



weekly worker

Gregor Gysi: the 'hidden' leader of Die Linke dominates 2010 Rostock conference

- SWP stunt backfires
- RTW conference
- Democracy debate
- PCS conference

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LETTERS



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

Lip service

In reply to Phil Kent's letter (May 6), I do not argue that past differences in the revolutionary camp are of no importance. To take this view would be petty bourgeois opportunism. We must relate to these past differences dialectically. For instance, the Soviet Union no longer exists, so differences about this issue assume the character of a non-antagonistic contradiction. Therefore, I am not opposing demarcations. What I argued was that Paul Smith is seeking to impose his demarcations without a correct understanding of the nature of the present crisis.

Phil Kent also suggests that it is sectarianism which prevents Paul Smith and I from joining the CPGB, based on the proposed *Draft programme*. I can't speak for Smith, but it is my opinion that the left in general does not recognise the real problems that society will face in the near future, as the contradictions of capitalism merge with the worldwide impending energy crisis. In my view, understanding this is more important than joining any particular group in the short term. Having said this, it is clear that the CPGB is ahead of the other left groups in promoting open debate, and also in opposing sectarian Trotskyist demands for forming a new workers' party to replace Labour.

The next point is that Kent rejects the view that the Soviet Union was a workers' state, so that he can deny any progressive role for it. At the same time, he argues that "the defence of the Soviet Union from imperialism did not depend on it being a workers' state". This is a good point, which presumably allows him to defend the Soviet Union from imperialism, while denying it any positive features. The struggle over the Soviet Union was between those who believed it had a progressive side and those who denied this. Trotsky tried to bridge the contradiction between the two sides by calling for the unconditional defence of the USSR, while advocating a political revolution to remove the 'Stalinist' bureaucracy - a position that Kent falsifies by claiming Trotsky only sought the overthrow of the leadership.

Those who deny that the Soviet Union had any progressive role to play are simply denying reality. I was recently told that before the revolution, in the Caucasus, women were sold in cages. Communists lost their lives in putting an end to these practices. Nevertheless, Trotsky's position is superior to both Kent and Paul Smith because he rejects the one-sided view that there was nothing progressive about the Soviet Union, which made it worthy of defence in

its own right.

The problem is that, while Trotskyists pay lip service to dialectics, this is unceremoniously discarded when it comes to Stalin and his period in office. When we consider the concrete context of the Soviet Union, we are faced with a choice of blaming capitalism and backwardness for most of its problems or blaming Stalin. Kent argues that "Stalin created and recreated the bureaucracy. Why is he not to blame for it?" Kent is probably unaware that bureaucratisation began even before the Bolshevik seizure of power.

Kent claims my defence of 'socialism in one country' rests on selective quotes, not on analysis. But my defence is based on Lenin's analysis of uneven development, which leads to the possibility of socialism in one country to begin with. Kent's position of either world revolution or nothing is ultra-leftist. The Bolsheviks did not start out with the intention of building socialism in one country; it was forced on them by uneven development. Kent also argues that the working class has the right to overthrow any regime and this presumably applies even if workers are manipulated and led by counterrevolutionaries. This is a total capitulation to spontaneity and a rejection of the view that different levels of political knowledge exist in the working class.

Kent suggests that much of what the Bolsheviks did before Stalin became the leader can be excused because they were acting out of desperation. Afterwards, however, nothing can be excused, since these were times of the relative stabilisation of the Soviet Union. This is a misreading of the situation. The surface may have been calm, but beneath was the preparation for war. Stalin was forced by this external threat to implement a crash programme of industrialisation. We all know the consequence in terms of repression.

As a critical defender of the Stalinist regime, I am not obliged to defend any reprehensible acts or mistakes. However, Trotsky's ruthlessness in dealing with political opponents when in power is well known. He ordered the taking of hostages and, during the Kronstadt uprising, warned the rebels that they would be "shot like partridges". He advocated the universal militarisation of labour and supported the banning of factions in the party. An interesting debate would be: to what extent did Trotsky's political behaviour help shape Bolshevik political culture?

On the issue of political repression, Mao suggests that Stalin's weak point was confusing the differences within communism with the differences between communists and their enemies. In other words, Stalin had problems when it came to handling contradictions. However, Stalin's letter to one Etchin (*Works Vol 13, 1931*), at least suggests a grasp of the

dialectical contradiction within the party. The problem here is that the correct handling of contradictions takes time, and time is precisely what the Soviet Union did not have.

It is reasonable to argue that racing against time may have forced Stalin to ride roughshod over the correct handling of contradictions in party and society. Arguably, with no threat of invasion, the Stalinist leadership would have had the time and opportunity to deal with political and social contradictions in a manner more appropriate to socialism. There is little in Trotsky's biography to suggest that he would have been better at resolving political and social contradictions than Stalin. Indeed his complete loss of power can be partly blamed on his lack of diplomacy; that is, if we leave aside his incorrect stand on socialism in one country.

Finally, comrade Kent claims I believe that "only an economic crash brought about by peak oil will motivate workers out of desperation to embrace socialism". If a permanent crash of capitalism does not motivate workers to embrace some form of socialism, what will?

Tony Clark

email

Left slight

Peter Manson writes: "There are strong reasons why a shift to the left is likely. Whenever Labour has been beaten in an election, there is a tendency to move, however slightly, to the left. It is not only the luxury of opposition, but the pressure from the rank and file, trade union affiliates and the necessity of winning back the party's working class base" ('McDonnell blocked by NEC bureaucrats', May 20).

SPEW confusion? Probably not, since there are two contemporary precedents for lack of left turns: the French Socialists and the SPD. Precisely because these parties do not meet the criteria Marx and Engels ascribed to real, worker-class parties, any potential 'left' turn is in rhetoric only, and even then slight.

Jacob Richter

Email

Premature

Oops. Readers of my letter (May 20) disputing the 'race' element of the South Shields seamen's riots of 1919 will notice that I made the mistake of transporting the Communist Party of Great Britain back into that year.

I should have said that the Arab seamen were influenced by, and part of, the process which would shortly bring around the CPGB and the Minority Movement. I'm aware, before you all kill me in the rush, that the CPGB wasn't formed in 1919.

David Douglass

South Shields

Dates

Dave Douglass is undoubtedly an excellent historian when it comes to the National Union of Mineworkers and the Mineworkers Federation that went before it. But not perhaps when it comes to the ins and outs of the organised left. His otherwise useful letter on the South Shields seafarers strike of 1919 is a case in point (May 20). He seems to be under the impression that the CPGB was already in existence.

It ought to have been. But unfortunately it took another year and a bit before it was formally established and another year on top of that to bring over comrades from the left of the Labour Party.

That unnecessary delay cost us dear. And it resulted from the sectarian

refusal to countenance unity with the British Socialist Party by comrades such as Sylvia Pankhurst and organisations such as the Socialist Labour Party. The footdragging and excuses came despite the urgings from Lenin in Moscow. He wanted communist unity in a Communist Party.

The delay in forming the CPGB and getting it running properly made a big difference to the class struggle and the class balance of forces in Britain. Surely a lesson here for today in 2010.

Sam Robinson
Armagh

International

Comrade Gelis totally misunderstands our position on the European Union (Letters, May 20).

Capital organises itself across national borders and the working class needs to organise itself on the same basis if we are to combat capitalist attacks on us. We need European-wide unions, we need our representatives in the European parliament to fight for the same (highest) standards of welfare for all workers and for the actions of the unions and parliamentary representatives to be coordinated. In other words, it is obligatory for our side to take advantage of capitalist unity to forge our own wider unity and to beat them at their own game.

It is illusory to believe that capitalists would not organise internationally if only the European Union did not exist. They could either do it behind closed doors or set up some other institution which could totally exclude the working class. To call for the restoration of 'national sovereignty' for all European states will not strengthen the hand of the working class, but encourage national exceptionalism and fuel futile attempts to solve international problems from localist perspectives through trade barriers and trade wars.

I am reminded how before 1914 French and German workers were united against warlike manoeuvres by their ruling classes. But eventually they were won over to patriotic sentiments with disastrous consequences. Is comrade Gelis attracted to such patriotic sentiments? The capitalist class can only be overthrown by a working class which consciously organises itself on an international basis. Hence the importance of organising across Europe if the revolution is to succeed.

It would be untrue to describe European revolutionary history as being exclusively national. Even Greek independence was won with international support - for human freedom, not just national rights. From the fractious Balkans there is the example of Yugoslavia. Check out Karl Marx's position in the German and central European revolutions of the 1830s and 40s. You will find a strong internationalist current. And what about the Russian revolution? Even in our own lifetime 1968 demonstrates the interconnectedness of revolutionary movements. Perhaps the revolution that initiates the overthrow of capitalism will start in one country, but it will require a coordinated international response for victory.

The Russian uprising of 1905 was marked by a series of significant actions stretching from the Baltic to Manchuria - and not only in Russia, but in Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania. However, each one faded away without really combining effectively with the others. If it had been possible to unite that revolutionary impulse, the tsar might well have been overthrown then. The lessons learned by the Bolsheviks from this period influenced their decisions during the

July days to hold back the revolution. Revolutionary success depends on coordinating and uniting revolutionary activity across the whole canvas. This cannot be achieved with a national agenda.

Arthur Lawrence
North London

Absurd

VN Gelis thinks the idea of co-ordinating revolution throughout Europe is "absurd" (Letters, May 20). The comrade even insists that the idea "goes against the whole history of Europe". True, in a way, but profoundly wrong all the same.

All working class revolutions to date have failed. Why? The Paris Commune of 1871 because it was isolated. The 1917 Russian Revolution became the Stalinist counterrevolution within the revolution in 1928 because of isolation. But a revolution in one country undoubtedly impacts on all other countries to one degree or another and results from often deep-seated systemic causes.

Take the year of revolutions in 1848, the springtime of the peoples of Europe. The first signs of those great events were the rumblings of 1846 in France and Poland. But raising its snout first in Sicily and then the northern Italian states, the mole resurfaced in France in February, ending the constitutional monarchy of Louis-Philippe. From France it spread to Germany in March, then Denmark, then Austria, then Hungary, then Poland, then ... Switzerland.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels had a clear premonition of the 1848 revolutions in 1847. Take a look at the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* and note that they urgently sought to get it translated into as many European languages as feasible: ie, English, French, German, Italian, Flemish and Danish.

They certainly believed that the coming revolution in Europe should be as closely coordinated as possible. Chapter four is devoted to the relationship between the communists and the existing opposition parties in Europe.

The First International, of which Marx was the effective leader, was established to coordinate the struggles of the working class. Primarily in Europe ... but also in the United States. The Second International was based on the principle of 'one state, one party', but sought to bring workers together globally through symbolic actions such as May Day strikes and demonstrations. The Third International put the communist parties under firm, centralised leadership ... and adopted the slogan calling for a "United States of Europe" in 1923 at Trotsky's urging.

What is really absurd is not the idea of coordinated revolution. It is the idea promoted by comrades such as Gelis who believe that small states such as Greece can escape pending bankruptcy and domination by France and Germany by breaking away from the European Union and dropping the euro. For what? Splendid isolation ... like Albania under Enver Hoxha?

No, the communist revolution is necessarily international because it overthrows international capitalism *positively*. We take over what capitalism has created. Our revolution might begin in an isolated country. A Brazil, an Iran or a Turkey. But by its very nature it is international ... and the idea of *not* planning, not consciously directing, not timing that revolution strikes me as either anarchistic or plain stupid.

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IRAN

Jafar Panahi released

Solidarity works, says **Jim Moody**



Juliette Binoche: championed Panahi at Cannes

On Tuesday last (May 25), the Iranian regime bowed to growing worldwide pressure over its imprisonment of film director Jafar Panahi and released him on 200 million rials (£14,000) bail. However, he still faces serious charges brought by the regime following gigantic, militant protests over last year's rigged presidential elections. But at least Iran's vicious clerics were forced to let Panahi out of the vile Evin prison where he has languished alongside other political prisoners since his arrest in March. Panahi's release is an encouragement to all those campaigning for democratic rights in Iran in solidarity with its people.

Juliette Binoche took Jafar Panahi's case to the world stage last weekend by holding his name in front of her as she received the best actress award.¹ Previously both the Cannes film festival and the French government had condemned Panahi's imprisonment by Iran's regime, which had prevented him from taking up his place on the festival jury. Tim Burton, head of the Cannes jury, left Panahi's chair empty throughout the festival in protest.

In Britain and Ireland solid campaigning work by Hands Off the People of Iran² to release Panahi has been vindicated. Ever since he was detained over two months ago, Hopi has worked hard to place the issue of his imprisonment in the forefront of political life. Most recently, Hopi and the Labour Representation Committee jointly organised a well-attended solidarity screenings of his film *Offside* in London; further successful film events have been held in Manchester and Glasgow within the last two weeks.

Around the world, Panahi's case has received wide support that has helped to build solidarity. On April 30 numerous Hollywood leading lights signed a petition for his release. Their petition read as follows:

"Jafar Panahi, the internationally acclaimed Iranian director of such award-winning films as *The white balloon*, *The circle*, *Crimson gold* and *Offside*, was arrested at his home on March 1 in a raid by plain-clothed security forces. He has been held since then in Tehran's notorious Evin prison."

"A recent letter from Mr Panahi's wife expressed her deep concerns

about her husband's heart condition, and about his having been moved to a smaller cell. Mr Panahi's films have been banned from screening in Iran for the past 10 years and he has effectively been kept from working for the past four years. Last October, his passport was confiscated and he was banned from leaving the country. Upon his arrest, Islamic Republic officials initially charged Mr Panahi with 'unspecified crimes'. They have since reversed themselves, and the charges are now specifically related to his work as a filmmaker.

"We (the undersigned) stand in solidarity with a fellow filmmaker, condemn this detention, and strongly urge the Iranian government to release Mr Panahi immediately.

"Iran's contributions to international cinema have been rightfully heralded, and encouraged those of us outside the country to respect and cherish its people and their stories. Like artists everywhere, Iran's filmmakers should be celebrated, not censored, repressed and imprisoned."

Signatories were Paul Thomas Anderson, Joel and Ethan Coen, Francis Ford Coppola, Jonathan Demme, Robert De Niro, Curtis Hanson, Jim Jarmusch, Ang Lee, Richard Linklater, Terrence Malick, Michael Moore, Robert Redford, Martin Scorsese, James Schamus, Paul Schrader, Steven Soderbergh, Steven Spielberg, Oliver Stone and Frederick Wiseman.

Subsequently, on Saturday May 22, 85 Iranian filmmakers also signed a letter calling for Panahi's release: "In view of the existing conditions for ... Jafar Panahi, we the undersigners of this letter, a group of independent film-makers, call for the freedom and speedy consideration of his conditions and his demands in prison." The previous weekend Jafar Panahi had started a hunger strike to underline his resolve. Veteran Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami also made vehement calls for Panahi's release while in Cannes with his film *Certified copy*, where he handed out an open letter he had written to the Iranian authorities demanding his colleague be freed. Kiarostami was quoted as saying at a press conference subsequent to the screening of his film: "When a filmmaker is imprisoned, it is the art which is attacked. I believe we can't remain

indifferent to the situation."³

Iran's clerical regime had clearly been shaken by worldwide condemnation of Panahi's incarceration. So much so that even before his release the panicked state-run Iranian media tried to allay spreading concern over his continued imprisonment that it started issuing statements about his imminent release. The official Iranian Students' News Agency stated on Tuesday May 25: "Tehran's public prosecutor, Abbas Jafari Dolatabadi, said Iranian director Jafar Panahi is to be released on bail and the judicial verdict for his release has been issued." ISNA even went so far as to admit that, "Panahi has been imprisoned since March 1 because of making a film about Iran's post-election events."⁴

Of course, while Jafar Panahi's release is an important victory for solidarity and consistent campaigning work, many political prisoners remain in Iran's jails. This was reflected in Jafar Panahi's own stance in refusing to be bailed previously while others were still held in prison. It also informed Hopi's campaigning slogan: Freedom for Jafar Panahi and all political prisoners in Iran! Meanwhile executions - state murders - are continuing: earlier this month, on May 9, five political prisoners were executed in Evin prison.

And, while we celebrate what solidarity has achieved around Jafar Panahi, we also must fight hard to ensure that US, British and the UN nest of thieves and butchers abandon their plans for regime change from above. Only Iran's people can accomplish democratic change, and it is to them that we give our support and solidarity in their struggles. Let Panahi's release spur us on to higher levels of such solidarity ●

jim.moody@weeklyworker.org.uk

Notes

1. See www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/politically-charged-finale-as-jury-honours-thai-and-binoche-stages-protest-1981119.html?action=PopUp.
2. <http://hopoi.org>.
3. <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/news-by-industry/et-cetera/iranian-director-Kiarostami-seeks-release-of-Jafar-Panahi/articleshow/5946654.cms>.
4. <http://isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-1544889&Lang=E>.

ACTION

Communist Forums

London: Sunday June 5: 'Where next for the left?' Details to be confirmed.

Oxford: Study group, every Monday evening, studying David Harvey's *Limits to capital*. Details: oxfordcommunists@googlemail.com.

South Wales: Call Bob for details: 07816 480679.

CPGB podcasts

Every Monday, we upload a podcast of commentary on the current political situation. In addition, the site will feature voice files of public meetings and other events: <http://cpgb.podbean.com>.

Communist Students

For meetings in your area, contact info@communiststudents.org.uk or check out www.communiststudents.org.uk.

Radical Anthropology Group

Introduction to anthropology series, St Martin's Community Centre, 43 Carol Street, London NW1 (Camden tube).

Tuesday June 1, 6.15pm: 'Stonehenge decoded'. Speaker: Lionel Sims.

Tuesday June 8, 6.15pm: 'Gender, power and asymmetry in the neolithic: West Kennet Avenue as a case study'. Speaker: Lionel Sims.

Tuesday June 15, 6.15pm: 'A radical history of astronomy'. Speaker: Fabio Silva. www.radicalanthropologygroup.org.

Action against deportations

Solihull: Friday May 28, 1pm: Solidarity picnic, UK Border Agency office, Sandford House, 41 Homer Road.

Glasgow: Saturday May 29, 11am: Meeting, Kinning Park Complex, Cornwall Street. Against the asylum system.

Finsbury Park: Saturday May 29, 2pm: Fun afternoon, Finsbury Park, Seven Sisters Road entrance, London N4.

Shoreditch: Tuesday June 1, 1pm: Picket, Communications House, Old Street London EC1.

City of London: Tuesday June 1, 3pm: Picket, Becketts House, London Bridge.

Whitechapel: Wednesday June 2, 7pm: Discussion, London Action Resource Centre, 62 Fieldgate Street, London E1.

Westminster: Saturday June 5, 2pm: Demonstration, Parliament Square, London WC1.

Brighton: Monday June 14, 6.30pm - film and food; 7.30pm - speakers and discussion, 113 Queens Road.

More information: National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns: ncadc@ncadc.org.uk.

No to EDL

Saturday May 29, 12 noon: Demonstration, assembly point to be confirmed. Protest against the English Defence League.

Saturday June 5, 11am: March and rally, Roald Dahl Plass/Oval Basin (next to the Wales Millennium Centre), Cardiff Bay, Protest against the Welsh Defence League.

Organised by Unite Against Fascism: uaf.org.uk.

Denaby Miners Gala

Sunday May 30, 10.30am: March and wreath-laying in honour of the 1984 strike, followed by speakers and live bands, Denaby main cenotaph. Speakers include Rodney Bickerstaffe and Arthur Scargill. More information: pinthepits@gmail.com.

Stop Islamophobia

Saturday June 5, 10am to 5pm: Conference - 'Defend the Muslim community', Camden Centre, London WC1.

Speakers include: Anas Al-Tikriti (British Muslim Initiative), Moazzam Begg (former Guantanamo Bay prisoner), Lindsey German (Stop the War Coalition), Kate Hudson (CND), Imran Khan (solicitor), Salma Yaqoob (Respect). £5 (£3 unwaged).

Organised by Stop the War Coalition: 020 7801 2768. Supported by British Muslim Initiative, NUJ, Unite, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Palestine Solidarity Campaign, Islam Channel.

Bradlaugh v Marx

Thursday June 10, 7pm: Public meeting, Bishopsgate Institute, 230 Bishopsgate, London EC2 (opposite Liverpool Street station). Talk by Deborah Lavin, historian and writer. Organised by the Socialist History Society: www.socialisthistorysociety.co.uk.

25 years on

Saturday June 19, all day event: Conference, 'Reflection on the miners strike of 1984-85', Northern College, Wentworth Castle, Stainborough, Barnsley. Keep the memory of the strike alive and set the record straight. £15, including lunch and refreshments.

Organised by Northern College: 01226 776025.

Shop Stewards Network

Saturday June 26, 11am: Annual conference, South Camden Community School, Charrington Street, London NW1 (nearest tubes Kings Cross, St Pancras). To register send £5 to NSSN, PO Box 58262, London N1P 1ET, with your details, including workplace and union. Branch or workplace sponsorship requested - suggested minimum £20.

Organised by National Shop Stewards Network: info@shopstewards.net.

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RIGHT TO WORK

Everything from the top

The May 22 Right to Work campaign meeting at Friends Meeting House in central London was a big success organisationally. Over 600 attended. They were, however, in the main, members of the Socialist Workers Party, although ex-SWPers Chris Nineham and Lindsey German, who are now part of the *Counterfire* group, were also there, as were a handful from other left groups.

The RTW meeting was far from being the ‘emergency conference’ the SWP claims it to be. It was a rally, and this was reflected in the top-down, undemocratic organisation of the day characteristic of events organised by the group. No motions were allowed because, according to the agenda, “This is an emergency conference to discuss resistance to austerity, *not* Right to Work’s annual policy making.” In fact there was no ‘discussion’, as there was zero time for contributions from the floor in the opening or closing plenaries, and, while the anodyne workshops in the middle of the day could relay ‘action points’ to the closing rally, chairs were instructed to “rule out attempts to move lengthy resolutions”. There was, in fact, one motion delegates could vote on - from the steering committee. Evidently any ideas on the best means of resisting austerity were not meant to extend beyond its supportable, but very narrow horizons. The ‘conference’ was worthless then as a forum for debating politics.

In the opening plenary the chair called platform speakers one after the other at breakneck speed, so there was not much time for anything beyond sound bites. First speaker, Tiago Gillot of the Portuguese Left Bloc, who talked about the need for public investment, defence of the health service and an end to privatisation, was typical. Next was Jeremy Corbyn MP, who believed that deregulation of the banks had caused the economic crisis, but, probably correctly, pointed out that tax increases would deepen the recession and throw many more people out of work. Adrian Ramsay, deputy leader of the Green Party, received a rather cool welcome. He said we need to be “fighting the recession”, not worsening it by making cuts. Other highlights included protecting and “where necessary” increasing the funding of public services, and achieving a stable economy by pulling a “million green jobs” out of a hat. We needed to go back to manufacturing and, yes, clamp down on tax evasion by the rich. Ramsay ended by saying we needed a coalition of the left against the cuts.

Next up, John McDonnell MP thanked those who had helped in his Labour leadership campaign, and asked comrades to contact their MPs and trade unions in support of his bid, saying diplomatically that he did not want to discuss Diane Abbott’s announcement of her candidacy. The proposed cuts would devastate communities, he said, and it was our job to mobilise and resist in every way possible. We had to make this an international struggle, and stand in opposition to capitalism and for socialism.

A BA cabin crew worker and Unite member, ‘Dave’ (not his real name), also addressed conference, to a standing ovation. Describing the workers as having “love and loyalty” for British Airways, he said the intransigence of management was ‘very frustrating’ and detailed the tactics of harassment and intimidation used to cow the workers. ‘Dave’ said that he would nonetheless be on the picket line as soon as the next strike was

called. SWP member Candy Udwin of the steering committee said there had been a “mood of resistance” at the previous week’s conference of the PCS union and now we needed to build “practical solidarity” with Greek workers. A speaking tour of Britain had been arranged.

Then the workshops. Some were about banal, practical stuff, which I suspect very few people had come along to be lectured on, such as ‘Organising a campaign against cuts’. Others were posed as political questions like ‘Should we defy the anti-union laws?’ and ‘Immigration: myths and truths’, which were clear no-brainers for the leftwingers present, and I cannot imagine that comrades attending these sessions learned an awful lot. Better, surely, to use such an event to have a genuine debate about the future of the left post-election, as our strategies, so far, have manifestly failed?

I went to the workshop on education cuts, which was being held in the main hall, along with two others. This made hearing the speakers nearly impossible - this was surprising, as the SWP usually does well with organisational tasks. I did hear Sean Vernell (UCU/SWP) getting excited about a Facebook group with over 5,000 members protesting the scrapping of maintenance grants in further education. The comrade pointed to strikes at UCL and other campuses and said we needed a united front and more demonstrations.

Another CPGB comrade attended the aforementioned session on the anti-union laws, along with around 60 others. Chair Paul Brandon answered the titular question about defiance in the affirmative, unsurprisingly. The rest of his contribution

focussed on the technical and legal aspects of the BA and Johnston Press disputes. *Socialist Worker* editor Charlie Kimber said we needed “a network of resistance and solidarity” and a political trade unionism.

The closing plenary started with Tiana Androu, a Greek civil servant, who received a warm welcome and told us how public sector workers in her country had defied their trade union leaders to take strike action, encouraged by the Communist Party (KKE). Pete Murray, president of the National Union of Journalists, had some interesting analysis of the general election in terms of the increased role played by the media, particularly News International, owned by Rupert Murdoch, who was, he pointed out, the first person invited into Downing Street by its new occupant. The comrade railed against the anti-trade union laws and pointed out the consistent bias of the courts and state apparatus towards the owners of capital. We need coordinated union action, more “demonstrations on the streets” and a tax on bankers. He also mentioned the “alternative of workers’ control”, but had no time to explain what that might look like or a strategy for getting there.

Dot Gibson, secretary of the National Pensioners Convention, veteran Trotskyist and former member of the Workers Revolutionary Party, said those groups who have “kept the flag flying” for socialism must unite “on the issues that matter” - a list of demands such as an end to privatisation and anti-racism and other things we were all against. Interestingly though, Dot said that instead of “simple opposition to the EU” we had to “build international solidarity”. The strong vote for socialist Labour can-

candidates showed that there was a hearing for the left, she concluded.

National Union of Teachers president Gill Goodwin argued for a broad-based campaign to defend public services, and for working class activists to join the Labour Party and “reclaim it at the grassroots”. Former *Socialist Worker* editor Chris Bamberg, now secretary of Right to Work, spoke last and was bombastic in his denunciation of the new government - “We’re not all in this together.” he claimed that the new government is weak and “hasn’t got a mandate”, so what we need is “a Greek-style response” requiring “coordinated action” - he meant in Britain, not across Europe. Comrade Bamberg was glad that John McDonnell had addressed the conference, but did not address the question of political representation. He did, however, concur with McDonnell that we need to “build the resistance”.

What received far more media attention than the conference itself, of course, was the SWP’s disruption of talks between British Airways head honcho Willie Walsh and the leaders of the Unite union. This event is reported below and suffice it to say that it was quickly and widely condemned as substitutionist and really lame. But the conference and the stunt quite nicely captured the contradiction between the constant SWP craving for political alliances with those to its right and the need to inspire its young cadre with such anarchistic actions.

Despite all the SWP talk about proving themselves the “best fighters”, the fact is that it can do no more than hold up a mirror to workers in struggle - and at worst, as at Acas, substitute themselves for those work-

ers. More often than not - and the Right to Work ‘conference’ was an exemplary case - the left is seen as being irrelevant and having ulterior motives (or would have been seen in that way had there been any ‘ordinary workers’ present).

There is a role for Marxists in pushing such struggles forward, but our fundamental task, in unions, or genuine united fronts (in which Marxists would be a minority), is political. The problem of the trade union bureaucracy will not be overcome by substitutionist actions, but through an openly fought political struggle against reformist trends in the workers’ movement. Organisational independence must be accompanied by political independence.

Overall the day showed how far the leadership of the SWP is from being able to pose this alternative vision, and how the question of unity is being further depoliticised; yes, we need a “network of resistance and solidarity” but what about political unity, or even discussion of the question?

Conference overwhelmingly passed the steering committee motion, which opposed making working people pay for the crisis, expressed solidarity with the people of Greece, called for a protest to coincide with the queen’s speech and another demonstration at the Conservative Party conference, and aspired to coordinated nationwide strike action. Proposals from the workshops that were also agreed included organising meetings on immigration, producing pamphlets on different topics, and adopting the call for a “million green jobs”.

Laurie Smith

SWP stunt backfires

The attempt by the Socialist Workers Party to gain publicity for itself by invading the May 22 talks at Acas has caused acute embarrassment. And the judgement of national secretary Martin Smith for his role in the stunt has subsequently been called into question by a good number of experienced SWP trade union activists. Most of them

are saying in private that he has taken leave of his senses and ought to be given the same treatment as John Rees.

Interviewed the next day on Channel 4 news, comrade Smith freely admitted that the stunt was organised by the SWP and the participants were members of his organisation.



He obviously relished the chance of gaining publicity for the SWP ... and a few extra naive recruits.

However, for anyone with an ounce of experience, the SWP came over like a bunch of irresponsible anarchists. Indeed *The Guardian* did actually report that “anarchists” had invaded the Acas offices. Comrade Smith pleaded on Channel 4 that the SWP had no wish to disrupt negotiations between

British Airways and Unite: “Do you really believe that the SWP, with 100 people causing a 10-minute protest, could stop negotiations between one of the most powerful multinational companies in this country and a trade union?”

The interviewer went on to accuse him of bullying. Comrade Smith, quite rightly replied that Willie

Walsh was the real bully ... and how easy it was to get into the building and go up to the 22nd floor where Walsh was with his management team. Meantime, Channel 4 was screening pictures of excited young SWPers surrounding and chanting at Walsh and a furious Tony Woodley, joint general secre-

tary of Unite, and the TUC’s Brendan Barber telling them to clear off and stop interrupting their talks.

On the same day, May 23, one of the rotating leads on the SWP’s home page featured a press statement by Smith claiming credit for and fully justifying the SWP action. However, soon after, this statement was replaced: “Hundreds of people protested at Acas headquarters today, where negotiations were taking place between British Airways and Unite the union.” Presumably the inclusion of the word “today” was intended to disguise the fact that the SWP was busily backtracking. Note also that the SWP is no longer identified as having organised the intervention - something that *Socialist Worker* is also keen to go along with in its short report of “a protest involving Socialist Workers Party members”.

Presumably the political committee met in emergency session and agreed on a damage-limitation exercise. Hence, the revised statement emphasises that, “The target of the protest was Willie Walsh, the union-busting and bullying head of BA” - not, of course, Derek Simpson and Tony Woodley, the official Unite negotiators, who were understandably outraged by the action. The reason the protest was necessary, according to the SWP, was because “BA workers are unable to speak out in person, fearing draconian disciplinary measures.”

Comrade Smith is now quoted as saying: “The SWP believes it was

LABOUR

Diane Abbott splits left

Labour's leadership contest is now properly underway, with the opening of nominations on May 24. Aspiring candidates will have to secure the consent of 33 Labour MPs in order to go to the vote later this year.

According to the Labour Party's website, David Miliband and Ed Miliband are now officially nominated, though David is now ahead of his brother in terms of backers. Ed Balls and Andy Burnham are still some way behind ... and at the time of writing John McDonnell has just four nominations - including, believe it or not, the execrable Frank Field and Kate Hoey.

While previously the post-Brown leadership contest was due to have been conclusively stitched up, with a ludicrous three-day nomination period initially imposed by the Labour national executive committee, now it has been extended to a miserly 16 days.

The protests began, naturally, on the Labour left, who are hobbled enough already by the MPs' stranglehold over nominations; but quickly they spread. Jon Cruddas, the soft left angling for a post as David Miliband's deputy, criticised the time limit forcefully. It was a measure directed clearly against the left, traditionally underrepresented in parliament anyway, but particularly badly marginalised at the present time.

In fact, so flagrantly anti-democratic was the original timetable that even Ed Miliband deigned to offer support to disaffected Labourites, via the social networking site Twitter. With both Miliband camps dissatisfied with the three-day period, to say nothing of less powerful figures in the party, one has to wonder who

supported it in the first place.

So the contest - at least, any contest not completely internal to New Labour - is just about alive. Still, the safe money is on a New Labour-only non-debate, as the first Labour left to throw his hat into the ring, McDonnell, knows all too well. His was the only serious left challenge to Gordon Brown's coronation in 2007, but despite an energetic campaign - not to mention a longer campaigning period - he was unable to get enough nominations. The reasons are multiple, but the two most important were the Labour Party machine's desire for an orderly Blair-Brown transition, and the fact that the largest trade unions refused to lift a finger for him and cajole their parliamentary groups into offering support, preferring instead to crown Brown. (It does not help that some left-led unions are not affiliated to Labour, leaving them in no real position to influence the outcome of such struggles.)

This time around, the number of nominations necessary has fallen - but only in proportion with the overall size of the parliamentary Labour Party. The number of identifiable lefts has certainly fallen too; though their electoral performance in the recent general election was generally better than the right, the latter have long consolidated their control over selections.

McDonnell's only major rival on the left last time was Michael Meacher, who pulled out when it became clear he had very little support whatsoever (it turns out, thankfully, that barely coherent conspiracy theories are not enough to secure leftwing support for a former Blair cabinet minister). He recommended his nominators transfer their support



Diane Abbott: in whose interest?

to McDonnell. This time around, the surprise rival is Diane Abbott, a long standing left MP best known today for her odd-couple TV partnership with reformed Thatcherite Michael Portillo.

This makes it extraordinarily difficult for either Abbott or McDonnell to make the ballot. They both fish, broadly, from the same pond: the shrinking number of Labour left MPs. There are differences too: McDonnell enjoys (if that is the word in a Labour leadership race) support from the far left, for a start. Socialist Appeal, the Socialist Workers Party, the CPGB and many others have weighed in for his candidacy; even the Socialist Party, officially committed to the dogma that the Labour Party is completely dead as any kind of organisation of the working class, has found the necessary spine to come out for McDonnell. He also has the advantage of enthusiastic support from the RMT.

Abbott's supporters have tended to use a single buzzword: 'diversity'. It is certainly true that she is the only woman and the only ethnic minority candidate; for anti-racists and anti-sexists whose beliefs tend towards the narrowly statistical, a black woman on the ballot is an achievement in itself. It would be something of an event, particularly if she somehow managed to go all the way and get the job.

The question is rather: what is there that politically differentiates Abbott from her better-established rival? The only honest answer is: not a whole lot. Both are opposed to the government's programme of cuts, and would be opposed to a Labour government's programme of cuts; both opposed the Iraq war from the outset, unlike Johnny-come-latelies like Ed Miliband and Ed Balls (although Abbott, unlike McDonnell, refused to call for an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of British troops). Both are, of course, opposed to all forms of racism, and are at least prepared to position themselves to the left of the Tories and Lib Dems on immigration. In the absence of significant political disagreement, Abbott's campaign amounts to splitting the left-Labourite nominations and votes. McDonnell, either diplomatically or naively, officially welcomes Abbott's campaign, calling for further reforms from the Labour NEC so they both can contest the leader-

right to protest and make a stand against the bully-boy and union-basher, Willie Walsh. We don't believe working class people should pay the price for their economic crisis²

However, the SWP's members' bulletin, *Party Notes*, now clearly wants to distance the SWP from the publicity disaster. On May 22 "a journalist from Sky TV informed a member of the party" that Willie Walsh was at Acas "just around the corner" from the Right to Work conference and afterwards "a group of 200 or so people" marched to the building. "About 100 protesters" went inside when they found an open door. The target was Willie Walsh and there was "never any intention of stopping the talks", which in any case were "already over".

Party Notes reports the union statement that the "widely reported distractions" at Acas "had little effect on the outcome of these talks". It goes on to claim: "Also we have received a very warm welcome on the BA picket lines this morning - 39 copies of SW have been sold." This despite the fact that *Party Notes* also fails to mention that the action was organised by the SWP.

The anonymous author complains of "a lot of blogging and Facebook chatter" and remarks: "I personally think it is best not to engage in these gutter debates, but, if you are, please try and find out the basic facts before firing off comments." Obviously, the SWP has been left at sixes and sevens by its comrades attempting to justify the

Acas invasion on the grounds that the Unite leadership was about to sell out.

Not at all the line that the leadership wants to pursue, as *Party Notes* explains: "... I think it is important we learn some lessons from the protest on Saturday. We are trying to bring together a serious coalition that can resist the cuts ... That means when we hold stunts and protests we need to point all our fire at the Con-Dems and the bosses, and should try and avoid at all costs protests that embroil Labour and trade union leaders in them."³

In other words, we shouldn't have done it. Perhaps the SWP leadership has forgotten that *Party Notes* can now be accessed by the public via its website, since neither the home page statement nor the *Socialist Worker* report expresses any such regret.

What a pity that the implied criticism of comrade Smith is so shame-faced and dishonest. It was a leftist act of pure substitutionism. If workers had themselves organised a picket because they suspected a sellout and asked for support, then of course it would have been right to answer their call. But to organise an action which involved Woodley, Simpson and Barber denouncing it and which appeared to be aimed at stopping their negotiations with BA was childish clowning ●

Peter Manson

Notes

1. *Socialist Worker* May 29.
2. www.swp.org.uk/node/167.
3. *Party Notes* May 24: www.swp.org.uk/party-notes.

late this kind of policy into reality.

David Miliband and Burnham are, we are told, Blairites, and the Eds Brownites; this is supposed even now to indicate some kind of principled difference. Yet the notion that Gordon Brown represented anything other than a less PR-friendly spin on Blairism is transparently risible after three years under his cosh (with the collusion of the Milibands and Balls). Both, it turns out, were enthusiastically Atlanticist variants of neoliberalism. Neither was guaranteed a future after the financial crisis. The political franchise of most mainstream media outlets has long been transferred from Labour to the Tories (even the Labour-stalwart *Guardian* backed Clegg in this election); the competition between Labour factions over immigration is suddenly of precious little concern to a reactionary press with its favoured boot-boys back in charge.

That the Labour right - or New Labour, as it branded itself for the last 13 years - represents nothing politically distinctive from typical right-wing governments around Europe is old news. That Blair and Brown were so transparently mendacious in their political billing as 'progressives' paralysed the trade unions and workers' organisations as they struggled to politically dissociate themselves from a government they nonetheless materially supported.

Today these organisations have the opportunity to revise radically their political commitments; even a consistent version of the Labourism unsurprisingly endemic in the unions would be an improvement over the incompetent 'realism' that recommends a vote for Brown over Blair, or Ed Balls over Ed Miliband. There is every sign, however, that this opportunity will once again not be taken. John McDonnell's support is concentrated in disaffiliated unions; though Billy Hayes, general secretary of the Communication Workers Union, politely touts both McDonnell and Abbott for glory. Most of the other unions - Unite, Unison and so on - can be expected to come out in favour of whichever New Labourite appears least comfortable in his own skin, with Balls the main contender.

Communists want to see the Labour Party completely transformed - from its foundations it has stood for the British working class's attachment to the nation-state and to the undemocratic constitutional order, and the reciprocal delivery of crumbs from the ruling class table. We want do drive out the pro-capitalist right wing, not seek some comfortable deal with it. That means we need to overcome Labourism in both its leftwing and rightwing guises. If the Labour Party were to disappear, or be completely subsumed into a bourgeois liberal grouping on the model of the Democrats in America, it would be a big setback for the working class movement in Britain. But that is exactly where right Labourism points - strange though it might first appear, something reinforced by left Labourism. In the name of realism and gaining a majority, left Labourites constantly seek to reach out to the right. In other words the trade union bureaucracy and the openly pro-capitalist right. So in order to cement the independent initiative of the working class it is necessary to supersede left Labourism positively. The nomination and election of John McDonnell as Labour leader would provide the best conditions to take forward this argument ●

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GERMANY

Key debates evaded

The German left party Die Linke is going from strength to strength. But crucial debates on the future of the party, the nature of capitalism and participation in bourgeois governments will seriously test it over the next few months. In the first of two articles, **Tina Becker** reports from the 2010 conference, which took place on May 15-16 in Rostock

The stormy weather outside the Stadthalle Rostock could have been an omen for the kind of stormy arguments you would expect of a young socialist party that has just begun the process of debating the recently published draft for its first ever party programme. But in fact, as soon as the 570 delegates and 300 or so visitors escaped the rain (passing a few nerdish conservative youths holding up placards bearing names of people "killed by communism") and entered the city hall of the east German city by the Baltic Sea, it was as if they had entered a calm haven. In fact, the whole conference was almost eerily tranquil. If you did not know the arguments that are currently raging behind the scenes, you would think Die Linke is just one big, happy family. But it certainly is not.

The draft programme, published last month, will be properly debated at next year's conference. But, of course, one comrade after another hinted at it or made reference to particular formulations within it. It is highly disputed and has already been hotly debated in the bourgeois press. It surely would have been a good idea to allow some form of debate or discussion on the draft at this conference.

Similarly, there was no space allocated to discuss any of the key speeches delivered. There were a lot of disgruntled faces, for example, when Oskar Lafontaine, who has recently resigned as party leader because he is battling cancer, described the "three key tasks of Die Linke" as "fighting for Keynesianism, the re-regulation of the finance markets and economic governance on a European level".

Instead, the conference had only one real, properly debated point of business: the election of a new leadership. Both current party leaders have resigned for health reasons: Lothar Bisky has for many years been the leader of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS, the former 'official communist' party of East Germany), one of the two components that came together to form Die Linke in 2007.

Oskar Lafontaine, on the other hand, played a crucial role in making a success of a newly emerging organisation in the west of Germany: the WASG (Wahlalternative Arbeit und Soziale Gerechtigkeit), which was made up mainly of disappointed left social democrats, union officials and the far left. He was a leader of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and minister of finance under chancellor Gerhard Schröder, when he resigned all his posts in 1999 over the introduction of a very unpopular, Blairite set of cuts and privatisations, known as *Agenda 2010*.

With Lafontaine at the helm, the PDS and the WASG merged in 2007, opening the way to success. 25,000 new members have joined since, bringing the total to almost 80,000. The ongoing attempt by the bourgeois media and the political elite to demonise the young party has not paid off. In TV debates, there is now almost always a representative of Die Linke present - it would look strange if its view was not heard. Die Linke is now represented in 13 of the 16 federal state parliaments, relatively comfortably exceeding the undemocratic 5% threshold. It has 78 repre-



Gregor Gysi: 'hidden' leader

sentatives in the national *Bundestag* and hundreds of Die Linke members have been elected councillors. The conference was shown live for 10 hours on a popular news channel. The party has changed the political landscape in Germany, no doubt.

And all of that despite the fact that there are some rather big political differences within the membership. The next few months will help to crystallise these differences, which for the last few years have largely remained concealed. It is unlikely though that this will blow the party apart, because there is a relatively healthy internal regime, which allows for different political platforms and tendencies to come together. This is certainly a useful lesson for the British left.

Follow the leader

The 2010 conference felt at times like a farewell concert for Bisky and Lafontaine. There were long speeches by both. Then there were long speeches about both. Then they got presents. Standing ovations. Kisses. It was not quite like in the old East Germany, but ...

The elections themselves were similarly bureaucratic. To elect 44 members of the new leadership took almost 12 hours over two days. And that despite the fact that, apart from one (not very funny) joke candidate, the 10 main posts on the executive were uncontested. The three main positions - leader, secretary and party-building officer - were each filled by two people - organised not only by gender (one man, one woman), but also according to geography (one east, one west). In addition, there are four (!) vice-leaders.

Political orientation was not officially a selection criterion, but clearly had to be considered too. There are about 50 political platforms within the party, some of them organised on single issues, but the most important ones group together comrades who have a common view on a whole range of issues. The biggest ones are:

- **Forum Demokratischer Sozialismus (FDS):** based mainly in the east and Berlin, it brings together the *realos* - those particularly keen on government participation so as to bring about 'real change' in society.

- **Antikapitalistische Linke (AKL):** The soft Stalinist Kommunistische Plattform from the east of Germany is the most organised force within this group - it has recently been growing in the west too, mainly because of its formally radical language. At conference, however, it was almost invisible and agreed with most things pushed forward much more energetically and visibly by the Sozialistische Linke.

- **Sozialistische Linke (SL):** Politically, it is based somewhere between the AKL and the FDS, with its motto being "Radical and realistic".

At the core is the group Marx 21 (formerly Linksruck, the German section of the Socialist Workers Party). Somewhat amusingly, a couple of sympathisers of the SL tried to convince me that Linksruck had indeed closed down and that Marx 21 members are operating independently of the SWP - an illusion that has certainly been fostered by comrades who have been very good at acting like the party's loyal opposition.

- **Emanzipatorische Linke (EL):** EL brings together a slightly weird ragbag of ideas, centrally their demand for *Grundsicherung*, a basic 'wage' of around €1,200 that everybody in Germany should receive from the state, no matter if they are a millionaire or a pauper. The idea is not very popular inside Die Linke, but publicly the party is often associated with it.

While the six main leaders belong to either the right FDS or the non-aligned centre, among the four vice-leaders are Sarah Wagenknecht (leader of the Kommunistische Plattform) and Katja Kipping (leader of the Emanzipatorische Linke). The Sozialistische Linke is well represented in the wider party leadership, with Christine Buchholz and Janine Wissler being their most prominent

representatives.

As far as I can tell, the Sozialistische Alternative (SAV), the German section of Peter Taaffe's Committee for a Workers' International, is not represented on the leadership. Because of a lack of any coherent strategy in Die Linke, it has pretty much manoeuvred itself into a position where very few people take it seriously. For example, in the WASG it argued against merging with the PDS, unless the latter ended all participation in regional governments. Then the SAV decided to join Die Linke in the west, but not in the east, and stood against the PDS in Berlin and later against Die Linke in Rostock.

Later still, the SAV changed its line and tried to join Die Linke everywhere, but some of its leading members were refused entry into the party using undoubtedly very bureaucratic means. However, almost nobody in the membership batted an eyelid, let alone tried to organise any kind of solidarity action. This is a shame, in my view, as politically the SAV has many good and principled things to say. Principles that the Antikapitalistische Linke and the Sozialistische Linke, for example, have given up without a fight (more below).

The new official leaders of the party might be called Klaus Ernst (former leader of the WASG) and Gesine Lötzsch (a longstanding member of the PDS in the east). But in reality it is Gregor Gysi, the very charismatic lawyer, who calls the shots. For a while, the former leader of the PDS was happy to share the limelight with Lafontaine, but he has made it very clear that he does not think of Ernst or Lötzsch as being in the same league. And, as he holds only one official position - that of leader of the party's fraction in the *Bundestag* - the magazine *Spiegel* has called him "the secret leader" of Die Linke. Only it is not a very big secret. He was omnipresent at conference, delivering a total of around five hours of speeches.

He is as unaccountable to the membership as George Galloway was in Respect and a lot of people rolled their eyes when he - yet again - got up to deliver this or that report. Incidentally, both Klaus Ernst and Gesine Lötzsch were heard for exactly seven minutes each - the time allocated to all candidates to introduce themselves.

Red holding lines

I will look at the party's draft programme in more detail in another *Weekly Worker* article. But to quickly sum up: the draft, published last month, is a big step to the left, especially compared to the previously published *Programmatische Eckpunkte*, which has served as a pseudo-programme since 2007. This mentioned socialism only once, as an aside, and was not much more than a Keynesian shopping list. The new draft clearly criticises capitalism and repeatedly names its goal as that of "democratic socialism".

This move to the left could be down to Lafontaine's influence or it might just reflect the party's need to appear more radical in the face of the crisis of capitalism.

But there are plenty of controversial

issues that will come to the fore in the next few months. For a start, the party will have to clarify what it actually means by "democratic socialism".

Because the right was first off the mark and started criticising the draft as "painting a horror scenario" of capitalism, the left has been forced into a defensive position. Both the Antikapitalistische Linke and the Sozialistische Linke are keen to highlight the positive things in the programme in order to rescue it from attacks by the right.

The most controversial point is the formulation on the question of government participation. For the time being, the left is concentrating its fire particularly on defending the 'red holding lines' in the draft that are supposed to protect the party from taking part in 'bad' capitalist governments:

"Die Linke seeks participation in government only if we can achieve an improvement of the living conditions of the people. It shall not take part in any government which pushes privatisation and promotes the erosion of social benefit and jobs. On a federal level, Die Linke, moreover, shall not participate in a government which is engaged in wars, permits military missions of the Bundeswehr abroad and advances rearment and militarisation."²²

However, despite this question being the most hotly debated issue within the organisation, it was hardly discussed apart from in passing during the debate on a couple of motions to conference. Each motion was rushed through with one speech for, one against, lasting not more than three minutes each. This is a very worrying characteristic of Die Linke conferences, especially when compared to the time allocated to the election procedure. The issue of government participation is still as disputed and unresolved as it was before conference.

But it is a most pressing issue. On May 6, Die Linke managed to scrape into the regional parliament of the west German federal state of Northrhine-Westfalia. 5.6% of the vote does not sound like much, but it is no small feat in the biggest of the 16 federal states. As a result, neither a conservative bloc of Christian Democrats (CDU) and Liberal Democrats (FDP) nor a 'red-green' coalition of Social Democrats (SPD) and Green Party had the necessary majority to form a government. Because of the German electoral system, there is almost no regional government that is not made up a coalition. And, as Die Linke grows in popularity, this situation is repeated more and more often across Germany.

The SPD in Northrhine-Westfalia officially approached Die Linke to form a 'red-red-green' coalition, which would have been the first of its kind in west Germany. But after a few hours, the negotiations were called off - by the SPD, it needs to be stressed. Officially, they did not like what Die Linke had to say about East Germany. But in reality, they were never serious about trying to form a government (unlike some - not all - of the representatives of Die Linke at the talks). As an aside, it is

interesting that the SPD must have felt enough pressure from its own left and its voters to pursue such negotiations. Only last year, in a similar situation, the leader of the SPD in the west German state of Hesse had to resign precisely because she wanted to hold such talks.

Worryingly, it is now undisputed within Die Linke whether it should at least try to get into regional governments. And that despite the fact the party's participation in the regional governments of Berlin and the east German states of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Brandenburg have already proved what such participation as a minority in a capitalist government actually means: you have to take part in forcing through cuts, cuts and cuts again. Especially in this period.

Well, that is because there were no 'holding lines', says the left. They are supposed to show that it is not Die Linke which is blocking this or that red-red government - it is the SPD, which will not move far enough in a left direction. But Lucy Redler of the SAV is right (see interview): these purely defensive holding lines are a cheap trick to fool the electorate. The left does not dare speak the truth - that Die Linke should fight in opposition - so it reverts to an outright lie. But that is a very slippery slope and comrade Redler puts her finger on it when she asks, if the SPD were to accept two of Die Linke's three conditions, then would that not still be better than a government of the CDU and Liberal Democrats? Would there not be the same kind of pressure from "the movements" and "the electorate" to participate in government?

Maybe because they are aware of this slippery slope, the comrades on the left are currently developing another 'strategy' to deal with the dilemma: that of tolerating a government of SPD and Greens. Particularly the SL is pushing the idea that Die Linke could use its votes in parliament to help a 'red-green' government to take power as a minority - but not take part in that government. They are proposing that Die Linke should help elect such a government without any conditions. The comrades believe that in this way they would absolve themselves from any sins committed by such a government, while at the same time they would prevent a conservative one. This might sound like a preferable option, but it is still an illusion to think Die Linke would not be tainted. It still would have helped to choose the butcher. Incidentally, the SAV also supports this position.

I think that the comrades seriously overestimate the illusions that working class people have in bourgeois governments. As a strong, principled party of the opposition you can have as much - if not more - impact on pushing through reforms. For example, in the west German state of Hesse, the SPD government felt so much under pressure from the growing popularity of Die Linke that, just before regional elections, it scrapped tuition fees - one of the key election demands of Die Linke (as an aside, this was not enough to save the downward spiral of the SPD and the conservatives are now in power there - but they too have not dared to re-introduce the very unpopular tuition fees). And Christine Buchholz's example of using parliament as a platform surely goes to show that you do not have to be in power to make a real difference.

For all their talk of "the movements", the left in Die Linke show very little confidence in them ●

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Notes

1. Süddeutsche Zeitung May 7.

2. Programme of Die Linke, first draft, p39: http://die-linke.de/fileadmin/download/programmdebatt/100426_draft_programme_en.pdf.

For and against 'holding lines'

Lucy Redler



A national spokesperson of Sozialistische Alternative, the German section of Peter Taaffe's Committee for a Workers' International

The SAV is the only visible group in Die Linke which clearly opposes all government participation in capitalist governments.

Many in Die Linke argue that this is the lesser evil, because, after all, we will prevent a government coalition of the CDU and Liberal Democrats. This argument falls well short, in my view, because if you participate in capitalist governments, you always end up helping to manage capitalism, and implementing social cuts and privatisation instead of fighting them. In their first term in government in Berlin, for example, the comrades privatised a building society and with it 120,000 council flats, reduced benefit for blind people by 20% and introduced cuts to a whole range of other social provisions.

In the process, Die Linke has lost a lot of credibility and votes. Because of that, there is an attempt to appear more 'people-friendly' in the current second term, but in my view it is continuing just like it was before. The Berlin government has just decided to postpone until 2017 measures that would raise the wages of public sector workers to meet those of the rest of Germany. Die Linke has also given its agreement to part-privatise the Berlin tram system, amongst other things.

I don't think the main question is 'What can we achieve in parliament?', especially because the great victories of the women's movement, for example, were fought for on the streets. I think the place of Die Linke is, first of all, on the streets, in the factories, with the protests. We should, just like Karl Liebknecht said, use parliament mainly as a platform.

What do you think about the 'red holding lines' supported by the SL and the AKL?

These are forces who don't actually want to see Die Linke in government. They believe that by playing tactical games you can lay the blame firmly on the door of the SPD. That's a very slippery slope. What if the SPD fulfils two of the three conditions? Then we will also be under pressure to accept. Or what if all three conditions are accepted, but then later, in the budget discussions, it turns out that there will be cuts after all? I believe that we should clearly tell the people what is actually necessary to stop the attacks during this worst economic crisis for 80 years. Not what we think they might understand, but what is necessary.

How strong is that view in Die Linke?

I think a majority is probably against government participation, but that many have the hope that they'll get out of this apparent dilemma by supporting the 'holding lines'. However, it also shows that there is a very lively and good debate in Die Linke. The place for all socialists should be in the party.

You and a few other SAV members have actually been prevented from becoming members of Die Linke, because you stood a candidate against the party here in Rostock in the local elections in 2009 - wrongly, in my view.

Let me explain. A member of the SAV had been a member of the Rostock parliament for many years and she had been doing very good work. We tried to arrange a joint list with Die Linke in order to stand together. But they didn't even want to talk to us. So the comrades in Rostock decided to stand alone - and against Die Linke. The arbitration committee of Die Linke unfortunately came to the view that I as speaker of the SAV am responsible for whatever any of my comrades are doing in whatever locality.

I think this is clearly a political construct and that I can't be made responsible for all that. Having said that, the time limit for an appeal has just passed, and my comrades and I can now officially reapply for party membership and we will probably do just that ●

Stefan Liebich



Leader and then vice-leader of Die Linke fraction in the regional government of Berlin, until he was elected a member of the Bundestag in 2009. He is the national spokesperson for the Forum Demokratischer Sozialismus, the *realpolitische* wing of the party

Many people on the left say that you cannot possibly achieve the aim of democratic socialism by trying to get into government with capitalist parties almost everywhere and on any basis.

That is not true: we are not doing that. We just don't think that the so-called 'holding lines' are the way to go about it. Real holding lines come through real negotiations and not by writing something down in a programme. If we are able to write down in negotiations with the SPD and the Greens that there won't be any cuts in public services, then I'm very glad. If we can't achieve that, we have to weigh up what other things we might be able to achieve - or if we should just leave it.

For us, for example, it would also be very important to prevent the privatisation of basic social provision services. We would also want to introduce 'common learning' in schools and bring together the divided German school system. And, of course, we would expect such a government to advance left politics in the *Bundesrat* [the second chamber, representing the 16 federal states]. You always have to ask yourself if a government of CDU and Liberal Democrats would really be the more preferable option.

Those who support 'holding lines' hope they will prevent some of the very unpopular

decisions that were made by Die Linke representatives like yourself in the Berlin government.

Of course, we made mistakes in our first four years in government in Berlin. Things happened that I wish hadn't. For example, a big building society was privatised - that wasn't good. I just don't think that 'holding lines' stop such things from happening. It is much better to have the strength and the ability in such situations to stay firm and push through alternatives.

That is working much better now in Berlin. Taking part in government coalitions clearly also teaches you a thing or two. But, of course, yes, mistakes were made and it is understandable that it has led to the discussion over 'holding lines'.

Are you hoping for government participation on a national level, too?

Yesterday the party conference took the decision to open up discussions with the SPD and the Greens - also with the view of building a majority coalition at the next elections. I think this is totally correct. We criticise the government of the CDU and Liberal Democrats all day long for plenty of good reasons, but we have to be able to give an answer too.

It was terrible that after the last elections - there were no other options to form a government coalition. The SPD and the Greens together couldn't muster enough votes and they all took out exclusion orders against us. That certainly is no way forward and there remains plenty to do to change that situation ●

Christine Buchholz



Since 2009 she has been a member of the German *Bundestag*. She is leading member of Marx 21, a group of about 150 people, which is centrally involved in the Sozialistische Linke and is based on the organisation Linksruhr, the 'dissolved' German section of the SWP's International Socialist Tendency

You are a vocal supporter of 'red holding lines'. But aren't they supposed to be a clever tactic to actually prevent government participation? Wouldn't it be better to be honest about it and say: we are against government participation as a minority partner in capitalist governments?

Yes, I am against participating in government coalitions under the current conditions of capitalism. But we have to face the fact that the majority of the electorate thinks along parliamentary lines and has expectations in that direction. This is why I think the holding lines are a good method to show that we are not against government participation in principle, because nobody on the streets would understand that.

But we put the conditions as clearly and transparently as we can, so that everybody can understand them. And in reality the SPD and the Greens are so degenerate that they are not prepared to take up these points. But that is not our fault. We are not selling our souls for power.

In his speech, Oskar Lafontaine identified the main tasks of Die Linke as fighting for Keynesianism and the re-regulation of the world economy. As a member of Marx 21 would you go further?

Well, we have worked out some common demands for the here and now, like reversing some previously enforced cuts, reintroducing regulations in the economy and a new programme of public investment. These are all, in the true sense of the word, reformist demands. But the important thing is, how we fight for these demands.

We believe that this is the central point: that we will only push these demands through if we build massive pressure and resistance. Because of the crisis-ridden nature of capitalism, we will see one crisis after another, so it will not be possible to stop once these demands have been won. And this is part of our programme debate: how do we change property relations? The first step is to fight for these reforms and in that sense we support that fight. But they have to be won through struggle, as a first step, in order to achieve a very different sort of society: socialism.

You have been a member of the German Bundestag since 2009. What kind of experience has that been?

As a member of the Bundestag, of course, you don't really change anything, especially if you are a member of an opposition party that no fucker wants to talk to. But there are certain things you can do. For example, I took the opportunity given to MPs to organise an official trip to Afghanistan. I met with the families of the victims of an Allied bomb attack in the Kunduz region where, under German command, over 140 civilians were killed.

We used these experiences and made a big public impact. I delivered a speech about it in parliament, when Die Linke fraction members held up placards bearing the names of all the victims. All media outlets reported this and we helped many more people to understand that this is a war against the civilian population. This is, I think, a good way to combine the work of an MP with the aims of extra-parliamentary movements - in this case the anti-war movement. Other comrades have organised similar actions - for example, in cooperation with the unions.

The right wing in the party would probably argue that it would be much easier to withdraw German troops from Afghanistan, were Die Linke part of the national government. How strong is the pressure to 'bring about real change'?

Of course, there is this pressure. But there is far more pressure on the SPD and the Greens, because the majority of the population in Germany is clearly against the war. And it says very clearly in our draft programme that Die Linke will only participate in a government that stops social cuts, abolishes the draconian Hartz 4 unemployment laws and reverses the undemocratic 'reform' of the pension system. The SPD and the Greens would have to move a long way in our direction ●

DEBATE

Electoral reform and

Nick Rogers discusses the democratic forms appropriate to the rule of the working class

Suddenly, democracy has taken centre stage in British political debate - primarily in the limited guise of electoral reform, but also in proposals for fixed-term parliaments and reform of the House of Lords. For communists this is an important opportunity. When the ruling class publicly debates any aspect of the way in which it rules the rest of us, a space opens up for communists to counterpose our democratic alternative - replacing the rule of the capitalist class with that of the majority of the society, the working class.

We are not on the brink of revolution. A hung parliament and coalition government brings that prospect no closer. Given the current malaise of the left, the key task is to take the first steps on the road to building a party. For only with a Communist Party can the working class challenge for political power. But the working class can only mount that challenge if it offers compelling answers to the main questions of the day.

The working class must provide answers that enable it to amass the weaponry to defend and advance social conditions. It must provide answers that explain why there is an alternative to a malfunctioning capitalist economy. However, most important are the answers we provide to the questions posed around the political system and democracy. It is these that have the potential to crack open the fortress of capitalist state power.

In this article I want to challenge the default position of much of the left, including the CPGB, in support of proportional representation. I believe that PR leads us away from the kind of participatory, direct democracy that should inform our political and democratic demands. In the course of the discussion I will refer extensively to recent contributions on these questions by Moshé Machover.

Electoral reform

Electoral reform in itself poses no significant challenge to the rule of the capitalist class. A glance at the constitutions of any number of states around the world demonstrates that capitalist political hegemony is perfectly compatible with a wide range of electoral systems - and, indeed, for long periods with the absence of elections.

On the British left, as illustrated by the chart in the Weekly Worker comparing the manifestos of left organisations,¹ proportional representation generally gets the thumbs-up. It is easy to understand why a marginalised left believes that a more proportional electoral system would enable it to establish a toe-hold in parliament and, from there, build a platform to advance socialist politics.

Indeed the experience of the Scottish Socialist Party with the additional-member electoral system in place for the Scottish parliament shows that PR does genuinely provide this opening - six MSPs elected in 2003. The trajectory of the SSP also warns that ultimately it is the credibility of any left challenge that weighs most heavily - zero MSPs elected in 2007.

For the Labour left, the question has always been more complex - and these days views on electoral reform are more diverse. The prospect held out by PR of perpetual coalition government has always threatened to reinforce the dominance of the Labour right and give to parties of the political centre the power of veto over pro-working class policies.

A 'Labour government committed to a socialist programme' becomes even more improbable under a system of PR. And conspiracy theorists see the introduction of PR across continental Europe after World War II - often at the behest of the two Anglo-Saxon powers - as a device to keep large, self-confident communist parties from forming governments.

In recent years the first-past-the-post electoral system, in which the winner of the most votes in a single-seat constituency is elected, has skewed general election results in favour of the Labour Party - the most recent election included. In part this reflects the lower registration and lower turnout of the registered amongst the poorest members of our society. FPTP in effect compensates for the political disengagement of the poor.

Moshé Machover has discussed in the pages of the Weekly Worker the merits of different electoral systems.² He identified two broad categories: district representation, in which representatives are elected for distinct geographic units; and proportional representation, in which representation is decided by the number of votes for parties.

Examples of district representation are the current FPTP system and the alternative vote electoral system proposed by the Labour Party going into the general election campaign - as a blatant manoeuvre to appeal to the Liberal Democrats in the event of a hung parliament. It transpired that David Cameron was ready to trump Gordon Brown's offer with a proposed referendum of his own.

Moshé takes a particularly harsh view of AV. This electoral system allows electors to rank all the candidates in their single-seat constituency. If no single candidate receives more than 50% of first preferences, the last candidate is eliminated and their second preferences redistributed. This process is continued until one candidate has more votes than all other candidates. The electoral system is designed to ensure that each elected representative has the support of a majority of electors in their constituency. No candidate can be elected with a little over a third of the vote, as is quite possible under FPTP.

Moshé points out, however, that AV does not necessarily guarantee the election of the candidate who most electors prefer over all others. To give an example, say, a Conservative candidate receives 40% of first preferences, a Labour candidate 35% and a Liberal Democrat candidate 25%. Under FPTP the Conservative would be victorious.

Under AV, by contrast, the second preferences of those who voted for the Liberal Democrat would be redistributed. Say those second preferences split 80-20% in favour of the Labour candidate. The Labour candidate would have 20% (ie, 80% of 25%) added to their total, bringing them up to 55%. The Conservative candidate would get only an additional 5% (ie, 20% of 25%), making a grand total of 45%. AV sees the Labour candidate is elected.

But let us examine the second preferences of the electors who voted Conservative and Labour. For the sake of argument, let us assume every single one of them cast their second preference for the Liberal Democrat - broadly speaking, not an entirely outlandish outcome. We can now see that while, as we have seen, 55% of electors prefer the Labour candidate to the

Conservative, a whopping 65% prefer the Liberal Democrat to the Labour candidate (and 60% prefer the Liberal Democrat to the Conservative). It transpires that on this interpretation of the results the Liberal Democrat is the most popular candidate.

Moshé argues that no system of district representative can resolve this conundrum if more than two candidates stand. Hence he opts for PR, which has the additional advantage of giving small - possibly radical left - parties hope of representation.

Moshé discusses three methods of PR. The single transferable vote electoral system of multi-member constituencies, favoured by the Liberal Democrats, which retains an element of district representation, while producing broadly proportional results. The additional member electoral system, which combines FPTP seats with representatives elected by PR so as to ensure a proportional outcome in terms of the final tally of representatives in the assembly. Under AM you therefore have two classes of MPs - those representing a constituency and those elected from a party list.

The STV and AM systems are only as proportional as the number of representatives being elected in each respective electoral unit. Take STV, with, say, a five-member constituency. Any one party or individual standing needs a sixth of the vote plus one to guarantee at least one elected representative - although fewer votes may be sufficient, depending on how the votes of smaller and larger parties divide.

The same principle goes for AM. In a region such as Glasgow, with eight proportionally elected members for the Scottish parliament, a ninth of the party list vote plus one will guarantee a representative. Again, smaller fractions may be sufficient, depending on the division of votes among other parties.

Only a party list electoral system - the third of the methods discussed by Moshé - applied across a large region or a whole country will ensure representation for parties gaining just a few percentage points of the vote - assuming that no artificial minimum barrier (often set at 5%) is applied. This is Moshé's preference. And an article by Jim Moody suggests that the CPGB leadership also backs the party list PR system.³

But for communists, elections should be about much more than measuring party votes. As the front-page headline of the Weekly Worker put it some weeks ago, we seek to "transform voting from an instrument of deception to an instrument of emancipation".⁴

The CPGB's minimum programme is intended to be genuinely transitional.⁵ The immediate demands of the Draft programme aim far higher than the demands of most of the rest of the left. For the most part, the loyalty of these groups to Trotsky's Transitional programme consists of labelling the demands raised in the course of any old reformist campaign as 'transitional'. PR might as well qualify as 'transitional' on the grounds that it has the potential to gain the left group advocating it a representative or two - and that step would supposedly be a step towards the political big time.

The democratic demands of communists should point directly towards the political structures that the working class requires to establish its political rule. It is far from clear that proportional representation meets this ambitious standard.

It is the system of soviet democracy as lauded by the Third International that for most Marxists argue will serve as the basis of political authority both in the immediate aftermath of a workers' seizure of political power and over the longer-term development of socialism (Marx's "first phase of communism") and the evolution towards communism (his "higher phase of communism").

And for most Marxists there is a sharp dichotomy between the limited nature of their present-day democratic demands - ie, PR - and their vision of working class democracy. Moshé Machover also proposes different systems of election for capitalist society and for the communist future.

This article is not the place for discussing to what extent, once the state has withered away, democracy is negated. I am focusing exclusively on the type of political structures that would sustain a workers' state and the building of socialism.

The council model

The English translation for 'soviet' is generally agreed to be councils, whether prefixed with 'workers', 'tenants', 'neighbourhood', or 'consumer'. The positive aspect of this vision of democracy is that, in appearance, it is direct and participatory. Workers or citizens (in a geographic or functional role) meeting in relatively small grassroots assemblies reach decisions about the industrial, geographic or sectoral issues which immediately affect them. They are empowered to implement these decisions.

There is no question that such bodies will play a hugely significant role in the course of any workers' revolution and in the decision-making processes that are set in place after this social transformation.

The question is whether such a system can form the basis of regional, national and supra-national assemblies. This requires a multi-tier structure. Grassroots councils elect delegates to a higher council. This second-tier council, in turn, elects delegates to a yet higher body, and so on. Eventually national, European or global councils are formed. Each council deals with the issues appropriate to its level in the hierarchy.

Stephen Shalom proposes councils at all levels comprising between 25 and 50 grassroots members or delegates. He argues that each council should be small enough to ensure all can participate in its deliberation, but big enough to ensure diversity of opinion. He calculates that 50-person councils could represent 625 million people with five levels.⁶

The strength of the council model is that it is founded on delegate democracy, where those elected take instruction from the lower council that elected them. Any council that loses confidence in its delegate - whether they conclude they have broken their mandate or simply are not competent - can recall them and elect another delegate in their place.

The problem is that the hierarchical nature of this structure attenuates democracy and, as I have argued before,⁷ eventually undermines it.

Moshé Machover has taken up this issue in an important discussion of political forms in a communist society.⁸ Moshé identifies a range of problems with the council model. It requires continual political mobilisation and activity by the majority of the population to be effective and accountable. When this falters, the democratic

credibility of the system fails.

Councils created by popular activity will not all be of the same size; some individuals will have representation in more than one council - works council, a street committee and consumer distribution council, for instance. The principle of equal suffrage will be broken.

Moshé demonstrates that mathematically the possibility of any one individual affecting the result of a decision will be much more remote than, say, in a referendum of the whole population on the issue. The influence of individuals is diluted.

Furthermore, the principle of majority rule is not sacrosanct because it is quite possible that a majority in the higher council may not reflect the majority at the base (similar to the lack of proportionality in our FPTP electoral system).

These are powerful arguments. However, Moshé does not quite touch on the key problem - his description of the dilution of democracy comes closest. The crippling flaw at the heart of the model is that, once a structure of multiple tiers is created, there is an inherent conflict between the collective, participatory nature of decision-making in each grassroots council and the absence of any effective collective mechanism for holding the layers just two or three levels above to account. The lines of accountability become too diffuse.

This fault is intrinsic to the hierarchical nature of the council model. For its proponents, each council shares responsibility for holding to account the council immediately above it. But all the citizens of a socialist democracy have to live with the outcome of the decisions made at every level of the structure. Imbued with enthusiasm for popular participation, they will want to know how they might make an impact on those decisions.

As far as the council to which they have elected a delegate is concerned, the lines of accountability are clear. You mandate your delegate, question them about their actions and, if necessary, recall them.

The problems start at the council two levels above the grassroots. No single grassroots council can swing even one vote at that level. Still, you can rely on your immediate delegate to lobby the other delegates at the council above yours and at least you know who is voting contrary to your position. You stand a chance of changing things in the future.

However, once you contemplate attempting to influence a decision three or four levels higher than the grassroots councils in which every citizen and worker is represented, the possibility of figuring out how to change the vote of just one delegate in the higher council, let alone engage in the campaigning necessary to gather support, verges on the impossible. It would be necessary to understand which delegates at the district, regional or national body were representing councils narrowly balanced between opposing views and work out, in turn, which delegates of which grassroots councils were capable of influencing the outcome.

The problem is, the council system puts in place no horizontal structures to facilitate this kind of coordination between councils.

Founded at the base on bodies created by the self-activity of the working class, a multi-tier council structure, far from promoting direct democracy, becomes entirely indirect and opaque. In

communist strategy

effect grassroots councils subcontract all responsibility for decision-making to the delegates elected to higher-level councils. There would be little point in the members of grassroots councils even discussing the activities of the higher-level councils.

Whatever might happen to the state as socialism matures, we can predict with a degree of certainty that, in a socialist polity that rested on the council model, democratic accountability would wither away. The tendency towards bureaucratisation and popular disillusion would be acute.

In practice this model has barely functioned outside of periods of intense struggle. In revolutionary Russia, three-monthly meetings of the All-Russia Congress of Soviets became annual from the end of 1918. Between July 1918 and February 1920 the central executive committee of the congress did not meet.

Councils will doubtless play an important role in the society of the future - as the struggle of the working class throws up a wide range of innovative structures - but precisely to allow participatory decisions to be made within workplaces and in local communities. It is the hierarchical nature of the model proposed for regional, national and supra-national political structures that is at fault.

Moshé proposes that a council system of five (perhaps six) levels could serve as the upper chamber in a bicameral system. Given the severity of the flaws of the multi-tier council model, I see fail to see the justification for embedding such a system in the constitution of any democratic society.

As for bicameralism, Moshé explains the service it provides to the bourgeoisie in capitalist societies as a tool for forestalling radical change. What need would a workers' state or socialist society have of such an institutional arrangement?

Commune state

What then is the model of democracy that should inform communists' democratic demands - demands designed to challenge the political supremacy of the capitalist class? And what form of election is most suited to this model? Of course, we are not in the business of writing a blueprint for a communist constitution. We do have a responsibility, though, to set out the broad principles of political decision-making and accountability for which we are fighting.

The lessons Marx drew from the all-too-brief experience of the Paris Commune of 1871 are still valuable: "The commune was formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms. The majority of its members were naturally working men ... The commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time ... From the members of the commune downwards, the public service had to be done at workmen's wages."

The latest proposed version of the CPGB's Draft programme, in commenting on a class constitution, attempts to put these principles into practice: "Supreme power in the state will be vested in a single popular assembly composed of delegates who are elected and recallable at any time. Pay of delegates will be no greater than that of the average skilled worker."

A key issue then is delegate versus representative democracy. While calling into question the multi-tier council model, it is important not to lose sight

of the form of democracy spontaneously formed grassroots councils embody - participatory and direct. Moshé Machover makes a sharp distinction between delegate and representative bodies. The lower assembly he sketches for his proposed bicameral communist constitution is a body in which 'representatives' are elected for a fixed term and are not recallable by electors between elections.

Moshé does not envisage the career politician of bourgeois ilk. He advocates frequent elections (every one or two years) and his proposed electoral system - a lottery weighted by votes received by individual candidates - is designed to ensure rapid turnover of representatives. However, if electors cannot recall representatives, the ability of electors to directly influence the outcome of proceedings in the assembly is blunted.

Of course, even the most tightly-mandated delegate has to take account of the debate in the assembly or council to which they have been elected - otherwise there would be no point in discussing anything there. They will also need to make tactical alliances with other delegates in order to come as close as possible to a decision that matches their interpretation of their mandate. To that extent that gap between delegate and representative is not necessarily huge - especially if elections are always pending. Nevertheless, a delegate is on all occasions bound by the principle that they must account for each of their actions to the people who elected them.

In addition to the direct accountability of those elected to their electors, a constitution appropriate to the rule of the working class would be governed by the following considerations (drawing again from Marx's description of the mode of operation of the Paris Commune): an assembly that combines legislative and executive functions; no overmighty executive; and delegate-representatives who do not enjoy a lifestyle superior to those they represent.

It is probably also important that a culture develops in which the roles that individuals play both in the political structure and administrative bureaucracy is rotated - to broaden the number of people who gain the necessary experience and skills and to curtail concentration of power.

What kind of electoral system might make this possible?

Moshé's weighted lottery ticks several boxes, but does not cater for recall. His proposal - explicitly for a communist society - is that in each single-member constituency a lottery should be conducted weighted by the vote received by each candidate. A candidate with 50% of the vote would have half the lottery 'tickets'; all the way down to a candidate with 2% of the vote receiving 2% of the lottery 'tickets'. The candidate with the most votes would have the greatest chance of winning, but in some constituencies a candidate with a very small number of votes would be selected.

The electoral system has the merit of ensuring pretty close proportionality. A party which consistently achieved an average of 2% of votes across, say, 200 constituencies would most likely (the laws of mathematical probability being what they are) get close to four elected members in most elections. The system also makes it very unlikely that one candidate would be repeatedly elected, however popular they were.

The fundamental drawback of the weighted lottery electoral system is that a great many electors would be

left nonplussed that the most popular candidate in their electoral district was not necessarily elected. Confusion might turn to anger if they found themselves represented by someone with minuscule support.

It goes without saying that the weighted lottery cannot cater for the recall of unpopular candidates - if its objectives of proportionality and turnover of candidates is to be achieved.

It is worth noting that Paul Cockshott has advocated uninhibited lotteries for all elected positions - an extension of the jury principle.¹⁰ It seems to me that this proposal has greater merit than weighted lottery, in that it explicitly sees political representation as a duty of all citizens. Such mechanisms may well play an increasing part in the decision-making processes of a socialist society evolving towards communism. In a capitalist society riven by class conflict or a workers' state seeking to resolve profound clashes of interest, a lottery literally leave too much to chance.

It is the elective principle that best measures the preparedness of the working class for taking power and allows the working class to express its interests through institutions such as political parties.

What then of proportional representation?

There is a glaring problem. No system of PR meets the principle of direct accountability to electors. Since the entire point of PR is give representation to those enjoying only minority support, combining this electoral system with recallability would result in electors replacing minority candidates with those more popular.

Yet this is precisely the circle that the Draft programme attempts to square. As well as calling for an assembly of recallable delegates, it proposes that "elections should be on the basis of proportional representation". Jim Moody suggests that after an election on the basis of party lists, political parties will be doing the recalling.¹¹ This entirely violates the principle of accountability to electors. We are advocating an electoral system for a working class constitution, in which electors - and by extension the working class - hand over all responsibility to a party machine. We are back to a political system in which the role of electors ends as soon as their vote is cast. What is emancipatory about that?

The CPGB's draft rules accentuate fears about the desiccated nature of working class democracy envisaged by the CPGB leadership. The rules create an over-powerful central committee subject to party members at congresses only every two or three years. The CC is the only party institution that is in a position to recall communist assembly members. Yet the CC would be held to account less frequently by the membership of the CPGB than would assembly members by electors - assuming annual elections.

Recallability on this basis would drastically weaken the influence of electors. Any communist member of the assembly inclined to respond to the views of the electorate rather than the party would presumably in pretty short order be removed and replaced with a more loyal party member. It would be a more accurate reflection of political realities, and altogether less time-consuming, if we proposed dispensing with elected members of the assembly and sent along instead a representative of each party central committee casting a weighted vote.

In fact, any system of PR - focused as it is on party representation and the

basis on which governments will be formed - tends to strengthen the power of the executive and undermine the legislative role of assemblies. It is not compatible with direct, participatory democracy.

One caveat to this conclusion. The single transferable vote in multi-seat constituencies does at least allow voters to rank the candidates presented by parties and add independents to the mix. Recallability, however, would undermine the proportionality of STV.

The role of the party is important and it will continue to make a vital contribution even in a socialist society. Parties will also provide horizontal coordination for those multi-tier council structures that do evolve. But the direct participation by the working class in political structures should be the overwhelming principle that guides a working class democracy. This means that the working class should be able to hold their delegate-representatives directly to account.

Our democratic demands should include citizens' assemblies in every electoral district with the right to summon their delegate-representatives to explain their actions and receive mandates. These assemblies should be able to trigger a new election at any time. This would be a form of collective accountability that acted as a powerful adjunct to the individual ballot. It would truly be a way of transforming voting into an instrument of emancipation.

Smaller constituencies would help make a reality of popular participation - although not to the micro-level proposed by Stephen Shalom. The elections to the Paris Commune were from arrondissements on the basis of one councillor for every 20,000 electors. That ratio would require a national assembly in Britain of over 2,000 members. Pretty big, but, remember, we are proposing that assembly members receive a skilled worker's wage and spend more time with their electors. That seems to me to be a better move than the Conservative proposal to reduce the number of MPs.

Annual election would at last fulfil all the demands of the charter. Elections are the ultimate sanction wielded by the population - even when participative structures have fallen into relative decline.

In this context, parties would be entitled to enforce party discipline. It would be appropriate for communist delegates to explain that they would follow the instructions of their party. If the party had the confidence of the working class electorate, this should present no problem. A party that encompassed a large proportion of the working class, was openly democratic and accountable to its members should succeed in gaining a majority of delegates in most bodies.

The party could propose that electors recall a communist delegate who had lost the confidence of the party (after perhaps expelling them). The party would refuse to endorse them in the next election if they insisted on standing in an independent capacity. It should, however, be the electors - taking the advice of the Communist Party as they see fit - who decide the fate of any delegate or representative.

In this way, the working class gains the confidence to rule itself and successively overcome class society, social divisions related to the division of labour, and the state form itself.

The precise electoral system is secondary to the principle of the fullest possible accountability. Some form of majoritarian system is undoubtedly

the only way of asserting the rights of the majority.

An electoral system that took account of all the preferences of all electors would avoid the concerns Moshé identifies with the alternative vote. That electoral system has a name - the 'borda count'. The Eurovision song contest is decided on the basis of such a count.

But would not such an electoral system offend most electors' sense of fairness? If, in the example we discussed earlier, the Liberal Democrat candidate was elected, despite receiving only a quarter of first-preference votes, it might well appear to most electors that the electoral system entailed some sort of fix. At best, it leads to lowest-common-denominator outcomes.

For all its drawbacks, AV is probably closest to the sort of electoral system most working class organisations use to elect their officers and committees. Historically, most soviets and councils have probably adopted systems of elections very similar to this. And the right of recall allows electors to correct any gross discrepancies between results and their wishes.

No majoritarian electoral system is going to facilitate a breakthrough by the revolutionary left and communists in current circumstances. That is obviously why most of the left are proponents of PR. Current circumstances are that the revolutionary left and communists have not established any working class base. We barely deserve to be elected. For parties that do build a working class base, no electoral system is a hindrance to gaining support. That, after all, was the experience of the Labour Party when it broke from the Liberals.

Mike Macnair has pointed out that AV does at least allow electors to vote for their preferred candidate without worrying about wasting their vote - the need for tactical voting is avoided.¹² Whether we should consequently support a 'yes' vote in a referendum on AV is a tactical consideration.

Our prime objective in the current mainstream debate around democratic issues should be to open up the debate to the questions that really touch on working class power and control.

Ultimately, the struggle for working class rule demands that the sphere of democratic decision-making - of politics - is expanded to encompass all aspects of society - economic and social. And the challenge to the capitalist state needs to tackle the state's monopoly of violence in the form of the standing army and the police force ●

Notes

1. 'The left and the 2010 general election' *Weekly Worker* May 6 2010.

2. M Machover, 'Proportional representation and Brown's opportunist ploy' *Weekly Worker* April 1 2010.

3. J Moody, 'Accountable to their party' *Weekly Worker* April 15 2010.

4. *Weekly Worker* May 6.

5. I have suggested that more clarity is required about the purpose of the immediate demands - N Rogers, 'The road to working class revolution' *Weekly Worker* April 8 2010.

6. SR Shalom, 'ParPolity: political vision for a good society', 2005: www.zcommunications.org/parpolity-political-vision-for-a-good-society-by-stephen-shalom - cited by M Machover.

7. N Rogers, 'For democratic republican self-government' *Weekly Worker* January 25 2007.

8. M Machover 'Collective decision-making and supervision in a communist society': www.zcommunications.org/collective-decision-making-and-supervision-in-a-communist-society-by-moshe-machover.

9. K Marx *The civil war in France*: www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/index.htm.

10. P Cockshott, 'Democracy or oligarchy' *Weekly Worker* October 8 2009.

11. J Moody, 'Accountable to their party' *Weekly Worker* April 15 2010.

12. M Macnair, 'Government of the people, by corruption, for the capitalists' *Weekly Worker* May 13 2010.

PCS

Socialist Party consolidates its grip

Dave Vincent reports on the conference of the civil service union

Last week's annual conference of the Public and Commercial Services union, held in Brighton, was a clear success for the Socialist Party and its allies, with delegates overwhelmingly backing the SP on just about everything.

But PCS activists and conference delegates do not in general reflect the views of the majority of members and the right is still able to challenge the left when it comes to national executive elections. This year the Democracy Alliance electoral pact between Left Unity (dominated by the Socialist Party) and the PCS Democrats retained overall control, but lost four places to the rightwing grouping, '4themembers'. Democracy Alliance candidates usually got around 115 branch nominations, as against less than 10 for 4tm, yet the latter were only 1,000 votes behind on average.

The Independent Left (breakaway from Left Unity) got around 20 branch nominations and overall came third (as usual), while non-faction independents like me, as expected, came last.

I think the reason 4tm did so well is that a significant number of our members did not want to take further strike action to defend the Civil Service Compensation Scheme redundancy agreement. National action had taken place on March 8, 9 and 24 and did not seem to have made a difference. However, since the NEC elections (and the general election) we had a surprise high court victory, which declared the outgoing government's reductions in redundancy compensation "unlawful". Deputy general secretary Hugh Lanning (addressing conference in place of general secretary Mark Serwotka, who is in hospital for tests on a possible heart problem), stated this was a vindication of the PCS fight on the political, industrial and legal fronts. He expected members will fight if the incoming government tried to get round the high court ruling.

So the gains the right wing have made seem due to temporary circumstances and members' perceptions at the time. Nevertheless, rumours that 4tm is dwindling in number and may fall apart soon seem a little optimistic judging by the NEC results.

Conference responded to the high court success by carrying a motion that authorised the leadership to seek reimbursement for pay lost during a strike called in opposition to the government's unlawful actions, although the Independent Left expressed some concern about relying on the courts.

The dominant theme of the conference was the changed situation following the formation of the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition and the need to fight the savage cuts they will seek to impose on workers (one delegate referred to this coalition as 'Con-Dom' rather than the usual 'Con-Dem' because of its aim to shaft the working class).

On to the main decisions then.

PCS is to launch a new national campaign in defence of civil and public services and to formally approach other public sector unions to seek closer coordination between them on common campaigning and joint action against spending cuts. We aim to organise demonstrations and set up town committees.

We agreed to affiliate to the Socialist Workers Party-initiated Right to Work campaign and to fight expected further attacks on our pension scheme, which the media insist on describing as "gold-plated" (un-



Conference 2010 in Brighton: SP intolerance

like the scheme enjoyed by chief executives, which is "solid gold", according to another delegate).

On pay there was no challenge to the NEC motion calling for continued attempts to get back to national collective pay bargaining across the civil service and combining with other public sector unions to fight the expected pay freeze or cuts by the coalition government. Conference carried a motion defending a dismissed activist against a background of an increase in such dismissals and other disciplinary actions against activists fighting cuts and office closures.

On standing PCS candidates in future local and parliamentary elections (and possibly supporting those of other unions with similar aims to us), the NEC won support for its very cautious motion. This gives it another year to come up with proposals ready for conference 2011 about how this would work in practice, which would then be put to an all-members ballot. Conference rejected my motion calling for the decision on selection to be made by PCS members in the constituencies concerned and not left totally to the NEC.

We agreed motions calling for a Tobin tax on stock market and banking transactions, a 10% wealth tax on millionaires and for the repeal of all anti-union laws. Conference agreed to work with groups like the Campaign Against Climate Change and Stop Climate Chaos and to support the 'million green jobs' initiative.

We took a stance against the English Defence League (and their Welsh and Scottish counterparts), making the point that trade unions need to organise the safety of anti-fascists who mount counter-demonstrations, given the violent nature of EDL supporters and that the best defence is to be found in large numbers attending.

On international issues conference agreed to call for the immediate with-

drawal of troops from Afghanistan, to support Greek workers fighting cuts and to campaign against the proposed change of law that would stop the prosecution of Israeli officials accused of war crimes (Gaza being mentioned).

The Independent Left made a very good showing, with a number of its motions getting debated. Its call for a campaign for free public transport was passed. However, its motion demanding that the salary of full-time officers be reduced to bring them more in line with our members was defeated. Although it did not specify any figure or set a deadline for its achievement, the SWP and SP voted against, despite both organisations having a clear commitment to such a position in theory. Only the IL argued in favour (I was not called to speak). One Alliance for Workers' Liberty delegate made the damning point that Militant and then the SP argue for reducing the pay of full-time union officials when the right was in control, but drop the demand (and practice) when they are at the helm.

Rightwing NEC member Rob Bryson, who was easily defeated when he challenged Mark Serwotka for general secretary, made his sole appearance on the rostrum in support of an unsuccessful motion calling for PCS to disaffiliate from Hands Off Venezuela. He is now hated by the SWP as a former member and was the only delegate booed (although he seemed to relish the reaction). When I asked him later about why he joined and then left the SWP, and why he has now moved so far to the right, there were a number of hostile glances and some critical comments directed at me for daring to be seen talking to him.

As Rob took strike action and stood on picket lines alongside other union members, I see no reason to treat him in this way. I understand the danger for PCS members if he

complete reactionaries and if there are any differences between Left Unity and PCS Democrats they are never shown publicly.

If anyone tried opposing this consensus in a serious way from the left, using, for example, arguments found in the *Weekly Worker* against half-way houses and socialism through parliament, or questioning whether the BNP is fascist, they would not be welcome. It is socialism as proclaimed and defined by the SP, and more and more activists recruited to the SP are now employed within PCS. It seems that SP delegates today can expect future PCS employment, but anyone (such as me) who dares question this patronage is accused of 'witch-hunting'.

However, I am pleased to note that the majority of delegates nowadays stay in the hall for most of the time in contrast to previously, when it was common practice to remain only for issues of particular interest or to hear expected major showdowns between right and left.

MPs John McDonnell (a warmly welcomed regular guest speaker at PCS conferences) and the Greens' Caroline Lucas (who was delighted at the PCS invite) addressed us, pledging their support for protecting public services. I imagine many trade unions affiliated to the Labour Party would invite neither.

Overall PCS is one of the better, more progressive, more democratic and more internationalist trade unions, although fighting within the limits set by the SP. Conference cheered when the Unite court victory in the BA dispute was announced and delegates donated £875 in a bucket collection.

I wonder whether this legal victory results from a realisation by the ruling class that making it impossible to take strike action, even though members have voted by 80%-90% to do so, will simply result in union members ignoring the anti-union laws, which actually make for a fairly quiet life for some union barons and are so employer-friendly.

The coalition government must know its planned attacks on workers will be resisted, but the possibility of illegal but effective action is not what they want ●

Fighting fund

Five minutes

We are on the verge of achieving our May fighting fund target of £1,250, but there are only four days to go.

Some generous donations over the last seven days have pushed us up to within touching distance - we now have £1,105, thanks mainly to a princely £265 received in standing orders, with gifts from SK, RP, DO and GD. Plus another £65 came in cheques - thank you, GK (£25), DR (£20), SL and LS (£10 each).

As I noted last week, however, we are for the moment faced with an additional £200 a month on top of our usual printing costs, which means I would be delighted if our readers could come up with that extra amount. In other words, we need £245 to make our regular target, but £445 would suit me down to the ground.

Once more, though, I've not received any contributions via PayPal over the last week. True, our readership seems to have sunk back to where we were before the general election - last week we had 15,684 online readers - but that still leaves plenty who, you would have thought, might have wanted to get out their credit card.

Well, there is still lots of time for that. Our May fund will end on Monday May 31 and it only takes five minutes maximum to donate via our website. I think we should aim for 10 comrades each contributing £10 to start with! Who's first? ●

Robbie Rix

Fill in a standing order form (back page), donate via our website, or send cheques, payable to *Weekly Worker*

See no evil, hear no evil

Ben Lewis is astounded by the PCS call for the state and employers to be granted more power over the workforce in the name of anti-fascism

It was certainly encouraging to hear the militant pledges made at last week's Public and Commercial Services union conference to rally members in defence of public services against the coalition government's 'austerity measures' and 'efficiency savings' onslaught. Watching from the visitors' gallery, however, I was disappointed to see PCS members in the department for work and pensions (DWP) and the child maintenance and enforcement commission (CMEC) vote overwhelmingly to give their state employers far more powers to investigate, monitor and sack their fellow workers.

Trade unionists voting for the bosses? Surely not. Such a move runs counter to even the most basic trade union instinct, let alone Marxist consciousness. How was it then that leading members of the Socialist Party in England and Wales and the Socialist Workers Party could enthusiastically support such a motion? As we have seen too often, when the intention is to attack the British National Party and the far right, the Marxist ABC is thrown out of the window.

The motion from Barnsley and Rotherham was moved by Keith Williams, who assured us that it was unlikely to be "contentious in this room". But some of his fellow trade unionists felt that it did not go far enough, he joked: they wanted the employers to ban the Liberal Democrats, the Tories and the Miliband brothers. The motion developed existing conference policy that "BNP membership should be incompatible with employment in the DWP and CMEC". BNP members are still being employed in these services, and some, like Frank Swaine in Hastings, even stood as BNP candidates - while PCS activists are facing management disciplinary hearings for handing out anti-BNP literature. Apparently this breaches their duty as civil servants to uphold political neutrality!

The motion correctly called for full union support for activists facing management action for handing out anti-BNP materials. Yet in addition it called on the PCS group executive committee (GEC) to "further press management to bring the DWP and CMEC rules into line with the prison service and ban BNP members from employment in CMEC and the DWP". Comrade Williams mentioned the "success" of campaigns like Love Music Hate Racism, Hope Not Hate and Unite Against Fascism. Nevertheless he admitted that the BNP's vote had actually gone up. Although the loss of council seats was a setback, the BNP would certainly not be going away any time soon. Summing up, it was a "right and a duty" of public service workers to ensure that those with unacceptable views on immigration, sexuality and religion were not employed.

Seconding the motion, North London SWPer Andy Lawson was far more hyperbolic, rolling out the sound bites typical of national organiser Martin Smith. The "Nazi BNP" had been "defeated" in what was a "huge victory" due to the hard work of activists on the ground - not least through PCS support for LMHR. The fight must be stepped up, though - did you know that the English Defence League is not only backed by a millionaire from Sweden, but "run by BNP cadres"? (Untrue, as *Weekly Worker* readers will know). The BBC's action in giving Nick Griffin a platform was "disgraceful" and comrade Lawson could not understand an employer "who does not have a problem" with employing BNP members. After all, "you cannot only be a Nazi on the weekend".

To his credit, comrade Lawson at least mentioned the "fear of banning organisations" that PCS members worried about their own jobs may feel. But his answer

was hardly reassuring: "Not only do we have to get this policy; we have to force it to be carried out." So we give the employers more power, and mobilise really hard to make sure that they use it!

Two speakers from the PCS Independent Left group argued against. Their IL caucus the previous evening had collectively agreed to oppose the motion. But it took the chair's casting vote in what was a very close call. Whereas members of the International Socialist Group and Communist Party of Great Britain cast their votes against, the Alliance for Workers' Liberty decided to abstain - presumably reflecting a failure to agree.

It was left to the CPGB's Lee Rock and the ISG's George Thompson to oppose this potentially suicidal step. Comrade Rock stressed that the BNP was no friend of the working class movement and that its ideas must be fought. However, he added, we must oppose the BNP with our own ideas and our own political alternative, not by demanding the state do it for us. Why on earth would trade unionists wish to give more power to the new welfare and pensions secretary, Iain Duncan Smith? Not only are his arch-Tory views much closer to the BNP than some might realise, but he is a leading light in a viciously anti-working class government that will be more than eager to track down what comrade Rock dubbed "hate figures on the left" who dare to speak out and organise action against the coming cuts.

Comrade Rock highlighted the obvious fact that the state is the main enemy - both in a general sense and in an immediate one. Who restrained and beat up anti-EDL protestors in Bolton? Not the EDL casuals, but armoured police! Who was threatening to put leading SWP member Weyman Bennett out of politics for many years? Not an EDL baseball bat, but the courts! Lee added that the Public Order Act of 1936 and the *Berufsverbot* in post-war West Germany - both pieces of legislation purportedly aimed against the far right - were used to hound, harass and persecute the far left. "There can be no doubt," comrade Rock concluded, "it will be used against the Socialist Party, the Socialist Workers Party and me as a member of the CPGB."

George Thompson of the ISG pointed out that the employers are already targeting and victimising reps for campaigning against the BNP - do you really think they will use more powers only against far-right organisations, as Keith Williams later argued in his reply? Comrade Thompson had already been stopped campaigning for both the Socialist Alliance and Respect by his line manager, and they would relish more

powers to meddle in the political activity of comrade Rock and himself. Not to worry though. Comrade Williams responded: "I am sure Lee is more than capable of looking after himself" if management moved against him. Cheers, comrade!

When SPEW member Katrine Williams stamped the motion with the official approval of the GEC, I could scarcely believe my ears. The BNP and other far-right groups hold views that are "offensive", she informed us - this from someone whose SPEW comrades have recently been subjected to an outrageous witch-hunt by the Unison bureaucracy (not even the employer!) on the basis of a purportedly racist and offensive 'See no evil, hear no evil' leaflet which criticised the (obviously greatly offended) Unison leadership. 'See no evil, hear no evil' well describes the touching faith our SPEW and SWP comrades have in the employers and the state.

And who is to decide what is "offensive"? It is in the nature of things that both Iain Duncan Smith and your local line manager could be offended - indeed outraged - by the notion that the exploitative state apparatus must be smashed, the people armed, etc, as much as, if not more than, they will be by idiotic, populist BNP immigrant and Muslim-baiting.

It will be a long, hard slog for our class to refashion itself into a serious political force. Watching the purportedly revolutionary left eagerly back the further empowerment of state and employer underlines just how abysmal is its grasp of democratic principle and how poor its collective memory. Where we need to fight for extreme democracy, we see calls for vetting and bans. In place of class independence, we find class collaborationism. Instead of irreconcilable opposition to the state, we find illusions in its role - as if it were a neutral arbiter upholding the 'public interest', or even could be used by the revolutionary left as a protective shield against the far right.

Of course, many of the militants who supported the motion will have done so through a desire to 'do something' about the BNP. Indeed, some of the more philistine SWP criticisms circling around conference after the debate were that the approach of comrades Rock and Thompson was tantamount to 'doing nothing'. Utterly idiotic. We do not need to do 'something': we need to do Marxism. This means opposing popular frontism, having no confidence in the state and insisting on working class independence.

A huge fight is on the cards and our class needs to build up its own strength, not call for even more powers to be vested in the class enemy ●

ben.lewis@weeklyworker.org.uk



Iain Duncan Smith: should we give him our blessing to sack workers?

What we fight for

■ Our central aim is the organisation of communists, revolutionary socialists and all politically advanced workers into a Communist Party. Without organisation the working class is nothing; with the highest form of organisation it is everything.

■ The Provisional Central Committee organises members of the Communist Party, but there exists no real Communist Party today. There are many so-called 'parties' on the left. In reality they are confessional sects. Members who disagree with the prescribed 'line' are expected to gag themselves in public. Either that or face expulsion.

■ Communists operate according to the principles of democratic centralism. Through ongoing debate we seek to achieve unity in action and a common world outlook. As long as they support agreed actions, members have the right to speak openly and form temporary or permanent factions.

■ Communists oppose the US-UK occupation of Iraq and stand against all imperialist wars but constantly strive to bring to the fore the fundamental question - ending war is bound up with ending capitalism.

■ Communists are internationalists. Everywhere we strive for the closest unity and agreement of working class and progressive parties of all countries. We oppose every manifestation of national sectionalism. It is an internationalist duty to uphold the principle, 'One state, one party'. To the extent that the European Union becomes a state then that necessitates EU-wide trade unions and a Communist Party of the EU.

■ The working class must be organised globally. Without a global Communist Party, a Communist International, the struggle against capital is weakened and lacks coordination.

■ Communists have no interest apart from the working class as a whole. They differ only in recognising the importance of Marxism as a guide to practice. That theory is no dogma, but must be constantly added to and enriched.

■ Capitalism in its ceaseless search for profit puts the future of humanity at risk. Capitalism is synonymous with war, pollution, exploitation and crisis. As a global system capitalism can only be superseded globally. All forms of nationalist socialism are reactionary and anti-working class.

■ The capitalist class will never willingly allow their wealth and power to be taken away by a parliamentary vote. They will resist using every means at their disposal. Communists favour using parliament and winning the biggest possible working class representation. But workers must be ready to make revolution - peacefully if we can, forcibly if we must.

■ Communists fight for extreme democracy in all spheres of society. Democracy must be given a social content.

■ We will use the most militant methods objective circumstances allow to achieve a federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales, a united, federal Ireland and a United States of Europe.

■ Communists favour industrial unions. Bureaucracy and class compromise must be fought and the trade unions transformed into schools for communism.

■ Communists are champions of the oppressed. Women's oppression, combating racism and chauvinism, and the struggle for peace and ecological sustainability are just as much working class questions as pay, trade union rights and demands for high-quality health, housing and education.

■ Socialism represents victory in the battle for democracy. It is the rule of the working class. Socialism is either democratic or, as with Stalin's Soviet Union, it turns into its opposite.

■ Socialism is the first stage of the worldwide transition to communism - a system which knows neither wars, exploitation, money, classes, states nor nations. Communism is general freedom and the real beginning of human history.

■ All who accept these principles are urged to join the Communist Party.

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weekly worker

A common union for all airline workers

No to the race to the bottom

Peter Manson looks at the prospects for the BA strike

It is now abundantly clear that British Airways, in its drive to cut costs, is absolutely determined not only to smash its unionised workforce, but actually to replace key sections of them. It is this that lies behind the refusal of BA chief executive Willie Walsh to accept a deal which gives him virtually all the 'savings' he had demanded from the outset.

A video produced by Unite, which can be viewed on the 'British Airways' website set up to support its British Airlines Stewards and Stewardesses Association section, features a BA manager (played by an actor) lecturing a Bassa stewardess: "We have a line of people waiting to do your jobs - and for less money".¹ This may be part of a propaganda video, but the union knows it to be true - which is why it has persuaded its cabin crew that they have no alternative but to agree to cuts in their wages and conditions.

In fact the union has trumpeted its preparedness to accept less pay. One of its posters, held up by Bassa pickets, proudly states: "We offered pay cuts" - Unite has actually agreed to them, but Walsh wants something else altogether. He knows his cost-cutting can only really have the desired effect with a different workforce. Stewards and stewardesses cannot be expected to smile at passengers and work contentedly for their employer when inside they are seething. The only long-term option Walsh has is to force out the majority, or at least important elements, of his current cabin crew and employ a largely new workforce.

That is why he has made such a big thing about what the press calls "travel perks" - highly discounted flights for cabin crew, where seats are allocated on the basis of seniority. It is not as though this costs BA money - the idea was that staff should be encouraged to take up *vacant* seats. Walsh knows that, taking advantage of these longstanding arrangements, more than 10% of stewarding staff actually live outside the UK. And this minority - which now depends on the "perk" simply to get to work - will tend to be the most set in its ways and the most reluctant to adapt to the new regime Walsh intends to impose.

Unite's advertising campaign, using selected national newspapers, has a stewardess saying: "I know airlines are in difficulties. That is why my union, Unite, has agreed to tens of millions of pounds worth of savings to help our company through hard times." But BA has responded by suspending or sacking more than 50 Bassa members, "some with over 30 years of loyal service". The advert notes that travel arrangements have been scrapped. "And we are not allowed to speak to you about any of this on pain of dismissal."

It concludes by appealing to the reader's sense of patriotism: "British Airways represents a great British tradition. But there is another great British tradition which the company doesn't get - standing up to bullies."

However, such Unite propaganda is submerged in a torrent of misinformation carried in most of the press. The only way to explain the current industrial action - this week sees the

first of three consecutive five-day strikes, which has led to the cancellation of around half of BA flights from Heathrow - is the union's bloody-mindedness. Elements of the press have been happy to repeat uncritically Walsh's ludicrous assertion that Bassa is "a small rogue branch of a trade union". According to *The Daily Telegraph*, Bassa has "taken the concept of mindless militancy to a whole new level".² In fact it is difficult to imagine a less militant bunch (in normal circumstances at any rate) than airline stewards and stewardesses.

The same press failed to criticise last week's high court ruling that the cabin crew strike was illegal because the union had not provided all members involved with the apparently vital piece of information that the massive vote for industrial action had included 11 spoilt ballot papers. Even the appeal court found this judgement so embarrassing and liable to bring 'industrial relations' law into disrepute that it promptly overturned it.

Equally absurd was the coverage of the last-minute BA-union talks on May 22. Readers will be aware that the negotiations, held at the Euston headquarters of the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service, ended in disarray, after several dozen comrades from the Socialist Workers Party invaded the Acas building. This was disingenuously linked to the fact that Derek Simpson, joint general secretary of Unite, was tweeting away on his Blackberry during the meeting.

According to the *London Evening Standard* editorial, "it seems questionable how serious Unite was about finding a resolution to the strike ... Derek Simpson was using Twitter to communicate with his supporters before and during the interruption of the talks by militant protesters."³ As for *The Daily Telegraph's* leader writer (who, by the way, found it "surprising to discover [the SWP] still exists"), he thought that tweeting updates to the public was no "different from shouting the odds out of the window".⁴

So tweets from 'Derek Simpsonjgs' during the negotiations, such as "Fear

of more sackings to come", are the equivalent of sabotage, are they? It seems they - either inadvertently or deliberately - encouraged the SWP invasion. And did you know that Simpson even had the nerve to tweet, "I am at Wembley for England match" two days later - at the very time his actions were causing such distress to passengers?

But what is wrong with union members being able to follow what their full-timers are up to at the negotiating table (even if the information has to be relayed "out of the window")? Actually, the whole thing should be fully out in the open. That way not only would Willie Walsh be exposed, but it would certainly help to hold trade union representatives to account.

However, as Unite says, "The antics of the SWP and references to tweeting are peripheral." Those "antics" (see p5) did not actually prevent a deal from being struck. That was down to the intransigence of BA on the question of the restoration of cabin crew travel rights (removed as 'punishment' for the first round of industrial action in March). As for the disciplinary action taken against strikers, it is reported that "progress" had been made on this issue - although how much the union has been prepared to concede is not yet known.

The overall picture, then, is that of Unite and its cabin crew members very reluctantly agreeing to strike in an attempt to defend their jobs, with BA looking for an excuse to dismiss them or provoke them into quitting as part of its drive to impose "regime change" - not so much on the union, as Simpson claims in one of his tweets, but on the cabin crew themselves.

That is why management has been prepared to ride out the strikes, which will cost the company £110 million if they all go ahead. This comes on top of the announcement of annual pre-tax losses for 2009-10 of £531 million. It is a huge gamble, but the BA board can see no way it will be able to compete with other carriers other than by dumping its existing workforce in order to transfer many of its

current flights to a new, low-cost, low-fare subsidiary, which would operate alongside a more upmarket branch of the company. Following the recent recession, there is huge overcapacity amongst airlines competing for holidaymakers and other travellers - problems that have been exacerbated by massive short-term losses caused by the recent volcanic dust crisis. The price war between carriers looks certain to hot up over the summer, as airlines desperately try to persuade passengers it is safe and reliable to fly.

The problems faced by these capitalist rivals are real enough, yet elements of the left insist on denying them. The *Morning Star* headline - "BA blame lies with one man" - implies it should all be put down to Willie Walsh's eccentric stubbornness rather than the logic imposed on his company by the economic downturn.⁵ But *Socialist Worker* is far worse: "Walsh is using the recession as an excuse to go on the offensive," one anonymous writer claims. Another explains: "BA says it has made a pre-tax loss of £531 million. In some areas, BA's revenue is down, but overall the company is making money. It made a net profit of £182 million in the year up until March 31 2010 - largely through gambling on the money markets. BA doesn't need to make cuts."⁶

What exactly is being said here? That BA has falsified its accounts? That there is no overcapacity caused by the recession? Whatever the intention of this foolish claim, it serves only to disarm workers, as they attempt to resist the accelerating attacks. Instead of encouraging such a blinkered approach - the equivalent of identifying one unscrupulous company in isolation from the system of capital itself - we must emphasise that BA workers cannot win in the long term unless their struggle is unified with those in other airlines.

As meagre as the wages and conditions of BA cabin crew are, they are indeed 'privileged' compared to those of the company's low-cost rivals. The instinctively sectional response of trade union bureaucrats,

having recognised that their employer cannot compete with its current relatively high wage bill, is to settle for the 'best possible deal in the current circumstances' - whose parameters are indeed limited by the union's own operating field: the single company. Unite bureaucrats like Simpson and joint general secretary Tony Woodley may rail against the 'race to the bottom', but their ability to negotiate is in the final analysis restricted by what the market dictates.

The job of communists and revolutionary socialists is to adopt a political approach. The only way to end the 'race to the bottom' is to agitate for a single set of demands across the industry - wages and conditions must be levelled up, not down. That means a winning other workers, crucially those at Heathrow and Gatwick, to respect picket lines and beyond that building a common trade union uniting all airline workers, not only in Britain but across the whole world. The airline industry is international almost by definition.

However, even this would be insufficient. Overcapacity cannot be wished away and the weakest will still go to the wall, even if it becomes impossible to undercut rivals because of trade union international organisation. It is correct to demand state subsidies and full protection or alternative jobs for workers whose companies go under. But we must also stress that what is required is an alternative political economy - that of the working class.

We do not accept that we must bow to the anarchic ravages of the market, determined by crisis-ridden capitalism's cycles of production. Social organisation must be based on production for need, democratically determined by the mass of the people ●

peter.manson@weeklyworker.org.uk

Notes

1. www.brutish-airways.com.
2. *The Daily Telegraph* May 24.
3. *London Evening Standard* May 24.
4. *The Daily Telegraph* May 24.
5. Editorial, May 24.
6. *Socialist Worker* May 29.

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