. He briefly joined the SWP only to break with it in favour of Respect Renewal. Meanwhile, we worked to expose the SWP's crass opportunism and 'supported' Respect like the 'rope supports the hanged man' (George Galloway).

Our political paths crossed once again in Left Unity. He argued for socialism, as against Socialist

Resistance (given its opposition to socialism, an absurdly misnamed iteration of Mandeliste Trotskyism before they became Anticapitalist Resistance). They resisted socialism as a programmatic commitment - something comrade Wrack argued for. And he argued well. However, he would not join Communist Platform, nor did he support our demands for a proper orientation to the Labour Party. Eg, Communist Platform's motion calling for Left Unity to campaign for the right of all socialist groups to affiliate to the Labour Party (as stipulated in the original 1900 constitution). He dismissed the idea as lacking mass traction. Er ... unlike socialism.

Comrade Wrack formed his own Socialist Platform that was distinguished first and foremost by its refusal to countenance any democratic changes to its 'Who we are' statement, a visceral hostility to organised communists and, ironically, horribly, a positive reliance on the social-imperialist Alliance for Workers' Liberty, when it came to votes.

Nonetheless, we sincerely attempted to engage with comrade Wrack. He featured on CPGB platforms alongside myself on more than one occasion. We wanted some kind of fusion and would have been more than happy to see him as a member of the CPGB's PCC. On balance he would have been an asset. But it was not to be. He careered off ... and again, like comrade McMahon, reappeared on my radar as a born-again communist in TAS.

Therefore, albeit with considerable qualifications, one can say that McMahon-Wrack have gone from extreme opportunism to something approaching the appearance of orthodox Marxism - well, at least for the naive observer. Their current failure to engage with - even to mention - the CPGB testifies to opportunism in matters of organisation.

But there are others - the friends by whom you shall be known. When

I last dipped into the TAS website the third article listed there was by one Chris Strafford ('Broad to death'<sup>4</sup>). From a CPGB point of view, this is a rather run-of-the-mill critique of Left Unity, Respect and the latest Transform nonsense. The problem being that the last polemic I wrote against Chris Strafford was when he was in and around the CPGB ... and when he advocated broad fronts/parties. So 'Broad to death' is not flattering imitation, but crude plagiarism, especially given the refusal, the failure to account for his own past and accept that my polemic against him was fully justified.<sup>5</sup>

## Utterly dumb

The comrade broke from our ranks in favour of the utterly forgettable, utterly dumb, Anti-Capitalist Initiative (along with Caitriona Rylance, who has recently appeared in the letters pages of the *Weekly Worker* in full self-righteous mode demanding that we should show "humility"<sup>6</sup>). This 'exiting' ACI project was backed by Workers Power's Richard Brenner, Marcus Halaby and Dave Stocking, Permanent Revolution's Stuart King and the Luke Cooper-Simon Harvey split from Worker Power (ie, all three WP fragments were involved in driving this opportunist merry-go-round). ACI was, laughably, going to *ever so 'umbly* strive for a situation where so-called Marxists would be "as minoritarian as possible", so as to reach out to "broader" forces: local residents, trade unionists, anti-capitalists, anarchists, autonomists, etc. Comrade Strafford was put in charge of the registration table at its founding conference.<sup>7</sup> One bright idea was to campaign against Ladbroke's betting shops.<sup>8</sup> The whole thing began as farce and predictably ended as farce.

Continued commitment to broad frontism led comrade Strafford to Left Unity, where, unfortunately, he joined the witch-hunt against Communist Platform's Laurie McCauley (whose 'crime' was reporting a routine meeting of the Manchester branch in the *Weekly Worker*). Comrade Strafford gravitated to Nick Wrack's Socialist Platform and in the process, presumably, reinvented himself politically. Later he published an online journal *Prometheus* (since closed).

## Trauma recovery

Seen in this light, TAS is an eclectic, unstable outfit, which claims to be in the forefront of the struggle for a "mass socialist/communist party", but in actual fact fights shy of engaging with what long went before it, what now stands in front of it and what towers above it: the CPGB. The appeal of TAS is to the disappointed, the demoralised, the hurt, even the downright cynical. More of a trauma recovery group than a serious organisation of communists then. TAS offers to provide a "home" to those "many individuals who are not members of any existing Marxist group, who consider themselves to be Marxists, but who have rejected [the] groups because

of their intolerant, undemocratic and sectish behaviour".

Should we tolerate the social-imperialists who back the foreign policy of their own ruling class and call for Nato to 'Arm, arm, arm, Ukraine'? We think not. Is it sectish to fight national chauvinism, broad frontism and the economic rejection of the battle for democracy? Once again, we think not. There should be no wish to live and let live, when it comes to advocates of opportunism. Doubtless that produces anarchistic accusations of inquisitions, inflexibility and bureaucracy. But what we are really talking about is open debate, resolutions and the normal workings of internal democracy. The CPGB certainly opposes backsliding and conciliationism, and will continue to undeviatingly argue for organising the advanced part of the working class into a party based on the solid foundations of a definite minimum-maximum programme.

Instead, with TAS, we get the toleration of opportunism and pandering to individualistic freelancers: "No-one likes to be hector, lectured, belittled or told what to think and what to do. Thinking Marxists want comradely debate." Doubtless some leaders of the confessional sects try to hector, lecture and belittle. Perhaps that is what happened to young Nick Wrack under the Peter Taaffe regime. Either way, we should be careful not to throw the communist baby out with the sectarian bathwater. Surely we favour telling communist trade union officials, communist MPs and communist councillors "what to do" - though, of course, not what to think. So, yes, we favour vigorous debate, binding votes and disciplined unity in action.

What about the abusive behaviour of the leaders of some confessional sects? Eg, Gerry Healy and Martin Smith. We say, publicly expose them after exhausting all available internal channels, defy bureaucratic centralism and organise co-thinkers into a politically coherent faction, even if that results in expulsion. So we favour splits as well as fusions.

In the interests of clarity, in the interests of overcoming any misunderstandings, in the interests of taking forward the fight for a mass Communist Party, we therefore formally offer TAS a debate, an exchange, a discussion at one of our Online Communist Forums. We shall get in touch ●

## Notes

1. talkingaboutsocialism.org/about.
2. 'Get in touch with us' *Weekly Worker* October 12: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1462/get-in-touch-with-us.
3. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 7, Moscow 1977, p204, ff.
4. Posted October 8 2023.
5. Eg, J Conrad, 'Programme and party: broad bad, mass good' *Weekly Worker* February 21 2013: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/950/programme-and-party-broad-bad-mass-good.
6. Letters *Weekly Worker* October 12 2023: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1462/letters.
7. B Lewis, 'Ditch sects and fronts' *Weekly Worker* May 3 2012: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/912/ditch-sects-and-fronts.
8. Daniel Harvey wrote an excellent critique of this kind of broad politics, amusingly including the aborted ACI campaign against Ladbroke's. See 'Organisation, consciousness and knack of falling apart' *Weekly Worker* December 4 2014: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1037/organisation-consciousness-and-knack-of-falling-ap.

Spot the difference



## MEMORIES

# Placing demands on Labour

Jack Bernard retells the hoary old tale of the inadequacies of the minimum-maximum programme of classical Marxism and the wonders that can be performed once equipped with transitional demands

Classical social democratic parties divided their programmes into two parts: a *minimum* programme and a *maximum*. For example, the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks shared a similar programme with this basic division.

The demands of the shared Russian Social Democratic Labour Party's 'minimum' programme were partial, minimal demands that were placed on the tsarist government and were realisable under a bourgeois regime. For example, Lenin explained that the demand for nationalisation of the land was a *bourgeois* measure, and not a *socialist* measure. He cited the example that Britain had nationalised the land in Australia, with the specific purpose of ensuring that farming would be done on a large scale and not by numerous petty bourgeois, small farmers operating on small plots.

However, whilst not openly challenging social democracy's division of programme into minimum and maximum parts, Lenin's 'minimum' demand for nationalisation of the land *took on* a transitional character by only being realised by the transitional government that was established following the October 1917 Bolshevik insurrection. The demand was *theoretically* realisable by the bourgeoisie, but in practice it was realised by a transitional *workers' and peasants' government* consisting of Bolsheviks and Left Socialist Revolutionaries.

The Russian Revolution that started in February 1917 raised conjunctural concerns that were not addressed by the RSDLP's programme. The tsarist army was not doing well in the imperialist World War I, and this problem needed addressing. In addition, the cities were short of food, and the poor peasants were now in a worse situation because of capitalist developments in agriculture following the counterrevolution of 1907.

The programme of the Bolshevik Party in 1917 has been summarised as 'Bread, land and peace', but this three-demand programme was largely something new. It addressed the *conjuncture* and was neither a minimum nor a maximum programme, but a selective transitional programme. And this programme of demands was accompanied by the slogan, 'All power to the soviets'. The October 1917 Bolshevik insurrection helped concretise this slogan by establishing not a Bolshevik government, but a transitional *workers' and peasants' government* based on the soviets.

Subsequent discussions within the Bolshevik Party led to the jettisoning of the classical minimum/maximum programme approach, in favour of a programme of transitional demands and slogans that were appropriate to each given concrete situation.

## Wrong slogans

Prior to the establishment of the *Senedd Cymru* (Welsh Parliament) in 1999, I had travelled to Cardiff to specifically listen to my friend and comrade, Ceri Evans, speak at a public meeting, in favour of an as-yet non-existent Welsh assembly.

Ceri was a revolutionary and a member of the Welsh Labour Party. He responded to talk within the party for a possible future Welsh assembly, but was not happy about the very limited powers that it was proposed to have. Ceri addressed this question by arguing that it should have nothing less than the powers of a *constituent*



Reliquary and skull of Saint Ivo of Kermartin (1253–1303) in Tréguier, France (photo Mathieu Guy)

*assembly*: ie, of the highest expression of the legislature within bourgeois democracy. (Ceri died at a young age and at his memorial meeting in Pontypridd a Labour member claimed that he had single-handedly won the Welsh Labour Party to supporting the establishment of the Welsh parliament.)

The demand for a Welsh assembly was a demand placed on the incumbent UK government. As Ceri formulated it, he in effect was demanding the right of self-determination for the Welsh people. Of course, this demand was not realised in full, but it doubtless had educational value. It was in effect an 'opening bid'. A Welsh parliament appeared, thanks to Ceri, but not with all of the powers that he had argued for.

But members of Workers Power at the Cardiff public meeting did not support the demand for a Welsh assembly and instead raised, and counterposed to it, the slogan of soviets. Doubtless, the comrades had read Leon Trotsky's so-called *Transitional programme* and had noticed that it stated: "The slogan of *soviets* ... crowns the programme of transitional demands."

But the comrades had also doubtless failed to notice that *The transitional programme* was specifically aimed at addressing coming *pre-revolutionary* situations. It clearly states the character of its envisaged "next period":

The strategic task of the next period - a pre-revolutionary period of agitation, propaganda and organisation - consists in overcoming the contradiction between the maturity of the objective revolutionary conditions and the immaturity of the proletariat and its vanguard (the confusion and disappointment of the older generation, the inexperience of the younger generation) ...<sup>1</sup>

A transitional programme is needed to bridge this contradiction: ie, this objective/subjective gap. Today in Britain, there is not a pre-revolutionary situation - the existing political regime of bourgeois parliamentary democracy continues to function. We must not counterpose to bourgeois democracy soviet democracy, because bourgeois democracy has not yet broken down. To do so would be abstract.

After the Bolshevik insurrection of

October 1917, a soviet government was established. But the Bolsheviks nevertheless kept their promise to convene the Constituent Assembly: ie, a bourgeois-democratic institution. At the initial meeting of this assembly, the Bolsheviks counterposed to it the power and authority of the existing soviet, and the constituent assembly was subsequently dissolved in favour of the soviet.

We must do what the Bolsheviks did: ie, exhaust all progressive possibilities within bourgeois democracy before counterposing soviet democracy to it.

The lesson lost on the comrades of Workers Power is that it is necessary to take account of the concrete political situation. In other words, *The transitional programme* must be interpreted in this light. For example, *some* of its demands and slogans are relatively timeless, whilst others are appropriate only to pre-revolutionary situations. In Russia in 1917, the demand for a constituent assembly was a *transitional demand*. This is because it proved to be realisable only by the workers' and peasants' government established after the seizure of state power by the Bolshevik insurrection in October.

In other words, Ceri Evans' demand for a Welsh assembly with the powers of a constituent assembly, was *also* a transitional demand. More precisely, it was a *transitional revolutionary democratic demand*. If such a Welsh assembly had been actually realised, and if this assembly had decided that Wales should form its own independent state, this would have meant *political revolution*, albeit hopefully a peaceful revolution, if it had been carried out. Of course, this hypothesis was not actually realised. Today's *Senedd Cymru* has no such power. Nor does the Scottish parliament.

The so-called *The transitional programme* is properly titled: *The death agony of capitalism and the tasks of the Fourth International*. I will refer to it simply as the *DA*.

The document was published in English by the American Socialist Workers Party and they took the liberty of renaming its section on the 'Workers' and peasants' government' the 'Workers' and farmers' government'. In the UK today, there are no 'peasants' as such; and small farmers are not as politically significant as, say, the mass of poor petty bourgeois, who often have been

obliged to become self-employed because of reactionary government legislation.

Hence, for the UK today, the term 'workers' and peasants' government' can be translated as 'workers' and poor peoples' government', 'workers' and poor petty bourgeois government', or - most appropriately - simply 'workers' government'.

The aforementioned section of the *DA* contains the following paragraph, which includes a crucial transitional demand:

Of all parties and organisations which base themselves on the workers and peasants and speak in their name, we demand that they break politically from the bourgeoisie and enter upon the road of struggle for the workers' and peasants' government. On this road we promise them full support against capitalist reaction. At the same time, we indefatigably develop agitation around those transitional demands which should, in our opinion, form the programme of the 'workers' and peasants' government'.

Though this demand in effect addresses the far left in the UK today, the most important party it addresses is the Labour Party (in Northern Ireland, it is Sinn Féin).

The Labour Party is a bourgeois workers' party. It is bourgeois because it has a bourgeois programme: ie, it defends capitalism; and it is controlled by politicians employed by a bourgeois state: ie, it is not controlled by its membership. It is the only *mass* workers' party in Britain. However, the Labour Party will almost certainly never form a true workers' government, though, as I will argue, this theoretical possibility must not be entirely ruled out.

## Peasants

Much of the argumentation within the *DA* section, 'Workers' and peasants' government', concentrates on lessons drawn from Russia in 1917. But the latter period was different to the situation in Britain today. Russia today has in effect stepped over the historical stage of bourgeois democracy. The latter was not an option for the Russian Revolution of 1917, and it has not been an option since then. The period between the February and October revolutions saw a brief period of *petty bourgeois democracy*. Today in the UK we have an established bourgeois democracy. The UK is in an aftermath of the post-war boom. Just as the so-called 'American dream' is now over, UK society follows suit, tail-ending the USA, as it has done since the 1930s. The UK is the USA's lap-dog.

Britain, but not the UK's Northern Ireland of today, has a functioning bourgeois democracy that has a long, post-World War II history. But some lessons of the period between February and October 1917 in Russia are nevertheless appropriate to the UK today. Specifically, revolutionaries must demand that a future Labour government *breaks politically from the bourgeoisie*. This is the most important transitional demand for revolutionaries in Britain today. It means also not taking a sectarian attitude towards all other parties of the proletariat, but there must be a particular focus on the Labour Party.

The following quote from *DA* illustrates the need for a basic non-sectarian attitude to other workers'

parties. I apologise for its length:

From April to September 1917, the Bolsheviks demanded that the [Socialist Revolutionaries] and Mensheviks break with the liberal bourgeoisie and take power into their own hands. Under this provision, the Bolshevik Party promised the Mensheviks and the SRs, as the petty bourgeois representatives of the workers and peasants, its revolutionary aid against the bourgeoisie; categorically refusing, however, either to enter into the government of the Mensheviks and SRs or to carry political responsibility for it.

If the Mensheviks and the SRs had actually broken with the Cadets (liberals) and with foreign imperialism, then the 'workers' and peasants' government' created by them could only have hastened and facilitated the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

But it was exactly because of this that the leadership of petty bourgeois democracy resisted, with all possible strength, the establishment of its own government. The experience of Russia demonstrated - and the experience of Spain and France once again confirms - that even under very favourable conditions the parties of petty bourgeois democracy (SRs, social democrats, Stalinists, anarchists) are incapable of creating a government of workers and peasants: that is, a government independent of the bourgeoisie.

Incidentally, the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was established in Russia in the autumn of 1918. A workers' and peasants' government existed until roughly late February 1918. Sometimes, Trotsky uses the term, 'dictatorship of the proletariat', to refer to the post-February political régime of an all-Bolshevik government. But these distinctions are outside the scope of the present article.

Having stated above, that "the parties of petty bourgeois democracy (SRs, social democrats, Stalinists, anarchists) are incapable of creating a government of workers and peasants", the text later adds the following qualification:

Is the creation of such a government by the traditional workers' organisations possible? Past experience shows, as has already been stated, that this is, to say the least, highly improbable. However, one cannot categorically deny in advance the theoretical possibility that, under the influence of completely exceptional circumstances (war, defeat, financial crash, mass revolutionary pressure, etc), the petty bourgeois parties, including the Stalinists, may go further than they themselves wish, along the road to a break with the bourgeoisie ...

In other words, the Chinese revolution of the late 1930s and 40s led to the establishment, by the Stalinists, of the Peoples' Republic of China in 1949, and a workers' state. Similarly, the July 26 Movement in Cuba, after resolving some internal differences, established a workers' state following the January 1959 government overthrow. Subsequently, Stalinism presided over the counterrevolutionary transformations of both the USSR and the PRC into bourgeois states;

respectively, in the late 1980s and the early 1970s. Again, these matters are outside of the scope of this article.

Our task as revolutionaries is not to speculate whether or not the Labour Party may go further than it wishes, along the road to a break from the bourgeoisie, but rather to simply demand that it does break from the bourgeoisie. The purpose of this transitional demand is thus not to expect a direct positive result, but rather to gradually expose the Labour Party - it will undoubtedly never break from the bourgeoisie - and this ongoing exposure will have crucial 'educational significance' for the masses. The *DA* explains this purpose of such a demand:

... the demand of the Bolsheviks, addressed to the Mensheviks and the SRs, 'Break with the bourgeoisie, take the power into your own hands!', had, for the masses, tremendous educational significance. The obstinate unwillingness of the Mensheviks and SRs to take power - so dramatically exposed during the July Days - definitely doomed them before mass opinion, and prepared the victory of the Bolsheviks.

The main alternative to this approach - and it is one that is common among the UK far left - is to simply denounce the Labour Party in a sectarian fashion; and to continue to attempt to gradually, and bit by bit, build an alternative mass party to Labour.

Another approach is to reduce this to simply an organisational question of whether or not revolutionaries should enter the Labour Party or do fraction work of a clandestine or non-clandestine nature within it. This is sometimes combined with the gradual, organic so-called party-building approach. It too, avoids the question of how to win the masses, by relegating it to the indefinite future and/or trying to win the masses solely by propaganda for socialism.

The demand, 'Break from the bourgeoisie', must also be placed on those revolutionary parties in the UK today that have adopted a social-patriotic position by their failure to clearly oppose the British government's sending arms and financial aid to the Zelensky régime in Ukraine and/or their tail-ending of Brexit.

## Europe

On June 30 1923, *Pravda* published a discussion article, 'Is the time ripe for the slogan: "The United States of Europe"?' Its political line was officially adopted by the executive committee of the Communist International shortly after its publication, against considerable opposition.

In Trotsky's *The first five years of the Communist International*, volume 2, there is an endnote from the editors for the above discussion article, which states:

"It was no mere accident," wrote Trotsky in 1928, "that despite all prejudices, the slogan of a Soviet United States of Europe was adopted precisely in 1923, at a time when a revolutionary explosion was expected in Germany, and when the question of state interrelations in Europe assumed an extremely burning character. Every new aggravation of the European - and indeed of the world - crisis is sufficiently sharp to bring to the fore the main political problems, and to invest the slogan of the United States of Europe with attractive power." The slogan appeared in Comintern literature as late as 1926.

Today in the UK, as with Workers Power at the Cardiff public meeting that I have previously referred to, it is abstract and inappropriate to raise

a slogan of a Soviet United States of Europe. But it is not abstract to raise the slogan of simply a 'United States of Europe' by in effect demanding that the European Union is transformed into a single-state, federal European entity rather than the restricted confederation that it presently is.

Trotsky, the author of the 1923 discussion article, claims that the bourgeoisie will never unite Europe peacefully. Today, all evidence suggests that he is right to make this claim: for example, war rages today in Ukraine. In other words, like World War I and World War II, which were both European-led wars, the bourgeoisie, with its EU, has only made partial steps forward in uniting Europe.

## Seriously

The call for a 'United States of Europe' is a transitional slogan despite the fact that it avoids mentioning either soviets or socialism. It is transitional because it requires a workers' and peasants' government to realise it.

Marxists who go beyond 'common sense' by taking dialectics seriously will understand that revolutionaries must exploit the dialectical contradiction between what is needed and what is 'possible' or 'realistic'. Bourgeois democracy was impossible in Russia in 1917, but a superior type of democracy - ie, soviet democracy - nevertheless proved to be possible. Democracy appeared to be impossible; but it was realised in soviet form.

Putting this another way, we must demand that the bourgeoisie unites Europe peacefully despite the fact that it will never achieve this. This is applying permanent revolution to the European revolution. (But again this is to a degree outside the scope of this article.) State unification of Europe is necessary. Hence, our slogan for a United States of Europe and our demand that the bourgeoisie establishes it have an educational significance, because they help expose the bourgeoisie's failures during the entire period since the revolutions of the 1848 period, and particularly since 1913. To repeat: a United States of Europe requires a future workers' and peasants' government to realise it in practice, hence it is a transitional slogan.

We must also raise demands that underpin the idea of a United States of Europe as a single, federal state. For example, the EU does not recognise the right of nations to self-determination. Instead, it simply recognises this right for its existing so-called 'national' states. The EU imposes no federal requirement that its member-states recognise the right of nations to self-determination. So, for example, in recognising both the UK and Éire as 'nations', the EU is denying the right of the Irish people to self-determination. We must demand a united Ireland as a part of a united Europe. All Irish people living both inside and outside Ireland must vote in elections for an Irish constituent assembly. But this is a tactical question, once again outside of the scope of this article.

Hence, as with the Labour Party, revolutionaries must not simply denounce the EU as being a 'nasty capitalist institution', but must place demands on it in order to expose its failures; and they must do this despite the fact that the UK is no longer an EU member. We must demand that the Labour Party begins the process of breaking with the British bourgeoisie by rejoining the UK to the EU.

What underpins the need for European political integration is that Europe is an economic entity. Hence, because of major economic links, both the Ukraine and Russia should be parts of the EU, as should be the Balkan states of Albania, Bosnia and

Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, North Macedonia and Serbia. But the bourgeois EU refuses to unite Europe. Instead, the EU remains a privileged club.

Turkey has been a candidate to join the EU since 1999. Accession negotiations started in 2005, but have not advanced recently. The EU is by far Turkey's largest merchandise import and export partner. In 2022, 26% of its goods imports and 41% of its exports were with the EU. But the EU's political institutions are blocking Turkey's membership of their privileged and exclusive club.

The sale of, for example, Russian gas to Germany has been literally sabotaged by the US - with EU support. Just as the British bourgeoisie indulged in economic sabotage by implementing Brexit, now the two western Anglo-Saxon countries have conspired to oppose Europe's economic and political integration, by demonising Russia and those countries that are or may be sympathetic to Russia.

As Lenin argued, the bourgeoisie in its imperialist epoch is decadent. It cannot solve the basic conflict between the world character of the productive forces and the national-state framework in which the world economy operates.

Trotsky's following words from his 1923 discussion article, basically remain valid today, 100 years later. He writes:

To the toiling masses of Europe, it is becoming ever clearer that the bourgeoisie is incapable of solving the basic problems of restoring Europe's economic life. The slogan, 'a workers' and peasants' government', is designed to meet the growing attempts of the workers to find a way out by their own efforts. It has now become necessary to point out this avenue of salvation more concretely: namely, to assert that only in the closest economic cooperation of the peoples of Europe lies the avenue of salvation for our continent - from economic decay and from enslavement to mighty American capitalism.

## Other demands

The *DA* contains, in its section, 'Against sectarianism', a general criticism of "sectarian moods and groupings" that were, in 1938, "at the periphery of the Fourth International". It states: "At their base, lies a refusal to struggle for partial and transitional demands: ie, for the elementary interests and needs of the working masses, as they are today."

The British Socialist Party - formerly Militant - claims to be guided by the *DA*, but whilst totally ignoring the document's section on the workers' and peasants' government, it also proposes a reformist programme of partial, minimum demands, and it fails to place these demands on the Labour Party. Its demands are posited as a programme for a future SP government. It thus takes a basic sectarian stance towards the Labour Party: ie, towards the only existing mass workers' party that might implement its demand for a £15 per hour minimum wage.

The SP has returned to the minimum/maximum programme division of classical social democracy: ie, it raises no genuinely transitional demands nor slogans. For example, by demanding a minimum wage of £15 per hour, the SP avoids the transitional demand for a "sliding scale of wages and sliding scale of hours", as proposed in the *DA*. Today healthworkers need a wage that is protected against inflation - hence, a "sliding scale of wages" is needed by them and others. This is a transitional demand that revolutionaries must

continually explain, elaborate on, repeat and thus popularise through both agitation and propaganda.

The SP's programme is a fraud because it claims to follow the *DA*, but does not raise transitional demands and/or slogans, raising only partial, minimal demands. And alongside this minimum programme it raises abstract propaganda for socialism: ie, its maximum programme. The SP has in the past raised its reactionary slogan for a 'left Brexit' and it counterposes to a United States of Europe (ie, to a federal Europe) its so-called "voluntary socialist confederation of Wales, England, Scotland and Ireland". This implies that an isolated, socialist British Isles can somehow exist within a hostile capitalist environment. In other words, the SP has learnt nothing from the historic failure of the programme of 'socialism in one country'.

Thus, the SP claims to follow Trotskyism, but it ignores Trotsky's main programmatic argument that the USSR would inevitably succumb to the pressure of hostile capitalist economic encirclement unless there was revolution in the west. A similar problem of economic isolation also destroyed the Chinese workers' state after it failed to build socialism in one country, and consciously adopted a capitalist road.

The SP in effect asks the toiling masses to wait until it is in a position to implement its minimum programme: eg, its demand for a minimum wage of £15 per hour. It thus has a rationalistic, gradual, building-blocks approach that ignores Marxist dialectics, as well as transitional demands and slogans.

I have used the example of the SP because it best illustrates the basic general programmatic problems of far-left revolutionary politics in the UK and elsewhere, today. In this article, I have specifically concentrated on two transitional demands/slogans; namely, that a future Labour government must break politically with the bourgeoisie; and that the UK should rejoin the EU, with full membership, adopting the euro as its currency. Also, the slogan of a United States of Europe must be given substance by, for example, demanding that the EU recognises the right of nations to self-determination. And this demand must also be placed on each and every European government. Unlike with the British SP, revolutionaries must be genuine internationalists.

Ongoing discussion is also necessary in order to identify what the "elementary interests and needs of the working masses ... are today", and on how to formulate and struggle for partial and transitional demands that address these interests and needs. But instead, virtually the entire UK far left indulges in abstract propaganda for socialism, with each party often pretending that it has a programme, and consequently each failing to agitate around an absent programme.

However, this article is about transitional demands and slogans, and thus avoids the needed discussion about partial demands that must accompany them. Suffice it say that a programme of partial and transitional demands is needed; and from this programme, a shorter programme of transitional demands must be selected, which, in the opinion of revolutionaries, should form the programme for a Labour government that breaks from the bourgeoisie.

Demanding this break is to demand that a Labour government enters upon the road of struggle for a genuine workers' government. When Labour deviates from this road, revolutionaries must clearly criticise it ●

## Notes

1. www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/tp/tp-text.htm.

# What we fight for

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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# weekly worker

## State clamp down egged on by press

# Week in the hall of mirrors

Reporting of Israel's assault on Gaza provides an object lesson in how the bourgeois media works, argues Paul Demarty

We can start with a single incident in recent media coverage of the Gaza war - relatively minor, given the relentless assault on truth we have been subjected to since Hamas's raids into southern Israel.

In advance of Saturday's mass demonstration against Israel's flattening and likely invasion of northern Gaza, Palestine Action, a direct action group, covered the facade of the BBC building in Portland Place with fake blood. It was an impressively grisly image, obviously intended to protest at the BBC's bias towards the Israelis. Yet that was not the story that initially made it out: the *Daily Mail* and GB News both took a rather different framing: "BBC headquarters is covered with blood-red paint, as controversy rages over corporation's decision not to call baby-slaughtering Hamas 'terrorists'", went the *Mail* headline; a shorter version adorned an article on the GB News website.

The clear implication - though craftily not stated explicitly - is that this was a righteous response from *pro-Israel* persons unknown, objecting to the Beeb's utterly marginal demerit from the most genocidal available rhetoric. In the inverted world of the media, this protest action had its meaning exactly reversed. Within a few hours, of course, the whole affair was forgotten; one day can produce five millennia's worth of the sands of time, if that is what is necessary to get the agenda back where it needs to be.

## Gates of hell

There is also, of course, the matter of those slaughtered babies - a particularly gruesome and confusing sub-plot of this whole affair. The allegation that Hamas militants had beheaded infants was widely and immediately broadcast as fact, but actual evidence of this crime has proven peculiarly elusive. The soldier who made the allegations initially turned out to be a fascist settler ideologue; Joe Biden repeated the story in a press conference, then had to quietly walk it back later the same day; Bibi Netanyahu claimed he had seen the evidence, and then later admitted that he had not.

Nonetheless, it has become the foremost bludgeon of the media onslaught against the Palestinian movement - the question of possibly hypothetical dead babies. Meanwhile, Gaza is reduced to brick dust - a place with an exceptionally young population. As I write, there are over 700 Gazan children confirmed dead, certainly including many infants - a number likely to be radically undercounted. Their deaths are rendered invisible, and the invisible deaths of settler babies inescapable.

That is not to say that children did not die at the hands of Hamas in their raids last weekend (some witnesses suggest mostly as a result of intense combat between Hamas and Israel Defence Force



Already banned in France and Germany

fighters, but there is little certainty here). Such is the routine savagery of guerrilla warfare, and for that matter the counterinsurgencies that inevitably follow - even the most superficial survey of its history will show that. Media consumers in the west, however, are denied even that level of background analysis.

It is as if, on October 7, a portal suddenly opened to hell itself, and demons came forth on a rampage around the western Negev. Hamas has existed for some four decades now; it has governed Gaza for nearly two (it was notoriously given a leg-up in the early days by Israeli intelligence, who sought successfully to split the Palestinian resistance by promoting religious fundamentalism.) The knowledge of how this provocation came to take place - indeed any theory more sophisticated than mere demonology - is blanketed in a fog of incuriosity.

This incuriosity is only to be expected on the part of the complicit - and the complicity of the western media (not to mention the western political class) is so brazen, it is almost embarrassing to be forced to describe it. The false equivalences pile up, day by day; in the name of 'fairness', occasionally a Palestinian dignitary or Gazan ordinary bod is invited to speak their piece, and then relentlessly berated about beheaded babies. The rhetoric of Israeli politicians, which has sometimes seemed cribbed from *The Turner diaries*, is left unchallenged - indeed, in at least one case, defence minister Yoav Gallant's description of Gazans as "human animals" was discreetly left out of 'factual' reports of his statements.

The classic mission statements of journalism - 'speaking truth to

power', 'comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable' - never seem so laughably off base as when Israel inflicts mass deaths on its occupied territories. How many must die before 'respectable' journalists start to look in the mirror and see something they do not recognise, something brutish and depraved, looking back? We have not reached that tally in 15 years of periodic carpet-bombings, of pogroms in the West Bank and Jerusalem, of peaceful protestors routinely and deliberately kneecapped by snipers near the border fence, of children incinerated in drone strikes.

## Wrong place

And, indeed, of *journalists* caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. It is not long since *Al-Jazeera's* Shireen Abu Akleh was murdered by sniper fire in Jenin. The lengths to which 'respectable' media went to avoid the stunningly obvious explanation - that Israel deliberately targets journalists it deems unfriendly - reached the level of gallows humour. So it was with this week's most prominent press corps casualty, who fell not in Gaza, but in Lebanon: Reuters cameraman Issam Abdallah's death was reported by *his own employer* with the headline, "Reuters journalist killed in Lebanon in missile fire from direction of Israel". But *who* launched the missile? Why? Who can say? A timely reminder, for all the workers in the world, that the boss is *not* on your side ...

All this serves the purpose not only of hiding, but pre-emptively delegitimising the truth. The sharp end of the media offensive is pointed at those who demur from the impenetrable consensus. We have seen, over the last week, numerous

protests - some fairly substantial - against Israel's actions, and a good thing too. In western Europe and the United States, the response has been strikingly anti-democratic, even for those of us who expect no better. Suella Braverman has threatened to ban Palestine demos in this country. Emmanuel Macron has already done it in France - an order heroically defied by Parisians on Monday.

It is no surprise to see similar actions in Germany, which has always been happy to enforce its Overton window with legal sanctions, and has wholly internalised the foolish notion that the crime of the holocaust demands unlimited support for Israel. Shielding today's *genocidaires* as penance for those of 80 years ago is the inevitable absurd result of the reification of historical crimes as somehow part of the essence of the national character.

A key part of the justification for such infringements of freedom of speech and assembly is the cherry-picking of (at least apparently) *pro-Hamas* statements by individuals on such demonstrations and their wide broadcast in the media. Certainly, that is an opinion held by many misguided leftists, from unsophisticated third-worldists to Charlie Kimber of the Socialist Workers Party.

These comrades seem uninterested in looking too deeply at the nature of Hamas, and the kind of strategy it is employing. The gamble seems to be to provoke the ground invasion the protestors are trying to prevent, and then strike a telling blow, or else trigger regional escalation - not a wholly impossible plan, but one that quite inevitably entails the unspeakable slaughter unfolding before our eyes. It is not so much heroism as desperation. The contemporary left seems more interested in making Jesuitical arguments about whether violent resistance is "justified", wholly in abstraction from such matters, than thinking strategically about the likely outcome. All these errors are errors of analysis, however; there is no moral equivalence between a few over-excited third worldists and the breathtakingly mendacious, genocide-abetting state and media who smear them as anti-Semites.

In any case, if the media can make the charge stick - that the left is a bunch of crazed anti-Semites who welcome the death of Jewish babies - then it serves further to hide the villainy of our leaders and their paid persuaders. 'Standing with Israel' becomes the moral position, and the uncomfortable consequences of doing so are well hidden.

Above all, times like this demonstrate the phoniness of bourgeois society's commitment to freedom of the press. The liberal ideal is for there to be a civil society *independent* of the state, which can in fact hold the state to account. Yet the state is indispensable to capitalism, and so the capitalist media is tendentially compromised by 'the national interest'. The *direct*

discipline of the state is one factor, from D-notices to the meddling of intelligence agencies. Another is the dependence of capitalist media operations on advertising funding, which allows the capitalist class *as a whole* to discipline media organisations by the threat of boycott. (Elon Musk's rather tepid anti-censorship rhetoric has led to such a boycott, as a result of which the website formally known as Twitter lurches from crisis to crisis.)

## Imperialism

To be subordinated to the state, however, entails taking your place in the state *system*. Not only is the British media (say) intimately imbricated with British imperialism, such as it is: it is indirectly an instrument of US imperialism. It is notable that far more disagreement is possible in the Israeli media than the British; *Ha'aretz* can write editorials partly blaming the Hamas attacks on the occupation and siege of Gaza, for example, because there genuinely are political choices to be made in relation to the Palestinians *within* the general frame of Zionism and Israel's wider geopolitical status. But for us Brits there is only the imperative to follow the orders of the top dog. The US might back Israel if some relatively 'dovish' government got the phoney peace process back on the rails; and it backs the current slaughter. What it cannot abide is dissension amongst its allies and clients.

It is not only the present miserable state of affairs that is implicated here. The same mechanisms ensured that, no matter how much Jeremy Corbyn watered things down and threw people under the bus, the media would never take him seriously, and would never ease its attack. The US state department found him unreliable, and therefore so did the British state, and therefore so did the bourgeois media.

The bottom line is a point we have made with admittedly trying repetition around these parts - *we need our own media*. Such institutions, if they are genuinely to be independent of the mechanisms of bourgeois ideological coercion, demand a real basis in wider society, the organisational sinews of a party. The left's wholesale adoption of spontaneist protest politics, as argued recently in Vincent Bevins's book *If we burn*, leaves it *entirely* dependent on the existing media. There is no point holding a demonstration if people do not know you are doing it. Those media will shape the narrative, assigning the appropriate roles to the actors on the screen - 'terrorist', 'activist', 'anti-Semite'.

Sometimes the result of this weakness is farcical - as with the dismal failures of 'movementist' parties, from Podemos to Syriza, to Corbyn's Labour. Sometimes, as with the immense difficulty of cutting through genocide propaganda in the last week, it is truly tragic ●

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