

A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity

# weekly **worker**



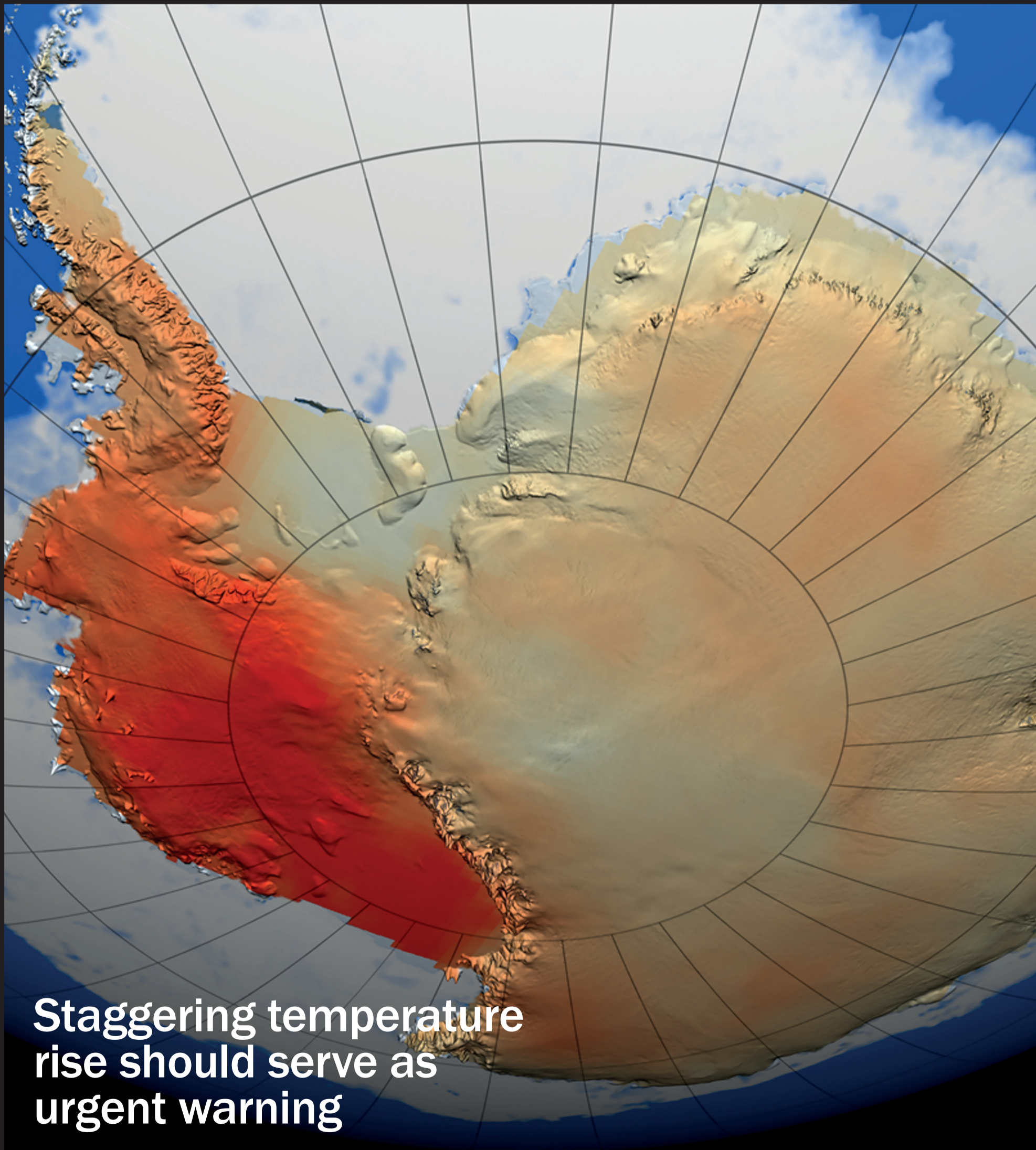
**Ministerial perks await: Richard Boyd Barrett wants to join a Sinn Féin-led capitalist government**

- Letters and debate
- Thames Water crap
- Elections and parliament
- US third parties

No 1486 April 11 2024

Towards a mass Communist Party

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**Staggering temperature rise should serve as urgent warning**



# LETTERS



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

## When did it start?

My wife and I read *The Guardian* (and *The Observer* on Sunday) to see what is going on. It does carry news, but an awful lot of nonsensical commentary. Obviously, at the moment it is necessary to follow what is going on in Gaza and *The Guardian* carries several pages on this each day.

It was clear quite early in the current catastrophe that there was a bias (surprise, surprise) and one of its manifestations was the way in which Israeli loss was personalised unlike that of the Palestinians. This has been noted, I've seen online, in the US mainstream media too.

*The Guardian* will show pictures of grieving relatives of the Israeli dead (whether from October 7 or from Israeli soldiers going down since), while Palestinians are mostly seen as just rows of wrapped bodies or maybe a dead child being carried through the rubble.

It is not entirely presented this way (they do have liberal readers to take into account, of course) - just mostly. There has been, lately, a little criticism of Israel (or at least Netanyahu) over destruction, starvation, dead children, etc, and even some Palestinian commentary from inside Gaza. Any criticism tends to be ahead (but not too far) of that from Biden or Cameron.

I skim these articles (and most of the paper) because there is not a lot to them, but one of the things I've been watching out for from the start of the current conflict

is how quickly they will bring in the October 7 attack. Generally, pretty quickly.

In a pompous piece, entitled 'The new world disorder: how the Gaza war disrupted international relations', on April 6 Patrick Wintour, the paper's diplomatic editor, managed to hold out until paragraph four and then: "... Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, vowed on 9 October, two days after the Hamas massacre in Israel that triggered the war ..."

On the same day in the 'Journal', the *Guardian's* 'opinion' section, Jonathan Freedland (who seems to lead the paper's Zionist stance) opens with 'Six months after the attacks of 7 October, and it's time to count again the losses'. I've looked at these two papers every day and, as far as I've seen, over six months they've brought in October 7, 1,200 killed, mostly civilians, 240 hostages ... every day, somewhere - in at least one article.

This is all, as *Weekly Worker* readers and millions of others know, a desperate attempt to make current events the entire responsibility of Palestinians and not the Israeli government, whereas many online articles from the left refer over and over to the past 75 years or even longer. The powers-that-be (ie, the US government) do seem to be a little more worried now, after some non-Palestinians have been butchered, but we will see what happens.

I've written about *The Guardian's* coverage, but a few weeks ago I got a copy of the *Daily Mail* just to see. It had Gaza filling a quarter of a page - I can't remember what it said. I guess there must be a lot of people out there who know even less

about this criminal activity than *Guardian* readers - good lord!

**Jim Nelson**  
email

## Not guilty!

By unanimous decision, a Wood Green crown court jury found Palestine Action activist Blyth Brentnall not guilty of "possessing articles to commit criminal damage" after a two-day trial. Despite being permitted no defence, and having admitted the intention to throw the items - eggs filled with red paint and ketchup - at a building, the acquittal took only one hour's deliberation.

The intended target was to be Elbit Systems' former HQ at 77 Kingsway, London, which was vacated over two years ago after Palestine Action's regular disruption at the site. Elbit Systems is Israel's largest weapons firm, producing 85% of its military drone fleet and land-based equipment. They also manufacture missiles, bombs, bullets and digital warfare for the Israeli occupation forces - its CEO even boasting of the central role the company is playing in Israel's ongoing genocide in Gaza.

The activist was arrested after the police found eggs in his backpack during a protest against Elbit Systems' presence in Britain, occurring amidst the bombardment of Gaza in May 2021, in which Israel killed at least 260 Palestinians, injured 1,900 and destroyed 1,800 residential units.

Due to the nature of the charge faced, the activist had a choice of whether the matter should be heard in a magistrates court or crown court - the defendant chose the latter, so that a jury, rather than a judge, would decide the verdict. Despite the jury's role, the judge disallowed all defences raised by the defendant, including that an act against Elbit would be one taken to save lives or to prevent a greater crime, and defences relating to the act being a proportionate protest. Despite this, it only took the jury just over an hour to reach a unanimous verdict: not guilty.

The government has increasingly acted to curtail defences available to individuals who engage in protest, civil disobedience and direct action, including most recently the stripping of a 'consent defence' - one of the few still available. Nevertheless, the jury upheld reason, deploying the principle of jury nullification in order to decide, as is their right, that no crime had been committed - despite the state's laughable attempt to prosecute the activist in this fashion. In her closing speech, the activist reiterated the jury's right to acquit based on their conscience: "According to the judge, I have no defence in law. So it is entirely up to you, the jury, to decide who is the criminal here."

Speaking after the acquittal, Blyth commented: "I would have been very disappointed if people thought that such a small attempt at direct action was deserving of punishment, in contrast to the genocide being committed right now. Everyone should consider joining Palestine Action if they wish to help end the atrocities taking place by taking action from within the UK."

**Palestine Action**  
email

## Complicity

I've long had little interest in or respect for Daniel Lazare as a comrade, due to the way he has

debated with comrades Moshé Machover and Tony Greenstein - and particularly his denigration of the Palestinian BDS campaign.

So I'm not getting into debate with his letter that cast accusations of dishonesty at me (April 4). He merely proves my political instincts correct that he will twist, misappropriate and is not to be trusted. This is particularly disgraceful when in the context of the genocidal attacks on the Palestinian people right now, for whom Lazare shows no solidarity or empathy whatsoever.

His charges against me are utterly false and disrespectful, if anyone wants to read what I actually had to say in my article about Juliano Mer-Khamis's assassination ('Promote a second front' March 28).

Despite everything thrown at it, the Freedom Theatre that Juliano founded still exists in the Jenin refugee camp and is now launching 'theculturalintifada.com' inspired by him. That's what I was promoting, whilst Lazare cuts and pastes from the *London Review of Books* in order to carp from the sidelines.

As to his comments on Communist Culture Club - along with my frustrations, as previously expressed, I found it strange that chair Tina Werkmann specifically asked Lazare to be first to comment on the *Al Jazeera* October 7 film because of his "differences with Tony". He immediately patronised and accused comrade Greenstein of being "not factual", but Tony's was a pre-recorded segment, so no debate on that was possible!

Most telling though was Lazare's complete ignoring of the extensive evidence in the programme, highlighted by Tony, of Israel's employment of the 'Hannibal Directive' - meaning it was better to kill Israelis rather than have them become hostages. Lazare ludicrously justified this as "friendly fire", killing only "two or three dozen", with no evidence to back that up. He then went on to say that "something really, really bad happened on October 7".

Such wilful ignorance and moralistic condemnation of Palestinian resistance puts Lazare firmly alongside the sickening mainstream media and its complicity with the genocide. Shame on him.

**Tam Dean Burn**  
Glasgow

## Fantasy world

We know that Gerry Downing is a fantasist, because for some years he has been founder member and (since splitting with the only other member) *lider supremo* of the Socialist Fight one-person outfit. In this capacity he 'represents' one of the many oil-slick Trotskyite internationals. And, judging from his letter to the *Weekly Worker* (March 28), he is a sociopath as well.

His characterisation of Tommy Robinson as a fascist is definite, because Downing says it must be so. Downing goes off tangentially into a rant about Gaza, which has no relevance here, so I will not comment on it. Anyone interested in his views (and there is no earthly reason why you should be) can have a look at YouTube, where he is struggling against Andrew Neil's questioning to explain just what type of Islamic State supporter he is, or an Ian Dale LBC interview, which exposes his deep anti-Semitism.

Downing makes a big show of an article by Paul Demarty in

which I simply do not feature - and neither do people such as Tucker Carlson or Eric Zammour. In fact the article concentrates on Frank Furedi's move to Substack. This reveals Downing's propensity to 'read into' the text like some demented Derridean until the text is deconstructed to fit his requirements.

"I think abuse and ridicule are the proper ways to attack gammon," says Gerry in school-playground style. In fact they are your only way when you have no actual arguments to present. This is an excellent tactic for the ilk of Downing, who can simply heap abuse on anyone who does not kowtow to them, often employing the race card. Is not this mindless shouting down of opponents more reminiscent of Nazis than anyone rational?!

On gammon, inasmuch as it relates to age, I would plead guilty to not being the first ever person to defy age. The problem for Gerry is that on the YouTube vids, from eight years ago, I recall, he looks a damn sight more gammony than me.

To finish off his missive Gerry issues a death threat, which seems to me rather stupid. One, it could put him and the paper in legal jeopardy (as his former colleague managed to do previously) and, more importantly, he has no way to carry it out. It is yet another example of Downing's fantasy world, where he is some kind of leftist Mafia don.

Yes, Gerry's missive is amusing, but there is a dark undertone to his writings. So, not wishing to attract any more death threats, I will leave it there.

**Ted Talbot**  
Email

## Anti-Muslim

For over six months, hundreds of thousands have marched in cities across the country against Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza. In response, both the Tories and Starmer's Labour Party have vilified pro-Palestinian activists and many have been arrested.

Escalating these attacks, the government, with the support of Labour, recently moved to designate several Muslim organisations as "extremist", which opens the door to an outright ban. This is an outrageous threat to the entire Muslim community in Britain. The government's repression of a vulnerable minority of the British population represents an attack on the whole workers' movement as well as the left. It must be opposed by the broadest possible forces. An injury to one is an injury to all!

The organisers of the national marches, as well as Muslim and socialist groups, have denounced the government's attack. They speak of legal action and make the call to continue demonstrating for Palestine. While necessary, this is far from enough. Many have recognised that this is one of the most severe attacks on democratic rights since Prevent, but it has not yet been met with a strong, large fightback!

We call on the Muslim Association of Britain, CAGE International, MEND, Friends of Al-Aqsa, Stop the War Coalition, trade unions and all socialist organisations to come together in a united front. A first obvious step is to organise a large national demonstration to defend the rights of Muslims and oppose the government's attacks as soon as is feasible.

**Partisan Defence Committee**  
email

## Online Communist Forum



Sunday April 14 5pm

**Stopping arms exports to a genocidal Israel:  
a week in politics - political report from  
CPGB's Provisional Central Committee  
and discussion**

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

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

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



# CLIMATE

## Tipping into the unknown

Staggering temperature rises in the Antarctic should serve as an urgent warning, writes Eddie Ford

Two years ago at the coldest place on our planet, scientists at a research station on the east Antarctic plateau documented a “mind-boggling” event - the largest jump in temperature ever measured at a meteorological centre on earth, with the region that day experiencing a rise of 38.5°C above its seasonal average.<sup>1</sup> The scientists themselves could hardly believe what they were seeing on their instruments, confronted by something completely unprecedented.

The implications are terrifyingly obvious. In sub-zero temperatures such a massive leap is tolerable, at least for humans, but imagine what would happen if we had such a rise in a country like the UK right now - on a spring day that would take the temperature to well over 50°C, which would be deadly for the population. The human body is not able to function in such heat because its natural cooling system experiences failure and everything starts to shut down. Chemical processes start to be affected, the cells inside the body deteriorate and there is a risk of multiple organ failure. The body cannot even sweat at this point, because blood-flow to the skin stops, making it feel cold and clammy. Unable to cool down, you start to fry in your own body - to the point where immersing yourself in ice water does not help. In other words, at such temperatures human life becomes impossible and it would be a catastrophe for the local ecosystem. We all go down.

What appears to be happening is that poleward winds, which previously made few inroads into the atmosphere above Antarctica, are now carrying more and more warm, moist air from lower latitudes - like Australia - deep into the continent, thus the dramatic polar ‘heatwave’ that hit the eastern Antarctic (which includes the continent itself, the ice shelves and the ocean immediately beyond).

Ominously, this staggering temperature hike is not an isolated or freak event. Over the past two years, there have been growing numbers of reports about disturbing meteorological anomalies on the continent. Therefore, amongst many things, glaciers bordering the west Antarctic ice-sheet are losing mass to the ocean at an increasing rate - while sea ice levels, which cover the oceans around the continent, have contracted dramatically, having remained stable for more than a century. The Antarctic was once thought to be too cold to experience the early impacts of global warming, but not any more - it too is succumbing rapidly to the soaring levels of greenhouse gases that are being pumped into the atmosphere through human activity.

### Regime shift

Anyhow, these dangers have been recently highlighted by a team of scientists at the University of Tasmania in a paper that was published last week in the *Journal of Climate*. After a detailed examination of recent changes in sea ice coverage in Antarctica, the group concluded there had been an “abrupt critical transition” in the continent’s climate that could have profound repercussions for both local ecosystems and the global climate system.

What this transformation appears to mean is a regime shift in the southern oceans to a new sea-ice state. So it was actually the case that the Antarctic sea-ice coverage actually increased slightly in the late 20th and



Krill: tiny but important

early 21st century, only to fall off a cliff in the middle of the last decade - a harbinger of the new Antarctic climate system that has disastrous implications for the region and the planet as a whole. Unfortunately, the continent is now effectively catching up with the Arctic, which until now has experienced the most dramatic impacts of global warming - warming at four times the rate undergone by the rest of the planet. But the Antarctic is already warming twice as quickly as the planet overall and that trend appears to be escalating.

### Polar hits

A central reason why both the Arctic and now Antarctic are taking disproportionate hits from global warming is because the earth’s oceans - through global warming - are losing their sea ice at their polar regions. Therefore the dark waters that used to lie below the white ice are being exposed and solar radiation is no longer reflected back into outer space - rather, it is being absorbed by the sea and further heating the oceans in a vicious cycle of warming.

As the polar ice melts and contracts, there will be direct consequences both for global temperatures and, of course, rising sea levels. Bangkok, Amsterdam, Ho Chi Minh City, Manila, Cardiff, New Orleans, London, Shenzhen, Hamburg and Dubai all face inundation.

How exactly will incredible temperature rises like 38.5°C in Antarctica affect global weather and global climate patterns? Interestingly, scientists say they have not yet gathered enough data about Antarctica to give you what they would view as reliable modelling to enable accurate predictions - more a rough and ready approach at the moment. The continent is so remote and hostile that the records are comparatively sparse and therefore fail to capture all of the complex physics, chemistry and biology.

When it comes to wild life, there are not only the magnificent emperor penguins, there is the humble algae which grows under and around sea ice in west Antarctica. This is starting to disappear, with very alarming implications. Algae is eaten by krill - the tiny marine crustaceans that are one of the most abundant animals on the planet and which provide food for predators that include fish, penguins, seals and whales. Clearly, if krill start to disappear in the wake of algae, then all sorts of disruption to the food chain will follow.

However, the threat posed by the disappearance of krill goes deeper than that. It plays a key role in limiting warming in a way akin to the reflective white ice sheets. Algae absorb carbon dioxide. Krill then come along and eat them and excrete it, the faeces sinking to the seabed and staying there - acting like a like a conveyor belt that takes carbon out of the atmosphere and carries it down to the deep ocean floor, where it is locked away. Conversely, decreased levels of algae and krill mean less carbon from the atmosphere

deposited on the ocean floor, and more remaining near the sea surface and returning to the atmosphere.

Another vicious feedback system that could have all sorts of other knock-on effects for any attempt to cope with the impact of global warming - one scary scenario after another.

### Uncharted territory

Alas, yet another global heat record was notched up this week. According to the European Union’s Copernicus Climate Change Service, global surface temperatures in March were 0.1°C higher than the previous record for the month - set in 2016 - and 1.68°C higher than the pre-industrial average. This is the 10th consecutive monthly record in a warming phase that has shattered all previous records. Over the past 12 months, average global temperatures have been 1.58°C above pre-industrial levels - which at least temporarily exceeds the 1.5°C benchmark set as a target in the Paris climate agreement. Of course, that target will not be considered breached unless this trend continues on a decadal scale.

But this new record is enough to trigger fears that, if temperatures do not stabilise or fall by the end of August, then the world could be moving into “uncharted territory” - tipping into a new phase of even faster climate change. As noted by the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, our planet has been warming at a pace of 0.3°C per decade over the past 15 years - almost double the 0.18°C per decade trend since the 1970s. The scientific debate, however, is about whether this is within the range of climate variability or a signal of accelerated warming. But the signs are not good - temperature records are being broken each month by up to 0.2°C, with many scientists admitting that no year has confounded their predictive capabilities more than 2023.

There are several possible explanations for this anomaly, if that is what it is. The El Niño effect, of course, plus reductions in cooling sulphur dioxide particles due to pollution controls, fallout from the January 2022 volcanic eruption in Tonga, and the ramping up of solar activity in the run-up to a predicted solar maximum. But, based on various preliminary analyses, these factors do not seem sufficient to account for the 0.2°C increase. We are stumbling in the dark.

Having said that, there is a 99.9% scientific consensus that human-made global warming is the cause - we are not dealing with some long-term natural changes in the climate, as a largely crank minority argue. This is the action of humanity - crucially the action of the advanced capitalist countries and now China, the ‘workshop of the world’. Meanwhile, in Britain we have the Tory government committed to ‘maxing’ out North Sea oil and gas, whilst the US is boosting and boosting again its production of shale oil.

All in service of a capitalist system that can only live by extracting ever more surplus value from workers and exploiting the wealth of nature without regard or limit. It is a system of expansion for the sake of expansion ●

eddie.ford@weeklyworker.co.uk

### Notes

1. theguardian.com/environment/2024/apr/06/simply-mind-boggling-world-record-temperature-jump-in-antarctic-raises-fears-of-catastrophe.

# ACTION

### Five demands to build a real alternative

**Saturday April 13, 10am:** Conference, Hamilton House, Mabledon Place, London WC1. To discuss the challenges - and solutions - to the crises we face and how we build a real alternative. Speakers include Jeremy Corbyn and Fran Heathcote (PCS general secretary). Registration £11.50 (free). Organised by Peace and Justice Project: thecorbynproject.com/events.

### No ceasefire, no vote

**Saturday April 13, 10am:** Conference, Bangor Street Community Centre, Norwich Street, Blackburn BB1. Independent socialist councillors, candidates and grassroots activists who are committed to justice for Palestine and changing politics. Speakers include George Galloway MP, Craig Murray and Salma Yaqoob. Registration £5. Organised by No Ceasefire, No Vote: noceasefirenovote.org.

### 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.

### Climate justice, climate jobs

**Saturday April 13, 11am:** Conference for trade unionists, Crowndale Centre, 220 Eversholt Street, London NW1. How to ensure the strength of the working class and trade union movement is at the heart of tackling the climate emergency. Registration £12 (£5). Organised by Campaign against Climate Change Trade Union Group: cacctu.org.uk/conference\_2024.

### Day of action for Palestine - stop the genocide

**Saturday April 13:** Protests nationwide. Demand a full ceasefire now, an end to Israeli apartheid and freedom for Palestine. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: palestinecampaign.org/events.

### London march for Palestine

**Saturday April 13, 12 noon:** Demonstration. Assemble Russell Square, London WC1 then march to Parliament Square. Demand the government stops arming Israel; demand a permanent ceasefire now. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: palestinecampaign.org/events/london-march-for-palestine.

### What it means to be human

**Tuesday April 16, 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: ‘Did matriarchy ever exist?’ Speaker: Chris Knight. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: radicalanthropologygroup.org/blog/did-matriarchy-ever-exist.

### Defend the right to protest

Public meetings organised by Stop the War Coalition. Police restrictions on peaceful marches are an attack on democracy - end the intimidation, arrests and Islamophobia.

**Bristol, Tuesday April 16, 6.30pm:** Hamilton House, 80 Stokes Croft, Bristol BS1. www.facebook.com/events/340293015200423.

**Birmingham, Wednesday April 17, 6.30pm:** Birmingham and Midland Institute, 9 Margaret Street, Birmingham B3. www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=10162101161859410.

### A celebration of Pat Arrowsmith (1930-2023)

**Thursday April 18, 6pm:** Public meeting, LSE Library, 10 Portugal Street, London WC2. A peace campaigner, an organiser of the first Aldermaston March in 1958 and an activist for Irish freedom. Speakers include Francie Molloy (Sinn Féin MP) and Lindsey German (Stop the War Coalition). Registration free. Organised by CND: cnduk.org/events.

### 50 years since the Portuguese Revolution

**Thursday April 18, 6pm:** Films, followed by discussion, Marx Memorial Library, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1. *Caetano assassino* (Claude Moreira), *República* (Newsreel Collective) and *Viva Portugal* (Cinema Action). Tickets £5 (£3). Organised by Marx Memorial Library: www.marx-memorial-library.org.uk/event/460.

### Palestine and the unions: the next steps

**Thursday April 18, 6.30pm:** Online trade union rally. How can unions deliver effective solidarity to the Palestinian people? Speakers include Susan Abdul Salaam (New Union of Jerusalem) and Chris Smalls (Amazon Labor Union USA). Registration free. Organised by Stop the War Coalition: www.stopwar.org.uk/events.

### Bristol radical history festival

**Saturday April 20, 10am to 4.30pm:** Free festival at M Shed, Wapping Road, Bristol BS1. Talks, walks, performances, exhibitions and stalls. Themes: Bristolians who went to fight for a better world; mental health and social care in Bristol; radical history: a DIY guide. Organised by Bristol Radical History Group: www.brh.org.uk/site/event-series/bristol-radical-history-festival-2024.

### The fight for Palestinian liberation

**Saturday April 20, 6.30pm:** Public meeting, Meli Cafe, 142 Northumberland Street, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1. Introduction covering settler-colonialism, Zionism and the British state by Anindya Bhattacharyya, followed by discussion. Organised by Revolutionary Socialism in the 21st Century: rs21.org.uk/events.

### 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.



## UTILITIES

# Money, debt and crap

Thames Water has defaulted on debt repayments; there is talk of renationalisation. Meanwhile there is an ongoing scandal about the release of untreated sewage into rivers and seas. **Mike Macnair** investigates the problems and possible solutions

Thames Water's holding company, Kemble Water Finance, last week announced default on interest payments on a £400 million bond, triggering debt restructuring negotiations. According to the *Financial Times*, the result "threatens to wipe out the stakes of Thames Water's nine shareholders, which include the Chinese and Abu Dhabi sovereign wealth funds, as well as Canadian and UK pension funds".<sup>1</sup> The decision may be genuine insolvency, but also may be a negotiating gambit in the company's ongoing efforts to persuade Ofwat (or the government that stands behind it) to allow massive price rises.

If we ask why Thames Water's parent company has such excessive debts, the answer is that a company with low debt at privatisation has been saddled with large debts after its acquisition by the Australian 'vampire kangaroo', Macquarie, which has made a speciality of acquiring infrastructure companies, loading them with debt *inter alia* to pay off the acquisition costs, and then selling them on to institutional investors on the basis that, since such companies cannot be actually allowed to close down, they offer a safe income stream.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1960s-70s arrangements of this sort, whereby companies were acquired on the basis that the acquisition costs were subsequently paid out of the company's assets, so that the acquirer of control at the end of the day gets something for nothing, were characterised by the courts as fraudulent.<sup>3</sup> But, since the 1980s 'Big Bang' deregulation, and especially the rise of 'hedge funds' and 'private equity', they have become acceptable 'financial engineering' or 'financial innovation', and Macquarie's business model will no doubt have relied on legal advice to this effect.<sup>4</sup>

But there is undoubtedly a serious problem of 'moral hazard': because the risk of loss remains with the state, which cannot allow the shutdown of the relevant infrastructure, while the gains are made by the financial players. Under a real fully free-market regime recognition of this moral hazard would require the *financial engineers* to be legally liable to indemnify subsequent owners, and the state where a bail-out was required, for losses caused by excessive debt loading.

Thames is not the only problem case. *The Daily Telegraph* on April 9, under the headline, "Thames Water collapse fears spread to rivals", reported that the prices of bonds issued by other water companies have fallen, while in the *Financial Times* (April 8) Frédéric Blanc-Brude argued that the 'capital asset pricing model' used by investors, based on "the expected return of 'the market' and how much this company correlates with it", is wrong.

### Overflows

Meanwhile, on March 31 it was reported that the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race on the Thames - a long-standing flagship sporting event - had been affected by untreated sewage in the river.<sup>5</sup> This is part of the same story: the water companies are demanding large price rises to allow them to pay for infrastructure improvements, supposedly necessitated by excessive rain; *The Times* has been campaigning



Thames Water HQ: on the banks of a horribly polluted river

about river pollution since February 2023.<sup>6</sup> The companies explain the problem by 'extreme weather'. A couple of years ago the story was one of 'insufficient rain'; this year it is one of 'excessive rain'.

It is unlikely that either is true; we are probably merely concerned with the public relations people exploiting global warming stories (mainly affecting countries other than the UK) as an excuse. Analogously, the expression, 'fatbergs' (first used in 2008), may have been invented to explain sewer blockages caused by wet-wipes and other 'luxury' toilet papers, as instead being caused by people putting cooking fats down the drain, which had been done for many years before the 'fatberg' problem emerged. The issue was that the water companies were unwilling to confront the commercial interests of the producers of wet-wipes, and so on, so 'spun' the problem as being one of households' and small businesses' behaviour instead.

In the case of sewage overflows, the high variability of rainfall in Britain is not a novelty of recent global warming. Hence, to consider the likely causes, we need to look at what has happened in the *recent* past. Sewer blockages due to 'fatbergs' are clearly an element of the problem. A second element, mentioned by *The Times*, is agricultural run-off due to excessively intense agriculture (factory farms, and so on). This, in turn, has been incentivised by the forms of agricultural subsidies under the EU, and so far continued after Brexit, since the new scheme is only just coming into force.<sup>7</sup>

A third element is the structure of incentives affecting housing developments. These steer developers towards 'greenfield' sites not previously built on, where upmarket housing can be built cheaply and sold at high prices.<sup>8</sup> The result is increased pressure on drainage systems, both from surface water run-off and from increased sewage in areas not previously covered by high-intensity sewers. Already by 2019 this was the subject of EU legislation, which the UK government decided to relax in August 2023.<sup>9</sup>

It is tempting to read this as a story simply of capitalist greed, and the solution to be simply renationalisation. This is the line to be found in the *Morning Star* and *Solidarity* (the latter adding "under democratic and workers' control").<sup>10</sup> *The Socialist* calls for 'socialist' renationalisation, meaning "with compensation paid only on the basis of proven need and placing it under democratic workers' control and management, so that decisions on investment are made by accountable representatives of workers and service users."<sup>11</sup> *The Communist* calls for renationalisation without compensation and under workers' control, and "Expropriate the super-rich to invest in quality infrastructure and utilities!"<sup>12</sup>

### More greed

*Socialist Worker* has not commented this week, but last December Yuri Prasad had mainly a 'greed' story, but offered a more extended 'green' answer, arguing for new water-saving technologies, changes in crops, and so on, as well as renationalisation.<sup>13</sup> Whatever the merits of this 'green' approach, it addresses last year's 'insufficient rain' story rather than 2024's 'too much rain'.

The problem is addressed by green-market economist Sir Dieter Helm in a recent blog post.<sup>14</sup> Suppose we do renationalise the water industry - even without compensation. (Helm, obviously, does not suppose it). It would produce the results of the short-lived Truss government's mini-budget: that is, an immediate general crisis of government finances. Equally, suppose nationalisation under workers' control (I leave aside for the moment 'democratic' control).

It will still be true, *first*, that major capital investment is still required to replace 19th century water and sewerage infrastructure - that is Helm's point. *Second*, raising these costs by increasing charges to domestic consumers (Thames Water is seeking 56% price rises by 2030<sup>15</sup>) can only hope to progress what is needed at a snail's pace (meaning that episodic supply failures and sewage pollution will continue nearly unabated for the next hundred or so years). The

funds have to come from outside the industry.

The current regime of privatisation was created in the belief (probably) that privatisation would attract real capital investment from private sources.<sup>16</sup> But the infrastructure companies have to compete to attract capital with financial engineering operations, whose capital gains are taxed at rates radically below the rates affecting income. They are therefore *forced* to offer returns that are unrealistically high relative to the actual available income from supplying water, maintaining sewage services, and so on. These required rates of return drive the financial engineering scams that have affected the water industry - but also all the other privatised utilities.

In this sense *The Communist* is right to propose, "Expropriate the super-rich". The problem is that this idea is completely illusory without overthrowing the free movement of capital in general (the assets of the super-rich are largely either mobile, or outside UK control). The same applies to *Solidarity's* long-running slogan, 'Tax the rich'. The top 1% already pay 30% of UK tax revenue.<sup>17</sup>

The 'wealth' of 'the rich', moreover, is largely a matter of flows of income into the UK arising from the financial operations of the City of London and related legal, accountancy, and so on, services. These flows are attracted into the City by its character as a semi-offshore jurisdiction and the UK as a low-tax, low-regulation location (relative to other 'developed capitalist' countries, including the USA). 'Tax the rich' would cut off these flows and immediately pose for a 'socialist' Britain the problem of how to pay for the 46% of food eaten here that is imported.

What is posed is the question of planning *in natura* - planning for material outcomes, as opposed to tinkering with market incentives. And this, in turn, poses the necessity for common action at a *continental* level. The working class could take *Europe* out of the regime of capitalism. The various 'nationalisation' slogans, in contrast, reflect the commitment of both the *Morning Star*, and the *soi-disant* Trotskyists, to 'socialism in a single country'.

### Information

*Third*, if what I have suggested above about the causes of the recent development of sewage pollution is right, solving the problem will also require at least regulatory prohibition of the sale of sewer-blocking hygiene products, and radical reform of the incentive structures affecting both agriculture and housing development.

Hence the problem with nationalisation "under workers' control". We do need to fight for workers' control - not just in the water industry, but generally. The point is well made by Robert Schlosser: rational, collective economic decision-making requires the input of all the workers, with all their specialist knowledge of actual production, not the speculative ideas of leftist 'cadres'.<sup>18</sup> But solving the problems of the water industry cannot be done on the basis of the resources, information or regulatory powers of the water industry itself. It requires planning on the scale of *general* social resources.

Further, is 'what I have suggested above' right? I flag this point because

what I have suggested about the causes of the sewage overflow problem is *conjectural*. It *has to be* conjectural, because the public information available about the issue is radically dominated by spin operations in the interest of the water companies themselves, and a variety of other businesses. The problem, then, is that getting to 'democratic workers' control' or 'democratic control' requires overcoming the control of information possessed by the capitalists, their states, and their political agents, including the labour bureaucracy.

As constitutional measures that implies, for example, banning the funding of news media by commercial advertising; declaring that payments to lobbyists for private access to government officials and elected representatives amount to bribes; imposing a scale-fees regime on the legal profession and radically reducing judicial review. In terms of what could be done *immediately*, what is posed is the question of a mass Communist Party as an alternative political voice that could support an actually independent workers' media.

Getting political democracy *generally* is necessary to 'democratic workers' control' as much as to 'democratic control'. The crisis in the privatised water industry - and it probably has now reached the point of crisis, rather than merely chronic problems - poses this particularly obviously ●

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USA

# Two-party dictatorship

Third parties face a whole series of increasingly impossible hurdles. Daniel Lazare looks at how both Republicans and Democrats oppose democracy

**J**oe Biden claims to be defending democracy against the ravages of Donald Trump and his 'Make America Great Again' movement. But he is really undermining it.

The latest example of the misnamed Democratic Party's war on democracy involves a third-party presidential bid mounted by Robert F Kennedy Jr - the 70-year-old son of Bobby Kennedy, whose own presidential campaign was cut short by assassination in 1968.

RFK Jr is an odd ball who gives new meaning the word, 'eclectic', by borrowing from the left and right - although these days it is mostly the latter. He is anti-vaccine, he believes in quack cures for Covid, he is pro-Zionist, and he believes that Nato expansionism triggered Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Most polls have him at around 12% or 13% - figures that will presumably fall, once the presidential election enters into the home stretch. But for now he is keeping Democrats up at night, worrying that he will steal away just enough votes to deprive Biden of victory in a half-dozen battleground states.

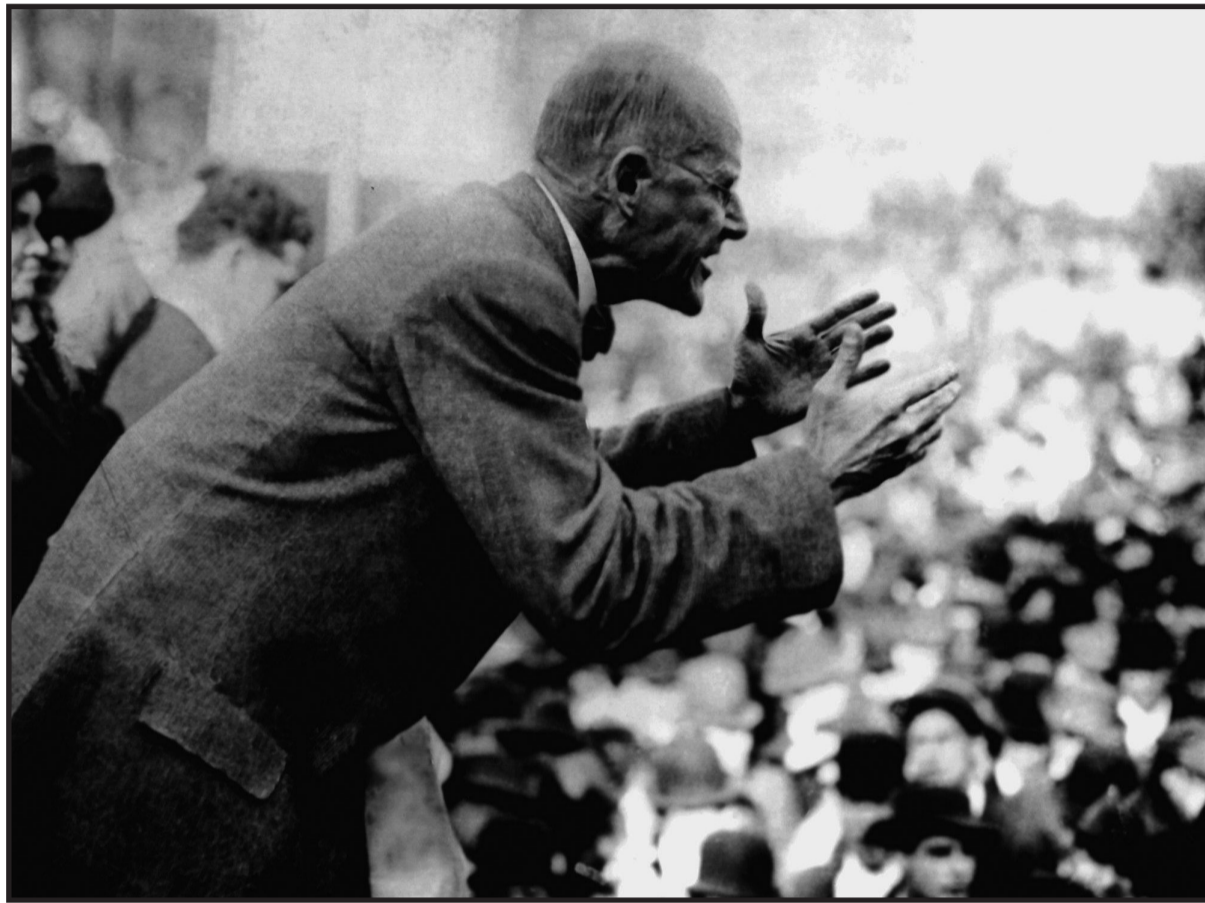
Their solution is to use an abundance of legal tricks - either to force him off the ballot or require him to spend so much money in litigation that he will have little left over to mount a campaign. Instead of allowing Americans to vote for the candidate of their choice, the Democrats' aim is to allow them to vote only for a candidate vetted and approved by a self-serving political establishment.

Such a strategy is only possible in a country with some of the most onerous voting laws on the books. All first-past-the-post voting systems encourage two-party duopolies by sending a clear and unmistakable message that, if people insist on voting for the party they like most, they could all too well end up propelling the party they like least across the finish line. Vote for a militant leftist, in other words, and the chances are that he or she will take so many votes away from a wishy-washy centrist that a conservative will end up slipping through. This is how winner-take-all systems work - they subtly, but powerfully, tilt the political field toward the status quo.

But the US is even worse. One reason is a complicated political structure that requires new parties to campaign not in one governing institution, but in several: ie, the House of Representatives, the Senate, the presidency, and perhaps state government too. But the United States has also installed a dense thicket of rules and regulations, whose purpose is to make any campaigning difficult. A new party can draw up a programme, sign up members and enlist candidates. But, since getting on the ballot can cost millions for lawyers and poll workers, that is often where it ends. They can go no further because a suffocating legal system will not let them.

## Control

The goal is obvious: to ensure bourgeois control. The process began around 1900, when new parties began to proliferate. The Socialist Party was the most prominent. It fielded hundreds of candidates for Congress and state and local offices, while its standard bearer, Eugene V Debs, racked up 902,000 votes in the 1912 presidential election and 914,000 in 1920, while serving a federal prison sentence for sedition. Other third parties also made inroads, such as Teddy Roosevelt's Bull Moose party in 1912 and Robert



Eugene Debs in 1918: dared to challenge two-party rule and landed in jail

LaFollette's Progressives in 1924. The Communist Party fielded some 1,200 candidates at all levels in 1932.

It was too much for a capitalist class reeling from the depression. When a black communist named Claude Lightfoot garnered 33,000 votes in a state legislative race in Chicago, the state responded not only by upping the number of signatures needed to qualify from 1,000 to 25,000, but by requiring the CP to obtain them in scores of rural counties, where the party was weak. Communists did their best to meet the new requirements, but fell short in five successive state-wide elections and were thus shut out.

Faced with a similar communist 'threat', Florida came up with another trick: bar any party from running that had not won at least 30% of the state vote in the previous two presidential elections. Alarmed by communist organising in the coalfields, West Virginia also hiked the number of signatures needed to qualify - in its case by a factor of seven. In 1937, California increased the number tenfold after the CP shocked the bourgeois establishment by fielding 35 candidates for Congress and the state legislature. Georgia and Ohio imposed draconian restrictions in the 1940s, while Missouri, Wyoming, Maryland and other states did so in the 1950s and after. Franklin D Roosevelt's New Deal - supposedly an agent of democratic transformation - did nothing to halt such tendencies. Neither did the Supreme Court despite occasional decisions in favour of beleaguered third parties.<sup>1</sup> The more post-war capitalism expanded, the more the political field needed to contract.

The result is that, where a few thousand signatures once sufficed, it now takes 675,000 to run nationwide, according to one advocacy group.<sup>2</sup> The Socialist Equality Party, which is fielding Joseph Kishore and Jerry White for president and vice-president, estimates that the real number is more like 1.5 million in case of legal challenges. "In contrast," the SEP notes, "getting on the ballot nationally in Russia - constantly denounced by the American media as the most

authoritarian and undemocratic country in the world - requires the gathering of 100,000 signatures."<sup>3</sup>

By that standard, America is roughly 15 times more undemocratic than Kremlin-type evil-doers. Moreover, the US political structure does not just hobble upstart parties: it also provides mainstream opponents with a wealth of opportunities to attack and harass. They can scrutinise third-party signatures for invalid addresses or other discrepancies. They can challenge whether a candidate is a *bona fide* resident of the district he/she is running in (US election law generally requires a politician to live in the state or district in which he/she is seeking office). They can scrutinise campaign donations to make sure all I's are dotted and T's crossed in that respect as well.

The result is lawyers, lawyers, lawyers, as new parties traipse from one courtroom or election board to another, trying to explain why they deserve a place on the ballot next to 'real' parties like the 'Repocrats'.

Americans have little idea how far behind international standards they have fallen. In Britain, all a candidate needs to stand for parliament is 10 signatures in a given constituency plus a £500 deposit, to be returned if he or she gets five percent of the vote. Any party with 250 signed-up members can run in all 338 House of Commons districts in Canada, while any party with 500 can run in all House of Representatives races in Australia. (Individual candidates must also deposit A\$2,000, refundable if he or she racks up at least four percent.) Ireland, Finland, Denmark and Germany require no more than 250 signatures, while Austria and Belgium require up to 500 in larger districts. France and the Netherlands demand only paperwork. In 2006, the Council of Europe rebuked Belarus for requiring signatures greater than one percent of a district's voters - a standard that US states routinely flout.<sup>4</sup>

A spokesman for Jill Stein, who ran as the Green Party presidential nominee in 2012 and 2016 and is hoping to get the nod again in 2024, was bitter now that more Democratic

harassment is on the way. He said:

If this is the plan Democrats intend to use - to tie up third-party campaigns with trumped-up legalese or to change rules midstream, because they are afraid of losing voters to candidates who better represent their values and priorities - I don't know how that can be considered an exercise in democracy. The Democrats appear to want to kill democracy in order to save it.<sup>5</sup>

## Democracy

Quite right. So why is America such an outlier? One reason, of course, is that it is an oligarchy, in which the top 10% monopolises two-thirds of all wealth, according to the latest statistics.<sup>6</sup> Given the acute instability of such an arrangement, it is clear that the political establishment can tolerate democracy only in the most limited doses.

But another reason is constitutional. In an otherwise excellent article, *Jacobin* magazine, an arm of the Democratic Socialists of America, argued that third-party barriers have "nothing to do with the constitution or the founding fathers", since they postdate them by a century or more.<sup>7</sup> This is nonsense. The constitution has everything to do with it. However belatedly, third-party restrictions flow naturally from an 18th century document in which the word, 'democracy', nowhere appears.

To be sure, the new American system of government quickly gave rise to a novel political system, pitting Alexander Hamilton's Federalist Party against Thomas Jefferson's and James Madison's 'Democratic Republicans', as they were confusingly known. But, while such parties allowed for a high level of popular participation by the standards of the 1790s, they did not anticipate the mass parties pioneered by the Chartists and Social Democrats during the age of industrial capitalism and therefore failed to advance beyond an 1830s stage of development. When socialists tried to open the political system up

some 70 years later, Democratic and Republican leaders responded as they were all but programmed to do - which was to close ranks against the newcomers and shut them out.

If Madison, the Virginia planter who served as the US constitution's chief architect, viewed 'faction' as synonymous with "violence ... instability, injustice and confusion" - not to mention "a rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property or for any other improper or wicked project" (to quote the famous 10th *Federalist Paper*) - then who were bourgeois party bosses to disagree? America had too much party democracy, as it was. It could stand no more.

Today, it can stand even less. Political parties are essentially voluntary associations in which citizens band together to fight for a common programme - socialism, 'animal rights', whatever. They come together, argue or split apart, as they try to persuade others to adopt their point of view. Given all that, Republicans and Democrats are not even parties at all. "No-one joins them, no-one pays dues to them and no-one attends monthly meetings to debate party policy or ideology," I pointed out four years ago. "Instead of programmes, they have 'platforms' that are mostly for show and which candidate are free to ignore."<sup>8</sup> Rather than free associations, they are little more than highly regulated mutual-aid societies for aspiring politicians, corporate donors and Hollywood celebrities.

Some 63% of Americans believe a major third party is needed to break up the two-party monopoly, according to a Gallup poll last September. The same number expressed "not too much or no confidence at all in the future of the US political system," according to another poll around the same time.<sup>9</sup> It is a grim judgment on the part of a population yearning to breathe free. Yet the Democratic response is to tighten the political dictatorship even more, so that anti-Trump voters will have no option other than to vote for a party that stands for inflation, wage stagnation, social decay and war.

Authoritarianism is closing in, as Trump defends the January 6 insurrectionists as good patriots gone slightly astray, and Democrats seek to narrow voter options. Indeed, with Kennedy complaining about the "harsh treatment" of "J6" rioters, he seems to be embracing a brand of authoritarianism all his own. US democracy is so depleted at this point that it can only come up with authoritarian solutions to the problems that ail it.

It is not a good sign, and Biden is making it worse ●

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## ELECTIONS

# Using every avenue

In what is almost certainly a general election year, **Jack Conrad** looks at the evolution, limits and possibilities of parliament. We don't have to settle for Sir Keir's Labour Party and the lesser evil

For communists parliamentary elections are a "secondary question".<sup>1</sup> Ranking different forms of the class struggle in terms of their importance, we would place routine economic struggles at the bottom and making revolution at the top. Elections come somewhere in the middle.

Tweedledum-Tweedledee elections, where voters are asked to choose who they might well consider to be the lesser evil, serve the ruling class to fool most of the people, most of the time. But, if we can get our act together, if we can form a real, as opposed to a fake, Communist Party, elections can become a very different matter. Instead of being of middling importance, they provide an antechamber to the very top. Hence we "consider it obligatory for the Communist Party" to stand candidates in elections, not least because we want to use "every avenue" to propagate our ideas, in the struggle to form the working class into a class for itself - a class that is ready to take state power.<sup>2</sup>

It has to be said that many on the left in Britain only pay lip service (if that) to this thoroughly orthodox Marxist approach to elections. Indeed, in the conditions which appertain today the 'election question' delineates the main divisions on the left. Many, maybe most, will automatically vote for Sir Keir Starmer's Labour Party, because that is the only realistic way to 'get the Tories out' (true) and because 'the worst Labour government is better than the best Tory government' (untrue). Meanwhile, they concentrate on what for them really matters: streets and strikes. Others will 'lend' their vote to the petty bourgeois Green Party, Plaid Cymru or the Scottish National Party, because they are more radical than Sir Keir's Labour (not that this sets the bar exactly high). Then there are those backing what amounts to Labour Party mark two projects: the various 'independent' exiles from Labour, but most notably Jeremy Corbyn's Peace and Justice Project and the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition. Yet, despite the absurd claims of this, that or the other confessional sect, there is, of course, no real Communist Party (certainly not the *Morning Star's* CPB, the Brarite CPGB (ML) or the Woods-Sewell Revolutionary Communist Party).

While at the moment we - that is, the Provo CPGB - are barred by the election commission from standing candidates under our own name, that was not so in the recent past. Either way, we consider it necessary - resources permitting, real opportunities beckoning, substantial progress happening - for a genuine Communist Party to stand candidates, including in direct competition with the Labour Party. To answer why we put building a mass CPGB and enhancing the political consciousness of the advanced part of the working class above who administers Britain, we can best begin by examining things historically.

It goes without saying that we are not interested in creating a rosy image of the past. No, for us historical experience is our movement's teacher. Learning from past events, including advances and setbacks, gives us a guide for current and future battles. As Franz Mehring put it in 1896, "The proletariat has the advantage over all other parties of being able to constantly draw new strength from



William Hogarth 'Canvassing for votes' from *The humours of an election* (1755)

the history of its own past, the better to wage its present-day struggles and attain the new world of the future."<sup>3</sup>

## Parliament

Let us begin with parliament itself.<sup>4</sup>

Like the French États Généraux, Sweden's Riksdag, the Landstände of Germany and the Spanish Cortes Generales, the English parliament had its origins in feudalism's endemic contradiction between what was later called the "divine right" of kings and the barons' "right of resistance".<sup>5</sup>

During the 13th century this "right of resistance" grew to the point where baronial magnates could, through concerted rebellion or collective pressure, require "their kings to promulgate acts of self-limitation".<sup>6</sup> The Charter of Ottokar in Syria, England's Great Charter, the Golden Bull in Hungary, the Pact of Koszyce in Poland all had the common purpose of 'restoring' the supposed 'ancient freedoms' of the nobles, and thus securing a greater share of the meagre surplus squeezed from the downtrodden peasants.

Dual power, though sealed and sanctified in meticulously drafted charters, proved inherently unstable. Between the irresistible barons and immovable kings there ran the ever-present threat of civil war. Both sets of heavily armoured thieves therefore had a pressing interest in courting the nascent class of merchants,

guildmasters and gentlemen farmers. The wealth and power of these *parvenus* had grown such that they deemed contributions to state coffers "aid that they had conceded rather than a tax imposed upon them".<sup>7</sup>

This swelling self-confidence fully explains the famous decision in 1265 by Simon de Montfort's baronial party to summon to council for the first time representatives from the cities, boroughs and *cinque ports* - namely "the more upright and discreet citizens or burgesses".<sup>8</sup> Ironically the passive entry of the burgesses into the political arena worked to the eventual advantage of the individual aspect of the state.

Ranking as first in the land, holding the reins of central power, recognised by the church, in charge of diplomacy, the treasury and the mint, the monarch was able to offer a more reliable social contract than could any selfish baronial outfit - especially after their leading families fought each other, often to the point of extinction, in the Wars of the Roses. The stage was set for the Tudor and then the Stuart autocracies, and their creation of a new, much tamer nobility.

Constitutionally, integrating the burgesses into the state and widening the political 'class' had immediate consequences. Crucially it meant the bifurcation of the king's council. One branch consolidated around itself executive functions through a

permanent salaried staff and meetings of privy counsellors and judges in the Star Chamber. The other evolved as a broad, usually annual, two-house parliament: the upper chamber of peers, the lower of commoners.

It hardly needs saying that this last-named house was a plutocratic affair. A world removed from 'one person, one vote', the House of Commons consisted of and represented rich and well connected squires and merchants organised in highly oligarchic and exclusive corporations. Labourers and peasants did not get a look in.<sup>9</sup> Lords, merchants, guildmasters and gentlemen farmers alike considered our ancestors fit only for toil, tithes and, if need be, the gibbet.

Despite its social base in the propertied classes, it will be understood that the feudal parliament had no right to direct policy, let alone the power to transform society. Criticism was tolerated - at least of the cringing variety. But the granting of extra tax demands, though expected, was sometimes withheld - the king wanted to fight wars, bestow generous gifts on courtiers and hangers-on, secure international alliances by marrying off sons and daughters. So the invention of parliament in medieval times was not the beginning of democracy that many modern historians would have us believe. This parliament had nothing to do with popular sovereignty - everything to do

with the manoeuvring between crown and barons.

However, while in most parts of Europe the representative institutions which grew up with feudalism tended to decline or disappear with feudalism's decay, in England it "only strengthened the position of the commons as the non-feudal part of parliament".<sup>10</sup>

The English Revolution, beginning in 1640, saw Charles Stuart parted with his head, the abolition of the Star Chamber and the founding of the Commonwealth, but failed to fundamentally transform the country. It was the compromise of 1688, the Glorious Revolution, that opened up the road for capitalist development and created the parliamentary monarchy. Today the 'king in parliament' is the sovereign power of the land. True, the monarch has largely been sidelined for everyday purposes, but the House of Commons and the House of Lords function as "major constitutional instruments".<sup>11</sup>

Throughout there were, of course, constant struggles from below: the 1381 Peasant's Revolt, the Lollards, Kett's rebellion, etc. The Levellers - a movement of the historically doomed lower middle classes - demanded freedom of religion, frequent convening of a new parliament and a wide electoral franchise. Their *Agreement of the people* (1647 and 1648) excluded Catholics, those who served Charles I... and wage-earners (about half the working population). Eduard Bernstein reckons that to have extended the franchise to labourers would, under the circumstances, "have strengthened the reactionary party".<sup>12</sup> A questionable proposition. The Levellers wanted a petty bourgeois parliament, not democracy (considered akin to a swear word by their most prominent leader, John Lilburne). Nonetheless, there would be elections every two years for all right and proper men over 21 years of age (women, naturally, went completely unconsidered).

Yet, though dominating the New Model Army, the Levellers were unable to match the power of Oliver Cromwell, the upper middle class grandees and wealthy merchants. Having refused to champion the interests of the broad mass of the population, even on paper, they had too narrow a social base. Their leaders were arrested, many executed and their mutinies were suppressed with relative ease. Either way, there can be little doubt that the *Agreement* greatly influenced the American Revolution, the London Corresponding Society and the People's Charter.

The 1838 People's Charter marked the arrival of the working class as a real force for itself and was based on these six points:

- A vote for every man aged 21 years and above, of sound mind, and not undergoing punishment for a crime.
- A secret ballot to protect the elector in the exercise of their vote.
- No property qualification for MPs, to allow the constituencies to return the man of their choice.
- Payment of MPs, enabling tradesmen, working men, or other persons of modest means to leave or interrupt their livelihood to attend to the interests of the nation.
- Equal constituencies, securing the same amount of representation for the same number of electors, instead of allowing less populous constituencies



to have as much or more weight than larger ones.

■ Annual parliamentary elections, thus presenting the most effectual check to bribery and intimidation, since no purse could buy a constituency under a system of universal manhood suffrage in every 12 months.

Though confined to reconstitution of the House of Commons, if won, especially by the physical force wing of Chartism, the implementation of these seemingly modest proposals, would have amounted to a social revolution. Engels wrote that the six points were “sufficient to overthrow the whole English constitution, Queen and Lords included”. Whereas for the radical bourgeoisie the six points were considered a final goal, a finishing point, for the proletariat, he writes, they were “a mere means to further ends. ‘Political power our means, social happiness our end’, is now the clearly formulated war-cry of the Chartists.”<sup>13</sup>

A House of Commons that champions the will not of the landed aristocracy and industrial capitalists, but the broad mass of the people, would quickly dispense with the House of Lords, the monarchy and go on to decisively deal with the bourgeoisie by taking up the tasks of socialism.

## Mystification

Establishment historians often boast that, apart from annual parliaments, all the points of the People’s Charter have been fully realised. That is undoubtedly true, indeed since 1928, when women were finally given the vote at the age of 21, something like 96% of those legally defined as adults have had that right. But, while this gives the appearance of majority rule, the essence of our parliamentary monarchy is no different from any other form of the bourgeois state, including abominations such as apartheid, fascist corporatism or a military junta.

Although in our society the ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas, this does not mean that there is no discontent. There most certainly is. Even in ‘normal’ times, times not characterised by economic and political crisis, huge numbers, surely the majority, are unhappy with their lives. Needs are never fully met. Low pay, price rises, long hours, sexual and racial discrimination, mass sackings, new tax burdens, war, pollution and global warming - all provoke movements which have the potential of going beyond the proscribed limits of bourgeois legality. But without their own party the working class is powerless to exert its will, let alone take up the tasks of socialism.

This is where the two-party system, with its ever-present alternative party of government ready in the wings, comes in.<sup>14</sup> As Lord Balfour, Tory prime minister over the years 1902-06, noted in his introduction to Walter Bagehot’s much quoted 1867 classic, *The English constitution*:

Our alternating cabinets, though belonging to different parties, have never differed about the foundations of society. And it is evident that our whole political machinery presupposes a people so fundamentally at one that they can safely afford to bicker; and so sure of their own moderation that they are not dangerously disturbed by the never-ending din of political conflict.<sup>15</sup>

Because of the two-party system, discontent can be safely syphoned off through the hope, and maybe the reality, of putting the alternative party into office. When that party forms a government, it does not, of course, mean the overthrow of the system and an end to its evils. All that happens is that the ideological veil changes

colour: the capitalist reality remains as before, as does the inevitable, ever-present danger of economic downturn and war.

Yes, since 1900, we have had the Labour Party. Its voter base is in the working class, it is constitutionally linked with the trade unions and it has a working class name. However, the Labour Party is politically a bourgeois party. To confirm that old thesis of Lenin’s have a quick look at Sir Keir’s front bench. It cannot be seriously disputed that, when it comes to their given portfolio, Rachel Reeves, David Lammy, Yvette Cooper and Wes Streeting are barely distinguishable from their Tory counterparts. Alike they are pro-business, pro-Nato and pro-monarchy.

Indeed, the extension of the voting rights to the point of universal suffrage has been used to considerable effect by the ruling class, its politicians and paid persuaders in academia, the media and the arts. Capitalist states - well, in the so-called west - ie, those countries at the top of the imperialist pyramid and its exploitative pecking order - call themselves democracies and, as compared with the regimes in China, Russia and Iran, they can easily claim, for good reasons, to be better places to live (an approach with its origins in the immediate aftermath of the October Revolution and which was taken to perfection during the cold war).

This ideology of ‘capitalism = democracy’ is widely accepted and serves wonderfully as a part of the dense thicket of mystification behind which the capitalist reality of the present-day state in Britain is concealed. Parliamentary elections and parliamentary votes are used to gain popular consent for what is, in fact, the rule of the many by the few. Meanwhile, despite the fact that the effective power of the civil service, the courts, army generals and MI5 far outweighs that of MPs, not least because of its own internal contradictions, big business, the mega rich, consider that money spent on lobbying, sponsoring, buying up, bribing even pretty obscure MPs is money well spent. Note, Sir Keir’s Labour Party now receives more in donations from high-net-worth individuals than from rank-and-file members or affiliated trade unions. Golden chains which guarantee that the Labour Party remains a loyal servant of capital, not labour.

First and foremost, however, parliament is a performance space, a talking shop, a sham. Effective power lies elsewhere ... in the cabinet, in the civil service, in the army top brass, in the boardrooms, in the stock exchange. Understandably then, William Morris thought a fitting fate for Charles Barry’s rather fine building would be to serve as a “dung market”.<sup>16</sup> Although most people take some interest in general elections to its lower chamber and even in the gladiatorial exchanges which characterise PMQs and set-piece debates, parliament does not empower the masses, that is for sure. Who “owns and controls the means of production is worth any number of general elections”.<sup>17</sup> Marx was absolutely right then when he said that bourgeois democracy, an oxymoron, gives the mass of people the opportunity to decide “once in three or six years which member of the ruling class was to misrepresent” them.<sup>18</sup>

## Civil war

The state is, as Marx argued, an organ of class rule, consisting of “special” bodies of people: ie, the armed forces, prisons, bureaucracy ... normally fronted nowadays by an elected chamber. The state exists for the suppression of one class by another and operates through legalising, moderating and organising the struggle of one class against another.

Arising when and insofar as class antagonisms cannot be reconciled, the very existence of the state proves that class antagonisms are irreconcilable.

Before and after universal suffrage, the history of Britain shows there has existed a permanent, undeclared and incipient civil war in this country. For example, following the French Revolution, soldiers were barracked in every strategic industrial city and town. They were there not to save us from possible invasion, but to guard against possible insurrection. One hundred and fifty years later, Field Marshall Lord Carver owned up, in a rare act of official honesty, that until just before World War II the “army saw its main function as being to maintain law and order at home and regarded the fighting of foreign wars as its secondary role”.<sup>19</sup>

As shown by leaks from army manuals, little changed after World War II. Marked “restricted” on the front cover, the MoD’s *Land operations*, Vol 3 - *Counterrevolutionary operations*, part 3: *Counterinsurgency* (1970), provides a chilling insight into the extent to which the army has been trained to deal with “civil disturbances resulting from labour disputes, racial and religious antagonism and tension of social unrest which savour revolt or even rebellion”. In the event of uncontrollable social unrest the military would join the police and civil authorities in a “triumvirate”.

It would follow these six guidelines to prevent a successful revolution: “a. the passing of emergency regulations to facilitate the conduct of a national campaign; b. various political, social and economic measures designed to gain popular support and counter or surpass anything offered by the insurgents; c. the setting up of an effective organisation for joint civil and military control at all levels; d. the forming of an effective, integrated and nationwide intelligence organisation, without which military operations can never be successful; e. the strengthening of indigenous police and armed forces, so that their loyalty is beyond question and their work effective - this is often easier said than done; f. control measures designed to isolate the insurgents from popular control.”<sup>20</sup>

Brigadier Frank Kitson’s 1971 opus on civil unrest was to all intents and purposes a condensed version of the army’s counterrevolutionary plans. Written against a background of rising industrial militancy, economic stagnation and a revolutionary situation in the Six Counties, his infamous *Low intensity operations* was an attempt to garner middle class support for army action against “subversion”. Revealingly, by “subversion” he means “all illegal measures short of the use of armed force”, “political and economic pressure ... strikes, protest marches, and propaganda ... taken by one section of the people of a country to overthrow those governing the country at the time, or to force them to do things which they do not want to do”.<sup>21</sup>

Between the army, as a line of last resort, and the House of Commons, as the first line of defence, the bourgeoisie has a minefield of other establishment institutions, laws and traditions in place to protect its privileges. The House of Lords, the courts, the civil service, the Bank of England, the mass media, prisons, MI5 and the police are all available to ‘check and balance’ any democratic right. Moreover, the unwritten British constitution gives the perfect legal device to quickly change form. Using its prerogative powers, the crown can dismiss any government and dissolve any parliament at any time.<sup>22</sup>

After all, Britain is a monarchical state.<sup>23</sup> Cabinet ministers, MPs, members of the armed forces, the police, the judiciary - all swear oaths of loyalty to the crown rather

than the elected government or the people. That is why cabinet ministers constitutionally derive their authority from being appointed to the crown’s privy council, not from being leaders of the majority party in the House of Commons.

Frankly, had Jeremy Corbyn led the Labour Party to a stunning electoral victory in December 2019 - highly unlikely, true - he would have fallen at the first hurdle. The Parliamentary Labour Party, dominated as it was by the right, was hardly likely to agree a vote of confidence in him. Therefore he would not have been invited to Buckingham Palace to form a government. Even if the privy council had thought things too dangerous to choose any other prime minister, a counterrevolutionary storm would have followed: endless obstruction and delay by the House of Lords, a run on the pound, wall-to-wall media lies, army generals refusing to obey orders, MI5 black ops - all coordinated by American “pushback”.

Of course, the form through which the bourgeoisie chooses or is forced to rule is not crucial. What fundamentally concerns us is the fact that because of capitalism the mass of the population, being wage slaves, live in permanent dissatisfaction, while a tiny minority grows fabulously rich through the exploitation of the majority’s labour-power. That does not mean we are indifferent when it comes to demands for the abolition of the monarchy, the House of Lords and the introduction of proportional representation. Far from it.

Our purpose, though, in making such demands is not to modernise Britain, to complete the bourgeois revolution or some such nonsense - no, it is to take forward the struggle of the working class into the realms of high politics, in preparation for the “critical moment, the decisive combat”<sup>24</sup> of taking state power: the salient from where alone we can expropriate the expropriators. That is exactly what our electoral work should be designed to achieve.

## Revolutionary

There is, therefore, the possibility - the aim, surely - of winning not merely a House of Commons majority, but a clear majority of votes. Because we do not suffer from that incurable reformist malady, parliamentary cretinism, we would expect the counterrevolutionary storm, a civil war. Communists would respond by threatening a *revolutionary* storm: mobilise the popular militia, split the standing army, disband the police and the secret state, abolish the monarchy and the House of Lords, nationalise the commanding heights of the economy and, above all, reach out to Europe, America and beyond to make our revolution an international revolution.

Though it might enrage some latter-day ‘revolutionary communist’ boycottists, Marx and Engels were very much of that view.<sup>25</sup> They too considered communist electoral work obligatory. Indeed in his introduction to Marx’s *Civil war in France*, Engels praised in the highest terms the “astounding growth” in the votes gained by the revolutionary workers’ party in Germany, the Social Democratic Party, after universal male suffrage was granted by Bismarck in 1866.

Yes, Bismarck’s democracy was a complete sham; however, so successful was the SDP’s electoral work that “the bourgeoisie and the government came to be much more afraid of the legal than of the illegal action of the workers’ party, of the results of elections than those of rebellion”. Thus, for Engels, the way the SDP had made use of universal

suffrage to steadily increase its strength had “supplied their comrades in all countries with a new weapon, and one of the most potent, when they showed them how to make use of universal suffrage”.<sup>26</sup> ●

## Notes

1. J Conrad *In the enemy camp* London 1993, p7. This little pamphlet should be read as a very flawed piece of writing - it is often hopelessly leftist. The only excuse I can give is the attempt to establish firm red lines against a pervasive background of ‘official communist’, left Labour and Militant Tendency soggy reformism. Despite that *In the enemy camp* does provide a useful record of our fielding four CPGB candidates in the 1992 general election and the historic background, not least in the early years of the CPGB.
2. J Conrad *Which road?* London 1991, p97.
3. en.internationalism.org/content/3076/contribution-history-revolutionary-movement-introduction-dutch-german-left.
4. Until the 12th century ‘parliament’ merely meant a ‘parley’ of anybody from kings to lovers.
5. M Bloch *Feudal society* Vol 2, London 1965, p452.
6. JC Holt *Magna Carta* Cambridge 1992, p26.
7. R Butt *A history of parliament* London 1989, p111.
8. *Ibid* p110.
9. There were a few places in Europe - Sweden, Denmark, West Friesland and the Tyrol - where the peasants did gain admittance to parliament. But even in these countries, where the traditions of primitive communism still lingered and the state was weak, “election was by a peasant elite” (AR Myers *Parliaments and estates in Europe* London 1975, p26).
10. AL Morton *A people’s history of England* London 1974, p101.
11. I Jennings *The queen’s government* Harmondsworth 1965, p67.
12. E Bernstein *Cromwell and communism* London 1930, p87. A gloomy assessment echoed by AL Morton: “Their exclusion from the franchise was ... regarded as necessary to prevent employers from having undue influence, and there is reason to think that this judgement was correct” (AL Morton *A people’s history of England* London 1974, p253).
13. K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 4, London 1975, pp518, 524.
14. The “greatest contribution of the 19th century to the art of government”, said Harvard professor Lowell in his “pre-1914 treatise” on the British constitution, was “that of a party out of power which is recognised as perfectly loyal to the institutions of the state and ready to come into office without a shock to the political traditions of the nation” (J Gollan *The British political system* London 1954, pp19-20).
15. W Bagehot *The English constitution* Oxford 1974, ppxxiii, xxiv.
16. W Morris *News from nowhere* London 1973, p257.
17. J Conrad *Which road?* London 1991, p8. Sometimes translated as who will “represent and oppress” them in parliament.
18. Interview by Desmond Wilcox, ‘Profile’, BBC TV, August 14 1979, as paraphrased by Tony Benn *Arguments for democracy* London 1982, p7.
19. Extracts were published in *Time Out* January 10 1975.
20. F Kitson *Low intensity operations* London 1971, p3.
21. In 1975 Australia’s Labour prime minister, Gough Whitlam, was dismissed by the queen’s representative, the governor general.
22. Until 1977 the Central Office of Information described the UK as a “monarchical state”. That is why Sir Ivor Jennings writes that what is thought of as state property in this country is often in reality crown property, why income tax demands are sent on Her Majesty’s Service, why criminal prosecutions are made in the name of “The Queen”, and why there is no national flag nor anthem - only a union flag and a royal hymn (I Jennings *The queen’s government* Harmondsworth 1965 p32).
23. K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 27, London 1990, p522.
24. The main butt of Engels’ polemics on this question were the anarchists - then led by Mikhail Bakunin, who advocated abstention from all politics that did not have as its aim the “immediate and complete” liberation of the working class. Engels ridiculed such pseudo-revolutionary posturing. “At quiet times,” he said, “when the proletariat knows beforehand that at best it can get only a few representatives to parliament and have no chance whatever of winning a parliamentary majority, the workers may sometimes be made to believe that it is a great revolutionary action to sit out the election at home and, in general, not to attack the state in which they live and which oppresses them, but to attack the state as such, which exists nowhere and which accordingly cannot defend itself. This is a splendid way of behaving in a revolutionary manner, especially for people who lose heart easily” (Karl Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 23, London 1988, p583).
25. K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 27, London 1990, pp515-16.



## IRELAND



**Mary Lou McDonald and Michelle O'Neill: one wants to be prime minister of Ireland, the other is already first minister in Northern Ireland alongside far-right Democratic Unionist Party deputy**

# Strengthen those red lines

Left groups are arguing about the class nature of a possible Sinn Féin-led government. Even about joining as coalition partners and getting the perks and privileges of junior ministers. **Anne McShane** calls for unity around tried and tested principles, not diplomatic fudges

**L**eo Varadkar was replaced as Taoiseach soon after he returned from the traditional St Patrick's Day trip to America. Not that Simon Harris should be expected to make any difference, certainly not when it comes to Ireland raising its diplomatic voice against the US, which is arming Israel to the teeth, in what is a genocidal war in Gaza.

This very much goes against the grain of public opinion. In Ireland - as elsewhere, including, of course, Britain - many thousands march every week demanding that the government condemn the US for arming and backing the murderous Israeli state. Polls show 71% believing that Palestinians live under an apartheid system, and 79% say Israel is guilty of genocide.

Varadkar refused to boycott the White House St Patrick's Day shindig, promising instead to make a difference by raising the "concerns of the Irish people on the shocking crisis in Gaza". And it is true that in his fawning speech to the assembled throng he did plead for a ceasefire. He also called for Israel to desist from entering Rafah. In other words

he tamely echoed current US policy statements, which create a little bit of distance that might allow Biden to escape charges that he is complicit in genocide. What he did not do, what he could not do was to call upon Biden to stop arming Israel. As he admitted in a later press briefing, the president had made it crystal-clear to him that there would be no halt to the export of weapons.

Indeed coinciding with his Washington visit, the US announced its latest batch of arms deliveries: more than 1,800 MK84 2,000lb bombs and 500 MK82 500lb bombs, as well as 25 F35A stealth jets. The 2,000lb bombs, are, of course, bunker busters which have caused mass casualties in Gaza.

Varadkar chastised those like former Irish president, now professional peace monger, Mary Robinson, who had insisted he make a demand for an arms halt. Apparently, she needs "to spend a bit more time reading foreign policy". Yet it was Varadkar himself who claimed that the Irish government could have an impact in US policy. But St Patrick's Day is an opportunity for Biden

to parade his Irish heritage and keep Irish Americans on side for the forthcoming presidential run off with Donald Trump. The notion that Biden really gives a damn about the views of Ireland's Taoiseach shows an elementary failure to grasp basic global geopolitical realities.

Back home, the Fine Gael/Fianna Fáil government was badly damaged by the decisive defeat of its two-part referendum on the family and the place of women within the constitution, cynically held on March 8. The first part of the proposal was to widen the definition of 'family' to relationships outside marriage. In my view this lost mainly because of the unpopularity of the linked second proposal, which was to remove the woman as the mainstay within the home, while continuing to place all responsibility for care on the family as a whole. The entire family would give "to society a support without which a common good cannot be achieved" and which the state would "strive" to support.

So 'modernisation' of the constitution would bring no benefits

- only additional burdens. Carers' organisations and campaigners for disabled rights protested at this indignity and stated they would call for a 'no' vote to the second part of the referendum. Indeed the Socialist Party in Ireland changed its position to a 'yes, no' vote after an initial 'yes, yes'. Not so People Before Profit (PBP), which continued to support the proposals in their entirety despite dismissing the second part as a sop.

### Left coalition

Even without the recent difficulties, the governing parties have been steadily slipping down the polls since the last election in 2020. Then FG won 20.9% of the vote, FF 22.2%. Sinn Féin won 24.5%, making it the largest party. But the two establishment parties refused to go into coalition with it.

PBP, which received 2.6% in coalition with Solidarity (Socialist Party in Ireland), proposed talks on a left government, and urged left-of-centre parties to get involved. Richard Boyd Barrett, its leading TD, berated the Labour Party for its reluctance to take up the challenge, stating that "to me it is a bit bizarre that, for the first

**Richard Boyd Barrett:**  
**craving to be a junior**  
**minister in a capitalist**  
**government**





time, there is actually a possibility of the leftwing government that people who would describe themselves as left have taken themselves off the pitch". He insisted that "Sinn Féin and ourselves are serious about this. We also want to open up discussions with others on the left."<sup>1</sup>

A statement on the PBP website on April 9 2020, confirmed that

Deputy Boyd Barrett urged all parties and independents of the left to renew their efforts to achieve a left government in Ireland and avoid repeating mistakes of the past by propping up an FG/FF government.<sup>2</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Boyd Barrett and the PBP failed in their attempts to put together a 'left government', and FF and FG went into coalition with the Green Party in June 2020.

I have written on a number of occasions about what a disaster a coalition led by SF would be for the Irish left. A SF-led government would be a bourgeois government. The Labour Party has participated in a whole series of governing coalitions and has proved itself to be a fierce enemy of our class. Urging such a party into a SF-led government as a junior partner is pure, unadulterated ministerialism. But only by adding such components does a SF-led government add up.

It is disturbing that Boyd Barrett - on behalf of the PBP - has shown such eagerness to become a government minister (what portfolio does he crave? Employment? Environment? Enterprise?). I have been told by PBP comrades that my claims are unfair, and that Boyd Barrett was probably only opening talks and not giving commitments. But, unless he was being misquoted by PBP itself, it is undeniable that he wanted his party to enter a coalition government with SF. Of course, it is true PBP wanted commitments, but it was also prepared to make compromises. And the key compromise was actually the willingness to enter a bourgeois government!

The year after the election, the group, Rise, led by Paul Murphy TD, formally joined PBP. Rise had emerged from a three-way split in the Irish section of the Committee

for a Workers' International in 2019 which also produced the current Socialist Party in Ireland, with its TD, Mick Barry. The entry of Rise into PBP has had a welcome effect in producing some open debate in Rise's journal *Rupture*. Rise describes itself as Marxist, with a commitment to breaking the left from both reformism and sectarianism, and an emphasis on debate and democracy.

PBP itself has no journal, although there apparently has been some internal discussion around launching one. The Socialist Workers Network - PBP's majority faction led jointly by Kieran Allen and Boyd Barrett - has an online website, *Rebel News*, which describes itself as the voice of "a revolutionary socialist organisation and component part of the 32-county socialist party, People before Profit". It also has an occasional theoretical journal, *Irish Marxist Review*. You would be pushed to find any discussion in the SWN press, but *Rupture* at least provides a partial understanding of the internal differences.

### SP and Rise

An interesting debate has happened between the Socialist Party in Ireland and Rise since 2022. *Socialist Alternative*, the theoretical journal of the SPI, published an article by Kevin McLoughlin on the attitude socialists should have to a "so-called left government" with Sinn Féin. To begin with, he argued that there was no guarantee of such a coalition:

even if Sinn Féin is the clear winner of the next election, it remains entirely possible, and perhaps most likely, that it would form a government with one or other of the traditional rightwing establishment parties - most likely Fianna Fáil.<sup>3</sup>

He went on to say that SF

has a very developed political position and worked-out strategic approach, which is rooted in two main beliefs. One is their desire for power, and their notion that they can achieve improvements based on their ability to run the Irish capitalist economy and state better than Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. The other is their conviction that

a united Ireland would somehow magically transform the prospects of Irish capitalism and peoples' living standards.

McLoughlin refers to the historical debates in the Socialist (Second) International and argues:

The basic approach of socialists to capitalist governments has been clearly established ever since the debates in the Socialist International at the turn of the 20th century, when the revolutionaries, including James Connolly, opposed Alexandre Millerand joining the French cabinet. Essentially, socialists should not support, join or sow illusions in capitalist governments: instead they should focus on building up the power of the working class movement and the socialist alternative.

He goes on to argue that PBP has a contradictory position; it recognises that an SF government would be a capitalist government, yet it continues to include it as the key component of its perspectives. McLoughlin asserts:

Socialists should not in effect talk up Sinn Féin. When those on the left describe Sinn Féin as being on the left or characterise a government Sinn Féin may lead as a 'left government', that serves to endorse Sinn Féin to working class people.

Unlike me, McLoughlin does not believe that PBP really intends to join an SF-led government. Instead he offers excuses:

Perhaps it is calculating that after an election it can enthusiastically engage in negotiations, safe in the knowledge that, by bringing out some demands that will not be met, it can justifiably withdraw from the process at some point without any damage.

But we both agree that PBP will come under enormous pressure to follow through on their pledge, even if they do not achieve their demands.

### Contradictory

The second piece from *Socialist Alternative* is a review by Eddie McCabe of the PBP pamphlet, *The case for a left government - getting rid of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael*, which I have also reviewed.<sup>4</sup> McCabe argues that the analysis it sets out "is not fully coherent, in large measure because of its contradictory, but on the whole mistaken, view of what Sinn Féin is and where it's heading." While PBP recognises how much to the right SF has shifted,

... it just seems unwilling to accept the full import of what this means for the prospect of a genuinely left government. And this refusal is a by-product of PBP's more fundamental illusion that Sinn Féin is more radical than it really is, which is linked to its mistaken belief that nationalism is more progressive than it really is.

He continues:

Not only has Sinn Féin given no indication that it favours such a radical programme: it has explicitly and repeatedly explained that it is opposed to anything resembling such a radical programme. Yet PBP continues to speak of and argue for a left government led by Sinn Féin as if this wasn't the case.

He refers to the commitment given in the pamphlet - which echoes the one given in 2020 - that

In the event of TDs being elected, we shall enter discussions with

Sinn Féin to form a left government without the two rightwing parties. We know that many of their own base support this and Sinn Féin should come under pressure to keep their word.<sup>5</sup>

McCabe concludes that what is needed is:

a skilful engagement with those workers and young people looking towards Sinn Féin, with a view to shifting them further left, beyond Sinn Féin. [This] can be carried out effectively without the elaborate, ultimately misleading and counterproductive, tactical ploys PBP seems wedded to.

Aprille Scully and Diarmuid Flood responded to McCabe's criticisms in an article in *Rupture* last month.<sup>6</sup> They admit that SF has become increasingly rightwing: "They have dropped many of their more leftwing positions - no longer opposing juryless courts, Nato or the neoliberal framework of the EU, and courting everyone from IBEC [For Irish Business] to the British royal family." I would add to that list its swing to the right on migration, with Mary-Lou McDonald promising to make deportations "more efficient".

But - and this is key to Flood's and Scully's argument - "while this is clear to those of us on the socialist left, we need to recognise that it is not yet clear to the vast majority of workers and young people who are hopeful that change is coming."

The two go on to discuss how the left should respond to the challenge of such illusions, rejecting the "sectarian" and the "opportunist" attitude. Instead we should adopt "an approach of harnessing creative illusions":

... instead of these twin dangers, we argue the socialist left has a complicated task of trying to harness these illusions. To mobilise this hope into a movement, while also intervening with positive proposals and demands which highlight the growing gap between the aims of SF voters and the actual plans of the SF leadership.

Their campaign is "for a 'left government' committed to breaking with capitalism and supported by a mass movement for socialist change". This would mean a programme that included "a fundamental restructuring of the housing system to end the rule of landlords and developers, complete separation of church and state, nationalisation of the banking and energy sector, and consistent anti-imperialism." They warn that "any government implementing such a programme would face opposition and sabotage from big business and the capitalist state, and would need 'people's assemblies' in workplaces and communities to organise resistance to this". The "committees could become the basis for "a radical new form of democracy" with "a different constitution designed to advance the interest of working people":

If elected, an SF government will be perceived as the 'left alternative' to FF and FG. We want to intervene as much as possible to demonstrate what a left government would

look like and make it clear that SF walked away from this.

A recent poll has SF down to 27.2% but still out in front of the big governing parties, with FF on 18.1% and FG on 20.2% (PBP/Solidarity has also dropped - to 1.7%). SF has responded to the drop in the polls by moving still further to the right on immigration. It fears losing votes among working class people who resent economic migrants and asylum seekers who compete for jobs, housing, education, health and other scarce resources. The government is setting the agenda on this, though, with plans to pass legislation to ensure Ireland is no longer a 'soft target'. So it is not just the far right that has stirred up xenophobia, but the main parties, including SF.

### What we need

It is hard to credit the idea that there exists widespread expectations that SF is busily readying itself to form a 'left government' - for example, like Leo Varadkar, SF president, Mary Lou McDonald, also refused to boycott the White House. It is inconceivable that a party which desperately wants to get into government, will snub the US, with its 970 transnational companies operating here, employing 378,000 workers directly and indirectly. It is far more likely that SF will bend to the US agenda, not the other way around.

I agree with McLoughlin and McCabe that PBP is actually creating illusions in SF, rather than dispelling them. There most certainly are profound differences within PBP. One wing under Richard Boyd Barrett hopes, prays for, government posts under a SF Taoiseach. The other hopes, prays, that such a thing will never happen, SF will never accept PBP's 'red lines'.

But I do not agree with McCabe that you need to have a "careful approach" to SF. This is what the *Iskra* editorial board, criticising Karl Kautsky's diplomacy in the Second International over Millerand joining a capitalist government, called a "rubber" formulation.<sup>7</sup> It is designed to blur, soften, bend 'red lines'.

Instead we should be hardening those 'red lines'. We should be openly warning about the class nature of a putative SF-led government. We should also be stating openly, frankly, that even entertaining the idea of supporting such a government, let alone joining such a government, is a betrayal of elementary socialist and working class principles ●

### Notes

1. www.rte.ie/news/politics/2020/0228/1118198-boyd-barrett-labour.
2. www.pbp.ie/left-government-needed-not-a-return-of-fg-ff.
3. www.socialistparty.ie/2022/12/socialists-a-sinn-fein-government.
4. McCabe's review can be found at www.socialistparty.ie/2023/08/sinn-fein-pbp-and-the-question-of-a-left-government-in-ireland. See also my article, "Chasing after cabinet seats" *Weekly Worker* April 24 2023: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1440/chasing-after-cabinet-seats.
5. www.pbp.ie/product/the-case-for-a-left-government-getting-rid-of-fianna-fail-and-fine-gael.
6. rupture.ie/articles/debating-left-government.
7. B Lewis 'A forgotten strategist' *Weekly Worker* June 8 2017: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1158/a-forgotten-strategist.

## Fighting fund

# So far, so good

Our readers and supporters will be pleased to hear that the good start to the *Weekly Worker* fighting fund for April that I reported a week ago has continued. In fact, whereas the first few days of the month produced £379 in donations, we received £479 in the last week - exactly £100 more!

So that means we now have £858 in the kitty towards our £2,250 target after 10 days. In other words, we've got rather more than a third of the way towards that target after exactly a third of the month!

The most generous contribution came from BK - the comrade who promised to match any monthly excess by exactly the same amount, up to a maximum of £500 in total! So, even though we were £6 short of £2,250 in March, he decided to contribute what was left of that £500 to boost our April fund. Because we had exceeded the target a few times since he made his initial commitment, there was only £84 remaining from that £500 - but he decided to top that up with an extra £16, taking his donation up to £100! What a man! Anyway, there were quite a few

other bank transfers or standing orders - thanks also to BB (£40, added to his annual subscription), FK (£39), BO (£35), CG and NH (£30 each), RG, DV and GD (each donating £25), JD and GD (£20), plus comrades IS, SM, LG and PM, who each chipped in with a tenner.

Then there was comrade MB, who added an extra £20 to his subscription cheque, and MH and GW (£10), as well as KA (£5), who each made their donations via PayPal, and finally comrade Hassan, who handed his usual fiver to one of our team.

All brilliant stuff - thanks to everyone! But now we really do need to maintain the pace for the rest of the month - please help us smash through that £2,250 barrier! Go to the web address below to check out the different ways you can help do that ●

**Robbie Rix**

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

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**ECONOMY**

# From magnificent to desperate

Share prices hit record highs, profits soar. Is another recession really off the agenda? **Michael Roberts** investigates present-day capitalism's inability to end stagnation and revolutionise productivity

**G**lobal stock markets have just recorded their best first-quarter performance in five years - buoyed by hopes of a soft economic landing in the US and enthusiasm about artificial intelligence. An index of worldwide stocks from the US finance company, MSCI, has gained 7.7% this year (the most since 2019), with stocks outperforming bonds by the biggest margin in any quarter since 2020.

This global surge has been helped mainly by the US stock index, the S&P 500, which closed at a record high on 22 separate occasions during the last quarter. The AI hype has fuelled the market's gains, with the major AI chip designer, Nvidia, adding more than \$1 trillion in market value - equivalent to about one fifth of the total gain for global stock markets this year! Nvidia's market capitalisation rose by about \$277 billion - roughly equivalent to the market value of every listed company in the Philippines, according to HSBC. And, as I have previously reported, there has been a 60% rally in bitcoin dollar prices.<sup>1</sup>

Euphoria in the US stock market is continuing, as investors are convinced that any US economic recession is off the agenda, and instead economic growth will accelerate this year and drive up global corporate profits. Are they right?

Finance capitalists usually measure the value of a company by the share price, divided by annual profits. If you add up all the shares issued by a company and multiply it by the share price, you get the 'market capitalisation' of the company - in other words, what the market thinks the company is worth. This 'market cap' can be 10, 20, 30 (or even more) times annual earnings. Another way of looking at it is to say that, if a company's market cap is 20 times earnings and you bought its shares, you would have to wait for 20 years of profits to double your investment. And we can get a sort of average price of all the company shares on a stock market by using a basket of share prices from a range of companies and index it. That gives us something like the S&P 500 stock index for the top 500 US companies in market capitalisation.

As company stock prices are based on the subjective judgements of financial investors, they can get way out of line with the actual profits made by companies and relative to the value of the assets (machinery, plant, technology, etc) that companies own. That is the current situation. We can measure that divergence in several ways.

The leftist economist, James Tobin (1918-2002), developed a measure of the relation between the 'market capitalisation' of the companies in the stock market (in this case the top 500 companies in the S&P 500 index) and divided that by the replacement value of tangible assets accumulated by those companies. The replacement value is the price that companies would have to pay to replace all the physical assets that they own (plant, equipment, etc). This is called Tobin's Q. The current Tobin's Q reveals that US company shares are valued way above the actual value of the assets that those companies own at a ratio of 1.48 compared to the historic average of 0.83.

Another measure of the relation between stock market prices and profits has been developed by the heterodox economist, Robert Shiller.



**Victor Dubreuil 'Barrels of money' c1897**

He measures the ratio of market capitalisation of corporate earnings (after inflation) averaged over 10 years. The Shiller measure tells a similar story to Tobin's Q. It shows a value well above the trend average measure of stock price to earnings, surpassing the 1929 level, with only 2000 being higher - just before the 'dot.com bust', when the great hopes of the internet revolution eventually did not deliver sufficiently higher real earnings and the tech bubble burst.

Another measure of the stock market's relation to reality is favoured by the legendary billionaire investor, Warren Buffett. Buffett monitors the market cap of the US stock market against real GDP - in other words, stock prices versus the real economy. The Buffett measure too is well above the historic-trend growth rate.

## Back into line

So currently the US and other stock markets are suspended in mid-air, well above real value, because investors hope and expect more real value to materialise. But, as I argued in 2012,

Whatever the fluctuation in stock prices, eventually the value of a company must be judged by investors for its ability to make profits. A company's stock price can get way out of line with the accumulated value of its stock of real assets or its earnings, but eventually the price will be dragged back into line.<sup>2</sup>

And there are already faultlines in this current market boom. In the US, the S&P 500 stock index (for the top 500 US companies) has been almost totally driven by the seven large social media, tech and chip companies - the so-called Magnificent Seven (Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta, Microsoft, Nvidia and Tesla). They now sport a market cap of around \$12 trillion. The market prices of the other 493 companies in the S&P index have hardly moved relative to earnings.

While analysts still make huge optimistic forecasts in 2024 for the

Magnificent Seven, earnings forecasts for the rest are dismal. In 2023, the Magnificent Seven grew sales by 15% year on year, leading to an earnings growth of 58%. In contrast, the remaining 493 stocks in the S&P 500 grew sales by only 3%, while earnings fell by 2%. So the market index depends on the Magnificent Seven sustaining these profit gains. Earnings growth estimates in 2024 for the Magnificent Seven are 20.8%, and the S&P 500 excluding them at only 6.7% respectively. And the Magnificent Seven are losing members: Apple (falling I-phone sales especially in China) and Tesla (falling EV sales as Chinese EVs take over).

Fundamentally, if US corporate profit growth slows (which is what is happening<sup>3</sup>) and interest rates on borrowing stay high, then the squeeze on stock prices will eventually lead to a reversal of the current market boom.

Investors have been expecting three cuts in the policy rate of the Federal Reserve this year, as inflation rates fall. But it seems that the 'last mile'<sup>4</sup> in achieving 'normal' inflation is now in jeopardy. What caused the inflationary spike back in 2021-23 was mainly due to energy and food prices. And both these are now turning back up again.

If inflation stays 'sticky' or even rises, then the Fed will hold off cutting its policy rate and borrowing costs will stay high. That will eat into net profits of most companies that are already struggling. The risk of bankruptcies among so-called 'zombie' companies will increase.

Up to now, debt servicing costs have stayed relatively low, because companies had loans or bonds issued with terms of several years when interest rates were very low. But, as more companies have to refinance, interest costs on their debt will rise.

Mainstream economists and media make much of rising public sector debt and the costs of servicing that debt. In the US, the cost to the budget will reach \$1 trillion and exceed spending on public services outside of social security and Medicare. The demand is that the public sector must reduce its

debt through higher taxes and more public spending cuts - a bleak prospect for American households.

But for the health of capitalist investment and production, it is the level of non-financial business debt that matters, not the public debt. US non-financial business debt is near all-time highs. Goldman Sachs economists estimate that \$790 billion of US corporate debt is set to mature in 2024, followed by \$1.07 trillion of debt maturing in 2025. That amounts to \$1.8 trillion of debt reaching maturity within the next two years. The average interest rate on corporate debt will likely rise to 4.3% in 2024 and 4.5% in 2025.

## Pound of flesh

And, talking of rising debt, the real crisis right now is among the countries of the global south. Over \$15 trillion was added to the global debt mountain last year, bringing the total to a new record high of \$313 trillion - up from \$210 trillion just a decade ago.

Emerging and developing economies have been the worst hit by previous debt crises, World Bank research shows.<sup>5</sup> To meet debt payments, at least 100 countries will have to reduce spending on health, education and social protection, the International Monetary Fund estimates.<sup>6</sup> Debt distress is when a country is unable to fulfil its financial obligations, such as repayments due on its debt. The IMF and World Bank reckon 60% of low-income countries are at or near this point.<sup>7</sup>

What is to be done to end the debt distress for these countries? The existing international agencies and mainstream economists offer two alternative strategies. The first is to 'restructure' the debt. That means poor governments unable to meet their debt obligations must negotiate with a host of creditors like the IMF, the World Bank, other governments, banks and hedge fund bond holders to get them to agree to a 'haircut' on what they are owed and/or agree to push out the times for repayments

and reduce the interest on loans. But there is no cancellation of the debt (often crippling and 'odious'<sup>8</sup>) - just renegotiation. And renegotiation is often blocked by private lenders, who demand their pound of flesh on time.

Take Zambia. Its government has finally reached an agreement with a steering committee of investors to restructure its three outstanding eurobonds, more than three years after defaulting.<sup>9</sup> Two initial agreements were rejected in November 2023 - once by the IMF and twice by the Official Creditor Committee. But there is no cancellation of the debt. Zambia still owes \$1.35 billion on one bond and will get a small reduction in the value of another, but this haircut is balanced by a steeper repayment schedule: \$498 million to be paid next year to the IMF; and \$578 million each year from 2026 to 2028.

The alternative 'solution' offered to countries in serious debt to foreigners is to cut public spending and raise taxes to obtain sufficient budget surpluses for the repayment of debt - in other words, fiscal austerity. Take Jamaica, a tiny island state. Recently, it has been heralded by mainstream economists as a great success story in paying down its debt, in 2023 halving its government debt-to-GDP ratio from 144% in 2012. We are told that this great achievement should be a guide to other poor countries on getting their house in order by running 'austere' budgets<sup>10</sup> - with surpluses much higher than even Greece was forced to run after the 'Troika crisis' of 2015.

It is claimed that tiny Jamaica (hardly a model for others, I think) achieved this fiscal improvement without any rise in unemployment. But even those presenting their glowing report on Jamaica's fiscal prudence had to admit that infrastructure spending was suppressed (ie, government investment forced down) and "we don't have a clear sense of whether a little less fiscal consolidation - if the additional funds had gone into things like education spending or health spending - might have been equally good or better".<sup>11</sup> Indeed. Actually, during the last 10 years, Jamaica's economy and living standards have stood still - as measured by per capita income. Hardly a poster for the austerity alternative.

For global south economies deep in unrepayable debt, the current choice is: rescheduling often on even harsher terms; or forced stagnation of the economy to pay back foreign creditors.

From the Magnificent Seven to the Desperate Hundred ●

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

## Notes

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ITALY

# Gaza and militarisation

Toby Abse reports on the links between Italian universities and Israel's war machine. Inevitably anyone who dares protest is branded an anti-Semite by the rightwing media

Although university and school students have been at the forefront of the pro-Palestinian solidarity demonstrations over the last six months, the wave of protests sweeping through Italian universities over the agreement between Italy and Israel on industrial, scientific and technological cooperation is not simply a response to the war in Gaza. It has to be understood in a wider context - the increasing militarisation of research in Italian universities.<sup>1</sup>

Given the persistent presentation by the rightwing, and much of the liberal, press of the student protests against the agreement, and the favourable response to such protests by the academic senates of a few institutions - most notably Italy's prestigious Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa,<sup>2</sup> and the University of Turin - as rabidly anti-Israeli, if not downright anti-Semitic, it is absolutely essential to spell out what the controversy over the agreement is really about.

Firstly, this controversy is not about some permanent blanket boycott of all relations between Italian and Israeli academics. Whatever view one takes about the merits or defects of the boycott, divestment and sanctions strategy advocated by many in the global Palestinian solidarity movement, this Italian opposition to the agreement is not really an academic boycott of the kind that in Britain led to a major row in the University and College Union seven years ago, but a response to particular projects of a scientific and technological nature that are either directly related to the military or have a 'dual use' character - in other words, a military as well as a civil application.

There should be no misunderstanding that this opposition to the agreement is in reality some call to ostracise Israeli historians, economists, sociologists, literary scholars and so forth - a misunderstanding actively and continuously promoted by Italian government ministers, that seems to have had a quite widespread impact in Israel itself. This can be seen in the negative view expressed by the Israeli anti-Zionist historian, Schlomo Sand, in a recent interview with *Il Manifesto*, in which he raised the standard objection to a blanket academic boycott: it would not help those Israeli circles most inclined to a pacific resolution of the conflict with the Palestinians, by which he obviously did not mean those engaged in work on drones, robots, artificial intelligence, etc.

Secondly, the controversy is closely related to opposition to the Italian arms industry - particularly to Leonardo, the largest Italian arms firm, in which the Italian government's ministry of economics and finance has a 30% stake.<sup>3</sup> Leonardo's turnover in 2022 was €15 billion, putting it in 13th place in the international table of arms manufacturers, as well as placing it at the very top of the EU league of armaments firms.<sup>4</sup> Since 2021, Leonardo has had what the Italians call a 'foundation' - in British terms a 'think tank' - called Med-Or. Med-Or is, as some readers may have guessed, an abbreviation of 'Medio Oriente' (Middle East).

Whilst Med-Or collaborates with the Tel-Aviv Institute for National Security Studies, its overseas connections are not confined to Israel. Its international council includes a former head of Saudi intelligence, the Egyptian former minister, Rachid Mohamed Rachid, and the Qatari, Khalid Al-Khater, as well as the



Palestinians march defiantly in immediate aftermath of October 7

former head of US intelligence, John Negroponte, and the former head of British intelligence, Sir Alex Younger. Equally important in the Italian context is that no less than 16 rectors (the Italian equivalent of vice-chancellors) of Italian universities are members of its 'scientific council'. Given that, to put it bluntly, Med-Or is merely an intellectual front for Leonardo - organising seminars on geopolitical questions - it is hardly surprising that in 2022 Leonardo itself declared it had made five important agreements with Italian universities, as well as actively collaborating with more than 90 others.

## Collaboration

If anybody doubts the closeness of Leonardo's relations with the Israelis, it should be emphasised that in February 2023 it signed two agreements - one with the Israel Innovation Authority and the other one with Ramot, a technology transfer company that promotes the intellectual property of the University of Tel Aviv. Leonardo has also been directly present in Israel for the last two years, through the company DRS Rada Technologies, created after Leonardo purchased the Israeli company, Rada Electronic Industries, specialising in radar for short-range defence and anti-drone technology. The relevance of all this to the current Gaza war should be self-evident, even if one presumes it is 'defending Israel against Hamas and Hezbollah attacks', rather than bombing civilians in Gaza, Lebanon or Syria.

Whilst the 2023 balance sheet of Leonardo indicated that it invested €2.2 billion in research and development and "product engineering" in collaboration with "90 universities and research centres in the world", it chose to make no declaration about how much of this sum was invested in Italian institutions. However, it is obvious that a very large proportion was given to Italian universities - probably for the most part the 16 whose rectors sit on the Med-Or 'scientific council'.

Needless to say, the rectors who have proved most hostile to student protests about Israel's war crimes in Gaza and Italian university links with the arms industry are those sitting on that 'scientific council', such as Rome's Antonella Polimeni, whose enthusiastic support for Giorgia Meloni was first shown by her hard-line response to anti-fascist protests by her students a couple of weeks after the neo-fascist premier was sworn in.

In view of the media emphasis on students allegedly intimidating university authorities, it is worth pointing out that nearly 2,000 Italian university lecturers and researchers sent a letter to foreign minister Antonio Tajani in February, pointing out that the agreement between Italy and Israel contained the danger of the Italian state financing projects with a "dual use". So the recent decisions by the academic senates of the Scuola Normale Superiore and Turin University were not just a response to protests by radical student collectives, but reflected the concern of some of those employed in the university sector. That is despite the fact that many of those teaching and researching in STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) are probably indifferent to the source of their funding, or the possible military application of their research projects. The ministry of education has reduced the funding allocated to basic research, whilst Leonardo gave 32 doctoral scholarships to 17 universities for projects related to AI, robotics and digital technologies in 2023.

The entourage of Meloni's under-secretary, Giovanbattista Fazzolari - a particularly diligent and enthusiastic member of her neo-fascist Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) party - has already evoked the spectre of the 1970s terrorist Brigade Rosse (Red Brigades) in relation to student protest, in a document described as an "informative note for internal use", setting the pace for defamation of the student movement. On March 26, the neo-fascist president of the Senate, Ignazio Benito La Russa, told the hard-right newspaper *La Verità*: "The Years of Lead started like this".<sup>5</sup> The degree of coordination in governing circles can be seen by the fact that on the very same day Anna Maria Bernini, the minister for universities, contacted both the head of the Italian police, Vittorio Pisani, and the minister of the interior, Matteo Piantedosi, propounding an equally hysterical assessment of the situation in Italian universities.

While the response to protests about the agreement by neo-fascists and hard-right newspapers like *Il Giornale*, *La Verità*, *Libero* and *Il Foglio* is no surprise, relatively liberal papers like the centre-right *Corriere della Sera* and the centre-left *La Repubblica* have been equally willing to treat any criticism of Israel as rabid anti-Semitism. They have attempted to mystify their readers by treating demands for a temporary

freeze - for the duration of the Gaza war - on particular scientific and technological projects with an actual or potential military application as if they were a blanket refusal to have any relationship with Israeli universities.

Sanctimonious remarks by Benini on the evening news of Italy's main state television channel, *Rai 1*, about the importance of scientific exchange and diplomacy - along with her proclamation that universities are 'neutral bodies' that should not take sides in a war - are about as hypocritical as one can get, given that the freeze is directed at military or 'dual use' research on drones, robots and the like.

Finally, one might observe that it is somewhat ironic that most of these governing and mainstream journalistic circles have for the last two years favoured, and attempted to implement, what amounts to a total cultural (and not just academic, let alone merely scientific and technological) boycott of anything Russian, including works by writers and composers, such as Dostoyevsky and Tchaikovsky - who, of course, died long before Vladimir Putin was born ●

## Notes

1. This phenomenon has been analysed at length in a recent book - Michele Lancione's *Università e Militarizzazione* (Milan 2023). Lancione teaches geography and political economy at the Politecnico di Torino - which, as he courageously points out, is one of the main partners in Italy's leading arms manufacturer, Leonardo.
2. It was modelled on the Parisian École Normale Supérieure, and has the same sort of role in relation to the rest of the Italian academic sector as Oxford and Cambridge in relation to other British universities.
3. Whilst it is, of course, true that Leonardo da Vinci had some interest in weapons systems, amongst a myriad of other things, the renaming of the old *Finmeccanica* after the man who painted the Mona Lisa is as disingenuous as the EU's decision to call its arms fund for Ukraine the 'European Peace Facility'.
4. Although it is not my intention in this article to discuss in any detail Italy's role in the general, and increasingly frantic, rearmament drive of Nato and the EU over the last couple of years, it needs to be stressed that Italian arms sales increased by 26% in 2023, that Italy has continued to sell arms to Israel since October 7 2023 in blatant breach of its own law banning arms sales to countries actively engaged in armed conflict. Further, one of the Italian arms industry's best customers is Qatar, the main source of arms to Hamas - a point that Italy's Green leader, Angelo Bonelli, has often raised when his pacifist line on Gaza has been described as 'pro-Hamas' by government ministers.
5. The 'Years of Lead' long ago became establishment shorthand for the 1970s - emphasising the bullets of ultra-left terrorists, rather than neo-fascist bombs.

## 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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# A paper tiger revealed

Israel is acting in an ever more bellicose fashion, doing everything it can to provoke war with Iran. **Yassamine Mather** looks at the Damascus consulate attack

**O**n April 1 a missile attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus, widely believed to have been conducted by Israel, killed seven people, including brigadier-general Mohammad Reza Zahedi, a senior commander in the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and his deputy, general Mohammad Hadi Hajriahimi.

Of course, Israel has a history of targeting Iranian military installations in Syria. However, this was the first time a diplomatic mission was hit, marking a significant escalation of the Israel-Iran conflict - a largely secret war, not least because of Iran's reluctance to openly respond.

The timing could not be a coincidence - soon after a resolution against Israel was approved in the United Nations security council, when for the first time the United States declined to use its veto and abstained. According to international law, the sovereignty of embassies and consulates belongs to the home country, so this attack in Syria could only be interpreted as an attack on Iranian soil.

Hence both the location and timing of the missile were significant, fuelling once again concerns about the spread of the Gaza war to other parts of the Middle East - even the outbreak of a full-scale war in the region.

If Iran responds proportionately to the attack on its consulate and the killing of one of its highest-ranking IRGC commanders, it will find itself two steps away from a war that it has tried so far to avoid, mainly because, despite all the rhetoric and slogans to the contrary, it does not have enough military strength to be effective in such a war.

So far the Tehran regime has done nothing, but that is, though, also a heavy blow to its reputation and regional credibility. An anonymous source quoted in *The Times of Israel* summed up Iran's position: "If they don't respond in this case, it really would be a signal that their deterrence is a paper tiger."

But the options for responding are limited. Iran does not want to start a confrontation that leads to a domino-like increase in military tension. At the same time, it cannot afford to look weak and cowardly.

The consulate - adjacent to the main embassy compound - was flattened. Israel, feeling isolated and abandoned by key allies, and facing charges of genocide and ethnic cleansing, probably hoped this attack would bring Iran into a confrontation with Israel, paving the way for a regional war that would renew unconditional US support.

Given this situation, the failure of major European countries and the US to condemn the attack has sparked further anger in Iran, with officials expressing outrage. During the recent UN security council session discussing the Damascus bombing, China, Russia and Switzerland condemned the incident. However, Britain, France and the US declined to support



Smoke, flames, death: Iranian consulate in Damascus

a proposed press statement regarding the matter. The head of Iran's mission to the UN took to Twitter/X to state, "The double standard undermines the security council's credibility and sets a dangerous precedent."

### Retaliation?

On April 8, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, Iran's foreign secretary, inaugurating a new consular building in Damascus, insisted that "America is responsible" for the bombing "and must be held accountable". "The fact that the US and two European countries opposed a resolution condemning the attack on the Iranian embassy is a sign that the US gave the green light" to Israel to carry out the missile strike, he said.

As I have already noted, amongst the victims were Mohammad Reza Zahedi. During the eight years of the Iran-Iraq war, he was one of its middle-ranking commanders. He

was also involved in the 33-day war between Lebanon and Israel in 2006, alongside Imad Mughniyeh, a senior Hezbollah military commander. Other victims were Hossein Aman Elahi, who, according to the Iranian media, was "chief of staff of the IRGC Quds Force, Syrian and Lebanese branch", and Mohammad Hadi Haji Rahimi, who was "a close friend and successor of Mohammad Reza Zahedi" from the "Syrian and Lebanese Branch of IRGC Quds Force".

Iran's foreign minister, Hossein Amirabdollahian, was quoted as saying: "We will make them regret this crime and similar ones". Iran will take "hard revenge" and "will respond at the right time and place". He added: "We have already taken revenge on Israel" and "We will punish them for this."

These statements by individual officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran give an indication of the pressure

the regime is under. Yet more than 10 days after the event it is not clear how, where and when Iran will 'retaliate'. On April 5, the Israeli media reported panic buying, as rumours of an imminent Iranian missile attack spread.

That is the view of many international news outlets too. For example, according to *India Today*,

GPS navigation services blocked, leave for combat units cancelled, air defence command amplified - Israel has left nothing to chance, as it fears a possible retaliatory attack from Iran following the killing of 13 people, including two Iranian generals, in an airstrike in Syria, foreign media reports said.<sup>1</sup>

The "13 people" refers to those killed in the last two weeks, it seems. A week before the April 1 attack, an Israeli missile destroyed

a villa housing Iranian officials in a Damascus suburb.

Over the last few years around 30 senior Iranian military personnel have been killed in Syria and, although every embassy has military attachés, Iran's involvement in the civil war in Syria is a more serious issue. That started after Iran saw the military advances of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq as a direct threat to its security, but Iran's involvement in the Syrian conflict has come with a heavy price. (Of course, there is another aspect to Iran's continued presence in Syria - its support for Hezbollah in neighbouring Lebanon.)

One possibility, it is claimed, is an attack on an Israeli embassy in Latin America or in Africa - maybe in a country with friendly relations with the Islamic Republic or a cyberattack on Israeli infrastructure. On the other hand, there are rumours of the continuation of secret Iran-US talks, with the Biden administration promising Iran it will be rewarded for its calm, considered response.

We all know from reports in the Israeli media that Iran and the US have held secret talks throughout the six months since October 7. And, immediately after the attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus, indirect messages were exchanged between the two countries, with the US issuing a statement denying any advance knowledge.

According to a *New York Times* report published on March 15 (also reported in the *Financial Times*), the two sides met in Oman in January, when those present included "the Biden administration's Middle East tsar, Brett McGurk, and special envoy on Iran, Abram Paley, and Iranian deputy foreign minister, Ali Bagheri Kani".

According to *The Times of Israel*, US and Iranian officials said they have continued to exchange messages about the proxies and a ceasefire. Quoting an unnamed senior US official, the paper claimed:

... the administration chose to take part in the talks to show it's still open to diplomacy with dialogue, despite the heightened regional tensions. American officials said Iran initiated the meeting and that Oman strongly urged the US to send representatives.<sup>2</sup>

Last week there rumours that Iran's reluctance to retaliate against Israel is partly due to US guarantees to Iran regarding its support for a ceasefire in Gaza. This week, as the conclusion of such a deal seems unlikely, the rhetoric from Khamenei and Biden has escalated ●

### Notes

1. [www.indiatoday.in/world/story/israel-gps-navigation-services-cancels-leave-for-soldiers-iran-attack-2523778-2024-04-05](http://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/israel-gps-navigation-services-cancels-leave-for-soldiers-iran-attack-2523778-2024-04-05).
2. [www.timesofisrael.com/iran-reportedly-pushed-us-to-broker-gaza-ceasefire-during-secret-talks-in-oman](http://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-reportedly-pushed-us-to-broker-gaza-ceasefire-during-secret-talks-in-oman).