

A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity

# weekly worker



**More to Horizon than Paula Vennells  
and corporate indifference: the rot  
runs deep into legal history**

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Towards a mass Communist Party

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**COMMUNISM AND HOLY WAR**

## LETTERS



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

## Factions

I am grateful for the responses from Jack Conrad, Ansell Eade and Tony Clark on the issue of factions within a genuine Communist Party, and for the tone in which they were made (Letters, January 11). It is fascinating - and revealing - these all focus on 'factionalism'.

Coming from the mainstream orthodox Communist Party tradition, I find it completely obvious why factionalism is detrimental to the operation and functioning of a genuine Communist Party and antithetical to true democracy within such a party.

Of course, there are always different tendencies and trends within any Communist Party - especially if it is appropriately representative of the diversity of the working class in modern capitalist society - and it is important for these to be expressed and resolved openly and democratically. The correct operation of democratic centralism adequately allows for that.

But *factions* are something quite different. They have their own memberships, policy platforms, aims and objectives, organisational disciplines, etc, which are *separate to, different from* and most often *opposed to* the main party itself. Otherwise why *organise* into a faction?

Membership of a Communist Party and democracy within it (and democracy in general) carries both rights and obligations. One of the most basic is the duty to *accept and carry out decisions* made by the party, after having had ample opportunity to contribute to the democratic determination of such decisions.

In any democracy, yes, individuals and minorities have rights, but so too have democratic majorities. They include - having had the argument, debate and the votes - an expectation that minorities and individuals accept the decisions made by the party, work as disciplined members and knuckle down and carry out those decisions.

The existence of (by definition, opposition - or at the very least 'dissent') factions carries a very strong implication that members of such will *not* carry out those decisions. Sure, they may not defy explicitly, but the very existence and membership of such factions is in effect a continued open declaration they disagree with such decisions and so any lip service paid is to be taken very lightly indeed.

Jack describes the high degree of factionalism within the original Communist Party of Great Britain when he joined in the 1960s. I joined in the mid-1980s and fully recognise all that - except it was far worse, with a raging, multifaceted factional civil war in full swing, when rival factions knocked seven bells out of each other, at the expense of the party itself.

In my view, factionalism destroyed the CPGB and it is actually a superb example of how factionalism is detrimental to any genuine Communist Party. Yes, some members continued to work and be active in the wider working class movement, but the great majority of members' and the party's resources were completely devoted to fighting the internal factional war. This reflected itself in a massive decline in party membership, a dramatic loss of influence, indeed credibility, within the wider labour movement, and ultimately organisational liquidation.

Jack and Ansell ask if it is not possible for members of factions to *advocate* both their factional viewpoints *and* the party as a whole? *And* to work in the mass movement? I guess it is theoretically possible, but I have seen very little evidence of that in practice.

The vast majority of evidence indicates the interest of the faction *always* takes precedence.

Open factionalism within a Communist Party, whether as a cause, symptom or both, is an indication it is experiencing extreme difficulties and an threat to its own existence. It is *never* a sign of it unifying, growing in influence or operating democratically.

Jack himself states the "Mensheviks were riven by factions". Hardly a positive characterisation! He is unwise to 'pray in aid' of Kamenev and Bukharin in any argument on factions, given their own factional records in opposition within the Bolshevik/Communist Party and the extreme actions they ultimately undertook to undermine Soviet socialist state power to further their factional opposition to the Bolshevik majority within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Jack's claim that the fragmentation and splitting within the Trotskyist movement is in any way comparable to what has happened within the communist movement is ludicrous. Even if we include the Maoists, over the past hundred years we are only talking single-figure numbers of actual splits or breakaways - a low single figure of parties or groups today claiming to be genuinely communist. We are talking literally of hundreds for the Trotskyists. No comparison whatsoever.

To answer Jack's direct question over 1903, no, of course not, banning factions would not have 'helped' the Bolsheviks, but equally would probably not have wholly hindered them either.

He is again confusing two really basic issues: (a) Bolsheviks/communists operating in wider political and mass formations (eg, the RSDLP, the Labour Party), where, of course, they must operate in an organised and disciplined manner; (b) how the Bolshevik/Communist Party itself is organised to take and carry out decisions - which must *also* be in an organised and disciplined manner.

Democratic centralism is really quite simple. An ample range of democratic opportunities to express one's view, in the branch, in the party press, in meetings, aggregates and formal congresses, both national and regional. Full opportunity to question or challenge others' points of view, to seek to persuade others etc. An open, democratic vote to decide the issue. And *then* the *whole* party coming together to carry out those decisions. Factions prevent the latter from happening and actually crowd out and limit the democracy for the membership as a whole.

From the scientific perspective, the correctness or otherwise of decisions can most often only be tested in practice. If real life, concrete reality, actual experience and results - or lack of them - demonstrates such decisions are faulty, then the Party can reflect on that and adjust policy accordingly. If you have large swathes of the Party's members through organised factions refusing to implement those decisions in the first place, how can you possibly arrive at a scientific assessment of their validity?

I think the basic problem is that Jack, his *Weekly Worker* group and the majority of writers to the paper have operated in oppositional sects and factions for so long they are addicted to them: they can't possibly imagine political life without them.

They just can't get their heads around the basic concept of being *positively* a member of a communist party, because as a communist you actually *agree* with the great majority of its positions and are *not* constantly trying to undermine the democratically elected leadership or trying to obtain martyrdom expulsions.

This is a recognition that you are part of an organised, disciplined collective and part of a tradition to which

hundreds of thousands in this country alone have previously contributed their combined wisdom and experience. It is Communism versus Trotskyism, Bolshevism versus Menshevism.

Andrew Northall  
Kettering

## Triviality

When writing about factions within the Communist Party of Britain, I can see that Andrew Northall *et al* are clearly following that famous dictum of Oscar Wilde: "*We should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality.*"

Steven Johnston  
email

## Hamas

Readers will be getting bored of the endless corrections I make to Daniel Lazare's pronouncements on Hamas, but in your last issue he was at it again ('Showing exceptional weakness', January 11). He keeps banging on about their founding charter being anti-Semitic. And what did they say in 1988? Back then Hamas had declared that the "Day of Judgment will not come about until Muslims fight Jews and kill them."

He claims that the 2017 document does not supersede it. He backs this up with a claim about Mahmud al-Zahar. Let's just check what Dr al-Zahar actually said in 2017: "The pledge Hamas made before God was to liberate all of Palestine. The charter is the core of [Hamas's] position and the mechanism of this position is the document."

And what does the new 'Document of general principles and policies' say? Point 16 declares: "Hamas affirms that its conflict is with the Zionist project, not with the Jews because of their religion. Hamas does not wage a struggle against the Jews because they are Jewish, but wages a struggle against the Zionists who occupy Palestine. Yet, it is the Zionists who constantly identify Judaism and the Jews with their own colonial project and illegal entity."

So not anti-Semitic at all. I asked a friend who was close to Hamas to explain their 1988 wording. He said that Israelis do not identify themselves to Palestinians as Zionists. They identify themselves as Jews. So Palestinians see them as Jews - not Zionists - hence the wording Hamas used initially. He said he had pointed out to Hamas leaders the difference between the two and convinced them they needed to clarify their position - hence the refinements and clarifications of the 2017 document.

Indeed, I personally know a few Jews - rabbis from the Neturei Karta - who have been welcomed by Hamas officials in Gaza. This is something that Lazare is clearly unaware of: that Hamas could welcome anti-Zionist Jews. But they do, because they have made clear their problem is with Zionism, not Jews.

Pete Gregson  
One Democratic Palestine

## Come clean

In my previous letter (December 14) I pointed out: "Daniel Lazare is in denial. He is in denial of the colonising essence of the Zionist project; he is in denial of the colonial nature of the conflict between the Israeli settler state and its colonised Palestinian subjects; he is in denial of the vast disparity of power between the nuclear-armed oppressor and its victims; indeed, he is in denial that the relation between Israelis and Palestinians is one of colonial-national oppression. None of these facts are hinted at, let alone mentioned, in his article, 'Far from pacified' (December 7)."

In his response Lazare protests: "But I'm not in denial at all. It goes without saying that Israel's power eclipses that of Hamas, that it is an expansionist state, that it is Jewish-supremacist, and that the international proletariat must

defend Palestinians against the Zionist onslaught" (Letters, January 11).

Lazare's emphatic "at all" is disingenuous, as he persists in his studious silence on the key facts: the colonising essence of the Zionist project; the colonial nature of the conflict between the Israeli settler state and its colonised Palestinian subjects. He still sidesteps the fact that the relation between Israelis and Palestinians is one of colonial-national oppression.

I am puzzled as to what peculiar ideology lies behind Daniel Lazare's prevarication. Perhaps some day he will come clean about it.

Moshé Machover  
London

## Focus on need

I think it's important to review the Hamas uprising of October 7 that's touched upon in Daniel Lazare's letter for the purpose of truth-seeking, and the dispelling of Zionist propaganda accounts which Lazare is all too willing to believe. What took place was a military operation led by Hamas, the major Palestinian resistance organisation.

Anything coming out of the Zionist government should obviously be taken with not a grain, but a bucket of salt - proven liars haven't the slightest credibility. What do we know or what does the evidence suggest? October 7 was a very disciplined, professional, military action. Intelligence hardware appeared to be confiscated, military personnel and armed civilians were killed. Civilians and military people were captured for the purpose, apparently, of being exchanged for Palestinian political prisoners, held by the colonialist administration, who are routinely tortured and humiliated in perpetuity. It seems that the protection of the Al-Aqsa mosque was crucially important. It appears that Hamas had planned for a long, brutal, genocidal response by the Israeli occupation forces.

It's not clear who was responsible for any terrorist acts that might have taken place. Zionist fabrications, which Lazare buys into, abound. The evidence points to many, if not most, of the civilians who were killed at the kibbutzim and music festival had come under fire by the Israeli security forces out of panic or calculated design (it's reported that the date of the festival was changed at the last moment and

Hamas couldn't have known this). The 'Hannibal directive', part of the established Israeli military strategy, was a likely approach (refer to investigative reporting by Max Blumenthal among others). Additionally, Hamas (and whoever else that might have breached the wall) didn't have the weaponry or equipment to lay waste to the scores of cars at the festival which Israel points to as somehow 'proof' of Hamas 'atrocities'.

This figures into the assembly line of false narratives by this evil, Zionist state - the junior sidekick of American imperialism. The determination of the facts is essential, based on the evidence or what's inferred from the evidence, not Lazare's guesswork out of whole cloth that he uses to bash and undermine the Palestinian resistance movement.

It was predictable that Lazare would try to mimic and bolster the Zionist condemnation of Hamas for not "repealing" the 1988 charter. This is a red herring. The updated 2017 charter is a moderate and pragmatic document which should have been the basis for negotiations, but Israel has shown time and again that they are not interested in serious negotiations; why would they be interested when they can continue the usurpation of Arab land? If anyone should require conditions for negotiations it's the aggrieved and dispossessed party - the Palestinian people and their representatives (for example, conditions such as the end to the violence and the end to settlement-building).

There's no good reason for Hamas to accede to unreasonable, pre-negotiation Zionist demands; in effect the Islamists would be prostrating themselves before the sadistic 'god of Zionism'. For starters, Lazare should call for the Zionist regime to retract or "repeal" their phony charge against Hamas of the butchering and beheading of babies. Moreover, he should focus on what's needed to rebuild the Palestinian left rather than keep whining about the imagined derelictions of Hamas, based on Zionist propaganda.

In a sea of Zionist, settler-colonial aggression over seven or eight decades, a one-day island of resistance in whatever form should not be the culprit for Lazare to obsess about, while the criminal, terrorist state of Zionist Israel currently carries out the mass destruction of the Palestinian people.

GG  
USA

## Online Communist Forum



Sunday January 21 5pm  
Communist unity and its refuseniks  
Speaker: Mike Macnair

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

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

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

CHINA

# One-trick pony

High end computer chips are now being made elsewhere. Michael Roberts looks at the economic and political background to last weekend's elections in Taiwan

The international media highlighted the Taiwan elections on January 13 as an important geopolitical pivot - namely, if the current incumbent government party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), won and continued its call for formal (not just *de facto*) independence from mainland China, that would mean intensified attacks on Taiwan by Beijing, perhaps leading to military conflict.

But this obsession with the US-China geopolitical conflict that so concerns the imperialist powers was not the main issue for Taiwanese voters: standards of living and the state of the Taiwanese economy were more to their point. Some 19.5 million Taiwan citizens were eligible to vote, out of a population of more than 23 million (voters must be aged 20 or older).

While Lai Ching-te retained the presidency for the DPP, the party lost 10 seats in the Legislative Yuan, dropping from 61 to 51 out of 113. Narrowly overtaking it was the Kuomintang or KMT - the nationalist Chinese party initially composed of those that fled the mainland after the 1949 revolution and took over control of the island from the indigenous population. The KMT increased its seats from 38 to 52. It is supposedly more inclined to work with Beijing and not disturb the status quo, although its presidential candidate said before the election that the US was Taiwan's ally and he would aim to strengthen even more the country's defences against the supposed threat from across the straits.

Mainland China under Xi Jinping continues to claim that Taiwan is part of China and unification must take place at some point. The US and its allies in the region continue with the formal paper agreement with China, which states that China and Taiwan are one country, but with two states. In reality, however, the US is buttressing Taiwan's military and financial resources to ensure continued separation in order to weaken Beijing and sustain Taiwan's pivotal role in providing semi-conductors and hi-tech components for the west.

It is true that the island's population increasingly sees its identity as Taiwanese rather than with mainland China, but that does not mean that the majority are in favour of outright provocation to Beijing. Most want things to stay as they are politically.

What mostly concerns the bulk of Taiwan households is the state of the economy. Tiny Taiwan is one of what used to be called the 'Asian tigers' (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan), which industrialised fast in the late 1980s onwards, at the same time as China began its economic march upwards. Taiwan's growth was based on huge inward investment from the US, using very cheap labour at home, policed by a military regime under the KMT for many decades (martial law was not ended until 1987 and there were no elections until 1996), while the US built up Taiwan's military power as part of the strategy of surrounding China.

Starting off as a poverty-stricken, resource-poor, technologically backward nation in 1949, Taiwan has now become the hub of a global production network in many



Chiang Kai-shek: no democracy under his rule

high-tech industries, with increasing significance in the world economy. Per-capita gross domestic product at about \$33,000 is more than double that in the Chinese mainland. Semiconductor and other electronic products account for over 70% of Taiwan's total exports or 40% of its GDP.

## Chips

But here is the problem. Taiwan has become a 'one-trick pony' based on tech components - just as Russia depends on energy and mineral resources exports. However, huge investment in machinery and tech components over labour has led to a long-term fall in the profitability of capital (*à la* Marx).

And Taiwan's position as the semi-conductor king is now under threat. Despite a highly competitive tech sector, Taiwan's ascendance on the value-added production ladder is stalling. And low value-added products, such as textiles, base metals and chemical products, still account for half of Taiwan's industrial production (largely unchanged in the past two decades).

The irony is that US domination now means not more investment domestically, but instead a demand that Taiwan's key companies relocate to the US or elsewhere, so that China cannot get them. The Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Corp (TSMC) is the world's largest supplier of computer chips, providing more than 90% of leading-edge chips. It still operates two plants in China, in Nanjing and Songjiang, making less advanced computer chips. But it has been complying with demands from the United States and other trading partners to restrict exports of equipment and technology for leading edge semiconductors. And it is being forced to shift production to Japan, Germany and Arizona.

This 'friend-shoring' threatens to weaken the domestic economy significantly. At the same time, trade and investment between mainland China and Taiwan, so important in the past to Taiwan, is being decimated.

Moreover, the success of Taiwan's technology sector is not reflected in the rest of the economy or its non-tech labour force. Outside of the tech sector, productivity growth has been sluggish, while growth in the

'Asian tigers' has been steadily on a downward trend.

And real wages of non-tech manufacturing and service jobs have barely increased since the early 2000s. TSMC median annual wages are \$56,264, but in other sectors the average annual salary for workers averaged less than \$12,000. Overall wages in these sectors have stagnated, while youth unemployment is near an all-time high.

Inequality of incomes and personal wealth remains high, as it does in most capitalist economies. The highest-earning 20% get over six times the income of the lowest-earning 20%. The top 1% have 25% of all wealth and the top 1% of income holders get 20% of all income. Meanwhile, huge property speculation has led to home prices jumping 50% in the last five years and accelerating, making it impossible for young Taiwanese to find decent accommodation.

## Pandemic

Since the end of the pandemic, which hit Taiwan hard, as in many other countries, economic recovery has been weak. Indeed, in 2023, the economy went into recession for several quarters - the poorest performance since the end of the great recession in 2009 - and this revealed that dependence on China's economy remains high. And real incomes fell by the largest amount since 2016. The DPP government may stand for 'independence', but it has not presided over better living standards for its electors.

Mainstream forecasters are talking optimistically about "meaningful growth" for this year after the election (around 3% real GDP growth, as opposed to 1% last year). But that assumes that world trade growth will pick up - pretty unlikely, given the expected slowdown in many major economies and the US's attempts to weaken China's trading capability.

We can see from all this that the threat of an 'invasion by China' was probably the least of the worries of Taiwanese voters, despite the media barrage from the west and from Taiwan's politicians ●

Michael Roberts blogs at [thenextrecession.wordpress.com](http://thenextrecession.wordpress.com)

## ACTION

### Stop the War London activists meeting

**Friday January 19, 6 pm:** Meeting to plan further mobilisations, Mander Hall, Hamilton House, Mabledon Place, London WC1. How to build on the consistently high number of protestors at recent Palestine demonstrations. Organised by Stop the War Coalition: [www.stopwar.org.uk/events/stop-the-war-london-activists-meeting-2](http://www.stopwar.org.uk/events/stop-the-war-london-activists-meeting-2).

### Big Birmingham demo for Palestine

**Saturday January 20, 12 noon:** Demonstration. Assemble Sparkhill Park, Park Road, Birmingham B11. March to St Martin's Square, Edgbaston Street, Birmingham B5. Demand a ceasefire now! Organised by West Midlands Palestine Solidarity Campaign: [www.facebook.com/events/331105316502875](http://www.facebook.com/events/331105316502875).

### Day of action for Palestine - ceasefire now!

**Saturday January 20:** Local actions nationwide. Demand a permanent ceasefire now and an end to the war in Gaza. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: [palestinecampaign.org/events/day-of-action-for-palestine-20-january](http://palestinecampaign.org/events/day-of-action-for-palestine-20-january).

### Arms dealers out of Twickenham stadium

**Monday January 22, 1.30pm:** Protest outside Twickenham rugby stadium, Whitton Road, Twickenham TW2. Weapons companies like Leonardo, Elbit and Raytheon - profiteering from over 24,000 deaths in Gaza - will take part in the International Armoured Vehicles event inside. Tell the Rugby Football Union to kick them out. Organised by Richmond and Kingston Palestine Solidarity Campaign: [caat.org.uk/events/twickenhamarmsfair2024](http://caat.org.uk/events/twickenhamarmsfair2024).

### Open afternoon at Marx Memorial Library

**Monday January 22, 2pm:** Historic building tour, Marx Memorial Library, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1. Visit the 'Lenin room' and see the collection on Lenin and his time in London, marking 100 years since his death in 1924. Admission free, includes light refreshments. Organised by Marx Memorial Library: [www.marx-memorial-library.org.uk/event/449](http://www.marx-memorial-library.org.uk/event/449).

### What it means to be human

**Tuesday January 23, 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 Australian aboriginal rainbow snake'. Speaker: Chris Knight. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: [www.facebook.com/events/1073945953734003](http://www.facebook.com/events/1073945953734003).

### Arms out

**Tuesday January 23, 7pm:** National film and speaker tour launch, Scale Space White City, 58 Wood Lane, London W12 and online. Exposing the truth about militarism, the arms trade, and their devastating effects on communities and the environment. Registration free. Organised by Shadow World Investigations, Campaign Against Arms Trade, Declassified UK, Demilitarise Education and Forces Watch: [caat.org.uk/events/arms-out](http://caat.org.uk/events/arms-out).

### Zionism, anti-Semitism and free speech

**Wednesday January 24, 6.30pm:** Public meeting, P21 Gallery, 19 Chalton Street, London NW1. The right have stepped up efforts to equate criticism of Zionism with anti-Semitism. Activists are being silenced on campus and arrested on demonstrations for using chants in support of Palestinian liberation. Speakers include Lindsey German. Registration £5 (free). Organised by Counterfire: [www.facebook.com/events/302114018986561](http://www.facebook.com/events/302114018986561).

### Israel-Palestine: oppression and resistance

Online education and discussion series.  
**Thursday January 25, 7pm:** Anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. Speaker: Thomas Suárez. Organised by Labour Left Alliance and Why Marx?: [www.whymarx.com/sessions](http://www.whymarx.com/sessions).

### Protect the right to strike

**Saturday January 27, 12 noon:** March and rally. Assemble Montpellier Gardens, Cheltenham GL50. Marking 40 years since Thatcher banned trade unions at GCHQ. Today the government is restricting the right to strike for over five million workers. Oppose the Minimum Service Levels Act, restrictions on trade unions and threats to the right to strike. Organised by PCS South West and TUC: [www.tuc.org.uk/events/protect-right-strike-march-and-rally](http://www.tuc.org.uk/events/protect-right-strike-march-and-rally).

### Palestine, internationalism and the left

**Sunday January 28, 10am to 5pm:** Day school, north London (venue tbc). Panels and discussions exploring the history of Palestine, its place in wider anti-imperialist struggles in the Middle East and its political importance to internationalist politics today. Organised by Workers in Palestine: [www.workersinpalestine.org/news/day-school](http://www.workersinpalestine.org/news/day-school).

### Palestine and the threat of wider war

**Sunday January 28, 2pm:** Rally, The Atrium, 124 Cheshire Street, London E2. Israel's genocidal attack on Gaza is destabilising the whole of the Middle East. The UK and the US are attacking Yemen. The risk of a war drawing in the whole Middle East is growing daily. Speakers include: Daniel Kebede (NEU), John Rees (Stop the War). Organised by Stop the War Coalition: [www.stopwar.org.uk/events](http://www.stopwar.org.uk/events).

### Fighting for anti-racist workplaces

**Sunday February 11, 12 noon to 4.30pm:** Conference, Hamilton House, Mabledon Place, London WC1. To discuss strategies and actions to combat racism in the workplace and shed light on the challenges faced by marginalised communities. Registration £6.13. Organised by Stand Up To Racism: [www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=705753268335746](http://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=705753268335746).

### 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.

## USA

# Stopping Trump juggernaut

Sleepy Joe is driving voters into Republican arms. The more he tries to stop Trump, the stronger Trump gets, argues **Daniel Lazare**

In the wake of the smashing victory in the Iowa caucuses, Donald Trump has all but sewn up the Republican nomination and is now in a position to take back the White House in the fall.

This assumes that former UN ambassador Nikki Haley does not out-perform the sceptics in New Hampshire's Republican primary on January 23 or that Florida governor Ron DeSantis does not pull off some come-from-behind upset in South Carolina on February 24. But, with Trump garnering an outright majority of the vote and carrying 98 out of Iowa's 99 counties, it is looking more and more unlikely. If Iowa proves anything, it is that the Republican Party is now Trump's personal property to do with what he will. With Haley and DeSantis all but out of the picture, no-one is in a position to say otherwise.

The Trump juggernaut has so many things in its favour at this point that it is hard to keep count. There is Joe Biden and the age factor, which is to say the fact that the 81-year-old president is growing frailer by the week, yet stubbornly refuses to step aside for anyone younger. There is the Kamala Harris problem: ie, a politician so unpopular that she had to drop out of the 2020 presidential race when her polls plunged to the low single digits, yet who, as vice-president, could well take over the Oval Office if Biden dies after winning a second term. It is a scenario that voters regard as all too likely - and one they do not like a single bit.

Then there is wealth polarisation, which is fuelling resentment of the limousine liberals and well-heeled neocons who run the Democratic Party. Plus a sputtering economy that saw real median household income plunge 2.7% during the Biden administration's first two years. There is the war in the Ukraine, which Washington expected Kyiv to win handily, but which is now turning into a nightmare in the wake of last summer's failed offensive. There is war in Gaza, war in the Red Sea, and looming confrontations in the Persian Gulf and the South China Sea - all adding to jitters back home. There is global warming, which is leading to much talk, but zero meaningful action - not to mention a government structure in general that is corrupt, dysfunctional and increasingly undemocratic, but which is also beyond reform.

Finally, there is the Democratic legal offensive, which was supposed to discredit Trump, but which has backfired by boosting his popularity all the more. Supposedly, Trump was finished after Democrats performed strongly in the 2022 midterm elections. All the TV talking heads said it, so it must have been true. But then New York district attorney, Alvin Bragg, indicted him the following April on charges of paying hush money to porn star Stormy Daniels, and his sputtering poll numbers reversed course. They rose again after a federal grand jury indicted him for possessing secret documents and then took another leap upward when a grand jury charged him with undermining the 2020 presidential election.

"Any time they file an indictment, we go way up in the polls," Trump joked in August. "We need one more indictment to close out this election." Democrats, as usual, accused Trump



**Donald Trump: campaigning**

of spreading disinformation. But the problem is that some of the cases are weak - most notably the Stormy Daniels affair, which involves ancillary fraud charges so convoluted that not even liberals can figure them out, plus a dubious civil suit brought by a Democratic prosecutor named Letitia James, who ran for office on a promise to bring Trump down. "I will never be afraid to challenge this illegitimate president," she said during her 2018 campaign. "I will be shining a bright light into every corner of his real-estate dealings."<sup>1</sup>

Now the same Letitia James is in a New York state courtroom accusing Trump of fraudulently inflating the value of some of his assets - except that, thanks to a legal quirk, she does not have to prove he defrauded anyone in particular or caused real, tangible harm: merely that he exaggerated in his usual canny-barker style. Indeed, Trump's bankers have testified that they were happy to do business with him despite such hyperbole, that they made oodles of money, and that they hoped more deals were on the way.<sup>2</sup>

So Republican complaints that Democrats are "weaponising" the judicial system in order to bring their hero down are not easily dismissed. Voters are getting the message, which is why support for Trump continues to grow.

## Consequences

To be sure, Democrats are now pinning their hopes on yet another legal manoeuvre - this time an effort to strike him from the ballot on the grounds that the post-Civil War 14th amendment precludes anyone from holding office who has "engaged in insurrection or rebellion". Since this is what Trump plainly did on January 6 2021, by urging a Republican mob to invade Capitol Hill and stop Congress from certifying Biden's election, Colorado and Maine have both decided that he is ineligible to run.<sup>3</sup> But as a *New York Times* columnist recently admitted, short-circuiting a Trump candidacy in this manner can only lead to more trouble still.

"There's no doubt that knocking Trump off the ballot would send shock waves through the American body politic, but why would anyone believe that it's inherently less destabilising if Trump runs?" - the columnist, David French, wrote. It is worth it, he said, because a Trump victory means there will be "an insurrectionist in command of the most powerful military in the world, who is hellbent on seeking vengeance on his political enemies. Does anything at all sound stabilising about that?"<sup>4</sup>

Instability will ensue whether Democrats remove him from the ballot or not. So they figure that they might as well go for it. But what strikes Democrats as a gamble worth taking strikes Republicans as no less a coup than what happened three years ago.

"The one thing that unites Americans of all political persuasions ... is the conviction that our democracy is failing and our country is going to hell," observed another *Times* columnist, Michelle Goldberg. "Tonight, Iowa's Republican caucus goes have sent it a little further on its way."<sup>5</sup> The process is unstoppable short of a radical restructuring of America's 18th-century slaveholders' constitution, something that only a workers' revolution can accomplish. But, since that is not remotely on Goldberg's radar screen, all she can do is blame Americans for not voting the way she would like them to.

This is not to say that Republican victory in November is assured. While a recent poll shows Trump two points ahead, another has the two men running neck and neck.<sup>6</sup> Sleepy Joe might thus pull it off. Still, given his Job-like list of woes, such an outcome is growing ever more distant. Democrats are panicking because they fear they are on the brink of disaster - which they are.

What does it mean for the world if Biden does not succeed? Certain self-proclaimed Marxists might argue that, Tweedledum or Tweedledee, none of it matters because US imperial interests always prevail. But this borders on the tautological, since

all it means is that imperialists got to do what imperialists got to do. More important is what a second Trump presidency means for the direction of US imperialism and its subsequent evolution.

One thing it will mean, for instance, is a harsher attitude toward staid centrists, who have previously served as Washington's most reliable allies. Emmanuel Macron and Olaf Scholz will be out, while a new crop of ultra-rightists will be in - people like Javier Milei of Argentina, Giorgia Meloni of Italy, Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders, etc. This does not mean that Trump will give them all they want, since if 'Make America great again' means anything, it is that US interests come first. But they will certainly receive a powerful boost. From Iberia to Scandinavia and beyond, the upshot will be an Axis-lite reminiscent of 1939-45. Muslim immigrants, the Jews of the early 21st century, will feel the heat, while Jews themselves - at least those who do not go around shouting pro-Palestinian slogans - will acquire something like favoured nation status. Repression of anti-Zionist protests and strikes will increase. So will climate denialism, even as the crisis accelerates.

Other changes loom as well. Even though Trump refused at a recent Fox News town hall to say whether the US would remain in Nato or not under his second presidency, there is no question that the Atlantic alliance will face a major shakeout. The far-right Alternative für Deutschland might not mind if it means that Nato stops blowing up German pipelines. But Poland, the Baltic states and others will all be in a state of shock.

Vladimir Putin will gain, as he and Trump sit down together to hammer out a Ukrainian deal over the head of Volodymyr Zelensky. Territorial concessions will follow, along with 'Finlandisation', in the form of neutrality, demilitarisation, plus removal of all those statues and plaques commemorating Stepan Bandera, Roman Shukhevych, and other wartime collaborators whom nationalists in Lvov and Kyiv insist on portraying as national heroes.

Strangely, however, de-Nazification will result in more rightwing authoritarianism rather than less. Benjamin Netanyahu will gain, although the real winner might well turn out to be an out-and-out fascist like Itamar Ben-Gvir. So will Qatar and Saudi Arabia, thanks to their close business ties with the Trump family.

Domestically, the results will be extreme. At last week's Fox News town-hall meeting, Trump tried to walk back such alarming comments as "I am your retribution" or his recent pledge not to be a dictator "except for day one". Instead, he was nice-nice, as he assured the audience: "There won't be time for retribution [because] there will be so much success."

## Mob rule

But one thing is clear. Trump is determined to avoid a bureaucratic revolt like the one that nearly toppled his first administration - one characterised by incessant leaks to the press and top officials working hand-in-glove with congressional Democrats to bring his policies down. So leakers will be crushed, while the prosecution of journalists who publish unauthorised information will likely follow. If Trump does not pursue old enemies like Hillary Clinton, then he will come up with new enemies to go after instead. A new element of vindictiveness will prevail.

Trump is also promising to use military funds to build detention camps for illegal immigrants and to invoke the 1807 Insurrection Act, so he can deploy troops along the southern border. He says he will use military force to go after Mexican drug cartels - which, of course, will only make drug problems worse inside the United States, while further destabilising countries to the south. Arrests, round-ups and family separations will all ensue - horrors that the working class must mobilise to prevent. But most important of all is the fact that a Trump victory will amount to a vindication of the Capitol Hill insurrection, which means that elections will give way to some form of mob rule. Voting will continue, but it will be a long time before a Democrat enters the White House again. The squabbling on Capitol Hill will also continue, but checks and balances will fall by the wayside, as Trump calls the shots.

Relying on Joe Biden to hold off such a disaster is like relying on Typhoid Mary to hold off bubonic plague. Sleepy Joe is driving voters into Republican arms and, the more he tries to stop Trump, the stronger Trump gets.

Workers must overthrow one in order to stop the other - and vice versa. America needs a new birth of freedom that only socialism can provide ●

## Notes

1. [www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2023/10/03/letitia-james-prosecute-trump-2018-comments-running-office-cnntm-vpx.cnn](https://www.cnn.com/videos/politics/2023/10/03/letitia-james-prosecute-trump-2018-comments-running-office-cnntm-vpx.cnn).
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3. See my article, 'More ballot games', January 4: [weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1472/more-ballot-games](https://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1472/more-ballot-games).
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DRUGS

# Police, soldiers and gangs

Once relatively stable, Ecuador has quickly become a failed state, highlighting the criminal failure of the insane 'war on drugs', writes Eddie Ford

Once a country that generally went unnoticed, Ecuador is now all over the news. Last week, with the cameras still rolling, masked gunmen brandishing high-calibre rifles and grenades burst into the studio of the state-owned TC Televisión - trying to make the broadcasters denounce the government and the police, as shots were fired elsewhere in the building. A police task force retook the studio soon after, arresting 13 intruders and releasing the hostages.

In the past, you might have thought that they were part of a brave guerilla group who had seized the TV station in order to issue a call for revolution and urge the oppressed masses to arm themselves in preparation. But that was not the case, of course. Rather, highlighting the reactionary times we live in, they were a *narco* gang expressing their solidarity with the drugs lord and leader of the Los Choneros cartel, Adolfo 'Fito' Macías. Serving a 34-years sentence and incarcerated since 2011 - having previously escaped prison and lived for a while as a fugitive in 2013 - he managed to break free again on January 7 from the country's largest prison. In response, the government of president Daniel Noboa declared a 60-day state of emergency that included nightly curfews; and in retaliation criminal gangs have launched numerous attacks against the police, prison officers and anybody who has incurred their displeasure - plunging the country into bloody chaos.

Over 158 prison guards and staff have been taken hostage by inmates in seven prisons, vehicles and buildings around the country have been set ablaze, and at least 15 people, including police officers, have been murdered. On the same day as the TV station was raided, government officials in Quito's historic centre and other state institutions were evacuated for safety and many businesses were forced to close their commercial activities for the day. An explosive device was later found and deactivated and several hospitals were targeted by the gangs, stealing medical supplies - presumably to treat wounded comrades - and shooting up the medical facilities and other buildings in what they hope is an intimidating display of power.

## Bananas

Noboa, a US-educated scion of a banana empire - the same old Latin American story - took office in November, promising a tough law-and-order agenda, has stated that Ecuador is "at war" with drug-traffickers and signed a decree making them legitimate "military targets". His role model appears to be El Salvador's populist strongman, Nayib Bukele, who took office in June 2019, also promising a severe clampdown on the drugs gangs. This apparently resulted in a nearly 60% decrease in homicides in 2022, and by even more the following year, but the campaign has led to the country having the *highest incarceration rate in the world* for adults - quite a claim - and inevitably to the increasingly authoritarian nature of the government.<sup>1</sup>

Noboa's government aims to hold a referendum that would allow for the extradition of citizens accused of crimes abroad and the seizure of suspects' assets - something that requires approval from the country's constitutional court before it can go



Daniel Noboa: inauguration as president and a crazy war on drugs

ahead. Setting the grisly scene, the nation was traumatised in August when centre-right presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio - a former investigative journalist standing on an anti-corruption ticket - was assassinated by gunmen ahead of November's snap election. Just before, Villavicencio had said he had been threatened by Los Choneros.

The upshot of all this is that Ecuador, having borders with Peru to the south and Colombia to the north, has turned from a relatively peaceful and stable country into one of the bloodiest in the region - becoming more or less a failed state in a remarkably quick period of time. This is evinced by the murder rate, which, according to the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences, has increased *ninefold* since 2017. Of course, murders are typically concentrated in a particular demographic, so we are almost certainly talking about an appalling death toll among young men - either at the hands of rival drugs gangs or the police, or the other way round - with the army and police knocking out drugs gangs in a seemingly endless cycle of killing.

Showing how serious things are becoming, Peru too has a state of emergency on its border with Ecuador, where it has now deployed troops. Colombia, which shares a porous border with Ecuador, has expressed "concern" about the deteriorating situation in its neighbour.

It is not too difficult to work out the reasons for this explosion of violence. Ecuador was part of the 'pink tide' that saw a series of

left-leaning governments elected in Latin America from the early 2000s - such as Mexico, Argentina, Bolivia, along with Peru, Honduras and Chile. Colombia elected the first leftwing president in their history with Gustavo Petro, a former member of the M19 guerrilla movement, while Bernardo Arévalo secured a surprise victory in Guatemala. Under what passes for social democracy nowadays, living standards in Ecuador markedly improved.

But, almost inevitably, this was followed by a 'conservative wave' of rightwing government. At the same time the criminal gangs and drugs lords became increasingly powerful - basically playing the role of a state within a state, as the economy plunged. The consequence is the current situation, where you have a state of war between the government and the gangs. With Ecuador being the perfect example, at the epicentre of this bloodletting are the country's grotesquely overcrowded prisons, which have fallen under the control of the gangs - often using them as bases for their operations and staging grounds for street battles. Over 400 inmates have been murdered in the last four years, while riots and jailbreaks are common (with massacres taking place within the complex where Fito was being held, for example).

Stating the obvious, Roberto Izurieta, a government spokesperson, said in a television interview that Ecuador's penitentiary system had "completely failed" - especially seeing how the leader of the Los Lobos gang, Fabricio Colón, had

also escaped jail in the same week. Izurieta added that Fito had been expected to be transferred to a maximum-security facility just hours before his disappearance, making it hard not to suspect an inside job. Indeed, the authorities said two prison officials had been charged for involvement in the escape. Unions representing prison workers (a hellish job!) have blasted the government for not providing information about their wellbeing, as videos circulate on social media of guards seemingly being tortured.

## Los Choneros

As for Fito himself, it goes without saying that he is a ruthless individual who appears only interested in accumulating power, wealth and influence. Along with Junior Roldán, he became co-leader of Los Choneros in 2020, following the murder of their predecessor, Jorge Luis Zambrano, who had been the supremo for quite some time - making the gang into what it is today. Strangely enough, Roldán was also murdered three years later, leaving Fito solely in charge of Los Choneros - causing a split within the organisation from those who remained loyal to the memory of Zambrano.

Like many a gang boss (or Mr Big) before him, Fito exercised what has been described as "significant internal control" of the prison where he was incarcerated - experiencing "differentiated and preferential treatment" by the authorities. In other words, in a classic 'police and thieves' situation - or soldiers and gangsters - the likes of Los Choneros

have begun co-opting parts of the state, starting with its jails and then expanding outwards.

There are a number of specific factors behind the escalating crisis in Ecuador. One of these is the Covid-19 pandemic, making thousands of young people jobless and thus creating ideal recruits for the gangs.

Arguably an even more important reason behind the growing power of the gangs is the changing global demand for cocaine, with markets in Europe, Asia and Brazil growing, as consumption in the US appears to wane. Actually, it is a moot point as to whether the demand for cocaine in the US has gone down or not - as the statistics can be interpreted in many ways.<sup>2</sup> It seems unlikely that opioids have taken the place of cocaine, as they are very different sorts of drugs, though it does seem the case that deaths from cocaine-related use have increased considerably in the US. Of course, that does not necessarily mean a proportionate increase in cocaine consumption (more that the cocaine now being sold in the US is laced with dangerous crap!).

Anyhow, whatever the exact reasons, with the agreement of Mexico's immensely powerful Sinaloa and Nuevo Jalisco cartels, the Ecuadorean gangs have made themselves an integral part of the global narcotics supply chain, partly thanks to the country's lightly policed shipping ports - perfect for diverting cocaine supplies to Europe. Meanwhile, cartels from as far afield as Albania have sought a piece of the Ecuadorian drug trade action and are financing local operations - creating the toxic conditions for a murderous surge in crime, as the gangs compete by any means necessary to secure the extraordinarily profitable trafficking routes. Naturally, being ambitious, they are using the huge profits from drugs trafficking to diversify into extortion, kidnapping, illegal mining, night clubs, the music business, and so on.

What is happening in Ecuador is another living and foul example of the criminal 'war on drugs' - an insane exercise, as it has only brought disaster whenever it has been tried - but governments keep on doing it anyway through a combination of venality, desperation and self-interest. Gangs in Ecuador now have 50,000 members or more for the simple reason that they have no future other than emigrating up north to Mexico and then over the border into the US. Either live in poverty, join a drugs gang or get out of the country.

Of course, the danger is that you go from the frying pan into the fire. If you are a young Colombian or Ecuadorian, what are you going to do in the US? Quite possibly get involved with criminal gangs or end up in a barbaric US prison, with your life still going nowhere. The only sane and humane way forward is the legalisation of all drugs, thus depriving the gangs of their profits and removing an easy excuse for the state to accrue more repressive powers ●

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## Notes

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## POST OFFICE



Petty bourgeois sub-postmasters were victims of a system designed to deny justice

# Justice at a huge price

The Horizon scandal was about faulty software, individual gullibility and corporate indifference, writes **Mike Macnair**. But the fundamental problem dates back to the 1660s and the selling of legal services to the highest bidder

**M**r Bates vs the Post Office had a wide impact, which took the government and the other actors in the Horizon scandal by surprise. Since then, Rishi Sunak and the Tory media have been struggling to get back control of the narrative.

As readers in the UK will know, between 1999 and 2015 over 900 sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses were falsely prosecuted for theft, false accounting and fraud, even though the account shortfalls were due to errors of the Post Office's Horizon accounting software. The announcement of a bill to reverse the convictions attempted to draw a line under the story - even if some lawyers complained this was inconsistent with the 'rule of law' and would open the door to 'bills of attainder' (acts of parliament to convict a person of high treason when they could not be convicted by an ordinary trial, as was employed against the Earl of Strafford in 1640, and against the Jacobite alleged plotter, Sir John Fenwick, in 1696).<sup>1</sup> A better analogy would be the 'bills of pains and penalties', which were used in the 18th and into the 19th century to convict people by act of parliament of crimes less than treason.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, press coverage has shifted towards finding scapegoats: Paula Vennells, Post Office CEO 2012-19, has agreed to give up her CBE and been urged to repay her bonuses; Fujitsu software engineer Gareth Jenkins has been blamed for

seeking immunity from criminal prosecution; the public inquiry cross-examination of Post Office investigator Stephen Bradshaw has been widely reported with strong spin against him; there have been calls for Lib Dem leader Sir Ed Davey (minister responsible for the post office during part of the scandal) to resign, and attention has been drawn to Tony Blair's links in 1996-98 to Fujitsu.<sup>3</sup> With Paul Patterson, Fujitsu's manager for Europe, admitting that the firm has a "moral responsibility" to compensate the sub-postmasters, this may be a big enough scalp to limit the scope of the ongoing blame game.<sup>4</sup>

But the Horizon scandal was the natural and probable consequence of a policy choice - the hope to make radical productivity gains in 'service industries' through information technology, and for Britain to be a 'world leader' in this field - combined with an institutional feature of the constitution: that the king sells and denies justice, in violation of Magna Carta chapter 29, through the free market in legal services. The regime has no intention of giving up either the policy or judicial corruption through the free market in legal services. The parliamentary sticking-plaster, and the individualised media (and public inquiry) blame-game, serve to divert attention from these.

The Horizon contract was a public-private partnership (PPP) originally awarded under the John

Major government, in 1996, to International Computers Ltd (ICL) at a time when ICL was increasingly dependent on collaboration with the Japanese firm, Fujitsu, but had not yet been actually taken over by it.

### British champions

ICL was in origin one of the 'British champions' created by the promotion of takeovers and mergers under the 1964-70 Wilson Labour government, which hoped to create British firms large enough to compete globally with those based in the US (another example is the car manufacturer, British Leyland). The policy failed, in essence because of a misunderstanding of the causes of the relative decline of British industry. It was not that British firms were too small, but that Britain's past global hegemon role led to continuing high returns in finance; this, in turn, forced industrial companies to pay high returns to shareholders and bondholders and high commercial rents, squeezing productive investment as a share of profits (while in the post-1945 settlement Britain lost the ability to protect its imperial markets).

The Thatcher and Major administrations largely, but not completely, accepted Britain's future as an offshore financial centre, and hence considerable de-industrialisation. But there were efforts to import tech by collaboration with overseas firms: thus British Leyland, renamed as

Rover Group, became an assembler for Honda cars from the 1980s. And thus ICL's collaboration with Fujitsu from 1981, ending with the former as a mere subsidiary of the latter from 1999. ICL was already dependent on public-sector contracts at the time when the Horizon PPP was awarded.<sup>5</sup>

This was a large part of the context in which the Blair government decided in 1998 to go ahead with Horizon in spite of being alerted to concerns that the software was defective.<sup>6</sup> Peter Mandelson warned that cancelling the contract would cause "political fallout" from Post Office closures and damage relations with Fujitsu, which he described as a "major investor in the UK over the past decade".<sup>7</sup> In substance, cancelling Horizon would threaten the viability of ICL, and the whole policy of attracting inward investment to acquire new technology, since the UK would appear to have sold Fujitsu a business dependent on government contracts, only to pull the plug shortly afterwards. The USA can and does get away with selling busted companies to foreign investors and then pulling the plug; the UK cannot.

The other side of the policy issue was the belief, which formed a large part of the policy of the Blair government, that IT could provide solutions to many economic and governmental problems. "Realising the potential of new technology" was a subhead of the

1997 Labour manifesto (though the content was not that extensive). Horizon - like many other failed public-sector IT projects of the period - was a part of this story.<sup>8</sup> Also part of it were the Electronic Communications Act 2000, providing among other things for 'digitally signed' documents; the Land Registration Act 2002, which attempted (but has so far failed) to create fully-online registration and transfer of rights in land; and a whole range of other initiatives.

One of the ones which passed under the political radar (unlike the failed attempt to introduce identity cards) was the 1997 Law Commission report on *Evidence in criminal proceedings: hearsay and related topics*. This report recommended the repeal of section 69 of the 1984 Police and Criminal Evidence Act (PACE), which required the prosecution, if it sought to introduce as evidence documents produced by IT, to prove that the machine was working correctly when the document was produced. Section 69 was regarded as unduly onerous. The Law Commission asserted, on the basis of a 1984 decision in the Divisional Court of the Queen's Bench Division about an 'Intoximeter' electronic breathalyser, that repeal would leave a common-law presumption that the machine was working properly.<sup>9</sup>

The problem with this approach was already identified in 1997, but then dismissed. What is the



## YEMEN

# A drop in the ocean

Houthis are no mere proxies of Iran, argues **Yassamine Mather**. They have their own political goals and agenda

As readers will know, Yemen has been the scene of a major civil war for the last 10 years - its population of 29 million people has faced death and starvation for most of this period. According to UN agencies, the country is facing a "humanitarian crisis". At least 150,000 Yemenis have been killed as a direct result of conflict, while 2,270,000 have died due to ongoing famine and lack of healthcare.

Yet the imperialist countries, led by the US (the 'international community') has paid very little attention to Yemen - until a few weeks ago, when so-called 'Houthi rebels' began attacking cargo ships. By early January, Joe Biden was explaining the reasons for the use of the mighty US airforce - plus a bit part for the RAF - against an impoverished, war-torn country as being a "direct response to unprecedented Houthi attacks against international maritime vessels in the Red Sea".

In order to understand the current situation, it is important to revisit the country's history.

In 1839, the British established a protectorate around the strategically important port city of Aden, covering south-eastern Yemen, as part of their Indian empire. In 1918, Shia imams set up a kingdom in north Yemen, declaring independence from the Ottoman empire. During the 1960s, a military rebellion and a six-year civil war ensued, with Saudi Arabia and Egypt supporting opposing sides. This conflict resulted in the overthrow of the king and the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic. In 1967, following the British withdrawal from the south, the People's Republic of Yemen was created. With the 1969 Correction Move, it aligned closely with the USSR's 'socialist' camp, becoming the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (also known as South Yemen). In 1990, following the end of the cold war and the cessation of Soviet subsidies, the two Yemens unified. However, in 1994, simmering north-south tensions flared up again, leading then president Ali Abdullah Saleh to deploy armed forces to suppress a southern secessionist movement, resulting in a civil war.

As far as Yemen's Islamist groups are concerned, it is crucial to make a clear distinction between various Salafi and other factions. Saudi Arabian pro-Sunni intervention triggered the first round of conflict with the Houthis, lasting from 2004 to 2010. The Sunni groups included the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as a faction of al Qa'eda.

The Houthis in Yemen are followers of the Zayd ibn Ali, who led an unsuccessful rebellion against the Umayyad Caliphate in the 8th century. The pro-Zayd sect differs from the 'Twelver Shi'ism' of countries like Iran and Iraq. They have their own distinct religious and political beliefs, do not accept the 'infallibility' of the Twelve Imams and in terms of doctrine are closer to Sunnis. They regard rationalism as more important than Quranic literalism and in the past were quite tolerant towards Sunni Shafi'ism - a religion followed by about half of the Yemeni population. Their recent alliance with Shia Iran reflects political necessities rather than deep religious association.

We also have to consider the events around 2011 and the Arab



Victims of one of the countless Saudi air strikes

Spring. Yemen was one of the first countries where pro-democracy protests took place. Large crowds of demonstrators gathered in Sana'a, the capital, as well as various other Yemeni urban centres, demanding president Saleh's resignation. They raised slogans against government corruption and poverty. The Yemeni demonstrations, which appeared to be coordinated by a coalition of opposition groups, resulted in the ousting of Saleh in 2012. This led to military intervention initiated by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in March 2015.

## Internationally

In 2012, following a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative, Saleh was granted immunity from local prosecution, and his deputy, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, became the uncontested transitional president for a two-year term. To this day, he continues to be recognised internationally as the official president of Yemen, even though he has lived in exile in Saudi Arabia since 2015! Meanwhile, Iran has recognised the Houthi's National Salvation Government in Sanaa.

In 2013, the UN, in collaboration with the GCC, established the Yemeni National Dialogue Conference (NDC). This aimed to engage various political groups, including representatives from the south and the Houthis' political party, known as Ansar Allah, as well as entities referred to as "civil society".

The outcome of the NDC's efforts, released in 2014, extended Hadi's term of office for a year to oversee a transition to multi-party elections. It established equal representation between north and south in a legislative body and ensured "freedom of religion and a non-sectarian state". However, Houthi-Sunni clashes and popular protests continued, ultimately leading to the Houthi rebellion and Hadi's departure in early 2015. This was followed by a Saudi-led military intervention called Operation Decisive Storm (in Arabic, *Amaliyyat Asifat al-Hazm*), which included a bombing campaign against the Houthis, later a naval blockade, and the deployment of ground forces into Yemen.

The United States aided the Saudis with intelligence and logistical support, including aerial refuelling of military planes and search-and-rescue operations for downed pilots. Saudi foreign minister, prince Faisal bin Farhan, has stated that US and British military officials were present in the command and control centre overseeing Saudi-led airstrikes in Yemen.

The Houthis currently control almost all of north Yemen, and after more than eight years of war, Saudi Arabia has not achieved its objectives in the country. Before the Gaza war of October 2023, Saudi Arabia and the Houthis were in discussions about a potential agreement that could have helped end the civil war - the Houthi delegation and Omani negotiators visited Saudi Arabia in September 2023 to finalise details. However, the war in Gaza has since dominated the political agenda in the Middle East, leading to a temporary pause in talks. Notably, the Saudis have declined to join the US-led coalition against the Houthis. As US and UK bombings of Houthi strongholds were underway, the kingdom's foreign ministry issued a statement expressing "great concern" and calling for "self-restraint and avoiding escalation".

As Helen Lackner, a renowned expert on Yemen, said in an interview with the *Jadaliyya* website,

Yemen appears in the media when two main types of events occur: first, particularly murderous and outrageous attacks causing large numbers of civilian deaths and injuries. This has been the case in the early years of the war, when the Saudi-led coalition airforces apparently indiscriminately bombed civilian targets and situations where many people assembled, such as weddings and markets. Despite efforts by social and traditional media under Saudi and Emirati influence to limit coverage, such events penetrated the barriers imposed.

As their numbers have diminished since 2020, the second reason for media concern with Yemen has focused on the humanitarian crisis, which, until overtaken by Afghanistan in mid-

2021, was officially described by the UN as "the worst in the world". With the worsening of numerous political, military and humanitarian crises throughout the world, Yemen is 'competing' for attention with many other crises, some of which are better known thanks to large expatriate communities and previous international prominence or their geographical proximity to the west.<sup>1</sup>

The Houthis are often labelled as Iran's proxies. However, while Iran is an important ally, this is not accurate. Publicly Iran's supreme leader ayatollah Ali Khamenei praised their actions on January 15, but there can be little doubt that in its 'calibrated' response to the many threats of war received from the US, Iran's Islamic Republic is joining Saudi Arabia in encouraging the Houthis to show 'restraint'. After a decade-long war, including military successes that have given them control of half of Yemen, they have their own political goals and agenda, and make independent decisions, not least regarding attacks on shipping. This autonomy is a key reason why the latest 'secret' message sent by Biden to the Iranian clerical leadership is unlikely to halt the attacks on ships traversing the Bab-al Mandab Strait.

## Opportunity

The Islamic regime in Tehran is seriously concerned about an escalation of the war in the Middle East in view of Biden's unequivocal warnings of military intervention against Iran. We do not know what exactly was threatened, but we can assume that they include the bombing of nuclear, security and military bases. On the other hand, Iran has promised its supporters that it will take revenge for the recent killings of leading IRGC (Revolutionary Guards) members as well as Hezbollah allies. Two wars in the region, in Gaza and Bab-al Mandab, have provided an opportunity to take calculated but restrained measures against pro-Israeli forces in the region as well as groups affiliated with the arch-enemy, Islamic State.

For this reason, Iran has launched a series of missile attacks on targets in Syria, northern Iraq and Pakistan in recent days. According to the Islamic Republic, the first target in Syria was Islamic State and the missiles used were 'fortress-breaker' missiles with a range of 1,400 km. Earlier this month, IS issued a statement claiming responsibility for two bombs that killed 91 people, as explosions ripped through crowds near the tomb of Qassem Suleimani. Iran has accused IS of collaborating with Israel, citing previous alleged cooperation between Israel and IS in Syria during that country's civil war.

The second strike was an attack on what Iran referred to as an "espionage centre" in the city of Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan. The missile strikes were carried out by Iran's Revolutionary Guards. On January 15 the IRGC launched ballistic missiles at what it called Israeli "spy headquarters" in Iraq's Kurdish region, claiming this was part of a policy of "defending its security and countering terrorism".

It is difficult to assess the veracity of this claim. However, the autonomous Kurdish government maintains good relations with Israel, and Mossad agents have been operating in that region. On January 16, Iran state TV said it had attacked two sites belonging to the Jaish ul-Adl ('Army of Justice'), an ethnic Baloch Sunni Muslim group that has carried out attacks inside Iran using missiles.

The three successive attacks resulted in the death of a number of civilians and escalated tension in the region. However, when the 'international community' says little about the death of at least 24,000 Palestinians in Gaza, it is inevitable that so-called 'rogue states' such as Iran will see an opportunity to take on what they label their 'terrorist enemies' in other countries.

As well as the US/British attacks, the actions of Iran's Islamic Republic should be condemned. But in comparison to the systematic genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, they are a tiny drop in an ocean of global injustice ●

## Notes

1. [www.jadaliyya.com/Details/44820](http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/44820).





**RELIGION**

# Communists and holy war

While the past should not and cannot be mapped onto the present, **Jack Conrad** argues that the approach taken by Comintern to the Muslim east contains many useful lessons - if, that is, we retain our critical faculties

**W**ithin the tsarist empire Muslims constituted something around 10% of the population. They were oppressed as a religion and as a people - it is important to recognise that to be a Muslim was as much about ethnic identity as it was faith. Because these people were concentrated in the east, in central Asia and the Caucasus, what the Bolsheviks were dealing with was not only a 'minority' religious question, but a national and colonial question.

After the February revolution the Bolsheviks bullishly promoted the slogan of national self-determination. Suffice to say, once they took power and established their government in Petrograd, that slogan increasingly went hand in hand with class war and the goal of social transformation in the east. As a result there was an influx of Muslims into the Communist Party. It is estimated that in Turkestan and other such areas those party members adhering to Islam numbered around 15% (although some give much higher figures).

Existing, often self-proclaimed national leaders recoiled. Many sought salvation with the well-funded and growing forces of counterrevolution. Not that white generals exhibited the slightest sympathy for them or their ambitions. This, and the fortunes of war, produced a highly unstable situation. Nationalists were alternately hammer and anvil and took one side after the other in the civil war. They bounced from the reds to the whites and vice versa.

Discontent manifested itself amongst Muslims even before the February revolution. Fermented by a thin stratum of intellectuals, there were incipient national movements against tsarism, which went hand in hand with the takeover of traditional grazing land by incoming Russian settler-colonists. The collapse of tsarism propelled the Muslim peoples onto the stage of history.

In May 1917 the first all-Russia congress of Muslims was held in Petrograd. It demanded not independence, but autonomy. The main bone of contention was between those who wanted it on a national-territorial basis and those who would have settled for cultural autonomy within a unitary Russian state. A second congress of Muslims followed in July 1917. It took place in Kazan and was mainly controlled by Tatars, who "played with pan-Tatian aspirations".<sup>1</sup> A Bashkir congress took place at the same time. It issued a programme demanding that Russia become "a democratic, federal republic", with Kazakhstan as an autonomous national unit.

Throughout the summer of 1917 there were other such gatherings and similar demands. EH Carr stresses that none of them should be regarded as "revolutionary in the social sense".<sup>2</sup> Delegates at the Bashkir congress were, for example, mainly composed of mullahs, elders and kulaks. An entry fee of 50 roubles was charged. So it would be mistaken, at this stage, to present the Muslim movement as a break with traditional social and power structures.

After the October revolution the Soviet government carefully and attentively addressed the national movement. A special appeal was



**Stalin in the 1920s: commissar of nationalities**

issued: 'To all Muslim toilers of Russia and the east'. It declared that "henceforth" your beliefs and usages, national and cultural customs are "free and inviolable". They should organise their national life in "complete freedom". Moreover, the Soviet government promised to protect those rights. In return it called for Muslims to lend their support "to this revolution and to its government".<sup>3</sup> Other Muslims, beyond the borders of the old tsarist empire, were also promised aid.

Another decree established a commissariat for internal Muslim affairs. It was headed by a Tartar and a Bashkir. Also in 1918, a congress of Muslim communists was held in Moscow. It set up a central bureau of Muslim communist organisations, which issued propaganda in many languages, including a daily paper in Turkish. Its second congress, in November 1919, was addressed by both Lenin and Stalin. Incidentally, and not unrelatedly, during the civil war tens of thousands of Muslims fought with the Red Army, sometimes in special Muslim regiments and units.

## Strategy and tactics

Not that the Soviet leadership was stuck on an unbending, one-gauge line. There was an agreed strategy, but necessarily that entailed constant shifts in tactical emphasis and changes of direction. Inevitably, sometimes those shifts were right, sometimes they were wrong. In early 1918 there was a wrong - a badly mistimed - shift in regard to nationalists, Islam included.

As commissar of nationalities -

hence, one supposes, acting on behalf of the Communist Party's politburo - Stalin determined to destroy the influence of the mullahs, who had till then been the backbone of the 'bourgeois nationalist movement' in the east. Apparently there was strong opposition to his change of emphasis from other leading communists in the field. They wanted to maintain the successful 'softly, softly' approach. But Stalin got his way. As things turned out, however, those who thought they could downplay or simply bypass national sentiments and aspirations with what were essentially hollow class appeals proved woefully mistaken. Stalin's attempt to win the masses in the east away from nationalism and Islam resulted in a "fiasco".<sup>4</sup> Whites, nationalists and pan-Islamists crushed those pockets of Soviet power that existed in the east.

By the end of 1919 the party's top personalities appear to have concluded that there had to be an urgent reorientation. The military situation was awful and they had dangerously underestimated the durability of Islam and the fact that mullahs and imams were deeply embedded socially, acting as they did as judges, law-givers, teachers and intellectuals, as well as political leaders.

Mutually beneficial arrangements were therefore sought with the more open-minded members of the Islamic clergy. There were those - albeit a minority, the so-called 'red mullahs' - who were prepared to tolerate secular schools and women being given legal equality. Anticipating the helping hand given by the Soviet

government to the 'bourgeois' Living Church breakaway from the 'feudal' Russian Orthodox church headed by Patriarch Tikhon, there would be a favouring of the 'red mullahs' over the overt reactionaries. Instead of direct, head-to-head confrontation, that way the power of Islam could, perhaps, be harnessed. Moreover, by extending this domestic course to the international level, a blow could be struck at the soft underbelly of imperialism by assisting national struggles in the east - crucially against the British empire. In a word, the strategy of the anti-imperialist united front.

Addressing the 2nd all-Russia Congress of Communist Organisations of the Peoples of the East in November 1919, Lenin spelt out the reasoning behind his strategy: "the socialist revolution will not be solely, or chiefly, a struggle of the revolutionary proletarians in each country against its bourgeoisie - no, it will be a struggle of all imperialist-oppressed countries, of all dependent countries, against international imperialism".<sup>5</sup>

Undoubtedly such a formulation could be innocently, or cynically, used to play down the importance of revolution in the capitalistically advanced countries in order to give prime place to national or peasant struggles in the so-called 'third world' - Maoism does that with a vengeance. Yet, as shown by history - and predicted by Marxist theory - whatever their socialistic and communistic pretensions, national liberation movements are strictly limited in what they can achieve in and of themselves, and often end in

cruel anticlimax and sometimes even in horrendous social regression.

The fact of the matter is that the imperialist centres - today the US, the EU, Japan, etc - constitute the commanding heights of the world economy and this, the world economy, is where the communist mode of production begins. It would, of course, be pure stupidity to in any way detract from the *vanguard* role of revolutions in those countries where the vast bulk of the human race actually live - China, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Korea, Turkey, Nigeria, Mexico, Brazil, etc. These countries smoulder with discontent, can burst into flame at any moment and now have large, often very militant, working class movements. Yet there can be no denying that without revolution in the core capitalist countries - which doubtless could be (surely will be) triggered by revolutions in backward and medium-developed countries - we shall continue to see the mere exchange of direct for indirect imperialist domination, the ousting of old corrupt elites by new corrupt elites; that or ectopic social formations and insane parodies of socialism.

Hence the real significance of the national liberation slogan - ie, the demand for self-determination - lies not only in opening up a second front against imperialism on the international chessboard, but with the working class, crucially in the core capitalist countries. By taking up the slogan against their own bourgeoisie as a basic democratic demand, the working class readies itself to become a ruling class. Demanding

# 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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the right of self-determination for countries oppressed by the ruling class is essential in establishing working class political independence. Inevitably, in the "imperialist-oppressed countries" themselves, by raising the exact same slogan against the external oppressor, there comes an opposite possibility - instead of working class political independence, subservience to petty bourgeois or bourgeois nationalism.

The 2nd Congress of the Communist International correctly highlighted the importance of the national liberation movements for the post-World War I period and rightly stressed the necessity of working class political independence. However, Lenin's draft, and the final resolutions themselves, are not without their pitfalls for the unwary. Properly understanding Lenin's real, intended meaning encapsulated in his Marxist terminology - that and a keen sense of history - are vital. After all, Lenin's 'Theses on the national and colonial question', drafted in July 1920, is now often treated as gospel by Maoists, Stalinites and SWPers alike.

## Two sets of theses

On this subject of the national struggle in the colonies, Comintern had another set of theses before it. Besides Lenin's, the other was drafted by the Indian communist, Manabendra Nath Roy (1887-1954). Both were sent to a drafting commission, whose members, let alone the original authors, could hardly have imagined in their worst nightmares how the future would misuse their work. Anyway, while between the two sets of theses there was much in common, there were three areas of disagreement - two "minor"; the other, according to Carr, "major".<sup>6</sup>

Roy described the economic conditions in the east as "pre-capitalist". The commission preferred "dominated by capitalist imperialism" - this amendment was readily accepted. Roy also maintained that, while the colonial empires lasted and the metropolitan countries could bribe their workers with the spoils of imperialism, revolution would be impossible. The commission seems to have thought, rightly, that this gave too much prominence to the colonies. Once again there was an agreed amendment to bring Roy into line with Lenin. The third area of disagreement was certainly harder to bridge.

Lenin's starting point was the need for an "alliance of the proletarians and the toiling masses of all nations and countries in a simultaneous revolutionary struggle against the landowners and the bourgeoisie". In Lenin's theoretical language he meant the overthrow of capitalism in the advanced countries and feudalism in the backward ones - a grand strategy given a new, third element by the October 1917 revolution. The colonial peoples were urged to closely align themselves to the growing power of the Soviet republic.

Communists in the colonial and oppressed countries must assist the "bourgeois-democratic national liberation movements". But what Lenin had in mind was not a bourgeois-led revolution - that class fearfully shunned all revolutionary methods. Rather Lenin defined objective limits: ie, the revolution could not immediately transcend capitalism. Lenin's "bourgeois-democratic" revolution relied on unleashing a peasant Niagara against landlordism, colonialism and all manifestations or relics of so-called feudalism. To all intents and purposes, a concrete application, or development, of the revolutionary

dictatorship (rule) of the proletariat and peasantry, under conditions where soviet (Bolshevik) power was already established in the Russian redoubt. Hence, depending on the balance of class forces - and presumably a successful revolution in Europe - there could be the dominant rule of the working class in such countries, *if* there was a strong, well established alliance with the peasantry. An idea mapped out by Lenin in his masterful 1905 pamphlet *Two tactics of social democracy in the democratic revolution*.

Naturally, for Lenin, any organisational or ideological subservience to either the peasants or the 'revolutionary' bourgeoisie was to be fought against:

The Communist International must march in temporary alliance with the bourgeois democracy of the colonies and backward countries, but must not merge with it and must preserve absolutely the independence of the communist movement even in its most embryonic form.

Equally, there should be a "determined struggle" against attempts to give bourgeois-democratic liberation movements "a communist colouring". Lenin's draft theses also insisted on the need to combat the "reactionary and medieval elements", along with "pan-Islamism and similar trends", which strive to combine the liberation movement against imperialism with the "attempt to strengthen the position of the khans, landowners, mullahs, etc".<sup>7</sup>

Roy had another, slightly different perspective. He distinguished between bourgeois-democratic movements in the colonies - by which he appears to mean bourgeois-led movements - and the "struggle of landless peasants against every form of exploitation", which required "the creation of communist organisations of workers and peasants". Comintern, he said, must resist the temptation of subordinating the second movement to the first. Nevertheless, the revolutions in the colonial countries will not in the first instance be "a communist revolution".<sup>8</sup> Hence Comintern policy should be based on land redistribution to the peasants. Essentially the agrarian programme of the old Socialist Revolutionary Party taken up by the Bolsheviks in 1917.

Roy's theses were agreed as a supplement by Comintern, but were destined to gather dust and all but be forgotten. Nevertheless, the germ of his theses would later be cancerously developed by Stalin and Bukharin and turned into the rigid, two-stage, anti-imperialist revolution in which the revolution against colonialism and the socialist revolution are separated by a whole historic epoch and embody entirely different and opposed social contents. Essentially a repeat of the programme of the Mensheviks.

To all intents and purposes the same fate lay in store for Lenin's theses. They emerged from the commission with a number of amendments, not least the problematic formulation of the "bourgeois-democratic revolution" being replaced by "national revolutionary movement". For the untrained eye this alteration made Lenin's theses appear harder. Nonetheless, they could be read selectively and with opportunist intent. It was possible to equate the duty to make common cause with the "national revolutionary" peasant movement against imperialism and their native landlord and bourgeois allies with pushing, or making way for, the "bourgeois-democratic" revolution. In other words banking on the patriotic, or national, bourgeoisie

taking single-minded revolutionary action against imperialism's agents or the colonial authorities. This labour of Sisyphus was, of course, exactly what Stalin imposed upon Comintern in the 1920s, not least in China. The results were bloody and historically calamitous.

There was also the looming problem of a clash of interests between the Soviet state and those of local communist parties. What happened when the "bourgeois-democratic" or "national revolutionary movement", or even government, violently turned against the communists? What happened when the nationalists simultaneously fought on two fronts - against imperialism, against the working class and the communists? Was the Soviet state and the international communist movement still obliged to offer unstinting aid? Should the Soviet state pursue its own immediate needs - ie, win allies against imperialism by offering military-diplomatic assistance - when that support strengthened the hand of those bludgeoning the local communists? Such knotty problems were to all intents and purposes left unexplored. That despite the counterrevolutionary anti-imperialism of Enver Pasha and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Turkey (many others were to follow).

## Immanence

It would, of course, be grossly unfair - that or simply dumb - to blame either Lenin or Roy for what followed. Locating some kind of original sin that supposedly exists with the term "national revolutionary", as opposed to "bourgeois democratic", and to directly ascribe to one or the other phrase "disastrous effects on contemporary politics" is to betray, or more likely to misunderstand, the Leninist programme.<sup>9</sup> Those inclined towards such unwarranted conclusions reveal a fundamental inability, or unwillingness, to learn the subtleties of communist politics.

As Carr comments, "The decisions of the 2nd Congress of Comintern in [sic] the national question, like most of its decisions, were taken in the unquestioning faith in the immanence of a proletarian revolution which would sweep the world." Perceptively the same historian says:

Once this faith was disappointed, the decisions themselves, applied in conditions utterly different from those for which they had been designed, not only falsified the intentions of their authors, but were used to justify a series of compromises and retreats which, in the hour of faith and enthusiasm, would have been brushed aside as inconceivable.<sup>10</sup>

Eg, the left nationalism that views national sovereignty or national independence as a goal to be proclaimed alongside, and as virtually synonymous with, socialism. Such a travesty was completely alien for both Lenin and Comintern. The principle they advocated was not national independence: rather self-determination - a vital distinction that only hardened nationalists or the woefully uneducated could possibly confuse. Lenin favoured the *voluntary* union of peoples into big states, the biggest feasible, not the further Balkanisation of the world. Nevertheless, many 'Marxists' today - for example, the leadership of the rump Scottish Socialist Party - insist upon independence as a prerequisite for socialism and thereby completely subordinate the programme of the international working class to the politics of petty bourgeois nationalism. In truth, of course, SSP leaders merely pay lip service to Marxism. Neither the

SSP nor its various fragments can be properly regarded as socialist organisations.

Lenin highlighted, by way of what Carr calls an "exception", the possibility of the east undergoing a permanent or uninterrupted revolution.<sup>11</sup> Lenin actually writes of overcoming "tremendous difficulties" and bypassing the "capitalist stage" of development.<sup>12</sup> A strategy first sketched out by Marx, not Trotsky, as the latter's epigones crassly maintain. With the aid of the victorious revolutionary proletariat these countries could make the transition to the soviet order, and hence through "defined stages of development" to communism, avoiding capitalism altogether.

The same theoretically and historically informed approach is needed when discussing the first (and only) congress of peoples of the east, held in Baku in September 1920. Gregory Zinoviev's opening speech is much criticised, both by left social democrats at the time and by latter-day left dogmatists. He was supposedly going soft on religion, giving it, specifically Islam, socialist features it does not possess. In reality Zinoviev did no such thing. He simply adapted and gave a new content to traditional language.<sup>13</sup>

Comrades! Brothers! The time has come when you can start on the organisation of a true and holy people's war against the robbers and oppressors. The Communist International turns today to the peoples of the east and says to them: 'Brothers, we summon you to a holy war, in the first place against English imperialism!' (*Tumultuous applause, prolonged 'Hurrah'. Members of the congress rise from their seats and brandish their weapons. The speaker is unable to continue for some time. All the delegates stand up and applaud. Shouts of 'We swear it'.*)<sup>14</sup>

Zinoviev was quite definite: the peoples of the east must pursue not only the national liberation struggle against imperialism, but the class war too. His sights were on a string of soviet republics in the east federated with Russia. He therefore began his speech by asking a fitting rhetorical question: "Are you a man who lives by his labour? Do you belong to the working masses? Do you want to put a stop to the strife between peoples? Do you want to organise a struggle against the oppressors?"<sup>15</sup> If the answer was 'yes', without forgetting or papering over differences, then an alliance between revolutionary nationalists and communists could be cemented.

Indeed, given the historical moment, it was necessary, pressing and on balance immediately beneficial for both sides ●

## Notes

1. D Peris *Storming the heavens: the soviet league of the militant goddess* Ithaca NY 1998, p322.
2. *Ibid* p323.
3. Quoted in *ibid*.
4. *Ibid* p326.
5. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 30, Moscow 1977, p159.
6. EH Carr *The Bolshevik revolution* Vol 3, Harmondsworth 1975, p254.
7. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 31, Moscow 1977, p149.
8. EH Carr *The Bolshevik revolution* Vol 3, Harmondsworth 1975, p256.
9. G Byrne, 'Bolshevism and Islam' *Solidarity* March 18 2004.
10. EH Carr *The Bolshevik revolution* Vol 3, Harmondsworth 1975, p260-61.
11. *Ibid* p257.
12. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 31, Moscow 1977, p244.
13. Radicals in England did the same with the *Bible*. William Blake wrote of "building Jerusalem" in place of the "dark satanic mills". Ditto, socialists and their working class crusades, communist catechisms and promises to build heaven on earth.
14. B Pearce (trans) *Congress of the peoples of the east* London 1977, pp36-37.
15. *Ibid* pp24-25.

# Grim fate awaits him

Julian Assange's imminent extradition draws a line under the idea of the internet as an untameable new frontier, argues Paul Demarty

It seems that time is running out for Julian Assange.

His extradition was approved last year, and we suppose the formalities are being worked out as we speak. In the meantime, Assange is in solitary confinement in Belmarsh - a step down from his previous effective house arrest in the Ecuadorian embassy in London, where he was shielded by Pink Wave president Rafael Correa, but not by Correa's successor, Lenin Moreno, who - despite his given name - represented the return of Ecuador to Washington-approved normalcy.

Assange is to be prosecuted under the US's obscene Espionage Act. His crime: publishing secret materials embarrassing to the world hegemon. And embarrassing they were. Wikileaks, the organisation he set up, rocketed to fame by hosting the "collateral murder" tape - video footage of an American air crew deliberately massacring Baghdad civilians in 2007. Its biggest coup came a few years later, however, when it obtained a large tranche of American diplomatic cables, which shone a very useful light on the minutiae of US foreign policy, as it looked to its low-level agents in embassies around the world.

At that point, it should be said, Wikileaks came close to being a respected journalistic organisation. The cables were published in concert with major mainstream media organisations, including *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*. The cables (and the massacre footage) were leaked by Chelsea Manning, who spent years in jail for her troubles. It was clear that the mop-up operation would include Assange. The opportunity came when Assange was accused of rape by two Swedish women shortly after. Regardless of the strength of the allegations, it was immediately clear that they opened him up to further extradition to the US, and under those circumstances, he was granted asylum by Correa, but was unable in practice to leave London.

## Alienation

It seems we will never know if the Swedish charges amounted to anything; they have long been abandoned. But their nature served a useful purpose in any case: alienating those who might otherwise have defended him, particularly on the soft left. *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* turned on him. Later Wikileaks disclosures cemented liberal-left distaste for the man - particularly a set of leaks from the Democratic National Committee, which clearly confirmed the DNC's bias towards Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential primary cycle. Wikileaks thereby got sucked into increasingly absurd conspiracy-theorising about Russia's interference in that election. It is necessary to state here that no proof has ever been provided to make this a more serious idea than the proposition that the



**Julian Assange speaking on the steps of St Paul's: we need an Assange mass movement to save him from a living death sentence**

September 11 attacks were staged by the US government to satisfy its alien overlords.

The allegations did a certain job, however, which was to ever further isolate Assange, who had, after all, masterminded some of the greatest journalistic achievements of this century. We recently lost a fine leftwing muckraker in Assange's compatriot, John Pilger. Pilger, and others of his generation, at least had some access to the heights of the mainstream media. Slowly that access has died, as *The Washington Post* says, "in darkness". It was left to oddballs like Assange - a technolibertarian of the old school, and certainly a wilful eccentric - to try to do real journalism, and afflict the comfortable.

We use the words 'real journalism' advisedly, since in his long confinement it has become common for liberal 'real journalists' to deny the designation to him at all - he is just a spy, or a devious rightwing activist, or whatever. These 'journalists' seem entirely ignorant of the fact that one thing, and one thing only, is demanded of them: making known to broad masses things that would otherwise be obscure. Wikileaks has done nothing else - it has only done real journalism, and has not condescended to publish horoscopes, and film reviews, and overlong think-pieces about how listening to Taylor Swift for 18 hours straight is a radical act of self-care. Here they are, thousands

of diplomatic cables, which have become indispensable material for writers of modern history. Right there in front of you, unpurgated: the mechanics of how modern empire works. Assange had no duty, as a journalist, to be an Obama liberal; he had only the duty to thrust the truth rudely into a somnolent public square.

The fact that the assault on Assange and Wikileaks might in due course have chilling effects on the wider industry dawned slowly. But, in all fairness, it did, in the end. Mainstream journalists first of all reconciled themselves to Manning, knowing that they too depended on people having the gumption to alert the fourth estate, when they found themselves party to crimes. In due course, some even came to see that they too could find themselves being subjected to the Espionage Act, if the wrong sort of people were in charge - and for four years, from 2017 to 2021, very much the wrong sort of person was in charge (and may be again by this time next year). The push and pull has been remarkable; the victory of Trump, which was against the wishes of the American deep state, reconciled liberal journalists to 'lawfare' and retailing dubious stories sourced in the securocracy. Yet the very logic of the position that Trump heralded a slide into total democratic breakdown entailed that those agencies might soon be enemies again.

At this point, it looks like 'too little, too late'. Before long, Assange will have his final date with British 'justice'. The United States was initially denied the right to his extradition, with the judge citing Assange's declining mental health and suicide risk. This was overturned on appeal. Assange then had his own appeal, which was, of course, rejected. The Australian government offered some very mild protests, which were angrily disputed by Anthony Blinken on the part of the US. By the middle of last year, the UK government had formally approved the extradition, and at this point it is presumably a matter of time.

He is still to face any charges in the States, where he is formally "innocent until proven guilty" - but let's not kid ourselves. The American state is crazed for revenge. He has no greater expectation of a fair trial than Jamal Khashoggi would have if Mohammed bin Salman had opted to do things above board and snatch him home to Riyadh instead of having him chopped into dog-food in Istanbul. He may come to look back on his days in Belmarsh - banged up for 23 hours a day for years on end, while British judges worked up their cowardice - with nostalgia, given the sort of treatment he can expect at the hands of the Americans. Surely the only thing that can save him is the sort of solidarity movement that eventually

saw the pardoning and release of Alfred Dreyfus in 1906 - that after a decade in prison hell.

## Old frontier

What does this mean strategically for journalism in the west? Nothing new, of course: Assange had long been sold down the river by treasonous colleagues, many of whom are effectively intelligence agents anyway. Wikileaks stumbles on, but its moment is gone. We have, today, somewhat-Wikileaks-like organisations calling themselves 'open source intelligence' (or OSINT) outfits, most of which are low-effort state cut-outs. Wikileaks published damning evidence of US war crimes, and diplomatic skulduggery, among other things. The OSINT people rarely manage to do more than illustrate wild speculation with a couple of grainy satellite photos.

Assange considered himself a 'cyberpunk': a computer hacker who used his skills to disrupt the workings of the enemy - in his libertarian mind 'big government' and the biggest government of all, the US empire. He was a representative of a certain mindset that saw the internet as the ultimate solvent of state tyranny, exemplified by John Perry Barlow's technoutopian manifesto, 'A declaration of the independence of cyberspace', presenting the internet as a wholly untameable frontier. Assange, and people like him (something similar is true of the Bitcoin cult years later), believed that there were technical means to ensure this freedom: the decentralised architecture of the internet, for one; and intelligent use of strong encryption to boot.

Things were never as decentralised as they might have first appeared, however. As for the encryption, per a classic comic strip by Randall Munroe, the men in black do not need to decrypt your data. They just need to hit you with a wrench until you tell them your password.

The internet changed journalism all right. It destroyed the economic basis of legacy media, which had to regroup with a greater dependency on shallow opinion writing and cultural commentary, and a drastically reduced capacity for serious investigative work. What it did *not* do is liberate the public square from state interference.

The Wikileaks exposures achieved a great deal, greatly enriching the understanding of conscientious contemporary observers, and no doubt future historians, of some of the great events of its time. What it did not achieve was political transformation, and could never have done - at least, not without a viable political project that Assange, the libertarian pro-capitalist, would have hated.

The frontier is closed ●