



Abolish the House of Lords

The rebellion in the House of Lords against a government amendment to equalise the age of consent for gays and heterosexuals demonstrates why the working class must become the champion of democracy

Democracy or the House of Lords? That was the question starkly posed last Wednesday when the Lords blocked an amendment to equalise the gay and heterosexual age of consent. Evoking their historic - and no doubt god-given - constitutional powers, the ultra-reactionaries and stone age bigots were prepared to sabotage the government's 'flagship' Crime and Disorder Bill in order to retain the criminalisation of homosexual relations for under 18 year-olds. Of the 290 votes cast for deleting the amendment, 138 were made up of non-hereditary life peers, including Labour ones.

The honourable lords and ladies revealed their determination to oppose gay equality, no matter what the cost. Even if it meant wrecking Jack Straw's authoritarian proposals on crime, which no doubt most of the upholders of law and order in the House of Lords thoroughly approve of. Former Tory cabinet minister Baroness Young led the anti-gay rebellion. Full of the milk of human sympathy, she explained that she had been "deluged" with letters from religious groups - muslim, jewish and christian - and members of the public begging her to oppose the gay equality amendment. Naturally, she "only stood on this issue because I care very much about young people. I would feel I was failing in my duty if I didn't say that lowering the age of consent without proper parliamentary scrutiny would be wrong - constitutionally and in principle."

The reactionary rebels clustered around Baroness Young were not just concerned with safeguarding "proper parliamentary scrutiny". Young herself stated that equalising the age of consent would be "the thin end of the wedge" and that in her "ideal world" the age of consent for women would also be raised to 18. Lord Longford, aged 92, was very concerned about the sexual-emotional health of young boys, arguing: "If someone seduced my daughter it would be damaging and horrifying, but not fatal. She would recover. On the other hand, if some elderly or not so elderly schoolmaster seduced one of my sons and taught him to be a homosexual, he

would ruin him for life." Lord Stoddart, a Labour peer, proclaimed there could never be equality between gays and straights: "One is the natural order of things; the other is not. Indeed, if nature had intended otherwise, it would undoubtedly have constructed the human body differently." These enlightened views were supported by the 'libertarian' Margaret Thatcher, James Callaghan, the archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, and the former chief rabbi, Lord Jakobovitz, who even argued that it was "undemocratic" for members of a minority (ie, gays and lesbians) to demand the same civil rights as the majority.

Unsurprisingly, Jack Straw is quite prepared to drop the age of consent amendment to his Crime and Disorder Bill rather than see it fall - unlike Mike Foster's anti-fox-hunting bill, which has been allowed to die a natural death. Under British constitutional law, the Blair government cannot simply overturn the Lords decision because the relevant passage started its parliamentary life in the Lords. That means it cannot invoke the Parliament Act, which allows the Commons to reverse the will of the Lords.

The House of Lords rebellion is not all bad news for Blair. Quite the opposite in some respects. By so openly flaunting their absurd prejudices and anti-democratic inclinations, the Lords have played into Blair's hands. Part of his 'New Labour, New Britain' project entails extensive constitutional reform, one plank of which is the scrapping of *hereditary* peers. That would at a stroke wipe out the massive inbuilt Tory majority in the Lords. Of course, Blair's 'anti-aristocratic' plans have nothing to do with a burning desire to introduce democracy, but rather to stuff the House of Lords with his own appointed life peers - ie, cronies and yes-men. To replace an inbuilt Tory majority with an inbuilt New Labour one.

It is undoubtedly true that the stuffed-shirts, ex-colonels and bishops in the Lords are cocking a snook at the increasing bourgeois consensus which believes gays and lesbians should have equality before the law. A large section of the bourgeoisie wants 'anti-homophobia' to be as

universally accepted as anti-racism, which is now official state ideology.

Communists and socialists demand the immediate abolition of the House of Lords. No hereditary peers. No life peers. Nor do we favour "a wholly elected revising second chamber ... made up of councillors from every European constituency, as now constituted, to replace the House of Lords, with no change at all in its powers", as argued by Tony Benn (*The Guardian* July 24). We support a unichamber assembly elected on the basis of proportional representation.

The CPGB also calls the *abolition of the age of consent*. The state should have no right to interfere in the bedroom or lay down when individuals are 'ready' to have sex - gay or straight, boys or girls, men or women.

In this regard we must make clear our criticism of the strategy pursued by Peter Tatchell and Outrage. With the latter we are a very long way indeed from the 1960s radicalism of the Gay Liberation Front. Outrage adopts an ultra-reformist policy, which seeks to *pressurise* the House of Lords, instead of calling for its immediate abolition. (If the House of Lords had voted for the equalisation of the age of consent, would Outrage have celebrated with the good lords and ladies?) Tatchell has already announced that when and if the age of consent is equalised to 16, he will then campaign for it to be lowered again to 14. What a hopeless method. A method essentially antithetical to human freedom, in that looks to those above to introduce 'sexual liberation' one tiny step at a time.

It is a grim indictment of most of the British left that virtually no organisation *openly* calls for the abolition of the age of consent. The Socialist Party welcomed the previous decision of the House of Commons to equalise the age of consent (unlike the now very 'gay-friendly' SP, the old Militant Tendency treated with macho contempt all manifestations of gay politics). The Socialist Workers Party has kept mum - or safe - on the issue.

You can guarantee that some left groups will consider such campaigns as, at best, a diversion from the class struggle and 'real' politics. At a re-

cent CPGB special meeting on the transitional programme, a member of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, Mark Osborn, mocked a CPGB May 7 election address in Manchester because it called for the abolition of the age of consent. He labelled it the "Moss Side disaster". Perhaps the AWL comrade is correct: the CPGB might have a got a few more votes if it had dropped all the awkward and controversial political stuff. The suspicion is that the AWL comrades think that the CPGB, and the left in general, should dump all this airy-fairy stuff about gays, drugs and workers' militias, and concentrate exclusively on 'bread and butter' trade unionist politics like wages, defending the NHS and fighting for jobs.

This has produced a vicious economic circle. The fact that the left has historically refused to *champion* democratic struggles such as those for gay rights has in turn resulted in the depoliticisation of many oppressed groups in society. Inevitably this breeds separatist and individual-

istic sentiments. So many in the gay community look to the 'pink pound' for salvation rather than collective working class action.

An even more serious omission has been the left's failure to prioritise democratic demands which go to the heart of the bourgeois state. Abolition of the Lords and the monarchy are tucked away like optional extras at the bottom of a long list of economic campaigning points. Yet a movement from below which places these central democratic questions at the top of its agenda could begin to challenge capital's hegemony in a revolutionary way. The left needs a new, democratic, truly *inclusive* vision, one committed to self-liberation.

The House of Lords' reactionary rebellion presents the Socialist Alliances with a golden opportunity. They should start an energetic and imaginative campaign which not only fights to abolish the Lords but calls for the sweeping away of the constitutional monarchy itself ●

Eddie Ford



A full week of debate and discussion at the Communist Party's annual school. Sessions and speakers include * **Harpal Brar** on the legacy of Stalin * **Hillel Ticktin** on market socialism * **Mark Fischer** and the **Marxist Bulletin** debate democratic centralism * **Bob Pitt** and **Hugh Kerr MEP** debate the Labour left * **Alliance for Workers' Liberty** on the USSR * **Jack Conrad** on 'Green politics' * **Tam Dean Burn** 'Theatre of the 21st century' * **Lisa Goldman**, artistic director, Red Room.

August 1-8, Brunel University, the lecture centre, Cleveland Road, Uxbridge, west London - 10 minutes from Uxbridge tube. Residential (self-catering): £75. Non residential: £30 for the week or £5 per day on the door



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

Party notes

Taking sides

The delay in the publication of the letters from comrades Mary Ward and Nick Clarke provoked a small flurry of controversy from some around our organisation. Jim Higgins - the ex-industrial organiser of the International Socialists - tells us in this issue that we were being "cynical" (see Letters). Dave Craig of the Revolutionary Democratic Group informed us - ironically, in the pages of *this* paper - that deferring publication in this way blew a "big hole in the policy of 'openness'" (*Weekly Worker* May 28). Even Nick Long - a comrade whose name is less than synonymous with an above-board approach to politics - felt qualified to tick us off for 'suppressing' the letters.

As we showed last week when we finally reproduced these sad little notes, our organisation had nothing to fear from them politically. They speak for themselves, unfortunately. We delayed publication to allow the preparation of a substantial reply and to create the space for some calm reflection on the part of our ex-comrades. As I underlined in last week's paper, beneath all the trivial complaints and reproaches, the political issue of substance raised was that of *liquidationism*. I think it is incumbent on those who have been so quick to accuse our Party of political censorship to indicate whether they stand *politically* with those whose actions implicitly suggest that this organisation be wound up.

A philistine counter-charge thrown back against us over the years from a variety of liquidators has been that we conflate the future reformed Communist Party with our current small group. This confusion produces a sort of organisation dementia in us, where we "[elevate] democratic centralism into a fetish - inappropriately organising [our] cadres as 'professional revolutionaries' on a cell basis - a state of affairs which smacks of nothing less than wish-fulfilling voluntarism" (International Socialist Group *Weekly Worker* September 26 1996). Thus, comrade Craig hints at a similar criticism when he writes that I had a "pragmatic" approach to printing the Ward and Clarke letters, that I believe we should "only [print] what ... will help the Party (ie, the CPGB)" (*Weekly Worker* July 16).

I have already denounced this "even-handedness" between forces fighting for the Party and those that have *deserted* it, and demanded that comrades in effect "take a side" (*Weekly Worker* July 23). But there is clearly more to be said.

The defining task that this organisation sets itself, our "central aim" emblazoned at the head of every 'What we fight for' column, is to "*reforge* the Communist Party of Great Britain" (my emphasis). Puerile charges against us that we believe ourselves to be 'the Party' are hardly worth answering. Our Party was liquidated by the opportunists.

Yet we continue to regard ourselves as *Party* members and our structures as *Party* committees. The leadership of this organisation originated as a faction of the CPGB in 1981. We claim a line of continuity with our Party throughout its history, an organic relationship we are proud of. Genuine communists were not excused their responsibilities to their Party because of the wrecking activities of the Euros or *Morning Star* splitters.

A lifeless, static and fixed-category approach to the question of the fight for Party reproduces strikingly similar objections to those that Lenin encountered in his battle against the liquidators. The arch-liquidator Petresov mocked Lenin's pretensions to 'pro-Partyism' by sarcastically asking, "Can there exist in sober reality, and not merely as the figment of a diseased imagination, a school of thought that advocates liquidating what has *ceased to be an organic whole*?" He compared the fight for Partyism being waged by the Bolsheviks and elements of the Mensheviks as "playing with toy soldiers in the face of tragedy" (Ascher *The Mensheviks in the Russian Revolution* pp76-77).

Formally, the man was irrefutably correct, of course. Did not Zinoviev subsequently write that during "this hard period" of reaction, that "the party as such did not exist", it had "disintegrated into tiny individual circles" (G Zinoviev *History of the Bolshevik Party* p165)? So Petresov was correct then. Wasn't he?

The fight for Party is the *key* question facing communists. There should be no equivocation, no 'balanced' attitude between a communist collective dedicated to that fight on the one hand, and individual deserters of the fight on the other. I suggest again that those comrades who - through sectarian pettiness or lack of political guts - have constituted themselves as the attorneys for trivial political backwardness should take a stand with the Party, *against liquidationism* ●

Mark Fischer
national organiser

The Weekly Worker

There will be no *Weekly Worker* for the next two weeks because of Communist University '98. The next issue will appear on August 20.

Cynical

When I wrote my moderately worded criticism of Mark Fischer's predilection for selective quotation from Lenin (*Weekly Worker* July 9) I little thought that I was giving Mark Fischer the opportunity to unmask me as a purveyor of "the tired old cynicism of an old and disillusioned revolutionary". Not only that: I am one of the group of wreckers who "alibies [sic] left liquidationism ..." And into the bargain I had failed - perhaps from an excess of cynicism, disillusionment and left liquidationism - to realise that the *Weekly Worker* is "the publication of a communist collective that has been cohered around decades of work around a *Partyist* project". That the CPGB could exist for even one decade while producing sentences like that one is a tribute to their case-hardened sensibilities, if nothing else.

Mark, having spent those decades of *Partyist* endeavour utilising the *Collected Works* of Lenin as a grab bag of quotations for all seasons, a universal hammer of each and every dissenter, he moves on from a dead author to one who at the last count was still breathing - to wit, Jim Higgins and his book *More years for the locust*. With a splendid piece of *legerdemain* he connects eight words from the introduction to 16 words from the final paragraph of the text. When he puts it that way, I have to confess it looks pretty "vacuous". But when one considers that there are about 60,000 words between these two items, many of which criticise the sort of political method employed by Mark Fischer, one begins to understand why he gets into such a nasty pet. Anyone who has read my book and still thinks I am cynical about socialism either has a serious comprehension problem or is called Mark Fischer.

Here is a brief quote from the book (p5): "How the workers in what remains of the 20th century and the untouched 21st will set about their tasks is not yet known, and what is certain is that the current coven of gurus have not got a clue either. What we can be sure of is that it will not be a straight repetition of the past ... Only the congenitally faint-hearted will conclude that, because there have been some bloody awful socialist organisations, we should withdraw from the struggle ... To plead that some groups have not lived up to our expectations or, worse still, have exceeded our worst nightmares is merely to describe capitalism's ability to impose its authoritarian values on those whose intention, at least, was to destroy capitalism itself. All of those groups, without exception, have something to offer, something to teach, something to fill one or other of the gaps in our understanding of socialism."

Now does that read like the opinion of a cynic? Those who have some interest in what *More years for the locust* really says can obtain a copy by sending £6.50 to me at Tann Cottage, Holt Road, Lethringsett, Norfolk NR25 6RZ.

So far as the substantive issue of the correspondence is concerned on whether the paper has a responsibility to publish the dissenting views of ex-members of the CPGB, I agree that the Party does not have to give them space. If it does not, however, it should not suggest that publication is withheld in the comrades' own best interest and then proceed to denigrate them in the pages of the journal as a petty, low-level variety of right liquidationists. That is a cynical piece of behaviour if ever I saw one.

Jim Higgins
Norfolk

The final word

In reply to the eight points of Mark Fischer ('Frozen in dogma' *Weekly Worker* July 16) in which he tries to differentiate between the political position of Trotsky and his movement and that of Leninism, the *Marxist Bulletin* and International Bolshevik Tendency supporters allege that Trotsky was Lenin's heir. It is on this assumption, of being the continuator of Lenin, rather than the independent development of

Marxist theory, that Trotsky held his place on the historical scene as a revolutionary communist leader. This aura of Leninism assumed by Trotsky gave special significance to his pronouncements on policy and was naturally transmitted to his unquestioning followers as the final word.

Given this historical background, fortified by Trotsky's brief (compared to his total period in politics which was mainly opportunist) background as a revolutionary leader during the Russian Revolution, Trotsky was able to make authoritative policy and political statements of what Lenin said or did in 1917 that were actually false and anti-Leninist. One such false anti-Leninist suggestion, repeated by the *Marxist Bulletin* group in the same issue of the *Weekly Worker*, is that the Bolshevik Party - ie, Lenin - forged a "united front with Kerensky to defeat Kornilov in 1917". This statement (which was also adopted by Stalinists) of a united front being entered into between Lenin and his revolutionary Bolshevik Party and reactionary, class-collaborationist social reformists as Kerensky and his government was initiated by Trotsky and perpetuated by the Trotskyist movement of all varieties for over 60 years as justification for their opportunist policies.

The historical background to this falsehood (see *The Leninist* No107 for a broader analysis) was Trotsky's isolation after the defeat of the German CP by the Nazis in 1933 and the failure of a left wing to develop within the Comintern or national CPs. Trotsky began to turn toward the social democratic parties as a field of activity, which involved the liquidation of the independent revolutionary party (entryism) and the development of its ideological concomitant: critical support for social democracy. Both entryism and critical support were translated in political terms as the 'united front' between the revolutionary vanguard and the backward reformist workers, the disastrous results of which, confirmed in history, were foretold by the much maligned Oehlerite tendency in 1935.

Trotsky and his followers of all brands always invoke the words of Lenin to justify their reactionary interpretation of the 'united front', not one of whom has ever quoted a statement from Lenin favouring entryism, critical support for social democracy - or a united front with Kerensky against Kornilov.

Tom Cowan
South London

Trotskyist label

I wish to raise a few points following on from Mark Fischer's 'Frozen in dogma' and the excellent debate the CPGB recently held with the International Bolshevik Tendency over the same subject.

I must first disagree with MF when he states that "Trotsky's contribution to the revolutionary workers' movement did not constitute a qualitative development of the theoretical categories of Marxism ..." This is interesting when the question of Trotsky's *Permanent revolution* is taken into account. Marx first used the same concept in his discussions of the revolutions in 1848 when he pointed out that, although other classes might seize power for a time, only the proletariat could make the revolution permanent. I would thus argue that it was Trotsky who really developed and advanced this theory, placing it in the context of the world revolution.

Indeed *Permanent revolution* was to have an impact in shaping Lenin's strategy on the Russian Revolution. In an article of September 1905, Lenin wrote this typically 'Trotskyist' sentence: "From the democratic revolution we shall at once, and precisely in accordance with the measure of our strength, the strength of the class-conscious and organised proletariat, begin to pass to the socialist revolution. We stand for uninterrupted revolution. We shall not stop halfway" (quoted in M Liebman *Leninism Under Lenin* pp 82-83). This was a different from the position held by Lenin prior to 1905 when he had been opposed to Trotsky on the issue and was

content to separate the bourgeois-democratic and the socialist revolution by a phase of intermediate development.

The IBT also raised some important issues, *inter alia* the political categorisation of the CPGB. They and other organisations present for the debate accused us of "not yet completely breaking from Stalinism".

Others suggested the political positions of the CPGB smacked of Trotskyism. I believe there is a truth in this statement, particularly when we read what Trotsky put forward in *The revolution betrayed* in 1937: "... as a result of the isolation and backwardness of the Soviet Union, a new bureaucratic stratum had emerged that first appropriated the Bolshevik Party and then the revolution itself. However, even though this stratum was parasitic upon the working class it was not a 'new class' in the Marxist sense ... Indeed, because of its position, it was impelled to defend the 'gains of October' ... This placed the bureaucracy in a highly contradictory position. On the one hand, it had to defend itself from the working class from whom it had usurped power. On the other hand, it was forced to preserve the new, historically progressive property relations ... Reactionary and repressive though it undoubtedly was, the new bureaucracy had no option but to defend the economic foundations of the new state; a state that in spite of its Stalinist superstructure still posed a social and economic base theoretically superior to capitalism" (quoted in H Ticktin and M Cox [eds] *The ideas of Leon Trotsky* p308).

Our analysis of the USSR found in numerous copies of *The Leninist* and the *Weekly Worker*, as well as Jack Conrad's book *From October to August*, does portray this typical orthodox Trotskyism. While I think our method on party organisation does to some degree categorise us as Leninist and thus counteracts this argument, I must state that I have no problem with certain political formulations of the CPGB being labelled as Trotskyist. What I think is imperative however is that we don't simply use labels without having first debated the ideas, and the method of formulating those ideas, behind them.

It is the method that counts, not merely the political categorisations.

Bob Paul
East London

Fine by me

Danny Hammill (*Weekly Worker* July 9) rather charmingly contradicted himself in accusing me of 'greenphobia' (a new affliction that I had not encountered before). Danny seems rather miffed that I believe, regarding the greens, that "these forces are non-socialist. Therefore they should be excluded" (from the Socialist Alliances).

Surely that is the whole point of a Socialist Alliance - that it is an alliance of *socialists*? Just to make my view clear, as far as I am concerned socialists should work with anyone (most definitely including greens) in comradely united front activities where we agree. But the Socialist Alliances are not a united front on a single issue, they are more than that - they are something that has the potential to become an anti-capitalist *political* alternative for working people, if correct organisational methods and policies are developed.

We must try to win those pro-working class, socialist-minded green activists who try to fight capitalism to a strategy based on class struggle and consistent socialist politics. Insofar, in the words of the Hackney amendment, that is what constitutes "principled" relations with 'socialist greens' and the like, that is fine by me. But it is not 'greenphobia' to advocate that non-socialists be excluded from a *socialist* alliance. It is basic class politics.

Ian Dudley
London

Art of revolution

action

When it comes to the relationship between the arts, New Labour and the revolutionary struggle for socialism in 1998, four questions immediately present themselves. Firstly, the real as opposed to the supposed relationship between New Labour and the arts. Secondly, the necessity of not underestimating the power of capital and its state. Thirdly, the role of artists in creating a cultural opposition. Here I will also talk about the Red Room's recent 'Seeing red' season. Fourthly, why the revolutionary left itself should care about art.

Evidently New Labour is not indifferent to the arts. Despite all manner of cuts the government spends an enormous amount on them. Moreover Blair has stated that he wishes to bring the arts into his "core script". He has assiduously courted artists, offering them a "new compact". Attacks on New Labour based on the notion that it does not care about the arts and crude demands for more money therefore miss the mark. If New Labour did not care, every subsidised theatre would close tomorrow. Instead Blair invites "leading theatre practitioners" to No10, for "informal discussions" as part of his campaign to bring them inside. This seduction of artists seems to be proving successful.

Why are the arts important to New Labour? There are a number of closely interrelated factors. Chris Smith, culture minister, often refers to the benefits to the national economy. The arts are a business in themselves. Culture and sport account for £50 billion per annum in economic activity. One percent of the population, or half a million people, are employed in the arts alone. But of far greater importance than dry economic statistics is Blair's project of remaking Britishness.

In part this is a repair job. Chris Smith's book *Creative Britain* leaves no doubt here. "Our first aim is to rebuild the nation's sense of community," he says. During the years of Thatcher and Major there was deep alienation and a fragmentation of the imagined community of Britishness. Thatcher's infamous claim that there is "no such thing as society" reflected her desire to atomise and privatise the population.

Blair wants to reverse the alienation of the Tory decades and mould a new mass identification with Britishness, ironically in order to preserve the achievements of Thatcher. She broke the power of organised labour, imposed draconian anti-union laws ... and greatly increased the competitiveness of capital in Britain. Where Thatcher relied on the big stick, Blair proposes to make Britain good for business and profit by avoiding open class conflict or sectional dissent. Blair's plan is insidious because it involves a broader, more hegemonic form of bourgeois rule. To achieve his aim Blair is relying on a constitutional revolution on the one hand and on the other creating a culture of incorporation.

The assemblies in Wales, Northern Ireland and London are already in place and will soon be functioning. Likewise the parliament in Scotland. Proportional representation, regional assemblies in England, abolition of hereditary peerages in the House of Lords and the modernisation of the royal family will follow. All these reforms from above are

Lisa Goldman, artistic director of the Red Room, spoke at Marxism 98 earlier this month. Here we present edited highlights

designed to give the appearance of democracy and gain mass acceptance.

Culturally Blair is a populist. The image of Britain coined by Major was warm beer and cricket on the village green - nostalgic, backward looking and *English*. Major had a minister for heritage. Blair, in contrast, has a ministry of culture, media and sport. He portrays himself and Britain as buzzy, cool, modern, forward thinking. He used to front a rock band. He has pop star parties at No10. He does the Des O'Connor chat show. In other words Blair is out to ride and incorporate popular culture. Significantly Chris Smith talks about making art more accessible and overcoming the division between high and low culture.

So the arts are important for a government with a sense of mission. Arts cohere and shape the national image. But they do more than that. What makes people feel human is not simply the external world. Art allows us to refine and generalise our experiences, emotions and ideas. Art makes and remakes the

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 "Our enemies consume art and promote it for their own purposes. They will also attempt to flatter, tame and incorporate what is oppositional. Such universalism contributes to the smooth running and re-creation of British capitalism"

inner world. It is therefore one of the key ways in which the dominant ideology is reproduced (and thus in turn the system of exploitation itself). All these aspects inform New Labour's concern for the arts.

There is, needless to say, another way in which New Labour could be made to care about the arts. That is if the arts become oppositional. Certainly, as a revolutionary artist and a theatre director working in the area of new writing, I am determined to commission and produce work which is critical. Yet the dominant culture is not static. It is constantly shifting and *absorbing* what was yesterday oppositional. That is why we must never underestimate our enemy.

If Blair sees the arts as having a vital role to play in his 'cool Britannia', then how should revolutionaries respond? In my view we must do more than call upon the govern-

ment to provide more funds. Of course, the arts are cash-strapped. Most artists live on and off the dole and on a pittance. There is not an artistic director in the country who doesn't want or need more money, including myself. But money to do what? There is a fortune being poured into the Dome and a lot of artists will be employed there. Maybe some spectacular experiments will take place. Maybe not. But the point is that the whole 'experience' is designed to promote the Blairite vision of New Britain. It will do nothing to empower people, inspire them to think independently or question the status quo. So yes, we should struggle for more funds, for higher wages, for better conditions. Crucially, however, we need a hegemonic vision that can challenge Blair, his constitutional revolution from above and the system he serves.

I don't have any easy answers, but I assume one of the reasons you asked me to speak at Marxism 98 - since I am not an SWP member - is the 'Seeing red' season I recently commissioned and produced at the Battersea Arts Centre. Now, I don't know if anyone here saw this work. Either way, I want to use it to illustrate my overall argument. Sixteen writers responded, with their own unique voices, to the events in Paris 30 years ago and last year's election of the Labour government. Initially there was a lot of press interest. They thrive on anniversaries. But the idea was provocation, to inspire artists to respond to what is going on today in a critical way.

It was also about bringing politics back to the fringe - it should not be a middle class career ladder, nor should it be in the pocket of big business (the Royal Court is blatantly courting Murdoch and other such sources for funding). None of our writers could even be paid. But the idea grabbed them. Paradoxically, at a point in time when Blair's popularity remains at an unprecedented high, many artists are deeply unhappy with him and his government. They have the same anti-Blair feelings articulated by the musicians who signed up to the *NME* rebellion. There are millionaires in the world of theatre. There are also paupers. Because typically success takes such a long time, many of us are forced to rely on the dole and part-time and poorly paid casual work. With 'welfare to work' we experience the true face of this brutal and bureaucratic government.

The crucial thing to understand is that despite the low pay, appalling conditions and long and unsocial hours we love what we do. Our work is our life, our vocation. So we are a strange group of people. Artists are on the one hand deeply alienated. On the other hand through work we have the potential to express our inner-self and humanity - which at its most profound must surely mean an implicit or explicit opposition to what exists.

The artists I approached were excited by the idea of 'Seeing red'. Together their plays give a real picture of the human condition in 1998. For example, Kay Adshead wrote about

an African asylum-seeker in Campsfield; Rebecca Prichard wrote about how poverty and fear destroys the family; Parv Bancel wrote about an Asian pop star in 'Cool Britannia'. They are the beginnings of a cultural opposition.

The season went down well with audiences and changed some minds about New Labour. The media response was particularly interesting. The left press who came enjoyed it. The bourgeois press responded in an altogether different fashion. It was ambiguous and produced the oddest set of reviews our company has ever had. They just didn't know how to engage.

Dominic Cooke of *The Independent* actually complained that it wasn't revolutionary enough: "Wake me up when the revolution comes" ... which kind of says it all. Of course if the plays had been calls to the barricades that would have been laughable. The point is to seek out what is revolutionary in what is. But it was *The Guardian's* Michael Billington who summed up the feeling of most of them when he said that "the jury's still out on New Labour". The "jury's still out on 'Seeing red'". They could neither praise the season, nor could they dismiss it. The season had no answers for them. It couldn't, because theatre's role is to ask questions. When we start getting a theatre of answers, it will be because people are out there on the streets providing them. In this period of reaction we must try and ask the right questions. The establishment media can't do that. They missed the questions being asked in 'Seeing red'. They misread and misunderstood the work, some of which was beautifully subtle and profound. They entered into no ideological engagement with the work. They were incapable of doing so.

Our enemies consume art and promote it for their own purposes. They will also attempt to flatter, tame and incorporate what is oppositional. Such universalism contributes to the smooth running and re-creation of British capitalism and its system of government. By the same degree making the workers into a political class and an alternative ruling class cannot come about simply through economic and wage demands. There must be an overall vision which embraces culture and the arts.

Revolutionaries themselves must do much more than criticise the government over low levels of arts funding. They must engage with the arts and artists. Why doesn't the SWP set up a pop band or a theatre company or documentary film crew? I bet there are loads of talented artists in the SWP - musicians, actors, writers. Under socialism, or perhaps more accurately under communism, culture and the arts will, I am sure, reach unheard of heights. Being artistic is to be fully human. Everyone will participate and express themselves. But that can't happen if we refuse to master the culture that exists now. The starting point must be to develop a rich and rounded view of the arts and culture ●

Lisa Goldman will be speaking at Communist University '98 on Thursday August 6 - 10.00am and 3.30pm

■ CPGB seminars

London - August 9 - 'Marx versus Blanquism', using Hal Draper's *Karl Marx's theory of revolution* as a study guide.

For more details call 0181-459 7146.

Manchester: August 17 - Report back from Communist University

For more details call 0161-798 6417.

■ Party wills

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Trotskyite economism or r

Jack Conrad (CPGB) and Dave Craig (RDG, faction of the SWP) reply to Ian Donovan, editor of *Revolution and Truth*

For communists the main theoretical issue raised by comrade Donovan's welcome article ('Fundamentally flawed' *Weekly Worker* July 23) is that of programme and programmatic method.

Ends determine means and means determine ends. Comrade Donovan utterly fails to grasp the necessity of democracy for the working class - both under capitalism and socialism - as a means and an end. However, without fighting for democracy the workers can never form themselves into a class, let alone a ruling class. Democracy is not just a good idea, an add-on luxury. It is essential for self-liberation. No democracy, no socialism. That is why comrade Donovan has such difficulty with the derisive term 'bureaucratic socialism' when we attach it to the Soviet Union. It is, comrade, a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron, which, yes, accurately describes the paradoxical reality of the Soviet Union under Stalin onwards. In the name of socialism the bureaucracy ruled.

The Soviet Union has definitively travelled from heroic beginnings to a pathetic grave. Instead of studying this highly complex historical phenomenon, discovering and laying bare the innate laws and mounting contradictions that drove the system forward to destruction, comrade Donovan simply repeats the talmudic-like dogmas he learnt in the 1980s school of the Spartacist League (ie, economic Trotskyism). Apparently because of 'socialist property forms' - ie state property - the Soviet Union retained a permanent organic relationship with the October Revolution.

Guided by his Trotskyite economism, the comrade thereby concludes that the Soviet Union was some sort of a workers' state, some type of socialism throughout its fleeting existence. Evidently he confuses form with

content. Whatever the ideological trappings and constitutional flimflam, the plain fact is that the workers exercised no democratic - ie, positive - control over the so-called workers' state or the product of their labour. *Ipsa facto* the Soviet Union has to be defined as non-socialism. More, it was anti-socialism. Stalin and his cohorts reduced the workers to an atomised, rightless and terrorised slave class through a *social* counterrevolution. Its date was 1928.

Comrade Donovan cannot call things by their proper names. He recoils from our description of the USSR as an "exploitative" social formation. Yet the bureaucracy did not socially reproduce themselves as a ruling stratum primarily through bribery, corruption and other illegal means. These were vital, though secondary features of the system. The social formation and the bureaucracy rested on the surplus product systematically pumped out of the workers. Unlike capitalism this was achieved through political, not economic means. Workers had to be made to work, in the last analysis by force. True, police officers wore uniforms replete with the symbols of October. However, they served not the cause of universal human liberation, but an exploitative, albeit historically unviable, bureaucracy. No wonder workers refused to lift a finger to save the Soviet Union. It "isn't worth fighting for", they said.

Accusations of 'Shachtmanism' or 'third campism' levelled against us by comrade Donovan miss the mark. We have set ourselves the job of painstakingly developing a scientific, general theory of bureaucratic socialism in the USSR. That means learning - not as first-year pupils, but critically - from all manner of thinkers, including noteworthy post-Trotsky revolutionaries such as Max Shachtman, Tony Cliff and Hal Draper. Besides throw-

ing 'mud' such supposedly 'dirty' labelling has another purpose. Comrade Donovan is excused from working things through logically and fearlessly, and drawing the right programmatic conclusions.

Comrade Donovan is obviously a sincere partisan of the working class and a committed communist. Unfortunately his present theory disarms him (this writer too was similarly disarmed in the past - so what I am saying here is in part self-criticism). It is taken for granted, if not gospel, by comrade Donovan that the Soviet Union was a form of workers' state. Yet by his own admission democracy was completely absent. The comrade is thereby drawn inexorably to dismiss or downplay the centrality of democracy and self-activity for the whole socialist-communist project. Where Marx and Engels declared that "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves", comrade Donovan considers that, initially at least, another social force can substitute (K Marx *MECW* Vol 20, Moscow 1985, p14). The theory of deformed workers' states underlines the point. 'Socialism' was, according to our Trotskyite comrades, brought to eastern Europe, China, Vietnam, North Korea, Cambodia, etc, not by the self-activity of the workers themselves. It followed either the tank tracks of Stalin's Red Army or the car-tyre sandals of peasant-party armies.

Hence, when it comes to Britain and other such capitalist countries, the question of democracy is presented as a minor afterthought, a tidying up operation or an irrelevance. Indeed comrade Donovan seems convinced that the *democracy* in an "advanced bourgeois democracy that is today's Britain" resulted from what he calls the "bourgeois-democratic revolution": ie, a historically necessary and

predetermined stage between feudal and capitalist society. No doubt Lenin too took the bourgeois democratic revolution as axiomatic. But he never let a bad theory get in the way of a good revolution. His thought was rich and dialectical, his revolutionary will unequalled. Fixed categories were an anathema. Hence the 'bourgeois democratic' revolution in Russia would in his programme be carried out against tsarism and the bourgeoisie by an alliance of the proletariat and peasantry.

There have certainly been bourgeois revolutions - that is, revolutions led by middling elements. England 1642 and France 1789 are classic examples. However, it would be profoundly mistaken to imagine that what was in both cases a bourgeois class-in-formation was a class of industrial capitalists or that their victory was over feudalism and directly ushered in capitalism.

Those who led the English revolution were commercial farmers, well-off gentlemen and the lesser nobility. In France it was lawyers and office holders. They did not overthrow feudalism. That society was long dead. As a system in western Europe feudalism originated in the collapse of the Roman empire before invading Germanic barbarians and had given way to centralised kingdoms and commercial trade by the 14th century - fief and vassalage characterised a military society where the elite were bound by ties of "personal" fidelity (M Bloch *Feudal society* Vol 1, London 1965, p147).

As to capitalism, it was not just waiting to happen. It must be located as a self-sustaining social relationship - merely *personified* by capitalists - specifically in time and place, and in relation to changes in the manner of the extraction of surplus from the direct producers. England was the first

country of capitalism, and it was so due to unique circumstances: a relatively integrated home market, a dispossessed peasantry (or tenant-farmers), and a developed money economy. Once established, the extraordinary dynamic of capital accumulation impelled other countries - states - to follow. Capitalism in France, Prussia, Russia, etc was sponsored from above, by the autocracy, not triggered from below by traders, guild masters and shopkeepers.

Moreover it needs to be stressed that the 'classic' bourgeois revolutions of England and France could have had other outcomes. They could have failed or stopped far short. On the other hand they could have gone further, much further. England might then have had a radical democracy stamped by the Levellers. France a *sans culottes* republic. The bourgeoisie had been compelled to put itself at the front of the masses. It was in the words of Hal Draper a "social gamble" (H Draper *Karl Marx's theory of revolution* Vol 1, New York 1977, p214). Once in power over its aristocratic rivals, the new class faced the Acherontic danger. Having been mobilised for god and parliament - or equality, fraternity and liberty - the lower depths gain a sense of their own strength. Dreams of a better life are ineffective and in revolutionary times take material form. The "vile multitude" have therefore to be driven back into their hovels. Hence the bourgeoisie is only democratic in so far as democracy serves its narrow class interests. Cromwell, for example, crushed the Levellers and introduced a military dictatorship of major-generals. He was contemptuous of democracy.

There is nothing inherently democratic about the bourgeoisie nor the capitalist system. The democracy that exists in the advanced capitalist coun-

Ian Donovan, editor of *Revolution and Truth*, last week criticised the revolutionary democratic communist platform. Whilst we think Ian is wrong, we must give him credit for openly expounding his views, which are representative of the majority of British Marxists.

This platform was adopted in February 1998 at a conference of the CPGB and RDG, with Open Polemic as observers. The conference also adopted theses on rapprochement and factions. The effect of this was to solidify an alliance between the two organisations that had been developing in the previous period. More recently the platform has been endorsed by the Scottish Campaign for a Federal Republic, and the Trotskyist *Marxist Bulletin*, who "don't disagree" with it.

It needs to be emphasised that the platform is not a programme. It is a general political statement which could equally be endorsed by French, German, South African or Indian revolutionary democratic communists. It does not contain specifically British programmatic demands such as the abolition of the House of Lords or a federal republic. It is a general platform, not a British programme.

Ian might have come forward as a revolutionary democratic communist, with some disagreement over this or that particular formulation in the platform. He could have argued for 'friendly' or 'improving' amendments

for debate. The platform is not set in stone. But in fact he came out as an opponent. I argued that "at present Ian is outside our tendency and opposed fundamentally to it". In his reply (*Weekly Worker* July 23) Ian confirms that this is correct. On this much we are agreed. Ian is an anti-revolutionary democratic communist.

What is at issue here is not simply this or that wording, but a fundamentally different approach to politics. It is the difference between a revolutionary democratic and an economic method. Our historical reference point for this is international revolutionary social democracy. Bolshevism was not simply a Russian trend, whose methods were peculiar to tsarism. The words 'revolutionary' and 'democracy' were not some strange deviation from Marxism. On the contrary, they captured an essential aspect.

The method of the Bolsheviks was to give priority to political struggle (the abolition of tsarism), providing working class leadership of the democratic movement. Consequently they based their politics on a correct understanding of both bourgeois and proletarian democracy. This was later summarised in *State and revolution*. Lenin often use the term 'revolutionary working class democracy' to describe these politics. On all matters of democracy, the Bolshevik attitude could be described as militant, consistent, revolutionary and resolute. They stood at the forefront or in the

vanguard of the democratic struggle.

What is to be done is a classic statement of this revolutionary democratic approach. Lenin reminds us: "He is no social democrat who forgets in practice that 'the communists support every revolutionary movement' and that we are obliged for that reason to expound and emphasise general democratic tasks before the whole people, without for a moment concealing our socialist convictions. He is no social-democrat who forgets in practice to be ahead of all in raising, accentuating, and solving every general democratic question" (VI Lenin *CW* Vol 5, p425). The Bolsheviks fought for the most advanced democratic demands under capitalism and imperialism including demands for a republic, national self-determination, a constituent assembly, proportional representation, the right to recall elected representatives, freedom of speech, rights for all oppressed minorities and a people's militia as against the standing army. They utilised every opportunity to use bourgeois democracy and bourgeois democratic demands.

All democratic demands were to be fought for in a revolutionary manner. Lenin explained that these demands "must be formulated and put through in a revolutionary and not reformist manner, going beyond the bounds of bourgeois legality, breaking them down, going beyond speeches in parliament and verbal protests, and drawing the masses into decisive action,

extending and intensifying the struggle for every fundamental democratic demand up to the direct proletarian assault on the bourgeoisie" (VI Lenin *CW* Vol 22, p145). There was no contradiction between the struggle to extend every aspect of bourgeois democracy and the aim of replacing it with a higher form of workers' democracy based on soviets.

Democratic demands are related to political struggle, in the way that wage demands are to the economic struggle. The Bolshevik politicians emphasised the struggle for democracy, and the economists emphasised the struggle for wage demands. Starting from the democratic struggle, the Bolsheviks made connections with the spontaneous economic struggle of the working class. The economists started from the opposite end, with the primacy of the economic struggle. They saw their task as supporting the economic struggle. When tsarist police attacked the picket line, the economists would show their hostility to the regime - thus lending the economic struggle itself a political character. They wanted to make 'practical' gains by joining the workers' fight for higher wages and improved social conditions.

The economists wanted to derive the correct wage demands by listening to the workers and adopting the demands coming spontaneously from the masses. The Bolshevik politicians did not and could not derive their

democratic demands from spontaneity. They derived them from the theories of democracy developed by international Marxism. Hence the political Bolsheviks were considered theoreticians and the economists claimed to be practical, down-to-earth activists.

For example, the demand for a federal republic might become, one day, a mass demand voiced on every picket line. But this is not the case today, and it is not the reason the RDG or CPGB adopted it. You will not hear the demand for a federal republic, unless perhaps the workers have read Lenin's *State and revolution*. This pamphlet may have been brought to the workers "from the outside": that is, from outside the picket line and the economic struggle. Thus the economists condemned the Bolsheviks for complicating matters with political theory instead of adopting the demands that had arisen spontaneously from 'within' the economic struggle.

I argued that the roots of Ian's fundamental opposition to the revolutionary democratic communist platform are to be found in economism: that is, a liberal democratic, rather than a revolutionary democratic position. Ian replies that the charge of economism is "plain silly". He tells us that "economism is the separation of economic from political struggle". But that is plain wrong.

The "separation of economic and political struggle" is not the same as

Revolutionary democracy?

Transition and Truth

tries is entirely the result of the direct demands by, or implicit threat from, the working class. The notion of English liberties stretching back to the *Magna Carta* is a Thatcherite fairy story. Universal suffrage - or what passed for it - has been conceded in face of a mass movement, as in Belgium. Either that or it was introduced in order to incorporate the workers and create a 'labour bodyguard': eg, Britain in the 1870s and Bismarckian Germany. In other words the "task" of the bourgeois revolution has nothing to do with realising some capitalist paradigm, as famously argued by Tom Nairn and Perry Anderson (and echoed by comrade Donovan). There is no model of democracy under capitalism which Britain falls short of because of its monarchy, House of Lords, unwritten constitution, common law, etc.

Comrade Donovan is a conscious apologist for bureaucratic socialism and an unwitting one for the bourgeoisie - the former is imagined as a workers' state, the latter as the bringer of democracy. Not surprisingly then the comrade is uncomprehending when faced with our *Draft programme*, its minimum-maximum structure and the CPGB's championing of democracy under capitalism as the way forward to socialism (which we view not as completely distinct from capitalism, rather as a transition - socialism, especially to begin with, retains many features of capitalism). Being a Trotskyite economist, comrade Donovan *knows*, no matter what the truth, that any organisation advocating a minimum programme must either be miserably reformist or naively centrist. Therefore, completely ignoring what we actually write and say, he invents his own *minimalist* programme for us. The CPGB, insists comrade Donovan, is, in the here and now, merely for the abolition of the monarchy and the

creation of a *bourgeois* federal republic. Hence he feels fully justified in rounding on us for having adopted "the programme of the bourgeois republicans".

Let me patiently explain to comrade Donovan the *Draft programme* of the CPGB, in particular the minimum or immediate section (the maximum section is concerned with the transition to full communism). The demands set out in the minimum section are technically feasible within the parameters of capitalism. When it comes to wages we therefore accept as given the system of buying and selling labour power as a commodity. However, we put forward as a minimum price not what the bosses say they can afford but what workers need to physically and culturally reproduce themselves. The CPGB does not arbitrarily pluck a figure out of thin air. In today's money we calculate that the minimum wage should be something like £285 per week - a level of income we also demand for pensioners, students, the unemployed, etc. Anything less is to accept relative poverty.

But our programme is not simply about defending the workers. The goal is to make the workers into a hegemonic class that can meet, challenge and defeat the bourgeoisie. For that workers need revolutionary answers to all questions in society, or a bridge between present-day non-revolutionary reality and the point of forming and institutionalising a workers' state. Fundamentally that is a process involving consciousness, of the workers transcending themselves as an economic class and becoming a political class. Demanding higher pay and better conditions cannot do that. But a political programme that is designed to *overthrow* the existing constitution can, because it encompasses all classes, strata and political forces. That, comrade Donovan, is why the

CPGB demands a federal republic and self-determination for Ireland, Scotland and Wales. This, contrary to your claim, is not a "minor tinkering with the format of a parliamentary regime". It is a demand for the working class to mobilise around using its own methods. That is why in the CPGB's *minimum* programme you will find sub-sections on councils of action and the workers' militia. In other words we leave the class content of the federal republic open-ended: but we are far from indifferent. Through living struggle it can, as with every other democratic demand, be given a definite class content.

Comrade Donovan dismisses out of hand the accusation that his outlook should be characterised as economism. That's plain silly. "Economism," he slyly declares, "is the separation of economic struggle from political struggle." Even if we accept this wrong definition, comrade Donovan is guilty. Faced with immediate demands for a republic and the abolition of the monarchy, he actually *counterposes* the workers' state (as if Britain was in the midst of a revolutionary situation). True, like us, he argues that Marxists should oppose "all" constitutional clauses "allowing the head of state to override parliament in circumstances of 'grave national emergency'". Mysteriously when *he* proposes to "tinker" with the existing constitution it "points directly to the need for the destruction of the bourgeois state itself". But all in all comrade Donovan considers anything short of the expropriation of the bourgeoisie a democratic diversion. Put another way, the comrade has no integrated or coherent programme for making the workers into a class. His leftist stance appears very r-r-revolutionary, but in reality it is c-c-conservative. At meetings of *Truth and Revolution* he can preach

about the marvels of a future socialism, but in practice he leaves the workers as a slave class.

Comrade Donovan has no problem with supporting spontaneous economic demands by the workers. He lends them a Trotskyite character. From trade union disputes, either with the employer or the government, he appears to believe that political consciousness will grow. But this is entirely false. Every democratic deficit, every denial of rights, every inequality, and not only in connection with the economic struggle, can draw the masses into politics.

The cronyism of Blair and New Labour, local government corruption, the state's treatment of 'illegal' migrants at Campsfield, the Stephen Lawrence murder enquiry, the institutionalisation of sectarianism in the British-Irish Agreement, the refusal to give Scotland and Wales parliaments with the power to freely separate from the United Kingdom, the censorship of TV programmes and films, the criminalisation of recreational drug takers, discrimination against 16-18 year-old male homosexuals, Aids, opposition to urban motorways - all these and countless other democratic issues, though in no way directly connected with the economic struggle, are sites of politicisation against the existing state.

Economic demands and reforms must be included in a programme. But the Communist Party uses economic agitation *primarily* against the constitutional monarchy system itself. "In a word," said Lenin in *What is to be done?*, "it subordinates the struggle for reforms, as the part to the whole, to the revolutionary struggle for freedom and socialism" (VI Lenin *CW* Vol 5, Moscow 1977, pp405-6).

Though he denies it, comrade Donovan does counterpose the socialist revolution and a workers' state to

a single question of democracy: in this case the abolition of the monarchy and the demand for a federal republic (from here on I am directly paraphrasing Lenin). We must on the contrary combine the revolutionary struggle against capitalism with a revolutionary programme and strategy on *all* democratic demands: a republic, self-determination for Scotland and Wales, the unity of Ireland, a workers' militia, the election of judges, equal rights and opportunities for women, etc. While capitalism exists, these demands can only be fulfilled in an incomplete or distorted manner. Yet by basing ourselves on the democracy already achieved during the course of the class struggle we can expose the democratic deficit that continues to exist under capitalism.

Communists openly say that it is necessary for the capitalists to be expropriated if *all* our democratic demands are to be realised. Some of our demands will be met before the overthrow of capitalism, others in the course of that overthrow, and others after it. The social revolution is not a single battle, but a period covering a series of battles over all sorts of economic and political demands, which are guaranteed only with victory over bourgeois society. It is for the sake of this final aim that we formulate every one of our democratic demands in a consistently revolutionary way.

It is quite possible that the workers in Britain will overthrow capitalism before a republic has been achieved. It is, however, quite inconceivable that the proletariat, as a historical class, will be able to defeat the bourgeoisie, unless it is prepared for that by being educated in the spirit of the most consistent and resolute revolutionary democracy. That, comrade Donovan, is the purpose of our minimum programme ●

Jack Conrad

the idea that Lenin focuses on of "lending the economic struggle itself a political character" (VI Lenin *CW* Vol 5, p 401). Here economics and politics are not separate, but rather united on a false basis. Ian has given us a false definition of economism, whose real purpose is to cover it up. Even economists recognise a connection to politics and so does Ian. His definition means he can claim he is not an economist. But this is only because he does not understand what economism is.

So when he opposes a revolutionary democratic approach to politics, he adopts the economist method "spontaneously". He constructs an argument as to why we should not emphasise political-democratic demands. First he divides the world into two types of countries - good and bad. Bad countries lack democracy. Here the struggle for democracy would be a good thing. Ian fully supports the prime importance of the struggle for democracy there. But Britain is a good country. It is advanced not backward. We already have computers and the internet, not like tsarist Russia. Compared to a bad country like Russia, he says, "In Britain conversely, the main agency of oppression and exploitation is the bourgeoisie itself."

So, Ian wonders to himself, what is the point in fighting for democracy here? The bourgeoisie are already in power and they have given us as

much democracy as is reasonable to expect or demand. This is how all British economists think. In a 'good' country like Britain, workers should concentrate on the primary question of 'lending the economic struggle itself a political character'.

This is not to say that economists totally reject democratic demands in 'good' countries. Even here, they concede that some democratic demands may still be relevant. So they divide democratic demands into good ones and bad ones. Ian supports 'good' demands like full equality for women and proportional representation. But he is totally and absolutely opposed to bad democratic demands, the chief of which is a republic.

In 1916 Lenin took up cudgels against a new trend within the working class movement which he called "imperialist economism". The problem was that these new economists "cannot solve the problem of how to link the advent of imperialism with the struggle for reforms and democracy - just as the economism of blessed memory could not link the advent of capitalism with the struggle for democracy. Hence - complete confusion concerning the 'unachievability' of democratic demands under imperialism. Hence the ignoring of the political struggle now, at present, immediately, and at all times, which is impermissible for a Marxist" (VI Lenin *CW* Vol 23, p16).

In a follow-up article, Lenin attacks

one of the chief imperialist economists, Kievsky. He draws attention to "the contemptuous attitude of the imperialist economist towards democracy" (the same contemptuous attitude shared by Ian Donovan). Lenin points out that the imperialist economists are demoralised. They wonder what the point is in arguing for self-determination of nations when imperialism has trampled this into the grounds. What is the point in "talking and thinking about a republic, when there is absolutely no difference whatsoever between the most democratic republics and the most reactionary monarchies"?

Lenin totally exposes the falsity of Kievsky's arguments against democratic demands. He says "Kievsky is very angry when told that he has given way to fear, to the extent of rejecting democracy in general. He is angry and objects: I am not against democracy, only against one democratic demand, which I consider 'bad'. But though Kievsky is offended, and though he 'assures' us that he is not 'against' democracy, his arguments - or more correctly, the endless errors in his arguments - prove the very opposite" (VI Lenin *CW* Vol 23, p23).

Surely Lenin could have written this against Ian Donovan. For Ian assures us he is not 'against' democracy, but only against one democratic demand that he considers 'bad': namely, the demand for a republic. Ian is in a favour of equal rights for women and

proportional representation which he thinks are good, even when the bourgeoisie is in power. But it would be a terrible setback if the workers won a republic! So every day Ian supports the economic struggle for higher pay and more social welfare under the bourgeoisie. He even raises the demand for proportional representation and women's rights under the bourgeoisie. But he cannot bring himself to call for a republic because the bourgeoisie might still be in power.

Of course Ian is in favour of abolishing the monarchy. But he has placed a very special condition on this. Parliament must be abolished at exactly the same time. If the monarchy is abolished before parliament then we will be a republic - the very thing that Ian opposes. On the other hand we are permitted to fight for equal rights for women or women's right to vote or proportional representative even without the abolition of parliament.

This is the same type of inconsistency and confusion which Ian shares with the 'imperialist economists'. As Lenin explains, "It is all one and the same theoretical and practical political error Kievsky [or Ian Donovan] unwittingly makes at every step. He thinks he is arguing only against self-determination [or a republic in Ian's case]. He wants to argue only against self-determination, but the result - against his will and conscience, and that is a curious thing! - is that he has adduced not a single argument which

could not be just as well applied to democracy in general" (VI Lenin *CW* Vol 23, p24).

The logic of Kievsky (and Ian) is simply to counterpose socialism to democracy. But if we counterpose socialism to a republic or self-determination, it is just as logical to counterpose socialism to women's rights or freedom of speech. Lenin explains the logic of Kievsky's argument thus: "The 'only' thing that can be 'opposed' to imperialist war is socialism; socialism alone is the way out; 'hence' to advance democratic slogans in our minimum programme - ie, under capitalism - is a deception or an illusion, befuddlement or postponement, etc of the slogan of the socialist revolution" (VI Lenin *CW* Vol 23, p24). Lenin suggests that "to say that is to show a lack of understanding of the relationship between capitalism and democracy, between socialism and democracy".

Against the revolutionary democratic demand for a republic, Ian tells us that "socialism alone is the way out". He thinks, like an imperialist economist, that to call for a republic is "a deception, illusion, befuddlement", etc. But it is Ian who is befuddled. The root of that error is in economic politics. Ian has invented nothing new. He is merely repeating economic ultra-leftism of the Kievsky variety, an ailment shared by large sections of British Marxism ●

Dave Craig

SWP in practice

Recent issues of *Socialist Worker* have been full of how workers are fighting back. Apparently the 'crisis of expectations' in the Labour government has provoked huge unrest. Workers are rising up. It is a time for boldness. A time to hit back. Throw caution to the wind. That is the SWP message.

But the practical application of this line in Islington Unison has produced disastrous results. The election of Rob Murthlewaite, a leading SWP member, as branch secretary some months ago inspired its cadre, membership and layer of supporters. It was seen as proof of the imminent fightback promised by countless SWP platform speakers. With other comrades in key positions the SWP was in a position of great influence. Predictions could now be made to happen.

The comrades did not have long to wait. A dispute broke out in May between housing workers and management. The council was determined to axe 50% of posts. Workers were to be forced to undergo humiliating tests to prove they could carry out tasks they

had been doing for years. The 'results' meant that nine black women workers were to lose their jobs. This provoked anger throughout the branch. But confidence was low - as ballots around similar disputes in the previous six months had produced very low turnouts and 'yes' votes so marginal that no action could be safely taken - and there was a distinct lack of backing from regional and national officials.

The ballot in housing was the first one in months to produce a decisive majority in favour of action. Here was a traditionally militant section, with a significant number of SWP members. There was a chance of a battle being won. But instead of building on the ballot victory and patiently winning the whole workforce by preparing for official action, the SWP acted precipitously, banking everything on its own rosy analysis. SWP members in housing were told to lead an unofficial walk-out. They did. Comrade Murthlewaite made the call for others to join them. They did not.

The advanced element had gone

over the top and found itself dangerously exposed ... and alone. After two years of management attacks the mass of council workers were not willing to risk unofficial action, not least in a situation where official action had just been voted on and agreed. Anger against management turned to dismay at SWP adventurism. Other militants argued that the group was being foolhardy. They warned that management would seize its chance. Sure enough, the Labour council threatened dismissal unless there was a return to work.

A number of housing workers wanted to retreat. They felt that calling off the action was the best tactic. Once back with the mass they could then come out again unitedly - officially. That would serve as a real warning to management. But a hard core of 12 (mostly SWP members) refused to return to work and wait for official action. It was a matter of 'principle' - or maybe the SWP losing face.

After three days management took its opportunity. It was too good a chance to pass up. All 12 were sacked.

Murthlewaite immediately organised a campaign. But meetings were badly attended and morale low. He pressed on and urged a 'yes' vote in a ballot of all council workers. Members were asked to come out in support of the sacked workers.

But the results - which came through earlier this week - were devastating for the union, the SWP and the 12 sacked members. Out of 2,500 ballot papers issued only 650 were returned. Of those 62% voted 'no'. The figures said it all. At a branch officers' meeting on the same day, comrade Murthlewaite resigned. He said it was obvious that he did not have the confidence of the branch. He had to go. Some sacked workers at the meeting argued that it had been wrong in the first place to take unofficial action. They knew that the support was not there. Now some of the most militant and determined members have been lost to the branch, their jobs sacrificed.

But comrade Murthlewaite dogmatically refused to accept that it was the SWP itself that was in the wrong. He

could not understand why the offensive had not worked. After all according to *Socialist Worker's* 'analysis' the time is ripe for unofficial action. What went wrong?

Demoralisation is rife. Some of the sacked workers have now left the SWP. They feel betrayed by a leadership which refuses to face up to the reality of Blair's Britain and the period of reaction. The branch itself has suffered a massive setback. The left is now being targeted by management and is isolated from the rest of the membership.

SWP members need to learn from this disaster. Far from quitting their organisation, they should stay in and fight. They should promote genuine debate and the unity of all communists and revolutionaries in one Party. Instead of being used as cannon fodder by an out-of-touch sectarian leadership, rebel against bureaucratic centralism and Cliffite dogma.

The pages of the *Weekly Worker* are open to all who want to debate the way forward ●

Anne Murphy

Around the left

Trapped in the past

We recently commented in this column on the divisions developing inside the Alliance for Workers' Liberty ('Principled minority', July 16). These divisions have centred around the British-Irish Agreement in Northern Ireland - should socialists have advocated 'yes', 'no' or a boycott? A minority, led by Mark Osborn and Sean Matgama, adopted the principled position of boycotting the May 22 referendum.

However, my previous article appears to be out of date already. It seems the 'boycottist' minority is in the process of becoming the majority, which should make the next edition of *Workers' Liberty* very interesting. Meanwhile, the battle on this issue within AWL is continuing to wage - without inhibition or diplomatic politeness. This can be seen in the AWL's *Discussion bulletin* No139 (July). On reading the *Discussion bulletin* two things become obvious. The arguments of the 'yes' camp are characterised by the most painful formalism and conservatism. On the other hand, the views of the anti-'yes' grouping, while groping semi-blindly towards principled Leninist politics, are riddled by *inconsistency* - which stems essentially from its inability, at least for the time being, to shake off the Socialist Organiser/AWL methodology of one-very-small-step-at-time *gradualism*.

Pat Murphy criticises the then minority, who insisted "at first that the decisive thing was not the agreement itself but our posture on such matters. Our posture is that 'we are the party of irreconcilable opposition'". However, argues Murphy, as the debate progressed, the minority became bolder: "Faced with a discussion in which comrades pointed out, amongst other things, that we only recently advocated a double 'yes' vote in the referendum for a Scottish assembly with tax-raising powers, there was then a change of emphasis ... The decisive issue now was the agreement itself. It is a rotten deal" ... totally unlike the Scottish referendum, for instance. Murphy presents the viewpoints of the minority as thus: "Scottish autonomy was a different case entirely and how could some comrades be so foolish as to think otherwise? We could advocate 'yes' there and take no responsibility whatsoever for the detail, express no confidence whatever in the bourgeois parties to deliver."

So what are the positive reasons for saying 'yes' to the agreement? Murphy, of

course, trots out the usual defence: "Essentially the agreement is a limited extension of democracy, a bourgeois democratic reform. It has all the weaknesses and limits of any such reform." But, for all that, it is "a reform that reflects real felt needs in the population ... It isn't a simple matter of always being 'with the class' or 'going through the experience with them': it is a matter of how we relate to democratic demands and bourgeois democratic politics."

Usefully, Pat Murphy goes on to sum up the mind-set of his grouping: "Our attitude to a popular vote on an assembly in these circumstances is comparable to the line we took in Scotland (though the 'national question' in Scotland is not the same). Within limits the creation of an elected assembly in Northern Ireland with links to the parliament in Dublin and guarantees against communal domination built in constitutes a partial democratisation of Northern Ireland (and indeed British) society ... For the first time in history Northern Ireland has an elected assembly supported by both communities. To this extent it is possible to make a socialist case for supporting its existence."

Naturally, this ties in neatly with the AWL's general programmatic approach to Ireland. Comrade Murphy writes: "We believe the only consistently democratic answer to the underlying conflict is a federal Ireland with voluntary agreed confederal links to Britain. Advocating a 'yes' vote in the May referendum makes sense as part of a simultaneous fight for that perspective."

It is interesting to note that Murphy concludes his case with the following worrying suspicion: "There is a danger, implied in some of this discussion, that [federalism] is just a comforting fig-leaf behind which lurks the same old bankrupt ultimatum: no solution but revolution. If that is so, we are little different from the SWP, the Socialist Party, etc in the undeveloped way in which they approach the national question"

In reply, Mark Osborn attacks the "lesser-evilism" of Pat Murphy *et al*. The comrade does not mince his words, writing: "Not only are these views *not Marxist*; they have not even really reached the level of politics". Comrade Osborn then goes for the jugular: "To be useful, 'lesser-evilism' has to ask: what does the lesser evil positively stand for? How does the lesser evil stand with regard to the development of the working class as a political class for itself? Or we are left with 'don't vote Nazi

in the East End, and 'vote Liberal' in the south west of England. Or we end up voting Democrat in the US, because we have not assessed the lesser evil to the Republicans *politically, from our own class standpoint.*"

Quite correct. But the righteous indignation of Osborn (and Sean Matgama, etc) does have a hollow ring to it. As far as we are aware, these comrades have always called for a Labour vote. They continue to do so. And the justification for their auto-Labourism boils down to nothing much more than ... lesser-evilism. At least Labour aren't the Tories. Things might get a little better under Labour. We must always 'be with the class'. When it comes to voting Labour, are the arguments of comrades Osborn and Matgama *that different* from the lesser-evilism preached by Pat Murphy?

It also has to be pointed out that comparison made by the former majority between the Scottish and Irish referendums is quite logical ... from their own gradualist perspective. It is comrade Osborn who is on dodgy ground here. How about this for a lesser-evil approach: "It might be useful to discuss the analogy between the agreement in Ireland and the question of a Scottish parliament. The Scots are not an oppressed people. However, there is friction between the Scottish people and the English. The Scots are a distinct group on a distinct territory: there is not an intermeshed population, English and Scots, competing in the way that Catholics and Protestants do in Northern Ireland. The Scottish parliament does give the Scottish people *a bit more control* over their lives. It will also be a mechanism for the Scots to work out their own future relationship to England. And what is the worse thing that can happen because of this reform? We argue against independence and lose; the Scots vote for candidates who are pro-independence; there is a rise in Scottish nationalism? And? So the Scots take their independence - preferable to trying to stop them against their will, and in the longer term a likely antidote to nationalism. In Northern Ireland matters are entirely different" (my emphasis).

Far from backing Blair's sop parliament as a 'small advance', the principled position was - as in Ireland - to call for a boycott. Scotland needs a parliament with full powers, capable of exercising the right to self-determination, not a body set up precisely to prevent it.

One of Mark Osborn's co-thinkers, Tom Rigby, presents the *Discussion bulletin* with a handy question-and-answer session. He states: "But

we often ask people to vote for things we don't agree with. For instance, we call for a Labour vote, but we don't endorse its programme. Why can't we do the same with the deal?" Comrade Rigby answers his own question in the following manner: "We no longer call for a Labour vote in quite the same way as we used to. We have had to adjust our slogans to recognise the way Blair is trying to change the party and the extent to which he has already succeeded. But nevertheless let us go back in the time machine when 'Vote Labour and fight' was an adequate summary of our position. The slogan expressed an entire orientation - it recognised the Labour Party as a distorted expression of working class independence, while simultaneously underlining the bourgeois nature of its policies and programme and the need for a working class fightback against Labour in office. The tension in the slogan was simply a reflection of the tensions in reality and the highly qualified nature of our support for Labour. The slogan was expressive of a dialectical contradiction. To oppose the contents of the deal, and then argue for people to vote for it, is not dialectical, but flatly self-contradictory. It is the equivalent of saying, 'The deal is crap: back the deal!'"

We can see from comrade Rigby's answer that the Labour Party acts like a theoretical black hole for AWL members, sucking everyone into the 'lesser evil' void - even those who are raising the banner of revolt against lesser-evilism. To no longer call for a Labour vote in "quite the same way" as before is still to support New Labour. It seems that AWL comrades are trapped in the past. They should really try to escape to the future.

Ironically, comrade Osborn has violently castigated those in the 'yes' camp for retreating into abstract-fantasy politics over the May 22 referendum - "The question on the ballot was: do we back the peace agreement cobbled together by British and US imperialism, the Irish ruling class and the more mainstream communalist politicians in the North? Yes or no to *this* question, not the ones you've invented" (*Workers' Liberty* June). Yet when it comes to the Labour Party the Osbornites and the Matgammarians put on their specially designed red-tinted glasses and slip back into "grade A fantasy" (Mark Osborn) ●

Don Preston

CPGB shitespeak

Mark Osborn of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty replies to Don Preston's criticisms (Weekly Worker July 16)

The Alliance for Workers' Liberty advocated a 'yes' vote in the recent Northern Ireland referendum for the following reasons: peace may allow the emergence of working class politics; the available alternative was resumption of the long war and continued direct British rule; 'yes' voters voted for peace, not for the specific details in the agreement; it is positive that large numbers of protestants voted for power-sharing and an all-Ireland link-up.

Now, down to business. If the ABC of socialist newspaper production is: A - get an editor; B - encourage people to sell you paper; C - try not to write shite in it, then I think it is worth you pondering a little on point C.

Examine these comments in your 'Principled minority' article, which claims that the Alliance for Workers' Liberty believes "poor old British imperialist forces are stuck in the middle of warring tribes", and "workers in the Six Counties must drop their irrational attachment to nationality and religion", and "bread and butter" trade union politics, allied to the civilising influence of British imperialism, provides the only hope". Here we have a particular brand of high-octane shite: blatant lying about what the AWL believes, without even the slightest attempt to justify yourselves using quotations, facts, etc.

Honestly, read these things again - how likely is it that we actually believe the "civilising influence of British imperialism provides the only hope" in Ireland? How likely is it, do you think, that we are, as your article says, "pro-imperialist"? The AWL is opposed to imperialism (although we might discuss its precise role in Ireland). Do you think we are lying? Why would we want to do that? If we were for imperialism, we'd say so! Sure, we disagree with you about Ireland, but does that make us "pro-imperialist"?

And take the following little points you make about our tradition:

■ When "the witch hunt [in the La-

bour Party] extended itself to [Socialist Organiser, our predecessor], it responded by attacking 'Leninist sects'". Now I'd always thought we had responded by organising a (rather impressive) defence campaign.

It is true that one aspect of our self-defence was to deal with the right wing's "argument" that 'Socialist Organiser is the same as Militant, just another Leninist sect'. Militant (and beyond them the other sects) was widely - and quite reasonably - despised by ordinary Labour Party members for being parasitic, wooden, intolerant, conspiratorial and religious. The witch hunters used this hatred to "justify" their banning of our organisation. A small part of a big campaign was to respond to this charge (SO 454, July 19 1990) by telling the truth: even on your own account of us, we are not a typical pseudo-Leninist sect. Should we have let the Labour right tell the Party's members we were? Did we hide what we stood for? Of course not. The paper, week in, week out, went to great lengths to say exactly what we stood for. And we published 10,000 copies of a 38-page pamphlet, *We stand for workers' liberty* (August 1 1990, at the height of the attack on us).

And the stupidity of putting back into circulation this daft little slander is that if you read SO No454 you'll find in the anti-witch hunt pull-out, which we circulated in great numbers round local Labour Parties, a defence of the real Leninist tradition: "With sincere revulsion and contempt I [Sean Matgamna, our editor] repudiate the antics of the pseudo-Leninist sects ... I do not thereby repudiate the tradition of Lenin and those who made the working class revolution in Russia in 1917. On the contrary, I believe that I thereby defend that tradition as it really was. "That the outcome in history of the 1917 revolution was - by way of Stalinist counterrevolution - a negative and horrible outcome, was not the fault of Lenin or his 'tradition',

but of those socialists in the west (in whose tradition the majority of Labour's NEC are proud to stand) who left the Russian workers in the lurch and made peace with their own ruling classes." Is that plain enough for you? Is this "grovelling"? No! How would you argue it is? The relevant word to focus on here is 'argue'.

■ You claim an aspect of our politics as "objective pro-Zionism". Now I think that use of the word "objective" in this way occupies a separate and special category of shite. "Objective" is shitespeak for 'the author does not intend to use evidence'. Myself? I'm not a Zionist. I would not call myself an 'anti-Zionist' because that would link me to a political current I'm very hostile to. Do we think "the left's anti-Zionism is no more than thinly disguised anti-semitism"? Well, I wouldn't put matters quite like that. But I'll ask you a question, by way of a response: the SWP - for example - believe that Israel is such a special place that the Jewish working class is not a working class, that the Jewish people are the only people on earth not to have the right to a state, that Israel must be "smashed", that the revolution in the region will be an Arab revolution which will have as one of its aims the destruction of Israel. Think about what this means - doesn't it make your hackles rise?

■ You say our "'anti-Stalinism' is virtually indistinguishable from mainstream bourgeois anti-communism". The evidence for this particularly stupid remark would be what, exactly? Try our *Capitalism or workers' liberty?* pamphlet published after the Berlin Wall was pulled down. You think we were arguing for the capitalism option? Er, then, er, why's our group called "Workers' Liberty" then?

You claim we "enthusiastically supported the 'anti-imperialist' *mujahedeen* in Afghanistan [against the Russian invaders]". No, you are not right here, either. We - of course - opposed the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, opposed their occupation and war in which a million people were killed and around five million others driven out of the country. Clearly the Afghan peoples did not want the Rus-

sians there. Clearly they had the right to fight for their right to self-determination. Were the Russians "imperialist"? - if this is not imperialism it is difficult to see what is.

Did we politically support the *mujahedeen*? Er, no, we didn't. You didn't quote us saying we supported them, did you? You won't be able to, will you? (And, in the parallel case, the USA's war in Vietnam, we supported the right of the Vietnamese to self-determination without giving the Vietnamese Stalinists political backing.)

All too difficult for you? Give me a ring and I'll suggest some reading. In fact start with the big book we've just published, *The fate of the Russian Revolution*.

You claim that this position (that never existed) means we believe in "MI5 socialism." Five quick points about this remark:

- i) Doesn't this sort of 'polemic' make you feel dirty?
- ii) Do you - honestly - find our writings, propaganda, etc, over decades, indistinguishable from MI5?
- iii) You claim to dislike the stupidity, irrationality and unwillingness to discuss on the left - and is this the sort of 'discussion' you really want to promote?
- iv) So people who backed Vietnamese self-determination against US imperialism were "KGB socialists"?
- v) The point surely is to develop what Trotsky called the "third camp": independent working class politics - in this case independent of Russian imperialism and what you refer to as the MI5 camp. If you read our (copious) writings about Stalinism, this is what you'll find.

■ And we are "developing a culture of openness"? But open debate in our publications is not new. To take a few of the many examples, more or less at random: there were big-scale discussions on Ireland, the Middle East, the Iran-Iraq war and the class nature of the Soviet Union in the pages of *Socialist Organiser* during the 1980s.

To end. We're quite happy to debate you on Ireland (I just didn't quite get to that point). But if we're going to discuss you should stop debating in shitespeak ●

One-sided analysis

Steve Riley of Manchester CPGB takes issue with Jack Conrad on the Soviet Union

It should be welcomed that theorists in the communist movement can still come up with original and insightful works. And it is this consideration which raised expectations in the CPGB around the ongoing work of comrade Jack Conrad developing his analysis of the USSR.

Conrad's work is now bearing fruit, but just like the subject of his enquiry, it displays an inability to resolve its own internal contradictions, and points to a disturbing uncommunist future.

This work started life as an attempt to fill out an understanding of the bureaucratic socialist states, as a ruthless criticism of the mistakes of our movement in the light of the counterrevolutions of 1989-91. But far from being an analysis of the category of bureaucratic socialism, Conrad's work became its thorough debunking and the rejection of all the progressive character of the Soviet Union from 1928 onwards.

Serious working class politicians do not uphold a fantasy of a workers' paradise in the USSR, but neither do we discount the facts of the last 80 years of class struggle in a rush to wash our hands of

inconvenient associations.

Whether or not the accounts of historians are correct in detail, the fact of the terror under Stalin is not in question. Neither is the failure of the Soviet bureaucracy to permit working class democratic control at the point of production. It still remains, however, to understand and explain the contradictory nature of the bureaucracy which can oppress the workers and peasants at home, yet fail to produce its opposite in class relations. The Soviet Union on the world stage intervened to suppress uprisings which ran counter to the interests of the bureaucracy, yet inspired the world's communist and national liberation movements for over half a century. Overbearing suppression and world-scale psychosis are pitifully unconvincing explanations.

A particularly bitter fruit which comrade Conrad's work has borne is not simply the theory of the 'freak society' but, by its forceful and one-sided concentration on the crimes of Stalin, the emotional assent of the majority of the comrades of the CPGB. Not least this has been permitted by the absence of any serious counter-argument, a charge which rings loudly in this author's ears. In part comrades became inured to the thesis by the belief, and later hope, that comrade Conrad's use of the most damning invective was hyperbolic. He is after all renowned for 'bending the stick' to make a point. The transposition of the thesis, however, from the

on-going work of one comrade to the perceived wisdom of the majority has now been convincingly achieved.

It is clear now that the condemnation of the Soviet Union from 1928 onwards is intended, a conclusion which has alarming consequences. The defence of the Soviet Union against imperialism was wrong. The correct position for revolutionaries in the Soviet Union during World War II would have been for the defeat of the Soviet Union by Germany. Support for the national revolutions in Cuba and Vietnam was wrong. Defence of these states against imperialism now is wrong.

What kind of idealist nonsense has brought this about? Comrade Conrad's drive to distance the CPGB from anything not identifiable as the 'pure thing' - advanced socialism arising out of the highest achievements of capitalism - has brought the CPGB to the point of opportunism. Like Tony Cliff in 1955, denouncing the great Satan may bring short-term popularity, but at the cost of a terrible historic wrong ●

'Understanding the USSR' is one of the courses in Communist University '98, which also includes comrade Riley's 'In defence of bureaucratic socialism'

What we fight for

● Our central aim is to reforge the Communist Party of Great Britain. Without this Party the working class is nothing; with it, it is everything.

● The Communist Party serves the interests of the working class. We fight all forms of opportunism and revisionism in the workers' movement because they endanger those interests. We insist on open ideological struggle in order to fight out the correct way forward for our class.

● Marxism-Leninism is powerful because it is true. Communists relate theory to practice. We are materialists; we hold that ideas are determined by social reality and not the other way round.

● We believe in the highest level of unity among workers. We fight for the unity of the working class of all countries and subordinate the struggle in Britain to the world revolution itself. The liberation of humanity can only be achieved through world communism.

● The working class in Britain needs to strike as a fist. This means all communists should be organised into a single Party. We oppose all forms of separatism, which weakens our class.

● Socialism can never come through parliament. The capitalist class will never peacefully allow their system to be abolished. Socialism will only succeed through working class revolution and the replacement of the dictatorship of the capitalists with the dictatorship of the working class. Socialism lays the basis for the conscious planning of human affairs: ie, communism.

● We support the right of nations to self-determination. In Britain today this means the struggle for Irish freedom should be given full support by the British working class.

● Communists are champions of the oppressed. We fight for the liberation of women, the ending of racism, bigotry and all other forms of chauvinism. Oppression is a direct result of class society and will only finally be eradicated by the ending of class society.

● War and peace, pollution and the environment are class questions. No solution to the world's problems can be found within capitalism. Its ceaseless drive for profit puts the world at risk. The future of humanity depends on the triumph of communism.

We urge all who accept these principles to join us. A Communist Party Supporter reads and fights to build the circulation of the Party's publications; contributes regularly to the Party's funds and encourages others to do the same; where possible, builds and participates in the work of a Communist Party Supporters Group.

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Political fightback

It is essential that ideas are articulated out in the open, where their strengths and weaknesses can be examined in the full light of day. This is particular so when the comrades expressing the ideas - however critical of ourselves - are engaged in joint work on a common project.

Last week the *Weekly Worker* carried letters from two comrades active in Lewisham Socialist Alliance, Toby Abse and Nick Long (July 23). Both comrades played a prominent role in support of the 'amalgamated' motion at the July 5 general meeting of the London Socialist Alliance. This motion - a hotchpotch of various parts inelegantly thrown together by the Socialist Party, the Socialist Democracy Group and Socialist Outlook - had as its central aim the ending of the London SA's *inclusive democracy*.

A CPGB motion, arguing for the continuation of inclusivity through automatic representation on the steering committee of all affiliated political and other groups, as well as borough SAs like Lewisham, fell on a tied vote (18 for; 18 against). Subsequently the 'amalgamated' motion was carried, although its worst features were removed as a result of a series of surgical amendments.

Moving the CPGB motion, I argued that the type of working class democracy we adopt must depend on the nature of our organisations. The annual election of a steering committee, as proposed by the 'amalgamated' bloc, might be appropriate for a party or trade union, but an *alliance*, by its very nature, demanded inclusivity. This was hardly a formula for CPGB 'domination', as some alleged. Rather it ensured that we, as a minority, could be outvoted at any time.

On the contrary, a system whereby an AGM - potentially packed by supporters of one or a few larger affiliates - elects its leading committee could clearly lead to the exclusion of minorities. Indeed even large groups could be kept out by an exclusivist bloc. Such a situation would threaten the whole existence of the alliances. Yet, in their rush to sideline the CPGB, the 'amalgamated' bloc of the SP, SDG and SO seem prepared to jeopardise the SA project itself.

In replying to our full coverage of the LSA meeting (see *Weekly Worker* July 9), comrade Toby Abse chooses to concentrate his fire on one individual, comrade John Bridge, a leading member of our organisation. According to comrade Abse, John Bridge did not attend meetings and pickets relating to the "heroic 11-week strike by 150 library workers" in Camden. In an effort to further damn this absence, he claims that the strike had "the potential to serve as an inspiring example to other local government workers", and "paved the way for the subsequent Blairite offensive against the Islington housing workers".

If only comrade Bridge had dropped his Communist Party work and thrown everything into this dispute, things



Thameside careworkers: trade union struggle is not enough

could have been oh so different. This one comrade, it seems, could have single-handedly transformed the dispute, perhaps even the entire political situation as a result.

For all its courage and intransigence, the library strike was an *extremely* low-level workers' action. Although of course it is *possible* that even a small spark could produce a raging inferno of struggle, recent protracted disputes - at Hillingdon, Magnet, the Merseyside docks - have shown that this is improbable. We are living in a period where working class militancy and combativity are at an all-time low and workers have no class identity. The 'socialist' USSR alternative is no more and the Labour Party has dropped any pretence of representing working class interests. In other words our class no longer has *any* kind of ideology around which to unite.

What then is the task of the left in this situation? Are we to scatter what remains of our cadre in solidarity with local isolated actions? Or should we concentrate our forces where they can be most effective - where we can make a difference, in the political field? Comrade Abse is not the first to blow up a local action into *the* strike, of allegedly strategic importance for our class. There will be many more Camden library-type disputes, but they do not necessarily signal a fightback of the class as a whole.

Comrade Abse, admitting for a moment that the LSA's inaction in Camden was not down to comrade Bridge alone, writes: "I believe that the failure of the LSA, as a collective, to intervene in this dispute was a serious mistake." A meeting of the LSA expressed solidarity with the strikers and raised a small collection. It was symbolic, but the regular presence of our supporters on the Camden picket line would have been no less so. The Socialist Alliances, let alone the CPGB, cannot conjure up a real solidarity movement out of nothing.

Comrade Abse is right to state that the *Weekly Worker* emphasises "the primacy of the self-activity of the workers themselves", but he misses the central point. That self-activity must be inspired and guided by a generalised *political* awareness. Our paper will continue to cover disputes like

Camden, but our main emphasis, our main energy, will go into the generation of the necessary political ideas. Only in this way can our class be re-armed.

That is why our coverage of the "relatively small LSA meeting" was so extensive. Comrade Abse should look at his copy of the July 9 issue of the *Weekly Worker* again. Did it contain *just* a series of reports of a meeting? Surely several questions of crucial importance for the entire movement were raised. For example, can we hope to build a real mass movement through backroom intrigue, or should we openly express our different perspectives? Can we get to the truth through the curtailing of debate, or ought we to thrash out our differences for as long as it takes? Is it true that workers are 'not interested' in lengthy political discussion, or does their self-liberation depend on the working class making the most advanced ideas their own? Can a movement for the class be re-created entirely on the basis of workers' current ideas and spontaneous actions, or does this require intervention and leadership based on political consciousness?

For his part, comrade Nick Long seems incapable of grasping the importance of any these vital discussions. Like so many others raised in the bureaucratic traditions of Labourism, Stalinism or Trotskyism, he sees only deadly threats in our practice of openness. That is why he wants to exclude us from the steering committee - even if, as I have pointed out, the structure adopted for the purpose risks wrecking the whole SA project.

He complains that the publishing of "private letters from other socialists" has become our "trade mark". Clear proof, in comrade Long's eyes, that "the CPGB, far from wanting to work with comrades in a fraternal and cooperative fashion to help build an alliance of socialists, sees its work as splitting groups and a party-building exercise for the CPGB" (Letters, July 23).

If the "private letters" published in the *Weekly Worker* contained details of comrades' domestic relationships or sexual liaisons, he would have very good grounds for condemning us. But, as the comrade well knows, such documents are not given publicity in

order to titillate our readers. What irks comrade Long is not some abstract concern for 'the right to personal privacy'. It is our exposure of the Socialist Democracy Group's method that upsets him. The SDG - of which he is a member - appears now to have renounced openness in favour of intrigue. It mouths a commitment to "inclusion" while practising the opposite.

Why should comrade Duncan Chapple (whose "private letter" we published in *Weekly Worker* July 23) be concerned that we revealed his desire to exclude the CPGB from the LSA steering committee? Because he wanted to continue denying that this was his intention. He had political reasons for keeping secret the political contents of his "private letter", just as we had political reasons for publishing it.

Comrade Long himself, however, does not even have the nous to keep his hypocrisy to himself. He parades it for all to see. He writes: "The notion of 'conspiracy, plots and intrigue' all directed at excluding the CPGB is silly" (Letters, July 23). Yet in the same issue we reproduce his 'Campaigning Alliances Bulletin', in which he reports (of the July 5 LSA general meeting): "A motion to give tokenistic automatic representation to tiny crackpot sect and 'front' campaigns on a future official London steering committee fell." Who can he be referring to? Why, the "spooky CPGB", the "fanatical and paranoiac CPGB" of course.

Comrade Long's latest scheme is to establish a 'south London committee' of Socialist Alliances. When asked by a CPGB comrade the purpose of this extra tier, he replied: "It's a body the CPGB can't control." Unsurprisingly comrades from Lambeth and Southwark were less than inspired by this pointless exercise and failed to turn up to comrade Long's 'informal discussions' earlier this week.

According to Nick, "The reality is that the CPGB fear the SA becoming a mass organisation - hence their opposition to a London founding conference and an orientation to mass organisations of the working class" ('Campaigning Alliances Bulletin' *Weekly Worker* July 23).

The logic is clear. The SAs have not attracted support among the "mass organisations of the working class" - so blame it on the CPGB and kick us off the steering committee. Then the alliances would really take off, wouldn't they? I have no doubt that comrade Long is sincere in his dedication to the working class cause, but he is letting his frustration at the absence of any fightback get the better of him.

Which "mass organisations of the working class" is he referring to? Only the trade unions could be placed in that category, but at the moment they are hardly organs of struggle. Instead of looking for scapegoats to excuse this wishful thinking, we should be prepared to engage in long, patient

work to re-equip our class *politically*.

Comrade Long's accusations that the CPGB is somehow out to wreck the London Socialist Alliance are wide of the mark, to put it mildly. Perhaps my memory is faulty, but was it not the CPGB that actually took the initiative to set up the LSA? And what of the six affiliated borough alliances? Two of those - Hackney and Brent - were also established through our actions. In addition CPGB comrades work in Lewisham and Lambeth SAs. We have employed our small forces to the greatest effect possible. But comrade Abse thinks we should have scattered them ineffectively, through instructing comrade Bridge to contest a council seat in Camden, for example, and diverting some comrades to build an SA there.

Just as Nick Long accused the CPGB of mounting a "smash and grab raid" on the Socialist Labour Party (and was an enthusiastic participant of the anti-communist witch hunt during his period of SLP membership), again without any basis in fact he alleges that we want to conduct a similar operation within the alliances. Of course we want to recruit individuals to the CPGB. No doubt the SDG - another "tiny sect" - would like to do the same. But we want to see the alliances grow and develop, just as we encouraged the SLP break from New Labour. Communists have a duty to try to mould and influence such movements.

It is ironic that comrade Long's SDG is part of a bloc within the LSA alongside an organisation which really is more interested in its own "party-building project" than developing the Socialist Alliances. The Socialist Party is singularly unenthusiastic about SA work. It sends only a couple of comrades to LSA meetings, while a handful do irregular work in some of the borough alliances. Hillingdon, the one SA it actually set up, is more or less defunct and the SP proposed that the LSA should be run down through meeting only every two months (comrades Long and Abse both gave their backing to this through supporting the 'amalgamated' motion). While CPGB candidates in the May local elections stood as 'Socialist Alliance-CPGB', the SP stood only under its own name.

While there are divisions within the SP - Dave Nellist in Coventry represents the pro-SA minority - the Taaffe leadership would see developing, expanding alliances as a threat, particularly in elections. It openly espouses the sectarian project of a "small mass party".

On the contrary, the CPGB is unequivocally committed to the SA project. But we do not seek to exclude those whose commitment is more questionable. Neither do we wish to sideline comrades to our right. We remain convinced that the SAs must be based on a genuinely inclusive democracy, where all ideas, including our own, can compete ●

Peter Manson