



# weekly worker

**Lady Gaga and the myth of the 'gay gene'. Maciej Zurowski looks at the pop diva's new anthem**

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Towards a Communist Party of the European Union

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## Middle East comes to midwest USA



# LETTERS



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

## Pentacle plan

*Weekly Worker* readers may be interested to know of some exciting direct-action plans for the TUC demonstration on March 26. The ideas below were arrived at during a representative gathering last weekend, but are subject to endorsement or amendment at a much larger meeting to be held at the University of London Union on March 12-13.

1. Hyde Park and the Pentacle plan: 'Hyde Park Stay for One Day' was agreed as the best 'soft' option, which will unify the most people, so it had plenty of support, even though some people thought it was not a sufficiently political target. Plenty of activists may wish to skip the march and go straight to Hyde Park to set things up, and make things comfortable. There was also strong support for the idea of re-occupying Parliament Square. In addition, we heard that the Student Activist Network may aim to camp overnight in Trafalgar Square.

The overall conclusion was that we should publish the Pentacle of five points - including Parliament Square and Trafalgar Square to be occupied at early stages of the march, plus (later on) Buckingham Palace, Piccadilly and Hyde Park/Hilton Hotel. We know that we can pull off Hyde Park. This will be the launch pad and should help us achieve the other more political occupations. The Pentacle allows for many different possibilities: people can choose their own styles of music and protest. The Pentacle is designed to keep people partying till Earth Hour at 8.30pm, when we should really 'cast a spell' by blacking out London. 2. Synchronised signal at 2.11pm: To improve our chances to go into occupation of both Parliament Square and Trafalgar Square, we agreed that striking simultaneously with a synchronised signal would stretch the police more, making it harder to kettle different groups at the same time. We calculate that the maximum number of people should be along the length of Whitehall around 2pm, with plenty more marchers still to pass parliament. Therefore we decided on 02.11 (easy to remember because of 2011) as the moment to strike!

At that point, all hell breaks loose - signals, flares, foghorns, air raid sirens, beetroot juice, red wine flowing in Trafalgar Square fountains, and general mayhem, out of which people can do whatever diversions they feel appropriate to prove ourselves ungovernable!

*Weekly Worker* readers may have noted that the Con-Dem government plans to sack one in 10 members of the armed forces, many just back from Afghanistan. Perhaps we should be asking: What is Her Majesty doing about that? Why spend millions on a royal wedding at such an inappropriate time? Everyone else seems to have human rights: aren't soldiers human too? Between March 26 and May Day we'll be preparing leaflets to welcome our comrades in uniform and extend them full trade union rights.

With support pouring in from all sides, I think we can expect regime change sooner than might have been imagined this time last year.

For more information, see: [www.battleofbritainmarch26.org](http://www.battleofbritainmarch26.org).

**Chris Knight**  
email

## Critical 'yes'

Probably because the March 3 referendum represents little more than a rather uninspiring sop to national aspirations and concern about the ob-

vious democratic deficit in Britain, it has hardly captured the imagination of the Welsh public. Even if the proposed reform is passed, Wales will not even enjoy the (very limited) powers the Scottish parliament currently holds.

Referenda are hardly communists' favoured option in terms of addressing the democratic deficit. They have a rotten history, being wielded by such luminaries as Louis Napoleon, Adolf Hitler and Ayatollah Khomeini.

Coupled with the fact that, from the point of view of self-determination, so *very little* is on offer, this might tempt some to adopt a position of 'actively boycotting' the referendum. I have some sympathy with this. Indeed, in 1998 the CPGB opted to boycott the referendum on devolution.

However, communists *do* want to engage with those who recognise the existence of a national question in Wales and wish to do something about it. As such, comrades Nick Davies and Darren Williams (Letters, February 24) correctly point out that by advocating a 'no' vote, comrade Gareth Evans ('Vote no on March 3', February 17) is effectively calling for the continuation of the current anti-democratic status quo. Communists should have no truck with that. We find it objectionable that the Welsh assembly's legislative remit is currently so limited. Ditto the situation where, if the assembly has the temerity to desire to pass primary legislation, it must first go to Westminster, cap in hand.

We should certainly not be lining up with the likes of the bone-headed Tory MP for Monmouth, David Davies, in the name of taking "the debate to a much deeper level", as comrade Evans suggests. Thus far the contribution of David Davies and his ilk to the 'debate' has consisted solely of invoking fear about the "vast amount of money" the assembly has cost and how a 'yes' vote would put "strain on the union" he so cherishes.

Comrade Evans also seems to buy into the scare story that more powers to the Welsh assembly will facilitate Wales's separation. He says, for example, that the 'no' campaign, True Wales, "has spent an inordinate amount of time (correctly) highlighting that the referendum represents something more than a mere tidying-up exercise". But the referendum quite clearly *is* a tidying-up exercise, a minor tinkering with the completely inadequate constitutional order. Of course, we communists are against Welsh independence. Whilst recognising the existence of a national question in Wales, ours is the call for humanity to shed the flag-waving, imagined community of the nation-state. Yet we must insist on the *right* of the Welsh people to decide their own future and demand *full* powers for the assembly - ie, *up to and including* the right to secede. For us, self-determination in a federal republic is the concretisation of our demands for self-determination.

We must stress working class unity at all levels, when it comes to opposing the cuts. Comrade Evans is quite correct to point out the fallacy of the argument of some in the 'yes' camp, who argue that more powers could somehow isolate Wales from 'English' cuts. The fact that the cross-party Yes for Wales! campaign does not and, as comrades Davies and Williams admit, *cannot* say anything about this reveals a serious shortcoming of that campaign.

**Ben Lewis**  
London

## UnMarxist

I fail to see any Marxism in Gareth Evans' article about the Welsh assembly referendum

A list of partial benefits gained and

failures delivered by the assembly government is possibly of interest, but it hardly constitutes a valid Marxist study of the value or non-value of the assembly. The record of the Welsh assembly government (WAG) is only a measure of the performance of the parties involved, not of the present value or possible future uses of the assembly as an instrument of workers' struggle. Let us not forget that the present WAG is one consisting of rightwing Labour members with a few nationalist partners who hold a wide range of reformist ideas. So, I suggest, little should be expected. Criticism of the performance of the WAG is totally valid. You could say it is a vital part of the struggle against the reformism of both Labour and the nationalists. Neither offers anything for the workers of Wales.

I would argue that as part of our efforts we should place demands on this motley crew. Demand that they draw up a budget that would meet the needs of the Welsh working class and a programme that would not stop at calls to fight the Tory cuts but would contain measures to engage in the expansion of services.

This would be a programme of demands similar to those forming a Trotskyist transitional programme. It would include social and economic demands, plus most of the democratic demands made in the article.

Supporting a 'yes' or 'no' vote would not preclude comrades from raising such a programme. I think raising such demands as part of a 'yes' campaign would be more consistent and understandable. Asking workers to vote 'no' as a way of extending powers seems to stretch logic, even dialectical logic, to a point beyond understanding.

I also hold the view - as, in my opinion, did the old teachers, Marx and Engels - that we fight for the greatest extension of democratic rights possible, thus providing the most favourable conditions for the workers' struggle.

**Terry Burns**  
Ex-Labour, Militant and SLP

## Better slogans

Eddie Ford states in his article that "proletarian rule is not on the immediate agenda. Therefore our strategy is for pan Arab revolution" ('Good-bye to Gaddafi', February 24).

Two obvious points come to mind. If working class rule is not on the immediate agenda, which class is going to lead the struggle for the proposed "pan-Arab unity"? This is presumably on the "immediate agenda", although it has to be said there is little sign of it from any reports on the ground. Anyway, surely it is obvious that any call for Arab unity advanced by any section of the Arab establishment will have a reactionary anti-working class dynamic. Why then should communists advance a slogan that can only aid our enemy? What next - communists advancing the call for the unity of all Turks or all Slavs? The reactionary implications should be obvious.

Secondly, is the call for workers' unity in the Middle East in the struggle for workers' power not a more appropriate slogan for communists to advance rather than the call for the unity of all Arabs? After all, a considerable population of non-Arab people live in the region (Jews, Kurds, Persians, Berbers, Turks, etc). In the case of the Kurds and Berbers, there is a history of national oppression enforced by imperialism and the local Arab ruling class.

The struggle for a united socialist republic of the Middle East would seem a more apt slogan for communists fighting for the unity of the

working class of the region. The era of national democratic revolutions led by non-working class forces is long past and it can't be revived. In the modern world that road only leads to defeat and demoralisation for the working class. The only social force that can advance democratic rights is the working class. A democratic republic is a socialist republic or it is a sham.

**Sandy Johnston**  
email

## ESA nightmare

Starting at the end of March, all 2.7 million people in receipt of incapacity benefit will, at the rate of 11,000 a week, have to face a medical before they are transferred to the new employment and support allowance (ESA), which is replacing incapacity benefit.

Of those 2.7 million, 1.2 million are receiving it on mental health grounds, including depression. The other 1.5 million existing claimants of incapacity benefit qualify on the grounds of physical disability. Since October 2008, all new claimants of incapacity benefit have had to claim ESA instead, and these claimants have had to face a work capability assessment medical after 13 weeks.

Statistics show that 90% of those who are claiming ESA on mental health grounds are failing their assessment medical and are being found fit for work and therefore ineligible for ESA. They have two options: they can either claim job seekers' allowance (JSA) or they can appeal to a tribunal. Of those appealing, 40% have their ESA reinstated, which rises to 70% if they are represented.

Work capability assessment medicals are carried out by nurses and doctors employed by Atos, a private French-Dutch company, which is being paid £100 million by the department for work and pensions. The assessment medicals carried out by these nurses and doctors, who are not trained in mental health, involve putting into a computer the answers given by claimants to questions originating from a computerised questionnaire. The results of this questionnaire are then analysed by a team of disability analysts, who take very little notice of letters written to Atos by claimants' GPs, consultant psychiatrists, psychologists and community psychiatric nurses.

It is entirely possible that at least 600,000 of the current 1.2 million mental health incapacity claimants will fail their medical and therefore be found ineligible for transfer to ESA. These 600,000 people will either have to apply for means-tested JSA or will drop out of the benefit system completely, because the other income or savings of the claimant or their spouse makes them ineligible for JSA. For those eligible for the means-tested JSA of just £65.45 a week, it will mean a drop in weekly income of over £25 a week. The savings to the DWP budget will be in the region of several billion pounds a year.

In the 1930s, communists called for 'work or full maintenance'. In 2011, communists call for a minimum wage of at least £400 a week. This figure should also be used as the level of benefit paid to those unemployed through unemployment or through physical disability or mental illness.

**John Smith**  
Cambridgeshire

## Million march

There have been calls for a so-called 'million man march' in Zimbabwe. Who is making those calls and whose interests do they represent?

Comparing Zimbabwe to Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and other countries in North Africa and the Middle East is the height of mischief. The situation in Zimbabwe is one where Zimbabweans, after years of suffering brought about by foreign-inspired political conflict and western sanctions, made a conscious decision to achieve political stability. People of various political persuasions have, through their own chosen representatives, come up with a political arrangement which will lead to a new constitution and elections.

So who are these people calling for an uprising? If they are Zimbabweans, then surely their interests are covered by one of the many political parties which took part in the elections. Those interests are represented today by participation in the global political agreement (GPA). It not, then they are a small minority whose interests cannot override those of the majority.

The above facts raise the question of the legitimacy of those calling for protests. These protests are for what? Replacing the GPA? Replacing it with what? Even if a million people were to march or protest, which is most unlikely, should their wishes undo what the Zimbabwean electorate chose? So far they have called for the removal of president Mugabe and the Zanu-PF party from government. They give themselves the right to replace more than half the Zimbabwean electorate who chose Mugabe and Zanu-PF. This makes them proxies of the Movement for Democratic Change in a backdoor attempt to achieve through so-called protests what they could not achieve through the ballot box. Or are the protestors going to also demand the removal of the MDC as well? In which case they then wish to replace the whole electorate, making their version of democracy even more bizarre.

Zimbabwe is on the recovery path economically. Its people are still battling to rebuild their lives after the turmoil of the last 10 years. They do not need more turmoil, which is certain to come about as a result of these planned protests. Businesses will be disrupted, new projects will be placed on hold, and we will all go back to shortages and the attendant price madness that they invoke in some of our citizens. People will die due to lack of medicines; people will go hungry.

Right-thinking Zimbabweans will see these so-called protests for what they are: the chance once again for a few individual Zimbabwean fat cats to profit from chaos and the suffering of the people, whilst they get paid by foreign-funded NGOs. Right-thinking Zimbabweans will see this as a slavish copying of events in other countries without regard to Zimbabwe's unique circumstances. Right-thinking Zimbabweans will say *no* to being part of an agenda that is driven by foreign interests in tandem with those of a few Zimbabwean fat cats. Right-thinking Zimbabweans will not participate in protests that are meant to short-circuit the legitimate process towards peace and development rather than conflict. Right-thinking Zimbabweans will ignore a few misguided, power-hungry individuals who seek to usurp the people's progress towards a better future.

Zimbabwe has thus far charted its own course. When other countries were busy scrambling for so-called 'aid and support' from the west in return for the unchecked exploitation of their resources by multinational corporations, Zimbabwe was fighting for the control of its own resources. Now these other countries have woken up to the fact that there is nothing in this arrangement for them and are removing governments that aided and abetted the western corporate looters. Zimbabweans are already a step ahead.

**Fariko Mwene**  
email



## IRELAND

# Economic meltdown sees left advance



**Richard Boyd Barrett and Joe Higgins: successful**

Last week's Irish general election not only produced the expected turnaround among the main parties: it also saw a real advance among the tiny forces of the far left.

The United Left Alliance - made up of the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party (the latter mostly standing under the SWP front, the People Before Profit Alliance), the Tipperary Workers and Unemployed Action Group (TWUAG), plus local groups and individuals - won five seats in the 166-member Dáil under Ireland's proportional representation voting system.

The ULA candidates elected were Richard Boyd Barrett (SWP/PBPA), Joe Higgins and Clare Daly (SP), Joan Collins (PBPA and ex-SP), and Séamus Healy (ex-Lambertist, representing the TWUAG). Results achieved by the 18 ULA candidates ranged from 0.8% to 21.3% of first-preference votes.

Comrade Healy did best, with 8,818 votes (21.3%) in Tipperary South, while Joe Higgins, who is now obliged to resign his seat in the European parliament, did almost as well in Dublin West (8,084 or 19.0%). Comrade Daly won 7,513 first preferences (15.2%) in Dublin North, Joan Collins picked up 6,574 votes (12.9%) in Dublin South Central, and comrade Boyd Barrett managed 6,206 (10.9%) in Dún Laoghaire. Four other (unsuccessful) ULA candidates won more than five percent. Boyd Barrett's election was significant in that he beat two very high-profile candidates to get the fourth seat in the constituency: Ivana Bacik, a sitting senator on the left of the Labour Party, and Mary Hanafin for Fianna Fáil - a member of the cabinet since 2004.

Joe Higgins said the five TDs would "work as a coherent, principled opposition". While the "intention is to form a party", he warned that "it's not going to happen tomorrow morning". However, the SP itself preferred to talk about the ULA in more general terms. According to the Committee for a Workers' International, the 'international' run by the Socialist Party in England and Wales, the "profile developed" by the ULA, and then the election of the five TDs, "means that the opposition that will develop to the new government's austerity policies can have a genuine left and working class reflection". The ULA should advocate "a distinct left and

socialist programme" and, the SP hopes, "could become the key force to represent the anger and radicalisation that will grip Irish society in the months and years ahead" (www.socialistworld.net, March 1).

For its part, the SWP in Ireland referred to the ULA as "a principled left that grows out of workers' struggles rather than being an add-on to the republican tradition". It "should engage in a process of open debate and discussion to lay the basis for a new leftwing party. That party should be a multi-tendency party, where the Socialist Workers Party work alongside the Socialist Party, the Workers Unemployed Action Group and independent socialists to build a genuine party of the left - while giving each other the freedom to debate and discuss their differences" (SWP newsletter, March 1). If the comrades are serious, this represents an advance on the SWP's position during its Socialist Alliance turn in Britain, when it opposed any moves towards an SA party.

The CWI highlighted "differences" with the SWP during the election campaign over the left's attitude to the Labour Party, which made big gains, increasing its representation from 20 to 37 TDs. The CWI notes that Richard Boyd Barrett "responded to some voters who said they were voting Labour by indicating that he was giving his second preference to the Labour Party, with whom he was involved in a life-and-death battle for the last seat in Dún Laoghaire. Such an approach only serves to legitimise people voting Labour and reinforces illusions that may exist in Labour instead of cutting across them."

However, in its post-election bulletin the SWP seemed more concerned with Sinn Féin voters: "... the ULA will have to relate to those workers who voted Sinn Féin to show that, while this party uses left rhetoric, it will not break from capitalism. The ULA can welcome many who support Sinn Féin into struggle, but it must seek to expose - in a consistent and fraternal manner - the weakness that hides behind a left republican rhetoric."

Like Labour, SF had an excellent election, gaining 10 seats. Among its 14 TDs, Gerry Adams topped the poll in Louth, while seats were unexpectedly won in Cork East, Meath West and Sligo-North Leitrim. In response to a question about a united left opposition, Adams said: "We'll

... figure all of that out. I've always believed in cooperation." He also invoked republican iconography: "Next Tuesday is the day that Bobby Sands started his hunger strike. Okay, so this isn't just about who wins what and who tops the poll and who doesn't. This is about actual sacrifice in terms of ongoing reconquest of Ireland by the people of Ireland."

However, what really differentiates SF from Labour at this stage is its call for a default on the non-sovereign debt and its support for some kind of strike action against the cutbacks. Further adding to its left credentials, Sinn Féin says all its TDs will only take the equivalent of the average industrial wage. However, it is hardly a working class party and is quite capable of a rapid swing to the right.

By contrast, Labour still enjoys trade union support. Unite called on it to "resist the lure of coalition with Fine Gael" and opt instead to lead a "game-changing" opposition coalition of the left, with "the prospect of a left-led government in the short term". According to Unite, the dividing line is "now between the left and the right" and there should be "an invigorated left opposition" of 60 TDs, "with Labour at the head, Sinn Féin, the United Left Alliance and other independents in support". Instead of joining Fine Gael in a coalition government, "Labour should look to the interests of the nation and working people".

However, talks between Labour and Fine Gael look certain to produce a coalition agreement. The economic meltdown meant that the parties of the outgoing coalition, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party, were pulverised at the polls, with FF losing no fewer than 58 seats (it now has a mere 20, its worst ever return) and the Greens being wiped out altogether. Labour wants less savage cuts (with anaesthetic) and says the better off should pay more in tax.

The ULA will hope to be at the centre of an extra-parliamentary movement against the cutbacks, although to date it has never succeeded in mobilising more than 1,500 people to its protest events. The likely visit to Ireland of the British queen in June also represents an opportunity which should not be missed. An internationalist protest against the visit could be organised - one which opposes cuts north and south in Ireland and links into the fightbacks in Britain ●

**Pat Corcoran**

## 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](mailto:info@communiststudents.org.uk) or check out [www.comuniststudents.org.uk](http://www.comuniststudents.org.uk).

### Radical Anthropology Group

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

**March 8:** 'The moon inside you'. Speaker: Diana Fabionova.

### Close Yarl's Wood now

**Saturday March 5, 1pm:** demonstration, Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre, Twinwoods Road, Clapham, Bedfordshire. End the detention of migrant women.

Enquiries to Stop Deportation Network: [stopdeportation@riseup.net](mailto:stopdeportation@riseup.net).

### Lobby Labour

**Saturday March 5, 11am:** March to Labour's local government conference, Assemble Geraldine Mary Harmsworth Park, Southwark, London SE11.

Organised by NSSN Anti-Cuts Campaign: <http://www.stopcuts.net>.

### Day X for the NHS

**Wednesday March 9, 5pm:** March, assemble Royal London Hospital, Whitechapel Road, London E1.

Organised by the Right to Work Campaign, Keep Our NHS Public and Tower Hamlets Hands Off our Public Services: 07795 412932.

### Save our services

**Wednesday March 9, 7.30pm:** Meeting, Railway Institute, 2 Romsey Road, Eastleigh, Hampshire. Speakers include: Clare Solomon (ULU president), Megan Dobney (Sertuc) and local union reps.

Organised by Hampshire TUC.

### Lobby Con Dems

**Saturday March 5, 11am:** Demonstration, march past Tory and Liberal Democrat Welsh conferences, assemble City Hall, Sophia Gardens, Cardiff.

Organised by Cardiff TUC and Cardiff Against Cuts: [cardiffatc@gmail.com](mailto:cardiffatc@gmail.com).

### Lobby Lib Dems

**Saturday March 12, 11am:** Demonstration, outside Scottish Lib Dem conference, Perth Concert Hall, Mill Street, Perth.

Organised by Scottish TUC: [www.stuc.org.uk](http://www.stuc.org.uk)

### Defend multiculturalism

**Wednesday March 9, 7pm:** Rally, Friends Meeting House, Euston Road, London NW1. Speakers include Martin Smith, Weyman Bennett, Peter Hain, Billy Hayes, George Galloway.

Organised by Unite Against Fascism: [www.uaf.org.uk](http://www.uaf.org.uk)

### No poverty and discrimination

**Saturday March 12, 12 noon:** Mothers' march. Assemble Trafalgar Square (north side). Followed by speak-out, 2pm, room G2, School of Oriental and African Studies, Thornhaugh Street, London WC1. Women and men, young and old.

Organised by Global Women's Strike: [www.globalwomenstrike.net](http://www.globalwomenstrike.net).

### Rage Against Lib Dems

**Saturday March 12, 11am:** Demonstration, Liberal Democrat conference. Assemble Devonshire Green, Sheffield S1.

Organised by Right to Work: [www.righttowork.org.uk](http://www.righttowork.org.uk).

### Right to Work

**Saturday March 12, 2pm:** Delegates' meeting, Sheffield (after demo, venue to be announced). Election of steering committee. Send delegates' names to [info@righttowork.org.uk](mailto:info@righttowork.org.uk).

### Travesties of justice

Reports from Bail Observation Project on immigration hearings. With report's authors, former detainees and immigration lawyers.

**Tuesday March 15, 7.30 pm:** Old Library, town hall, St Aldates, Oxford.

**Tuesday March 22, 7pm:** Committee room, Houses of Commons, London SW1.

Further information: Campaign to Close Campsfield: [www.closecampsfield.org.uk](http://www.closecampsfield.org.uk).

### We're all in this together

**Friday March 18, 7pm:** Art Uncut first London show, Bull and Gate, 389 Kentish Town Road, London NW5. Featuring UK Uncut, False Economy, Josie Long, The Temp and the Tycoon, Rumour Cubes. Discussion on social and economic consequences of cuts, followed by music and comedy.

Organised by Art Uncut: [www.artuncut.org.uk](http://www.artuncut.org.uk).

### No to cuts budget

**Wednesday March 23, 5pm:** Demonstration, Trafalgar Square, for rally at Downing Street 6pm.

Organised by Right to Work and Coalition of Resistance: [www.righttowork.org.uk](http://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](http://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.



## UPRISING

# No imperialist interventions

Communists oppose western meddling in Libya, writes **Eddie Ford**. Rather it is the masses themselves who must overthrow the Gaddafi regime

Isolated and beleaguered, the Gaddafi regime is fighting for its very life - effectively reduced, as things stand now, to a rump which controls Tripoli and not much else (with protests sporadically breaking out in the capital's southern suburbs).

Libyan ambassadors and diplomats abroad are deserting their boss in increasing numbers, like rats leaving a sinking ship. Of course, for the most part, their sudden fealty to democratic values is pure hypocrisy - they were loyal servants of the Libyan regime right up until the 11th hour, when they finally realised that the writing was on the wall for Gaddafi and therefore that it might be more expeditious to find employment elsewhere. As for the Libyan masses, they remained unbowed despite the terror launched against them - steadfast in their total rejection of the *regime*, not just colonel Muammar Gaddafi himself. The latter has vowed to "turn Libya red with fire" if necessary in order to stay in power. More likely that he has signed his own death warrant.

Hence the eastern half of the country, apart from this or that pocket, has been almost completely freed from Gaddafi's tyrannical rule. Benghazi, the country's second city and now widely referred to as 'free Benghazi', has become the *de facto* capital of Libya - until Tripoli falls, that is. A provisional government (or national council) has been declared, though, of course, given the rapidly moving confusion of events - the fog of revolution - it is not entirely clear who or what it is composed of, or its exact political configuration. However, one thing that does seem all but certain is that we are not dealing with an Islamist authority of any stripe here.

In other words, a living repudiation of the scaremongering lies promoted by the regime - and some of its wretched apologists in the west and elsewhere - to the effect that the forcible overthrow of Gaddafi would represent a victory for the Islamists or even al Qa'eda. To this end on February 21 we had Saif al-Islam Muammar Al-Gaddafi, the tyrant's odious son, ranting on state TV that the country would be split asunder into "15 Islamic fundamentalist emirates" if the regime was toppled - when he was not spluttering on about how he would "eradicate" all anti-government protestors (amusingly enough, for those who appreciate dark humour, Saif al-Islam received his PhD from the London School of Economics in 2008 for a dissertation entitled, 'The role of civil society in the democratisation of global governance institutions: from "soft power" to collective decision making?'). In fact, all the evidence to date indicates that Islamist involvement in the Libyan uprising has been minimal.

In the words of Fathi Terbil, the 'human rights' lawyer whose arrest on February 15 sparked off the mass protests and who now sits on the new revolutionary council in Benghazi, "this is just the first stage of the uprising", which aims for the "destruction of the regime". But, he cautioned, "we haven't completed it yet".<sup>2</sup> In order to defend the gains of the revolution - and to claim the prize of Tripoli - the revolution must not halt, but instead act with ruthless *aggression* against the regime: attack is so often the best form of defence. Even now, with the regime visibly disintegrating, there is still the danger that Gaddafi could regroup his forces and regain the ini-



**Benghazi liberated, but what about Tripoli?**

tiative. Even if such a reimposition of control was only temporary, any prolongation of the regime can only mean more death and suffering for the Libyan masses - as the Gaddafi dictatorship has shown itself more than willing to inflict cruel and wanton violence when cornered.

But, having said that, the balance of forces is weighted against the Gaddafi regime. By all accounts, Gaddafi is now largely reliant on his elite armed forces and mercenaries to prop him up. Mercenaries are all very well and good, but their 'loyalty' quickly evaporates when the going gets tough and it looks like their paymaster is on the losing side. In which case, they just make a run for it - especially when, as in Libya, they are a rag-bag of desperadoes recruited from every corner of sub-Saharan Africa, not to mention eastern Europe, Russia, South Africa, etc. And Gaddafi's elite units, like the air force, might turn out to be just as disloyal as well, when asked to fire upon their own brothers and sisters - quite literally. Of course, we have already seen mutinying amongst such elements - with two senior Mirage F1 fighter pilots defecting to Malta; and the crew of a Sukhoi-22 who refused to bomb Benghazi.

Desperately, the regime is trying to break out of its Tripoli box - with very little success so far. On February 28 Gaddafi's Khamis Brigade - led by his youngest son of the same name and purportedly the best equipped army unit in Libya - tried to reclaim the strategic town of Zawiyah, 19 miles from the capital. Ominously for the regime, the brigade was beaten back by revolutionary forces using seized military equipment (albeit mostly semi-decrepit), including tanks, armoured personnel carriers and pick-

up trucks mounted with anti-aircraft guns. The fighters themselves were armed with a mixture of hand-guns, assault rifles, shotguns and improvised weaponry. Perhaps even more inauspiciously for the regime, stories are circulating that there was a "breakdown" of military discipline amongst the Khamis Brigade - even a "split".<sup>3</sup> One rebel told the Associated Press that the Khamis Brigade was defeated "because our spirits are high" and "their spirits are zero".<sup>4</sup>

Revolutionary forces are now attempting to organise a liberation army that can march on Tripoli itself, though there is no way of knowing at the moment as to how advanced these plans are - or to what degree we are witnessing the birth of a serious or viable military-political force that can finally dislodge Gaddafi. But some sort of military committee appears to have been formed, which includes defecting senior officers from the regime, and it is roughly estimated that this nascent revolutionary army consists of at least 5,000 volunteers - most of whom are being trained in Benghazi (receiving a crash course in basic military concepts and manoeuvres). We can only expect their numbers to swell over the next days and weeks.

### Imperialist threat

Meanwhile, both the United States and UK governments have openly declared that Gaddafi is "delusional" and "has to go" - something that communists find hard to disagree with. However, there is the danger that imperialism might intervene in an effort to devise an outcome more to its liking. Like finding a hand-picked successor to Gaddafi - a favoured client who it hopes will do its bidding. Or perhaps by claiming that intervention is nec-

essary in order to avert "genocide" - the charge that some have absurdly, and self-interestedly, directed against Gaddafi. The dictator sitting in Tripoli wants to eliminate, whether physically or not, all those who oppose his regime - not carry out the extermination of any particular ethnic/racial group or peoples.

Whatever the justification employed, the western threat is real. David Cameron belligerently told MPs that Britain did not "in any way rule out the use of military assets" and suggested that the British government might arm anti-Gaddafi forces. Cameron now appears to have backtracked from this stance, after the Obama administration publicly distanced itself from such notions. However, it would be foolish in the extreme to dismiss the prospect of imperialist intervention in Libya - especially if the US starts to fear that the quickly unfolding events in that country pose a definite risk of revolutionary contagion. Then the US tone could change rapidly, from its opposition to "outside intervention by any external force" - as Hillary Clinton put it - to precisely the opposite: military or other measures to restore 'order' and 'stability' to Libya, and the Arab world as a whole.

Needless to say, communists utterly oppose any imperialist intervention in Libya - no-fly zones, sanctions, 'targeted' assassinations, coups d'etat, etc. We want the Libyan masses to deal with Gaddafi themselves, which, of course, they are perfectly capable of doing. A Libyan revolution carried out from below would be a tremendous step forward - providing further inspiration, and revolutionary impetus, to the masses on the streets of Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, etc.

The democratic and revolutionary struggles in these countries are interweaving with, and feeding off, each other in a dynamic way. The Arab masses are increasingly calling for total regime change, not just for the removal of this or that president or monarch - as evidenced so clearly in Bahrain, where a movement for reforms *within* the existing monarchist system quickly turned into a mass force demanding the overthrow of that entire regime. The same is happening in Tunisia as we speak. Hence on February 25 some 100,000 or more protestors, in the largest demonstration since the ousting of Ben Ali, gathered in the capital demanding the resignation of the interim government. And the masses got a scalp, with the resignation two days later of Mohammed Ghannouchi - the prime minister and self-proclaimed acting president, not to mention former close ally of Ben Ali.

As the Gaddafi regime faces its violent demise, it is no exaggeration to say that we are in a period of the Arab awakening. The lynchpin, of course, is Egypt, which was briefly at the centre of the pan-Arabist movement - then under the leadership of bourgeois and petty bourgeois nationalists rather than the necessary working class hegemony - until the 'road map' with Israel transformed Egypt into a key imperialist ally under the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak. Therefore the real question is, who is going to *lead* the Arab revolution? That task can only fall to the working class and its organisations.

Finally, we in the CPGB denounce those who - to some measure or another - have come out in support of the 'anti-imperialist' Muammar Gaddafi, even if they might voice mealy-mouthed criticisms of his regime. Daniel Ortega, former hero of the Sandinista revolution, has openly admitted that he telephoned Gaddafi in order to offer his "solidarity", describing the Libyan tyrant as a man "waging a great battle" to defend the unity of his nation.<sup>5</sup> Ditto Hugo Chávez, who posted a message on Twitter proclaiming: "Long live Libya and its independence! Gaddafi faces a civil war!" He has also repeated the simplistic allegation, albeit dressed up as a paraphrasing of Gaddafi, that the US has been orchestrating the mass movement because it is "after the Libyan oil, just like they were after the Iraqi oil"; it has "gone mad" for oil.<sup>6</sup> Conspiratorial crap, parroted, of course, in *The News Line*, the Workers Revolutionary Party's paper ("They want to steal Libya's oil," says Chávez<sup>7</sup>), when it is not urging the masses in Tripoli to "defend their city against Nato", side by side with Gaddafi's forces.<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, those who have not prostituted themselves before nationalist tyrants insist on working class independence - no to the dictators, no to imperialist intervention. For an Arab revolution led by the working class ●

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### Notes

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## CRITIQUE

# The leadership of ‘events’

Andrew Coates unravels Slavoj Žižek’s ‘communist hypothesis’

For Slavoj Žižek we live in apocalyptic times. The unrest and revolutions sweeping Arab countries are revelations; they disrupt the normal flow of history. Tahrir Square shook Egypt as if through “intervention of a mysterious agency that we can call, in a platonic way, the eternal idea of freedom, justice and dignity”.<sup>1</sup> The fall of the Mubarak state signifies more than regime change. It appealed to a “universal secular call for freedom and justice”. It shows, as Žižek never ceases to repeat, Mao’s truth that “there is great chaos under heaven - the situation is excellent”.<sup>2</sup>

For Žižek’s platonic friend, Alain Badiou, the struggles sweeping the Arab lands are a “model of emancipation”. They are times when people’s lives are caught up without “hiatus” in a “communism of movement”, facing the (capitalised) state.<sup>3</sup> Žižek is hardly less breathless, calling it a “miracle” and “sublime”. If we followed him this would be another sign that “the global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero-point.”<sup>4</sup> It is hard to excel this lyricism - although one might expect backtracking, as the Arab revolutions return to mere politics.

Žižek’s ideas are rooted in readings of Hegel, Marx and the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan. His writings are an avalanche. They mix pell-mell discussions of abstract theory, cultural criticism and the latest news. The Slovenian philosopher and ‘cultural critic’ could be considered an *intellectual* in the French sense. That is, a person who has made a mark in his field, and has gained the right to talk of universal issues. He inspires a journal of Žižek studies, and has multiple platforms in the media. A devoted following listens. Most recently he has talked of the importance of the contemporary leftist “critique of political economy”. This is “the *sine qua non* of contemporary communist politics.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps some of the audience will not only be entertained by a defence of communism, but will develop a serious interest in these politics as well.

## Historical movement

Žižek refers to “a set of social antagonisms which generate the need for communism ... a movement which reacts to actual social antagonism”.<sup>6</sup> This, Žižek observes, puts him at loggerheads with his (otherwise often complementary) enthusiast for the “communist hypothesis”, Alain Badiou. To the French philosopher the “eternal” Idea of Communism became manifest in the period 1792–1871 and absorbed into an abortive politics of the state from 1917 to 1976 (the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution). Badiou defends a return to the Eternal-Present of Communism and its hero-symbols, from Spartacus to Che Guevara, free from political parties, but capturing the symbols of past revolutionary events “to project a fragment of the political real into the symbolic narrative of a History”.<sup>7</sup> To Žižek communism is not such a transhistorical “political-egalitarian project”. It is founded on antagonisms within the history of “global capitalism” that (may) be “strong enough to prevent its indefinite reproduction”.<sup>8</sup> But does he really, in Marx’s own words, make communism part of “the real movement which abolishes the present state of things”?<sup>9</sup>

Marx considered (in a skeletal formulation) the working class to be the flesh and blood of this move-

ment. Wage labourers are shaped by conflicts arising from the private appropriation of their work. To classical Second International Marxism the growth and spatial concentration of the proletariat pushes it to realise its common interests. Through political and industrial action the proletariat assembles as “united individuals”, prepared to seize control over their living conditions. The problem for Žižek is that, following Toni Negri and Michael Hardt (and also Paulo Virno), the “standard notion of exploitation” - the motor which pushes the workers to fight to regain their “alienated” products” - has been replaced by “intellectual labour”.<sup>10</sup> To put it simply, ‘private property’ stands against the mass of the population in the form of exclusion, from control over its system. It appropriates “the shared substance of our social being”, not just the fruits of our labour.<sup>11</sup> As a result ‘class struggle’ over production, the classic fulcrum of labour movement politics, is only a part of much wider conflicts.

The rise of the “general intellect” (knowledge and social cooperation) creates “wealth out of all proportion to the direct labour time spent on production”. The exploiters operate indirectly, by “rent appropriated as the privatisation of the general intellect”.<sup>12</sup> There are very sharp social divisions. But they are most visible between those ‘inside’ the set-up, who benefit from such fees, or from the equally ‘out of reach’ flows of international capital, and a much more heterogeneous ‘outside’. They range from those maintaining the machinery created by knowledge-technologies, in production or in services, and often hold only precarious jobs, or are simply parked as unemployed.

It is hard to see where this gets us. Marx observed in his chapters on ‘Machinery’ in the *Grundrisse* (1857–58) that in technological development “general social knowledge has become a direct force of production” and the processes of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect.<sup>13</sup> There are many debates on this issue. One point is that Marx demonstrates that what is commonly called ‘industrial’ labour was in the 19th century factory *already* bound up with the ‘general intellect’ through the *machine* (not to mention the organisation of the labour process). This does not abolish the extraction of surplus value; it alters its rate by increasing the quantity of fixed to relative capital (as in automated production). Whatever else may have changed about the importance of symbolic or linguistic inputs into production (from science to media), this does not affect the basic structure of Marx’s theory.

The precise way in which labour-time is taken from the worker and channelled off into surplus value (rates of exploitation) has *always* been opaque. Perhaps the ‘transformation problem’ of how Marxists can relate actual prices to value had been solved and then made obsolete by new forms of production. If so, the news has not reached the immaterially produced academic world on tap in the UK.

Where does this lead us? To Negri, Hardt and Virno, communism is the re-appropriation of the ‘general intellect’ by new forces, the ‘multitude’, a *plurality* or multiplicity beyond (but including) the working class, the excluded and the oppressed. Negri has speculated that capital could in some intermediate stage be compelled to follow its dictates: “There is the need to make capital aware of the weight and importance of the common good,

and if it doesn’t want to understand it is necessary to impose it.”<sup>14</sup>

For Žižek this is “utopian”. He begins from a class triad that fragments, and reconfigures, the working class. This is made up of “intellectual labourers, the old manual working class, and the outcasts (unemployed or living in slums and other interstices of the public space.” These are caught in a process that results in “the gradual disintegration of social life proper”. Into the void have flooded new populist, fundamentalist and “half-illegal initiatic groups”.<sup>15</sup> Liberal democracy holds this, relatively, together, by ‘listening’, protecting minorities and difference. This runs the gamut from 1960s sociological clichés about the ‘lonely crowd’, pop-political science about European xenophobia, dribs and drabs about identity politics, to recycled Mike Davis observations about the world’s mega-cities slums.

What is the upshot? Wracked with mutually loathing identities, what drives the (implicit) unity of this new working class to do ... what? There is clearly nothing solid here, no burgeoning political agency with a common purpose - the common objective is obscured, the shared space, inexistent and the sense of mutual interest elusive. This, apparently objective process (despite Žižek’s own claim to spurn ‘labour metaphysics’ of processes beyond human agency), carries all before it. We are being reduced, willy-nilly, to “substanceless subjectivity”.<sup>16</sup>

## Project?

Žižek therefore invents a problem of agency of his own. He claims that the “new emancipatory politics will no longer be the act of a particular social agent but the explosive combination of different agents”. We risk being washed away into an “empty Cartesian subject dispossessed of all our symbolic content, with our genetic base manipulated, vegetating in an unliveable environment”.<sup>17</sup> Crises, apparently, are a favourable terrain for challenges to the system. Will any emerge? Will there be an ‘event’, the ‘creation of new possibilities’?

A large chunk of Žižek’s position inclines to a picture of humanity cast adrift in what he once described as the Hegelian dialectical process, “the notion of ‘System’ as the self-deployment of the object itself with no need for any subjective agent to push it forward”.<sup>18</sup> In this endlessly fluctuating order is the conflict between the included and the excluded (to strip down the already bare-bones picture of class) being emptied out ‘behind our backs’? Yet ‘events’ can always just ‘happen’.

Žižek resolves the dilemmas presented by ineluctable commodification by injecting a massive dose of *voluntarism* over and beyond his ‘political economy’. We can call on the Eternal Present of Communism to re-ignite our will to fight. Here we find Badiou: “The communist idea thus persists: it survives the failures of its realisation as a spectre which returns again and again, in an endless persistence best recapitulated by Beckett’s already quoted words: ‘Try again, fail again. Fail better.’” Or, in a different vein, Žižek states that sometimes we need a “leap of faith, faith in lost causes, causes that, from with the space of sceptical wisdom, cannot but appear crazy”.<sup>19</sup>

The dictatorship of the proletariat could be one such wager on History. The lecturer advocates, or rather toys with, radically transforming the state. He does not have strong ideas - indeed any ideas whatsoever - of any party

helping in this process, or what its programme should be. Or about what exactly the transformation is going to involve. History proper - the record of deeds, of factional struggles, of conflicting left strategies, of wars, of parties and institutions - is overshadowed by a handful of evergreen ‘events’: the French Revolution, the Paris Commune, the October Revolution, the Cultural Revolution. Badiou calls these signs of the “rupture in the normal order of bodies and languages”.<sup>20</sup> Their completely shattering effects are difficult to trace historically. It is hard to find a fundamental break in the writings of at least one actor in these events, Lenin, whose ideas few would claim underwent a total change in 1917.

With indescribable *légèreté* Žižek does not flinch from violence, and terror - at least in their textual-verbal forms. The deaths of our glorious martyrs turn up as mere props on the stage of the ‘event’. Žižek admires strict “egalitarian justice, disciplinary terror, political voluntarism” and “trust in the people”.<sup>21</sup> Authentic terror is, apparently, the work of love. He revels in the claim that the working class cannot become another ruling class *because* of its fracturing in the new constellation of the ‘general intellect’ created by the dominance of ‘immaterial labour’. This is no doubt a great comfort to anyone worried about the experiences of 20th century Stalinism, and the dictatorial policies of all previous communist governments that have assumed power with this ideology.

Sceptics will surely be reassured to hear that there is no need for a majority of the people to support the revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Such an ‘event’, an irruption in the normal flow of history, does not have to seek permission from a big Other in the shape of a democratically elected assembly. “With Lenin, as with Lacan, the point is that a revolution *ne s’autorise que d’elle même* [authorises itself]: one should take responsibility for the revolutionary *act* not covered by the big Other.”<sup>22</sup> Fears about violence are misguided. They may have to exploit a certain amount of “rage capital”. They take inspiration from Robespierre and the terror during the French Revolution. But “if one means by violence a radical upheaval of the basic social relations then, crazy and tasteless as it any sound, the problem with historical monsters who slaughtered millions was that they were not violent enough. Sometimes, doing nothing is the most violent thing to do.”<sup>23</sup>

## Mysticism

Žižek is a self-proclaimed atheist. But he also a ‘god-seeker’ in the mould of a minority of early Bolsheviks (like Bogdanov) who sought inspiration from religious faith’s capacity to find a sure footing in eternity. In his efforts to discover how religions create a “common space”, an “egalitarian social order of solidarity”, Žižek has evoked Saint Paul’s Ephesians 6:12. This is a call to fight not against flesh and blood, but against “authorities, against the world rulers (Kosmokratoras) of this darkness, against the spiritual wickedness in the heavens”, a battle against “those in power in general, and against the global order and the ideological manifestation that sustains it”. In this vein Žižek talks of god-become-man: “the love that binds all members of the ‘Holy Ghost’ - that is, of the party or emancipatory collective”.<sup>24</sup>

This takes us to realms beyond rational communist thought, to the great flows of being beyond history.

Will Žižek go further in this mystical, millennialist direction? Critics have accused him of randomly lumping together ideas, of repetition, of contradiction and of opaque thoughts. It would be better to say that his ideas are often hidden behind great verbal radicalism and convoluted digressions, as shown by his current religious themes. Very few people who take the time to decipher his writings will find substantial tools to use for mundane politics. The pictures of class divisions (included/excluded), immaterial production (exploitation reduced to rent), privatisation of the ‘commons’, and the dictatorship of the proletariat - not to mention the residue of Badiou’s timeless metaphysics - are, we have argued, botched. Nobody is going to storm heaven - or the state - with copies of these writings in their haversack.

Yet ... and yet ... Žižek is often on the right track. He has recently risen to defend the remnants of European social democracy - observing that “we will have to re-invent aspects of the new, just to keep the machinery going and maintain what was good in the old - education, healthcare, basic social services”.<sup>25</sup> Is this more inconsistency - hard against his ultra-Leninism? Perhaps it is not. Žižek, in a moment of candour, to Bernard Henri-Lévy, admitted he did not expect any “anti-capitalist revolution” to come about in the foreseeable future. Rather he considered the radical left a source of energy to help maintain the institutional achievements of the historic left.<sup>26</sup>

As the watch-word of the present this is easy to grasp. But it has its faults. We - that is, those of us active on that left - require a lot more: we need to rethink our whole strategic approach to achieving power and, above all, to engage in *mass* politics. That said, Žižek’s social democratic ambitions are not ignoble; they are highly defensible. In the meantime we have Egypt ●

## Notes

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## MARXISM

# Stalinist barriers to

Paul B Smith concludes his call for a renewed Marxist culture

I stated in the first part of this article that in *Capital* Marx embarked on an inquiry into how the surplus product is extracted from labour ('A Marxist culture free from the taint of Stalinism', February 24). I could also have added that he wanted to discover the laws governing the mode of extraction of the surplus product. The key concepts in the book are surplus value and abstract labour as the substance of value. These are not logically or empirically independent. They do not exist in a static relationship to one another. They are interconnected. They are in constant movement and part of a process of transformation.

Abstract labour, for example, comes into being as labour-time that is socially equalised through capital's use of labour-power. Marx uses the term 'homogeneous' to describe it. Capital is indifferent to labour's qualities and reduces all working activity to a certain intensity and rate. In principle, capital is blind to whether labour is skilled or unskilled, women's or men's, intellectual or manual. These qualities become important only as a means of dividing workers in the class struggle. Gender, race, ethnic and religious hatreds serve a crucial role in keeping workers helpless and powerless, but destabilise the conditions for capital accumulation. They are an aspect of a declining capitalism.

Labour is abstract because it can be quantified in terms of the time expended, the value of the commodities it consumes and the amount of value and surplus value it produces. Capital combines labour-power with raw materials and machinery and this combination produces and reproduces value. It follows that, when abstract labour ceases to exist within the mode of production, then surplus value will not be the form the surplus product takes.

This was the case in the former Soviet Union. The ruling elite of this state attempted to extract a surplus through brute force. Extensive policing of every aspect of their working and non-working lives atomised workers and kept them isolated and fearful of one another. Workers were dependent for their subsistence on a bureaucratically allocated distribution of products. Generalised commodity production set neither the rate at which the Soviet worker worked nor the way in which they worked. The surplus product was bureaucratically administered and took the form of use-value, not value.

Marx argued that, through the process of competition, capitalist production becomes centralised. In response to repeated crises and through the impact of the class struggle it becomes socialised and politicised. Transnational monopolies, bureaucracies and governments manage production, consumption and distribution socially and politically. Education, health and social care produce use-values, not value. The pursuit of profit is divorced from industry. Surplus value is invested in finance. Unproductive finance capital comes to dominate and destroy industry. As a result of these tendencies, abstract labour and the law of value go into decline.

The student struggling to understand *Capital* faces a couple of challenges. The first is that the education system is based on training people for the needs of capitalism. Capitalism needs a workforce trained to subject itself to the routines of industry. Students in higher education see getting a degree as a means of becoming a manager or a professional on a

good salary. Compulsory assessment forces them to internalise competition. Unfortunately this does not develop students' talents and creativity. The system atomises, divides and isolates students from one another. It makes it difficult for them to study cooperatively. It also makes it hard for teachers to give students critical feedback without appearing to harm students' careers.

The second challenge is that the study of *Capital* requires the student to have a perception of the whole of humanity and society rather than a specialised examination of its constituent parts. Students are not taught how to approach the critical understanding of the evolution of society as an interconnected global totality.

Instead schools promote a mixture of religious and nationalist propaganda, market conformity and compliance. They stuff children's heads with heaps of facts and useless information in order to make them compete for positions within a social hierarchy. As a result, students bring to their study habits that separate events from their conditions, people from their alternatives and potentials, social problems from one another and the present from the past and future. The liberal ideal of a critical understanding of the arts and social sciences is confined to the teaching of a few privileged children and young adults. Such an understanding pursued honestly and diligently, of course, could lead to a critique of capitalism itself. The majority of middle and working class students are denied this form of education.

When Marx, for example wrote in *Capital* about the "law of the determination of value by labour-power" acting as a "coercive law of competition" (p110), he was not referring to a generalisation based on numerous examples of observed particular instances. He described a movement within the totality of capitalist social relations. This is movement between the poles of a contradiction - in this case, the contradiction between abstract and concrete labour. Marx thought of this contradiction as affecting the whole of society. It is not confined to one particular sector of industry, nor is its operation limited within the boundaries of the nation-state. It is global and inclusive in operation.

## Contradiction

When Marx mentioned the poles of a contradiction, he was not referring to a logical contradiction. A logical contradiction is when it is stated that both a proposition and its negation are true. When Marx stated that the commodity contains a contradiction between use-value and exchange-value, he was not speaking of a logical contradiction between propositions.<sup>1</sup> Rather he was stating that use-value and exchange-value have completely different natures. Use-value is essentially qualitative in nature. Its aim is to realise a human goal, or satisfy a human need or desire through its natural or artificial qualities.

The aim of exchange-value, on the other hand, is essentially quantitative: to realise itself as money and capital. The latter must increase its magnitude through accumulation if it is to retain its nature as self-expanding value.

The commodity then is the bearer of two different natures. A real contradiction expresses the antagonistic movement between these two opposing natures or - using the analogy of a magnet - opposing poles. Through countless daily acts of purchase and

sale, contradiction is the principle of change between one form and another. Commodities are changed into money, money into commodities, and money into more money. Exchange-value and use-value are two forms of the same social substance - labour - and the movement between these two forms constitutes the dynamics of the system as a whole.

It leads to the supersession of the contradiction - a new entity emerges or the old entity disintegrates. Supersession, like contradiction, is a concept Marx took from his teacher, the German philosopher, Georg Hegel, in order to understand change. Supersession means the retention of what is rational or pro-survival in the evolution of an entity into something new. At the same time this evolution destroys what is irrational and harmful. Supersession is a revolutionary concept.

## Socialist theory

I stated previously that Marx intended *Capital* to be a contribution to proletarian science and that the contents of the book were an advance in socialist theory. In previous works, Marx had criticised the political economy of his socialist predecessors and contemporaries. These included people such as the followers of the reformer, Robert Owen, and the French thinker, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Proudhon is famous for his saying that private property is theft. Like the Owenites, he had a moral critique of capitalism based on a labour theory of value derived from Smith and the other great bourgeois political economist following him - David Ricardo.

The Owenites condemned capitalism for robbing workers of the fruits of their labour. Following Smith and Ricardo, these early socialists knew that labour was the source of value and surplus value. They then argued that money could be abolished and replaced with units of labour. They introduced schemes replacing money with coupons. These recorded the amount of hours workers had worked. These labour chits were then exchanged for goods that had an equivalent amount of hours spent on them.

Socialists even proposed a national bank. This would issue a certificate for a number of labour units in exchange for the worker's product. Socialists argued that labour money and exchange markets would enable workers to gain the full labour value of their products. They could then avoid having to sell their labour-power to robber capitalists. All their schemes rapidly went bankrupt.

Marx argued that money could not be abolished without abolishing all the categories of a capitalist economy. These included wages, rent, interest, money and capital. It meant abolishing the commodity form and exchange itself, so that workers were freed from alienation and all production was for use-value or human need. The emphasis Marx gave to the doubling of form throughout *Capital* reiterated these points.

Marx showed that socialism is incompatible with the market in all its forms. This included the small-scale commodity exchange his Owenite socialist predecessors and the anarchist followers of Proudhon wanted to preserve. In *Capital*, Marx used the idea of the planning of production and distribution within society worldwide as his criterion for a socialist alternative to capitalism.

He suggested that if the working class came to power it would aim to abolish the capitalist division of labour. He argued that capitalism creates the conditions for this abolition. It makes workers constantly change their jobs. Capitalism demands that they be completely adaptable to the different demands of different kinds of work. Abstract labour is flexible labour. Freed from the coercive pressures of wage-slavery, workers can strive to be fully developed individuals, capable of performing many alternative kinds of activities.

There are many insights into the future society within the book. Marx pointed out that capitalism creates the foundations for socialism. Capitalism's drive to lengthen the working day overworks and kills workers. But it also lowers the value of labour-power through the introduction of automated machinery. This diminishes the amount of time necessary for the worker to engage in the labour process.

There is labour-time necessary for the reproduction of the individual and society and there is labour-time which is not. The distinction between necessary and free labour is crucial to the idea of a global society planned democratically by workers. The possibility of a world of abundance in which robots made robots and workers were freed from all forms of unnecessary and unwanted work is therefore posed by capitalism itself.

Within capitalism, surplus labour-time is wasted. The population surplus to the requirements of capital is underemployed or unemployed. In the absence of social planning, this surplus population grows larger, as more automated machinery is introduced. Within a planned society, on the other hand, necessary labour is freed from the commodity form. A fully automated society is one in which individuals have more free time to engage in domestic and creative activities. Thus Marx stated in volume 3 that the shortening of the working day is the fundamental prerequisite of the realm of freedom within socialism. This has become an important transitional demand for socialists.

## Stalinism

Marx engaged with and contributed to a vital socialist movement. This thrived until the 1920s. It has been almost completely wiped out by Stalinism. Prior to then, socialists saw the teaching of *Capital* as an essential part of the education workers needed to emancipate themselves. For example, in the 1900s the Scottish teacher and Marxist, John MacLean, held political economy classes every Sunday in Glasgow. These attracted hundreds of workers. Moreover, Marxist intellectuals such as Luxemburg and Hilferding were able to develop Marx's categories. Political economy had something important to say about the way the world was changing under the impact of imperialism and finance capital.

After the defeat of the Russian Revolution in the 1920s, the communist parties worldwide remained tied to the Soviet Union. This had a disastrous effect on the evolution of Marxist political economy. The rise of Stalinism as a counterrevolutionary movement entailed - as I mentioned earlier - the killing of thousands - possibly hundreds of thousands of Marxists. The purges culminated in the denunciation and death of countless Marxist intellectuals and activists. It gave rise to what Ticktin has called "anti-Marxism

dressed up as Marxism". This was propagated throughout the world by communist parties, their fellow travellers and their opponents.

Readers familiar with the intellectual history of the left will have noticed that I have not mentioned the terms 'dialectical' or 'historical materialism'. I have done this not because these terms are meaningless, but for another reason. They were taken over by Stalinists and used to exclude political economy from left discussion. Those of you who bother to consult Soviet textbooks will find that a summary of the ideas found within *Capital* are given short shrift and the bulk of the teaching concentrates on 'DiaMat' and 'HistMat'.

These are not theories. They are recitations of thoughts as patterns used to justify the pre-eminence of the USSR worldwide. Thus DiaMat, based on Stalin's reading of Engels' *Anti-Dühring*, attempted to show that the USSR had transcended the contradictions of capitalism. The notion of 'contradiction' is understood to be 'conflict' based on the class struggle. The propaganda stated that the USSR had eradicated conflict because it was a classless society and therefore had no contradictions.

Stalin based HistMat on Marx's 1857 *Preface to the contribution to a critique of political economy*. This is the passage that mentions the concepts of an economic 'base' and an ideological 'superstructure'. Stalin used HistMat to argue that the ideological superstructures of the USSR were socialist because the economic base was owned by workers: ie, it was a nationalised economy.

I mentioned previously that, for Marx, political economy was an inquiry into how the surplus product was extracted from labour. Stalin tried to write the concept of surplus product out of history. The concept had been used by the Soviet 'Asian mode of production' school of political economy in the 1920s. Stalin suppressed this school because it was clear that the concept of surplus product could be used to criticise the USSR. It could not therefore be tolerated. The idea that there could be a surplus product and hence a group of people living off that surplus product in the USSR was a revolutionary concept. It had to be air-brushed from history.<sup>2</sup>

Far from being a classless society that had eradicated contradiction and conflict, the elite group in the former USSR tried to extract a surplus product from the working class in the USSR by force. The driving contradiction of the Soviet product was within use-value. The system produced useless products. These ranged from unwearable clothes and shoes, to factories unable to produce machinery that worked or could be repaired. Atomised Soviet labour prone to alcoholism and sabotage was useless as source of a surplus sufficient to reproduce the Soviet elite.

Planning was non-existent in a society where managers fulfilled targets either by fiddling figures or by producing sub-quality goods. For example, one of the ways the Soviet Union attempted to boast its superiority to the capitalist west was that it manufactured arms as good as anything made in Europe or the US. When the regime collapsed in the 1980s, the only weapon that could compete with western products for efficiency was the Kalashnikov rifle.

The contradiction within the Soviet product drove the system to change into the disintegrating hybrid of capi-

# study and thought

talism and Stalinism that exists today. With neither a labour market nor planning controlled by freely associated labour, the USSR could move only either towards socialism or back to capitalism. Socialism would have meant world revolution and was therefore inconceivable.

The path the elite chose towards integration with the capitalist class is now blocked by crises and political instability. The intelligentsia has been reduced to poverty and workers work without payment. The former USSR is therefore continuing to disintegrate into antagonistic parts at war and in conflict with one another.

When Stalinists declared socialism to be inevitable, they were justifying the Soviet Union. They meant something like: 'The Soviet system is superior to capitalism. Marx's concept of global socialism is not on the agenda for the foreseeable future. Anyone who questions these ideas will be punished, ridiculed or denied privileges.' It does not follow from this, of course, that socialism is *not* inevitable. Marx clearly thought that socialism was more than a possibility. On the other hand, he had no conception of what might happen if capitalism were to defeat an attempted socialist revolution in an undeveloped nation.

## Althusser

Stalinism encouraged interpretations of *Capital* that served to uphold the power and interests of bureaucratic elites in monstrous regimes. These were neither capitalist nor socialist. Thus the French philosopher, Louis Althusser, argued that there was an unbridgeable gulf between the humanist Marx of the early 1840s and the anti-humanist Marx that wrote *Capital*. The latter, he argued, showed that individuals were subject to impersonal social forces they could not understand or resist.

For example, people's belief that freedom is worth fighting for was an illusion caused by the impersonal forces of an ideological state apparatus. Schools, religion and the family force individuals to think and behave as they do. People have no choice. A prime example of an ideological state apparatus was the Stalinist Communist Party. Party members could not be held responsible for crimes of mass murder committed in the Soviet Union and other Stalinist regimes if ideology controlled their subjectivity and social structures determined their actions.

Towards the end of his life Althusser admitted to being a trickster and deceiver who was ignorant of Marx. However, the influence he had on a generation of leftist students has been damaging. His interpretation of *Capital* made Marx's ideas almost unrecognisable. It took years of scholarship to clear up the mess Althusser and his followers left behind.

When students of *Capital* turn to secondary sources on *Capital* they will find much that is confusing. There has been a level of contestation within Marxist studies rarely found elsewhere. This would not be a problem if argument is based on an agreed set of fundamental truths concerning how to study *Capital*. These have yet to be established. This contributes to difficulties students may experience.

It is true that consensus is much easier to achieve now than it was during the cold war when Stalinists and anti-Stalinists were at loggerheads. For example, there is agreement now that Marx's notebooks of 1857 - *The Grundrisse* - prove that the attempt

to separate Marx's early work from his late work has failed. Althusser's claim that there is an "epistemological break" between the early philosophical and humanist Marx and the late scientific and anti-humanist Marx is false.

It is now impossible to argue that the German philosopher, Georg Hegel, was not a major influence on Marx. It is clearly false to suggest that, in *Capital*, Marx is not grappling with the alienation that workers experience within the capitalist system. Many of the prejudices that Stalinist academics inculcated have been by and large exploded and this is all to the good.

The point I am making is that the means to realising socialism presently appears to be absent. It has been absent for nearly a hundred years. There is no vital socialist movement that presently supports students of *Capital*. If one of the means of creating a vital socialist movement entails the study of the book then we have to start the process of Marxist education over again in apparent isolation. Certainly we need a political economy that can explain the present crisis and its possible trajectory. This is difficult without a grasp of the categories found within the book.

## Science?

The final reason for neglect of the book is that it is considered outdated and no longer relevant to understanding the 21st century.

*Capital* is allegedly of philosophical and historical interest only. It is a form of pseudo-science. These were positions taken in the heat of the cold war in the last century. They appear less convincing today. Karl Popper, the leading philosopher of science of the period, dismissed Marxism as a form of pseudo-science on two grounds. The first was that explanation and prediction in the social and historical sciences was impossible. The second was that Marxism was not a falsifiable doctrine.

Popper was correct to argue that Marx's predictions do not conform to the accuracy of a natural science. Why should they? They should only conform if one accepts the dogma that only the natural sciences can achieve success in understanding reality. One of the differences between the natural and social sciences is that the latter deal with people in social relations, not things. To deny that people are unaware of the social forces that control them (and cannot therefore act on the basis of this information to change them) reduces them to things. This is what Althusser does. It is a form of commodity fetishism.

Marx's predictions and explanations are based on the concept of tendency. Laws are not like natural laws that are always empirically corroborated. They are identifiable tendencies within an evolving social totality. Predictions based on them do not therefore have the accuracy of predictions in physics or chemistry.

Popper was wrong, however, to argue that the methods and results of *Capital* are not falsifiable. If, as it appeared in the 1950s, a new form of class society was evolving out of capitalism worldwide and a bureaucratic elite was becoming the new ruling class extracting a surplus from workers, then Marx's prediction of a classless alternative to capitalism would have been falsified. Moreover, if, as was argued during the cold war, capitalism had eliminated social inequality; benign management had eradicated the possibility of crises; and

workers standards of living worldwide (not just in western Europe and the US) had risen far above subsistence - then again, Marx's predictions would be falsified. *Capital* would then be neglected deservedly.

The problem with these falsifications is that they were based on Soviet interpretations of Marx - in particular the so-called law of the accumulation of misery. This is found in the section of *Capital* titled 'The general law of capitalist accumulation'. Here Marx discussed tendencies towards greater centralisation and concentration of capital, industrial cycles and crises, the industrial reserve army of labour and the surplus population. The Soviet interpretation passed into the folklore of educated debate on Marx at the time. Stalinists argued that the standard of living of workers in capitalism always declined to below the value of their labour-power.

Consequently, over time workers would become increasingly pauperised. This misreading was used to support Soviet propaganda - in this case that, because workers were fully employed in the Soviet Union, their standard of living was higher. Workers were happier than workers in the capitalist west. During the cold war advocates of capitalism and critics of Stalinism found this easy to falsify.

Marx actually states the following: "It follows that in proportion as capital accumulates, the lot of the labourer, be his payment high or low, must grow worse. The law, finally, that always equilibrates the relative surplus population, or industrial reserve army ... establishes an accumulation of misery, corresponding with accumulation of capital. Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole" (pp169-70).

Marx is not referring to workers' standards of living. The law is supposed to apply to high paid as well as low paid workers. Marx confirmed that capital employs workers at wages above the value of their labour-power as well as below it. This follows from the distinction he makes between the concept of price and that of value - wages in this case expressing the price of labour-power. Wage rates are determined by supply and demand.

The accumulation of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality and mental degradation are qualitative aspects of workers' lives that can be confirmed empirically. Research into the relationship between overwork and mental illness, deaths and disabilities caused through industrial accidents and war; the relations between addictions, feelings of desperation, alcohol, drugs and the sex industry; the persistence of child slavery and sweatshop labour and the destruction of social relations in working class families and communities - these can all be used (along with other indicators) as objective confirmation of this law.

## Relevance

Marx's ideas appear more relevant today than they did during the cold war. During the recent crash of 2008, two of the chief investment officers of JP Morgan, the investment bank, wrote a commentary for their clients titled *Eye on the market*. They stated that global consciousness had been rudely awakened and that "the greatest fear for Europe might be that Karl Marx was right: that capitalism is a system doomed to destroy itself through its

own internal contradictions".<sup>3</sup> This is a recognition that there is an awareness within the ruling class that capitalism is an unworkable system. It addresses Marx's understanding of crises directly and confirms one of his predictions. This is that capitalism cannot avoid or prevent crises.

In *Capital*, Marx refers to the life of modern industry as being one that follows a cycle of periods of prosperity, over-production, crisis and stagnation. During the 19th century, these cycles were frequent and posed crises of political and social relations. Working people were thrown out of the factory with no means of support. They were forced into the industrial reserve army of labour competing for jobs or rotted in the surplus population. Crises brought the nature of the system into question.

Regular cyclical crises are typical of the unplanned nature of capitalism. Within *Capital*, Marx argued that the possibility of crisis arises out of the circulation of commodities. Commodities can be exchanged for money - a sale - and money can be exchanged for commodities - a purchase - but people are not bound to buy because they have made a sale - or to sell because they have just bought. If the time between sales and purchases becomes too great, then there is the possibility of crises.

Marx understood the causes of crises to be overproduction, under-consumption and the disproportionate imbalance between the manufacture of producer and consumer goods. In the 19th century, Marx saw these fluctuations in economic activity as threats to capitalism and therefore as crises to the system itself. By the late 20th century, however, periodic downturns and upturns were managed by governments and were no longer global in extent. Under conditions of full employment in the 1950s and 60s, they were successfully controlled by fiscal and monetary means.

The collapse of consensus on how to manage the global economy in 2008 reflects changes in the modes of control since then. Full employment depended on cold war expansion of arms manufacture and Stalinist bureaucratic controls over labour-power. This led to wage rises, inflation and workers' militancy. A turning point was 1968, when for a brief period, both capitalism and Stalinism appeared to have lost control and proletarian revolution had once more become a realisable idea. A subsequent political and economic crisis led to the return of finance capital as the dominant strategy.

The G20's endorsement of austerity and cuts in public expenditure risks a slump in demand. This will slow down recovery, make the prospects of a relapse greater, increase deflationary pressures and pose the danger of training a new generation in the art of anti-capitalist political opposition. Conversely, the Keynesian alternative of fiscal expansion would reflate the economy, but risks a return to wage militancy, inflation and increased working class confidence in collective action. It is difficult to see how the capitalist class can find a coherent strategy to stabilise the system in these circumstances. For the moment in the UK, the section that supports the government appears to be following a reckless path.

At the same time, environmentalists argue that there is an ongoing crisis in species survival, caused by carbon dioxide pollution and climate

change. It is unlikely that the capitalist class as a whole wants to destroy the planet or commit suicide. The question is whether it is capable of developing strategies to regulate pollution and invest in initiatives designed to offset warming such as carbon capture, storage and pollution-free sources of energy.

Crisis, therefore, poses the possibility not only of recovery, but also of decline and termination of the system. Environmentalists have highlighted the preoccupation capitalism has with growth and how growth is damaging to the environment. This is correct. There can be no such thing as a capitalist social order that is not about growth and accumulation on a progressively increasingly scale. However, the environmentalist solution to growth is to advocate frugality and reduced forms of consumption.

Marx, on the other hand, links the destructive power of capitalism on the environment with the damage it does to workers. Thus he states that capital's investment in technology increases the soil's fertility in the short term but ruins it in the long term. Capital's overworking of the land is at the same time a process of overworking labour-power. Waste of natural resources involves wasting human resources (p102).

Marx is opposed to growth as capital accumulation, but in favour of growth of the productive use of natural and human resources. The solution he recommends is, of course, the classical socialist alternative - the supersession of capitalism by a globally planned economy under the control of the immediate producers. Crisis therefore poses the possibility of a transition to a new social form of production, distribution and consumption.

## Conclusion

I have argued that ideas found in *Capital* are relevant to an understanding of changes today. The reasons for the book's neglect are the influence of commodity fetishism and Stalinism. These have created barriers to study and thought. One of these includes an education system dominated by the needs of the market and industry (rather than honest inquiry into the nature of capitalism). Another barrier is the absence of a vital movement for socialism. Neither of these barriers is insuperable. Stalinism is a spent historical force. Commodity fetishism is still potent, but arguably more transparent, now that free market ideology or 'neoliberalism' is discredited. As the crisis deepens and is prolonged, the socialist movement has an opportunity to renew itself. Embedded within a working class mobilising to act globally and collectively, there will be greater opportunity for creating a vibrant Marxist culture, free from the taint of Stalinism.

How do you define Marxism? What has been your experience of teaching and learning Marxism? What kind of support do you need to campaign for a Marxist education? I would like to hear from you. Contact me at teachingandlearning4socialism@gmail.com.

## Notes

1. S Meikle, 'Dialectical contradiction and necessity', in J Mephram, DH Rubin (eds) *Issues in Marxist philosophy Vol 1: Dialectics and method* Brighton 1979, p19.
2. HH Ticktin, 'Marxist political economy' *Critique* 40, Vol 34, No3, 2006, p282.
3. HH Ticktin, 'Critique notes' *Critique* 46, Vol 36, No3, 2008, p334.



## UNIONS

# Middle East comes to midwest USA

Jim Creegan reports on the class struggles in Wisconsin



**H**aving read into so many past events promises of fundamental change that were never fulfilled, socialists should proceed with extreme caution regarding the possibilities of recent happenings in the Middle East. The present juncture does, however, put the ability of Marxists to rein in their wishful-thinking tendencies to an exceptionally severe test.

Here in the US, for instance, Rupert Murdoch's fascistic media clown, Glenn Beck, was incensed in mid-February by a placard in the hands of one of the 30,000 state government employees then encamped or demonstrating outside the capitol building (seat of the state legislature) in Madison, Wisconsin. According to Beck, it read: "From Cairo to Madison, workers unite!" The placard was obviously carried by some leftwing group. But, sententious phrasing aside, the sentiment it expressed was not too far from that of the demonstration as a whole. Many in the crowd - apart from the lefts - reportedly referred to the capitol building and surroundings as "Madison's Tahrir Square". "The images from Wisconsin," wrote one reporter for *The New York Times*, "evoked the Middle East more than the Midwest" (February 19).

The union action - still going on as I write, and spreading across the country - is the biggest mass protest in the state since the Vietnam era. It was organised by public-service unions, under strong pressure from their rank and file, to oppose a bill introduced in the Wisconsin legislature by Scott Walker, a Republican governor newly elected with Tea Party backing. Many schools were shut down for a week, as teachers called in sick to join the rallies, accompanied by thousands of high-school students who used their days off to come out in support. Rallies of hundreds and even thousands took place in small towns throughout a state often held up as an exemplar of middle-American political moderation, as bland as the cheese for which Wisconsin is famous.

The measure the workers are trying to kill would deprive unions of their right to bargain collectively with the state over everything but wages. Working conditions, holidays, benefits, work rules - all would be dictated by the employer; employees would immediately be forced to pay a much bigger percentage of their pensions and medical fees; workers would no longer be required to join the union or pay dues; contracts could last no more than a year, and an annual vote on union representation would be required, with the obvious purpose of encouraging employees to disaffiliate. The benefits unions would be forbidden to bargain for have compensated historically for wages that are on the whole lower than in the private sector for workers of comparable age and education (contrary to the rightwing propaganda now portraying public-service workers as living on easy street). The bill's provisions are so onerous that its true intent - to rid Wisconsin of public-sector unions altogether - is widely acknowledged. Walker has threatened to call out the National Guard against demonstrators. An assistant attorney general in the nearby state of Indiana, where public workers have already been deprived of bargaining rights has just been fired for advocating the use of live ammunition against demonstrators.

To justify the legislation, Walker is saying that his deficit-ridden government can no longer afford its union contracts. This is a blatant lie. Of the many states facing fiscal crises in the wake of the 2008 recession, Wisconsin is one of the least hard hit. Last month, the governor and the Republican-controlled state

legislature stopped crying poverty long enough to push through tax cuts for the rich and corporations that would make the existing deficit worse.

Among Walker's biggest campaign contributors were the billionaire oil and gas moguls, David and Charles Koch (pronounced like the carbonated eponym for US commercial supremacy). Major benefactors of the Tea Party through an outfit named Americans for Prosperity, the Kansas-based Koch brothers own petrol-supply centres and a toilet-paper factory in Wisconsin, and are notorious for funding union-busting efforts throughout the country. Walker hatched plans with the Koch brothers to take on the unions before he was even elected governor.

The CEO of another Koch-backed rightwing group, the Bradley Foundation, managed his gubernatorial campaign. Now he is turning around and attempting to make workers pay for a shortfall he has deliberately increased at the behest of his big-business backers. As another placard (this one hand lettered by an actual union member) read, "Don't piss on my leg and tell me it's raining".

(Walker's complicity was exposed in a phone conversation he had on February 23 with a blogger from Buffalo, New York, pretending to be David Koch. Walker, who was completely taken in, spared 20 minutes from his busy union-busting schedule to talk to the impostor at the very time he was refusing all phone calls from Democratic state officials trying to reach a compromise on the bill. Responding to a suggestion from the Koch impersonator that he infiltrate the demonstrations in the capitol with provocateurs to create an incident, Walker said that he had thought about it, but decided the stratagem was too risky from a political standpoint. The prankster later promised to take a delighted Walker to California and "show him a good time" once he had finished dealing with "those union bastards".)

Walker has enough votes in the Wisconsin legislature to pass the bill, but all 14 Democratic state senators boycotted the session before which it was to be submitted, denying Republicans the quorum needed to convene. To get around a law requiring them to attend all senate sessions while present in Wisconsin, the Democratic lawmakers fled to Illinois, where they have remained for over a fortnight at this writing. Walker is threatening to make redundant thousands of state workers if the legislators do not return and allow him to pass the bill. Narrow party-political considerations, more than solidarity with the unions, were probably their main motive. The fact that the Democrats have refused for decades to support unions in any meaningful way has not prevented labour bureaucrats from favouring the party with generous campaign contributions. The destruction of public sector unions in Wisconsin - the place where they were born in the 1950s, and have played a major role in state politics ever since - would thus deprive Democrats of a major funding source, and give Republicans, who rely almost exclusively on donations from corporations and the rich, an annihilating electoral edge. (Walker was careful to spare the only two public unions that supported his candidacy in November - the firefighters and the police - from the provisions of his bill. This did not prevent firefighters from joining the protest; the police were there too, albeit in the contradictory role of demonstrators and enforcers of the governor's orders to curtail them. After mass support rallies in Madison and around the country on February 26, it was the police who



blocked protestors from re-entering the capitol building, in probable violation of the state constitution.)

The Democrats want to continue collecting union money, but face an acute dilemma: any strong support for the Wisconsin labour action would compromise a source of institutional funding several-fold greater than unions: namely, the corporations - many of the same ones that donate to the Republican Party.

Thus, while some local Democrats may genuinely back union rights, the response of the national leadership was belated and equivocal. Not until four days into the protests did president Barack Obama offer up the mildest of rebukes to Walker on a local radio station interview. While he said the governor's move "seemed like" an assault on unions, and that we should not demonise public workers, he also called for shared sacrifice in the face of the national fiscal crisis, giving credence to the falsehood that the Wisconsin governor is motivated by budgetary concerns.

The very next day the White House was bending over backwards to deny Republican accusations that the Democratic Party was behind the protests. This time it was telling the truth. What else but vacillation can be expected of a president who had just put before the US Congress a budget bill calling for major reductions in social spending, and had given the green light to the likes of Walker in December by announcing a two-year pay freeze for federal employees?

The party-political side of the Wisconsin confrontation, however, is a secondary aspect of what is shaping up to be perhaps the most important class battle since Ronald Reagan sacked striking air traffic controllers 30 years ago. (Walker himself recognised the parallel in the above-mentioned colloquy with the Koch imitator, when he said he viewed the anti-union battle as his Reagan moment. Reagan's firing of the air controllers, he said, was the "first crack in the Berlin Wall"; from that point on, he continued, the Russians knew they couldn't push Reagan around.)

Legislation similar to the Wisconsin bill is pending in several states, including Tennessee, Missouri and Ohio. Fifteen thousand protestors assembled last week in the Ohio capital of Columbus. The public speeches of New Jersey's Republican governor, Chris Christie, sound three notes: bash the unions, bash the unions and bash the unions! The outcome in Wisconsin could therefore seal the fate of what is poised to become a national trend. Republicans have taken their November victory at the polls as a mandate for all kinds of anti-popular measures under the pretext of deficit reduction; governors with eyes on the White House in 2012 are now trying to outdo one another in union-crushing zeal. As the ranks of union members and their supporters at the Madison statehouse swelled from 30,000 to 80,000 in a matter of days, and Tea Partiers mounted a counter-demonstration of about 7,500, the unfolding confrontation in the country's heartland became the main focus of national politics.

## Last bastion

Here as in Europe, public-service unions are perhaps the most enduring redoubt of working class strength. In the US, 36% of government employees are union members, a opposed to about 7% in the private sector. Public unions have, in general, been less susceptible to neoliberal assaults than their private-sector counterparts because the governments that employ their members are not directly profit-driven, and hence less subject to the pressures of capitalist competition. Moreover, most of the services they provide - education, transportation

and public maintenance - cannot be relocated to low-wage countries.

Public unions remain a thorn in the side of the ruling classes not only because the latter no longer wish to pay the tax bill for their salaries. They have also managed to maintain certain conditions of employment that are rapidly becoming extinct for most other workers. Their job security, seniority rights, vacations, grievance procedures, medical cover and ability to retire in middle age with sometimes decent pensions make them slightly less dependent on the whims of their bosses, and therefore less intimidated. Their existence is a standing reminder of how things were for larger swathes of the working class before the age of austerity, and how they could be again with union power restored. They must be crippled to finish the job begun 30 years ago by Thatcher and Reagan.

Yet the very things that make public unions strong also leave them open to rightwing demagoguery. Their members are paid with taxpayer funds. If bus and train drivers have the power to paralyse whole cities and countries, the public is also greatly inconvenienced by transport strikes. If the benefits government employees enjoy can serve as a model for other unions, they can also be an object of resentment among those who have much less and may look upon public workers as privileged.

The success of efforts to turn opinion against public employees has varied depending upon the level of class-consciousness and political traditions in a given country. During what till now was the high watermark of resistance to neoliberalism - the French strikes of 1995 and after - such efforts failed miserably, as the workers garnered broad popular support. In the United States, on the other hand, divide-and-conquer tactics have been much more successful.

Rightwing politicians and the mass media constantly portray government employees as unwilling to share the burdens that all Americans must bear in order to reduce growing public deficits. The oligarchs who have been devouring an ever-growing share of national income for decades, who caused the financial crisis that produced the budget gaps in the first place and then received billions in government largesse to get them out of the mess they made for themselves are, of course, conveniently airbrushed from the picture. But many middle and working class Americans simply lack the intellectual armour to protect themselves against such duplicities. Reference to classes and class interests is effectively relegated to the left-liberal fringes of mainstream political discourse. Deindustrialisation, low union density and the 'death of communism' have given individualistic habits of thought a decided upper hand over the country's already underdeveloped collectivist traditions.

## Teachers targeted

Especially pernicious is the crusade that has been waged for years against teachers' unions and public education itself. The pretext is concern over the alleged failure of the nation's public schools ('state schools', in British parlance). And, because of the concentration of the white middle classes in suburbs and private academies, many urban schools are indeed little more than holding-pens for black and Latino youth.

But, rather than address the education gap's main causes - overcrowding, underfunding and the impoverished, chaotic ghetto life pupils must face when they go home - champions of 'school reform' seek to lay the blame on bad teachers, whom they contend are protected by

their unions. Anti-teacher attitudes are hammered into the public mind by an unrelenting propaganda barrage in the mass media. Here in New York City, the tabloid press offers up an almost daily diet of horror stories about teachers who show up drunk or abuse their sick leave. In the public schools the reformers are attempting to abolish 'tenure', which is in fact nothing more than a guarantee of due process before firing that teachers usually receive after several years on the job; they also insist on measuring student progress according to standardised achievement tests, and seek to replace union seniority rules governing pay, promotion and dismissal by a 'merit system', according to which pedagogues would be judged by how well their students perform on the tests.

The 'reformers' are also promoting charter schools as an alternative to standard, city-run public education. Charters receive public funds, but are founded by private, sometimes for-profit groups. They usually feature longer school days, lower pay, and are - in most cases and most importantly - non-union. Although the charter schools are on the whole no more successful academically than public ones, they are promoted by exaggerated claims, like those contained in a heavily publicised documentary film of dubious factual merit titled *Waiting for Superman* by Davis Guggenheim of *An inconvenient truth* fame.

The 'education reform' movement is being promoted by Bill Gates and other less public-spirited corporate CEOs and 'conservative' think-tanks. It is not only a rightwing cause, but has been embraced by many in the mainstream liberal establishment. It has won the backing of the Obama administration and his education secretary, Arne Duncan, a prominent 'reformer' in his previous capacity of superintendent of schools in Chicago. Last year, Obama and Duncan gave unqualified support to the wholesale firing (later rescinded) of scores of teachers from a Rhode Island high school with a poor academic record. The charter school movement is not only a battering-ram against unions, but a bridge to the privatisation of the educational system, using children as a cover. The long-standing anti-teacher campaign paved the way for the current denigration of all government employees.

## Without a piston

The resistance of workers in Wisconsin and other states is not merely a response to union busting at home, but a ripple effect of the rebellions now sweeping the Middle East with tsunami force. It tells us that globalisation can cut two ways: both to the advantage of the ruling classes in the form of the greater international mobility of capital; and against them by making rebellion contagious across borders and even continents with unprecedented speed. These rebellions prove that neoliberal capitalism, with all its triumphalist bravado, cannot make the class struggle go away.

Wisconsin indicates that even the western world's most complaisant workers have limits as to how much they will take from a ruling class so puffed up with arrogance that it is now being compared to the clique that surrounded Mubarak. Wisconsin also says that unionised workers, however decimated and demoralised, still have the potential to form the core of a wider resistance to neoliberal assaults. A broad union-centred mobilisation, supported by minorities, students and intellectuals could stop the Tea Party in its tracks. A recent *New York Times*/CBS poll records a significant shift in public opinion in favour of unions; 60% of respondents not only support the retention of bargaining rights,

but also oppose cutbacks in worker wages and benefits.

But midwestern workers also have a serious problem in common with the rebellious masses of Cairo and Benghazi: the almost total lack of conscious political leadership. Trotsky wrote of the October revolution that the Bolsheviks were the piston and the masses were the steam.

Due to the discrediting of socialism after the fall of the Soviet Union, combined with decades of free-market brainwashing, the current revolts in the Middle East are taking the form of a huge eruption of steam without a piston.

The communist, socialist and left-nationalist parties that would once have contended for the leadership of such spontaneous upheavals are conspicuously absent. Even if they misled the masses in the past, their very presence could at least pose questions as to what kind of leadership there should be. Today there is little such debate, and many on the left are lauding the leaderless, politically inchoate nature of these movements as a virtue.

The error of such thinking is apparent in the national class confrontation now brewing in the midwest. No radical organisations have led any section of the American working class, apart from a few maverick unions, since the 1930s and 40s. The few socialist groups that now exist number in the hundreds at most.

No grouping of this size can place itself at the head of a mass struggle, no matter how correct its programme. For their part, the Democrats are limiting themselves to their usual role of attempting to contain the confrontation, but without exercising any active political direction.

The leadership vacuum is therefore being filled by Democrat-loyal trade-union bureaucrats. The bureaucrats know that more is involved in this fight than the economic welfare of their members. At stake is ultimately the right of public sector unions, and perhaps even of private sector unions, to exist. The bureaucrats must therefore fight back in some way, for

without the unions they would cease to exist as well.

But the resolve of the bureaucrats does not match the militancy of those who follow them by default. The former have already given away half the game by conceding to Walker all of the drastic economic givebacks he is demanding. In return, they ask only that their collective-bargaining rights be spared.

The governor thus far refuses to budge. The union leaders say that their capitulation on the economic issues demonstrates their willingness to share in the sacrifices necessary to balance the state budget; Walker's intransigence, on the other hand, shows that his bill is not about budget-balancing, but union-busting. But is not a budget-balancing crusade that leaves the wealthy untouched a total fraud, no more legitimate as an excuse for savaging workers' living standards than destroying their unions?

The bureaucrats have obviously conceded on givebacks to show the ruling class, and large sections of the public still in its ideological grip, how 'moderate' and 'reasonable' they are. But the bourgeoisie is in the end persuaded by power and nothing else; gestures of good will from intended victims avail nothing. One cannot expose the sham of sacrifice-sharing while simultaneously buying into it. To do so can only confuse and demoralise the rank and file and weaken their ability to prevail.

The absence of the alternative leadership necessary to bring mass struggles to a successful conclusion is the main reason why Marxists should remain guarded in their understandable optimism about events from Tahrir Square to the Madison statehouse. The possibility that these events are but the opening salvoes of a new epoch of resistance, and the potential of such resistance to revive belief in the class struggle and a socialist future - both prerequisites for building revolutionary parties big enough to intervene in the greater world - are, on the other hand, reasons why a certain optimism is not unjustified ●

## Fighting fund

# Anticipation

Last week's paper saw an example of what the *Weekly Worker* has been able to achieve, thanks to the generosity of our readers and supporters.

I am referring, of course, to our six-page supplement, which carried Jack Conrad's important article on the origins of women's oppression. We aim to continue to improve and expand upon the contents of this publication, but, in addition to the dedication and commitment of the comrades who work on the paper, we also need another ingredient: hard cash.

I am pleased to say that, despite last month being the shortest of the year, we comfortably exceeded our £1,250 target. Thanks mainly to standing order donations of £133 last week, we reached the lofty heights of £1,479. Special thanks to comrades JT (£50), PM (£30) and DS (£20). I must also mention the £10 PayPal gift from comrade JS - an anticipation of his new monthly standing order of no less than £45.

The first of JS's regular payments hit our account on March 1, as did SD's £30 (he has increased his contribution by £10). In fact the first two days of the month brought in £175 all told - a good start to our March fighting fund.

However, this column would not be the same without my usual moan! Yes, I'm at it again - complaining about the lack of donations from all those online readers. Now that our web counter is up and running once more, I can tell you that we had 13,332 visitors to our site last week, but good old JS was the only one to get out his credit card.

How about a few more of you following his example? Please don't take the *Weekly Worker* for granted ●

**Robbie Rix**

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



## CULTURE

# Lady Gaga and the 'gay gene'

The pop singer says LGBT people were 'born this way'. Maciej Zurewski is not so sure

**W**hen Lady Gaga announced in early 2011 that her next single would be called 'Born this way', anyone familiar with the singer's club-conscious pop and gay-friendly sound bites knew what she had in store. A few weeks and several press statements later, even the most backward tabloids understood: this was to be Gaga's first explicit celebration of sexual diversity, an instant anthem for the gay community.

In contrast to her cautious "tribute to my gay friends", 'Alejandro' (2009), this time Gaga has delivered a full-blown sexual identity anthem that stands absolutely no chance of receiving airplay in the bible belt. "No matter gay, straight or bi, lesbian, transgendered life", Gaga bellows with pithy righteousness, and "Don't be a drag - just be a queen". Before the song was even released, the British crown's favourite camp man, Elton John, breathlessly hailed it as a gay anthem that would obliterate Gloria Gaynor's 'I will survive'.

While Gaga's debut album, *The fame*, was a near flawless dance-pop record that merged watered-down club beats with smart songwriting, the new single is somewhat of a disappointment. Gaga's borrowing from Madonna was not necessarily detrimental to the effectiveness of her music so far, yet 'Born this way' is musically a little too close to 'Express yourself' for its own good and a little too shamefacedly so to pass for a tribute. What is more, in her attempt to obliterate all gay anthems known to man by making her message bigger, louder and blunter, Lady Gaga slips into the kind of didactic agitprop mode that may have worked for anarcho-punk in the early 80s, but thwarts the sense of dialogue that a good pop song needs.

Uninspired though the track may be, it shot to the number one position of the Billboard Hot 100 within only three days. After all, fans had been aching for new material since November 2009, while Gaga kept

milking her expanded debut album, *The fame monster*, for single excerpts and remixes. "I'm overwhelmed by your support," tweeted the millionaire pop star on February 14. And she may well be. Evidently, the Lady Gaga brand has developed a pulling power which, for the moment, bypasses the fans' critical judgement.

But there is another side to the single's success. As Gaga surely expected, the song's central message instantly polarised the American public into two camps: the gay community and its urbane well-wishers on the one hand, and the Christian right on the other. 'Born this way' was a sure-fire way for Gaga to cater to the sentiments of her target audience, while stirring some welcome controversy among those who were hardly Lady Gaga fans to begin with. "The lyrics are ballsy enough, certainly within the US context, to run the risk of offending the many and vociferous religious groups", rejoiced London's punk historian and gay rights advocate Jon Savage in a Lady Gaga eulogy for *The Guardian*.<sup>1</sup>

It is no big secret that mainstream pop acts rely on the spending power of two core target demographics: teenage girls and gay men. Likely *Xfactor* winners, boy bands and girl groups are wheeled off by music management companies to perform test gigs at club nights such as London's *G-A-Y* before they are unleashed upon the masses and hit the big time. Then there are those who, like Madonna, have more authentic links to the gay community, having cut their teeth and gathered inspiration as dancers and singers at underground gay clubs for years.<sup>2</sup> Once success strikes, they 'give back' to the community by citing from its culture and occasionally dropping a few favourable words.

As Savage noted, "Gaga knows that releasing a gay-friendly single will bind in her gay, lesbian, transgendered target audience ... and there's the other side of the coin, which is that it's just polite to recognise the concerns and lives of the people who are your fans - and to give them a bit of support." What Savage does not mention is that in the pop industry there is a somewhat more cynical understanding that a bit of politeness can go a long way: express solidarity with the gay community and you will have their faithful support. Teenage girl audiences, in contrast, are considered to be profitable, but fickle.

## We are who we are

Like Madonna before her, Lady Gaga can certainly not be accused of being impolite - or of possessing a bad business sense, for that matter. When promoting her disco album *Confessions on a dance floor* on British television in 2005, Madonna said she was a "gay man trapped in a woman's body". Incidentally, Ana Matronic, vocalist in alternative pop combo Scissor Sisters, had used very similar wording in an interview with *The Guardian* a few months earlier, describing herself as a "drag queen trapped in a women's body". And Lady Gaga? Not one to aspire to the heights of originality, she decided to recycle Madonna's variation yet again in an April 2009 interview.

'Born this way' is not the first gay anthem of recent months. Last November, the *New York Times* even identified a trend of new "songs for gay survival".<sup>3</sup> The author, Alex Hawgood, cites as examples 'We R who we R' by Ke\$ha, 'Raise your glass' by P!nk and Katy Perry's 'Fireworks', among others. On the surface, these are simply hedonistic, celebratory tunes that see the protagonists partying and accepting themselves for who they are. On another level, as Hagwood notes, they can be read as songs of defiance in the face of intolerance. Ke\$ha, the *ersatz* Lady Gaga, went as far as to dedicate her song to "those that haven't been accepted because of their sexuality" in the light of an increase in gay teen suicides in the United States. So far, so commendable - and why on earth should pop charts not contain messages of diversity and tolerance? Surely, to those whom such songs provide strength and reassurance in difficult times, the possibility that the artist is just being opportunistic is a secondary question.

But what does it mean to be a "gay man trapped in a woman's body"? Intentional comic effect aside, the underlying notion is that being gay is not just a sexual preference: it means to possess a distinct gay personality, and quite possibly one that is more fun, more fabulous, more hip than most straight people could ever hope to be.

Lady Gaga celebrates *difference*, and the celebratory feel-good tone characteristic of much contemporary gay culture is something that all such recent gay anthems have in common. A militant but critical song such as Tom Robinson's 'Glad to be gay' (1978) would be quickly dismissed as 'self-hating' today.

But Gaga's love and knowledge of her target audience runs deeper than that. 'Born this way' addresses in a very conscious fashion a theme that is crucial to what Savage calls "gay identity formation", and especially so in the United States: over the past decades, the idea that homosexuality is a genetic predisposition has become increasingly central to gay identity. Counterposed to this view stands that of the Christian right, which regards heterosexuality as the default sexual orientation, homosexuality being a mere lifestyle choice - and a sinful one at that. In 2007, a moustachioed bigot named Donnie Davies claimed his 15 minutes of fame by uploading the composition, 'God hates a fag', onto YouTube.<sup>4</sup> The Christian hate rock tune - I'm using the term 'rock' generously - is something of a mirror image to Lady Gaga's 'Born this way': "Being gay

is nothing but a choice," warbles the sorry singer.

Typically, the *Baptist Press* featured a pre-emptive headline in the run-up to Gaga's new release: "Lady Gaga promotes a gay myth". One can be offended by the way the author, Kelly Bloggs, frowns on what he considers to be "aberrant sexual behaviour". But, despite being a rightwing misanthrope, Bloggs may well be right when he says that Gaga promotes a "myth". To put it bluntly, there is no conclusive scientific evidence for a genetic basis of homosexuality - or, for that matter, of any other sexual preference.

## Justify my love

Alleged findings of a 'gay gene' first surfaced in the liberal media in the early 90s. The preceding decade, of course, had been a time of political, social and cultural reaction. To rally mass support for Reaganomics, the conservative American right corralled the most backward elements of all classes behind its ideological smoke-screen of a return to the good old values of the 1950s. Goodbye liberation movements and sexual permissiveness - hello god, family and country.

While any gains the women's liberation movement had made were transformed into the elitist concept of a 'new conservative femininity' - ie, middle class career women not entirely unlike Madonna - it was the gay community which drew the shortest straw. Encouraged by the Aids epidemic rearing its hideous head, the so-called 'moral majority' fired away: the HIV virus was god's punishment, or at the very least evidence that the 'homosexual lifestyle' was a sordid choice in opposition to nature.<sup>5</sup>

It was against this background that gay rights activists became eager to find some biological causality for sexual preference - as opposed to the 'choice' claim of the crazed Christian right or the more secular conservative view that homosexuality was a mental illness which might be cured. If nature made me this way, so went the argument, then I am not guilty of any wrongdoing. And furthermore, as Lady Gaga puts it in 'Born this way', "I'm beautiful in my way, 'cause god makes no mistakes".<sup>6</sup>

In 1991, the findings of Simon LeVay, a neuroscientist and later director of the Institute of Gay and Lesbian Education in southern California, seemed to offer just the results that the victimised gay community was desperate to see. Based on autopsies of 41 Aids victims, LeVay found similarities in a tiny region in the centre of the brain between 19 men of *self-declared* homosexual orientation (as opposed to the *assumed* heterosexual men and women).

Whether these similarities were the cause or the consequence of sexual preference - or perhaps just coincidence - LeVay could not say with certainty, as he later admitted. Further studies, in which LeVay and his colleague, Dean Hamer, examined the frequency of homosexual preference among blood relatives stood on similarly shaky ground and produced similarly inconclusive results. Ditto all successive attempts to link homosexuality to biological determination.

But that mattered little to gay rights activists, who at that point were prepared to clutch at any straws they were offered - and given the context, who could blame them? The liberal media broke a popularised account of LeVay's and Hamer's studies as the 'gay gene' story, which the gay com-

munity embraced with great relief. To many, it now virtually constitutes a religious dogma - question it and you'll get burned.

## Psychopathia sexualis

The sentiment that eventually motivated the hunt for the 'gay gene' predated the actual research by over a century. In 1864, German civil servant Karl-Heinz Ulrichs published a proto-'Born this way' pamphlet which pleaded for the acceptance of men who, according to him, were born with a 'female mind' and therefore attracted to other men. What was given at birth, argued Ulrichs, warranted no punishment. The 'born gay' idea proved to be a real survivor in the homosexual subculture.

Pop music first documented it in 1975, when disco artist Valentino released a gay anthem that incidentally was called 'I was born this way'. In the late 1980s, the resurrected Dusty Springfield followed suit with a tune called (you guessed) 'Born this way', which she recorded in collaboration with the Pet Shop Boys, a pop act that was immensely popular with the Eurocommunist-cum-liberal *Marxism Today* crowd.<sup>7</sup> An intelligent person that possesses a good knowledge of gay identity politics, Lady Gaga is well aware of these artefacts and the title of her new single is surely an intentional nod at those in the know.<sup>8</sup>

Though many orthodox Marxists may not wish to touch the works of Michel Foucault - on a bad day the man could be an unbearable postmodernist - *The history of sexuality* is not without interest.<sup>9</sup> Foucault's study advances the idea that the category of 'homosexuals' as a distinct group of people is a fairly recent one in western culture - only few cultures in human history, in fact, knew of such a notion. Before European scientists advanced the category of the 'homosexual' in the second half of the 19th century, we knew only of homosexual *acts* - which across different societies were banned, tolerated or confined to specific cultural practices.

While Foucault's account sometimes threatens to derail into what might be called a more sophisticated variation of labelling theory,<sup>10</sup> Marxists should take into account the material forces driving the invention of the homosexual. During early industrialisation, traditional gender roles and family bonds appeared to break down, as factories were packed to the rafters with men and women alike. Tiny living spaces were shared by several families. To bourgeois eyes, there was something alarming about the sight of these communities: fantasies of untamed proletarian sexuality merged with the perceived threat of working class solidarity and power.

In order to increase social control and atomise the masses into individualistic units modelled on the bourgeois nuclear family, the ruling classes began to enforce a new moral code. 'Family values' were promoted among the proletariat, and any non-reproductive sexual activity - including pornography, prostitution and homosexuality - was harshly penalised.<sup>11</sup>

It was around that time that the category of the 'homosexual' first appeared in Carl Friedrich Otto Westphal's paper *On contrary sexual feeling* (1870) and similar medical and psychiatric textbooks, attributing homosexuality to psychological disorders. This narrative proved most useful in providing ideological backing for the measures being implemented. Richard Kraft-Ebbing expanded these accounts by



Lady Gaga



listing further ‘deviations’ in his influential *Psychopathia sexualis*. An Austrian Roman-Catholic, Kraft-Ebbing believed that any non-reproductive sexual activity was a perversion. Most crucially, though, he attributed these activities to strictly defined categories of ‘perverts’, who stood in contrast to the healthy exclusive ‘heterosexual’: the homosexual, sadist, masochist, fetishist and so forth.

In response to all this, a subculture that understood itself in terms of exclusive homosexuality developed, acquiring its own cultural codes and practices, as well as its own sources of self-worth. The concept of homosexuality as a strictly separate, innate orientation became its founding myth.

All successive efforts at explaining sexual orientation in biological terms - eg, those of Hirschfeld - took as their starting point the bourgeois narrative of heterosexuality and homosexuality as separate identities. The physician and homosexual rights activist, Magnus Hirschfeld, picked up on Ulrichs’ pamphlet and undertook painstaking research to prove the existence of a human ‘homosexual species’, drawing up a rather laughable typology that included features such as curly hair.

Hirschfeld’s ‘Scientific-Humanitarian Committee’, meanwhile, was at the forefront of the homosexual rights struggle, counting among its supporters prominent German socialists such as Karl Kautsky and August Bebel.<sup>12</sup> But despite all these well-intentioned and laudable endeavours, a credible medical explanation of homosexuality was never produced. Like LeVay and Hamer a century later, Hirschfeld had clearly based his research on a false premise.

## True colors

Here and there, officially sanctioned ignorance was temporarily interrupted with some more insightful research. To Sigmund Freud, there was no such thing as biological determination. In his *Three essays on the theory of sexuality* (1905), he described human sexuality from infancy up until the age of five as ‘polymorphously perverse’: ie, not directed at the opposite sex, but at any object or activity that might provide pleasure. Only with socialisation during the following ‘latency period’ would a child’s sexual preference be determined. If heteronormative socialisation was successful, the individual’s sexuality would become focused on procreation and what you would call ‘straight sex’ today.

What was interesting about Freud’s theory was not so much his penis-fits-vagina conclusion, which was not so different from earlier accounts that held homosexuality to be some sort of psychological defect. The crucial bit was the idea of polymorphous perversity in infancy: ie, the potential to enjoy a wide variety of turn-ons not limited to the opposite sex, procreation or the genitalia. According to Freud, there was no such thing as default heterosexuality or, for that matter, any other inborn sexual orientation.

The American sexologist, Alfred Kinsey, was not convinced that a straightforward gay-straight schism existed even among adults when he drew up the Kinsey scale in 1948. According to their sexual history, individuals were slotted somewhere between 0 and 6 - with 0 implying ‘exclusively heterosexual’ and 6 ‘exclusively homosexual’. Though Kinsey’s research was criticised on methodological grounds - as any study can and in fact should be - the relatively low occurrence of individuals who could plausibly be classified as one extreme or the other led him to conclude that “males do not represent two distinct populations”. Kinsey only recorded manifest sexual activities, while leaving sexual fantasies, repressed libido and the subconscious unexamined. Quite possibly aware of this grey zone, however, he concluded that “the living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects”.

This is not to say that we must accept any of these accounts as the last word. Rather than sexual preference being determined exclusively by socialisation, we can well imagine that it is shaped by a variety of factors - a dialectical interplay between nature and nurture, if you will, and one with wildly different results. Where various accounts of human sexuality compete - from psychoanalytical to anthropological, from biological to sociological - we should not be afraid to

advocate the most thorough and ruthless interdisciplinary research. There is nothing to fear. As Engels wrote, “The more ruthlessly and disinterestedly science proceeds, the more it finds itself in harmony with the interests of the workers.”<sup>13</sup> By extension, they will be consistent with the project of the liberation of humanity as a whole.

Alas, to pursue science ruthlessly can be a difficult thing in a world where scientific research, like any other professional activity, ultimately depends on the man with the moolah. Who conducted the research? Who financed the study? What results did they want to see and why? What are their sectional interests? As we have seen, these are questions worth asking before we bow to the authority of ‘scientific fact’. Engels himself was unknowingly misled by the ‘scientific’ discourse on homosexuality of his time. Despite his otherwise rigorous method, it just did not occur to him that the officially prescribed homophobia was intimately linked to the bourgeoisification of the working class family. Karl Heinz Ulrichs’ campaign for homosexual rights did not meet with Engels’ approval - to put it mildly.

It is no coincidence that the utopian socialist, Charles Fourier, hailing from the first half of the 19th century and not yet blinded by the novel idea of ‘homosexuals’, held positions that were much more consistent with the idea of sexual freedom, recognising the wide, unstable, often periodically changing range of sexual preferences held by individuals. As long as sexual acts are consensual, argued Fourier in *Le nouveau monde amoureux* (1818), they should be enjoyed and defended - regardless of whether they are ultimately the result of predisposition, socialisation or even ‘choice’. This simple, yet positive notion strikes me as the ethic that should be at the core of our every engagement with the topic of human sexuality.

## Dancing on our own

So whom does the artificial gay-straight dichotomy benefit today? Firstly, there is the conservative right, for whom it is a useful device to stir divisions within the working class. Although outright homophobia, like outright racism, is no longer acceptable in the political mainstream, implicitly homophobic themes can always be tactically employed. On demand, the right can arbitrarily reserve its position in order to mobilise support in the gay community, as David Cameron did when attempting to project a gay-friendly image in a disastrous interview with the magazine *Attitude* before last year’s general election.<sup>14</sup>

But this is normally the preserve of the second main benefactors, the liberal capitalist parties, traditionally able to drum up electoral support using socially progressive slogans much more skilfully. An interview with *Attitude* in January 2010, for instance, saw Nick Clegg pose as a rebel against David Cameron, who he said was “very difficult to trust” with regards to gay rights.<sup>15</sup> In the United States, where Barack Obama teamed up with Lady Gaga to speak for ‘gay America’,<sup>16</sup> this dynamic is much more pronounced.

It may be wrong to overestimate the importance of the identity politics peddled in the 1980s by Eurocommunists and various other reformists, which later became part and parcel of the top-down ‘political correctness’ programme of New Labour and the US Democratic Party. But at times one cannot help but wonder just how much the cross-class LGBT nationalism they helped to advance has to answer for. By the 2000s, the political mainstream could utilise gay rights themes to mobilise support for imperialist war against Muslim countries. In Britain, this tendency has found its most recent, admittedly marginal expression in the rainbow-flag-waving LGBT ‘division’ of the English Defence League.

And then, of course, there is the multi-million pink money industry, which will sell you anything from gay music to gay shower curtains. At the end of the day, neither liberals nor conservatives nor the gay industry is interested in real sexual freedom. Over time, the existence of clearly defined sexual identities has arguably taken on a dynamic somewhat different from its original purpose in the 19th

century. But, in the final analysis, it still serves to facilitate a lot of smooth financial transactions.

## Live to tell

When speaking about the gay community, I have avoided wrapping the term, community, in quotation marks. I appreciate there are plenty of non-straight individuals who find the idea of buying into a particular identity and lifestyle, along with a narrow set of assumptions and prejudices,<sup>17</sup> to be abhorrent - provided they possess the spending power to buy into it in the first place. Then, of course, there are those comparatively marginal ‘queer’ radicals, whose ideas are closer to what I have advanced in this article than they are to the ideas that inform mainstream gay culture.

And yet, just like the much maligned cross-class ethnic communities, the gay community serves as a port of call, protection and source of self-worth in what continues to be a homophobic world - despite official political correctness. They are not just market demographics, but communities based on a shared experience. More often than not, this experience includes getting bullied at school, discrimination at work, threats and assault in the street, or, in the best case, being at the sharp end of what tends to be the same ‘harmless’ jokes over and over again. The scenario depicted in Bronski Beat’s 1980s song, ‘Smalltown boy’, is still a familiar one to many.

Yet paradoxically, by continuing to uphold the idea of a distinct identity the gay community helps to perpetuate the very same myths that are the source of its oppression - as well as a hurdle on the path to general sexual liberation. Artists like Lady Gaga, regardless of their intentions, have to be complicit with certain ideological orthodoxies in order to sell their product. As an active gay rights campaigner of the most liberal variety, Gaga arguably means well when recording a song such as ‘Born this way’. But the question is not whether she is genuine or calculated. The problem is that, in a society driven by the profit motive, messages that promote genuine sexual liberation do not stand a chance of receiving the same amount of spotlight as Lady Gaga’s song ●

## Notes

1. *The Guardian* February 14.
2. Lady Gaga’s transformation from 70s glam rock-influenced, trust fund-powered singer-songwriter into electro-pop star can be viewed here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2VQykoEeto](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2VQykoEeto).
3. [www.nytimes.com/2010/11/07/fashion/07ANTHEM.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/07/fashion/07ANTHEM.html).
4. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyv0VxNEVm8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gyv0VxNEVm8).
5. To get an idea to what extent the ideas of the conservative right were common cultural currency in the 1980s, one only needs to remind oneself that America’s biggest rock band at the time, Guns N’ Roses, released a million-selling record on Warner Music that spoke of “faggots” who “spread some fucking disease”.
6. Admittedly, Lady Gaga mentions “lesbian, gay, transgendered life” in her song, but the celebratory tone and the idea of the song clearly caters to mainstream gay culture, which I therefore address in my article at the expense of LGBT people more broadly.
7. Neil Tennant of the Pet Shop Boys was a reader of *Marxism Today*. Having provided many hours of excitement to the postmodern leftist intelligentsia with pop that “challenged notions of authenticity”, he joined the magazine’s core contributors when becoming a Blairite in the mid-90s.
8. It is what separates her from air-headed ‘gay icons’ such as Paris Hilton, who was caught on tape making homophobic remarks.
9. Foucault’s desire to ‘deconstruct’ everything, including reason and sanity, led him to adopt some very strange positions indeed, such as his support for political Islam in Iran, which he deemed “stronger” than Marxism. However, since he desired his work to be “a kind of tool-box others can rummage through to find a tool they can use, however they wish, in their own area”, I am happy to follow suit.
10. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labeling\\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labeling_theory).
11. It is worth noting that a bourgeoisification of the working class family along similar lines was advanced during Stalin’s rapid industrialisation of the Soviet Union. This was also accompanied by a ban on homosexuality.
12. Bebel’s Reichstag speech in opposition to *Paragraph 175* can be read here: <http://paganpressbooks.com/jpl/BEBEL.HTM>.
13. F Engels *Ludwig Feuerbach and the end of classical German philosophy*: [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1886/ludwig-feuerbach/ch04.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1886/ludwig-feuerbach/ch04.htm).
14. ‘David Cameron stumbles through interview on gay rights’ *The Guardian* March 24.
15. ‘Clegg lays down to Cameron on gay rights’ *The Independent* January 13.
16. [www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-solis/lady-gaga-and-obama-for-g\\_b\\_318088.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-solis/lady-gaga-and-obama-for-g_b_318088.html).
17. The gay mainstream dislikes ambiguity no less than the straight mainstream does: bisexuals, ‘fence-sitters’ and ‘turncoats’ are traditionally viewed with suspicion.

# 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.**

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# weekly Worker

## Arms and the arms dealers

# No champions of democracy

David Cameron's gun-toting trade tour is a much-needed reminder of imperialism's real interest in the Middle East, writes **James Turley**

**W**hen David Cameron delivered a speech attacking multiculturalism last month, much of the inevitable controversy focused on his timing - it coincided with an English Defence League protest - which turned out to be its largest yet. Cameron pointed out, not unreasonably, that the conference at which he spoke had been in his diary for some months; he could hardly be accused of being deliberately inflammatory, except by the *content* of his speech.

However, when he includes the representatives of no less than eight arms firms amongst the British capitalists on a trade tour of the Middle East at a time when the whole region has erupted into protest, he cannot seek refuge in prior appointments. The repressive regimes the prime minister claims to oppose have brought to bear everything from CS gas to airstrikes on dissidents - and now he hopes to sell them more. It is a nakedly cynical bit of money-grubbing for British capitalism: there is no reason why something as profitable as the arms trade should be interrupted by the democratic aspirations of the pesky Arab masses.

The resultant furore is the latest in a long line of indicators that imperialism has been utterly wrong-footed by the Arab revolts. The first major upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt drew some of the least enthusiastic endorsements of democracy from the United States and Britain since 9/11, which served as a spurious alibi for repressive global police actions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Only when it became clear to everyone else in the world, it seemed, that Ben Ali and Mubarak simply could not survive such deep popular opposition could the likes of Barack Obama, Cameron and foreign secretary William Hague bring themselves to acknowledge that their favoured strongmen would have to step aside.

The substantially more brutal methods of repression favoured in Libya by Muammar al-Gaddafi - whose links to imperialism, though real, are shallower and less well-established - presented the west with a chance to reassert its tattered moral authority in the region. Day by day, calls for sanctions and other forms of quasi-military (or just plain military) intervention gather steam. Forget the disasters in Iraq and Afghanistan, we are told: Something Needs to be Done.

A fine moment, then, for Cameron to set off on his jaunt to the Middle East, as if nothing had happened - let alone what some are calling the 'Arab 1848'. The first stop was Egypt; one almost has to have a grudging respect for the sheer *balls* of the man. How many western leaders, short of an improbable ascension of Henry Kissinger to the US presidency, could bring themselves to troop a gang of arms dealers through the hotel lobbies of Cairo at a time like this?

After all, it was the west which armed Hosni Mubarak's regime over decades. It is Britain, specifically, which has armed Gaddafi since Tony



David Cameron

Blair's high-profile overtures to the tottering tyrant in 2004. It is now a known fact that British-made armoured personnel carriers have been mobilised against protestors, and very likely that British-made CS canisters and sniper rifles are also in use. No less than 50 British firms were present at an arms fair in Libya only last year, and total exports in this sector from Britain to Libya amount to some £100 million since the infamous 2004 handshake between Gaddafi and Tony Blair.

Cameron, defending his arms trade jolly, has pointed out that Britain has some of the 'strictest' rules on arms exports in the world - which seems to amount to formal assurances that shipments of weaponry will not be used to 'violate human rights'. It does not take a genius to work out that this is a cover story - and a pretty shaky one at that. "What did the [foreign office]

think colonel Gaddafi meant to do with sniper rifles and tear-gas grenades?" asked Simon Jenkins in the *Guardian*. "Go mole hunting?" (February 22). As a rearguard PR action, the foreign office has revoked 52 arms export licences to Libya and Bahrain - which, as Jenkins points out, amounts to an admission of guilt.

There are two matters arising from this tragicomic affair which must be highlighted. The first is ABC anti-imperialism. Those voices clamouring for western intervention in Libya should be told where to get off. The United States, Britain, France and the rest are no great white hope upon which the Libyan masses can rely to make selfless sacrifices in the service of a forthright commitment to democracy. Until a few months ago, Ben Ali, Mubarak and even to some extent Gaddafi were allies. Not only were they tolerated: they were artificially propped up and provided with arms whose only conceivable use is in putting down popular unrest.

The imperialists do not want democracy in the Middle East - they want their needs met. Most infamous among these needs are the region's prodigious natural resources - principally oil - but there are broader strategic-geopolitical concerns at work too. If these needs can be met by a notionally democratic regime, so much the better to save spin doctors a few headaches. If not, so be it. The bourgeoisie, far from being 'naturally' democratic, will take every opportunity to contain and limit the rights of the masses if it thinks it can get away with it. The democratic gains achieved in Britain, as elsewhere, were not handed down to us from above: every one of them had to be fought for and won against our rulers' opposition.

More than that, as an old French saying has it, supporting the machinations of imperialism is worse than a crime: it is a mistake. The fundamental premise of such politics is that, without

the beneficence of the US and its allies, the poor, beleaguered Libyan masses will simply be crushed into nothingness by Gaddafi's war machine. Quite the opposite; before any UN resolutions and so forth, the rebels had already seized control of the east, amid large-scale army defections (though the army has been gutted over decades by Gaddafi in order to circumscribe threats to his power). Attempts by western governments to isolate Gaddafi, and promises of kangaroo-court hearings for his supporters, make him - if anything - *more* likely to insist on going down in blood and fire.

The second major issue is the strategic importance of arms production within capitalism overall. The emergence of capitalism as a fully-fledged mode of production in different countries, from Venice to Britain to France, was inevitably marked by wars of expansion; more recently, the post-war recovery in the capitalist world dovetailed with a substantial rise in arms expenditure by peacetime standards.

Dwight Eisenhower, himself an old military man, famously signed off as president of the United States by warning of the growing power of the "military-industrial complex" (which, tellingly, he could only safely do beyond the point where he could threaten that power - it would better be called the military-industrial-political complex). On the other side of the political spectrum, Marxists - notably Tony Cliff and Michael Kidron of the Socialist Workers Party and its predecessors, as well as the influential Trotskyist, Ernest Mandel - have frequently attempted to theorise this phenomenon. One does not have to endorse their conclusions to acknowledge that the persistent resurfacing of the arms question in Marxist theory indicates some level of real significance.

Arms production is of necessity particularly closely integrated with the state, which is the principal consumer

of its products. Expenditure in the sector is wasteful, even by the standards of a mode of production where waste has a certain use-value. However, because its products can invariably find a market among the states of the world, it acts as a backdoor stimulus to the economy as a whole.

Thus, arms production is heavily subsidised. Some sense of the scale of this can be surmised by examining the scandal surrounding the so-called Al-Yamamah contract between BAE and the Saudi government. When the serious fraud office - more than a decade after the first indications of fraud and bribery on BAE's part - seemed close to uncovering substantial legal violations surrounding the sale of fighter jets to Saudi Arabia (the sums of money involved ran into the billions of pounds), government pressure led to the investigation being canned in 2006. The blame for this was laid at the door of the Saudis, who threatened to cease cooperation on counter-terrorism if things went further; nevertheless, it is an indicator of how business is done in the arms trade, and the close integration with sections of the state. The BAE scandal is a large and very public example of the kind of deals conducted at innumerable arms fairs and high-profile lobbying missions ... like Cameron's Middle East jaunt. In this world, it is a necessary part of the business of politicians to sell weaponry to tin-pot dictators.

The political consequence is inescapable. Scrapping the arms trade - this corrupt and repugnant junket dedicated to the production of mass murder - requires, more than any other sector of capitalist production, the destruction of the political rule of the bourgeoisie, and the winning of the type of extreme democracy to which Cameron *et al* will not even bother paying lip service ●

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