



weekly **worker**

**Steve Gillan of the POA
discusses the nature of
the prison officers' union**

- More SWP defections
- SWP 'property rights'
- Iran and workers
- Moat and women

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Tolpuddle:
humble petition or
militant action?

LETTERS



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

Studying Rita

Having read your article, 'Tip of an iceberg' (November 26 2009), I thought you might be interested in the conclusions we arrived at in 1999.

During the Vietnam war, widespread resistance inside the armies (Rita) appeared in the United States military and played a significant, though even today little known, part in the American defeat. At first it seemed that this resistance was a localised and temporary phenomenon, linked to, indeed caused by, the Vietnam war. However, it soon became apparent that quite similar resistance movements had developed inside many other militaries, although at this time these armies were not, or no longer, engaged in active warfare. Furthermore, resistance activities, including attempts at unionisation, continued in the US army after the end of the Vietnam war.

Detailed studies of such movements showed that *soldier* resistance is encountered in many, indeed most, countries above a certain threshold of capital accumulation - countries where the price and value of labour-power (wages, standard of living) is relatively high. Below this threshold, resistance, where it appeared, was initially an *officer* phenomenon, though under certain conditions it could and did spread to the soldiers (eg, Portugal, Papua New Guinea).

Countermeasures by the ruling classes of the highly capitalised countries, such as the complete or partial phasing out of conscription and the amelioration of the quality of soldier life, have reduced and altered, but not abolished, these resistance movements. In these rich countries soldier behaviour has changed quite dramatically and apparently permanently.

Even in 'poorer' nations the native ruling classes and their foreign allies can no longer count on the unthinking obedience of their armies. The successful revolt of the Papua New Guinea 'defence force' against the Sandline mercenaries in 1997, which saw the rapid politicisation of the rank and file soldiers and their subsequent alliance with the left against the Chan government, is a particularly striking example. It can be compared with similar developments in Portugal between April 1974 and November 1975.

Rita tends to be an unhappy, avoided subject for the left, however - although I personally have some difficulty in taking 'Marxists' and 'revolutionaries' seriously as long as they ignore military matters.

My personal involvement began more or less by accident. In the mid-60s I was living in Paris and was a member of PACS, the Paris American Committee to Stop the war - the war

in question being, of course, Vietnam. PACS, most definitely a middle class and mostly middle-aged organisation, had no problems in supporting the American draft-resisters and/or draft-dodgers then pullulating in France and many western European countries. There they usually lived quite legally, often as students. The draft-dodgers/resisters came almost entirely from the same or similar classes as the PACS members, though these were usually several decades older. Here there was no problem.

But *soldiers* were another matter entirely. Then, in December 1966, an American GI showed up in Paris, stating: "I don't mind burned bonzes, but I hate fried drivers" - he had no objection to Vietnamese monks burning themselves as an anti-war protest, but he, a driver, didn't want to die slowly after his petrol truck was mined. Most of the respectable PACS leaders were thrown into a tizzy. The GI, who had come from the US army in Germany, was settled in France; he was first seen as an exceptional, isolated individual, but others, many others - dozens, scores, hundreds - soon followed. Desertion (actually often absence without leave) was a becoming a mass phenomenon. In fact, according to official army figures, 432,000 American GIs deserted during the period 1964-73.

But things soon became much more complicated for the anti-war and peace movements in the USA and in Europe. As more American soldiers began to resist, and as after 1967 these resisters no longer found themselves isolated within their units, they now tended not to leave, but to stay inside and fuck the army up. They were only occasionally linked up with leftwing, or rather 'new left', organisations, but tended to do their own thing. One of these, important as an easily visible indicator, was the GI newspaper - often printed on base, sometimes with civilian help. Over 400 (American) GI papers were published during and immediately after the Vietnam war.

As the GI resistance grew, the peace movements could no longer ignore it, but relations were often complex. Many peaceniks were students, and opposed the draft. Faced with resister soldiers, most of whom had volunteered, the 'new left' students became confused. Often they attempted to impose their ideas on the GIs. They had difficulties envisaging on-base resistance and initially tried to tell the soldiers that 'Desertion is the only solution'. Struggles around bread and butter issues, such as hair length, mess-hall food or housing conditions, and above all against harassment, failed to impress the student peaceniks who spoke of imperialism and - in Europe - communism. I remember the utter confusion of a well-meaning French leftist when told by a GI activist: "Communism sucks. I live inside a communist conspiracy, the United States army, where you have no freedom, no initiative. That's

communism."

But perhaps the biggest surprises came later, as the Vietnam war wound down and - for the US army - ended in January 1973. The draft was abolished. The American peace movement faded and GI resistance diminished, as the now all-volunteer US military was reduced from its maximum of approximately 3.7 million people to about 2.1 million. Most resisters - sometimes specifically targeted and offered 'early outs' - went home.

Many had assumed that Rita was directly linked to the hated Vietnam war. It would, we assumed, disappear after the Vietnamese victory. It did not. It only changed its forms. During the middle 1970s there was a serious attempt to unionise the US army, only ended when the civilian organising union, the American Federation of Government Employees (panic-stricken by the - for them - unexpected hostility of the military and political establishment), ran away. Other forms of action also continued, though now unconnected with the left.

But another enormous surprise - quite unexpected and still almost totally unreported - was the emergence, sometimes at the same time as in America, sometimes somewhat later, of a new, modern form of Rita in the militaries of nations where there was no Vietnam war, in fact no ongoing war of any kind.

Dutch soldiers, in many ways pioneers, organised in an officially recognised conscript union, the VVDM, which in a few years utterly changed conditions inside their army. French soldiers - quite illegally - demonstrated in garrison towns in Germany and France; Italian conscripts and (volunteer, professional) NCOs marched in their thousands. In Switzerland soldiers formed committees and published their own newspapers.

Rita does not mean that soldiers will resist any and all missions, but rather if a mission is repugnant to the rank and file it can no longer be carried out unconditionally.

Max Watts
email

Fear of fascists

Mike Macnair made some valid points about the mistakes of communist policy on fighting fascism in the past, but his overall position regarding the present does not stand up to scrutiny ('Gerbils on a wheel', July 8).

Macnair argues: "The basic fact is that 'No platform for fascists' and ritual confrontation as a tactic does not work"; and "We need to challenge the view that there is only one way to deal with fascism". While no-one would deny the need to explore various means of fighting fascism, Macnair fails to offer any suggestion about what these means would consist of.

Basically, there are only two approaches: ideological or physical confrontation. In reality, the two are usually combined to one degree or another. Perhaps Macnair wants more emphasis to be given to the ideological aspect at the expense of the physical struggle - a dangerous folly in my view.

The essence of comrade Macnair's mistake is a failure to grasp that the class struggle, including the fight against fascism, is a form of warfare. In any war, two armies fight to defeat each other. This struggle may take different forms, but all wars, including class war, are made up of two ingredients: attack and defence. According to Macnair, the tactics of the working class in the struggle against fascism should be limited to self-defence. But an army which only defended and never attacked would be surely heading for defeat as the confidence and determination of the

other side grew stronger.

If Macnair were a general in a regular army, he would not be taken seriously for proposing such an approach. The argument that the left should limit its anti-fascism to self-defence is a coward's ideology, which has no place in the revolutionary movement. Macnair's policy of not confronting the fascists is reminiscent of Gerry Healy's Workers Revolutionary Party, an organisation which left the dirty work of fighting the fascists to the Socialist Workers Party in the 1970s. I am hoping that comrade Macnair will not want to lead the CPGB down this Healyite road.

Many years ago I went to a meeting of the Revolutionary Communist Group held in Clapham. There were about 15 members of the group in attendance. Two fascists appeared outside the meeting to disrupt it, and the whole meeting panicked. It was obvious to me that a fear of the fascists was deeply inculcated within this organisation. Comrade Macnair, or whoever is formulating policy on fascism in the CPGB, should take care that they do not inculcate this fear of fascism within their own ranks - a fear which always hides behind the criticism of confrontation. The ideological struggle against fascism must always be supplemented with a physical struggle.

From a strategic perspective, fascism will only be defeated by socialist state power. Until then, the war against fascism must include both defensive and offensive campaigns, which means we must be prepared to attack them whenever necessary.

Tony Clark
email

Charlatans

I disagree with Peter Manson's argument on the alternative vote electoral system ('Fight for genuine PR', July 8). Despite the fact that we recognise that bourgeois democracy is a sham, despite the fact that we recognise that we only enjoy bourgeois freedoms so long as we struggle to defend them every day, we do defend bourgeois democracy and bourgeois freedoms against attack by reactionary forces. This is because, if those reactionary forces succeed, some of the basic gains that have been made - gains that are themselves important for workers to be able to organise and to defend themselves - would be lost.

We don't defend them by sowing any illusions in workers' minds about bourgeois democracy. On the contrary, the classic example of how to defend bourgeois freedom against fascism was given by Trotsky in his *Programme of action for France*, where he argued for defence of bourgeois freedoms by setting up factory committees, peasant committees, workers' militia and so on. In other words, measures of proletarian struggle and workers' democracy.

And, of course, despite recognising that bourgeois democracy is a sham, for the reasons that Lenin set out in *Leftwing communism: an infantile disorder*, we are in favour of participation in elections and parliaments because, although we recognise that they are obsolete, the workers do not, and we have to go through these experiences with them to enable them to learn those lessons.

It makes sense then that as Marxists, whilst saying to the workers that bourgeois democracy is a sham, we also say we recognise that at the moment you don't accept what we say. We are not in a rush; we will walk with you along this road. We will keep you company, confident that, as we walk and as we discuss the things we see along the way, you will come to

agree with us. It makes sense that as part of that process we argue that this bourgeois democracy should at least meet its own standards. We should be consistent democrats.

As consistent democrats we cannot possibly support an electoral system that denies to large numbers of voters the right to have their voice heard in the corridors of bourgeois power. There is a downside to that. In a parliament of 600, a fascist party like the BNP would get 30 seats if it got 5% of the vote in a truly proportional system. That is not an argument against proportional representation; it is an argument for ensuring that the fascists are not able to win 5% of the vote.

The Liberal-Tory proposal for a referendum is a sham too. What kind of referendum is it that only allows voters to choose between two options? Even current bourgeois democracy allows as many parties as can obtain a minimum number of proposers to stand in elections. How can the Liberals put forward such a sham, and run roughshod over their own supporters with such a stitch-up, when AV is not a proportional system at all, and therefore does not meet the very criteria that Liberals have always insisted on for electoral reform? Worse still, were the vote to go in favour of AV, it would almost certainly rule out any further change in the electoral system for more than a generation, if not forever.

It's suggested that, had there been AV at the last election, it would have made little difference. The Tories would have probably got around 15 fewer seats, Liberals 15 more, and Labour a couple more. But no-one really knows because it would encourage all kinds of weird tactical voting.

Contrary to Peter's argument that voters might vote for the two major parties to keep out the BNP, the opposite is quite possible. In any election, it would make sense to try to only vote for your preferred candidate so that none of your other votes were cast for the next most likely winner. If that were not allowed, it would make sense to try to 'waste' these next preference votes. Imagine a six-way seat where Labour and Tory have similar support. A Labour voter might put Labour first, the Alliance for Workers' Liberty second, Monster Raving Loony third, BNP fourth, Liberal fifth and Tory sixth. The reason for voting in this order would not be because the AWL was their second most preferred candidate, but because they knew that they would be likely to get fewer votes than any of the remaining candidates, so voting for them second would be like wasting their second vote, ensuring it didn't go to a party that might have a chance of winning, and so on, for the remaining preferences. A Tory voter might vote in a similar way. The result would be that some of the no-hope parties get lots of second or third preference votes, not because anybody actually preferred them, but simply in order to waste their second preference votes!

I have no reason to vote for such a flawed alternative to the current flawed system. If we are to vote for an alternative voting system, then we should be able to vote on a range of voting systems so that we can choose the most democratic. I am all in favour of such a vote. I am all in favour of such a discussion on a renewal of democracy, but without such a discussion, without such a vote, I will not give credibility to such a sham referendum. In fact, the Liberal-Tories have said that they want to introduce a range of democratic reforms. Good, but we should have a wide-ranging discussion of those too. They propose to reform the House of Lords. But the most democratic reform would be to

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just abolish it altogether. Why can't we vote on that? Come to that, why can't we vote on that even greater affront to democracy - the monarchy? Why can't we vote to abolish that too?

The Liberal-Tories say they want to introduce the right of electors to recall their MPs, but they have not rushed to allow David Laws' electors that right. They say they want to introduce greater democracy over the police. Good. But why should the public not have the right to directly elect not only police chiefs, but the top civil servants, the military top brass, judges and so on? Many of those things are even enshrined in the constitution of the United States, as is that other democratic right, the right to bear arms as part of a well-regulated militia.

British democracy and political institutions developed as a hodge-podge, introduced by edict from above, ceding certain rights to wider sections of the population only as and when the ruling class believed they had sufficient power and sway over the masses to be able to control it. In other countries, their written constitutions were the product of extensive public debate and discussion. The US constitution, for all its deficiencies, was based on all of those discussions about freedom that people like Tom Paine, Jefferson, Rousseau and others conducted and wrote about. We should demand no less for a liberal and democratic bourgeois constitution in Britain in the 21st century. Whilst conceding nothing to bourgeois democracy and continuing to argue that only a direct workers' democracy can truly advance the interests of workers and the middle classes, Marxists should be at the forefront in proposing such a democratic revolution in Britain.

In fact, at the same time as organising meetings in every workplace, on every street and estate, through every trades council, every constituency Labour Party and in every town to discuss our alternatives to the Liberal-Tory cuts, why not include discussion of these elements, which could also provide alternatives? Our basic demand should be for the convocation of a constitutional convention to discuss the establishment of a British written constitution and bill of rights. It should be composed of delegates directly elected in each locality at similar conventions with each delegate firmly mandated on how they must vote. If the Liberal-Tories are serious bourgeois democrats rather than just charlatans, it is the least they should concede.

Arthur Bough
 email

Singled out

Although I agree with the general conclusion of his article, Peter Manson has seriously misunderstood the mechanics of AV. Peter writes: "... since each ballot paper will usually contain several votes ... it would be quite normal for two or more candidates to receive the votes of a majority of electors".

Each ballot paper will *not* contain several votes. The elector only has *one* vote. It's just that AV, like the single transferable vote system, allows them to indicate an order of preference as to who gets that single vote. In other words, the vote is transferable. It's still only one vote, though. And that vote will only be transferred if the elector's first-choice candidate is eliminated *after* it has been established that no candidate has a majority of first-preference votes.

Steve Cooke
 Stockton-on-Tees

Nine points

Eddie Ford correctly says that "it was always going to be the working class that would have to pay the price" for the massive financial crisis

when "catastrophe was only narrowly averted by frantic and massive state intervention" ('War on the working class', June 24). Under capitalism, there is no choice, especially with the mainstream parties needing to avoid clobbering largely middle class floating voters.

It is easy to say tax the rich and bash the bankers, and saying so is very popular at the current time. But what, other than the token £2 billion the coalition will raise from its levy on the banks, which is chicken feed compared to the £375 billion bailout, would be the consequences of doing so? Companies and rich individuals would flood overseas. It is necessary to argue for the confiscation of their assets in this country if they do that and to spread the revolution worldwide so that there is nowhere to run. Unfortunately, few revolutionary socialists make such points even if they are aware of them. And if you don't make such points, you ultimately lose the debate.

Eddie correctly points to the likelihood of a double-dip recession as a result of the cuts, and I'd add that a depression rather than merely a second dip is on the cards. He says "we need a strategy leading to an *alternative* society" (his emphasis). So what strategy does he propose? A "united Communist Party, guided by a principled Marxist programme". Well, the Campaign for a Marxist Party didn't take off at all, and the Greek Communist Party has been leading the protests there, but what has been missing in Greece is an adequate programme. That is more important than the precise form of party.

In the budget response special of the Scottish Socialist Party's newspaper, *Scottish Socialist Voice*, Raphie de Santos proposes a nine-point transitional programme. He writes: "We would take the banks under full social ownership and control - they have £560 billion in liquid cash and £5 trillion of assets. This would not only allow us to recoup the £375 billion that we have ploughed into them during the financial crisis but allow us to fund socially useful projects. An example of this would be a renewable energy programme. The design, administration, construction, maintenance, running, assembly, commissioning and servicing of the programme would create hundreds of thousands of jobs and apprenticeships for our young and old."

This sort of demand, alongside a call for closing tax havens and loopholes, is key to winning the struggle.

Stephen Wallis
 Manchester

Predators

It would be pointless to go back through the correspondence in the debate between Heather Downs and myself to argue who said what (Letters, July 8). That discussion is there in black and white and readers can read what was said.

I entered this discussion when Heather cited the case of the two 10-year-old boys charged with 'rape' and her objection to the way in which the *Weekly Worker* had reported it, charging the paper with 'liberalism' and basically being soft on sexism. Since she never at any time conceded the obscene absurdity of current 'rape' laws as applied to consensual sex between children and pre-16 teenagers, there is a clear implication that she approved of the charge in general and the application of it in this case in particular. Her last letter now suggests she does *not* support the use of the word or the law in such circumstances - in which case we agree.

However, she then goes on to quote the statistics on 'rape' and what she considers the inadequate state response to them. Need I point out that these statistics *include* all

the allegations related to those very voluntary relationships and activities between consenting teenagers and children which have been classed by the state as 'rape' and which she agrees are "foolish"? Again she doesn't differentiate between the victimless, crimeless cases of 'rape' and actual rape, again suggesting she actually *supports* the charge and the classification. How else can we read this? She is putting forward two contradictory propositions.

Let us agree that, if the law was adjusted to recognise consensual voluntary sexual relationships and games between children and teenagers before the legal age of consent, we could clear away a whole swathe of rape charges, allegations and statistics about convictions, non-convictions and cases not brought to court. There then wouldn't need to be any responses by the state to these natural and harmless activities.

Heather cannot get out of the fact that she talked about predatory sexual behaviour in the context of discussing this particular case, and that led to a deduction on my part that she considered the 10-year-olds to be sexual predators. Her last letter outlines again the case that they were.

Let me clarify that I *do* consider a 10-year-old to be capable of *actual* rather than *statutory* rape, just as I believe a 10-year-old is capable or murder. I'm not arguing that rape by a child is impossible. My objection to the current law, and what I assumed was Heather's defence of it, is that *any* sexual act between children of either or both sexes is classed as 'rape' and kids are prosecuted and tried under that absurd law. This then is mixed into the debate about rape, convictions, predatory men and "inadequate state responses to sexual violence".

It is essential in trying to take the blind emotion out of this discussion to draw a line between actual rape and some figurative 'rape'. In other words, cases need to be judged on actual events and whether force and coercion were involved rather than simply an older child being present at a voluntary activity or relationship.

I mentioned in my last letter that there is a wing of the middle class feminist movement which sees all men, and apparently boys too, as 'predatory' and virtually all heterosexual behaviour as 'sexist'. If I had to list examples of this, I'd fill the whole paper. Heterosexual men in the movement are constantly under observation for the slightest demonstration of sexism, such that most leave their sexuality outside of conferences and rallies for fear of being so condemned. Express the view that you like the way a female comrade looks, and you're likely to be struck from the movement for life as a sexist bastard. You can be a giggling transvestite in a mini-skirt with pigtails or a gay couple holding hands and snogging over the political literature, but let anyone hear a bloke say he fancies one of the women! What?

David Douglass
 South Shields

Drastic action

I agree with most of what you say in 'Marxism, nature and proposition one' (July 8) and I learned a few things too, but don't forget, we harmonise with nature in order to better master it for ourselves.

Without some drastic human action there would be no cows in the meadow, or landscape in a garden, etc. In other words, we have learned to create natural harmony for our own purposes; and we constantly experiment to reach new, more fruitful, levels of harmony so that we may better exploit it. We act within nature for ourselves and our species.

Malcolm Watts
 email

ACTION

Communist Forums

London: To be announced.

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 features 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, Tuesdays 6pm-9pm, St Martin's Community Centre, 43 Carol Street, London NW1 (Camden tube). Begins September 21.

www.radicalanthropologygroup.org.

Bring the troops home

Friday July 16, 5pm: Protest, Downing Street, London SW1. End the killing in Afghanistan.

Organised by Stop the War Coalition: 020 7801 2768.

Against cuts

Friday July 16, 7pm: Meeting to set up Stroud Coalition Against the Cuts, Old Town Hall, Stroud, Gloucestershire. Speaker: ex-MP David Drew. Open to anyone appalled by government cuts.

Organised by Stroud Constituency Labour Party: 01453 840080.

Calais migrant solidarity

Friday July 16, 8pm until late: Benefit gig, Wagon and Horses, 28 Adderley Street, Digbeth, Birmingham B9. With live music and vegan food. £4 on the door (refugees free). Organised by West Midlands No Borders: noborderswestmids@riseup.net.

Remember Tolpuddle

Friday July 16 to Sunday July 18: Festival, Tolpuddle, near Dorchester, Dorset. Seminars, talks, rally and music. With Billy Bragg, Tony Benn and many others.

Organised by the TUC: tolpuddle@tuc.org.

Images of working lives

Friday July 16 to Friday July 23 Photo exhibition: experiences of Kurdish migrants in London. RenkArt Centre, 86 Stoke Newington High Street, Stoke Newington London N16. £4 on the door (refugees free). Organised by Working Lives Research Institute, London Metropolitan University: www.workinglives.org.

The next steps

Saturday July 17, 10am - 5pm: Conference, Resource Centre, 356 Holloway Road, London N7. Campaigning to end the Gaza siege. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: info@palestinecampaign.org.

Reports from the frontline

Saturday July 17, 1pm - 6pm: Meeting, Compass Pub, 58 Penton Street (corner of Chapel Market), Angel, London N1. Sessions on 'Palestine - the freedom flotilla and the siege of Gaza', with a witness to the Israeli attack on the Mavi Marmara; and 'Cuba and Venezuela - building socialism in Latin America.' Speaker: a volunteer worker in both Cuba and Venezuela.

Organised by Rock Around the Blockade: www.ratb.org.uk.

Save our schools

Monday July 19, 1pm: Rally, followed by lobby of MPs, Westminster Central Hall, Storey's Gate, London SW1. Protest against swingeing cuts in school building and second reading of Academies Bill.

Organised by NUT and other education unions: 020 7388 6191.

Afghanistan - time to go

Monday July 26, 7pm: Meeting, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. Speakers include Joe Glenton and Caroline Lucas MP.

Organised by Stop The War Coalition: 020 7801 2768

National demo now

Monday July 26, 7pm: Meeting, Indian YMCA, 41 Fitzroy Square, London W1. 'TUC must call a national demo now - as the first step towards a one-day strike'.

Organised by the London Shop Stewards Network: 020 8522 1156.

Defend our services

Wednesday July 28, 7.30pm: Meeting, Willesden Green Library Centre, 95 High Road, Willesden, London NW1. Speakers: John McDonnell MP, Clara Osagiede (Right to Work campaign), Jerry Hicks (Unite), Ann O'Neill (Brent Mencap), BA cabin crew speaker. Chaired by Pete Firmin (CWU and president, Brent Trades Union Council).

Organised by Brent Trades Union Council: <http://brenttuc.org.uk>.

Stuff your cuts

Sunday October 3, 12 noon: Demonstration, outside Tory Party conference, central Birmingham. Protest against being made to pay to pay for a crisis we did not cause.

Organised by Right to Work: 07986 085162.

CPGB wills

Remember the CPGB and keep the struggle going. Put our party's name and address, together with the amount you wish to leave, in your will. If you need further help, do not hesitate to contact us.

SWP

Defections no answer

Peter Manson looks at the latest split from the Socialist Workers Party

In the wake of the Socialist Worker's Party's annual Marxism school, the organisation has suffered the loss of another small section of comrades. Activists from Doncaster SWP have decided to throw their lot in with former leader John Rees and his *Counterfire* group. The comrades have written to national secretary Martin Smith claiming that the entire branch has resigned.

The leadership of Martin Smith and Alex Callinicos may have thought they had seen the last of the defections to *Counterfire* following the decision of comrades Rees and Lindsey German to throw in the towel and quit the SWP in February. But there remained a thin layer of Rees sympathisers after 42 members of the Left Platform oppositional faction walked out. As the Doncaster comrades state, a number of them had "broadly sympathised" with the LP, which suffered a hammering at the SWP conference in January.

So now they too have gone - casting a somewhat different light on the recruitment, according to official claims, of 165 new members at Marxism. For the SWP it has always been a case of 'easy come, easy go', with the turnover of membership often likened to a revolving door: a large proportion of recruits never attend 'party events' or pay dues and a good number simply disappear, so lax are SWP membership criteria. So the organised defection of an active branch is much more of a loss than the fact that a few score students may have filled in a membership form at Marxism is a gain.

The Doncaster comrades note "with sadness" that after "many years of operating as loyal party members" they have concluded that the SWP is "no longer 'fit for purpose'". The decision to resign, they say, was particularly difficult, and they faced "a dilemma whether or not to leave" because of the attacks the working class is facing. But they felt they had to do so "in order to operate more effectively as socialists".

This immediately poses several questions: what is it about the SWP that makes it "no longer 'fit for purpose'" - ie, an organisation that once was, but no longer is, capable of leading the working class? What has changed so significantly? If it was able to fulfil that role previously, why did it so patently fail to do so? Finally what makes the comrades believe that they *will* be able to "operate more effectively as socialists" *outside* the SWP - specifically as part of the right-moving, movementist *Counterfire* sectlet?

Three failings

The Doncaster comrades make three kinds of criticisms. The first is for the most part a repetition of those raised by Rees *et al*: "the party" had begun to play down the importance of 'united front work'. The second takes issue with the SWP's current tactics in a couple of areas and the third, and most significant for them, relates to the lack of accountability of trade union full-timers who are SWP members.

Their "misgivings" about the SWP's perspective are those of the LP/*Counterfire*: The SWP was tardy in launching a "united front against the recession" (along the lines of the Stop the War Coalition), and for that reason "lost valuable ground" when the crisis first broke. As we have previously pointed out, this was pretty desperate stuff when it came from comrade Rees and it remains pretty desperate now. The



Martin Smith: bureaucratic centralist regime

SWP leadership at first rejected the comparison with STWC, but within weeks had launched the Right to Work campaign in any case.

Counterfire criticised RTW mainly because the SWP had not managed to persuade *enough* Labour Party and trade union leaders to speak from its platforms. Apart from that, it seems an SWP led by Rees and his close collaborator, Lindsey German, would have run RTW along similar lines. It really is scraping the barrel to suggest that the slightly earlier launch of an RTW-type grouping would have made all the difference in preparing our class for the current cuts offensive, for instance.

In reality it was always unlikely that RTW could become an organising centre of resistance to the ruling class offensive. On the one hand, the union leaderships and rank and file themselves will, sooner rather than later, organise strikes, demonstrations, days of action, etc, as the cuts start to bite. It is likely that the TUC will at least partly coordinate such events and RTW will act as mere cheerleaders for them. On the other hand, if the SWP behaves as it always has in STWC and its other 'united fronts', it will work to *prevent* RTW adopting a serious, consistent strategy to channel spontaneous resistance into a real working class political force. The SWP's *popular-front* policy has always been 'broadness at all costs' and this means it *cannot* go further than the lowest common denominator - ie, the next demonstration, the next rally-type 'conference'.

The Doncaster comrades are, however, correct to protest about the SWP's attitude to STWC in the recent period: "At times the party

has downplayed its importance, not mobilised properly for demonstrations and appeared sectarian because it has appeared our only involvement in it is to recruit around flashpoints and not sustain a durable movement."

The reason why the leadership "downplayed its importance" and failed to mobilise the entire SWP organisation as it had in the past was because in 2008-09 comrades Rees, German and Chris Nineham - the main organisers of STWC - were being or had been deposed as SWP leaders and comrade Smith was not overly keen on their claiming credit for bringing out large numbers onto the streets (in fact it is not very likely that greater SWP enthusiasm would have produced greatly increased STWC turnouts for much of that time).

The Doncaster comrades also take issue with a number of tactics adopted by the leadership. Whereas the SWP "used to be dynamic, imaginative and related brilliantly to the best fighters", now it has become "tired and formulaic" and, as a result, does not respond in the appropriate way. Its idiotic invasion of the Acas negotiations between British Airways and Unite in May is cited (although, of course, the SWP leadership itself conceded within 48 hours - in its internal *Party Notes* - that this had been an error). The comrades also complain that the leadership failed to recognise "the threat posed" by the election of the English Democrat mayor in Doncaster and "did little to give us direction".

Criticism is also directed at the SWP's specific tactics in relation to the English Defence League (although not its overall approach). The SWP is said to have been largely responsible

for "dividing the very large demo in Bolton into three smaller groups". This "left us looking smaller than we actually were and allowed the police a free rein to make mass arrests". The SWP also caused "unnecessary aggravation, which gave the media the opportunity to portray the UAF as the aggressors".

These criticisms are partially correct, but go nowhere near far enough. They completely fail to get down to the twin causes of the problem, neither of which are new: it is not that the SWP has suddenly become less "dynamic" and "imaginative", but that it remains handicapped by its programmeless dogmatism (illustrated by the claim that the BNP and EDL are "Nazi" and closely linked) and shameless opportunism, just as it was under the Rees-German leadership.

Party discipline

For the Doncaster comrades, however, "the heart of the problem" - "perhaps the catalyst for our estrangement from the party" - centres on the SWP's trade union work. Their main gripe is that members should not normally take up full-time union positions, but instead concentrate on building rank and file union organisations: "... full facility time should only be contemplated in exceptional circumstances and only on the proviso that the party closely monitors the comrade's work, which must involve the CC, the local SWP branch and the respective union fraction".

In my opinion, there ought to be no conflict in principle between seeking election as a union full-timer and promoting rank and file organisation. But the comrades are correct to stress the need for the accountability to the revolutionary organisation of union leaders at every level (including rank and file leaders). All members must work under the direction of the revolutionary organisation and it goes without saying that the leadership must make *itself* accountable to the members, not least by facilitating a healthy, democratic regime, where criticism and genuine debate are encouraged. Not that this was a feature of the state of affairs under comrades Rees and German any more than it is under comrades Smith and Callinicos.

The particular complaints of the Doncaster comrades against the local Unison full-time branch secretary was that he did not develop "the combativity and self-activity of the working class", he did not "relate to the most advanced workers" and he failed to distribute SWP material or sell *Socialist Worker*. The comrade "often acted unilaterally against branch decisions". Yet "our concerns were not taken seriously", even though his "increasing bureaucratisation" was bringing "the party into disrepute". All this resulted from "the lack of political support that the CC gave Doncaster SWP branch and Unison comrades".

What is described is certainly a serious matter. But is it a *splitting* matter? Surely a combination of the misbehaviour of an individual comrade and the failure to take action to stop it on the part of the leadership, even if the allegations are completely true, is not sufficient to demonstrate that the SWP is "unfit for purpose"?

Perhaps in the realisation that this is the case, the comrades go on to state that the full-timer's conduct is "a symptom of a wider malaise. In short, the party has lost direction." They then remind us of the behaviour of Jane Loftus, an SWP member on the executive of the Communication

Workers Union who voted against SWP policy on the CWU NEC, and of the decision to "substitute the party for Unite members and interrupt the talks between BA and Unite" - although in truth it is difficult to find much in common between the two examples.

The same applies to all the other complaints. Even if we agreed with every word of them, they still would not justify a decision to split. This is not the way to go about building a mass revolutionary party of the class. A fight needs to be had within the existing groups to combat the opportunism, bureaucracy and general lack of effectiveness of the left. The fact that no serious attempt ever seems to be made to overcome these failings internally, and no serious *theoretical* critique based on partyism is ever undertaken, indicates why all such splits are doomed to failure.

The comrades state that, since the leadership "will not change tack", to "remain as party members would compromise our integrity and leave leading socialists in Doncaster in a state of paralysis". Therefore they have embarked upon this "reluctant but essential break, which will allow us to operate as revolutionaries ... Although we now belong to a considerably smaller organisation, *Counterfire*, we think we are better placed to resist the cuts and fight war and imperialism and, therefore, bring new layers of workers towards revolutionary politics."

Well, perhaps they are sincere, but if so they are seriously mistaken. Do they believe the intention of Rees and co is to patiently work for an SWP mark two and do they really think an SWP-type formation is the answer? Or have they bought into *Counterfire*'s movementism and given up on parties even of the bureaucratic centralist kind? There is a clue in their concluding words about the SWP:

"Of course, we recognise that there are many committed comrades in the party and we wish them luck in the coming struggles. Let us maintain our integrity, respect our differences and, in a non-sectarian way, develop the struggle for a better world. In the words of Trotsky: let us 'march separately but strike together'."

The "non-sectarian" phrases provide the cover for an abysmal retreat. What happened to the need for a single revolutionary party, to which they, along with the rest of the SWP, were once formally committed? Now it is sufficient for all "committed comrades" to "struggle for a better world" in whatever way we see fit. Of course, neither the *Counterfire* comrades nor virtually anyone active in the SWP is "committed" to genuine partyism, where differences are not just respected, but openly and publicly expressed *within* the party and where all revolutionary socialist and communist trends can unite.

It goes without saying that the action of the Doncaster comrades in its own small way represents yet another setback to the fight for the Marxist party that alone could not just resist the coming attacks, but begin to lead our class onto the offensive ●

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Notes

1. Their letter is reproduced on the *A very public sociologist* blog: <http://averypublicsociologist.blogspot.com/2010/07/doncaster-swp-why-we-resigned.html>.

Keep off our turf

James Turley critiques the SWP's proprietorial culture



'New layers' of naive youngsters

It has become common in daily life for capitalism to restrict people's access to communal space - indeed, this is one of the oldest features of capitalism, which was built in Britain at least off the back of the enclosure acts, which created the proletariat through denying peasants access to the commons.

Today that process continues, albeit in the urban sphere - many leftwing activists trying to sell papers and distribute leaflets in city centres are harassed by police officers and private security guards keen to ensure activities on 'their' turf are restricted to approved consumerism. Those planning demonstrations have to give prior notice and the police have to agree the route. Teenagers who commit the crime of hanging around in a shopping precinct after trading hours are regularly moved on by the police. Democracy Village protesters still occupying Parliament Square face eviction by Boris Johnson and the Greater London Authority if they lose their legal appeal at the end of this week.

In bourgeois society, where legal ownership confers numerous other rights, this is perfectly unsurprising. The point of ownership is control - so a building owned or rented by a capitalist will be organised according to the needs of capital. That means uniformed guards to deal not only with genuine breaches of security, but to keep the floor free of 'foreign bodies' that may interfere with the money-making operations.

Unfortunately, this is also apparently the culture of the Socialist Workers Party. As reported in this paper last week (July 8), CPGB comrade Zuri Zurowski fell foul of the same kind of mind-set at the SWP's annual 'festival of ideas', Marxism. He was confronted by an abusive, screaming and threatening, officially T-shirted SWP steward while leafleting for our fringe meeting on fascism. The incident took place outside a Marxism session where Martin Smith was due to talk about the fascist English Defence League. This is *our* building, our comrade was told; we booked it, and if you want to leaflet, you will have to do so outside.

In fact, this behaviour compares unfavourably with bourgeois society - after all, should a *Socialist Worker* seller in a shopping centre be confronted by

a jobsworth cop or security guard, it is more likely they will be *politely* asked to move on, rather than being told that they are going to get their head ripped off. Ditto club bouncers. They now have to undergo 30 hours of compulsory training, learning how to defuse potentially violent situations as well as the gentle art of restraining without injury.

For good reason - wilfully antagonising someone may escalate things, when the aim should be to calm the situation down and resolve matters peacefully. Quite apart from being an affront to democracy, the attitude of this SWP comrade represents incompetent stewarding - his threats may well have been empty (comrade Zurowski's head remains attached to his body), but that does not mean they could not have provoked just the sort of problem that stewards are supposed to be there to prevent.

It is easy enough to draw comparisons with far-left groups past who relied on physical force in dealing with their competitors. The most infamous advocate of such activities on the British left was the Trotskyist Gerry Healy, whose organisations always tended to act like millenarian cults and treated other left groups with the visceral contempt more classically associated with Stalinist slurs against Trotsky. Indeed, as a Young Communist League member in the 1930s, Healy learned from the best on this score.

Yet this is not simply a function of the well-documented sectarianism of the far left, but a carbon copy of the culture of the labour bureaucracy. In 2005, Walter Wolfgang - a veteran leftwing and anti-war campaigner, aged 82 at the time - was physically removed from the Labour Party conference floor after shouting a single word - "Nonsense!" - during a speech by Blairite hatchet-man Jack Straw. Straw was offering up the usual mendacious defences of Britain's mission in Iraq. Because he dared to dissent from this garbage, the world's TV cameras were treated to the spectacle of several burly stewards dragging an octogenarian activist to the door. Upon attempting to re-enter the conference later that day, Wolfgang was briefly held by the police - under (what else?) anti-terror legislation.

It all makes perfect sense for the labour bureaucracy. Its whole basis

is its function: to act as a buffer between capital and labour, exacting concessions from the bourgeoisie in return for pliancy from the working class. Its methods follow from that role. From dodgy back-room pay deals to administering the state in the interests of capitalism, the labour bureaucracy thrives when it is insulated from pressure from below. The whole history of the Labour Party is one of periodic purges of dissident members (particularly those associated with Trotskyism), and the most recent is the most prolonged and thoroughgoing on record.

Against this, communists argue for democracy in our movement. Democratic mechanisms are our main weapon against the corruption of our leaders and our goals - they do not solve everything, but, combined with a culture of criticism among the membership at large, they may be used to hold powerful individuals to account and replace them if necessary. We want Jack Straw to get heckled and exposed as a class traitor; and we want every labour bureaucrat brought under democratic control from below. For that to happen, however, we need our voices to be heard in the first place.

The SWP's internal culture corresponds alarmingly to that of the labour bureaucracy. This is perfectly clear from the whole Marxism weekend, not just the unsavoury experience of comrade Zuri. Members of an array of different political groups attend the festival, but are greeted in the manner of leeches and parasites (rather like entryists in the Labour Party). The 'debates' are largely engineered through the speaker slip system, which means unacceptable criticisms are weeded out. Alternatively a member of another left group is set up to be condemned by a series of SWP loyalists parroting the prescribed line in breathless tones.

Whether the SWP can continue to get away with this kind of culture is another matter. The organisation, despite displaying its usual bravado, is reeling from a series of political blunders over several years. First came the split in Respect, which lost it most of its remaining allies among the wider left; then came endless internal ructions, centred around former leader John Rees.

Rees's name was synonymous with

the Respect venture, after all. Rees and George Galloway, then still an MP, were inseparable in public, and it was Rees who carried the can for the appalling way the SWP managed the split. He was widely reviled by the SWP rank and file. By any conceivable measure, he was unfit to serve on any central committee.

The CC behaved in the usual way, though - it attempted to lop off Rees and his closest allies as cleanly as possible. Neither side of the dispute, to be sure, had any interest in discussing the political failures behind the Respect disaster, since all were implicated. There has yet to be a serious accounting for the whole popular frontist episode.

The leadership did not get its way completely, however. Internal pre-conference bulletins published before the January 2009 conference revealed widespread discontent with the party regime, and even with aspects of its strategy - prolonged 'united front' work with any and all allies, typically on an issue by issue basis. As a result, a 'democracy commission' was set up, whose emptiness was revealed spectacularly when, not satisfied with edging him out of the CC, the SWP leadership decided to provoke a full split with comrade Rees and his allies. The 2009-10 pre-conference period - astonishingly, the *only* time that SWP comrades have any opportunity to openly critique the actions, views and perspectives of the leadership in any meaningful way - saw another wave of grumbles, as the SWP apparat and comrade Rees's Left Platform were clearly heading for a split.

The split produced, around the exiled minority, a media-centric left operation in the form of *Counterfire*. But the problems have continued. The SWP's economic 'united front' - Right to Work - had no sooner held a major conference than it destroyed its own reputation, when a hundred SWP/RTW activists invaded the Acas talks over the BA cabin crew dispute in an utterly childish and anarchistic fashion (not many anarchists would be so silly, in truth).

Now, the Doncaster branch - always, according to their split document, closer to Rees - have resigned *en masse*. They cite the directionless character of the SWP's union work, in particular their failure to hold the SWP's union officials to account. No

sooner is a debate stitched up than a new row erupts - and increasingly, these rows end in splits.

Demographically speaking, the SWP has historically dealt with this problem by roping in 'new layers' of naive youngsters, who - efficiently managed by a full-timer - can be relied upon for loyalty for a few years at least. But SWP leaders are caught in a genuine bind. They treat the organisation as their personal property; the problem is that it is more or less an accurate assessment. By maintaining bureaucratic organisational norms and opportunist political priorities, the leadership comes into possession of the party structures. It regulates communication between factions and branches. It is their shop, and if you don't like it, you can leave and try another.

The SWP's project, however, remains a revolutionary one in the broadest terms - they wish, one way or another, to place the working class in charge of the world and remake it into a communist society. Moreover, there is the group's founding myth - *only* by rejecting Trotsky's theory of degenerated and deformed workers' states (ie, that the socialised property of the Stalinist regimes was itself a stamp of working class rule, however corrupted by the bureaucratic ruling caste) could founder-guru Tony Cliff produce a socialism that was genuinely a 'socialism from below', of mass action and democracy.

My point is not to argue with Cliff's conclusions on all this (many are, of course, arguable), but simply to point out that there is a contradiction inherent in any organisation that argues for socialism 'from below', through one or another form of workers' democracy, but uses the technical-organisational norms of the labour bureaucracy to pursue this project. Either the bureaucratic machine, and the leadership's monopoly over information, must be destroyed; or the political errors will simply multiply. Treating other left voices as comrades in a common struggle, rather than dangerous parasites, and engaging in the battle of ideas without threatening to turn it into a literal bloodbath - that would be a good start ●

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INTERVIEW

We don't make the laws. We do a job

Steve Gillan, new general secretary of the prison officers' union, the POA, wrote to the CPGB in response to Eddie Ford's article last week. Mark Fischer spoke to him

Could you tell us something about your political and trade union background?

I joined the prison service some 20 years ago. I was actually looking for a secure job. My employment was erratic prior to this, I had a young family and felt I needed something secure. Something that provided a long-term future for them. I also wanted to work in the public sector - it was a way to give something back to society.

So I started in HMP Chelmsford and I very quickly became a branch official. I suppose coming from a town like Greenock in Scotland meant that my roots were steeped in trade unionism. My grandfather, my uncles and my father himself all worked in the shipyards. There was a very strong union backdrop to my upbringing - the Clydeside and its history. I believe every worker has a basic right to join a union and to be treated with respect as a worker. Trade unions are about winning and keeping that respect for workers.

As I say, I was a branch official early on in Chelmsford and I soon became assistant secretary at national level for the POA. Then I was national vice-chairman for four or five years, afterwards the finance office of the union for a similar period and finally general secretary.

As to my political background, I've voted Labour all my life. That was the tradition in Scotland; it was what I was brought up with. I'm a Labour Party member - but I'm not now, nor have I ever been, *New Labour*. I'm old Labour, if such a thing exists. *New Labour* has done nothing good for working men and women in Britain. I have to say, I actually struggled this time round to vote for Labour. I was deeply dissatisfied with the Blair-Brown mantra, the way they dealt with the Iraq war, or why young men and women are being sent to die in Afghanistan - a war probably to do with money and oil rather than any notion of 'democracy'.

But, when it came to it, my roots wouldn't allow me to vote anything other than Labour, although there isn't a flag paper between the policies of *New Labour* and the Tories, when all said and done. They share the love affair with the private sector, with the private finance initiative to fund schools, hospitals and prisons.

It's interesting, isn't it? People don't generally want to talk about prisons in the same breath as our education system, the national health service, housing and so on. But why not? After all, it's the taxpayer that funds it. So a hospital, or a school or a prison should be equally important to the taxpayer because they are *paying* for it - they should have as much interest in the penal system as they have in the education system. They should want to know what's going on, there should be scrutiny and transparency.

For instance, I think the general public should be concerned and want to know why we are holding 86,000 prisoners in this country - something I think is obviously wrong.



Here you might see a parallel between what I'm saying and what Ken Clarke has said. But that's not accurate. What Clarke was effectively saying was that the onus must be shifting away from the state to the private sector. I still agree with what Jack Straw said prior to 1997, before Labour coming to power - back then, he, Prescott and Blair all said that privatisation of prisons was *morally repugnant*. Yet *New Labour* in government opened more private prisons than the Tories.

Now, listening to my views, some people might think this odd. Here I am talking about old Labour, I head a trade union that has taken militant strike action over the past few years, in defiance of court injunctions. Yet the POA is composed of people that some might simply describe as officers of the state. Well, I think every worker has a fundamental right to join a trade union simply by dint of being a worker. So I believe that a policeperson has the right to join a trade union. A British soldier - should they have that right? Of course they should. Trade unions are basic organisations for the defence of workers' right. Perhaps if people in the army and police were in proper trade unions - let's leave aside the Police Federation for the time being - then things would be very different for them.

Trade unions in the army would not only fight for better conditions for the rank and file soldiers: they would be able to question, as a collective organisation of soldiers, why we are actually at war in Afghanistan in the first place, for example.

You've obviously touched on something important here; something that causes some controversy on the left. Let me put it bluntly. Bus drivers wear uniforms and go off to work every day to earn their wages. Prison officers also wear uniforms and go in to graft for their daily bread. You ain't exactly bus drivers, though, are you ...?

No, absolutely correct! We're not the

same in that sense. But I wrote to you because of this section in the Eddie Ford article in last week's *Weekly Worker*, which I take objection to. Let me quote it:

"We cannot simply treat the POA like any other trade union - purely as 'workers in uniform' just like any other section of the working class - and thus accord the POA the status of a 'normal' trade union, no different from the National Union of Mineworkers or the National Union of Teachers. This, of course, is the economist and rightist position of SPEW and the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain, which in the eventuality of any POA strike action will automatically - and routinely - support it, as they would any other strike action by any other union."

"The plain fact of the matter is that POA members are responsible for the daily, direct, physical oppression of the most downtrodden section of the working class - a section which has increased in numbers with each month and year that has gone by."

From my point of view that is simplistic and I don't view our role as such. Look, we as prison officers try our best, under the most difficult of circumstances, to *rehabilitate* prisoners. Personally, I'm proud of the things I have done in that context. The problems you were referring to are very much of the past when there were too many bad apples. Of course, we still have those - but that's no different from any other occupation, like teachers, doctors or even MPs. But I see our job as helping to rehabilitate the people we look after, not 'physically oppress' them. These people are locked up by the courts - we don't arbitrarily pick them up off the streets. Society decides that they will be imprisoned; society has its rules. We have no control over that.

What this trade union is saying is that there needs to be a root and branch examination of the whole criminal justice system. Those members of our society who end up in prison represent a *failure* of our society as a whole, not simply the people who might turn the

key at night.

Alcohol abuse, drug abuse, mental health problems, plus poverty and social alienation. Until we start to address these sorts of problems in a fundamental way, we are not going to be looking seriously at the causes of crime.

It's easy for Ken Clarke to come along and talk about a "rehabilitation revolution" - at the same time they're cutting the budgets for probation and other related services. It's fantasy, pure fantasy. If they really wanted that 'revolution', then they would be seriously addressing the social causes of crime.

OK, so you often deal with the products of our 'broken society', but not only them ...

Oddly enough, I've just come back from the Durham miners' gala - Durham prison actually had a lot of miners locked up in the strike ...

Exactly my point. We're talking about a situation looming in this country where there will be a rise in working people's struggles. You talk about the anti-trade union laws and the repressive legislation against working class organisation. Yet you could be in the position in the not too distant future of turning the key on activists and militants who have fallen foul of those laws. Again, this does say something about the 'duality' of prison officers - workers and trade unionists, but ...

I can see that. There will be those in the movement that look at us with suspicion, that are unsure about our reliability as comrades, if you like. I would simply say, it's not us that make the rules. We don't make the laws. We do a job. First, to protect the public; second, to rehabilitate those that need it.

Take the PCS. They have members in the dole offices, in the tax offices, in the immigration services, etc. That doesn't stop them being workers or trade unionists. It doesn't make them enemies.

True, when we turn up at some trade union forums and conferences, we get a degree of hostility. I can understand that. (And by the way, sometimes we get hostility because we've been *too* militant. For the last two years, we've called for a general strike against anti-union laws - that's earned us some dirty looks as well!). But we actually need some fighting unity in our ranks, given the struggle we have coming up.

No-one ever reports the good things prison officers do - and we used to have more time to do these sorts of things when the prison population was just 40-odd thousand. This was one true thing Ken Clarke did point to. No-one ever talks about the prison officer who sits in a kid's cell and talks him out of self-harm or suicide. I can bring to mind thousands of cases when an officer has stayed after work to undertake that sort of care of prisoners. You get an instinct for it. It's part of the job that is not recognised by the wider public, yet is goes on all the time.

We are not rightwing skinhead boot boys, covered in tattoos, people who

failed to get into the police - that's a parody of the truth.

A part of rehabilitation has to be a huge expansion of prisoners' rights, surely? It's not simply a question of a Mr Barrowclough on your wing as opposed to a Mr Mackay, if we can put it in Porridge terms. We are trying to integrate people back into a society they feel part of and have a stake in. What's the attitude of the POA to prisoners' rights - work at trade union rates, the right to vote, etc?

The political climate at the moment makes it hard to come out with a positive agenda like this. Of course, it is appalling when someone says we should bang people up and throw away the key. If you take away hope from people, the prisons become hellholes for prisoners and officers alike.

Should prisoners get the vote? I don't think that's really for me to pass a comment on. Parliament says no. The majority of the public would say no, I guess. Until that changes, we just implement the rules. Although organising ballot boxes in prisons would be a bit of nightmare!

There is a tendency to see prison as something alien. It's not. It's like the way the rightwing media brand prisons as 'breeding grounds for terrorists' as far as Muslims are concerned. No, prisons don't make young men and women from a Muslim background turn to terrorism - *society* does that. Prison simply reflects the wider reality.

You've been at pains to emphasise the trade union credentials of the POA, which is fair enough. But, given the sections of society you deal with, the job you do, a narrow approach to what constitutes a 'trade union issue' for the POA - just pay, conditions, etc - can lead you in quite reactionary directions.

That's precisely why our union calls for a thorough overhaul of the way our society deals with drugs, for example.

As a prison officer I was appalled when they effectively legalised cannabis. I have seen the effects on people's lives and families that addiction to this 'soft' drug has had. The same with alcohol. But then there's the problem of prohibition - do that and you simply hand a huge, lucrative industry over to gangsters. So, until we start addressing these questions rationally, we will have the ongoing problems of society reflected in the criminal justice system.

I think you're right - the POA should have a leading voice in the overhaul of the system, as it's our members who are working at the 'coalface'. Take the irrationality of the fact that we are stopping building schools, but there are more PFI prisons in the pipeline. Educate our kids better, give them some hope and a future, then perhaps we wouldn't need as many prisons.

It's time for a rethink, we say ●

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OPPRESSION

Moat's paranoia and the community of women

Communists fight to reassert the power of women, writes **Eddie Ford**

The unhappy circumstances surrounding the life, manhunt and death of Raoul Moat tell us a lot about our society, especially about the subordinate position of women within capitalism and class society in general.

Of course, with the 37-year-old Moat - who apparently shot himself after taser weapons were fired at him by police - a picture emerges of a violent man riven by profound jealousy and chronic personal insecurity. Addicted to steroids - as a consequence of his fanatical body-building regime - and prone to "unpredictable" outbursts of anger, he had been imprisoned for a "low-level assault" on a relative. Moat had extensive links with Newcastle's criminal fraternity and was "well known" to the police, who had accumulated a "significant amount" of information on him. He has been described as a "paranoid Narcissist" and this extreme paranoia took the form of installing 26 hidden CCTV cameras in his back garden - with a close neighbour saying that Moat was "sick of the police", who he believed to be persecuting him.

Moat's shooting spree appears to have been triggered by remarks made by his former girlfriend, Samantha Stobbart, who told him that she had left him for a police officer - which, as it happened, was untrue: rather Stobbart said this in an understandable but misjudged bid to scare Moat off. Immediately upon his release, the police received a warning from Durham prison that Moat might well be planning to cause "serious harm" to Stobbart - with whom he had a three-year-old daughter. After finding Stobbart at her parents' house in Gateshead, Moat fired a shot through the lounge window and hit her in the arm - though she is now in a "stable" condition. Her boyfriend was less lucky and was killed instantly when he ran outside the house to confront the attacker.

Raoul Moat's assorted letters, phone calls and Facebook posts reveal a man full of pent-up rage against his former girlfriend and new partner - policeman or no policeman. On Facebook he wrote: "Just got out of jail, I've lost everything - my business, my property - and to top it all off my lass of six years has gone off with someone else. I'm not 21 and I can't rebuild my life. Watch and see what happens." And in his phone calls to the police he declared that they were "going to pay for what they've done to me and Sam", and went on to say he had "never cheated on her" - he just wished "she hadn't on me". For Moat the fact that she had "cheated" by leaving him for another man meant that "she pulled the trigger by doing so just as much as me".

As we can see, Moat treated his former girlfriend as some form of private property. When she found another partner, he felt he had been *robbed* - as if someone had stolen a prized possession of his, like a car. Hence he felt obliged, and perversely empowered, to punish those transgressors whom he believed responsible for this humiliation - Stobbart's boyfriend, Chris Brown, and his imagined 'accomplice',



Bonds of community broken

PC David Rathband. From Moat's perspective, it appears, he was just 'upholding the law' - the social law, that is, which grants men the right to lord it over women: to dominate and subjugate, politically, economically and sexually.

Moat's behaviour reflects, of course, a much wider attitude, and points to the role broadly assigned to women - maybe idealised and put on a romantic pedestal, but in reality still often treated as second-class or inferior citizens. Hardly equal members of society. After all, up until 1991 there could not be rape within marriage according to English law and it took until 2003 for the law to be further clarified, when consent was given some sort of proper legal definition in England and Wales. And previous to that, in relatively recent history, a woman's property and goods automatically became the property of her husband upon marriage - legalised extortion, in other words.

Today's society is incredibly atomised, as the remorseless logic of capitalism - in the constant drive for profits - eats away at all the bonds and ties of communality, of shared experience and solidarity. We feel powerless against such blind forces. But this is doubly so for women, who if they lose their male partner or husband can so easily find themselves in a frighteningly precarious position - struggling against the odds to bring up the kids, a not inexpensive activity, whilst trying to pay the mortgage

or rent, and all the rest. To further increase the sense of isolation and powerlessness, there is the distinct possibility - thanks to the irrational and wasteful demands of the capitalist economy and housing market - that close relatives, like her mother or sisters, may live hundreds or even thousands of miles away. Leading, of course, to the unenviable situation of either total reliance on state benefits - making you constantly vulnerable to the arbitrary caprice of the state bureaucracy - or working like a slave just to keep your head above water, hardly ever having quality time with the children in the process. Only to lose your job or have your benefit(s) slashed by a government hell-bent on an austerity drive, plunging you into penury and desperation.

One response to the Moat case, and domestic violence in general, is to call upon the state to introduce ever more draconian legislation - earlier state intervention into more and more spheres of personal and domestic life. This is certainly the approach of many radical feminists and their co-thinkers in the bourgeois state machine. However, communists think this is a profoundly mistaken way to tackle the problem. Rather we have a twofold approach. Social security and other such benefit payments must be significantly increased, not cut; the minimum wage must also be increased from its present miserable level; housing must be provided according to need; and working hours

reduced to a maximum 35-hour week. Such measures would help women in particular. However, in the long term we seek to reorganise the whole way of life and the way things have been organised for thousands of years.

Essentially, yes, Moat's basic attitude to women can be found over a whole number of different societies - viewing women as private property, goods to be haggled and fought over. But it was not always like that, though you could be forgiven for thinking so, in view of the sheer weight of cultural prejudice. This takes as a given that men have always wielded the club and held the upper hand and sees the macho 'stone age man' carting enormous Mastodon cutlets back home to the cave, with the womenfolk acting as passive, if not unseen, participants in the drama.

But this is all ahistorical nonsense, a complete reactionary fantasy. The anthropology of fools. Instead, the oppression of women is due to the historic defeat of the female sex with the Neolithic counterrevolution or the so-called 'farming revolution' - which saw women *dispossessed* by increasingly wealthy cattle-owning men; who as a logical political-economic correlation began to view women as a mere *extension* of their cattle.

Yet prior to this anti-women, class-driven counterrevolution, the so-called primitive societies were egalitarian, classless, matrilineal-led communities - where women were truly respected

and played a leading role. Indeed, in these supposedly primitive societies it was the *men* who entered into the women's household upon marriage and not the other way round - the operative relational principle being 'bride service', which sees the man (or potential groom) providing supplies or other services for his wife's family in order to prove his worth. If he was later deemed unworthy, or abusive, then the wife, supported by her many relations, would tell the man to pick up his blanket and scudoo. Any children they might have had together would, of course, be looked after by the whole extended family and would suffer no want or stigma. Such was life in the matrilineal-communist household of the past, the original affluent society.

In other words, the opposite of the patrilineal concept of 'bride price' - which is when the crap began. This system would see a rich man giving, say, 50 cattle to his bride's father in return for her. The result being that he could accumulate four or five wives and in any domestic dispute it was the woman who had to knuckle under and obey his dictates. Her father being unlikely to welcome his daughter home if that meant he had to hand back 50 cattle. Needless to say, while women became the first oppressed class, the mass of men thought that they benefited from this counterrevolution. Though most were lucky to get just one wife, she was his property and had to do as he said. And, of course, any woman who did not accept this grossly unequal arrangement - who rebelled against the patrilineal order - would be literally putting her life on the line. Not totally unlike Samantha Stobbart, you could say, or other contemporary victims of domestic violence.

The patriarchal attitudes that come with 'bride price' are in many ways on the retreat, given the democratic and social advances we have seen over the last 40 or 50 years. However, the crippling and disempowering atomisation of present-day society calls out for the real re-establishment of community. It hardly needs saying - not David Cameron's 'big society', but the community envisaged by Marx and Engels. They regarded so-called primitive, Palaeolithic societies as a source of inspiration, a model for the future. Not in some utopian or backward-looking way, but because they sought to *reassert* the power of women - the "community of women", as the *Communist manifesto* famously puts it, which "has existed almost from time immemorial": and which in a new form will "do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production".

Just like Marx and Engels, communists today fight for a revival - albeit on a higher and more advanced level - of the "liberty, equality and fraternity" of the 'primitive' peoples, our revolutionary ancestors. We do so because of our conviction that we humans are a revolutionary species and that the communist household, and society, offers a superior and genuinely moral alternative to capitalism ●

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WORKERS' RIGHTS

Humble petition or militant action?

There are two sides to Tolpuddle, argues Mike Macnair

Every year around this time there is a festival and march organised by the Trade Union Congress at Tolpuddle, Dorset, to commemorate the Tolpuddle Martyrs. The martyrs were six men - George Loveless and his brother James, James Hammett, James Brine, Thomas Standfield and his son John - who were convicted in 1834 of "administering an unlawful oath" - ie, attempting to form a branch of an agricultural labourers' union - and sentenced to transportation to Australia. Within two years a mass campaign had secured their pardon and their release. This year's festival is taking place over the coming weekend, July 16-18, with the march on Sunday at 2pm.

Remembering the Tolpuddle Martyrs and the long history of the struggle for legal trade unions is important to the workers' movement in any year. This year it is particularly appropriate: recent months have seen a series of abuses of judicial power to stop strikes, and sections of the Tory-Lib Dem government and the Tory press are flying kites about yet more restrictions on strikes and on trade union political action. Workers' right to organise, limited as it is, has been fought for and won against the opposition of the capitalist class over centuries. It should not be taken for granted.

The story of the Tolpuddle Martyrs is also pertinent today, because it is a story about what happened after the 1824 repeal of the Combination Acts and along with them a whole raft of medieval and more recent anti-union laws. What happened in the Tolpuddle case was - like many more recent cases - the abuse of judicial power to circumvent the parliamentary legislation by straining the interpretation of older law.

There is, however, another side of Tolpuddle. This side is about *who* is remembered, why and how. The Tolpuddle Martyrs were far from being the only trade unionists victimised under 19th century anti-union laws. They were not even the only trade unionists whose victimisation was in the end defeated after solidarity campaigning, whether by jury verdict, pardon or otherwise.

However, the martyrs seem distinctive in another way. The standard history represents them as a *respectable* group: southern rural workers, not northern urban workers; Methodists (including two lay readers), not Chartists. The TUC's flyer for the event represents it as a "commemoration of the moral power of the working class".² The underlying narrative on offer is one of the progress of trade unionism through peaceful protest and lobbying. The annual festival is thus not just a festival of trade unionism: it is a festival of Fabianism and Labourite ideology.³

This narrative is attractive. Unfortunately, it is false. Major concessions to the working class in this country have not come about by polite lobbying and being helpful to the employers. They have come about - in the 1820s, 1840s-50s, 1870s, after World War I and II, - because the capitalist class were put in fear of something much worse than making the concessions: of real threats to their power.

When the capitalists cease to be afraid of the working class, they cease



to make concessions and begin to take them back. The Fabian-Labourite policy of legalism, lobbying and 'realism' has given us ... Thatcher's anti-union laws, the trade union defeats of 1980s, and Blairite 'New Labour' subservience to the City, with its inevitable end in today's Con-Lib coalition and the promise of a new round of anti-union laws.

Anti-union lawyers

The last few weeks have been marked by significant kite-flying in favour of more extended anti-strike laws from a section of the Tories and their press, and by the employers' organisation, the Confederation of British Industry. The proposal being touted is to bring in a minimum threshold in strike ballots: ie, that no strike should be legal unless 40% of those eligible to vote in a strike ballot support it.⁴ This proposal involves strikingly obvious double standards: if the test were applied to the formation of governments, few in the last 50 years would be considered to have a mandate at all.

Alongside this proposal is another double-standards offensive. For some time the employers have been attacking strike ballots over small

technical errors. Where the margin in the vote was small, the unions have usually simply pulled the action or rerun the ballot (at, it should be noted, considerable expense).

Double standards are involved for three reasons. First, on the standard applied, the recent UK general election would be rendered void by the errors which led to some voters being disenfranchised on May 6. Secondly, under the *Re Duomatic* principle, companies (ie, the employers; but equally, from the point of view of real free-market individualism, associations which interfere with the market) can take decisions completely informally.⁵ Thirdly, as I argued in this paper on April 8, lawyers have their own trade unions - which are not merely untouched by the anti-union laws, but positively protected and promoted by the state.⁶

In July 2009 the court of appeal in *Metrobus v Unite* rejected arguments that a "strict construction" (against unions) of the legislation was inconsistent with international human rights law as an interference with freedom of association. Lord Justice Kay took the opportunity to reassert that English law does not recognise a

legal right to strike - merely statutory immunities from legal liability for striking, which would otherwise exist. (As counsel for Unite pointed out to the court, the International Labour Organisation has ruled that these rules so restrict the right to strike guaranteed by the ILO treaties that the UK is in breach of the treaties.)⁷

Metrobus v Unite encouraged employers' lawyers and judges to make more aggressive use of the act. In December last year, in the first case on the cabin crew strikes, Justice Cox ruled that the union was to be held to strict standards of compliance with the rules, and that applying the test of 'balance of convenience' for the issue of interim injunctions meant that an injunction should be issued to stop the strike, partly because it would be inconvenient to the travelling public. In April Justice Sharpe in *Network Rail v RMT* extended the strict standards of compliance to require the union to take proactive measures. These decisions then formed the basis of Justice McCombe's decision to enjoin the May round of cabin crew strikes.⁸

Unite appealed McCombe's decision and won a 2-1 decision in the court of appeal from the Lord Chief

Justice, Lord Judge, and Lord Justice Smith. The master of the rolls, Lord Neuberger, dissented.⁹ The majority judgments are highly opaque on the law applied, but seem to represent a softening of the line of *Metrobus v Unite* on "strict construction". (This is perhaps part of *why* they are opaque: the court of appeal is supposed to be bound by its own prior decisions.) The 'balance of convenience' issue is not addressed at all, so that Cox's dodgy arguments in this context stand.

BA v Unite in the court of appeal thus looks like the minimum decision necessary to avoid an immediate and public confrontation in *this case* where there was a large majority for strike action, while still leaving the "strict construction" and 'balance of convenience' arguments still available to employers. It is symptomatic that in spite of the decision British Telecom was able to use equally technical objections to persuade the Communication Workers Union's lawyers that they would lose in court.¹⁰

A small, quiet voice, not reflected in the capitalist mass media, offers a minimalist alternative to this legal offensive. John McDonnell MP obtained first place on the private members bill ballot and has taken the opportunity to introduce the Lawful Industrial Action (Minor Errors) Bill. The text is not available on the House of Commons bills website, but seems from the title likely to go no further than the small changes proposed in clauses 4-7 of the 2006 Trade Union Freedom Bill.¹¹

The agenda of this bill was informed by two sources. The first was 'realism': the hope that something might actually get passed if it did not make 'unrealistic' demands. The second was the technical advice of the unions' lawyers. The result is very minimal proposals which - if they were passed - might have the effect of rolling back the "strict construction" line to a limited extent. But in reality "Judge and co" (as Jeremy Bentham called them¹²) would find new reasons to rule for the employers; and in any case a bill which might conceivably have been passed by a Labour majority has no chance today.

In these circumstances 'realism' is senseless. No matter how 'realist' you are and how good the legal advice, a bill will not get passed. So the point of a bill, if it has one at all, is to inspire resistance to the courts. That is, as part of a campaign to expose the class bias of the judicial system, and thereby to create the conditions for broad mass solidarity behind unions and groups of workers targeted by the employers' lawyers and judges. Such a bill should start from general principle - freedom of association. It should strike at the root - the lawyer-created 'economic torts', which are the backstop around which the modern anti-union laws are built.

Meanwhile, the issue of trade union support for the Labour Party through the political funds is also back on the agenda. On Tuesday July 6 *The Times* reported that the government was considering imposing new rules on trade union political funds, while on Thursday July 8 Sir Hayden Phillips was reported as saying that regulation of party funding was merely a matter of "political will". Sure, it is. The Tories have consistently insisted that any 'reform' must cap union donations

to Labour, while leaving untouched the multiplication of front subsidiary companies to evade caps on corporate donations.¹³

As I argued in my April 8 article, the judicial decisions are at the end of the day paid for by the employers through the so-called ‘free market in legal services’. But, as I also argued in a May 29 article, the reality is that under the present political regime the laws passed by parliament are likewise paid for by the employers at the end of the day (through the advertising-funded media, corporate political donations, and so on) and merely *fraudulently misrepresented* as the result of the will of the people.¹⁴ In other words, the ‘old corruption’ which gave our ancestors the Combination Acts and the Tolpuddle case never went away; it has only taken different forms. It is the *natural form of capitalist rule*.

The remedy for it is *working class organisation and solidarity*. Within the framework of capitalist corruption, whether the forms are old or modern, the interests of the working class will always be subordinated at best, stamped on at worst. But through *independent* working class political organisation, the development of workers’ independent media and so on, we can cut across the paid-for lies of politicians, journos and lawyers. That *collective political action* is what Tory kite-flyers hope to destroy by new restrictions on trade union political funds.

Electoral and judicial corruption is the natural form of capitalist rule. In this sense, we still face the same underlying order that the Tolpuddle Martyrs faced. The only real enemy of this order is working class collective political action. But working class collective political action *can* defeat governmental and judicial corruption - just as the mass campaign won pardons for the martyrs. These are fundamental lessons of Tolpuddle which we need to remember in today’s politics.

A political struggle

As I said above, the standard Tolpuddle Story, reflected in the TUC’s literature and in the website of the Martyrs’ Museum, is one of the martyrs as representing respectable, Christian and ‘moral force’ trade unionism.¹⁵ This image is counterposed to the much more *political* Chartism - and its ‘physical force’ wing - and to the more disorderly and violent ‘Captain Swing’ agricultural workers’ movement which went before it. The reality of the history is somewhat different.

Capitalism came into the world industry by industry, and brought with it anti-union laws - starting with the Confederacies of Masons Act 1425, penalising building workers’ attempts to organise to raise wages. This industry-by-industry form continued down to the 18th century.¹⁶ At this point, however, the judges began to assert that combinations to raise wages amounted to ‘common law’ criminal conspiracy. The first printed case is that of Cambridge tailors in 1721. An act had been passed to penalise a union of *London* tailors, and the decision extends it beyond London; the judges claimed to rely on an earlier case, not in print, of the tubwomen (women porters) employed by the London brewers.¹⁷ By the late 1750s judges were urging grand juries to report workers’ ‘combinations’ for prosecution.¹⁸

From the employers’ point of view ‘common law’ conspiracy had the disadvantages that the proceedings were dilatory, and those prosecuted might abscond and be untraceable; also it was tried by jury, and the jury might for one reason or another sympathise with the defendants. In 1799 the Tory government, acting on a suggestion by William Wilberforce, brought in the first *general* Combination Act, providing for summary jurisdiction before JPs, who could be trusted

to take the employers’ side. It is perhaps noteworthy that Wilberforce was celebrated in 2007 as an icon of the peaceful and realistic lobbying leading to the abolition of the slave trade. This celebration attempted to glorify bourgeois ‘public opinion’ and marginalise less respectable aspects of the campaign against the slave trade.¹⁹

The Whig opposition opposed the 1799 bill as an invasion of the right to trial by jury, and supported a mass petitioning campaign after the act was passed. The result was a body of ‘realistic’ amendments in the new act of 1800, which *seemed* to make it fairer (for example, by allowing prosecution of employers for combinations to reduce wages: a merely formal possibility, given the domination of the JPs by employers).²⁰

What followed was a period of extensive, violent and disorderly class struggles. It was also a period in which the working class began to identify itself as a class and its enemy as a class, and to think politically through a wide range of semi-underground ideas. Combinations for sectional trade purposes - proto-trade unions - looked like a threat to capitalists all through the 18th century. Now they began to look to the employers and government like something *preferable* to Jacobinism, Painism, Spenceanism and so on, and to ‘Ned Ludd’ machine-breakers, ‘intimidation’ and arson.²¹

The result in 1824 was to allow a clique of Ricardian *laissez-faire* theorists to secure the repeal of the acts of 1799-1800 and all the prior special acts - and even, for a brief moment, the abolition of the doctrine that combining to raise wages was a ‘common law’ conspiracy. The repeal let loose a massive strike wave, with resulting demands from employers for the re-introduction of the acts, and in 1825 the government restored ‘common law’ conspiracy and imposed some other forms of control. But the repeal came about because the *forcible* struggles of trade unionists down to 1824 led the parliamentary majority to conclude that the game of unmitigated standing repression was not worth the candle: the committee which brought in the 1824 act commented that the Combination Acts “had a tendency to produce mutual irritation and distrust, and to give a violent character to the combinations, and to render them highly dangerous to the peace of the community.”²²

But repeal was not yet enough to curb the growth of various forms of working class political consciousness by canalising it into ‘respectable’ sectional trade unionism. The ideas of both combination and radical democracy were spreading into the agricultural labour force, with increased momentum through the 1820s. 1830 saw the great wave of ‘Captain Swing’ rural revolts; one of the Loveless family was arrested as a Swing rioter, though he avoided conviction, and George was a spokesman for wage demands in 1831-32. Unions were in process of forming the Grand National Consolidated Trade Union with aims of a complete replacement of capitalism and suggestions of a general strike as means, and George Loveless was in contact with them. The danger seen by Lord Melbourne’s Whig government was that the GNCTU, with its radical aims, would spread to rural labourers. Hence local landowner-JP James Frampton, who saw the Tolpuddle union and similar groups as a revival of Swing, got the home office’s go-ahead to find some way to prosecute at Tolpuddle, in the hope of breaking this development.²³

The repeal of the Combination Acts was an obstacle. The home office suggested use of the Seditious Meetings Act 1817, aimed at republicans, which made it an offence to hold an unlicensed meeting or lecture; the way found was the Unlawful Oaths Act 1797, aimed at ‘mutineers’ (strikers) in the navy.

Tolpuddle thus represents yet another case of judicial extension of legislation - in this case what would probably now be called ‘anti-terrorism’ legislation - in the interests of government and the employers. (How can you tell when a judge is lying? When he tells you in a trade union case which he has just decided against the union that he is ‘only following the statute’.)

The GNCTU failed as a trade union project in 1834, as its leadership counterposed its general aims to the immediate sectional struggles of affiliated groups, particularly the tailors. But it was strong enough to organise the mass campaign which led the government to back down over Tolpuddle. And at least partly out of its ruins grew Chartism. By 1838 George Loveless was back in Dorset organising campaigns for fair wages ... and the vote.²⁴

The Tolpuddle prosecution was thus an ‘aftershock’ of the repeal of the Combination Acts, as the prosecutor and the lawyers temporarily found a way to circumvent repeal by abusing other legislation. Within two years this attempt was defeated: the government backed down in the face of broad solidarity campaigning. But this campaigning was *not* the product of respectable lobbying on minimalist demands. On the one side, it was part of the work of a broad movement which sought a radical overthrow of the political and social order - whether this movement took the form of the GNCTU or of Chartism. On the other, the government’s back-down aimed, as the original repeal of the Combination Acts had aimed, towards domesticating and depoliticising trade unionism.

Put in fear

The repeal of the Combination Acts and the back-down over Tolpuddle came because the governments and the possessing classes were put in fear of something worse ... widespread violent and disorderly class struggles, and the growth of a class-political consciousness out of which developed the GNCTU and Chartism. This narrative is not unique in the history of the British labour movement.

Chartism was defeated in 1848 by precisely targeted repression.²⁵ But this repression was also accompanied by (carefully separate) substantive concessions: the Factories Acts 1847 and 1850, limiting working hours.

In the 1860s, British trade unionists and leftists developed a broad campaign in solidarity with the struggle against slavery in the American civil war. Out of the campaign developed the First International. At the same time a militant campaign for extension of the suffrage, led by the Reform League, was waged.²⁶ The concessions this time were the Reform Act 1867, letting some better-off skilled workers vote, and the Trade Union Act 1871. As with Tolpuddle, the employers and their lawyers and judges found ways to resist the new act and two more were needed to do the job: the Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act 1875; and Employers and Workmen Act 1875.

1914-18 produced growth of the illegal shop stewards’ movement, the Clyde and Sheffield Workers’ Committees, and at the end of the war army mutinies and industrial action against the intervention in Russia. The major concession was the extension of the suffrage in 1918 to all men over the age of 21; a lot of industrial co-determination schemes were also floated, but rapidly abandoned.

1939-45 saw the revival, again, of the illegal shop stewards’ movement and illegal strikes. The Chamberlain government fell after that well known ultra-left, Ernie Bevin, went round the country making speeches threatening that the working class should take over to conduct the war effectively.

After the USSR was drawn in, the Communist Party grew dramatically. By 1945 the regime was in no mood to attempt to rerun the combination of repression with concessions of the end of World War I, and the press swung behind Labour to deliver large-scale concessions.

Selective breeding

The British ruling class is thus adept at meeting militant struggles with a combination of immediate repression and - hopefully delayed - concessions. It was already using this tactic before the Combination Acts.²⁷ As long as the concessions can be somehow separated from the immediate demands of militants, they can be presented as (a) what the regime intended to do all along, and/or (b) the product of the *peaceful, lobbying* road taken by ‘responsible’ leaders.

The result is a sort of capitalist selective breeding of trade union and Labour leaders. Leon Trotsky remarked on it in *Where is Britain going?* (1924), drawing an analogy with pigeon-fanciers who had supposedly produced pigeons with beaks too short to break out of the shell.²⁸

Another angle on the same phenomenon: the old Civil and Public Service Association (now amalgamated in PCS) published in 1980 a history of itself under the title *From humble petition to militant action*.²⁹ This may well be a fair characterisation of the history of trade unionism in the civil service. But the general history of the trade union leaderships would perhaps be better characterised by reversing it: *From militant action to humble petition*. The story of Tolpuddle as representing “the *moral* power of the working class” is a part of the process by which Labour and TUC leaders ‘educate’ workers for humble petition and *against* militant action.

It should be obvious today that humble petition - the Fabian-Labourite policy of legalism, lobbying and ‘realism’ - is not working. What we get is a ratchet effect against trade union freedom. Heath’s industrial relations legislation was not repealed, but *replaced* by Labour’s ‘realistic’ 1974 Trade Union and Labour Relations Act, which maintained higher levels of control than pre-1971. That paved the way for Thatcher’s anti-union laws. The New Labour ‘realists’ left 98% of Thatcher’s anti-union laws in place. That paved the way for today’s judicial offensive against the unions and Tory talk of a new round of anti-union laws.

‘Realism’ today infects even the organised far left. Take, for example, the Socialist Workers Party. Its distorted version of the ‘united front policy’ demands that it unite with the right wing of the movement - on whatever platform the right wing requires. Their difference is merely on method: moderate demands, they say, but militant action. The idea is an illusion: who, apart from a few students and ex-students, will risk jail or the dole to fight for ... a return to Keynesian demand management?

What is needed is to put the capitalist class in fear. That does not mean a call for a return to Ned Ludd and Captain Swing in the sense of machine-breaking, arson and ‘intimidation’ as tactics in industrial disputes. It means setting our *political* sights higher. We need to aim to build mass support, not for a lesser-evil or ‘realistic’, minimal reform, but for the overthrow of the corrupt capitalist state and legal order and a working class take-over of the running of society.

If we can build such a movement, we may not win the big prize it aims for. Victory is never certain. But even in defeat we would win major concessions - as the Chartists, the First Internationalist trade unionists and suffrage activists of the 1860s,

and the illegal militants, leftists and communists of the war years of the 20th century, did not win the big prize, but still won major concessions.

We should remember the history of our own movement. Not in the sanitised form of respectable Fabianism and apolitical trade unionism. We should remember the struggle for *working class political power*, and a world without capitalism, of which Tolpuddle was a small part. And if we renew that struggle we might - with persistence and luck - win through to its goals ●

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Notes

1. www.tolpuddlemartyrs.org.uk/index.php?page=2010-festival.
2. Above n1 (emphasis added).
3. Cf also Bristol Radical History Group, ‘Tolpuddle and swing: the flea and the elephant’: www.brh.org.uk/articles/captain_swing.html.
4. ‘Boris Johnson bid to curb strikes is “declaration of war”’ *Standard* July 5: www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23852406-unions-on-attack-over-government-war.do; ‘How far is Cameron prepared to push the unions’ *FT* Blogs July 5: http://blogs.ft.com/westminster/2010/07/how-far-is-cameron-prepared-to-push-the-unions; ‘A new round of anti-trade union laws?’ Len McLuskey on the Socialist Unity blog, July 8: www.socialist-unity.com/?p=6254.
5. *Re Duomatic* [1969] 2 chapter 365.
6. It is not enough to call for abolition of anti-union laws: www.cpgb.org.uk/article.php?article_id=1003878.
7. *Metrobus v Unite* [2009] EWCA Civ 829; this and other cases cited below are available on www.bailii.org.
8. *BA v Unite* [2009] EWHC 3541 (QB); *Network Rail v RMT* [2010] EWHC 1084 (QB); *BA v Unite* [2010] EWHC 1210 (QB).
9. *BA v Unite* [2010] EWCA Civ 669.
10. ‘BT strike bid halted by legal hitch’ *Channel 4 News* July 6: www.channel4.com/news/articles/business_money/bt+strike+bid+halted+by+legal+hitch/3701177.
11. John McDonnell launches bill to restore the right to strike; June 30: http://l-r-c.org.uk/press/john-mcdonnell-launches-bill-to-restore-the-right-to-strike; http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2010-11/lawfulindustrialactionminorerrors.html; 2006: www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmbills/032/2007032.pdf.
12. Eg, ‘On Humphreys’ real property code’ in J Bowring (ed) *The works of Jeremy Bentham* London 1843, Vol.5, p396: ‘Here then is a Gordian knot, which, somewhere or other, and somehow or other, Judge and co must have cut by their instrument of all-work - *falsehood*’.
13. ‘Party funding deal needs political will, watchdog hears’, BBC news July 8: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/politics/10544760.stm.
14. ‘From an instrument of deception’: www.cpgb.org.uk/article.php?article_id=1003904.
15. www.tolpuddlemartyrs.org.uk.
16. There is a convenient list of statutes in James Moher, ‘From suppression to containment’ in J Rule (ed) *British trade unionism: the formative years 1750-1850* Harlow 1988, chapter 4, p76; cf also JV Orth, ‘English combination acts of the 18th century’ (1987) 5 Law and History Review 175, pp180-94.
17. *R v Journeymen-Tailors of Cambridge* 8 Modern 10, 88 ER 9. The tubwomen case is sometimes identified with *R v Starling* (1664) 1 Levinz 125, 83 ER 331 (and other reports), in order to increase the pedigree of what seems to have been a new idea. But there is nothing in *Starling* to suggest the involvement of tubwomen (the case concerned an agreement of London brewers to try to provoke mass opposition to the excise by creating an artificial shortage of beer and blaming it on the tax).
18. *Gentleman’s Magazine* August 1758, Vol 28, pp391-92 (Lancaster, 1758, Lord Mansfield CJ); G Lamoine (ed) *Charges to the grand jury 1689-1803* (RHS 1992), 405-6 (Dublin, 1763, Aston CJ); 426 (Middlesex, 1770, John Hawkins JP).
19. On the act: Orth, above n15, 195-200. On Wilberforce and abolition: www.history.ac.uk/1807/commemorated/discussion/memory.html; cf. also M Macnair, ‘Abolition and working class solidarity’ *Weekly Worker* March 15 2007.
20. Orth, above n15, pp200-05.
21. EP Thompson *The making of the English working class* Harlow 1968; Moher, above n15, pp84-90.
22. JV Orth, ‘The British trade union acts of 1824 and 1825’ (1976) 5 *Anglo-American Law Review* pp131-52 (quote at p142).
23. R Wells, ‘Tolpuddle in the context of English agrarian labour history’ in J Rule (ed) *British trade unionism: the formative years 1750-1850* Harlow 1988, chapter 5, pp118-22.
24. TM Parssinen, A Prothero, ‘The London tailors’ strike of 1834 and the collapse of the GNCTU’ (1977), 22 *International Review of Social History* 65-107 at pp74-75, 72; R Wells, ‘Southern Chartism’ (1991) 2 *Rural History* 37 at p39.
25. J Saville 1848: *the British state and the Chartist movement* (Cambridge 1987).
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IRAN



Divided theocratic regime paralysed by sanctions

As the US steps up its efforts to provoke regime change from above, Yassamine Mather looks at the reasons for the failure of the working class to win leadership of the opposition movement

New sanctions imposed by the United States government last week were the most significant hostile moves against Iran's Islamic Republic since 1979. They marked a period of unprecedented coordination led by the US to obtain the support of the United Nations and European Union.

After months of denying their significance, the government of president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was forced to react by setting up an emergency counter-sanctions unit, whilst Iranian aviation officials accused the UK, Germany and the United Arab Emirates of refusing to supply fuel for civilian Iranian airplanes. As it turned out, this was not true. However, the EU banned most of Iran Air's jets from flying over its territory, because of safety concerns directly related to previous sanctions. It is said that most of the national

airline's fleet, including Boeing 727s and 747s and its Airbus A320s, are unsafe because the company has not been able to replace faulty components.

The US is adamant that 'severe' sanctions are necessary to stop Iran's attempts at becoming a military nuclear power. Scare stories are finding their way into the pages of the mass media. According to US defence secretary Robert Gates, Iran is developing the capacity to fire scores, or perhaps hundreds, of missiles at Europe. Ten days after making that claim, Gates alleged that Iran had enough enriched uranium to be able to build two atom bombs within two years.

However, it is difficult to believe the Obama administration's claims that the new sanctions have anything to do with Iran's nuclear capabilities, which is why we should consider other explanations.

Why is there such an urgency to increase the pressure on Iran? One likely possibility is that the Obama administration has observed the divisions within the current government (between neoconservatives, led by Ahmadinejad, and traditional conservatives, such as the Larijani brothers, who control Iran's executive, parliamentary and judicial system) and sees an opportunity for regime change from above.

After weeks of infighting between Ahmadinejad and the conservatives, involving angry accusations and counter-accusations in parliament over Azad University, this week the reformist website, Rah-e-Sabz, posted an article claiming that "the supreme leader and former president Hashemi Rafsanjani had agreed a resolution of the conflict" over who controls Azad.

The university, one of the world's largest, is part of a private chain with branches throughout the country and is considered a stronghold of Islamic 'reformists'. Since 2004 Ahmadinejad has been trying to reorganise its board of governors in order to take back control. When the Islamic parliament opposed his moves to replace the board, the Guardian Council, which has to approve every bill, took the side of the Ahmadinejad camp, creating yet another stalemate between the two conservative groups within the ruling elite.

The supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, had no choice but to intervene. He did so by ordering the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution to stop Ahmadinejad's attempts to overrule parliament (in other words, he supported Rafsanjani, who, together with members of his family, are trustees and on the board of the

university). In return Rafsanjani publicly praised Khamenei.

Some see this as a clever move. For the first time since last year's disputed presidential elections, Khamenei has been forced to take a public stance against Ahmadinejad, resulting in a retreat by the president and his allies in the revolutionary guards. Azad University remains under the control of Rafsanjani and his family. No doubt if the rift between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad continues, the balance of power could shift in favour of the former president.

Meanwhile, Tehran's bazaar was on strike for most of last week, in protest at a decision by Iran's government to raise bazaar taxes by up to 70%. The government declared July 11 and 12 public holidays in 19 Iranian provinces, citing hot weather and dust, but there were rumours that the real reason was to conceal the possibility of strikes on those days.

All this is a reflection of Iran's political paralysis and the state's inability to deal with a combination of economic crisis and growing opposition amongst the majority of the population.

Crippling effects

Successive Iranian governments have denied the effectiveness of 30 years of crippling sanctions, but most economists inside the country estimate that sanctions have added 35% to the price of every commodity. Iran had been forced to buy spare parts for cars, planes, manufacturing equipment, agricultural machinery, etc on the black market, and now it will be forced to buy refined oil in the same way, causing a further jump in the rate of inflation. The smuggling of refined

oil from Iraq started earlier this month, but the quantity received is unlikely to be sufficient to meet demand even during the summer months.

The new financial restrictions that came with the latest sanctions have crippled Iran's banking and insurance sector. Iran already attracted little foreign investment, but now even China is pulling out of industrial ventures, such as the South Farse oil project. The proposed policing of ships and containers travelling to Iran means shipping insurance rates in the Persian Gulf are now the equivalent of those in war zones.

Despite the absence of the large demonstrations that followed the rigged elections of a year ago, most Iranians agree that the religious state is today weaker than it was in June 2009 (at the height of mass protests) and that could explain renewed interest in the US for regime change from above. At a time when anger against Iran's rulers and frustration with leaders of the green movement amongst youth and sections of working class is tangible, it is difficult to predict what will happen next. From bloggers to journalists, from students to the unemployed, opponents of the regime are blaming 'reformist' leaders Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karubi for the current stalemate - people's patience is running out. Could it be that the Obama administration is planning to replace the Islamic Republic with a regime composed of selected exiles, à la Ahmed Chalabi in Iraq or Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan? After all, there is no shortage of former Islamists currently residing in the US who have converted to 'liberal democracy', including Iranian disciples of Karl Popper. Such people are paraded

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daily in the Farsi media and portrayed as the voice of reason.

In contrast to the hesitation and conciliationism of green leaders, others within the opposition have been stepping up their protests against the Islamic regime and two potentially powerful sections - the women's movement and the workers' movement - are conducting their own struggles. Yet here too Moussavi's patronising attitude to both groups (he called on workers to join the green movement to safeguard their interests, while his wife claimed to support women's rights) have backfired badly. In the words of one feminist activist, the green movement should realise it is one section of the opposition, but not the only voice of the protest movement.

Workers' movement

Superficial analysts abroad labelled last year's anti-dictatorship protesters in Iran as middle class. However, those present at these demonstrations were adamant that workers, students and the unemployed played a huge role. In May, the Centre to Defend Families of the Slain and Detained in Iran published the names of 10 workers who were killed in post-election street protests, and there is considerable evidence that workers, the unemployed and shanty town-dwellers were among the forces that radicalised the movement's slogans (crossing the red lines imposed by green leaders, such as the call for an end to the entire regime, and for the complete separation of state and religion). In addition we are witnessing an increasing number of workers' demonstrations, sit-ins and strikes against the non-payment of wages, deteriorating conditions and low pay. The workers' protest movement has been dubbed a tsunami, and in recent months it has adopted clear political slogans against the dictatorship.

Last week was typical. Five hundred workers staged protests outside Abadan refinery against unpaid wages, blocking the road outside the refinery. Two of their comrades filming the action were arrested, but these workers are adamant they will continue the strikes and demonstrations next week. Three hundred Pars metal workers staged a separate protest against non-payment of wages and cuts in many of the workers' benefits, such as the bus to and from work and the subsidised canteen, which managers of the privatised company intend to close. Similar protests have taken place in dozens of large and small firms throughout Iran. Most have moved on from purely economic demands to include political slogans against the regime.

However, we still see little coordination between these protests and workers have yet to make their mark as a class aware of its power and historic role. Despite much talk of mushrooming industrial action and even a general strike, so far we have not seen the Iranian working class taking its

rightful place at the head of a national movement.

So how can we explain the current situation? A number of points have been raised by the left in Iran:

1. The working class and leftwing activists have faced more severe forms of repression than any other section of the opposition, even prior to June 2009. However, it is difficult to accept that fear of arrest or detention has played any part in the reluctance of workers to make their mark as a political force. Clearly repression has not deterred workers from participating in strikes, taking managers hostage or blocking highways. In fact incarcerated activists include the majority of the leaders of Vahed Bus Company, serving Tehran and its suburbs, the entire leadership of Haft Tapeh sugar cane workers and activists from the Committee to set up Independent Workers' Organisations.
2. Workers have been misled by the leaders of the green movement. Yet throughout the presidential election debates they did not hear any substantial difference between the economic plans proposed by Moussavi and Karroubi, who, for example, defended privatisation, and those of Ahmadinejad and other conservatives. Workers are opposed to plans for the abolition of state subsidies. However, they remember that this was a plan originally proposed by the 'reformist', Mohammad Khatami, during his presidency, as part of the much hated policy of 'economic readjustment'.

Workers are also well aware that the leaders of the green movement aspire to an Iranian/Islamic version of capitalism, where the bourgeoisie's prosperity will eventually 'benefit all' - an illusion very few workers subscribe to. It should also be noted that the Iranian working class as a modern, urban force is primarily secular, with no allegiance to the Islamic state, and constitutes a growing wing of the protest movement that wants to go beyond adherence to legality and the reform of the current constitution. Kept at arm's length by leaders of the green movement and yet incapable of asserting its own political line, the working class is facing a dilemma in the current crisis.

3. The opportunist left has diverted the class struggle. However, the Iranian working class is wary of claims made by leaders of the green movement, as well as sections of the opportunist left like Tudeh and the Fedayeen Majority, that the first decade of the Islamic Republic under ayatollah Khomeini constituted the golden years of the revolution. Older worker activists realise that it was the clergy and the Islamic regime that halted the revolution of 1979 and threw it into reverse. The Khomeini years coincided with the worst of the religious repression, and it was not only the radical left who were the victims (thousands were executed), but workers in general. The state was constantly calling on them to make sacrifices, to send their sons to the battle front and produce more for the war economy, while ruthlessly suppressing

workers' independent actions as the work of traitors and spies. So, contrary to the opinion of Tudeh and the Fedayeen Majority, the first decade of Khomeini's rule - under Moussavi's premiership, of course - were the dark years for Iranian workers and no amount of rewriting history will change this.

4. The current economic situation is so bad that the working class is unable to fight effectively for anything more than survival. Striking for *unpaid* wages is symptomatic of this, on top of which there is the threat of losing your job and joining the ranks of the unemployed. In other words, the defensive nature of workers' struggles hinders their capability to mount a nationwide struggle. Of course, if this argument is correct, the situation will get worse once further sanctions bite. There will be more job losses, more despair amongst the working class.
5. Despite many efforts to create nationwide workers organisations - not only the Committee to set up Independent Workers' Organisations, but the Network of Iranian Labour Unions (founded in response to the bus drivers' actions and the imprisonment of their leader, Mansour Osanlou), workers have failed to coordinate protests even on a regional level.

6. The confusion of the left has had a negative impact. Workers have not forgotten how the Fedayeen Majority and Tudeh apologised for and supported the 'anti-imperialist' religious state. The majority of the working class was aligned with the left, and so went along with the dismantling of the workers' shoras (councils) that played such a significant role in the overthrow of the shah's regime. Later, during Khatami's presidency (1997-2005), the Fedayeen Majority and Tudeh advocated collaboration with the state-run Islamic factory councils, although the majority of workers considered these anti-trade union organisations, whose main task was to spy on labour activists and support managers in both private and state-owned enterprises. The Shia state claimed to international bodies such as the International Labour Organisation that the councils were genuine trade unions, even though they were set up to destroy labour solidarity within and beyond the workplace. Despite all this the opportunist left not only refused to expose their true function: it called on Iranian workers to join them as a step towards the establishment of mass labour organisations!

Revolutionary left

Over the last few years the left has publicised workers' demands and organised support for them. Yet there have been big problems. We have seen two distinct approaches regarding the form working class organisation should take. Some advocate the need to unite around the most basic of demands in trade union-type bodies independent of political organisation. Others argue that a struggle within such a united front between reformist and revolutionary currents over strategy and tactics will be inevitable and the revolutionaries will win over the majority of the working because of the superiority of their arguments.

Then there are those who emphasise the need for a different form of organisation altogether: underground cells of class-conscious workers capable of mobilising the most radical sections of the class. Of course, it is possible to combine both options, but proponents of both strategies imply that the two paths are mutually exclusive. Those calling for a workers' united front label advocates of cells 'sectarian ultra-leftists', while the latter allege that those who want to work for the creation of mass, union-type bodies are succumbing to reformism and syndicalism.

While recent attempts amongst sections of the left to discuss these issues should be welcomed, it has to be said that the working class and the left have a long way to go before the 'tsunami' of workers' protests becomes a class-conscious nationwide movement capable of overthrowing the religious state and the capitalist order it upholds ●

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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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Summer Offensive

10k and counting

Our annual fundraising campaign, the Summer Offensive, maintained a very respectable pace this week, with £1,537 added to our total. We have now cleared £10k, with £10,067 in the pot towards our £25,000 target by August 14, the last day of this year's Communist University.

The winner of the Summer Offensive sweepstake on the World Cup - Ben Lewis - donated his £50 winnings back to the campaign after his team, Spain, edged a final that at times bore more resemblance to a Jet Li movie than a football match. In other words, lots of fun for the non-footie fans amongst us, despite the pompous, moralistic guff from many sofa pundits that followed the final whistle.

Equally robust as the no-nonsense Dutch this week are comrades JM, AM and PM with contributions of £220, £260 and £200 respectively. Well played, comrades.

The SO is very much a game of two halves. As we move into the fifth week of the campaign, we normally see the things starting to pick up. Given the sparkling pace comrades have set so far, this would mean we would easily bust through our £25k target.

Still a long way to go, comrades, but things are looking good! ●

Howard Roak

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Dumbing down art

Philistinism of cuts

Along with other unprotected areas of government expenditure, the budget of the department for culture, media and sport (DCMS) is being slashed by 25%. This unprecedented attack on the funding of arts and culture goes far beyond what the Thatcher administration felt able to do, although it expresses the same viciously philistine values.

Under the government of Margaret Thatcher, any idea that the arts should be challenging was ditched, as Tory grandees presided over the development of the 'heritage industry'. 'Culture' was regarded as the promotion of a mythologised Merrie England and a pasteurised past that might appeal to a certain kind of tourist. But the coalition is going much further.

At a recent meeting called by the secretary of state for culture, Olympics, media and sport, Jeremy Hunt, arts organisations were told to forget the existing funding model altogether - in favour of one that relies on philanthropy. Hunt has written to the top 200 donors to cultural organisations to thank them for past generosity and is "currently looking at how to make it easier for cultural bodies to raise funds." Since there is to be this drastic and systematic withdrawal of state funds for the arts, the Tory intention is that those who want to be creative will have to look elsewhere to sustain themselves and their organisations.

It has to be said that the arts and culture generally in Britain are already quite conservative. But that is nothing to how conservative they will become if they have to rely heavily on charity handouts from rich donors and corporations. He who pays the piper calls the tune. Projects will have to pass individuals' and corporate managers' tests of artistic value. How could it be otherwise?

One major flaw in the Tory-Lib Dem plan is that there are no guarantees that funding from such private sources would anyway cover the projected shortfall, which is set to increase markedly. And where philanthropy fails to fill the gap, even mainstream museums and theatres might well be on the way to closing. It is even more likely that many cultural centres and other venues that are an outlet for artistic talent will struggle the most, especially where they encourage more innovative and searching forms of expression. For why will those owning or controlling wealth and potential largesse be interested in subsidising projects whose challenging nature could be viewed as directed against the very social system from which such donors benefit? Rather bland or kitsch decoration and works that uphold the approved version of British tradition and 'heritage'.

A Disneyfied cultural scene rather than a critical one is what appeals to conservative instincts. Instead of an artistic critique of society, this reactionary view much prefers a bowdlerised reflection of past 'glories' and inoffensive medi-

ocrity. While Shakespeare's Globe² on London's South Bank has thankfully become a worthwhile theatrical venue, its Thatcherite conception was to fit with what middlebrow America might regard as quaintly English.

Arts Council England, which exists to disburse government funds to the arts in England, has suffered an immediate £19 million (4%) reduction in its budget for this year, much of which will be taken up by exhausting its reserves. It means that a total of 880 arts organisations across the board are experiencing a reduction in funding for the current year of 0.5%. For some organisations hanging on by their fingernails, even this is a blow, given that budgets for this year are already tight. But this is only the beginning, as the great bulk of the cuts are not due to be implemented until the next financial year.

According to a letter sent earlier this month to funded bodies, ACE chief executive Alan Davey gives notice that its cuts decisions are to take the form of two hits: firstly for 2011-12 grants, and secondly for the 2012-13 and 2014-15 grant years together. Perhaps the bitter pill is supposed to be easier to swallow in two gulps. In his letter Davey states: "... we have been asked to model a reduction of up to 30% over four years; we are now asking you to model prudently for a minimum of a 10% reduction in your funding for 11-12."³ This means that the second series of cuts will be even more severe than the first, removing as much as twice what is to be cut next year. Retrenchment starts now, however, for all ACE-funded organisations, as they grapple with the problems that a 10% reduction will mean for their projected work in 2011 and 2012.

It is ironic that a prime purpose of ACE, as featured prominently on its website, is so contradicted by the coalition's policy of slash and burn across the board: "Culture is central to any government that places quality of life and creative opportunity at the

heart of its agenda."⁴ Well, not as far as this one is concerned.

Some sectors within the DCMS remit have already been hit hard. Extensive projects at the British Film Institute (BFI) have been scrapped. "We are concerned that film is bearing the brunt. Over 50% of the DCMS cuts announced are coming from the film sector," says a BFI statement.⁵

BP, a firm that has recently been in the news for other reasons, has given arts money for over 30 years. "Our strategy focuses on long-term partnerships with a small number of outstanding institutions: the British Museum, the National Portrait Gallery, the Royal Opera House and Tate Britain."⁶ However, what with BP's problems currently in the Gulf of Mexico, who knows how its future funding of these prestigious arts organisations may pan out? If arts organisations are to depend on such donors even more heavily in the future, their sustainability has to be questionable. Not only are their futures dependent on corporate whim and notions of acceptability, but also on these corporations' profitability in times of capitalist crisis. That is certainly not assured.

Artists themselves are far from happy with the concept and actuality of corporate sponsorship. The Good Crude Britannia, "a national artists' campaign against BP sponsorship of Tate,"⁷ was launched somewhat theatrically at the end of the June at Tate Britain's Summer Party. Jane Trowell of the arts activist group, Platform, commented: "We hope that, as happened with the tobacco industry, it will soon come to be seen as socially unacceptable for cultural institutions to accept funding from big oil."⁸

In fact, arts funding in Britain is already very poor. Apart from the high culture on offer at institutions such as Sadler's Wells and Covent Garden, those groups trying to finance arts projects regarded as less safe by the establishment already struggle to get even paltry funds from the state. Now even harder times are in prospect, fur-

ther marginalising many artists and preventing their work from being appreciated by wider audiences.

However, increasing involvement of the corporate world in the arts is on the cards - if the economic situation and company bottom lines do not fall through the floor, that is. Enter stage right, Arts and Business, which exists to "connect companies and individuals to cultural organisations and provide the expertise and insight for them to prosper together."⁹

North of the border the future is equally uncertain for arts projects. Launched this month, Creative Scotland¹⁰ has taken over the functions and resources of the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen. When its board meets for the first time next month, it will identify key priority spending areas - in other words, deciding which arts projects in Scotland will bite the dust under the new regime.

Implementation of an investment review announced by the Arts Council of Wales¹¹ at the end of last month will reduce the number of organisations it funds by a third. As *The Stage* noted at the time, "32 arts bodies, including Beaufort Theatre, Gwent Theatre and the Hay Festival of Literature and the Arts, will lose their regular core funding at the end of next March."¹²

Obviously getting financial support from the state and its organs, such as the ACE and their equivalents, can have negative impacts on what artists want to achieve. However, it is, though flawed, a way of obtaining some part of the social product, of the wealth that society as a whole creates. Social suasion plays at least a role in this manner of getting funding. But for this government that is anathema. It is aiming for privatisation of arts funding. In this view, social product remains more and more where these reactionaries of the first water see it should stay as of right: in the possession of the owners and operators of capital. Once it is within

their control, these individual 'true' owners of the social product may then deign to disburse it where they will. A portion may come the way of the arts ... if they are lucky and are sufficiently craven.

Instead of what can be persuaded, pressured or cajoled out of state funders, the new government's diktat on the arts means that those with projects in mind must go cap in hand to the wealthy for scraps from their table. Such ignominy is insufferable. What is necessary is for artists and those who work with them to fight what is threatened by these cuts, exposing them as antithetical to humanity's spirit of generosity and solidarity that artistic expression often tries to encapsulate.

In the end, only a society that does away with profit as its sole *raison d'être* can lead to art's blossoming. To imagine that the profit-mongers at the top of corporations can consistently nurture and promote artistic talent is the height of folly.

Government cuts essentially define artistic licence as a tax-deductible. Capitalism proves once again that it pollutes and destroys all it touches ●

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