

# weekly worker



**Debating strategy:  
Labour intervention,  
not abstentionism**

- Iran strange bedfellows
- Egypt still moves
- Our history
- Electoral tactics

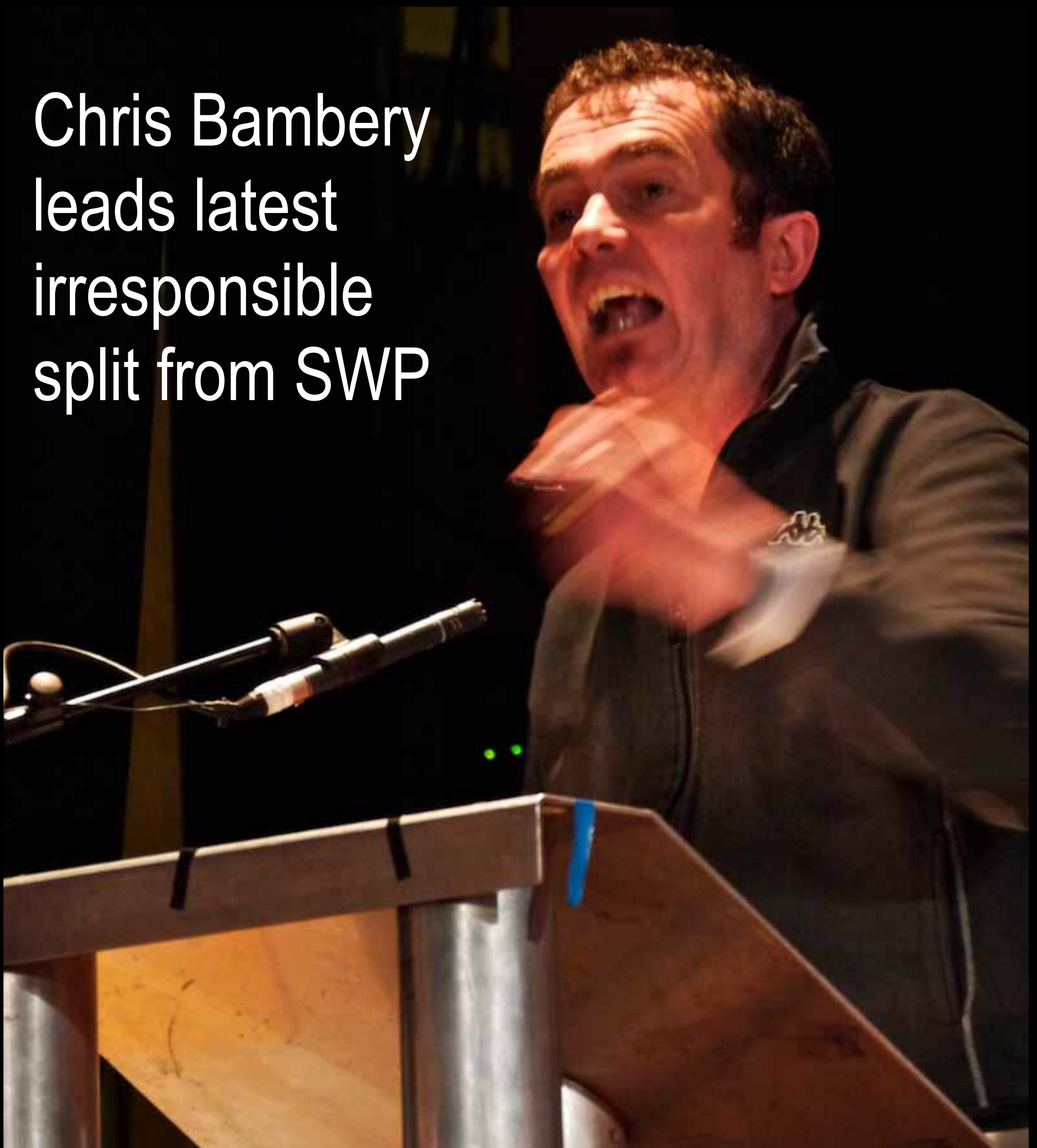
No 861 Thursday April 14 2011

Towards a Communist Party of the European Union

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Chris Bambery  
leads latest  
irresponsible  
split from SWP



# LETTERS



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

## Banker revolts

Let me tell you a little story. One of my close friends lives in Cairo. We keep in contact with each other using Skype and mobile phones. She is fairly well off, I suppose, even by western standards.

During the revolution, she was on the barricades defending her neighbourhood from the thugs that the regime set loose. She had armed herself with a broom, while other members of her family had molotovs, sticks and even a gun. While not intellectually being a revolutionary, events had made her into one.

This is an important point. Revolutions create revolutionaries out of ordinary people. She now wants to return to that sort of taking events into her own hands, because the regime is not acting quickly enough. She is talking about ordinary people taking power out of the hands of the state (the army and police), which is quite radical for her, as she used to be a bank manager. Revolution has its own internal logic.

The conditions are getting riper for a genuine socialist revolution. Of course, what is needed is a party to focus that anger and aspiration. I'm sure there are many millions of Egyptians thinking the same as her. It was good that you interviewed Mohammed Hamama ('Unity across the Arab world', March 31). A revolutionary party is crucial - not only in Egypt, but here in the UK.

Debate within a revolutionary party is also crucial. It saddens me that the British left splinter and fracture. When at work, what tends to happen is that workmates argue amongst themselves and have different views, but we all defend each other against the boss. Having different opinions is healthy, because we learn from each other. Just imagine if Mr Smith in accounts decided to form his own anti-boss enclave and flagged off any workmate who did not believe that his favourite football team was the only one worth supporting and resorted to fisticuffs to prove it. This is how the British left seem to me.

Don't misunderstand - I am all for rigorous analysis and debate. I also agree to differ with no bitterness. We all have a common enemy. The seeds of unity must be sown now. The Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Party, CPGB and others need to coalesce around a common set of goals and ideas. These ideas must be socialist, class politics, and none of the 'movementism' that has been around in the last 10 years or so.

The world is crying out for an alternative leadership. We should take inspiration from Egypt.

**Roberto Vicentini**  
email

## Al Jazeera

Thank you for being open in publishing views and arguments different from the majority view of your group. You are right in recognising that the only conditions of debate consistent with a movement for communism are those encouraging comrades to express themselves.

Please let comrade Moshé Machover know that Al Jazeera didn't originate in a joint venture with the BBC ('The long road to the Arab revolution', March 31). A joint venture does figure, as does the BBC, but it's a little different.

A Saudi satellite company, Orbit, asked the BBC to televise for the first time in Arabic the world service news. Orbit broadcast this from October 1994 until April 1996, when it pulled

the plug because it found the content objectionable.

Two hundred and fifty experts (journos, producers, administrators, technicians) were looking for work and Al-Jazeera picked up almost half of them. Six months later, Al Jazeera hit the ether (see H Miles *Al Jazeera* London 2005, pp30-34).

**Dave Gannet**  
email

## Neutral

I totally agree with the need to state the truth about all camps engaged in the Libyan revolt: namely that none of them is any better from the point of view of the international working class ('No united front with Gaddafi', April 7).

It is, of course, also true that there will never be a pure proletarian revolution, and the description of the anti-Gaddafi forces as all-out reactionaries is one-sided. Fortunately, the international revolutionary forces are so weak that they would be well advised not to do much more than to explain the above truth to the world. But I wonder what it ought to do if it was strong enough to give any meaningful material support.

It is quite obvious that there can be no question of the Libyan oppositional masses in the east of that country being able to topple the disgusting Gaddafi regime on the basis of their own strength. So to whom would the international revolutionaries send their weapons or whatever else if they could? Does comrade James Turley really propose lending material support to the nuclei of armed opposition forces there, whose ideology might not be representative of the majority of the people in the region, let alone those in the whole of Libya, but whose impact would in any case prevail, given that they are organised and armed? I am, of course, speaking of the forces identified by even the international bourgeois press as pro-al Qa'eda or, to be more general, 'Islamist', 'royalist' or whatever, but certainly not progressive even in bourgeois terms.

If I'm not mistaken, the only way at present to topple the Gaddafi regime is by the active military involvement of the imperialist powers - something we most certainly do not favour, not least because it is plain that this is diametrically opposed to any sort of power to the Libyan masses. It seems to me that any material support given to the oppositional forces able to use it would put us into the imperialist camp at this time. Apart from the fact that Gaddafi doesn't need any, supporting him would only be a very short-term 'anti-imperialist' action - a tactical move that would blemish our political identity for a long time. So why not stay neutral?

**A Holberg**  
Germany

## Wrong

There are a number of things wrong with James Turley's article. Firstly, he says: "... our project is doomed if it is not international, and thus does not tackle in a principled, democratic and consistent way the malign consequences of the division of the world into competing states. Supporting imperialism is one, particularly harmful, error in this regard - because imperialism thinks and operates internationally itself."

But how is it possible for 'imperialism' to think internationally? Imperialism is in fact the social relation that is capital, raised to a global level. Like capitalism, it involves a number of discrete but dialectically intertwined phenomena - enterprises, classes, parties, states, bureaucracies, governments, etc. But, just like capitalism, all of these parts,

whilst comprising the whole, do so via contradiction. The social relation itself is defined by the continual resolution of these contradictions. In fact, the social relation is to be understood not as a thing, but as a process.

So it is equally true to say that many capitalists within this system do not think or operate internationally. Whilst politicians may well do so and attempt to frame solutions to the contradictions that arise within the system on the basis of international institutions, those same politicians need to address the concerns of their own electorates and therefore the needs of the narrower economic concerns of their particular state. It should be clear that this cannot constitute some kind of single consciousness going under the name 'imperialism' and acting as a single will.

James then says that there is an argument going back to Trotskyism that, where a non-imperialist state is attacked by an imperialist state, it is necessary to form a united front with the former against the latter. There is no basis for this approach in Trotsky's writings. James quotes him on Abyssinia as the classic source for this approach. In fact, Trotsky's argument in relation to a hypothetical attack on a fascist Brazil by a democratic Britain is the clearer, more often cited argument. Trotsky argues that in such a situation communists would support Brazil against Britain because a victory for Britain would likely only result in the installation of another fascist dictator more to Britain's liking and to Brazil being doubly oppressed. A victory for Brazil would both weaken Britain and strengthen the forces of the workers in Brazil.

But there is nothing in Trotsky's argument here that suggests a 'united front'. Far from it. In fact, it was Trotsky who had done most of the work for the early Comintern in relation to the united front. It was a tactic to be used between two mass working class parties, each with a similar level of support within the class. He could not have proposed a united front with such a state for the obvious reason that it is neither a party nor working class!

To argue that a tactical alliance in action is possible is something completely different. It is no different from Lenin's argument about entering into such alliances with alien class forces in the context of the democratic revolution. But, just as Lenin argued in that context that 'extreme revolutionary opposition' had to be adopted to such forces, so too does this apply to Trotsky's position. That is why Trotsky opposed the Stalinist position in relation to the Chinese revolution in the 1920s. He argued that the communists in China had to support the KMT in opposing Japanese imperialism. Given that the KMT had access to weapons, they should even be prepared to accept weapons from it in order to fight. But he argued it was necessary to maintain strict organisational and political separation from them, precisely because they represented the class enemy, and would turn on the communists and revolutionary workers and peasants, which, of course, they did.

In fact, this whole argument is inextricably tied by its methodology to many other basic principles of communist strategy. For example, it is the same methodology that lies behind Lenin's idea of revolutionary defeatism and, more clearly, Trotsky's proletarian military policy. The former did not mean acting to physically assist the military campaign of the enemy, but meant continuing to undertake revolutionary activity against your own ruling class, even if that meant the possibility of military defeat.

Extending that to the conditions

of World War II, Trotsky argued that, although Marxists had to oppose the war, the reality was that without revolution the war would happen and workers would go to fight. He argued that, just as Bolsheviks had done in World War I, communists would have to try to become the best soldiers to win respect from their comrades and thereby attempt to put themselves in the best position to continue to oppose the war, and to work towards turning it into a civil war against the bosses. It is also the same methodology that Trotsky used in relation to defence of the USSR. Revolutionaries had to continue to struggle against Stalinism but, if the USSR was attacked by imperialist powers, then they would defend it. But they would defend it in the same way he had outlined in relation to China. They would maintain their own organisational and political independence; they would argue that the Stalinists were incapable of organising an effective defence, and they would seek to split away sections of the bureaucracy, and win over the workers for a political revolution.

Consequently, in relation to his Brazilian example, there is no suggestion from Trotsky that supporting the state had anything to do with supporting the regime, any more than supporting the USSR against an imperialist attack had anything to do with supporting the Stalinist regime. On the contrary, the war was an opportunity to expose the reactionary nature of those regimes, and to win the workers away from them! There could be no question of giving political support. Nor could there be any question of the communists advocating merging the forces of the workers with the regime or other classes. And on that, Trotsky was doing nothing more than the Comintern had agreed in relation to the *Theses on the national and colonial questions*.

It is from this perspective that the most dangerous element of James's argument is apparent. He argues that, although the rebel forces do contain many reactionary forces - Islamists, tribalists, former regime hatchet men and so on - and has indeed been guilty of pogroms, then this is also true of Gaddafi's regime. But this is a false argument on many levels.

Firstly, the fact that the 'rebels' are a lesser evil compared to the regime is not in itself an indication that they are progressive. It certainly is not a reason for communists to throw in their lot with them. But even if it were true, then in the face of an imperialist attack on the country, communists still have to support the state, whilst continuing to mobilise the workers to oppose both imperialism and the Gaddafi regime.

But it clearly is not true, as James says, that, "As such, despite the reactionary forces involved (which by no means are defining it), the mere fact of a rebellion is a positive, progressive development." The regime of the shah was reactionary, but if anything the rebellion of the Khomeinists, and certainly the regime established by it, was even more reactionary! In fact, there have been numerous examples of reactionary regimes that faced opposition from even more reactionary groups. That is why in the *Theses on the national and colonial questions* we find the following:

"second, the need for a struggle against the clergy and other influential reactionary and medieval elements in backward countries;

"third, the need to combat pan-Islamism and similar trends, which strive to combine the liberation movement against European and American imperialism with an attempt to strengthen the positions of the khans, landowners, mullahs, etc ...;

"fifth, the need for a determined struggle against attempts to give a communist colouring to bourgeois-democratic liberation trends in the backward countries; the Communist International should support bourgeois-democratic national movements in colonial and backward countries *only* [emphasis added] on condition that, in these countries, the elements of future proletarian parties, which will be communist not only in name, are brought together and trained to understand their special tasks: ie, those of the struggle against the bourgeois-democratic movements within their own nations. The Communist International must enter into a temporary alliance with bourgeois democracy in the colonial and backward countries, but should not merge with it, and should under all circumstances uphold the independence of the proletarian movement even if it is in its most embryonic form."

Lenin argued that if any of these forces refused to allow the communists to organise the workers and peasants on a revolutionary basis, then they should be treated as enemies like the Second International.

Communists should be very wary of simply jumping at the outbreak of fighting in Libya and assuming that this is just another manifestation of some Arab revolution sweeping across the region. As Lenin said, the truth is always concrete, and the facts in Libya suggest that this is something completely different from what has happened in Egypt. In fact, even the upheavals in Bahrain are not the same as in Egypt because of the factor of the division between an oppressing Sunni minority and oppressed Shia majority, let alone the factor of Iranian involvement in that process. The reality of Libya is more the outbreak of a civil war, with complex bases. Communists should be wary of simply taking sides in that civil war that could mean being in opposition to workers in Tripoli and other parts of the country, who might oppose Gaddafi, but even more fear the rebels.

Our job is not to pick sides, but to advance the cause of the Libyan workers. Our job is not to act as cheerleaders for rebels simply on the basis of them possibly being a 'lesser evil', but to advance a communist programme around which we attempt to mobilise the working class.

**Arthur Bough**  
email

## No street party

A number of very misleading, inaccurate and possibly defamatory claims about Republic have been made by or on behalf of Camden council concerning our 'Not the royal wedding' street party. This has all the appearances of a smear campaign against us and we are demanding a full retraction from the council.

Camden has suggested that it has "offered" Republic Lincoln's Inn Fields as an alternative venue for the party. In fact, Camden has merely invited Republic to apply to hold the party there, which would incur upfront costs of more than £3,000. The council has made it clear that if objections were received this application could also be vetoed.

A Camden spokesperson told *The Guardian* yesterday that Republic has not submitted an event management plan. In fact, we submitted an event management plan last month, which was subsequently accepted by both the council and Camden borough police. The same spokesperson told *The Guardian* there were "significant concerns from the police about the potential for disorder". In fact, the police have no concerns about our event and have not objected to it.



This has been confirmed in writing by Camden borough police.

In an emailed statement councillor Sue Vincent, cabinet member for environment, drew a link between Republic's street party and the "anarchic behaviour of the cuts march". This is entirely without foundation and potentially defamatory.

There is no evidence of widespread opposition to the party, as Camden has claimed. The council has received a total of three formal objections to the party. By contrast, Republic has carried out consultation with the local community - to the satisfaction of Camden council - which was generally very positive.

**Republic**  
email

## Past his peak

It's quite obvious from Andrew Northall's letter, that the comrade presently lacks energy-awareness in general and awareness about peak oil in particular (April 7).

Firstly, according to Andrew, I am well on the road to non-Marxism, which he equates with non-communism. This is because I have the temerity to criticise Marx. As far as I am concerned, sharing the same goal as Marx - ie, communism - does not oblige me to support all, or indeed, any of Marx's theories. Therefore to imply that criticism of Marx leads to non-communism is nonsense, since the idea of communism in the working class movement preceded Marx.

Andrew also says I used to be with him in defending the success and achievements of the Soviet Union. I can't see how anything has changed here. I continue to defend anything which was positive in the Soviet experience, while opposing anything which was negative. This is why I describe myself as a critical supporter of the Stalinist regime.

Like all Marxists, Andrew bases his communism exclusively on material abundance. He says that without abundance it would not be possible to meet the needs of the people. There will be the scourge of scarcity, an elite and the state. I am all for abundance, but I am not going to define communism in this way, because not only is the concept relative and related to population size, but also the Marxist definition of communism as abundance misleads people into believing that people will always behave badly in its absence and the corollary is they will behave well where there is abundance. Such a view is in keeping with the Marxist idea that communism comes from the productive forces, whereas I would argue that real communism comes from ideology and culture.

Andrew says that he remains unconvinced by "Tony's outlandish 'peak oil' theory". Any half-informed person knows that the theory is the view of leading geologists who have worked within the oil industry, such as the father of peak oil theory, Marion King Hubbert, and adherents like Colin Campbell, Kenneth Deffeyes and many others. If Andrew thinks I am obsessed with the issue it is because, like most Marxists at present, he hasn't considered the significance of industrial capitalism built on abundant, cheap oil supplies, the production of which is now stagnating before entering permanent decline. Peak oil means the end of capitalism, a process which will begin with increasing austerity. Now there is no way back for capitalism. That is why we can dispense with Paul Smith's Marxist phrases that the crisis "poses the possibility not only of recovery, but also of decline and termination of the system" (*Weekly Worker* March 3).

What we will be faced with is not decline and termination, but rather sudden collapse, which, by the way, started in 2008, when oil prices reaching \$147 per barrel,

triggering the financial crisis and a freezing up of credit. Unfortunately, the Marxist movement remains in the past, unaware that capitalism cannot be saved this time round by war or fascism.

**Tony Clark**  
London

## Unimaginative

I haven't had the opportunity yet to read Ian Isaac's book about the miners' strike, but I certainly intend to. Although I have never worked in the coal industry, like most people in south Wales I have ancestors who did (my great uncle was SO Davies, a former vice-president of the South Wales Miners Federation and later MP for Merthyr).

As an active member of the Labour Party I was very keen to get involved in the dispute, so I joined the Cardiff Miners Support Group (I think I may have met Dave Douglass briefly when he attended one of our meetings. He refused to drink our local beer because he claimed it contained animal extracts. Obviously a man of principle!). The support group was run by and large by Trots from all the disparate groups (the only ones missing were Militant, who in their usual sectarian way would only operate in areas where they were in the majority: eg, Maesteg and Caerphilly).

The one issue which separated me more than any other from the prevailing Trotskyist view was their fetish for mass picketing. This again was the main reason I started to become disillusioned with Arthur Scargill (apart from the fact that I have always been suspicious of people who refer to them themselves in the third person). What Scargill should have realised early on in the strike was that there was not going to be another Saltley Gate - Thatcher was not going to allow it.

After Scargill refused to let South Wales, Scotland and Yorkshire come

to agreement with the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation over coal usage, the only action that prevented any movement of coal into a steel plant was when the miners peacefully (although illegally) occupied the cranes at Port Talbot docks. But, when I suggested at the support group that the miners should adopt the tactics of Greenham Common rather than be smashed to pieces at Orgreave, I was viewed as some sort of heretic.

Scargill was derelict in his duties towards the miners when he either ignored the fact or failed to realise that Thatcher would go to any lengths to fulfil her political agenda (remember the Falklands). He should have considered more imaginative and intelligent ways of prosecuting the strike than sending massed ranks of unarmed miners up against a well paid, well armed army of paramilitary thugs.

**David Walters**  
Cardiff

## Unfair

I was reading an old *Weekly Worker* article by Harry Paterson that talks about comrade Roy Davies ("For democratic centralism", special supplement, March 23 2000). It states: "Again, it is no coincidence that the comrade responsible for this reformist rubbish is Roy Davies, a comrade, I am informed, who has also rejected the revolutionary party."

My father gave his all to Militant, he gave up his marriage and children to fight for the 'revolutionary party', so to say that he "rejected" it is unfair. He should be commended for his undying support, not lambasted for it.

My father would be disgusted with me that I wrote this, and possibly rather angry, but he was a faithful servant to the Socialist Party, no matter how it ended. I am proud of what my father did in the name of his beliefs.

**Alun Davies**  
email

## Fighting fund

# Openness

I couldn't help but notice Peter Manson's article on the latest SWP splinter - and in particular the advice of the organisation's founder, Tony Cliff, when it comes to open discussion:

"... all the party's issues of policy are those of the class, and they should therefore be thrashed out in the open, in its presence ... This means that all discussions on basic issues of policy should be discussed in the light of day: in the open press. Let the mass of the workers take part in the discussion ..."

Well, neither the SWP nor *Socialist Worker* practises anything like that, but the *Weekly Worker* certainly does. Our paper is renowned for its to and fro of open polemic - both on the letters pages and in feature articles; both between CPGB comrades and with supporters of other tendencies. We always report on the debates that take place at our internal aggregates and also try to inform readers of the differences within the leadership of other groups.

None of this has anything to do with 'gossip', as some inanely claim. Our aim is to inform the advanced section of the working class about the competing ideas dividing our movement, so it can judge for itself who is right and equip itself with the necessary answers. In this the *Weekly Worker*

is still unique.

And our readers know it. That is why so many are prepared to support our fighting fund so we can, as many urge, "keep up the good work". Last week our donors included SM, GD and DY, whose monthly standing orders arrived in our account. Then there was comrade CS, who handed over £30 in cash and, finally, GH and SK, who both sent in a £20 cheque.

A bit of a thin week, to be honest - all that only comes to £110, taking our running total for April to £410. But we need to raise £1,250, with almost half the month gone.

Our big weakness remains the small number of donations received from all those internet readers - there were 12,522 of them last week, but not one contributed to the fighting fund. Yet so many of those thousands have come to accept the message we continue to plug: the need for openness in the struggle for a single, united Communist Party. If you are one of them, please help ensure that message is still heard. Open your wallets to support open debate ●

**Robbie Rix**

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

# 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.communiststudents.org.uk](http://www.communiststudents.org.uk).

## Radical Anthropology Group

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

**April 26:** 'A brief history of life on earth'. Speaker: Chris Knight.

## No benefit cuts

**Thursday April 14:** Day of action

**Poole:** Protest, 12 noon, Poole Job Centre.

[www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=161332900587762](http://www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=161332900587762).

**Bristol:** Protest, 12 noon, Government Buildings, Flowers Hill.

[www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=199413500079998](http://www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=199413500079998).

**Brighton:** Protest, 2pm, Churchill Square.

[www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=210782635605158](http://www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=210782635605158).

**London:** Protest, 2pm, *Daily Mail* headquarters, Young Street (off Kensington High Street), W8.

[www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=161556473898500](http://www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=161556473898500).

## Unheard voices

**Friday April 15, 1pm, Saturday April 16, 2pm:** Spring conference, Amnesty International, Human Rights Action Centre, 17-25 New Inn Yard, London EC2. 'Who's telling our stories? Unheard voices; mobilising migrants to speak up'.

Organised by Migrant Voice and Migrant Voices for Change Network: <http://migrantvoice.org>.

## Smiley Culture

**Saturday April 16, 12 noon:** March to New Scotland Yard, in protest at death of Smiley Culture. Assemble Southbank Club, 124-130 Wandsworth Road, London SW8.

## Our cuts - their celebration

**Saturday April 16, 1pm:** Convention, room A10, London South Bank University, London Road, SE1 (nearest tube: Elephant and Castle).

Sessions: 'Royal wedding - what would Tom Paine have said?' (Clive Bloom); 'The fight for a republic - the flags of our ancestors' (Steve Freeman); 'What is English republican socialism?' (Peter Tatchell); 'The case for republican secular democracy' (Clive Bloom).

Organised by Republican Socialist Convention: [49sfreeman@googlemail.com](mailto:49sfreeman@googlemail.com).

**Venezuela**  
**Saturday April 16, 10am:** National event, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. 'Defending the majority, not punishing the poorest' - how Venezuela is developing public services for all. Speakers include: Henry Suarez (Venezuelan ambassador), Seamus Milne (journalist), Billy Hayes (CWU) and Hugo O'Shaughnessy (journalist and writer).

Topics include: 'Venezuela's economy - protecting living standards during recession and future challenges' and 'Who is the Venezuelan opposition?'  
Organised by the Venezuela Solidarity Campaign: [info@venezuelasolidarity.co.uk](mailto:info@venezuelasolidarity.co.uk).

**Support Zimbabwean socialists**  
**Monday April 18, 1pm:** Protest, Zimbabwe House, 429 Strand, London. Stop the treason trial.  
Organised by Action for Southern Africa: [campaigns@actsa.org](mailto:campaigns@actsa.org).

## Economic crisis

**Wednesday April 20, 7pm:** Meeting, Redhills (NUM hall) Durham.

Discussion: The world economic crisis. Speaker: Terry McPartlan, LRC national committee.

Organised by Durham Labour Representation Committee.

## Immigration detention

**Wednesday April 20, 6pm:** Meeting, Old Town Hall, 29 The Broadway, London E15. 'What is immigration detention?' Testimonies from individuals who were detained, plus experts to answer questions.

Hosted by RAMFEL, Detention Forum and London Detainee Support Group, and supported by Praxis and the Dover Visitors Group. To book a place contact Lucy Mercer: 020 8478 4513.

## May Day

**Sunday May 1, 12 noon:** March, Clerkenwell Green, London EC1. Speakers include: Tony Benn, Ken Livingstone, Sarah Veale (TUC).

Organised by the London May Day Organising Committee: [www.londonmayday.org](http://www.londonmayday.org).

**Sunday May 1, 1pm:** March, All Saints Park, Oxford Road, Manchester.

Organised by Manchester TUC: [secmtuc@gmail.com](mailto:secmtuc@gmail.com).

## Defend council housing

**Saturday May 7, 12 noon:** National meeting, Camden Town Hall, Judd Street, London WC1. Organise next steps in campaign against Localism Bill.

Organised by Defend Council Housing: [defendcouncilhousing.org.uk](http://defendcouncilhousing.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.



## THE LEFT

# Latest irresponsible split from SWP

The defection of Chris Bambery and a section of the Scottish membership highlights systemic failings. **Peter Manson** reports

**T**he resignation of Socialist Workers Party central committee member Chris Bambery on April 10 was rapidly followed by the departure of at least 38 comrades in Scotland two days later. These defectors are expected to formally announce their adherence to the Counterfire grouping of John Rees and Lindsey German sooner rather than later.

It is no coincidence that comrade Bambery's resignation letter was first posted on Alex Snowdon's *Luna 17* blog on April 11<sup>1</sup> - comrade Snowdon is a member of Counterfire. Within an hour or so it also appeared on the sites of other leftwing bloggers. Similarly, the statement of comrade Bambery's 38 supporters in Scotland was first made public on the Counterfire website.<sup>2</sup>

Their letter to "CC and party members" was introduced by Counterfire in this way: "A new socialist organisation is being formed in Scotland which is committed to building the movement against the cuts, solidarity with the Arab revolutions and the Stop the War Coalition." Counterfire has consistently claimed that the SWP has been insufficiently enthusiastic about the anti-cuts movement and has at best gone cool on the STWC (which was set up originally on the initiative of the SWP, but is now led by comrades Rees and German). And Counterfire has been particularly keen on the "Arab revolutions".

Its website introduction concludes: "Counterfire sends its greetings to the new group, which is committed, as we are, to building the widest possible movements of resistance and to building an organisation of Marxists." So Counterfire clearly knew an awful lot about a group founded just an hour or so earlier.

In truth, it came as something of a surprise when comrade Bambery - closely associated with the former Rees SWP leadership - did not follow the example of Lindsey German and Chris Nineham in stepping down from the CC when comrade Rees was dumped at the end of 2007. Comrade Bambery not only remained an SWP member after the leadership organised a 'rebellion' of *Socialist Worker* journalists to have him removed as editor in 2009, but he stuck it out on the CC. It was the same when Rees, German and Nineham led a walkout from the SWP of around 60 people in February 2010. Comrade Bambery stayed put, appearing to have switched sides.

But now he talks about the "relentless factionalism" which was "driven by the leading group on the CC" and has afflicted the SWP "for four years" - in other words, since the CC majority decided to place the entire blame for the Respect debacle on comrade Rees. Admittedly, Rees was the chief architect of this overtly popular-frontist episode, but the entire CC had gone along with it (uncritically, it seems).

So, after four years of biting his tongue, comrade Bambery has now begun to echo Counterfire's criticisms of the leadership. But the reasons he gives for his resignation seem insubstantial, to say the least.

In his letter addressed to SWP national secretary Charlie Kimber he explains that, despite his "32 years membership" - 17 as national secretary and five as *Socialist Worker* editor - he felt he had no alternative but to throw in the towel. Why?

Because at the April 8 special CC meeting former national secretary and chief hit man Martin Smith accused him of having played a "filthy" and "disgraceful" role in the party. He specified comrade Bambery's particularly "foul role in Scotland", for which he had had CC responsibility since 1988 until it was removed from him earlier this year. According to the resignation letter, comrade Smith said that despite the CC's best efforts to "integrate" him, comrade Bambery had "spent the last year and a half organising against the CC". Such allegations were repeated by other CC members.

For comrade Bambery these accusations, mixed with a couple of minor insults, amount to "a major factional attack", leaving him no alternative but to call it a day. Not very convincing.

He then regurgitates the Rees-German line that the leadership's attitude had "damaged our united front work in all the campaigns - Right to Work most obviously ... Stop the War is now treated with derision by leading CC members". In recent weeks there has been "no lead or drive from the CC in turning the party towards building the growing anti-cuts movement". What is more, unspecified "internal arguments" have held back Right to Work "from its inception" and "brought it near to derailment". Finally, "the stress on party-building has increasingly meant 'intervening' from the outside rather than recruiting whilst working alongside those who are building the movement".

Unlike under the leadership of John Rees then, the SWP no longer takes so-called 'united front' work seriously and instead abuses the broad alliances it sets up simply to recruit to itself - that is the Rees-Bambery accusation. Of course, seasoned SWP-watchers have noticed no change at all from the days of the *ancien régime* either in the organisation's promotion of broad, popular-front-type alliances or in its cynical use of them as recruiting channels.

Among the 38 comrades in Scotland signing the joint resignation letter are the Glasgow and East Coast SWP organisers and six members of the Scottish steering committee. Two of them, Suki Sangha and James Foley, were also members of the SWP national committee and comrade Foley is actually number five on George Galloway's Coalition Against Cuts list for the May 5 election to the Scottish parliament - one of only two SWP comrades nominated for the eight-person slate.

The 38 simply repeat comrade Bambery's vague allegations: "factionalism persists at the very centre of the organisation"; there has been a "retreat from systematic united front work"; the SWP did not mobilise efficiently for the March 26 TUC demo; Right to Work has been undermined; etc.

### Headteacher

For its part, the CC responds in its by now accustomed way: like a tolerant headteacher who has bent over backwards to make allowances for their recalcitrant charges despite the latter's totally unreasonable behaviour. The reply was published in the internal *Party Notes* and should remain accessible on the SWP website until it is replaced by next week's edition.<sup>3</sup>

The CC states that comrade Bambery's resignation is "very disappointing". However, "The CC has for some time had worries about aspects of Chris's work." For example, "There was criticism of his role in not effectively helping to build a broad Right to Work." Even more 'worrying' for the CC, though, is what comrade Bambery had been up to north of the border: "As Chris's letter states, the CC asked him to step aside from responsibility for our work in Scotland, and after the evidence that has now emerged of organised opposition to the party in Scotland it is obvious we were right."

But what, precisely *had* he been up to? The leadership explains: "The argument at the CC that Chris refers to involved him spreading information about internal CC discussions to those outside the CC. Several of us believed he was trying to stir up division in the party - a view which subsequent events confirmed."

This is the nub of the matter. Comrade Bambery had clearly been elaborating to comrades in Scotland (and, presumably, elsewhere) what the differences on the CC were - and no doubt explaining why he was right and the majority were wrong. Why is this unacceptable? It is not a question of 'stirring up' divisions, surely: rather of reporting existing ones. And surely it is better to have such divisions out in the open in order to resolve them?

In fact just over a year ago the SWP seemed to be recognising that such secrecy was not a good idea. It had set up a 'democracy commission' following complaints of a lack of explanation and openness in the wake of comrade Rees's removal from the leadership, and the commission's report to the January 2010 SWP conference contained the following remark: "For some time now the custom and practice has been for *all* differences within the CC to be hidden from the wider membership (except for close personal confidants), with all CC members presenting an image of more or less total unity until the last possible moment."

The democracy commission therefore recommended: "... the responsible discussion of serious political differences when they arise would help educate comrades and train them in thinking for themselves."<sup>4</sup> The DC recommendations were overwhelmingly accepted and, I assume, all CC members voted for them.

If they were to implement what they seemed to agree to by their votes, they would be doing no more than their founder and guru, Tony Cliff, had laid out - in his early days, that is, before he became the main driving force in saddling the International Socialists/SWP with its current variant of bureaucratic centralism. Back in 1960 he wrote:

"... the internal regime in the revolutionary party must be subordinated to the relation between the party and the class ... The revolutionary party that seeks to overthrow capitalism cannot accept the notion of a discussion on policies inside the party without the participation of the mass of the workers - policies which are then brought 'unanimously' ready-made to the class. Since the revolutionary party cannot have interests apart from the class, all the party's issues of policy are those of the class, and they should therefore be thrashed out

in the open, in its presence.

"... This means that all discussions on basic issues of policy should be discussed in the light of day: in the open press. Let the mass of the workers take part in the discussion, put pressure on the party, its apparatus and leadership."<sup>5</sup>

It goes without saying that the SWP practice is precisely the opposite. For instance, at the same time as appearing to move in the direction of the open reporting of differences on the leadership, the DC made the following comment: "If for example, the organisation decides, as it has done, to oppose the slogan 'British jobs for British workers', it is not then permissible for any member, especially a leading member, to support this slogan in a ... public forum."

I commented at the time that the example was deliberately chosen for its undesirability - no genuine socialist would ever say such a thing, obviously.<sup>6</sup> But, again, how can this gagging order - the banning of public expression of differences - be reconciled with Cliff's advice that "all discussions on basic issues of policy should be discussed in the light of day". Does the fact that "the organisation decides" on a policy mean it ought to be set in stone? What if the policy turns out to be incorrect?

### Culture

Returning to the leadership's response to comrade Bambery, the CC states: "We do not think that the party is riven by factionalism, nor does it have a culture where it is impossible to raise political disagreement." It is insufficient merely to assert this. After all, the democracy commission report came to the opposite conclusion.

The report stated: "The main form of democratic difficulty we have experienced has been reluctance, at all levels of the party, of comrades with sincerely held doubts and/or differences to speak up. One reason for this has been the tendency to put down dissenters so severely and comprehensively as to deter any repetition or imitation." It further stated: "Nor should there be a fear as - with reason - there has been in the past, of exclusion, isolation or ostracism for the expression of dissident views."

Has the SWP now discarded these bureaucratic, anti-democratic practices? I very much doubt it. Part and parcel of them has been the attempt to put down dissent by calling on those who question the CC's wisdom to stop wasting time and *get active*. This was epitomised by one SWP comrade's comment on the Socialist Unity site's Bambery thread: "OK, this is all very exciting, but there are cuts to fight, so will you people please get back to fucking work? Most of us in the SWP actually have things to attend to and not much time to waste on gossip. You people remind me of the House of Lords."<sup>7</sup>

The internal regime notwithstanding, the CC does make some correct criticisms of comrade Bambery in the following passage:

"If Chris believed there were fundamental problems around Right to Work and other issues, his responsibility ... was to raise these questions and encourage other comrades to do the same."

"As our leading comrade in RTW, as a central committee member and as a member of the party's finance committee, Chris had the opportunity

to register political disagreement about all the issues he raises in his resignation letter. In the past year he never has.

"Instead he has written key documents for the party's perspectives, introduced sessions at conference and headed up our work in a key united front - without any open political disagreements. Indeed, he said he had no differences with the perspectives document presented to Sunday's party council - on the day he resigned. He could have attended the council and argued at it. Surely the Tony Cliff who Chris mentions would have done so! But Chris chose not to attend."

"In our tradition, if you disagree, you try to win your position in the party and seek to persuade others of your case."

The final sentence is, of course, laughable - especially in view of the democracy commission's observations. However, that is how things *ought* to be and it is positive that the CC, however hypocritically, has felt obliged to state this. There is now just the little matter of making it a reality.

The CC has called an emergency national committee meeting for April 16 to discuss the latest crisis. As well as the situation in Scotland, it will also no doubt be considering what to do about Right to Work, whose national secretary is ... Chris Bambery. Will the CC be prepared to see RTW go the same way as Stop the War? Or will it risk alienating its allies by ensuring he is replaced by an SWP loyalist? RTW is, after all, more clearly an SWP front than STWC ever was.

Readers could keep an eye on comrade Bambery's blog on the RTW website - as I write, the last entry was made on April 6.<sup>8</sup> However, I would reckon that the SWP apparatus has already closed this line of communication. Clearly, the SWP leadership regards comrade Bambery's defection as a huge embarrassment. Doubtless that is why there is no mention, no hint of it in the latest edition of *Socialist Worker*.

For our part we do not welcome or celebrate such irresponsible splits. The left has a terrible reputation for splitting almost as a matter of routine over what are essentially secondary issues. Comrade Bambery should have fought inside the SWP and raised political criticisms. That might have got him expelled, but better to have stayed and fought than to have simply walked away.

However, one thing is for sure: until the bureaucratic-centralist regimes are broken apart - and not only in the sects, but the trade unions and the Labour Party too - the working class can make no serious, no lasting progress ●

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### Notes

1. <http://luna17activist.blogspot.com>.
2. [www.counterfire.org/index.php/news/news/11886-new-socialist-organisation-formed-in-scotland](http://www.counterfire.org/index.php/news/news/11886-new-socialist-organisation-formed-in-scotland).
3. *Party Notes* April 11: [www.swp.org.uk/party-notes](http://www.swp.org.uk/party-notes).
4. SWP democracy commission report *Pre-conference Bulletin* October 2009.
5. T Cliff *Trotsky on substitutionism* 1960: [www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1960/xx/trotsky.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1960/xx/trotsky.htm). Thanks to the comrade writing on the Socialist Unity blog for reproducing this ([www.socialistunity.com/?p=7983](http://www.socialistunity.com/?p=7983)).
6. 'Triumvirate's reorientation faces Left Platform rebellion' *Weekly Worker* October 29 2009.
7. [www.socialistunity.com/?p=7983](http://www.socialistunity.com/?p=7983).
8. <http://righttowork.org.uk/category/blog>.



## IRAN

# Unlikely bedfellows

In a change of policy that Alex Callinicos calls “entirely consistent”, the Socialist Workers Party now supports the same group of Britain-based Iranian exiles that enjoy the backing of the social-imperialist Alliance for Workers’ Liberty. **Tina Becker** reports

When the Socialist Workers Party does one of its many political U-turns, it usually does so without any attempt to theorise the change and certainly any public admission of the fact it has even taken place. One of the more startling examples of the organisation’s crass opportunism (or ‘programmatic flexibility’, as the comrades might call it) can be seen in its position on Iran and the green movement.

Readers of the *Weekly Worker* will remember how, just a couple of years back, the SWP rejected all criticism of Iranian dictator Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the name of the ‘unity’ of the anti-war movement. The affiliation of Hands Off the People of Iran to the then SWP-run Stop the War Coalition was rejected on the grounds that Hopi opposes not only any imperialist intervention in Iran, but also the theocracy, arguing instead for active solidarity with the tens of thousands of women, worker and student activists who have been fighting against their regime.

It would have been bad enough if the comrades had simply argued that the left in Britain must limit itself to overthrowing its own regime; that the left cannot get involved in the ‘internal’ affairs of other countries.

However, the SWP went further. At the October 2007 STWC AGM, Iran-born SWP member Somaye Zadeh was wheeled out to oppose Hopi’s request for affiliation. She went on to tackle “five lies” that were being peddled against Iran, including “No5: Iran is an undemocratic and repressive country”. She admitted that homosexuality was banned, “but, at the same time as homosexuality is not allowed, Iran does allow sex changes and in fact the average number of sex changes in Iran is seven times that in the whole of Europe.” To wild cheering from SWP members in the audience, she explained that “the literacy rate amongst women is 98%. And 64% of university students are women. This is unparalleled in the Middle East and beyond.” Also, there had been “a flourishing of magazines, newspapers, theatres, books, arts and websites”. The situation in Iran “clearly isn’t so black and white” as Hopi suggested.<sup>1</sup>

## A change

But then June 2009 happened. Immediately following the presidential election fraud, millions of Iranians took to the streets of Tehran and other cities, demanding more democracy. First, the group around former SWP leader John Rees changed its mind, now admitting that there was indeed “serious repression” in Iran.<sup>2</sup> The rest of the SWP soon followed.

However, it did not come out in support of those who had been fighting this repression for years, those who had been struggling for the *overthrow of the whole regime* - ie, the most radical sections of the protests. Instead, the SWP threw in its lot with the ‘green’ movement as a whole - without making any distinction between its very different components. In effect, it supported the ‘reformist’ misleaders, Mir-Hossein Moussavi and Mehdi Karroubi, making just the occasional mild criticism of Moussavi and giving favourable coverage to the election campaign of Karroubi.

The *Socialist Worker* forum on ‘Egypt and the lessons for Iran’ on



**The horror of Iraq: principled solidarity requires consistent anti-imperialism**

April 7 showed that the comrades still support this line, though they seem to be tweaking it somewhat. Now, apparently, the time has come for the comrades to recognise that there are “different shades of green”.

SWP member Ali Alizadeh (who was identified merely as “a supporter of the green movement”) made an interesting attempt to explain the movement’s limitations and its failure to make revolution, for which he saw three main reasons. Firstly, the “myth of leadership” of Moussavi and Karroubi, which led to thousands of people waiting - in vain - for them to push the protests further than the “legalistic demands” they concentrated on. Secondly, the movement disarmed itself by its “fetishisation of non-violence”. And, thirdly, it had bought into the regime’s efforts to “rewrite the 1979 revolution”. Comrade Alizadeh reminded the audience of around 100 of the “many strikes, the flowering left, the workers’ councils which ran many areas for almost 18 months”.

Then he turned his attention to how the left should intervene in the green movement. He admitted that “maybe we did not challenge Moussavi and Karroubi enough before the 2009 elections”. Now, however, “different shades of green have emerged”, which means “we should concentrate on building our own, independent working class organisations”. Or, putting it another way, “We can now move from a popular front to a united front. That means we stay within the movement, but we fight to win it over to our ideas.” So socialists in Iran who

had previously supported the “popular front” approach and had not attempted to win the movement “over to our ideas” had been correct at the time? As for the present, we “do not dismiss Moussavi. Moussavi’s past is not my concern. We want to keep the unity of the movement.”

After his contribution was challenged by a number of people in the audience (interestingly, not a single SWP member intervened from the floor), Alex Callinicos jumped to comrade Alizadeh’s defence from the top table. While his main contribution had been uncontroversial, he now explained that “the issue with Moussavi is not if he’s a bastard or not. The issue is that he helped to create the conditions necessary to build a movement from below”. He then wheeled out good old Lenin and his correct observation that “revolutions are never pure”. Many of the leaders of the revolution in Egypt were “pro-capitalist supporters of the west - does that mean we don’t support the revolution?”

Of course it doesn’t. But Lenin was rather more principled than comrade Callinicos claims. He explicitly argued that revolutionaries, while engaging in diverse mass movements, must never bury their criticisms of the non-socialist forces they happen to fight alongside. The SWP insists the united front involves putting aside differences and “searching for the *point of agreement*” rather than the point of dispute.<sup>3</sup> Lenin argued that it served to *highlight differences* through common action, exposing

the superiority of the communists. And Trotsky famously wrote that we should be prepared to make alliances with the devil - as long as we don’t call him an angel.

There have been plenty of such ‘angels’ in the recent history of the SWP, most notably George Galloway, who for the SWP oscillates between cuddly cherub and Satan’s spawn. Comrade Callinicos simply ignored a member of the audience who reminded him that not long ago the SWP invited the Iranian state’s Press TV to film the STWC conference.

Probably hoping that comrades have the memory of a goldfish, comrade Callinicos claimed that the SWP has “been entirely consistent in its support of the green movement”. This is, of course, somewhat true - it is just that *before* June 2009 it stabbed in the back those who had been fighting for working class independence.

## What about imperialism?

So far, so typical of the SWP. However, it is rather more difficult to understand why the organisation now courts the International Alliance in Support of Workers in Iran (IASWI). At the April 7 meeting, comrade Callinicos stressed that it was “very important for the left in Britain to support the alliance” and IASWI comrades were given plenty of time to speak.

The British section of this group - made up of undoubtedly well-meaning exiled Iranians - almost exclusively concentrates on its “aim to bring the

terrible plight of the Iranian workers, the efforts of the trade unionists and progressive opposition to this regime to the attention of international labour movements and public opinion”, as stated on the leaflet given out at the meeting.

Both the British and the Canadian sections are under the political influence of the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) and the International Confederation of Free Trades Unions (IFTU) - organisations that are deeply compromised politically. They have been more or less silent on the role of imperialism in the Middle East and have acted as junior partners in implementing the reactionary agenda of the US and its allies. No wonder: the constituent parts of these organisations are often directly or indirectly dependent on their own government and collaborate with them on all sorts of issues.

To be fair, many in IASWI internationally, particularly the Swedish section, have been consistent anti-imperialists and Hopi has benefited from the contributions and support of comrades such as veteran oilworker Ali Pichgah and comrade Majid Tamjidi. However, on the English section of IASWI’s website<sup>4</sup> I could not find a single mention of the need to oppose war or the sanctions that are crippling Iran and the democracy movement. And none of the three IASWI speakers at the April 7 meeting talked about the issue either (though when I approached one of them after the meeting, he said, “Of course we are against imperialism”. You should put it in your propaganda then, comrades!).

No wonder that the pro-imperialist Alliance for Workers’ Liberty has been an outspoken supporter of IASWI for years. But it is rather surprising to find the SWP now backing the group too. This is, after all, an organisation that usually prides itself on its implacable and vocal opposition to imperialism (often by mistakenly supporting anybody and anything that labels itself ‘anti-imperialist’). In reality, of course, the switch is totally in keeping with its opportunist politics. The comrades have in all likelihood been unable to form any links with serious organisations in Iran - so they are now trying to jump on what looks like an easy bandwagon.

The SWP would be well served to drop its opportunism and support a principled solidarity campaign like Hands Off the People of Iran. Hopi’s message of clear opposition to both imperialism and the theocracy is the only one that makes sense. In fact, a young SWP member at the meeting took one of our leaflets and was so taken with it that he went to the SWP’s main stall and suggested it should have our material on it. The more seasoned SWP member took one look at me, tore the leaflet out of his comrade’s hand and crushed it into a ball ●

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## Notes

1. See *Weekly Worker* November 1 2007.
2. ‘Left Platform lines up with Moussavi’ *Weekly Worker* February 11 2010
3. See ‘Fight the CC apparatus’ *Weekly Worker* January 8 2009.
4. www.etehadbinalmelali.com.



## LABOUR

# Intervention, not incoherent abstention

James Turley replies to critics of the CPGB's project to transform the Labour Party

Two articles appeared in the last *Weekly Worker* which were sharply critical of the Communist Party of Great Britain's perspectives on work in the Labour Party.

Comrade Dave Vincent objects to our reading of Labour's political dynamics in the present situation - in particular the notion that it is in some way shifting to the left. Comrade Chris Strafford, one of a minority of CPGB members who oppose our perspectives, raises objections of two kinds: theoretical and political criticisms of our aims with regard to the Labour Party on the one hand; and practical objections to attempting to carry out this strategy in the present conjuncture on the other.<sup>1</sup>

### Moving left?

Comrade Vincent is certainly not under the impression that Labour is, as Eddie Ford put it in our paper, "taking on redder hues".<sup>2</sup> This being the Labour Party, there is no shortage of evidence for his view; comrade Vincent mentions Ed Miliband's statement rejecting the use of industrial action to bring down the government, and his extremely lukewarm opposition to the cuts - 'Too fast, too deep, too soon' is the official mantra. His article was written, I would guess, too early to take in Miliband's recent fawning appearance before the British Chambers of Commerce.<sup>3</sup>

This is all true enough - 'red' Ed is certainly not in a mood to burn all his bridges with the bourgeoisie and middle England. What comrade Vincent misses, however, is that these features are broadly true of Labour left shifts past, though they have never been so unabashed as they are today, in the aftermath of Kinnock, Blair and Brown. When Labour tacks left, this is *always* fundamentally a *pose* - an attempt to rally an energised and angry population to the Labour rosette, all the better to dampen that enthusiasm with another wonderful Labour government a few years down the road.

In this respect, it is simply impossible to deny that Miliband, and especially pro-Labour union leaders, are posing left. The very idea of Tony Blair appearing in public to address a mass protest - even a hypothetical one which targeted Tories rather than his own government - is basically absurd. (As an experienced trade union militant, comrade Vincent does not need me to tell him that Brendan Barber's acquiescence in calling that mass demo in the first place is quite an exceptional moment in that dozy bureaucrat's career.)

To that appearance, we might add Miliband's disavowal of the Iraq war, and his leadership campaign, which attempted to open up some distance from the New Labour project of which he was previously an architect - all attempts to neutralise him in the eyes of those alienated by Labour in government.

He is not attempting to dress himself as a full-blooded socialist, of course. Nevertheless, every concession to his left - no matter how meagre - carries the risk of incurring the wrath of the bourgeois media,

especially its far-right daily rags. The *Mail* has painted Miliband as a closet Bolshevik so many times that one almost expects them to forge another Zinoviev letter. The conditions of opposition, in the contest of broad anger at a government without a clear mandate by any measure, nonetheless make these concessions necessary.

One might then wonder: if Miliband's salutations to the suffragettes and MLK are so much ingratiating hot air, why should we *care* that he bothers to make them? What, as the old saying has it, does it all have to do with the price of eggs?

The problem for us is that - contrary to the position of much of the far left - Labour remains an integral part of the British workers' movement. It may be the most politically degenerate section, the most integrated into the British state; but the flipside of that fact is that it is also one of the most powerful and influential. Like the proverbial butterfly of chaos theory, indirectly triggering a hurricane with a flap of its wings, an incremental shift in the political profile of the Labour Party can have far-reaching consequences for the rest of us.

Miliband's meagre left posturing strengthens the hand of those leading union bureaucrats whose basic strategy, in all such situations, is to 'wait for Labour' against their more militant members who wish to build serious, politically radical resistance to the government now. They strengthen their hand, for that matter, against the more radical union tops (Serwotka, Crow and the rest). And electors in wider society - especially those who abandoned Labour during its last spell in government - will feel *more* comfortable in marking their cross for Labour at the next opportunity, if not overly enthusiastic.

This dynamic is not *immediately* obvious now (though it is worth noting that Labour's vote held up well in its heartlands at the last general election, and a decent showing in May is very likely), with the relative radicalism of the anti-cuts movement still outstripping the tameness of the Labour leadership. If, however, we do *not* manage to defeat the cuts, the battered masses will look to any 'realistic' alternative when we finally come to the polls. Conversely, if we *do* defeat the government and trigger an election, the Labour electoral machine will come into its own. In either situation, the trade union officials can be relied upon to fall into line, and the masses can look forward to years of disappointment under Miliband.

Intervention in Labour is important, then, not because it is now suddenly a viable vehicle for socialism - any group or individual who believes that is naive in the extreme. It is because Labour is - and always has been - a strategic *obstacle* to socialism, which Marxists will have to deal with one way or another.

Comrade Vincent does not see it this way: "I have argued before that socialists/Marxists should be relating to those joining anti-cuts protests who are not Labour Party members rather than wasting time with 'Labour

Party no matter how bad' useful idiots (to capitalism), who foster illusions in Labour." This implicitly erects a Chinese wall between Labour and the rest of the workers' movement. It is a misleading assessment for several reasons - firstly, would he apply this test to union members who supported Labour? If not, why do so when it comes to the anti-cuts movement - which enjoys (often mealy-mouthed) support from many Labour-affiliated unions?

Secondly, 'Labour Party no matter how bad' is indeed an unhelpful perspective. Yet that kind of inviolable tribal attachment surely does not exhaust the range of reasons for individuals to engage in the Labour Party. Presumably some people expect it to actually do something; others will have a project to *make* it do something, even if that project is hopeless. It is quite as necessary to have the argument for Marxist politics with these people as with those on the non-Labour left. Useful idiots? Perhaps - but no more so than those who are suspicious of political organisations *tout court*, whom we must also convince of the need for a Communist Party.

### Selling out?

Of course, establishing that we need some kind of intervention in the Labour Party does not establish any particular strategy for implementing one. Chris Strafford objects to the strategy outlined in the CPGB theses on the Labour Party, on a number of political, historical and theoretical grounds. Unfortunately, his line of argument is tenuous in places and leads him to make some pretty wild claims.

Given his hostility to the CPGB theses, it is perhaps ironic that many of his initial arguments against intervening in Labour - a bet carefully hedged by saying that one day it perhaps will be necessary - hinge around the traitorous nature of the organisation on the one hand; and the historic uselessness of the Labour left in checking the right, or even giving the party any direction beyond the extraction of modest concessions, on the other.<sup>4</sup> On this, comrade, we are all agreed (see theses 6 through 8 for a less confused run-down of the typical functioning of the Labour left-right split).

Yet it does not follow from this that Marxists have no stake in the relative balance of forces between left and right in the Labour Party. Our aim is to build a substantial Marxist wing in Labour (something rather sniffily dismissed by comrade Strafford as "comrades pretending to be Labourites with a Marxist twist"). In this respect, the overall balance of forces is a *practical* consideration - when Labour shifts to the left, it becomes easier for Marxists to operate in the Labour Party (it is no accident, for example, that the high watermark of the entrant Militant Tendency came in the early 1980s). In reality this is true of society as a whole; when even the most dead-end leftisms have a wide influence, it becomes easier for us to make our particular case.

Comrade Strafford, however, does not seem to take seriously at all the CPGB's stated intention of building a Marxist wing of Labour - in, but not of, the Labour left. He wheels out Lenin's condition for Labour-affiliation in the 1920s - the CPGB must "retain complete liberty of agitation, propaganda and political activity". This freedom "does not currently exist and furthermore we are not in a position to form any kind of serious bloc with the Labour Party, as suggested by Lenin". Thus, with the dull compulsion of the inevitable, comrades will have no alternative but to pretend to be "Labourites with a Marxist twist".

The truth is that, unlike entrust groups for whom the world outside Labour is almost inconceivable, we *do* retain complete liberty of agitation and propaganda. Ed Miliband cannot shut down the *Weekly Worker*. He cannot stop all his lay members from promoting and distributing it. That, precisely, is the point of organised and disciplined Marxist intervention within Labour, and indeed the collective endeavour of communist politics as a whole.

Comrade Strafford seems to have lapsed into that oldest of sins in the bourgeois social sciences: methodological individualism. From that perspective, the idea that Labour Party Marxists might have to tell one or two fibs about their broader political affiliations to throw witch-hunters off the scent amounts to a wholesale capitulation to social democracy.

It matters not that several present-day members of the CPGB (including three Provisional Central Committee members) spent their politically formative years engaged in an illegal factional struggle in the old 'official' party, and seem to have gotten out alive without becoming Euros. It matters not that it was necessary for CPGB supporters to lie even to join Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party. The latter's bans and proscriptions were effectively copied and pasted from the Labour constitution - yet apparently intervening in the Labour Party is the high road to liquidation.

That this line is manifestly unsustainable does not mean that there is no danger of comrades 'going to the dark side', as it were - yet the collective division of labour among CPGB members and supporters is as good a bulwark against it as it was against comrades 'going native' in Respect or the Socialist Alliance.

### Transforming Labour?

Comrade Strafford's most substantial objection is to the end goal of our intervention in the Labour Party, summed up by the CPGB theses thus: "The Labour Party can be made into a real party of labour. By that we communists mean establishing the Labour Party as a united front for all pro-working class partisans and organisations. Undemocratic bans and proscriptions should be rescinded and all communist, revolutionary socialist and left groups encouraged to affiliate."

This line has come to be known in our ranks and periphery as that of the 'permanent united front'. It is not the perfect name, but in my view comrade Strafford is correct to differentiate it from the classical conceptions of the united front (if very wrong to reject it out of hand on that basis). "No leader of the early CPGB or the Communist International proposed turning the Labour Party into a 'permanent united front'," he writes - and to my knowledge, he is correct.

He further argues: "There is nothing dogmatic in defending the Comintern understanding of the united front as a temporary agreement of workers' organisation around specific struggles, so long as it gives a positive guide to communist work under differing circumstances and is not used as a straitjacket." Once again, more or less correct - except that this is not *quite* the Comintern understanding either.

Given comrade Strafford's insistent accusation that we are attempting to re-enact the struggles of the 1920s, it is ironic that he should miss, precisely, a key aspect of the context of the Comintern propositions regarding the united front. He notes correctly that social democracy retained its existence as a "genuinely mass force", against communist expectations that the betrayals of 1914 and 1917-19 would cause its credibility among the working class to evaporate. Thus, the united front policy was a reaction to an ebb in the revolutionary tide.

Yet everywhere in the Comintern's perspectives down to 1935 at least (and in the writings of Trotsky until his death) is the expectation that capitalism is in terminal and quite immediate decline; the *unspoken* assumption of the classic writings on the united front is that revolution will be on the agenda in not too much time.

So, while part of that policy has enduring resonance to this day in its immediate *tactical* usage - temporary unity around specific actions - it is somewhat sundered from the *strategic* conception in which it was to fit: unity of the workers' organisations to form a 'workers' government' against the attacks of the capitalist class.<sup>5</sup> There are important ambiguities in the workers' government slogan in any case:<sup>6</sup> nonetheless, if the united front is to have *strategic* importance today, it requires a justification independent of the classic Comintern theses.

In order to establish such a justification, it is necessary to take a step back from the immediate issues here. The united front is, at its core, the united action of different sections of the working class in defence of the interests of the class as a whole. It is not a particular organisational form, but rather an arrangement of forces which will take one of several possible forms.

On this basis, Trotsky writes perceptively: "... just as the trade union is the rudimentary form of the united front in the economic struggle, so the soviet is the highest form of the united front under the conditions in which the proletariat enters the epoch of fighting for power. The soviet



in itself possesses no miraculous powers. It is the class representation of the proletariat, with all of the latter's strong and weak points. But precisely and only because of this does the soviet afford to the workers of diverse political trends the organisational opportunity to unite their efforts in the revolutionary struggle for power."<sup>7</sup>

The soviets in 1917 were *not* simply a wing of the Bolshevik Party. All manner of political tendencies were represented there - from Bolsheviks to Christians and anti-Semites. This was not viewed as a dilution of their political authority, but an opportunity for the Bolsheviks to reach even the most backward layers of the class and win them over.

The Labour Party is not a party of labour in the strict sense, but a party of the labour bureaucracy. It is composed essentially of two parallel structures - the federal affiliate structure, which maintains historic links primarily with the unions, but also with the cooperative movement and certain political factions (the Fabians and so on); and an individual membership structure, which gives it a certain reality as a political party of the state. Each is used to quell the radical elements of the other - trade union block votes suffocate initiative in the constituencies, and the bans and proscriptions designed to preserve the specific political character of Labour partly sustain the hold of the bureaucrats over the unions.

The 'individual membership party' side of Labour is less useful to us. After all, we want a mass-membership Communist Party, and having also a mass-membership Labour Party of a comparable character amounts to a colossal duplication of effort at best, or otherwise an expression of the malign influence of the labour bureaucracy. The affiliate structure, however, has a certain use - as a point where diverse organs of proletarian struggle come together in some kind of unity, to fight for workers' interests against the capitalists, and fight among themselves for hegemony. In other words, the Labour Party could become a united front in the sense that the soviets were - *an alternative centre of governmental power*, for whose leadership communists really could meaningfully compete.

Thus, comrade Trafford's jeremiads about unity with the centrists and the right miss the point. The avowedly pro-capitalist right of Labour is simply going to have to go - they need unity with communists like they need a hole in the head. As for centrists, left-reformists and the rest: *diplomatic* unity with such layers is to their advantage, not ours, and to be rejected. That is not the unity of the united front,

however, whether in its short-term or permanent, 'soviet'-style forms. It is not the unity we fight for.

I - and the CPGB majority - do not mean to look into our crystal balls and tell comrades with *faux* certainty that this is how the British revolution will pan out. Maybe the 'British soviets' will be ... soviets, in the more commonly accepted sense; or maybe they will grow out of other organs of struggle not yet seen. That, however, is not the point. We have established the need for communists to intervene in some way to neutralise Labour as a threat to the revolution; even comrade Trafford accepts that, in an abstract and distant way.

The question is: what do we *do* with Labour? Trafford cites various Comintern documents to suggest that we split it, outrun it, leave it to wither in our dust. But why destroy something that *might* be useful? The liquidation of Labour as even the thoroughly bourgeois workers' organisation it is now would not be a step forward for the working class. We would have to find some other way to give the basic struggles of the workers a political form. What Labour offers us is a *potential* building block for working class power - worse than useless without the mass action of revolutionaries, of course, but nevertheless real in the *longue durée*.

From this perspective, it should be clear that much of what comrade Trafford writes in order to characterise our position is extremely tenuous.

An analogy is drawn with Graham Bash and the comrades at Labour Briefing - fair enough in some respects, if of limited value, given the vast differences between our two currents. S o m e h o w , h o w e v e r , in comrade Trafford's mind these differences have disappeared. We are accused of having a "Bashite" conception of using Labour's general

committees (which just about still exist) as prototypical organs of power.

In a final twist of the *non-sequitur*, the CPGB is accused of subscribing - through our unconscious 'Bashism' - to the Nairn-Anderson thesis on premature British development! Somehow, the organisation whose endless calls for a mass Communist Party are one of the most persistent irritants to the ostensibly Marxist left in Britain (one such call, naturally, is in the Labour theses), has accidentally adopted the view that "the Communist Party [is] an alien in the British labour movement" and accepted "the impossibility of building a party outside Labour".<sup>8</sup>

Sorry, comrade - it just won't wash. Classical Marxism has long accepted the distinctive character of the British Labour Party<sup>9</sup> - long before Tom Nairn and Perry Anderson over-egged the pudding in the 1960s and 70s.

## Wasting resources?

The other set of comrade Trafford's objections are *more* practical. On the one hand, he doubts that Labour Party Marxists, given scarce human resources and the very obvious lack of a mass character, can make an impact in the highly bureaucratised Labour

machine; and further suggests, like comrade Vincent, to make fighting austerity the key priority. On the other, he complains that the CPGB theses are ambiguous in important ways: they are short on "actionable" content, and it is unclear whether they are to guide us in the immediate term or a hypothetical united Communist Party in the future.

We will take the second point first. Comrade Trafford believes he has identified an inconsistency: "The agreed theses have been presented by some PCC members as a strategy document for now, whilst others consider it a strategy document for a future Communist Party. This demonstrates shifting positions and the subsequent confusion within our ranks." In truth, this dichotomy amounts to a misunderstanding. The theses contain a number of observations on the nature of the Labour Party, and propose an 'end goal' for intervention in it - the much-maligned 'permanent united front'.

The latter will not be *achieved* without a mass Communist Party. Yet we can begin groping towards it with the forces we have now. It is only a waste of effort if it entails cessation of our propaganda for a united Communist Party. It does not - therefore, it is not.

The same goes for the lack of "actionable" content. "This gives the PCC *carte blanche* when deciding the practical interpretation of the theses," worries Chris. "This is bad for democracy and gives space for individuals to interpret the theses how they want." In a sense, however, that is the point. Our culture is not one where the central committee is to breathe down every comrade's neck; groups of comrades assigned a particular sphere of work are expected to use their *initiative*, a precept which goes for the PCC quite as much as anyone else.

A comparison: the CPGB has discussed, in similarly general terms, the matter of student work and the opportunities and challenges represented by campus activism. The result has not been comrade Trafford receiving

detailed orders about how to participate in Communist Students - quite the opposite: he and others used their *initiative* and built a decent branch in Manchester. The theses are supposed to guide comrades, and make them accountable to the organisation, not provide "*carte blanche*" for the PCC to lead them by the nose. Comrade Trafford, after all, is quite free to argue that our interventions are *not* an acceptable interpretation of the theses, and fight a political battle on those grounds.

As for whether it is all a waste of time, given the balance of forces - this is a short-termist perspective. No, Labour is not currently an hospitable environment for Marxists. There is no way to turn it into one, however, if Marxists are not prepared to put in the hard yards, and build themselves as a meaningful alternative to Labourism in the Labour left. The flipside of it is that the argument is quite as true of the trade unions - in some ways *more* true. Comrade Trafford would not argue, I hope, against the need for communists to slog away at democratising the unions, even given our meagre forces. Thus, all other things being equal, our meagre forces are no argument against trying to influence Labour.

As for the battle against austerity, here comrades Trafford and Vincent are united on the same error. Counterposing work in Labour (especially the Labour left!) to work in the anti-cuts movement is - again - an unjustified abstraction. All manner of forces have been pulled into this movement, and that includes sections of the Labour Party - even 'Red Ed' has to pay it guarded lip service. The opportunity *is* there to make an impact - in particular localities, and even on a grander scale than that. To reject it out of hand is inconsistent with activism in unions and even local anti-cuts committees - thus, however orthodox his references, comrade Trafford *is* committing a pretty classic leftist error ●

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## Notes

1. D Vincent, 'Stop fostering illusions'; C Trafford, 'Labour dead end and our strategy', both *Weekly Worker* April 7. For a statement of the CPGB majority position, see the 'Draft theses on the Labour Party', October 21 2010.
2. *Weekly Worker* March 31.
3. *The Guardian* April 7.
4. The post-war welfare state and 'social democratic consensus', though a major disjunction in the history of capitalist Britain, was nevertheless modest compared to what *might* have been on the table in the aftermath of World War II, had the vast bulk of the European workers' movement not been basically carved up between social democrats and Stalinists.
5. See thesis 11 from 'Theses on Comintern tactics': [www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/4th-congress/tactics.htm](http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/4th-congress/tactics.htm).
6. See M Macnair, 'The minimum programme and extreme democracy' *Weekly Worker* May 18 2006.
7. 'What next?': [www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1932-ger/next02.htm#s8](http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1932-ger/next02.htm#s8).
8. Needless to say, Graham Bash, Tom Nairn and Perry Anderson have come in for heavy criticism from us before - see M Macnair, '100 years hard labour?' *Weekly Worker* September 28 2006.
9. Eg, K Kautsky, 'Sects or class parties' ([www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1909/07/unions.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1909/07/unions.htm)). Kautsky proposed the admission of Labour to the Second International - with Lenin seconding.



Ed Miliband: posing a tad to the left



## EGYPT

# Mubarak's detention is due to targeted mass pressure

Far from the revolutionary movement coming to a halt, argues **Eddie Ford**, new advances are being made

On April 8 the masses once again converged on Cairo's Tahrir Square - the people's parliament. In one of the largest demonstrations since the democratic upsurge in January, more than 100,000 protested against the old order in Egypt. The regime still clings onto power under the patronage of the ruling military council currently headed by field marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi - who from 1991 onwards loyally served as defence minister under the Hosni Mubarak administration.

But cracks in the army are emerging, with sections becoming increasingly seditious - even allies of the revolution. Thus at the April 8 demonstration dozens of soldiers openly defied orders and joined the protestors - some of whom were chanting, "The people want the fall of the field marshal" and "Tantawi is Mubarak and Mubarak is Tantawi". Indeed, by some accounts it was an actual army officer leading the anti-Tantawi slogans - anti-top brass graffiti was sprayed onto the makeshift barricades as he shouted.<sup>1</sup> For the generals this must have represented an ominous development, setting a dangerous precedent. More generally still, if the army starts to fray at the edges - even split down the middle - this poses a mortal threat to the entire regime, not just the present army incumbents or a future, tame, 'civilian' government deemed friendly to the interests of the Tantawi ruling council and the Egyptian ruling class as a whole.

In response then, the obviously panicked military council - in reality showing its fragility rather than strength - mounted a pre-dawn raid on the protestors occupying Tahrir Square. Some 20-30 military trucks carrying a mix of army, police and the dreaded internal security forces stormed into the square at 3.30am, armed with clubs and rifles. This led to a two-and-a-half hour battle, which saw the unarmed protestors being repeatedly fired upon with rubber bullets (the very same 'non-lethal' bullets, of course, that were responsible for 17 deaths in Northern Ireland). At least two people in Tahrir Square were killed and scores badly injured. Inevitably, there will be other such murderous attacks on the revolutionary movement in Egypt - whether from the army, paramilitary agents, lumpen elements or downright criminal thugs bought cheap by the regime.

All of which, once again, raises the urgent necessity for the workers, peasants and urban petty bourgeoisie to form a popular militia if they are to defend and extend the gains of the revolutionary movement - and, more simply, prevent themselves from being butchered by a dying, but still potentially deadly, regime. At the moment, this means that the masses must arm themselves with whatever comes to hand - clubs, knives ... and perhaps pistols 'expropriated' from the police and other sources (it is quite legitimate, of course, for the Egyptian revolutionary movement to buy/acquire weapons from whomever they like).

However, it is far from fanciful to envisage soldiers handing over weapons to the pro-democracy movement - intimations of which we saw at the April 8 demonstration.

Given that state power ultimately comes from the barrel of a gun - until we have world communism, that is - such an eventuality would make a popular militia a serious force. That would increase the chances of winning over more sections of the army to the revolution, which in turn would decrease the likelihood of the generals launching assaults on the pro-democracy movement. In other words, forming a popular militia is part and parcel of the revolutionary fight for democracy.

Understandably, and tactically quite correctly, the protestors have concentrated their fire up until now on the hated former despot, Mubarak himself, along with those closely associated with him and his National Democratic Party regime (the NDP, quite disgracefully, was up until January 31 a member of the Socialist International, which, of course, includes the Labour Party; so, in that sense, both Tony Blair and Mubarak were part of the same organisation). This ire has been particularly directed against his kleptocratic family, especially the two malodorous sons, Alaa and Gamal Mubarak, the latter being groomed to dynastically succeed his father - until, that is, it finally became clear to the military and US imperialism that the masses would not tolerate such an outcome. Hence when Mubarak senior was forced out of the presidential palace on February 11 by a combination of escalating pressure from above and below - both internally and externally - so too was the St George's College-educated<sup>2</sup> Gamal left without a throne to park his backside on.

Of course, the masses' rage against the Mubaraks is not driven by a petty desire for revenge - they want democracy, and the corruption and ill-gotten wealth of Mubarak and the NDP

are clearly antithetical to democracy. The regime has terrorised and robbed for decades (Hosni Mubarak ranking 20th on *Parade Magazine's* 2009 list of the world's worst dictators<sup>3</sup>) and the Mubarak family has stolen billions from the state coffers - living like modern-day pharaohs whilst the masses were reduced to poverty and misery, with even basic foods such as bread, beans and rice becoming increasingly expensive. As if that were not enough, just hours before the demonstrations, Mubarak had rubbed yet more salt into the wound - and further inflamed the passions of the demonstrators - by releasing a five-minute audio recording to a Saudi-owned satellite television network, Al Arabiya, in which he denied that he or his family had abused power or smuggled any assets abroad. Perish the idea.

Therefore it is more than understandable for the protestors at Tahrir Square to demand that the Mubaraks and their cronies be prosecuted. After all, Hosni Mubarak has been left to live in luxury in another opulent presidential residence in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh. It was not for nothing that one activist group dubbed the April 8 demonstration as "the Friday of purification and accountability" and that the protestors on that day also vented their anger against the public prosecutor - who has filed charges against some, but not all, of the Mubarak-era officials. An affront to the masses, who want real and thorough-going regime-change - not the old Mubarak system without Mubarak and a bit of constitutional tinkering.

However, as the *Weekly Worker* goes to press, it does appear that the regime - to some degree or another - has acquiesced to the demands of

the protestors, presumably out of fear of what the masses would do if the Mubaraks went unpunished. Yet more evidence indeed that the regime is unable to rule in the old way, veering crazily from repression to concessions on a near daily basis. On April 13 Egyptian prosecutors announced on state television that they had detained Hosni Mubarak and his two sons for 15 days in order to face questioning about corruption and "abuse of power" (just hours after the ex-dictator was abruptly hospitalised)<sup>4</sup>. Both the sons have been transferred to a Cairo prison<sup>5</sup>.

The prosecutor general's office has set up a Facebook page to "promote communication" between the authorities and the families of those killed and injured during the 18 stormy days of turmoil that led to Mubarak's ousting - but it seems, though the details are so far hazy, that any subsequent murders or beatings carried out by the military ruling council will not be investigated. We shall see. When the news of the Mubarak arrests broke, needless to say, there were spontaneous demonstrations in Sharm el-Sheikh and elsewhere - with crowds jubilantly chanting "15 days", "God is great", etc. In its war of democratic attrition against the *ancien régime*, which continues to steadily crumble, the masses are winning more and more battles.

And they want much, much more than just the Mubaraks and their closest henchmen getting banged up - great though that would be, of course. So banners at the April 8 protest included a whole gamut of economic demands - such as, for instance, the imposition of minimum and maximum wages.

Then there are an extensive series of political and democratic demands. Like a *complete* purge of all Mubarak/NDP elements from the government; the immediate release of *all* political prisoners, Islamists included, of course; the *real* abolition of the vicious, 500,000-strong internal security forces, especially the feared State Security Investigations; the ending of the curfew; the removal of all bureaucratic restrictions on the press; opposition to all censorship; freedom of association; freedom to form political organisations/parties; freedom to form trade unions and take strike action; and so on. In the words of another banner seen on April 8, "The revolution is continuing until democracy is achieved". Sentiments which communists wholeheartedly endorse, seeing how the class struggle and democratic struggle are bound up together.

Obviously we have no hesitation in calling for the overthrow of the regime in Egypt - and all the other reactionary regimes in the region, including the 'anti-imperialist' or 'anti-Zionist' ones like Gaddafi's Libya or Assad's Syria. However, our revolutionary-democratic approach is tempered by the sober fact that *proletarian* rule is not on the immediate agenda - the working class cannot come to power either today or tomorrow. The reason for this is quite straightforward. After decades of state repression the working class in Egypt just does not exist politically - at least as far as Marxists understand it.

Accordingly, our essential strategy is for pan-Arab revolution, which

we believe to be usefully informed by the broad Marx-Engels approach to Germany in 1848-51 - we are for the revolution in permanence (a somewhat different perspective, it needs to be mentioned in passing, from VI Lenin's call for "uninterrupted revolution" in Russia or Trotsky's theory of "permanent revolution"). What is required are the tactics and programme of forming the working class into a party - a party that can win a *majority* of the Egyptian population and thus has a realistic possibility of spreading the flame of revolution. By definition, for such an approach to be even vaguely viable, space is needed to enable the workers to organise, educate and generally exert themselves as a political force - for which the very first condition, of course, is the winning of freedom of the press, freedom of association, freedom to form parties, trade unions, popular assemblies, militias, etc. Precisely the sort of aims being advocated by those occupying Tahrir Square, even if the left forces involved are at the moment weak and divided. But we are optimistic about the left in Egypt and the rest of the Arab world. There is every reason to believe that it will both rapidly grow and rapidly learn.

Logically then, for the working class to become an independent political class for itself the entire Mubarakite state-apparatus must go: the standing army, police, secret police, the NDP, the government-controlled media and all the rest of the bureaucratic crap. Communists most certainly do not call for the holding of elections under present conditions. Whilst the regime may be cracking before our very eyes, it is still in place and there is no genuinely democratic alternative to it. Hence any such elections could only produce a danger for the revolutionary movement. Of course, if elections do end up being held for all our objections, then it might be a perfectly legitimate tactic to participate in them.

So communists are not for a new parliament, president, constituent assembly or, for that matter, a 'yes' vote in the coming referendum on constitutional 'amendments' - as approved by the army council, of course. We note, without surprise, that the Muslim Brotherhood has come out in favour of these extremely minor constitutional sops (ie, restricting the presidency to two terms). But both the MB and the army have a mutual interest in *stability* - the exact opposite of what communists desire: the building of an alternative power from below. Or, to put it another way, the only government we want is the weakest one possible - a very temporary and fleeting institution whose ability to crush the developing working class movement has been severely limited, if not crippled altogether ●

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## Notes

1. *The Guardian* April 9.
2. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St.\\_George%27s\\_College,\\_Cairo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._George%27s_College,_Cairo).
3. *Parade Magazine* March 22 2009.
4. *New York Times* April 13.
5. [http://news.yahoo.com/ap/ml\\_egypt;\\_ylt=AkfMsSH7NCWKBW5fcrH6GScV6w8F;\\_ylu=X3oDMTJzYjV0b3JxZGFfZc2V0A2FwLzlwMTwNDA4L21sX2VneXB0BGNjb2RIA21wX2VjXzhfMTAEY3BvcwM2BHBvcwM2BHNlYwN5b190b3Bfc3RvcmlcwRzBzGzDzWd5cHRpYW5wcm90](http://news.yahoo.com/ap/ml_egypt;_ylt=AkfMsSH7NCWKBW5fcrH6GScV6w8F;_ylu=X3oDMTJzYjV0b3JxZGFfZc2V0A2FwLzlwMTwNDA4L21sX2VneXB0BGNjb2RIA21wX2VjXzhfMTAEY3BvcwM2BHBvcwM2BHNlYwN5b190b3Bfc3RvcmlcwRzBzGzDzWd5cHRpYW5wcm90)



**Fraternisation is growing. Soldiers are coming over**



## OUR HISTORY

# Labour will betray us

**D**ebate over the new party's possible affiliation to Labour was the most controversial at the Communist Unity Convention (later known as the CPGB's 1st Congress). After the speech of comrade JF Hodgson for proposition A, "That the Communist Party shall be affiliated to the Labour Party",<sup>1</sup> the chair, Arthur MacManus, called on comrade William Paul<sup>2</sup> to speak for proposition B, "That the Communist Party shall *not* be affiliated to the Labour Party". This is an edited version of his speech.

Mr chairman and comrades, we hope that we shall be able to emulate the good spirit that Hodgson has put into the debate, and we will assure him that we do not intend to use Lenin as a bludgeon.<sup>3</sup> We will meet our comrade with argument.

Taking the case of Lenin, it is quite true that Lenin has written a book entitled *Infant disorders of leftwing communists*, and I think if our comrade were to hear some of the arguments put forward by some of our moderate friends he might be tempted to write another book on the disorders of the senile-decay elements. Let that pass. There is not one in the audience to whom I yield in admiration for Lenin, but, as we said yesterday, Lenin is no pope or god.

The point is that, so far as we are concerned, on international tactics we will take our international position from Moscow, where they can be verified internationally; but on local circumstances, where we are on the spot, we are the people to decide. Not only so, but our comrade Lenin would not have us slavishly accept everything which he utters in Moscow. The very warp and woof of our propaganda is criticism, and as we believe in criticism we are not above criticising Lenin. Wherever we find our comrade Lenin speaking on points regarding the Labour Party, we should remember what our delegates from the BSP said a few weeks ago in *The Call*.<sup>4</sup> They had to admit, so far as the Labour Party and its structure were concerned, Lenin was a little vague. No doubt that is why they are able to quote him this morning as they have done.

What comrades who are in favour of Labour Party affiliation have to prove is their argument, no matter who says it. What is the position?

Capitalism is collapsing in every one of its institutions. It is collapsing most conspicuously in the parliamentary institution, and yesterday we passed a resolution in favour of parliamentary action; but not in the spirit that our comrade Hodgson would have us imply. When we declared for parliamentary action yesterday, this conference put behind every argument in favour of participating in parliamentary action this fact - that we believe in parliamentary action for the express and decisive purpose of destructive and agitational work.

The Labour Party does not believe in that conception of parliamentary action; the Labour Party believes in parliamentary action as a constructive weapon in the working class movement, and, in so far as the two functions are diametrically opposed, they cannot be mixed, and he who will mix them is going to place himself in the delightful position of the acrobat who tries to stand on horses running in different directions. Not only are the two functions diametrically opposed in regard to parliamentary action, but it is not two functions only: it is two principles. It is the principle of



**Labour's socialism: always constitutional**

the Second International, to which it is logically affiliated, which is the principle of the Labour Party; whereas we stand on the other side in favour of the Third International; who use the parliamentary weapon for destructive and agitational purposes.

Hodgson made a good point. He said that we have got to understand that we are dealing with an enemy who is keen, that this enemy has only two methods of trying to beat us down; that he tries to meet us with a brutal frontal attack, which he does not care to begin on just at once, until he has exhausted another method. That other method is the method of compromise, the flank movement or camouflage. Where do we stand? We find that the British ruling class in this country, above all classes, has made its inroads, has opposed every movement of revolt in this country, not by a fair frontal attack, but by the insidious and slimy method of trying to get underneath it, and thereby to eradicate it.

We have to realise that the capitalist class, economically living by swindling, also hopes to live and maintain its class rule by politically swindling us. Jeremy Diddlers<sup>5</sup> alike on the economic and political fields, the capitalist class internationally - in every country where there has been a crisis - the position has been that, confronted with the crisis, they did not first of all try to smash the revolutionary class, but tried to gather the moderate elements, to compromise with them and to throw the responsibility of diddling the working class upon these elements.

Therefore you find that in Russia - and Hodgson admitted that he hoped for it very quickly here - when the crisis took place it automatically produced Kerensky and, when Kerensky could not solve the problem, Korniloff.<sup>6</sup> The same thing applied in Germany. With the crisis Scheidemann and Noske were called into being, and behind that came the assassination of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.<sup>7</sup> In France, during the period of crisis, there were brought into being the Albert Thomases, Briands, Millerands. We find the same thing in Italy. The middle class look to this party which

will mislead the working class. So, in America, your Spargos and Hillquits<sup>8</sup> were called statesmen, while Eugene Debs was put into gaol.<sup>9</sup>

Come to Britain. We find here that the crisis is going to produce exactly the same results. We can go back to 1914, and what was it that the capitalist class was afraid of in 1914 when they declared their war? It was the working class. It was this working class political expression; and it was this parliamentary Labour Party that let the working class treacherously down. Our friends say you can easily explain this.

You can if you are trained in the subtle method which our friends revel in, but the working class do not possess the subtle method. They judge us by the company we keep, and in the moment of crisis, when the indignant masses rise to sweep the Labour Party away, we may be swept away too. We *shall* we swept away too, because, when we tell the working class that we knew this all the time, but that we were playing a long game called tactics, the working class will not understand these methods of dissimulation.

The working class will say, 'If you knew and did not tell us, you ought to be damned 30 times over.' We find that in 1914, when the crisis took place, it was the Labour Party that let the working class down. Even when they wanted some slimy individual to come along and diddle the soldiers out of their pensions, the Labour Party produced Mr John Hodge.<sup>10</sup> That is why to our friends of the anti-parliamentary group yesterday, when they told us the fight was ineffectual in Gorton, we said it was not ineffectual in so far as it helped to expose Hodge.<sup>11</sup> If this vote for affiliation to the Labour Party is carried we shall not be able to fight and expose Hodge. We shall be tied down.

The same thing is true in regard to food control. Food control has become the capitalist class method of blockading the working class during a strike. When the south Wales miners exposed Rhondda, to whom did the capitalist class look? Was it not to JR Clynes? Now we are at the point of success

in this country so far as building up a leftwing, revolutionary movement is concerned, we shall find that the capitalist class will become ever more intent in trying to diddle us, ever more intent to try to win us into the Labour Party, in order to try and disarm us.

Our friend tells us we ought to be in the Labour Party because that is where the working class is, but if our friend goes to anti-socialist demonstrations or conferences, these claim to represent the working class, and every argument he can put forward to show why we ought to be affiliated to the Labour Party can be applied to joining the Salvation Army. You will find then that we have got to build up our own organisation, that we have got to set out our own code of tactics, and that we have got to develop these - not that we shall be so much left that the battalions will be left behind. What battalions will be left behind?

When the crisis comes the battalions to be left behind will be the Labour Party and, the further we are away from the Labour Party, then the better for us. Comrade Hodgson in the argument he was putting forward was impelled to say, despite himself, the way the fight can be fought by us, when he inadvertently admitted that it was in the workshop; and, although we believe in parliamentary action, we have shown that its function is of a destructive character, and, if you like, we can point out when the crisis comes, and the Labour Party is exposed, and the vortex of revolution, instead of sweeping us into the Labour Party and drowning us - at that moment we can tell the working class we were opposed to these people, and that in every demand for higher wages we were in every one of these struggles.

Therefore the working class will be compelled to look to us, and will come our way, because they will see that right through all the struggles we were the people who stood with the weapon clean in the hand of the Communist Party, and refused to violate fundamental principles by joining the Labour Party and indirectly joining the Second International.

In this fight our friends may imagine, if this demand is carried, to attract

certain elements to the Communist Party. But we tell you that the elements attracted by passing the Labour Party affiliation clause will repel the people we want.

We have realised during the past that all the great vigour and enthusiasm of our movement has been throttled by compromise. Let us throttle that spirit now. Let us build up the Communist Party and carry on its own work, merging in all the struggles of the masses. In that way we can reach the working class - but not by hauling our colours down and joining hands with Thomas and co, who will ultimately betray us ●

## Notes

1. *Weekly Worker* April 7.
2. A leading member of the Communist Unity Group and of the Provisional Executive Committee of the CPGB.
3. News of Lenin's support at the second congress of the Communist International for affiliation to the Labour Party - in the form of his pamphlet *Leftwing communism, an infantile disorder* - was beginning to filter through to delegates. "I do not know whether the delegates are aware of it," the pro-affiliation comrade Hodgson had coyly remarked, "but this matter has been dealt with by Lenin in this latest work of his" (*ibid*).
4. Paper of the British Socialist Party - the organisation with most delegates to this founding congress.
5. The popular character of Jeremy Diddler, a skilled conman, appears in a 1803 farce titled *Raising the wind* by James Kennedy (1780-1849).
6. Kerensky was a member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party and the prominent figure in the provisional government that came to power following the February 1917 revolution. Korniloff (more usually rendered 'Kornilov') was the tsarist general who led an attempted coup against the provisional government and later a commander in the counterrevolutionary white armies.
7. Social democrats who supported German imperialism during World War I.
8. John Spargo (1876-1966) and Morris Hillquit (1869-1933) were leaders of the Socialist Party of America - Spargo on its right wing and Hillquit (an advocate of the "most popular brand of evolutionary socialism within the Socialist Party") its centre.
9. Eugene Debs of the Socialist Party of America was arrested on June 30 1918 and charged with sedition for making a speech urging resistance to military draft.
10. John Hodge was a Labour rightwinger who went on to serve as minister of pensions in the Lloyd George coalition government from August 1917 to January 1919. A prominent Tory who served under him captured the essence of this anti-strike, reactionary wretch as a "fat, rampaging and most patriotic Tory working man".
11. This is a reference to the fact that the Labour Party put up an unsuccessful candidate against Hodge in the general election of 1918.



## DEBATE



Bolsheviks: tactics were many and varied

# Electoral principles and our tactics

When is it permissible to vote for opportunist or even non-working class candidates? In the first of two articles **Mike Macnair** begins his examination of the issues

Comrade Chris Strafford in a letter in last week's paper argues that communists should not call for a critical vote for George Galloway in the upcoming Scottish parliament elections, although he is standing on a platform of opposition to all cuts, backed by the Socialist Party Scotland (Committee for a Workers' International), the Socialist Workers Party and Solidarity.

Comrade Strafford offers two grounds for this view. The first is that Galloway is the leading figure in Respect, Respect councillors in Tower Hamlets have voted for a cuts package and Galloway has not criticised them for doing so. The second is not new: Galloway's continuing links with the theocratic regime in Iran. Hence, "Working class partisans who are consistent internationalists must not support Galloway in May's election unless he breaks all links with the Iranian regime and opposes austerity in deeds as well as words."

This two-part article is not mainly addressed to the specific question of whether to call for a critical vote for the 'George Galloway (Respect) - Coalition Against Cuts' list, or for George Galloway in particular, in the Scottish parliament elections. This is, in my opinion, a tactical issue which depends on the political meaning of a vote for this list, or for George Galloway as an individual, in the current state of Scots politics.

For what it is worth, my view on this tactical issue is that we *should* call for a critical vote for the list and for Galloway as an individual candidate - without, in any way, abandoning or cutting back on political criticisms of the list in general, or of Galloway

and in particular of his 'idiot anti-imperialism'. In the first place I do not think that a large vote for this list or for Galloway would signify that Scottish voters were solidarising with Galloway's support for the Iranian regime. At most, on this front, it would be a vote for an 'anti-war' candidate.

Secondly, my personal view - *not*, I should emphasise, the view of the CPGB or of the Provisional Central Committee, but an undeveloped minority view - is that the question of how local councillors should act when faced with cuts imposed by central government is also tactical. In 1984-85 the demand for councillors to set illegal budgets was correct, since to do so would have opened up a 'second front' in the miners' strike. In the *immediate* conditions of 2011, I think it is ultra-left: it may come on the agenda in 2012 or 2013, but at present the mass movement against the cuts is insufficiently developed. Even apart from this point, the likelihood is that most people who want to express an anti-cuts vote on May 5 will vote Labour, in spite of Labour's extreme ambiguities on the issue. A vote for an anti-cuts list backed by the far left will in this context be an *advanced* vote.

Thirdly, though the entry of the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party in Scotland (the CWT's rebranded Scottish section) into an electoral bloc with Galloway is completely opportunist and Galloway's decision to bloc with them is equally so, the CPGB has over the last 15 years, consistently and in my opinion correctly, insisted that moves towards the unity of the ostensibly Marxist organised far

left, however opportunist their basis, are nonetheless objectively steps towards what is necessary - a united Communist Party.

It was this policy which led us to give critical support to Scargill's Stalino-Labourite, British nationalist Socialist Labour Party, to the pseudo-left Labourite Socialist Alliance, and in a more limited way to the working class element of Respect before the split with the SWP. The new list is even in one respect a slight political advance - it addresses British-wide politics, as opposed to the overt Scottish nationalist separatism of the Scottish Socialist Party and Solidarity. I see no more reason to turn back from this policy in favour of pulling back our skirts for fear of contamination by Galloway than there was in 2003-04, when the Alliance for Workers' Liberty (and a minority in CPGB) ran the same argument in relation to the beginnings of Respect.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, my main purpose in this article is to address the larger issue of the relation between principles and tactics in electoral slogans. My reason for writing it is that I think comrades have a tendency to confuse the two issues - not by any means just in this discussion or the CPGB's earlier discussions on voting for Diane Abbott in the 2010 Labour leadership elections, or on how far to call for a vote for No2EU in 2009, or the earlier discussions mentioned before, but also more generally on the left. On the one hand, smaller left groups commonly display an *effective* rejection of all tactical calls for votes as amounting to 'giving a left cover' to Labour or similar parties, to popular frontism or to this or that

centrist. The result is a politics of purity and abstention.

On the other hand, the 'official communist' tradition reduces *all* electoral issues to tactical ones. This winds up - as is most clearly visible in the policy of the Communist Party USA - with what was once called Lib-Labism: urging the working class to support the lesser evil of two purely capitalist parties, as opposed to taking steps to organise *its own independent* political representation. As is most transparent, again, in relation to 'Obamania', this policy does not even achieve its own aims, but merely produces cynicism and demoralisation. All the more, it actually functions as an *obstacle* to the open promotion of the independent interests of the working class as a class or to a communist policy.

To get to grips with this problem effectively requires starting from two related points. First, the bourgeoisie is *not* a *democratic class* and the expression 'bourgeois democracy' is an oxymoronic misnomer of what is actually *constitutionalism*. Second, because the proletariat as a class relies on voluntary collective action in order to defend its interests, it *does* require both political democracy and an *independent* class political party organisation.

However, arguments about electoral slogans are usually framed by the history of the issue in the workers' movement. It is therefore necessary to run through the history to see what it can tell us and - in particular - the limits of what it can tell us. The rest of this article will discuss the history as far back as the policy of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party from

1906 on. A second part will discuss the policy of the German Social Democratic Party before 1914, and the occasional comments of Marx and Engels on the issue, and will then move to attempt a more positive analysis of the problem.

## Since 1917

Though it may look odd, it is most convenient to work backwards in time through the history, in order to see how the present politics of the issue has evolved.

The electoral policy of the organisations coming out of the Trotskyist tradition has been characterised since 1945 at the latest by complete incoherence. What may be called 'left' Trotskyists demand such stringent conditions for electoral support that they are *de facto* abstentionists. But they cannot - unlike anarchists and left and council communists - be abstentionists in principle, because this would conflict with their formal commitment to the ideas of the first four Congresses of the Comintern and their use of Lenin's *Leftwing communism, an infantile disorder* in the education of their cadre. Those Trotskyists who are not practical abstentionists have gone through a bewildering series of tactical zigzags with no coherent policy detectable at all. The only lesson from this history is a negative one: that the framing assumptions of Trotskyist strategy derived from the 1938 *Transitional programme* do not provide a basis for a coherent electoral policy.

The policy of 'official' communists and Maoists alike insists, as I said above, that the issue is purely tactical. In reality, lying behind this



is the policy of a strategic class alliance between the proletariat and a section of the capitalist class, on terms limited to what the relevant capitalist party is willing to agree: the ‘people’s front’ policy, adopted at the 1935 7th Congress of the Comintern and maintained since then, with a brief interlude in 1939-41.

A problem with this policy is that the section of the capitalist class which is to be treated as a strategic ally of the working class has varied between the ‘democratic bourgeoisie’ (Democrats, Liberals, Radicals and such-like parties) against ‘fascism’ (meaning authoritarianism in general) and the ‘national bourgeoisie’ (nationalists of one stripe or another) against ‘imperialism’ (meaning more or less exclusively *US* imperialism; but also in recent politics against the European Union). Since nationalists are usually social patriarchalists and public-order conservatives, these are politically inconsistent alliances. It is for this reason that the issue has to be claimed to be *purely* tactical: the ‘official’ Communist Party was thus permitted to zigzag between the two types of alliance depending on the diplomatic needs of the Soviet Union. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, maintaining the people’s front policy has had outcomes ranging from the red-brown (semi-fascist) Communist Party of the Russian Federation, through the reconstruction of the Italian Communist Party as the non-class ‘Democrats’, to the role of former British Eurocommunists as hard-line Blairites and advocates even after 2010 of regrouping Labour with the Liberals.

In adopting the people’s front policy, the Comintern zigzagged away from the ‘third period’ policy of 1928-34, which was ostensibly<sup>2</sup> and in most places a policy of communist electoral isolationism. For mass communist parties this could function as an electoral policy, for small ones it amounted to *de facto* abstentionism.

The ‘third period’ replaced the policy of the *united workers’ front*, which the Comintern and its sections had been pursuing in various forms since 1921. The background to this policy is that the Social Democrats (German SPD and French SFIO) on the one hand argued that the communists were splitters, while on the other hand their own actual policy was one of coalition with bourgeois parties. The united front is presented in the Comintern documents as a matter of definite class *actions* (strikes, etc), not electoral or parliamentary combinations. In practice it was also an electoral and governmental (‘workers’ government’) policy: the communists proposed to the Social Democrats a socialist-communist alliance, as opposed to the Social Democrats’ coalition policies.<sup>3</sup>

In this aspect it was a partial turn away from the policy of forcing through the split in the international workers’ movement which had been dominant between 1918 and 1921 and - in Lenin’s and Zinoviev’s thought, if not more widely - since 1914-15. Bolshevik policy in 1917 Russia itself after Lenin’s return aimed for the unity of *the internationalists*, partially achieved in July with fusion of the Bolsheviks and Mezhrayontsi, and a split with the defenscists. Though Trotsky and subsequent Trotskyists have retrospectively interpreted the May-June slogan, ‘Down with the 10 capitalist ministers’, and Bolshevik policy in the August 1917 Kornilov coup, as examples of the united front policy, in reality neither was conceptualised in this way.

All these different policies down to and including the original creation of the people’s front policy had a common framing assumption. This was that capitalism had entered into the terminal crisis, or *Zusammenbruch* (‘breakdown’), predicted since the 1880s as the inevitable outcome of capitalism by the left and centre of the German SPD. The period of gradual growth of the workers’ movement under capitalism was thus definitively over and the struggle for power was on the immediate agenda. If there was a temporary revival in the 1920s or the mid-1930s, it could only be a brief prelude to a new massive dislocation.<sup>4</sup>

Electoral and parliamentary tactics were therefore at the end of the day of secondary importance - though, as Lenin argued in

*Leftwing communism*, not to be abandoned. It was for this reason that the tactics were conceived as *short-term*.

In the event, however, it turned out that the crisis of 1914-45 was the death agony not of capitalism, but of British world hegemony. Once the US had established its hegemony - but was nonetheless faced with a much expanded ‘Soviet bloc’ - a period of relative stability and reforms opened up in Europe and, after ‘decolonisation’, in a good many of the resulting semi-colonies. In these new circumstances a *long-term* electoral and parliamentary policy was inevitably needed. US hegemony has weakened in the late 20th-early 21st century, in spite of the illusion of a ‘unipolar world’ caused by the fall of the USSR. The position of the working class has very substantially worsened since the 1970s. But we have by no means entered into the death agony of the US hegemony. Hence the workers’ movement *still* - as yet - inevitably needs a long-term electoral and parliamentary policy. This requires us to look back - critically - at the pre-1914 electoral policy of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, and of the German SPD, which the former to a considerable extent attempted to copy.

## Before 1914

In *Leftwing communism*, Lenin wrote: “Prior to the downfall of tsarism, the Russian revolutionary Social Democrats made repeated use of the services of the bourgeois liberals: ie, they concluded numerous practical compromises with the latter. In 1901-02, even prior to the appearance of Bolshevism, the old editorial board of *Iskra* (consisting of Plekhanov, Axelrod, Zasulich Martov, Potresov and myself) concluded (not for long, it is true) a formal political alliance with Struve, the political leader of bourgeois liberalism, while at the same time being able to wage an unremitting and most merciless ideological and political struggle against bourgeois liberalism and against the slightest manifestation of its influence in the working class movement.

“The Bolsheviks have always adhered to this policy. Since 1905 they have systematically advocated an alliance between the working class and the peasantry, against the liberal bourgeoisie and tsarism, never, however, refusing to support the bourgeoisie against tsarism (for instance, during second rounds of elections, or during second ballots) and never ceasing their relentless ideological and political struggle ...”<sup>5</sup>

The context is the peculiar class-based electoral system for the Russian дума created in response to the 1905 revolution. Votes were cast in class-based *curia* - workers’, urban, peasants, noble - for *electors* who would elect the actual дума delegates. The RSDLP (apart from the ‘boycottist’ tendency) sought to gain representation under this very undemocratic system. This inevitably involved partial alliances with other parties.

The evolution of RSDLP policies in this respect is as follows. At the 1906 Tammerfors all-Russian conference, which was dominated by the Mensheviks, a general resolution allowing for local agreements was passed, which Lenin opposed.<sup>6</sup> At the July 1907 Kotka all-Russian conference, where Lenin was in a bloc with the Mensheviks against the boycottists, the resolution passed was that “in the second and subsequent stages agreements are permitted with all revolutionary and opposition parties up to and including the Constitutional Democrats ... in the workers’ curia, no agreements are permitted with other parties, except the PSP and national social democratic organisations ... the only agreements permitted are those of a purely technical nature.”<sup>7</sup>

The 1912 Prague congress, which was Bolshevik-controlled and was generally regarded as the moment of a decisive split, resolved that the RSDLP should:

“1. Put forward its own candidates in all workers’ curiae and allow no agreements with other parties or groups (ie, the liquidators) ....

“3. In cases of a second ballot for electors in the second-stage assemblies of urban

curia representatives, agreements may be concluded with the bourgeois democratic parties against the liberals, and then with the liberals against the governmental parties. One form of agreement could be for the compilation of common lists of electors ....

“5. No electoral agreements may involve putting forward a common platform, and they may neither impose any sort of political obligations on Social Democratic candidates nor may they impede the Social Democrats in their resolute criticism of the counterrevolutionary nature of liberalism and of the half-heartedness and inconsistency of the bourgeois democrats. “6. Wherever it is essential to defeat the Octobrist-Black Hundred or the government list in general in the second stage of the elections (in the district assemblies of representatives, in the guberniia electoral assemblies, etc) agreements must be reached concerning the division of deputy seats - first with the bourgeois democratic parties (Trudoviks, popular socialists, etc) and then with liberals, non-party persons, Progressivists, etc.”<sup>8</sup>

This policy is not one of a *campaign coalition* in modern terms like the people’s front or the various coalitions that the French and Italian left has been involved in. It is a much more limited policy of *stand-down agreements*, where the parties campaign independently on their own platforms, but may agree not to contest some seats or - after the votes have been cast - carve up the slate of delegates in order to keep out the right.

It should also be emphasised that the election of дума delegates had no implications for the election of a *government* or taking responsibility for it. The Russian government was responsible to the tsar, who retained the legislative power, not to the дума, which was merely consultative.

Nonetheless, the RSDLP and the Bolsheviks in particular were prepared to make limited technical agreements even with the liberal Cadets against the monarchist ‘governmental parties’. In the *workers’ curia*, however, they insisted on a very much more limited scope for such agreements. It is clear that the Bolsheviks, unlike the Mensheviks in 1906, thought there were issues of principle as well as of tactics involved.

Lying behind this RSDLP policy is the electoral policy of the German SPD, which the RSDLP - like many other European socialist parties - attempted to imitate. I will discuss this policy in the second part of this article before going on to the underlying issues ●

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## Notes

1. The two arguments presented in comrade Strafford’s letter can be found more elaborately developed by the AWL at [www.workersliberty.org/story/2011/04/10/george-galloway%E2%80%99s-new-bag-carriers](http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2011/04/10/george-galloway%E2%80%99s-new-bag-carriers) (posted April 10). The arguments from 2003-04 can be found in the back issues of this paper from that period, and on the AWL website (Google Galloway & site:workersliberty.org; though the results are not chronologically organised, their date is shown on the results page).
2. The Soviet diplomatic orientation which lay behind it was arguably one of alliance with the German nationalist right against the Social Democrats, following the decision of the Social Democrats in late 1926 to denounce in the Reichstag the secret military collaboration between Germany and Russia under the Rapallo treaty, and French and British war threats towards the USSR in 1927. In 1931 in the ‘Red Referendum’ the KPD actually made a bloc with the Nazis and the right to try to remove the SPD *Land* government in Prussia.
3. J Riddell, ‘The origins of the united front policy’ *International Socialism* April 2011 usefully discusses the antecedents of the policy. I have argued in *Revolutionary strategy* (London 2008) chapter 7 that the policy involved a contradiction with the ban on factions adopted in 1921, which adversely affected its implementation in the 1920s.
4. RB Day *The crisis and the crash* London 1981; on the connection with the ‘third period’ turn, N Kozlov, ED Weitz, ‘Reflections on the origins of the “third period”’ (1989) 24 *Journal of Contemporary History* pp387-410.
5. [www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwv/ch08.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwv/ch08.htm).
6. RH McNeal (ed) *Resolutions and decisions of the CPSU* volume 1; R Carter Elwood *The RSDLP 1899-October 1917* Toronto 1974, p105. For Lenin’s opposition, ‘Blocs with the Cadets’ (November 1906) *CW* Vol 11, pp307-19; [www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1906/nov/23c.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1906/nov/23c.htm).
7. *Resolutions and decisions* p117.
8. Extracts from *Resolutions & Decisions* pp150-52.

# What we fight for

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Become a  
**Communist Party**  
 associate member

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Town/city \_\_\_\_\_

Postcode \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

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**NUS conference  
sees no advance  
for divided left**

# Getting things into perspective

The defeat of Clare Solomon offers us a snapshot of the student movement, argues **Ben Lewis**

**E**lections can be used as a barometer of the class struggle and an insight into the health of our own forces. Notwithstanding the peculiar dynamics within the world of student politics, this can also be true of local student union sabbatical elections.

On the back of some of the biggest and most influential student demonstrations, occupations and walk-outs seen in this country for decades, one would therefore expect this rise in militancy to find reflection in the various local union elections up and down the country. Yet, whilst there have been some prominent leftwingers elected in Liverpool University, the School of Oriental and African Studies, the London School of Economics and Goldsmiths, in many places the left has not been able to make advances - or even register on the radar.

Arguably the biggest blow to the student movement was Clare Solomon losing out in her bid to be re-elected as president of the University of London Union. Dubbed by many the *de facto* leader of the student movement, Clare has played a valuable role in coordinating demonstrations and other actions. She used her influence to rock the boat rather than simply slot into existing structures, and also set up the London Student Assembly, which was an excellent initiative. Although another activist from Counterfire, Sean Rillo-Raczka, was elected as vice-president at ULU, things will be a lot more difficult without comrade Solomon as president. As she correctly pointed out in an interview with *The Guardian* following the election, one of the reasons she lost was because a “rightwing alliance” was able to cohere around a single candidate, Vratislav Vrap Domalip. Domalip’s candidacy was clearly anti-leftwing and anti-Solomon, explicitly on the basis of transforming ULU from an institution of social criticism to one of “social mobility”, as his manifesto put it. Beyond some rather inane pledges and platitudes, Domalip also made clear that he would “condemn any violent protests”. One wonders whether Mr Domalip would also “condemn” police violence, open mass imprisonment (kettling), horse charges ...

Clare Solomon’s defeat was a setback, including symbolically, and it is an election we should have won. The media, all too keen to hound and slander comrade Solomon from the outset, have taken great pleasure in the outcome. But what does it say about the current state of the student movement? Firstly, it is clear that student politics is subject

to extreme volatility, meaning that movements can disappear as quickly as they emerge. Whilst the passing of measures to triple fees and scrap the education maintenance allowance has had a direct and immediate negative effect on the numbers being mobilised, the sheer scale of proposed closures, cutbacks and redundancies on campuses yet to come into effect make the resurgence of student protest a question of when, not if.

Secondly, and more importantly, the inability of the left to actually make substantial electoral gains underlines the urgency of getting our act together. For all of the talk of the winter’s events heralding another 1968, the far left is in a profound state of disarray. Indeed, while certain groups may have come into contact with more young radicals from the protests and grown as a result, the fact remains that collectively we do not have any viable organisation in the student movement capable of attracting the mass of students. The perspectives are to strengthen this or that group, not the movement as a whole.

It is always a good idea to draw on the experience of previous struggles for inspiration and guidance, but there has been a huge exaggeration of the similarities between autumn 2010 and spring 1968 (the title of comrade Solomon’s new book, for example, is *Springtime: the new student rebellions*). This nostalgia for 1968 also overlooks the fact that those tumultuous events actually culminated in a strategic defeat of the working class in France and elsewhere. In this sense, the Socialist

Workers Party spiel about “the streets” undoing parliament’s work reveals an absolute poverty of strategic thought - we cannot and should not simply rely on spontaneity and anger, but should instead organise and educate. As with the ‘adult’ groups, however, the division of the student left into warring sects and their manifold ‘united fronts’ only serves to miseducate and disorganise the movement. In these conditions it is perhaps inevitable that the left has been unable to create a pole of attraction distinct from the ‘official’ structures - ie, the machine turning out future professional politicians that is the National Union of Students.

Despite convening in times that have not been normal, the NUS annual conference, in session as this paper goes to press, has, I am told, been fairly run of the mill. However, given the ever increasing gulf between the NUS’s crusty careerist structures and actual students, it is likely that even hell freezing over might pass unnoticed by the self-serving cabal that is the leadership, with its elaborate standing orders and self-serving apolitical initiatives.

Whilst it is true that thus far this year’s conference has seen more rhetoric against the cuts on offer from NUS tops - conference even agreed a policy supporting all protests and strikes against the cuts, and calling for coordination with the unions - a militant campaign is completely alien to such people. Here too the right has been able to largely outflank the left. It may have been forced to drop its dithering leader, Aaron Porter, who will be replaced by current NUS

Scotland president Liam Burns. But it has ensured that there will be no national demonstration this year (the one mandated by last year’s conference saw 50,000 people on the streets and the occupation of Millbank!)

The left may have just been able to carve out a ‘united’ slate for the NUS elections behind closed doors, but this actually reflects the left’s *divisions* and its attendant political conservatism. Thus, while it is no bad thing for comrades from the Socialist Workers Party, Workers Power *et al* to stand together, what they are actually for is classic ‘student trade unionism’ - predominantly focusing on fees and free education around the slogan, ‘For a fighting NUS’. Although some of the votes were not bad (SWPer Mark Bergfeld received 149 out of 744 votes and Michael Chessum of the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts polled 174 out of 527), this does not represent any substantial increase on previous far-left efforts.

Not that the NUS should bother us all too much. Of crucial importance now is to build the student movement *at the base* - not just in terms of mobilising for demonstrations and agitating around the rather unambitious demands on fees and cuts we have seen, but actually taking *ideas* to the mass of students, and attempting to win support for the basic principles which should unite all those who see themselves as Marxists. We need to explain the background to many of the issues they face - the role of state violence in protecting the interests of the ruling class, the need to fight for democracy at all levels

of all society, the need for a Marxist political alternative, and so on. In spite of their lofty claims and pretensions, this cannot be done effectively by any of the purportedly Marxist grouplets in isolation.

As within the workers’ movement more generally, the greatest obstacle to taking up these tasks in a serious way remains the lack of unity of our forces around a project which is both inspiring and viable. There is no iron law which dictates that far-left student politics must be limited to unambitious ‘fees, cuts and conditions’ activist networks. Such practice is only ‘common sense’ at the moment because of an amateurish and constricted vision. Instead of *mass* perspectives which have the long-term aim of winning the majority of society to a project guided and informed by the politics of Marxism, time and time again we see groups like the SWP, the Socialist Party in England and Wales, and Workers Power *consciously limit* their politics to projects like the Education Activist Network, Youth Fight For Jobs/Education and the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts - usually in the hope of chasing (largely illusory) allies to their right in the student bureaucracy.

The onus is on us to take up these basic tasks - not to look back to the illusory halcyon days of 1968 and carry on ignoring our debilitating division. Unless the left in the student movement can get together as Marxists then student radicalism will surely be unable to effectively confront the enormous attacks being made upon us ●

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