

weekly worker



**Danny Boyle's Olympic
opening ceremony: a
snapshot of 'culture wars'**

- Syria and Kurdistan
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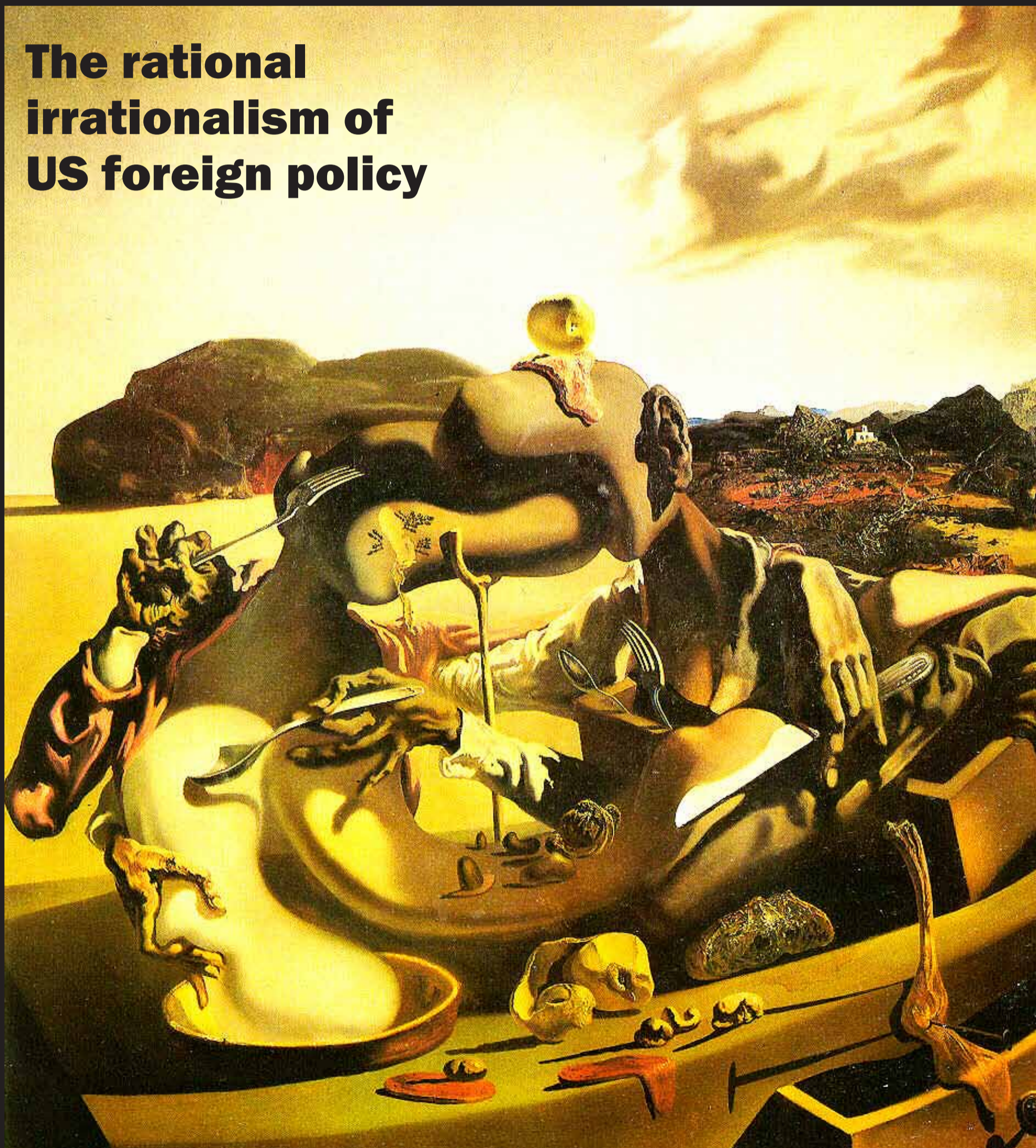
No 925 Thursday August 2 2012

Towards a Communist Party of the European Union

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The rational irrationalism of US foreign policy



LETTERS



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

More symptoms

In our exchange about the definition of 'sectarianism', Mike Macnair says: "The predominant current usage is that a 'sectarian' group is one which (a) pays attention to the political differences on the left, one which 'talks to the left rather than talking to the masses'; and (hence) (b) one which gives space in its press to public criticisms of the current leaders of the 'real mass movement' like George Galloway or, on a larger scale, Hugo Chávez" (Letters, July 26).

This led me to do a little research into the employment of the term by the Socialist Workers Party in particular. Here are three examples.

● The late Chris Harman, writing in 2004, talks about "a 'sectarian' approach of standing apart from struggle" and "a sectarian practice that involved standing aside from [mass] movements". In contrast to those like the SWP, who know how to correctly engage in such struggles, "sectarians ... do not understand the importance of a limited programme which can draw in the widest number of activists" (*International Socialism* autumn 2004).

● Chris Bambery, in a 2005 article, states: "The Socialist Workers Party wants to be part of a mass movement in which we can win a mass hearing for revolution. The main danger facing the left today is sectarianism. New movements and a new left are emerging, globally and locally. Revolutionary socialists cannot afford to sit on the sidelines, but need to be at the centre of the debate" (www.socialistworker.co.uk/archive/1751/sw175111.htm).

● Joseph Choonara (2009): "A serious revolutionary organisation starts from what unites it with workers who are fighting back ... So which party should you join? The one least interested in petty squabbling on the left and most capable of engaging with the struggles of those fighting back. The Socialist Workers Party may disagree with other left groups, but it does not churn out tracts denouncing their sins. Nor does it look for blemishes in every movement simply to justify standing aloof from it. It is only once you get stuck into the struggle that real political debate about the way forward, rather than sectarian lecturing, can be on the agenda" (*Socialist Worker* April 4 2009).

It is clear from these examples that SWP usage defines sectarianism as standing "apart", "aside" or "aloof" from the movement. In fact this usage is rather similar to Mike's "rough formulation" - that "sectarianism is the rejection of united organisation and common action where it is possible on the basis of partial common ground". But in the hands of the SWP this of necessity means toning down your own revolutionism by focusing entirely on that "partial common ground" in order to (eventually) "win a mass hearing for revolution".

So, yes, the SWP generally refuses to engage in debate with other left groups and it is very diplomatic in its criticism of its allies to the right. But it is incorrect to imply that it never engages in public criticism, however muted, of those allies. It *did* criticise George Galloway at the time of the split in Respect and, for example, it has more recently reported on its disagreements with Mark Serwotka on the timing and extent of public sector protest strikes.

But, once again, to point to the refusal to debate differences on the

left, or the toning down of criticism and of its own revolutionism, is merely to point to the symptom. The SWP engages in these practices because it believes they *facilitate* "united organisation and common action", which in turn is necessary to pursue the interests of 'the working class as a whole'.

The fact that the SWP draws particular conclusions about *the way* in which the first must be facilitated or the second must be pursued does not in itself call into question either Mike's definition or what I believe to be the more precise one: 'putting the interests of one's own organisation before those of the working class as a whole'. Neither definition carries with it "support for the whole fucked-up practice of the far left". Neither is "so broad as to be content-free".

The SWP actually demands that "united organisation" must be advanced *on its own terms*. So it calls on everybody to join Right to Work or Unite the Resistance and not the rival "united organisation" promoted by the Socialist Party in England and Wales or Counterfire.

Mike says: "The *immediate* answer as to why they're refusing to unite is that each group wants to retain *control* of the broad front and not to be placed in the position of having to operate as a minority. But is this in the *objective interests* of the SWP, SPEW, etc, as groups? The answer is that it is not."

Well, he has inserted the word "objective" before "interests" in order to deny that the groups mentioned are pursuing separate and rival *perceived* interests (you could say that communism it is in the objective interest of every human being and that therefore the contesting classes have no real rival interests). In fact the SWP *et al* want control in order to win a bigger influence, gain more recruits and strengthen their own sectarian projects at the expense of the others. Yes, that is in the interest "of the small group of leaders and the full-time apparatus", in that they wish to retain "personal control, and, in the case of the full-timers, their jobs". But those leaders usually manage to persuade their membership that the interests of the leaders and those of the organisation itself are identical.

Finally, Mike raises a new objection to the orthodox definition of 'sectarianism': "it generalises on and abstracts from Marx's usage to the point at which it comes to lack any operational content which can distinguish the Spartacists from the Labour Party or the Aslef union - the Labour Party also puts the (apparent, short-term) interests of a section of the working class ('British workers') ahead of the interests of the class as a whole; Aslef can from time to time be accused of putting train-driver interests ahead of the interests of the class as a whole."

In my view this criticism is completely insubstantial. Surely it is a given that terms like 'sectarianism' and 'opportunism', as employed by Marxists, are used specifically to refer to the failings of groups and individuals *on the far left*? In case of ambiguity, however, we could always say: 'putting the interests of one's own *revolutionary* organisation before those of the working class as a whole'.

Peter Manson
South London

Principled unity

In *What is to be done?* Lenin comments: "... you all can go into the swamp, but I am not going to follow you." Was Lenin a sectarian or was he a principled Marxist who refused to adapt to opportunism?

The most important part of comrade Macnair's comment is on

the nature of rank-and-file groups. As a non-Socialist Party member on the steering committee of the National Shop Stewards Network, I agree with his conclusion. At one time the NSSN was composed of two main political groupings, the SWP and the SP, together with various non-aligned syndicalists and anarchists, but some years ago the SP majority engineered a split and the SWP walked out of the organisation. It is now largely dominated by the SP.

The SP is a left reformist organisation moving rapidly to the right and they have cultivated relationships with bureaucrats like Crow and Serwotka in the trade union bureaucracy. They organise big conferences with over 400 workers attending, occupying the ground that the Communist Party's Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions once occupied. That is why I think it is important to resist the reformist outlook of the SP and battle inside the NSSN.

The SWP, of course, are anti-communists and flit eclectically from one position to another. In the recent pensions dispute they and the SP consciously aided the right wing of the trade union bureaucracy. Counterfire and its Coalition of Resistance is a rightwing split from the SWP and have no serious role, as far as I am concerned. Comrade Macnair is right: these splits and the refusal to adopt a common programme - what a difference that would make - produce a disorganising effect.

The unification of these disparate organisations is still the task we need to set ourselves - but on a principled basis, not cosying up to the trade union bureaucracy, whether it be left or right.

Laurence Humphries
email

State cap retort

I would like to take issue - well, mild issue anyway - with Mike Pearn's attack on me in regard to the theory of state capitalism (Letters, July 26).

It is true that Trotsky held that different theories of the nature of the Soviet Union were not bars to belonging to the same party or organisation. What enabled people to do so was their programmatic agreement on what to do in Russia, Britain and elsewhere. But that is not how older comrades such as myself remember it, as far as all 57 varieties that claimed to be Trotskyist were concerned in the 50s, 60s, 70s and even 80s. The International Socialists took a hard position against the others as 'degenerated workers' statists' and the IS/Socialist Workers Party were denounced as the 'state caps' - that defined them for many otherwise very sane and highly intelligent individuals, such as my late comrade, Al Richardson. True, I think he was softening a bit towards the end of his life, but until then it was felt there was a secret James Burnham/Max Shachtman class traitor inside Tony Cliff.

In fact it seems to me that the words 'state capitalist' are used in two distinct ways. One, to which Mike refers at the end of his letter, relates to the particular way in which the state has intertwined itself - or rather has been intertwined - with capitalism, whether in the UK, the USA, present-day Russia or China, let alone Egypt, Iran and most of the other countries of the world. This has occurred both nationally and internationally in many, many markets - commodity, financial and labour ones. Nigel Harris has written brilliantly about this and the way in which large masses of capital are breaking down the authority of the national state.

The other meaning was the Soviet system, where no market production of any sort was allowed, where there was a high degree of autarchy and often incredible economic inefficiency, and where a monstrous tyranny was imposed, so that all institutions were state ones, as in North Korea today. In all the other cases there was a stock market, however monopolistic and corrupt, and some room for institutions outside the state, but this did not appear to be the case in the Soviet Union. Of course, there is no such thing as a perfect circle and I am sure comrades will point to exceptions to this, but there was surely a very great qualitative and not merely quantitative difference between the USSR, on the one hand, and Mubarak's Egypt, Putin's Russia or present-day China, on the other. With the disappearance of the USSR, the problem no longer exists as a practical one except perhaps in North Korea (I know Harris would see the USSR and all the others as part of the same continuum).

It is, of course, a very interesting historical question - what *was* the USSR? So powerful, yet so fragile, perhaps a very peculiar, temporary blind alley, in which the first workers' state found itself. Was it a one-off (*sui generis* to Latinists) that will be unrepeatable? Should it have died 50-70 years ago, but outlived its time? What it was *not* was a new mode of production. In order to annoy everyone, I think I would see the USSR as once originally a workers' state, with a totally state capitalist economy, run by a despotic collective of bureaucrats with disastrous consequences for the world working class.

But I have no wish for theological disputation (having lost my faith at the age of 16 while doing the reformation at history O level and finally deciding that it was all a load of bollocks a few months after my confirmation in the Anglican denomination).

What is surely important is the nature of the programme that we have to elucidate for the present times, the sort of organisation (party?) that we must build, the nature of the links between different national movements that we must forge and what we can learn from the past about all these things. I suspect Mike would not disagree with me about any of this in broad terms, though not always in the details. In relation to these questions many aspects of the American International Socialist Organization today struck me as very positive.

Ted Crawford
London

False analogy

David Walters proposes to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by instituting "Arab majority rule" (Letters, July 26) - an obvious echo of the call for "black majority rule" during the struggle against South African apartheid.

His advocacy of inequality of national rights, and of redressing the national oppression of the Palestinian people before the idea of a regional socialist federation can even "truly be posed", amounts to seeking a bourgeois nationalist resolution of the conflict, prior to and unconditioned by a socialist revolution.

But the analogy with South African apartheid is false and misleading; and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot have a bourgeois nationalist resolution. To understand why, and to find a rebuttal of his other objections, David Walters should read my recently published book, *Israelis and Palestinians: conflict and resolution*, especially the penultimate chapter,

'Resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - a socialist viewpoint'. See also my article, 'Breaking the chains of Zionist oppression' (*Weekly Worker* February 19 2009).

Moshé Machover
email

Apologise!

I don't think I've ever disagreed with an article as much as Jim Creegan's obituary of Alex Cockburn ('A radical for all seasons', July 26). I am truly shocked that a revolutionary socialist paper could print Creegan's utter garbage. I have no doubt this was an honest mistake, but the paper should issue a profound apology.

Cockburn was not an anti-Zionist and made common cause with Gilad Atzmon and a whole galaxy of Atzmonites and other fake progressives. I have done a quick Google search on the *Counterpunch* site and it lists no less than 304 Atzmon articles - no doubt some of them are duplicates. Cockburn was part of that reactionary gaggle of conspiracy theorists who, not understanding capitalism, reached back into the cesspit of pre-capitalist society.

What is worse is that the garbage site called *Counterpunch* has constantly reprinted the articles of the medieval anti-Semite, Israel Shamir, who believes in the 'blood libel', whereby Jews murdered non-Jewish children to use their blood to make *matzot* (unleavened bread) for Passover. Countless Jews died the most horrible deaths, victims of Christian-inspired pogroms at Easter, because of this. Julius Streicher, the Nazi editor of *Der Stürmer* who was hanged at Nuremberg, revived this blasphemy in his pornographic paper.

Or perhaps more to Jim Creegan's taste is Israel Shamir's 'Dreyfus case, revisited' which *Counterpunch* printed. "Was he really a victim of anti-Semitism?" Shamir asks about the royalist-military frame-up of the Jewish officer, Alfred Dreyfus. It was precisely the defeat of these reactionaries that led, 40 years later, to the resistance to the Nazis and the remarkable survival of 75% of French Jewry in the holocaust.

I also have a personal-political axe to grind. When Mary Rizzo, Atzmon's collaborator (before she found out he was a misogynist) printed a particularly virulent attack on me personally and Jews Against Zionism, Roland Rance and myself replied. Cockburn not only refused to publish it, but he refused, despite many emails and phone messages, to acknowledge it (see www.whatnextjournal.co.uk/Pages/Politics/Counterpunch.html).

If his father, the redoubtable Claud Cockburn, had seen what and who his son had aided in the cause of 'anti-imperialism' he would have turned in his grave. That Alex Cockburn started off as a radical is not doubted, but he died a reactionary racist who believed that conspiracies explained all.

Tony Greenstein
Brighton

Bittersweet pill

The latest circular to Unite bus workers tells us that "on June 22 thousands of Unite bus workers came together in a historic act of unity", that "every bus operator in London was forced to negotiate in one room with Unite for the first time" and that there were "over 2,000 new members joining since the start of the campaign". It asked: "How can anyone say this isn't a total victory?"

It is true that from zero offered at the beginning this represents a victory, but a very minor and limited one. It was achieved by strike action and can be built upon if we correctly assess what has been achieved. But

this is only a small part of the story. A 29% minority voted against this deal, which concedes an Olympics bonus of £27.50 per completed duty, amounting to a maximum of £577 before tax. But those off sick, on holidays or having rest days will lose out.

And there is no mention of the use of court injunctions during this dispute, granted to three companies by anti-working class judges (are there any other kind?) on the most spurious grounds. Before that last day’s strike was called off, seven more companies had applied for injunctions. There was no question of Unite defying these laws, which declared illegal a 96.7% vote for strike action in Metroline, for instance. Until these laws are defied in a mass way and the laws repealed as a consequence, we will see the democratic right to strike effectively abolished by these injunctions.

The bonus claim was also correctly seen by many as a diversion from the central attacks on bus drivers over the last three years, since the abandonment by Unite of the equal pay campaign in late 2008. Since then wage settlements have been below inflation for all drivers. A two-tier workforce has been introduced by the companies across London with not even a token show of opposition from Unite. And this has escalated recently - for instance, Metroline introduced its new starter rates on January 1 2012 without even bothering to consult the union. That amounts to effective derecognition.

Because there is now such a two-tier workforce then it is obviously in the best interests of all companies to get rid of the higher paid ‘senior’ staff, so the rate of disciplinaries and sackings has enormously increased, with final written warnings awarded for brushing another bus mirror and sackings for three reports of missed passes for passengers who could have boarded by the back door.

Of course, a strike during the Olympics on the above might have won us back all we lost in recent years. And this is what makes this Olympics bonus “total victory” such a bittersweet pill to swallow. Drivers all across London know that Unite could have done so much better by its members on the issues that really matter if they chose to fight on them.

In July 2008 regional secretary Peter Kavanagh said: “If we don’t get parity across London by the time the Olympics starts, no-one will get to the starting line.” Not only have we not got that across London; we do not have it now within single garages themselves. At Arriva in Watford they pay £7.80 for starters. There is now total silence on the “race to the bottom” that they all condemned so vociferously in 2008.

Unless the rank and file can rally against this bureaucracy we will get nowhere.

Bus driver
London

Workers’ coach

What a brilliant article by comrade Ben Lewis! (‘Doing it better than our enemy’, July 26). I’d like to suggest some practical starting points for workers’ sports as part of the party-movement - not as its own separate ‘worker sport movement’. Various sport services can be provided in the here and now with little initial ‘investment’, particularly with regards to facilities: chess and checkers groups, hiking groups and such.

Linking this to the theoretical, the standard definition of tailism is one where the class-conscious workers are merely behind the struggles of less conscious workers. I have entertained the neological concept of ‘revolutionary tailism’, whereby the class-conscious workers would educate, agitate and organise with the express purpose of pushing workers

ahead, but then realised that tailism is tied to workers already on the move.

The position of coach, however, is one that is behind the bench during a game, perhaps on the playing area during practices and in the locker room during intermissions. So what about ‘coachism’ then? Sometimes the authoritative coaching might have to be as strict as that of Soviet hockey authoritarians Anatoli Tarasov and Viktor Tikhonov (I’m a hockey fan), but ultimately the players themselves bask in the glory of the sport.

Jacob Richter
email

Recruit women

During my recent brief membership of the Labour Party, I tried to get the local party to actively promote the selection of women candidates for the 2013 county council elections, without any success.

All leftwing groups, perhaps with the exception of Socialist Party in England and Wales, have very few female members either at rank-and-file level or in the higher echelons. This, in my honest opinion, is a big mistake. The way to win male members is to first recruit large numbers of female members. It is no accident that the Young Conservatives and the Young Communist League (during the 1930s) were both known as marriage bureaus.

Even the TUC understands what I am getting at. The general council has nominated a woman as the next TUC general secretary, who will be approved by the TUC Congress this September. The general council fully understands that 55% of trade union members are now female. At the same time, the cutbacks in the public sector are disproportionately hitting female workers.

John Smithee
Cambridgeshire

Solidarity

Over the past weeks we have received countless statements of solidarity relating to our exclusion from the Linke Buchtage book fair in Berlin, including from Ken Loach, Moshé Machover, Saree Makdisi, Moshe Zuckermann, Ben Watson, Evelyn Hecht-Galinski, Tariq Ali and Ilan Pappé, to name but a few. We would like to use this opportunity to thank all signatories for their solidarity with the LAIKA publishing house.

This solidarity has served to reinforce our publishing policies. We consider it a gain for us all when groups that hold formal identities but lack political substance are confronted with their own limitations. However, we must be clear that they are merely extreme manifestations of a lost left identity, using substitute themes to compensate for barely recognisable class-struggle content.

Today we are a long way off from a new internationalism. Defining the substance of the old is exhausted as a source of strength. Many struggles in the world are limited to immediate interests and fail to develop a social or political dimension that points beyond them. This makes a critique of these struggles legitimate, yet it does not legitimise the social relations that give rise to them.

We must not fail to identify really existing injustice, and we must have the courage to name its perpetrators and stand in solidarity against them. Solidarity with the oppressed, such as those who live in the occupied territories of Palestine, is never illegitimate. Only the rule that cements human misery is illegitimate. If we can no longer stand in solidarity against real and evident injustice, and if such solidarity takes the back seat to mutual political agreement, then we are betraying ourselves and opening another door to Guantánamo.

No war of the ruling class is our war.

With thanks and regards to all those who do not allow themselves to be driven mad by the desolate state of things.

Willie Baer, Karl-Heinz Dellwo
Hero

Davie Guy, president of the Durham National Union of Mineworkers, died of cancer on Wednesday July 25.

I am heartbroken. Davie was a close friend and comrade of mine, he was loyal and could always be relied upon to support any and every event I ever put together. We shared so many platforms on so many issues and agreed on all but details about the problems that confronted us.

Davie’s style of debate and argument was unique. He turned things over slowly and systematically like a man digging his garden. His style was so calm and relentless, building a force of fact and logical progression, and his honesty shone through in every sentence. He was quite the most transparent and honest man in the NUM. He was neither cowed by threat nor charmed by guile. I don’t think Dave had an enemy in the world, though not everyone treated him with the respect he so richly deserved.

People perhaps do not realise what an impact he and Davie Hopper had on the whole movement. They transformed an entire NUM area from the dotage of moderation into a militant and vibrant campaigning force again. They swung that area behind the 1984-85 strike and kept it solid for 12 months. Their impact on the North East area was legendary. They brought fresh air and vigour to a region which had almost given up and brought it marching back to claim its battle honours and place in history.

The Durham Miners Gala - the ‘big meeting’ - was over, we all thought, when the last Durham pit closed in 1993, the soul was ripped out of our communities and a general state of anomie fell on the region like a plague. Under the leadership of the two Davies, and with the still restless spirit in those communities, the Gala and everything it stood for refused to die. For the last two years it has gone from strength to strength, with 100,000 people, proud of their working class culture and roots, back on the streets and searching for political answers. This year was the first year I think Dave has ever missed a gala and we all know how ill he must have been not to be able to get there.

Dave’s fight with cancer was awe-inspiring. He simply refused to let it dictate the terms on which he lived and intervened into life. The treatments Dave was receiving were horrendous, painful and draining, yet he stood his corner and always believed he could beat this. Last year I was speaking at Sunderland University on the 84-85 strike to a crowded audience of students and Dave had promised to attend to back me up if necessary. He arrived five minutes late, but what I hadn’t realised was that he had come straight from hours of punishing chemotherapy. His jaw set, his face drained, he had made a promise and, even though it was such an unimportant event and such a small commitment, he turned up, true as his word. It sounds silly mentioning it, but I think it marked out what sort of a brave and dedicated man he was.

I know he was going through hell, and I confessed I didn’t think I would have the bottle to do it in his place. He assured me: “For them grandbairns, Dave, you would - and I will.” He fought for every added day, turning out on platforms and political events, when other, lesser men would have laid abed.

Dave was a bliddy hero, I shall miss him dearly.

David Douglass
South Shields

ACTION

CPGB podcasts

Every Monday we upload a podcast commenting on the current political situation. In addition, the site features voice files of public meetings and other events: <http://cpgb.org.uk/home/podcasts>

London Communist Forum

Sunday August 5, 5pm: Weekly political report from CPGB Provisional Central Committee, followed by public meeting: ‘From the Workers’ Olympiad to the perversion of Olympic sport’. Speaker: Keith Flett.

Sunday August 12, 5pm: Weekly political report from CPGB Provisional Central Committee, followed by open discussion and *Capital* reading group. Caxton House, 129 St John’s Way, London N19. This meeting: Vol 1, chapter 3, section 2C, ‘Coins and symbols of value’.

Organised by CPGB: www.cpgb.org.uk.

Organise building workers

Saturday August 11, 2pm: Unite construction national rank and file meeting, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. Organised by Siteworker: <http://siteworker.wordpress.com>.

Home from home?

Ends Friday August 31: Exhibition, Swansea Museum, Victoria Road, SA1. Forced to flee because of violence or persecution. In collaboration with Swansea City of Sanctuary, Swansea Bay Asylum Seekers Support Group: www.swansea.gov.uk/swanseamuseum.

Stop the EDL

Saturday September 1, 11am: Demonstration against English Defence League march, central Waltham Forest. Organised by Unite Against Fascism: www.uaf.org.uk.

Anti-Deportation Campaigns

Saturday September 8, 10am to 5pm: National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns annual general meeting, Praxis Community Projects, Bethnal Green, London E2. Organised by NCADC: www.ncadc.org.uk.

TUC action call

Sunday September 9, 12noon: Lobby the TUC for a 24-hour general strike. Assemble 1pm, The Level park, Union Road, Brighton. March 1.30pm to Brighton Centre. Organised by the National Shop Stewards Network: www.shopstewards.net.

Build for October 20

Monday September 10, 7 pm: Public meeting, Stockwell Community Resource Centre, Studley Road, Lambeth, London SW4. Build for national TUC demonstration. Organised by Lambeth TUC: www.lambethtradesunioncouncil.com.

Love Music, Hate Racism

Saturday September 15, 1pm to 1am: Anniversary event, Rich Mix, Bethnal Green Road, London E1. Day and evening: £12 waged, £6 unwaged. Day or evening only: £6 waged, £3 unwaged. From Rich Mix: www.richmix.org.uk. Organised by Love Music, Hate Racism: www.lovemusichateracism.com.

Free Miami Five

Tuesday September 18, 6pm: Vigil, US embassy, Grosvenor Square, London W1 (nearest tube: Bond Street). Speakers include Aleida Guevara, daughter of Che Guevara. Organised by the Cuba Solidarity Campaign: www.cuba-solidarity.org.

Facing the abyss

Wednesday September 19, 9:30am to 4.30pm: Conference, Tavistock Centre, 120 Belsize Square, London, NW3. Exploring the challenges for separated children seeking asylum as they turn 18. Organised by National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns: www.ncadc.org.uk/events/facingtheabyssflier.pdf.

Save our services

Wednesday September 19, 6pm: Lobby - defend public services in Lambeth, town hall, Brixton Hill, London SW2. Organised by Lambeth Save Our Services: <http://lambethsaveourservices.org>.

Besiege the Lib Dems

Saturday September 22, 12 noon: Demonstration outside Liberal Democrat conference, The Level, Brighton. Organised by Brighton Trades Council: www.brightontradescouncil.blogspot.co.uk.

No to coalition austerity

Sunday October 7: Mass protest, Conservative Party conference, Birmingham. Times and location tba. Organised by TUC: www.tuc.org.uk.

Defend the Right to Protest

Sunday October 14, 11.30am to 5.30pm: National conference, central London (venue tbc). Tickets £6 waged, £3 unwaged. Organised by Defend the Right to Protest: www.defendtherighttoprotest.org.

March against austerity

Saturday October 20, 11am: Mass demonstration against cuts. Assemble Victoria Embankment for march to Hyde Park rally, 12 noon. Organised by TUC: www.afuturethatworks.org.

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.

OLYMPICS

Establishment's contradictory coup

The Olympic opening ceremony represented another rearticulation of post-World War II British national identity, argues **Eddie Ford**



© Mike King/NOOD
Windrush

It is possible that Aidan Burley, the 32-year-old Tory MP for Cannock Chase and former Oxford University theology student, had no idea that his two July 27 tweets attacking the Olympic opening ceremony would whip up such a storm. If so, the opprobrium heaped upon him must have come as a bit of shock.

His first tweet was discharged as the athletes started to enter the Olympic stadium after the Danny Boyle-directed £27 million extravaganza: "The most leftie opening ceremony I have ever seen - more than Beijing, the capital of a communist state! Welfare tribute next?" And the second one went: "Thank god the athletes have arrived! Now we can move on from leftie multicultural crap. Bring back red arrows, Shakespeare and the Stones!"

Burley's tweets were condemned by virtually the entire political establishment and way beyond. David Cameron crossly slammed them as "idiotic things to say" about a ceremony which was a "great showcase" for the country. Boris Johnson, the Tory London mayor, also poured scorn on the "nonsense" view that the extravaganza had all being "leftie stuff" - confessing that he had "hot tears of patriotic pride from the beginning". Labour MP David Winnick even went so far as to suggest that Burley's comments - apart from being "totally inane" - were "anti-British" and "at variance with the feeling of millions of people up and down the country".

True, Burley quickly started to backtrack, as the babble of condemnations became a din - possibly a lesson in the dangers of impetuous, post-pub postings to social media websites. Speaking the next morning to BBC West Midlands radio, Burley claimed - not entirely convincingly - that he was not attacking multiculturalism as such, which naturally should be "celebrated". Rather, he was "having

a go at the rather trite way, frankly, that it was represented in the opening ceremony". After all, he continued, "we all love the NHS" - Tories and non-Tories alike - but for those overseas viewers, especially in the United States, "20 minutes of children and nurses jumping on beds must have seemed quite strange".

Perhaps moving on to his *real* objection to the opening ceremony, Burley remarked: "And then we had all these rappers - that is what got me to the point about multiculturalism". Given that rap music is enjoyed by a "relatively small section of society", mainly young people - or so he contended - he then not so innocently asked: "Is that what we are most proud of culturally?" A few hours later, despite being "misunderstood" and presumably a victim of political correctness gone mad, he briefly appeared on ITV's *This morning* expressing his disapproval of those "parts" of the opening ceremony that were "overtly political, like showing CND signs" - and complained again about the "huge" and "disproportionate focus" on rap music, "when it is a small part of multiculturalism".¹ Burley is referring, we guess, to the *one minute* of Dizzee Rascal performing 'Bonkers' (the May 2009 number-one single, which *NME* magazine lists among the "150 best tracks of the past 15 years").

Culture wars

Leaving aside for now the irony of the Rolling Stones being seemingly invoked as a symbol of white or 'Anglo-Saxon' cultural supremacy - they were, of course, originally denounced by unreconstructed racists for playing the "devil's music" - it is not too hard to make out what Burley is trying to say. Boyle's "crap" opening ceremony did not portray Britain in the way he would have liked: overwhelmingly white, imperial and royal.

Now you could just dismiss Burley's remarks as the utterly irrelevant semi-ravings of a reactionary idiot and no more. After all, he was the man David Cameron sacked last year from his post of parliamentary private secretary to the transport secretary for his "offensive and foolish" behaviour during a Hooray Henry, Nazi-themed stag party in the French Alps - which involved frequent Nazi saluting and toasts to the "ideology and thought process of the Third Reich". What fun. A slight weirdo then, even if he did write a letter of "fulsome apology" to *The Jewish Chronicle* and made a big show of planning a visit soon to Auschwitz (the French prosecuting authorities have started a "preliminary inquiry" into the incident, seeing how it is a crime to wear or exhibit in public anything reminiscent of the Nazi era, except in the context of a film, play or historical exhibition).

But it would be profoundly mistaken to simply ignore Burley's complaints about the ceremony or, alternatively, refuse like a philistine to *critically* engage with the vast number of political symbols and messages generated by the extravaganza: a lot of 'decoding' has to be done. Albeit in his own bigoted way, Burley's remarks contain a kernel of truth. Meaning that the MP for Cannock Chase feels that the ceremony had become a site for culture wars - and the wrong side came out on top. Or, as Labour MP Paul Flynn enthusiastically put it, "wonderfully progressive socialist sentiments and ideas were smuggled into the opening romp" - and, best of all, Tories like Cameron and Johnson were "tricked into praising the Trojan horse". In marked contrast, that is, to the recent diamond jubilee pageant - a thoroughly stodgy, mind-stultifyingly conservative glorification of monarchical power.

We should hardly be surprised at

the opening ceremony if we consider the social, cultural and political background of the team responsible for it. Hardly rightwing establishment figures. Boyle has earned a radical reputation, not undeserved, for films like *Trainspotting* and *Slumdog millionaire* (not to mention vastly entertaining movies like *28 days later* and *Sunshine*). Frank Cottrell Boyce, who scripted the actual ceremony, used to write for *Living Marxism* - the monthly journal produced, of course, by the Revolutionary Communist Party before it dissolved into various libertarian pressure groups/think-tanks (as the *Daily Mail* delightedly told its no doubt horrified readers). Paulette Randall, the associate director of the ceremony, is a black theatre director who has worked on plays like *Gem of the ocean* - about the legacy of slavery - and James Baldwin's *The blues for Mr Charlie*, a powerful play loosely based on the 1955 murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi. The ceremony's "creative

overseer" was Stephen Daldry, who directed the justifiably popular *Billy Elliot* about an aspiring 11-year-old ballet dancer in a northern mining community set against the backdrop of the 1984-85 Great Strike.

Then look at the kaleidoscopic, sometimes slighting bewildering torrent of imagery, scenes and mini-dramas conjured up by the undeniably talented Boyle in his 'Isles of wonder' ceremony - a name taken from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and involving a cast of over 7,500. Such as the unforgettable vision of the five Olympic rings being forged by the workers of the industrial revolution - with its epically depicted miners rising from the mists of memory. Or the segment where dozens of nurses and children in pyjamas - along with an army of umbrella-waving Mary Poppinses - acrobatically skip and dance on massive hospital beds with the letters 'NHS' on prominent display, whilst seeing off a collection of evil

Faster, higher, stronger

London Communist Forum, Sunday August 5, 6pm

The Olympic Games have always reflected the changing trends of history - from the first Olympiad in war-driven ancient Greece, Hitler's ideological triumph in 1936 and the famous raised fists in Mexico, to the present.

According to the International Olympic Committee, "The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity." However, even to the casual observer, London 2012 represents a combination of 21st century chauvinism and corporate and state power.

In this talk, socialist historian Keith Flett looks back to the International Workers' Olympiad of the 1920s and 30s by way of contrast. He will discuss the very nature of sport, and the role of the workers' movement within it.

There will be plenty of time for discussion and debate.

Caxton House, 129 St John's Way, London N19.

Organised by CPGB: www.cpgb.org.uk; 020 7241 1756

villains including Lord Voldemort from the Harry Potter series. Leading to the *Daily Mail* headline, “Americans baffled by ‘leftwing tribute’ to free healthcare during opening ceremonies (and what was with those flying Mary Poppins defeating Lord Voldemort?)”.²

There were also references to the suffragettes, the Jarrow crusade and many aspects of working class history - good and bad. Boyle also gave us an allusion to his own film, *Trainspotting*, along with flashes of Bill Forsyth’s *Gregory’s girl* and Ken Loach’s classic *Kes* - and much more. We even had a glimpse of the first ever pre-watershed lesbian kiss on British television from a January 1994 episode of Channel Four’s *Brookside* (this journalist remembers it well).

Perhaps further upsetting the cultural conservatives, we were bombarded by songs from popular culture - even if Elgar did make a predictable appearance. The Jam’s ‘Going underground’ (“You choose your leaders to place your trust, but the lies all come down and the promises rust”); The Who’s ‘My generation’ (“People try to put us down”); The Sex Pistols’ ‘Pretty vacant’ (seems particularly pertinent with this government); The Eurythmics’ ‘Sweet dreams’ (“Sweet dreams are made of this, who am I to disagree? Some of them want to use you ... some of them want to abuse you”); ‘Uprising’ by The

Muse (a call to action?); etc, etc.

Whatever else you can say about the opening ceremony, it would be churlish in the extreme to deny that Boyle - now hotly tipped for a knighthood - succeeded in his prime objective: to make sure that extravaganza had something for “everyone”. It is hard to think of anyone or anything, desirable or undesirable, that was left out. Indeed, the show was almost the ultimate in inclusiveness - and only a sad cynic would doubt Boyle’s sincerity.

Equal

Self-evidently then, the opening ceremony was hardly a straightforward celebration of the establishment or reactionary values. No, rather, the Boyle opening extravaganza was a complex and *contradictory* phenomenon that represented another attempt at rearticulating British national identity.

It was a further elaboration of the post-World War II ideology of bourgeois anti-racism predicated on an ‘inclusive’ nationalism embracing the Smiths, Patels and Adebayos as *equal* subjects under the crown. With everyone safely herded into the big official anti-racist tent, subscribing to the same, mythologised ‘anti-fascist’ British history, the real and hard-won democratic gains of the working class can then be being partially championed and *appropriated* by this new British nationalist paradigm. Welcome to the

reinvented ruling class - now relaxed and prepared to mock even itself. Certainly one that no longer believes in a quasi-scientific biological racism or militaristic empire-building; one that is no longer exclusively white, heterosexual or totally obsessed by a ‘kings and queens’ view of history.

But by definition this is a constantly contested process. In that sense, Boyle’s ceremony - for all the spectacle, razzmatazz and expensive special effects - was a *snapshot of the class struggle*. It was therefore full of paradoxes, successes, defeats and compromises - just like political struggle and life itself. Naturally it is easy to understand why it seriously ruffled the feathers of Aidan Burley, the *Daily Mail* and US conservatives - as to some extent the ceremony actually was a giant promo for the Labour Party ‘socialism’. Or “leftist multicultural crap”, to coin a phrase. But all this just shows how “crap” the ideas of the Tory right are, based on nothing much more than crazed middle class prejudices plus worship of the market, elitism, monarchy, individualism, etc.

Just imagine for a moment if the whole thing had been staged by a straight-as-a-die member of the establishment - churning out an incredibly dull affair that waffled interminably on about the Magna Charta, the beautiful English language, the mother of parliaments, the glorious history of the monarchy, the

beloved Church of England, Winston Churchill and Britain’s finest hour ... it would have been a bad day for the establishment.

Instead, the establishment very wisely appointed Boyle in 2010 - in order to get a truly populist show that indirectly acknowledged the battles and struggles fought from below. In fact, the Olympic opening ceremony was a brilliant coup for the ruling class and a personal artistic triumph for Boyle. Its “dark, satanic mills”, suffragettes, NHS, racial equality, rap music, lesbian kiss, etc presented us with a revamped idea of Britishness that saw the establishment *simultaneously* incorporating the progressive struggles and yet making concessions to them.

The figure of Danny Boyle himself - knighthood or no knighthood - near perfectly encapsulates this double act, giving voice to both working class culture and the rearticulated establishment outlook. No wonder the saner elements of the ruling class are as pleased as punch. Thanks to Danny Boyle, millions - previously on the outside - will have been drawn, to some degree or another, into the new bourgeois consensus ●

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Notes

1. www.itv.com/news/2012-07-28/tory-mp-insists-leftie-ceremony-tweet-misunderstood.
2. *Daily Mail* July 28.

Summer Offensive

Feel the pain - do it anyway

Before we get into the specifics of the past seven days of our annual fund drive, the Summer Offensive - and it has been another good week - I have to put out a special call for support.

We actually need at least £3k by Monday of next week (August 6) to enable us to kill some rather large, ominously looming bills. I know there are comrades out there with SO donations still screaming to get out of their pockets; comrades wracked with guilt because of their unpaid Communist University ‘fees’; still more who feel they should come to the event, know they *need* to, but ... I feel your pain, comrades. But now it’s time for you to feel some of ours.

Contrary to the lurid financial stories hatched up about us by some of the more putrid imaginations of the left, we have no source of regular income outside a narrow circle of pretty hard-pressed working people. The annual Summer Offensive is essentially the period when we make a determined effort to turn outwards and impress upon our readership and sympathising periphery that, whatever the political strengths of our project, it remains extremely fragile in terms of core personnel and resources, especially its financial resources.

So it is pleasing to report another invigorating week for the campaign, with an additional £2,654 added to our total, taking us to £12,333 - a good platform from which to attack our target of £25k by August 26. It is important to emphasise, however, that this total does not simply represent cash in hand. Much of it is spent already or earmarked to be spent in the very near future.

So it’s unfortunate that this stage of the 2012 SO coincides with a number of painful debt obligations that we need to fulfil without getting into *further* debt, as it were. So, don’t sit on it. If you were thinking of making an SO donation, do it *now*. If you haven’t stumped up for CU, jump to it. And if you can’t come at all, how about donating so someone else can. (We often subsidise lower-income comrades - particularly the younger).

Of course, I’m being slightly facetious. I am well aware that comrades have tight financial constraints of their own and it is not simply inertia that stops them rushing the cash in. But I would urge those that can to

hurry donations in sharpish over the next few days; it would be a tremendous help, comrades.

It’s always encouraging to know our efforts are appreciated and comrade RT showed some love with a £30 resub to the paper, combined with a £30 donation. He sends his “congratulations for a very helpful and informative weekly publication” and adds that “over the last six months I have learned a lot from the articles, as they have helped clear up many areas I have been uncertain about for many years!”

The entire point of the *Weekly Worker* and the website whose content it drives is exactly that. Clarification and education of the advanced part of our movement as a vital precondition for it to face up to the huge challenges that capitalist austerity and the offensive of the ruling class present. The paper is a unique and indispensable publication on the left.

This is why the most recent meeting of the leadership of the CPGB thought it essential to emphasise again that the paper is at the very centre of this year’s Summer Offensive. It forms the spinal core of the whole, interconnected project that this organisation is committed to: the reforging of a principled, united, democratic Marxist party.

From this flow our priorities, as we move deeper into the second half of this year’s fundraising campaign. With (hopefully, my dear, generous comrades) our urgent financial obligations met, we can reconnect properly with what the campaign is actually all about - ie, politics and, in particular, the concrete vehicle for the politics of this revolutionary trend in the movement: the *Weekly Worker*.

We will be contacting comrades individually and collectively over the next week to explore what they can do to help build the financial base of the *Weekly Worker* (account number 00744310, sort code 30-99-64).

But don’t wait to be asked. Above are the details of where you can offer your support by transfer from your bank account. We look forward to hearing from you, comrades ●

Mark Fischer

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

Behind the ‘spectacular success’

Just as at the time of the official jubilee celebrations, the Olympics have seen a severe and heavy-handed clampdown on the right to protest - nothing must be allowed to detract from the splendour and efficiency of the British establishment’s organisational effort.

The regular monthly cycle event known as Critical Mass happened to coincide with the July 27 Olympics opening ceremony. On the last Friday of the month dozens of cyclists gather at an agreed point and ride around together to symbolically “reclaim the streets of London”. Supporters say that there is no need for police permission, as the event is not a demonstration, but merely a ‘spontaneous cycle procession’, with the route usually being determined by whoever happens to be at the front.

I am an occasional participant in Critical Mass and the event usually passes off without incident, but this time 182 people were arrested simply for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Scores of us were held overnight on a police bus and only released the following morning. We had gathered south of the Thames and unusually there was an attempt by police to prevent us crossing into central London in one body. Police even used pepper spray near Blackfriars Bridge in one incident, but people made their way via various routes to the Embankment, and we headed off to the east - those at the front had decided to go towards Stratford and the Olympic Stadium.

As far as I can tell, most of those taking part were not ‘anti-Olympics’, but people who are passionate about cycling and things like cycle lanes. Most were not intending to disrupt the ceremony, but thought we would certainly get noticed near the Olympic venue.

We were stopped just after we crossed the Bow flyover at about 9pm and soon found ourselves kettled in Stratford High Street. There were about 50 in my group held near the Tesco Express, including a couple of cyclists who were not even part of Critical Mass, but just happened

to be riding by. We were kept there for about three hours without toilet facilities, but the police kindly told us we could go behind a rubbish bin to urinate and we were let out one by one.

At around midnight I was assigned an ‘arresting officer’, who I later found out is based at Harlesden police station and is part of the ‘disruption team’. Other arresting officers were from Yorkshire. I had my photograph taken and an orange tag was attached to my bike so that it could be identified later on.

I was told to board a single-decker bus which was already full and we were driven to Charing Cross police station. For the first time since our arrest we had access to drink - we were offered a bottle of water on the bus. Ours was the third bus to arrive at the station. We were kept waiting on board until about 3am, when we were transferred to another vehicle, this time a double-decker.

By now people were complaining about the lack of food and drink - the officers brought themselves drinks but we had nothing until about 4.30am, when we were given a hot drink. We were informed that in any 24-hour period we were entitled to two meals and one snack, but, as we had only been detained for seven hours, everything was in order. I found it impossible to sleep, as the bus was full and we had to remain sitting upright. We were, however, allowed ‘comfort breaks’ - we were accompanied to the toilet by our arresting officer.

When we asked how long we were going to be held on the bus, we were told that the police station can only process so many people at a time. They don’t normally have to deal with scores of arrested cyclists and didn’t we know it was Friday night?

At 7am, things started to move at last. Those of us upstairs were taken to the lower deck and gradually, one by one, we were escorted into the police station. An officer typed up the details given to him about the time and nature of my arrest and I was asked to state my address, age, eye colour, height ... I was subjected

to an airport-style search (I had to take off my shoes and belt) and the contents of my bag were listed, put in a plastic bag and sealed. I was kept standing throughout this lengthy process.

Next I was taken upstairs, where a female officer took side and front photographs. She also took my fingerprints and the arresting officer took a DNA sample using a swab inside my mouth. As I was not on the electoral roll, the arresting officer telephoned the driving licence authorities to confirm my address.

When it came to my turn to be taken to the main desk, I was told the reason for my arrest - we had been warned that a mass cycle “north of the Thames” might result in a “threat to public safety”, which the police had powers to prevent under section 12 of the Public Order Act - and, although I was not charged with any offence, was bailed until September 18. I was read out my bail conditions, which included a ban on riding a bicycle in the borough of Newham, and asked to sign an electronic reader to confirm I understood the conditions. I was told my bike was at Charlton car pound and that I would need some photographic ID to reclaim it. The officer wrote down the address of the pound and I finally left the station just before 9am. A mere 12 hours without food or sleep.

Later that day I went to the car pound, but was told that the bike could not be released until Monday July 30, as the details had “not yet come through”. When I returned two days later I was made to wait for three hours. Yes, once again it was a case of the police ‘only being able to process so many people at a time’ ...

Obviously the whole thing was a thoroughly unpleasant experience. But clearly that was the intention - a form of intimidation. Our cycle procession was entirely peaceful and only three people were charged with minor offences, but I am sure most of the 182 people arrested will think very carefully before failing to heed police ‘advice’ about where they can cycle next time ●

Shawn Carter

GLOBAL POLITICS

Imperialism, capitalism and war

Mike Macnair examines the paradox of the rational irrationalism of US foreign policy

For some years now the USA and its allies have been carrying out a blockade, or siege warfare, against Iran, under the euphemistic name of 'sanctions'. In July, the sanctions siege was significantly intensified and alongside it the US and Israel have been organising semi-clandestine sabotage operations (most notably the Stuxnet computer virus) and assassinations.

Also parallel to the siege has been the running threat of direct bombardment - with its own set of euphemisms: the 'surgical strike' to 'take out' Iran's potential nuclear capability. The level of media attention paid to this threat varies: very recently Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney has given his backing to an Israeli 'strike', while publicity has been given to the arrival in the region of US super-bunker-buster bombs.

There is something obviously irrational about this policy. The suggestion that Iran getting the bomb threatens an immediate attack on Israel, which has 100 or more warheads and complete delivery systems, etc, is ludicrous. The arguments that president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is a madman or can be analogised to Hitler are both equal nonsense, and scarily reminiscent of similar claims about Saddam Hussein in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

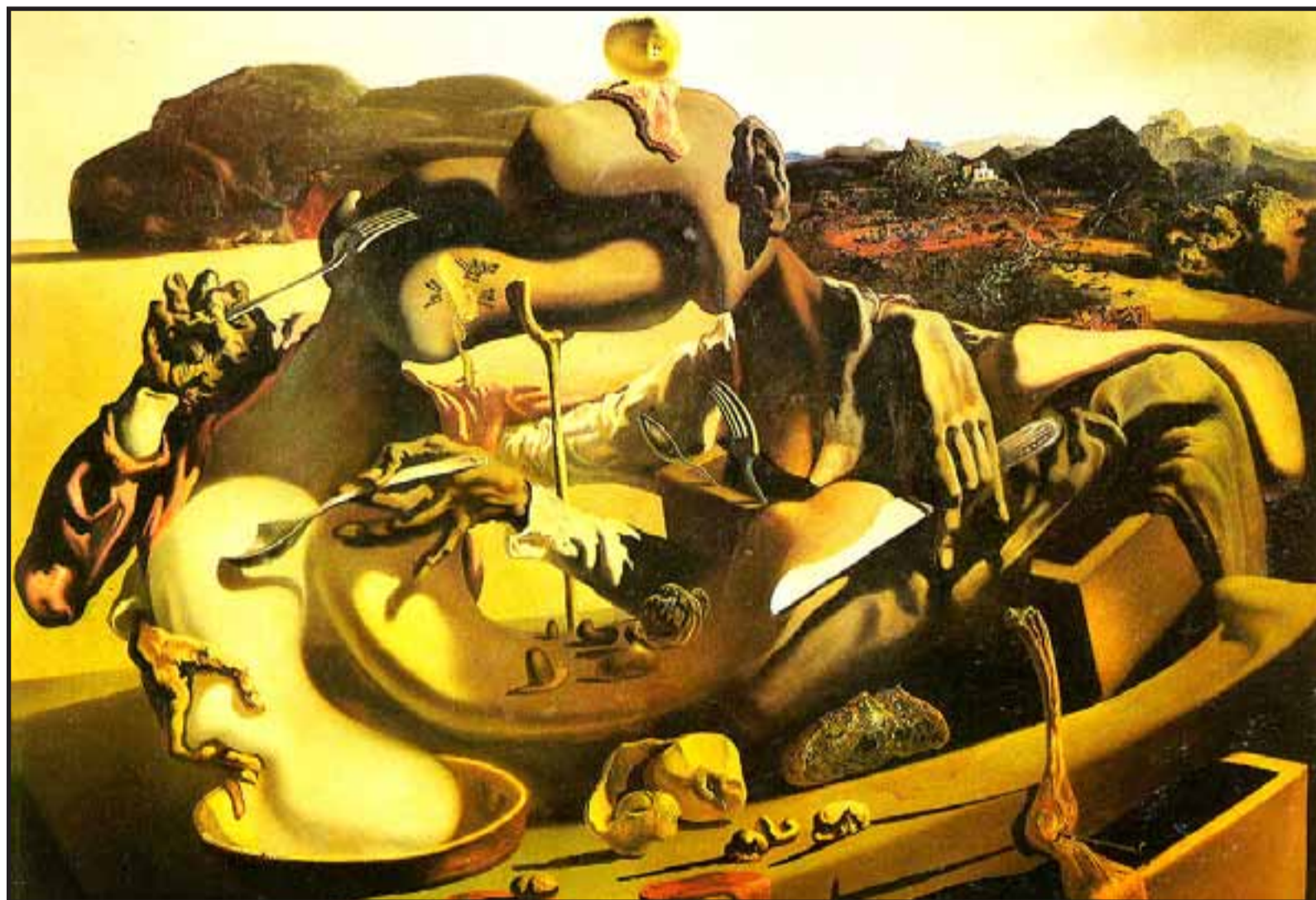
Moreover, one might imagine that the US would be a bit more cautious, given that its budget has been tightened by the results of the 2008 crash, and it spent billions failing either to find weapons of mass destruction or to create a shining beacon of democracy in Iraq, and has equally failed to defeat the Taliban in 11 years of war in Afghanistan.

The apparent irrationality - in a certain sense *real* irrationality - has substantive present political implications. On the one hand, an important section of the anti-war movement has seized upon it with the aim of persuading the capitalist class, or at least sections of it, to act more rationally: it is not really in their interests to pursue such wars.

(Or perhaps the idea is that we could have capitalism without US hegemony (or any other hegemon state): the United Nations as a proto-world-state, the 'law-governed world order' which Peter Gowan promoted before his death. The reality is that the UN, though an entity with which the US is often partially at odds, is an agency of the US's alliance systems; and the 'law-governed world order' is precisely a regime in which the security council can authorise siege warfare, bombing and invasions.)

On the other hand, an equally important section of the left argues that behind the irrational arguments are real, rational reasons for the US to act as it does - chiefly concerned with the price and control of oil and with maintaining US geopolitical dominance through surrounding Russia and China. This latter view is associated with the idea that the left and the workers' movement has a stake not merely in the defeat of the war drive, but positively in the victory of the US's 'anti-imperialist' opponents.

This idea is a bastardised form of the 'anti-imperialist united front' of the colonial workers' movement and the nationalists and/or pan-Islamists, which was promoted by the early Communist International. 'Bastardised', because in its modern form it is filtered through the diplomacy of the old USSR-led



US policy often looks crazy

'socialist bloc'. The underlying idea is that the overthrow of imperialism (identified in modern practice with US-led imperialism) can precede and provide the basis for socialist revolution.

The view that the irrational explanations conceal real rational reasons of imperialist interests is associated with the 'anti-imperialist united front' conception, but is not essential to it. Rather, it offers supporting grounds for it: if the imperialists have a real economic or geopolitical interest at stake in creating puppet regimes in the Middle East, then the 'resistance' offered by nationalists can potentially actually undermine the imperialist order.

How should we judge these questions? In my view the siege warfare and bombing threats against Iran are part of a larger pattern of US policy and the nature and incidence of wars since the US defeat in Indochina in the 1970s. This US behaviour is neither simply irrational, nor, on the other hand, do the irrational explanations conceal real decisive interests which explain the war decisions.

I propose to explain, or to contribute to an explanation of, this US behaviour by three elements. The first is the political effects of the business cycle. The second is the relative decline of the United States, which partially repeats the previous experiences of older 'leading capitalist states'. The third is the decline of capitalism as such, which is reflected in differences between the present relative decline of the US and the decline of British world hegemony in the late 19th century.

The pattern

Before the 1970s, US Middle East policy had a clear and rational character as part of the general policy of the cold war. This was an orientation involving state-to-

state alliances, 'containment' of 'communism' - ie, of the USSR and its alliance system - and US-Soviet competition in development aid within the framework of managed trade and limited import-substitution industrialisation in 'developing countries'. US military interventions and those of the US's British sidekick were directed to supporting existing state regimes and used quite limited force. The 1967 Arab-Israeli war and 1973 Yom Kippur war were fought wholly within this strategic framework.

After Vietnam, the US gradually broke with this policy and embarked on a new orientation. Financial globalisation is the most discussed aspect of the changed orientation; but other aspects of it include the 'human rights' offensive; increased use of US support for guerrilla and militia operations to destabilise regimes seen as hostile to the US, with some tendency to produce 'failed states' (most strikingly Afghanistan after 1980); and episodic large-scale military operations that are merely destructive.

There is an apparent indirect connection to financial crises. The point at which the 1987 stock market crash began to feed through into the real economy around 1990 was followed by the first Gulf war of 1991. The point at which the economy was affected by the dot-com crash of 2000-02 (as opposed to mere financial difficulties), was followed by the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

It looks to me (I may be wrong) as though, although the sheer severity of the crash of 2008-09 has delayed the process, nonetheless this crash has already been followed by an escalation of siege and sabotage operations against Iran, while a large-scale bombing campaign against Iran appears to be in the offing.

All these 1990s-2000s wars display marked irrationality in the apparent

reasons for war. In this I exempt the case of Afghanistan. There was nothing irrational about the United States making war on Afghanistan after the Afghanistan-based Al-Qa'eda made a large bombing attack on US home territory. What was and is irrational in the war in Afghanistan was both the impact of the 'war on drugs' and the curious US doublethink about its relations with Pakistan.

The 1991-92 Gulf war was preceded by signals that the United States was unconcerned about the territorial relationship between Iraq and Kuwait; and, indeed, before 1991 Saddam Hussein was a US client, and the emir of Kuwait was a British client. The ostensible reasons for the invasion of Iraq were ludicrous; and the ostensible reasons for the siege warfare and bombing threats against Iran are equally ludicrous.

Hidden reasons?

The argument that US war-making in the Middle East produces cheap oil, and so protects the interests of US businesses and consumers in cheap oil, is plain nonsense. If anything the effect of these operations is to raise the price of oil. There was some reason to suppose in 1991 that there was actually an economic benefit to US finance capital from raising the price of oil: this meant that certain loan obligations which were collateralised in oil did not default and produce a banking crash. So it might in an odd sense have been rational to start a war in the Middle East in order to push the price of oil up; but the result could have been achieved more cheaply by some other form of market manipulation.

There is some basis for the idea that the US has a geopolitical interest in controlling the 'oil taps'. It is certainly the case that there are people writing strategy articles in the US who argue that the US needs such a policy in order to control China's and Europe's access to oil, and thus maintain US

hegemony. That would require the United States to exercise control over Central Asian oil sources, and perhaps Afghanistan and Iran could be imagined as steps in this direction.

In 1991 the idea was put forward by sections of the left that the war was about disciplining 'third world' regimes to counter their nationalism and force them to comply with IMF dictates. That idea was dodgy, because the left nationalism of the Iraqi Ba'athist regime had already been destroyed when Saddam Hussein made his coup d'état in July 1979, effectively as an agent of the United States, and through his launching in September 1980 of the war with Iran. There was nonetheless a certain historical and rhetorical basis to the idea that the US was acting as 'world cop' in the interests of IMF compliance against Iraq. But the idea that the United States is engaging in war threats against the Islamic regime in Iran in order to force the regime to become IMF-compliant is manifest nonsense: the regime is one of the most IMF-compliant regimes in the world.

What about the direct interests of US capital? Massive reconstruction contracts were handed out after the invasion of Iraq, and it is certainly true that a fair number of firms and individuals made a lot of money by stealing from the United States through reconstruction contracts (bales of dollars which were flown out to Iraq disappeared there, and so on). But there is a big difference between engaging in one-off theft on a grand scale, which is what happened in the wake of 2003, and creating a stream of profits for capital through privatisations and so on. And the second of those things pretty clearly has not happened in Iraq.

The US's big oil majors have under the Iraqi government obtained leasehold titles to large quantities of potential oil fields. But it is unclear

how far these titles can actually be turned into real revenue streams. Iraqi oil production is back to pre-1991 levels, but not, as yet, very profitable.¹ It must be said, moreover, that the oil majors could almost certainly have got similar concessions from the Ba'athist regime if the US had been willing to make a deal with it. Similarly, the US could certainly make deals with Iran if it were only willing to give up on its policy of confrontation with the regime.

To a considerable extent the reason why profits from investment in Iraq did not materialise is precisely the thefts. The reconstruction did not get done, and the conditions for an emergence of capitalist development *à la* Germany and Japan after World War II, or even of a serious revival of capitalism under US ownership, were not created.

Business cycle and irrationality

If we look at the political dynamics of the business cycle, apart from the peculiar conditions which existed between 1950 and 1970, it is clear that the cycle displays the effects of gradually growing confidence, followed by solid faith in the future, then euphoria in the bubble phase, panic in the crash phase, and finally doubt, hesitation and disorientation in the stagnation which follows a crash.

The boom phase of gradually growing confidence and faith in the future carries with it rationalism: the ascendancy of liberal political ideas about the self-regulating free market, but also and equally faith in scientific approaches, top-down management, bureaucracy, reformism, and so and so on. The crisis phase and the stagnation phase carry with them the opposite. There is a loss of faith in the legitimacy of liberalism and in forms of corruption that have become normalised.

It is important to be clear that corruption is not something that is peculiar: it is a normal aspect of capitalist government. The capitalist class is a minority class. In order to operate as such in a political regime in which the petty bourgeoisie is able to vote (as in Britain in the 19th century) and certainly in mass suffrage, capitalist politics has to function through institutionalised mechanisms of corruption. In the crash and stagnation phase, these mechanisms lose their legitimacy.

The result, if the left is weak, is an increased influence of forms of political irrationalism: traditionalist nationalism and the religious politics of nostalgia. To this extent Tariq Ali was correct when he argued in *The clash of fundamentalisms* that the Iranian regime and the Christian right in the US are mirror images of one another.

The loss of legitimacy also implies a traditional state practice: to try and distract attention from a loss of legitimacy at home by turning to glorious adventures abroad. This is a completely traditional practice of the state core, recommended in Machiavelli's *The prince*, and taught as part of US political science degrees. A 19th century example is Napoleon III's turn to military adventurism after the crash of 1857.

The business cycle, then, produces a cyclical return of political irrationalism and a cyclical return of governments attempting to distract attention from trouble at home through international conflict. There is a sense in which the conflict between the United States and the theocratic regime in Iran involves both sides attempting to do this.

US decline

The left has been stuck with an entirely erroneous historical conception, originally constructed by Kautsky

in the 1890s, according to which capitalism develops in a single country, and produces dominance of industrial capital as opposed to merchant capital, leading to a policy of peace and free trade. This was supposed to characterise the policy of the British state in the period of the dominance of free trade as an ideology: 'Manchester liberalism', or 'Manchesterism', as Kautsky called it. The late 19th century rise of imperialism as an ideology is then taken to reflect a new economic development. This approach is reflected in Hilferding's discussion of imperialism in *Finance capital* and, thence, in Lenin's *Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism*.

The reality is that the policy of free trade of 19th century British 'Manchesterism' was nothing more than a mercantilist policy in the interests of British shipping capital and the financial capitals associated with British shipping capital in the 19th century. It was absolutely not the case that the British government pursued a policy of free trade with a view to establishing a level playing field between British and foreign capitals. It pursued a policy of free trade because under the circumstances which existed that was the most advantageous policy for British capital as against foreign capitals.

There was never a period in the past of purely national capitalist development. Capitalism emerged as an *international* phenomenon in the late middle ages, built around bulk shipping using new technologies on a scale which required both the ships and the docks to be staffed by free and mobile wage labour. The transition from small-scale transport run on a family basis - peddlers going around with trains of pack mules and so on, and small family ships - to bulk shipping, is a transition to capitalism on an international scale. The consequence of bulk shipping is that it becomes possible to ship wool out of England (as a specialist primary materials producer) to the Netherlands, to produce high-grade cloth there, thanks to a high level of specialisation, and sell it on into southern Europe and into the Islamic world. Capitalism thus emerges as an international phenomenon, as a systematic international division of labour.

The result is that even interstitial city capitalism, in a Europe dominated by declining feudalism in the later middle ages, already engages in colonialism and the export of capital for primary production. Clear examples are found in the colonial sugar plantations operated by Venetian capital in Cyprus and by Genoese capital in Madeira.

At the same time there are insufficient decorative metals, (gold, silver, copper) in the world, for the monetary circulation needs of the capitalist economy. Hence credit money is essential: you cannot have capitalism without credit money.

But there is a difference and a very important difference between credit (lending people money, selling goods on credit and so on) and credit money. The difference is that credit money can be used as a means of payment to third parties. In order to have credit money, as opposed to networks depending on inter-personal trust, like the feudal social relation of lord and vassal, credit has to be impersonal.

Credit is made impersonal through a combination of institutions. First, there must be state enforcement. It is a mere illusion of the anarcho-capitalists that there can be capitalism without the state.

In itself routine state debt enforcement is not enough. It is always possible to dodge debts by moving assets out of reach of the territorial state, and for the debtor to move out of reach of the territorial state. So there has to be a carrot as well as a stick. To

disincentivise debt-dodging the state has to act in a mercantilist fashion: to provide positive benefits to 'its' capitals, which are made unavailable to 'other' capitals. Debt-dodging by moving the debtor or assets out of reach of the state then involves loss of the gains made available by the state. In order for capitalism to function the state has to discriminate against 'outside' capitalists. It has to act in a mercantilist fashion.

Hence, the idea that there could be a free-standing capitalist state not acting in a discriminatory fashion is an illusion. There never has been a non-mercantilist capitalist state and there will never be. Capital is international in character; but the capitalist state starts on a city scale, and then develops into a 'quasi-nation-state'.² It is not and cannot be a world state in the full sense, precisely because of its need to discriminate in order to incentivise debt payment and thereby enable credit money.

But at the same time, capital needs an ultimate guarantor of credit money on the scale in which capitalism operates, which is international. So that demands the formation of a systematic hierarchy of nation-states, headed by a top-dog state. In the first place it is a *military* top-dog state, but it will inevitably become the case that that its currency will become the global reserve currency, even if that was not the case before.

That arises precisely because the currency is a form of credit money; credit depends on the regular enforcement of debts; and, hence, credit money depends on the state issuer of the money acting as a mercantilist state. Capitalism therefore from its early beginnings involves an international hierarchy of states.

The status of reserve currency state results from military superiority and in particular naval superiority. The cause of this superiority, in turn, is superior productive capacity in the home territory. But the effect of being the reserve currency state is to undermine material productivity in the home territory, for two reasons.

The first is that being the reserve currency state gives both local capitalists and the state the ability to skim off a segment of the surplus product from international financial transactions. This creates a pull towards investment in financial operations relative to domestic production. Secondly, being the reserve currency state increases the military demands on it. For example, when the British defeated the French in 1793-1815, the British became unequivocally the global reserve currency state. But a consequence of that was the demand on the British navy to deal with pirates and with troublesome local powers here, there and everywhere increased.

This increase in the demands on the military implies a problem of staffing and reliability. And this, in turn, implies a need for domestic peace. Thus, some of the spoils of empire must be diverted to concessions to the domestic subordinated classes. These may take the form of the high development of state or charitable welfare institutions, which are in the last analysis based on a cut in profits; of regulations which tighten the labour market, and also reduce the ability of capitalists to externalise costs onto neighbours; and so on. These developments are again already visible in Venice and Genoa by the later 15th century, in Netherlands by the later 17th, in Britain by the later 19th. They imply in turn that it is more profitable both to shift to financial operations and to offshore material production.

Hence, after this has been going on for some time, the top-dog state is no longer top-dog because its general domestic material productive capacity supports military superiority. It remains top-dog state simply by virtue

of the tribute it obtains by skimming from financial flows, which allows it to support an unusually large arms budget proportional to its overall material productive capacity.

Hence in turn, the declining top-dog state is driven to repeated display of its military capabilities in order to retain its status; and this display is not necessarily rational in the individual case. The Crimean war was probably in immediate terms irrational, as were Britain's repeated interventions in Afghanistan in the late 19th century. The Boer wars were equally clearly irrational operations of the British state.

The top-dog status persists long after the material productive dominance which gave rise to it is gone, as long as the state can preserve its global strategic balance. It was only when Britain lost the ability to act as globally dominant military power in 1940-41 that it ceased to be the world top-dog power - and there ceased to be the great flows of financial inflows into the UK which supported this status.

The United States appears to have entered into relative decline in terms of productive dominance in the late 1960s, and to have moved into financialisation and offshoring of material production from the 1980s. Military 'display' activity, which reasserts its military dominance as the ground for it to receive tribute, follows naturally as an element of the process of decline.

In other words, it is rational in a sense for the United States to display its military power: anybody who 'disses' the United States has to be punished. As it were, the US is saying, 'You don't fuck with the capo. If you have ever dissed us in the past we are going to take revenge: when we have the opportunity we will go after you.' That is a kind of rationality, but it produces an irrational appearance (nonsense arguments about Iran getting the bomb to wipe out Israel or Saddam Hussein becoming a new Hitler) and nonsense outcomes: wrecked economies and failed states.

Decline of capitalism

One has to be very cautious about positing a general decline of capitalism as such, because quite a lot of the phenomena which are identified in the traditional left as evidence of that decline, such as the ascendancy of finance capital, appear to be phenomena in the decline of top-dog states in the sense discussed above.

We can see capitalist decline, it seems to me, most strikingly by comparing the United States with the European empires of the late 19th century. They were brutal, but they did in fact lead to capitalist development - railway lines, roads and productive operations of one sort or another. And they did produce capitalist development in the colonised countries.

The policy of the United States during the cold war period also produced capitalist development in subordinate countries. But US military operations overseas since its effective defeat in the Vietnam war have had a completely different character. All that they have done is inflict destruction on one or another country, smash a functioning capitalist economy and leave behind a wasteland. It seems to me that this is evidence of an overall decline of capitalism between the period of British decline and that of US decline.

Why? Part of an answer is that the European empires of the 19th century were characterised by enormous emigration of people going to seek their fortunes in this, that or the other colony. The US at this period was both a coloniser of the 'American west' and a recipient of migration. The present-day US is exactly the reverse:

it receives migrants, rather than exporting them. Partly this is simply because the level of concessions which have had to be made to the working class in order to preserve domestic peace means that it is on the whole better to be poor in the United States than it is to be poor in a hell of a lot of other countries. The decline of capitalism consists, in this aspect, in its weakening *vis-à-vis* the working class, and that decline is evidenced in migration phenomena.

But the paradox of this, as far as everywhere else in the world is concerned, is that the symptom of that decline and of the migration problem is that the form taken by the decline of the United States is the infliction of mere destruction all over the world rather than the creation of the conditions for a capitalist development anywhere.

Why it matters

My basic points are, first, that US action is not simply irrational; but, second, that it is not simply rational action concealed under an irrational facade, but action which has really irrational motives and outcomes, which, however, are rationally driven by the situation of the US in world affairs.

I said at the outset that this matters because of the politics of the anti-war movement (to the extent that it survives at all). On the one hand, the idea that this is a matter of simple irrationality to be got rid of by pushing for a peaceful capitalism and a 'law-governed world order' simply strengthens the institutions through which the US usually acts, and the ideology which is used to justify barbarous attacks on 'outlaw states'. It is rational for the US in decline to do things which appear to be irrational and have irrational outcomes.

The dynamic of successive wars is therefore not going to be stopped by sections of the capitalist class being persuaded that it would be more rational if they did not happen, or by building a consensus for a 'law-governed world order'. Obama promoted this ideology as an alternative to Bush; but his practical policy is - surprise, surprise - identical to Bush's.

On the other hand, the idea that the US is driven by secret rational motives such as control of oil promotes illusions in other capitalists and other states - like the Iranian regime, or like China. The Chinese have demonstrated that they are just as capable of functioning as 'great Han chauvinist' imperialists as the Americans are of functioning as Anglo-Saxon imperialists; it is just that China is not now top dog.

The real alternative to the dynamic of repeated destructive imperialist wars laying waste to sections of the globe is not alliance with the 'democratic bourgeoisie' for a 'law-governed world order', nor alliance with the 'national bourgeoisie' against schemes for US world domination. Rather, it has to be the action of the working class, of the workers' movement organising itself in international solidarity for its own vision of peace and peaceful development. It is the struggle for working class political power that can potentially stop the infernal dynamic of repeated imperialist wars ●

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Notes

1. 'Oil output soars as Iraq retools, easing shaky markets' *New York Times* June 2 - an article that shows significant symptoms of 'official optimism'.
2. I say *quasi*-nation-state because the Netherlands is not a nation-state: it is a sub-national state which organises *part* of the Dutch-speaking population of the area. Britain is a supra-national state which organises three or four nationalities and indeed was imperial almost from the outset of the British as a capitalist state. France is also a supra-national state. Despite the dominance of the ideology of the nation-state in the 19th century, most capitalist states are quasi-nation-states, not nation-states in the proper sense.

SYRIA

Where is the left?

As Syria descends into bloody chaos, confusion lingers on, writes **Paul Demarty**

Buried under the obsessive cataloguing of every last shot-put, dive and show-jump at the Olympics - which activity, by the standards of the UK media, seems to pass for news these days - a familiar tragedy is unfolding.

The civil war in Syria is intensifying by the day; fighting spread last week to the most populous conurbation, Aleppo, where it continues to rage. Al-Jazeera reports that 200,000 people have fled the city already; casualty figures appear to be relatively low so far, but somewhat obscured by the fog of war. The same cannot be said of the country as a whole, alas - the death toll already amounts to many thousands, and supply lines for basic necessities have been interrupted on a large scale.

The nature of this conflict is a controversial topic on the international left. There are those - fewer in number in each passing war, it must be said - who argue that it is some kind of 'point of principle' to support (or any number of combinations of weasel words that amount to 'support') regimes such as that of Bashar al-Assad, on the basis that they are confronted by proxies of the international imperialist order. This position is quite as meaningless in the Syrian context as in all the others, and there is no need to go into it here.

Ali v Callinicos

More interesting is a debate that has sprung up between Tariq Ali and the Socialist Workers Party's Alex Callinicos on the nature of the war. Ali, in a brief interview for the frequently unhinged *Russia Today* news network, argued that the Syrian war is one more front - after Iraq, Libya and so on - in a western 'recolonisation' of the Middle East. He breezed through the ever-weightier evidence that a good many atrocities have been committed by the Free Syrian Army (some as provocations, to be blamed on Assad), and pointed out the obvious fact that material and military support for the rebels issues primarily from Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The conclusion he reaches is a rather grim one. Syrians are presently faced with the choice between a motley crew of rebels, dominated by reactionary Islamist elements, and a brutal and authoritarian Ba'athist regime. They want neither; the only solution is "negotiation", the calling of a "constituent assembly" and so forth. This, however, is going to prove impossible - because the west backs those who want no negotiations.²

Alex Callinicos is not impressed: "Although I have great respect and affection for Tariq, I think this is nonsense," he huffs. The recolonisation perspective would only work if there were "a long-standing western priority to remove the Assad regime. But there is no evidence of this. Under Bashar's father, Hafez, the Syrian state established itself as a brutal but reliable capitalist manager."³

He concedes that the Syrian uprising has led to Assad's more powerful neighbours trying to replace his regime with something more "congenial", but believes it unlikely that there will be western boots on the ground, or even a military intervention after the fashion of the Libyan air support campaign - primarily because Russia will not abandon "its last ally in the Middle East".

He also agrees that neither Assad nor the Syrian National Council looks attractive to the majority of the Syrian population; but then asks, where is this



Aleppo: opposition fighters

majority? All the evidence suggests that it is rising, peacefully or violently, against Assad. Callinicos argues further that it is implausible that all these fighters are simply puppets of the Gulf states and the US - it looks like "an improvised and desperate armed rising", with none of the heavy ordinance that one would expect from a force backed by world imperialism.

Above all else, the Syrian civil war (Callinicos is happy to use that phrase) has its roots in a popular revolt. "Those in the western left who allow a reflexive and unthinking 'anti-imperialism' to set them against the Syrian revolution are simply confessing their own bankruptcy."

Old mindset

Both perspectives are deeply flawed in different ways. It must be noted that the SWP as a whole is becoming *more* sanguine about prospects in Syria - yet, in this piece at least, comrade Callinicos remains stuck in an old mindset which is proving difficult to shake off.

This is the mindset of winter 2010 through to spring 2011 - the moment that did for Ben Ali and Mubarak, the moment of Tahrir Square, of revolts springing up throughout the Arab world, from Libya to Bahrain. The Arab awakening had the salutary effect of revealing the western image of the Arab masses as pliant, ignorant subjects of brutal regime as so much sub-colonial hokum. It was also a shot in the arm for the whole of the left internationally - a reminder, at a time when we are all under one cosh or another, of the power of the masses when they are united in a momentous struggle, however ill-defined in details, for freedom and dignity.

Like all the best drugs, political euphoria takes a while to wear off - and then issues in a monster of a comedown. The left, in Britain at least, appears on the whole to have overdosed. As a movement, we were wrong-footed by the transformation of the Libyan popular revolt into a military assault of western-backed tribalist and Islamist forces for state power. That, on the whole, is the direction things are going in now - the Arab revolution cannot in any sense be completed under present conditions, and the dynamic is one of retrenchment, of the reconfiguration of political alliances and the restoration of 'stability' in the region.

And so comrade Callinicos's reasons for supposing that the west will not intervene are entirely spurious. Firstly, the west *is* intervening, through those Gulf states

with which it is allied. Saudi Arabia is not stupid enough to get involved in something like this without a US green light - still less Qatar. Secondly, the political spine of Vladimir Putin is hardly something upon which to stake a perspective. Of course, Russia would not like to lose another ally; but then it is a matter of Obama making an attractive enough deal over Syria to force through compliance with a security council resolution. Libya was a Russian ally too.

Whether or not the west uses direct military force, there is every reason to imagine that it is taking an active interest in bringing this conflict to a close - with the Free Syrian Army and SNC replacing Assad at the top. Not least among its priorities is, precisely, the need for 'stability' in the region. What exactly that highly euphemistic word means depends whose mouth it is in, but there is no way to deny that the chaos in Syria is of an infectious sort - a kind of grim counterpart of the Arab awakening. Fighting is reported in Yemen, as well - tensions are rising in Lebanon, a country whose fate is bound up with Syria. Things are starting to look very dangerous indeed.

In this situation, whether or not a civil war grew out of a political revolt becomes a matter of secondary importance. "Good? Bad?" wonders the anti-hero of an old video game. "I'm the one with the gun." The *outcome* of this situation will be decided by who can win a *military* victory - and at present, the two candidates are, as Ali points out, the Ba'athists and the armed rebels, who are composed predominantly of extremely dubious forces, and supported by equally dubious foreign paymasters.

'Recolonisation'

Ali, on the other hand, is mistaken to call this 'recolonisation'. Imperialism, except in limited cases, no longer desires or needs formal colonies. It is not quite true to say, as Callinicos does, that the important point is the installation of "brutal but reliable capitalist managers" - imperialism is about political-military as well as economic relations between states, and the US's enthusiasm for deposing Assad has more to do with Iran - an unlikely but consistent regional ally of the Assad regional dynasty - than Syria itself. In that respect, the game is somewhat more dangerous than Ali makes out.

Ultimately, though he indicates sympathy with both the Syrian masses and those on the ground fighting - in spite of everything - for a progressive

outcome, his thinking on the issue is basically limited to great-power politics. He supports the idea of a 'compromise' UN resolution, which would choke off arms supplies to both sides, and ultimately negotiations between them. This, ultimately, is a leftist version of the diplomatic line coming out of Moscow and Beijing, and is subject to the same vulnerabilities as Callinicos's belief that Russia is a check on western military intervention.

The question that cries out to be asked is simple - where is the left? Comrade Callinicos rightly points

out that its weakness has deformed the course of events in Syria considerably: "One thing the Arab revolutions have revealed," he writes, "is that much of the left in the region is politically dead. The best evidence is provided by those elements in the Egyptian Communist Party who backed the military candidate, Ahmed Shafiq, in the recent presidential elections."

In Syria, things are little different - the Communist Party there is thoroughly and fatally compromised by its relationship with the Assad regime. Those left groups who took the initiative in 2011 to fight for the regime's overthrow were, as they are in other countries in the region, small and fragmented.

Syria's fate is tied up with the left because it is tied up with the Arab world's fate as a whole - only the far left can truly lead the struggle for the thoroughgoing democratic and socialist transformation of this region, knotted with national questions and sectarian-religious divides, a transformation that can consign horrors such as the present war in Syria to the past. Within the borders of Syria, the best the left can hope for right now is survival ●

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Notes

1. www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/07/2012731267977893.html.
2. <http://stopwar.org.uk/index.php/tariq-ali-what-is-really-happening-in-syria>.
3. *Socialist Worker* July 28.

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Fall of Assad could see break-up

Intercommunal conflict could change the shape of the borders throughout the region, argues **Esen Uslu**

The scheme hatched to undermine the Assad regime in Syria is about to bring about the undesired consequence of a total collapse of the "territorial integrity" of Syria. The former up to now had been intertwined with the latter.

Turkey, and behind it the USA, European Union and Nato, has been advising Bashar al-Assad to leave the scene gracefully so as to allow a controlled passage to 'democracy', while at the same time the imperialist powers have been organising the opposition forces, arming and financing them with the help of their allies in the Gulf. Considering what happened in the countries along the southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, the Assad regime chose not to go, but instead decided to fight on to the bitter end.

In its quest to hold onto power Assad stepped up his brutal repression of the opposition. Iran, Russia and China have done their best to bolster the regime, as it attempts to win the civil war at any cost. However, its mainstays - the armed forces and other critical parts of the repressive state - are gradually disintegrating. Not only because they have lost some of their top brass in an explosion in Damascus, but because the trickle of top soldiers and officials seeking refuge abroad has gradually become a mass exodus.

According to recent newspaper reports in Turkey, there are 26 generals and 400 officers of the Syrian armed forces in Turkey among the nearly 50,000 refugees. Just a couple of days ago the chief of police in Latakia defected, together with a number of his officers. Similar defections have taken place across the Jordanian and Lebanese borders, where nearly a quarter million Syrians have sought refuge.

While it is gradually losing important parts of its repressive apparatus, the Assad regime is still quite capable of hanging on, and meting out severe punishment to the armed groups of the Syrian National Council, the umbrella organisation that is striving to unify the opposition.

So long as its Free Syrian Army remains in its present state - that is, unable to unify and control all local and 'international' armed groups, which are facing far better equipped, trained and disciplined troops fighting within a unified command structure - the only option for the SNC is to demand and pray for international intervention. Meanwhile, the regime and its international backers have other clever plans up their sleeves, including playing 'divide and rule' with Syria's sizable minorities.

By doing so it also reminds the world of the country's fault lines and of its own position as the unifying force. To emphasise its indispensability it warns of the unforeseeable and most probably disastrous consequences of a total collapse of the state apparatus, which would open the way to a long-drawn-out war between the various communities.

Indeed, the religious and ethnic groups that make up the population of Syria have been constantly checking their backs. While they oppose the Assad regime, they are also afraid of the other opposition forces. Religious communities of Christians, Druze, Sunni Muslims and Alawis still bear the scars of past internecine wars and massacres that have taken place repeatedly since the late 19th century.

They are also quite wary of external 'liberating forces' - since the end of World War I such 'liberators' have several times carved up the



Bashar al-Assad: 'unifying force'

land, reunited it and carved it up again. So, while SNC is looking for outside help, most of the population is not. Although the various population groups want to see the back of the Assad regime, they do not want to surrender their armed capabilities to the SNC, since they regard those independent armed capabilities as their only real guarantee in case of a civil war.

Kurdish control

Traditionally the opposition to the repressive central regime in Syria has started in the Druze mountains in the southernmost corner of the country, passed through Homs, and gone on to Aleppo and Syrian Kurdistan. This time a similar pattern has been followed. The uprising started at Daraa in mid-March 2011, and the siege of that city ended in massive oppression in late May. One year later, an uprising in Homs and other cities along the route to Turkey flared up and now the battle for Aleppo is being fought.

However, in Syrian Kurdistan Assad's armed forces have remained in their barracks while the police and entire civilian administration have been transferred to the local Kurdish forces. Practically the whole of Syrian Kurdistan, including all the main towns along the Turkish border, are now being run by local Kurdish councils. Considering the fact that Syria has refused even to accept the citizenship of Kurds living in these territories since the 1960s, this is quite startling.

Back then the Syrian government decided to create a 300km by 20km area dubbed the 'Arab cordon' along the border with Turkey. Kurds were forcibly removed, and Bedouins from the south were brought in to settle in the area. Kurdish place names were replaced with Arabic ones, but the Kurdish presence could not be wiped out. The plan was to remove 140,000 of them to the southern deserts, but when the Kurds refused to accept this, they were stripped of their property rights and citizenship. Today there are more than 300,000 Kurds living in the region as stateless persons.

Faced with the 2011 crisis, the Syrian government relented and granted citizenship rights to those Kurds who were ready to pass through rigorous tests. To date only a very small number of Kurds have registered their applications and obtained their ID documents.

Since then there have been many uprisings and defeats, the formation of many parties and their demise, creating a fractured and mostly illegalised political landscape. The quickened pace of recent events has helped repair the structure of Syrian

Kurdish groups, and attempts to form a unified front organisation came to fruition. A meeting of the various parties called by the president of Iraqi Kurdistan, Massoud Barzani, was held in Erbil in the first half of July. It agreed to form the Kurdish Supreme Committee (KSC) and its armed Popular Defence Forces.

It seems that the meeting managed to paper over longstanding divisions between the PYD (Party of Democratic Union), which has maintained close relationship with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) of Turkey, and the Kurdish National Council (KNC), which has managed to unify 15 lesser parties of Syrian Kurdistan.

The main stumbling block was the plebeian and radical character of the PYD, while the lesser parties that came together in the KNC were offshoots of the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria, with their various reformist ideas. Furthermore only the PYD had a viable paramilitary force - some of its cadres had been trained in Iraq and had gained first-hand experience, having taken part in the guerrilla campaigns of the PKK in Turkey.

The PYD has been open in its opposition to the Syrian National Council, but the KNC has maintained an uneasy connection with it. In an SNC meeting held in July in Cairo under the auspices of the EU, the Kurdish observers ended up in a fist fight with nationalist delegates before storming out. The SNC was acting on its remit to "maintain the territorial integrity and unity" of Syria, and in practice this meant that Kurdish rights could not be recognised and their demands not met.

The threat of an imminent collapse of the Assad regime, and its replacement by one endorsed by the SNC, hastened the formation of the Kurdish Supreme Committee, triggering the takeover of Syrian Kurdistan. The Assad regime has not yet attempted to regain control, since its priority is complete victory in the battle for Aleppo. Moreover, the establishment of a Kurdish-controlled zone along the Turkish border represents a slap in the face to the Turkish government, which has been very active in providing support to the SNC.

Turkey cannot intervene without upsetting its long-cultivated links with Iraqi Kurdistan. Those links are quite important for Turkey in forestalling a Kurdish uprising within its borders. The Turkish government has abandoned its policy of attempting a negotiated settlement in northern Kurdistan within the context of the new constitution by granting some of the long demanded rights of the

Kurds in return for an end to the guerrilla war. Instead it is pursuing a two-pronged policy of winning the guerrilla war waged by the PKK within Turkey through its far greater firepower, and forcing the closure of PKK bases in Iraqi Kurdistan through the good offices of Barzani.

In return Iraqi Kurdistan has been offered a new pipeline to carry Kurdish oil to the terminal at the Mediterranean Sea, among other economic incentives. Although this policy left the Iraqi government at odds with Turkey in the short run, Ankara believes that the benefits of this course of action are overwhelming in the long term.

While Barzani could never have refused such an approach out of hand, developments in Syria have now brought about an opportunity not to be missed. To date the approach has been successful, but there are still possible pitfalls along the way.

The Syrian regime is not surrendering, and may be able to do enough to crack the SNC and trigger communal strife among the opposition. In such a case, the breathing space gained by the regime might be enough for it to renew its attack on Syrian Kurdistan.

The KSC is vehemently against allowing Free Syrian Army forces to enter the zone it has established under its control, and has no intention of taking part in any joint action with it against the Assad regime. The transfer of power to the KSC has provided it with the opportunity to implement the democratic autonomy programme of the PYD. However, the general situation is not conducive to peaceful and democratic development. The organisations are already quarrelling amongst themselves, since the PYD insists on using its flag and banners in every office it occupies, ignoring the agreement to recognise KSC-approved Kurdish symbols. However, no-one wants to jeopardise everything that has so far been gained.

The Turkish authorities, after their initial kneejerk reaction towards the transfer of power in Syrian Kurdistan, have recently seemed to adopt a more measured approach. However, the army has been mobilised and more and more forces are being deployed along the Syrian Kurdistan borders.

The Turkish government has declared that if the level of autonomy enjoyed by a Syrian Kurdistan is settled by a broad consensus in a future Syrian parliament it would not raise any objection. However, it says it will never allow Syrian Kurdistan territory to be used as a "terrorist base" like the Qandil mountains in Iraq.

Clashes in Turkey

Guerrilla activity has suddenly increased in the Hakkâri province of Turkey. A major guerrilla offensive centred on the Kurdish town of Şemdinli, but it was met by a fierce counteroffensive on the part of the Turkish armed forces. Despite the use of heavy artillery as well as aerial bombardment against targets on the Goman mountains along the border, the guerrillas managed to infiltrate the town. They destroyed a bridge connecting it with towns and villages in the border region. Numerous armoured units and airborne troops were deployed under the protection of helicopter gunships, and a costly battle has been going on.

The region has been declared a prohibited zone and no mainstream media news is coming out of it. Many villages have been depopulated,

their inhabitants forced to leave. The authorities have not allowed MPs to visit the area and are refusing to provide information about their operations until they have been completed. Requests by local authorities to be allowed to go into the prohibited zone to extinguish forest and scrub fires caused by the bombardment have been flatly denied. There are only unreliable estimates of casualties.

Unexpectedly the guerrillas have stood their ground. But that is a very costly way to conduct a guerrilla war. Perhaps a desire to relieve the pressure on Syrian Kurdistan has played a role in the adoption of the tactic. This stand may also be intended to demonstrate to world public opinion that, despite the positive developments in Iraqi and Syrian Kurdistan, the Turkish government is still not ready to accept Kurdish rights, and is prepared to use all manner of brutal measures to subdue the guerrilla war.

Whether such a tactic would bring Turkey back to the negotiating table is doubtful. However, the Kurdish forces seem to be committed to pursuing it until the winter lull.

Meanwhile along the western part of Syria, border crossings have been taken over by the forces loyal to the SNC, and the principal towns along the road to Aleppo have fallen under their control. The refugee camps are now run by Sunni Islam forces with no strong loyalty to the SNC or any other body.

The Alawite community living on both sides of the border are increasingly harassed by those Sunni Islam forces. Many clashes have taken place in camps. In one case Turkish police officers were taken hostage during negotiations. Eventually the incident was brought to an end by the action of gendarmerie forces.

Several trucks owned by Turkish Alawite long-distance haulage companies have been stopped and burnt by the Islamist armed groups, which have used centuries-old bigotry to mobilise the Sunni population against the Alawite communities in Syria. Consequently, border crossings have now been closed to local traffic. Attacks in Turkey against the Alawites are on the rise, and in Hatay province Alawite youth are talking about arming themselves to protect the community.

Iran, the major supporter of Alawites in Syria, and consequently the Assad regime to a degree are quite alarmed. As Yassamine Mather so eloquently explained in last week's issue, US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have strengthened the hand of Iran ('Islamists gaining ground', July 26). Today the question in many minds is this: is the US-led coalition ready to reverse that trend by allowing the takeover of Syria by Sunni Islamists? Such a decision would inevitably provoke a break-up of the country - the unexpected outcome of the war, with unforeseeable consequences.

One thing is sure: an intercommunal war would irrevocably change the shape of the borders imposed by imperialism in the 20th century, from the shores of Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. That would affect Israel, Turkey and Iran as well as Kurdistan as a whole.

That is why communists must develop a new programme for the whole region: a programme for democracy and popular power that avoids the trap of nationalism. It is time to discuss such ideas and take the first steps along that road ●

The passing of a liquidationist scheme

The Anti-Capitalist Initiative is not long for this world. Peter Manson reports on the departure of its largest component

Amere three months after its founding conference, the Anti-Capitalist Initiative has split, with its largest single component, Workers Power, walking out. The initiative originally emanated from WP, which probably accounted for around a third of its activist support - most of the rest coming from two sections of WP's former membership: Permanent Revolution and the grouping around Simon Hardy and Luke Cooper. Now it can surely be just a matter of time before the ACI itself is buried.

Back in September 2009, when WP launched its 'Call for an Anti-Capitalist Party', it was presented as an "appeal to all the trade unions and socialist organisations, to all activists fighting for resistance from below, to anti-racist and anti-fascist campaigners confronting the BNP, to the trade union leaders and members: let's unite and build a new anti-capitalist party".¹

This halfway house formation remained a pretty low-level campaign, but recently it has been PR, which split from WP in 2006, and the Hardy-Cooper group, which departed from WP this spring, who have been pushing the initiative, while diverting it from WP's original goal of founding a party to the setting up of effectively yet another anti-cuts-type front.

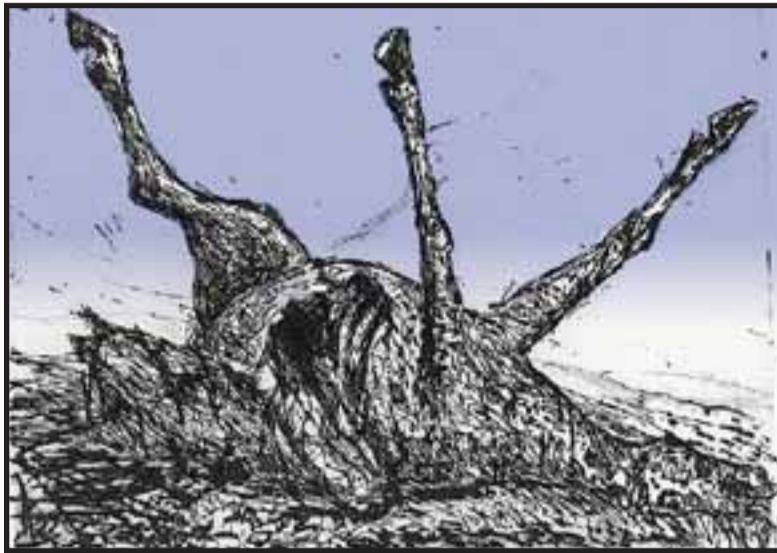
At the ACI's founding in April, PR and Hardy-Cooper, plus most of those from outside the Workers Power milieu, defeated WP's attempt to set the aim of creating a halfway-house party. So at the July 14 'Rebellion' rally/conference WP tried again - this time proposing a brief, 11-point platform, which began: "The Anti-Capitalist Initiative campaigns to unite workers, students, claimants and youth for the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a democratically planned, ecologically sustainable, socialist system." Point 11 was: "We support the formation of a mass, anti-capitalist political alternative to the Labour Party."

This time the platform was not voted down: the majority accepted the chair's ruling that the motion should not even be moved. So now WP has issued a statement - 'Anti-Capitalist Initiative not fit for purpose' - which declares:

"The ACI's refusal to even discuss adopting any concrete political positions confirmed our view that the ACI is of no use either for the clarification of the tactics and strategy we need defeat the Tory Lib-Dem coalition or for mobilising common action up to the TUC's demonstration on October 20. As a united front for action it is too small and superfluous, given the number of campaigns devoted to this struggle. As a discussion forum its majority has developed an aversion to any serious discussion of programme ... Since the ACI has thus proved useless for the tasks which alone would give it any meaning, Workers Power will not be wasting further time or effort to persuade it of this."²

Small numbers

We are indeed talking about very small numbers. WP says there were 60 comrades at the Rebellion event, while comrade Hardy 'talks up' the attendance - there were actually 70 present, he says.³ Apart from WP and its former comrades, most of the others who have supported the ACI are youth involved in, for instance, the recent Occupy protests, who are not exactly keen to sign up to a party



Dropping the dead donkey

of any type - and certainly not one dominated by trade unions (not that any union would even contemplate making WP's fantasy of a new left-Labour party come true).

According to WP, Permanent Revolution "has been pretty clear from the outset that they were opposed to the ACI transgressing the boundary of a socialist discussion club", while Hardy-Cooper at first prevaricated on WP's proposals. However, "Simon Hardy ... and his allies ... are now doing all they can to prevent the ACI from establishing programmatic self-definition."

Workers Power notes "the manifest failure of the network to attract solid support on the basis of one or two meetings by minor media celebrities, academics or student leaders. None of them, it should be noted, have actually joined the ACI. Neither has the major efforts expended on the website and Facebook attracted boots on the ground or even bums on seats. Reports from the half a dozen or so local groups told the same story - one big meeting around a well-known guest speaker or a cultural event, and then a rapid shrinkage down to eight or so regulars - nearly all members of left groups or ex-members."

CPGB comrades who have attended local group meetings have reported along similar lines. But, in truth, how could it be any different? It is not merely the failure to adopt any politics (beyond "[searching] out avenues for unity and cooperation that present radical and socialist ideas in a way that is more appealing to new layers of activists"⁴) that has kept the numbers down. That is just as absurd as suggesting, as some in the ACI have done, that it is the "Marxist jargon" of the left that puts off newcomers. No, the ACI is correctly regarded (by the handful of 'ordinary workers' and youth who have even heard of it) as just another tiny group of leftwing activists claiming to have answers.

WP concludes: "Today it is plain that the ACI has attracted neither significant numbers nor has it the will to engage in a serious discussion of programme. Quite the opposite: it is shrinking and its two dominant groups are resolutely opposed to even the most modest steps towards programmatic clarity. As a result of the debate Stuart King let slip that PR 'will never unite with WP', so even as a vehicle for revolutionary regroupment the ACI has no future."

Of course, the idea that "regroupment" could ever be on the cards between organisations that have recently split over presumably irreconcilable differences was always ludicrous. And it was obviously the

last thing in the heads of comrades Hardy and Cooper, who are clearly on their way out of Marxist politics altogether. WP claims that comrade Cooper wants the ACI to encompass the views of "convinced individual anarchists, syndicalists, left reformists", while comrade Hardy thinks the ACI should attract "people who don't accept the class struggle".

Comrade Hardy's own report of the Rebellion event on the ACI website is not exactly honest. In true Socialist Workers Party style he does not mention the ACI's political components and only hints at the controversy and rows that erupted over WP's attempt to put forward its platform. According to Hardy, "The purpose of the event was to develop arguments around the fightback against austerity and discuss the tremendously exciting events going on in Greece."

He observes: "The first session was certainly the most successful, with two excellent speakers on Greece really giving a flavour of the kind of political challenges facing Syriza and the Greek people in their fight against austerity." As for the second session on "austerity and the fightback", it "heard from a range of activists involved in different struggles and across the unions. Maia Pal gave a report-back from the Canada student struggles, whilst Rebecca from the PCS explained the crisis in the pensions campaign after several unions accepted the government offer". Doesn't it make you wish you were there?

Comrade Hardy's very brief report ends by noting: "The final session on the way forward decided not to take motions because they had not been adequately circulated in advance. Some contained policy statements which were better taken at the forthcoming autumn conference that is being planned. The final session could have been more successful - some present felt that there was too much circular debate on the question of when to adopt policies and the process that it would take."⁵

Yes, you can imagine who those "some present" were. Don't Workers Power realise that procedural questions and the discussion of politics is so off-putting for young people new to politics? I am sure, by contrast, everyone was inspired by the stirring words of Maia Pal and Rebecca.

Brave face

Comrade Hardy's got round to posting his 500-word report on the ACI website on July 19, but neither he nor comrade Cooper have yet responded to WP's July 25 statement. The site

does carry Stuart King's riposte copied from the PR website, however.

In 'Moving on - a reply to Workers Power', comrade King writes: "At its first meeting in London in April the ACI had debated whether to adopt a set of political principles or programme. The general opinion of that meeting was that we should not rush into adopting a formal programme for the ACI. Rather we should develop local anti-capitalist groups, have a day of discussion and debate where we discussed political issues and ideas, and plan a conference for the autumn where we could discuss our political platform. The programme put by WP at this first meeting was defeated."

"At the July activist gathering we organised, Rebellion, Workers Power turned up again with a programme - circulated only two days in advance - demanding it should be voted on. Again the meeting voted down WP's attempt to discuss its programme, while being absolutely clear that platforms and policies would be discussed at a properly organised conference in late autumn, a few months hence. Within a week Workers Power had used the failure to get their own way as an excuse to walk out of the initiative."⁶

According to comrade King, "Any political organisation, even a loose one like the ACI, needs to develop a set of principles it fights for and stands by." But "it needs to do it carefully and with the fullest debate". There must be "a proper discussion in local groups, motions and amendments circulated in advance and a serious approach to developing political positions amongst a diverse political grouping".

Hmm. The few dozen people who came to Rebellion should first have been able to discuss any motions locally among themselves (presuming the half-dozen local groups had met, of course) - even though WP's 11 points were largely uncontroversial for most of the left. But PR, like Hardy-Cooper, is not thinking primarily of the socialist left, but looking to provide a comfy home for all those young "anarchists, syndicalists, left reformists" who are just itching to get involved in the ACI.

No doubt, however, comrade King is correct when he writes: "The truth is that the Workers Power leadership always felt alienated from the Anti-Capitalist Initiative and were looking for reasons to leave. They were having to work with a group of young comrades who had resigned from Workers Power ..."

But there is nothing like putting on a brave face: "The ACI will carry on trying to build something new and collaborative on the left. Indeed without the constant 'interventions' of WP it might well get along a whole lot better."

Well, good luck with that one, comrade.

Liquidationism

As for WP itself, it continues to claim that, while it stands for revolutionary regroupment, the type of mass party that should be aimed for at this stage is not a specifically Marxist one: "We have always been clear that small groupings like WP or the League for the Fifth International are not the revolutionary party or the international the world working class so urgently needs. The purpose of groups like ourselves (and, whether they recognise it or not, the SWP too) is to develop the programme for such a party and international (ie, its

political basis) and to strive to fuse those politics with the mass forces of the working class vanguard. This may require joining larger parties that have attracted serious working class forces and are playing a role in the class struggle - parties like Syriza in Greece. It may require a fight to unify a whole range of groups and parties around common action and debate over programme."

At a WP weekend school in November 2009 comrade Brenner declared that such a mass formation would "not be an alternative to the revolutionary party of the working class" - it would be "a way of getting there".⁷ And that is exactly how advocates of halfway house formations envisage them. In reality, however, they end up seeking approval from the right and represent a retreat from revolutionary politics.

The problem is that a halfway house set up by revolutionaries cannot but lead in the opposite direction. They must water down their revolutionism to stand any chance of attracting the non-revolutionary union leaders and members - not to mention the libertarian/anarchistic activists in WP's sights. After all, none of them are exactly rushing to join the existing revolutionary groups, are they? That is why we say that to campaign for a halfway house is a form of liquidationism, whereby the left contents itself with largely supportable but platitudinous 'starting principles' and restricts its Marxism to its own internal events and the pages of its little-read journals.

This liquidationism is directly related to the kind of bureaucratic centralism that WP decries in the SWP and Socialist Party in England and Wales, but in fact practises itself. Workers Power states: "The public discussion of internal disputes is not a general principle of communist organisation. It is, of course, unavoidable in a mass party, whose internal life will be reported in its mass press. There is no abstract 'right', however, for an individual party member, or for minorities, to criticise the party in public."⁸

The problem with this is that it frequently leaves minorities feeling they have no option but to split. Public criticism ought not to be regarded as regrettably "unavoidable in a mass party". It must be regarded as the norm - the exception being when it may directly interfere with an agreed action. Unless this is grasped, we will never get anywhere near a mass revolutionary party.

The fight for such a party must begin with the existing Marxist left. We must look to unite our forces within a single, genuinely democratic-centralist organisation, not waste our time in liquidationist schemes ●

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Notes

1. Quoted in 'Rival CNWP launched' *Weekly Worker* November 19 2009. The 'Call for an Anti-Capitalist Party' has since disappeared without trace from the WP website.
2. www.workerspower.co.uk/2012/07/anticapitalist-initiative-not-fit-for-purpose.
3. 'Rebellion event sparks much needed debate': http://anticapitalists.org/2012/07/19/rebellion-report.
4. http://anticapitalists.org/about-us.
5. 'Rebellion event sparks much needed debate': http://anticapitalists.org/2012/07/19/rebellion-report.
6. www.permanentrevolution.net/entry/3420.
7. See 'Rival CNWP launched' *Weekly Worker* November 19 2009.
8. 'Statement on resignations from the British section of the League': www.fifthinternational.org/content/statement-resignations-british-section-league.

REVIEW

Mosaic of struggles

Keith Armstrong and Peter Dixon (eds) **Still the sea rolls on: the Hartley pit calamity of 1862** Northern Voices Community Projects, 2012, pp64, £7.99

Gordon MacPherson **Fight to the finish: the life, poems and stories of an east Durham miner** Northern Voices Community Projects, 2012, £5

“Some of the dead had died with a smile on their faces, others frowning in terror or anger. Some were fresh and pure as the day upon which they left god’s blessed light, never to be returned to it again in life. On others the hand of the corrupter had been planted, and already dust was returning to its native dust. They were strong men of gigantic mould, still apparently engaged in a deadly struggle with the last adversary and there were children - weak and helpless, ever doomed to toil in everlasting darkness - clasped in the arms of loving fathers, who even in their extremity remembered those whom they had begotten” - Wemyss Reid, 1862

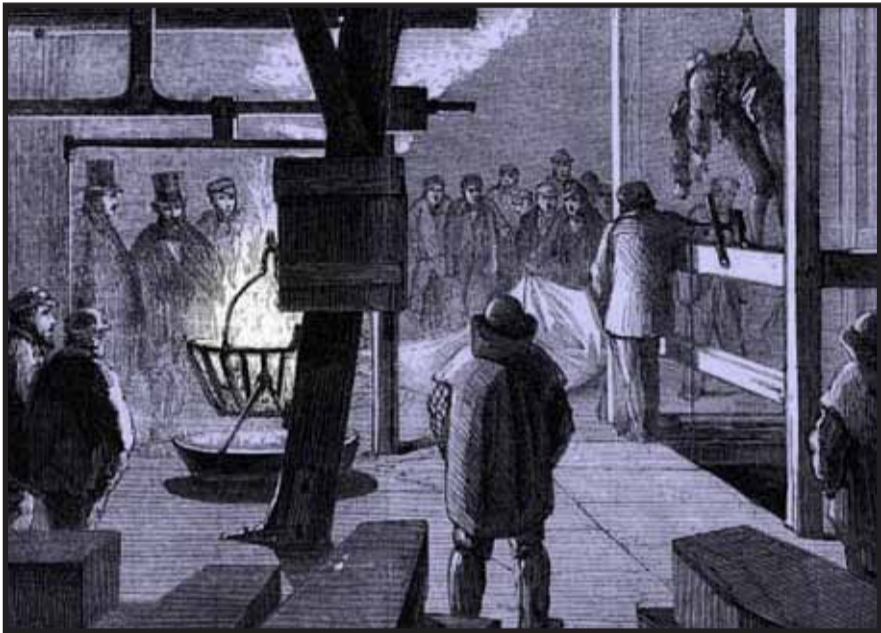
2012 has been a year of anniversaries for the workers’ movement too numerous to list, but including a number of mining disasters. Not least of these was the bicentenary of the Felling disaster near Gateshead, when 92 men and boys were blown to kingdom come and had any chance of survival snuffed out by the rich and powerful coal-owning Brandlings, who sealed the shafts with granite slabs to extinguish the flames and save the coal seams - the poor lads, some as young as eight, along with their dads and granddads, were collateral damage.

2012 also marks the 150th anniversary of the Hartley disaster - the first of many huge pit calamities of the Victorian era - and *Still the sea rolls on* gives the Hartley community the chance to reflect on the legacy of that fateful day in 1862, to add their words, their reflections in prose and poetry. Some of the contributions are from the period, others are newly drafted.

The absence of a second vital shaft was one of the deadly ingredients of the disaster. Though miners since the days of the early unions a generation earlier, as well as contemporary mines inspectors, had demanded that each mine must have two shafts, this had not passed into law. A second shaft, they were told, would cost a prohibitive £300. Another ingredient was the massive pumping engine perched over the shaft. It worked continuously, night and day, to keep the lower levels of the mine free of water. The engine’s beam, huge and heavy, was made of cast iron, not wrought iron. The third ingredient in the mix that day was the fact that the afternoon shift had descended the mine, and the day shift had not yet ascended. Sons joined fathers and grandfathers, uncles, brothers and cousins, into the mine; whole generations of families toiled together. At the fatal moment, the mighty beam - 42 tons of it - snapped at the point of maximum stress, sending half of it down 600 feet of shaft, and sealing 204 men and boys beneath.

Everyone round the world watched the unfolding fate of the trapped Chilean miners in 2010, and similarly this disaster touched the living rooms of Britain 150 years ago. The men were still clearly alive: they could be heard, working, digging, trying to clear a way through. Miners from around the region volunteered to help: 50 of them worked night and day. Hanging like acrobats upside-down in the shaft, suspended by ropes, deluged in water and rubble, they dug and hewed to make a hole just big enough to squeeze the men out.

But a wicked further twist of fate was seeping into the shaft area. Without ventilation, black damp, which clings to the floor, was creeping silently around the



Hartley pit, 1862: bringing out the dead

trapped men. It drained their strength, the youngest giving out first - the boys of 10 and 12 lying in their father’s arms - then the strongest. The sound of pick and pinch bar fell away. When the men from the surface broke a small hole into the shaft, a blast of foul air nearly overcame them and they had to be pulled up to the surface.

For seven days, the volunteers worked on, the papers carrying daily updates. At the surface the miners’ wives, mothers, sweethearts and sisters braved all weathers and refused to move from the spot, keeping their resigned vigil - a sight all too common at pitheads around the country. Three survivors were brought up, one of whom had hung on by the toes of his boots to the edge of a stricken cage for many hours in the dark in unbearable pain. At length the rescuers were able to announce that all were dead and, pitifully, the bodies of adults and children were hauled up from the pit one at a time, 204 of them in all. They were buried in a mass grave.

The disaster won us miners the legal obligation for all pits to have two shafts. It further won us the right to appoint independent workmen’s inspectors to report back on conditions - such was the distrust for owners and government inspectors alike.

Hartley was far from the last such disaster, though. Four years later, the worse ever English mine disaster killed 388 at the Oaks Colliery in Barnsley. Then at Blantyre Colliery in Lanarkshire an explosion killed 207 in 1877. Explosions also resulted in the death of 200 at Wood Pit in Lancashire (1878), 272 at Prince of Wales colliery in Monmouthshire (1878) and 290 at Albion Colliery, Glamorgan (1894). With the advent of nationalisation in 1946 we thought we had put the dark days of fatal explosions behind us, only for 81 to be struck down at Easington, Co Durham in 1951.

Still the sea rolls on comes with contemporary illustrations, such as those from *London Illustrated News*, which had artists and journalist on site throughout and whose editions were snapped up as they came off the press.

Tribute

Fight to the finish is a tribute to a man and his principles - one of the now fast disappearing army of union pitmen. The opening pages of this little volume are penned by the author’s daughter, Heather Wood, but the rest is the work of Gordon

himself - the poems and prose which were discovered after he died, for few knew he was writer during his life.

Gordon was four months old when his dad, aged 27, was killed at Shotton pit. His mother told him how his body was delivered to the back door in a wheelbarrow, still black and bloodied from the pit. His dinner was in the oven and the table set for his meal, but that same table was cleared, so that his family could bathe his body.

When Gordon was 11, World War II began and the area where he lived was frequently bombed. At 18 he was called up for ‘national service’ and was sent off to Burma to fight ‘the communists’, who, it seems, had the audacity to want to govern their own country. This was some baptism of fire, and amid the flying bullets he wondered if he would ever see home again.

On his return he signed on for what was to become a lifetime at the pit. In later years, as his generation of miners swung broadside on to challenge Tory policies and governments, the press declared that he and his fellow miners were thugs, traitors, enemies within. It forced him to reflect long and hard on his years of service to the flag, when he laid his life on the line ‘for queen and country’.

The warmest parts of this book for me are his reflections of childhood incidents, like finding a two bob bit - 24 pennies. This was a small fortune, which he ought to have handed over to his mam, struggling to make ends meet: “Have you ever tried explaining away something to your mother with a king-sized bull’s eye gobstopper in your mouth, five Woodbines sticking out of your ganzy and a large ice cream stain on the front of it?”

The poems are full of commitment to the miners and the working class. There are odes against Thatcher and the ruling class past and present. It may not be great poetry, but it is part of an ever more voluminous mountain of writing by ordinary men and women who lived through the decade of miners’ struggle from 1983 to 1993, every page of which gives the lie to press tales of reluctant strikers and automatons following orders blindly. It adds another dash of colour to the mosaic of coalfield struggles during that time.

Those who base their understanding of this period on dry statistics and the work of well-heeled academics would do well to read this book. Little of the rest will make sense unless they do ●

David Douglass

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 readied to make revolution - peacefully if we can, forcibly if we must.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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weekly Worker

US election poses Iran danger

Stepping up the threats

It is mid-summer in an election year, so we should not be surprised by the hawkish statements regarding Iran coming from the US - not just from the Republican contender, Mitt Romney, but also the current US president. However, even when we take into account the timing, some of the statements Romney has just made in Jerusalem are more than worrying - and they have been matched by Barack Obama's promises to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee on the despatch of bunker-buster bombs to the Gulf region.¹

According to the *Financial Times*, in a keynote speech delivered in Jerusalem, Mitt Romney stated that the US has a "moral imperative" to stop Iran - the "most destabilising country in the world" - from developing nuclear weapons.² Earlier in the day one of Romney's advisors, Dan Senor, had said: "If Israel has to take action on its own, in order to stop Iran from developing that capability, the governor would respect that decision".³

In March 2012 Obama had criticised the "bluster and big talk" of Republicans candidates about a possible war with Iran: "This is not a game. There is nothing casual about it."⁴ However, with the polls suggesting a tight presidential race,⁵ the US president has himself joined the "bluster and big talk" about Iran, the suggestion that the use of bunker-busters may now be on the agenda representing a real escalation. It is sad reflection of our time that the fate of 75 million Iranians and the possibility of military air raids against Iran's nuclear facility might be decided by the rise and fall of Obama's ratings in the polls. Added to this are reports that the United States is sharing with Israel full details of its possible military plans in relation to Iran.⁶

As far as Iranians are concerned, the war started on July 1, when a combination of new EU and US sanctions came into effect. The result has been large numbers of job losses, long queues for basic food, riots and demonstrations - no wonder Iranians are convinced that the confrontation with the west has entered a new phase. Sanctions cover not just nuclear, missile and military exports to Iran, but also oil, gas and petrochemicals, plus refined petroleum products; shipping in general; and banking and insurance, including transactions with the Central Bank of Iran - its director, Mahmoud Bahmani, commented that sanctions are "no less than a military war".⁷

But it does not end there. On July 30, negotiators from the United States Congress and Senate reached an agreement regarding a new round of sanctions. The Senate Banking Committee's Democratic chairman, Tim Johnson, promised to do all he could to make sure the legislation passed before the August recess: "... unless Iranians come clean on their nuclear programme, end the suppression of their people and stop supporting terrorist activities, they will face deepening international isolation and even greater economic and diplomatic pressure".⁸ In addition, on July 31 Obama announced new measures to penalise foreign banks



Romney: 'moral imperative'

that help Iran sell its oil.⁹

Clearly the reason for imposing sanctions and preparing for war has changed. It is no longer just about Iran's nuclear programme. Now the US might go to war because the US has suddenly realised that the country's rulers suppress the Iranian people and support "terrorist activities". Iranians have every reason to ask, why now? The Islamic regime has been suppressing its own population since the day it came to power and in the last decade the bulk of the state's most brutal repression has been directed at workers and labour activists who have campaigned against the religious capitalist state's implementation of neoliberal economic policies dictated by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

As for the regime's "terrorist activities", over the last 33 years its main victims have been the Iranian people themselves. However, there is no doubt that many of the US's current and previous allies in the region, including Israel and Saudi Arabia, can match Iran in this regard, but so far there have been no ultimatums issued against them.

The nearer we get to the presidential elections, the more we can expect both candidates to emphasise their support for Israel and declare further measures to punish Iran. Contrary to what some commentators are saying, this is not

just about gaining more votes from amongst Jewish Americans: a lot more is at stake. In these times of economic crisis the hegemon capitalist power cannot tolerate regimes such as Iran or Syria and, contrary to what the Senate Banking Committee chairman says, the possibility of air raids against Iran would remain even if the country's clerical dictators came "clean on their nuclear programme, end the suppression of their people and stop supporting terrorist activities".

Inside Iran, after months of denying or playing down the effects of existing and future sanctions, the regime now admits that the current situation is not sustainable. The price of basic food items has shot up, the country can no longer export oil and the reaction of Iranian leaders over the last few days has only compounded the sense of panic.

As factions of the Islamic state continued blaming each other for the appalling economic conditions, with some now talking of a possible U-turn regarding the nuclear programme, supreme leader Ali Khamenei was forced to intervene. He urged all factions to stop bickering, reminding everyone that the current threat of war has nothing to do with Iran's nuclear programme. Referring to attempts at a rapprochement with the west during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), Khamenei commented that such policies had failed in the past.

You know that military confrontation is looming when Iranian leaders call on the people to have more children. Echoing Ruhollah Khomeini's infamous call to Iranians to defeat Saddam Hussein's Iraq through population growth so as to create a "20-million-member army", Khamenei blasted family planning programmes and urged his subjects to reproduce more. Of course, many Iranians would say that in the current economic climate they cannot afford to feed one or two children, never mind a much larger family. Iran's population growth rate has fallen from 3.9% in 1986 to 1.3% in 2011.¹⁰

US strategy is quite clear: sanctions

are putting the reactionary rulers of Iran under severe pressure. The intended consequences are clear too: it is hoped that the pressure will drive Iranian rulers to take forceful countermeasures which the US will use as justification for military action, such as closing the Straits of Hormuz (through which 30 % of the world's oil flows) or embarking on a terrorist adventure.

Some sections of the left, notably those influenced by US 'regime-change funds', claim that sanctions are actually a blessing. The population will be forced by the food shortages, absence of medical equipment and lack of jobs - not to mention the continued repression by the religious state - to rise up against the regime. Leaving aside the callousness of such wishful thinking, there is no direct correlation between the worsening of living conditions and the ability of the people to make revolution. The problem in Iran, as elsewhere, is in the absence of a truly nationwide organised working class movement, and in its absence the crisis could pave the way for the coming to power of the most dubious rightwing forces - or merely the transfer of power from one faction of the Islamic regime to another.

Hands Off the People of Iran activists have been discussing our intervention in the current situation. In counterposition to the disastrous CIA-funded Iran Tribunal, we are investigating the possibility of setting up a *workers'* tribunal that will examine in depth both the crimes of the Islamic regime - not least the mass execution of prisoners in the summer of 1988, including aspects the Iran Tribunal is conveniently keeping quiet about - and the devastating effects of the current imperialist sanctions and military threats. This would help publicise not only the life-threatening shortages caused by sanctions, but also the psychological effects of war threats on millions of Iranians already under pressure from a repressive dictatorship.

This is a major project that may be beyond our current capabilities.

However, we think such a proposal can gain momentum and in the meantime we plan to hold a symbolic event that will help us to judge how we can advance the possibility of a workers' tribunal.

With this in mind we will be contacting those involved in the International Endowment for Democracy, such as professor Bertell Ollman, who exposed the pro-imperialist agenda of the National Endowment for Democracy during the war against Iraq. The idea is to bring together all those opposed to the pro-imperialism of the NED amongst US and UK academics, activists and trade unionists to put both the Iranian state and the imperialists in the dock.

We will also seek to work closely with those sections of the Iranian left taking a principled position on the issue of 'regime-change funds' - and in particular with those former political prisoners who took such a courageous stance in opposition to the sham Iran Tribunal.

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Notes

1. 'US adds 13.6-tonne bunker-buster to arsenal': www.vancouversun.com/sports/adds+tonne+bunker+buster+arsenal/7005758/story.html.
2. 'Romney forced to clarify Iran position': www.ft.com/cms/s/0/c2012f06-d96d-11e1-8529-00144feab49a.html#axzz225sNjQMO.
3. *Ibid*.
4. 'Obama warns of "loose talk" on Iran': www.ft.com/cms/s/0/e9d579c0-6621-11e1-979e-00144feabdc0.html#axzz225mJnd6J.
5. The Presidential Tracking Poll for Sunday July 29 shows Romney on 47%, with Obama two points behind: www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/obama_administration/daily_presidential_tracking_poll.
6. 'Panetta: US, Israel united in favour of more Iran sanctions': <http://news.antiwar.com/2012/07/29/panetta-us-israel-united-in-favor-of-more-iran-sanctions>.
7. www.mercurynews.com/breaking-news/ci_21197657/irans-ahmadinejad-calls-sanctions-ridiculous.
8. 'Deal struck to tighten sanctions against Iran': www.nytimes.com/2012/07/31/world/middleeast/deal-struck-to-tighten-sanctions-against-iran.html.
9. 'Obama announces new sanctions': <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/08/01/uk-iran-usa-obama-idUKBRE87006020120801>.
10. 'Iran urges baby boom': www.newsday.com/news/world/iran-urges-baby-boom-1.3869460.

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