

## Labour Party centenary

# Blair realigns UK politics

To call last week's proceedings at Bournemouth a conference would be to abuse the English language. What we witnessed was more akin to a CPSU congress from the 1930s. No speech from the platform was complete without some reference to the monolithic unity of the party and the genius of its leader. The role of the 1,500 'delegates' was a simple one - to acclaim their approval for every resolution and to punctuate every speech with stormy applause.

On one occasion they somehow lost the script and voted the wrong way. The solution to this embarrassment was obvious: tell them to vote again.

Only one speech mattered - that by the Leader himself. Its objective was to consolidate New Labour's expropriation of the centre ground by making mainstream politics definitionally identical with Blairite orthodoxy. Those who accept it can join Blair's crusade to "create a model 21st century nation"; those who do not are ridiculed as "weird". They constitute the devilish "forces of conservatism" (whether of the right or the left) against which Blair launched a sneering and splenetic assault.

Blair's denunciation of conservatism was to some extent misconstrued by the Tory Party and its press as being directed exclusively at them. Of course, this centenary year, it served the purpose of playing to the audience's prejudices and establishing in rhetorical fashion that New Labour, despite its relentless drive to the right, has not lost touch with its roots. But, as any fool knows, everything the Blair government has done so far - in economic policy, law and order, maintaining anti-trade union legislation, military intervention on behalf of the 'international community', the constitutional revolution, etc - has served to extend or complement the Thatcherite project.

Where Thatcher renewed British capitalism by attacking and defeating the organised working class, Blair renews British capitalism by rewinning popular consent. The real point of Blair's attack was political, to establish new polarities involving a specific repudiation of traditional Labourite ideology.

Hence his assertion that the 21st century will not be "the battle between capitalism and socialism, but between the forces of progress and the forces of conservatism ... We were chained by our ideology. We thought we had eternal doctrines when they are in truth eternal values - solidarity, social justice, the belief not that society counts before individual fulfilment, but that it is only in a strong society of others that the individual will be fulfilled".

The language of values was pervasive and represented another (failed) attempt to give some concrete meaning to the flatulent banalities of the 'third way'. The 'value' which dominated Blair's speech was equality. Not the equality of *outcome* which lies at the core of left social democratic reformism, but equality of *opportunity* in the form of what Blair, with the air of a man introducing us to a startlingly new idea, described as "true, classless meritocracy": "Not equal incomes ... But true equality - equal worth, an equal chance of fulfilment, equal access to knowledge and opportunity. Equal rights. Equal responsibilities. The class war is over. But

the struggle for true equality has only just begun."

The reference to the end of the class war was another attempt to shift the ideological focus away from traditional polarities and introduce a "new progressive form in British politics". The assertion is, of course, pure hypocritical cant and nonsense. Class division and antagonisms will exist as long as capitalism itself. The war is not over but many battles have been lost in recent years. The victors have been the bourgeoisie - precisely that class which finds in New Labour and Blairism a congenial and compliant servant, the class in whose interest Blair's administration has created ever deeper, substantive *inequality*. The vanquished have been the working class - atomised and demoralised by a succession of defeats.

The slogan dominating the podium at Bournemouth - "for the many, not the few" - aptly illustrates the paradox and the deceit at the heart of Blairism. The 'many' refers not to the Labour Party's supposedly natural base - ie, the working class - but to that amorphous 'constituency' which brought Blair to power in 1997 and which he needs to maintain as the foundation of support for his long-term vision of a 'radical' liberal, centre coalition, capable of dominating British politics in the 21st century. There should be no room for misunderstanding about this fact. In a sentimental passage in which he quoted Kier Hardie, Blair alluded to the foundation of the Labour Party as a "mistake", the clearest indication of his fundamental attachment to liberalism, and indeed to the tradition of 'one-nation Toryism', another political force which he hopes to harness to his 'radical' project.

This became evident on the day after his speech, when he launched an overt appeal to disaffected Tories to join ranks with New Labour: "There must be many people in the Conservative Party today, sensible people, one-nation Conservatives, who believe in sensible engagement in Europe, who believe in fairness and enterprise going together, who see a Labour government that is now a modern party and feel more at home in today's Labour Party than they do in a Conservative Party more extreme than ever before ... they can join us because

they're not people who want to hold the country back." This bold, some might say impudent, invitation fitted seamlessly into the strategy enunciated in Blair's Bournemouth address: marginalise the opposition by making it appear extreme and reactionary; widen potential support by flattering it as "sensible" and "modern", terms that encompass Blair's definition of 'radicalism' - "to be modern and sensible is to be radical".

It goes without saying that Blair's commitment to the 'values' of equality and opportunity, like his commitment to abolishing poverty, sermonised in terms of emetic mock-humility - "while there is one child still in poverty in Britain today, one pensioner in poverty, one person denied their chance in life ... there is one prime minister that will have no rest, no sense of mission completed" - is merely hot air and empty rhetoric. How else can one explain his bizarre assertion that "You can't solve the problem of poverty by simply giving people more money", or the parenthetical statement that the defence of personal freedom amounts to "libertarian nonsense"? How else can one interpret a policy on education that, leaving aside all the blather about meritocracy, has as its centrepiece the idea of making truancy an arrestable offence - not for the children (at least not yet) but for the parents? Those parents who cannot pay fines of up to £5,000 will presumably find themselves in prison, where they will be competing for space with those refused bail because they have tested positive for drugs. Does this authoritarian criminalisation of a social problem reflect the "new moral purpose" supposedly at the core of New Labour's project?

The peroration gave the game away: "To every nation a purpose. To every party a cause. And now, at last, party and nation joined in the same cause for the same purpose: to set our people free." Have we not heard something like this before? "*Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer*". Only his customary modesty forbade Blair from including himself in this rapturous evocation of a party and a nation that have become one. What, in the name of all that is rational, has this got to do with the Labour Party that is celebrating its 100th year of existence?

The time cannot be far off when

Marxists will have to undertake a fundamental theoretical re-evaluation of the Labour Party, one that seeks dialectically to grasp the complexity and contradiction of the problem as a *process*, rather than as a motionless category. Traditionally, following Lenin, we have theorised it as "a bourgeois party of the working class": bourgeois - because politically it has consistently taken the side of imperialism; a party of the working class - because of its organised mass base in the trade union and labour movement. In formal terms, so long as the party maintains its organic link with the trade unions this definition must still hold. There seem no grounds for believing that Blair intends to sever that link in the foreseeable future - the suggestion by Ken Cameron of the firefighters' union at last month's TUC that it was time for the two wings of the labour movement to seek an amicable divorce fell on deaf ears.

The unions, despite the haemorrhage in membership (down to around six million from a high of 12 million), still give some £6 million a year to the Labour Party and, however much the bureaucrats may moan about being marginalised or treated like an embarrassing relative, they have little choice but to maintain their allegiance and hope (in vain, one suspects) for better times. This means accepting Blair's stated determination not to change one clause of the anti-trade union, anti-working class legislation currently on the statute book. As Sir Ken Jackson of the AEEU put it recently, "The choice is not between a Labour government we want and the Labour government we've got, but between a Labour government and a Tory one" (*The Independent* September 28). A message that will doubtless be made clear whenever they step out of line.

What of Labour's relationship with the working class as a whole? Nobody can maintain or believe that Labour any longer seeks to represent them or further their interests *as a class*. In the event of any confrontation between capital and labour, it is absolutely clear whose side New Labour will be on. The party's approach to the class is marked by tension and ambiguity. In the light of recent mass abstentions by the core vote, the Millbank machine is reportedly about to set up a "unit aimed at reconnect-

ing Labour's leadership with the party's grass roots" (*The Times* October 1). It is difficult to reconcile this attempt at 'reconnection' with Blair's apparent desire further to tighten his grip on the party by abolishing general management committees, a move that, according to David Evans, Labour's regional director in the north west and an ardent Blairite, "will empower modernising forces and marginalise old Labour" (*The Independent* September 27). For "old Labour", read any party activist who is still a partisan of the working class.

There has always been a contradiction in the relationship between the Labour Party and the class it historically has purported to represent: the active pole constituting the leadership's consistently bourgeois, reactionary politics; the subaltern pole formed by the grassroots membership among trade unionists and passive voters. The same contradiction is mirrored in the trade unions themselves. With the Thatcherite offensive that began with the miners' strike, followed by the period of reaction ushered in by the collapse of 'official communism' and the relegation of socialism to the margins of political life, the contradiction has become ever wider. The extent to which the link between the party and the class can any longer be regarded as a living, *organic* one, rather than a formal, historical one, is now open to serious question.

Of course, life is constantly changing. Thus far, Blair has enjoyed double good fortune. He has presided over a 'golden' economic legacy (golden that is, for the bourgeoisie and sections of the middle classes) and he is faced by an opposition party that is still traumatised by the catastrophe of 1997 and has a leader whose approval ratings, even among Tory supporters, are in minus quantities. In time, all of this could, and no doubt will, change. It will then remain to be seen to what extent New Labour is forced to retreat from its present course.

A year ago, I wrote that "Labour is well on the way to transforming itself from a bourgeois party of the working class into a bourgeois party of the bourgeoisie." The transformation is still not complete, but, as Bournemouth demonstrated, it is gathering pace ●

Michael Malkin

## Private Godfrey

Michael Farmer is not serious when he talks about “miscreants” in the Party’s current controversy over the British-Irish being “thrown out” of the organisation (*Weekly Worker* September 30).

Comrades are well aware that the conclusion of any sharp, even occasionally discourteous, debate in our ranks does not augur a purge of the defeated minority. Indeed, it is not in our culture to impose the sort of crude political gagging order that masquerades as ‘democratic centralism’ in other revolutionary groups. Our minority - whatever its political physiognomy - will be able to continue to agitate, organise and polemicise *openly* for its point of view as a component element of this Party.

However, the comrade raises important questions over the tone of the debate, setting his face against what he classifies as “name-calling” on the part of Jack Conrad. Unfortunately for his case, the only examples of this “worrying trend to vilify” those who refuse to agree is Conrad’s accusation that his opponents exhibit “vicarious Irish nationalism, residual bureaucratic socialism”. In fact, these are political characterisations - and pretty mild and qualified ones at that. The comrades these charges are aimed at can disagree with them, but they can hardly complain that they overstep the boundaries of comradely debate.

In fact, it is comrade Farmer who seems to be light-mindedly tripping into the minefield of political exclusion and purge. First, he equates bureaucratic socialism with Stalinism. This is too narrow. In my opinion the very different trends of Stalinism, Trotskyism and social democracy all adhere to particular forms of what could be characterised as bureaucratic socialism. But then, in his final sentence, he calls for these “Stalinists” in the Communist Party to be “expunged”. This is surely polemical excess, particularly given the views on the nature of the Soviet Union held by some of our comrades who also disagree with Jack Conrad over the British-Irish. There are no plans afoot by the leadership to institute political expulsions in our organisation, now or in the future.

The culture we fight for is robust, open and democratic. Comrades have the right (although not the *duty*) to express themselves in tones that others claim to find insulting or even abusive. In the pages of our press, you will find a variety of different styles and tempos of polemic. While it is certainly true that comrade Conrad is among the more robustly pugnacious, he is hardly uniquely belligerent. In general, the exchanges between our comrades are marked by a communist candour, a sincere search for clarity and truth. The angularity and sharpness of our language is a product of this fundamental fact.

This is fully in the best traditions of our movement. Martov - then a rather ‘soft’ member of the *Iskra* editorial - neatly captured this blunt, no-nonsense expositional style when he commented that the paper “strove to make sure that ‘all that is ridiculous’ appears in ‘a ridiculous form’”, and to “expose ‘the very embryo of a reactionary idea hidden behind a revolutionary phrase’” (cited in M Liebman *Leninism under Lenin* London 1985, p29). The search for truth is an *active* process of sharp, sometimes harsh *conflict*, in other words.

Thus, this ruthless exposure of “the very embryo of a reactionary idea hidden behind a revolutionary phrase” - a “polemical style that was destined to enjoy a brilliant future in the Bolshevik party” - was damned by the rest of the left: “On all sides, *Iskra*’s opponents condemned the polemical methods of this journal, which was accused, to quote Trotsky’s testimony at the time, of ‘fighting not so much against the autocracy as against the other

factions in the revolutionary movement” (*ibid*).

Now, doesn’t this sound familiar? I refer readers to the Socialist Democracy Group’s charming appraisal of this paper (*Weekly Worker* September 30) as a “poisonous shit sheet denouncing the whole left (including their own correspondents) ...” For such philistines, our barbed debates are the very opposite of the two-faced diplomacy that passes for ‘comradely relations’. This simply underlines how far a sect like the SDG is from Leninist politics.

Contrasting the Bolshevik Party before and after the ascendancy of Stalin, Leopold Trepper noted that, far from introducing rancour and schism, frank and occasionally very violent exchanges helped *fuse* those who were *actually* revolutionaries: “During Lenin’s lifetime, political life among the Bolsheviks was always very animated. At the congresses, in the plenums, at the meetings of the central committee, militants said frankly what they thought. This democratic and often bitter clash of opinions gave the party its cohesion and vitality” (my emphasis L Trepper *The great game* p44).

It should be obvious to us as Leninist politicians that when a political opponent starts at our use of a particular phrase, when they make demands that we ‘withdraw’ these accusations, the likelihood is that we have touched a soft spot. Here is Lenin gleefully poking at one of Plekhanov’s weaknesses:

“... In the original draft of the Menshevik resolution on the state дума proposed by the committee, clause 5 (on the armed forces) contained the following sentence: ... ‘Seeing for the first time on Russian soil a new authority, sprung from the depths of the nation, called into being by the tsar and recognised by the law’, etc. In criticising the Menshevik resolution for what may mildly be called its imprudent and optimistic attitude towards the state дума, I also criticised the words I have underlined and said jestingly: should we not add ‘and sent by god’s grace’ (meaning authority)? Comrade Plekhanov, a member of the committee, was frightfully angry with me for cracking this joke. ‘What!’ he exclaimed in his speech, must I listen to these ‘suspicions of being an opportunist’? (his exact words, as I wrote them down) ... Comrade Plekhanov’s resentment exposed his vulnerable spot ... In my speech in reply to the debate, I said it was not a matter of ‘suspicions’ and it was ridiculous to use such pitiful expressions. Nobody was accusing Plekhanov of believing in the tsar. But resolutions are not written for Plekhanov: they are written for the people. And it was indecent to disseminate among the people such ambiguous arguments” (VI Lenin *CW* Vol 10, Moscow 1977, pp363-64).

Today, we believe the politics of much of the left to be “indecent” from the viewpoint of Marxism and their dissemination amongst our class positively harmful. It is our duty therefore to counter this, to sharply draw clear and unambiguous lines of political demarcation between communist politics and the swamp. And if a comrade peddling opportunism reacts to being *called* an opportunist, all to the good. Perhaps the shock will precipitate reappraisal and change.

What is the alternative? That we should behave as ‘gentlemen’? That we should deal with each other in the manner of that epitome of addle-brained English courteousness, private Godfrey of *Dad’s Army*? There would be no better way to blur political questions, to smudge the distinct lines we are trying to draw. It would not produce communist politics or anything like it ●

**Mark Fischer**  
national organiser

## The pits

I have been a communist for 63 years and spent 64 years working in the trade union movement in various capacities. I am now active in the anti-racist and pensioners’ movements.

I have read your weekly paper. In it I found very little to commend. The attacks on the Communist Party of Britain and Socialist Labour Party and the sectarian comments in both cases speak volumes about your determination to lambaste anyone or any group who express a different point of view other than your own. You have struck the pits of political comment - this attack on personalities shows your own poverty.

It also indicates quite clearly that you do not show the slightest wish to develop any form of united action on the many issues that could be won to express alternative policies to that of the Millbank Labour bureaucracy.

I wish you well, and hope that you will recover from trying to present a case that everyone else is out of step but yourselves.

**Henry Suss**  
Manchester

## Don Quixote

Having just become acquainted with your newspaper on-line, I couldn’t help but notice a contradiction inherent in it.

Your open editorial policy is admirable and an example to other leftwing media. However, I sometimes cringe and laugh at some of the more wild articles and letters. Two of the most recent were Marcus Larsen’s quixotic articles, ‘What kind of republic for Australia?’ (September 2) and ‘East Timor and Australian DSP’ (September 9). They reminded me of all the little Don Quixotes on the left trying to overthrow capitalism.

For example, some years ago, when I was working in the Socialist Party of Australia’s Sydney bookshop, I was appraised of the short history of the Marxist-Leninist-Trotskyist Party of Australia by its general secretary. He was the only member. There were three at one stage, but two of them had been recently expelled. Apparently, the president of the party (his girlfriend) was expelled for sleeping with the chairperson (their lodger).

So to Larsen’s articles. He accuses Australia’s Democratic Socialist Party of “tailism”, “gradualism”, “reformism” and “capitulation to junior imperialism”. To Larsen the DSP is not revolutionary enough. If this small group of leftwing radicals and reformed Trotskyites are “tailist” then I’m Michael Portillo. The members of the DSP (and I am not a member or supporter) are strident revolutionaries, but not all of them are Don Quixotes.

Many members recognise their true position in Australian politics and the absolute futility of making ridiculous demands that they know they cannot immediately achieve. They recognise that the left has to be rebuilt, and that will take some time. They also know that most Australians are imbued with liberal and reformist ideals that will take time to dislodge. And no amount of soap-box ranting will convince anyone, rarely even the converted.

Incidentally, it is very telling that Larsen’s main target is not capitalism or imperialism, but a leftwing party. Larsen’s demands to abolish the states and standing army may be admirable, but no-one else, even on the left, will countenance such impossibly ridiculous demands.

Engage the reformists and liberals, and try and persuade them. We should not tilt at windmills just to show people how revolutionary we are. My argument is certainly not that ‘resistance is futile’, but that resistance is made harder by the ranting of little Don Quixotes.

**Simon Stevens**  
Perth

## Opportunist logic

The political impact of the Australian/UN presence in East Timor is negatively affecting solidarity in Australia. As the transition from Indonesian occupation to UN protectorate continues, the Australian Council of Trade Unions has lifted its bans on Indonesian interests. The ACTU said that “all remaining industrial bans on Indonesian interests have been suspended due to the arrival of peacekeepers in East Timor”.

Even so, some unofficial actions continue by a number of unions - particularly in the state of Victoria, where the Labor Party’s domination of unions is weaker. There are also plans in place by a number of unions to ‘facilitate’ the rebuilding of East Timor. Nevertheless, there is silence on the question of Australian troops.

This move by the official leadership of the trade union movement must be vehemently opposed. Industrial action against Indonesian interests and

Australian interests in Indonesia must be stepped up until there is a full withdrawal of all Indonesian and UN troops and the smashing of the militias. Action against the Australian government must be escalated until Canberra recognises the full independence of East Timor and cuts its military links with Indonesia. Indonesia must get out. There must be no UN protectorate.

The relaxing of working class pressure on the Indonesian and Australian governments by the ACTU is the direct result of a policy which relied on Australian junior imperialism. Yes, the chief advocate of this social-imperialist position in Australia has been the Democratic Socialist Party. The DSP squandered all its consistent hard work in solidarity with East Timor and Indonesia by opportunistically pursuing the line of least resistance.

**Brad Collins**  
Sydney

## Mechanical

The pompous philosophical garble from the portentously self-christened ‘Delphi’ would be as laughable as Mrs Malaprop’s self-important misuse of language, if it were not underpinned by such vicious anti-communism (*Weekly Worker* September 23).

Delphi declares airily, out of the blue, that “the historical conditions for Bolshevism have long since disappeared”. Bolshevism, which is the urgent, constant, collective struggle to understand the world and the emerging new elements in it - particularly at present in the balance of class forces - has never been more urgently required.

Delphi’s bizarre assertion is a pseudo-revolutionary left equivalent to the incredible denial of reality expressed by ultra-spin Blairism, now stating that the “class struggle is over”. Delphi’s criticism might help the ‘lefts’ if they actually had any intention of struggling for Bolshevism, or were capable of doing so. But the whole panoply - from Trotskyism to museum Stalinism, and old-style bureaucratic syndicalism and Labourism such as the SLP - is *incapable* of getting (and does not want to get) a *single* fact about reality right.

Quite without evidence, Delphi asserts that “imperialism is not on the edge of imminent collapse” - which presumably means the three-year *continuing* economic meltdown in Asia was a giant collective world fantasy. It presumably means too that Marx’s devastating and never refuted analysis of capitalism relentlessly driving down the rate of profit until huge tides of surplus capital eventually swamp the whole system - in a giant *crisis* of overproduction - was simply wrong.

The great Delphi wants to draw further conclusions about theory and practice too, worried about mechanical application of theory leading to mistakes. But, though finally on the right track with this notion, he fails to get at the essence of the problem, which is that the great swamp on the left is completely *wrong* in its sniping and diversionary politics. That is why theory becomes mechanical: not through some failure of method, but failure to grasp the class truth. Instead he cuts to his real target - Roy Bull and the *Economic and Philosophic Science Review*.

The kind of inflated, pseudo-intellectual nonsense which Delphi postures around in this article have been used for decades to throw dust in the eyes of the working class and keep them away from philosophical and political study by overawing them with big words.

**Don Hoskins**  
EPSR

## Dover demo banned

Between 300 and 350 passenger and freight transport workers attended a demonstration in Dover called by the TGWU as part of a worldwide day of action for a maximum 48-hour working week. It would have included a march through the town and demonstration outside the dock gates but for the police refusing permission as a result of the ban on marches because of the National Front.

Anti-racists should consider this very carefully when deciding tactics in future. It is disgraceful that such a legitimate workers’ demonstration should be banned under the same blanket legislation as that used to stop/protect the fascists.

Apart from this the demonstration was very successful, although small compared to the scale of the strikes, demonstrations and blockades which were reported from all over the world

**Rachael Webb**  
Dover



## Labour Party lobby

## Left numbers game

In this period of reaction it is vital that the left should openly acknowledge its weakness and lack of influence. Unfortunately, however, that appears to be the last thing many groups are willing to do. Take last week's lobby of the Labour Party conference, organised by the Socialist Workers Party. As a rare example of a leftwing demonstration with reasonably wide backing, it provided an excellent opportunity to maximise our forces.

The left failed the test. The main groups were much more interested in jockeying for position in order to show *themselves* in the best possible light. In other words, a typically sectarian and dishonest approach.

As I reported last week, there were around 4,000 people at the rally and march in Bournemouth. This was certainly disappointing, especially as we are now halfway through New Labour's first term of office and at least some sign of independent working class activity in opposition to Blair could reasonably have been expected. It is possible that my estimate of the numbers was incorrect, but at least it was honest. For example, it took me no more than half an hour to walk from the back to the very front of the demonstration, as it made its way towards the town centre. Clearly the lobby was much smaller than the previous two years.

But the SWP had an interest in talking it up. Not only did it view the event as a way to keep the cadre working; it needed to 'prove' that the class was at last beginning to awake, to organise and of course start to look to "the socialists" for a lead - ie, to the SWP itself. Accordingly it claimed there were "up to 10,000" present. What is more,

"those demonstrators represented the feelings of millions more across Britain" (*Socialist Worker* October 2).

What use is such hyperbole to the working class? We all know that Blair is still riding high in the opinion polls and that in general workers are not looking for a left alternative. With the partial exception of Scotland, where the Scottish Socialist Party won almost 10% in the recent Hamilton by-election, the left is on the margins. Even if we are to judge working class combativity in terms of industrial action alone - strikes are at an all-time low - we would have to say that it is almost non-existent.

The latest strike statistics were in fact alluded to by the SWP's Chris Harman. *Socialist Worker* reported him as telling the Meyrick Park rally that, "There is a gap between the low level of industrial struggle and the bitterness with Blair." The paper's coverage of the event was designed to demonstrate how the SWP is allegedly starting to fill that gap - irrespective of the truth of course.

The particular brand of opportunism of the Socialist Party in England and Wales led it to report the event in a totally different way. Unlike the SWP, it did not emblazon its front page with headlines proclaiming the lobby's astounding success. Tucked away on page 3 of *The Socialist* is a tiny article by Bill Mullins, part of the leadership faction which is stridently opposed to close cooperation with the SWP. While the SWP claimed ludicrously inflated figures, comrade Mullins was intent on talking down the numbers for all he was worth. According to him, there were only "2,000-3,000 people" present (October 1).

This deliberate understatement was totally in keeping with SPEW's entire attitude to the lobby in the run-up to Bournemouth. As general secretary Peter Taaffe was heard to comment after a public meeting last month, "Why should we build anything that benefits the SWP?" (*Weekly Worker* September 16). Obviously SPEW has decided to continue this disgraceful sectarianism even in its subsequent reporting.

Comrade Mullins wrote: "The organisers, mainly the SWP, had booked five special trains and a number of coaches from around the country; they obviously hoped for more protesters. But workers now see lobbying New Labour to "get them to change direction" (as one SWP platform speaker said) as a lost cause ...

"Real opposition to government policies will increasingly come from below, including mass demonstrations and protests, such as mass

non-payment of student tuition fees."

The last named campaign is of course SPEW's current hobby horse, just as the SWP's had been the Labour conference lobby. Clearly "mass demonstrations and protests" are fine - unless they are organised by the SWP. But what does comrade Mullins mean by "opposition ... from below"? Does he think that effective protests will be entirely spontaneous, without any organisational input? And what is the difference in this regard between an SWP-organised lobby and a SPEW-organised fee protest?

Comrade Mullins' quotation of the words of an "SWP platform speaker" is disingenuous. The words, "get them to change direction", may have been used, but SPEW knows full well that the SWP was primarily aiming to engage with the Labour left, not trying to "change the government's mind", as a SPEW leaflet handed out in Bournemouth dishonestly claimed. Yes, the SWP billed the event as a lobby, but it was in effect a demonstration. *Socialist Worker* itself referred to "demonstrators", not 'lobbyers'.

The whole Mullins article reeks of sectarian sour grapes - the attitude of working class partisans ought not to be coloured by such semantics.

Yet another approach was adopted by the *Morning Star* (Com-

munist Party of Britain). As regards numbers, the *Star* gave no estimate, referring vaguely to "thousands" of protesters (September 29). What was more interesting was the fact that the CPB agreed to support an SWP event in the first place. Of course the *Morning Star* could not bring itself to mention the sponsors by name, claiming the lobby was simply a "grassroots demonstration" (perhaps one of SPEW's spontaneous happenings "from below"? - September 25).

This refusal to utter the name of an opponent - even when you are actually supporting its event - betrays a lack of self-belief. There could surely have been no-one who attended the lobby who did not know who the organisers were - including the handful of CPBers. But Robert Griffiths, John Haylett and co no longer believe that *they* can provide working class leadership and therefore see no point in trying to establish the truth. They are reduced to maintaining the old 'official communist' illusions. In the meantime their increasingly elderly followers continue to shrink in number.

By contrast, *Socialist Worker* was more than pleased to report that "Robert Griffiths of the Communist Party of Britain" spoke on its platform. Obviously the SWP has no fear of such a political hulk ●

Peter Manson

## Fighting fund

## More than money

I see from *New Times*, the magazine of Democratic Left, that the organisation is about to give up the ghost. Democratic Left was of course set up when the CPGB majority decided to dissolve the Party back in 1991. The magazine announces that a forthcoming DL conference will transform the already loose grouping into "a new network" - the final sad stage in the liquidation of a miserable formation.

The exit of DL will surely be greeted by the media as the final coda of communism. It is no such thing. The real communists continue to work to re-establish their influence. Not least with the *Weekly Worker*. Our paper is dedicated to the *reforging* of the CPGB - an urgent necessity, despite the bland talk of 'modernisation' put out by the Euros, the faction which led the Party by the nose into the world of pretentious liberal waffle inhabited by *New Times*.

The Provisional Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain, then publishers of the fortnightly newspaper, *The*

*Leninist*, wrote to the Euro misleadership, instructing it to hand over all property, files, money and archives to the remaining members of the CPGB. It is estimated that they misappropriated around £4 million - accumulated over 70 years of communist sacrifice and dedication.

Needless to say, we are still waiting. Of course much more than money is needed to build a genuine Communist Party. Nevertheless we cannot do without cash - which is why it is essential that we meet our monthly fighting fund target of £400 (a mere one-ten-thousandth of the Euros' ill-gotten wealth).

Thanks to our readers, September's target was surpassed with a final total of £453. We start October's fund with £40, including welcome gifts from PL (£20), JB and DC (£5 each).●

Robbie Rix

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## Website

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## action

## ■ CPGB seminars

**London:** Sunday October 10, 5pm - 'Trade unions and the International', using Hal Draper's *Karl Marx's theory of revolution* Vol 2 as a study guide. Sunday October 17, 5pm - 'Crisis and the Communist manifesto', using Simon Clarke's *Karl Marx's theory of crisis* as a study guide.

**Manchester:** Monday October 4, 7.30pm - 'Ireland: loyalism and partition'. E-mail CPGB2@aol.com.

## ■ CPGB weekend school

The national question in the British Isles: lessons of the October revolution. Speakers to be announced. Central London, November 13-14. Call 0181-459 7146 for details.

## ■ Freedom for East Timor

Picket every Monday 12 noon - 2pm, Indonesian embassy, Grosvenor Square, London.

## ■ Hands off the tubes

Family day in Trafalgar Square: Saturday October 9, 12 noon to 4pm. Music, campaign stalls, exhibitions, speakers. Organised by Campaign against Tube Privatisation.

## ■ Anti-Fascist Action

An afternoon of film and discussion: Sunday October 10: Lux Cinema, 2-4 Hoxton Square, London N1 6NU, 2.30pm to 6pm. £5 (£3 concessions). Nearest tube - Old Street.

## ■ Nominate Bannister

The Campaign for a Fighting Democratic Union has chosen the Socialist Party's Roger Bannister as its candidate for the union's general secretary. The CPGB is backing his campaign. For details on how Union branches can nominate call Glen Kelly 0171-251 8449.

## ■ Support Tameside

Support group meets every Monday, 7pm at the Station Pub, Warrington Street, Ashton under Lyne.

## ■ Ireland conference

'Ireland: beyond the sectarian divide'. Organised by Greater Manchester Socialist Alliance. Saturday November 13, Manchester town hall, 10.30am. £15 (organisations, per delegate), £10 waged, £5 unwaged. Details: GMSA, 58 Langdale Road, Manchester M14 5PN.

## ■ Glasgow Marxist Forum

Public meeting and discussion: 'Ireland peace process in crisis. What is the socialist view?' Speaker from Socialist Democracy, Belfast. Thursday October 14, Partick Burgh Halls, 7.30pm. All welcome.

## ■ Stop privatisation

Conference against privatisation of public services - Saturday November 6, 10am to 5pm, Natfhe headquarters, Britannia Street, London WC1. Call Greenwich Union (0181-854 8888 x5227) for more details.

## ■ Scrap tuition fees

National demonstration - Thursday November 25. Assemble 12 noon, Malet Street, London, outside University of London Union, WC1. Organised by National Union of Students.

## ■ Party wills

The CPGB has forms available for you to include the Party and the struggle for communism in your will. Write for details.

## ■ Hackney Socialist Alliance

To get involved, contact Box 22, 136-138 Kingsland High Street, London E8 2NS, or ring Anne Murphy on 0973-231 620.

## ■ Brent Socialist Alliance

To get involved, contact Galaxy News, Box 100, 37 Walm Lane, London NW2 4QU, or ring Stan Kelsey on 0181-451 0616.

## British-Irish debate

# Bolshevism and consistency

## Jack Conrad replies to José Villa on the rights of peoples to self-determination and the struggle for socialism

José Villa - a former leading member of Workers Power - prefaces his polemic against me with the assertion that my 20 theses on 'Ireland and the British-Irish' contain "two significant innovations" (*Weekly Worker* September 30). What are these "innovations"? The first, advocating the right of self-determination, including the right to form a separate state, for a people who the "author recognises do not constitute a nation". The second, proposing to give that right to the British-Irish.

Comrade Villa argues that these "innovations" are wrong because for "Marxists self-determination is only applicable to nations and it is not a universal principle". Furthermore, to "accept" the right of self-determination for "an ethnic group" would mean an "alteration in Marxist principle", something all the more objectionable in the case of the British-Irish, a "privileged community" whose benefits have been achieved "through backing the imperial power at the expense of the rest of the same nation".

Along with comrade Villa I too think that there is a "big difference" between nations and ethnic groups. But what are nations? And what are ethnic groups? Unfortunately comrade Villa's definition of the nation is like his polemic as a whole, an eclectic combination of truth and error. Let me quote him. Nations are "constituted" by definite groups of people, divided by "antagonistic classes", but who share "the same territory, a common history and many cultural, linguistic (this could be one or more languages) and economic links".

Nations under capitalism are certainly "constituted" by "groups of people" who are "divided by antagonistic classes." What of nations after the workers' revolution? Do nations immediately vanish along with the political and economic expropriation of the capitalist ruling class? Surely not. Socialism abolishes the division of society into antagonistic classes. Yet though socialism ushers in a classless society the existence of different nations - ie, historically constituted communities of people who share a common territory, language, culture and an economy - will continue albeit in truncated form for some considerable time into the future.

Then there is the artless suggestion from our comrade Villa that nations can have more than one language. Here is an "innovation". Anyone familiar with the *Bible* knows the tower of Babel story and how god "confused" the language of "all of the earth" and thereby created nations (Genesis 11). Did not the ancient Greeks define themselves as a proto-nationality according to their common language as opposed to the non-Greek-speaking 'barbarian' outsiders. Mutual incomprehensibility amongst people who continuously interact with each other must lead members of one language group to identifying themselves at the same time as separate and a commonality. Hence in the modern era language was a vital element in the formation of nations. Benedict Anderson is of the opinion that "print-languages" under capitalism provided the cultural raw materials "for national consciousness" (B Anderson *Imagined communities* London 1991, p44).

Up to now Marxists - till the arrival of comrade Villa, that is - have insisted that nations must share a common language. Here are a few authorities covering between them a broad spectrum. Kautsky defines nations as a "community of language" (K Kautsky *The materialist conception of history* New Haven 1988, p380). "Language," says Trotsky, "... becomes national together with the triumph of commodity exchange which integrates nations" (L Trotsky *The history of the Russian Revolution* Vol 3, London 1967, p39). "There is no nation," emphasises Stalin, "which at the one and the same time speaks several languages" (JV Stalin *Works* Vol 2, Moscow 1953, p304). Even Otto Bauer confirms that

"it is unthinkable that a nation should maintain itself in the long run as a community of culture without a community of language, this most important instrument of human communication" (O Bauer *The nation* in G Balakrishnan [ed] *Mapping the nation* London 1996, pp53-4). In other words countries such as India, Switzerland, Spain and Canada are not nation-states, but multinational states.

What of ethnicity and ethnic groups: ie, those whom I supposedly want to exercise self-determination, including the right to form their own states? Ethnicity is a very wide sociological category. It encompasses nations. But it also includes religious, national and racialised minorities, and even certain occupations and sexual preferences. An ethnic group is therefore any community of people who in one way or another set themselves apart from other people, or are set apart from other people, on the basis of "perceived cultural difference" or "perceived common descent" (my emphasis, S Jones *The archaeology of ethnicity* London 1997, pxi).

There are many competing approaches to ethnic identity, but recently there has been a useful corrective bias towards self-labelling. In other words the primary definition of an ethnic group is sited not so much on how others may define them, as on how they define themselves. Thus imposed names such as 'Eskimo', 'gypsy' or 'Laplander' are rejected in favour of Inuit, Roma and Saami. Be that as it may, individuals are bound to possess a vast array of often complex and overlapping ethnic identities, from the regional to the national, to the transnational. So, for example, I think of myself as a Londoner, south-eastern English, British, European, an atheist and an internationalist communist - four or five identities. Up the road from me in Highgate lies buried a Jewish man whose father converted to protestantism, who was also a Londoner, an atheist and a communist, but who was born in Germany and spoke German as his mother tongue - again a typically rich combination of identities.

Ethnic identities are potentially incredibly fluid, uberoous and potent. Mostly in so-called normal times they are lax and protoplasmic and hardly matter. By and large we take what we are for granted. On the other hand in periods of persecution, or under adverse conditions of intense competition, or when you are forced by circumstances to settle abroad, they can become of crucial, inescapable and overarching importance. Hence a sudden deterioration in the economy, a shift in the balance of class forces or the storm clouds of war can give rise to a multitude of often novel ethnic identities up to and including national-ethnic identities which grip the imagination of masses of people, national-ethnic identities which hitherto slumbered dormant underneath the surface or gestated in no more than embryonic form.

Evidently the notion of some "universal" principle of ethnic self-determination would be no panacea; rather a reactionary nightmare. Taken to its absurd conclusion, not only does ethnic self-determination or autonomy mean the creation of countless nano-statelets, but split personalities. Ethnic identity does after all resemble a Russian doll. Endlessly each one re-

veals another. Even if we apply the more rational plan of pre-World War I social democracy in Austria-Hungary for extra-territorial autonomy, it would result in numerous rival ethnic parliaments overseeing cultural, educational, scientific and language matters. Inevitably such a plan institutionalises and freezes divisions between people who invariably live and work alongside each other on broadly the same territory. The Good Friday agreement, it should be noted, embodies something similar for Northern Ireland.

Let me assure comrade Villa that Jack Conrad entertains no schema whereby Kurds, Zulus, Australians, Jews, Sikhs, Irish, muslims or any of the other hundreds of ethnic groups scattered throughout the towns and cities of Britain - and all other countries - have the sovereign right to form their own separate states. As a communist I favour the unity of people within the largest democratically agreed state boundaries and the revolutionary assimilation, or merging, of cultures.

Comrade Villa is not consistent. Bizarrely, writing like an Austro-Marxist philistine, you, comrade Villa, demand the "right" of every "community" to "have their own schools". Segregation is not something I call for. On the contrary, I envisage secular schools in which every community mixes. As I am sure comrade Villa is aware, here I follow in the footsteps of European enlightenment thought in general and Bolshevism in particular. Against the Austro-Marxists, Lenin made this rather germane statement: "One cannot be a democrat and at the same time advocate the principle of segregating schools according to nationality" (VI Lenin *CW* Vol 19, Moscow 1977, p504). My thesis 11 applies this to a united Ireland: "Communist are for secularism and against denominational schools, colleges and other such institutions."

What of the British-Irish? My contention, comrade Villa, is that while the British-Irish cannot be strictly defined as a fully developed nation, nor are they an inexcitable everyday religion or an inert ethnic group (the same goes for the catholic-Irish minority in Northern Ireland). The British-Irish could be described as an historically constituted semi-nationality or semi-nation, which shares a common territory, language, culture and economic life. On a ought-to-100 index, from non-nation to full nation, the British-Irish would score, say, 75. The eastern republics that federated to the early Soviet Union - Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tadjikistan, etc - surely fell well short of full nationhood too. In many instances there was no print-language. Certainly no mass literacy. Economically such republics were extremely backward. Nevertheless formally these republics enjoyed full self-determination in the USSR, up to and including the right to secede.

It is correct to say that Britain is the main problem in Ireland and that the majority of protestants in Northern Ireland have throughout the 20th century constituted a labour aristocracy (a politico-economic category). They have sought to preserve meagre privileges at the expense of catholics by initiating and buttressing sectarian discrimination from below and by appealing above to the Northern Ireland and British states. However, the protestants are not simply a labour ar-

istocracy: "There is an undeniable historically established religious, ethnic and cultural dimension" (thesis 1 *Weekly Worker* August 26).

More than that. The British-Irish have continuously inhabited parts of what is now Northern Ireland since the early 17th century. That gives them nearer a 400-year tradition than the 300 years comrade Villa grants them. They settled primarily in Antrim and Down as a mass of 'strong farmers' - from England, but mainly Scotland - and were used to pacify the most rebellious part of Gaelic and Anglo-Irish Ireland and hence "assure" it for an absolutist monarchy that had recently redefined itself according to a nationalised version of protestantism: ie, Anglicanism.

As was bound to be the case, the settlers quickly diverged from their origins and formed another - hybrid - Irish identity. They ceased being Scottish or English. Yet in general they kept themselves as a commonality against and separate from the Irish catholic majority (both Gaelic and Anglo-Irish). Significantly, cultural links between Scotland and the British-Irish in Northern Ireland are nowadays still stronger than those between the British-Irish and the south. Either way, the million-strong British-Irish are "an historically constituted and distinct community of people" (thesis 2).

Being presbyterians, they were themselves subject to prohibitions as dissenters by the Anglican ascendancy: eg, the Corporation Act (1662), the Test Act (1673). They were oppressed-oppressors. Hence many of the 'strong farmers' of Antrim and Down took part in the 1798 United Irishmen rising. That revolutionary moment of fraternity between the British-Irish in north-eastern Ulster and the general mass of oppressed Irish led to a strategic reorientation by the United Kingdom state. The presbyterians were included within the protestant ascendancy from the 19th century onwards (previously exclusively Anglican).

Comrade Villa writes blithely of Britain oppressing Ireland for 800 years. This is a conventional Irish nationalist formula. It is also a crude simplification. Britain only took united political form with James VI of Scotland's dynastic assumption of the English throne in 1603 and then, following the 1688 Glorious Revolution, the act of union and the merging of the two parliaments in 1707. More than that, till the reformation and the planting of a mass of British-Irish protestant settlers, the other population of Ireland by no means constituted a single commonality.

In ancient times the mass of illiterate Irish peasants spoke various dialects of Gaelic. Above them ruled an elite of thieving petty kings and warrior chiefs. The Ui Neill and Eoghanachta were the main powers from the 5th century. Ireland was a geographical entity, little more. Fragmentation or irrelation was further complicated by the successive waves of Norse, Norman and English pre-feudal and feudal adventurer-settlers, pirate-traders and royal conquerors (defeated or marginalised elites from Ireland did their fair share of raiding-settling too - in the 8th century 'Irish' states were established in Dyfed, the Isle of Man and western Scotland).

Norse cities - Dublin, Cork, Wexford and Wicklow - dominated the western

seaboard of 8th and 9th century Ireland. New Gaelic kingdoms arose from the ruins of the old and turned the tables on the Viking incomers. The two cultures found an uneasy cohabitation until the Norman invasions of the 12th century. These quintessentially feudal incursions fitfully continued throughout the subsequent centuries till the formation of the absolute Tudor and Stewart monarchies and their attempt to physically uproot and replace whole swathes of the native population. What must be understood, however, is that this native population was no longer universally Gaelic-speaking, as it had been 700 years before. Ireland was now divided into Gaelic-Irish and Anglo-Irish cultures and a mosaic of hostile baronies. (There were some notable examples of assimilation by Gaelic Ireland: for example in the lightly settled north-east of Ulster and Connaught, but this was not the general rule.)

The Tudor, Stewart and Cromwellian drive for conquest negatively defined the Irish as Irish - both the Gaelic and Anglo-Irish - not in terms of language or nationality, but religion. The catholic majority were victims of constant persecution as catholics and denied basic rights. The old English in Ireland were thereby "excluded" from the emerging British nation (SG Ellis *Tudor Ireland* London 1985, p319). Because they remained catholic the Anglo-Irish became simply Irish. The bitter divisions between the Anglo-Irish and Gaelic feudal cultures "gave way ultimately to a sense of common catholicism" - the highly fragmented Gaelic-Irish slowly merging with and forming a new "subordinate" English-speaking culture "in the polity of Ireland" (H Kearney *The British Isles* Cambridge 1995, p170). As a consequence the Irish national question and British domination both took the outer form of religion.

There are striking similarities between Ireland and the south Slavs. The Croats, Serbs and Bosniacs speak the same language - not least thanks to Vuk Kardadzic, the "virtual founder" of modern literary Serbo-Croat, who in the 19th century resisted attempts to create a print-language out of church Slavonic (E Hobsbawm *Nations and nationalism since 1780* Cambridge 1991, p60). True, there are still distinct dialects spoken and they use different alphabets - Croats have Roman characters and Serbs Cyrillic ones. Nevertheless these south Slavs share common imagined origins and many collective experiences, as well as a language.

However, due to a combination of factors (eg, incorporation by culturally antipathetic empires - the Ottoman and Hapsburg - Nazi divide and rule and, capping it all, the malevolent disintegration of bureaucratic socialism) they are today ferociously and bloodily divided by religion. This despite the fact that Tito presided over a secular state and most Yugoslavs were non-observant, if not outright atheists. Religion has returned in another form to define the ethnic-national lines of demarcation, conflict and state formation.

Would comrade Villa dismiss the Serbs as having absolutely no rights to self-determination? How about simply damning them as a "privileged community" who sought benefits "at the expense" of the rest of the south Slav nation? The CPGB has consistently taken an altogether different approach. Negatively we are for the right of all the peoples in former Yugoslavia - whether defined by national-ethnicity or national-religion - to self-deter-



# tent democracy

mination. The Kosovars, Hungarians, Macedonians, Croats, Montenegrins, Bosniacs, Serbs, etc should be free to decide their fate, including whether or not to separate; be it from former Yugoslavia, Bosnia or Serbia. Positively, at the same time, we also seek the widest unity: eg, a democratic federation of the Balkans. These two principles are not “contradictory”, as comrade Villa foolishly maintains (echoing his ally of convenience, Tom Delargy of the Scottish Socialist Party), but complementary and universal. Jack Conrad applies the same method to Ireland and the British-Irish.

Who are the British-Irish, according to comrade Villa? The British-Irish are a “privileged segment of the Irish nation which oppressed the catholics, nationalists and republicans and served Britain against the Irish nation’s right of self-determination”. Historically comrade Villa equates the British-Irish as akin to the white South Africans, in particular the Boers, and the French Algerians. He also cites British enclaves such as Gibraltar, the Malvinas and certain Caribbean islands, where “most of the population” would not like to break their links with Britain. Scraping the bottom of the barrel, the comrade also brings into play US overseas bases in Panama and Guantánamo in Cuba. None of these peoples - or troop emplacements - have the right to self-determination in the programme of José Villa.

Again we have muddle. Comrade Villa states that whites in South Africa like the British-Irish “also dominated entire regions”. Frankly, this is sheer sophistry. White South Africans dominated the *whole* of South Africa from the formation of the union in 1910 to the election of the ANC government in 1994. There is, however, no historically constituted territory where white South Africans have a clear majority. The same can be said of the French Algerians. Under the apartheid system there were, of course, restricted zones, especially in urban areas. Yet they were entirely artificial, relying on black domestics and huge numbers of other labourers who were forced to commute daily from nearby shanty towns or live in inhuman compounds. Nowhere that can be called historically significant, I repeat, do white South Africans outnumber black, Asian and coloured South Africans. Furthermore, it ought to be added that white South Africans are made up of two distinct language groups: the English and Afrikaners.

There is a political-economic parallel between the British-Irish on the one hand and the white South Africans and the French *colons* in Algeria on the other - they operated as a labour aristocracy. Nevertheless the economic gap between the oppressed and the oppressed-oppressors in Northern Ireland in comparison to apartheid South Africa or colonial Algeria is comparatively tiny. We do not have the ‘first world’ within the same territory as the ‘third world’. Moreover, when assessing the different outcomes in Algeria and South Africa in terms of the ‘privileged segment’ of the population surely Marxists view South Africa - where they stayed - as infinitely preferable to the mass exodus of the French *colons*.

The communist programme does not aim to expel the British-Irish from Ireland. We must win them to the cause of socialism and communism. The same goes for the now historically established Jewish population in Israel mentioned by comrade Villa. It is one thing to oppose the Zionist-inspired influx in the late 1940s and the crimes perpetrated against the Palestinian

Arab population. It is another to deny the rights of the four million Jews who now inhabit Israel, 60% of whom were born there. Should they be driven into the sea? I think not.

As to Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands, the fact that comrade Villa shoehorns them into the same category as US military bases is worrying. It shows beyond doubt that he has not broken fully with petty bourgeois anti-imperialism: ie, ‘third world’ nationalism. Whatever the particular imperial reasons for British involvement in Gibraltar or the Falkland Islands, I am firm in my conviction that those who are historically rooted in these territories should have self-determination. Presumably comrade Villa would have celebrated a forcible takeover of Gibraltar by general Franco and the imposition of fascist terror. He did after all ‘militarily’ support the attempted ‘liberation’ of the Falklands/Malvinas by the military dictatorship of the butcher general Galtieri. In this way comrade Villa elevates the mystical nationalist principle of territory above the rights and wishes of living peoples. To my mind such a stance is thoroughly undemocratic. It is false, not genuine anti-imperialism.

Let me now turn to the much-discussed Cossacks. I pointed out in my previous polemics on the British-Irish that the Bolsheviks stood on the principle of self-determination for all peoples in Russia and gladly welcomed the Don Cossacks’ decision to establish their own autonomous republic within the Russian Soviet federation.

Comrade Villa disagrees: “The Bolsheviks,” he says, “were against giving any national or democratic rights to the Cossacks.” In fact, “At the beginning of the civil war they said that all the Cossacks were a reactionary stratum that needed to be *smashed*” (my emphasis). True, in the course of the war Lenin “realised that it was possible to split that mass around social and class questions”. Later, “*when the reds defeated them*, Lenin imposed the victors’ conditions”, the comrade informs us (original emphasis). “The Cossack elite were expropriated and a non-sovereign *Soviet* republic based on the oppressed Cossack labourers was established in the middle of Russia as a part of the Soviet federation. The Bolsheviks,” concludes comrade Villa, “would never ever accept the right of a reactionary and segregationist Cossack state to secede.”

If comrade Villa is correct in terms of principle, that his sketch above accurately reflects the programmatic approach of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, then I have no hesitation in concluding that they were wrong. If that was Bolshevism, then I declare myself non-Bolshevik. But I sincerely believe that history shows a different picture. More, when it comes to principles - and it is principles that this debate around the British-Irish is primarily concerned with at this moment in time - the Bolsheviks took a position entirely at odds with the one outlined by comrade Villa. This means that either comrade Villa is wrongly informed or he is tailoring the history of Bolshevism to suit his own purposes.

The Cossacks, we should stress, were no run-of-the-mill people or ethnic group. They were an historically established privileged caste of peasant-soldiers who served as the counterrevolutionary terror troops of tsarism. Between the 15th and 18th centuries Russian settlers were planted on the frontiers of the Muscovite empire. In return for a perpetual obligation to perform military service these Cossacks were granted parcels of land.

Lenin noted that on the league table of rich peasant households, the “first place amongst them is held by the Cossacks” (VI Lenin *CW* Vol 13, Moscow 1977, p223). Organised in large military communities - *voiski* or hordes - they were subject to an elected ataman who exercised dictatorial powers. In the 19th century the Cossacks had, according to EH Carr, “become the mainstay of the regime” (EH Carr *The Bolshevik Revolution* Vol 1, Harmondsworth 1975, p300n). They also formed the “nucleus” of the counterrevolutionary white armies during the civil war (ibid). As Lenin angrily wrote, the Cossacks “were fighting for their privileges” (VI Lenin *CW* Vol 30, Moscow 1977, p81).

Is there a qualitative difference between the Cossacks and the British-Irish? Surely not. Except that in a small county like Ireland the British-Irish add up to something like 20% of the population. The Cossacks were a mere drop in the continental ocean of Russia.

From the start the Bolsheviks promised all nations within the Russian empire the right of self-determination up to and including the right to separate. Stalin, as the Bolsheviks’ leading spokesperson on nationalities, made this abundantly clear at the 7th Conference of RSDLP(B), in April 1917, slamming those such as Pyatakov who refused to countenance self-determination. Stalin in characteristic style rhetorically asked himself, “How is the political life of the oppressed nations to be arranged?” In answer to his own question he insisted that, “The oppressed peoples forming part of Russia must be allowed the right to decide for themselves whether they wish to remain part of the Russian state or secede and form independent states.”

Stalin cited the ongoing conflict between the Finnish bourgeoisie, which wanted independence, and the provisional government, which refused to grant it (incidentally the Bolsheviks recognised the independence of Finland after the October Revolution in spite of its counterrevolutionary regime). The Bolsheviks, he said, had to side with the Finnish’s people’s right to self-determination. Why? Because “it is inconceivable for us to accept the forcible retention of any people whatsoever within the bounds of a unitary state. When we put forward the principle that peoples have the right to self-determination, we thereby raise the struggle against national oppression to the level of a struggle against imperialism, our common enemy. If we fail to do this, we may find ourselves in the position of bringing grist to the mill of the imperialists. If we, social democrats, were to deny the Finnish people the right to declare their will on the subject of secession and the right to give full effect to their will, we would be putting ourselves in the position of continuing the policy of tsarism” (my emphasis, *JV Stalin Works* Vol 3, Moscow 1953, pp54-55).

Stalin hammered home the principled position of Bolshevism again and again in the run-up to the October Revolution. Here he is in August 1917: “We absolutely insist that union must be voluntary, for only such union is genuine and lasting. But that requires, in the first place, full and unqualified recognition of the right of the peoples of Russia to self-determination, including the right to secede from Russia. It requires further that this verbal recognition should be backed by deeds, that the peoples should be permitted right away to determine their territories and the forms of their political structure in their constituent assemblies. Only such a policy can promote confidence

and friendship among people. Only such a policy can pave the way to a genuine union of the people” (ibid pp223-24).

As indicated above, the principle of self-determination and voluntary union was carried through into practice after the October Revolution. One of the first decrees of the new Soviet regime was the ‘Declaration of the rights of the peoples of Russia’, signed in “the name of the Russian Republic, People’s Commissar for Nationalities” by Djughashvili-Stalin and V Ulyanov (Lenin). Here is the bulk of it:

“... The 1st Congress of Soviets, in June of this year, proclaimed the rights of the peoples of Russia to self-determination. The 2nd Congress of Soviets, in November last, confirmed this inalienable right of the peoples of Russia more decisively and definitely. Executing the will of these congresses, the council of people’s commissars has resolved to establish as a basis for its activity in the question of nationalities, the following principles:

1. The equality and sovereignty of the peoples of Russia.
2. The right of the peoples of Russia to free self-determination, even to the point of separation and the formation of an independent state.
3. The abolition of any and all national and national-religious privileges and disabilities.
4. The free development of national minorities and ethnographic groups inhabiting the territory of Russia.

“Decrees will be prepared immediately upon the formation of a commission on nationalities” (J Reed Ten day that shook the world Harmondsworth 1970, p231).

Note that there is no caveat about rights only for progressive peoples and opposing national or democratic rights for oppressed-oppressors like the Cossacks. It was indeed in the spirit of consistent democracy that the Soviet government issued its ‘Appeal to toiling Cossacks’ immediately in the wake of the overthrow of Kerensky and co. Not only was a Red Army recruited from factory workers to fight counterrevolution, but: “Hundreds of propagandists were sent to the Don” with the appeal to explain to the working Cossacks that the Bolsheviks were not their enemies, but friends who did not want to rob them of either their land or their liberties (ibid p250). Revealingly, after five Cossack delegates appeared in November 1917 at the 2nd Congress of the Soviets, it was decided to retitle the highest body in the land the ‘All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Workers’, Peasants’, Cossacks’ and Soldiers’ Deputies’. A wonderful list-title that was “retained” till the foundation of the USSR in 1922, when the names of the separate groups were dropped (EH Carr *The Bolshevik Revolution* Vol 1, Harmondsworth 1975, p301n).

Soviet Russia was constitutionally founded as a federation of Soviet republics. As the embodiment of the “voluntary union of the peoples of Russia”, Lenin thought the Soviet constitution “should fully reassure the Cossacks” (VI Lenin *CW* Vol 36, Moscow 1977, p472). His optimism was not misplaced. By February 1918 there was a marked swing towards the Bolsheviks, particularly amongst younger Don Cossacks (attracted by the revolution’s call to divide the lands of the great Cossack landowners, abolition of compulsory military service and restrictions on free movement). They rose up against “their fathers and Kaledin”. The 1st Congress of the Soviets of the Don Republic, held over April 9-12 1918, “regarded the Don Republic as part of the RSFSR” and declared the “working Cossacks’ readiness to defend Soviet power” (VI Lenin *CW* Vol 42, Moscow 1977, p509n).

Stalin, as commissar of nationalities, could therefore write in February 1919 that a “voluntary union of the working people of all the independent Soviet Republics” is “now yielding its beneficent fruits”. He sums up the proc-

ess in the following passage: “Thus, from the breakdown of the old imperialist unity, through independent Soviet republics, the peoples of Russia are coming to a new, voluntary and fraternal unity. This path is unquestionably not the easiest, but it is the only one that leads to a firm and indestructible socialist union of the labouring masses of the nationalities of Russia” (*JV Stalin Works* Vol 4 Moscow 1953, pp236-7).

Comrade Villa makes much of the autonomous status of the Don Republic. Too much. For him it correlates with “non-sovereignty” and therefore presumably an absence of the right to secede. Here we have a failure to appreciate the original concept of Soviet autonomy. Again I will turn to Stalin as commissar for nationalities. This time in October 1920: “Soviet autonomy,” he explains, “is not a rigid thing fixed once and for all time; it permits of the most varied forms and degrees of development. It passes from narrow, administrative autonomy (the Volga Germans, the Chuvashes, the Karelians) to a wider, political autonomy (the Bashkirs, the Volga Tatars, the Kirghiz); from wide political autonomy to a still wider form of it (the Ukraine, Turkestan); and, lastly, from the Ukrainian type of autonomy to the highest form of autonomy - to contractual relations (Azerbaijan). This flexibility of Soviet autonomy is one of its prime merits; for this flexibility enables it to embrace all the various types of border regions of Russia, which vary greatly in their levels of cultural and economic development” (*JV Stalin Works* Vol 4, Moscow 1953, p367).

As any student of the Russian Revolution knows, however, there was a drift going on in Stalin’s outlook and practice. Stalin would soon openly launch his ‘autonomisation plan’, by which all the independent Soviet republics would be incorporated into Russia and thus cease to have the right to secede. This, as comrade Villa is certainly aware, led to a clash between Stalin and an ailing Lenin. Against Stalin “haste”, Lenin rejected ‘autonomisation’ and argued strongly for a guarantee of continued equality in “a formal union with the RSFSR, in a Union of Soviet Republics of Europe and Asia”. Stalin famously responded by accusing Lenin of “national liberalism” (M Lewin *Lenin’s last struggle* London 1975, p52). It is sad that someone of the stature of José Villa, who proudly calls himself a communist, should on this basic democratic issue side with Stalin’s burgeoning bureaucratic tendencies instead of defending the essential principles of Leninism.

Comrade Villa closes his polemic badly. He repeats his economic claptrap about the CPGB’s “central goal” being a “pure bourgeois republic”. A falsehood. When it comes to the withdrawal of British troops, comrade Villa does not demand as a precondition that Ireland must first be socialist. Does that mean the comrade’s “central goal” is a “pure bourgeois republic” in Ireland? No, of course not. Failure to unconditionally oppose British imperialism would be to desert the principles of revolutionary democracy and to give up on the real struggle for socialism.

In the British Isles we communists want the working class to take the lead in all democratic issues. Concretely the CPGB demands a federal republic which guarantees the right of Scotland and Wales to self-determination. The CPGB also calls for a united Ireland. Jack Conrad proposes that Ireland too should also have a federal dimension in the form of a British-Irish province, so as to ensure that unity between the dichotomised communities is voluntary and thus lasting. This is something I would fight to realise both before and after the expropriation of the capitalist class, as an integral part of the struggle to reach communism and working class self-liberation.

This is our real “central goal”, to which we subordinate everything in our programme ●

The publication of this small book by the International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT), centred around the founding programme of Trotsky's Fourth International, is primarily aimed at rescuing from historical oblivion some of the earlier accomplishments of the Spartacist tendency, the IBT's historical mentors, in order for the publishers to attempt to claim to be the 'real' inheritors of this allegedly uniquely revolutionary 'tradition'.

The material covered is quite wide-ranging in a sense, involving a substantial introduction that demonstrates amply how in many ways Trotsky's 1938 programme drew on earlier ideas that were put forward in the period of the first four congresses of the Communist International (1919-22). However, true to the method of the Spartacists in shaping their understanding of reality to fit the requirements of their programme, the IBT skirts around one of the central issues for Marxists today - whether there is an inherent logic in a perspective primarily based on a system of economic demands, that can provide a short cut to working class power.

Apart from the introduction and related postscript, which fleshes out a little more the historical similarities with some of the early Comintern's material, the essential thesis of the book is that modest successes made by the Spartacists in the 1970s in building oppositions to the very rightwing bureaucracy in some American trade unions (in a period of considerable spontaneous economic trade union militancy worldwide) demonstrate that their allegedly unique understanding of 'programme' is the only way forward for the working class.

The considerable arrogance of this claim of 'unique' correctness is belied by the tiny size of their organisation, having been compelled to start over again after the 'degeneration' of their political predecessors into something resembling a miniature composite of the Moonies and the followers of Enver Hoxha. It is worth noting that the great communists, the authentic bearers of the revolutionary tradition, have not historically tended to degenerate into leaders of bizarre and anti-human cults like the Spartacists (and the Healyites, who underwent a similar evolution in the previous generation). Rather, even in the twilight of their lives, they either died of old age still fighting honourably in non-revolutionary times, like Marx and Engels; or they died fighting against degeneration of the revolutionary movement in the face of great events, as did Trotsky and Lenin. For the principal cadres of a genuine revolutionary communism to degenerate into their complete opposite is unknown in the history of Marxism.

The claim of this tradition of so-called 'anti-revisionist Trotskyism' to embody a unique revolutionism is exposed by this repeated evolutionary tendency, which in its final form has before provided (and possibly will again) much titillation to the bourgeois tabloid press. Be that as it may, there are still political questions that must be addressed if the revolutionary left is to evolve something better, to re-establish a durable revolutionary tradition that appears to have been simply destroyed with the death of the Bolshevik generation.

Trotsky's *Transitional programme*, the most illustrious exhibit in the IBT's case, is a document of many facets. There is a considerable section devoted to an exposition in programmatic form of Trotsky's understanding of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers' state. Whatever one may think of this understanding today, the fact remains that, assuming one shares this view of the nature of the USSR, there is little that is controversial in the perspective put forward concerning the overthrow of

# Semi-religious

**L Trotsky Transitional programme**  
(edited by the International Bolshevik Tendency) -  
Bolshevik Publications 1999, pp218, £5

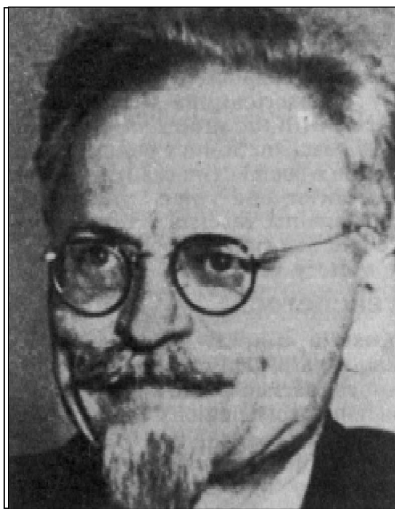
the evidently unstable and historically unviable Stalinist bureaucratic regime and the restoration of soviet democracy, combined with defence of the remaining gains of October against attack from the right.

But this is not the main theme of the IBT's book, not surprisingly with the collapse of the USSR now somewhat stale news. Likewise, the programme of demands for the workers' movement in fascist countries has only limited relevance in current circumstances. And there is little in the material on backward countries and permanent revolution that had not been elaborated before and in more detail by Trotsky. What is most essential for the IBT, and revealed by the main focus of the IBT's book, is something other than these things. Rather, the IBT's book is about perspectives for revolutionary work in capitalist countries, and their own interpretation of this.

The IBT thesis is (1) that the *Transitional programme* is not a sacred text *per se*, but rather essentially a *method* that in all times and places in this imperialist epoch of capitalism provides a bridge from the 'minimum' programme of simple reforms (political and 'economic') under capitalism, to the 'maximum' programme of the revolution; and (2) that the IBT is the unique embodiment of this perspective, because only it (if only it had the forces) will seek to take this 'method' into the working class in the trade unions, by building oppositional groupings around the essentials of Trotsky's programme.

Yet the IBT is only able to claim the former by a considerable modification of Trotsky's own views on the *Transitional programme* and the importance of some of its key demands. Since Trotsky authored the document, it is certainly pertinent to take some notice of the significance *he* attached to its central 'transitional' component, the alleged 'bridge' between the non-revolutionary situation of bourgeois hegemony and reaction, and those demands within it that, when they are realised, really do herald the coming of the struggle for power by the working class. Such demands as those for a workers' militia or workers' control of production, while fruitful subjects for propaganda in the political-ideological war against the ruling class and its democratic pretensions, can only be actually *realised* by means of mass agitation in a revolutionary situation. So in a sense these demands are certainly 'transitional' in that they pose point blank the question of power.

But that is not what Trotsky meant by 'transitional'. Rather, he regarded particular demands, primarily the sliding scale of wages to provide a built-in defence against inflation, and the sliding scale of hours, sharing out all available work among the whole working class to abolish unemployment, as the central component of his conceptual 'bridge' from wage demands and other reforms in the 'here and now', to the point at which successful *agitation* for such demands as the workers' militia, workers' control of



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*While transitional demands such as Trotsky advocated can play an important role in some situations, a more comprehensive 'bridge' from the here and now to the socialist future is needed than Trotsky himself envisaged*

.....

industry, and the workers' government itself becomes possible. In other words, these demands, and others like them when such could be formulated by the same 'method', were *the* central component of Trotsky's conceptual 'bridge' from a non-revolutionary situation to a revolutionary one.

Trotsky is quoted by the IBT discussing with his American co-thinkers on the subject of the sliding scale of wages and hours:

"It is easier to overthrow capital-

ism than to realise this demand under capitalism. Not one of our demands will be realised under capitalism. That is why we are calling them transitional demands. It creates a bridge to the mentality of the workers and thus a bridge to the socialist revolution. The whole question is how to mobilise the masses for struggle. The question of the division between the employed and unemployed comes up. We must find ways to overcome this division."

In asserting that "not one of our demands will be realised under capitalism", Trotsky was expounding his central programmatic conception - that capitalism, as he analysed it in the apparently catastrophic prologue to World War II, was doomed to a world-historic crisis in the short term, one that immediately posed the question of its destruction. Trotsky believed that the crisis of capitalism in the 1930s was so acute and capitalism so *economically* bankrupt that a programme that merely took aim at its economic logic could well be sufficient to finish it off. Thus the catastrophist flavour of the programme, as evidenced in the following extracts:

"The economic prerequisite for the proletarian revolution has already in general achieved the highest point of fruition than can be reached under capitalism. Mankind's productive forces stagnate. Already, new inventions and improvements fail to raise the level of material wealth. Conjunctural crises under the weight of the social crisis affecting the whole capitalist system weigh ever heavier deprivations and sufferings upon the masses. Growing unemployment, in its turn, deepens the financial crisis of the state and undermines the unstable monetary systems. Democratic regimes, as well as fascist, stagger on from one bankruptcy to another.

"The bourgeoisie itself sees no way out. In countries where it has already been forced to stake its last upon the card of fascism, it now toboggans with closed eyes toward an economic and military catastrophe. In the historically privileged countries - ie, in those where the bourgeoisie can still for a certain period permit itself the luxury of democracy at the expense of national accumulations (Great Britain, France, United States, etc) - all of capital's traditional parties are in a state of perplexity, bordering on a paralysis of will. The 'new deal', despite its first period of pretentious resoluteness, represents but a special form of political perplexity, possible only in a country where the bourgeoisie has succeeded in accumulating incalculable wealth. The present crisis, far from having run its course, has already succeeded in showing that 'new deal' politics, like popular front politics in France, opens no new exit from the economic blind alley."

It would be anti-historical and anti-materialist for Marxists to condemn Trotsky for his writings of this period on the basis of subsequent events. The view put forward in these paragraphs can be placed among the most eloquent expressions of the ap-

parent prospects for the capitalist system at the time, and in terms of analysis was shared (with trepidation, as opposed to Trotsky's revolutionary optimism) by many sections of the imperialist bourgeoisie, in Europe in particular.

However, history has a habit of playing nasty tricks on even capitalism's most assiduous and talented analysts and critics, and this is just as much true today as it was in the period in which these passages were written. Barely 10 years later, the capitalist system had not only not collapsed, but, contrary to Trotsky's seemingly so commonplace assertion that economically capitalism "had reached the highest point of fruition" that was possible under this social system, had embarked upon the biggest and most sustained economic boom in its entire history. This shows that no one person, however great their talent, experience and integrity, can single-handedly grasp all the tendencies of development of such a complex social organism as modern capitalism.

The IBT's semi-religious method is shown by their quotation of Trotsky's words on the cover of the book: "Only continuity of ideas creates a revolutionary tradition, without which a revolutionary party sways like a reed in the wind." This sentiment, insofar as it means that ideas that have more or less correctly explained the world in the past should not be cavalierly scrapped on some subjective whim or fleeting new revelation, has much to recommend it. However, the IBT makes use of this statement in a scriptural manner, to define *itself* as the unique bearer of a "continuity of ideas" that makes it Trotsky's sole legitimate inheritor. But in order to do so it has to expend a fair amount of effort trying to fit square pegs into round holes. For instance, in stark contrast to Trotsky's statement that "not one" of the demands of the *Transitional programme* "will be realised under capitalism", the IBT comes up with the following piece of sophistry:

"...Trotsky explicitly indicated that transitional demands are not put forward as structural reforms to the operations of capitalism. They are demands which, if raised skilfully at appropriate junctures and taken up by the mass of workers, challenge the whole logic of the profit system. A 'sliding scale of hours' is not something that revolutionaries would make a focus of popular agitation year in and year out - it is a demand appropriate in a period of mass unemployment. The call for a 'sliding scale of wages', outside of the context of a reduction in the working day, is only appropriate when inflation poses a threat to working class living standards. It would make no sense in periods of deflation. Nor does the demand to index wages to inflation in any way preclude fighting for improvements in the wage scale" (p27).

The question is, though, *why* is it not appropriate to raise these demands in all times and all places? Trotsky had very good reason to believe that it was appropriate to make them the centrepiece of the revolutionary programme for an entire epoch, and that "not one" of them could be achieved under capitalism. This was because he believed that "without a socialist revolution - in the next historical period, at that - a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind." It is obvious from the

# method

whole tone of the presentation that “in the next historical period, at that” meant a perspective of a few short years before an intractable economic collapse and massive social crisis in which “only the overthrow of the bourgeoisie can open a road out”.

It is perfectly obvious that the IBT itself does not agree with the author of the *Transitional programme* that “not one” of the demands in that programme can be achieved under decaying capitalism in the imperialist epoch. If it did, it would engage in agitation “year in and year out” for these demands. The reason why it (correctly) says that it is not “appropriate” to do so is precisely because Trotsky has been proved wrong - it is possible for even decaying imperialist capitalism to roughly satisfy these demands in particular times and circumstances.

Many ultra-orthodox Trotskyists have faced this dilemma before, and have chosen different ways to seek to resolve this apparent contradiction - usually by distorting and falsifying post-World War II social reality to fit the catastrophic predictions in the *Transitional programme*. This litany of scriptural fanatics and flat-earthists has included not only the followers of Gerry Healy, who ceaselessly cried wolf over the imminent crisis and collapse of capitalism for 30 years to ‘prove’ their fealty to Trotsky’s analysis of 1938, in the process creating a bizarre and hyperactive religious sect, but also James P Cannon.

In the face of the newness of the post-war economic revival, the Cannonites’ disorientation was perhaps more understandable, but, just as the American working class was beginning to flex its industrial power and take advantage of the marked revival in the capitalist economy in the late 1940s, they forecast a rapid reversion to economic slump, that would allegedly be far worse than that of the 1930s and lead to an imminent American revolution. The Spartacists insisted that the post-war economic boom was a myth, pointing to the continued existence of a shallow, short-term trade cycle of expansion and contraction in the 1950s to rubbish the idea that any significant change had happened in the economic fortunes of capital.

These futile attempts to stick to *Transitional programme* ‘orthodoxy’ by claimants to the mantle of ‘pure’ Trotskyism blinded them to the reality of post-World War II social development. One can invent a reality, as did the Healyites and, for a while, Cannon. One can deny that real economic phenomena that contradict one’s ‘programme’ have any significance, as did the Spartacists. Or one can baldly deny that the governing ideas and conceptions of the author of the *Transitional programme* have any bearing on attempts to ‘apply’ that programme in circumstances as different from those in which it was conceived as chalk is from cheese, as do the IBT. All these are techniques of bending reality to fit the scripture (or ‘programme generating theory’, in the Spartacist parlance), not a proper materialist investigation of social reality.

Transitional demands are an important tool of communists in fighting to win the working class to an understanding of its own historic class interests, to the need to liberate itself in order to liberate the whole of humanity from oppression and exploitation at the hands of capitalism. But

they are not some kind of ‘master key’ for this purpose, nor can they be the dominant ethos of the revolutionary programme for an entire epoch. We need transitional demands as a part of the tactics of revolutionaries, but a transitional *programme* in the sense that Trotsky meant is often chimerical.

Trotsky’s characterisation of the period in which he was writing as capitalism’s *death agony* (as opposed to merely its decay) was historically specific to the decisive denouement that he believed was imminent. Although World War II, resulting in the deaths of more than 40 million human beings, was the most barbaric event in the history of capitalism, far from bringing on capitalism’s final ‘death agony’, it gave it a new lease of life, by destroying the old ‘colonial’ imperialist domination of Britain and France and replacing it with more sophisticated forms of domination of the world, primarily through imperialist *economic* muscle, led by the United States.

The imperialist epoch, in terms of massive obstruction of the human progress that would have been possible under socialism, as well as the decay of much of the underdeveloped world in the same period (often prey to imperialist wars against ‘communist influence’ and the like) and the insidious growth of environmental degradation, remains an epoch in which capitalism is a reactionary force on a world scale, and will remain so until the inauguration of world socialism. Trotsky’s observation - that “the objective prerequisites for the proletarian revolution have not only ‘ripened’; they have begun to get somewhat rotten” - rings very true today when one looks at the absolute impoverishment of much of Africa and the environmental damage caused by rampant capitalist growth. But, far from stagnating, capitalism since World War II has caused massive damage by its one-sided forms of economic *expansion*. Hence a programme that is based on an understanding of imperialist capitalism as being primarily characterised by stagnation and decline of the productive forces is bound to lead to an overemphasis on ‘economic’ demands as central to revolutionary strategy.

While transitional demands such as Trotsky advocated can play an important role in some situations, a more comprehensive ‘bridge’ from the here and now to the socialist future is needed than Trotsky himself envisaged. In particular, what must be stressed is the role of the working class as liberator of humanity from all forms of oppression, not just economic exploitation. The belief that ‘economic’ transitional demands are the central component of a revolutionary programme is shown by the IBT’s showcasing of the US Spartacist League’s modestly successful trade union work in the early 1970s. The fact that Spartacist-supported oppositional groupings in a number of American trade unions achieved reasonable results in a number of union elections in that period, gained a degree of credibility as militants, and played a role in a few struggles of varying degrees of importance, is presented as proof that standing on a programme of ‘transitional’ demands is the only way to fight for revolutionary politics in the working class, and that the IBT, as the Spartacists’ ‘continuator’, are the only ones anointed to do this.

However, it could be observed that in other countries in the 1970s, leftist trade union oppositional groupings that were more or less openly connected to far-left organisations also gained creditable votes in union elections in this period, which both in Europe and North America witnessed no small amount of trade union militancy. It is arguably the case that, far from the Spartacists’ ‘unique’ programmatic approach to trade union work producing these results, in reality they gained from the same environment of trade union militancy as did the Cliffites and Healyites, to mention but two, in Britain.

It is notable that, while standing for paper programmes calling for sliding scales of wages and the like (crowned with the call for a workers’ government), none of these caucuses came near to leading struggles for these demands. In one case, it is true, an SL-supported caucus managed to initiate a union guard to defend a black union member whose home and family were being attacked by racists. But even the workers involved in this action, according to the account (from *Workers Vanguard*), showed a strong tendency toward liquidating the action and cajoling the cops to take over the task.

It is often the case that workers seeking to defend their interests more intransigently than the incumbent union leaderships, particularly in a period of heightened economic militancy, will vote for and work with ‘reds’ in pursuit of particular aims. However, such militants do not thereby necessarily become revolutionaries, or won to a ‘revolutionary’ programme. Rather, the programmes of such groupings are often less important to many than the potential they have to put pressure on the union and thus help achieve more in the ‘here and now’ than the current leaderships. This phenomenon produced considerable support for leftist oppositional groupings in trade unions in a number of countries in the 1970s - the programmatic small print was largely irrelevant.

In reality a much more comprehensive programme, focusing on the potential role of the working class as the agent of human liberation, is necessary to win militants to a revolutionary position than one centred on ‘transitional’ economic demands that have at times been more or less realised under capitalism.

The IBT, following the Spartacists, invests the *Transitional programme* with almost magical powers. In Northern Ireland, for instance, the IBT puts forward a number of demands from the *Transitional programme*, including those for work-sharing on full pay and a workers’ militia (in this case formed from both communities) as an antidote to the sectarian polarisation between the two communities. The IBT, following the Spartacists, put forward the view that the national question in Ireland can only be resolved equitably after the seizure of state power by the proletariat. But the problem is that the national question is also the biggest *obstacle* to the seizure of power by the proletariat, as it poisons not only the protestant working class, with its deep roots of sectarian bigotry, but also the oppressed catholic community, who (understandably, in a number of ways) often regard the bigotry of their protestant class brothers as more dangerous to their interests than their own Irish nationalist bourgeoisie.

In order to solve these questions, it is not enough to put forward demands that protestant and catholic workers unite (even to form an anti-sectarian, anti-imperialist workers’ militia, which would certainly be a positive development, were it to actually happen), but revolutionaries rather have to seek to put forward positive democratic solutions to the national question in the here and now. ‘Algebraic’ formulations as to what should happen to each community *after* the revolution are hardly going to break the dominance of unionism and loyalism over protestant workers. Rather we need demands that can be fought for *now*, and thus open the road to winning the protestant workers to a struggle against oppression. To pose the national question as only soluble after the revolution is to postpone both the solution to the national question *and* the revolution for an indefinite period, if not forever.

Of course, the issues raised here are only a small part of the re-examination of ideas and strategy necessary to re-arm Marxists in this reactionary period. Political thought can only develop through political struggle, and, as a member of the IBT in the period in which much of the material in this book was being written, I participated to some extent in the debates that led to its publication (after a puzzling gap of around 18 months, I might add).

There was a fairly bitter and acrimonious debate with the majority of the IBT branch in New York over the contents of this book, with the New York-centred grouping arguing that the *Transitional programme* was all right in its day, but had become obsolete.

Unfortunately, this opposition, though it made some interesting points, essentially accepted that socialist revolution was off the political agenda until such time as economic conditions again approximated those described by Trotsky. Thus the IBT opposition argued that proletarian revolution was not possible in the period of the French May 1968 general strike, this being allegedly a situation where the proletariat had been sucked behind a radicalised section of the petty bourgeoisie, and had not acted as a class, because such proletarian struggles were not possible in the post-war boom.

This error, together with the contention of the leading figure in the New York opposition that Arthur Scargill’s social chauvinist opposition to the European Union was “right”, as opposed to the IBT’s ‘abstentionism’ in refusing to back Scargill’s little-England crusade, meant that, whatever interesting questions they raised, the IBT opposition was essentially liquidationist. In fact, the New York opposition accepted, in an inverted form, the same premise as all those partisans of the *Transitional programme* who have mangled reality to fit Trotsky’s ‘finished programme’ - the idea that proletarian revolution is impossible in conditions of relative material prosperity.

This contention actually *demeans* the revolutionary potential of the proletariat, and projects that the only circumstances in which it can grasp its historic mission to liberate humanity from oppression is when it is staring pauperisation and starvation in the face. The future, one can confidently predict from looking back at history, will be much more complex.

Such a narrow vision of the class struggle, which amounts to an ‘economistic’ impoverishment of the potential power of Marxism, needs to be overcome by systematic criticism of the past and re-elaboration of a revolutionary programme based on social reality as it actually is, not as Trotsky one-sidedly thought it was half a century ago ●

Ian Donovan

## 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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# Politics of exclusion



Line engaged

**M**ark Fischer has clearly overreacted to the Socialist Democracy Group's light-hearted and irreverent remarks on our website regarding the *Weekly Worker*/Communist Party of Great Britain (*Weekly Worker* September 30). We have clearly touched a raw nerve! I think one of our members must have collected a large wager in light of comrade Fischer's response!

Our impious comments do however sum up much of the feeling many socialists have regarding the CPGB. The *Weekly Worker* is clearly a mixture of *LM* and *Private Eye*. Informative, entertaining reading, but not serious politics.

The reaction of comrade Fischer would appear to be driven more by frustration at the failures of the CPGB and the tensions and strains within the organisation. The letters from Communist Party comrades within the same issue appear to give testimony to this.

Comrade Fischer is however correct to ask comrades to judge an organisation by its practice and, I would also suggest, its successes. The bal-

ance sheets between the two make interesting reading.

All the projects the CPGB seem to be involved in turn to dust. The frustration many on the left have with the CPGB is that their involvement often means the kiss of death for an initiative or project. The attempt to hijack the Rugby Socialist Alliance conference comes to mind. The disruption caused by the CPGB clearly put the Socialist Alliance project back. Hence the situation this year when discussion seeking to draw together comrades for a London Euro challenge proceeded without the involvement of the CPGB in the important stages. The isolation of the CPGB was evident at the relaunch London Socialist Alliance conference in Lewisham in August and the last meeting of the LSA.

I am not aware of any socialist in the Socialist Labour Party - which at its height had more than 2,000 members - who became attracted to the methods, tactics and politics of the CPGB. Having had the misfortune to witness first hand a leading CPGBer operate, I am not surprised. That com-

rade was repeatedly admonished by the SLP branch and narrowly escaped expulsion for putting women who had fled domestic violence at risk. The CPGB continued to stand around the sick bed of the SLP long after the rest of the left had seen the patient was brain-dead and the life support machine had been switched off!

The contrast with the record of the Socialist Democracy Group could not be more stark. The SDG over its couple of years of existence has drawn together a wide range of socialists. Members and supporters of SDG politics are involved in a wide spectrum of campaigns, from anti-racist work, third world solidarity, defence of public services campaigns (with notable success in Lewisham), trade union work, helping to launch a new trade union journal for militants and work to build broad SAs.

Membership of the SDG includes activists who have been involved in the Independent Labour Network, Scottish Socialist Party, former members of the Labour Party, the SLP, Socialist Outlook, independents and not just those former Socialist Party

comrades involved in a debate in the SP regarding the lessons to be drawn from the formation of the SSP. We all share a determination to see the formation of a new party of the left. The ongoing success of the SSP is an inspiration for all socialists (why no mention of the Hamilton South result in contrast with that of the SLP in Wigan, Mark?).

I am therefore pleased to inform comrade Fischer that the SDG is no more. We have resolved to liquidate our organisation and put our resources at the disposal of a much larger group of comrades and help facilitate the development of the Socialist Network. SN will be launched in Liverpool on October 16.

All those who support the need for a new Marxist politics and are willing to examine and reassess how socialists should organise are welcome to attend. Contact Anne Bannister on 0151-287 8983 if you are in agreement with our politics and would like to attend.

If Mark Fischer were to ring he may find the line constantly engaged! ●

Nick Long

# Politics of openness

## Jim Blackstock replies

**H**ow foolish of comrade Fischer. Clearly our national organiser has no sense of humour. How could anyone misinterpret the words that appeared on the SDG website? For those who missed them last week, here are the "light-hearted and irreverent remarks" about the *Weekly Worker*:

"This poisonous shit sheet denouncing the whole left (including their own correspondents), produced by a bunch of ultra-left nutters with half the price of a printing press, is, nevertheless, a source of (often ill-gained) documents and news of the far left. Wash your hands after reading."

This harmless jocular having "touched a raw nerve", comrade Fischer "overreacted" with these furious words: "I confess I am absolutely delighted with this passage ... it is so refreshing to see the SDG actually say what it means ... The author is to be congratulated." Easy, Mark.

Strangely though, no sooner has comrade Long dismissed the significance of the website remarks than he immediately contradicts himself: "Our impious comments do however sum up much of the feeling many socialists have regarding the CPGB." Yes, I am sure he is right. That no doubt explains why the SDG and its allies have on so many occasions - unsuccessfully - tried to exclude, expel and

generally demonise the CPGB and CPGBers.

Many on the left also share the SDG's contradictory attitude about our press. Comrade Long is not the only one who without fail rushes round to his local *Weekly Worker* seller every Friday afternoon so as to be one of the first to pick up the latest so-called 'gossip' about the left. Personally I think such comrades should refuse to read what may well turn out to be "ill-gained" information.

On second thoughts, perhaps we should turn this moralism on its head: if, despite themselves, so many find the information gleaned from the *Weekly Worker* both interesting and useful, why does just about the entire left seek to keep such information under wraps? Why do they pretend that they have no internal differences and refuse to argue out their disagreements before the whole class? Obviously, when we lift the lid on the SLP, SWP, SPEW, CPB, the Democratic Left, etc, they are none too pleased. It is all very well taking delight at the embarrassment of others, but when it is your own group's failings that are being exposed, many can only resort to wild insults and witch-hunting (not the SDG of course).

Comrade Long is typical of so

many in believing that to indulge in *open* polemic, external and internal, is a sign of weakness. Thus he points to strongly worded letters in last week's paper criticising the views and actions of one of our leading comrades and regards this as evidence of "tensions and strains within the organisation". According to comrade Long, our national organiser must have been trying to distract attention from these "failures" by launching such an unwarranted attack on the SDG.

I have news for him: as editor of the *Weekly Worker* I have no intention of suppressing critical comment. The intense, *public* debate about such an important issue as the British-Irish is actually a sign of our strength. If workers are to become a ruling class, they must master every detail, every nuance of policy, strategy, tactics and organisation. Nothing and nobody must be above criticism. It is gratifying to learn that comrade Long regards our paper as "informative, entertaining reading", but astounding that he claims that such issues dealt with by the *Weekly Worker* are "not serious politics".

It is precisely fear of criticism that has led sections of the left to attempt to exclude the CPGB over and over again. The "light-hearted" remark with which comrade Long concludes his piece is an excellent example of 'many a true word'. He erects a smokescreen of allegations concerning our "disruption" - everything we touch "turns

to dust", it seems - in justification. No wonder "discussion seeking to draw together comrades for a [failed - JB] London Euro challenge proceeded without the involvement of the CPGB in the important stages". We just could not be trusted to refrain from reporting conflicting views, not least as the pretensions of the SWP, SPEW, ILN, SO and SDG "turned to dust". Don't we realise that attempts to form a left election bloc are no business of the working class?

The most serious - and pathetic - allegation in comrade Long's letter relates to the CPGB's attempt to engage with the SLP. I am not referring to our 'lack of influence' - the circulation of the *Weekly Worker* speaks for itself. No, I am talking about the claim that "a leading CPGBer ... narrowly escaped expulsion for putting women who had fled domestic violence at risk". What on earth could this despicable individual have done? It turns out that female members of comrade Long's SLP branch (along with male members) had been put "at risk" ... through being sent a copy of the *Weekly Worker*! Apparently this 'abuse of confidential information' (names and addresses were freely circulated) endangered members' security.

This sexist claptrap would be laughable if it were not such a grave accusation. We take the political and personal security of militants and left activists very seriously indeed and take careful steps to ensure that any

potentially compromising details we receive never fall into the wrong hands. And incidentally we received information regarding the SLP from many more sources than comrade Long imagines (another pointer to the influence we won). But, like the good SLP loyalist he was, comrade Long felt duty-bound to actively participate in the anti-communist witch-hunt, fingering alleged "members or supporters" of the CPGB - until it dawned on the poor man that the Scargill leadership did not give a damn about the likes of Nick Long, so he limply resigned, walking out without a fight.

Comrade Long is forever proclaiming that his latest organisation is 'the answer'. The last one was the SLP, then along came the SDG. Now it is his Socialist Network.

We hear that the launch date of October 16 is no accident. It coincides with SPEW's 'Socialism 99' weekend. Given the programmatic crisis wreaking havoc in its ranks - Scotland, Liverpool gone already - it is not surprising that a layer of SPEW activists are expected to attend the SN launch. There is even talk within SPEW of the financially important Welsh organisation sending observers.

Either way, the CPGB is more than willing to "examine and reassess how socialists should organise". But we will continue to argue strongly for openness and against the attempts to exclude communists actually boasted about by comrade Long ●