



# weekly worker

**What the hell is going on?  
National Union of Students  
no-platforms George Galloway**

■ Aslef, Labour and Progress  
■ Eric Hobsbawm obituary  
■ 'The sex myth' review  
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Towards a Communist Party of the European Union

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## Crazy politics and class forces





# LETTERS



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

## Mild peril

The *Platypus Review* has published two articles by *Antideutsche* ('anti-German') currents, in order, at least in part, to break such perspectives out of their German parochialism and bring to the light of day what we consider to be important symptoms of the global 'left', of which the *Antideutsche* must, for good or ill, be considered part. We want readers to think - really think - about how the 'left' has ended up taking such bad positions, which ultimately must be considered no worse, ideologically, and certainly not practically, than, for example, Hugo Chávez's support for Ahmadinejad (and the Islamic Republic more generally) against the green movement during the 2009 election crisis in Iran.

Platypus seeks to expose the less well known pathologies on the 'left' than the usual, banal and mealy-mouthed: for instance, the supposedly 'anti-imperialist' but ultimately politically unserious platitudes of Tariq Ali, George Galloway *et al.* The *Antideutsche* may be apparently less of a problem than the mainstream 'left' internationally, but that doesn't mean something crucial can't be learned from considering them. Certainly, it is not the case that the *Antideutsche* are more influential than the Socialist Workers Party or the US International Socialist Organization - or than Die Linke. That the *Antideutsche* appear to 'cross a line' more than others do is an artefact of 'leftist' doxa that we need to recognise and interrogate, precisely in serious consideration of the problems raised by them.

What Maciej Zurowski ('Not part of the left', October 4) is confessing is a greater willingness to concede to problems of one kind (for example, Die Linke) rather than another. We in Platypus don't think such selective concessions are justifiable or warranted in any way.

We think a future left cannot begin as a fringe - tail - on the existing prevalent dead 'left', but rather must take a much broader approach, not eclectic or reducible to claims of 'unorthodox' or 'undogmatic' sentiments, but rather be much more critically engaged - with all aspects of the problem of the current 'death of the left' that we face today.

Platypus's publication of the *Antideutsche* is meant to precisely put pressure on them at a global stage. We don't expect them to achieve a greater hearing and political influence than they already do. We don't fear giving a platform to anyone who claims to be on the 'left'.

Furthermore, Zurowski's contention that by publishing such articles at all Platypus tacitly concedes to them, for publishing "a strong polemic alongside a mildly critical reply, for instance, aims to leave the reader with the impression that the truth is to be found somewhere in the middle". But the reply to the *Antideutsche* we have already published, Felix Baum's characterisation of the *Antideutsche* as "German psycho" (<http://platypus1917.org/2011/03/01/german-psycho-a-reply-to-the-initiative-sozialistisches-forum>), is hardly 'mild' in its criticism.

The truth is not to be found "somewhere in the middle," between avowedly "anti-fascist" and "anti-imperialist" perspectives, but rather in neither and both such perspectives. This is why it is important to include them all in considering the impasse the global 'left' has faced for more than a generation. None should be considered out of bounds for critical educational purposes. It is actually Zurowski's argument that implies that one must

navigate somewhere between twin dangers, whereas actually there is no escaping them, but only the possibility of transforming such politics. A future, reinvigorated left will need to incorporate and transcend the concerns of, for example, both the anti-fascist and anti-imperialist 'lefts' today, not choose sides or find some place 'between' them.

For it is not simply the case that, as Zurowski puts it, "At its most elemental, the left opposes privilege, while the right defends it ... and eventually Platypus, too, will have to decide on which side of the class divide it stands." The problems today are not so simple, especially as all tendencies on the 'left' in their weakness concede in important respects to the status quo. This is why Platypus exists: to address precisely that which the various existing tendencies on the pseudo-'left', including the *Antideutsche*, are blind to in their divided, blinkered condition, what they all have in common - the fact that the 'left is dead'.

This cannot be adjudicated, let alone overcome, by trying to determine on "which side of the class divide" various tendencies and organisations do or do not stand, which can apparently, according to Zurowski's standards, change as quickly as a particular political position happens to be taken, showing how specious such criteria are for contributing to the actual building of a socialist politics that has any hope of really changing the world. Everyone on the present 'left' has long since adapted to the overwhelming power of the status quo, and none are really challenging it.

'Position-taking' is virtual and gestural, not substantial. The stakes of the present 'left' are not very high, practically, but only have a (deleterious) effect ideologically. This is why no concessions at the level of the educational tasks can be afforded. No propaganda purposes of expediency can justify ignoring problems out of distaste. To simply wish away the *Antideutsche* as well as other problems on the 'left' is to concede to the reality that produced them.

It should be noted that the *Platypus Review* has solicited comrades from the CPGB to contribute an article in critical response to Grigat's, which we think will be highly educational for our readers. We only publish the articles we do in order to stimulate discussion: if this is boycotted out of allergic aversion or mutual anathematisation (of the *Antideutsche* as pro-'imperialist', or of others as supposedly 'anti-Semitic'), it is not the fault of our own project, but rather characteristic of the conditions on the 'left' that we seek to change.

Zurowski's article provides some very useful critical historical background account of the *Antideutsche*. However, I think that a response to the Grigat article in the *Platypus Review* more directly addressing its concerns with respect to Iran will find a broader audience precisely among those German readers Zurowski is most concerned will be influenced by the *Antideutsche*.

**Chris Cutrone**  
email

## Arrogant

In his comments (Letters, October 4) on Heather Downs' letter (September 27), Tony Greenstein accuses Heather of lumping all her opponents into common groupings - and then proceeds to do exactly the same with feminists, when he refers to "a long tradition of feminist support". No matter what he suggests they support, he is claiming, apparently, that all feminists support the same common group of activities, ideas and goals. I am surprised he knows the views of all feminists. In my view, this is an arrogant claim.

But it gets worse. He then uses

selected individual cases to throw dirt. He cites Nora Elam, the suffragettes' general secretary, who "graduated to become the British Union of Fascists women's organiser for Sussex and Hampshire in 1935". This creature was a suffragette, therefore a feminist (?) and is the only suffragette referred to. No mention of the suffragettes who progressed to socialist and communist organisations. Maybe in Tony's world these suffragettes escaped the movement without the dreaded contamination of late 20th century feminism.

This *Fox News*-type spin is added to by Tony when he writes: "Feminist demands are, like their gay equivalents, demands for the democratisation of capitalism. They come from the least oppressed women." Tony just wipes out 40 years of women's struggles - the fight for equal pay, job security, women's health and safety and other proletarian issues - and reduces the struggle to talk about "glass ceilings in investment banks". There are, of course, no feminists who do anything about "the low wages of cleaners". What world does Tony live in? I thought he was a bit of a historian. I found his book on fighting fascism in Brighton very interesting. He should adopt the same methods to the struggle of working class women and the women's movement.

But his method on this matter is best illustrated when he finds an event at Brighton Gay Pride which he tries to hang on all feminists and gays. His method is nothing less than an assortment of innuendo, guilt by suggested association and blatant crap.

Then we have this gem of bogus linkage in regard to Assange: "What I do raise is the context in which these allegations are made - the convening of a secret grand jury in the United States and the desire to extradite him." There has been no grand jury meeting about the events in Sweden. Yes, if he is sent to Sweden, the US will try to get him extradited and the Swedish government will bend the knee and off he will go. But there is no proof that the women involved are part of any conspiracy.

Did Julian Assange commit rape? I do not know. Nor does Tony. Should these accusations be investigated? Yes. Should he be sent to Sweden? No. Do we fight the US attempts to get him to the US, via Sweden? Yes. Do we defend democratic rights? Yes. Do we fight rape and violence in relationships? Yes.

I now turn to comrade Dave Douglass and his letter about the student and her teacher (October 4). I have no problem with his attacks on the "doublespeak" of the state, BBC, press, etc. As these organisations and their spin have nothing to do with the issues involved in the case, I think Dave is using them as a smokescreen.

For me the issue is clear: should a teacher be sexually involved with his/her student? In my view, there are added problems that arise when there is a 10-year difference between the two. Is a 15-year-old able to decide, without external pressure, if they are to enter into a sexual relationship? In general I would say yes. The age is not the issue, as some 15-year-olds could be more than capable of making such a choice, while others may not. Should 15-year-olds have relationships with partners 10, 20, 50 years older? I have difficulty in giving a 'one answer suits all' to this question. For me there is a question about the role of the older partner in such a relationship. They are likely to have 10, 20 or 30 years more experience of life, relationships and the effects on an individual of the complex emotions involved in starting, maintaining and ending relationships.

Should a teacher have a sexual relationship with his or her student, who in many cases is likely to be

much younger? I would put a very large question mark against such a relationship. In most cases I would answer with a no. My reasoning is that it is an unequal relationship. The daily relationship is one of power - teacher over student. We may not like the existence of this power relationship and wish that education was free of such structures and roles. But we live in a capitalist, hierarchical society. Power and authority are staple ingredients of capitalist structures, be they in the realm of education or economic activity. History shows us that many students and workers have suffered harm at the hands and through the actions of the holders of these powers.

The question for me is, can these inequalities gained through the sexual, life and relationship experiences of the older partner, plus the added unequal power/authority gained from his/her role, not skew the relationships in the partnership in the direction of the older, authoritative player?

It may be old-fashioned to say women and men in general will not have a fully equal and free social, including sexual, existence until humankind has achieved a classless world. But to imagine sexual and other social relations acted out in a fully free manner within a society of hierarchies and class is utopian.

**Terry Burns**  
email

## Marginalisation

A letter in *The Guardian*, published on October 1, asserted that "There are around 50 months left before we [humans] cross a climate threshold. After that it will no longer be 'likely' that we will stay on the right side of a 2°C temperature rise - a line Britain and the rest of the EU have sworn not to cross ... we call on the government and opposition to say what they will do in the same time frame to grab the opportunity of action and prevent catastrophic climate change."

In the absence of evidence to the contrary, I assume that the above assessment of the situation is an accurate one. If so, the following passage, which appeared in part two of Gabriel Levy's very useful contribution to the *Weekly Worker*, leaps out: "As you all probably know, there is much public discussion about whether governments should implement policies to limit climate change, or adapt to it. I think that socialists should keep out of this discussion and continue to do what we are doing - that is, try to bring closer a time when these issues will be dealt with by society as a whole in a completely different manner" ('Natural limits, sustainability and socialism', September 20).

Surely such an approach, while laudable in part, would simply leave the field open to 'government and opposition', with continued marginalisation of the left. I refrain from any further comment at this stage. What do readers think?

**Chris Gray**  
email

## Abject

I'm a Kenyan man, aged 36, languishing under the yoke of abject poverty owing to perennial unemployment.

I'm a Bachelor of Arts graduate in economics from the University of Nairobi and this is my 12th year without a job. It is extremely difficult securing an opportunity in Kenya. There is stiff competition in Kenya's labour market and corruption is rampant. You must know somebody big to get an opening. You must have a big brother working in a company or in the civil service to push things for you.

Formally, the corporate sector here enacts a strict elimination system when awarding a job. One must have three

years' experience, plus postgraduate qualifications. I have none. In the first place, after my graduation, experience was the obstacle; now it is that I can't account for all the years when I have been out looking for employment. My situation is replicated in the lives of more than three million Kenyans who have university degrees but can't find jobs because they are too poor to bribe, don't have a big brother or didn't have resources to pursue postgraduate education.

Out of Kenya's 39 million population, more than 70% are people aged 42 and below. Only 20% of the population, according to official statistics, are in formal employment. The rest are underemployed in the informal sector, including the poverty-prone agricultural sector, while 65% of Kenya's population live below the poverty line, earning less than \$2 a day.

On the other side, Kenya's economy is rapidly growing. A lot of grand investments, but no room for the poor. The cost of living skyrockets by the day. Kenya has entered a permanent high-food-price regime, owing to poor agricultural production occasioned by the government's massive disinvestment in agriculture and climate change. It is now interested more in capital investments in mining and international trade. The local business community is heavily investing in real estate - areas that don't stimulate growth. So we have ugly income disparities in Kenyan society. Consumption is very high in a small segment of the population and despicable want characterises the majority. Kenyan members of parliament are the highest paid in the world and so are CEOs here, but this is the same country where 65% of the population live on less than \$2 a day.

As if this isn't enough, Kenyan politicians hire unemployed youth to perpetrate ethnic violence, so as to gain political capital and help them to get rid of the democratic process. You have people voting out of fear of being killed or evicted from where they live. I am a victim of this too, as my wife was killed during the bloody post-election conflict of 2007 - her only crime was belonging to the tribe of the man who had won the poll, but was robbed of victory in favour of the incumbent president, Mwai Kibaki, who is from my tribe.

Now we are approaching another election in March next year and another wave of ethnic violence has occurred. I humbly appeal to all British communists to condemn this system of the use of violence, under which people are prevented from holding the rulers to account and end up seeing only the 'wrong' tribe, not the evils committed by the ruling elites.

**Sam Waweru**  
email

## Left masters

After reading last week's *Weekly Worker*, I would like to offer some constructive criticism about both the content of the paper and where the CPGB is taking it.

First, I welcome Paul Demarty's article, where he concludes that Ed Miliband's speech at Labour's conference shows how the Labour leader has embraced 'Blue Labour' ('Labour turns blue', October 4). Paul was right to explain that there is a class war being fought within the Labour Party between left reformists and those wanting to turn Labour into a British version of the US Democrats. Unfortunately, it is the ruling class who are winning the class war within Labour. Hence Ed Miliband's 'one nation' speech, which shows how much the Blairites still control the parliamentary Labour Party.

Second, as always, I enjoyed reading the different views put forward at the recent CPGB aggregate, including the



CPGB motion on Aslef’s resolution at Labour conference about the secretive Progress organisation.

Third, I found the article on ‘anti-Germans’ headlined ‘Not part of the left’ completely incomprehensible. Sadly, the reader needs to have an IQ of 140 and a master’s degree in modern history to understand it.

This brings me to my fourth point. The CPGB’s Provisional Central Committee seems to have been asleep at the wheel and forgotten that the priority of a Marxist leadership is to build the party and explain what the party should do next. Unfortunately, the PCC seems to have retreated into a pseudo-academic milieu, with its orientation centred solely on recruiting members from amongst the shifting sands of the student fraternity. This emphasis on recruiting students is common to all leftwing groups, and is one of the main reasons why such groups have not grown or have even shrunk during the worst recession since the 1930s. I therefore disagree with the PCC when it concludes that the only thing leftwing groups can do at the moment is to increase their ‘market share’ rather than recruit from newly radicalised workers, both young and old.

The CPGB seems to have got itself in a rut over the last couple of years. This is shown by the fall in the attendance at Communist University in comparison to even a few years ago. Incomprehensible articles such as the ‘anti-German’ one mentioned above do not help. In contrast to the discussion at the CPGB aggregate, it is not the shortage of writers, but the obscure subjects chosen for articles featured in the *Weekly Worker*.

The CPGB should prioritise the building of the membership of the party. Only then will the ‘project’ to unite Marxists both in and outside the Labour Party become a reality. Work done today will pay huge dividends in the future. A big step forward would be the re-introduction of the ‘Party notes’ column, which, like Lenin’s *Iskra*, detailed developments both inside the party and amongst those groups which will form the basis of the united Marxist party we all seek.

Whilst I do not advocate that the *Weekly Worker* becomes like the dumbed-down *The Socialist* or the *Daily Mirror*-style *Socialist Worker*, I do want to see more articles which don’t require a master’s degree in politics to understand.

**John Smithee**  
 email

## Taken to Tusc

Sorry about this, but why must we take the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition seriously (‘For a new, united socialist party’, October 4)?

The cuts and fighting against them have nothing to do with socialism. Tusc is just another party that works within the capitalist framework - *ergo* just another capitalist party! You can’t impose a political party on the working class that they don’t want and won’t vote for and then say we must support them.

The party should stand and stand for communism and nothing else. I read the opening sentence of ‘Labour turns blue’ - “We on the far left ...” - and I couldn’t make it any further. I thought the ‘we’ in the CPGB were communists and not lefties of any type.

**Steven Johnston**  
 email

## Resist

We, members of the May 6 Committee, which brings together people from various Russian political and social movements, call on concerned people around the world to join us for 10 days of united solidarity actions from October 20 to October 30. We demand that the Russian authorities release people already arrested as part of the Bolotnaya Square case and cease

their current drive to arrest even more people on charges of so-called “mass rioting”. Independent public inquiries into the events of May 6 on Bolotnaya Square have concluded that there is no evidence that Article 212 of the Russian Federation Criminal Code (mass riots) was violated.

The people who took part in the ‘March of the millions’ that day in Moscow themselves were victims of illegal actions on the part of the police and other officials. Not only did the police fail to ensure safe passage and access to the site of the authorised rally, but they also violently dispersed the marchers, beating and illegally detaining hundreds of people in the process.

The Russian Federation’s investigative committee nevertheless concluded that it was not ordinary citizens who were the injured parties in this case, but the riot police who beat and detained them without cause. Seventeen people have now been charged with mass rioting and violence against the authorities in connection with this case, but complaints of illegal actions by police filed by ‘March of the millions’ participants are not being investigated.

Hundreds of new names might be added to the sad list of the prisoners of Bolotnaya Square unless thousands of people call for an end to this political crackdown. You can help by spreading the word about what is happening in Russia, writing letters of protest to the Russian authorities, holding rallies, marches and pickets outside Russian embassies and consulates, and organising solidarity concerts for political prisoners. Only together can we resist the lawlessness of the authorities!

**Praxis Centre**  
 Moscow

## Reinstate Ian

Please support the petition calling for the reinstatement of respected Manchester Metropolitan University academic and trade unionist Ian Parker.

Ian was suspended from work after having been unable to arrange, with barely 18 hours notice, for a union official to come with him to hear a charge that the university said amounted to “gross professional misconduct”. What this seems to mean is that Ian raised concerns within the university about the problem of secrecy and control in the department in which he works, and was suspended for doing so.

Ian has had to leave his office and

key, been told not to contact university staff and students, and his access to his email has been suspended. For his students Ian has simply ‘disappeared’ overnight and, while he is keen to continue supervising and teaching, he is not allowed to.

This is an attack not only on a respected and internationally renowned scholar, but on all trade unionists everywhere - Ian is also a University and College Union representative and it is the latter which is ultimately at the heart of this matter. As trade unionists we cannot simply stand idly by and allow this victimisation.

Please support the campaign calling for the lifting of Ian’s suspension and for this full reinstatement, including by signing, and encouraging others to sign, the e-petition at [www.change.org/en-GB/petitions/ian-parker-should-get-back-to-his-work#share](http://www.change.org/en-GB/petitions/ian-parker-should-get-back-to-his-work#share). Also by sending protest messages to the vice-chancellor, John Brooks ([j.brooks@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:j.brooks@mmu.ac.uk)) and the head of the department of psychology, Christine Horrocks ([c.horrocks@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:c.horrocks@mmu.ac.uk)).

There will be flyers and posters put up on campus, and call-outs in lectures all next week. Further action is also planned. Please let the organisers know if you have any ideas concerning how we can best fight this together (because we *can* fight this together). Email [china.t.mills@gmail.com](mailto:china.t.mills@gmail.com).

Thanking you in anticipation of your support.

**Stephen Hall**  
 Greater Manchester Association of  
 Trades Union Councils

## Mangle angle

Unfortunately, part of my letter in last week’s paper (October 4) has been mangled in the editing process. The statement, “Yes, I measure the rate of profit using the historical cost of the fixed capital because a rate of profit is a rate of return on investment and the money that’s been invested in the fixed capital is its original, or historical, cost”, is a quote from Andrew Kliman, taken from his interview with Nick Rogers.

Of course, I do *not* measure the rate of profit using the historical cost of capital. That is the method of the temporal single-system interpretation, which I reject as being not just contrary to Marx’s method, but, more importantly, logically inconsistent, leading to spurious results and the undermining of the Marxist critique of capitalism.

**Arthur Bough**  
 email

# Fighting fund Early promise

Our October fighting fund has received a big boost in the shape of a £500 gift from comrade TM. Brilliant! That sets us up nicely in our effort not only to reach our £1,500 target for October, but also to wipe out last month’s £167 shortfall.

But TM has not been the only generous one this week. First up is comrade RH, who made a nice donation of £20 using our online PayPal facility. He was one of just under 10,000 visitors to our website last week, by the way - 9,589, to be precise. Then there were seven comrades whose regular standing orders, totalling £120, came through - thank you, FK, CG, RK, DV, GD, SM and RP, for your donations ranging from £5 to £30.

Finally, the above-named comrades have been joined by two new standing order donors - comrades SJ and SW, who have both committed to £10 a month. SW comments that the September

27 issue of the *Weekly Worker* is “probably the best I’ve read yet”. We’re glad you liked it, comrade, and your donations will hopefully help us not just maintain the quality, but increase it further.

The £640 received this week takes our total so far to £802. That’s good going, with only a third of the month gone. And those new standing orders have pushed up our bedrock of regular donors just that bit more too. But we must now make sure October lives up to its early promise. If you want to support the *Weekly Worker* please send a cheque or make a payment via the website. Better still, join SJ and SW and make it a regular contribution!

**Robbie Rix**

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

# ACTION

### CPGB podcasts

Every Monday we upload a podcast 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 October 14, 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 6, ‘The buying and selling of labour-power’. Organised by CPGB: [www.cpgb.org.uk](http://www.cpgb.org.uk)

### Radical Anthropology Group

**Tuesday October 16, 6.15pm:** ‘Did women once rule the world?’ Speaker: Chris Knight. St Martin’s Community Centre, 43 Carol Street, London NW1 (two minutes from Camden Town tube). Session cost: £10 waged, £5 low-waged, £3 unwaged. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: [www.radicalanthropologygroup.org](http://www.radicalanthropologygroup.org).

### Miscarriage of Justice Day

**Saturday October 13, 10am to 5pm:** Conference, St George’s Lecture Theatre, Mappin Street, Sheffield S1. Organised by National Federation of Miscarriage of Justice Campaigns: [www.unitedagainstinjustice.org.uk](http://www.unitedagainstinjustice.org.uk).

### Progressive students

**Saturday October 13, 10am -5.30pm:** Conference, University College London. Fighting austerity, fees, racism, inequality and war. Organised by Student Fightback: [www.studentfightback.org.uk](http://www.studentfightback.org.uk).

### Austerity, injustice and the power of protest

**Sunday October 14, 11.30am to 5.30pm:** National conference to defend the right to protest, University of London Union, Malet Street, London WC1. Workshops and forums include: ‘Policing austerity’, ‘Defending the right to strike’, ‘Know your rights’, ‘Whose streets?’ Speakers include: Darcus Howe, Owen Jones, John McDonnell, Tony Benn, Alfie Meadows, Nick Wrack, Mark Serwotka, Gareth Peirce. Waged £6, unwaged £3, solidarity £10. Organised by Defend the Right to Protest: [www.defendtherighttoprotest.org/national-conference](http://www.defendtherighttoprotest.org/national-conference).

### Socialist films

**Sunday October 14, 11am:** Screening, Renoir Cinema, Brunswick Square, London WC1. Margaret Dickinson’s *Builders and the games* (UK 2012, 57 minutes). Reel News’s *Greece: our present is your future* (UK 2012, 45 minutes). Organised by London Socialist Film Co-op: [www.socialistfilm.blogspot.com](http://www.socialistfilm.blogspot.com).

### The case for a general strike

**Monday October 15, 7pm:** Rally, Friends Meeting House, 173 Euston Road, London NW1. Organised by Unite the Resistance: [www.uniteresist.org](http://www.uniteresist.org).

### When workers shook Britain

**Monday October 15, 6pm:** Introduction to general strike episode of *Days of hope*, University College London, Gower Street, London WC1. Speaker: Ken Loach. Hosted by the UCLU Marxist Society: [uclumarxsoc@gmail.com](mailto:uclumarxsoc@gmail.com) .

### Free the women at Yarl’s Wood

**Croydon, Wednesday October 17, 1pm:** Demonstration, UK Border Agency, Lunar House, 40 Wellesley Road, Croydon. Organised by No Deportations: [www.no-deportations.org.uk](http://www.no-deportations.org.uk).  
**Salford, Wednesday October 24, 12 noon:** Demonstration, UKBA signing centre, 1-2 Dallas Court, South Langworthy Road, Salford, M50. Organised by Movement for Justice: [www.movementforjustice.org](http://www.movementforjustice.org).

### Free Palestinian child prisoners

**Wednesday October 17, 7.30pm:** Public meeting, Quaker Meeting House, 22 School Lane, Liverpool L1. With Victoria Brittain and Ken Keable. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: [www.palestinecampaign.org](http://www.palestinecampaign.org).

### Socialist theory

**Thursday October 18, 6pm:** Study group, Social Centre, Next from Nowhere, Bold Street, Liverpool L1. ‘Marx’s vision of communism’. Organised by Socialist Theory Study Group: [teachingandlearning4socialism@gmail.com](mailto:teachingandlearning4socialism@gmail.com).

### A future that works

**Saturday October 20, TUC demonstrations**  
**London:** Assemble from 11am, Hungerford Bridge, Victoria Embankment, London WC2, for march at 1.30om to Hyde Park.  
**Glasgow:** Assemble from 11am, George Square, Glasgow G1, for march to rally at Glasgow Green, Glasgow G40. Organised by TUC: [www.afuturethatworks.org](http://www.afuturethatworks.org).

### Europe against austerity

**Sunday October 21, 11am to 5pm:** International conference, 128 Theobald’s Road, London WC1. Organised by Coalition of Resistance: [www.coalitionofresistance.org.uk](http://www.coalitionofresistance.org.uk).

### No to EDL

**Saturday October 27, 11am:** Demonstration. Walthamstow, London E17. Organised by Unite Against Fascism: [www.uaf.org.uk](http://www.uaf.org.uk).

### CPGB wills

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



**NUS**

# Unreason all the way down

The National Union of Students no-platforms George Galloway, Galloway sues the NUS, the left talks nonsense throughout and **Paul Demarty** wonders what the hell is going on

**A**sad truth about today's left is that it is pretty irrational, all told. Normally this irrationality comes out in more or less disguised form: the standard practice, adopted widely throughout the left, for example, is to dress up your own nominally revolutionary politics as one kind or another of right-on liberalism or social democracy. This policy is irrational, because it has failed consistently for the same reasons, over and over again - yet still it continues. But it does not *seem* that irrational, because not going to the masses with full-blooded revolutionism *looks* eminently 'realistic'.

You have only to push the right buttons, however, to see the steady secular decay of rational thought blossom proudly before your eyes. This time around, the button is the big old one marked 'rape', with a couple of complementary prods of the one marked 'no platform' - and the result is truly terrible to behold.

## Assange and Galloway

The whole farrago started with Wikileaks founder Julian Assange claiming - and obtaining - asylum from the Ecuadorian embassy, to avoid a European arrest warrant issued by the government of Sweden. The problem is the nature of the allegations against him, which amount under Swedish law to rape.

This is button number one. Much of the left has simply internalised the mode of argument typical to liberalism in general, and liberal feminism in particular - politics starts to look like a list of bad things which you should be prepared to loudly criticise. Rape, and violence against women, is a pretty obvious one. After all, (almost) nobody considers it a 'good thing', and rightly so. Even the Ku Klux Klan added wife-beaters to the list of its enemies fairly early on, along with Jews, Catholics, blacks and so on.

So the issue presented the left with an impasse: what is more important? Opposing bad wars, or opposing bad rape? George Galloway, the MP for Bradford West, stomped right into this delicate territory with insufficient attention to the lie of the ideological land. He described the allegations of rape against Assange as little more than accusations of "bad sexual etiquette"; which subsequently allowed an establishment reeling from his recent electoral victory, and very keen that Assange's bad sexual behaviour should bring down as many troublesome anti-war celebrities as possible, to stick the knife into Gorgeous George.

It worked - Galloway lost his election candidate for Manchester, Kate Hudson, and his long-time ally, Salma Yaqoob, over his comments. Then the National Union of Students took its swing, with a motion from its women's group attempting to ban 'rape deniers' such as Galloway from campuses.

The NUS is as it almost always has been: dominated by Blairites and sub-political careerists, to whom leftwingers (even as compromised as Galloway) are at best an annoyance and at worst a threat. The two NUS executive members who are delegated from the union's women's campaign are very much cut from the same cloth. Yet on this issue, the sub-



**George Galloway: litigious**

Blairites could count on substantial sections of the left to go along with the purge - because, after all, rape is a *very bad thing*.

## Prosecution

So who took the bait? Michael Chessum - leftish bureaucrat and mainstay of the National Campaign against Fees and Cuts - lays out the essential case.<sup>1</sup>

"A - Giving known and unrepentant rape apologists a platform is a fundamental barrier to creating a safe space. It effectively excludes a lot of people, especially survivors and victims of rape and sexual assault.

"B - Giving rape apologists a platform contributes to a dangerous culture of not taking rape seriously, and excuses potential rapists for their actions. Rape apologetics normalises rape. This is a direct and present danger to real people."

Meanwhile, there are our old friends, the Alliance for Workers' Liberty. Untroubled as they are by the lurking matter of imperialism, having consented to eight out of every 10 imperialist interventions in the last couple of decades, they had but one stake in this - a long-running, and by now quite pathological, vendetta against George Galloway *as an individual*. Riding a substantially Blairite attempt to smear him is utterly par for the course - after all, the AWL has consistently called for votes for Blairite apparatchiks over Galloway whenever the issue has been posed. Galloway for the AWL is some kind of devil figure - the mean average of Hitler, Pol Pot and Fred West.

Since the group's role in all this is the same as its role whenever a war breaks out - offering mealy-mouthed support for the establishment and scurrilous attacks on left opponents - it is worth looking a little more closely at Chessum's statement, the comrade not exactly being a nobody on the student left. And there is no other way to put this: *in what universe does a*

*woman feel less 'safe' because George Galloway is around?*

The argument is rehearsed because 'official' feminism has come up with this notion of a 'safe space'. Does it mean rough stewards at the door, keeping hordes of marauding rapists out? Of course not: it means defining, *a priori*, the terms of *debate* in a meeting room so that nobody will feel unduly intimidated by what is said. It is, in short, a weapon of the bureaucracy. It serves selectively to protect dubious political arguments from the level of attack they deserve. (As an aside, the AWL wheels out bureaucratic 'feminist' technicalities to get its way and attack enemies as a matter of course.)

For a woman *genuinely* to live by the implied calculus of the 'safe space' policy would be a pretty dire existence. You could not go to the pub; you could not step outside your front door, practically. You would only be able to hide under the bed sheets, and then under the bed whenever anyone knocked at the door. Nobody *does* live like this, of course; because the 'safe space' policy - like 'public safety' legislation in society at large - is about manipulation and control, not 'safety'.

## Defence

Arguments from the motion's opponents were politically less dubious, but intellectually no better. The essential approach, embodied in amendments from the Socialist Workers Party and the sub-Stalinist Socialist Action (more precisely, its front, Student Broad Left), was two-pronged - in the first instance, the amendments restored the context of imperialism to the issue, the thrust of which is broadly acceptable (although SA/SBL's guff on 'Ecuadorian sovereignty' is straight out of the Stalinist play-book).

The other side of the argument is a rehearsal of 'no platform for fascists' dogma, however. A statement from the Socialist Worker Student Society<sup>2</sup>

is paradigmatic. What it amounts to is an almost religious approach to 'no platform' - For It Has Been Written that 'no platform' is reserved for fascists; and incorporating other categories of bad people into it is a violation of the SWP's Pharisaic purity laws on the subject.

Why are fascists so special? "Fascism is not based on rational arguments; we do not challenge these organisations to debate." This ought to send anyone's irony-meter into overdrive. It is the substance, for instance, of the liberal-imperialist Nick Cohen's arguments against incorporating the depredations of imperialism into an explanation for Islamic terrorism - because, don't you know, Islamism is irrational, so trying to rationally explain it is logically absurd!

More to the point, this is actually an argument *for* no-platforming Galloway. This man is a vocal opponent of abortion. His basis for being so? His Catholic faith - ie, it is an irrational position. You cannot argue with irrational people - so Galloway should be no-platformed! And the same goes, surely, for all the Christian unions, Islamic societies and so on ... and the SWP itself, since its attitude to no-platform is so irrational. Eventually the only people left in the student movement will be those whose politics are based entirely on cynical and rational calculations - that is, the Blairite careerists.

Elsewhere, the SWSS statement buys wholly into the moralistic attitude to Galloway's comments adopted by the witch-hunters - hardly surprising, because no organisation on the far left has so thoroughly internalised the list-of-bad-things liberalism alluded to above as the SWP. "We should not no-platform rape apologists; instead we should demand that they retract their statements. People like Tony Benn and George Galloway have influence in our movement. We need to challenge them to ensure that it is never acceptable to make statements that undermine [sic] rape again." As such, it is the weakest argument imaginable. Opponents of the SWSS amendment could simply disagree with its prioritisation of oppressions. They did. The amendments were ditched and the motion was carried.

## Galloway's revenge

In the final, bitter twist, Galloway has announced he will be suing the NUS for libel. I am no expert on libel law, but I know that the British system is the envy of all the world's litigious bullies; and I would suspect that settling down in writing the notion that a person is a 'rape denier' probably constitutes an adequate level of defamation to bring a case. Galloway says that any damages he receives will go directly to the legal defence funds of Julian Assange and Bradley Manning, the US private held in virtual solitary confinement for over two years for allegedly passing on US military secrets to Wikileaks.

It is not a particularly principled act to use libel law to silence one's critics, no matter how shrill and obnoxious they are. Galloway is thus doing exactly the same thing that has been done to him, and so his move should be condemned.

A better approach - which, even in the context of Galloway's legal case, would still be legitimate -

would be to call on students and local student unions to defy the ban and render it unworkable. The notion that the NUS can claim any kind of democratic mandate over its constituent elements is laughable; overthrowing its latest bureaucratic diktat (which, in substance, is exactly what this no-platform motion is) at the grassroots would be a service to anybody who wants students to think and act as political agents, independent of the bureaucracy.

This was already a hard sell, but it is substantially the same pitch that got Galloway elected in Bradford, where he successfully appealed to constituents to overthrow the Mafia-like grip on local politics enjoyed by the Labour Party. The patronising, infantilising discourse of 'no platform' and 'safe spaces' could quite easily be presented as such to students. Alas, Galloway's egotism and litigious reflexes have made that pitch all but impossible.

Yet it is impossible to muster up any sympathy for the NUS bureaucrats involved in the case; still less their idiotic left outliers. Should all this shrieking bluster result, ultimately, in funds for Assange's legal defence, the irony will be quite beautiful. This is a hole they dug for themselves, with the enthusiasm of the righteous zealot. Besides, given that talking to Galloway is now *verboten* in the NUS, dragging its people to court is pretty much the only way he can get them to look him in the eye and call him a rape-denier (except for AWL members, who do it for fun).

All this could have been avoided with one snip of the shibboleth scissors: accept that, in cases of sexual bad behaviour, the line between the problematic and the criminal is a legitimate topic of debate. The accusations against Assange suggest that his relationships with women are unhealthy. They do not suggest that the solution is a spell in the slammer. All those whose sole contribution to this issue is to repeat 'Rape is rape' like a shrill wind-up toy should ask themselves whether they would rather be cajoled and misled into unprotected sex by a dodgy partner, or dragged into an alley, beaten and sodomised. Neither should be acceptable - but to suggest that they ought not to be qualitatively different in the eyes of the law is frankly obscene.

Galloway's comments are problematic, because they ignore the social dimension that produces the deformed sexual practices of individuals like Assange. The problems could be teased out by any intelligent person with any familiarity with feminist and socialist arguments for women's equality in the context of a serious debate, which is why Galloway avoids such debates like the plague. To shanghai the question into the irrationalist dogma of no-platform is tantamount to closing one's eyes, covering one's ears and shouting, 'La, la, la - I can't hear you!'

Before that spectacle, Galloway may well conclude: 'These people are not rational, so what's the point in challenging them to a debate?' ●

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## Notes

1. <http://anticapitalists.org/2012/09/26/rape-apologism-imperialism-and-the-student-left-we-need-to-talk>.
2. <http://swssnet.wordpress.com/2012/09/26/swss-statement-on-nus-nec-motion-no-apologies-for-rape-apologists>.



## PROGRESS

# Capitalism's Trojan horse

Attacks on Progress should be welcomed, but should the left vote for Aslef's rule change? Stan Keable of Labour Party Marxists looks at the issues

**P**ledging, on day one of the Labour Party conference, to "kick the New Labour cuckoo out of our nest",<sup>1</sup> Len McCluskey, general secretary of Unite, Labour's biggest affiliated trade union and biggest financial backer, declared war - on behalf of the trade union bureaucracy - against the party's pro-capitalist Trojan horse inside the party, Progress.

He was backed up by the leaders of the second and third biggest affiliated unions - Dave Prentis of Unison and the GMB's Paul Kenny, and by a rule-change resolution from leftwing train drivers' union Aslef, which Kenny told the GMB conference in June "will outlaw Progress as part of the Labour Party - and long overdue it is". He added: "This is about an organisation funded by external vested interests, who seek to gain influence over candidate selection and in internal elections."

The Aslef motion, however, like all rule-change proposals not backed by the party's national executive committee, will only come before Labour conference next year.

McCluskey further upped the stakes by saying Unite would be prepared to end its affiliation if it decided it was no longer being listened to: "The Labour Party has no god-given right to exist. The Labour Party can only exist if it is the voice of ordinary working people and in particular of organised labour."

Though this sounds admirably leftwing, what is really at issue is the power of the trade union bureaucracy, as opposed to those who would turn the Labour Party into a British version of the US Democratic Party. Of course, it was the trade union bureaucracy, an inherently conservative social caste, which made the Labour Party an electoral runner at the start of the 20th century. The big unions switched their support from the Liberals and opted instead for the newly formed party of Kier Hardie and Arthur Henderson. While the trade union bureaucracy has traditionally provided most of the Labour Party's funds, they have often used their block votes and organisational muscle to hold the party to the right and defeat leftwing critics.

That was overtly the case until Tony Blair, who managed to remove the old clause four, turn the annual conference into a media circus, get the backing of the Murdoch empire and secure significant donations from the super-rich, big business and media celebs. For a time it looked as if he was going to delabourise the Labour Party.

So what we are seeing is a rearguard action by the trade union bureaucracy.

For the "Blairite dead", as

McCluskey called them, electoral success is everything; class struggle is old hat. For careerists, on the other hand, gaining office is what it is all about. Their self-justifying claim is that Labour in office can deliver fairness and protect the poor and vulnerable - but fighting for our rights disqualifies us from their benevolence. They see the trade union link, along with strikes and demonstrations, as a vote loser.

Although their candidate, David Miliband, was narrowly defeated, crucially by the votes of trade unionists, in the 2010 leadership election, the Blairites are far from "dead", and remain a threat to the traditional role of the trade union barons in the party. With swathes of MPs, many of them in the shadow cabinet, the 'project' is busily renewing itself. And, through Progress, they are having considerable success - in the selection of council and parliamentary candidates and in setting the agenda for Labour's "priorities in government". Progress is extraordinarily well financed, thanks to the largesse of Lord Sainsbury (see below). Claiming to be merely "a journal which organises events", its mentoring, web of well connected contacts, ability to shoo people in as interns and research assistants, and the production of a wide range of well researched policy papers gives the budding careerist everything they need for success.

## Dossier

It was back in February that the attack on Progress began in earnest, with the circulation to all Constituency Labour Party secretaries of an anonymous dossier: 'A report into the constitution, structure, activities and funding of Progress'.<sup>2</sup>

This dossier informed CLPs that a company called Progress Limited was created in 1994, and is controlled not by shareholders, but by its guarantors, whose names are "unavailable for public inspection". So "we do not know who owns or controls the private company". Its first director, appointed by the guarantors in 1995, was Derek Draper - at the time a researcher for New Labour's 'third man' (after Blair and Brown), Peter Mandelson. Because Progress consists "wholly or mainly" of members of a registered political party, it is legally obliged by the electoral commission to report all donations of £7,500 or more. As a result the dossier was able to reveal the £250,000 per year donated by Lord Sainsbury since 2001, which he raised to £260,000 in 2010.

"Vesting power of political activities ... to a democratically constituted membership structure," the report concludes, "appears entirely absent." Members of Progress receive its journal and discounted access to events, the report says, but have no democratic say in the organisation - more like being a member of a fitness club than a political organisation.

When, in January 2012, Progress announced a range of new officers, there was "no evidence of a notice of poll,

nomination period, electoral procedure, or publication of result, as would be expected in a democratic organisation". Unrepentant ex-New Labour minister Stephen Twigg replaced coalition collaborator Alan Milburn (David Cameron's social mobility tsar) as honorary president, and ex-Liberal Democrat and ex-New Labour minister Lord Andrew Adonis became chairperson.

Unfortunately, the anonymous dossier looked for technical rather than political means to defeat Progress, suggesting the expulsion of Militant as a model. "The last time the NEC considered the matter of non-affiliated organisations operating within our party was during the battle to expel the Militant Tendency, when the NEC determined to set up a 'register of non-affiliated groups to be recognised and allowed to operate within the party'." So in place of the old list of proscribed organisations, the NEC now has a 'legitimate affiliates' list. "The terms of eligibility are revealing - groups had to be open and democratic, should not be allowed to operate their own internal discipline, and could not be associated with any international organisation not supported by Labour or the Socialist International. Where an organisation was unable to meet these criteria, they were to be given a three-month period to put their house in order."

From 1996 to 2006, says the dossier, the media reported Progress as a "Blairite think-tank", but from 2010 it "underwent a transition from loyalty to the leader to providing a platform for supporters of 'New Labour' against the new leader": ie, against Ed Miliband. So, instead of condemning the New Labour politics of Progress, the dossier attacks it for becoming that evil thing, a faction: "Progress has transformed itself into a factional body that self-identifies with New Labour and as such has its own ideology, policies, candidates and campaigns."

The anonymous authors are here displaying their own bureaucratic propensities. They do not recognise a leadership faction as such. So New Labour control-freakery was okay when it demanded "loyalty to the leader", presumably with their backing. "Whilst this form of organisation is distasteful" - god forbid that party members should organise freely around their own ideas (eg, Marxism and the supersession of capitalism) - "we would be foolish to believe that similar organisations do not operate at the fringes of our party. The key difference ... is that those organisations do not have the funding available to Progress ...". Yes, massive business funding is "distasteful" in a workers' party. After all, who pays the piper calls the tune.

The dossier ends with the recommendation that the NEC should set up "an inquiry into the organisation and activities of Progress" and "must consider amending the rules of the party to place constitutional requirements upon members associations in matters of fundraising, governance and discipline". In other words, an administrative fix for a political problem, in a way that strengthens the bureaucracy's control over the rank and file. Unfortunately, Aslef's rule-change proposal fits the bill.

Defending Progress on February 21, Robert Philpot admitted on its website that there was a democratic deficit. Progress "never claimed that membership of the organisation bestows rights other than to receive the magazine and attend our events", he stated. "We are a magazine

which organises events, like the *New Statesman*," he proclaimed, with tactical nous. "There has been no change in Progress's purpose since its creation. The organisation was established to promote the modernisation of the Labour Party and the election or re-election of Labour governments: something we continue to vigorously support."<sup>3</sup>

## Legitimacy

The attack on Progress was continued by Michael Meacher in the *New Statesman* (March 15), repeating everything in the anonymous dossier, including its factual errors and implied condemnation of factions of all hues. He accused Progress of "crossing the red line of legitimacy" from being a political campaigning body to "a party within a party".

In June, the GMB conference carried a resolution against Progress, entitled 'Maintaining unity in the Labour Party', which highlighted its immense business funding and sponsorship and pointed out that "the November 2001 edition of *Progress* magazine sought to undermine Ken Livingstone's campaign for London mayor". The resolution also "noted" that Progress "argued that Labour's front bench needed to support cuts and wage restraint" - thus "Progress advances the strategy of accepting the Tory arguments for public spending cuts."<sup>4</sup>

Unison's Dave Prentis emphasised his dislike of factions, more than of rightwing politics: "Progress seems like a party within a party. Our affiliation is to the Labour Party. We don't expect an organisation to be able to grow within it."<sup>5</sup> Ed Miliband's riposte should be noted, and we should hold him to it with respect to left views and organisations: "We should be a party open to ideas, open to organisations and open to people that want to be part of it, not excluding people or closing it down."<sup>6</sup> But unfortunately he was defending the free expression of *anti-working class* politics within the party.

McCluskey accepted Miliband's argument, undermining Kenny's and Prentis's hard line (but he has now rejoined them with his 'Kick the cuckoo out' slogan). The furore, McCluskey said, was due to "the amount of money being ploughed in". However, "I would be concerned about banning any group. It is a dangerous route to go down."<sup>7</sup>

Progress, for its part, denies having any policies - it simply wants to get Labour into government. But its promotion of New Labour is announced proudly on its website: "Progress is the New Labour pressure group which aims to promote radical and progressive politics for the 21st century."<sup>8</sup> And its business-sponsored events give plenty of scope for ideas which weaken trade union influence and undermine working class party membership. In his speech to the Progress rally at Labour's conference, president Stephen Twigg called for building "Labour supporters' networks in constituencies up and down the country. If we can get hundreds and thousands of Labour supporters signed up, we strengthen our relationship with local communities. And we should then look to reform our party to give supporters a bigger say - perhaps starting with the London mayoral selection for 2016."<sup>9</sup>

This contempt for the right of members to democratically control the party is beautifully illustrated in an angry blog comment by a Progress

supporter: "... does coughing up £40 a year [membership fee] entitle anyone to special privileges [ie, members' rights] over the party to influence policy?"<sup>10</sup>

In response to the demand for "acceptable standards of democracy, governance and transparency", Progress has tried to clean up its undemocratic image. It held an election! A "strategy board" was elected in September, consisting of four members chosen by each section - members, councillors and parliamentarians: 425 members and 86 councillors voted, but the parliamentarians were "uncontested".<sup>11</sup> Trouble is, the elected board does not run the show - it meets just three times a year to "approve" decisions made by the organisation's directors. And it is allowed one "representative on any interview panel constituted to appoint a new director of Progress".<sup>12</sup> In short this is sham democracy.

## Pre-split

Progress, it seems obvious, is a pre-split formation. For all its supporters' proclaimed single-minded devotion to getting Labour elected, their real interest is getting themselves into government. Their chief financial backer, David Sainsbury, was New Labour's chief backer, donating £18.5 million to the party between 1996 and 2008, but when Miliband won the leader election the donations dried up. During the 13 years of New Labour government, he was the longest serving minister.

But Sainsbury has a fickle history. If (when) the fight against austerity produces a stronger Labour left, we should not be surprised to see Sainsbury and Progress ditch Labour and split to the right, as he has done before. After joining Labour in the 1960s, he was one of the 100 signatories of the infamous 1981 'Limehouse declaration', which led to David Owen's Social Democratic Party, a rightwing split because of "the drift towards extremism in the Labour Party" and because "a handful of trade union leaders can now dictate the choice of a future prime minister".<sup>13</sup>

When, after the 1987 general election, the SDP merged with the Liberal Party to form the Liberal Democrats, Sainsbury and David Owen created the "continuing" SDP, which was wound up in 1990. With Labour already committed to neoliberalism by Blair, Sainsbury rejoined in 1996, becoming a key player in Blair's team. A year later, Blair made him a lord. Nothing to do with his money, of course.

The Aslef rule-change proposal is the wrong way to tackle Progress. A capitalist Trojan horse should have no place in a genuine workers' party and Progress should be opposed on that basis.

## Notes

1. *The Sunday Times* September 30.
2. The dossier can be downloaded from <http://liberalconspiracy.org/2012/02/20/revealed-that-dossier-on-progress>.
3. [www.progressonline.org.uk/2012/02/21/response-to-the-recent-document-concerning-progress](http://www.progressonline.org.uk/2012/02/21/response-to-the-recent-document-concerning-progress).
4. [www.gmb.org.uk/pdf/Motion%20154.pdf](http://www.gmb.org.uk/pdf/Motion%20154.pdf).
5. *The Guardian* June 18.
6. *The Guardian* June 22.
7. *Ibid*.
8. [www.progressonline.org.uk](http://www.progressonline.org.uk).
9. [www.progressonline.org.uk/2012/09/30/progress-rally-speech-stephen-twigg](http://www.progressonline.org.uk/2012/09/30/progress-rally-speech-stephen-twigg).
10. [www.progressonline.org.uk/2012/05/12/keynote-address](http://www.progressonline.org.uk/2012/05/12/keynote-address).
11. [www.progressonline.org.uk/2012/09/27/results-of-progress-strategy-board-elections-2012](http://www.progressonline.org.uk/2012/09/27/results-of-progress-strategy-board-elections-2012).
12. [www.progressonline.org.uk/campaigns/progress-strategy-board-elections/terms](http://www.progressonline.org.uk/campaigns/progress-strategy-board-elections/terms).
13. [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Limehouse\\_Declaration](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Limehouse_Declaration).



Lord Sainsbury:  
main backer



## USA

# Crazy politics and class forces

Jim Creegan examines the campaign of the Republican Party in the 2012 presidential elections

When, in the late 1989, the New York real estate mogul Leona Helmsley was standing trial for tax evasion, her fate was sealed when one of her assistants testified that she had said: "We don't pay taxes. Only little people pay taxes." Not only did these words figure in getting the 'queen of mean' sent to jail; they also caused a scandal in the media and in the country at large. Everyone in Helmsley's social set knew that what she said was true, but to say such things to anyone outside her most intimate circle was considered the height of vulgarity and indiscretion.

Now consider the following words, spoken by Mitt Romney to a group of donors at a \$50,000-a-plate fundraiser in Boca Raton, Florida in May concerning likely Obama voters: "There are 47% of the people who will vote for the president, no matter what. All right, there are 47% who are with him, who are dependent upon the government, who believe that they are victims, who believe that the government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to healthcare, to food, to housing - you name it. My job is not to worry about these people. I'll never convince them that they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives."

The above remarks were not intended for public consumption either. They were discovered by a reporter for the leftish magazine, *Mother Jones*, on a private videotape, released in September. Mitt Romney went on television hours after the tape became public to say that he had spoken "inelegantly", but did not retract the substance of his remarks (until weeks later). He declined to do so because these comments, writing off nearly half the American people as parasites and freeloaders, only made fully explicit the deep class contempt that is being voiced with growing boldness by the right, and has in fact emerged as a distinct theme of the 2012 Republican campaign. Sentiments similar to the thoughtlessly blurted-out words of disdain that meant disgrace and jail-time for a *nouveau riche* vulgarian 25 years ago have now come close to being the slogans of one of the country's two major political parties.

At the beginning of the Republican primaries in January, there were widespread expectations that the party might adopt a less strident approach. Romney was seen by many, inside and outside the GOP ('grand old party'), as a 'pragmatic' man of the middle with an

impeccable big-business pedigree. His late father, George Romney, president of American Motors before becoming governor of Michigan in the 1960s, was closely associated with the now virtually extinct liberal wing of the party. His son made his fortune as the CEO of a financial services firm. As governor of the country's most liberal state of Massachusetts, Mitt Romney was responsible for the local healthcare reform bill upon which the president modelled the national medical insurance scheme now known as 'Obamacare'.

Romney's reputation as a moderate establishment figure made the GOP's Tea Party base uneasy. The fact that he is a Mormon was also seen as a negative, because many Christian fundamentalists regard that religion as heretical. Thus several challengers put themselves forward early on as right-populist alternatives. But none of these 'anyone but Romneys' could hope to match the front-runner's formidable campaign war chest, or the determination of the Republican establishment's master strategist, Karl Rove, not to allow the party banner to be seized by any of the bizarre middle class creatures to emerge from the Tea Party swamp.

Not by Rick Perry, the governor of Texas, who had earlier entertained the idea of his state seceding from the American union, and who in one debate was able to name only two of the three federal government agencies he had vowed to abolish.

Not by the black pizza magnate, Herman Cain, who, in addition to being accused of sexual harassment by two women, advocated the abolition of the graduated income tax.

Not by former Republican senator Rick Santorum, a rightwing Catholic who opposes contraception as contrary to the laws of nature and god, and denounced the constitutional separation of church and state, as well as universities, which he characterised as liberal propaganda mills.

Not by Ron Paul, who advocates an isolationist foreign policy and extreme right-libertarianism at home, including the abolition of the

Federal Reserve, and put out a newsletter in the 80s and 90s that, among other racist slurs, called Martin Luther

King a world-class philanderer who seduced under-aged girls and boys.

And not by Newt Gingrich, former speaker of the House of Representatives, an establishment figure who mouthed Tea Party slogans, but repelled voters with an opportunism crass even by Republican standards, and an otherwise thoroughly arrogant and repulsive personality.

As these challengers fell one by one by the wayside, the nomination settled on Mitt Romney as the party's default sanity candidate.

But an increasingly fanatical Republican base is unlikely to be inspired by a candidate who not only looks like a Ken doll, but is as stiff and mechanical as one on the platform. Romney is also afflicted with a severe case of foot-in-mouth disease. Readers of this paper are no doubt familiar with his singular achievement of getting himself denounced in public by the leader of the world's most Republican-like party, and prime minister of America's closest ally, David Cameron, for implying that London might not have been ready for the Olympics. But it is the pattern of domestic campaign gaffes that gave voters a glimpse into the insulated world of wealth the Republican standard-bearer takes for granted.

In one campaign speech Romney said he favours private health insurance because it allows people to get rid of a given plan if it does not meet their needs. He then added that he "liked to be able to fire people" who do not give him what he wants. The liberal media instantly made the connection - if it escaped the notice of the candidate himself - between this remark and Romney's role as former CEO of Bain capital, a vulture capitalist firm that specialises in taking over various companies, 'downsizing' them (read: giving a good number of employees the sack) and then flipping them for a profit.

This was only the first of a string of blunders long enough to run the length of the campaign trail. During one of the primary candidates' debates, Romney casually offered to bet one of his opponents \$10,000, as a less prosperous individual might wager \$10. Stopping in Detroit, Romney attempted to highlight his support for the auto industry by revealing that his wife "drives a couple Cadillacs".

Seeking further to burnish his common-man credentials, Romney said that not only was he a fan of (American) football and stock car racing, but was personally acquainted with several team owners. His wife, Ann, also sought to counter suggestions that she and her husband were oblivious to the concerns of ordinary folk, when, comparing her fortune unfavourably to that of Bill Gates, she said, "I don't really consider myself wealthy" (the Romneys have an estimated net worth of \$250 million, with a good chunk of it stashed in the tax shelters of Bermuda and the Cayman Islands).

In the beginning, Romney steadfastly refused to release his federal income tax returns. When it was pointed out that his father, entering the Republican primaries in

the 60s, made public 10 years of his returns, his son reluctantly consented, at different intervals, to release his filings for 2010 and 2011. With most of his \$13 million income for 2011 coming from stocks and bonds, the Romneys paid an overall rate of just under 14%, approximating the 15% levied on capital gains in the current tax code. A person earning \$35,000 in wages, on the other hand, would pay over 20%. Romney wants to cut capital gains still further.

## Fateful choice

Yet Romney's offhand bits of ruling class candour, rather than being a cause for embarrassment to his party, were a mere foretaste of untethered class arrogance to follow.

In the past, both parties have sought to distract attention from their shared pro-business agenda by playing up non-economic, so-called social issues: defence of 'family values' (opposition to abortion and gay marriage), opposition to immigration and racial resentment for the Republicans; support of 'choice' and 'diversity' for the Democrats (the rights of women and minorities that many Democrats favour are by no means unimportant or merely diversionary; they are, however, non-class issues with which Democrats put a 'progressive' veneer on their austerity agenda). The attempt by both parties to hide behind 'social issues', however, is undermined by persisting high unemployment rates and mortgage-delinquency foreclosures, which place economic questions at the forefront of this campaign. The Republicans, of course, have adopted blaming Obama for the continuing mess as their principal tactic. But this has not acquired the traction they hoped for, since the continuing crisis originated under George W Bush, and an economic focus only raises questions about the remedies the Republicans are putting forward.

In fact, they have nothing more to offer than the budget balancing and trickle-down economics they have peddled for decades: encouraging 'job creators' (read: capitalists) to invest by removing government constraints on their profit-making and favouring them with ever greater subsidies and tax breaks. Yet these gifts to the ruling class were presented to the public in the past at least partly as technical prescriptions, motivated by concern for the unemployed. The Romney campaign, while also motivating its policy ideas in the usual ways, cannot seem to resist the additional temptation to present them as moral imperatives based on the intrinsic worthiness of rich people.

The initial step in the direction of frontal class assault was Romney's pledge to make the repeal of 'Obamacare' his first order of business if elected (despite the fact that it is modelled on a bill Romney himself authored, underscoring the candidate's complete inauthenticity). The second step was taken in mid-August, when Romney selected Paul Ryan as his vice-presidential running mate. Considered the intellectual *Wunderkind* of the Republican Party, this 42-year-old member of the House of Representatives from Wisconsin, and Tea Party favourite, had recently emerged as the GOP point-man on budgetary matters.

Ryan claims to be inspired by the Ayn Rand doctrine of transcendental selfishness (except for her atheism, which he, as a Catholic, disavows). He made a name for himself in 2011,

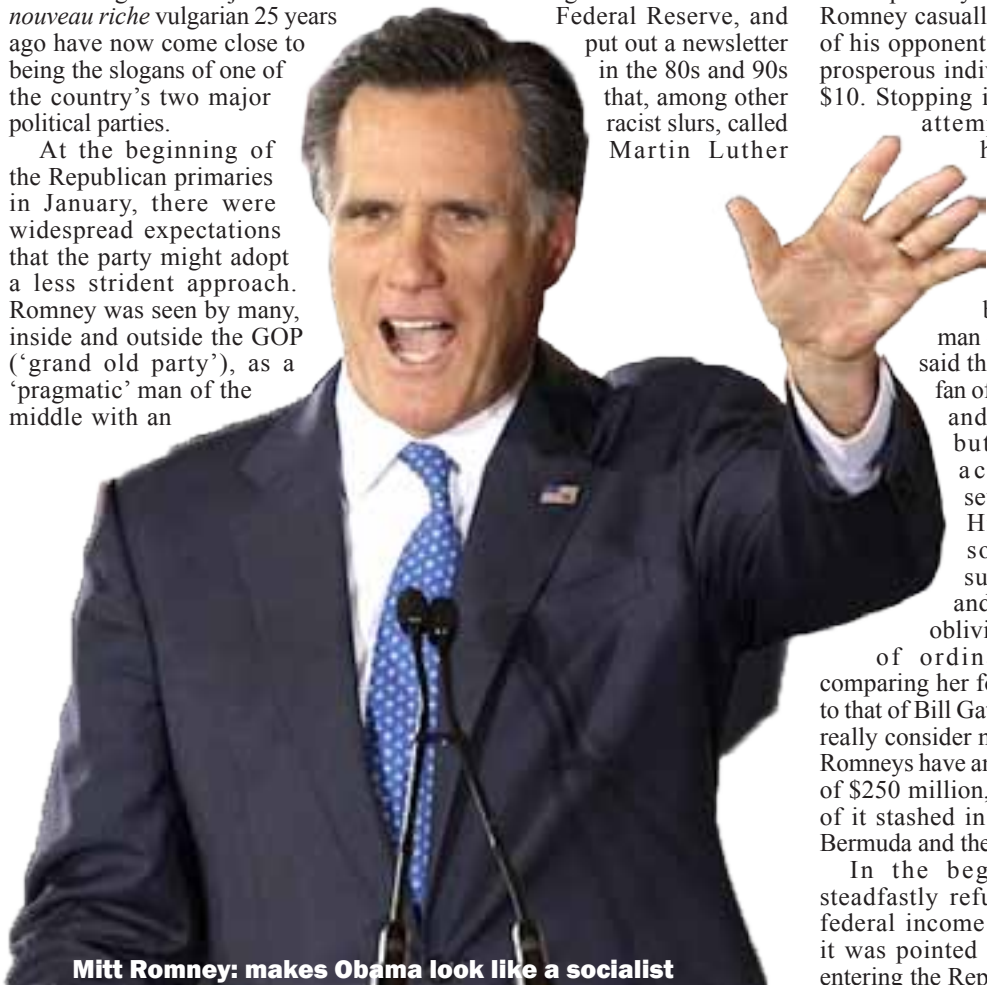
when he introduced a radical budget bill that passed the Republican-dominated House, but was defeated in the Democratic-majority Senate. With the nomination of Ryan as number two on the ticket, Romney chose to elevate the essentials of this bill ('Ryanomics') to the status of a national Republican platform.

The Ryan budget advocates big reductions in government programmes that benefit the poor and elderly in the name of reining in government debt and ultimately balancing the federal budget, despite the fact that Ryan himself voted for 66 fiscally expansionary measures during the Bush administration, under which most of the present federal deficit was accumulated. Moreover, Ryan's numbers do not add up. The cuts he proposes - in government-sponsored student loans, food coupons and medical care - would save the government about \$1.7 trillion over the next 10 years, according to *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman (August 20). At the same time, Ryan favours increasing military spending, and proposes tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy that would cost the government about \$4.3 trillion over the same period. Ryan says he will make up the difference through the closing of tax loopholes he refuses to name, and further spending cuts he also declines to identify.

By far the heaviest blows of Ryan's budgetary axe will fall on the old. He advocates raising the minimum eligibility age for social security (government old-age pension) from 65 to 67 and subjecting the benefit to means testing. (His earlier budget included a proposal to convert part of social security to private accounts, although this has now been dropped.) Ryan also advocates turning Medicaid, which provides free medical care to the indigent, into a "block grant", to be administered by the states according to their own rules rather than as aid from the federal government, to which all qualified applicants are now entitled.

But his most audacious proposal is to turn Medicare - which pays the bulk of hospital and doctor bills for those over 65 - into a voucher plan. Instead of the current guaranteed cover for 80% of all medical bills, Ryan would give each "senior citizen" a fixed amount of money with which to purchase private insurance. Though pegged to current costs and indexed to inflation, such vouchers could hardly keep pace with the notoriously skyrocketing costs of healthcare. Ryan, to be sure, is nimbler on the hustings than his running mate. But are his public relations talents worth the risk of frightening the older people who comprise the country's largest single voter demographic, including the older white voters who make up a substantial part of the Republican base? It is doubtful whether Ryan's fulsome assurances that his plan will not affect those now under 55, or that traditional Medicare will continue to remain an option for seniors, will serve to allay suspicions that his attack on the most popular government programme since the New Deal is only the first step in a plan to do away with it altogether.

By making a direct attack on key elements of the 'welfare state' the centrepiece of his campaign with the selection of Ryan, Romney seems to calculate that his main chance for the White House depends not on capturing undecided voters, but rather in maximising turnout among the GOP's Tea Party enthusiasts.



Mitt Romney: makes Obama look like a socialist



The efforts of Karl Rove and co did in fact succeed in keeping some the party’s zanier middle class characters from capturing the nomination. But the candidate actually chosen as the party’s more respectable face is nevertheless pushing the Tea Party economic agenda.

### ‘We built it!’

The Republican national convention, held in Tampa, Florida at the end of August, was the high point of a campaign that lived up to the party’s reputation for mendacity.

Shortly before it opened, the party had been running television adverts claiming that Obama aimed to abolish the federal work requirement for welfare payments, adopted under Bill Clinton. Although the assertion had no basis in fact - Obama in fact sought to give the states more leeway in determining what kind of work recipients would do - the Republicans refused to retract the advert. At the convention itself, Paul Ryan gave an acceptance speech in which he sought to blame Obama for the closing of a General Motors plant in Ryan’s home town of Janesville, Wisconsin. He neglected to add that the closing took place before Obama took office, under the presidency of George W Bush - a non-person at the convention due to the fact that his eight-year presidency was a universally recognised debacle. When it was pointed out to him that Ryan’s statement was deliberately misleading, a Republican pollster named Neil Newhouse replied: “We’re not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact-checkers.”

The standard Republican ‘social issues’ were also in the Tampa platform, including an anti-abortion plank that made no exception for rape victims. Romney sought in addition to appease rightwing, anti-immigrant sentiment at the expense any potential appeal for Latino votes: he vowed to veto the Obama-sponsored Dream Act, which would give illegal immigrants brought to the US as children a path to citizenship via university enrolment and military service. He also voiced support for building a wall across the Texas-Mexico border to keep Mexicans out.

In addition, Romney advocates a vaguely more aggressive US foreign policy, aimed at restoring America to its status as undisputed world policeman, but has provided few specifics. Partly to repay his biggest single campaign donor, an international gambling casino magnate and arch-Zionist named Sheldon Adelson, Romney has accused Obama of “throwing Israel under the bus” for not being tougher on Iran. Romney has also made some noises about Obama being a bit too friendly to the newly elected Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt. But the favourite Republican trope of accusing the Democrats of weakness on ‘national security’ falls flat when levelled against the president who killed Osama bin Laden and has made drone strikes his foreign policy signature.

Talk about ‘social issues’ and foreign policy, however, could scarcely be heard above the thunderous affirmation of bourgeois supremacy that was the keynote of the convention. “We built it!” read the banner draped across one wall of the stadium. The slogan was an implied riposte to remarks of the Democratic Massachusetts Senatorial candidate, Elizabeth Warren, later echoed by Obama, to the effect that business-owners and investors did not build their enterprises entirely with their own two hands, but relied on services provided by the larger society as well. The ‘it’ of the slogan was ambiguous enough to refer not only to business, but to the country as a whole, the implication being that, since ‘we’ white property-owners were the

ones who built ‘it’, ‘we’ are also ‘its’ rightful owners. Paul Krugman commented:

... the fact is that the modern Republican Party just doesn’t have much respect for people who work for other people ... All the party’s affection is reserved for “job creators”, aka employers and investors. Leading figures in the party find it hard to even to pretend to have any regard for ordinary working families - who, it goes without saying, make up the vast majority of Americans .... consider Mr Romney’s speech at the Republican national convention. What did he have to say about American workers? Actually, nothing: the words ‘worker’ or ‘workers’ never passed his lips.

.... And when Mr Romney waxed rhapsodic about the opportunities America offered to immigrants, he declared that they came in pursuit of “freedom to build a business”. What about those who came here not to found businesses, but simply to make an honest living? Not worth mentioning

.... In the eyes of those who share this vision, the wealthy deserve special treatment, and not just in the form of low taxes. They must also receive respect, indeed deference, at all times. That’s why even the slightest hint from the president that the rich might not be all that - that, say, some bankers may have behaved badly, or that even ‘job-creators’ depend on government-built infrastructure - elicits frantic cries that Mr Obama is a socialist (*The New York Times* September 21).

### Whose party?

The right turn in the Republican Party has been the occasion of much argument and analysis, not least in the pages of the *Weekly Worker*. Is the party’s ‘extremism’ driven by an increasingly frenzied petty bourgeois base, or have its big financial backers moved sharply to the right as well? The answer seems to be a bit of both.

This writer has tried to analyse the class composition and social psychology of the Tea Party’s *enragés* in a previous article (‘Tea Party tempest’ *Weekly Worker* March 18 2010). Upon reflection, I think that article, which emphasised the ethnic and generational aspects of the Tea Party, gave short shrift to what is perhaps the movement’s principal bond: the myth of the heroic, self-reliant entrepreneur. The myth goes beyond the Tea Party. It is the bedrock of American false consciousness. No politician, Republican or Democrat, can give a speech these days without paying homage to ‘small businesses’ at least two or three times. Big business people often like to pretend to be small ones; workers who own little more than the houses they live in and the cars they drive have business cards printed up; and even some self-proclaimed socialists have abandoned the notion of social planning in favour of ownership by workers at the enterprise level. At its core, the myth is borne of the desire for social autonomy. It is mythological because it overestimates the degree of autonomy that the petty bourgeoisie actually has, as well as the opportunities society offers for their success But does it lack all relation to reality?

Many Marxists tend to be dismissive of the role of small business, deeming it insignificant in corporate-dominated economy, and regarding its continuing hold on the American imagination as a residue of times gone by, like legends of the wild west. But Wall Street historian Steve Fraser, in a recent review of *Pity the billionaire*,

criticises the assumption of its author, Thomas Frank, that the world of the petty entrepreneur is largely a thing of the past:

... the tumultuous evolution of capitalism over the past hundred years - especially during our age of ‘flexible capitalism’, with global corporations offloading all sorts of functions once performed internally onto a menagerie of contractors, subcontractors and ‘free agents’ - has repeatedly offered fresh possibilities for small and medium-sized family businesses, even while power and wealth are being concentrated elsewhere. This world can’t be consigned to some museum of early capitalist curiosities just yet (*The Nation* May 21).

Commenting further on small-business psychology, Fraser adds:

... among men and women who have struggled to create their own businesses (or dream of doing so), and whose determination is an affirmation of their self-reliance, ingenuity, discipline and moral stamina, conflating the free market with freedom is instinctive. It is a passion, blind as passions can be. Consequently, they are reluctant to credit their material dependence on an array of local, state and federal government programmes and bureaucracies ... (*ibid*)

Small and medium-sized entrepreneurs do indeed have their grievances against big banks and corporations. But the grievances are often insubstantial compared to the aspirations that incline the small proprietor to regard the big bourgeois as a model. Did not the Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg come from middle class obscurity? The ruling class must, after all, renew itself periodically from outside its ranks. Although the old American fortunes (Rockefellers, Mellons, etc) have by no means disappeared, the 80s and 90s saw the rise of great new fortunes based on the junk bond, high tech and real estate manias of those years. There is still, in other words, a significant interface between the big and petty bourgeoisie.

Many of the new billionaires are middle class parvenus who retain the go-it-alone attitudes of middling ranks from which they rose. Unlike the bluebloods who came before, they never faced the challenge of revolutions abroad or labour battles at home. They live in financial-sector and high-tech bubbles. The only workers many come in contact with are chauffeurs, secretaries and office cleaners. They therefore have little use for the rhetoric of class conciliation or *noblesse oblige*. They see no need to pose as custodians of the capitalist system as a whole, or to engage the services of the politicians, lawyers or social engineers who try to sell them their expertise in smoothing over social conflicts. They see themselves engaged in a competition in which success depends upon mastery of the advanced technology and arcane financial instruments from which today’s great fortunes flow. The Everests of lucre upon which they sit are, in their eyes, the reward for mastering the techniques and playing the game better than anyone else. If, as they believe, money is the principal measure of intelligence and worth, and they possess it in multiples inconceivable to the ordinary person, by those same multiples do they think they exceed the ordinary person in intelligence and worth. They demand not only recognition, but celebration, of their superiority. They see themselves not as skimmers of profit, but as creators of wealth, and as such the main benefactors of society.

Mitt Romney surely panders to

these attitudes, but also to a large extent embodies them. The existing tensions between the top and base of the Republican Party should not be taken as indicating the existence of two hardened factions. It is true that the Republican establishment does not want the party represented by the crazies or idiots who proliferate in small town and suburbs. But those at the top believe their billions come from individual creativity and relentless striving, while those at the base believe that these two virtues are their path to the top.

### Wall Street for Romney

The big Wall Street players are casting an early vote for Romney with their cheque books. This is a major change from 2008, when Obama raised about \$16 million from the financial sector, compared with John McCain’s \$9 million. This time round, the \$4.8 million raised by Obama from Wall Street as of June was dwarfed by the \$37 million that flowed to the Romney campaign (*Slate* June 13). The cascade was facilitated by the Supreme Court’s ‘Citizen’s united’ decision permitting unlimited corporate political donations, which has fuelled multiple super-PACs (political action committees), with untold amounts of cash.

This Wall Street shift may seem peculiar in light of the fact that the financial sector has prospered under Obama. There is, however, widespread grumbling about the Dodd-Frank bill, which, in the wake of the 2007-08 meltdown, placed certain less than ironclad limits on the ability of bankers to speculate with their own funds, and created a Consumer Protection Bureau, which Obama made a point of placing under banker-friendly supervision. But even minimal nods in the direction of regulation were apparently too much for the rough and ready guys of the stock exchange.

But what really irks Wall Street is the blood-curdling anti-capitalist rhetoric that Obama has unleashed against them in the last couple years. Take for example the gauntlet he threw down during last year’s budget-ceiling battle: “If you are a wealthy CEO or hedge-fund manager in America right now, your taxes are lower than they have ever been. They are lower than they have been since the 1950s. You can still ride your corporate jet. You’re just going to have to pay a little more (*The New Yorker* October 8).

Christia Freeland, a chronicler of the lives of these thin-skinned John Galts, reports that a highly influential hedge-fund manager, Leon Cooperman, considers words like these “a declaration of class warfare”, on a par with the rantings of Hitler (*ibid*).

### Fly in the ointment

Political democracy has always presented certain difficulties for the bourgeoisie. Chief among these is that the majority of people for whose votes they must appeal live from work and not off property, and cannot therefore always be counted to lend a sympathetic ear to travails of the of the ruling class. Hence there have arisen in the democratic age modern bourgeois parties that have elevated the concealment of the class’s real interests, and the manipulation of popular fears and prejudices, into a highly polished art.

There is, moreover, a division of labour between the bourgeoisie and its political minions. The former rake in the profits and supply the funds, while the latter, much like public relations firms, invent the strategies and slogans intended for mass consumption. But when, as in the case of the Romney campaign, the ruling class - self-infatuated, afflicted with

historical amnesia and besotted with riches beyond the dreams of Croesus - begins to drop its inhibitions and proclaim its superiority from the rooftops, problems will arise. Even when aided by the notorious lack of class-consciousness among American workers, and backed by a solid layer of the petty bourgeoisie, demanding that the people sacrifice so the rich can thrive can still be a hard sell. This is why the Republicans are attempting to supplement their paeans to private property with the second, more practical tactic of voter suppression.

Efforts to restrict the franchise are being carried out at the state level, in states with Republican-majority legislatures and/or governors. Their ostensible purpose is to curtail voter fraud, a phenomenon that in fact is virtually non-existent. From 2002 to 2007, federal prosecutors convicted only 86 people for voter fraud out of 300 million voters. A report by the New York University School of Law stated: “It is more likely that an individual will be struck by lightning than he will impersonate a voter at the polls” (*Rolling Stone* August 30 2011).

Yet the past several years have witnessed a spate of state laws that aim to restrict early voting, deny the franchise to convicted felons, eliminate same-day voter registration, and require photo IDs on election day. Attempts to pass such laws have been made in many states, but are particularly significant in the ones known to go either way in national elections, the ‘swing states’ of Florida, Ohio and Pennsylvania. Reminiscent of the poll taxes and literacy tests intended to keep blacks from voting in the Jim Crow south, they create obstacles deliberately designed to affect precisely those groups whose voting surges gave Obama his 2008 victory: blacks, Latinos, poor people and the young. All pretence of combating voter fraud was flung to the winds by the Pennsylvania Republican House majority leader, Mike Turzai, when he remarked upon the passage of one such legislative measure: “Voter ID, which is going to allow governor Romney to win the state of Pennsylvania. Done.”

But Turzai’s law, along with many other such voter-suppression efforts, are being overturned in various state and federal courts. And, more than that, the Boca Raton “47%” video, discussed above, rendered unmistakable in millions of minds the message the Republican Party has been projecting in slightly less explicit ways since the beginning of the campaign: that it is a party of property and privilege, dripping with contempt for everyone else: ie, the majority. Immediately following the revelation, not only Obama, but Democratic candidates all over the country, received a substantial boost in the polls, as Republican contenders for House and Senate seats scrambled to distance themselves from their party’s standard-bearer.

At the time of writing, Romney has rebounded somewhat as a result of a nationally televised debate in which he tried to soften the party’s image with confidently delivered lies about its own publicly declared positions. Obama, still filled with the spirit of capitulation that has marked his first term, was unable to punch back, throwing his supporters into a panic. But, in this writer’s opinion, Romney’s second wind will soon be spent, and the ruling class majority that backed him will awaken on the historically freighted election-day morrow of November 7 to find themselves the victim of the fall that pride precedes. And from that fall, they might just have wit enough left to conclude that the rhetoric of class conciliation and shared sacrifice deployed by Obama is still more effective in disarming the working class than the politics of ‘in your face’ ●



## OBITUARY

# Unrepentance of Eric Hobsbawm

The death of Eric Hobsbawm was greeted, for the most part, with highly respectful eulogies. Across the bourgeois political spectrum, many a good word was found for the man who, until October 1, was the officially designated 'greatest living Marxist historian'.

It was perhaps not a surprise to find tributes on the pages of *The Guardian* and the lips of Ed Miliband - who, after all, is something of a 'red diaper baby' himself. Others were slightly more surprising - such as the fond farewell to a "good friend" that came from Niall Ferguson, the perpetual Tory boy charlatan. "He and I shared the belief that it was economic change, above all, that shaped the modern era," Ferguson wrote. "The fact that he sided with the workers and peasants, while I side with the bourgeoisie, was no obstacle to friendship."<sup>1</sup>

Others of Ferguson's general stripe were less amiable. The irrepressible Michael Burleigh castigated Hobsbawm for being a "believer in the red utopia to the very end" in the *Torygraph*,<sup>2</sup> while AN Wilson rather juicily suggested in the *Daily Mail* that Hobsbawm may have recruited agents for the Soviet Union at Cambridge University - a charge, alas, unsullied by anything resembling evidence.<sup>3</sup>

### Communist

The bourgeois commentariat is united on one point - Hobsbawm was, to his death, an unrepentant Marxist. His commitment to the communist cause is a rather more complicated beast than that, but it is certainly true that his subjective commitment to the movement that, in Britain at least, predeceased him by over two decades, was tenacious.

This was in the main a consequence of the circumstances that brought him into that movement. Born to Jewish parents, he was a schoolboy in Berlin when Hitler came to power; his family immediately decamped to England. The young Hobsbawm witnessed Hitler's rise first hand, and saw from a relatively safe distance the shadow of fascism spreading over Europe. At the head of those struggling against that barbarism, for better or worse, were the communist parties.

Hobsbawm returned from military service in World War II to the political freeze of the cold war; he was one of many communist intellectuals to promptly bury himself away in academia, ducking the intensifying anti-communist mood more or less successfully (although, unsurprisingly, the secret services kept a substantial file on him). It was in this capacity - as a lecturer and professor at Birkbeck College in London and a fellow of King's College, Cambridge - that he made his most lasting mark on British intellectual life.

Hobsbawm rapidly came into the Communist Party Historians Group, whose influence both within and without the left is well known; the group launched his career, and those of comrades such as Christopher Hill, EP Thompson and John Saville. The watchword for the group was 'history from below'; history was no longer to be thought of as the playground of Great Men or an abstract sequence of events that culminates in bourgeois society as the apogee, but rather as a field in which the toiling masses are key agents.

Hobsbawm's central contribution to this project was the three-volume history of what he called the "long 19th century", joining up two decisive events in modern European history - the French Revolution of 1789 and the great war of 1914 - through a complex intervening narrative. He hewed



Neil Kinnock's 'favourite Marxist'

closer to economic-technological explanations for historical change than, say, Thompson - but always in the context of popular life and struggles.

All of Hobsbawm's major writings postdate the major crisis-point in the Historians Group - the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. That year is well known as having plunged the 'official' communist movement internationally into a serious internal crisis, as activists and intellectuals struggled both with Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin and with the crushing of the Hungarian uprising. Hobsbawm, almost uniquely among his colleagues, stuck with the CPGB, approving "with a heavy heart" and not without criticisms of the Soviet intervention.

He would later look back on the 1950s cold war atmosphere in academia as oppressive, but not intolerable: "You didn't get promotion for 10 years, but nobody threw you out." Something similar was on offer to intellectuals of a Stalinist persuasion in the communist parties. Hobsbawm's interventions in the CPGB were characterised throughout by a certain academic distance from the cut and thrust of factional struggle. He was able to praise presumptively the French student revolts of 1968 - provided he kept from criticising the French party when it abdicated its responsibility.

### Eurocommunist

But 1968 was not a turning point to the left, as it may first have appeared, in 'official' communism. Discontent with another Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia sped up the crystallisation of so-called

Eurocommunism - in the western parties; by the late 1970s, the Euros were a well-established and influential faction in the CPGB.

Hobsbawm's sympathy for this trend was plain for all to see. In 1977, he published a volume of interviews with Giorgio Napolitano (then leader of the Communist Party of Italy; now the country's president), which had, the previous decade, been the crucible for Eurocommunism, the great "triumph" having been the "historic compromise", which saw a coalition government between the PCI and the Christian Democrats (as comrade Toby Abse has put it, the Christian Democrats made the history, while the communists made the compromise).

The following year, he delivered the annual Marx Memorial lecture, the text of which became the infamous essay, 'Forward march of labour halted?' His argument was simple and somewhat statistics-heavy: the CPGB's focus on developing its ranks through the trade unions and the traditional labour movement left it vulnerable to ongoing changes in the structure of the British labour force. The extension of women's employment, the declining overall share of manual workers in the total workforce - all pointed to the unsustainability of the view that the labour movement was on a perpetual forward march to social dominance. Hobsbawm concludes by suggesting that we need a less economic vision of the working class.<sup>4</sup>

The essay is in fact an object lesson in how the history of ideas works. There is very little in it that is, at face value, objectionable from the point of view of revolutionary Marxism - even its vague conclusions. The *meaning* it took on in the context of 1978 - the

year of the 'winter of discontent', that rounded off a decade of militant labour struggles - was unmistakable. Soviet-loyal centrists in the CPGB, such as the Straight Left faction, were also the most enthusiastic advocates of work in the unions and labour movement as a whole; dismissing this period of industrial militancy as, in a sense, the last gasp of that movement, fired a shot across the bows of such elements, and emboldened the Euros.

It became the opening sally, if you will, of the 'long 1980s' in the CPGB, a period of decay and dissolution; seized on (as was intended) by the Eurocommunists to justify not a less economic working class politics, but an ever more intense disavowal of class politics altogether, culminating in the formal liquidation of the CPGB in 1991.

Hobsbawm's political activity in the 1980s was of this character. It was not only Martin Jacques, the Euro editor of *Marxism Today*, who seized on 'Forward march ...', but Neil Kinnock, who described Hobsbawm as his "favourite Marxist". Hobsbawm provided the intellectual meat for the wholesale decimation of the Labour left by the Labour Party bureaucracy. The *ultimate* result was the Tony Blair government, which at different times included a number of former Euros.

### Unrepentant?

The greatest irony of Eurocommunism is that it promised a 'third way' between social democracy and pro-Soviet communism, but ended up on the 'third way' as we now recognise it - that is, a political project radically to the *right* of the social democratic mainstream of the 1980s.

It is to Hobsbawm's credit that his

drift to the right stopped well short of certain former 'comrades' ("I used to be a Marxist," sneered former Blair-era home secretary John Reid once - "I used to believe in Santa Claus"). In a rogue's gallery that includes not only Jacques and Reid, but also Jack Straw and the prince of darkness himself, Peter Mandelson, Hobsbawm stands out as the most principled of a pretty unprincipled bunch.

He continued to avow a commitment to the Marxist method - as he understood it - to his death. He scandalised the good people of the BBC by affirming that, in his view, 20 million deaths would have been justified if they had genuinely ushered in a communist society. Despite having abandoned more or less every direct political commitment to communism, he refused to lower the flag.

In the end, this was an emotional problem for him, rather than a political one. His writings on the 20th century are slippery and evasive, in order to keep open the possibility that 'official communism' was a legitimate - indeed, the only correct - political choice for progressive individuals of his generation.

We may grant Hobsbawm his unrepentance - but that sentimental attachment to Stalinism did not, in the end, strengthen the cause to which he committed almost his whole adult life. Rather it led him to prepare the ground for Blair.

Harley Filben

### Notes

1. *The Guardian* October 1.
2. *The Daily Telegraph* October 1.
3. *Daily Mail* October 1.
4. [www.amielandmelburn.org.uk/collections/mt/pdf/78\\_09\\_hobsbawm.pdf](http://www.amielandmelburn.org.uk/collections/mt/pdf/78_09_hobsbawm.pdf).



## REVIEW

# Accepting assertion as fact

Dr Brooke Magnanti **The sex myth: why everything we're told is wrong** Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2012, pp272, £14.99

**D**r Brook Magnanti's book is a very worthwhile read. Over the course of 270 pages she makes a good job of debunking the myths, breaking through the hype and addressing the moral outrage and panic surrounding issues of sex, albeit from a liberal perspective. The book is well researched and covers a range of controversial topics - recognising women's sexual arousal by visual stimulation, questioning the numbers behind sex trafficking statistics, tackling the perceived early sexualisation of young people and its negative effects (or lack thereof).

Dr Magnanti herself comes from an interesting background. While an American (very noticeable from her writing style), she studied, lives and works in the UK, and so she discusses these issues with reference to both UK and US politics. Magnanti has professional interests in population-based research, standards of evidence, human biology and anthropology - all of which are evident within this study. In addition to her academic qualifications in genetic epidemiology and forensic pathology, she has worked as a call girl and authored the bestselling *Belle de jour* memoirs, which went on to be adapted into the TV series, *Secret diary of a call girl*. This, rather than giving her kudos for her real-life experience in the sex industry, has caused her to be discredited (and arguably patronised) in the eyes of intellectual feminists, *Guardian* columnists and well-meaning liberals alike.

In this book Magnanti takes on both the moralising left and evangelist right. She has three terms: "agenda-setter" (companies, NGOs, etc with an interest in a particular view); "constellation-makers" (those who draw conclusions from information "based on their exact position on Earth at a given time", without any hard evidence); and "evangelisers" (those who spread the word because it suits their world view). She views these three groups as key to creating accepted views about sex and sexuality that often have little or no factual basis.

The book begins with an exploration of women's sexual arousal. It is still a commonly held view (among both men and women) that, while men are sexually aroused by visual stimuli, it is emotional attachments that trigger sexual arousal in women. Magnanti cites a series of studies which analyse visual, verbal and genital responses on groups of both heterosexual and homosexual men and women watching a range of pornography. The results are perhaps surprising. While (straight or gay) men's physical responses are in line with their verbal description of what turns them on, straight women who claim to be aroused only by heterosexual intercourse in fact respond to a variety of other images.

Magnanti goes on to describe the concept of 'sexual addiction' as a false epidemic that particularly seems to affect celebrity types. (Of course, the religious right have a lot to say about sexual addiction - possibly because some of their leading practitioners have been afflicted by it - and they seem to make a lot of money out of 'curing' it.) She quotes Dr Patrick Carnes, co-founder of the Gentle Path sex addiction programme (the centre that treated Tiger Woods), who defines sexual addiction on his website as including at least some of the



**Brook Magnanti: taking on moralising left and evangelist right**

following: "compulsive masturbation, compulsive heterosexual and homosexual relationships, pornography, prostitution, exhibitionism, voyeurism, indecent phone calls, child-molesting, incest, rape and violence" (p37). As Magnanti points out, child molestation and rape require a rather different response from, for example, approaches to excessive masturbation.

Carnes also boasts a "sexual addiction screening test" - a truly absurd series of questions, to which the respondent answers 'yes' or 'no'. A prime examples is: "Has sex (or romantic fantasies) been a way to escape your problems?" I would suggest that such a definition would make everyone reading this a sex addict and, as Magnanti points out, "Isn't that more or less the very definition of a fantasy?" (p38). The issue is, of course, as she goes on to explain, that if you start to diagnose something as a disease then you offer 'treatment' for it. Which means that therapists, insurance companies and evangelical churches, with their anti-porn, anti-sex moral crusades, also have an agenda at play here. Aptly, a researcher is quoted at the end of this chapter as quipping: "A nymphomaniac is someone who has more sex than you."

### Moral panic

In the next chapter Magnanti challenges the idea that contemporary culture leads to the early sexualisation of children - a notion that has driven a moral panic espoused with relish by the tabloid media. Quite correctly, she points out that this is simply a matter of what is considered acceptable (and who are considered children). While some would consider skimpy outfits immodest, others would take the same view of female uncovered hair (and, of course, such standards of 'modesty' apply only to women or girls).

Magnanti goes on to argue that responsibility for what is acceptable should lie with the family. This is where it is worth taking issue with her, insofar as that may be true to an extent with young children, but, as the author herself points out, what is appropriate for a toddler would not be suitable for a teenager. In any case, children and young people should not be regarded simply as the property of their families.

Magnanti questions the media furore around push-up bras for pre-

teens, etc (even on supposedly intelligent programmes such as *Newsnight*), on the grounds that they might actually be needed, as the age at which girls are reaching puberty continues to get younger. She takes on the 'evidence' of reports into the sexualisation of young people, such as that of the UK government in 2009, which was launched by then home secretary Jacqui Smith, glamour model Danielle Lloyd and psychologist Linda Papadopoulos (who, as I recall, used to feature regularly on daytime TV shows). The 2009 report, Magnanti argues, "describes a world where girls who can barely walk are given high heels and Playboy tees", and this is blamed for everything from violence to anorexia (p59). The report introduced no new material, but relied solely on referencing existing research (ie, it was a literature review, not a piece of research in its own right), but this did not stop it coming up with policy recommendations for the Labour government.

Magnanti goes on to question the academic integrity of other papers of this nature, querying the agenda of those behind them, and pointing to their merely anecdotal evidence and assumed correlations. In terms of academic integrity, she takes issue with data produced by public opinion polls used to influence policy. The data can be affected by the way the question is posed or simply how the researchers choose to present the figures. Anecdotal evidence is all well and good, as long as one recognises it for what it is. And the fact that an opinion is widely held does not make it factually correct: eg, in parts of America creationist ideas might hold sway in popular belief, but this does not negate the evidence for evolution.

One of my favourite chapters in the book is entitled 'Myth: when adult businesses move into a city, the occurrence of rape and sexual assault goes up'. This is interesting, as it challenges commonly held views of feminist groups and campaigners against domestic and sexual violence, just as much as those we would more readily expect to find ourselves opposing (the church, pharmaceutical companies, the state). Remember the Socialist Workers Party, Respect and George Galloway wanting to 'clean up' London's East End in 2006? This shows that 'evangelisers' of all types are all too

eager to endlessly repeat data that supports their world view, even if it has long since been discredited.

The chapter looks at incidents of rape in the London Borough of Camden since a licence was granted for Spearmint Rhino to open (Spearmint Rhino differs from other lap-dancing establishments in that it features full nudity). A 2003 study showed that incidents of rape had risen by 50% in areas surrounding lap-dancing clubs - sparking many a headline. But, as Magnanti points out, "correlation is not the same as causation" (p84) - a very basic principle in all scientific research. The women's charity, Lilit, published data showing an increase in reported incidents of rape in Camden from 72 to 96 (actually a 33% rise) comparing 1999 and 2003. This was a very small sample dealing with just one borough, but, even so, the report failed to take into account the increase in population, which would leave us with a proportional rise of just under 18%. Neither did it factor in the trend over a longer period for the number of incidents to fluctuate considerably year by year - sometimes up, sometimes down. The overall trend shows that rapes in Camden are thankfully falling, not rising (assuming that the ratio between reported and actual rapes has remained constant).

### Prostitution

Other chapters ask whether pornography objectifies women and whether restricting or banning prostitution would end the exchange of sex for money. The motivations of those who oppose sex work are examined, revealing the hypocrisy and often ignorance of the moral crusaders, both left and right.

While most of what is raised here is no doubt fair, Magnanti occasionally bends the stick too far. Although she makes valid points about the favourable pay and conditions for porn actresses, as opposed to their male counterparts, she argues that the men are mere "living props", performing feats that would be more suited to sex toys, and are often reduced to "faceless entities" (p104). Because male actors are more easily replaced than the actresses, without whom the show cannot go on, they are generally paid significantly less, she claims - though I would imagine they have longer careers than the women, who will find it harder to get work as

they get older.

Magnanti has a go at feminists (although she is not directly referred to, Caitlin Moran springs to mind as a recent example) who draw a distinction between erotica and pornography - 'Burlesque good, strip clubs bad'. She cites Ellen Willis, who makes the point that "this kind of hypocrisy appeals to an idealised version of what kind of sex people should want rather than what actually arouses them" ("what turns me on is erotica; what turns you on is pornographic" - p109). This criticism of contemporary feminists is refreshing - so much popular feminist literature, with its trashy, anecdotal finger-wagging, is utterly tedious.

The author makes use of her direct experience of the sex industry to write with a clear sense of frustration of the liberals and feminists who know little about prostitution, but are quick to make broad assumptions about the women (never the men or transgender people, who are largely forgotten) working in the trade. The perception that these are mainly young, abused or fleeing abuse, drug-addicted or uneducated is not true, when looking at sex work as a whole (though these are prevalent within street-walking). Magnanti produces data claiming to show that 85% of women prostitutes were over the age of 26, and around a third (both male and female) have a university degree, which compares favourably with the UK population as a whole (p178).

Magnanti is offended by the one-dimensional, patronising notion that prostitutes are merely exploited women. That is a view I experienced at first hand within the Scottish Socialist Party, whose 2006 conference debate on 'prostitution tolerance zones' threw up many a crude example of the left's failure to engage with the issue in any serious way: prostitution is a form of violent oppression and all prostitutes are 'victims' to be rescued (by the state). Once again it is important not to overstate things, however: it is worth bearing in mind that there are many people on the harder end of the game who *are* vulnerable and exploited. It is also true that some women are forced into this line of work against their will - but there are, of course, laws against forced labour, as well as those against assault and rape.

What *The sex myth* reveals is that data from governments, NGOs and charities based on incomplete statistics and anecdotal evidence have become accepted wisdom (the chapter on trafficking is very illuminating in this respect, though too complex to sum up here). Journalists with tight word limits and TV presenters of two-minute news items end up reinforcing the official reports. They, like the layperson, rely on the so-called 'experts'. Information is repeated and repeated, taken as gospel even when factually inaccurate. The resulting prejudices permeate social attitudes, with very few people even thinking to question what lies behind the data, the reports and the policies.

Early on in her book, Dr Magnanti refers to the Chinese proverb: "Three men make a tiger". The idea being that the individual is likely to accept assertion as fact if they have heard it from three different people. In summation, "It only takes a handful of persuasive voices to convince people something exists, even if it may not" (p37).

**Sarah McDonald**



## THE LEFT

# There's no success like failure

**Tony Greenstein** bemoans the continuing self-marginalisation of Britain's far left

**I**t is ironic that the various socialist groups, having predicted the crisis of capitalism for years, are too weak to take advantage of it. We have the greatest financial crisis since the South Sea bubble nearly 200 years ago.

That rallying cry of monetarist orthodoxy, letting lame ducks go the wall, has been jettisoned. Banks that would be bankrupt in an instant are too big to fail and have consequently received unlimited government bailouts. Real unemployment is over 3.5 million and, as with the 1834 Poor Law and the abolition of Speenhamland parish relief, the unemployed are being held responsible for their own predicament. There is a wholesale reversal of the post-war settlement, which involved the creation of the welfare state, the 1948 National Assistance Act and the national health service.

The queen is alleged to have asked a group of economists why they did not predict the economic crisis. Perhaps we should ask the same of the socialist gurus and the pet economists who preside over their fiefdoms. Marxism is supposed to be scientific socialism, yet it operates in code, with dialectics being reserved for the socialist high priests. Socialist groups have no greater understanding of the crisis of world capitalism than any bourgeois party. I make no claims to an understanding of the dismal science myself, but it seems to me that we have witnessed the transfer of production to the third world and Asia, whose labour western societies have lived off, having defined the rules of the game via the dollar and euro. If this is true, then it raises questions about whether revolutionary change is possible in the west, even theoretically.

We have three major political parties between whom you would be hard pressed to slip a piece of paper. Ed Miliband's big idea consists of a call to return to Disraeli's one-nation Toryism! It is difficult to imagine a more favourable climate for Marxist and socialist groups, yet they have almost shrunk into insignificance.

### Sectarianism and the left's crisis

Nearly a decade ago the Socialist Workers Party successfully destroyed the Socialist Alliance after it became mesmerised by George Galloway and the prospect of a Muslim block vote. Today Respect is in free-fall and the far left's electoral front is the misnamed Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition.

Despite their abject failure to sink any roots or develop any coherent analysis to explain their predicament, socialist and Marxist groups run a mile rather than confront their own failures. There is no debate about the reasons for the left's failure - merely a call for greater activity. There is therefore little possibility of this failure being reversed, since the left seems incapable of even recognising it. Members therefore draw their own conclusions and leave, disenchanted or burnt-out or both. Both the principal groups on the left - the SWP and Socialist Party - would run a mile rather than accepting that their strategy might need rethinking. It is not the message that needs changing, still less the messenger - the fault lies with the audience. What none of the larger groups on the left, including the Communist Party of Britain, will do is draw up any kind of honest assessment or balance sheet of where they have gone wrong and why.



**Alex Callinicos: should know better**

Whereas the secret state and MI5 have long since transferred their attentions to anarchist and environmental groups, the sects and grouplets of Britain's far left measure failure as success and survival as an achievement in itself. Recruiting in ones or twos is the key to a socialist revolution. It is far more important than seeking to change the balance of class forces.

The reasons lie in the fact that the most important battles are with each other. The SWP in particular is an unstable, Stalinoid group, which best resembles a revolving door. As long as 'members in' are greater than 'members out' then all is well. And if that requires a statistical sleight of hand that would embarrass George Osborne, then so be it.

Perhaps I can declare an interest here. I joined the International Socialists (later SWP) when I was 16, having just led a school strike. Within three years I was expelled for breaking the rules of 'democratic' (ie, bureaucratic) centralism, when I voted publicly against the IS's attempt to wind up the Anti-Internment League. I considered the anti-imperialist struggle and the fight for self-determination of the Irish people as more important than the sectarian interests of the IS leadership. After the branch had twice hesitated to do the deed, Roger Rosewell - the IS's industrial organiser at the time - was brought up to Liverpool to crack the whip and affect my expulsion. Amongst those abstaining was John Bloxham, later to become a pillar of Socialist Organiser/Alliance for Workers' Liberty.

For his part, Rosewell ended up as Shirley Porter's bag carrier, an employee of Aims of Industry, leader writer for the *Daily Mail* and a member of the industrial committee of the Social Democratic Party! Clearly

he had been a state asset, but to this day neither I nor IS's membership have received an explanation from the central committee over the role that Rosewell played. He simply disappeared down an Orwellian memory hole. Although by the time he wrote *Days of the locust* he had changed his views, at the time it was national secretary Jim Higgins who saw through my expulsion.

My case was in no way exceptional, but it is precisely such behaviour that has alienated thousands of potential revolutionaries over the years. Although the IS/SWP had a formal appeal system, I doubt if any of the hundreds of expelled SWP members has ever successfully appealed. It should be a matter of shame that the bourgeois courts, by way of comparison, are models of democracy. Socialist and Marxist groups treat democratic rights and debate as a luxury rather than a precondition for socialism.

Of course, there are objective reasons for the weakness of the socialist left. Prime amongst which is the restructuring of the working class itself consequent on the defeat of the miners' strike of 1984-85. Long gone are the big trade union battalions - the miners, dockers, shipyard workers, engineers and car workers. The working class has not disappeared - people still need to sell their labour - but it has been fragmented, atomised and depoliticised. There has been a catastrophic decline in union membership, the abolition of the closed shop and a massive decrease in union militancy. One of the few blue-collar unions remaining, the RMT, despite moving to the left, is weak and fragmented as a result of rail privatisation.

The question that arises is what is the purpose of an organised far left? If we are merely the creatures of forces

beyond our control then perhaps we should own up to our impotence: let us be honest reformists rather than dishonest revolutionaries.

Internationally capitalism is not only undergoing a massive economic crisis, the worst of which is probably to come, but it has also become more savage and warlike. Where once the US only tiptoed around the Middle East, preferring to rely on its surrogates, since the first Gulf War it has preferred to do the job itself. We are in a state of permanent war, yet the left, apart from the million-plus march in 2003, has had virtually no impact. Whereas the international left played a major part in the withdrawal from Vietnam, it has had little impact on the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan. Is it any wonder that some of us have retreated into single-issue campaigns?

The traditional divide in the socialist movement was between reform and revolution. Yet today the Labour Party does not even pretend to want to reform capitalism. One question that we have never faced up to is whether it is possible to replace capitalism, given the weakness of our own side. The emphasis by Marx and Lenin on the organised working class as the gravedigger of capitalism was predicated upon the fact that industrial capitalism had thrown together, in factories, large numbers of workers, whose consciousness would rapidly be transformed from the economic to the political. It was not that the working class was any more oppressed or exploited, in the commonly understood sense of the term, than a slave or peasant of the feudal era, but that the working class was able to do something about it. Further, that capitalism laid the basis for a society where humanity was free of want, if only it could be organised on the basis of human need, not market imperatives.

Yet in the 130 years since Marx's death there has just been one successful socialist revolution, in Russia - and that quickly degenerated, as it was left isolated. The factors that enabled the Bolsheviks to gain power - an alliance with the peasantry in the middle of a world war and a weak aristocracy - are unlikely to be emulated.

In Britain, as Lenin recognised, the working class's conservatism was a direct product of the fact that it too was a beneficiary of British imperialism. The Attlee government in 1945 came into office in the midst of a financial crisis, even though the nature of the crisis was very different from today. Europe had been bankrupted by war, whilst the USA towered above them economically and had surplus capital aplenty. European communist parties preferred to salvage rather than overthrow capitalism. What the US needed was investment opportunities and export economies, hence the Marshall Plan. Only a £3 billion loan from the USA kept Britain afloat.

Yet the Labour government embarked on a process of nationalisation, even as it created the NHS and a welfare state that provided a safety net. This was only possible because Attlee's government super-exploited its African and Asian colonies (whilst conceding independence to India, Sri Lanka and Burma). The rubber plantations of Malaya and the cocoa plantations of west Africa, in addition to the forced loans that constituted the sterling area, financed Labour's reforms. Today the City of London and the invisible trade balance continues that tradition in a different guise.

### The left groups

I stood at the last local elections in Brighton for Tusc alongside supporters of the Socialist Party and Socialist



Resistance. Imagine my surprise when I discovered, mid-campaign, that the SP had produced its own leaflet naming only its own candidate. In essence two campaigns were being fought - the electoral campaign and a recruitment campaign for the SP. To me this symbolised the contradiction of having parties within parties. As long as Tusc continues as a Heath-Robinson contraption - a coalition of convenience between sections of the RMT bureaucracy and the SP, with the SWP occasionally tagging along and nobody putting anything in between elections - it has no future. How can you have a credible electoral organisation if it does not even have an individual membership?

The SP argues that ‘one person, one vote’ was responsible for the Labour Party moving to the right. In fact the lack of real support amongst the membership was a symptom of the left’s weakness, even at the height of Tony Benn’s campaign for the deputy leadership. But to imagine you can create a viable organisation without a membership, which does not even allow a vote at its national conference, because that would mean the RMT leadership no longer retaining control, is self-defeating. Such a stance all but guarantees that the RMT will ditch Tusc for failing to make an electoral impact.

It is, of course, positive that the RMT executive supports Tusc. Political currents are welcome within such a party, but loyalty ought to be to the ‘party’ (Tusc is registered as a political party with the electoral commission), not the current. Why? Because the priority is building for socialism and no political sect or current is capable of doing this.

Instead the different sects believe that the route to socialism lies in building and retaining control of front groups. The SP believes a party can only be created by the trade unions: ie, the left trade union bureaucracies. Such a stance is inherently reformist, since trade unions exist to mediate between capital and labour, not to overthrow the former. A mass party based on individual membership, but to which unions could affiliate, would attract the membership of trade unions. But this is not a road that even the left union bureaucracies want to take. The SP’s position is an adaptation to existing economic and trade union consciousness.

One of its model unions is the Prison Officers Association - a bunch of unreconstructed Neanderthals, many of whose members identify with the far right. It has never shown the slightest degree of sympathy or support for political prisoners. The SP’s economism helps explain why it is not involved in international solidarity work or indeed virtually any other campaign outside those with direct economic demands. Yet in comparison with the SWP, the SP is a serious socialist organisation.

The politics of the SWP are eclectic. Although it is more likely to be involved in international, environmental and anti-war campaigns, at the end of the day its main purpose is to recruit to its own sect. One Brighton anarchist pamphlet describes the SWP as the vampires of the left! It never ceases to amaze me that groups led, as in the SWP’s case, by a distinguished professor are not able to see that building one’s own group at the expense of the class is a recipe for disaster. Is it any wonder that the British left is so weak?

Long gone are the days when the IS/ SWP organised a six-week strike in a Manchester engineering company because of the victimisation of a shop steward (John Deason). Its lack of a base in the working class has meant that its politics have lacked any firm grounding or social base. The anti-war struggle became a love-in with Islamic mullahs and small businessmen. Respect was founded on the most opportunistic electoralism. And when it woke up to the fact that non-Islamic SWP members were unlikely to benefit from an Islamic vote, the SWP first tried to destroy Respect and then broke from it.

The Socialist Party is more consistent and has a base within some unions: in particular the PCS. However, this is at the expense of raising any political demands. The savage attacks on department for

work and pensions members are a direct consequence of New Labour’s abolition of the divide between the employment and benefits service. This was symbolised by the creation of Job Centre Plus, yet PCS failed to oppose New Labour’s ideological attack on the very concept of benefits (renamed tax credits). Instead of instructing their members to refuse to sanction claimants and to refuse to work with privatised companies, the SP concentrated on economic demands, ignoring the fact that politics determines economics. By accepting the involvement of Atos, Maximus, A4E and all the other crooked companies that the New Labour and the Tories have employed, PCS has accepted savage cuts to jobs and the eventual demise of the entire DWP labour force.

The major political groups on the left have their own peculiar definition of sectarianism, which goes something like: ‘If you criticise us then you are being sectarian.’ In other words, people are expected to work alongside them, put up with party-building at the expense of joint work and if you query what they are doing then *you* are the sectarian!

The Communist Party of Britain has failed to learn any lessons from the collapse of the Soviet Union and Stalinism. Instead the CPB sent a delegation to ‘socialist’ China recently, which queried whether the country would remain socialist amidst the sweatshops of Apple Inc. I only hope it was not put up in the same hotel as the International Monetary Fund delegation! The CPB operates at the fringes of the TUC and trade union bureaucracy and because it is vastly weakened compared with the days of Harry Pollitt, it has had to cooperate with its hated Trotskyist rivals.

The Alliance for Workers’ Liberty is barely worth mentioning. It has crossed the international class divide, refusing during the Iraq war to oppose the occupation. It has done the same in Afghanistan. Its slide began with Ireland and then developed into support for Zionism.

What is left of the old International Marxist Group are two groups and a couple of splinters. Socialist Action operates in a semi-submerged state, its politics combining neo-Stalinism and a third-worldist approach to national liberation movements. Alone among the groups, it has no paper. It is active in Palestine and Venezuela Solidarity Campaigns. Having tied its fortunes to Ken Livingstone, it has seen them decline alongside him.

The other group is Socialist Resistance. On an individual basis I have a high regard for many of its members, but as a group it leaves a lot to be desired. Marginalised in Tusc, it is led by Alan Thornett, who first earned his spurs in the Workers Revolutionary Party. It has barely a hundred members.

### Next to zero

Most organisations and sects on the far left are today propaganda groups. Their intervention in either class or related social struggles is next to zero. One of the more remarkable features is that it is the anarchists and direct-action activists and groups who are more vibrant. UK Uncut, Occupy - these are the targets of police repression. In Brighton we have a vibrant anarchist social centre, the Cowley Club. When the English Defence League came to town, it was not the SP or the SWP (Unite Against Fascism) which took the lead, but the anarchists, together with old unaligned far-left socialists. The result was a mass campaign which led to Sussex police being unable to force a path through Brighton for the fascists. After marching just one-third of the way along their route, they were diverted down the backstreets. It was as magnificent a victory as anything we saw in the 1970s and 1980s, when the SWP was committed to direct physical opposition to fascist marches and activities. The anarchists had learnt the lessons the Trotskyists had forgotten.

In the lead-up to the march I spoke to a packed meeting of students at Sussex University - the kind that the far left would once have put on. During the demonstration against the EDL one young woman who was at the meeting came up to me and asked pointedly whether our

achievements in stopping the fascists matched those I had talked about a few days previously. I agreed they had! These are young people for whom the far left currently holds no attraction.

One group I have not mentioned is the Communist Party of Great Britain! The CPGB is committed to building a Marxist party. However, this is a purely theoretical position without any practical relevance or possibility. The CPGB was part of the Socialist Alliance and even Respect. Yet despite this it proudly proclaims that there are no halfway houses. Either a Marxist party or nothing. The problem is that a Marxist party consisting of all the sects would resemble nothing so much as rats in a bag. It would not be the capitalists I had to fear, but my own comrades!

The one thing the CPGB has going for it is the most open paper on the left. The SP’s *The Socialist* is as dull as ditchwater. *Socialist Worker* is as predictable as ever. Neither publication has an open letters page, because debate is frowned upon. One of the smallest groups on the left boasts a paper with perhaps the largest readership. It is an asset that it would be foolish to dispense with.

The one silver lining in a grey-clouded sky was the Scottish Socialist Party. Circumstances were more favourable, with proportional-representation elections to the assembly and the previously successful fight against the poll tax. Nonetheless, it pointed the way and that was why the RMT, which was expelled by Labour for supporting the SSP, has ended up backing Tusc. The SP opposed Scottish Militant Labour’s formation of the SSP, but was forced to follow in its footsteps.

That the SSP ultimately collapsed in the wake of Tommy Sheridan’s disastrous libel and perjury trials should not blind us to its successes. Whether you call it a Labour Party mark two or a halfway house, the fact is that half the way is better than not even setting out on the journey. To broaden the base of socialist ideas and support can never be a bad idea.

What of the Labour Party, to which the CPGB is increasingly drawn? Having been a ward chairperson and active at the time of the Benn deputy leadership campaign, before being subject to the Kinnock purge, there is no doubt that the SP is essentially correct. Whether you call it a bourgeois workers’ party or an openly pro-capitalist party along the lines of the Democrats, the fact is that socialists no longer have any purchase in it.

There was a time when the Labour Party proclaimed its belief in the reform of capitalism. As Alan Bullock wrote in his biography of Labour’s post-war foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin, the ghost of the 1930s stalked the Labour cabinet. By that he meant mass unemployment. Today’s party is only too eager to get into bed with the Liberal Democrats. When Aneurin Bevan, John Freeman and Harold Wilson resigned from the Labour cabinet in 1951, over the introduction of prescription charges, to form Keep Left (later Tribune), their support lay in the constituencies. The trade union barons - Arthur Deakin of the TGWU and Lord Carron of the AUEW - were viciously anti-left. When New Labour gained office and Gordon Brown opposed restoring the link between pensions and earnings, it was the union block vote that passed the successful motion. The CLPs voted by nearly two to one against. When the individual membership of a party swings in such a dramatic fashion from left to right - a swing that is as much in evidence today as it was 15 years ago - then it is time to draw conclusions - one of which is that the Labour Party can only be the graveyard of socialism.

What is clear from the Labour Party conference and Miliband’s appeal to the spirit of Disraeli is that Blue Labour is going to be out of power for some time to come. The only real question is whether the Tories will win the next election outright. It is not only irrelevant whether the union leaders still retain their clout inside the Labour Party. It is political folly to believe it matters. When Labour ditched clause four, it openly espoused capitalism. Our task is to build an alternative, not to play games in someone else’s party ●

# 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

## SWP neuters political debate

# Annual show of 'democracy'

The three-month period when Socialist Workers Party comrades are permitted to put their views in writing before the entire membership has just begun and for the same period members may also form temporary factions in order to put forward a commonly held idea or set of ideas.

Contributions, whether from individuals or groups of comrades, are published in three *Pre-conference Bulletins*, known as *Internal Bulletins* or *IBs*, in October, November and December, prior to the annual conference, to be held over January 4-6 in London. Apart from clipped, three-minute interventions at pre-conference aggregates or at conference itself, the bulletins are the only way in which members can participate in something approaching political debate. The SWP does not host an email discussion list and the only officially sanctioned means of horizontal communication is via meetings of SWP branches or trade unions fractions, whose business is overwhelmingly organisational.

*IB* No1 has just come out - emailed to every "registered member" (anyone who has applied to join over the last three years, whether or not they are ever seen or heard from again). The first *IB* is always the shortest and least controversial and this year looks like being no exception. Two-thirds of its 28 pages are taken up by the central committee itself, dealing with either its own perspectives or organisational matters.

This time, national secretary Charlie Kimber outlines the conference procedure for the benefit of those who have never attended: "The main method of discussion is through what we call commissions. These are documents drawn up at the end of conference sessions which summarise the main strands of discussion and action to be taken." The CC insists that, although motions "can be useful", commissions must be "the main method of discussion". This is because "It is perfectly possible to change your mind after hearing the debate: this is the strength of the commissions system."

You can also change your mind after hearing a debate on a motion, I would have thought. But comrade Kimber is not referring to the mass of delegates: he is referring to those who want to put forward an alternative point of view. The CC hopes that such dissenting views can be 'accommodated' - or neutered - by making some vague reference to them in its "commissions" or, better still, the comrades concerned can be persuaded to drop their proposals - 'change their minds'. The idea is that the final "commission" statement will be seen to have overwhelming support and any hint of opposition will appear totally marginalised, irrespective of the validity of its criticisms. The system is even less democratic than the compositing so beloved of union bureaucracies - at least composited motions are usually circulated in advance.

These "commissions" are often based on the leadership's own lengthy perspective documents - in fact it is not unusual for CC documents to emerge in the post-conference report exactly as they went in. This year *IB*



Bland

No1 carries the first three of these CC proposals - 'Perspectives - a prolonged crisis', 'Fighting racism and fascism' and 'Syria and the Arab revolutions'. Several more are promised. The handful of motions from branches or other SWP bodies will be squeezed by the commissions - there will be the usual rally-type speeches followed by comrades from the floor giving their 'local input' to back up the leadership.

The first CC document stresses, of course, the key role of the SWP itself. While it is "too small on its own to shape the direction of class struggle nationally", the "party" is able, thanks to such influential bodies as Unite the Resistance and Unite Against Fascism, to make a real impact. Through UTR "The SWP has played a prominent role in the most important expressions of resistance to the coalition government."

UTR is positively contrasted to, on the one hand, the National Shop Stewards Network, which engages in "the ritual denunciation of union leaders, except those who happen to be involved in the project"; and, on the other, the Coalition of Resistance, which "falls into the opposite trap" of making itself "the prisoner of sections of the union bureaucracy". UTR, of course, strikes just the right balance between these two extremes.

So building its November "conference" is one of the SWP's upcoming priorities. It must be even bigger than last year's, which

was "over a thousand-strong" (in reality 600-700). That will really give the opposition to austerity a boost and put some fight into the union bureaucracies, won't it? Well, at least it might enable the SWP to outdo the Socialist Party's NSSN and Counterfire's COR in winning new recruits.

Meanwhile, the leadership claims credit for the British National Party's loss of support and council seats: comrades "tirelessly knocked on doors, spoke at small meetings and undermined the Nazis' votes. This was slow, meticulous and patient work, which finally undermined the BNP's electoral base ..." The CC states that the "mainstream coverage has emphasised the infighting and chaos within the BNP itself, but this ignores the campaigning work of Unite Against Fascism".

By the way, the CC believes that "Institutional racism continues to scar British society." In fact "Cameron's speech in Munich attacking multiculturalism and blaming Muslims for not integrating into the 'British way of life' in February 2011 represented a step change in state racism." In order to "deflect anger away from their failure to deal with the economic crisis and in order to justify the so-called 'war on terror' the Tories are shamelessly playing the race card." This "legitimisation of racist ideas" is one of the key factors in the "rise of the far right across Europe".

It is as though there were no such thing as official anti-racism - of the type that sees John Terry charged with a "racially aggravated public order offence" for engaging in an abusive verbal altercation on a football pitch. No, on the contrary, across Europe the ruling class is deliberately engaged in the "legitimisation of racist ideas".

The final CC document, 'Syria and the Arab revolutions', is more measured, correctly stating its opposition to both the Assad regime and imperialist interference. But it continues to totally understate the latter, implying that the west is not serious about arming the Free Syrian Army, which is "opposing tanks and air attacks with the most basic of weapons". The "heart of the revolution" is to be found in the Local Coordinating Committees, which receive no imperialist aid, the CC claims.

*IB* No1 also carries a few pieces with headings such as 'Building Unite the Resistance in Manchester' and 'Organising PhD students' (yawn), but there is also a contribution from "Ian (Manchester)" - no surnames are published in the bulletins - called 'Raising the political level of the party'.

In fact Ian is primarily concerned with facilitating debate. He writes: "One of the silliest ideas that pops up from time to time is that debate necessarily increases disagreements, which necessarily lead to factions, which necessarily lead to splits. Debate normally increases the understanding of all participants, increases the prospects of the 'losing' side in any argument accepting the outcome, helps avoid mistakes and accelerates learning from events." So we should "bend the stick in the direction of greater debate in order to help raise the political level of the party and intervene in the struggle more effectively".

Ian notes that, despite the successful motion at this year's conference - that "*Socialist Worker* should frequently carry features on the theme, 'debates in the movement', which ... can also be used to air debates between SWP comrades in order to raise the level of clarity and assist debate in party

branches and fractions" - only two such debates have been carried (on Syria and Scottish independence): "It is regrettable that the CC has not made a more serious attempt to implement this conference decision."

Ian also wants to revisit the failed attempt at the 2012 conference to effectively make the *IBs* an all-year-round feature: "We have plenty of national meetings (national committee, party council) which could theoretically take decisions, but we currently lack the space for adequate debate to facilitate that. A bulletin wouldn't necessarily need to be tied to a particular meeting, though the CC could use and time them to circulate discussion documents ... if they wanted to stimulate debate in branches on particular topics." But unfortunately it is a big 'if'.

Ian has further suggestions for improving internal democracy. For example, while he does not object to nominations for the CC being made using the existing slate system, "I think this year we should elect individually". This would "reduce the huge premium for being on the outgoing CC's slate", which he says has been a "significant factor discouraging CC members from promptly bringing major problems to the attention of the wider party ... Doing so when in a minority would be very likely to result in losing a place on the CC slate."

He also encourages the open expression of differences within the SWP apparatus: "We should ... clarify that individual CC members and full-timers can participate freely in the key areas of the party's democracy ... without being bound by the CC 'line'." Discipline, he says, is required "for unity in action in the carrying out of decisions, not to stifle debate". It is "necessary in a revolutionary party to ensure united action against the enemies of the working class, not against our own members".

Ian calls on other comrades to respond to his arguments in the following *IBs*. Let us hope they do so ●

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