

A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity

weekly **worker**



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Towards a mass Communist Party

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STOP THE ISRAELI GENOCIDE IN GAZA



LETTERS



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

Reactionary

Pete Gregson's letter (October 19) is indicative of a depressing tendency towards tailism in the left, which sees any movement opposed to what we oppose as necessarily progressive. This is particularly dangerous when talking about Hamas, as well as Islamic fundamentalism in general.

This was seen in Iran, where the left allied itself with the reactionary agenda of the ayatollahs, before being promptly destroyed by them when they took power. In the UK we had our own Socialist Workers Party opportunistically voting down its own declared positions in Respect in order to curry favour with the Muslim Association of Britain in the context of the Iraq war. Now the same organisation is opportunistically telling us we should celebrate the Hamas attack.

However, for Marxists, who believe in the principal of the political independence of the working class, it is necessary to criticise all ideologies that are opposed to workers self-emancipation, and call them what they are - reactionary, or heaven forbid, even deeply reactionary (as in 'opposed to political and social progress'), as Moshé Machover did in his article, 'Oppression breeds resistance' (October 12), and Eddie Ford in his last week ('What you need to know about Hamas', October 19).

Pete says that if he was not an atheist he would like to be a Muslim, because he says the time he spent living among Muslims showed him that Islam is a "fundamentally peaceful" religion that is "humanistic" and "deeply reflective". Well, clearly followers of Islam are a highly varied group, and have very different relationships to their religion, depending on different histories, cultures, understandings, social and familial relationships, and a hundred other factors. As we know, more often than not, people we meet in life are reasonable and kind.

But Islam (meaning 'submission to the will of God') in its core is a very particular set of doctrines, which many on the left, and in society generally, make a point of not looking at. Its founder, Muhammad, claimed that an angel called Gabriel met him in a cave, and recited word for word a book called the *Quran*. This book is claimed to be unchanging and unalterable and everything it contains absolutely true, regardless of any time, place or context. This first point is in fact what makes Islam the most inflexible of the major religions. The *Bible*, for example, can be taken literally by some, but can also be seen as a collection of stories, prophecies and so on, and therefore can be open to many different readings.

Inevitably, despite claims about its absolute authenticity and correctness, the *Quran* does contain contradictions, errors and omissions. Early in his career as a 'prophet', Muhammad was in competition with a lot of both monotheistic and polytheistic traditions. At first, he chose to affirm the authenticity of the monotheistic traditions (Judaism and Christianity), against the polytheistic ones he was surrounded by in Mecca, saying that what was given to them was true. As the followers of those monotheistic religions rejected him, however, he became hostile to them, saying that believers who die in the act of fighting them will be served by virgins and young boys in paradise.

Supposedly, the virgins' skin shall be "so beautiful, pure and transparent that the marrow of the bones of their legs will be seen through the bones and the flesh" (*Sahih al-Bukhari* 4:54:476). But in the end, he said, even the trees and the rocks would cry out, "there is a Jew behind me, so come and kill him" (*Sahih al-Bukhari* 2926).

Some of Muhammad's claims supported or amended the prevailing attitudes of the time - one being his acceptance of the institution of slavery, albeit in a regulated form. Muhammad purchased, sold and owned slaves. Islam provides for the freeing of slaves, and forbade Muslims from enslaving other Muslims, but at the same time the Islamic world was the centre of the global slave trade throughout most of its history. That is, until the early capitalists in Europe took on the barbaric practice.

In other ways, what Muhammad taught went against the grain of the culture - women had some status in pre-Islamic Arabia. He had to actually go out and instruct that the "majority of dwellers in hellfire are you (women)", and that women are "deficient in intelligence", because their testimony in court is only worth half of a man's, and "deficient in religion", because of their menstrual cycle interrupting prayers (*Sahih al-Bukhari* 304).

There is one *hadith* where Muhammad's wife, Aisha, bravely stands up to him on behalf of a woman who is being abused by her husband. She said the woman's skin is "greener than her dress", but Muhammad ruled that women cannot divorce their husbands where there is domestic violence, but only if their husbands are impotent. "No-one suffers more than the believing women," Aisha is supposed to have said (*Sahih al-Bukhari* 5825). Conversely men only have to say "I divorce you" three times (*Surah al-Baqarah* v: 229-230).

Early on, Muhammad seemed to have a relaxed attitude to people from other faiths, saying: "to him his religion, to me my religion" (*Quran* 109:6), and "there is no compulsion in religion" (*Quran* 2:256). Yet later he said, "if anyone discards his religion, kill him." (*Sahih al-Bukhari* 3017); and, "if any turn away, then seize them and kill them wherever you find them and take not from among them any ally or helper" (*Quran* 4:89). In reality it was whatever was expedient for himself at the time. But these latter prescriptions are enforced in many Islamic countries, where apostasy is a crime.

Contrary to Pete Gregson's claim, Islam is not uniquely tolerant. Blasphemy is often punishable with a death sentence. In Pakistan, for instance, even an accusation is enough to get you killed, and often before it even reaches court, because of the popularity of mob 'justice'. But here at home we now have *de facto* blasphemy laws as well. There was the case in Wakefield only recently, where a boy dropped and scuffed a *Quran* at his school, and he was suspended for 'desecrating a holy book', as well as subsequently being sent death threats. His mother was sent to the local mosque to make a grovelling apology. Nowadays the police record such a matter as a 'non-crime hate incident' on people's permanent records, rendering them unemployable without so much as a trial or admission of guilt.

Jews and Christians and other minorities might have existed in the Muslim world for 1,400 years, as Pete says, but most of the time it was not as equals, with equal

rights. Discrimination, special taxes and rules designed to humiliate minorities were commonplace, and still are in some places. This is not to say that there have not been many Islamic scholars over the centuries who have tried to employ *ijtihad* (the struggle for interpretation) to reform the understandings of the texts in different ways. Unfortunately, they have historically usually been on the back foot. As the Salafists, Wahhabis and ayatollahs keep pointing out, the texts say what they say, and it is extremely backward and uncompromising for the most part - and not just in a "small 'c' conservative" way, as Pete asserts. It seems at least from my own appraisal of the source material, that the 'prophet' could at least be described as self-serving, opportunistic, misogynistic, and false. And we probably do have a duty to say so on behalf of those that are too afraid to, and those under the thrall of his sanctimonious and corrupt representatives.

Is it politically useful for socialists to brush all of this under the carpet, in light of current events? I would say not, and especially so in light of our comrades in the Islamic world, who have faced persecution and death for opposing the 'divinely' sanctioned authorities in their countries. Does it justify Israeli persecution of Palestinians? Absolutely not. We have to expose how Israeli and US elites have promoted religious fundamentalism of all stripes for their own twisted aims. Islam is not unique in having deformities - don't they all? Hindu nationalism is expedient for Narendra Modi in India, Buddhist nationalism for the military regime in Myanmar. Christian and Jewish fundamentalism has been used to promote Zionism, and Islamic fundamentalism for driving out socialism.

I would suggest Pete remove the rose-tinted glasses. It is necessary to call everything by its name, including what is deeply reactionary.

Daniel Harvey
email

Genuine unity

I would like to comment very briefly on two articles and a letter in the October 12 edition of the *Weekly Worker*.

I found the subheading to Moshé Machover's article, 'Oppression breeds resistance' - which reads "A revolt of the hopeless by the hopeless for the hopeless", disgraceful and appalling. Some might call it racist as well. Yes, of course, some sections of the Palestinian people may be feeling "hopeless", but it is also clear many more are proud, dignified and defiant and fully prepared to engage in a wide range of forms of resistance to the Israeli occupation.

I found Machover's article to be typically and insufferably arrogant and patronising. Also, as Dan Lazare well set out (Letters, October 12), Machover's expression of unconditional support for Hamas towards the end is profoundly unMarxist and unsophisticated. Perhaps if the *Weekly Worker* commissioned an article from a Palestinian communist, rather than Machover as its pet "expert" on all things Palestinian, Israeli and Arab, a more rounded and balanced analysis might be forthcoming.

On the call by Nick Wrack and Will McMahon for unity in a mass socialist/communist party, I agree with the great majority of the words and sentiments ('Get in touch with us', October 12). However, while I have no doubt both are highly intelligent and principled socialists, I have to ask, what standing or status

do either of them have within the real labour movement? If little or none, then this by definition will not go very far. I suspect their "rejection of Stalinism" is merely a cover code for a rejection of mainstream communism and an advocacy of Trotskyism. A communist party without communists? I hope I am wrong.

Lawrence Parker is far more correct in his letter in the same issue that any *serious* effort to achieve greater socialist/communist unity cannot start with prior exclusions of some of the more significant socialist/communist formations already in existence. You have to meet the class at least halfway - without, of course, sacrificing, underplaying or hiding your principles. Where its most advanced elements have organised themselves within more significant parties and groups, you have to treat them, as well as those parties and groups, with respect and on the basis of equality.

If Wrack's and McMahon's call is in reality for Trotskyist unity, then I fear they are pursuing a chimera. 'Trotskyist unity' is a complete oxymoron, if ever there was one. The 557 varieties of Trotskyism are all able to quote from their god from a very large selection (Trotsky was nothing if not flowery and verbose) to support their individual lines and separate existences, primarily because their god was so chaotic, eclectic and contradictory. He was literally the factionalist and splitter in chief. If Wrack and McMahon hide their Trotskyism from new recruits to whatever they manage to create, then the latter are going to be exceedingly disappointed when they find out this is just another sectarian endeavour.

But, if one takes the statement at face value, and approaches it on the basis of what unites rather than what divides us, then surely a genuine socialist/communist party - rooted and grounded within the real labour movement, aiming to be a mass party of millions ultimately, through the correct operation of democratic centralism - could *easily* accommodate differences of view regarding Trotsky, Stalin, the nature of the USSR, etc. By appearing to exclude mainstream communism, by labelling it 'Stalinism', Wrack and McMahon are off to a poor and rather pointless start.

Are people in their "new layers" and "new generations" *really* that bothered about historical and doctrinal differences over individuals and events which are often over 100 years old? I suspect not, except insofar as these might affect current revolutionary strategy and tactics. I think they are probably more minded to want the socialist and communist left to get our collective acts together and to provide a genuinely credible alternative - not only to this or a successor government, but to this economic and social system.

Andrew Northall
Kettering

Critical support

Moshé Machover has put the cat among the pigeons with his October 12 article, 'Oppression breeds resistance'. Daniel Lazare is so outraged that he gives no support whatsoever to Hamas: "Suppressing the truth about Hamas in any respect is nothing short of a betrayal", he asserts (Letters, October 19). Whereas Pete Gregson is outraged that he has any opposition at all to the politics or actions of the same group, finishing his own letter with: "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" (Marxism is not

a charge we can lay against Pete - his letter makes this clear).

I have some differences too with the conclusion of Moshé's article, but he gets the essentials correct in supporting Hamas's offensive against Israeli Zionism, albeit from their reactionary political perspectives. The title of his piece and his citing of past outrages by oppressed peoples - the native American massacres of white settlers, the excesses of the Mau Mau in Kenya and the NLF in Algeria - puts things in their proper context. Moshé gives us Matzpen's solution: The overthrow of the Zionist colonial regime "would require the participation of the Israeli working class, and this in turn can only occur as part of a socialist transformation of the Arab east, leading to a regional socialist union or federation, including Israel". A two-state solution, with Israel still in existence (but not as a Jewish state?) with a Palestinian state next door? Not a single, multinational workers' state of Palestine as part of a socialist federation of the Middle East?

Daniel's letter is self-contradictory. For him Hamas is reactionary through and through, without contradictions. Remember Bert Cochran in the US Socialist Workers Party, who in 1953 described Stalinism as counterrevolutionary "through and through"? Joseph Hansen correctly described the opposition as Stalinophobic, neglecting the obligations of Marxists to defend the degenerate workers' state and capitalist overturns despite the overall counterrevolutionary nature of Stalinism.

Daniel is also wrong about Lenin's "struggle against pan-Islamism" being "a top priority", which means we should not "include Hamas in the bourgeois-democratic category at all, no matter how broadly defined", because it is not democratic. But here is what Lenin had to say in his 'Draft theses on national and colonial questions' at the Second Congress of Comintern (June 1920): "... second, the need for a struggle against the clergy and other influential reactionary and medieval elements in backward countries; third, the need to combat pan-Islamism and similar trends, which strive to combine the liberation movement against European and American imperialism with an attempt to strengthen the positions of the khans, landowners, mullahs, etc." So he is *combating* pan-Islamism, not making it "a top priority".

And what are we to make of the complaint that Hamas is not narrowly nationalist enough? "Rather it describes itself in its 1988 charter as a "universal organisation" dedicated to Muslim hegemony throughout the world". The mass demonstrations throughout the Arab world for Gaza indicates that their internationalism - distorted and Islamist though it is - gets a mass response on the street and creates big problems for pro-imperialist Arab regimes in the region.

It is difficult to take Pete's letter seriously. So what if "Arabic life is conservative - but with a small 'c'?" He says: "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."

So that's it then. Rather than see their uprising as reactionary, like Daniel, he sees it as entirely progressive, without contradiction -

oppressed women will just have to shut up and accept it for the greater glory of Allah. We certainly will not have these sluts running about in their mini-skirts and bikinis.

Back in 2016 Socialist Fight stated its position on the Israel/Palestine question, "Although Hamas is potentially no less reactionary and more so on social issues than the [Palestinian Authority], nevertheless it is fighting Israel now. It expresses the anger of the oppressed, in a very distorted way it is true, so it deserves unconditional but critical support against Israel right now."

On the governmental slogans, we say that the only progressive outcome of the conflict in the region is "a multi-ethnic workers' state in occupied Palestine/Israel; we are totally opposed to a two-state solution. We are for the destruction of the settler-colonial state of Israel and for a multi-ethnic workers' state of Palestine in a Socialist Federation of the Middle East."

Gerry Downing
Socialist Fight

Not terrorist

I don't agree with Jack Conrad in his latest talk that Hamas is a "terrorist organisation". Hamas is an organisation of freedom fighters which uses terrorist tactics at times.

It's not uncommon for resistance movements against colonialism to use such methods (we may agree or disagree with these methods). The al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, can be comparable to the mujahideen of the FLN, which won independence for Algeria in 1962 in its war with France after 132 years of occupation.

It plays into the hands of the Zionists and reinforces them, at least ideologically, by agreeing with them that Hamas is a terrorist organisation, when it's not true. It also helps the Zionists when the left has a tepid or no response to the past Hamas statement about the destruction of Israel. The authentic left should say emphatically and in no uncertain terms: 'We agree with Hamas if they want the destruction of Israel in its present Zionist form' - in other words, the destruction of the Zionist system.

The Palestinian prime minister said recently that what's needed is a "united front" (what took you guys

so long?). Belief in a united front was like a religious faith for Leon Trotsky and Clara Zetkin. Next I want to hear about a broad revolutionary socialist movement in Palestine and the entire region. Regardless of practicality, it's important to keep the ideas of socialism alive; without an idea and a dream, nothing happens.

GG
USA

Ever so 'umble

On the question of "humility" raised in Jack Conrad's article ('Getting in touch', October 19), I was not tasking this to the CPGB alone. What I actually wrote in my letter (October 12) and certainly meant was that we would be better served by humility, reflection etc - in other words, all those who are in some way concerned with advancing communist unity facing head-on the fact that we have made essentially no advance in this area and to think very seriously about how to break this "logjam", as Mike Macnair describes it (Letters, October 5).

The purpose of drawing the line of fire specifically towards the CPGB though is done here on the basis of the very same arguments as those outlined in Jack's article. I believe criticising the CPGB on these points is important *precisely* because what the CPGB does impacts on us all and remains important for those of us invested more widely in the project of communist unity. I don't think we should take the approach of not addressing it or not addressing what it does (either positively or negatively) - and these are the points I would argue for within Talking About Socialism also.

If, as Jack writes, the CPGB "towers over" others on the left on the question of communist unity - then, yes, logically the CPGB *does* hold a special responsibility amongst us to clearly advance and justify its approach to communist unity in this period and to be open to criticism around this, based on the premise that criticism is the means by which we can refine and develop our approaches, and ward off stagnation. There are many who have an interest in the partyist project and in advancing unity on the basis of Marxist politics in this period - demonstrating leadership over this

is not a medal that, once acquired, is pinned to the chest forever: it must be consistently shown in practice.

This is why it *is* important to ask these critical questions in terms of what vision the CPGB has for advancing and cohering these various forces in some way, and what vision it has for pushing meaningfully forward with the project of communist unity in this period. Perhaps there is no clear vision for advancing and cohering these forces, and perhaps, as Mike suggests, it *isn't* immediately clear how to push forward - well, that kind of clarity would be massively valuable in itself, because it indicates that a very open process, involving the free exchange of perspectives, analysis, information-sharing, criticism, etc, might be fundamental to map a way forward.

Is this free exchange what is happening though? Is this what is being encouraged through practice? Defensive responses, such as those displayed in Jack's article, encourage the opposite of free exchange - they encourage in practice the closing down of discussion, criticism, questioning, etc. This is why questions of political culture, which are often considered unimportant side issues, are actually significant here. The real issue is not personal (mine or anyone else's feelings), but political - it is about what this speaks to and encourages in the wider audience. It encourages a political atmosphere in which the majority of those who are interested in critique and discussion will see that and think, 'OK, maybe I won't say anything; maybe I won't raise anything; maybe I won't present a criticism or a suggestion.' This isn't healthy for a movement that is supposed to thrive on the open exchange and expression of perspectives - and in pedagogical terms this culture and approach to exchange would clearly be recognised as encouraging disengagement or submission in those who are around it.

Culture is a political question and it is a significant one too - this is the setting in which criticism is exchanged or not exchanged; in which questions or concerns are raised or not raised; in which information is shared or not shared. It relates therefore in quite clear ways to the development of an organisation: to its ability to maintain dynamism, to be responsive to developing contexts, to guard against inertia. This question of political culture surely constitutes a significant part of the explanation, for example, as to why (despite dealing with thought and care around the question of democratic centralism) there is often very little in the way of publicly recognisable and clear exchange of differences and criticism in the *Weekly Worker* around core questions of the approach and trajectory of the CPGB from *within* the group itself.

I suggested the need for humility and self-reflection in assessing our position in this period not as an attack - but because I believe there is something potentially substantial to be gained, I believe we can genuinely make some advance in this period, but that this requires a wide and self-critical level of open and comradely discussion. This discussion and criticism *is* something that is very clearly needed, since, as raised above, it is not immediately clear how to push forward in this period.

Jack may not want to engage in this - but what about others in the CPGB? I think an open exchange of thoughts in the letters page here would send a very encouraging message in many ways, and I would certainly be very interested to hear CPGB comrades' thoughts more widely on these questions of strategy and approach in this period.

Caitriona Rylance
Bolton

ACTION

Emergency in Gaza

Friday October 27, 6.45pm: Public meeting, Event Space, Hamilton House, 80 Stokes Croft, Bristol BS1. Discuss what is happening in Gaza, the causes of the current violence and how to support freedom and liberation for Palestine. Registration free. Organised by Bristol Palestine Solidarity Campaign: www.facebook.com/events/6797600840297975.

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.

Stop the war on Gaza

Saturday October 28, 12 noon: National demonstration. Assemble Victoria Embankment, London WC2. March in solidarity with Palestine. Demand an end to the bombardment of Gaza. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign and Stop the War Coalition: www.facebook.com/events/6799243656820575.

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.

All out for Palestine

Saturday October 28, 12 noon: Demonstration, assemble St Peters Square, Manchester M2. Stop the genocide - free Palestine. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign Manchester: www.facebook.com/events/1383197579221438.

Introduction to Living Rent

Monday October 30, 6.30pm: Online briefing. Living Rent is Scotland's tenant and community union. Learn about the history, vision, structure, campaigns and activities, which include securing home repairs, stopping evictions and preventing rent increases. Organised by Living Rent: www.livingrent.org/intro_to_lr_oct23.

What it means to be human

Tuesday October 31, 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: 'The science of mythology: "The sleeping beauty" and other tales'. Speaker: Chris Knight. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: www.facebook.com/events/1236015760405186.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Peace and justice international conference

Saturday November 18, 10am to 5.30pm: Conference, ITF House, 49-60 Borough Road, London SE1. Politicians, union leaders, academics and activists discuss solutions to global injustice, inequality and conflict. Tickets £27.80. Organised by Peace and Justice Project: www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=709145511250516.

Engels and revolution

Thursday November 23, 6.30pm: Lecture, Working Class Movement Library, 51 The Crescent, Salford M5 and online. The determining factors in Engels' thought and practice were the necessity and possibility of working class revolution and human liberation. Speaker: Dr Katherine Connelly. Registration free. Organised by Working Class Movement Library: www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=711810560987489.

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.

Online Communist Forum



Sunday October 29 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

Organised by CPGB: communistparty.co.uk and Labour Party Marxists: www.labourpartymarxists.org.uk
For further information, email Stan Keable at Secretary@labourpartymarxists.org.uk

A selection of previous Online Communist Forum talks can be viewed at: youtube.com/c/CommunistPartyofGreatBritain

WAR CRIME

Genocide in Gaza

Electricity cut off, no petrol, an absence of drinkable water, together with grotesquely reduced healthcare, all point in one direction, warns **Ian Spencer**



Israel seems intent on leaving nothing behind except rubble and a mountain of skulls and bones

The bombing of the al-Ahli hospital on October 17 has brought an even sharper focus on the health of the population of Gaza. Around 500 Palestinians were killed in what, increasingly, seems likely to have been an Israeli attack.¹ Many of those killed were taking refuge from the relentless bombing of one of the most densely populated areas on the planet.

At the time of writing, some 7,000 Palestinians, including at least 2,000 children and 1,000 women, have been killed by Israeli air strikes, while three times that number have been injured. There has also been the deliberate killing of Palestinian civilians in the occupied West Bank by both the Israel Defence Forces and Israeli settlers. And all that before Benjamin Netanyahu's 'next stage': the expected ground invasion of Gaza.

Deliberate

Aside from the deliberate destruction of health infrastructure, because of the Israeli blockade Gaza's hospitals have no access to the electrical grid and are dependent on local generators to maintain electricity. Israel has stopped access to food, fuel and water since October 9 as an act of collective punishment, following the Hamas incursion two days earlier. What few health facilities remain in operation are denied basic supplies. However, they have been suffering for the last 17 years of siege imposed after Hamas took power in Gaza.

Of course, there is more to health than hospitals. Even before the current Israeli attack, the Gaza Strip had a population of 2.2 million people, half of whom are under 18,

in an area of 141 square miles. The population density of 15,000 per square mile is the outcome of the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, since the Nakba of 1948, who had little choice but to take refuge in the strip. Of the 2.2 million Gazans, 1.2 million are registered by the UN as refugees. There is also widespread malnutrition, particularly when it comes to iron deficiency anaemia, which affects up to 50% of infants and young children.²

In the second quarter of 2023, the unemployment rate in Gaza was 46.4%. However, among the youth it was as high as 70%. Around half of Gazans lived in poverty even before the current Israeli attack. The relationship between poor mental and physical health, unemployment and poverty is widely understood. One consequence is a high infant mortality rate of 23 deaths per 1,000 live births (compared, for example, with the UK of four deaths per 1,000 or even 12.6 deaths in Jordan - itself home to many Palestinian refugees).

Unsurprisingly, the prevalence of mental health problems among Gazans was very high too. Over half of those screened were showing signs of depression and around 7% with post-traumatic stress disorder.³ Atrocities like the seizure and demolition of homes, oppressive policing, unlawful killings, detention without trial and torture - all inflict profound psychological damage and leave victims in a state of 'learned helplessness', resigned to their fate and vulnerable to depression and anxiety. In 2022 studies published by Save the Children showed that 80% of Gazan children were exhibiting signs of depression and anxiety.⁴

This would have long-term consequences, even if peace and stability were to come tomorrow. There is considerable evidence that prolonged trauma in childhood can have long-term consequences for the mental health of adults and even the subsequent children of those traumatised.⁵ Women, in particular, who have suffered malnutrition are likely to have children who are more prone to diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular disease and low-birth-weight children of their own.⁶ The Israeli bombardment and deliberate starvation of the population of Gaza is even an attack on future generations of Palestinians due to epigenetic damage to the foetus *in utero*.⁷

Since the Israeli attack, 1.4 million people have been displaced from their homes. Over a million were ordered to go south 'for their safety' - only to be bombed *en route* and to be subjected to the same air attacks in the south. The city of Khan Yunis was subjected to extensive bombardment, as tens of thousands moved there to escape bombing in Gaza City. Gaza is now completely dependent on pitifully small amounts of 'humanitarian aid' from the Rafah crossing. Oxfam has stated that "starvation is being used as a weapon of war against civilians", who now have just 2% of their usual supply of food.

Medical personnel continue to work despite a health system that has effectively collapsed and the fact that many of them too have faced the loss of their entire families. The lack of basic supplies means that surgeons are forced to operate with minimal (sometimes no) anaesthetic and substituting vinegar for

antiseptic. Operations take place by the light of torches or mobile phones. Needles and gloves must be reused without the possibility of proper sterilisation, leading to the danger of high rates of hospital-acquired infection and cross-infection. The sheer number of casualties requires battlefield tactics of triage. Often the badly injured must be left to die to preserve resources for the potentially saveable.⁸

Ambulances

There is growing evidence that Israeli air attacks have deliberately targeted ambulances, at least 15 of which have been hit - something strongly condemned by the Palestinian Red Crescent. Israel has bombed in the vicinity of the Red Crescent HQ and the Al-Amal hospital in Khan Yunis. The targeting of health personnel has not been confined to state facilities, but NGOs trying to provide aid in Gaza have also been attacked - Médecins Sans Frontières has counted 16 killed and 18 ambulances destroyed. The deliberate targeting of ambulances has meant that local aid workers have resorted to taxis and private cars to rescue the wounded and sick. MSF has also reported that it has already used half its emergency provisions, which it schedules to last two months in times of crisis.

An overcrowded ghetto, which is forced to concentrate its population even further in the south, is certainly at high risk of epidemic and water-borne disease. The greatest danger is now of cholera and typhoid. Much of Gaza is dependent on desalinated water, which will not be possible when the fuel runs out. Most of Gaza's 65 sewage pumping

stations and all five of its wastewater treatment facilities have been forced to close, meaning that now 90% of its water is unfit for human consumption. The lack of electricity from the grid now makes pumping water to residential areas impossible. People are increasingly going to be dependent on wells or aquifers, where water is contaminated with sewage.

The increased concentration of the population will easily facilitate the spread of Covid-19 and other diseases, which are typically fatal for the very young as well as the old and infirm. There had been 1,000 deaths from Covid even before the Israeli order to evacuate the north of the Gaza strip. Vaccination will assume a low priority in the face of the imminent death threat from Israeli bombardment, as will the treatment of Gazans with existing health conditions.

What does all this tell us? That disease is now threatening to turn ethnic cleansing into genocide ●

Notes

1. The Israel Defence Forces responded quickly to attribute the attack to a misfired rocket from Palestinian Islamic Jihad. However, there is good evidence that the IDF lied - and not for the first time.
2. World Health Organisation (2012), A65/27.
3. documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099153502102330181/pdf/P17925303fca130e30936d016a378b6a1e9.pdf.
4. Save the Children, 'Trapped: the impact of 15 years of blockade on the mental health of Gaza's children' (2022).
5. B van der Kolk *The body keeps the score* New York NY 2014.
6. N Hart, 'Famine, maternal nutrition and infant mortality' *Population Studies* March 1993.
7. R Sapolsky *Behave* London 2017.
8. *The Guardian* October 24.

PALESTINE

Expect the worst

October 7 was a disaster for the Palestinian people because it has created the conditions for yet another round of ethnic cleansing. There is also the danger, argues **Moshé Machover**, of a wider regional conflagration

I would like to start by quoting from a statement I signed 56 years ago, which was published in *Ha'aretz* on September 22 1967, shortly after the Six Day War:

Occupation entails foreign rule. Foreign rule entails resistance. Resistance entails repression. Repression entails terror and counter-terror. Victims of terror are mostly innocent people. Holding onto the occupied territories will make us into a nation of murderers and murder victims.

I want to put in this context the events that were triggered on October 7 2023, with the atrocity committed by Hamas. I am not referring to this predicted chain of causality in order to excuse Hamas's atrocities. They are inexcusable (as are the much more massive technological atrocities committed by Israel). Rather, it is a way of explaining what caused them.

The origin of this is the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories in 1967. This is the cause. And I would like to link the likely consequences of these recent events with another prediction I made quite some time ago: this cycle of resistance, repression, terror and counter-terror is escalating and is pointing towards a major ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967. I did not, of course, predict that this ethnic cleansing would be triggered in Gaza - I expected it to start on the West Bank, where people would be driven across the river Jordan. On the face of it, ethnic cleansing in Gaza is more problematic: where would the people flee to (if they were still kept alive)? And I did not envisage the massive scale of extermination, which at this stage seems a possibility.

It is certainly not the case that the ethnic cleansing will be *caused* by the assault by Hamas on Israel on October 7. But, as I will explain, this assault has made resistance, including international resistance, to this process more difficult. And in this sense that atrocity committed by Hamas is a calamity for the Palestinians, as it reduces the slim chance of *preventing* ethnic cleansing.

Let me be clear: what is taking place now is *already* ethnic cleansing. If you bomb a population on the scale that is now happening - starving it, denying it water, destroying essential buildings, including the al-Ahli hospital (I will explain below why it was almost certainly bombed by Israel), starving the population, ordering a million human beings to move from where they are - including incapacitated people, those in hospital - and flee miles away to somewhere where they will still be bombed, this is already ethnic cleansing (some may call it genocide).

Can this be prevented? The only (very slim) chance is by pressure of public opinion, particularly in the west - most importantly in the United States and in Israel itself. But what took place on October 7 undermines this possibility for the simple reason that most people see only the atrocity itself, not what caused it. Most people

just see what the media reports - they do not understand the causality, the root cause, which is the Israeli occupation itself. As a result, our ability to prevent ethnic cleansing is reduced. So this is a huge own goal that Hamas scored against the Palestinian people.

I am not making a value judgement here. Certainly atrocities should be condemned, but I am talking about the dire political consequences. If Hamas had launched a successful *military* operation - overcoming the surveillance system of the Israeli intelligence and driving the military out of key positions - that could have been the beginning of a successful story. There were several possible motivations for such a military operation, but the immediate conjuncture is a process of rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia, bypassing the Palestinian people: the culmination of Netanyahu's idea of putting the Palestinian problem on a shelf for the foreseeable future and improving relations with the Arab regimes.

Atrocities

But what has followed October 7 has been a chain of atrocities. Some people have speculated that this is what Hamas wanted to achieve - it was a deliberate tactic to ignite a much wider conflagration of war in the region. If this is so, then that would be another major own goal for the Palestinian people.

When I predicted that Israel was moving towards an ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from the occupied territories and possibly from Israel itself, I mentioned that this could only take place at an opportune moment. There has to be a conjuncture in a regional and international situation which would serve as a cover for such a major ethnic cleansing. In this context a major regional war would be, from the point of view of the Zionist regime, an ideal opportunity for perpetrating ethnic cleansing.

To repeat, whether or not Hamas aimed to provoke such a regional conflagration (rather than just conducting an act of blind rage), it has managed to engineer an opportunity for Israel to perpetrate ethnic cleansing - not only in Gaza, of course, but also in the West Bank and possibly in Israel itself (and, by the way, such moves towards ethnic cleansing in the West Bank are already beginning to happen).

We have seen major events which point in the direction of escalation. So what will be the consequences? Of course, Israeli society has moved sharply to the right, but fortunately opposition to the Palestinians in the public opinion of western countries seems less sharp than it could have been. The demonstrations that are taking place in London and many other places are an indication that there remains substantial support for the Palestinian people, and their individual and collective rights. But you cannot be too optimistic about this.

In this context, I want to comment briefly on the bombing of the al-Ahli hospital. First of all, Israeli *hasbara* has zero credibility - many people in Israel who are not necessarily anti-Zionist

do not have any illusions in the credibility of the Israeli denials. But allow me to make a statement of a probabilistic nature.

The October 17 bombing of this hospital was either a deliberate attack by Israel or a random fluke of a faulty Palestinian rocket. How can you judge which is more likely? First, consider the not widely publicised, but clearly verified, fact that the hospital was bombed three days earlier as well, on October 14. There is plenty of evidence about this and there is no doubt that it was targeted by Israel on that occasion, using a smaller projectile. So if it was hit again by pure chance by a faulty Islamic Jihad rocket, it would be completely fortuitous that it fell in exactly the same place!

That is quite apart from all the video and sonic evidence that has been produced by well-established researchers. So just think about it. How probable is it that the same hospital was hit twice - once deliberately and then simply by fluke? Draw your own conclusion.

I would now like to comment on two articles in last week's *Weekly Worker*.¹ They both mention the well-known fact that Hamas originally (back in the 1980s) was encouraged by Israel in the Gaza Strip. That took place under the leadership of the then defence minister, Ariel Sharon. The idea was that this would undermine the Palestine Liberation Organisation, primarily Fatah, which was then the big 'terrorist organisation', according to Israel.

Muslim Brotherhood

By contrast Hamas was regarded largely as a charitable organisation. It is, after all, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, based in Egypt. (Remember that the Gaza Strip was under Egyptian rule until 1956, then briefly under Israeli rule following the Suez campaign, and then again under Egyptian rule until June 1967.) Encouraging Hamas was regarded as a way of undermining the militancy of the Palestinians and particularly Fatah - the leading group within the PLO coalition. Of course, the Israeli colonial regime did not realise what Hamas would become.

But the most damaging error from the viewpoint of the Israeli regime was made under Benjamin Netanyahu. Something not

mentioned in those *Weekly Worker* articles is that from 2009 Hamas was actually fostered by Netanyahu. The crazy tactical idea behind this was that, in order to divide the Palestinian people, Hamas should be allowed to rule Gaza, into which financial assistance would be allowed by Israel to flow from various Arab regimes, particularly Qatar. This has recently been mentioned in several articles in the press, but it has been known in Israel for quite some time.

Let me quote you some facts. This was published in an Israeli article a few days ago in *Ha'aretz*:

The prime minister himself spoke briefly at times about his position regarding Hamas. In March 2019, he said during a meeting of Likud MKs, at which the subject of transfer of funds to Hamas was under discussion, that, "Whoever opposes a Palestinian state must support delivery of funds to Gaza, because maintaining separation between the PA in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza will prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state."

In a tweet two months later, Channel 13 quoted former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak as telling a Kuwaiti newspaper: "Netanyahu isn't interested in a two-state solution. Rather, he wants to separate Gaza from the West Bank, as he told me at the end of 2010."

General ... Gershon Hacohen, a prominent rightwinger, made things crystal-clear in an interview with the online magazine *Mida* in May 2019: "When Netanyahu didn't go to war in Gaza to defeat the Hamas regime, he basically prevented Abu Mazen from establishing a united Palestinian state," he recalled at the time. "We need to exploit the situation of separation created between Gaza and Ramallah. It's an Israeli interest of the highest level, and you can't understand the situation in Gaza without understanding this context."²

What is really behind all this? The Palestinian Authority in the West Bank is completely subservient to Israel in all operational issues. It is really an arm of the Israeli colonial regime and it cannot do anything without Israeli acquiescence, if not instructions. But Israel cannot prevent the Palestinian Authority from issuing statements and declarations, and one of the things that the PA does publish is its position in favour of the so-called two-state solution.

This is regarded as very annoying by the Netanyahu governing coalition. Whereas previous Labor governments would say, 'Yes, yes, a two-state solution' (while ensuring that it could not happen), Netanyahu wants to get this annoying idea off the agenda. And for this he was ready to foster Hamas, which he did not regard as constituting any major danger to Israel. Hence this crazy policy.

So what we have here is not only a failure of the Israeli intelligence and the Israeli military to prepare for the incursion by Hamas, but the result of a policy of

actually fostering Hamas in order to prevent the unification of the Palestinian leadership and pressure for a two-state solution.

Prospects

So what are the prospects now? Israel has undergone a massive shock; its society is traumatised. As I have pointed out, public opinion in Israel is moving sharply to the right. But that does not mean that Netanyahu's coalition is secure. Quite the contrary: now he is going to be under pressure from two sides.

First of all, those 'liberals' who protested against, as it were, the 'downfall of Israeli Jewish democracy' over the months preceding the current events, are going to accuse Netanyahu of failing to prepare for a Hamas onslaught. Of course, Netanyahu is going to blame this on the army and the intelligence, but he cannot avoid accusations of having fostered Hamas, which is now general knowledge. On this he is also going to be attacked from the extreme right.

Is the present conflict going to spread into a major conflagration in the region? I do not have a crystal ball, but it seems a definite possibility. And, when this starts, who knows how far it will go? Will it involve only Hezbollah or will Iran be drawn into it? Of course, Netanyahu's policy is to try to drive the United States into an open military conflict with Iran. The military moves made by the US, with the two aircraft carriers now in the Mediterranean, point to its readiness to engage in a war - against Hezbollah, but quite possibly with Iran itself. This would be a major disaster.

We sometimes know how wars start, but how they end is very unpredictable - except that the consequences will be very bad. In fact Joe Biden himself hinted at this during his visit to Israel last week. He indicated that Israel has to be careful not to commit the same mistakes the USA made when invading Afghanistan and so on. He has cautiously warned Israel not to start something of the same nature, for who knows where it will end?

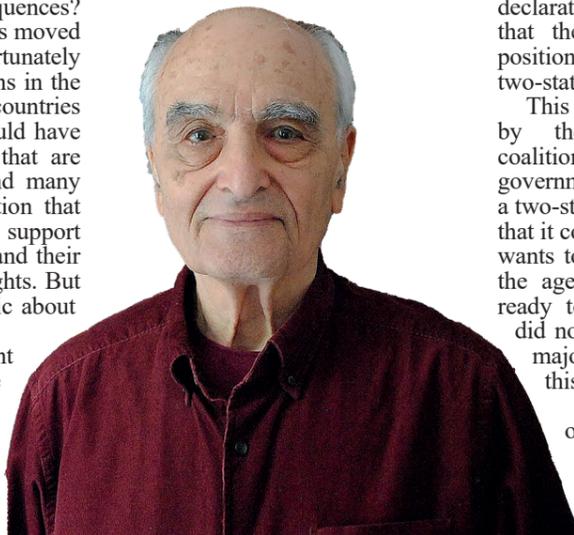
There has also been speculation that the US might use the opportunity of a regional war to try to overthrow the Assad regime in Syria, dislodging the Russians from their last remaining naval base. This will be to the advantage of the Americans by severing the umbilical cord between Iran and Hezbollah, which runs through Syria.

But, as I said, if a regional conflagration begins, we cannot foretell how it will end. However, one thing is very likely: it will be used by Israel to try to perpetrate yet more ethnic cleansing ●

Moshé Machover was speaking to the October 22 CPGB members' aggregate which included a number of invited associates and guests

Notes

1. 'What you need to know about Hamas' (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1463/what-you-need-to-know-about-hamas); 'Week in the hall of mirrors' (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1463/week-in-the-hall-of-mirrors) - both *Weekly Worker* October 19.
2. www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-10-20/ty-article-opinion/premium/a-brief-history-of-the-netanyahu-hamas-alliance/000018b-47d9-d242-abef-57ff1be90000.



Moshé Machover: Israeli government helped Hamas

AGGREGATE

Opportunism in matters of organisation

While we broadly agreed over Israel and Gaza, we sharply disagreed over membership commitment and maintaining barriers. James Harvey reports

Our October 22 aggregate of CPGB members and invited guests had two agenda topics: firstly, Israel's war against Gaza and the developing situation in the Middle East; secondly, the issue of dues paid by CPGB members and political differences thereby revealed over organisational principles and approaches.

The aggregate's main political discussion on the Middle East was opened by Moshé Machover and Farzad Kamangar. Comrade Machover's contribution is carried in this issue of the paper, so I will focus on comrade Kamangar's talk on the impact of Israel's attack on Gaza on the wider Middle East, especially the danger of a wider war with Iran. She explained the widespread opposition to Israel's occupation and ethnic cleansing and the pressures it exerted on regimes in the Arab world. The Arab states have long ago sold out on the Palestinian question, but cannot ignore the Palestinian diaspora, which is in many cases an integral component of their own population.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is in a difficult position, with its leadership verbally militant, but, because of its political and military weaknesses, reluctant to act. There is little mass support for the Palestinian cause in Iran, which many felt had been cynically manipulated by the regime to secure its own position. However, comrade Kamangar cautioned, this was a fast-changing situation and the trajectory of events was unpredictable. Given this, it remained an open question whether Iran might or might not be drawn into war.

The wide-ranging discussion that followed looked, amongst other things, at the changing balance of forces in the Middle East, perspectives for the immediate period, the nature of Hamas, and the impact of the Gaza crisis on British politics. Above all, comrades located the discussion in the wider, geo-political context and stressed the importance of understanding US strategy in the region. Hamas has been successful in disrupting Israel's normalisation attempt, especially its proposed rapprochement with Saudi Arabia. Palestine has been forced back onto the political agenda. Comrades agreed that Hamas was a reactionary, anti-working class organisation, but that, given the context of Israel's historic repression of Gaza, resistance, including atrocities, is inevitable.

Addressing both the uncritical support given by some on the left to Hamas and the reservations others have expressed about the nature of the organisation, Carla Roberts referred to Trotsky's argument that we can make "alliances with the devil without calling him an angel". Mike Macnair further developed the point in distinguishing between moral condemnation of Hamas for an atrocity and the politics which produce atrocity. Citing Marx on the Indian War of Independence 1857-59 and the experience of other anti-colonial struggles, Mike commented on the hypocrisy of the idea of 'the laws of war' and argued, *a la* US civil war general, William Tecumseh Sherman, that 'war is hell' by its very nature.

Jack Conrad argued that Hamas was not the equivalent of Islamic State, but was a pan-Islamic resistance movement with deep popular roots and a clear strategy. Presumably it acted to wreck the Abraham accords and to set the whole



Huge numbers: organisation key

region aflame. In the context of Gaza and the Palestinian struggle it was not our job to "run a health check on the resistance". Communists must raise their own slogans, demands, and programme for the Middle East, locating our opposition to the Israeli state in its alliance with US-UK-EU imperialism. The best support we can give the Palestinian resistance is to fight against our own government - and the whole political class - which lines up behind Israeli settler-colonialism and the horrors that entails.

Comrades also gave their views and shared experiences of the protest demonstrations and the character of the movement that is developing. The establishment campaign to identify anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism, so successful in the Labour Party, was now being deployed against the protest movement, along with increased threats by the Tories to further clamp down on free speech.

There was a discussion of the significance of the slogans raised in the movement and the various positions adopted by the left on the bourgeois one/two state so-called 'solution', calls for a federation of the Middle East and an Arab revolution under the leadership of the working class. Jihad, it was suggested, can be perfectly innocuous - meaning as it does, a 'struggle against sin', etc. Others insisted that its meaning on Palestine demonstrations was perfectly clear: religious war against Israel (not our politics, but defensible, if only in terms of free speech). Mike Macnair asserted that the accusation that the widely heard one-state solution slogan, 'Palestine will be free, from the river to the sea', is anti-Semitic was first levelled by the Alliance for Workers' Liberty and then picked up by the capitalist state.

Giving you dues

If the discussion on the Middle East showed general agreement with the CPGB's position on Israel's war on Gaza, the second session showed some considerable differences on organisational questions. While ostensibly the discussion began on the level of dues that members should pay, the issues of recruitment, communist unity, and the nature of the party that the CPGB wishes to build quickly came to the fore. Behind seemingly technical proposals, lurked serious disagreements with the leadership that - though as yet, inchoate - amount to opportunism on the organisational question.

In his introductory remarks, comrade Conrad, speaking on

behalf of the Provisional Central Committee, said the issue of dues had been raised by members, supporters and frenemies in various discussion forums, rather than by the PCC itself. The level of dues paid by members is, however, covered in our draft rules, article 23, and has therefore always involved flexibility and taking into account the ability of an individual comrade to pay a given amount. Ten percent of one's net income and more is certainly an aspiration. One shared by devout Christians, Jews and Muslims. But there has been some really stupid chatter doing the rounds about us bankrupting comrades. However, the only confusion on this issues comes from those who want an excuse not to commit themselves, or those who want to excuse those who want an excuse for those not wanting to commit themselves. Hence, comrade Conrad argued, the issue of dues is really about what we actually mean by building a Communist Party.

Existing left

We have little time for recent 'do your own thing' initiatives such as Nick Wrack's and Will McMahon's Talking About Socialism project, the broad parties/fronts past, present and future, the freelance gadflies and the little army of the lost and lonely. Despite the huge setbacks internationally for the left over the last 30 or 40 years, our strategy remains that of *going through* the existing left. We stand for unity, but not on the basis of the lowest common denominator. Rather unity is fought for around our *Draft programme*, a minimum-maximum programme which stands fully in the tradition of classical Marxism. Our struggle for a mass Communist Party is one that encourages splits and fusions, organised rebellions against the bureaucratic centralist regimes of the existing left and then a systematic reaching out, through agitation, propaganda and organisation, to the advanced part of the working class. Only then can we begin to win the broad mass, seek to win or neutralise the middle classes and achieve a clear social majority for socialist change.

This is not a process of unity brought about by cosy consensus, agreements not to subject others on the left to harsh polemics, but, on the contrary, the fearless clarification of positions, establishing sharp lines of demarcation and the constant struggle against the opportunist tendencies that will inevitably occur and occur again and again.

Anne McShane responded to comrade Conrad's opening by

suggesting that there was a lack of consistency about how the rules on dues were applied, resulting in some confusion. She talked about a sliding scale which by definition is consistent but inflexible and could genuinely prove bankrupting for the heavily indebted, those with children and a big mortgage to boot.

However, she agreed that the real issue was around the type of organisation we want to build. We were not simply a Zoom discussion forum, although she believed that there was a 'general view' outside the organisation that the CPGB was apathetic to recruitment, did not put enough effort into social media work, etc, etc. Comrade McShane was also critical of our lack of CPGB involvement in broad front projects such as the Labour Left Alliance (where actually our comrades on its leadership formed an opposition fraction). She also bigged-up the Zoom discussion circle Why Marx? (a worthy enough project where our members, candidate members and supporters more than occasionally appear). She also denounced the intolerant and polemical style of some leading comrades. Jack Conrad in particular was singled out. "We are not always right about everything", she said. "We set up barriers to membership". She wanted "all communists in the CPGB".

Ryan Frost argued along similar lines. He questioned the hostile and combative tone. He suggested that we need to change not our arguments, but how they are presented.

In her contribution Carla Roberts argued that things are changing politically and that a certain space might possibly be opening up for communist politics, in which the CPGB is well-positioned to make some substantial gains. She put her finger on the dues question. Behind it lies political differences. Obviously the CPGB needs to improve its online and social media presence to make these areas more attractive and interesting. She wanted to see greater emphasis on communist unity, maybe a communist unity conference. Not that she held out any great hopes on that score. Indeed she rightly said it might well be better to hold fire on that particular idea. Ian Strong, a candidate member, argued that we may be in a period of some considerable change: he believed that the Palestine issue and the mobilisation it had produced was far more significant than the Corbyn movement in the Labour Party. We need to intervene.

Amongst others, PCC members Mike Macnair and Farzad Kamangar

reminded comrades of the partyist nature of our politics. Our politics are not based on diplomatic coalitions, agreements around the lowest common denominator or tailing mass movements. Many of the new left projects are still predicated on ideas of a Marxist core in a reformist sea: we have to expose them rather than humbly submit and accept our minority status in the interests of not putting people off.

Consequently, style is substance, comrade Macnair argued, since we cannot have the openness of the *Weekly Worker* without its *polemical character*. Comrade Kamangar dealt with a number of comments on organisational issues and strongly defended the idea that the success of the *Weekly Worker* was due to its hard editorial line and political coherence. That, and not some mythical broad appeal, was the way forward. We had a distinct voice and focus, and that needed to be emphasised and advanced, not weakened or dissipated by chasing after soft people with soft politics.

Strategically she disagreed with the idea that the protest movement around Gaza was a fundamental turn in world politics that would almost automatically lead to a mass influx into principled revolutionary politics: it was excellent that so many people, not least young people, were becoming involved, but at this stage it remained a protest movement. Without a Communist Party worthy of the name it will eventually dissipate. We do, after all, have the examples of the mass protest movement against the Afghan and Iraq wars. All that they produced was Stop the War Coalition and Respect. Popular fronts both.

Barriers

Jack Conrad made the final reply to the discussion. He said that we do indeed *actively* maintain *barriers* stopping people from entering the CPGB. Especially in what is still a period of reaction, that is the only serious approach. Our members have a meaningful voice and a meaningful vote. It would be *criminal* to let all and sundry join. There has to be a willingness to commit to unity in action, making a meaningful financial contribution and a proven political understanding, no matter how elementary.

Our slogan is therefore not 'every' self-declared communist a member of the CPGB. We sift, we sort, we separate the mere talkers from the doers, the poseurs from the really committed. This matters. We have had some near run-ins, including when it comes to our *Draft programme*. There was after all a 50:50 tied aggregate vote to amend it on the women's question so that it conformed with the political economy of the bourgeoisie as opposed to the political economy of the working class. A fundamental issue.

Instead of fighting to limit competition between workers, limit the exploitation of women, we had the bourgeois feminist proposal to facilitate the equal competition between men and women in the workplace. A gift for the boss class. Note, having been defeated both the mover and the seconder left our ranks. Not that the PCC pushed them, but the PCC did not fight to stop them.

No resolutions were submitted to this aggregate. But it is clear from some of the contributions that the discussion needs to continue. Nuances, differences and fundamentals need to be clarified and fought out ●

MEANINGS

Etymology of terror

Accusations of terrorism have become all but meaningless. Paul Demarty examines the strategy, tactics and hypocrisy of the T-word

My article last week began with rightwing media attacks on the BBC for failing to directly call Hamas a 'terrorist' organisation, and crafty attempts to portray a blood-spatter paint protest at Portland Place as a justified Zionist action against such intolerably 'pro-Hamas' editorialising, as opposed to what it really was: a pro-Palestine protest against the totally one-sided, pro-Israel coverage the BBC is actually producing.

Our theme last week was the media at large, but there is another matter arising from this silly bit of Beeb-bashing: is Hamas a terrorist organisation, after all that? What exactly is a terrorist organisation anyway? The BBC is rightly accused of dodging the matter by its rightwing adversaries: it prefers elaborate circumlocutions of the form, "Hamas is considered a terrorist group by the United States, Israel and many other countries"; it is being faulted, then, for attempting to retain the phoney veneer of 'impartial' fact-based news coverage, instead of behaving unambiguously as a propaganda arm of the US state department (and, in this particular case, the Israeli Defence Forces).

Media organisations live and die by the trust of their consumers - and obtain that trust by the old-fashioned methods of fraud, subterfuge and manipulative framing. If there were a patron saint of bourgeois media, it would be Shakespeare's Iago. For the BBC, the basis of the fraud is a commitment to 'balance'; to just come out and say what its editorial line actually is would damage the brand; the *Daily Mail* - well-known as an ideologically stringent outfit - is, of course, not so constrained.

In a certain respect, the BBC and the *Mail* share a definition of terrorism, the most vacuous and degraded one available. A terrorist organisation is simply a more-or-less armed force that is on the 'wrong' side, according to the particular speaker. Terrorist organisations come in lists - the US state department has one, of course, as do equivalent ministries around the world, and the UN. Hamas is designated a terrorist organisation by a fairly predictable list of parties: Israel, the US, the UK, the EU, and - for some reason - Paraguay. The *Daily Mail* has an implied list of terrorist organisations that certainly includes Hamas, and says so. The BBC hypocritically nods at the responsible authorities and asks us to draw our own conclusions. Both, in the end, view it as a matter of Carl Schmitt's friend/enemy distinction.

Revolution

Terrorism was not always a word used in such a deliberately vague, nominalistic way, of course. Its modern history begins with the French Revolution, and the emergence of the word 'terror' as a way to describe the bloodier moments of the post-revolutionary order. With all the other European powers attempting to strangle the revolution in its cradle, radicalisation gave way to mass executions - first of reactionaries and later of moderates; the so-called Reign of Terror was met by the White Terror of the famous 'Thermidor reaction', which by and by led to the establishment of the first French empire.



Supporting Palestinian resistance being branded as promoting terrorism

Terror here was a term used by the *enemies* of the 'terrorists', unsurprisingly; and cognate usages have recurred since. The Bolsheviks resolved to meet 'white terror' with their own 'red terror' after 1917; the mass purges of the 1930s under Stalin is commonly called a terror. Another usage also emerged in Russia, however, and a little earlier. Many in the revolutionary underground embraced a strategy of conducting spectacular acts of violence against elements of the tsarist regime, up to and including the tsar himself. Brave individuals would hurl a bomb at the emperor or some hated minister, with near certain death to follow.

These were not marginal forces. Narodnaya Volya ('People's Will') may not have been great in number, but was quite fanatical in the pursuit of an 'agrarian socialism'. It was well organised and could be spectacularly successful, as with the assassination of Alexander II in 1881. Its political support in the wider population led sometimes to juries nullifying charges against its members. The theory was simple: assassinations and the like would frighten the tsar's flunkies and embolden the masses, who in due course would take up arms in revolt.

In the Russian underground, this strategy became known as 'terrorism' - especially (again) among its critics. Yet those critics were not exactly *enemies* of the Narodniks, or at least not always. Russian social democracy was founded, to some extent, by veterans of the older movement or others like

it (Vera Zasulich was a Bakuninist who attempted to assassinate the governor of St Petersburg; Pavel Axelrod and Georgi Plekhanov were members of the populist underground as students). Yet they founded it because populist and anarchist terrorism had met its limits. Success brought infiltration and reprisals; and moreover alienated the embryonic urban proletariat, which cried out for permanent organs of self-defence and looked to the example of the international workers' movement.

Terrorism was not opposed, in this dispute, to the forces of light (as with modern 'war on terror' foolishness); nor to the moderate and temperate customs of good governance, as the French revolutionary 'terror' was said to be by the likes of Edmund Burke. It was opposed to *mass* politics, mass parties, even in the tyrannical conditions of late tsarist Russia. At length, the case was proven by the massive growth in support for social democracy and the decisive role of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party in defeating tsarism in the end.

It seems fair to describe Hamas, by the 'Russian' definition, as a terrorist organisation. The abductions, bombings and other spectaculars that typified its activity through the first and second intifadas plainly meet the definition - they are useless *purely* as military operations, take no territory and destroy no armies, but attack instead the psychology of each side. 'Operation Al-Aqsa Flood' was clearly on a far greater scale - an impressive feat of improvised

combined-arms warfare, which perhaps killed more Israelis in one day than Palestinian forces managed in both intifadas put together. But it cannot seriously be supposed that Hamas militants thought they would keep the kibbutzes and army bases they took on October 7.

It is its old strategy, but writ, very, bloodily, large; and it has the old flaws - flaws familiar to Zasulich and Plekhanov a century and a half ago. One *coup de main* against a superior enemy force, no matter how astonishing, changes nothing for the positive.

Civilian

Of course, this is not the definition under which the BBC is to be denounced by its own enemies. That would be the friend/enemy version: a terrorist is an evildoer. *Per se*, this is not defensible, so some reason must be given for placing people on the 'enemy' side of the line, and the most common such reason is the deliberate targeting of civilians for violence. This is, again, hard to deny in the case of Hamas, which began to hit Israeli civilian targets with suicide bombs in 1996, in retaliation for massacres of Palestinians.

The problem is that this principle does not distinguish between Hamas and its enemy, except inasmuch as so very, very much greater terror is inflicted on the Palestinians by Israel that the comparison is all but facile. A distinction could be drawn between state and non-state (or para-state) violence, the latter qualifying as terrorism - but that

was abandoned long ago for the expediency of absorbing states like Iran and Gaddafi's Libya into the same rhetorical frame as Hamas and Carlos the Jackal.

There is no more foolish idea, upon a moment's reflection, than the one that a 'normal' army does not attack civilians - only a 'terrorist' army would do such a thing. However, any war more serious than a few minor skirmishes results in massacres, burned and bombed towns, minefields, rivers of blood. Israeli spokespeople openly cite the destruction of Dresden as a precedent for their present crimes - an action still formally defended by the western powers, despite its appalling brutality and apparent military redundancy. The Soviets were hardly much better behaved on the eastern front, of course; and we will not insult readers' intelligence by reminding them of the crimes of Nazi Germany.

Israel's backers are guilty of hypocrisy if they denounce Hamas for targeting civilians, for obvious reasons. But they are also complicit in a greater hypocrisy, the idea that the 'wrong' side in a war follows from their methods, tactics and strategy. From that narrow point of view, there just are no 'good' wars at all. To accuse some military power of targeting civilians is no more than to identify them correctly as a military power. There are, of course, variations - extreme excesses of bloodlust, as demonstrated by the Israeli government and its keenest supporters in the present conflict. If we are to discriminate meaningfully, however, we must cease treating war as an inverted beauty pageant and ask whether military action brings us any closer to a world *without* armies, *without* aerial bombardment, sniper fire and evacuation orders altogether. We prefer peaceful means to warlike ones - but warlike ones to the perpetual warfare of class society.

Which brings us back to the Russian disputes of the 1880s-1910s. Hamas is not, of course, a leftwing organisation (although leftwing groups did participate in Al-Aqsa Flood). The aims of the Narodniks and RSDLP differed in many important details, but had the same rough shape; the same is not true of communists and Hamas-style Islamists. The question is rather posed regarding left sympathisers with Palestinian liberation, who could not help but welcome Hamas's breakout effort, merely for proving that such a thing was possible.

Leftwing discussion has focused on the question of whether violent resistance is *morally permissible* - understandably so, given the hypocrisy of the mainstream media on this point. We cannot be satisfied with this, however: we have a world to win, not an argument. Terrorist spectaculars failed the Russian socialists of the last two centuries; they found another way. *Perhaps* Hamas and its allies can inflict so great a defeat on Israeli ground forces to make this gambit pay off. If not, those of us who seek the victory of the Palestinians over their oppressors will need to press for *another* strategy ●

PROTESTS



Whitehall: packed together like sardines

Unprecedented numbers for Palestine

Ryan Frost gives his impressions of the demonstrations and why it is vital to go beyond the essentially circular politics of protest

It was a great success in terms of bringing masses of people out onto the streets of London to express their solidarity with the besieged population of Gaza. Indeed according to one of the main organisers, the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, October 21 was the biggest pro-Palestine march in British history, with 300,000 people attending - inevitably the BBC and the police claimed that there were only 100,000.

Based on my own observation, I am inclined to lean towards the PSC claim - it certainly seemed more like a quarter of a million to me. It took well over an hour for the wide and fast moving human column to pass me by and still people kept coming. Once in Whitehall the whole thing banked up to Trafalgar Square. We were packed in like sardines making it almost impossible to keep in touch with other CPGB comrades (not helped by the blocking of mobile phone calls, presumably deliberate state policy).

Demographic

Whatever the exact figure, it struck me immediately how this march dwarfed any previous demonstration I had attended (unlike some of my other comrades, I am no veteran of the Iraq war protests).

The general demographic contained a good percentage of those from a Muslim background, but included a wide range of others too - from anti-Zionist Jews to Christian west Africans. All shades of people were present in fact. The large turnout of Muslims was only to be expected - London alone has a Muslim population of about 1.3 million, according to the 2021 census. The Muslim Association of Britain was another of the main organisers and the Palestinian cause is widely supported among British Muslims for religious as well as basic humanitarian reasons. Inevitably, apart from unity against Israel's bombardment of Gaza, people expressed all manner of different political viewpoints.

Home-made placards - and there were many of them - carried all sorts of contradictory messages. One that I saw, held up by someone who was clearly not Muslim, stated his support for Hamas, while another denounced both Hamas and the Israeli state. Despite the heterogeneous politics, people were receptive to the *Weekly Worker* and we were able to get out large numbers. Naturally, every campaign, group and 'party' was doing the same thing. People were also eager to carry Stop the War, MAB, PSC, SWP and SPEW placards and buy Palestine badges.

Then there was the rain. Pretty wet to begin with, then dry and then the heavens opened. Storm Babet hit central London and soaked us to our skins. Despite that, the atmosphere remained militant and enthusiastic. I saw people clambering up scaffolding, railings or onto ministerial windowsills to wave the Palestinian flag. Everyone chanted pro-Palestine slogans - a popular one being 'From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free!' - a call for a one-state solution once upheld by the PLO and Fatah - which, according to home secretary Suella Braverman, means the destruction of Israel and is therefore anti-Semitic! Presumably ANC calls for the destruction of apartheid South Africa were anti-white. Presumably Nelson Mandela deserved his prison sentence on Robben Island.

Braverman is clearly out to silence, close down, delegitimise solidarity with Palestinians. She has after all been urging the police to treat the chant for 'jihad' as a "racially aggravated" offence. Despite that, I am glad to say, I did not see any police snatch squads barging into the packed crowd to arrest anyone for making the jihad call for a militant, an armed struggle, against the Zionist state. But who knows what will happen next time?

Braverman's very public summoning of Met police chief, Sir Mark Rowley, and her demand for still further restrictions on our already severely limited right to free speech, is now the norm though. Causing offence, upsetting someone, voicing an honest opinion is increasingly problematic.

Tube driver

Just before the demonstration got going from Marble Arch a Central Line tube driver, who was unable to book the day off to attend himself, led a carriage-to-carriage 'Free Palestine' chant, using the train's tannoy. Brilliant. He finished by saying: "Hope you all have a blessed day today and look after yourselves" and urging everyone to keep the Palestinian people "in your prayers." The driver has been subsequently suspended and is now "under investigation" (rightly, he has been defended by Diane Abbott, to the feigned horror of the frothing rightwing press and media).

Attempts to smother Palestine solidarity are not just confined to the Tory government: Labour general secretary David Evans sent out an email warning elected Labour representatives not to attend pro-Palestine demonstrations. There is a clear pro-Zionist consensus between Rishi Sunak's Conservative Party and Keir Starmer's Labour Party.

However, despite Evans' warning, former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn was present and gave a standard social-pacifist speech denouncing the government's lack of action over a ceasefire and letting aid through into Gaza. Of course, he hasn't got anything to lose. His career as a Labour MP is over (like Diane Abbott's). Apart from Apsana Begum, no member of the Parliamentary Labour Party spoke (nor, according to my knowledge, marched). The Socialist Campaign Group is evidently useless, evidently spineless.

According to *Socialist Worker*, "The demonstration last week opened up new possibilities for solidarity with Palestine - and wider resistance against the government. This week's larger demonstration opens up even greater potential." Yes, October 21 was a great day for Palestine solidarity, with hundreds of thousands proclaiming that the government's and the whole establishment's support for the Israeli regime is not in their name.

However, the limits of this and other demonstrations must be borne in mind. People come together for the afternoon and then they go home. They are not organised. Therefore their anger, their militancy, their

energy is dissipated, not contained, not harnessed, not directed. Perhaps some will join the SWP, others SPEW, the CPB or even Socialist Appeal. The PSC has certainly seen a flood of new supporters. That is no bad thing, far from it. But we have to go beyond the confessional sects and the essentially circular politics of protest.

We need to challenge for power and for that there is no substitute. We need a mass party, not just any mass party though, but a mass Communist Party ●

Notes

1. socialistworker.co.uk/palestine-2023/palestine-march-london-2.

Fighting fund

Show your face!

In stark contrast to last week, a rather meagre £387 was donated to the *Weekly Worker* fighting fund over the last seven days. That takes our running total up to £1,757 towards our £2,250 monthly target - in other words, we still need just under £500 in just six days.

Well, that's a setback, but I know from past experience that we can still get there! Please do your best to help us out.

Over the last week there were just seven contributions to the fighting fund - all via bank transfer or standing order. What happened to the usual donors via PayPal, cash or cheque? Perhaps a few more of them will now show their face!

Anyway, our thanks go to those seven - especially comrades SK and PM, who both donated three-figure sums. Then there were DR and DG (£20 each), GD (£15), JL (£10) and TT (£6). But now, of course, we really need

to up the ante and make sure we get the £493 we still need by Tuesday October 31.

As I say, that is more than possible and we could even pass right through that £2,250 barrier - and don't forget, as I wrote last week, that comrade BK has offered to double any surplus we make, which makes it all the more important for us to do it.

I know there are lots of supporters who like to chip in, but haven't done so for a few weeks, so, if you're one of them, there's no better time than right now! Please make sure the *Weekly Worker* gets what it needs to continue its vital role. We can do it! ●

Robbie Rix

Our bank account details are name: Weekly Worker sort code: 30-99-64 account number: 00744310 To make a donation or set up a regular payment visit weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/donate

GERMANY

Named after the leaderene

Sahra Wagenknecht is that rarest of rare things - a popular politician - and she is set on a split with Die Linke and going her own way. **Carla Roberts** takes a look at her BSW project

After months of speculation, Sahra Wagenknecht of Die Linke has finally announced that she will indeed form a new party. For reasons to do with German legislation, the long-standing MP has formed a 'club' first, which carries the snazzy name, 'Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht - für Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit' (Alliance Sahra Wagenknecht - for Reason and Justice).

While we would question how healthy any leftwing organisation can be that takes its name from its leader, she clearly does not suffer from any lack of self-confidence. She is indeed among the most popular politicians in Germany and has fans even outside the left milieu, because she regularly manages to eloquently demolish the platitudes of establishment politicians on this or that TV chat show. Wagenknecht takes obvious delight in railing against the liberal bourgeois consensus - a consensus increasingly embraced by Die Linke.

Inspiration

Die Linke came together with high hopes in 2007 and provided inspiration for the New Anticapitalist Party in France, Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece and Left Unity in the UK. Wagenknecht has had well known differences with Die Linke for many years. So why split now? The answer is rather banal: Die Linke is now a sinking ship. By trying to appeal to traditional leftwingers, while also showing that it can run capitalism in the many 'traffic light' regional government coalitions it has participated in, it ended up disappointing everybody. It is increasingly seen as a rather lame, pro-establishment party, with its leader, Janine Wissler, perfectly summing up the problem of the party: she used to be a leading member of the German section of the International Socialist Tendency, Linksruck, but quickly rose up the career ladder in Die Linke and has now left most of her Cliffite baggage behind, functioning mainly as a 'neutral' bureaucrat.¹

In last week's federal elections in Hesse, Die Linke lost all nine of its parliamentarians, after its share of the vote crashed from 6.3% to just over 3%. It is unlikely to make it into the German Bundestag in the 2025 general election. Even in the 2021 election, it did not clear the 5% hurdle nationally and only retained a parliamentary fraction because a number of its candidates were elected directly by local majorities in eastern Germany - that, according to the complicated German electoral law, allows all votes to be counted.

It currently has 38 members in its national fraction and nine of those have now joined Wagenknecht's BSW. However, they are not voluntarily bailing out. This puts Die Linke's leadership in a difficult position: if it expels nine MPs, the party loses its status as a fraction and becomes a mere 'group', which comes with massive cuts in its state-funded finances.

According to a new poll conducted by the only national tabloid, *Bild-Zeitung*, the BSW would achieve 12% in a general election,² while Die Linke would be kicked out of the Bundestag with a measly 4%. Other polls even predict that the Wagenknecht party could attract up to a quarter of the vote. Needless to say, such polls should be taken with a large pinch of salt, especially as they

are being conducted two years prior to a general election and without the organisation having done or said anything yet. The 2024 European parliament elections, which Wagenknecht wants to contest with the new party, will give a clearer picture.

In any case, a split puts the survival of Die Linke in serious jeopardy. For a long time, its parliamentary presence has been the key reason why many on the left continued to support it, as the only left organisation with any chance of making it into the Bundestag. After a half-hearted attempt to ban political 'platforms' was defeated some 15 years ago, it continues to allow political trends to organise openly within its structures, move motions at conference, etc. In the absence of a principled party, Die Linke still offers Marxists an opportunity to engage with thousands of other socialists with their own political programme - in our view a worthwhile forum, despite the obvious political shortcomings.

Will the BSW be as democratic? Very unlikely. We will have to wait for the founding conference in January 2024 to see what is being proposed. *The Times* accurately describes its political outlook as "leftwing conservative" - its platitudes about 'justice' and 'reason' show where the party wants to position itself.

Wagenknecht comes from an 'official communist' background. Born in Jena, in the German Democratic Republic, she joined the ruling Socialist Unity Party as a 19-year-old in 1989 - just as the GDR collapsed. Intelligent, personable and articulate, she quickly became leader of the GDR-nostalgic Kommunistische Plattform within Die Linke. She left the Kommunistische Plattform some years ago, though politically she still seems to be of a similar persuasion.

She is quite similar to George Galloway on a number of levels: a populist, a rebel, a show pony who does not like to be told what to do. Like Galloway, she riles against the European Union not from an internationalist, but a nationalist perspective ('bad for local people and national business'). Wagenknecht has often clashed with the party's leadership and has been outspoken in her opposition to Germany's financial and military support for Nato's proxy war in Ukraine (not seriously opposed by Die Linke). And, just like Galloway, she is less than keen on "uncontrolled" migration, weaselly arguing that "the acceptance and integration of a very large number of refugees and migrants is linked to considerable problems".³

The BSW has a meagre website, which contains the short, apolitical *Founding manifesto*. We read that, when it comes to "peace", our "foreign policy is in the tradition of former [social democratic] chancellor Willy Brandt and president Mikhail Gorbachev", who "opposed the logic of the cold war with a policy of relaxation, balancing interests and international cooperation".⁴

AfD

The political overlap with the rightwing Alternative für Deutschland is obvious. Despite having a fair share of millionaires in its ranks, AfD has successfully positioned itself as the representative of the

'little people' - those left behind, the discontented - with increasing success: The party now stands at around 22% in the polls.⁵ Wagenknecht has been quite open that she is trying to attract the more leftist elements of that potential vote.

Rather than trying to provide positive answers and a coherent programme for international socialism, just like AfD she instead wants to protect "our country", a classless Germany, from the "influx" of those who have no job, no skills and no visas - ie, those millions of people pushed to the bottom of the heap by imperialist wars and superexploitation. Unsurprisingly, there is not a single mention of the word 'socialism' to be found or what kind of society BSW is striving for. Her programme is characterised by crass political opportunism.

The slightly bizarre thing is that this is not the first time Wagenknecht has gone down this road: in 2018, she founded 'Aufstehen' (Get Up) on exactly the same mixture of vague platitudes and national chauvinism - and left it after a few months, when it became clear it was not a vote winner, and only attracted what *Der Spiegel* dubs "Verrückte" (crazies). This new effort is slightly more serious, with more MPs and possibly a few thousand members who could act as foot soldiers.

And, with Die Linke drifting steadily to the right, there certainly is a vacuum on the left. Perhaps she is hoping that the increasing opposition to the massive German support for the unwinnable war in Ukraine will translate into electoral support. In their joint statement, Die Linke's 10 dissident MPs made great play about Wagenknecht's now famous petition, *Aufstand für den Frieden*, which was followed by a peace demonstration under the same name in February 2023. It attracted over 50,000, but was shunned and denounced by all mainstream parties - including Die Linke, which boycotted the demonstration due to it being "rechtschaffen" (open to the right).⁶ A foolish decision by Wissler and co, not least because it had nothing to do with any of the official slogans,

Sahra Wagenknecht: hugely popular on chat-shows



which mainly featured the usual pacifistic platitudes. No, it was merely that the AfD had announced that its supporters would attend. That is what led to the Die Linke boycott.

Die Linke did not want to be seen at the same protest as the AfD, which is now, worryingly, the clearest anti-war voice in the Bundestag. By contrast, Die Linke lays the blame firmly - and exclusively - at the feet of the Russian government, with no mention, let alone criticism, of the role of Nato and the attempt to reboot US global hegemony.⁷ By contrast the AfD has no problem publicly blaming the US and Nato for recklessly pursuing the Ukraine war which has resulted in Germany taking a huge economic hit.

According to a *Bild-Zeitung* poll, Wagenknecht might indeed 'steal' up to four percent of the AfD vote, which, standing at 18%, remains a major force. Of course, AfD has the 'advantage' of being so hated across the board by respectable politicians that it does not get asked to join regional or national coalitions, where its true nature would quickly be exposed. There is probably less such establishment shyness when it comes to a figure like Wagenknecht, who has steadily moved to the political centre.

Israel-Palestine

The situation in the Middle East might have also taken some wind out of Wagenknecht's chauvinist sails - the entire establishment is currently raging against Hamas and the "terrorists" in Palestine. Wagenknecht has been surprisingly quiet on the Middle East, perhaps because she does not want to ruin her new party's chances of electoral success by coming out with a position that might easily be described as too critical of Israel - which these days is more commonly known as being 'anti-Semitic'.

She has previously criticised the soft, pro-Zionist stance of Die Linke and famously refused to stand up and applaud when Israel's president, Shimon Peres, visited the Bundestag in 2010 - a symbolic gesture unheard of in Germany, which typically kowtows before Israel for obvious historical reasons. Such a gesture would be unthinkable today and Wagenknecht has not come out with anything against Israel's war against the Gaza population, as far as we can tell.

Die Linke, on the other hand, has produced a frankly bizarre statement, which peddles the much-dismissed "two state solution", and pleads for international law and peace, etc. However the first half of the statement goes into overdrive in its condemnation of the "horrific" and "barbaric terror attack", before describing "Hamas's declared aim" as "the destruction of Israel and the establishment of an Islamic dictatorship in Palestine ... We condemn the anti-Semitism of Hamas." It claims: "Because of the history of the holocaust and because of anti-Semitism, the state of Israel is an historic necessity", which is why Die Linke "will continue to oppose every form of anti-Semitism here, in the land of the perpetrator".⁸

It seems that Die Linke has made the transition from soft to hardcore Zionism. Like the rest of the establishment, it sees a "dramatic increase in anti-Semitic incidents". In a speech to the Bundestag on

October 19, chancellor Olaf Scholz combined his "determination that we shall not lose control over immigration" with his "outrage about the way in which anti-Semitic hatred and inhuman agitation have been breaking out since that fateful October 7."

The proof, however, is rather thin. Rias, the state-funded organisation tasked with measuring anti-Semitism, claims that in the 11 days between October 7 and 18 there were a staggering "202 anti-Semitic incidents", representing "a rise of over 240% compared to last year".⁹ But it is worth looking more closely at those incidents: "91% of the cases are Israel-related anti-Semitism" - ie, not anti-Semitism at all - "Israel was given the blame for the massacre, anti-Semitic terror [ie, Hamas] was legitimised and the state of Israel demonised". In reality, out of the 202 cases, a mere 15 could be described as anti-Semitic (the star of David was daubed on some house walls). The others - as far as we can gather from the information provided - are of an anti-Zionist nature and express criticism of Israel. No matter. *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian* echo the story about "a rising wave of attacks on Jews across Germany" in screaming headlines.

The German establishment, as throughout most of the west, is wielding the anti-Zionism equals anti-Semitism conflation as a weapon in the class war in order to silence criticism of Israel. In Berlin - perhaps the most multicultural, young and vibrant of the main German cities - pro-Palestinian demonstrations were banned. The Berlin state senate allowed schools to suspend students for chanting 'Free Palestine' - which led to appalling scenes, when young school girls were arrested and led away by armed police. Chanting "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" has also just been banned across Germany as "seditious"¹⁰ under the infamous paragraph 130, because it allegedly "incites hatred against a national, racial or ethnic group".

So is the Wagenknecht party a split to the right? Yes and no. She may be 'to the right' of the liberal left in Die Linke on some social issues - certainly on asylum and immigration policy. But she is 'to the left' of it on questions of imperialism and war, and to some extent she wants to talk about the working class, which Die Linke has increasingly forgotten how to do. Those opposing Die Linke's soft imperialist politics will probably be told to get out and follow Wagenknecht ●

Notes

1. 'Mixing left and right' *Weekly Worker* April 6: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1437/mixing-left-and-right.
2. www.bild.de/bild-plus/politik/inland/politik-inland/erste-umfrage-mit-sahra-wagenknecht-partei-wahl-beben-85844914.
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USA

Joe Biden's two-front war

Economically more and more debt, diplomatically more and more enemies, militarily more and more wars. Daniel Lazare sees imperial overload

Imperial overstretch - the phrase that historian Paul Kennedy made famous in his 1987 bestseller, *The rise and fall of the great powers* - can be understood in various ways.

Militarily, it is the moment when an empire finds itself fighting more wars in far-flung places than it can handle. Economically, it is when military costs outweigh financial resources, forcing the empire to borrow ever more heavily (the case with 17th century Spain) or squeeze the poor back home. Intellectually, it is when stale ideas lag farther and farther behind modern events. Instead of thinking through problems afresh, political leaders fall back on tired old clichés - that they think will get them out of trouble, but only plunge them in deeper.

Joe Biden's October 19 address on the Israel-Hamas conflict is a case in point. Televised from the Oval Office, it was an attempt to drum up support for what is now a two-front imperial war - one in Ukraine and the other in the Middle East. A string of platitudes from beginning to end, it described the Hamas October 7 attack as "pure, unadulterated evil" and vowed to back Israel to the hilt, while at the same time promising self-determination for the Palestinians. It put Vladimir Putin in the same 'evil-doer' category as Hamas, declaring that, while they "represent different threats", both share one thing in common - "they both want to completely annihilate a neighbouring democracy - completely annihilate it".

"You know," Biden went on, "history has taught us that when terrorists don't pay a price for their terror ... they cause more chaos and death and more destruction" - a statement that many people in the Middle East believe holds equally true for a US war machine that has yet to pay a price for spreading anarchy from one end of the region to the other. As if two wars were not enough, Biden also used his speech to engage in sabre-rattling *vis-à-vis* Russia and Iran. If Putin attacks Nato itself, he warned, "we will defend every inch" (Putin has given no such indication, of course). Iran, he added, will be held "accountable" for supporting Russia, Hamas "and other terrorist groups in the region" - a reference, presumably, to Hezbollah.

Pointing down

Does that mean that more war is on the way? If so, Biden's message to Americans was 'Sit back and relax', because there is nothing the US cannot handle:

We are, as my friend Madeleine Albright said, the indispensable nation ... In moments like these, we have to ... remember who we are. We are the United States of America - the United States of America. And there is nothing, nothing, beyond our capacity if we do it together.¹

American imperial power is thus as infinite and inexhaustible as Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Roman, etc imperial powers were in their own day too.

All of this might have been more convincing if America's vital signs were not otherwise pointing down. Government is in such disarray that the US lacks a functional legislature due to Republican infighting in the House of Representatives. The country's top presidential contender



Two carrier fleets deployed in support of Israel

is facing four criminal trials and one civil trial and could well end up in jail if he continues violating judicial gag orders not to attack what is in fact a full-court Democratic legal offensive.

A drug epidemic is claiming more than 100,000 lives a year, homelessness is exploding and housing costs are mounting, with nearly a third of New York City tenants paying more than half their income in rent.² With the federal deficit doubling to \$2 trillion over the last 12 months, the cost of servicing the \$33.6 trillion federal debt has risen to \$910 billion per year - half of what the US spends on the military.³

Yet the \$105 billion that Biden requested last week in emergency military aid for Israel, Ukraine and Taiwan will add still more debt on the pile. It is not as if the White House *has* to borrow: after all, it can always raise taxes instead. But it will not, because Republicans would veto a tax hike in the House, and because the administration is afraid an increase will tank the economy.

But there is another reason the White House will not raise taxes: because Biden is afraid of the response. Americans are tired of war after 20-plus years of non-stop fighting since 9/11. But they will be even more tired if they have to pay the bill up front, rather than putting off the cost of America's growing military adventures to some later date. The effect will drive them straight into the arms of Donald Trump, who is now up by six points against Biden and the independent, Robert F Kennedy Jr.⁴

Since a second Trump administration is something the political establishment is desperate to avoid, its only choice is to pump up the deficit even more and then stand by and watch, as interest-rate payments (currently about 15% of expenditure) eat up a growing share of the federal pie.

This is what imperial overstretch looks like: more wars, more debt and more mindless odes to American greatness. Axios.com described the Hamas assault and its aftermath as "the heaviest, most chilling week since president Biden took office just over 1,000 days ago". In addition to

the war, it said that administration strategists are weighed down by other woes, such as Vladimir Putin's and Xi Jinping's meeting in Beijing last week to strengthen their joint anti-US alliance, growing tensions with Iran and North Korea, plus "a massive spread of doctored or wholly fake videos to manipulate what people see and think in real time" - in other words, a supposed avalanche of disinformation that is leading to stepped-up calls to censor the internet.

Bob Gates, secretary of defence under both George W Bush and Barack Obama, called it the greatest case of system overload since World War II:

There's this gigantic funnel that sits over the table in the [White House] Situation Room. And all the problems in the world end up coming through that funnel to the same eight or 10 people. There's a limit to the bandwidth those eight or 10 people can have.

As a neocon who championed US intervention in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, Biden is as responsible as anyone for the debacle - particularly since his confrontational policies *vis-à-vis* Russia and China helped usher in a new round of violence beginning in February 2022. His vow last week not to give up on a two-state solution, because "Israel and Palestinians equally deserve to live in safety, dignity and peace", was especially laughable, since his entire Mideast strategy has been predicated on burying the Palestinian problem so as to promote an Israeli-Saudi alliance against China and Iran.

It is this effort - part of the so-called Abraham Accords - that is now blowing up in Biden's face like an exploding cigar. What have the Palestinians got after 30 years of the Oslo 'peace process'? The answer is less than zero. Self-government in the West Bank is a joke. Israeli roadblocks and checkpoints limit movement at every turn, while Palestinian construction is virtually prohibited in the 60% of the territory (known as Area C) under direct Israeli control. Not only have

Jewish settlements expanded, but radical nationalists have established 100 wildcat outposts that, while technically illegal, are government-subsidised regardless - outposts that the settlers then use to brutalise and harass their Palestinian neighbours with absolute impunity.

Hamas

Gaza has meanwhile been under a state of siege since Hamas took control in 2006. Thanks to the Israeli blockade, nearly 80% of its 2.4 million inhabitants depend on international humanitarian aid for survival, with 60% suffering from food insecurity. Unemployment is more than 40% overall and more than 60% for young adults. Although the Oslo Accords supposedly allow fishing up to 20 nautical miles off the Gaza coast, Israel has never allowed more than 12 in its determination to squeeze the strip dry and sometimes limits it to just three.⁵

And then there is Hamas - the Israeli doppelganger, whose far-right clerico-fascist politics mirror Zionism as much as opposing it. By killing more than a thousand Israeli civilians and taking more than 200 hostages, Hamas's savage October 7 assault played straight into Netanyahu's hands by providing him with the excuse he needed to pound Gaza City with hundreds of electronically guided bunker-buster bombs, reducing it to dust and rubble. With more than 5,000 people dead - nearly half of them children, according to *Al Jazeera* - the result is the greatest disaster for the Palestinians since the Six-Day War in 1967 or maybe even the original Nakba in 1948. And all this *before* Israeli troops enter Gaza itself and engage in a rubble war with Hamas survivors that will inevitably summon up memories of the basement fighting that marked the Warsaw ghetto uprising in April-May 1943.

But Hamas is nothing if not consistent. Its long-term goal has been to turn the Palestinian people into martyrs, so that "masses everywhere in the Islamic world will come forward in response to the call of duty, while loudly proclaiming: hail to jihad", to quote

its 1988 charter.⁶ But, with two US aircraft-carrier groups standing guard off the Israeli coast to prevent Hezbollah from intervening in the north, the strategy is a flop. After decades of US intervention, the Middle East is too weak to respond in a way that Hamas would like. Lebanon is bankrupt, Syria is exhausted after years of US and Saudi-sponsored civil war, Iraq is an American satrapy, Jordan is an unstable monarchy, while Egypt is ruled by a military dictatorship, whose sole *raison d'être* is to keep the Muslim Brotherhood out. Libya is broken beyond repair while Saudi Arabia and the other oil monarchies give new meaning to the word, 'corruption'. Obtaining help from those quarters is like getting water from a stone: ie, unlikely in the extreme.

But Israeli strategy has also flopped. Since the 1970s, the Zionist goal has been to channel funds to Islamist forces in order to create a conservative counterweight to the radical secularists of the Palestine Liberation Organisation. In a recent letter to the editor, David K Shipler, an ex-*New York Times* bureau chief in Jerusalem, said he was told back in 1981 by brigadier general Yitzhak Segev, the former military governor of Gaza, that the aim was "to tilt power away from both communist and Palestinian nationalist movements in Gaza, which Israel considered more threatening than the fundamentalists". Netanyahu expanded on the theme, when he told the Likud Party's Knesset members in March 2019:

Anyone who wants to thwart the establishment of a Palestinian state has to support bolstering Hamas and transferring money to Hamas. This is part of our strategy - to isolate the Palestinians in Gaza from the Palestinians in the West Bank.⁷

But bottling up Hamas has caused it to explode. Biden's 'America is back' strategy of renewed confrontation and aggression is doing the same and may lead to other explosions as well - in the western Pacific most likely, but also possibly in the Persian Gulf. But this is what imperialism leads to when it enters its death throes - more war, more nihilism and then greater and greater collapse. Nationalism has never been more of a trap in Israel, Palestine, or the United States as well.

As distant as it may seem, a socialist workers' federation has never been needed more ●

Notes

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IRAN

Rhetoric and double talk

How will the Islamic Republic react to Gaza? Yasmine Mather explains why the masses are for the moment largely passive and how that could easily change

No doubt the most protracted conflicts in the Middle East centre around Israel and Palestine. Events in Gaza - notably artillery bombardment, air strikes and the siege - have been a focal point for mass protests, and in the last two weeks every significant Middle Eastern urban centre has witnessed huge turnouts for pro-Palestinian demonstrations.

For many in the Middle East, the Palestinian cause is not just a historic political issue, but a symbol of resistance against injustice, colonialism and foreign domination. That is why demonstrations in Cairo, Beirut, Amman and Baghdad are not merely expressions of anger at events in Gaza, but expressions of a shared history, identity and quest for justice - a reminder that the Palestinian struggle has a central place in the collective Arab psyche. Of course for most of the citizens of the region, current events and Israeli plans for ethnic cleansing are reminiscent of the Nakba (the 'catastrophe', the mass expulsion of Palestinians during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war).

Of course, the scale and nature of demonstrations has been influenced by national and regional politics. In Yemen it is interesting to note that the two sides of the civil war have united in huge protests against Israel and in support of Palestine. In a number of provinces, thousands of protestors gathered to express their opposition against the indiscriminate bombing of Gaza by Israel.

One Yemini, speaking to *Arab News*, said:

Our solidarity with the people of Gaza has nothing to do with religion, race or ideology. These people are humans in the first place, and being silent on the Israel crimes is inhuman. It is disgraceful to the entire world to let such a genocide unfold.¹

While some Arab leaders allowed or even encouraged large protests as a means to bolster their own standing, to deflect from domestic issues or to assert themselves against regional rivals, some states tried to suppress or downplay demonstrations, fearing the repercussions of a too vociferous pro-Palestinian stand and wary of their diplomatic ties or other strategic considerations.

In Egypt we had the bizarre situation where Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who is seeking re-election as president, tried to organise a pro-Palestinian demonstration - only to be snubbed, as many Egyptians called it a 'staged protest' and refused to attend. In the words of one pro-Palestine supporter, speaking to *Al-Jazeera*: "It was a comedy show. Most people who were there were hired or paid to come." Various journalists report that "there were directives by the different ministries to take to the streets in these mobilisations, as well as the state-backed trade union federations, who also mobilised their workers."

Instead of the 'official' protest, thousands went to other, non-governmental demonstrations - and even those who did go to the Sisi demonstration managed to shout their own slogans, which were a return, at times, to the slogans of the Arab spring of 2011.

Of course, Egypt is now looking at a possible influx of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. An Israeli think tank, the Misgav Institute for National Security



Hezbollah a real power in Lebanon

and Zionist Strategy, headed by Benjamin Netanyahu's former national security advisor, Meir Ben-Shabbat, published a paper on October 17, which says this: "There is at the moment a unique and rare opportunity to evacuate the whole Gaza Strip in coordination with the Egyptian government."

Solution

The detailed proposals explain both the 'needs' of the Gaza population and the solution:

There is a need for an immediate, viable plan for the resettlement and economic rehabilitation of the entire Arab population in the Gaza Strip, which sits well with the geopolitical interests of Israel, Egypt, the USA and Saudi Arabia ...

The average cost of a three-room apartment of 95 square meters for an average Gaza family of 5.14 people in one of the two mentioned cities stands at \$19,000. In calculating the total population that resides in the Gaza Strip, which stood at 2.2 million people, it is possible to assess that the amount that would need to be transferred to Egypt in order to finance [resettlement] would be around \$5-\$8 billion.

An encouraging injection to the Egyptian economy of this magnitude would provide an enormous and immediate advantage to El-Sisi's regime. Such money sums, compared to the Israeli economy, are miniscule. The investment of a mere few billions of dollars (even if it is \$20 or \$30 billion) in order to solve this difficult issue is an innovative, cheap and viable solution.

There is no doubt that, in order for this plan to be enacted, many conditions need to exist in parallel. At the moment, these conditions exist, and it is unclear when such an opportunity will arise again, if at all.²

However, in contrast to the large regional and indeed global protests in solidarity with the Palestinians, we have witnessed muted demonstrations in Iran's Islamic Republic. A government-sponsored protest saw a mere few hundred gathering in a Tehran square immediately after the bombing of

either indifferent or misinformed about the issues involved.

4. The myth that all of Hamas and Hezbollah funds come from Iran: it is a well documented fact that Hamas's income comes mainly from Qatar and super-rich individuals in other Gulf countries. As for Hezbollah, it is now part of the government in Lebanon and over the last few decades it has become a major owner of capital, finance, real estate and manufacturing in Lebanon, which increasingly pays for at least a portion its military expenditure.

In summary, the Iranian public's subdued response to the attacks on Gaza is not an isolated phenomenon, but is rooted in the country's socio-political landscape. Decades of state propaganda, combined with the influence of foreign media and growing disillusionment with the regime, have resulted in a complex web of perceptions and beliefs about the Palestinian cause.

Regional war?

Of course, Iranians have no reason to be apathetic and the situation will change dramatically - either if Hezbollah, and by extension Iran, get involved in the current conflict or if the US intervenes directly.

So far it is clear that yet again, despite all its anti-Israeli, pro-Palestinian rhetoric, Iran's Islamic Republic has so far done its best to restrain its main regional ally, Hezbollah. Iran's security and military forces are fully occupied trying to control protests inside the country and this policy has its own dangers. The Islamic Republic - the country that in the past has made so much noise about Israel - looks completely impotent at a time when Palestinians desperately need all the help they can get. The regime's own internal and external supporters might be wondering what is going on.

Over the last couple of weeks the Islamic Republic has chosen the relatively easier option of concentrating on low-level operations against US forces in Iraq and Syria. The US has evacuated non-essential personnel from its embassy in Baghdad and consulate in Erbil over the "increased security threats" against its personnel and interests.

On October 24, US secretary of state Antony Blinken told the UN security council that Washington does not seek conflict with Iran, but warned that the US "would act swiftly and decisively if Iran or its proxies attack the US".

Of course, Netanyahu is keen to expand the war and this week he visited northern Israel to tell soldiers on the Lebanese border: "We are now in a double battle" - adding he could not tell them right now if Hezbollah will decide to enter the war fully, but said the fight with Hamas was 'do or die' for Israel. A day earlier on October 22, Israel's economy minister, Nir Barkat, issued an ominous threat to Iran and Lebanon, saying his country would "wipe them off the face of the earth" if Hezbollah opens up a northern front in the Hamas war.

How will US imperialism respond? ●

Notes

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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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Deserting the ship

Birds of ill omen are flying for Rishi Sunak and the Tory government. After two big by-election wins, Sir Keir increasingly looks like a prime minister in waiting, writes **Eddie Ford**

Now, we can all be wrong, when it comes to making predictions. After all, many were convinced that Britain would never vote to leave the European Union, and that Donald Trump would never become president - the political establishment would not allow it! But after last week's devastating by-election defeats, the writing really does seem to be on the wall for the Tories, with things only going from worse to worse.

On a fairly low 35.9% turnout, the Tamworth seat was won by Sarah Edwards, the Labour candidate, getting 11,719 votes, compared to the 10,403 for the Conservative candidate - the charming Andrew Cooper, who in 2020 posted a message to Facebook telling jobless parents who cannot feed their children to "fuck off" if they still pay a £30 phone bill. This represented a swing of 23.9%, the second-biggest from Conservative to Labour since 1945. No government has previously lost so safe a seat in a by-election - making it a bird of ill omen for the Tories, especially when you consider that parties to their right (Reform UK, Britain First and Ukip) attracted a total combined vote of 9.4%.

Pincher by nature

We also need to remember the revealing context. The by-election happened due to the resignation in June last year of the sitting Tory MP, Chris Pincher, following allegations that he had sexually assaulted two men, and his recommended suspension from the House of Commons for eight weeks. These and other allegations pre-dated his appointment by Boris Johnson, who piously denied all knowledge. But it was later revealed that Johnson had actually been aware of the allegations - according to Dominic Cummings, the then prime minister had joked in 2020 about the MP being "Pincher by name, pincher by nature". Many cited this scandal as the final straw that led to Johnson's resignation.

Then we have Mid-Bedfordshire - a seat comprising various small towns and rural areas in the outer parts of the London commuter belt, which has voted Tory since 1931. The seat became vacant following the resignation on June 9 this year of Conservative MP, Nadine Dorries, also under interesting circumstances. A die-hard Boris Johnson fan, and another person known for exemplary integrity! She lost the whip in 2012 after she took part in the *I'm a celebrity ... Get me out of here!* TV programme without informing the chief whip (getting re-admitted a year later). Despite her announcement that she was standing down from the seat "with immediate effect", she tortuously delayed her resignation until August 29 following a storm of criticism about her absence from parliament, improper conduct, and so on. Some commentators thought



Nadine and her BoJo hero

that she simply behaved like this to cause trouble for Rishi Sunak, which might possibly be true. Her main beef was, though, not being elevated into the House of Lords.

Anyway, on a 44% turnout, Labour's Alistair Strathern won by 13,872 votes to 12,680 on a 20.5% swing - the first time a Labour member had held the seat in its 105-year history. Another bird of ill omen flutters in the sky. In fact, when examined further, the statistics for both by-elections make for even worse reading if you are a Tory. In Mid-Bedfordshire, the Conservatives' own share of the vote fell by even more than in Tamworth - the 28.7-point drop being the sixth biggest fall in Tory support in the post-war period. As for Tamworth itself, the result is particularly painful, because the seat voted strongly to leave the EU in 2016 and Labour's vote in the constituency had actually been in long-term decline.

Delusion

Labour's success in Tamworth especially augurs well for its chances of recapturing the many so-called 'red wall' seats that the party lost in 2019 - with Boris Johnson promising (or lying about) 'levelling up' and 'getting Brexit done' (which he didn't lie about). Of course, it was just three months ago that a narrow Tory victory in Johnson's old Uxbridge seat gave the Tories a sudden rush of hope, with Sunak declaring that the next general election was "not a done deal". But the idea that Uxbridge was a potential pathway back to electoral recovery looks like a pathetic delusion and the next election, if anything, now looks more of a done deal that it did before October 19.

For the Tories, these crushing by-elections defeats must bring back disturbing memories of the results that characterised the 1992-97 parliament. Hence in its last three years, there were four by-elections in which there was a swing of more than 20% from Conservative to Labour. But now we have had three in just three months - a dramatic speeding up of events, which can only point in one direction. Even more significantly, one of those four by-elections happened to be in none other than Tamworth (albeit called then South East Staffordshire). Almost uncannily, history has more or less repeated itself - because in April 1996, Labour won the seat with a 22% swing, before going on a year later to achieve a landslide victory under Tony Blair with a 179 majority.

Yes, we all know that swings against the government in by-elections are often an exaggerated reflection of the current national mood. Some desperate Tory spokespersons have pointed to the fact that turnout fell strongly in both by-elections by around 30 points, compared to the general election - presenting this as a lack of any real enthusiasm for Sir Keir Starmer's Labour Party. No doubt this is true, but it just serves to emphasise the truly dire state the Tories are in. Turnout fell by similar levels in the by-elections we had in the 1992-97 parliament, only for there to be record high swings to Labour in the general election. The Tories cannot avoid the fact that, by all measures, Labour's performance is matching - or bettering - what happened in the run-up to the 1997 general election.

No wonder stories are going round that the chancellor, Jeremy Hunt,

will resign before the next election to avoid a 'Michael Portillo moment'. Portillo was an intolerant, rightwing Thatcherite MP, who in 1997 got trounced by a complete outsider, Stephen Twigg - the first openly gay president of the National Union of Students. This was an event that came to symbolise the extent of the Labour landslide victory - the images of a crestfallen Portillo at the count still provide a happy memory for many people of a certain generation. He contested for leadership of the party following the 2001 general election, but many reckon that Portillo's 1999 admission to *The Times* that he "had some homosexual experiences as a young person" scuppered his chances - losing out to the self-styled 'quiet man', Iain Duncan Smith.

Naturally, there are plentiful rumours of other MPs and ministers quitting before the election, including names like party chairman Greg Hands, deputy prime minister Oliver Dowden and leader of the House of Commons, Penny Mordaunt. A special MRP poll published recently by *The Observer*, taking into account the new constituency boundaries that the next election will be fought on - which have been blatantly gerrymandered to the detriment of the Labour Party - suggested that Labour would win 420 seats, equating to a landslide 190-seat majority despite the 20 or more seats stolen in the redrawing of the boundaries. The Tories would lose *all* their 'red wall' seats and 20 behind the 'blue wall' - saying just about everything you need to know about today's Conservative Party. With no post-conference bounce (quite the opposite!), Rishi Sunak's attempts to portray himself as the 'change' candidate challenging the status quo in politics has been an abysmal and predictable failure.

Mistaken

Only a short time ago some comrades on the left were actually saying that Keir Starmer did not want to beat the Tories and win the election. Apparently, all he cared about was getting rid of the Labour left. This was when Starmer was trailing behind the Tories in opinion polls and not doing particularly well in by-elections. Obviously, these comrades were badly mistaken in their assessment of Sir Keir and what he is all about. They did not understand that the Labour Party could function perfectly well without the dues being paid by activists or the left acting as the donkeys dishing out leaflets, knocking on doors, and so on.

Potentially, Starmer will have *The Sun* on his side - not to mention *The Times*, *Sunday Times*, *Financial Times*, etc. 'Sensible', 'moderate' opinion is now backing Starmer and his team, wanting to put the crazy and chaotic Tory years behind

them - shuddering at the memory of David Cameron, Theresa May, Boris Johnson and Liz Truss. Indeed, as has been reported in the *Weekly Worker* and elsewhere, seriously rich individuals and capitalist companies have been paying Labour considerably more than the trade unions - the traditional financiers of the party. In September, it was reported that Labour had boosted its election war chest with a record quarter for funding, receiving more than £10.4 million.² This included £3 million from David Sainsbury, the supermarket baron, as well as £2.2 million from Gary Lubner, who made hundreds of millions of pounds running the company behind Autoglass. That trend will surely accelerate as the general election gets nearer.

True, the party's mass membership has shrunk by about 200,000. But, on the other hand, it is worth pointing out that people have been joining as well (or rejoining). You and I might guess what sort of people they are politically. They simply look at a Labour Party that is on the up and likely to be a winner, and want to be associated with that - as opposed to the Conservative Party, which appears dead on its feet. Some of these new recruits will be dreaming of getting into parliament or, more likely, into the council chamber. Besides that, there are all sorts of quangos to fill, government advisors to be appointed, and so on. You name it and the opportunity is there for some ladder climbing careerist. The payroll list is going to be very long.

The most noticeable thing now about the last Labour conference is the presence of big business, special receptions and stands, that are all over-subscribed - the *Financial Times* jokingly referring to the "Liverpool Davos". Labour's 'business day' had twice as many firms involved as last year, with the likes of Goldman Sachs, Boeing and Amazon sponsoring events.

As Hamish Sanderson of Labour Business loudly proclaims, "Labour is now the party of *all* business," which is meant to convey the message that, unlike the Tories, it is not just the party of hedge-fund managers. How the trade union bureaucracy squares that particular circle remains to be seen. One thing is certain though, the working class needs to prepare for the most rightwing Labour government ever ... and that is really saying something, given the rotten history of Labour governments ●

eddie.ford@weeklyworker.co.uk

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