

weekly **worker**



**Marxism and theoretical
overkill: Mike Macnair takes
issue with Jairus Banaji**

- Irish left front
- Labour debate
- LRC conference
- COR perspectives

No 849 Thursday January 20 2011

Towards a Communist Party of the European Union

www.cpgb.org.uk

£1/€1.10

TUNISIA: MASSES IN REVOLT



LETTERS



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

Scottish lessons

The Republican Communist Network welcomes the vindication of those Scottish Socialist Party comrades who refused to go along with Tommy Sheridan's attempt to use his public and celebrity position to extract money for personal gain. Whilst fully recognising the political damage and personal hurt to SSP members resulting from this debacle, the RCN opposes the jailing of our former SSP comrade, Tommy Sheridan, and looks forward to the day when such issues will be dealt with within the organisations of our class, not those of the bourgeoisie. Lessons, however, must be learnt.

The rise of the SSP to a position of influence and respect within the working class of Scotland owes a great deal to the hard work and dedication of many comrades. No-one can underplay the contribution made to this by Tommy Sheridan. He became the public face of the socialist movement in Scotland and inspired many people to become involved in class-based activity. However, Tommy is a human being and is flawed like the rest of us. He grew to believe his own rhetoric; he courted the press on personal and family matters and set himself up to be the epitome of the clean-cut family man. He grew to believe that he was the SSP.

As we said at the time of the split within the SSP, the decision of Tommy Sheridan to pursue his court case against the unanimous advice of the SSP national executive represented a rejection of inner-party democracy and the accountability of party officials to the membership - an anti-party action, which has had dire consequences for the SSP. It was a gross political mistake.

The subsequent decision to form a new organisation, Solidarity, on little political basis other than personal support for Tommy Sheridan, represented a continuation of this anti-party action and heralded one of the most serious mistakes made by socialists in post-war Scottish politics. It placed personality and individual egos above principled politics. It weakened the working class in the face of the current ruling class offensive.

The decision of the Socialist Workers Party and Committee for a Workers' International to back this split further demonstrated their own sectarian agendas. These organisations' lack of commitment to principled socialist unity has already been clearly shown by their recent separate 'unity' initiatives in England and Wales, and in Northern Ireland.

The most immediate lesson for socialists is the incompatibility of trying to build a socialist organisation through promoting a celebrity leader. The consequences of the internecine warfare for the SSP and the working class movement have been catastrophic. Our credibility as an organisation which can lead the struggles that face us and unite the left in Scotland is severely diminished. However, we have survived and in pockets around Scotland have continued to work democratically and been leading fighters in various struggles.

Although we hold Tommy Sheridan responsible for the initial damage to the SSP, we also recognise the potential for subsequent and continuing damage caused by the misguided actions of a number of our own comrades, some of these actions in direct contradiction to party policy.

The membership of the party must be trusted. Some of the fallout from the

court case could have been mitigated if the minutes of the EC had been dealt with in the normal manner and been made public to the membership. Only the RCN argued for the minutes to be open.

Socialists should not go to the bourgeois courts for rulings on how we conduct ourselves. Such appeals should only be made to the democratic institutions of our class. What chance have socialists got of bringing about socialism in the face of capitalist economic and state power, if we have to run to their courts to sort out our problems in the here and now?

We accept that individuals found themselves in exceptional circumstances. However, the George McNeillage tape should have been seen to be dealt with by the party. This has been damaging for the SSP amongst the broader labour and trade union movement. The end does not justify the means.

Frances Curran's use of the courts for a ruling being called a "scab" by *The Daily Record* was also a political mistake and against party policy. Party members who handed minutes to police or who gave affidavits to newspapers must now see that, however well intentioned, their actions were not helpful and once more were against party policy.

Once again, it is our contention that we must bring the continuing self-inflicted damage to an end. The mistakes we made must be acknowledged, breaches of policy on the part of office-bearers should be addressed and we must show ourselves to be a democratically accountable party.

Also, the party must now seek to carry through the decision of the post-split 2006 SSP conference, which welcomes back former members without recriminations, especially now that they can clearly see the tragic implications of the misguided actions of Sheridan, Solidarity, the SWP and CWI leaderships.

We must also try to win back the largest group of all - those former members who left the SSP and did not join Solidarity. They have raised criticisms, not only about the egotism of Sheridan and the unattractive sectarianism and splitting tactics of the SWP and CWI, but also of some of the badly misjudged actions of the SSP in attempting to deal with these problems. This group currently forms an important bridge to those wider sections of the working class whom we need to win over once more to principled, socialist unity.

Republican Communist Network
email

Scottish disaster

John Rogan's letter (January 13) counterposing my comments in my 2006 article on the Sheridan affair to Sarah McDonald's January 6 article is misconceived. There is a radical difference between, on the one hand, driving someone out of the workers' movement by political action and, on the other hand, calling on the capitalist state to vindicate the names of their opponents (inevitably by state prosecution) - or selling a video confession to the Murdoch press for a large sum of money.

The police and courts and the advertising-funded media are - when it comes to issues like the Sheridan affair - instruments of the class enemy. It is a little bit as if British soldiers in World War I, fed up with the incompetence of their generals, had demanded that the German army court-martial the British generals.

Of course, this half-belief that the capitalist state apparatus and media are somehow neutral instruments lies at the root of the whole problem of the Sheridan affair: the SSP promoted Tommy Sheridan's family life. Then it adopted policy backing state action against prostitution.

Then the Murdoch press, inevitably, went after Sheridan on exactly this issue. Then Sheridan sought to vindicate his name in the bourgeois courts ... and so we arrive at the utter disaster that has resulted.

Mike Macnair
Oxford

Anti-elitist leadership

Tony Clark writes that "people who are fighting to destroy leadership in the working class are really opposing formal leadership structures where the leadership is open and accountable, as far as this is made possible by political conditions."

While concealing themselves behind anti-leadership rhetoric, they replace open leadership with informal, secret and unaccountable leadership cliques. Unable to escape the iron law of leadership, they opt for informal leadership, behind the backs of the working class" (Letters, January 13).

Surely, Tony is not accusing the Socialist Party of Great Britain of such practices. The SPGB expects any working class organisation to possess democratic self-organisation, involving formal rules and structures, to prevent the emergence of unaccountable, self-appointed elites, who may become the *de facto* leaders making decisions; and the SPGB endorses Jo Freeman's *Tyranny of structurelessness* (<http://libcom.org/library/tyranny-structurelessness-jo-freeman>).

Formal rules and structures are required to prevent the emergence of unaccountable elites. We're not talking about the sort of structures advocated and practised by Leninist organisations, which are designed to enshrine control by a self-perpetuating elite.

We are talking about structures that place decision-making power in the hands of the group as a whole, along the lines of the seven "principles of democratic structuring" listed by Freeman.

Mandating delegates, voting on resolutions and membership referendums are democratic practices for ensuring that the members of an organisation control that organisation and, as such, key procedures in any organisation genuinely seeking socialism.

Socialism can only be a fully democratic society in which everybody will have an equal say in the ways things are run. This means that it can only come about democratically, both in the sense of being the expressed will of the working class and in the sense of the working class being organised democratically without leaders - to achieve it.

The crucial part of the SPGB case is that understanding is a necessary condition for socialism and we see the SPGB's job as to shorten the time, to speed up the process - to act as a catalyst.

The SPGB views its function to be to make socialists, to propagate socialism, and to point out to the workers that they must achieve their own emancipation. To "make socialism an immediacy" for the working class, something of importance and value to people's lives now, rather than a singular 'end'. We await the mass 'socialist

party'. Possibly, the SPGB might be the seed or the embryo of the future mass 'socialist party' but there's no guarantee that we will be (more likely just a contributing element, in my humble opinion). But who cares, as long as such a party does eventually emerge?

At some stage, for whatever reason, socialist consciousness will reach a 'critical mass', at which point it will just snowball and carry people along with it. It may even come about without people actually giving it the label of socialism. At the later stage, when more and more people are coming to want socialism, a mass socialist movement will emerge to dwarf all the small groups and grouplets that exist today.

When the idea of socialism catches on, we'll then have our united movement. With the spread of socialist ideas, all organisations will change and take on a participatory-democratic and socialist character, so that the majority organisation for socialism will not be just political and economic, but will also embrace all aspects of social life, as well as interpersonal relationships. We're talking about a radical social revolution.

We actually have a knowledge test for membership.

The SPGB will not allow a person to join until the applicant has convinced the party that s/he understands and accepts the party case for socialism. This does not mean that we have set ourselves up as an intellectual elite into which only those well versed in Marxist scholarship may enter. The SPGB has good reason to ensure that only conscious socialists enter its ranks, for, once admitted, all members are equal and it would clearly not be in the interest of the party to offer equality of power to those who are not able to demonstrate equality of basic socialist understanding. Once a member, s/he have the same rights as the oldest member to sit on any committee, vote, speak and have access to all information. Thanks to the test, all members are conscious socialists and there is genuine internal democracy. And we are fiercely proud of that.

Consider what happens when people join other groups which don't have such a test. The new applicant has to be approved as being 'an okay comrade'. The individual is therefore judged by the group according to a range of what might be called 'credential indicators'.

Hard work (more often than not, paper selling) and obedience and compliance by new members are the main criteria of trustworthiness in the organisation. In these hierarchical, 'top-down' groups the leaders strive at all costs to remain as the leadership, and reward only those with proven commitment to their 'party line' with preferential treatment, more responsibility and more say.

New members who present the wrong indicators remain peripheral to the party structure, finding themselves unable to influence decision-making, eventually resigning, often embittered by all the hard work they had put in and the hollowness of the claims of equality and democracy. (Does that sound familiar?)

The longevity of the SPGB as a political organisation based on agreed goals, methods and organisational principles and which has produced without interruption a monthly magazine for over a hundred years, through two world wars, is an achievement that most socialist organisations can only aspire towards.

Tony Clark should be envious rather than dismissive. Meantime, the best thing we in the SPGB can do is carry on campaigning for a world

based on the common ownership and democratic control of the Earth's resources in the interests of all.

We in the SPGB will continue to propose that this be established by democratic, majority political action. Other groups will no doubt continue to propose their own way to get there. And, in the end, we'll see which proposal the majority working class takes up.

Alan Johnstone
SPGB

Curmudgeons

Paul Smith (Letters, January 13), in his response to Andrew Northall's challenge to the mythology of the 'great terror' of the late 1930s (Letters, January 6), found it "remarkable" that any contributor to this newspaper should present the former USSR as "in some way socialist or progressive".

This would, of course, have had to include Trotsky himself whose 'The problems of the development of the USSR' (1931) accepted the main lines of Stalin's programme and defined Stalinist Russia as a proletarian state. Trotsky argued not for the destruction of the Stalinist system but for its replacement by an alternative group of leaders. In his *Bulletin*, Trotsky was later to write: "If the bureaucratic equilibrium in the USSR were to be upset at present, this would certainly benefit the forces of counterrevolution."

What Northall was challenging was the prevailing mythology of those influenced by Trotskyite curmudgeoning and the self-serving blame-shifting of Khrushchev in order that we can recognise the immense amount of research that has been carried out by academic historians in the archives of the Stalin era.

Oleg Khlevniuk's previous work with Yoram Gorlizki on the 'cold peace' of 1945-53 is equally commendable for its insights into the realities of the Soviet leadership.

This should be complemented by other publications by J Arch Getty and Oleg V Naumov on *The road to terror* and the biography of Yezhov. Sebag Montefiore may have brought the *Court of the red tsar* to a wider audience, but the need for a deeper political assessment of the experience of the building of socialism in the USSR requires far more than the outworn shibboleths of Paul Smith.

At a time when even the presumption of Stalin's guilt for the assassination of Kirov has been thoroughly questioned by the research of Matthew Lenoe, we deserve much better than the repetition of disproven mythologies.

Robert Wilkinson
Twyford

Historical documents

The Workers' Film and Video website collates a number of good films about the key events of the last two centuries. Topics so far include the French Revolution, the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution, May 1968 in France, 1968 in the United States and the key strikes of 1930s America.

My intention is to build up a collection of good films about all the key events since the French Revolution to the present available in the one place. Hopefully, the films will stimulate discussion and debate. Any suggestions for additional films or topics will be welcomed.

Peter Burton
<http://workersfilm.blogspot.com>

IRELAND

Shattered illusions

The left's general election campaign is beginning to make an impact, writes **Anne Mc Shane**

Crisis continues to grip Irish society, as the government struggles to hold onto power. With Fianna Fáil at a record low in the polls, even its own membership is turning away from it in disgust. The old power structures are feeling the strain following unparalleled shifts in political loyalties.

Fianna Fáil is locked in an internecine war, as TDs do battle to oust Brian Cowen, the taoiseach (prime minister). He may have survived the January 18 confidence vote - a vote he called himself to put his opponents on the back foot - but his problems are far from over. Party members and TDs are deeply disgruntled, and squabbles and back-stabbings are rife. And the rats are deserting the sinking ship, with several TDs, including ministers, announcing that they will not contest the general election expected to be held within weeks. They were not exactly looking forward to the intense anger they would have faced on the doorstep, followed by annihilation on voting day.

Fianna Fáil has up to now always been the largest party. Set up by Eamon de Valera in 1926, it has dominated the political landscape for over 80 years and been in office for 22 out of the last 24 years. The foremost party of church, state and the establishment, it has seemed untouchable. During the years of the 'Celtic tiger' its leaders' appetite for influence and extravagance was breathtaking. Bertie Ahern and his cronies revelled in their apparent unassailability. Developers, bankers and a coterie of hangers-on found themselves richly rewarded for their allegiance. But now the party is over and Fianna Fáil has woken up with one hell of a hangover.

Today that era is despised by the majority of people as one of corruption, greed and lies - when politicians and their friends in high places lived it up and benefited from a constant exchange of money and favours. The thorough exposure of this sleaze and avarice has left the working class in no doubt as to the disposition of their rulers. Capitalism has been shown to be a society of gross inequality. As the economic system goes into tailspin, the working class are being made to pay.

Since 2008, when the banking crisis hit, there has been round after round of savage cuts. The latest budget saw the poorest in society subjected to still more attacks, while the wealthy actually gained under the Finance Bill. Our rulers have no shame about insisting that their privileges are preserved and we must suffer. Despite the deep anger and demands for the government to go, it is determined to hold on for as long as possible. In this it has received support from the European commission and IMF, which insisted that the austerity budget agreed as part of the most recent banking bail-out be passed before the government leaves office.

And even as the draconian cuts impoverish thousands, reports of corruption continue. Recent revelations show that Cowen and crew were up to their stinking necks in it. The latest is the 'Golfgate' scandal where the taoiseach was treated to a day out by disgraced banker Sean Fitzpatrick, then chairman of Anglo Irish, just days before the government announced a guarantee to protect his bank's funds. Cowen has threatened defamation proceedings against Sinn Féin TD Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin for suggesting improper conduct and insists that the banking problems were

never even mentioned all day long. Funnily enough, nobody believes him. Fitzpatrick was later found to have helped himself to €155 million in secret loans from Anglo Irish - loans which will never be repaid.

Of course, Fine Gael, the second party, is no alternative - in fact leader Enda Kenny plans to force through even harsher attacks. The Labour Party's Eamonn Gilmore has posed as the defender of ordinary folk, but has conceded that he will not reverse current cuts and promises to adhere to IMF/ECB stipulations. Labour is prepared to enter into government with Fine Gael - which tells us everything about what is in store under that coalition. As for the Greens, it seems they are finished - they have shown themselves to be a pitiful excuse for a 'radical' party as Fianna Fáil's junior partner.

Meanwhile, Sinn Féin is on the rise in the polls and is predicted to make vital gains, which could mean a position in government. Of course, its record in Stormont can leave no doubt as to which side it will take when actually wielding power. Despite a section of the membership considering itself working class and leftwing, the leadership under Gerry Adams is most definitely pro-capitalist.

Left challenge

At least voters will be able to support a working class candidate in a minimum of 18 out of the 43 constituencies (165 TDs will be elected using a form of proportional representation that favours the big parties). The United Left Alliance has announced its first batch of candidates - 16 are members of either the Socialist Party or People Before Profit, the Socialist Workers Party-dominated 'united front'. The SWP has 'disappeared itself' into the PBP/ULA.

The ULA initiative is to be greatly welcomed and has enormous potential. It is definitely attracting an audience beyond the usual left. The launch meeting in Dublin in November was very large, while the meeting I attended in Cork earlier this month saw an impressive turnout of 250. A significant number of the audience were new to politics and were very keen to get involved in the debate about the way forward. People were passionate and articulate and in fact I would argue that the audience was to the left of the platform.

First up was Joe Higgins, Socialist Party MEP, who made the point that the most important part of the ULA programme was its assertion that there can be no just or sustainable solution under the capitalist market. What we needed was "a credible left representation in the Dáil", linked with a mass movement of opposition outside. A 24-hour general strike would be the start of such a movement that should aim to link up with the working class across Europe. He pledged that the ULA would not enter any coalition and if it did well enough to be considered "viable" in the election it would "review" the possibility of forming a party.

PBP councillor (and leading SWP member) Richard Boyd Barrett spoke next and gave a fiery account of his fight against corruption in his local council, Dún Laoghaire. He said that ULA candidates had signed up to a pledge to be accountable and transparent, and to resist junketeering. All the other parties were committed to the austerity measures and did not deserve any support. However, after the meeting he did advise one audience

member that he should vote Labour or Sinn Féin in the absence of a ULA candidate. Obviously a problem with consistency here.

Ann Foley, also PBP, reminded us of a famous Rosa Luxemburg quote: "Those who do not move do not notice their chains." Luxemburg, of course, also famously said that the struggle for reforms must be linked openly with the fight for revolution. And it is here that the flaw at the heart of the ULA programme can be located. Despite being the creation of two organisations which say they are revolutionary, the programme does not even mention socialism. When this was raised by me, comrade Boyd Barrett retorted: "People are not interested in rhetoric, but in concrete proposals for real change." So socialism for him is an empty phrase, compared to the reforms the ULA is promising. He also said that he did not want to put off those who did not see themselves as socialists.

But the job of revolutionaries is to win people to our political aims, not to draw up a platform we think will reflect workers' current consciousness. And in fact many of those whose illusions in capitalism are being shattered will be open to the idea of a genuine alternative. What people so desperately want is a new society which is democratically run on the basis of need. So how can an open call for working class rule be considered rhetoric - unless you think it is impractical or utopian? Judging by the response of the audience and those who spoke to me afterwards, people were very interested in discussing socialism. There is a deep awareness that there are no easy answers and we must have a vision and a commitment to overthrowing the old. The Socialist Party had previously complained about the SWP refusal to include socialism in the platform, but its comrades did not repeat that criticism on the night.

The question of abortion was also raised from the floor, but it seems the ULA has no policy on a woman's need to control her own body. Mick Barry, SP councillor and general election candidate, said that he has a pro-choice position - he believes in abortion as a right and this is also the position of the SWP. But the ULA has not had the opportunity to sort out all its policies. You would have thought that this vital question would not take much sorting out - they are all agreed anyway. And in the light of the recent European Court of Human Rights decision mandating the Irish government to legislate for abortion (in limited circumstances), it is very much on the agenda. I have been reading an SWP article which argues that it will be a central question for women in the general election. The right wing, backed by the church, is already campaigning to make it a voting issue and deny women their reproductive rights. Why then do our comrades keep quiet? It is shameful.

The meeting ended with the announcement that a local organising event would be held soon and there is to be a national convention in Dublin on February 19. At the moment there is no membership structure or branches, yet the ULA urgently needs to draw people in or risk losing momentum. It would be a tremendous advance to see a bloc of working class TDs elected, but if we are serious we need to set our sights now on establishing a party that openly states its aims, not wait to "review" the question until after the election ●

anne.mcshane@weeklyworker.org.uk

ACTION

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

Tuesdays, 6.45pm to 9pm, St Martin's Community Centre, 43 Carol Street, London NW1 (Camden tube).

January 25: 'Song lines' (Aboriginal Australian mythology). Speaker: Chris Knight.

Picket Blair

Friday January 21, 8am: Protest outside Chilcot enquiry, Queen Elizabeth II Centre, Broad Sanctuary, Westminster, London SW1. Organised by Stop the War: stopwar.org.uk.

No cuts, no fees

Saturday January 22, 12 noon to 6pm: Conference, University College London, Gower Street, London WC1.

Organised by National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts: againstfeesandcuts@gmail.com.

Manchester against the cuts

Saturday January 22, 10.30am: Conference, Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester M2.

Organised by Greater Manchester Association of Trades Union Councils: 01706 913698.

Tusc and local elections

Saturday January 22, 3.30pm: Conference, St Pancras Community Centre, 30 Camden Street, London NW1. Speakers: Owen Herbert (RMT executive), Michael Lavalette (SWP councillor), Clive Heemskerk (SP). Chair: Dave Nellist (SP councillor).

Organised by Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition: www.tusc.org.uk.

Rising against the cuts

Monday January 24, 5pm: Meeting, Congress House, Great Russell Street, London WC1.

Organised by Black Communities Rising Against the Cuts and South East TUC: info@tuc.org.uk.

Reinstate EMA

Saturday January 29, 12 noon: Demonstration, Parliament Square, London.

Organised by Education Activist Network, National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts, University and College Union: educationactivist@googlemail.com.

Labour Briefing

Saturday January 29, 12noon: AGM, St Margaret's House, 21 Old Ford Road, London E2 (nearest tube: Bethnal Green). Speakers include: John McDonnell MP, Christine Shawcroft (LP NEC), George Binette (Camden Unison), Lutfur Rahman (Tower Hamlets mayor).

Organised by Labour Briefing: www.labourbriefing.org.uk.

Bloody Sunday anniversary

Monday January 31, 7.30pm: Meeting, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. 'Political status for Irish republican prisoners.'

Organised by Irish Republican Prisoners Group: gerdowning@btinternet.com.

Unite against the EDL

Saturday February 5, 12 noon: Protest, George Square, Luton town centre.

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

Support Wikileaks

Monday February 7, 7pm: Rally, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. Speakers include: Tariq Ali, Jo Glenton and John Rees.

Organised by Stop the War Coalition: stopwar.org.uk.

Hands Off the People of Iran

Saturday February 12, 10.am to 5pm: Annual conference, University Of London Union, Malet Street, London WC1. Launch of new campaign to fight for the freedom of Jafar Panahi and all political prisoners in Iran. Speakers: John McDonnell MP, Ruben Markarian (Rahe Kargar). Plus discussion: 'WikiLeaks, whistleblowers and war' with Moshé Machover and Mike Macnair. Organised by Hopi: www.hopoi.org.

People's Convention Against Cuts

Saturday February 12, 11am to 5pm: National conference, Friends Meeting House, Euston Road, London NW1. Unite those in and out of work and build resistance to the cuts.

Organised by Right to Work: www.righttowork.org.uk.

Oppose the cuts

Saturday March 26: National demonstration against cuts in public services. Assemble 11am Victoria Embankment, and march to a rally in Hyde Park.

Organised by the Trade Union Congress. www.tuc.org.uk

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.

TUNISIA



Death to Ben Ali's party

Masses in revolt

The people have succeeded in sending one dictatorial president packing. But the old regime remains intact. **James Turley** argues for a pan-Arab revolution led by the working class

Kept quietly out of the western media for decades, Tunisia has now hit the news with a bang.

After weeks of protests, the Tunisian president finally gave up the ghost on January 14. The background to the revolt against the regime of president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali was endemic unemployment, soaring food prices and an authoritarian political system. Millions are in desperate economic conditions. Millions yearn for radical change. When Mohamed Bouazizi, a young man prevented from selling fruits and vegetables on the street in his home town, set himself alight in a final, desperate act of protest, the floodgates opened. Fear gave way to anger. Mass demonstrations paralysed the country - and, even with Ben Ali having fled to Saudi Arabia, still continue.

The president tried every trick in the book to defuse the protests, but, as he swung from brutal repression to ever larger concessions and back, it became increasingly clear that his days were numbered. In order to save the regime he had to go. Various members of his cabinet, army generals and the business elite urged him to quit ... and within a matter of days he did just that (the alleged \$5 billion fortune he and his immediate family amassed is now being 'investigated'). So for the moment the old regime survives, albeit with new faces. Fouad Mebazaa, former speaker of the lower house, has taken over as interim president and now heads a wobbly 'unity coalition'. He promises early elections, press freedom and other concessions. Not that the masses are satisfied. Demonstrations continue.

It is often claimed by apologists for imperialism that the dark days of the cold war, when no dictator was too brutal to enjoy American support so long as he stood firm against the communist threat, are over - that the much-touted western support for freedom, democracy and human rights is sincere. In this respect it is

a happy accident that Ben Ali has wound up in Saudi Arabia - he has fled to the best known counter-example to this mendacious argument, a monarchy sustained by religiously charged despotism, his own regime being a more obscure variant of the same phenomenon.

The Tunisian government, under Ben Ali, was a consistent ally of the US and other imperialist powers (especially its former colonial overlord, France). It colluded, most significantly, in the 'extraordinary rendition' and torture of terror suspects in the aftermath of 9/11 and the war in Afghanistan. It was also the officially stamped 'model' for economic growth in the region, a stalwart example of neoliberal orthodoxy (before, that is, the west suddenly discovered the manifest corruption in the country last week ...). Nicolas Sarkozy came under fire from the French opposition parties for maintaining an undignified silence, as his close ally was ever more starkly rejected by the Tunisian people.

The US, according to cables released by Wikileaks, was not clinging on so tightly; the foremost imperial power in the world, after all, has learnt when it is time to let go of tin-pot client dictators. The author of a cable of July 17 2009 sums up his conclusions at the outset: "By many measures, Tunisia should be a close US ally. But it is not." The rest is a candid assessment of the decay of a "sclerotic" regime, corrupt to the very top.¹

The international media, meanwhile, have done their bit for opacity in international affairs. Those following the BBC's reports of events could be forgiven for thinking it the fastest revolution in history - no mention until the end of last week. That was the tipping point, when it could simply no longer be ignored, as tour operators began to evacuate British holidaymakers amid escalating violence. Rare are the moments when vulgar tourism

gets disrupted so spectacularly by political upheaval.

The governments and big economic interests of the imperialist world, needless to say, will be watching events closely - and doing their damndest to make sure any resulting settlement is to their liking. The coalition government issued in by Ben Ali's fall is already in a crisis of its own. Only days after coming into existence two of its 'worker' components peeled off due to ongoing popular pressure (showing its worth - not the former 'official communist' Movement Ettajdid - Movement for Renewal). The momentum is clearly to the left. Having taken cabinet positions for a few days, the Union of Freedom and Labour and the General Labour Union now demand the removal of all ministers belonging to Ben Ali's Democratic Constitutional Rally (the party seems to be disintegrating). Indeed the trade unions have turned very rapidly from tame state-run institutions into a leading force in the protests.

None of this is to the liking of the US and other imperialist powers. They want another colour revolution, a jasmine revolution, not a real people's revolution. This was always going to be problematic. Nevertheless, if the US gets its way, we should expect a revamped coalition which will ensure an 'orderly' transition to free (or at least apparently free) elections, at such time when everyone has calmed down (and the US has found a way to give its favoured agents a head-start in any polls).

At present, the Tunisian masses are unlikely to bite on any such kind of arrangement, at least without some serious concessions. The chants of "Ben Ali out!" have been superseded by "RCD out!" Those on the streets know full well that the whole gang at the summit of his party have been holding them down for decades, while lining their own pockets - not just the top man himself.

That raises the possibility of the exact opposite development - far from Tunisia stabilising in line with the needs of imperialism, other North African populations will get the bug; or, worse still, the unrest will spread throughout the Arab world. This possibility should not be underplayed. Neighbouring Algeria has recently seen large-scale food riots of its own. Meanwhile the regimes in Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Syria, Libya and Jordan are petrified that the contagion might spread. In Egypt, the most important Arab state by far, pro-Tunisia demonstrators have taken to the streets. The government of Hosni Mubarak is corrupt, nepotistic, deeply unpopular and the masses live in dire poverty (50% of its 80 million have to make do with less than \$2 a day).

Communists, certainly, urge the masses in the Arab world to seize the moment opened up by Ben Ali's fall, and the continuing protests in Tunisia. The demand must not be elections after a period of calm. On the contrary the demand must be for the immediate release of all political prisoners, the lifting of all state proscriptions on 'subversive' political organisations (there have been a wave of arrests in particular of leftwingers). The role of Islam as the state religion must be ended. Trade union must be given full rights to operate. The people should arm themselves as a particular matter of urgency - given that the state response to protest has already claimed the lives of over 100 demonstrators. The police and the army must be replaced by a popular militia.

Instead of Mebazaa's interim government we should be calling for a provisional government born of revolution that will take back the billions looted by Ben Ali and sweep away the whole RCD regime (a position advocated by the Maoist Workers Communist Party, which ends its response to Ben Ali's fall with calls for a provisional government, constituent assembly and democratic

republic²).

Necessarily there must be widespread nationalisation. Ben Ali and the RCD regime privatised much of the economy for its own narrow benefit. There must also be far-reaching democratisation. The existing parliament must be closed down. After that the position of president must be abolished, along with the whole upper house of parliament. A successful uprising crowned by a revolutionary provisional government can then oversee elections to a popular assembly (elected on the basis of proportional representation).

But things can and must go further. After all, many countries in the region are facing the same issues over which Ben Ali came to grief - rising food prices, progressive immiseration of masses of people. There is also a fuzzy but nevertheless real, shared Arab national identity - a common language and shared history - that allows ideas and movements to jump borders very quickly. There are some indications, moreover, that this spread of unrest is already happening - *The Guardian* reports "a spate of self-immolations" in North Africa.³

How far such a pan-Arab movement is taken depends, ultimately, on what political forces gain hegemony. The relative prominence of the left and the workers' movement in the Tunisian protests is heartening, when Islamists have in the last decades increasingly become the beneficiaries of grievances with the *status quo*. It is very possible that, despite the ethnic and religious distinctions between the two cases, the idea of an Islamic Revolution has lost much of its sheen thanks to recent events in Iran •

james.turley@weeklyworker.org.uk

Notes

1. www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/217138.
2. <http://tunisiasolidarity.wordpress.com/related-items>.
3. *The Guardian* January 17.

INTERVIEW

No to fake new regime

London-based Tunisian socialist Nadim Mahjoub looks forward to an Arab revolution. Ben Lewis spoke to him

It is said that there are decades when weeks happen and weeks when decades happen. Clearly in Tunisia we are witnessing a shift from the former to the latter - not that the BBC initially had much to say on it ...

The role of the media has been in keeping with imperialist plots. I say 'plots', not 'plans', because I do not think the imperialists have many plans at the moment - any they did possess have been clearly undermined by the explosion of social unrest in Tunisia.

It is not simply that it took the BBC 26 days to come up with a headline story on Tunisia: its role has constantly been to distort the reality of what has been going on. On January 18, for example, its main story spoke of a "new regime" in Tunisia. It is clearly not a new regime at all, as the thousands of people on the streets will tell you. So it is quite interesting - initially the BBC ignored what was going on, but now it is clearly throwing its weight behind the new 'national unity government'. Look on the BBC's Arabic service, for example, and you will find many 'intellectuals' and others whose opinions are respected by the establishment using the pretext of security to argue that change must be moderate and the so-called "new regime" must be supported.

Actually the "new" regime's supporters are more than willing to send in the security forces to suppress the protestors. But all this actually misses the point - the pro-Ali security forces and armed gangs have been faced down and replaced by the army. In my assessment the army will not shoot at the protestors. On the contrary, we have seen instances of fraternisation between the army and the people.

This media picture reflects some sort of 'colour revolution' agenda then?

Absolutely - similar to those in

eastern Europe, where the CIA played a major role in supporting bourgeois forces within the countries concerned.

What is your perspective on the current situation?

My perspective is to fully support the people who have been on the streets in their thousands - especially those in Tunis who have suffered sustained repression at the hands of the so-called security forces. I do not believe that the halfway measure of the new coalition government will solve any of the fundamental problems which sparked the protests: namely institutional corruption, lack of democracy, economic hardship and so on.

I also want to point out that we are not only dealing with Tunisia here - it is not only in Tunisia where there is a wholly corrupt and dictatorial regime which rigs elections. We see numerous monarchical, autocratic, bourgeois regimes in cahoots with western imperialism - particularly French imperialism - in the case of Tunisia. So when I look at these events I do so from the perspective of the whole region of North Africa and the Middle East, with Tunisia as the spark for change everywhere. We have already seen food riots in Algeria, unrest in Egypt and even protestors in Yemen singing the Tunisian national anthem!

Your assessment of Tunisia as a spark seems to be echoed by commentary in the media, particularly in relation to Egypt.

It is quite clear that the imperialists are most fearful of a similar explosion in Egypt. The thing to remember is that in some ways the workers' and students' movement in Egypt was more advanced than in Tunisia. The strikes of textile workers, tax-collectors and so on a few years ago were very strong, with slogans surfacing about toppling the whole regime. Egypt is an extremely important ally of the US and, indeed, Israel. Quite clearly this is a very delicate situation from the standpoint of the imperialists.

I have heard you talk about the slogan of 'the Arab revolution'. How widespread is this sentiment?

I think that it is becoming more rooted in society, partly because the economic crisis is affecting huge swathes of the population - not just in North Africa, but right across the world. I have seen economic statistics on eastern Europe, for example - the time is certainly ripe for social explosions. The world is far more unstable than it was five years ago.

People are bound to draw inspiration from events unfolding in a country that was supposed to be one of economic prosperity: sun, sea and sand, etc. So, although the idea of an Arab revolution might not be in the consciousness of the majority at the moment, this situation could change quite quickly, given the nature of the crisis and the similar effects it is having in and around Tunisia.

Hopefully people beyond the region - in Britain in the struggle against cuts, for example - can be empowered by the events in a small country like Tunisia.

In 2003 we also saw large-scale demonstrations of students and trade unionists against the regime, but these were

suppressed. What has changed now?

Something deeper has happened - I have never seen such determination from people on the streets. For them it is not about Ben Ali, but about toppling the whole regime. The current protests can certainly be seen as a continuation of the opposition organised by, for example, the leftwing coalition of trade unions in 2003. These demonstrations were organised independently of the UGTT (Tunisian General Union of Labour), which really has been a tool of the state in maintaining social peace. Just like in 2003 it is the trade unions that organised the protests and demonstrations, but what we are seeing now is on a different scale - the army has sided with the protests, for example.

What about the student movement? What explains its relative strength?

The student movement has always played an important opposition role. The regime made a big mistake because, although it tried to clamp down on all currents in the student movement, its focus was on the Islamists. So leftwing students had more leeway and continued to organise. Now that the universities have been closed down, thousands of students are on the streets, alongside workers and a section of the middle class and intellectuals.

What about the role of the Islamist opposition? For example, Mohammed Ali Harrath, CEO of the Islam channel, has been on the BBC (he also spoke at the AGM of the Labour Representation Committee). What do you think of his analysis?

I disagree with him. When he said there was a revolution in Tunisia, I disagreed with him. When he claimed that the regime was toppled I disagreed with him again. He is from the wing that claims to be moderate and not for an Islamic state. This is in contrast to other groups which are openly for the Tunisian caliphate - ie, no capitalism, but no democracy either. I am not sure how he comes to the conclusion that the regime has already been toppled. What was taking place was a revolutionary movement aimed at toppling the regime.

What is the Islamist movement's relationship to the protests and to the national unity government?

The Islamist movement is certainly for the toppling of the regime and supportive of the protests. However, this movement has never been of one colour - it consists of different groups with different aims - some would certainly be tempted by the prospect of a seat in government, for example, but this would depend on the broadening of the 'national unity' administration.

We have seen in some Arab countries how the 'moderate Islamists' have been invited or made their way into parliament, but not to topple dictatorships. A famous quote that is still reiterated is the one by the leader of Tunisian Islamist movement, 'Al-Nahda', after he was released from prison in 1987: "I have faith in Allah and Ben Ali." The head of the movement that publishes the Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper, which is based in London, still faces the prospect of life

imprisonment if he returns to Tunisia. He has publicly stated that if this is lifted then he will return. Again, this could happen. Indeed, a few years ago the Islamists joined with other parties in a coalition.

Of course, all of this really depends on the opposition movement and how far it goes. If it shifts even further to the left and deepens its support, then this might make those forces both inside and outside Tunisia currently talking about a broad government opt for more desperate measures. One of the problems faced by the movement is the absence of a large workers' party which can provide leadership and quickly seize the initiative.

A problem, of course, that is not confined to Tunisia. What are the main forces on the left?

I will not speak about those supposedly 'left' groups who joined the coalition government. Of the rest, the Workers Communist Party of Tunisia is the biggest and has been dominant in the student movement for quite a long time. In addition there are various Trotskyist groupings which are very small in size - it is very difficult to assess their relative strengths without being on the ground, but they too were largely confined to the university campuses. The WCPT is in part successful because it combines underground activity with open work in the media - it has appeared on Al-Jazeera, France 24, etc. But they are not a large force across the country as a whole, and tend to be concentrated in particular areas amongst students and union militants.

The WCPT's call for a constituent assembly is finding some resonance amongst the trade union left: ie those leading the marches and demonstrations currently. With such agitation there is a good chance that they can spread this message and even influence the army. This is crucial actually. As long as the army is on the side of the protestors then there is a real possibility of the movement spreading. But all this is very difficult to predict at the moment.

What can the British workers' movement do in order to support its brothers and sisters in Tunisia?

I am involved in the Tunisia Solidarity Campaign (although I am giving you my personal view). We are holding our second meeting this week and one of the things we will be discussing is how to link the British workers' movement with trade unions in Tunisia. We will also discuss how we can raise funds for Tunisian trade unionists. Another way to support the Tunisian people is to get in contact with the forces on the ground and do all that we can to counter the lies of the media - with all its talk of a "new regime" the BBC is effectively treating the Tunisian people as idiots, and we should not stand for it.

What is your own political background?

I left Tunisia legally in late 2000, having previously been deprived of a passport for seven years. I was tortured in 1991 for distributing a tract. I was banned from teaching in state schools because of my political activities in the underground Communist Union of Tunisian Youth, which is linked to the WCPT and is very active in the universities. I am no longer involved, but I am pleased the party refuses to join the 'national unity' government coalition ●

ben.lewis@weeklyworker.org.uk



Don't trust the army

THEORY

Marxism and the

Jairus Banaji *History as theory: essays on modes of production and exploitation* Historical Materialism books series, Vol 25, Leiden, 2010, pp406, £81

In March 2010 the Indian novelist, Arundhati Roy, published in the journal *Outlook India* a substantial and sympathetic report of the activities of the Naxalite (Indian Maoist) guerrillas in Chattisgarh state in eastern India.¹ Roy's report has been very widely circulated on the web. It has also been the subject of furious attacks from Indian establishment politicians and the threat of prosecution under 'anti-terrorism' laws (though more serious threats to prosecute Roy, this time for sedition under the Indian penal code, have been made in relation to another article which supported the secession of Kashmir).²

Shortly after Roy's article was published, leftist and academic Jairus Banaji posted a short sharp critique of it on the Indian political blog *Kafila*. If Roy's original article was savaged by the Indian political establishment, comrade Banaji's critique has given rise to almost equally sharp polemics on the Indian left.³ Banaji has elaborated his critique in a substantial article, 'The ironies of Indian Maoism' in the autumn 2010 issue of the Socialist Workers Party's theoretical journal, *International Socialism*.

Why is this current political debate relevant to *History as theory*, Banaji's collection of essays written between 1976 and 2009, mainly on the problems of Marxist interpretation of ancient and medieval history? The answer is that Banaji's theoretical arguments are in the last analysis targeted on those used by Indian 'official communists' and Maoists in support of their respective political lines.

'Official communists' argue, the world over, for a strategic alliance between the working class movement and sections of the bourgeoisie. In the old central imperialist countries this is usually presented as an 'anti-monopoly' alliance. In the countries which were formerly colonised, in contrast, the argument is that capitalism is not fully developed, because of colonial or neo-colonial subordination: there are significant 'survivals of pre-capitalist relations of production'. 'Official communists' claim that it is therefore necessary to ally with the 'national' bourgeoisie against imperialism and/or with the 'democratic' bourgeoisie against the old landlords and similar classes to 'complete the bourgeois revolution'.

Maoists classically argued that the same 'survivals of pre-capitalist relations of production' mean that the prime revolutionary class is the peasantry. Just as - according to Maoists - the working class of the imperialist countries forms a labour aristocracy relative to that of the colonial countries, so the urban working class of the colonial countries forms a labour aristocracy relative to the rural exploited classes. The strategy for revolution is therefore to 'surround the cities'. It is this strategy that the Naxalites have been attempting to apply, with very varying levels of success, in parts of India - mainly in eastern states - since the 1970s.

There are very substantial objections to the arguments both of the 'official communists' and of the Maoists which can fall within the same general framework of the development of capitalism out of pre-capitalist societies, and the idea

that some pre-capitalist relations of production survive in 'third world' countries, including India.

For example, both the 'old Bolsheviks' of Lenin's time and Trotsky alike argued: (a) that the capitalist class would not seek to overthrow the pre-capitalist state (because it was more afraid of the rising working class than of the declining pre-capitalist classes); and (b) that the peasantry could only play a revolutionary role if the urban proletariat *took the lead*. They differed as to whether contradictions between the urban proletariat and the peasantry would mean that the resulting regime would fail in the absence of immediate support from the western proletariat taking power (Trotsky) or whether a 'democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry' could be (relatively) stable (Lenin). But neither would have agreed with a strategic class alliance with the bourgeoisie (the line of the Russian Mensheviks) or with peasant leadership in the revolution (the line of the Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party or Narodniks).

Equally, but less immediately dependent on Russian debates, it could be argued: (c) that the global course of events since 1945 has shown that the 'national' or 'democratic' bourgeoisie is an utterly untrustworthy ally for the working class; or (d) that the Maoists' narrative of the Chinese revolution as a guerrilla struggle based on the peasantry and ending with 'surrounding the cities' is false: the Chinese Red Army in the 1940s was a large regular field army controlling substantial territory and supplied with munitions by the USSR. And the Chinese Communist Party of this period, if in a sense it based itself on the peasantry, continued to recruit *cadre* from the urban classes.

Banaji's objections are more fundamental than these. In 'Ironies' he argues that a substantial part of what the Naxalites identify as 'peasants' are in reality already rural proletarians. Hence the Naxalites succeed - in their base-building phases - when they build what are in substance local rural proletarian mass movements. And hence they fail - in their bids to hold onto and govern territory against the Indian state - when they try to follow the Chinese example.

In *History as theory*, Banaji goes further. He argues that the whole 'traditional Marxist' scheme of differences between modes of production which are defined by the mode of *exploitation* - slavery in classical antiquity, serfdom under feudalism, wage labour under capitalism - is to be rejected. This scheme is, he says at several points, "teleological" (without explaining what he means by that). The objections are backed by depth empirical research, which he claims has been lacking in many Marxist writers who support the mode of exploitation schema.

This running argument makes *History as theory* more than 'selected essays'. It ties together into a single argument chapter 2, 'Modes of production in a materialist conception of history' (1977); chapter 3, 'Historical arguments for a logic of deployment in pre-capitalist agriculture' (1992); chapter 4, the previously unpublished 'Workers before capitalism'; chapter 5, 'The fictions of free labour' (2003);

chapter 6, 'Agrarian history and the labour-organisation of Byzantine large estates' (1999); chapters 7 and 8, two critiques of Chris Wickham's *Framing the early middle ages* (Oxford 2005), one new and one from 2009; chapter 9, 'Islam, the Mediterranean and the rise of capitalism' (2007); chapter 10, 'Capitalist domination and the small peasantry; the Deccan districts in the late 19th century' (1977); and two new concluding chapters, 11 and 12, 'Trajectories of accumulation or 'transitions' to capitalism', and 'Modes of production: a synthesis'.

If these arguments of Banaji's are right, those of the Indian 'official communists' and Naxalites are not merely falsified in the way that Trotskyist or old Bolshevik objections would falsify them. They fall to the ground as irrelevant to reality, because based on a false *a priori* construction about historical development.

Overkill

At the same time, however, if the full effect is given to Banaji's negative critique of the 'traditional Marxist' scheme, but no positive alternative scheme of general historical development is put in its place, Marx's and Engels' core arguments for the leading role of the proletariat in the struggle against capitalism *also* fall to the ground and for the same reason. What is left is merely an ethical or utopian socialism. This ethical or utopian socialism may prioritise the working class, as Banaji's actual politics does. But it lacks serious and solid grounds for supposing that working class self-activity under capitalism points towards a future without capitalism. The result, in other words, is theoretical overkill.

There is a sense in which theoretical overkill is predictable from Banaji's history. Banaji studied classics at Oxford University in the 1960s and went on to masters-level postgraduate work there before returning to India in 1972. As a student he became a member of International Socialism, the precursor of the SWP. In India, campus activism at Jawaharlal Nehru University Delhi in 1972-74 was followed by labour research and organising in Bombay in the late 1970s-80s.⁴

In the late 1980s Banaji returned to Oxford and to classics to write a doctoral thesis on the late antique agrarian economy in Egypt, presented in 1992, which was published in a revised form in 2001 as *Agrarian change in late antiquity: gold, labour and aristocratic dominance* (Oxford). *Agrarian change*, though its origins as a doctoral thesis make it tightly argued and densely documented, is plainly part of the same general project on agrarian relations and modes of production as the essays in *Theory as history*. Since the 90s Banaji has held a range of senior research posts in various universities.⁵

His joining IS when he was a student in the late 60s/early 70s cannot have been an 'only show in town' decision. Oxford University at the time had a significant Communist Party with a real intellectual life. The Healyite 'orthodox Trotskyist' Socialist Labour League was mainly based at the car factory, but also had a significant presence on campus. Later a mad sect, the SLL at this period intervened seriously in the academic left as well as the trade unions. The

Mandelite International Marxist Group started its presence in the town at Ruskin, the trade unionists' college, but by 1969-70 was significantly present on the university campus. The Maoist CPB (Marxist-Leninist) had a small but active branch in the city. And, of course, there were the usual recurring, ephemeral, semi-organised groups of anarchists, libertarian socialists, situationists, etc, who were and are found in every university town. The Oxford far left had various common projects in which they worked together, polemicised with each other and so on. Banaji's choice to go with IS must have reflected not merely general radicalisation and activist commitment, but an active preference for IS over the alternatives.

The SWP is today a fairly standard ex-Trotskyist group evolving towards a sectarian left version of 'official communism'. But in the late 1960s to very early 1970s, before the 'Bolshevisation' of the mid-1970s and the 'party turn' of 1977, the IS was something quite different. Its international politics were closer to those of today's Alliance for Workers' Liberty. Its 'class struggle strategy' for Britain and Europe was closer to that of today's Commune group.

The IS's origins were in a line of argument most clearly summed up in Tony Cliff's *State capitalism in Russia* (1955): the argument that the USSR was a 'state capitalist' regime. Some other authors have suggested that 'state capitalism' in Russia was an extreme form of the protectionism and high-level state control common to transitions from feudalism to capitalism. For Cliff, in contrast, it was an expression of capitalist *decline*, a stage of monopolised capitalism beyond imperialism.⁶

This argument was - as I suggested above that Banaji's argument in *History as theory* may be - theoretical overkill. The post-war 'official' Trotskyists, following Trotsky's 1939-40 arguments on the partition of Poland, said that the Sovietisation of eastern Europe and the Chinese revolution was somehow 'progressive' (whatever the explanation). Cliff's theory rejected this in the most categorical way possible: the regime was part of the obvious enemy, capitalism.

But to achieve this result involved identifying as 'capitalism' a regime without unemployment (instead there was massive make-work and low labour productivity), which suffered from endemic and episodic sectoral underproduction, not from cyclical crises of overproduction.

It also involved casually conflating capitalism with pre-capitalist modes of production and these with each other. Thus Cliff at one point in *State capitalism in Russia* made an analogy between the Soviet economy and those of ancient China, Egypt and Babylonia (traditionally described by Marxists as examples of the 'Asiatic mode of production'); at another he cites state ownership of the land under the Mamluk regime as 'Arab feudalism', showing that class society is compatible with the absence of private property in land.⁷

New left and 'teleology'

As well as this theoretical overkill, the IS in the late 1950s to early 1970s

was deeply influenced by the 'new left', which emerged after the crisis in the western communist parties caused by 'de-Stalinisation' and the 1956 Hungarian revolution. In the 70s some ISers - notably Banaji's slightly younger contemporary at Oxford, Alex Callinicos - were also influenced by French left-'official communist' theorist, Louis Althusser.⁸

The question of 'modes of production' was problematic for the 'new left' in four ways, two coming from 'official communism' and two from the western academy. The first was that 'official communist' doctrine justified the tyrannical character of the Soviet and similar regimes as a regrettable necessary stage in the transition from capitalism to communism proper. The second was that this doctrine was also used to justify further 'necessary stages': the 'advanced democracy' which was supposed to be the outcome of the 'anti-monopoly alliance' in the imperialist countries, and the necessary capitalist stage in the colonised/neo-colonised countries.

The third problem was the great emphasis placed on the supposedly teleological character of Marx's account of history by Karl Popper and a broad range of sub-Popperian authors across several academic disciplines: authors who built on Max Weber's 'ideal types', opponents of 'historicism' in anthropology, and so on.⁹ The fourth was the US state funding of social democratic politicians and authors in the cold war period. This meant - for example - widespread willingness to deploy Karl Kautsky's theoretical objections to the 'prematurity' of the Russian Revolution, based on a theory of necessary stages, in favour of the idea of 'Leninism opposed to Marxism'.

'New left' authors and the activists who used their ideas responded in two ways. One - as it were the right wing of the 'new left' - could perhaps be called 'premature Eurocommunists'. 'Marxist humanists' like Roger Garaudy in France and EP Thompson in England called on the ethical and humanistic elements of the writings of the early Marx against the 'scientism' of the later Marx, Engels, Kautsky and Stalin. They accepted the general frame of capitalist constitutionalism as protecting important liberties that Stalinism destroyed; and they retained the general political framework of the people's front policy, merely getting rid of the 'inhuman' role of the party.

The second line of approach was to resurrect the arguments of the revolutionary syndicalist, Georges Sorel, in *The decomposition of Marxism* (1908) - for the most part not directly. Rather the arguments used were those of authors within the socialist movement, but to some extent influenced by the revolutionary syndicalists, like Anton Pannekoek; and authors from the left wing of the early Comintern, like Karl Korsch and (in the early 1920s) Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci. Rosa Luxemburg, viewed pretty much exclusively through the prism of *Reform or revolution* (1900) and *The mass strike, the political party and the trade unions* (1906) became almost the totem of this sort of 'new left'.

This trend's political inheritance from Sorel was a syndicalist focus on the immediate class struggle at the point of production - strikes, and if

theoretical overkill

possible unofficial ones. Its theoretical inheritance was the belief that the ‘historical materialist’ arguments shared by the young Marx and Engels (and, in reality, by the *late* Marx and Engels) could be discarded. The centre of Marxism was *Capital* and, in particular, the Hegelian dialectical exposition of the first part of volume 1 of *Capital*. These arguments provided the exclusive ground for the leading role of the working class and could be read to give a central role to the strike as the moment at which the working class, otherwise merely within capitalism, became an actor against it.

The ideas of this ‘left new left’ could be mixed up with elements taken from Maoism or from Che Guevara. By the late 1960s it had also had a profound influence not only on the IS, but also on the ‘official’ Trotskyist Unified Secretariat of the Fourth International. The ‘orthodox’ Trotskyist opponents of this influence, in so far as they did not collapse simply into ‘official communism’ (the US SWP, and so on) have since then largely collapsed into it themselves. It has thus shaped the ideas of the far left well beyond people who are conscious of its origins.

Louis Althusser was a left academic within the Parti Communiste Français somewhat sympathetic to Maoism, who deployed a highly selective version of the ‘left new left’ critique of historicism and ‘historical materialism’ to provide arguments against the PCF’s ‘Marxist humanist’ critics. Althusser in a certain sense preserved the idea of distinct modes of production, but he did so by effecting a complete severance *between* modes of production, which cease to form a general historical narrative. Rather Althusser adapted the ‘structural anthropology’ of Claude Lévi-Strauss, itself derived from the ‘structural linguistics’ of Ferdinand Saussure. The key move was that ‘synchrony’ (structural causation within a mode of production) overdetermines ‘diachrony’ (historical development). Like the ‘left new lefts’ Althusser insists that the only real Marxism is that of *Capital*, claiming that an ‘epistemological break’ lay between the early Marx and the Marx of *Capital*.

The intellectual context within which Banaji constructed his early arguments was thus one in which it was an orthodoxy not needing much explanation that the ‘Stalinist’, ‘Kautskyite’ or ‘Engelsian’ sequence of modes of production (primitive communism, Asiatic mode, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, communism in a higher form) was wrong, teleological, deterministic-automatistic, and so on, and that Marxism had to start from *Capital* Vol 1 and nowhere else.

Within this framework, references to ‘modes of production’ have to be read not as phases of a narrative, but as ‘ideal types’ in the style of Max Weber: or, to put it another way, as a historian’s equivalent of the ‘comparative statics’ which are foundational in the various forms of marginalist economics.

These assumptions remain present in Banaji’s work down to the present day *as assumptions*, not argued positions. What his work does is to offer empirical historical evidence, informed by economic analysis, against authors and tendencies who *do* use the sequence of modes of production in historical and political argument.

True or false?

What I have said so far perhaps helps to explain why Banaji’s arguments have taken the shape they have. But it certainly does not prove they are false. On the contrary, the essays are very

high-quality historical work.

It seems to me that Banaji succeeds in demonstrating certain of his specific claims. In particular:

1. There was very substantial use of wage labour in agriculture (and elsewhere) in many pre-modern societies. (Chapters 3, 4 and 6).

2. There is a spectrum between the considerable degree of freedom (of movement, of choice of employer, etc) of many workers in the more developed capitalist countries and the total unfreedom of chattel slaves. Neither the chattel slavery of Africans in the early modern to 19th century plantation economies nor forms of indentured labour, debt-bondage, sharecropping and so on, then or more recently, can be said to show the existence of (in any strong sense) pre-capitalist social relations of production in a country (chapter 5).

3. Following the last two points, phenomena of labour relations at the point of production *alone* cannot be used to identify the mode of production in the larger sense or to describe the larger society as pre-capitalist (*passim* in the book).

4. Following on from all this, the ‘Brenner thesis’ that capitalism emerged in England as a result of a specific mutation in labour relations in agriculture is to be rejected. Rather capitalism, at least in its modern sense, emerged in the later middle ages in the Mediterranean interface of Catholic Christendom, Byzantium and the Dar al-Islam (chapter 9).

5. Indian agriculture in the 19th century was dominated by *capitalist* relations, although these were mainly ones of (in Marx’s terminology) the formal subsumption of labour under capital (household commodity production dependent on and organised by merchants and moneylenders) rather than ones of the real subsumption of labour under capital (large-scale shipping, factory production and mechanised or semi-mechanised large-scale farming).

Any narrative of historical materialism will therefore have to take serious account of Banaji’s arguments and evidence on these issues.

On the other hand, a number of Banaji’s assumptions, and in some cases his formal claims, are more problematic. It will clarify what follows to state some points as briefly as possible. A second part of this review will provide more supporting argument for some of these points.

First and at the most superficial level, it seems to me that the line of argument connecting reformism and Stalinism to historical materialist ‘automatism’, ‘scientism’, etc is false as a characterisation of the history of the workers’ movement and leads to dead-end politics. I have made this argument elsewhere and will not elaborate further here, since, though I think it is part of the *background* to Banaji’s argument, it is not part of the argument itself.¹⁰

Second. The argument that the idea of the sequence of modes of production is ‘teleological’ is unsound as a matter of epistemology and historical method, quite irrespective of whether the sequence of historical periods constructed is a Marxist, or any other, interpretation of history.

What we actually have from Marx and Engels on this topic are a few general sketches of the approach (in *The German ideology*, the *Communist manifesto*, the *Contribution to the critique of political economy*); some of Marx’s rough notes; a polemic by Engels against the rival ‘force

theory’ (in the *Anti-Dühring*); Engels’ *Origin of the family* based on the contemporary anthropology and on aspects of classical antiquity; and some journalism and private correspondence. This material was all written before the publication of the vast bulk of the written sources for ancient and medieval society now available, let alone the information generated by archaeology. To treat Marx’s and Engels’ comments as holy writ for modern historical investigation is therefore obvious nonsense.

There are, however, solid *non-historical* grounds in human biological nature and our material needs for the core of historical materialism - that the ways in which historical societies produce their material subsistence constrain the sort of general social orders possible. Similar grounds support the rejection of methodological individualism (humans are a social species) and of marginalism (there are physical minimum subsistence levels, maximum working hours and maximum quantities of land). These grounds require the analysis of societies and their dynamics in terms of the social division of labour.

The productive character of this basic approach as a research paradigm in history is evident in historical work produced in the last century (Banaji’s work is a very distinguished example). This evidence also suggests that certain aspects of Marx’s and Engels’ specific arguments and comments on aspects of the past were insightful beyond the historical evidence available to them. But we have to be willing to reconstruct their specific theories and narratives very radically or replace them, so far as this is required by the evidence.¹¹ The question is whether reconstruction on this sort of basis will produce similar arguments to those of *Theory as history*.

Origins of the present

Third. Because of his assumptions about teleology and so on, Banaji simply does not address in any *systematic* way the problems of grand-scale narrative of the origins of the present and of historical periodisation and transitions. Nor, apart from in the very concrete chapter 9 on the Mediterranean origins of capitalism, does he address the specific aspect of this problem which presents itself as the historical, economic and social-scientific debates about the origins of European priority in the development of capitalist modernity.

The result is that the most theoretical sections of the book - chapters 1 and 2, 10 and 11 - are relatively disappointing: their outcome seems to be merely negative critique, and fiddling round the edges of the classical Marxist scheme.

There is no engagement with the attempts at a general reconstruction by authors coming from the Marxist tradition, like - for example - Igor Diakonoff’s *The paths of history* (1999) or David Laibman’s *Deep history* (2006). Nor are fully non-Marxist attempts to address these issues tackled, like - for example - John A Hall’s *Powers and liberties* (1986), or Michael Mann’s *Sources of social power* (1986-93). There is also a large volume of neoclassical and ‘institutionalist’ economists’ writing on history from marginalist perspectives - much worthless, but some containing real insights - produced since the 1980s.

Fourth. This ‘missing link’ affects the plausibility of some of the

interpretations in *History as theory*: in particular, the two chapters of critique of Chris Wickham on the early middle ages (chapters 7 and 8).

The starting point here is a persistent controversy between ‘modernist’ interpretations of the economy of the Roman empire (and, in particular, the late empire), which stress its similarities to European capitalism in the period before steam-driven industry, and ‘primitivist’ interpretations, which stress its differences.

Fashions among ancient historians have shifted on this topic. In the 19th century the ‘modernist’ view was largely dominant. In the 20th, the dominant interpretation shifted towards the ‘primitivist’ side. In the very recent past there has been a shift back towards ‘modernism’. Banaji places himself on the ‘modernist’ side of this dispute, while he argues that Wickham’s theoretical construction assumes ‘primitivism’.

The shifting fashions have an ideological aspect. But the absence of a clear, settled view is also partly due to the severe limitations of the historical sources for the shape of the Mediterranean and European economies before the central middle ages, when tax and judicial records, etc begin to survive in sufficient quantities to be plausibly representative.

In addition, the sources we do have may be analogous to the words linguists call ‘false friends’, where the same word is used in two languages with different meanings. The reason for this is that (as Marx observed in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*) Europeans down to the 19th century were very prone to ‘copying’ classical antiquity. Words and forms may therefore be the same in appearance, but very different in content when read in context.

This is intensely true of legal sources. The same limited body of Roman legal texts was read from the 11th-12th century down to the 18th as the basis for medieval law; from the 16th-19th century as the basis for overthrowing medieval law in order to ‘return’ to an imagined ‘law of business Rome’ - ie, create law fit for capitalism; and from the 19th onward as evidence for scholarly interpretations of the Roman society and economy, whether ‘modernist’ or ‘primitivist’.

Hence, legal sources cannot be read as transparently expressing current economic practices. This is not only true of legislation and treatises, but also of written contracts and pleadings in disputes before judges: these documents are products intended to create legal results, and therefore using the language of the law, even if this language refers to long-obsolete practices or involves fictions. Using them as evidence for the social relations of production requires an interpretive context which includes the structure and evolution of the legal order as a whole - which, of course, poses that of the evolution of the social order as a whole - in order to disentangle norm and practice.

In *Agrarian change in late antiquity* Banaji’s use of legal sources is able to approach success in this task, because the main body of the work is narrowly focused on the specific evolution of the *Egyptian* agrarian economy in antiquity - which was always a special case and is much better evidenced than elsewhere. In the critiques of Wickham, which necessarily have a broader focus, some of the arguments are more problematic.

This is also, I think, *because* the underlying structure of Banaji’s

negative critique of the relation between mode of production and mode of exploitation in *History as theory*, and his non-engagement with the larger ‘origins of the present’ issues, does not really allow for full integration of the questions of the evolution of legal norms.

Fifth. By the rejection of ‘teleology’ and so on, Banaji rules out in principle the interpretation of particular forms as transitional. He makes the superficially legitimate point that there is a risk that the ‘transitions’ will swallow up the ‘mode of production’. However, arguably we *should* read ‘modes of production’ as forms of social dynamics which rise and decline, and which only have strong direct descriptive value at the moment of apogee. (This moment should be placed for feudalism somewhere around the 11th-13th centuries; for classical antiquity somewhere *before* the fall of the Roman republic; for capitalism - probably - in the 19th century.)

If so, the transitional forms will include *not only* forms which are visible precursors of a new order, but also specific adaptations to decline which do not foreshadow the new, and blind-alley experiments which fail.

This point has more specific political implications. The formal subsumption of labour under capital in Marx’s writing is transitional between household production and capitalism proper. It is empirically observable that it does not in itself produce the same political dynamics as the real subsumption of labour under capital. This is because only the real subsumption of labour under capital *forces* labour to recognise that it is engaged in a cooperative enterprise which is part of a general social division of labour. The implication of this observation is not that Banaji’s critique of Indian Maoism and ‘official communism’ is exactly *false*, but that, in positing simple labour self-organising as the alternative to these trends, it is not merely theoretical overkill, but also may fail to address issues that need to be addressed.

I will elaborate on some of these points in the second part of the review ●
Mike Macnair

mike.macnair@weeklyworker.org.uk

Notes

1. www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?264738.
2. *The Hindu* April 22 2010 (www.hindu.com/2010/04/22/stories/2010042263141100.htm); *Wall Street Journal* November 30 2010 (http://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2010/11/30/does-criticizing-india-count-as-sedition-aroundhati-roy-will-find-out).
3. http://kafila.org/2010/03/22/response-to-aroundhati-roy-jairus-banaji. Representative criticisms can be seen in the comments to the original post, but there is a lot more debate elsewhere on the web.
4. ‘Interview with Jairus Banaji’ in the Sri Lankan online magazine *Lines* 2006: http://issues.lines-magazine.org/Art_May06_Aug06/jairus_short.htm.
5. From the preface to *Agrarian change* and from various university websites.
6. This as well as earlier documents by Cliff are available on the Marxists Internet Archive at www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/index.htm.
7. Chapter 6: www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1955/statecap/ch06.htm#s6; Appendix: www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1955/statecap/appendix.htm#s4.
8. A Callinicos, *Althusser’s Marxism* London 1976.
9. István Mészáros in *The power of ideology* (London 1989) critiques authors of the first type.
10. Rosalind Coward deploys the second type in *Patriarchal precedents* (London 1983) to provide Eurocommunist arguments against Marxism.
11. I argued in ‘Darwinism and Marxism’ (*Weekly Worker* December 19 2002) that Steven Jay Gould’s *The structure of evolutionary theory* (2002) was a good guide to the sort of method involved.

OUR HISTORY

Applying Bolshevism

Though the founding congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain revealed political strengths and weaknesses there was a determination to apply the lessons of Bolshevism to Britain

Following comrade Albert Inkpin's report¹ on the negotiations leading to the 1st Congress of the CPGB (the Communist Unity Convention, July 31-August 1 1920), fraternal greetings were read from a wide variety of different organisations and prominent individuals. Messages came from the communist parties of Germany, Austria, Holland, Hungary, Lithuania and Switzerland; and from the soon to be communist Norwegian Labour Party and Italian Socialist Party. The left group within the Independent Labour Party also sent a message.² Signatories to this included Helen Crawford³ and Shapurji Saklatvala.⁴ Among the individuals who sent their best wishes were Clara Zetkin,⁵ Tom Mann⁶ and VI Lenin. Making a powerful intervention into the controversies that still divided revolutionaries in Britain, Lenin declared his solidarity with the plan to immediately establish the CPGB and his opposition to the impotent sectarianism of Sylvia Pankhurst's organisation, the Workers' Socialist Federation. This talented and charismatic leader and her group had (for the moment at least) decided to stand aside from the process of fusion.⁷ Moreover, in the 2nd congress of Comintern (July 19-August 7 1920), Lenin unequivocally declared his support for those communists in Britain who favoured the tactic of affiliation to the Labour Party and communist participation in bourgeois elections.⁸ Immediately following the fraternal messages, the congress turned to the resolution on general policy, moved by AA Purcell.⁹ The succinct resolution, moved on behalf of the Joint Provisional Committee of the CPGB, read as follows:

The communists in conference assembled declare for the soviet (or workers' council) system as a means whereby the working class shall achieve power and take control of the forces of production; declare for the dictatorship of the proletariat as a necessary means for combating the counterrevolution during the transition period between capitalism and communism; and stand for the adoption of these means as steps towards the establishment of a system of complete communism, wherein the means of production shall be communally owned and controlled. This conference therefore establishes itself the Communist Party on the foregoing basis.

Interestingly, the official record of Purcell's speech supporting this declaration reveals fussy, half-baked thinking. There was praise for the Bolsheviks and the Russian Revolution and a recognition of the need for the dictatorship of the proletariat. But communism seems to be equated with nationalisation and workers' control over industry. Not the full development of democracy and

human freedom. His speech was reported thus:

During the last three months, wherever he and some others had gone to Russia they had been confronted with a request as to when England was going to do something with regard to the formation of a strong Communist Party. That was because in Norway, Sweden and elsewhere this work had already been done or, at any rate, communists in these countries had already gathered the forces together for the purpose of being prepared to work on the necessary lines. Anybody who had seen the development that some present had seen could hardly come back to this country without being convinced, if they were members of the working class at all, of the very urgent need that existed for the formation of what he regarded as an important guide to the trade union or industrial movement in this country. We required that guide here just as it was required in the case of Russia.

He believed that in the resolution we had a clear statement that many members of the industrial movement, mainly unattached to any socialist organisation, would be prepared to rally round. A great many trade unionists today used the cry, 'control of industry'; most of them hardly knew at the moment - because of the want of a guide - where that was taking them to, or what was expected of them in that connection. Here we saw it clearly laid down that the purpose of the Communist Party was to assist and act as a guide to the proletarian movement.

We must make certain that we did not quarrel about mere phraseology; but that we regarded as important the need for urging the working class itself to rally for the purpose of being capable of owning and controlling the means of production in this country. He believed that if we adapted our methods we could rally round us, particularly in the large centres, masses of the working class prepared to fight and give of their best in the interests of such a movement as this.

The resolution declared for the dictatorship of the proletariat as a means of combating the counterrevolution in the transitional period between capitalism and communism. That, again, was a statement of the highest importance, because it urged the working class to come into the ranks of communism, as well as to assist in the work of communist agitation. In declaring ourselves within the four corners of this resolution, we were laying down a plan that the working class of this country could rally to.

Capitalism, he believed, was decaying at its very roots. The industrial organisations might not know that; but so long as they were prepared to revolt, it was our business to go to them and say, 'While you are prepared to revolt we, at the same time, are prepared to show you the machine that must be used in order to take possession of the means of production and work them in the interests of yourselves and the community generally.' For the purpose of doing that we had to recognise the hard, concrete facts of industrial organisation. It was useless continually prodding and pinpricking the working class; we were not going to get the best from the working class by doing that, we had to take them in hand and show them the way laid down in this resolution.

He thought we should do our utmost to be unanimous about this resolution

in order that it might not merely go forth to the international communist organisations of the world as our definite declaration, but that it could be taken to our people, and they be asked to recognise in this instrument the first step towards success in their own emancipation.

The resolution was formally seconded by William Mellor of the Guild Communist Group.¹⁰ Discussion was very brief. Obviously delegates had convened precisely on the basis of agreement with these principles. For example, support for the dictatorship of the proletariat in the transitional period was not controversial. Nevertheless - and as is the way sometimes in left meetings - some delegates felt compelled to speak anyway. Harry Webb of the Ashton Communist Group kicked off the debate:

... delegates had come with definite mandates, and nothing that could be said would influence those mandates in the slightest degree; but what was said might be carried back by the delegates to the groups and might affect the actions of those groups in the future. Certain words had been left out of the resolution which would give it much more effectiveness; what was needed was the dictatorship of the proletariat, not only in the form of the soviet council, but also in the form of the man with the gun in his hand. To men who had been used by imperialism in the world war we must point out the historic and revolutionary value of the gun in the hands of the working class. In this classic home of capitalism its downfall would be in the form of a civil struggle which would be consummated in the streets, the workers battling through by the guidance of the Communist Party.

CL Gibbons (Ferndale Socialist Society) said he wanted to make a little clearer the point in the resolution which declared for the soviet or workers' council, and then went on to state the means whereby the working class should achieve power. Seeing that this was the beginning of the Communist Party, he thought that we should quite definitely state that the achieving of power would come from the soldiers' councils, and the actual control of the forces of production from the workers' councils. He thought this should be made clear and put in the resolution.

At this point William Mellor intervened to make a blindingly obvious point:

If they did not agree with the resolution they should go away; if they did agree they should pass it without making long speeches as to its meaning.

But he suggested it was urgent that some reference should be made to the Third International. He had put through to the standing orders committee a suggestion that the Third International should be mentioned in this resolution on general policy, and he hoped

that the conference would agree we should not only stand for the dictatorship of the proletariat, agree with the soviet system as the means whereby we could achieve communism and agree that communism was our aim, but, as a Communist Party, we should at this crisis declare our adherence to the Third International. He asked the chairman to use his influence with the standing orders committee to get them to include in the resolution a certain declaration of our adherence to the Third International.

AA Watts (BSP, Rochdale) said he rose to voice the opinion of the branch that an effort should be made to include any other body who had not seen their way yet to fall in with this convention. We want one Communist Party here, not more.

R Stewart (Socialist Prohibition Group) said he did not want to be taken as stressing too much the point of the man with the gun. A great many people talked about guns who would run away when they saw one. He did not know whether he could use a gun if he had one, and he did not know much about the dictatorship of the proletariat.

What he knew was that the dictatorship of the proletariat was necessary, and that we should require to do as circumstances determined. He did not suppose the sincerity of those who were not gunmen would be questioned; we should all count it a pleasure and pride to live and die for the communist movement. But he thought the provisional committee would be wise to devote themselves to building up such an organisation as would make it possible for the minimum of violence to achieve the maximum for the Communist Party. Even the capitalist could not use guns upon us, except so far as he could persuade members of our class that somehow or other our policy was detrimental to their interests. Whether the guns came soon or late, or whether they came at all, there might be moments when it was far more revolutionary to refuse to have anything to do with guns. As to the Third International, it did not seem to him necessary to write in explicit terms that we were attached to it; the

less we loaded the resolution with phrases, the better.

What we needed to do was to form as soon as possible a party sufficiently strong to bear itself in any manner dictated by the circumstances of the moment.

The chairman, Arthur MacManus, said he recommended that the words "and adherence to the Third International" should be added to the resolution.¹¹ The amended resolution was then carried unanimously as follows:

"The Communists in conference assembled declare for the soviet (or workers' council) system as a means whereby the working class shall achieve power and take control of the forces of production; declare for the dictatorship of the proletariat as a necessary means for combating the counterrevolution during the transition period between capitalism and communism; and declares its adherence to the Third International; and stand for the adoption of these means as steps towards the establishment of a system of complete communism wherein the means of production shall be communally owned and controlled. This conference therefore establishes itself the Communist Party on the foregoing basis" ●

Notes

1. *Weekly Worker* December 9.
2. During the period 1919-20, left members of the Independent Labour Party started to organise themselves as a loose network. This put out a newspaper which campaigned for affiliation to the Third International.
3. Scottish comrade Helen Crawford was to play a leading role in the CPGB, in particular in her energetic organisation of the party's work amongst women. She headed the CPGB's women's department, set up in January 1922, and was also the women's representative on the political bureau.
4. Shapurji Saklatvala (1874-1936) was born in Mumbai (then Bombay), India. He came to the UK in 1905. He joined the CPGB in 1921 along with a left faction of the Independent Labour Party. Naturally he also remained a Labour Party member. Standing as a communist, but with the support of the local Labour Party, he won the constituency of Battersea North in the 1922 general election. He lost the seat in the 1923 election, but regained it in the contest of 1924 - despite not having Labour support this time. He finally lost the seat for good in the 1929 general election - unsurprisingly, given the 'third period' ultra-left insanity that the CPGB and the world communist movement had then embarked on.
5. Clara Zetkin (1857-1933) was influential on the left of German Marxism from 1878, when she first joined the Socialist Workers Party, which changed its name in 1890 to the Socialist Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). Her principled political stance in World War I led her into the left split from the SPD, the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD) and its left wing, the Spartacist League. In 1919, this finally became the Communist Party of Germany - too late to be a contender in the German revolution, which by then was rapidly ebbing. She represented the KPD in the Reichstag from 1920 to 1933, when the Nazi assumption of power forced her into exile in the USSR.
6. See *Weekly Worker* August 5.
7. See *Weekly Worker* October 21.
8. This 2nd Congress of the Third International was already in progress as the Unity Convention met.
9. AA Purcell became a member of the general council of the TUC in 1921, left the CPGB in 1922 and went on as a leftwing member of the Labour Party to play a treacherous role in the 1926 General Strike.
10. William Mellor (1888-1942) resigned from the CPGB in 1924 and two years later became editor of the *Daily Herald*, taking the reins from George Lansbury. He was the first editor of *Tribune*, but only lasted a year (1937-38) before being sacked as a result of disagreements with Stafford Cripps over the British popular front against fascism.
11. Arthur MacManus was a member of the Socialist Labour Party. He played an important role in the Unity Committee created in 1919 to facilitate the merger of SLP, British Socialist Party and others. MacManus was the CPGB's first chairman, a post he held until 1922.



Arthur MacManus

DEBATE

Wedded to left reformists

Chris Strafford argues that nothing positive can be learnt from the National Left Wing Movement and the Communist Party's intervention in the Labour Party in the 1920s

Labour Party work and communist intervention and affiliation has been a central theme of recent debates at CPGB aggregates and within Communist Students. In this article I will look through the history of the early CPGB with specific focus on leftwing organisation within the Labour Party, as this forms the historical basis of the approach of Jack Conrad and others to Labour work for communists today and in the future. They have attempted to build a strategy on an understanding of the early CPGB that is flawed and is removed from the experiences and realities of the period.

It was only after pressure from Lenin and the Comintern that the CPGB was won to seek affiliation and take up work in the Labour Party. The world war and the shift of working class support from the Liberals to Labour created the conditions for massive growth in the Labour Party. In 1924 Labour won almost five and a half million votes, compared with the half a million it received in 1920. The growth of the Labour Party, coupled with its peculiar structures, where revolutionaries had freedom of action and criticism, opened up a key space for struggle by communists. This did not mean that the Comintern was rejecting the organisational split between reformism and revolution. It also rejected the idea that the Labour Party could be transformed for revolutionary ends. The affiliation tactic was based on an optimistic belief that exposing the reformists by struggling against them within Labour could be a way to build a mass party around the numerically weak revolutionary core represented by the CPGB.

With its fulsome embrace of the market, privatisation and the bureaucratic domination of the rightwing bureaucracy, the Labour Party of 2011 is a world away from the 1920s party. This has been the trajectory of this bourgeois workers' party over the last 80 years. Yet the stranglehold of the right wing has not resulted in Labour being transformed into the third party of the bourgeoisie; it remains a bourgeois workers' party. It remains so through its formal links with the common defence organisation of the working class, the trade unions, and through the belief held by millions of workers that the Labour Party is still their party. Understanding the lessons of communist intervention should not be considered abstract, as the Labour Party has proven time and time again that it can be resuscitated. With Labour now in opposition these lessons and this debate are important to all communists.

Organising the left

The National Left Wing Movement began life shortly after the 1925 Labour Party conference, but only became a serious organised force in January 1926. The NLWM took up the fight against the rightwing Labour leadership and gained vast support by tapping into the anger of workers against the betrayals of the Labour leaders. Amongst other things, it fought for the reversal of the bans against communists and for militant action against the reactionary blows the working class had been dealt since 1921.

The NLWM was organised under the direction of the CPGB and from 1924 produced *The Sunday Worker*. It projected the politics of the leftwing bureaucracy through the newspaper, which - like today's *Morning Star* - was supposedly a non-party publication. Its "serious financial deficit was met



by funds supplied by the Comintern - £4,000 in 1925 alone".¹ The paper was edited by party member William Paul and later Walter Holmes and had a circulation of around 100,000. *The Sunday Worker* and movement were weakened by being politically wedded to the fake left leaders of the Labour Party and the trade unions. It gave space to articles by Purcell, Cook and Lansbury, occasionally offering timid and opportunist criticism. This tailism of the left bureaucracy is a common feature amongst nearly all of the socialist groups left in the Labour Party and trade unions today; it is exemplified by the opportunist positioning of the offspring of the Militant Tendency, the Socialist Party, in the trade unions and Socialist Appeal within Labour.

Whilst Labour work for the CPGB in the early 1920s was sporadic and dependent on whether the branch was controlled by former British Socialist Party comrades or more critical members, communists played an integral part in Labour Party life throughout the period and beyond. This cannot simply be put down to the continuation of the BSP's attitudes. It requires an appreciation that Labour was a mass party and, if communists are to win the masses, it necessarily means engaging with Labour on a serious basis.

The advice given to British communists by Lenin in the aftermath of the October revolution was half-heartedly enacted and the request to affiliate to the Labour Party was dismissed by the Labour leadership. The rejection was made easier by the polemical and vitriolic tone of the letter requesting affiliation. Though even with a toned-down request and a change of name, the Labour leaders would have rejected the affiliation of the Bolsheviks' sister organisation. Nevertheless, many CPGB members remained not only within the Labour Party, but were chosen as candidates and elected openly as communists. It is necessary to stress how embedded communists were in the party and how much workers saw them as being part of the big Labour family. The union and Labour leaders' anti-communist witch-hunts was answered by wide support to keep communists within the existing structures and to allow them to stand not only for trade union positions, but as parliamentary and council candidates.

Whilst money and resources were pumped into the left wing, the CPGB was not sold on its importance. At its 7th Congress in May-June 1925, the CPGB adopted a thesis which stated that "the 'left wing' groups are confused and without any definite programme beyond resentment at the policy of the right wing. Its unorganised, unformed character leaves the leading spokesmen of the left in the power of the right wing, who advance them or push

them into the background according to the exigencies of the situation, while maintaining control of the whole apparatus of the Labour Party. The fears and political confusion of the left wing is seen in the futile attempts to create a grouping of the left forces which will provide a centre functioning as a barrier between the Labour Party and the Communist Party."²

At the 1925 conference of the Labour Party in Liverpool, the left was once again beaten by the right wing. This prompted a more serious and uniform approach to Labour work. In January 1926, the CPGB executive passed a motion which called for solidarity and coordination between the leftwing groups, the Independent Labour Party and the CPGB within the party. The executive called on members to "redouble their efforts" and join with all non-communist workers in the Labour Party in building up "a great leftwing movement to fight for the policies of: (1) mobilising the workers around a socialist programme to overthrow the capitalist class; and (2) making the Labour Party safe for socialism instead of liberalism".³

This period saw growth in communist support within the broad labour movement, which did not automatically result in the transformation of the young CPGB from a propaganda group into a mass party. The NLWM strategy did bring in members and support, but it was more of a trickle than a flood. The situation changed in 1926 with the rise of the strike movement, the defeat of the general strike and the isolation of the brave miners. The CPGB, numerically small and in a state of disarray, was not up to the task of bolstering the movement to retreat in good order or to build proper support for the miners. In response to this situation, the leadership of the CPGB looked to the left leaders within the Labour Party and the possibility of mobilising the support of the broad movement through the Labour left.

The NLWM move has to be understood in the context of retreat and disorder within the workers' movement. The CPGB suffered greatly in the lead-up to the General Strike, as the government attempted to break up any potential revolutionary leadership: "Encouraged by the Liverpool conference with its formal exclusion of the communists from the Labour Party, and its recommendation to the trade unions not to elect communists as trade union delegates, it swooped down upon the Communist Party headquarters and imprisoned 12 of its executive members. Apparently the government was under no delusion as to the influence of the Communist Party, should an open struggle take place. To put the leaders out of the way seemed an essential precaution."⁴

Internationally, the revolutionary

wave had ebbed and a series of defeats were inflicted on the movements in central Asia and Europe, in addition to the defeat of the revolutionary wing at the 5th Congress of the Comintern in 1924. The Comintern falling under the tyranny of bureaucracy and counterrevolution led by Stalin and his allies. The disorder in the CPGB was a common feature of all communist parties and the wider movement internationally. This not only created fissures and splits, but also shifting political strategies which were nothing more than ill-thought-out political get-rich-quick schemes. A way out from the frustration of an isolated Russian Revolution committing suicide was sought by reorganising other national communist parties. The policy of Bolshevisation was adopted at the 5th Congress that replaced what was left of revolutionary dynamism of the Third International parties with bureaucratic uniformity.

Learning the lessons

The obvious lesson of the NLWM and the period of struggle before, during and after the General Strike is that it is dangerous to sow illusions in left leaders. Whilst the NLWM did bring together the most militant sections of the Labour Party, it failed to imbibe these workers with the politics necessary to deliver a death blow to the Labour right and the Labour Party itself. It did show that we can win workers from reformism through fighting the bosses and bureaucrats together. It also showed what happens when communists build up and place the movement in the hands of the leftwing bureaucrats. When it comes to the crunch, these left leaders will go cap in hand to Downing Street and surrender when there is even a glimpse of revolution. Some think that ousting the Labour right and democratising the Labour Party will be enough. If the

history of the British working class and its struggles with and against the Labour Party teach us anything, it is that we must carry out an unremitting struggle against the right and left leaders.

If we are to overcome Labourism positively then we must have strategy that is not based on an opportunist approach and programme like the NLWM. If the Labour Party revives itself and there is a considerable militant wing, we should fight for it to stand on communist politics, not a dumbed-down version. A struggle in the image of the NLWM is not on the cards at this time and is undesirable. We need a fundamentally different approach. We need to take on Lenin's advice when he insisted on the condition of "complete liberty" for working within Labour.

The key lesson is one of situation. We must base our strategy and tactics in reality. The struggle of the NLWM in the Labour Party was only possible because thousands of communists were members and hundreds of thousands saw communists as part of the movement that should be within Labour. There was also a militant movement of the class striking back against the reactionary wave and assaults it had endured since the beginning of the 1920s. Building such a movement that can withstand the pressures of censorship and reformism and overcome Labourism requires mass struggles outside the Labour Party and the existence of a unified communist party that does not make the mistakes the CPGB did in the 1920s and fights for its programme ●

Notes

1. H Pelling *The British Communist Party: a historical profile* London 1958, p40.
2. J Klugmann *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain* Vol 2, London 1969, p258.
3. *Ibid* p259.
4. CPGB *The reds and the General Strike*: www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/britain/pamphlets/1926/reds.htm.

Fighting fund

Standing out

The campaign to increase our regular income is starting to bear fruit. Five comrades have already pledged to take out a standing order and two more have agreed to increase their existing monthly contributions. These comrades alone will push up our monthly total by over £100. Thanks to comrades AD, whose £25 SO authority I received today, and TB, whose first £15 has safely landed in our account - not to mention comrades DC, DV, SD, AL and TDB, who have all promised regular donations.

If that is what we can do in just a couple of days, think how much extra we can raise for our monthly fighting fund once we really get going! And we need it. We have not been reaching the full £1,250 target each and every month for the last period and, what is more, our expenses have continued to rise. So, please, comrades, if you can start a new SO or add to your existing one, don't wait to be asked! Fill in the form on the back page or on our website, or organise it directly with

your bank if you have an online or telephone account.

I also have news of a brilliant £150 donation from comrade AP - over and above his £50 annual subscription. Generosity! Then there was another extra from BB - £25 added to his £50 sub and £25 book order - transferred directly into our account, plus a nice £25 from AN via PayPal (we had 12,727 internet readers, by the way). Oh, and I received £155 via existing SOs.

All this means we almost doubled our total for January over the last seven days. It now stands at £709, but we still need over £500 in a week and a half. I could really do with hearing from you if you haven't already contributed this month. Better still, fancy answering our standing order appeal?

Robbie Rix

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

LRC

Cuts and rebuilding

Unison Labour Link activist **Stan Keable** reports on the Labour Representation Committee's AGM

"No cuts at all, no privatisations at all" - that is how John McDonnell MP set the militant mood of the Labour Representation Committee's annual conference in London on Saturday January 15. Describing the coalition government's austerity programme as an all-out attack on the working class, using capitalism's systemic crisis as the excuse to eradicate the entire post-World War II welfare state, he called for mass struggle "using all the means at our disposal" to bring down the government, combined with a fight to democratise the Labour Party and transform it into a real party of the working class.

"There is a left within the Labour Party, and it is the LRC - no matter what others call themselves," he said. "It is this organisation that has consistently campaigned for socialism within the party." And with a 25% increase during 2010, individual membership is over the 1,000 mark and rising. Local groups are being formed around the country, and - for the first time this year - are directly represented on the national committee.

Comrade McDonnell outlined the futility of limiting the party to electoral politics: "We can await the next general election, win the occasional by-election and cheer. But whilst that is happening we will be seeing the end of the welfare state, the end of council housing, the privatisation of the national health service, the withdrawal of free education from this generation. Yes, we will work for the election of a Labour government, but we will be mobilising to bring this government down."

Although several platform speakers had been advertised - veteran Tony Benn, Christine Blower (NUT), Matt Wrack (FBU), Jeremy Corbyn MP and student leader Clare Solomon - I am pleased to report that their speeches were short, and the conference was not reduced to a mere rally.

Unprepared

The Fire Brigades Union, which disaffiliated from the Labour Party in 2004, is one of four national trade unions affiliated to the LRC (along with Aslef, the BFAWU and CWU). FBU general secretary Matt Wrack, one of its two delegates on the LRC national committee, told the conference a reduced fire service budget will increase the fire risk to property and people, and described the "horrific" cuts as "a general attack on our class ... This is not a war on the poor - it is a war on the majority." He described his frustration at how "woefully ill-prepared" our class is -

the official movement, the left and the anti-cuts organisations. The official labour movement leadership, he said, "lacks a challenge to the basis of the cuts", only arguing that they should be less deep and less quick. The FBU "rejects the cuts agenda completely".

The fragmentation of the left is laughable, he said. The *Life of Brian* scene is funny because it is true: "The only people we hate more than the Romans are the fuckin' Judean People's Front ... Splitters!" And the anti-cuts movement is riven with division and sectarianism. "I am fed up with being presented with *faits accomplis*: 'We have created a campaign: will you put your name to it?' What is needed is a 'genuine, viable, democratic mass movement against the cuts ... There is a huge thirst for the idea of coordinated industrial action'."

Councillors were in short supply at the conference, and the only one to speak was 'anti-cuts but cutting' councillor Charlynn Pullen from Islington - who received a remarkably tolerant hearing, laced with some muted hostile heckling. Pullen had joined the LRC before she joined the Labour Party, and became a councillor last May, when Islington borough council had been won back from the Liberal Democrats. There is now a 35-strong Labour group and only 13 Lib Dem councillors. The Labour group was "campaigning against the government's cuts", playing a prominent part in the local anti-cuts campaign, helping to mobilise the local community for the TUC's March 26 demo - but implementing a cuts budget, while "trying to do good things". They have brought the cleansing contract in-house, for example, and are paying the 'Living Wage'. "If we vote against the cuts today," she said, secretary of state for communities and local government "Eric Pickles will write our budget tomorrow".

Although the next speaker, LRC treasurer and Labour Briefing stalwart Graham Bash, was "pleased the councillor spoke" and praised her "bravery" in speaking up, he replied well to her argument that 'Labour cuts are better than Tory cuts', pointing to "the political price we pay by taking political responsibility for the cuts".

The LRC does not have "a sole orientation to the Labour Party", he said. We are committed to developing the class struggle, but "the class struggle needs political representation". If we fail to transform Labour, then "we face the more difficult task of creating a new party". Having thus - quite correctly, in my view - located the fight to transform Labour *within* the class struggle,

comrade Bash went on to join the attack on motion 10, which sought to downplay the importance of the struggle within Labour.

The 'no cuts, no privatisations' policy was endorsed in resolution 9 on council cuts, moved by former Lambeth council leader comrade Ted Knight on behalf of the Croydon and Crystal Palace branch of the Unite union. Labour councillors must not allow themselves to become "local agents of this anti-working class coalition government", he argued. In order to "be able to join and strengthen local anti-cuts actions" they should refuse to implement cuts budgets and "refuse to vote for a single cut". There is no surcharge facing them, as there was in his day. And we cannot build a campaign on the slogan, 'A Labour cut is a better cut'. "If they choose not to join us, the movement will sweep them aside."

Students

Students played an invigorating role among the nearly 300, mostly middle-aged activists present in London's Conway Hall. Two student activists heavily involved in the recent demonstrations and college occupations topped the poll for the 16 individual members' seats on the national committee: Mary Partington with 118 votes, and Owen Jones with 103 (out of 158 ballot papers cast).

Expressing his concern at the punitive sentences being handed down to activists by the courts to scare others away from direct action, LRC chair comrade McDonnell said that "the students have demonstrated that we have been on our knees too long". And towards the end of the day, student leader Clare Solomon came away from the first national committee meeting of the Coalition of Resistance to tell us about the London Student Assembly which meets every Sunday with about 200 activists present, and to ask us to mobilise workers to join the student demonstrations - starting on Wednesday January 19 - and not leave them to face police violence and kettling alone. The fight for free education, against tuition fees and to defend the education maintenance allowance is everybody's business. The lecturers' University and College Union came in for particular praise from comrade McDonnell for coming out so forthrightly to demonstrate alongside the students.

So it seems most appropriate that motion 13, on "trade unions and the Labour Party", should be moved by the youngest speaker of the day, Callum Williamson, on behalf of Communist Students. The motion, which after some controversy was carried with a small minority against, calls for the LRC to campaign for the full involvement of trade unions and trade unionists in the Labour Party, as well as opening up party democracy to the whole of our class by removing the bans and proscriptions which exclude "communists, revolutionary socialist and left groups" from the party.

Focusing on the task of "uniting the workers' movement and transforming the Labour Party into an organisation fit for class struggle", comrade Williamson argued that political differences are no obstacle to unity. "Discussions on programme and strategy are best conducted in the same organisation rather than from afar in a sectarian manner ... For the left to carry on in the way it is behaving now amounts

to suicide and will condemn us to defeat."

Surprisingly, while no-one spoke against the removal of bans and proscriptions, point one of the motion - "The LRC will campaign for all trade unions to affiliate to the Labour Party" - was contested by LRC activists in the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS), members of PCS Labour Left. They seem to have been swayed by the Socialist Party in England and Wales, which dominates the leadership of that union. How strange that a 'Labour left' organisation does not support affiliation! One University and College Union comrade announced that "we in the UCU pride ourselves on being non-affiliated", while Barnet trades council secretary Austin Harney said he "would be lynched" if he proposed affiliation to Labour in his union. Comrade Harney then launched into an anti-Labour diatribe, listing the sins of the last government and arguing that unions should not support Labour until Labour changed its tune. A self-defeating strategy, unfortunately, and contrary to the theme of the conference, which was convened under the slogan 'Resist the cuts, rebuild the party'.

The PCS, of course, has never been affiliated to Labour, but the Peter Taaffe leadership of SPEW is still pursuing its futile Campaign for a New Workers' Party, attempting to create another 'old Labour' party in parallel, and in competition, with the real thing. This is a silly aim. Having been hounded out of the Labour Party by Neil Kinnock, SPEW (formally Militant) has tailored its theory to match its practice, deceiving itself that Labour has lost its organic links with the working class, is no longer a bourgeois workers' party, but is just another bourgeois party, in essence no different to the Tories or Lib Dems. Now that things have so obviously changed, and the prospects for the Labour left are on the rise, I hope we will see the SPEW comrades thinking again and joining us in the fight to transform Labour.

The RMT union under Bob Crow's leadership dared to back the Scottish Socialist Party and was expelled for its sins. We must fight for the RMT to be re-admitted. It is not impossible - after all, Ken Livingstone rebelled against Blair, who was subsequently forced to reinstate the then London mayor.

The FBU, on the other hand, walked out of the party in protest. Understandable, but mistaken. United we stand, divided we fall. We must persuade the firefighters to rejoin and add their weight to the fight within.

As comrade Williamson quite rightly said in his reply to the discussion on motion 13, "Until the leftwing unions engage with Labour, it will be difficult to break the right wing's hold on the leadership."

Party

The conference slogan 'Rebuild the Party' turned out to be the focus of the sharpest conflict of the day, continuing an earlier national committee debate in which the minority, wanting to put the emphasis on the burgeoning anti-cuts movement, argued for 'Rebuild the movement' instead. The battle was initiated when comrade Owen Jones sharply condemned motion 10, saying that the LRC "must stand for the return of a Labour government" and must fight within the Labour Party - as well as working with all

those outside the party who are fighting the cuts, etc.

I must confess that, at first, I found the heat generated in this debate surprising, as speakers on both sides, for and against motion 10, emphasised that they favoured struggle both inside and outside the party. Moving the motion, Nick Toms of Lambeth and Southwark LRC had spoken about the divided anti-cuts movement, and how one left group must not impose its politics on the movement. Non-controversial, in this conference at least.

But after comrade Jones opened fire nine more speakers joined the attack, including a number of heavyweights. After Jenny Lennox (Walthamstow) came Permanent Revolution's George Binette, who asked the movers to withdraw the offending last three paragraphs. Then Jon Rogers, leader of the left caucus on Unison's NEC, followed by Peter Keenleyside, who announced that the Communication Workers Union, which he represented, would have to leave the LRC if motion 10 were carried. Then there was joint LRC secretary Peter Firmin of *Labour Briefing*, who claimed the motion downgraded Labour Party matters, making them the private business of individuals, not the concern of the LRC.

It was LRC vice-chair Susan Press who had proposed the alternative slogan, 'Rebuild the movement', on the national committee, and who now described the conflict as a "false dichotomy". But then comrade Simeon Andrews (who romped home onto the NC with 81 votes) gave the motion the kiss of death by announcing that he did not want to "transform" the Labour Party, but to "replace" it. And, sure enough, when I checked his election address, there it was in black and white: "... we need a movement that can not only bring down the coalition government, but can lay the foundations for a new party which can once again represent the interests and aspirations of the people."

The Alliance for Workers' Liberty's John Moloney described the LRC as a bridge between the movement and the Labour Party, and implied - wrongly, in my view - that those who opposed motion 10 wanted to "destroy the bridge" and concentrate solely on the party. Fellow AWLer Martin Thomas disagreed with him, and spoke strongly against the motion himself. It not surprising that there are divisions in the social-imperialist AWL. A few years ago AWL tops were insisting that democracy in the Labour Party had been "concreted over". Now its apparatus at least has changed its mind - good.

Motion 10 was defeated by a two-to-one vote. In truth the comrades opposing motion 10 were not downplaying the burgeoning mass anti-cuts movement, but emphasising that to be victorious it must be channelled into the fight to unite the left and to transform the Labour Party into a political alternative, a real party of the working class.

The lack of clarity about the nature of the alternative working class politics which are required, and about how capitalism is to be overcome, is a weakness which must be addressed. This fuzziness reflects the fact that the LRC brings together a mix of comrades ranging from electoral reformists to Marxists of various hues ●



Matt Wrack: unity

COR

Good turnout, timid politics

Lee Rock, CPGB representative on the Coalition of Resistance's national council, reports on its first meeting

Readers of the *Weekly Worker* will recall that the COR conference on November 27 2010 'elected' 122 people to the national council. In reality, everybody who put their name forward was accepted onto the NC. Although this makes for a rather unwieldy committee, this was clearly done in a spirit of inclusiveness and is therefore to be welcomed.

It is also a good sign that more than 70 actually turned up to the first meeting of the NC on January 15 in London. This emphasises the fact that COR is currently the main show in town when it comes to the myriad of anti-cuts campaigns that have sprung up since the election of the coalition government.

Another positive feature was the fact that - in stark opposition to plenty of other meetings I have been attending - representatives were honest and forthright about their political affiliation: There were nine or 10 members of John Rees's group, Counterfire, seven representatives of Socialist Resistance and the same number from the Green Left. The Socialist Workers Party and Workers Power sent four comrades each, the Alliance for Workers' Liberty a couple. All in all, representatives of political organisations made up more than half of those present. Apart from an official representative from the Unite union, the rest of the committee appeared to be made up of non-aligned, local anti-cuts campaigners.

Interestingly, the only serious left group that did not send a representative was the Socialist Party in England and Wales. Or if it did, the comrade(s) concerned did not identify themselves as such and I did not recognise them. SPEW seems to have decided to continue on its sectarian trajectory and go it alone through its various front campaigns - be it Youth Fight for Jobs/for Education, the National Shop Stewards Network or the Campaign for a New Workers' Party.

The meeting was opened by Andrew Burgin, who spoke about the need for militant action by users and providers of services under threat - and raised the possibility of taking over such services. It was said later, for example, that when libraries are earmarked for closure, they should be occupied (Counterfire comrades in Doncaster reported that 14 libraries in the town were set to close). This is often easier done by the people who use the service, as opposed to those delivering it, comrades remarked.

Andrew also made reference to the 'protocols' agreed with other anti-cuts campaigns, making particular reference to the SWP's oddly-named Right to Work campaign. An agreement has been negotiated to have a representative on the other's steering committee and to avoid organising national activities on the same dates. Clearly, this is not enough. The various national campaigns must urgently merge in order to allow for effective national action against the attacks that are coming.

Chris Bambery, national secretary of RTW and a leading SWP member, then spoke of the good working relationship with COR. Chris went on to talk of the next national student action on January 29, adding that workers should walk out in support of the students. This seems highly improbable and it is unlikely to be a position that SWP members will be putting in their own workplaces. After all, the SWP comrades have been arguing not to go further than the demands of the union bureaucracy. But it certainly sounded militant in the confines



Clare Solomon: student leader

of a meeting room.

Ex-SWP and now Counterfire member Clare Solomon, who has played a leading role in the militant wing of the student movement as president of the University of London Union, reported to the council about the weekly meetings of the London Student Assembly (see *Weekly Worker* January 13). Between 150 and 200 students attended the first meeting after the Christmas break on January 9, which hopefully indicates that students have not given up the fight. The demonstration on January 29 in London, despite the attempts by the National Union of Students leadership to undermine it by calling a demonstration in Manchester for the same day, will be an important test for our forces. It is, of course, cause for concern that a couple of hundred arrests have already taken place and that the police are still after many more.

After hearing these reports, the meeting dealt with the large number of amendments to the final 'declaration' that were referred to the national council at the COR conference in November. Most of them were fully supportable and caused no real disagreement (these can be read on the COR website).

The first real debate, which the chair unfortunately cut very short, was about support for a general strike. Moved by Jeremy Drinkall (Workers Power), it was not wanting COR to call a general strike, but simply calling for support for one. To revolutionaries, inspired by recent events in Europe and Tunisia, one might think such support non-controversial. Unfortunately not. Both the SWP and Counterfire argued against it. The line being that no trade union

has (yet) called for it, so we should not be seen to pressurise them, presumably.

The amendment was lost by about two to one. The same result went for another amendment from Workers Power that simply stated: "We will fight with the official leaderships wherever possible and without them where necessary." The only logic of opposing this is either the belief it just cannot be done - or the fear of upsetting the leadership of the so-called fighting unions.

A brief but interesting discussion took place around an amendment that stated: "Where they [local councillors] vote for cuts we will oppose them and encourage anti-cuts groups to stand against them." This was overwhelmingly defeated, with Chris Bambery of the SWP stating it was not possible, as we cannot even get unity amongst the left. Chris unfortunately did not go on to speak on whether the SWP wanted unity amongst the left (Marxist or otherwise), and if so, what it was doing about it. Clearly, the need for Marxist unity in a single Communist Party remains an essential task for all Marxists today.

Whilst not happy with the wording of the amendment, I spoke in favour of it. I put forward the need for a political alternative in any election where all other candidates of the major parties were supporting cuts. Also, there would be no serious opposition to the likes of the British National Party, who are quite capable of picking up a lot of disgruntled protest votes. 'Don't vote BNP - vote for cuts' is hardly a winning slogan.

Another unfortunate vote came with the defeat of an amendment moved by the AWL's Daniel Randall: "COR also calls for a united left slate at NUS conference 2011, involving the National Campaign Against Cuts and Fees (NCAC), the Education Activists Network (EAN) and others to challenge NUS leaders who refuse to back the student protests."

The SWP argued against the amendment, saying it was "not the role of COR" to encourage such unity. This could have been a purely sectarian manoeuvre - ie, the SWP is trying to make sure that COR does not become too successful. Or it might have been bowing to the NUS bureaucracy once more - after all, SWP comrades have been arguing against the abolition of student fees (because the NUS bureaucracy will not do so). In any case, the SWP certainly helped to prevent COR adopting a more militant outlook, along with their former comrades in Counterfire. They might have parted ways organisationally, but politically they are still conjoined twins.

One of the more humorous moments of the day came when some local anti-cuts activists complained that the morning had been spent talking politics. Even the old charge of "this is just a talking shop" was wheeled out. The idea that we can have a real coalition of resistance to the cuts and not talk politics is very naive. The cuts are a political attack and we must have a political response. It was worrying to see Dan Randall and other AWL members clapping enthusiastically for this nonsensical 'no politics, please' stance.

The afternoon concluded with the national council agreeing to increase its number to about 135, while the steering committee, which has been meeting on a weekly basis since May 2010, was augmented by the addition of around 10 new members. These include: Chris Bambery (RTW), Amy Leather (SWP), Brian Heron (People's Charter), Bill Greenshields (Communist Party of Britain) and a representative of the CPGB.

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 all imperialist wars and occupations but constantly strive to bring to the fore the fundamental question - ending war is bound up with ending capitalism.

■ Communists are internationalists. Everywhere we strive for the closest unity and agreement of working class and progressive parties of all countries. We oppose every manifestation of national sectionalism. It is an internationalist duty to uphold the principle, 'One state, one party'. 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.

Become a Communist Party associate member

Name _____

Address _____

Town/city _____

Postcode _____

Telephone _____ Age _____

Email _____ Date _____

Return to: Membership, CPGB, BCM Box 928, London WC1N 3XX

weekly worker

The state is
quite prepared
to break its own
rules

Police agents exposed

Mark Kennedy was not the only spy to infiltrate the eco-protest movement. It is endemic, argues **Eddie Ford**

Last week saw the collapse of a £1 million trial of six green campaigners charged with “conspiring” to shut down the E.ON UK-operated coal-fired power station at Ratcliffe-on-Soar in 2009. The case against the activists was dropped when Mark Kennedy (aka ‘Mark Stone’), an undercover police spy who had infiltrated their extremely ad-hoc climate change campaign group, suddenly offered to give evidence in their favour.

Kennedy is clearly one of many such police agents. He has reportedly alleged that at least 15 cops have infiltrated the eco-protest movement. Three of them have now been named: Lynn Watson, Mark Jacobs and Jim Boyling (the latter who actually married and had two children with one of the people he was sent to spy on).

All the evidence indicates that Kennedy went ‘native’ - identifying with the aims and values of those individuals he was meant to be fitting up (fearing his old masters, he is in hiding in the United States). In 2009 he appears to have left the police force in disgust and shame. Now the police are left with egg on their face, with awkward questions being asked, in particular about the activities of the secretive National Public Order Intelligence Unit - a body set up in 1999 to target “domestic extremists” and run by the Association of Chief Police Officers. Kennedy was a Metropolitan officer seconded to the NPOIU some 10 years ago.

Needless to say, communists welcome the abandoning of this trial. We do so because it represented not only an assault on democratic rights generally, but almost a vendetta against an entirely innocuous campaign group - you could barely call it an organisation - which by no stretch of the imagination could be said to constitute a danger to life and limb or even the economy. Perhaps even more to the point, communists think that the recent revelations about Mark Kennedy - a state agent who managed to insinuate himself into a small group with consummate ease - provides a valuable lesson for those trying to build a revolutionary movement in this country. Namely, the advantage of an *open* and democratic organisation that aims - as far as objective circumstances permit - for *mass* actions and protests, as opposed to ‘exemplary spectaculars’ organised by small and often elitist groups, no matter how sincere or well-intentioned.

Of course, on one level, no-one should find Kennedy’s spying activities remarkable - such covert operations are only to be expected. Anyone involved in any sort of militant political protest or anti-establishment politics ought to expect to be watched in one way or another by state spies - it is naive to think otherwise. Leave aside Northern Ireland, there must be several hundred of them operating in Britain. Not only will the eco-

movement be riddled, so will the far right and the far left, including left groups in the trade unions, etc.

Thanks to Mark Kennedy we certainly know that the police have been intimately involved in the green movement since at least 2000. He earned a reputation in the appropriate circles as a committed and dedicated eco-warrior. Paradoxically, or perversely, this reputation is not as ill-deserved as it might at first seem. In the words of Danny Chivers, one of the six defendants in the failed case, Kennedy was not “someone sitting at the back of the meeting taking notes” - rather “he was in the thick of it”. In fact, according to Chivers, he energetically “helped recruit as many people as possible” to the protest group - which hoped against hope to shut down the Ratcliffe power station for a few days as a protest against global warming. Furthermore, Chivers recounted, Kennedy was one of the “key people” involved in the 2005 protests against the G8 summit in Gleneagles 2005.

Not only that, as is now clear, Kennedy *initiated* many, if not most, of the actions against the power station - like driving a ‘reconnaissance’ party there in his van and then hiring a truck for the main protest. Not for nothing did he quickly acquire the nickname “Flash”, because he always seemed to have more money - and ideas - than the other activists. Which was hardly surprising, given the substantial financial and logistical support he was getting from NPOIU. Thus he was supplied with a passport and a wad of credit cards under his assumed name, and his handlers also made deposits of up to £200,000 a year into his ‘Mark Stone’ account - on top of his £50,000 per year police salary, plus bonuses, of course, which was being paid into his own account throughout this entire period. This cash, it goes without saying, was to be deployed for

bribes, drinks, socialising, seduction - he slept with two female members of the climate group - accommodation, vehicles, regular travels abroad to meet other climate change campaigners and so on (since leaving the police he has confessed to finding it hard to sign cheques under his own name again).

Naturally, Kennedy was also kitted up with various technological devices to aid police surveillance and monitoring - most notably a BlackBerry mobile phone containing a tracking device, so that his handlers would always know his whereabouts day and night. Kennedy’s cover officer, as he explained, was the “first person I spoke to in the morning and the last person I spoke to at night” - in fact “he knew when I went to the loo”. Apparently, the information obtained by Kennedy went to the very top, sometimes landing on the prime minister’s desk - for example, during the G8 protests.

What is particularly instructive was the way in which he first inveigled himself into the green/anarchist milieu. Growing his hair long, wearing rings and having extensive tattoos done, he started hanging about at the various vegetarian/vegan cafes and bars where the prominent eco-activists from around Europe congregated. Kennedy’s crucial breakthrough came in 2003, when he went to a meeting of the direct action group, Earth First. Like many other groups of this nature, EF proudly proclaims itself as a “non-hierarchical” organisation that has “no leaders” - making an ideological virtue of being small and a loose network, *not* “a cohesive group or campaign”. In other words, a near ideal environment where a motivated state agent could not only move around, but also *rise to the top* - as, of course, ‘structureless’ organisations have leaders just as much as ‘hierarchical’ ones do, but with a far less transparent and accountable ‘chain of command’.

Which is why Kennedy was able to climb the anarchist tree so rapidly. At the EF meeting Kennedy was introduced to a vegan activist called Mark Barnsley, who claimed to have fought for the Palestine Liberation Army and was then a leading figure in the semi-underground, anarchistic protest milieu. Telling Barnsley that he had “led a bad life” and wanted to “make amends”, thus his interest in eco-activism, Kennedy’s friendship with him “blossomed” and before long “he treated me like a brother”.

From that point onwards Kennedy was quickly accepted into the anarchist/direct action fraternity, gaining access to all the inner circles and informal networks necessary for him to carry on and step up his spying operations. Soon he was involved in all manner of actions, including protests at the Drax power station in Yorkshire, as well as missions in Iceland and Germany - where he used his climbing skills to hang banners from pylons.

When asked about his bountiful finances, he made up a story about having been being a drugs courier - not a difficult thing for someone who had previous worked in the Met’s narcotics unit, buying and selling drugs so as to garner evidence against dealers. As for his regular disappearances for extended periods, when he was actually attending police briefings/debriefings and the like, he just said that he had to visit his brother in the United States.

The perfect secret agent? Maybe too perfect. Kennedy’s undoing came in April 2009, when the police carried out what is thought to be the biggest pre-emptive raid on environmental campaigners in UK history. This saw hundreds of officers invading the Iona independent school in Sneinton, Nottingham, and arresting 114 campaigners for “conspiracy to commit aggravated trespass” - they

also seized “specialist equipment” alleged to be linked to the planned protest at nearby Ratcliffe-on-Sea. Kennedy, of course, had tipped off the police about the ‘secret’ Sneinton meeting.

However, his cover was obviously so convincing that the police mistook him for one of the climate change campaigners (well, he looked just like an anarchist, after all) and he ended up being punched and kicked by five officers - the result being head wounds, a broken finger and a prolapsed disc. Unsurprisingly, the episode left Kennedy bitter - not just because he had been beaten black and blue by his supposed colleagues, but because his superiors banned him from suing the police for compensation. Not illogically, they pointed out that if he were to do that it would blow his cover for good - which “pissed me off”, said Kennedy.

But the damage had been done, with some group members finally becoming suspicious of Kennedy - despite the world of good that his beating at the hands of the police must have done for his credibility. However, in October 2010 Kennedy was confronted by some of the activists after they found documents which revealed his true identity. He admitted to being a police officer, but said he had left the force after the April 2009 raid - which in fact seems to be true. Kennedy then disappeared, hated by his former comrades - who rightfully felt “violated”, “betrayed” and “sickened” - and distrusted by his bosses in the police force, who thought he had become a distinct liability, if not effectively a ‘double agent’ working against them. Kennedy himself has declared that his former employers had “left him hung out to dry” - which is doubtless true ●

eddie.ford@weeklyworker.org.uk

Subscribe
here

UK subscribers: Pay bystanding order and save £10 a year. Minimum every 3 months... but please pay more if you can. Your paper needs you!

Standing
order

	6m	1yr	Inst.
UK	£25/€28	£50/€55	£200/€220
Europe	£30/€33	£60/€66	£240/€264
Rest of world	£60/€66	£120/€132	£480/€528
New UK subscribers offer: 3 months for £5			

Name _____
Address _____
Post code _____
Email _____ Tel _____

Send a cheque or postal order payable to ‘Weekly Worker’ to:
Weekly Worker, BCM Box 928, London WC1N 3XX, UK.

I enclose payment:

Sub £/€ _____
Donation £/€ _____
Total £/€ _____
Date _____

To _____ Bank plc _____
Branch Address _____
Post code _____
Re Account Name _____
Sort code _____ Account No _____
Please pay to **Weekly Worker**, Lloyds TSB A/C No 00744310
sort code 30-99-64, the sum of £ _____ every month*/3 months*
until further notice, commencing on _____
This replaces any previous order from this account. (*delete)
Signed _____ Name (PRINT) _____
Date _____ Address _____

Tuesdays, 6.45 to 9pm, St Martin’s Community Centre, 43 Carol Street, London NW1 (Camden Town tube).

January 18: ‘Jack and the beanstalk in three continents’. Speaker: Chris Knight.

January 25: ‘Song lines’ (Aboriginal Australian mythology). Speaker: Chris Knight.

February 1: Rapunzel lets down her hair on the Mosquito Coast. Speaker: Mark Jamieson.

February 8: ‘The two Wawilak sisters’ (Aboriginal Australia). Speaker: Chris Knight.

February 15: ‘The social origins of language’. Speaker: Jean-Louis Dessalles.

February 22: ‘The Tower of Babel’. Speaker: Chris Knight.

March 1: ‘The origins of fire’ (Aboriginal Australia). Speaker: Chris Knight.

March 8: ‘The moon inside you’. Speaker: Diana Fabionova.

March 15: ‘The woman with the zebra’s penis’ (Hadza). Speaker: Camilla Power.

March 22: ‘Why do fairy tales feel magical? Violations of causality, fascination and spiritual experience’. Speaker: Charles Whitehead.

March 29: ‘The wives of the sun and moon’ (Plains Indian). Speaker: Chris Knight.

April 5: ‘The hunter Monmanéki and his wives’ (Amazonia). Speaker: Chris Knight.

April 12: ‘Is world mythology one myth only’? Speaker: Chris Knight.