

# weekly worker



**After Jeremy Hunt's budget flop, things  
get even worse for Tories with Frank  
Hester's Diane Abbott racist rant**

- Letters and debate
- Marc Mulholland on war
- Systematic inequality
- Comic opera Karl Marx

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Towards a mass Communist Party

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# LETTERS



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

## Lost Momentum

Momentum's first biennial all-member convention was held online last Sunday (March 10). For an organisation that once boasted over 40,000 members, the attendance of just 197 on the Zoom call illustrated its existential crisis: there is no longer a comfort zone where the left can operate inside the Labour Party.

The sorry state of Momentum I described in my article, 'Under false colours' (*Weekly Worker* June 9 2022) has now degenerated further - left activists with no stomach for Starmer's Labour Party have moved on, leaving just a small cohort of careerist left councillors with any reason to stay.

The convention agenda was devoid of any significant political controversy, and the staffers seemed to be familiar with Zoom technology and its built-in voting tools, so the event should have been a slick affirmation of the atomised click-vote democracy imposed after Lansman's coup in 2016. However, members struggling with unfamiliar procedures, combined with delays in calling speakers and votes, meant that the undemocratic shortcomings of this format were exposed. Often the pauses between speakers were longer than the 90 seconds allowed for a contribution.

The session on general election strategy was indicative of Momentum's fish-out-of-water problems: how to campaign for Labour in the election, while really promoting alternative 'socialist' policies. Although the motion was the day's longest (over 700 words), it was a struggle to find anyone willing to speak. One comrade who did highlighted a big issue for activists - all the current Labour publicity material is emblazoned with union jacks! Momentum will be producing its own material - aimed at other campaigners - promoting the 'socialist' case for voting Labour, 'socialist' policies and the importance of democratising the party. Like all of the policy motions, this one passed without opposition.

However, I noticed that no speakers mentioned the likelihood of left candidates standing in the general election against Labour, possibly including Jeremy Corbyn and some other former members of the Socialist Campaign Group. Perhaps some things are better left unsaid.

The session on constitutional amendments was not for the faint-hearted. The first of these was so controversial that it was defeated. This was a proposal to relax Momentum membership requirements, to allow anyone *eligible* to join the Labour Party to be a Momentum member, rather than just those who *are* Labour members. In the debate it emerged that many Momentum members have cancelled their party subscription, so the change was needed just to keep them on board. But others were worried that the change would provide Starmer with an excuse to proscribe Momentum on grounds of being run by outsiders. When the CWU union rep spoke against, the amendment's fate was sealed - apparently constitutional amendments are subject to a trade union veto!

The second amendment was even stormier. It seemed to be a rekindling of the factional battle from years

ago that divided the leadership (not so much the members, who couldn't tell them apart): 'Forward Momentum' versus 'Momentum Renewal'. The issue was 'party leader endorsements' and whether the national coordinating group (NCG - Momentum's leadership) could engage in backroom deals for these, as happened when Momentum backed Angela Rayner rather than Richard Burgon for the deputy leader position. There was an amendment to the amendment, which appeared to still provide the NCG with some room for dealing, and this passed, as did the amended amendment (with CWU consent too).

Throughout the proceedings there was no mention of the phenomenal Momentum-inspired Labour conference presence, *The World Transformed*. Was this due to a falling out? Will there be a TWT in 2024? We deserve some answers.

**Clive Dean**  
email

## Clara Zetkin

In this imperialist epoch, when International Women's Day has been coopted by the reformists in many areas of the world, it's important to remind those who need reminding: International Women's Day is a communist holiday, and a major founder of this enduring celebration was Clara Zetkin.

Zetkin deserves a lot of credit for many things - not least that she was influenced by August Bebel, Friedrich Engels, other early Marxists before her, and the socialist ideas of her time. Although she didn't produce original Marxist theorisation, she was able to skilfully transform socialist ideas into organisational effectiveness; she was widely recognised as the major leader of the international socialist women's movement and main authority on the woman question.

She understood the meaning of 'women's self-organisation' and sought to organise women of all political backgrounds for the cause of socialism (she believed in the need for women's socialist autonomy in the German SPD, but the autonomous women's organisations came to an end in 1908 and she was removed from her leadership position). She was influenced by the contemporaneous bourgeois women's debates, but took the approach of the 'clean break' - an uncompromising separation from the bourgeois women's movement. This was an idea which had currency at the time; she was aware of the potential political toxicity and political incest of the situation in which socialists lose their independence and become subsumed into bourgeois politics.

Her 1923 anti-fascist speech in the Comintern regarding Germany and the 'united front' was a political *tour de force*; it's plausible that her ideas were developed at least partially, if not totally, from Leon Trotsky's opinions and his extensive writings in 1922 on the subject of the united front. John Riddell indicates in his 2014 writing, *Clara Zetkin in the lion's den*, that in 1921 Zetkin's critique of the disastrous, ultra-left 'March Action' in Germany, as well as her promotion of a united front, was very astute and powerful. Conversely, Max Schachtman states in 1933 in the socialist newspaper *The Militant* that she didn't always "distinguish between the revolutionary left wing and the adventurist or infantile ultra-left".

Her united front politics were subsequently rejected by the

Comintern by 1924 - a disaster for the German proletariat. Zetkin had basically no political significance in this period - she attempted no challenge to Stalin's counterrevolution; if she had publicly challenged Stalin, she undoubtedly would have become another victim of his paranoid megalomania and that of his subservient epigones who destroyed the *crème de la crème* of the Bolshevik revolutionaries and thousands of other victims. But being silent - except possibly in the backrooms of the CPSU - and refusing to change course when she saw the Comintern's slide into degeneration - might have been consistent with what seemed to be an authoritarian streak in her German personality.

Of particular note, she was opposed to Trotsky's Left Opposition, which is expressed in her 1928 tract entitled 'Trotsky's "exile" and social democracy'. Zetkin approved of Trotsky's banishment to Turkey. Trotsky viewed her as unoriginal, and destructive to proletarian internationalism.

The socialists of Zetkin's time saw motherhood and participation in waged, public production as the roles to aspire to for proletarian women. Her views had evolved: initially, she was more focused on Engels' productionist analysis and she didn't focus on reproduction, but she came to agree with his views on women's oppression, which specifically dealt with the socialisation of privatised, domestic slavery (otherwise known as housework), and she began to consider 'woman as woman' in addition to the class aspect (she realised that economic independence is not enough to free women). She didn't seek to transcend the prevailing socialist view - for example, to look at the division of sexual roles in the family - except in its economic and social definition.

She was politically to the right of Engels in at least the sense that she was a zealous believer in monogamous marriage (as a duty to the socialist movement). Zetkin was a pro-natalist; she subscribed to the doctrinaire view that proletarian women had an overriding societal function - their interests were subordinate to the interests of humanity - and they should strive to be not just mothers, but mothers of very large families (apparently, the cost was not an issue for her) as a duty and obligation to the movement.

This ideology wouldn't go over very well in the current historical period - especially, for example, with 'Queer theory' and politics which might see Alexandra Kollontai, who surpassed orthodox Marxism (regarding reproductive autonomy, bodily integrity, etc) as more of a political soulmate. But Kollontai as well saw motherhood as a central role of women - meant to support and serve the 1917 Russian Revolution.

Zetkin was opposed to fertility control (contraception) and reproductive rights for both moral and political reasons, which was to the right of where the radical bourgeois feminist movement stood, as well as where many, if not most, socialist women stood, in Germany; Zetkin saw women's desire for reproductive self-determination as selfish 'egoism'. This perspective is unfortunate, regardless of whether women's right to control their own bodies was based in the socialist ideas of the time.

All told, Clara Zetkin was one of the exceptional articulators and leaders of the movement for women's rights, despite her political limitations, and the legacy of International Women's Day will forever be associated with her revolutionary socialist contributions and legacy.

**GG**  
USA

## Rights of nations

I see the *Weekly Worker* has published a letter from the loyalist apologist, Louis Shawcross, headed 'Good old Tommy', which praised the fascist, Tommy Robinson, for his racist campaign against Muslims and saying he "fought tirelessly to expose the crimes against hundreds of victims/survivors of rape gangs in the north of England".

It is libertarian nonsense to defend the right to free speech of fascists (as opposed to far rightists and Tories), but is far worse to publish a letter in what is supposed to be a leftwing publication defending a fascist. This follows widespread demands, even within the Tory Party itself, that the whip be removed from Liz Truss, because she spoke in an interview with the far rightist, Steve Bannon, after attending a rally by the Conservative Political Action Conference in Maryland and did not object to him calling Tommy Robinson "a hero".

Turning to the CPGB's Communist University Spring 2024, it was very disappointing, because it contained so many outright rejections of Marxism, Leninism and the Russian Revolution itself - from guest speaker Marc Mulholland, and CPGB leaders Mike Macnair and Jack Conrad.

The first CU speaker was Oxford professor Mulholland on 'Marxism and revolutionary defeatism'. One of his themes was the politics of Brendan Clifford's red-brown British and Irish Communist Organisation (BICO) and Stalin's definition of what constituted a nation. At first, I thought he was citing this to show how wrong and one-sided the latter was, until I realised that he was defending it - and, via this definition, the existence of two nations in Ireland. "A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up, manifested in a common culture," Stalin wrote in 1913.

This definition conveniently allows the Ulster loyalists, the Ukrainian far right after the February 2014 US-organised fascist coup, the Zionist state of Israel (but not Jews before the 1948 Nakba and founding of the state of Israel), the French colons in Algeria and the US Confederate states before the civil war to be designated as nations. So they should have the right to self-determination and, as far-right supremacists, the right to oppress as second-class citizens the Irish nationalists, the ethnic Russians, the Palestinians, the Arab majority in Algeria and their own black slaves in the USA.

This is opposed to Lenin's 1914 polemic, *The right of nations to self-determination* against Rosa Luxemburg and later his final struggle in 1921-22 against Stalin over Georgia and Ukraine, in which he correctly designated the Georgian Stalin as a Great Russian chauvinist against his own nation. Stalin accused Lenin of 'national liberalism' in a letter to the politburo in September 1922, because he defended the rights of oppressed nations to self-determination *regardless of the politics of its existing leadership*.

BICO, which was known on the left as "the Peking branch of the Orange Order", counted amongst its

admirers and enthusiastic readers of its press the Ulster Unionist leader, David Trimble, and Enoch Powell, who dubbed them "nice, comfortable unionist Marxists". They supported the 1974 Ulster Workers Council strike against the Sunningdale Agreement, because it was soft on the nationalists, and the 1981 Falklands war against Argentina in defence of the British colonial settlers on Argentina's islands.

Are we seeing a rerun of the liberal Northern Ireland prime minister, Terence O'Neill, vs far-right, supremacist loyalist bigot Ian Paisley in the late 1960s, where the supremacists defeated the liberal unionists. Is a BICO-type red-brown rationale emerging to defend the union and the material interests of the British empire against Irish reunification posing the threat of socialist revolution in alliance with advanced sections of the British working class? In a letter in the *Irish Daily Mail* published on February 20, Louis Shawcross says: "One has to look beyond the rage and thunder to see it for what it is. We're blessed for having the present leadership in the north - all sides". Both Michelle O'Neill and Sir Jeffrey Donaldson are well pleased with this *Weekly Worker* correspondent, we must assume.

As for the anti-imperialist united front, it is obviously a tactical orientation and not a strategic one, as Macnair dubbed it. It does not oblige you to put your head in the lion's mouth or dissolve communist forces into the bourgeois or petty bourgeois group. This is what Stalin and the Comintern did, resulting in the massacre of the Shanghai Commune in April 1927 and the further massacre in Wuhan, when Stalin tried again with the 'left' Kuomintang. Mao was not so foolish as to put his head back in that lion's mouth, as Stalin instructed him; he made a pragmatic decision to save himself, but was later to advise the Communist Party in Indonesia to do just that - which resulted in the 1965-66 massacre of between half a million and one million of not only CP members, but communist sympathisers, trade unionists and all leftists in general.

At CU Mike Macnair gave us his long-held view that modern imperialism has always existed historically and is simply nations attacking and oppressing other nations. This is the view of all capitalist defenders, as promoted so strongly by the *Telegraph*, *The Sun*, the *Mail* and the *Express*. He argues that Karl Marx always held this view and Lenin was wrong to see anything unique in modern imperialism. He rejects Lenin's theories in his 1916 book, *Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism*, as simply copying bourgeois historians. Here Lenin analyses modern imperialism since the last quarter of the 19th century as capitalism marked by monopolies, cartels, the role of banks as monopolists of finance capital, and a new colonial policy centred around the struggle for raw materials and capital exports.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels began their famous 'Irish turn' in 1856, following Engels' visit to the west of Ireland and the absolute devastation he saw there after the Great Famine - or genocide, as it is more properly termed. Previously they had seen colonialism as progressive in transferring advanced technologies, industries and railways to these colonies. Now Engels saw the brutal reality, and he and Marx went on to give unconditional support to the Fenians - always trying to unite them in struggle with the English radicalising workers.



Not until the Irish Turn of 1867 and the Fenian uprising did Marx recognise the progressive dynamic of the struggles of oppressed peoples. Marx did not develop his 1850 permanent revolution until 1871, when he understood the great revolutionary significance of the Paris Commune, as Lenin did later. He and later Engels recognised the plight of the poor oppressed Jews fleeing from the tsar’s pogroms in a far better way than Marx did in his pamphlet *The Jewish question* of 1843.

In 2006 Mike Macnair wrote in the *Weekly Worker*: “This tyrannous character reflects the decision of the Bolsheviks (a) to create Bonapartist centralism within their party and (b) to use state repression (the ban on factions, etc) to resist the natural tendency of the party to split within the framework of the common party identification created by the new state form. Behind these decisions, as I argued before, is the fact that the Russian party-state created in 1918-21 was socially based on the peasantry” (‘The minimum platform and extreme democracy’, May 17 2006).

In this scenario Mike Macnair describes Kautsky’s reformist parliamentary road to socialism, as endorsed by Joe Stalin in the *British road to socialism* in 1951. We were unsure if he was endorsing it too, until we came to his assertion that this was “Kautsky in his most revolutionary phase”, who “had broken from the democratic republicanism of Marx’s writings on the Commune and *Critique of the Gotha programme* and Engels’ arguments in *Can Europe disarm?*”

Of course, as we have seen above, in Marx’s writing on the Commune he did the exact opposite: he had broken from his previous emphasis on defeating the old feudal state in alliance with a section of the bourgeoisie to emphasise the permanent revolution after 1848, the need to smash the bourgeois state and the defence of Ireland’s (and by extension all colonies’) right to self-determination after he completed the famous ‘Irish turn’ in 1870. In 1870 Karl Marx analysed this phenomenon and suggested a solution:

“After studying the Irish question for many years, I have come to the conclusion that the decisive blow against the English ruling classes (and it will be decisive for the workers’ movement all over the world) cannot be delivered in England, but only in Ireland.”

**Gerry Downing**  
Socialist Fight

## Don’t fight back

Last week on Channel Four news Krishnan Guru-Murthy interviewed a leader of Hamas about what was going on in Gaza and at one stage he was very insistent on trying to get the chap to admit that if it wasn’t for the events of October 7 then 30,000 plus Palestinian civilians would not have been killed by the Israelis.

This is a common attack by the mainstream media: ie, to suggest that October 7 was the kicking-off point of the current ‘conflict’. This is, of course, to dismiss the decades of occupation, along with the regular massacres and destruction inflicted on the Palestinians inside Gaza and out. ‘Mowing the lawn’, for instance - after all, these are warm, friendly people who have to defend themselves through mass murder!

I wondered after watching this interview what Guru-Murthy thought about the Mau Mau in Kenya, bringing down the wrath of the British state on to their people. If the Vietcong had not fought against first the French and then the Americans, would they have been spared My Lai and so many other atrocities? Did the indigenous inhabitants of America

bring about their own destruction? We have the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto, the Algerian fight against the French, and so on and so on.

Indeed, if Neville Chamberlain had been a bit more cautious, might Britain have been spared the blitz? One can only ponder over the content of any interview that Guru-Murthy might have with Volodymyr Zelensky one day - we might guess what questions will not be asked!

The message? If you are oppressed or occupied by a force of much greater might than you, don’t fight back. Accept your oppression or you’ll regret it.

**Jim Nelson**  
email

## And Scotland?

In an otherwise quite sensible analysis on the challenges for the far left of entering the electoral arena, Edmund Griffiths, like so many other commentators, shows he is ‘Scotland blind’, notwithstanding the very brief mention of Scottish Militant Labour (‘How we should contest’, March 7).

The Scottish Socialist Party did scale the foothills of parliamentary democracy to win six members of the Scottish parliament (MSPs) in May 2003, after having secured its first representative there in the figure of Tommy Sheridan in May 1999.

The SSP had emerged out of the Scottish Socialist Alliance - an amalgam of radical left forces in support of independence, of which the key one was Scottish Militant Labour. Many will now recall how the SSP imploded from late 2004 onwards as a result of the crisis around Tommy Sheridan’s personal life.

But, with the SSP being founded 25 years ago this February, this should not blind us to the lessons that can be learnt from how it was built and grew into a force of around 3,000 members at its peak. This is even so, given that the elections to the Scottish parliament use a proportional representation mechanism for the regional ‘list’ seats.

These lessons can be read about in my (unauthorised) biography of Sheridan called *Tommy Sheridan: from hero to zero? A political biography* (Welsh Academic Press, 2012).

**Gregor Gall**  
Glasgow

## Trans ideology

Andy P’s remarks on Trans rights contained the familiar unsubstantiated allegations of ‘hatred’ and opposition to undefined ‘trans rights’ (Letters, March 7). He does, however, raise a point about stepping out of “the rigid social boundaries of gender”, which is worth addressing, as trans ideology - a particularly virulent form of identity ideology - has nothing liberatory or progressive about it.

Gender ideology has taken on much of the language of previous radical politics, whilst changing its meaning. The charge of ‘biological essentialism’ within feminism, including socialist feminism, once referred to the essentialising of sex stereotypes, but now involves denying the material reality of biology and its role in social reproduction, or in practice offering an often misogynistic mapping of sex stereotypes onto the other sex.

For feminism, the meaning of gender involved socialising individuals into a social structure, which for historical reasons asserted the superiority of men over women and subjugated women to specific roles. Some feminists believed this benefitted all men and disadvantaged all women in equal measure, and drew the conclusion that patriarchy, rather than social class, was the major fault line in society. Others attempted

to combine a critique of gender with social class, but, generally speaking, all of them wanted to stop putting people into pink and blue boxes.

Trans ideology, on the other hand, asserts that gender is not socially constructed, but internal and innate. This theoretically confused and politically debilitating notion is now unfortunately uncritically accepted by much, although certainly not all, of the left. As the political philosopher, Rebecca Reilly-Cooper, has pointed out in her perceptive observations of this phenomenon, this identity ideology accepts the gender categorisations of capitalism, and, rather than wanting to tear down the stereotypes, asserts that there are more than just the two boxes.

This relies upon and encourages no collective challenge to gender oppression, but instead embraces a personalised neoliberal entrepreneurialism, where we simply reinvent ourselves. So some declare themselves ‘trans’, a select few are ‘non-binary’, while the majority remain ‘cis-gender’. A smaller handful might opt out of the gender spectrum altogether, declaring themselves ‘agender’ or ‘pangender’. This is why capitalism has no issue with embracing identity ideology, as it does not in any way challenge structural oppression or exploitation. As Reilly-Cooper observes, no amount of calling themselves ‘agender’ or insisting on their own pronouns would prevent employers seeing them as women and potential baby-makers, and discriminating against them on that basis.

Trans ideology, like all contemporary identity politics, has nothing to offer collective movements for social change. It has succeeded in becoming a mainstream narrative because of the retreat of social movements and a working class left. If it is embraced more wholeheartedly in North America than in Britain, that is largely because the retreat and weakness of the left is even more pronounced there.

**Ben Rust**  
email

## Warmonger poet

Regarding the discussion in the CPGB’s Spring Communist University on the poet, Bertran de Born, those interested can pursue the topic via Wikipedia, whose article looks like an excellent summary of the current scholarship.

Bertran’s poem, ‘It pleases me, gay Easter-tide’, is a paean of praise of warfare, and as such has no obvious connection with any particular historical event in mediaeval Aquitaine or Limousin - the region of Bertran’s castle, Hautefort - although that is certainly possible. Richard Coeur de Lion, being Henry II’s third son, was not expected to succeed his father, but, together with his elder brothers, had no scruple about challenging him militarily, especially in the years 1180 to 1183 CE. His elder brother, Henry, died in 1182 and Richard therefore inherited his father’s dominions.

Whatever the details, Bertran is an example of a baron delighting in the use of warfare as an instrument of policy and as a means to gain control of land - a typical feudal practice. The end of the poem illustrates this, where he writes (and gives instructions to his jongleur, Papiol, to deliver his message to Richard, whom he calls ‘Yea and Nay’, as follows:

Barons! put in pawn castles and towns and cities, before anyone makes war on us.

Papiol, be glad to go speedily to ‘Yea and Nay’, and tell him there’s too much peace about.

**Chris Gray**  
London

# ACTION

## Scotland demonstration for Gaza

**Saturday March 16, 12 noon:** Assemble George Square, Glasgow G2. End the genocide! Ceasefire now! Speakers at rally include Jackie Walker, Marc Wadsworth and Tony Greenstein. Organised by Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign: [www.facebook.com/events/729591775872999](https://www.facebook.com/events/729591775872999).

## Stop UK support for Israel’s ethnic cleansing

**Saturday March 16, 12 noon:** Demonstration. Assemble Piccadilly Gardens, Manchester M1. End the genocide! Ceasefire now! Organised by Greater Manchester Friends of Palestine: [www.facebook.com/events/378087995140692](https://www.facebook.com/events/378087995140692).

## Woolwich march for Gaza

**Saturday March 16, 12.30pm:** Assemble by Greenwich Islamic Centre, 131 Plumstead Road, London SE18, then march to Woolwich town centre for rally. End the genocide! Ceasefire now! Organised by Lewisham Stop the War and Greenwich Palestine Action: [www.stopwar.org.uk/events/woolwich-march-for-gaza](https://www.stopwar.org.uk/events/woolwich-march-for-gaza).

## Stop racism, stop the hate

National demonstrations for UN anti-racism day, organised by Stand Up to Racism and the TUC: [standuptoracism.org.uk](https://standuptoracism.org.uk).

**Glasgow, Saturday March 16, 11am:** Assemble BBC Scotland, Pacific Way, Glasgow G51.

**London, Saturday March 16, 12 noon:** Assemble home office, Marsham Street, London SW1.

**Cardiff, Sunday March 17, 11am:** Assemble Welsh parliament, Cardiff Bay, Cardiff CF99.

## Why does Britain support Israel?

**Tuesday March 19, 6pm:** Public meeting, Root25, 116B Bow Road, London E3. Despite genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza, the British state maintains full support for Israel, providing arms and protecting it at the UN. Meanwhile, protestors demanding a ceasefire are demonised by the establishment. John Rees leads the discussion. Organised by East London Counterfire: [www.facebook.com/events/1339268933450426](https://www.facebook.com/events/1339268933450426).

## What it means to be human

**Tuesday March 19, 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: ‘Trust, digitality and the hunter-gatherer cradle of language’. Speaker: Chris Knight. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: [www.facebook.com/events/381422654369605](https://www.facebook.com/events/381422654369605).

## Military influence on nuclear power decisions

**Tuesday March 19, 8pm:** Online webinar. Despite high costs, long lead times and problems with waste storage, investment in nuclear power proceeds. Only when the military need for nuclear engineers and infrastructure is understood do government plans become clear. Organised by Abingdon Peace Group and Salisbury CND: [www.cndsalisbury.org.uk/events](https://www.cndsalisbury.org.uk/events).

## Arms out: war on Yemen

**Tuesday March 19, 7.30pm:** Films and discussion, The Trades Club, Holme Street, Hebden Bridge HX7. Screenings of *Warton’s war on Yemen* and *When the music stops: Yemen, art and war*, followed by discussion with Kirsten Bayes (Campaign Against the Arms Trade) and Matt Kennard (Declassified UK). Tickets £5.50. Organised by The Trades Club: [thetradescub.com/events/armsout](https://thetradescub.com/events/armsout).

## Building the movement for rent controls

**Thursday March 21, 6.45pm:** Rally, Hamilton House, Mabledon Place, London WC1. Hear how a campaign for rent controls can stop huge rent increases. Organised by London Renters Union: [londonrentersunion.org/2024/rent-control-rally-21st-march](https://londonrentersunion.org/2024/rent-control-rally-21st-march).

## Communist culture club

**Thursday March 21, 7pm:** Fortnightly online culture meeting. Includes Dan Lazare on George Orwell and Tam Dean Burn on ‘The third intifada will be political!’ Organised by Labour Left Alliance and Why Marx?: [www.whymarx.com/sessions](https://www.whymarx.com/sessions).

## How capitalism ruined crypto and how to fix it

**Thursday March 28, 6.30pm:** Talk at Space4, 113-115 Fonthill Road, Finsbury Park, London N4. Joshua Dávila discusses his work and book *Blockchain radicals: how capitalism ruined crypto and how to fix it*, which shows how the technology can be used for more radical purposes. Tickets £5, refunded when you attend. Organised by Housmans Bookshop and Futures Podcast: [housmans.com/events](https://housmans.com/events).

## Socialism: utopian and scientific

**Thursday March 28, 7pm:** Online session in the fortnightly ‘ABC of Marxism’ course, presented by Ian Spencer. Organised by Labour Left Alliance and Why Marx?: [www.whymarx.com/sessions](https://www.whymarx.com/sessions).

## Ceasefire now! stop the genocide in Gaza

**Saturday March 30, 12 noon:** National demonstration, central London - details to be announced. Organised by Stop the War Coalition: [www.stopwar.org.uk/events](https://www.stopwar.org.uk/events).

## Bargain books

**Saturday April 13, 11am:** Book sale, Marx Memorial Library, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1. Get your hands on Marxist classics, socialist histories and rare pamphlets. Organised by Marx Memorial Library: [www.marx-memorial-library.org.uk/event/450](https://www.marx-memorial-library.org.uk/event/450).

## 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.



## DEFINITION



"For our demands most moderate are: we only want the earth" (James Connolly 1907)

# How to be an extremist

Michael Gove and co seek to redefine 'extremism'. Paul Demarty suggests that we should wear the label with pride

Samuel Johnson famously quipped, in 1775, that "patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel".

He had in mind William Pitt the Elder - a great Whig statesman, who made a habit of high-blown patriotic rhetoric unmatched, in the eyes of the incorrigible Tory, Johnson, by prudent policy. Yet many indeed have since attempted to conceal ignominy by draping themselves in the flag.

Perhaps in our time, however, there is a new redoubt for the truly debased politician. Perhaps today the last refuge of the scoundrel is 'anti-extremism'. So it seems in the case of Michael Gove, secretary of state for communities and one of the canniest remaining figures on the government front bench, who is looking to pilot a revamp of the government's working definition of 'extremism' in various municipalities around the country, with the aim of excluding such 'extremists' from public life.

That new definition, which leaked back in November, forbids as 'extremist' "the promotion or advancement of any ideology which aims to overturn or undermine the UK's system of parliamentary democracy, its institutions and values". This would be overbroad and chilling enough as such, were Gove and co not explicit about the sorts of organisations they intended to catch, which included the Muslim Council of Britain - whose 'mainstream' credentials have barely been questioned outside the far right before now - and Palestine Action, which conducts direct-action stunts to expose the crimes of Israel.

But as written it would also include Lee Anderson, late of Gove's parish; the various Catholic neo-integralists, with whom Tory ministers cheerfully pal around at National Conservatism conferences; and, needless to say, the whole radical left, from open revolutionaries like ourselves to those anti-racist activists who agree with us that the police

should be abolished. Would Gove himself be safe? His old idea to send ex-squaddies into schools as role models to alienated young men has a little bit of an Andrew Tate vibe; and we recall, for some reason, Kenneth Clarke caught on tape during the 2016 Tory leadership contest: "I think with Michael as prime minister we'd go to war with at least three countries at once."

The legality of this definition is highly questionable, and indeed the last time one was proposed, in 2016, it was shelved, when it became clear that judicial blessing was not to be forthcoming. But that is all to the good: there is nothing a Tory government likes more, in an election year, than a kabuki fight with 'leftie' judges... Yet, even as such, it is more or less the 'common sense' definition in the Westminster bubble, arrived at in stages. Any oppositional movement, from Brexitism ("closet racists and swivel-eyed loons", as David Cameron put it) to Palestine solidarity ("vile anti-Semites", as too many worthies to mention are currently putting it), is in danger of being put beyond the pale by an increasingly philistine and intolerant political class.

### Failure

Whence this endless ratchet? After all, it seems worthwhile to point out that, on its own terms, the post-9/11 'anti-extremism' policy of successive governments has been a total failure. The first version was rolled out in 2003, only to be followed by the 2005 London bombings that killed scores of people. Inevitably it was beefed up again and again, gaining its current form - the preposterous 'Prevent' strategy, in 2011. None of that did a damn thing to prevent a series of low-tech terrorist incidents in the 2010s, mostly associated with Islamic State. Fiery Islamist sects have followed each other into notoriety and oblivion - we think particularly of Anjem Choudary's

delightful *al-Muhajiroun*, but others could be cited, and as a whole they are not going away.

Not that we should forget the far right here, also notionally targeted by all this legislation, who have been on a continuous long march into the political mainstream. The British National Party was succeeded by the (more violent) English Defence League; both were succeeded in turn by more vigorously racist outfits like Britain First and National Action, the latter being eventually banned. More 'mainstream' parties of the right, like the UK Independence Party, began to adopt the rhetoric of continental defenders of European Christian civilisation against the swarthy Arab hordes threatening its borders. Lee Anderson may have jumped ship, but this sort of racist raving is now utterly pervasive in the Tory Party. Along the way, two MPs have been assassinated - one by an Islamist, one by a far-rightist.

It is difficult to overstate the inadequacy of 'anti-extremism' to the task of applying any meaningful brake on the advance of 'extremism'. The money might have been better spent on giving everyone in hard-up rustbelt towns a fiver each. The policy has instead had the effect merely of recruiting reluctant teachers and other relevant public servants into the role of Stasi snitches, producing occasional embarrassments like the reporting of two young brothers under Prevent rubrics because they had been given toy guns as a gift.

The result of these outrages is, precisely, to confirm the accounts of the 'extremists'. A militant Islamist has endless proof, by way of this sort of absurd harassment, that the liberalism of western societies is a sham, designed to conceal their main purpose of suppressing Islam. A far-right ideologue can point to such outrages as proof that society is run by 'cultural Marxists' and whatever else. And, needless to say, it provides endless opportunities

for papers like this one to argue that only socialist revolution, in the end, can get us to true political democracy...

That is on the assumption, of course, that the actual purpose of such state policy is to fight the specific ideologies supposedly at issue, and thereby to defend democracy. But there is an alternative interpretation: what is being defended is not democracy, but the class interests of those who really make the decisions in the last instance, and it is in the end good enough to defend it by direct repression, so long as that repression can be justified in the minds of enough people. Hence the importance of *misrepresenting* the question as one of 'democracy' versus 'extremism', and furthermore of identifying 'extremism' with the agency of certain rivals (Russia, China, even Iran - in vain do leftists point out that it is the west's *allies*, like Saudi Arabia, who most aggressively promote Islamism around the world).

If such is the reality, it does not really matter much whether the supposed 'extremists' are kept at bay. *Some* indications of the 'threat' are actually useful, inasmuch as they justify the ratchet. It is always necessary to do more, precisely because nothing you do actually works.

### Radicalism

The differences between the mainstream parties on this question are essentially trivial. The policy was initiated originally by Tony Blair, and handed seamlessly over to the Tories. No doubt the present hue and cry is a desperate attempt to get some ground back in the forthcoming general election (and delegitimise the Palestine movement while they are at it); it is quite impossible for a Labour leader as 'responsible' as Sir Keir Starmer to object to further measures against 'extremism' on any but the most bad-faith, ticky-tacky grounds.

The liberal media harrumph about the legalities. It is a free hit for the Tories, and who knows? It could even work, by reducing the number of defectors following Lee Anderson to Reform, or to shore up the Tory vote in certain swing seats.

This consensus leaves those of us fighting back potentially in an awkward position. The response of, say, the Socialist Workers Party is simultaneously to ridicule the accusation of extremism and to defend the right to protest to the point of demanding that protestors defy bans and 'take to the streets in rage'. Yet there is a contradiction here: 'We're not extremists, and to prove it, we'll defy the law!'

Indeed, perhaps we are extremists, after all: radicalism is always 'extremism' to the defender of the status quo, and we ought not to fear being viewed as such. As that bastion of the American right, Barry Goldwater, notoriously put it, "Extremism in the defence of liberty is no vice." Insofar as extremism definitions like Gove's play into actual legal suppression we should, of course, seek to wriggle out from under it. Yet our fundamental task is revolution, which means *delegitimising* the status quo, as openly as we are able. We do not reject the charge of 'extremism' as much as we reject the prerogative of the state to sort political outlooks into the categories of 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate'.

Our extremism is *democratic* extremism. And we favour maximal freedom of speech and association, in part *because* repression does not work: far better to have Islamist or neo-fascist reactionaries stating their cases openly than to have the dead hands of the bureaucratic state and corporate media deciding on everyone's behalf that they may not speak.

We do not seek to usurp that power, but to abolish it ●

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## TORIES

# Staring into the abyss

Far from Jeremy Hunt's budget being a 'gamechanger', it has backfired on the Tories, writes **Eddie Ford**. Indeed, with Braverman, Anderson and now Hester, the government has suffered one PR disaster after another

Some Tories were desperately hoping that the 2024 spring budget would finally shift things in their favour. Looking for reasons to be cheerful, they tell themselves that the polls must tighten at some point, especially as many psephologists and pundits, based on historical precedent, have been expecting Labour's lead to shrink - previous UK elections have often had the incumbent party experience an uplift in fortunes in the general election campaign.

But no such thing has happened, of course, since there were no real surprises. No rabbits out of the hat - except perhaps for an increase in the child benefit threshold to £60,000. Jeremy Hunt's 2p cut in national insurance, on top of the previous 2p cut announced last autumn, was heavily trailed, as was the scrapping of 'non-dom' rules for residents whose permanent home is outside the UK, which will fund the cut - in the process stealing a flagship Labour policy (Sir Keir Starmer had planned to use the £2.7 billion raised from the abolition of non-dom status for public services, including the National Health Service. But it is something that Labour can happily live with, as Starmer can now endlessly mock the Tories for implementing his policies.

At the same time, the chancellor raised revenue through a number of small tax increases on vaping, tobacco, holiday home lets, business class flights, etc. This allowed him to meet his fiscal rule of reducing debt as a share of gross domestic product in five years' time by what the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) described as the "historically modest margin" of £9 billion. Hunt also announced the extension of a windfall tax on oil and gas companies, leading to reports of a "heated" row with Douglas Ross, the Tory leader in Scotland - with the chancellor saying too that the government was "backing the great British pub", with an extension of the alcohol duty freeze until February next year.

Hunt stated that his ambition was to phase out national insurance contributions for employees and the self-employed altogether, but everyone takes that with a huge pinch of salt, if only for the reason that he and the Tories will not be around to do any such thing. More to the point, the £900-a-year saved for the average worker from reduced national insurance charges is dwarfed by tax increases previously announced, thanks to the infamous 'fiscal drag' that will move millions of people into higher tax bands.

As most Tories gloomily conclude, especially those on the right, this is not a budget that will leave people with a warm glow and thus act as a launch pad for a general election - quite the opposite. Therefore a late election looks even more likely: one that they will have to go into with taxes at their highest level since 1948 and living standards squeezed - with the grim prospect of a fresh round of austerity after polling day. OBR calculates that Hunt's overall plans meant that funding for councils, etc was on track to fall by at least 2.3% per year. Fairly frighteningly, both Birmingham and Nottingham councils have effectively gone bankrupt and it is estimated that 63 English councils could go the same



Jeremy Hunt: budget flop

way in the next year - and perhaps 127 in the next five years (out of a total of 317!).<sup>1</sup>

### Polls

Indeed, in yet more bad news for the Tories (does it ever end?) the budget appears to have backfired, according to an Opinium poll, with almost twice as many voters believing it will increase taxes overall, as opposed to those who think it will mean tax cuts.<sup>2</sup>

It should be noted that Opinium is one of the few polling companies that does not have Labour on a lead of 20 points or more: a recent Ipsos poll, for example, resulted in a 27% lead for Labour, causing some commentators to talk about the Tories suffering an "extinction-level event" - comparable to the 1993 Canadian election that saw the Progressive Conservative Party slump from 167 federal seats to just two. Opinium's findings are not so dramatic, but nevertheless it shows that, compared with its previous poll taken two weeks before the budget, the Tories have fallen two points to just 25%. This is the reverse of a "budget bounce" - Labour is now on 41%, putting its lead up to 16 points.

Similarly, a new YouGov survey makes for pretty depressing reading if you are a Tory.<sup>3</sup> Asked whether the budget is 'fair' and 'affordable', just 27% thought it was, whilst 32% thought it was the opposite. A sharp contrast to a poll taken after the 2023 autumn statement back in November - viewed as 'fair' by 38%, as against 23% who thought the reverse. Virtually the same split exists when it comes to 'affordability', with 28% saying they think these changes are affordable, compared to 33% who do not think so.

Things get more damning for the Tories when people are asked how these measures might impact on them and their families. Just 10% think the changes will make them better off, compared to 20% who think they will be worse off (the majority, 58%, feel the measures will make no difference either way). Meanwhile, when it comes to their views on the state of the economy overall, *only 4% say it is in a good state, compared to 71% who say the opposite.*

Finally, quite interestingly, they were asked if they prefer Labour's non-dom tax plan over the Tory one - 52% favoured the Labour policy, compared to 21% for the Conservatives. It was also more popular amongst those who voted Conservative at the last election (38% to 29%). Labour is winning the battle of ideas, insofar as you can call it that.

Spelling more danger for Tories, between now and the general election - whether it will be held in the autumn or winter - are the May local governments, with thousands of council seats across England up for grabs. There will also be elections for regional mayors and the London assembly. Andy Street, the Conservative West Midlands mayor, and Ben Houchen, the Conservative Tees Valley mayor, are among those facing re-election, and both are symbols of the "levelling up" agenda fraudulently espoused back then by Boris Johnson (which you hear very little about nowadays). Sadiq Khan seems set for an unprecedented third term as London mayor against his lacklustre Tory opponent, Susan Hall, whose official website has only been updated twice since October.

The last time council seats were at stake was back in 2021 during the Covid pandemic, meaning that the "vaccine bounce" helped the Tories

make significant gains, and Starmer was on the verge of resigning after losing the Hartlepool by-election - at least according to a new biography of the Labour leader by Tom Baldwin.<sup>4</sup> Of course, this all sounds like an alternative universe, given that Labour has had a commanding lead in the polls for quite some time now.

All this means that the Tories have a long way to fall this spring. Perhaps huge losses could trigger a putsch against Rishi Sunak by Tory MPs desperate to save their skins and their jobs, with some predicting that the party could lose as many as half of its councillors up for re-election - which would represent an abject humiliation for the Tories, as they stare further into the abyss, which is definitely gazing back at them.

### Gloom and doom

Capping a dreadful week, there has been the Frank Hester scandal. Having endlessly prevaricated over calling his comments on Diane Abbott racist - he said she "should be shot" and she "makes you want to hate all black women" - Tory ministers eventually caved ... with Sunak refusing to return his £10 million donation and urging everyone to move on. This coming after Lee Anderson's half-crazy attacks on Sadiq Khan for being "controlled" by Islamists and Suella Braverman saying that Islamists are "bullying" this "once great country into submission."

Of course, having stubbornly refused to apologise, Anderson predictably defected to Reform UK, which has spooked many Tories from all sections of the party. One of the 'five families' on the right, the New Conservatives grouping of MPs led by Danny Kruger and Miriam Cates (the latter touted as a possible future leader), said that, while they

criticised Anderson's move for making a Labour election victory more likely, it was ultimately the responsibility of Sunak and his party to keep MPs on side.

The grouping issued a statement pointing out the obvious: "... our poll numbers show what the public think of our record since 2019". Hence, unlike the deluded prime minister, "we cannot pretend any longer than the plan is working" and have to "change course urgently". It is widely reported that No10 is braced for more Reform defections, which led the *Daily Mail* to run the rather unlikely story that Rishi Sunak could call a general election if 10 or more MPs cross over to Reform (March 12).

Piling on the pressure, the latest Redfield & Wilton Strategies survey released a few days ago showed Reform at their highest-ever level on 14% - just 10 percentage points behind the Tories on 24%, with Labour holding an 18-point lead over the Conservatives on 42%. More ominously for the Tories, the poll also revealed that 21% who backed the Tories at the 2019 general election would now support Reform. So, it seems, they are getting squeezed on both sides - although, of course, the 'first past the post' electoral system will prevent an army of Reform MPs getting into parliament.

As commented upon before in this publication, gallows humour abounds in the Tory Party, as increasing numbers seem to have accepted their fate. Right after the budget, the Conservative Party's great and good assembled at the Guildhall in London to hear Sunak address the 50th anniversary dinner for the Centre for Policy Studies think tank. One person attending called the event the "most opulent funeral I've ever been to". Another said that they had noticed a big upsurge in Conservative special advisors and CPS staff applying to join the exclusive Carlton Club - primarily in the hope of using it to network for another job. So far, 61 Tory MPs have announced that they are standing down before the election, including Theresa May, adding to the general sense of the decks being cleared ahead of a possibly calamitous and historic defeat.

No wonder that one Tory MP, directly after Sunak's Guildhall speech, said: "We're stuffed". Another member of the 'five families', Grassroots Conservatives, described the party as "burnt toast", which offered "nothing for working people" and just made "things better for the rich" - all exemplified by Jeremy Hunt's budget. For them, as revealed in a leaked WhatsApp message, the Tories deserve to lose the next election.

It is almost impossible to see how the Tories can stage anything like a comeback from this situation ... unless Sir Keir and his team hit their own omnishambles ●

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### Notes

1. [itv.com/news/2024-03-05/section-114-notices-which-councils-in-england-are-at-risk-of-going-bankrupt](https://www.itv.com/news/2024-03-05/section-114-notices-which-councils-in-england-are-at-risk-of-going-bankrupt).
2. [theguardian.com/politics/2024/mar/09/hunt-budget-backfires-voters-taxes-rise-observer-opinium-survey](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/mar/09/hunt-budget-backfires-voters-taxes-rise-observer-opinium-survey).
3. [yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/48862-what-did-uk-public-make-of-2024-spring-budget-poll](https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/48862-what-did-uk-public-make-of-2024-spring-budget-poll).
4. [amazon.co.uk/Keir-Starmer-Biography-Tom-Baldwin/dp/0008661022/ref](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Keir-Starmer-Biography-Tom-Baldwin/dp/0008661022/ref).



## WAR

# Distrust your government

What should the communist position be on defence of existing states, national self-determination and war? **Marc Mulholland** based his talk to Communist University Spring 2024 on this study

**W**e know that Marx and Engels paid a great deal of attention to international relations. Engels in particular took a great interest in military affairs and was nicknamed 'The General' by his mates. His technical knowledge was quite impressive, though he usually predicted the wrong victor.

Marx and Engels tended to see international relations as a terrain for the democratic and proletarian movements. As such, they took sides: they favoured war against Russia (and possibly England) in 1848-49; they favoured Anglo-French victory in the Crimean War of 1853-56 (although would have preferred the theatre of operations to be in Poland); they favoured the defeat of French forces by Austria in the 1859 war, though, when this devolved into the semi-revolutionary war of Italian unification, they applauded Giuseppe Garibaldi and his 'Redshirts'; they certainly favoured Northern victory in the American Civil War (1861-65). In 1870 they backed Prussia against France and short-sightedly lambasted August Bebel for abstaining on Prussian war credits as a member of parliament; they switched to support of France after the fall of Napoleon III, counselling against radical republican revolution in the face of the enemy; they supported the Commune levying war, once it was clear that the only alternative was non-resistance.

As a general rule, Marx and Engels favoured any international complication that might weaken the bastions of reaction: sometimes Britain or France, always Russia. In all of this, they never adduced a general right to national self-determination - always to be preferred in any clash of arms. The apparent exceptions prove the rule. They always backed the liberation of Poland, but the dismemberment of Poland in the 18th century was a standing outrage for the entire European liberal-left, not just the radicals, and Polish independence was favoured as a blow to tsarist power. They gradually evolved a position in favour of Irish independence (perhaps followed by federalisation with Great Britain) - partly to get the divisive Irish question off the agenda of the British workers' movement, partly out of a personal sympathy with the beleaguered, yet indomitable, Irish nationalists. Ireland and Poland were *sui generis* rather than instances of a 'right of national self-determination' in their thinking. Marx and particularly Engels were notoriously unsympathetic to other nationalities they considered resources for counterrevolution, especially the South Slavs.

## Existing states

In the period of the Second International, dating from 1889, the affiliated socialist parties generally took existing state boundaries as their framework for operations. They were not, as a rule, pro-secession or pro-revanchist. In Peter Nettl's famous formulation, although amending its sense somewhat, they were 'inheritor parties'. Their aim was for the working class to take over the state territory as it was, rather than seek to expand or contract it. This, in turn, can be related to the socialist 'strategy of patience'. This strategy of attrition rejected a reliance on explosively growing forces for revolution out of social



Berlin's Marx-Engels Forum in 1986

breakdown in favour of steadily building proletarian organisation, concentrated on a party.

The 'strategy of patience' generally meant an acceptance of multi-nationalism as a basis of state boundaries. It is worth remembering that the nation-state was fairly unusual at this stage: the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, the Habsburg dual monarchy (Cisleithania and Hungary) and the tsarist empire were all obviously multi-national. Germany was not really a nation-state: it excluded the Germans of Austria (Bismarck did not want to have any more Catholics) and included a good number of Poles. Belgium combined Francophones and Walloons. Switzerland was a Franco-German-Italian lash-up. Ethno-nationalism was generally seen as impractical or fruitlessly divisive.

The position of the International was that a right of 'national' self-defence (really state self-defence) did exist. During the Millerand controversy, an allowance was even discreetly made for an emergency coalition with bourgeois parties in circumstance of foreign invasion.<sup>1</sup> Generally, national self-defence was played down, however, because it was recognised any war would be catastrophic. The famous 1907 Stuttgart Resolution against 'War and militarism' did not oppose any war - only 'aggressive war' (*Angriffskrieg*). Its famous last paragraph threatening to parlay war into revolution is probably best understood as a 'cease and desist' to the great powers.

It was only really the anarchistic left (notably Domela Nieuwenhuis) who pointed out that mass armaments and the shading of diplomatic manoeuvre into questions of force made the differentiation of illegitimate aggressive war from legitimate defensive war (*Verteidigungskrieg*) an impossible judgement call. This 'fog of war' problem was not actually new. Marx, after all, had been conned by the 'Ems Telegram' - Bismarck's ingenious ruse to depict France as the aggressor in 1870. But the development of military technology meant that it was now even more difficult to differentiate defence from attack. With mass armies of unprecedented magnitude, congested lines of march and sprawling front

lines, any effective defence required pre-emptive attack if it was to have any hope of rapid advance.<sup>2</sup> With armies probing or driving across enemy borders in the opening moves of the war, every belligerent could - and did - claim self-defence in 1914, with varying degrees of plausibility.

Historiography now blames the Germans for the outbreak of war. But really it was a war of mutual aggression in a race to protect tottering allies. Germany would not allow its ally, Austria, to be knocked out in a regional war by Russia. France would not allow Russia to be flattened by Germany. Britain would not allow France to be overcome as a barrier between it and Germany. Each great power was prepared to escalate into a European-wide conflagration in pursuit of 'security', with ideology ('Democracy' versus '*Kultur*') little more than window-dressing.

When the war broke out, Lenin in effect adopted the anarchistic position: that it was meaningless in a general war to distinguish between *Angriffskrieg* and *Verteidigungskrieg*. But he did so by theorising 1914 as a *break* with traditional statecraft, rather than a disastrous concatenation of its long-established logic. Building on pre-war theorising in the International, he posited imperialism as a *new* stage of capitalism, with the consequence that *both* 'national self-defence' and the civil space for the socialist 'strategy of patience' were radically outdated.

Imperialism - in socialist parlance primarily a description of statised finance capitalism and only secondarily related to colonialism - meant the collapse of bourgeois preference for orderly inter-state relations. As Hilferding had put it in 1910,

The old free traders believed in free trade not only as the best economic policy, but also as the beginning of an era of peace. Finance capital abandoned this belief long ago. It has no faith in the harmony of capitalist interests, and knows well that competition is becoming increasingly a political power struggle. The ideal of peace has lost its lustre, and in place of the idea of humanity there emerges a glorification of the greatness and power of the state.<sup>3</sup>

In Lenin's view, the consummated imperialist stage of capitalism meant that the only choice now available was imperialist war or revolutionary overthrow. (Kautsky had seen the implication of Hilferding's *Finance capital*, which is why he developed the ultra-imperialism theory of great-power cooperation, as a new basis for the 'strategy of patience'.)

## Contradiction

But there was an odd contradiction in Lenin's position: while 'national defence' was out, 'national self-determination' was in. The Bukharin-Piatkov group within the Bolshevik tendency pointed out that Lenin's support for national self-determination made nonsense of arguments *against* national self-defence. Lenin's response was, first, to differentiate between oppressor nations and oppressed nations. This was a cop-out, really, as any country denied a right of self-determination, if such a right exists, can obviously claim to be oppressed. Second, he made the right of self-determination conditional. As he wrote later in the *Theses on Brest Litovsk*, "no Marxist, without renouncing the principles of Marxism and of socialism generally, can deny that the interests of socialism are higher than the interest of nations to self-determination".<sup>4</sup> The Red Army duly invaded Poland in 1920 and socialist Georgia in 1921. The logic of this argument, of course, is that there is no *right* of national self-determination at all.

Despite Lenin's grounding of all his political positioning in terms of grand theory, it is better, I think, to see his position as evolving out of the exigencies of political tasks. While the 'strategy of patience' was the general approach of the International, in Russia this had always combined with the 'strategy of overthrow': ie, overthrowing the tsarist regime. The 'strategy of patience' was a perspective of building up proletarian capacities for assumption as a ruling class through its institutions (press, trade unions, cooperatives, party). The 'strategy of overthrow' was a class-collaborationist perspective, because it assumed either an alliance with the liberal bourgeoisie (Mensheviks) or the peasantry (Bolsheviks). Lenin explicitly folded this into collaboration with (predominantly petty bourgeois) nationalist movements, as when he famously remarked that "whoever expects a 'pure' social revolution will never live to see it. Such a person pays lip service to revolution without understanding what revolution is."<sup>5</sup>

The development of the Leninist slogan of 'the right to national self-determination, up to and including the right of secession' was within this context. It was an explicit appeal to the nationalist petty bourgeoisie to overthrow, in the first instance, tsarism. It needs to be remembered that the Finns and even more the Poles were in the vanguard of revolution in 1905; they were not a reserve. This slogan carried over to 1917, because, in part, the Leninist schema envisaged it as a kind of bourgeois revolution without the bourgeoisie. This would create a state based upon a worker-peasantry class alliance, able to force-march capitalism as fast as possible in the direction of socialism. In 1917-18, Lenin called this regime 'state capitalism'. This collapsed into 'war communism', but was restored

from 1921 as the New Economic Policy. Within this complex, class-collaboration strategy, alliance with nationalists operated as a kind of revolutionary auxiliary. Once it could no longer be instrumentalised in this way, the 'right of self-determination' was abandoned.

We should stress that Lenin's position positively favouring a 'right of national self-determination' was unusual in pre-1914 socialist circles. More typical of the 'strategy of patience' era was the Austro-Marxist position. They were certainly confronted by the national question in their own state terrain, but unlike tsarist Russia there was not the sense that the state was a Behemoth that needed to be disaggregated. If anything, dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian state threatened a *de facto* partition of the region into German and Russian spheres of control. Indeed, while the nationalist movements were noisy and loud (and petty-bourgeois), even they were not, pre-1914, separatist.

The Austro-Marxist position of cultural autonomy within the state, developed by Karl Renner and Otto Bauer, was ultimately about charting a democratic process of negotiating national claims, so as to clear space for class politics. As Otto Bauer put it in 1907,

... national autonomy is not a programme devised by clever men in order to rescue the state in its hour of need, but the demand that the proletariat necessarily voices in the multinational state ... National autonomy is a necessary goal for the proletarian class struggle, because it is a necessary means of its class politics.<sup>6</sup>

It was reasonably successful at clearing space for class politics, with the socialists becoming the largest single party in the *Reichsrat* (upper house) in 1906. The multi-national party, however, found it difficult to contain a slippage of its constituents shifting towards a prioritisation of 'national liberation', and the Czech socialists broke away from the state-wide socialist body in 1911.

'Sliding towards unhyphenated nationalism' probably describes James Connolly's trajectory in Ireland and certainly Józef Piłsudski's in Poland. Rosa Luxemburg shocked the International by tilting at its sacred cow - the independence of Poland. Her argument that internationalised capitalism means that sovereign independence for Poland was an economic impossibility was thin, but she did make the valid prediction that conceding an unalienable 'right of national self-determination' in effect gives it absolute priority over merely 'sectional' class demands.

Lenin's position *vis-à-vis* the tsarist empire, as we have seen, was 'overthrow' rather than patiently waiting as an inheritor party. In Russian circumstances, his position was not so unique. When it came to calling for the 'overthrow' of tsarism, even liberals were in general agreement. 'Revolutionary defeatism' was really a liberal-left common sense. Almost everyone wanted to see Russia lose the Russo-Japanese war in 1905 (what did they care for the Far East?) and hoped that it would trigger the overthrow of the regime, which it nearly did.

The Great War was somewhat more complicated, but, again, by about 1916, liberals and even some



of the right, as well as the left, wanted to see even military setbacks for Russia if it meant the overthrow of decrepit tsarism. It becomes more complicated after February; then the liberal-left wanted victories for the army at the front, but the Bolsheviks understood, reasonably enough, that this would simply strengthen the forces of military counterrevolution. But they argued for soviet power, in part because this would best allow military *resistance* to Germany if it continued in its aggression.

The expectation was revolutionary war against Germany if it did not desist from advancing. This is why the peace with Germany signed at Brest Litovsk was so problematic. Lenin was prepared to give up vast swathes of territory to gain a breathing space - which was a mistake. Lenin later admitted as much:

The revolution of October 1917 at one stroke achieved such successes that it seemed to us in the spring of 1918 that the war had drawn to a close - actually, it had only just started in its worst form: the form of civil war; actually, peace with the Germans meant that they assisted the worst elements in the civil war; actually, the peace treaty we then signed with the Germans, and which collapsed in the autumn, in many cases meant that assistance was given to these worst elements by the Allied Powers, who blamed us for concluding peace with the Germans.<sup>7</sup>

He did not go on to say, but might well have done, that a revolutionary war against Germany would have been preferable.

## Difficulties

A combination of Leninism and president Wilson's tendentious 'Fourteen Points' has tended to fetishise 'the right of national self-determination'. But the difficulties remain.

First there is the difficulty of coming up with a set of 'rules'. To whom should the right apply? Stalin famously proposed a definition: "A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture."<sup>8</sup> This could have perhaps unexpected results once applied. As the Irish post-Maoist organisation, the British and Irish Communist Organisation, argued in *One island, two nations*, published in June 1973, "The partition of Ireland was the outcome of the growth of two distinct Irish nations, each with its own economic life, and culture, its own religion and view of history, and each with its own closely-knit identity." This echo of Stalin in defence of the partition of Ireland was deliberate and pointed.

Second, the right to self-determination certainly enables foreign subversion against sovereign states (it was a primary point of pressure applied by America during the cold war) and often involves elite rebellion in favoured regions wishing to break away from the demands of social solidarity across the state terrain. Regionalism is usually stronger in areas of relative wealth or resource rather than areas of social disadvantage (consider 'King Cotton' in the southern states of America, 'Scottish Oil' from the 1960s, the prosperous economies of northern Italy, Catalonia, the Basque country and southern Germany). To recognise a non-negotiable right of self-determination in such cases is a standing invitation to rebellion in the capitalist interest.

It is worth reflecting on the arguments made at the time of the

American Civil War.<sup>9</sup> The South insisted that they had a legal and unconditional right to secede from a union they had joined voluntarily. The North denied this. Legally and constitutionally, they said, the union had been a one-way compact. There was no exit clause. While there was no constitutional right to secede, there remained, however, as an inalienable freedom deriving from natural law (or human nature): a right to *revolution*. The right to revolution is a moral rather than a legal right, and requires a moral cause. The confederacy attachment to slavery meant, therefore, that there was no moral right to southern revolution in pursuit of self-determination.

This is a useful way to think about the question. In essence, the national question is a distributional question at the level of culture. Like all distributional questions, the socialist or communist perspective is dual:

■ In the short run, it is for distribution in favour of the working class (with the important qualification, however, that one does not ignore the interests of other classes, especially the subaltern classes; historically the peasantry, today the petty bourgeoisie); ■ In the long run, the communist aims for distribution from each according to her ability, to each according to her needs - or, in other words, negotiated distributional planning. This is a matter of iterative democratic *process* rather than identity-based *rights*.

Unlike material resources, which can be grown, cultural rights tend towards zero-sum: if Northern Ireland becomes more Irish, for example, it becomes less British, and vice-versa. The communist position is for a radically democratic process to manage this difficult problem, not laagered community rights. Democratic processes can certainly involve agreed secession, but within a democratic polity a majority *cannot* be duty-bound to acknowledge a minority right to secession *a priori*. A sovereign state, after all, retains the right to suppress insurrection.

There remains unimpaired, however, a *moral* right to revolutionary secession. This right derives not from identity, but from natural law (in other words, the prerequisites for human flourishing). It attaches to a national group denied any meaningful democratic process or simply unable, for embedded historical reasons, to defer to the state majority. This is not something that can be defined by Stalin's rules, or any other pro-forma, but by politics.

Much of this is always implicit in international law. State boundaries may be changed by agreement, but not by external aggression or foreign subversion, even if foreign interference can credibly appeal to self-determination arguments. Dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, after all, was connived at by Germany and Britain largely on the justification of allowing for the national self-determination of the Sudeten-Germans. Even the German invasion of Poland in 1939 was predicated on the long-run suppression of Germans in the Polish Corridor and, once war broke out, the massacres visited on this national group, which were real enough (if, of course, immediately dwarfed by the violence of German imperialism).

Socialists oppose the violent violation of state sovereignty by foreign state actors, whether directly by invasion or indirectly by sponsoring 'colour revolution', because it short-circuits democratic process. Socialists, for example, accept the legal position that the occupied territories in Palestine are illegitimate Israeli entities, regardless of how much time has passed and regardless of ethnic change since

they were seized. Let us say the north of the Gaza Strip is shortly to be denuded of Palestinians by massacre, starvation and expulsion, and settled by Israelis: this will not create a new 'right of national self-determination' for the now dominant community in the area.

Similarly, socialists do not disassociate from the position of most states in the world, which still includes the US and the UK, just about, that Taiwan does not have a 'right to national self-determination' as a sovereign state. Taiwan was, in practice, a secession by an elite defeated on the Chinese mainland with the support of external actors seeking to reverse the revolution.

This is not to say that 'facts on the ground' are never subject to democratic negotiation. Socialists, in particular, will be extremely cautious about violent revanchism to reverse conquest or foreign-sponsored secession, because such actions, in turn, will themselves be instrumentalised by other foreign state actors or domestic authoritarians. So communists should certainly oppose any attempt by China to invade Taiwan and would see the current dispensation - one country, two governments - as a tolerable instalment of the long-term (if currently stalled) democratic process. Similarly, the Israeli nation subsists and its destruction as a 'settler colony' would involve atrocities incommensurable to any concept of 'historic justice' for the Palestinians. (Overthrow of the *regime* in Israel, however, if it were possible, would be a moral imperative at this point, given its military campaign of obliteration).

Regarding Ukraine, I do not have the expertise to pronounce, but certain things can be said. Ukrainian nationalism is of relatively recent growth, but is now real enough. The borders of the Ukrainian state were fairly arbitrary: quite glaringly in the case of the Crimea, credibly in the Russian-speaking Donbass region. However, it is doubtful that the moral case for secessionist national revolution in the Russian-speaking regions has ever been sufficiently established, and certainly no such revolution took place. Instead, the Putin regime sponsored subversion and then violently redrew borders. This was and is naked aggression.

This is not to say that socialists take an absolutist position of backing overwhelming force to restore the status quo ante. While they do not recognise the legitimacy of Russian conquests, they favour a democratic resolution of the conflict - democracy as a process, which might well result in an agreed border shift at some point in the future. They expose and warn against the US and its outriders instrumentalising the conflict to prepare for a war of encirclement against China as a geopolitical rival.

## Ireland

To take my own country, there was no question that Ireland, with its long history of conquest, brutal misgovernance and resistance, had the 'moral right to revolution'. This was all but recognised in the 19th century by such a legal eminence as AV Dicey, even as he opposed concessions to Irish nationalism on British-state prudential grounds.<sup>10</sup>

What, however, of partition? It is difficult to see how the substantial Protestant majority in the Six Counties has lacked a 'right of self-determination', if that derives from "historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture". A right of revolution, however, is a different matter. The 'self-determination' of Ulster was

first raised as an attempt to frustrate democratic negotiation between the Irish and the British. It was supported by the Tory establishment in Great Britain as a revolt against the partial democratisation of the British constitution. It was motivated in large part by an ethno-religious supremacism. It lacked, therefore, an essential moral grounding.

At a certain point, Irish partition became baked in as an inevitability, short of civil war. This represented a forced short-circuiting of the democratic process, but, given the devastation its reversal would have involved, not a *casus belli*. A socialist approach would have been to favour maximisation of all-Ireland dimensions in opposition to the state-builders on both sides of the border (the Northern Ireland and Free State governments agreed to the abandonment of the integrative 'Council of Ireland' in 1925).

A low-level war did erupt in Northern Ireland from c1971, though an Irish Republican Army victory was impossible, given the balance and forces, and would have been disastrous if it had somehow come to pass. The significance of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 is that it establishes an imperfect, but tolerable, democratic-process arrangement for evolving the national question, and it *rejects* the possibility of repartition around a right of Ulster self-determination. The communist stake in all of this, and its primary critique of the politics of communal stasis, is an iterated democratic approach to the national question and a clearing of the ground for class politics.

## Military budgets

The question remains of what socialists are to do in regard to budgets for war-making (I will dispense with the tedious euphemism of 'defence'). Clearly, voting for war credits and offering support to the belligerency of one's own state shattered the basis of the Second International.

But the question is not entirely straightforward: provision of war *materiel* is not, in itself, any more an instrument of foreign intervention than its denial, and both can be equally predatory. Anglo 'non-interventionism' during the Spanish civil war was meaningfully pro-fascist. Socialists, moreover, should not be pacifistic non-resisters to foreign aggression, and lectures addressed to those resisting conquest on accepting foreign arms are not likely to win much favour.<sup>11</sup> Some wars are easy to oppose, some are not. Ukraine certainly has a right to defend itself regardless of Nato shenanigans, though I would have thought that a workers' party *in situ* would be less than happy-clappy about forever war.

We are all glad that Germany lost World War II, and it would have been a good thing if Hitler had been stopped well in advance. But that does not resolve the issue of voting for war credits. We should look upon the military budget in the same light as the Mutiny Bill that used to be presented to parliament. This was an important outcome of the Glorious Revolution: it prevented the executive maintaining a standing army without parliamentary oversight. This did not amount, however, to parliamentary control of army and navy deployments in detail. Voting in favour of the Mutiny Bill was always recognised as a matter of *confidence* in the government to exercise its powers. If it was not passed, government was deemed impossible, and the ministers would have to resign.

If we think of military credits as a matter of confidence, the issue clarifies. The military can do good, of course - think of disaster relief at

one end of the spectrum, liberating Belsen at the other. But military affairs are veiled in a great deal of secrecy by their very nature. This is unavoidable, as surprise and deception is a strategic and tactical resource. As a matter of principle (and often self-preservation) communists cannot trust the ruling-class state, configured as it is by a substantial oligarchy in even the most democratic arrangements we have seen. It cannot be trusted to spend money and resource without democratic oversight - and the absence of close democratic oversight is precisely what the military budget requires.

Even taking World War II, consider what happened in its fog: the British decision for war was taken by a government that had appeased fascism and betrayed Czechoslovakia; death camps were known, but not bombed to protect intelligence; three million were starved in Bengal to maintain supplies for the war on Japan; area bombing 'dehoused' (ie, killed) huge numbers of non-combatants; atom bombing was in arrant violation of civilian protection; war was very nearly waged against the Soviet Union in 1940 and again, if not quite so nearly, in the immediate aftermath of VE and VJ Day. And this was the good war.

This is not to argue that wars can always be fought by Queensbury Rules. Often they cannot. But voting for a military budget is never voting for (or against) any particular operation. Always and everywhere, by necessity, it means placing blind trust in the state and government. This is not an accidental feature of a military budget, but its absolute requirement. Such would be the case even if there existed a communist government of a state beleaguered by capitalist encirclement and foreign subversion. A parliamentary vote for a military (and espionage) budget in these circumstances would precisely be an expression of confidence in the executive - in its 'dictatorship', to use Marx's frank word - rather than a meaningful democratic control of its military decision-making.

Communists naturally cannot place such trust in a regular bourgeois government, which is defined by oligarchy, corruption and systematic deception in the capitalist interest. The correct position remains, therefore, Wilhelm's Liebknecht's slogan of 1871: "*Diesem System keinen Mann und keinen Groschen!*" - 'Not one recruit, not one penny will we approve for this ruling-class state!' ●

## Notes

1. K Kautsky *Sozialisten und Krieg* Prague 1937, p315.
2. Little regarded these days, and not even mentioned in Christopher Clark's account of the origins of World War I. AJP Taylor's 'War by [railway] timetable' thesis remains compelling. Taylor made the point that mobilisation had to be massive and total if it was to be effective at all. As a consequence, all potential belligerents were on an escalatory hair-trigger.
3. R Hilferding *Finance capital: a study in the latest phase of capitalist development* (1910), London 1981, p335.
4. D McLellan *Marxism after Marx* London 1979, p109.
5. www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/ni/vol08/no07/lenin.htm.
6. O Bauer *The question of nationalities and social democracy* (1907), translated by E Nimni, Minneapolis 2000, p258.
7. VI Lenin, October 31 1922 - in *Collected Works* vol 33, London 1970, pp393-94.
8. www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1913/03a.htm#1.
9. See, for example, J Lothrop Motley *The causes of the American Civil War* Washington DC 1861, pp14-15.
10. See M Mulholland, 'Revolution and the rule of law: Dicey on Irish home rule' in A Dickinson, T Endicott, W Ernst (eds) *Dicey - 100 Albert Venn Dicey: a centennial commemoration* Cambridge 2024.
11. For the Vietnamese, small arms and artillery came from China, MiGs and air defence from the Soviet Union. They put them to mostly good use.



**ECONOMICS**

# Rules of the game

Liam Byrne reckons that the social mission of Labour is for 'equality' and 'fairness' and yet the fundamental causes of inequality lie in the system of capital itself, writes **Michael Roberts**



**O**n February 28 I attended the book launch<sup>1</sup> at the London School of Economics of *The inequality of wealth*<sup>2</sup>, by Liam Byrne - a Blairite Labour MP. Byrne was a stalwart of the Blair and Brown Labour governments in the UK and was most famously known for his quip when handing over his role in the UK government's finance ministry to the winning Conservatives in 2010 with a note saying, "I'm afraid there is no money" (ho, ho). An ex-tech entrepreneur, Byrne now heads up the UK parliament's Business Select Committee and will probably be in the cabinet if Labour wins office at the end of this year.

Byrne reckons that the social mission of the Labour Party is for 'equality' and 'fairness' - not for any radical transformation of the economic structure of the capitalist economy (ie, socialism). In this sense, he represents the 'moderate' wing of the party - or you might say the current dominant, pro-capitalist wing.

In his professed mission for equality, he tells us in his book about the shocking levels of inequality of wealth (and income) that exist in modern Britain. Byrne presents us with lots of factoids - some of which are confusing and incorrect - but, no matter, something must be done, because "the inequality of wealth is toxifying our politics and our society.

It's destroying our economy, and it's about to get 10 times worse". The feeling is, he notes, like the very last days of Rome:

The average wealth of a Roman aristocrat was about one and a half million times that of the average income of the Roman citizen. But in the last *Sunday Times* rich list, the wealth of the [Indian-born, London-based billionaires] Hinduja brothers was about 1.2 million times the average earnings in our country.

He is concerned about tax avoidance schemes for the rich: "It's wrong that someone who [thanks to capital gains on investments as well as his salary] makes £2 million a year, like Rishi Sunak (current UK premier), is paying half the rate of tax of a senior teacher" - although he holds out little hope that a Labour government will do anything about this if it takes office at the end of this year.

Inequality is going to get worse, he reckons. The 'baby boomers' are about to die and five and a half trillion pounds of wealth is going to get transferred down the generations:

Some people are going to inherit millions and others are going to inherit care bills. Generation Z is about to become the most unequal generation for half a century, and we would be naive to think

**Vasily Perov**  
**'Tea drinking in Mytishchi'**  
**(1862)**

it isn't going to have political consequences. Wealth inequality is at the heart of the new populism.

## Middle way

And populism is very worrying to Byrne, as it threatens democracy. Growing inequality threatens to cause a break-up of the existing democratic order.

At the LSE launch, Byrne said he aimed to find a 'middle way' to rectify things between the view that nothing can be done and the view that some revolutionary transformation of the economic structure was needed, which the electorate would not accept.

What were his policies for his 'middle way' to greater equality? What we want, Byrne said, was a "wealth-owning democracy" - a phrase recalling Thatcher's 'property-owning democracy', which actually kick-started the sharp rise in UK inequality in the 1980s. The phrase also echoes the position of the current Labour leader, Keir Starmer, who pledges to make Labour "the party of home ownership".

In the UK, 65% are home-owners, with some 38% having mortgages. It seems we already have a property-owning democracy, which has not led to a reduction in extreme inequality. Nevertheless, apparently the answer to reducing inequality

of wealth is for everybody to get a home that they can call their own. As the Conservative 'intellectual', David Willetts, puts it,

There is a myth that somehow young people are not aspirational. If you look at people's aspirations, they want to own their own home, to have a decent job with a decent wage, and be able to afford to raise their kids - young people are not young Marxists.

Byrne's aim is that everybody should get on the ladder to owning their own home (presumably with a mortgage) and also have some savings to invest for their retirement. To do this, a government should give every young person £10,000 to kick their careers off; it should establish a sovereign wealth fund to build up funds (what for, Byrne did not explain); and there should be fairer taxation: eg, income from capital gains should be taxed at the same rate as income from work. He even flirts with the idea of a wealth tax on the very rich that could bring in billions for the economy and for redistribution. But that was basically it. Moreover, all these 'radical' measures to reduce inequality of wealth would have to be slowly introduced over "three parliaments" (I make that 15 years!), so that the electorate gradually got used to the policies!



The packed LSE audience, along with Byrne's fellow speakers (a professor of sociology and somebody from the anti-poverty research institute, the Rowntree Trust), had no criticisms to make of the Byrne programme. So let me make just a few.

What Byrne never talked about was why there was such inequality of wealth and income in the UK and in all the other countries of the world? Why are the rich rich and why are the poor poor? Surely, there is something endemic to the capitalist economy that explains this permanent inequality. In several posts and papers,<sup>3</sup> I have discussed the underlying causes of inequality, but Byrne does not do so: it is just there and shocking, and we need to do something about it before it explodes into revolts!

## Pre-distribution

But here is the policy problem. If inequality is endemic to capitalism, then what is needed are policies prior to redistribution. It is not a question of trying to redistribute excessive wealth from the rich to the rest of us through taxes and/or closing up evasion loopholes and tax havens, etc. That might help a bit, but the underlying generation of the forces of inequality would remain untouched.

Pre-distribution policies are needed. Byrne advocated only one - better jobs with better pay for those at the bottom of the ladder. How that was to be achieved, given the state of the UK economy (and other capitalist economies), was not explained. He also seemed to suggest raising the social security minimum level to take people out of poverty - again how that was to be implemented was not explained.

Byrne noted the disparity of wealth between London and the regions. The latest Institute for Public Policy Research 'State of the north' report found that:

While England's average wealth per person grew from around £226,300 in 2010 to £290,800 by 2020, regional inequalities in wealth have widened. For instance, the gap per head between the average wealth per person in England overall and the

north stood at £71,000 in 2020, almost double the gap in 2010, at around £37,300 (ONS 2022a in 2023 prices).

The gap between levels of wealth in the north and Midlands, and the rest of England, is growing. Overall in England, the wealthiest 10% hold almost half of all wealth. Nearly half of wealth is found in the south, where 40% of the population reside, against a fifth of wealth being found in the north, where around 30% cent of the population live, with the remainder in London and the Midlands.<sup>4</sup>

It is clear why. The rich live in London and the south mostly, the most important means of production and finance are based in London, and the jobs that pay the best are in London. What is Byrne's answer to this? Give the regional mayors more money to spend, taking central government funds away from London. This would solve little - especially given that some of the poorest boroughs in England are in London!

The point is that post-distribution policies will do little to change the underlying inequality of income and wealth. That would require a radical shift in the ownership and control of that wealth: ie, public ownership of the banks and large companies, and public investment directed towards social need, not profit. But such policies are anathema to those like Byrne seeking the 'middle way'.

That also applies to policies like a wealth tax or a minimum tax on corporate profits - policies strongly advocated by leading inequality economists Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, based at the Inequality Lab in Paris. Zucman and his colleagues have provided invaluable data on the scale of inequality between countries and within countries. Zucman is a leading campaigner for reducing inequality globally.

Last week, he was invited by the G20 finance ministers meeting hosted by Brazil to present the case for a coordinated minimum tax on the super-rich. Zucman addressed the ministers and reckoned:

... there was strong support for

the idea that we need new forms of cooperation to tax the super rich, increase tax progressivity, and fight inequality. This in itself is a historic development - for too long these issues have been ignored.<sup>5</sup>

Zucman was commissioned by the G20 ministers to come up with detailed policy measures to tax the super-rich. But what are the chances of this ever being implemented through global cooperation? As Zucman said, "... it may take years to get there for the super-rich. But it's in our collective interest to act fast, because what's at stake is not only the future of global inequality - it's the future of globalisation and the future of democracy."<sup>6</sup>

I am not attacking the genuine efforts of Zucman and others to find ways of reducing inequality. And the recent attack on their analysis of rising inequality of income in the US by some US government economists has been proven bogus.<sup>7</sup> But will such redistribution ever be adequate, even if implemented? And won't such policies be watered down to accommodate vested interests (the rich) to the point that they do little to reduce inequality?<sup>8</sup>

## Worsening

Over the last 80 years, inequality of income and wealth in the major economies has only got worse. The World Inequality Report (WIR) shows that the world has become more unequal in wealth in the last 40 years.<sup>9</sup> In 2021, "after three decades of trade and financial globalisation, global inequalities remain extremely pronounced ... about as great today as they were at the peak of western imperialism in the early 20th century."

The global concentration of personal wealth is extreme. According to the WIR, the richest 10% of adults in the world own around 60-80% of wealth, while the poorest half have less than 5%. According to the UBS Global wealth report,<sup>10</sup> 1% of all adults in the world own 44.5% of all personal wealth, while more than 52% have only 1.2%. The 1% are 59 million, while the 52% are 2.9 billion.

If you own a property to live in and, after taking out any mortgage debt, you still have over \$100,000 in net assets, you are among the wealthiest 10% of all adults in the world. That is because most adults in the world have no wealth to speak of at all. And, apart from the phenomenal rise of China, personal wealth and power remains in the rich bloc of North America, Europe and Japan, with add-ons from Australia. Just as this bloc rules over trade, gross domestic product, finance and technology, it has nearly all the personal wealth.

In the 21st century, inequality of wealth has risen significantly. Indeed, the wealth of the 50 richest people on earth increased by 9% a year between 1995 and 2021, with the wealth of the richest 500 rising by 7% a year. Average wealth grew by less than half that rate, at 3.2% over the same period. Since 1995 the top 1% took 38% of all additional global wealth in the last 25 years, whereas the bottom 50% captured just 2% of it. The rise of the so-called 'middle class income group' is mostly due to China's reduction of poverty levels. The top 0.01% of adults increased their share of personal wealth from 7.5% in 1995 to 11% now. And the billionaire population increased its share from 1% to 3.5%.

Tony Atkinson was the founding father of modern research into inequality<sup>11</sup> - somebody who clearly should have got a Nobel (Riksbank) prize in economics before he died. In an address, 'Where is inequality

headed?',<sup>12</sup> Atkinson pointed out that the biggest rises in inequality took place before globalisation and the automation revolution got underway in the 1990s.

He pinned down the causes of inequality to two. The first was the sharp fall in direct income tax for the top earners under neoliberal government policies from the 1980s onwards. But the second was the sharp rise in capital income (ie, income generated from the ownership of capital rather than from the sale of labour-power). The rising profit share in capitalist-sector production that most Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development economies generated since the 1980s was translated into higher dividends, interest and rent for the top 1%-5%, who generally own the means of production.

Piketty, Saez and Zucman in their latest paper on US inequality of income find:

... the stagnation of incomes for households in the bottom 50% is particularly noteworthy, given the growth for those in the top one percent. In 1980, the bottom half received about 20% of national income; by 2014, their share had declined to 12%. For the top one percent, the picture is exactly the reverse: in 1980, they received 12% of national income; in 2014, they received 20%.<sup>13</sup>

And they conclude: "Given the massive changes in the pre-tax distribution of national income since 1980, there are clear limits to what redistributive policies can achieve."

## Capitalist mode

Indeed. Marx considered that any distribution of the means of income and wealth was only a consequence of the ownership of production. The capitalist mode of production rests on the fact that the material conditions of production are in the hands of non-workers, in the form of property in capital and land, while the masses are only owners of their personal conditions of production - of labour-power. Capitalists accumulate profits as capital.

As Ian Wright has put it,

Firms follow a power-law distribution in size. And capital concentrates in the same way. A large number of small capitals exploit a small group of workers, and a small number of big capitals exploit a large group of workers. Profits are roughly proportional to the number of workers employed. So capitalist income also follows a power law.<sup>14</sup> The more workers you exploit, the more profit you make. The more profit you make, the more workers you can exploit.<sup>15</sup>

This is the reason for rising inequality: when there are no checks on capital accumulation.

Wright sums it up in this way:

The fundamental social architecture of capitalism is the main cause of economic inequality. We can't have capitalism without inequality: it's an inescapable and necessary consequence of the economic rules of the game ●

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

## Notes

1. See [www.lse.ac.uk/Events/2024/02/202402281830/inequality](https://www.lse.ac.uk/Events/2024/02/202402281830/inequality).
2. L Byrne *The inequality of wealth: why it matters and how to fix it* New York 2024.
3. See, for example, [thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2017/02/19/inequality-after-150-years-of-capital](https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2017/02/19/inequality-after-150-years-of-capital).
4. [ippr-org.files.svcdn.com/production/Downloads/State\\_of-the\\_north\\_2024\\_Mar24\\_2024-02-22-154025\\_rrfw.pdf](https://ippr-org.files.svcdn.com/production/Downloads/State_of-the_north_2024_Mar24_2024-02-22-154025_rrfw.pdf).
5. [twitter.com/gabriel\\_zucman/status/1763253134950867089](https://twitter.com/gabriel_zucman/status/1763253134950867089).
6. [twitter.com/gabriel\\_zucman/status/1763253147256967232](https://twitter.com/gabriel_zucman/status/1763253147256967232).
7. See [www.brookings.edu/articles/measuring-income-inequality-a-primer-on-the-debate](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/measuring-income-inequality-a-primer-on-the-debate).
8. [www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/10/loopholes-weaken-minimum-global-corporate-15-percent-tax-eu](https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/10/loopholes-weaken-minimum-global-corporate-15-percent-tax-eu).
9. [wir2022.wid.world](https://wir2022.wid.world).
10. See [thenextrecession.files.wordpress.com/2023/08/global-wealth-report-2023.pdf](https://thenextrecession.files.wordpress.com/2023/08/global-wealth-report-2023.pdf).
11. [thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2013/07/14/the-story-of-inequality](https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2013/07/14/the-story-of-inequality).
12. [ethicsinsociety.stanford.edu/news/tony-atkinson-where-inequality-headed](https://ethicsinsociety.stanford.edu/news/tony-atkinson-where-inequality-headed).
13. [www.nber.org/papers/w27922](https://www.nber.org/papers/w27922).
14. See Wikipedia's definition here: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Power\\_law](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Power_law).
15. See [thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2018/04/11/inequality-and-exploitation](https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2018/04/11/inequality-and-exploitation).

## Fighting fund

## Help us get there

As usual, the second week of the month was not the most productive - £340 was donated to the *Weekly Worker* fighting fund, as opposed to £712 in the first six days!

But that's because lots of our supporters have set up standing orders to be paid at the very beginning of each month - mind you, things usually shoot up again in week three, thanks to a handful of really generous monthly SOs which come our way then. But for now we have a total of £1,052 in the kitty for March, towards that £2,250 target - not too bad with, as I write, just 13 of March's 31 days gone.

The largest contribution in the last seven days came from comrade PB, who, as usual, came up with her excellent £70 donation, while other bank transfers/standing orders were paid by BO (£35), NH (£30), GD and DV (£25 each), plus IS, SM, LG, PM and CC, who all donated their regular tenner. On top of that, both RL and US comrade PM chipped in with their usual brilliant £50 PayPal contributions and, finally, comrade Hassan handed

his expected fiver to one of the *Weekly Worker* team.

Let me remind all our readers, though, that our printing costs have soared and we still haven't found a regular printer who can be relied upon to do the necessary each and every week at a price that is anywhere near as reasonable as the previous company, which had to pack up after a fire. But we're still looking and I'm confident we'll (eventually) find one that won't be overly costly in the longer term.

In the meantime, we really need to reach that £2,250 target as a bare minimum each and every month. So can you help us get there in March? Send us a cheque, click on PayPal on our website, make a bank transfer or - best of all - set up a standing order.

If you want to play your part, please see the details below ●

**Robbie Rix**

Our bank account details are  
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[weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/donate](https://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/donate)

## Online Communist Forum



Sunday March 17 5pm

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

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

Organised by CPGB: [communistparty.co.uk](https://communistparty.co.uk) and  
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**MIDDLE EAST**

# Keeping control over Arab street

Israel's ethnic cleansing and potential genocide in Gaza has seen the region's autocratic regimes clamp down on popular protests. **Yassamine Mather** sees anger below and fear above

In the absence of major demonstrations in support of Gaza in Iran's Islamic Republic, unfortunately, despite popular Arab anger, we are not seeing a continuation of the large demonstrations of late 2023 in cities throughout the Middle East. The exception remains Sanaa in Yemen, where support for the Houthis is growing and regular Friday demonstrations see hundreds of thousands on the streets supporting the Palestinians.

In the Jordanian capital, Amman, we can blame this on the regime's arrest of around 1,000 pro-Palestinian demonstrators in October and November 2023. Amnesty International has called the Jordanian government's measures "draconian" adding that, according to information it has received, security forces have detained several political activists for posting on social media expressions of support for Palestine, criticising the government's policies towards Israel and calling for public demonstrations and strikes. Security forces have used the country's Cybercrimes Law to justify these arrests. According to Lama Fakih, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, "Jordanian authorities are trampling on the right to free expression and assembly to tamp down Gaza-related activism."

Of course, the Jordanian regent and his government are well aware of strong pro-Palestinian sentiments in the country. That explains King Abdullah's comments during his visit to the White House three weeks ago, when he said: "One of the most devastating wars in recent history continues to unfold in Gaza, as we speak ... We cannot afford an Israeli attack on Rafah." Of course, what he is really worried about is the growing anger and frustration inside his country and the threat this poses to his own rule.

Meanwhile, state action has reduced pro-Palestinian protests in Cairo. In Egypt, they were outlawed in November 2013 and, except for a short period immediately after the Israeli bombing of Gaza, when president Abdel el-Sisi tried (and failed) to use a pro-Palestinian march for his election publicity, demonstrations remain illegal. In late October they were allowed for a couple of days and appeared to be orchestrated by the state, with demonstrators being transported in and voicing support for el-Sisi as well as the Palestinians.

However, other protests seemed more spontaneous, and some took an independent direction. During one instance, a group of locals made their way to Tahrir Square, the symbolic heart of Egypt's 2011 protests. While there, the chants shifted from focusing on Palestine to echoing the familiar refrain from 2011 directed at the Egyptian authorities: "Bread, freedom, social justice!"

In Egypt 57 people who took part in protests after October 7 are currently in prison, awaiting the outcome of 'police investigation'. According to Ahdaf Soueif, writing in *The Guardian*,

The sentiment in the country is strong. TikTok and Instagram videos from Gaza go viral: a woman looking for a "fair little boy with curly hair"; a grandfather holding the rigid body of a little girl; a red triangle hovering on the screen to direct your eye to a targeted Israeli Merkava tank about to explode; smiling kids



**Israeli soldiers in Gaza: emptying the land of its people**

making V-signs in the rubble. Uber drivers turn off their meters for Palestinian passengers.

Despite crippling economic conditions, donations flood into private centres, hastily set up to receive them. A call for accommodation for three families who managed to get to Cairo was answered in minutes.<sup>1</sup>

## Illegal

We have not seen any protests in the Persian Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia. This is mainly because any form of protest is illegal in these countries. In fact, in most of these countries, it is illegal to express a political opinion!

The only exception, apart from Sanaa, is Kuwait, where in October large demonstrations were held in support of the Palestinians. But the last Kuwaiti demonstration I can find was held back in January, when the Kuwaiti media reported it positively, which means it probably had state support. According to the *Kuwait Times*,

Hundreds of protestors gathered at a demonstration at Irada Square on Sunday, organised by political and civil organisations. The event marked the 100th day since Hamas's 'Al-Aqsa Flood' operation and the Zionist-American criminal war of genocide against Gaza and Palestine that has claimed a surging civilian death toll and ravaged the besieged Palestinian territory.

Hundred days is a period that

may shape a future that may determine one's fate, and today this period started a revolution to correct the path and achieve victory. This is what our heroes in Gaza are, who succeeded in breaking the image of [the Zionist entity's] strong intelligence ...

MP Hassan Jowhar said during the demonstration: "The 100 days have recorded unprecedented success. Today, the Arab and western peoples are liberated from the restrictions of their governments. They are taking action, and there has become a culture of boycott among Arabs and Muslims. Even our children are calling for a boycott that harms the financial and economic situation of the Zionists and their allies who support them ..."

In the United Arab Emirates, all demonstrations are illegal and there are no political parties. However, around the Cop28 gathering in December 2023, 100 protestors gathered on the sidelines outside the UN climate summit calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. This was an unusual scene in a country where any form of political activity is banned.

In Lebanon the last major Gaza protest I can find online dates back to October 31 2023. Hundreds of protestors gathered outside the French embassy in Beirut, chanting slogans and waving flags, as they voiced their opposition to western backing for the Israeli bombing of Gaza. "How are foreign governments with Israel?" asked a man who lives in a Palestinian refugee camp in

Beirut. "They are killing kids in front of the world. They should be supporting the Palestinians, not Israel."

Hezbollah has made a lot of noise about Gaza, and there have been limited daily skirmishes, and occasional rocket attacks into northern Israel. However, on each occasion, it has made it clear that its action was in retaliation for the last Israeli attack on it.

The latest of these operations took place on March 12, when Hezbollah launched more than 100 Katyusha rockets at two military bases in the occupied Golan Heights. However, the party's statement does not mention Gaza. It merely stated that the rocket attack "was in response to the Israeli attacks on our people, villages and cities, most recently near the city of Baalbek and the killing of a citizen".

## Fallen short

All this has caused anger amongst Palestinians in Lebanon and elsewhere. A couple of long speeches by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah have fallen short for Palestinian refugees in Sabra and Shatila, where some 250,000 Palestinians - children of those who were forced out of their homeland in 1948 - barely survive today.

Of course, Iran has received strong warnings from Joe Biden and the US administration to stay out of the Gaza conflict and discourage its regional allies from "escalating the war", and Tehran has indeed discouraged Nasrallah from engaging in any serious military operation against Israel.

However, Hezbollah has its reasons for avoiding a full-scale war with Israel: it is part of the coalition in power in Beirut, having several ministers in the current government. The party is not only keen to avoid the type of conflict that will damage Lebanon's fragile economy: it wants to keep those ministerial positions too (so far there have been no complaints about it from coalition partners).

In February foreign minister Abdallah Bou Habib described Hezbollah members as "Lebanese who know", who are seeking to secure "Lebanon's interests". He argued that the regime would not try to silence Hezbollah's guns - let alone consider disarming it - until Israel had settled all outstanding disputes with Lebanon.

To summarise, US threats against Iran, as well as the continued operation of well-organised dictatorships in the region, have created a situation where full and open public expression of the anger and frustration felt by millions in the Middle East has been successfully suppressed. However, as the number of deaths keeps increasing, as starvation threatens the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians, even the well-oiled repressive security forces of Egypt, Jordan and the Persian Gulf states might not be able to continue silencing protestors and keep control of the Arab streets ●

## Notes

1. [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/dec/03/egypt-palestinians-rafah-border-rights](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/dec/03/egypt-palestinians-rafah-border-rights).
2. [kuwaittimes.com/article/10125/top-stories/kuwaiti-protesters-rally-in-solidarity-with-palestinians](https://kuwaittimes.com/article/10125/top-stories/kuwaiti-protesters-rally-in-solidarity-with-palestinians).



## REVIEW

# Essentially human qualities

Jonathan Dove (director Stephen Barlow) **Marx in London!** Theatre Royal Glasgow, February 15-17, and Festival Theatre Edinburgh, February 22-24 - UK premieres



Comic opera: Marx lets forth (pic James Glossop)

**K**arl Marx and his family lived in London for over 30 years, but Jonathan Dove's comic opera concentrates on just one day in their life there - August 14 1871.

I am not sure why this date was chosen, but it was certainly one of the most intense periods of Marx's life. His pamphlet on the lessons of the recent days of the Paris Commune, *The civil war in France*, had changed his life. As Francis Wheen describes in his *Karl Marx* biography, "After years of obscurity, Karl Marx suddenly woke up to find himself infamous." Wheen quotes Marx's letter to Ludwig Kugelmann: "I have the honour to be at this moment the most calumniated and the most menaced man in London."

Wheen also relates that Marx's doctor recommended he should ease his stress by taking a break: he and family members went off to Brighton for two weeks in August 1871, so maybe Dove chose August 14 to illustrate all the domestic difficulties the family had also faced up to that point.

Dove cites Wheen's book and Jonathan Sperber's *Karl Marx: a nineteenth century life* as the key texts that he drew from in creating the

opera, whose first performance was in Bonn, where Marx had attended university in 1835. The director of the opera house there, Jürgen R Weber, was looking to commemorate Marx's 200th anniversary in 2018 and provided Dove with the idea of a comic opera, exploring the Marx family misfortunes and chaos.

These were caused through continual poverty-stricken panic and only resolved by visits to the pawnbrokers, and cash received from Friedrich Engels. Indeed one of the funniest and most audacious moments in Scottish Opera's production is Engels' arrival on a penny-farthing wearing goggles and sprouting a pair of wings as the family's 'guardian angel'. He also later appears as a veritable knight in shining armour.

As I say, the opera had a world premier production in Bonn in 2018, but the Covid lockdown prevented it from coming to the UK at that time. So an entirely new production has been created and I can only imagine that we are very fortunate that this happened, as this is a brilliant and very funny *tour de force* in every aspect - from its slapstick and farce-facing direction injected by Dove's

long-time collaborator, Stephen Barlow, to the awe-inspiring stage set jointly produced by Yannis Thavoris and opera first-timer PJ McEvoy. This dazzlingly portrays a two-dimensional-appearing, yet-ever evolving, Victorian London, reminding me somewhat of Walt Disney's film, *Mary Poppins*.

We are shown scenes of the move from the Marx residence at Maitland Park, Kentish Town, which is emptied of its furniture by bailiffs, and of its procession on a cart through the streets with Marx's daughter, Eleanor (nicknamed 'Tussi'), who is singing incredibly highly pitched notes to a young man she pretends is their new piano teacher (but is actually a gun-maker) in pursuit of knowledge about his origins. In true comic-opera style, we discover that Marx had an illegitimate child with their housekeeper, Helene. She spends much of the first half of the show warding off Karl's advances, whilst beating him at chess, then consoling his wife, Jenny, whilst getting sozzled with her through the song 'Another little drink'.

Alcohol also features at the Red Lion pub, where Karl wins an unlikely 'commie karaoke' competition with a bravura speech trouncing the invented Italian anarchist, 'Giuseppe Melanzane'. With an impassioned plea for humanity to leave behind private property and inheritance and move to a socialist future (which I could hear produced quiet chortling behind me, but could not tell if this was *Schadenfreude* or not), Karl wins the suitcase of cash on offer. But, rather than use it to solve the family's financial problems, he spends it all at once buying every revolutionary in the pub a round of drinks!

The other moment where politics usurps the farcical fray is at the end of the first act, when Marx is in his favourite British Museum reading room. Tired out by his efforts and plagued by carbuncles on his backside, which made writing difficult, he dozes off there - and the chorus emerges in his dream, with the refrain of "Soon, soon", answering his call for revolution. Amongst the masses joining in that chorus we see a suffragette, a civil rights campaigner, a 1960s peacenik, a gay rights activist and a present-day nurse with a placard demanding a pay rise. Perhaps not quite a storming of the barricades, but a poignant evocation of the need for mass action nonetheless.

Dove has said that he wanted to explore the contradictory and essentially human qualities of Marx (without the 'ists' or the 'ism'), but I do think his past work, producing many large-scale community operas, has given him the sense of the need for, and power of, collective culture. Dove is a unique figure in contemporary theatre practice. His most successful work so far is *Flight* - another unlikely comic opera about the true story of an Iranian refugee who lived in Charles de Gaulle Airport for 18 years!

I hope this wonderful Scottish Opera production moves beyond its February premieres in Glasgow and Edinburgh and finds its way home to London - with ticket prices within reach of all those interested in Marx (including its 'ists' and 'ism'), and who also appreciate what Dove says he always strives for - a good night out! ●

Tam Dean Burn

## Notes

1. F Wheen *Karl Marx* New York 2012, p395.

## 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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# We are all Palestinians

Despite the smears, hundreds of thousands are determined to continue showing their solidarity. Ian Spencer reports on last Saturday's demonstration in London - the 10th since the war on Gaza began

Whatever else the Palestine solidarity marches are, they are a reminder - a constant reaffirmation - that the daily horror of genocide and ethnic cleansing is the death-agony of a system.

What will replace it is to be decided. But the fact that "In our thousands, in our millions, we are all Palestinians" is at the heart of these events, which assert humanity over barbarism and solidarity with the suffering of our brothers and sisters in Palestine, testifies to at least the possibility of an internationalist movement. March 9 saw some 450,000 march in the 10th national demonstration in London and, coming as it did, after International Working Women's Day, the crowd heard from an all-female cast of speakers, including Welsh singer Charlotte Church, Zarah Sultana MP and Lindsey German of the Stop the War Coalition. The death-toll in Gaza is approaching 35,000, with women and children making up two-thirds of those massacred by Israel. Those remaining face starvation.

Charlotte Church is, of course, one of the latest to be accused of anti-Semitism, having led a rendition of 'From the river to the sea' at a village hall charity concert in Caerphilly, South Wales. She responded to the slur in a way that Jeremy Corbyn can only dream of, saying: "I am fighting for the liberation of all people. I have a deep heart for all religions and all difference." She added: "Clearly, if you know the history of it all, [it is] not an anti-Semitic chant calling for the obliteration of Israel. It is not that in any way, shape or form. It is calling for the peaceful coexistence of Israelis and Palestinians."

The state response to the demonstrations has been to constantly try to portray them as full of hatred. The latest contribution to the mad hatter's tea party of foam-flecked pundits has come from Robin Simcox, who has the ridiculous title of Commissioner for Countering Extremism. He was appointed to this post by the 'extremely moderate' Priti Patel, before she was dismissed for breaching the ministerial code by having unauthorised meetings with the government of Israel. Simcox's background is, unsurprisingly, in the rightwing Henry Jackson Society, and asserts that the Palestine marches are turning London into a 'no-go zone' for Jews - apart, of course, from the thousands of Jews marching every week, who are determined to show that Israel and its apologists do not speak for them!

I maintain that the ruling class is afraid. It is afraid that the mask has slipped enough not only to reveal the brutal, inhuman nature of Zionism, but also the complicity of the USA and UK, in particular. They are afraid that the links are now being made between almost perpetual war and the cuts to the



Charlotte Church: demonised for singing for peaceful co-existence

workers' standard of living. The malignant absurdity of dropping aid from air, by countries that have done most to supply the bombs that have created the famine, is lost on nobody. The bizarre and wilfully pointless, if not deeply suspicious, decision to build a 'pier' to land aid by sea, which will take two months, when every aid agency in the region has asserted, time after time, that the most efficient and quickest way to get the most aid to the starving is by road, but that this is being prevented by Israel.

The fear in little Rishi Sunak's eyes was visible when he referred to the election of George Galloway in the February 29 Rochdale by-election as "beyond alarming". In my experience it is unprecedented

that a prime minister should come out of No10 with a lectern to give the public a bit of a telling off for the drubbing they have given to all the bourgeois parties. Maybe it is only a matter of time before he demands the dissolution of the electorate. He is right to be alarmed, as not only is his party facing electoral meltdown, but his likely successor commands no respect either - both are charged with genocide by the marchers.

Talking of respect, Galloway's picture on the front of last week's *Weekly Worker*, which we distributed at the demonstration, solicited more than a few conversations with people as critical of gorgeous George as we are. But most were also in agreement that there was only one real issue in Rochdale on the day - yes, Gaza and

UK support for the Israeli genocide. The people acquitted themselves well and are under no more illusions than we are.

It was notable that, as our demonstration of hundreds of thousands reached Victoria Street, there was a pro-Israel counter-demonstration. I counted about six people holding up Israeli flags and about as many more without flags. Even they did not manage to provoke the slightest hostility from the Palestine solidarity marchers that I saw. It is true that I shouted "From the river to the sea" a bit louder at that point, but otherwise the friends of genocide elicited no response at all. I honestly believe that would have been true even without the significant police presence.

An increase in the police numbers has been another feature of the state's attempt to demonise these totally peaceful marches. As Sunak's lectern diatribe put it, "This week, I have met with senior police officers and made clear that it is the public's expectation that they will not merely manage these protests, but police them."<sup>2</sup> So far, at least, the policing has been decidedly low-key. Let us keep it that way and fraternise with the police at every opportunity. Their pay is being cut, just as ours is. As regards the public's expectations, I believe it is as clear in the opinion polls as it is on the street that the public expects an end to genocide and ethnic cleansing. What remains to be seen is whether that will be expressed at the ballot box nationally. We need to transform the demand for a ceasefire to one for an end to the arming of Israel and ultimately an end to the current Zionist state in favour of a republic of the Middle East with the right of return for all Palestinians.

Supporters of the Palestinian people are wiser than to respond to the actions of provocateurs, and the 10 marches have retained their almost carnival atmosphere - so much so, that they have started to include music and street food. This is even more remarkable, considering what has been occurring in Gaza. If we thought we had heard it all, when the Israel Defence Forces presented a picture of the Al-Shifa Hospital being used as some sort of Hamas control centre, the sight of IDF marksmen targeting starving refugees queuing for the most basic means of subsistence is enough to make almost everyone's blood boil. We have also witnessed the heroic, tragic self-immolation of US airman Aaron Bushnell outside the Israeli embassy in Washington DC. His final words, livestreamed from his phone, were:

I will no longer be complicit in genocide. I am about to engage in an extreme act of protest. But, compared to what people have been experiencing in Palestine at the hands of their colonisers, it's not extreme at all. This is what our ruling class has been decided will be normal.

Then he set himself on fire and screamed, "Free Palestine". He died nine hours later, aged 25.<sup>3</sup> This was not an act of hate, but all-consuming love, which deserves to be remembered forever.

Bushnell was, after all, a professional armed serviceman, so I would suggest: with the uniformed services, fraternise and fraternise again. The revolution to end barbarism depends on winning them to the side of the workers of the world ●

### Notes

1. *The Times* February 26.
2. *The Times* and YouTube, March 1.
3. *The Guardian* February 28.