

weekly worker



**Gaiety is the most outstanding
feature of the Soviet Union:
Saatchi's new Russian art**

- James May 1969-2012
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No 942 Thursday December 13 2012

Towards a Communist Party of the European Union

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Crazy
contortions of
SWP central
committee



LETTERS



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

Holy grail

Poor Steven Johnson (Letters, December 6) - a very bad case of the pot calling the kettle black, when he accuses the Socialist Party of Great Britain of irrelevancy.

I'm not required to rebut his letter because the *Weekly Worker* has repeatedly documented the failure of the left to influence the course of working class politics and, no matter how tasty and appetising they have made their menu of reforms, the left have continued to lack any real impact in elections. We just need to read the latest issue for confirmation, where Peter Manson writes: "This is reflected in the lack of enthusiasm among workers for leftwing opponents of the coalition cuts agenda" ('Austerity assault intensifies', December 6).

For the triumph of socialism, organisation is essential, but the organisation must be for socialism and based on socialist principles, or such organisation can be nothing to the workers but a delusion and a snare.

To the left, unity is the holy grail, always sought but never found. Insistence upon the necessity for agreement on principles, on methods and, above all, on the aim appears to be scorned as sectarianism. Real unity is a means to an end. First of all, the essentials regarding the end to be sought and the means to that end must be agreed upon, for 'unity' without common principles, methods and object is a unity of impotence. Unity under any other conditions than that of agreement on aims and methods is doomed to failure. The current type of left unity does not prevent certain members of one party from calumniating 'fraternally' against their 'dear comrades' in the other, nor discourage persecuting them with venomous bile, as again the *Weekly Worker* has amply provided examples of over the years.

Peter's article also happens to offer an echo of the SPGB's consistent position and yet again unintentionally confirms the correctness of the SPGB when he writes in connection with the far right: "In general the best means of defeating them is by forcefully arguing for our politics - or do we think those politics are so weak that we have no chance of winning the debate?" This is a position we have held since Mosley's Blackshirts marched in the streets, and the battles we fought against them were the battles of ideas on the platform. And, believe it or not, a debate actually involves defining what socialism is. Contrary to what Steven believes, we don't claim an SPGB monopoly, but we certainly don't so easily cede its meaning to our enemies, whether they be 'national socialists' or 'state socialists'.

Alan Johnstone
SPGB

Too much

In his comment on the SPGB, Steven Johnson proves too much when he claims: "No matter how much the working class ignore them, they continue to believe that they know what is best for them."

But surely this applies to all left-of-Labour groups calling themselves socialist? Even to the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, which, despite having the support of the two main Trotskyist groups in Britain (the Socialist Party in England and Wales and Socialist Workers Party), is ignored in elections quite as much as the SPGB - sometimes in fact more so. Despite this, they too also continue

to believe that what they propose is best for the working class.

John Lewis
email

Old hat antis

Honestly, what decade is the *Weekly Worker* living in? If I were cynical, I'd suspect they were conspiring with the Platypus sect to pretend that the 'anti-Germans' were still relevant, or even that such a thing still exists ('Excusing capitalism of role in rise of Hitler', December 6). The whole 'anti-German' thing has been deadlier than a doornail since around 2006.

The hard-core 'anti-Germans' around the Bahamas and similar formations no longer consider themselves 'communists' or even 'anti-Germans'. Instead they are just openly neoconservative reactionaries. What used to be considered the 'soft-core' 'anti-German' milieu has abandoned the idiotic theoretical posture entirely, many having moved on to a sort of general anti-nationalism, inspired by the journal *Gegenstandpunkt* (which was always hostile to the 'anti-Germans').

Bahamas made a rather public show a few years ago of disclaiming any pretensions to being communist or in any way a part of the left, and even decided that the label 'anti-German' was no longer any kind of indication of their politics (this is the magazine, by the way, that engaged in apologetics for the English Defence League).

Susann Witt-Stahl is a decent journalist, so I'm not sure why she's indulging in this weird, alarmist sensationalism for an English-speaking audience, pretending that a marginal sect has any kind of influence. What is true to some extent is that the German left as a whole, even the radical left, has a somewhat indulgent position toward Israel that would probably shock most on the left from Anglophone countries, but that doesn't have anything to do with the 'anti-Germans'. You can find that sort of thing going all the way back to the 1980s.

But the 'anti-German' tendency belongs to an era when the iPod was considered a bold new technological innovation, *Lord of the rings* films still topped the box office charts, and George W Bush still occupied the White House. Usually it's only the Platypus cult which tries to rehabilitate the 'anti-Germans' and assert their supposed relevance. How weird to see their critics doing the same.

Angelus Novus
email

SWP fork

Socialist Workers Party comrades in Unite will meet on Sunday December 16 to decide whether to back the incumbent, Len McCluskey, in the recently announced snap election for general secretary, or instead support Jerry Hicks, who finished in second place in the 2010 election, or even stand themselves.

The election has been called three years early, with McCluskey serving only two years of his five-year term. He could have waited until 2015 to stand again, but then he would have been 70 by the end of his second term and his advisors think that members would not be too happy to have a general secretary working past normal retirement age.

Jerry Hicks, who has been runner-up in the previous two elections, said: "Our union has a long and discredited history of general secretaries trying to cling onto power beyond the age of 65. There was Ken Jackson, and then Derek Simpson; now Len McCluskey wants some more of it."

If the SWP back Jerry or stand themselves, they will be expelled from the union's United Left. It is another fork in the road - further right behind McCluskey or left in defence of the

working class and union membership, and their own organisation in Unite. If they do as we in Grass Roots Left advocate and back Jerry Hicks - as they did last time after a fierce internal battle - then we have a fighting chance of enough or at least a substantial number of nominations. And a base to fight for re-elections to the national committee.

Grass Roots Left is always open to negotiations on the level of cooperation or even a merger we might enter into with the SWP if they take the decision to fight McCluskey's undemocratic manoeuvre.

Gerry Downing
Grass Roots Left

Logic-chopping

While media outlets from the *Daily Mail* to *Private Eye* have expressed deep disquiet at the proposals of Brian Leveson for press regulation, and David Cameron has followed their lead, the learned judge can at least count on the support of the National Union of Journalists.

The NUJ hierarchy has long been pushing for a shift towards the 'Irish model', of which Leveson's proposals are a vague variant, that puts regulation in the hands of a body of public worthies (including journalists' representatives). This would keep press regulation independent of either proprietors or politicians, thus safeguarding free speech and giving journalists a way to get around the authoritarian landscape of the modern newsroom.

Or it would, if we lived on Sugar Candy Mountain and not in the grubby, corrupt world on which the phone-hacking scandal shone an unflattering light. The notion that 'proper' appointment of regulatory board members could in any way be free of political pressures - or indeed that Rupert Murdoch and co are insufficiently ingenious to poach a few gamekeepers - is a fantasy, made pitifully absurd by the corrupt solidarity among the establishment exposed last year.

The NUJ leadership also likes to pay lip service to the importance of shop-floor organisation in the press; but by effectively backing the judicialisation of press complaints, they undermine it. The move to arbitration and tribunals in resolving industrial disputes has had exactly that effect across the union movement as a whole - a trade union which fights to convince an 'independent' arbitrator of the justice of its claim has very little need for shop stewards, and a good deal more need for lawyers and bureaucrats.

In a letter to all NUJ members (www.nuj.org.uk/files/LevNUJ.pdf), general secretary Michelle Stanistreet is in fine defensive form, and objects to the idea that the NUJ wants to "create a press akin to that in Zimbabwe or Iran" through statutory regulation of the press. Apparently, we have it all wrong: "the union does not back statutory regulation of the press," she writes - in bold, for good measure.

Yet, given that the *same letter* demands an "independent regulatory body" that has "the authority and ability to regulate all commercially driven press", and is "backed by the ability to impose sanctions, such as fines", we have good reason to wonder what planet she is on. Whence comes the 'authority' to regulate the press, let alone to levy fines? It takes more than moral authority to get your hand in Rupert Murdoch's pocket, that's for sure.

We are not the only ones left wondering, alas. This astonishing exercise in cheap logic-chopping does not appear to have convinced the NUJ rank and file, two thirds of whom, according to *Private Eye* (December 14), oppose statutory regulation.

Harley Filben

London

Conspire!

Paul Demarty's article on press freedom ('The dog that didn't bark', December 6) ignores one critical point for the left: effective left agitation and "scandalising the establishment" (Mike Macnair) requires sensationalism of our own, not just cheap sloganeering. Truly beating the media moguls' filth, at their own game, means mobilising even the most backward elements of the working class.

German workers' agitation did not pull any punches when it included conspiracy theories in its arsenal. In light of this recent crisis, this is an ideal situation for leftist equivalents of Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity and so on to disseminate conspiracy theories, Alex Jones-style, about the chambers of commerce/industry, federations of small businesses and employer associations in each country, for example, as a way for conspiracy-theory workers to scapegoat the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie (talk of a chamber of commerce 'cabal' and its 'funders' and 'fellow travellers') instead of merely the 'greedy bankers' and 'corporate executives'.

Jacob Richter
email

Equality

David Ellis is doubtless sincere in his outrage at the crass and inhuman inequalities born of the system's relentless drive to capital accumulation for its own sake (Letters, December 6).

That said, I do fear that his proposals for a viable, post-capitalist society are rather flawed. His thought still bears the fingerprints of *bourgeois* ideology and logic. His anti-capitalism consists of a society "where each individual is born into equality", where the fruits of the "full employment" of each "part-time" labourer earning a "living wage" are dished out equally amongst the mass of the population.

Oddly enough, to point out the trap that I believe comrade Ellis has fallen into here, I would turn the comrade's attention to the very text from which he draws the famous Marx quote on the guiding principle of communist society - "From each according to their ability; to each according to their needs" - namely the latter's 1875 *Critique of the Gotha programme*. This text was based on Marx's "notes in the margin" to the programme agreed by the newly unified German Social

Democratic Party, which consisted of the (pro-Marxist) 'Eisenachers' and the 'Lassalleans', supporters of the deceased Ferdinand Lassalle.

Marx is particularly scathing in his response to the Gotha programme's ahistorical and therefore ultimately meaningless platitudes, such as the concept of "the free state" and the Lassalleian "iron law of wages".

Yet Marx also turns on the programme's self-contradictory commitment to making "the proceeds of labour" belong "undiminished with equal right to all members of society". In an eminently readable passage, Marx could hardly be more clear: we human beings are extremely *unequal*. Some of us are 'naturally' good at particular activities, some work more quickly and effectively than others, some are able to pick up particular skills or talents more effectively than others. Each of us has our own particular strengths, weaknesses and quirks marking us out as human individuals. As Marx puts it, humans "would not be different individuals if they were not unequal". This is the "from each according to their ability" half of the society for which we should be striving.

As the other half of the quote implies, we human beings also have diverse and wide-ranging *needs*. Some of us live on our own. Some might have one or two children to support. Others are not able to work or are partially or wholly dependent on the help of others merely to carry out the most basic of tasks. Given the above, a society based on part-time wage-work and "equality" would actually lead to some getting more than others. What about those who cannot work?

Positively overcoming capitalism does not involve a combination of equality, a living wage and full employment. Were it only that simple. Rather, it involves the creation of a society where we can fully develop and express our unequal individuality, and where wages and the concept of employment - full or otherwise - are consigned to the dustbin of history. This presupposes the supersession of what Marx deems "bourgeois right": ie, the replacement of value production, based on the equal standard of labour-time and wage labour, with conscious social control and planning, so that work "has become not only a means of life, but life's prime want".

Ben Lewis
London

Fighting fund

Concerned

I must mention comrade DB, who has decided to subscribe to the *Weekly Worker* via PayPal. However, as he reads us online and he is currently in Italy, he doesn't really want a paper copy. Nevertheless, it's only right that he 'subscribes' at the European rate of £7.20 a month, rather than £5 for those in the UK, isn't it?

Well, thank you, comrade. There's no faulting your generosity - although some might call into question the underlying logic. Still, who's complaining?

Another online donor was comrade KG, who *did* stick to a fiver for his one-off contribution. He and DB were among the 9,742 people who read us via the website last week. We also received standing orders totalling £75 and two donations by cheque - £10 on top of the sub that EW decided to take out for a new reader, and £4 added to the cost of Lawrence Parker's newly published second

edition of his book, *The kick inside*, from comrade SJ.

Speaking of which, 20 copies were sold at the December 8 launch - and I hear that a dozen copies have already been ordered online. It's well worth a read, I can tell you.

But I digress. We only received £101 for our December fighting fund this week, meaning that the total so far stands at a lowly £343. We need £1,500 every month and I'm a little concerned that comrades will forget their paper over the Christmas period. After next week's edition there'll be no *Weekly Worker* until the new year. So who's going to nag you?

Tell you what - how about everyone who wants to donate doing so before next week, just so I can relax?

Robbie Rix

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

OBITUARY

Rebel with the megaphone voice

James May: November 5 1969 - December 3 2012

I knew James throughout his life. He was born during the same year I joined the Young Communist League. I soon got to know his parents, Tom and Rosemary May, who were both active members of the Communist Party. James was the eldest of three (he had a sister, Harriet, and a brother, Oliver, as well as a half-brother, Matthew Johnson). If memory serves me right, he was named after James Connolly, the great Scottish-Irish revolutionary socialist (Harriet after Harry Pollitt and Oliver after the Lord Protector himself).

The May household in Luton's Lewsey Farm was gloriously chaotic, full of children, trade union militants, political work and almost permanent debate. That was the background in which James grew up and, hence, it was no surprise that he became a member of the YCL in 1983.

However, as mapped out in the pages of *The Leninist*, by this time 'official communism' was in terminal decline. The Eurocommunists around *Marxism Today* dominated the CPGB and YCL. But a bitter factional war broke out when they attempted to take over the *Morning Star* and downgrade trade union work in favour of the ghastly politics that eventually morphed into New Labour.

Showing the cowardly mindset of the Eurocommunists and their bureaucratic allies, objections were raised to James being allowed to join. Even at the age of 14 he was a revolutionary and already spoke with a megaphone voice. His dress sense was equally outrageous (and enduring). James identified with punk and its 'fuck off', anti-establishment attitudes. Someone, therefore, that Eurocommunists, wishy-washy feminists and dull reformists instinctively disliked.

James gravitated towards *The Leninist* faction of the CPGB. Undoubtedly, what attracted him was not the finer points of our theoretical outlook. No, it was our unashamed revolutionary politics, our vitriolic hatred of the Eurocommunists and the withering criticism meted out to the *Morning Star*, *Straight Left*, New Communist Party, Communist Liaison and the other 'official communist' factions. That and, perhaps, our attitude towards the Soviet Union. Where without exception the 'official communists' lauded Mikhail Gorbachev, our paper called for a political revolution and working class democracy.

I vividly remember James holding aloft the big red banner we paraded outside the final congress of the 'official' CPGB in 1991. "Communism lives" and "Provisional Central Committee of the CPGB", it defiantly read. The Eurocommunists were intent on abandoning the CPGB name and changing themselves into the Democratic Left (formally dissolved in 1999). We were intent on reclaiming the CPGB name and building a genuine Marxist party.

Naturally, James attended many of our meetings, including one of our schools in the Mediterranean (it might have been on Corfu). He was though, he confided, unhappy, frustrated and looking around for a new

political terrain. Frankly, I encouraged him. Life is too short to devote oneself to a political project that does not challenge you, stretch you and fulfil you. When, later, he told me that he was going to join the anarchistic Class War group, I actually thought he was doing the right thing ... and told him so. Not only could he potentially grow politically; he was moving away from the considerable shadow cast by his father.

James and myself often came across each other over the subsequent years. On demonstrations, of course; at Community University sometimes; bumping into each other in Camden Town - me usually shopping, him usually heading off to a punk gig or a drink with mates; and on social occasions too. I attended his wedding. And James never stopped reading our paper. He contributed to the letters pages under the name of John Walsh (but under more exotic names on occasion).

In Class War James seems to have made a real impact. It is easy to understand why. Tall, striking blonde hair (sometimes spiked up into a mohican) and, more than that, he had a pretty well worked out set of politics ... in a milieu noted for its woeful philistinism this made him different.

He quickly earned the nickname, 'Captain Bollocks'. Never slow to make his opinions known in the bluntest terms - eg, "That's a load of ..." - James loathed the so-called political correctness of middle class radicals and the reformist left. And, whatever you thought about what James was saying, you knew that he meant it. Doubtless this won him enemies, but it also won him many friends.

Against those who wanted to close down Class War he united with those determined to maintain it. James insisted that Class War should be Class War ... and those who did not like it should leave. There was a bitter split between the London and

Leeds wings of the organisation. And it was the Londoners who were responsible for editing the relaunched *Class War*. James, however, was no writer: he suffered from dyslexia. Nevertheless, many of his ideas, along with his vicious sense of humour, found their way into its pages.

Class War was an easy sell on the streets and on demonstrations. The organisation and the paper benefited from being something of a media cliché in the 1980s. But the project never got anywhere. Class War always remaining a tiny sect, amongst many rival tiny sects.

Being a free spirit, James was ready to try a new orientation. He was one of the few, if not the only comrade, from that background to become involved in the Socialist Alliance (in the late 1990s it united six of Britain's leftwing organisations, including the Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Party in England and Wales, Alliance for Workers' Liberty and the CPGB). Because of James and other Luton oppositionists, I got invited to speak to the Luton branch of the SA. The SWP were there in force ... and deeply uncomfortable with the rough and tumble of debate with those to their left. I remember James giving them a ear-bashing over their moralistic attempt to get Bernard Manning banned.

James variously worked as a milkman, a post office driver and for meals on wheels, as well as caring full-time for Lillith Scarlett and Harry Spartacus, his two children. Though he never held down a job for long, he decided to take a place at Northampton University in order to become a junior school teacher. He focused in particular on mathematics, a field he found almost effortless. James got a 2.1 degree - a fantastic achievement, especially if you consider his dyslexia.

I always thought that James would make a brilliant teacher. When you saw him with his two kids, it was clear that he would have been an inspirational and much loved figure. But with his refusal to hold his tongue, his fruity language, his contempt for political correctness, it was never going to be. He failed his assessment, which basically finished any thoughts of a career in education.

Over the last two or three years James became depressively ill. Often he behaved in an utterly irrational fashion too. He was still under treatment when he committed suicide.

Without James the world has become a greyer place.

John Bridge

The funeral is on Tuesday December 18 at 1.45pm: Luton Crematorium, The Vale, Butterfield Green, Stopsley, Luton LU2 8DD. A wake will be held at The Moat House, Moat Lane, Luton LU3 1UU.



James May: spiky

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 December 16, 5pm: Weekly political report from CPGB Provisional Central Committee, followed by discussion and *Capital* reading group. Caxton House, 129 St John's Way, London N19. This meeting: Vol 1, chapter 10, section 2: 'The greed for surplus labour'. Organised by CPGB: www.cpgb.org.uk.

Radical Anthropology Group

Tuesday December 18, 6.15pm: 'A Christmas fairy tale: the shoes that were danced to pieces'. Speaker: Chris Knight. St Martin's Community Centre, 43 Carol Street, London NW1 (two minutes from Camden Town tube). Cost per session: £10 waged, £5 low waged, £3 unwaged. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: www.radicalanthropologygroup.org.

Left Front Art

Thursday December 13, 6.30 pm: Discussion - 'Labour: vehicle for queer liberation?' Bonnington Centre, Vauxhall Grove, London SW8. Speaker: Hannah Thompson (Labour Representation Committee). Organised by Left Art Front: www.facebook.com/leftfrontart.

Save Lewisham Hospital

Thursday December 13, 4pm: Protest, music and vigil. Lewisham hospital, Lewisham High Street, London, Greater London SE13. Organised by Save Lewisham Hospital Campaign: www.savelewishamhospital.com.

Capitalism and art

Friday December 14, 6.45pm: Meeting - corporate sponsorship of art and its meaning. Abrar House, 45 Crawford Place, London W1. Organised by the City Circle: www.thecitycircle.com.

End anti-Roma apartheid

Friday December 14, 12 noon: Protest, Belgium embassy, 17 Grosvenor Crescent, London SW1. See Traveller Solidarity Network: <http://travellersolidarity.org>.

Kazakhstan solidarity

Sunday December 16, 2.30pm: Film showing, *The massacre at Zhanaozen*, Horse Hospital, the Colonnade, Bloomsbury, London WC1. Followed by discussion. Organised by Campaign Kazakhstan: www.campaignkazakhstan.org.

Decriminalise sex work

Monday December 17, 7pm: Film showing - *Decriminalisation in New Zealand*, Crossroads Women's Centre, 25 Wolsey Mews, London NW5. Organised by English Collective of Prostitutes: ecp@prostitutescollect.net.

End violence against sex workers

Monday December 17, 7.30pm: Talks and film showing, Old Hairdressers, 20-28 Renfield Lane, Glasgow G2. See www.facebook.com/events/170089976468366.

Solidarity with Greek anti-fascists

Saturday January 19, 12 noon: Demonstration, Greek embassy, 1A Holland Park, Notting Hill, London W11. Organised by Unite Against Fascism: www.uaf.org.uk.

Socialist theory

Thursday December 20, 6pm: Study group, Social Centre, Next from Nowhere, Bold Street, Liverpool L1. 'The nature of the transitional epoch' (continued). Organised by Socialist Theory Study Group: teachingandlearning4socialism@gmail.com.

Solidarity with Greek anti-fascists

Saturday January 19, 12 noon: Demonstration, Greek embassy, 1A Holland Park, Notting Hill, London W11. Organised by Unite Against Fascism: www.uaf.org.uk.

End the siege

Thursday December 27, 1pm: Protest, Israeli embassy, 2 Palace Green, London W8. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: www.palestinecampaign.org.

Free the children

Thursday January 17, 7pm: Discussion meeting on Palestinian political child prisoners, Friends Meeting House, 6 Mount Street, Manchester M2. Speaker: Victoria Brittain. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: www.palestinecampaign.org.

Palestine Solidarity Campaign

Saturday January 26, 10am to 5pm: AGM, London Irish Centre, 50-52 Camden Square, London NW1. Register online at www.palestinecampaign.org/PSC. AGM. £8 waged, £6 unwaged. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: www.palestinecampaign.org.

End the arms trade

Saturday March 9, 10.30am to 4.30pm: National gathering, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. Organised by Campaign Against the Arms Trade: www.caat.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.

MIDDLE EAST



Iron Dome in action

Why did Israel do it?

The success or failure of the onslaught on Gaza can only be judged against the operation's aims, writes Israeli socialist **Moshé Machover**. This is an edited version of a talk given to the December 8 CPGB aggregate

In the last issue of the *Weekly Worker* there was an article by Tony Greenstein¹ about the Israeli onslaught on Gaza called "Operation Pillar of Defence" in the international press.

But this is not the name that has been given to it in Israel itself. There the onslaught on Gaza was referred to as "Operation Pillar of Cloud". Those of you who know your *Old Testament* well will realise that this is a reference to the time when the children of Israel were wandering in the desert, eventually to conquer the holy land. Jehovah appeared before them during the day as a pillar of cloud (and during the night as a pillar of fire). So the term was obviously used as a propagandist appeal to the Israeli public. But to appeal to the *international* public it was better to represent it as the "pillar of defence" - which is the one thing that it was *not* about.

Tony describes the operation as a failure, but he does not state what the aims of the operation were to be. A failure to do what? I happened to arrive in Israel just the day after the ceasefire was signed - it was a short visit commemorating the 50th anniversary of the first issue of *Matzpen*, the journal of the Socialist Organisation in Israel that came to be known by the same name. While I was there, and also in many comments afterwards, I heard any number of reasons given why Israel went through with this operation. They may all be right: after all, when a country goes to war it is normally an over-determined act, and there are several considerations.

If you want a detailed exposition of the whole background and details of the events then I recommend the 'Gaza quiz', composed by Stephen Shalom.² It is a very informative document, which tests you on your knowledge of events, so I will not go into the details of the background here, except for a few salient points that throw light on the whole thing.

As I say, there were several considerations for the offensive, but one thing is quite clear: that it was a move planned some time in advance. It was not a reaction to some rockets landing in Israel from Gaza, which in any case had been provoked by Israel in the first place. But to see that it was planned a long time in advance we should note that this operation was preceded by the Israeli bombardment of the Yarmouk arms factory in Sudan about a month before, which was briefly in the news.³ The explanation at the time - quite correctly - was that this was a *military exercise*: the factory in Sudan is roughly the same distance away as that between Israel and the main nuclear facilities in Iran, so Israel was actually testing its ability to take them out.

Israel itself hinted at the time that it targeted the Yarmouk facility because it was manufacturing missiles for Hamas in Gaza. I think that this is correct and that it was also a reason for the bombing - Israel wanted to prevent Hamas from renewing its arsenal, so it could not effectively counter the forthcoming Israeli attack.

Hamas uses two types of rockets - both unguided, both not very effective; they are more or less pointed in the

general direction of Israel and land very randomly. One is the home-made, locally manufactured, short-range Qassam rockets, which are little more than fireworks. They can cause quite a fright if they land near you, but the more serious weapon that Hamas has acquired is the Fajr-5 missile, which is of Iranian origin and probably assembled in Sudan, amongst other places. There are several ways of getting materials into Gaza, but the most important one is through the underground tunnels in the Sinai.

Election boost

So what was the attack on Gaza really all about? I think that the most obvious explanation is that it was an electoral move by the Netanyahu government. This explanation is corroborated by the fact that it happened around the same time before the election as Operation Cast Lead did in the last electoral cycle. That attack on Gaza was launched four years ago, two months before the anticipated Israeli general elections in 2009. And this present operation was launched two months before the January 22 2013 general elections, which Netanyahu called before he was compelled to. It was clearly synchronised.

Both Cast Lead and "Pillar of Defence" were presented to the Israeli public as defensive moves. Of course, Israel carries out many low-level provocations - the assassination of Hamas leaders, killing of civilians, use of drones - but these fall below the radar of the international and Israeli domestic press: perhaps they know about them, but in any event

they barely report them. Then, when a certain point is reached, Hamas or some other Islamic group is provoked into retaliating and fires rockets at Israel, which is then loudly trumpeted as a pretext for Israeli military action - it works every time. The international media - even those that are not so uncritically pro-Israel like *The Guardian* - whilst perhaps condemning the ferocity of the attacks, nevertheless say that they are defensive moves in response to Hamas provocations. They may be dubbed an 'overreaction', but that is still a form of *reaction*, as opposed to the reality: attacks carried out as an Israel initiative.

How much of an initiative it was this time can be judged by the information that came out later. The immediate trigger for the last volley of rockets from Gaza into Israel was the assassination of Ahmed Jabari, a commander of the military wing of Hamas.

Now this in itself is provocative enough: Hamas *has* to respond simply to cover itself in front of its own supporters. But it is actually worse than this, as explained by Gershon Baskin of the Israel-Palestine Centre for Research and Information - a sort of moderate, centre-ground organisation. Baskin had been instrumental in mediating - unofficially, of his own accord, but with the knowledge of the Israeli government - and he had been busy immediately before the onslaught trying to arrange a long-term ceasefire with Hamas. And who was his interlocutor? It was Jabari. The Hamas commander was shown

holding in his hands the text for the proposed agreement, to which he was actually favourable.

It was just at the point that a ceasefire was being agreed that Israel assassinated Jabari - not only as a provocation, but in fact to *prevent* it being implemented. Its terms were supposedly more favourable to Israel than the agreed ceasefire later mediated by the Egyptian president, Mohamed Mursi. Jabari was assassinated in order to clear the way for an attack.

All this had been pre-planned to take place two months before the election. If you look at what happened before the 2009 election, you can see how it all came to be arranged. The Israeli public and even the international public will accept this 'defensive response', which, of course, increases support for the government. It also shifts the centre of Israeli public opinion to the right. Last time, the pre-election attack on Gaza was actually initiated by the Kadima government led by Ehud Olmert, which also involved Ehud Barak, and in the event Kadima did in fact win the largest number of votes.

No party has ever won an outright majority under the strictly proportional representation system (which is one good thing I can say about Israel!). The whole country is one constituency and normally the party that gains the biggest number of seats is entrusted by the president to form a coalition government. However, because Kadima did not cover its right flank, there was increased support for the more rightwing Likud. Despite coming second, Likud ended up forming the

government, because the shifts in party votes meant that Kadima could not establish a coalition with the right in the way that Likud could.

So last time Kadima failed to get back into office despite Operation Cast Lead, but this time prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu has secured his right flank. There are parties even further to the right than Likud, not least Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Our Home) led by former nightclub bouncer Avigdor Lieberman. He was promoted very quickly to foreign minister as part of the coalition led by Netanyahu, who had arranged the merger of Likud with Yisrael Beiteinu.

All opinion polls now predict that this amalgamated party will win by far the largest number of votes in the forthcoming elections. Whether the attack will have succeeded in these terms we shall only know on January 23 - I suspect it will.

‘Lawn-mowing’

But other important reasons for the attack on Gaza have been pointed out. In the first place, it has been described by Israeli commentators as an exercise in “lawn-mowing”. Lawn-mowing is something that has to be done periodically to keep the grass at an acceptable level. Israel was acting to destroy the Hamas arms caches and rockets in the Gaza strip - useful not only as a lawn-mowing operation, but also in the event of Israel instigating a war against Iran: it wants to avoid the possibility of a missile attack from Gaza if there were a military engagement with Iran, which is what would probably happen if and when Israel did attack the Islamic Republic. That partial destruction of the Yarmouk facility in Sudan also fits in with this explanation.

The ceasefire mediated by Egypt was agreed when it seemed that the caches of weapons had been depleted, although they will no doubt be replenished. One way or another, Hamas will continue to manufacture its home-made Qassam rockets and, somehow, find a way of obtaining more advanced rockets from abroad. Then in a few years time, assuming nothing major happens in the Middle East, you can expect more of the same.

The general consensus in Israel is that the Mursi-mediated ceasefire is a temporary thing. It is not at all seen as a long-term arrangement; nothing fundamental has changed. Israel has mowed the lawn and depleted Hamas’s military caches.

Another reason for this operation taking place is the Arab spring, and especially the changes in Egypt. Israel was actually testing the position of the new Muslim Brotherhood

regime. Most people agree that Mursi actually came out of this stronger - his standing was enhanced and his prestige increased, when the ceasefire agreement was signed in Cairo, with Mursi flanked by Hillary Clinton - a sign of American approval. And, as Israel is a junior partner of the United States, it has no reason to regret Mursi’s increased prestige.

However, one complication is that the whole episode has also increased the standing of Hamas - an unintended but necessary consequence, since it proved it could survive the attack. At the same time, it reduced the prestige of the Israeli stooge, Mahmoud Abbas, leader of the Palestine Liberation Organisation regime in the West Bank. That led to a toning down of American opposition to Abbas going to the United Nations and obtaining the status of non-member observer for Palestine.

Israel resisted this move in the UN, but the US toned down its opposition and allowed the UK to abstain - there was vacillation on the part of foreign secretary William Hague. Before the operation he was against Palestine obtaining non-member observer status, as was Germany as well, actually. In the event, the UK and Germany abstained. Particularly in the case of Germany this came as a nasty, unexpected surprise to the Israeli government, because Germany was expected, as usual, to vote with the US. In the end the only EU county to do so was the Czech Republic. The only other states of any consequence to vote with the US and Israel were Canada and Colombia - the rest are countries like Micronesia and the Marshall Islands.

Field testing

But I have not finished enumerating the reasons for Israel conducting this operation. An important one, in my opinion, was to test the new Israeli missile defence system, Iron Dome. Unlike its previous anti-missile system that was mainly American-produced, this new, cheaper Rafael system is produced in Israel, with American assistance. The military wanted to test it in field conditions. It is possible to conduct a controlled test - firing a rocket into the air for the system to shoot down - but that is not so realistic. A proper test requires field combat conditions. The reports leaked to the press say that it was 85% efficient in preventing rockets landing in Israel, and no doubt it will be further improved. This is something else that is important for Israel, should it go to war with Iran.

All these reasons for the operation are connected - it was not carried out

just for electoral reasons or just to test Egypt or just for lawn-mowing, but also to test an important element of Israeli arms in case Tel Aviv gets the green light from America to attack Iran. Israel by itself, I think it is agreed, is not able to go it alone in attacking Iran - this is why it did not attack prior to the US presidential elections. The Israeli military establishment is mostly against an attack on Iran if it has to go it alone; the Israeli intelligence establishment is also against it, as too is the Israeli public. And the US has made it clear that if Israel acts independently it will not have US support.

As I wrote in an article published in the *Weekly Worker* earlier this year,⁴ Netanyahu also has political plans in case a war breaks out, quite apart from the actual conflict with Iran. He may want to use such a war as a smokescreen for major ethnic-cleansing in the West Bank. So winning or losing against Iran is not the only consideration.

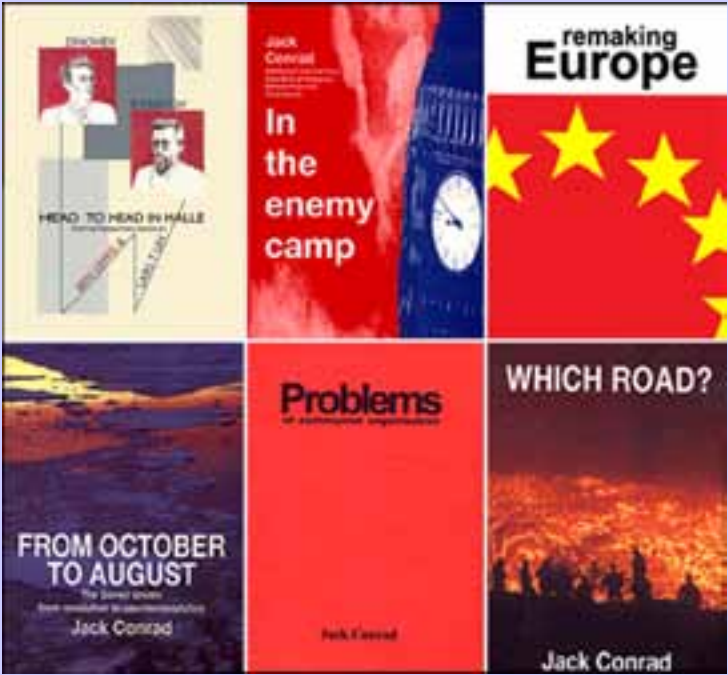
But finally, and also very importantly, Israel is one of the major arms manufacturers and exporters of the world. Not as important as the US or Britain, but not far behind. And Israel is very interested in selling Iron Dome, but in order to sell something one needs to demonstrate it. Again, demonstrating it in the field is much more impressive than simply inviting foreign military officers to watch the system shoot down a missile that has been fired overhead for that purpose. So this is also a consideration, as pointed out by the Israeli left economist, Shir Hever.⁵ Arms are one of the most important export sectors for Israel, along with diamonds and high technology.

So whether this entire operation has been a success or not depends on many criteria. What exactly do you think Israel wanted to achieve? As I have explained, there are many reasons, some of which can only be judged as to their success or failure in the future. In one respect, Israel lost a little bit, in that it was compelled to accept the recognition of Palestine as a non-member observer state. Whether Abbas will use this new status, as Israel fears he will, by going to the International Criminal Court and accusing Israel of violations and war crimes, remains to be seen - I doubt this, as there will be strong pressure against it ●

Notes

- 1. ‘Israel annexes more land’, December 6.
- 2. www.zcommunications.org/gaza-quiz-by-stephen-r-shalom.
- 3. *The Guardian* October 25.
- 4. ‘Netanyahu’s war wish’, February 9.
- 5. ‘The privatisation of Israeli war’: http://thereal-news.com/t2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=74&jumival=9191.

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AGGREGATE
Political weapon

Taking place in London on December 8, the latest CPGB members’ aggregate dealt with important political and organisational issues.

The politics was provided by guest speaker Moshé Machover, who gave CPGBers his always informed and valuable take on the recent Israeli offensive against Hamas and the Palestinians, explaining that the acts of aggression were carried out for many causes - none of them anything to do with the official justification (see opposite). Comrade Machover stressed again the regional context, not least Israel’s aggressive intentions towards Iran and the envisaged solution to the ‘demographic crisis’

faced by the settler state.

A lively debate followed, as comrades both picked the comrade’s brains and contributed their own thoughts on this live issue.

It fell to comrade Laurie Smith, thrust into the spotlight without any warning, to provide those present with an update on the CPGB’s recent website redesign (which, we hope you agree, is a great improvement on the old version) and to confirm that, even though the new site has only been up for a short while, the web team is already preparing the ground for a new cpgb.org.uk - version three should be up and running in around a year’s time.

‘Why so soon?’ you may

ask. Well, as comrade Smith elaborated, so much had to be learned by comrades in order to achieve the first redesign that the moment it was complete they could already see its deficiencies and realised that overcoming these would require something more than mere tinkering. He finished by asking comrades for their opinions and suggestions on the present website and what they would like to see in the future.

It goes without saying that everyone agreed our website ought to be a valuable educational tool, as well as a political weapon to take on the rotten ideas of a decaying system and a decrepit left.

Michael Copestake

THE LEFT

Crazy contortions of S

Following criticisms of the SWP's culture and practice in the first two *Internal Bulletins*, the leadership has mobilised to rubbish opponents. Peter Manson reports

The third and final Socialist Workers Party *Pre-conference Bulletin* has seen a concerted counterattack led by the central committee against comrades calling for greater democracy, openness and honesty within the organisation.

As readers may recall, strong points were made in the first two *IBs* (*Internal Bulletins*, as they are commonly known) by "Ian", "Paris", "Ruth" and "Justin" - for reasons of security only first names are given (although when that given name is something like "Lovedeep", "Søren", "Aamna" or "Despina", it makes you wonder just how 'secure' it all is - especially when the comrade's SWP branch is specified).

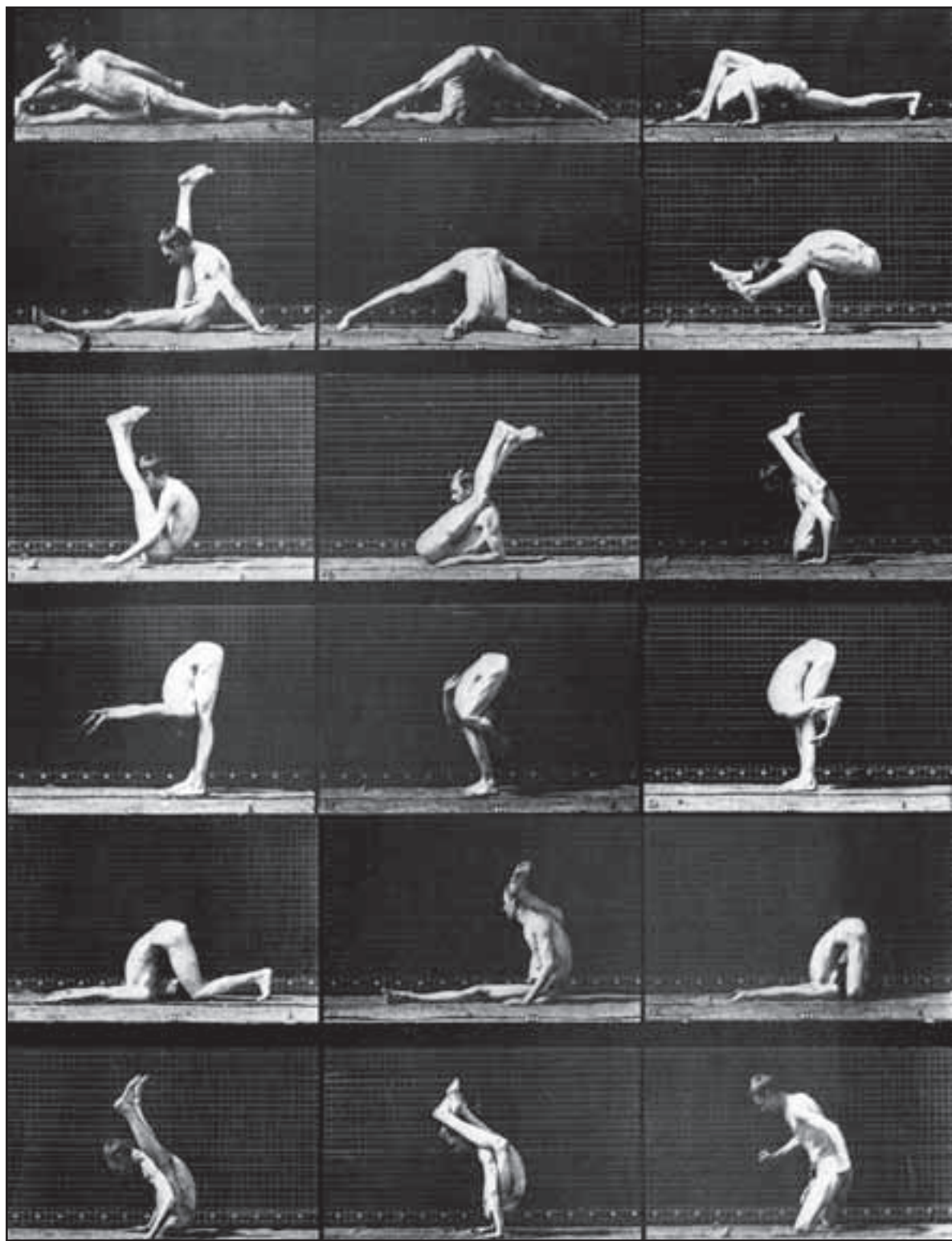
The critics demanded, in particular, much more genuine debate - to be facilitated by more frequent discussion bulletins and the right of CC members and full-timers to state their own individual views rather than be bound by the central line on every question, including tactical nuances. There was also the call to do away with the undemocratic, 'take it or leave it' slate system for electing the CC, and for the leadership to honestly face up to its mistakes and failures, and admit to the organisation's weaknesses - not least the real state and size of the membership.

The similarity of the responses - from both the CC itself and from various individuals and groups of comrades - leads one to suspect a degree of coordination. The main criticism of especially Paris and Ruth is that their proposals would deprive the SWP of any effectiveness by calling into question democratic centralism itself. This is combined with the claim (implied by the CC, openly stated by others) that the critics just want to sit around talking instead of getting on with the action.

In its contribution entitled 'Democracy, intervention and the revolutionary party: a reply to Paris and Ruth', the CC begins by stating: "The starting point for any evaluation of the party's internal mode of operation - how it organises, debates, elects its leadership and so on - is an assessment of the current balance of class forces and how the party has responded to the major tests it has faced in the recent period. Unfortunately, neither Ruth nor Paris make any serious attempt to develop such an assessment."

This allows the leadership to go into a long diversion about the great successes of Unite the Resistance and Unite Against Fascism, the SWP's two main fronts at the moment. Don't the critics realise that their outstanding achievements are all down to the *current* forms of organisation? According to the CC, "... the general direction of many of the arguments and proposals they make are ones that would act to weaken the party's ability to act effectively in the class struggle at a crucial juncture. Indeed, at stake is how we conceive the nature of a revolutionary party itself." The effect of those proposals, "if accepted, would be to shift the SWP towards being a much more decentralised and less interventionist party".

"Jess (South East London)", "Paul (East London)" and "Doug (Birmingham)" head their riposte: 'In defence of Leninism': "There is a very strong smell in these arguments," they write, "that locates a problem as being inbuilt to, inherent in, any form of leadership." The rather mild suggestions from Paris, Ruth and so on



Making 'Leninism' look ridiculous

for introducing some basic democracy into the SWP would apparently represent "a break from any serious notion of a democratic-centralist, interventionist party in the Leninist tradition".

For his part, "Jeff (Cardiff)" says they result from a "creeping infection of autonomism in their attack on democratic centralism and the slate system of voting in particular", while "Gareth (Hackney)" says that all this "shades into the suspicion of revolutionary leadership as remote and manipulative that is characteristic of movementism". He too alleges that the critics are making "an argument against democratic centralism itself".

"Sean (North London)" also weighs in. I wonder if he is the same person as "Sean V (Islington)", who is standing once more for the 50-strong national committee and goes by the name of Vernell? He pretends to believe that "the model put forward is closer to the social democratic type practised within the trade unions than those in a revolutionary party based on democratic centralism. The proposals, if implemented, would institutionalise passivity within the organisation." But "we must not see their proposals

in abstract from the method in which they are rooted": ie, one that would take the SWP "away from the democratic centralist tradition".

Finally "Shaun (Thames Valley)" alleges: "Implicit in both contributions is a different view of the party. Do we want to intervene in struggles as an organisation or simply participate in them as a loose grouping of individuals?"

I cannot believe that these comrades seriously believe that such proposals, which in reality ought to be uncontroversial in a genuinely democratic-centralist organisation, are inspired by impulses that are anarchistic, social democratic - or both.

Slate system

The main change in formal democracy that the leadership's critics propose involves a switch to individual voting for CC elections. In the words of a motion from Bury and Prestwich branch, "For the January 2013 conference, slates or individuals may be nominated, after which the election will take place on the basis of votes for individual candidates rather than slates, which means that conference must decide the number of people

it wishes to elect to the CC before electing them."

At the moment, if a comrade wishes to stand for the CC he or she may do so only as part of a full slate. One complication is that there is no fixed size for that slate - that is, there is no rule stipulating how many people should sit on the central committee. Another is that it is unclear whether those nominated for a particular slate can refuse to appear on a rival one. For example, if you are opposed to the re-election of a single current CC member and want to nominate a slate with someone else on it instead, are the rest of the outgoing CC obliged to stand on your slate as well as their own? If so, then any number of nominated individuals could simply add their name to the current list of CC members, and conference delegates would in effect be voting for or against those individuals. If not, you will have no option but to try to chuck out the entire leadership.

So what is wrong with the Bury and Prestwich motion? Let the CC explain: "A leadership elected on an individual basis is one that is more likely to pursue different perspectives rather than collectively agree a

coherent and focused strategy which it takes responsibility for, can be tested in practice." Even without the garbled grammar it would be difficult to follow this. What is actually wrong with having "different perspectives" feed into the collective? Doesn't that actually *help* in arriving at a "coherent and focused strategy"?

Jess, Paul and Doug go for a different line: "The key problem is that delegates at our conference are and should be voting for a leading body and not simply individuals. We do not want to vote for this or that individual to be a CC member: we want to decide on what we think is the right leading body for the party as a whole." This is so stupid, it almost beggars belief. Is that "leading body" not made up of "individuals"? Yes, but, as things stand, they can only be selected by the self-perpetuating CC.

Other CC apologists come up with equally absurd statements. For example, Jeff says: "The great advantage of the slate system is that the party gets exactly the slate that the majority vote for and not the haphazard result of individual voting." For "Gareth (Hackney)" the effect of the latter would be to "move us away from a democratic-centralist idea of the party towards a more movementist notion of leadership, one representing a coalition of overlapping interests". Overlapping interests? He adds: "The slate system, along with political clarity, has stood us in good stead, in a way that cannot be said of other revolutionary organisations ... which have been tolerant of permanent factionalism and eclecticism in their politics." No-one could ever accuse the SWP of eclecticism, could they?

Then there is "Donny (Edinburgh)" - I wonder what his surname is. This one is a gem: "The revolutionary party tries to lead the working class in its fight to defeat capitalism. That alone brings real democracy. Our internal practices exist to help achieve these ends. So the democratic question of how to choose a CC comes down to how to secure the best central leadership." In other words, internal democracy matters not a jot - as though there is no relationship between how we conduct ourselves within the "revolutionary party" and what we advocate for society as a whole.

Donny states: "With slates the argument is therefore about faults in political strategy, not individuals. If members think a political problem exists, a different slate can and should be proposed to correct these faults ... with individual elections the creation of a CC would be more haphazard, and less likely to produce a coherent political line". He concludes by asking: "What type of CC will best equip the party to spearhead the fight for the general strike: an assembly of individuals or a collective body?"

Sean Vernell again: "If we go down the road of electing our CC members on an individual basis, then not only does it become a 'popularity contest', but also it will break any possibility of the leadership being able to act in a collective way, because it will reinforce individual members of the CC to be more responsive to their individual power bases in the party rather than to the collective will of the CC and that of conference decisions."

How can intelligent people come up with such nonsense? Ironically many of these comrades pay lip service to the notion that there is no one single correct way to elect a leadership, but surely that contradicts their dogmatic defence of the slate system.

SWP central committee

Comrade Vernell also has something to say about another of the proposals from Ruth and Paris: “If the party supports their calls to give full-time workers the same democratic rights as the unpaid members of the party, it will bring about a significant shift of democracy away from the unpaid members to unelected full-time workers within the organisation. The problem of granting full-time workers the same democratic rights as non-paid members of the party is it could lead to unelected full-time workers overriding the democratically made decisions of the members through conference and party councils.”

What on earth is he talking about? The idea, as I understand it, is that all members should have equal rights. No-one should be seen as a mere conduit for the leadership without being able to make their own input. As another motion from Bury and Prestwich puts it, “... full-timers have a particular responsibility to win the party as a whole to carrying through decisions effectively. If some argue against decisions that have been reached, or obstruct their implementation, this undermines our democracy, our unity in action and the effectiveness of the party.”

However, the motions proposes: “Individual CC members and full-timers can participate freely in the key areas of the party’s democracy - NC meetings, internal bulletins, and speaking at party conference, without being bound by the CC ‘line’.”

As he did last year, Neil Davidson - “Neil (Edinburgh)” - adds further clarity, including on the democratic balance between leaders, full-timers and lay members: “... members of the CC must be free to express their views during the pre-conference period, in the same way as other comrades - including other full-timers. At the moment, we have no way of knowing what individual CC members actually think on any issue.”

The CC is, after all, “the main active element and provider of initiatives. If there are disagreements, or even just differences of emphasis on the CC, we need to know what these are, since this obviously has a bearing on what decisions conference itself may make.”

In the words of one of the motions from Bury and Prestwich, “Discipline is for unity in action in the carrying out of decisions, not to stifle debate. It is better that the strongest possible speakers from each point of view are heard to ensure maximum clarity. Discipline is necessary in a revolutionary party to ensure united action against the enemies of the working class, not against our own members.”

Culture

Comrade Davidson points to other failings. Referring to the slate system, he states: “The procedure we have used virtually since the founding of the SWP in 1976 has exhausted any usefulness it may once have had.” However, the problem is the unaccountable culture, of which the slate system is an essential part.

For example, John Rees may have been blamed for the Respect debacle and criticised for his leadership style. But what happened after he was deposed? “At the time, some of us argued that the party’s difficulties ... were not simply the result of the politics and personalities of the Rees-German-Bambury-Nineham faction, but instead had deeper structural roots, which allowed this group to dominate the CC and hence the party, and which, unless consciously dealt with, would survive its departure.”

However, demonstrating the

total failure of the SWP majority to understand basic democracy are statements like this one from Shaun: “What would clearly be a recipe for disarming the party is the suggestion from Paris that ‘different political tendencies should be represented on the CC’. The CC needs to provide coherent collective leadership. Of course there will be debate and disagreement, but enshrining an organised opposition within it would render it inoperable.”

Or “Pete (Birmingham)”: “Does [Paris] really think that we would be a more coherent, united and effective organisation in this situation? The divisions in the CC would be a permanent feature and the whole party would experience the debilitating effect of this.” So the leadership must be monolithic. Does that apply then to all organisations and institutions? How about workers’ soviets? Would they be “inoperable” if they contained opposition groups?

“Simon (Huddersfield)” gives an example of how the current culture allows the leadership to push through changes. In September a party council - the delegate body that meets once or twice a year between conferences - agreed a document regarding the submission of motions to conference. “From now on,” says Simon, “a faction of members that remains a minority opinion in the branches will be denied the right to submit a motion to conference to be debated.”

Factions, of course, are only permitted in the three-month period before conference, which takes place at the beginning of January every year (in 2013 it will be held in London over the weekend of January 4-6). Simon says that the change “makes a mockery of the current rules on members being able to organise as a faction in the run-up to conference, in order to try to win conference to their position”.

Whatever you think about this, Simon certainly has a point when he writes: “... proposals on how conference is structured ... or on how motions are submitted ... should have been debated and voted on at conference, not a party council ... attended by fewer delegates than attend conference, and at such short notice that only the delegates attending party council were sent the CC proposals to read before they were adopted.” So the right of factions to submit motions to conference was abolished without any discussion in the organisation as a whole.

Yet, as Simon points out, “Under the commissions system, a group of comrades can propose an ‘alternative commission’ to be voted on ... can any group of like-minded delegates submit an alternative? Do we now have one rule for motions and another for commissions?” Commissions are “documents drawn up at the end of conference sessions which summarise the main strands of discussion and action to be taken”, writes national secretary Charlie Kimber in introducing conference procedure. He does indeed state that “if there is more than one point of view in the discussion, then there can be alternative commissions which are then voted on”.

So anything can be proposed by anyone from the conference floor without prior notice? Apparently. But in reality, of course, it will only be the leadership that will be in a position to do this.

Debate

The last thing the CC wants is real debate. So, for example, it writes in response to Ruth and Paris: “The call for more *Internal Bulletins* must at least be tempered by a concern to

avoid creating an organisation more preoccupied with internal arguments than intervention, and where those comrades with the time to write for and read the extra *IBs* set the agenda for debate, rather than delegate meetings at party council and conference. Such collective discussion is ultimately a higher form of democracy than a series of individual contributions which may only haphazardly reflect the wider overall experiences of comrades.”

So it is actually *better* when delegates agree a proposal without having discussed it in advance, is it? Just like they did at the September party council. But aren’t those comrades “with the time to write for and read the extra *IBs*” also likely to be the ones with “the time” to go to conference in any case?

In case you have any doubt about the leadership’s contemptuous attitude to debate, here are the CC’s recommendations in relation to Socialist Worker Student Societies: “We want to roll out SWSS caucuses that are broader than just the SWP members: These should have a five-minute-long political introduction and then set out the political tasks. We will have to patiently explain why we do paper sales, use petitions, and involve ourselves in particular political activities.”

Yes, that’s right: *five minutes* for a “political introduction” and then straight on to the real “political tasks” like organising paper sales.

But it is not just students who should stop all this political discussion. “Penny (Edinburgh)” - a co-thinker of “Donny” - has a piece entitled ‘How small changes can make a difference to a branch’. She proudly announces that Edinburgh branch meetings have been reduced to one hour, 25 minutes. They *must* finish at 9pm: “Comrades who are parents, who have to get up for work early doors ... who are disabled and who find sitting still for two hours draining/painful/impossible, can all find long meetings difficult. Shortening them is orientating on the working class.”

And Penny advises comrades in other towns and cities to follow suit: “The only items for the branch meeting agenda after the political lead-off and discussion are basically what we did last week (and how it went), plus what we are doing in the week to come and why. This doesn’t preclude in-depth political discussion and debate on items like UTR, etc.” Yes, the “in-depth” debate will be about why everyone should make sure they go to the next Unite the Resistance ‘conference’, I suppose.

But not to worry, there is always the branch committee, which Penny says had to be set up to deal with outstanding business and whose meetings “last on average 35 minutes”.

Everyone knows that too much thinking and debating is bad for you. That’s what the CC is there for, after all. Here is comrade Vernell again: “The calls for more theory articulated in some of the pre-conference bulletins reflect a gradualist approach to leadership and class struggle: first you get everyone in a room to debate and discuss our theory of working class struggle and trade unions. When everyone is clear and has the ‘correct’ understanding, then we go out in the field of struggle to implement this ‘correct’ understanding.”

Whatever happened to the dialectical relationship between theory and practice?

Not everyone is bludgeoned into submission though. “Tim (Bristol)” declares: “*Internal Bulletins* before party councils will revitalise that body, which has, at the moment, little value

other than a forum where the CC can mobilise the party faithful.” But who said the CC wants it ‘revitalised’, Tim?

And “Ian (Manchester)” makes a reappearance to follow up his submission to *IB* No1. Having mentioned in passing those “backward ideas such as counterposing theory and activity”, he goes into abstract mode, being careful not to direct his criticisms to anyone in particular:

“A leadership that is over-reliant on a party ‘machine’ would tend to be highly protective of it. Anything or anyone they perceive (rightly or wrongly) as a threat to their control over it would elicit an exaggerated, almost paranoid, reaction. Instead of comradely and political debate there would be a closing of ranks and a desire to deal with any issues within the machine - ‘not in front of the children’.”

But thankfully, there is no such regime in today’s SWP. Or is there? Ian goes on: “This was the unhealthy party culture comrades experienced in the era of Rees, German and Bambury and which we have begun to correct. But let us not kid ourselves that the SWP is the ‘finished article’ of a revolutionary party - we have a lot of work to do!”

Honesty

In its reply to Ruth and Paris, the CC extols the virtues of an “honest analysis of our successes and failures” - and then in the very next paragraph declares: “The recent UTR national conference on November 17 was a significant success, with 1,000 in attendance.”

Even more “honest” is comrade “Sean” - he should know: he was one of the main speakers at the event: “The Unite the Resistance ... conference ... was a great success. The turnout surpassed most comrades’ expectations. Over 1,000 people attended - the majority, by some margin, were not members of the SWP.”

So a hall that officially “seats up to 1,000” and was only three-quarters full somehow had “over 1,000” people in it. What is more, most of them were not SWP members. In that case, the leadership’s all-out attempts to mobilise its own comrades were truly a dismal failure, weren’t they? Only 300-400 could be bothered to go along.

How apposite is the comment by “Anna and Sue (North London)” and “Regine (Central London)” in their piece on the women’s question: “As Lenin said, ‘Never lie to the class’ - this also means our own members.”

As an aside, it is in the context of mobilisations for the likes of UTR that comrade Davidson points to one of the SWP’s fundamental weaknesses: its inability to develop a coherent strategy resulting from its refusal to adopt any programme. He writes: “We have always refused to follow orthodox Trotskyist organisations in drawing up programmatic demands, transitional or otherwise. For much of our history this has been a defensible position, allowing the maximum tactical flexibility ... But unconstrained manoeuvrability, like all forms of ‘stick-bending’, has come at a cost. To this day we tend to operate with a set of relatively short-term tactics.” And if they fail “this has no consequences or implications for our analysis, despite the significance we have previously ascribed to them. We simply move on to building for the next all-important demonstration or event. What is our strategy?”

The question of honesty also comes up in other contributions, such as ‘Building the resistance, building the unions’ by “Brian and Pete (Leeds and West Yorkshire)”. They contend: “... the SWP seriously failed to realise (or

was insufficiently honest about) the extent and the speed of demoralisation [throughout the working class]. A tendency of misplaced triumphalism made it difficult for many members to be open about the difficulties they were having in re-invigorating any sense of resistance.”

(These two, by the way, also state: “... we have often tended ... to repeat that this government is almost uniquely weak”. However, “it is quite probable that the present government could remain in office in some shape or form until May 2015”.)

Nowhere is the leadership’s dishonesty more apparent than on the question of membership figures. These *must* go up every year and anyone who has signed a membership application form within the last two years, irrespective of whether they have ever been seen or heard from since, *must* be counted as a member.

In *IB* No2 Paris called for this demoralising practice of servicing ‘members’ who have never been to a meeting or paid a penny in subs to be ended. But the CC indulges in more crazy contortions in twisting his words: “Paris ... calls for more involvement by members in the party. However, it seems this will only apply to some members, since he proposes that the way to resolve what he rather insultingly calls the ‘low political level’ of too many members is to conduct a purge of the membership lists.”

I wonder why it is ‘insulting’ to say that the membership has a “low political level” - it is not as though they have much opportunity to develop their ideas through vigorous debate, is it? The CC also reprimands Paris for wanting to “exclude comrades with major family commitments or trade union responsibilities”. It alleges he also “ignores how sudden shifts can take place in comrades’ level of activity and involvement”. In fact “to reduce the party only to the ‘most active’ ... would be to cut it off from much of its links to the wider working class and risk turning it into a sect existing in a vacuum.”

But they are arguing against things Paris did not say. On the one hand, there are inactive members who nevertheless will turn up to the odd event, help out in specific campaigns and make financial contributions, and, on the other, at least *half* of the SWP’s “registered members” do none of those things.

“Simon and Christine” from the membership office inform comrades that this “registered membership” stands at 7,597 - the SWP “recruited 890 people since this time last year”. But they assure the likes of Paris that “We have taken off 420 people from the lists this year.” That gives you some idea of the “membership” turnover. Presumably a similar number of ‘members’ are struck off every year. In other words, about half those ‘recruited’ do nothing more than pass through the SWP revolving door.

“Anne and Martin (North-West London)” state: “Based on the statistics of three London districts, we estimate there are just a few hundred comrades in the whole country involved in the ‘effective intervention’”. The CC’s answer is to launch yet another “subs drive”, whereby the minority of activists are expected to spend hours and hours telephoning, emailing or personally calling on those elusive “registered members” - to very little avail.

As “Tim (Bristol)” points out, “Continued massaging of membership figures and branch numbers must end, and the overreliance on the central office needs to stop” ●

REVIEW

The people against fascism?

Donny Gluckstein *A people's history of the Second World War: resistance versus empire* Pluto Press, 2012, pp288, £17.50

Britain has a bit of an obsession with World War II. Whether drunk football fans singing the *Dambusters* theme at England matches or the apathetic BBC2 schedulers' constant resort to more *Dad's army* repeats, people treasure our collective myth of 'the war'. All in it together, sacrificing and making do, our island home standing proud and free. Not just the last triumph of the British empire, but an unambiguous war for democracy. Or so they say.

But Donny Gluckstein's book - just like James Heartfield's *Unpatriotic history* and a recent re-edition of Ray Challinor's *Struggle for hearts and minds* - begs to differ, bringing into relief the hypocrisy of the western imperialist powers and the darker episodes of the war effort, as against the motives of many ordinary Britons fighting the war. According to Gluckstein, the 'people's war' that rank-and-file soldiers fought, and so too the anti-fascist resistance movements in Axis-occupied areas, was distinct from the 'imperialist' war between the major powers over territory and colonies.

Of course, there is nothing new in saying that Britain did not just fight foreign fascism over the years 1939-45, but was itself transformed domestically. Indeed, such a narrative was consciously mobilised by the British government during the war. From the depiction of social change, as women came into the workforce in *Millions like us*, to the shared sacrifice and breakdown of rigid class barriers in *Mrs Miniver* or the spontaneous will to resist fascism of *Went the day well*, wartime propagandists constantly stressed popular participation, collective effort and democratic spirit. So too in later memorialisation: the priggish bank manager, captain Mainwaring, conservative but with a chip on his shoulder about his terribly lower-middle-class upbringing, reproaches his deputy, the aristocratic Sergeant Wilson, "Things will be different after the war, you know!"

As Gluckstein notes, Angus Calder even produced a history called *The people's war*. The task Gluckstein sets himself, though, is to extend this to an international plane, showing how the 'people's war' was distinct from - or clashed with - the imperialist war, in each of the specific arenas of conflict, from the French resistance to India and Vietnam.

In this sense, I am not exactly paying the author much of a compliment when I say that he has covered a wide array of situations and research material. While his project does not cover the war in its entirety (the Soviet Union and Japan being the most notable omissions), he does attempt to imply the 'people's resistance versus empire' schema to each and every one. Although the author is a member of the Socialist Workers Party, he does not claim to be writing a Marxist history of the conflict, but rather to be testing his 'people's war' idea.

As we shall see, the problem with this analytical framework is not just oversimplifying some among his 15 case studies, but also blurring the specifically class-struggle elements of the crisis the war entailed. Unfortunately the limitations of space, language and my own knowledge mean I will have to restrict my comments to his analysis of western Europe, and the way in which the classless 'people's war' praised by Gluckstein is in fact a mainstream myth of anti-fascism and



Resistance: but in whose interests?

was used in the period of World War II to demobilise potential revolutionary forces.

In Spain

In his opening chapter, 'Spanish prelude', Gluckstein explains how the 'people's war' against fascism began in 1936, in response to general Franco's coup attempt. While the western democracies tacitly preferred the victory of the Italian and German-backed nationalists, important sections of the Spanish working class resisted Franco *en masse*. Certainly, it was a brave choice to apply the 'people's war' idea to the fight of the Spanish republic, which fractured precisely along the lines of whether the struggle was simply anti-fascist or else also entailed a working class revolution.

Gluckstein's explanation is that the 'people's war' was itself a revolution, confronting the army (p14), but imperialist France and Britain failed to support the democratically elected government (as might be expected, if the overthrow of capitalism was on the cards), while the communists, in line with Stalin's desire to appear moderate and appease the western democracies, wanted to limit the struggle to simple opposition to Franco (p19). As such, his criticism is not directed against the communists, Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM) and Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) for making a bloc with bourgeois legality in the Popular Front, subordinating the revolution, but instead and only on the western democracies' failure to support the republic, and then Stalin for kowtowing to these same imperialist powers. Yet the revolution was doomed not from the point where the Popular Front broke down, but rather when it began: when the contrasting class

interests of the republican state and the working class were smothered, as the anarchists and POUM capitulated to a bourgeois-liberal leadership.

Gluckstein's focus has the effect of exaggerating the role of a nebulous 'imperialism' and downplaying the direct, class opposition between the remnants of the republican state (which, unmentioned by Gluckstein, had attempted to reach an accommodation with Franco and initially mobilised no opposition) and the revolutionary movement arising during the war crisis. If the western democracies were opposed to 'reds' in Spain, the Popular Front was the instrument of the non-fascist Spanish ruling class to muzzle them, under the 'pragmatic' argument that all other political questions were subordinate to the urgent, joint fight against Franco, and would have to be addressed only upon some undefined tomorrow.

This superficially 'common sense' idea played a similar role in the French and Italian resistances, and, on a rather lesser scale, the 'vote for anyone but the BNP' propaganda of Unite Against Fascism. But note Leon Trotsky's bitter denunciation of "the empty abstraction of anti-fascism" and the Popular Front in his writings on Spain: "The very concepts of 'anti-fascism' and 'anti-fascist' are fictions and lies. Marxism approaches all phenomena from a class standpoint. [Republican prime minister] Azaña is 'anti-fascist' only to the extent that fascism hinders bourgeois intellectuals from carving out parliamentary or other careers. Confronted with the necessity of choosing between fascism and the proletarian revolution, Azaña will always prove to be on the side of the fascists. His entire policy during the seven years of revolution proves this."

A rather bombastic critic, certainly, but certainly one worth engaging with:

instead, the author makes just one reference to Trotsky, in his introduction (p7). Gluckstein's smoothing over of the domestic class battle, within the republic, is also expressed in a mechanical division of labour among anti-Franco forces: thus the revolution is portrayed as going on behind the lines (factory and land occupations, confrontations with bosses), whereas the front is a simple military campaign, as if there were no connection between overall political leadership and the fate of local efforts to transform the economy. Indeed, the very words 'people's war' are strongly redolent of the kind of rhetoric the bourgeois republicans and Stalinists used, to try to pose the war as an all-class alliance without internal contradictions.

Class

Indeed, rather than seeing perspectives of social and political transformation as intertwined with the struggle between classes, Gluckstein's book favours a sociological and often reductive interpretation of class, drawing a link between the fact that workers and other 'ordinary people' were mobilised against fascism and their espousal of little-defined aspirations for social reform, as a cause 'parallel' to, but separate from, the clash of empires led by generals and politicians.

The division between the 'imperialist' and 'people's' war essentially seems, then, to be predicated on a rather tendentious view that Allied ruling class leaders were not subjectively opposed to Hitler, whereas the 'ordinary people' under their command fought for various reformist objectives. Certainly, Gluckstein can deploy some juicy quotes by Churchill and other ruling class figures praising Hitler, Franco and Mussolini, whose 'order'

they preferred to the spectre of godless Bolshevism - but he still plays down the degree to which they really did fight fascism, a regime which certainly did not prove necessary to the survival of world capitalism.

Figures such as Joseph Goebbels, who believed that the Allies would need the Nazis to keep order after the war, were wrong: unlike at the end of World War I, the Axis countries occupied by the Allies were not humiliatingly punished, as advocated by Lord Vansittart, but instead rebuilt with some form of welfarist democracy, helped by Marshall plan aid dollars. Combined with the later creation of what would become the European Union, they planned for democratic stability and managed class tensions in western Europe much more consciously than the author lets on.

Moreover, Gluckstein rarely comes very close to defining what 'the people' means as a political subject, instead characterising it largely negatively and in terms of its sociological make-up, that is, the participation in Resistance movements of people who were not workers (p. 12). In a response to SWP historian Ian Birchall's review of his book, Gluckstein writes: "If anything, WWII came closer than WWI to lining up the armies separately, because in country after country a movement of 'a section of the petty bourgeoisie [and] the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses' fought both Axis or foreign occupation and their open ('Quisling') collaborators in the domestic ruling class."²

However, the implication of Gluckstein's reading is that the fight against 'Quisling' elements of the ruling class is in itself revolutionary, which seems to fudge the distinction between anti-Nazism and class struggle. But the general trend of World War II was for ruling classes to break with Hitler and save themselves, as Allied victory became inevitable (most notably Italy), or else for non-collaborationist elements of the state to find themselves on the right side of history (France, the Netherlands, Norway, etc).

Revolution is not just about destroying some external enemy, or eliminating the ruling class in a military confrontation, but actively creating new social relations and democratic forms. Unless you imagine fascism, or individual fascists, to be absolutely necessary to the survival of capitalism, even the most 'militant' anti-fascism (hanging collaborators from lamp-posts, blowing up Wehrmacht units, purging institutions of Nazi sympathisers post-war), if not part of a conscious political mobilisation to reorder society, will leave capitalist class domination fundamentally intact.

Never in this book does Gluckstein bring such questions into relief, and discussion of aspirations to remake society post-war is always unsatisfactorily vague. While a 'people's history', this is definitely not history from below, and Gluckstein rarely dwells on the complexity of working class people's political ideas and traditions, nor their efforts at organising, preferring to highlight the perfidy of bourgeois politicians and the attitudes of the main Stalinist and social democratic parties.

This has the unfortunate effect of portraying working class people as passive victims of events, left crestfallen, as bad leaders betrayed their naive expectations, and also

leads to anachronism. Indeed, despite an analysis surprisingly long on praise for the role of the communist parties in resistance movements, Gluckstein does not spare us from sterile speculation, at 70 years' distance, on the possible results of different tactics, such as when he argues that a "genuine people's war imbued with internationalism and emphasising the common interest of ordinary people in opposing *all* ruling classes" (whatever "ordinary people" means) "could have generated mass support for [the Polish resistance] in Volhynia" (p63). However, he does not seriously engage with the WWII-era critics of the mainstream popular-frontist resistance strategies - even though their critiques are surely much more interesting to the reader than his own, since they both lived through and tried to shape the events concerned, testing analysis against reality.

I presume the reader will accept that resistance movements did more to shape the terrain for their own countries' post-war political life than they actually tipped the balance of the war in the Allies' favour (indeed, victories such as Stalingrad, proving that Hitler was not infallible, but rather doomed, were important spurs to partisan activity in all countries). As such, the question of the left's approach to resistance struggles is not so much a question of whether or not it was really necessary to fight fascism, in the abstract, but what kind of post-war society such movements were gradually building, as they approached governmental power. While the author could hardly have been expected to address every Trotskyist, left-communist and anarchist group under the sun, the most glaring sins of omission are those which pose clear challenges to his 'people's war' interpretative schema. I will focus here on the example of Italy.

Anti-fascism in Italy

The Italian ruling class was imperilled in World War II, 20 years of fascism and a disastrous war effort sparking significant working class rebellion. Massive strikes in the northern industrial centres in March 1943, organised around wage demands, galvanised elements within the regime that saw Mussolini as leading them into the abyss, and on July 25, just after the Allies landed in Sicily, the king and the fascist Grand Council overthrew the hapless *Duce*.

In his place, the king appointed marshal Pietro Badoglio, conqueror of Ethiopia in 1935-36, who (having bloodily suppressed anti-fascist demonstrations greeting the fall of Mussolini, in order to maintain order) began peace negotiations with the Allies. When the armistice was announced on September 8, Nazi Germany immediately invaded to shore up its strategic position, quickly overrunning most of the country. Hitler soon put Mussolini back in office, charged with keeping order in the puppet 'Salò republic'.

Meanwhile, Badoglio remained prime minister of the kingdom of Italy in the Allied-occupied areas in the south of the country, supported by the British and Americans. Anti-fascist partisan activity and workplace organisation continued to build in the German-controlled north and centre, with tens of thousands of young men flooding into the resistance from November 1943 as an alternative to being conscripted to the Salò armed forces.

The resistance movement was primarily organised in the popular-front Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale (CLN), with the pro-Moscow Communist Party (PCI) by some way its largest element. Gluckstein argues that the CLN's 'people's war' against the Nazi-fascists had a radical agenda: "Fighting both Salò and the

Wehrmacht gave mass struggle a dual character. It was a battle for national liberation, and a 'true civil war' for 'class emancipation'" (p147).

His citation of the words 'class emancipation' is rather precarious, here, suggesting that the mere fact of civil war against a domestic opponent collaborating with the Nazis - Salò - implies that the fight had a 'class' character. However, he writes: "Although workers played such a prominent role in Italy, even here the people's war was never a pure class phenomenon", as northern industrialists hedged their bets by funding the CLN parties and keeping open contacts with both the fascists and US intelligence (p153). Indeed, the CLN was a cross-class phenomenon - but not just because of industrialists' support or sociological make-up, but rather its political breadth. As well as the communist and socialist parties and the left-republican Partito d'Azione, the CLN included two liberal parties and the Christian Democrats, gathered behind a programme of national unity.

Indeed, ever since the Comintern's Seventh Congress the PCI had taken a series of positions designed to apply the Stalinist popular front strategy to Italy, mostly relying on the idea that Mussolini was selling out Italy's interests for the sake of his alliance with Germany. Such a narrative ran through the several appeals "extending a hand to fascists of whatever rank" in the exile PCI press from 1936-39, including the argument that Italy had "just and honest" territorial interests in the Balkans, and that Mussolini was reckless to instead build an empire in Africa (which was, of course, already 'taken').

The Stalinist policy was to isolate Hitler internationally, and, failing that, to drive a wedge between Mussolini and the Italian bourgeois establishment, while also stirring discontent in the fascist mass organisations. As Trotskyist Pietro Tresso caustically argued in 1938, the PCI view was that "It was necessary to tear (fascist) Italy from its affair with Hitler, and rally it to the fight for 'democracy'. For this purpose 'our brothers in black shirts' could give us the greatest of support. The enemy is no longer fascism, but Hitlerism. So enough of anti-fascism. In Italy there are no longer either fascists or anti-fascists, much like for a long time there has been no mention in the Stalinist 'newspapers' of proletarians and bourgeois, nor rich peasants and poor ones, nor exploited and exploiters. In Italy there is now nothing but Italians and anti-Italians."³

Similarly, throughout the German occupation of Italy, from September 1943 onwards, the PCI portrayed its cause in nationalist terms, invoking the imagery of the 19th century Italian wars of unification and insisting that it had no immediate revolutionary aims, instead calling on all Italians to close ranks and fight to "kick out the Germans". Its press explicitly counterposed a national struggle to the class-struggle policy of other communist organisations, which the Stalinists denounced as divisive "class particularism".

Having declared war on Germany - which was then occupying all of central and northern Italy - in October 1943, Pietro Badoglio wanted the CLN parties to join his Allied-backed government and lend it popular credibility. However, the PCI leadership initially refused, on the grounds that the monarchy was too divisive, too compromised by its association with fascism, to act as an effective figurehead for the national struggle. Other CLN parties were similarly reluctant to support the new regime, fearing being outflanked to their left by the PCI should they break ranks.

But in April 1944, under Moscow's instructions, the PCI changed tack with the so-called 'Salerno turn', leading to

all CLN parties joining His Majesty's government. While many militants complained of accommodation to the hated monarchy, this turn had a certain political logic. Closely aligned to the Allied powers and promising to delay addressing institutional questions until after the war (thereby stabilising bourgeois order at the moment when it was most in crisis), it was only natural that the CLN cross-class alliance would try to make a bloc with forces with similar objectives, including elements of the ruling class which had seen that the Rome-Berlin Axis was doomed to failure.

Indeed, this was exactly the PCI vision Tresso had pointed to in 1938 - parts of the fascist-era establishment had cut Mussolini loose in order to join up with the democratic Allies, and thus could also be welcomed into the popular front in Italy. Curiously, though, Gluckstein writes that "The Salerno turn transformed the PCI's role in the resistance. Class struggle was to be replaced by 'national unity' with the bosses, the monarchy, ex-fascists, and anyone not overtly in the Nazi camp" (p155). He adds: "One consequence of the Salerno turn was the growth of revolutionary movements outside the PCI advocating the class struggle transposed onto an international plane." He cites the examples of Stella Rossa, which had about half as many members as the PCI in Turin, and Bandiera Rossa, the largest formation of the Roman resistance - both of them heterodox organisations outside the CLN and believing in the immediate possibility of socialist revolution.

A number of Gluckstein's references on these pages are from an article by Arturo Peregalli in *Revolutionary History* Vol 5, No4, based on his masterful work *L'altra resistenza*. However, the author's portrayal of this text and the events there described is misleading, forced to fit his own 'people's war' schema. In fact, just a few lines after Peregalli refers to radical left groups seeing the war as "the class struggle transposed onto an international plane", the late Italian historian correctly explains that "These movements were not surprised by the 'Salerno turn': they merely regarded it as a tactical adjustment that would extend the [already existing] all-class alliance to the royalists. Their critique of the PCI's policies covered more than just the changes after March 1944."⁴

It is not true that the PCI - or at least its press and leadership - had a class-struggle strategy prior to the Salerno turn; instead, it argued that class-conscious workers should mobilise together with all true Italians for the CLN. PCI-organised strikes in the northern factories both before and after Salerno had this same objective. Moreover, the other main communist groups were not post-Salerno splits, but rather independent formations arising out of local initiatives, often somewhat eclectic and informed by the lasting traditions of the pre-1926 Communist Party. The 20-year fascist suppression of the left had meant that many militants, isolated from international Stalinism, held onto fragments of the early, revolutionary and class-against-class ideas of the Comintern. They saw the war as the ripe moment to 'settle accounts' with Italian capitalism, and thus refused to submit their own objectives to a generic war against fascism.

Hence legendary Bandiera Rossa partisan, tram-driver Tigrino Sabatini, explained to his comrades in autumn 1943, "Lenin turned war into revolution. Stalin, Togliatti and [the Rome PCI's Mario] Alicata send revolutionaries to fight the war."⁵ Sabatini and 185 of his comrades would be murdered by the Nazis during the nine-month occupation of Rome - a third of the anti-fascist total.

Whereas Gluckstein identifies the CLN and its fight against the Salò republic with "class struggle",

and its embrace of Badoglio and the monarchy against this same enemy as unprincipled "national unity", thus giving rise to revolutionary oppositions - in fact these other communist movements were significant from the very start of the resistance period. As Bandiera Rossa explained as early as October 1943, class struggle was not just a spur to action against Nazis, but instead a clash taking place *within* the anti-fascist camp, between revolutionary perspectives and those who "drugged the masses with talk of freedom", using national unity against the Nazi-fascists as a cover for the restoration of bourgeois order.

As it happened, Badoglio only remained prime minister until June 6 1944, to be replaced by former Rome CLN president, the liberal Ivanoe Bonomi, as the Allies reached the Italian capital. The CLN parties remained in governmental alliance until 1947, establishing a republican constitution via referendum. As such, Salerno was not the moment of 'betrayal' of class struggle or the CLN's people's war in order to forge national unity: rather, it put the pre-existing Stalinist popular-front strategy into practice, concretising the full extent of PCI class collaboration. Indeed, it proved to be just a temporary phase in the CLN's wider operation of channelling working class rebellion into safe, parliamentary-democratic channels.

As part of this, the PCI made largely non-specific rhetorical promises of social reform - the kind of demagogic ideas so praised by Gluckstein - both to defend its appeal to its members (and indulge their hopes of a future, 'radical' change of tack) and undercut rival communist organisations. But, combined with this effort to confuse opposition with its two-faced promises, the Stalinists also subjected leftist opponents to 'Nazi'-baiting and even direct physical repression. Stella Rossa - publicly attacked by leading PCI member Pietro Secchia as a "mask of the Gestapo" - had its leader, Temistocle Vaccarella, assassinated by Stalinist hoodlums during the German occupation; other such victims included the left communists, Fausto Atti and Mario Acquaviva. Across the Alps, Pietro Tresso and three of his French comrades suffered a similar fate.

SWP's anti-fascism

As well as his misreading of Peregalli, I had other concerns about the author's real grasp of the realities of World War II. I could not quite make out whether the sentence, "The Soviets put no obstacle in the way of British and US supply planes flying the 1,250km from their nearest bases in Italy [to Poland]" (p68), was meant to be a joke. The clash between Charles de Gaulle and the ex-Vichyist generals in North Africa is basically ignored, and the whole chronology of his chapter on France screwed up by wrongly dating the Anglo-American invasion of Algeria as November 1943 rather than the previous year (pp92-94). But I am going to shy away from writing a response to Gluckstein as long as the original book.

In my final remarks I would like to briefly describe how Gluckstein's failure to understand the role of anti-fascist and democratic ideology in World War II, and its mythology, is connected with the SWP's current understanding of the modern-day British far right and how to fight it.

Reading Gluckstein's book reminded me of an article I once read in *Socialist Worker*, in an issue largely dedicated to anti-fascist themes (it was produced for a Unite Against Fascism demo responding to the election of BNPer Richard Barnbrook to the London assembly). Simon Assaf interviewed a Guyanese RAF veteran on the experience of West Indians who

volunteered to fight for Britain. While undoubtedly highlighting the racism which blighted the armed forces, the piece nonetheless promotes the idea that everyone pulled together, coloniser and colonised, against fascism, such as in a reference to "the extra taxes, raw materials and food that *flowed* from the colonies to support the war" (my italics).⁶ Indeed, this piece also advertised an Imperial War Museum exhibition on West Indians supporting the British war effort.

Surely this shows not so much the contradiction between 'people's' and 'imperialist' war, but rather that anti-Nazism is closely linked with British 'patriotic' mythology and, the more minority groups whose contribution to the war effort can be recognised, the more effective its role in creating a sense of common identity and shared values, without distinction of class, race or gender? Indeed, on YouTube you can even find a 1965 video of Churchill's funeral, to the tune of 'I vow to thee, my country', and when the camera pans past a black man, it suddenly zooms in on his face, to draw our attention: 'See, even *they* appreciated him.'⁷ There is nothing new, nothing radical in focusing on the participation of subaltern groups in the collective war mobilisation. At worst it is merely jumping on the bandwagon of identity politics, without concern for what the war really meant.

But, rather than seeing the continual recreations of the far right as evidence of the crisis of working class organisation combined with social breakdown, the SWP portray the English Defence League and British National Party as 'Nazis', directly tapping into the collective myth of the British empire's 'good war'. It seems rather odd, though, to suggest that British racists draw their main inspiration from German Nazism - a bit like the Football Association's current plan to address racism in the sport by giving classes in British culture to foreign players. This is exactly the kind of superiority complex at the heart of mainstream racism in Britain: unlike the foreigners, even our colonial empire was an enlightening civilising mission, our crimes in World War II were still part of the fight for democracy, and so on.

This is precisely what the claim that the Tories or the establishment or the BBC are trying to legitimise the BNP does not get. In fact, when Nick Griffin was on *Question time*, Tory Baroness Warsi specifically defended Winston Churchill (whatever his own racism) from the BNP attempt to associate themselves with his politics. Why? Because the British ruling class has never needed fascists, but rather proudly recalls the fight against Hitler. Liberal inclusiveness, all of us in it together, writing social conflict out of history, is a much better way to galvanise a shared identity. More 'militant' anti-fascism, demanding the BNP is excluded from public space and calling on people to vote for anyone, so long as they are not 'the Nazis', merely serves to galvanise the idea of a 'legitimate' mainstream, from the SWP to David Cameron.

And such was the mobilising power of the 'people's war', from communists to Churchill, 70 years ago ●

David Broder

Notes

1. <http://johnmolyneux.blogspot.co.uk/2012/11/the-second-world-war-revisited.html>.
2. <http://london-socialist-historians.blogspot.co.uk/2012/10/book-review-and-response-peoples.html>.
3. <http://thecomune.co.uk/2011/03/17/stalinism-and-fascism-in-1930s-italy>.
4. www.revolutionaryhistory.co.uk/homepage/articles/articles-of-rh0504/the-left-wing-opposition-in-italy-during-the-period-of-the-resistance.htm.
5. Quoted in F Chilanti *Ex: con uno scritto di Antonio Pizzut* Milan 1969, p49.
6. *Socialist Worker* June 21 2008.
7. www.youtube.com/watch?v=87Xkr8z3IEo.

RUSSIA

Accusing misery, celebrating resilience

Saatchi Gallery, Duke of York's HQ, King's Road, London SW3 **Gaiety is the most outstanding feature of the Soviet Union: new art from Russia; admission free, ends May 5 2013**

At first glance, this new art from the Russian Federation could be taken as presenting 'Russia as ruin' - a society of the homeless, the depressed, the tortured; one either recovering painfully from the Soviet period or very far gone in a post-Putin wasteland; a vision in painting, photography and sculpture inviting either pity or despair.

An obvious contrast is with socialist realism, the official art of the USSR. This art was called 'socialist', but it was more Heroic and Optimistic than Marxist: the portrayal (in image and print) of a people - soldiers, builders, leaders - overcoming difficult conditions or coming out the other side into a full utopian morning.

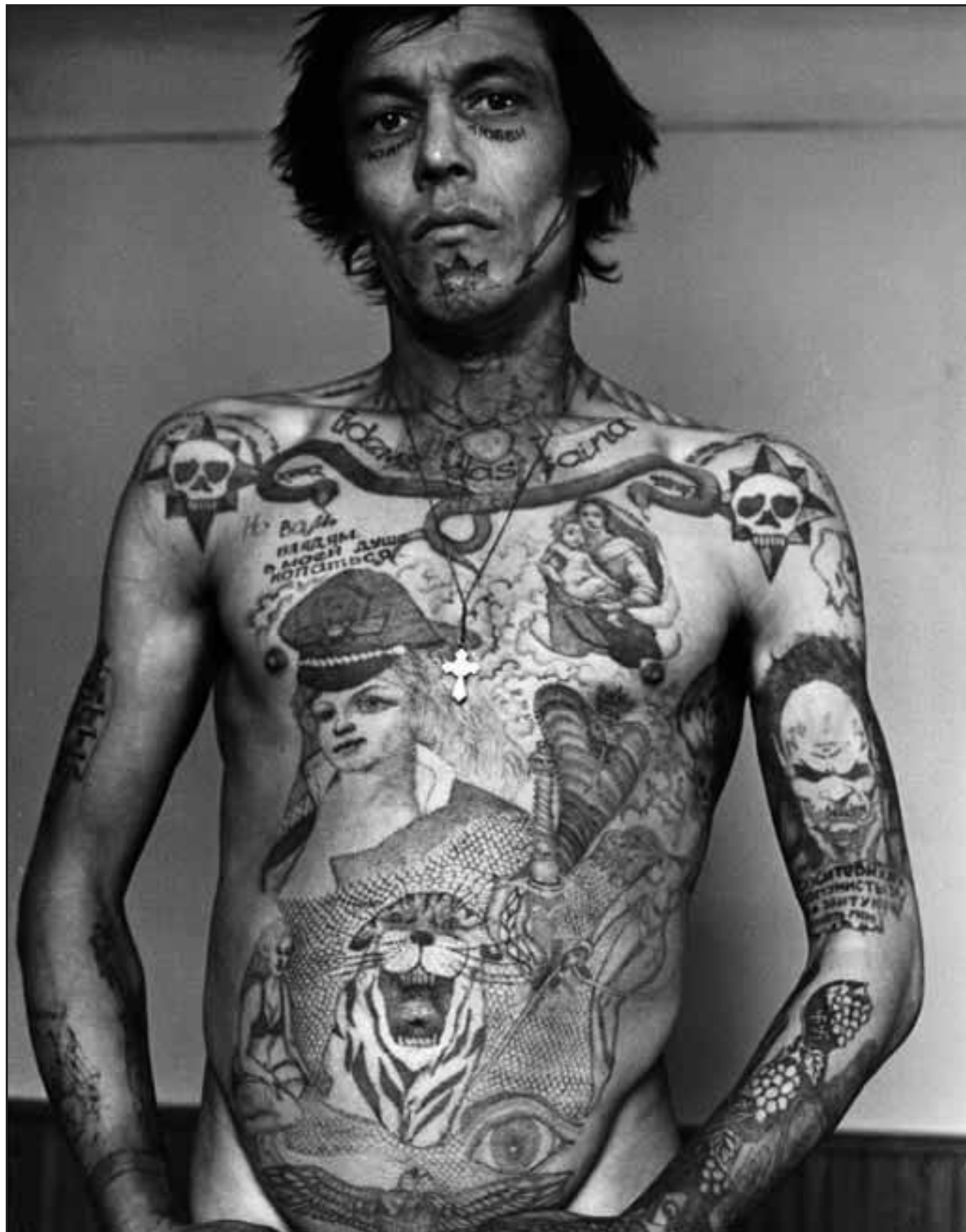
In *The total art of Stalinism* Boris Groys commented: "The slogan of the age was 'Nothing is impossible for a Bolshevik.' Any reference to facts, technical realities or objective limits was treated as 'cowardice' and 'unbelief' unworthy of a true Stalinist. It was thought that will-power alone could overcome anything that the bureaucratic, formalistic eye perceived as an insurmountable obstacle."¹

As Paul Flowers recently observed, following the failure of an international revolution, the Soviet republics retrenched into "a profound process of indigenous modernisation", the new elite committing themselves to "a programme of intense national economic and social development, in a country in which a state apparatus under a forceful leadership takes the place of a non-existent or failed bourgeoisie".² No wonder their state-sponsored art was required to be optimistic.

Optimistic art, of course, was not the preserve of the USSR. Models can be found in the work of the renaissance, romantic and high Victorian periods. In fact it was part of the socialist realist aesthetic to re-use rather than reject the past, unlike their rivals in the avant-garde and Proletkult. For example, compare Millais's 1882 portrait of Disraeli. It shows a British parliamentary politician standing, arms folded, as if ready to reply to an opponent in the house. He may not be about to lead a charge or fix a tractor, but neither is he represented sitting down at home privately posing for the artist (like Churchill in Graham Sutherland's portrait).

With this in mind (or even without it), the colour photos of Boris Mikhailov's *Case history* at the Saatchi could strike you as far from optimistic. In a series of large blow-ups, they depict citizens, bruised, half-naked and in the snow, ragged and tattooed. Whether young or old, they are hardly tourist posters. These are in fact a few prints from his project photographing the Moscow homeless, 500 pictures in all, representing his critique of the 'mask of beauty' in the new capitalist republic. The temptation here, if not to pass on quickly, would be to conclude that these are simply pathetic wrecks of post-Sovietism. But take another look and there is something about the subjects which is jaunty, not fallen or passive.

Many pose consciously and upright, show off their bodies defiantly, hug each other affectionately. You certainly would not describe them as merry or pretty - no airbrushed fashion layout here - but just because someone is down it does not mean they are out. A friend of mine suggested a parallel with the work of 60s New York photographer Diane Arbus. Except that these subjects, more damaged though they be, are not on the margin of the norm (like Arbus's strippers, dwarves,



Sergi Vasillev (photographer) criminal tatoos

nudists): they are at the 'bottom' of it, resembling a version of all citizens, of ourselves, gone out into the cold.

The figures in the photos of Vikenti Nilin's *Neighbours* series would be closer to an implication of despair. The pictures show different kinds of people - some could be artists, some porters - but all in the same position: poised on window ledges and balconies in a tenement, legs dangling over a high drop. They wait, on the edge, as if to decide what to do next in the face of the void. They may provoke anyone to ask whether these images could be the result of Photoshop, so precariously balanced are some of the sitters, or in what impossible space the photographer could have been standing.

Irina Korina has another concern. Her *Capital* (2012) is a two-metre sheet-metal column, topped by a small canopy of plastic bags - bags which may have once been used for shopping, but are now sagging with rubbish. 'Capital' here, of course, being a play on words - in particular, the term from classical architecture meaning the style of the top or joint of a column which defines the specific 'order' involved: Ionic, Doric, Corinthian. This then can be read as both a reference to the classical style favoured everywhere by empire-builders, whether Napoleon,

Stalin or the White House, and as a proposal as to the style of today, the new 'order' of shopping and rubbish.

Further reference to the state comes in Gosha Ostretsov's sculpture/construction, *Criminal government*, a life-size box of separate cells, through the open doors of which we glimpse man-like creatures with 'Martian-alien' or carnival heads, blood streaking their shirts and ties and with limbs missing. Some have suggested these figures might be KGB men getting their come-uppance, but they could equally be a fantasy about Putin ministers or oligarchs. The figures are like outer-space emissaries who have been discovered, arrested and tortured. Choose your analogy.

Turning from recent works, visitors may take the lift to the galleries on the top floor. Here is a retrospective exhibition of the in-between period of modern Russian art. In *Breaking the ice: Moscow art 1960s-80s* (ends February 24 2013), we first have the post-Khrushchev thaw, the work of those relaxing into imitations of cubism, surrealism and metaphysical art. Windows and doors to nowhere, homely stairs up into a corner, shimmering op art - a practising of modernist gestures by the formerly cut off.

Accompanying these in the second

gallery is the more impactful work of the 1980s and Russia's contribution to postmodernism: namely, sots art. 'Sots art' being the Russian abbreviation for 'socialist art' - termed ironically, and in the west dubbed 'Soviet pop art'. Its most famous practitioners, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, had once been official painters who designed for such organisations as the Soviet Young Pioneers. From 1972, they began to play around with the style of this iconography, substituting their own friends and relatives for party heroes and teasing the likenesses of well-known leaders. Later they came up with darkly varnished productions of their own, like the one of Stalin alongside Spielberg's ET, shown on the cover of Groys' book. At the Saatchi we have their portraits of politburo members, a solitary seated bear and the image of a resplendently unfurling red flag, which nevertheless has lost any evident hammer and sickle.

In another part of the same gallery, there are pastiche constructions of western advertising signs, such as for Marlboro and McDonald's. In the latter work though, Alexander Kosolapov places under the golden arches a familiar iconic head from Bolshevik history, adding the legend *McLenin's*. This need not be read as just cynicism, but simply a satire on the manager-

bureaucracies' favourite brand. The party may in fact have believed sincerely that they were the inheritors of that writer and activist and simply saw his cult as necessary to inspire national pride and modernisation. They were not the only ones to believe in socialism as statism and statism as the remedy. Elsewhere it was called the new deal or the third Reich or the welfare state - with the difference that in those the point, of course, was to assist private property and the law of value rather than starting from their abolition.

Downstairs again, surplus value is back with a vengeance. In Dasha Shishkin's *Not sad, just sighing* (2012) we find something very like members of the luxury classes: pastel, Matisse-like panoramas, skinny female figures, naked or in Dior dresses, their noses like tentacles, their heads bald as skulls. They crowd a hotel restaurant or shopping mall. Outside the open doors is a landscape of bare earth, rock and a stub of shrubbery - half desert, half unplanted garden. If these are the Russian elite, they could belong to any country (or planet).

Finally, Valery Koshlyakov's super-large paintings on cardboard of stadia and opera houses (some in Paris, some in Moscow) - images not bright and whole, but pieced together, like jigsaws of streaking paint on sections of old boxes. The paintings seem to be made from a vagrant's point of view, the cardboard suggesting refuse and sleeping quarters under flyovers. Their form is rough, but confident, intimidated by neither the grand past of the personality cult nor the grandiose present of superstar celebrity. It is said that if the artist has no storage room for one of his works he simply destroys it.

As usual the white walls of the Saatchi are hardly broken by any explaining text. Profiles of the artists though have a separate wall space. Of course, in other art galleries there is now a profusion of explanatory material on the walls. This can be stifling. At Tate Britain a panel next to Francis Bacon's *Triptych* of three figures at the base of a crucifixion declared that all the figures are "screaming" - a debatable generalisation from one open mouth and Bacon's other picture of a screaming pope. But material supplying context can complement works rather than overpower them, as in recent London shows on Degas and photography or Gauguin and traditional societies, offering not *what* to think, but some things to think about.

Whether text-supported or blank-walled, art galleries need not embalm art as something separate from the world. Exhibitions too can be contributions, like the art itself, whether critical or utopian, connecting us to a world in process. There is no going back, but no stopping either. Marx's *Capital* makes the desires of the proletariat (for sustenance and satisfaction) not just the fuel of capitalism, but the spark for revolution. The demands created by capitalist progress are the basis for greater progress beyond capitalism. As Mikhailov's photos accuse misery, they also celebrate resilience. Other works here mock and satirise, but they presume a confidence in opposition.

There is no overcoming yet; no transcendence, no positive utopia. But there is a pushing back ●

Mike Belbin

Notes

1. B Groys *The total art of Stalinism* London 2011, p60.
2. 'Sticking with old dogmas that have failed time and again' *Weekly Worker* November 29.

AUSTRALIA

Strange sort of unity

Last month the *Weekly Worker* published a statement from the Australian group, Socialist Alternative, calling for a “new kind of left unity” (“Solidarity in a revolutionary party”, November 8). Although SA has a reputation for extreme sectarianism we were willing to consider the possibility that it had mended its ways, especially when we read: “What we want to create is an organisation that does not start with the historic differences that divide the far left, but a socialist programme for Australia today: for revolution; for a Marxist party; against imperialism; against all oppression; against the capitalist state; for workers’ power. “We are not proposing a ‘broad party’ that tries to involve all kinds of non-socialist forces. We want a Marxist party, with a clear programme and principles. We want a political organisation that operates on the basis of majority decisions, but where minorities have the right to their opinions. We don’t want ‘unity’ for its own sake, but unity of the forces who want to fight for revolutionary change.” The *Weekly Worker* emailed the group and its journal, *Socialist Alternative*, both before and after we republished its statement, but unfortunately received only automated responses. It is very strange that a group calling for Marxist unity refuses even to reply to approaches from others on the revolutionary left. Below is the response to Socialist Alternative’s call from Solidarity - like SA one of several Australian splinters from the Socialist Workers Party’s International Socialist Tendency.

Building unity and a stronger left

The announcement of the proposed merger between Socialist Alternative and the Revolutionary Socialist Party has triggered some discussion about the prospects for unity on the far left.

In the context of a rightward-moving Labor government, and the threat of an Abbott Liberal government in power after the next federal election - not to mention the global crisis of capitalism - there is a pressing need for a stronger left. Public sector workers and students across the country are receiving a taste of the austerity policies gripping Europe, and job losses are, again, starting to mount.

We face government attacks on refugees, Muslims and Aboriginal people and the threat of climate change and increased ‘natural disasters’. A more united left could be a stronger force for building grassroots movements for change, as well as helping to increase the support for socialist ideas within the working class.

But taking unity seriously also involves recognising that the existing differences on the left, in terms of political theory and practical orientation, cannot simply be brushed aside or papered over.

There is a superficial attraction to the idea of merging organisations as a short cut to building a bigger organisation. Going from 250 to 275 members can seem a big jump when the far left is so small, but the political basis of any fusion is far more important than resulting size. Simply building a bigger sect does not mean any greater influence of socialist ideas in the movements or the working class - far from it.

Solidarity has shown by its own practice that we are committed to building greater unity where there is a real basis for it. Our own organisation was formed in 2008 out of a merger between three existing groups in the International Socialist tradition: the

International Socialist Organisation (ISO), Solidarity and the Socialist Action Group.

But this was only possible as a result of an extended period of joint work, discussion and reappraisal of previously held positions. The possibility of talks leading to our merger came from the recognition that there was a practical convergence in our approaches to both building campaigns and movements and to building a revolutionary socialist organisation.

From our perspective, there are important challenges that any organisation on the revolutionary left in Australia must face up to. Foremost among them are the problems of propagandism and sectarianism - for instance an approach that measures the value of struggles by what the group can get out of it.

Socialist Alternative and the Revolutionary Socialist Party insist they are united by their intention to build a cadre organisation. But cadre can’t be built in isolation from the day-to-day struggles of workers and the movements.

The response of much of the far left to the difficult decades following the upturn in struggle in the 1960s and 1970s was to retreat into a routine of socialist propaganda, rather than recognising the importance of continuing to find ways to intervene in the wider left (such as the unions, the Labor Party and more recently The Greens) and to constructively building broad-based campaigns and social movements.

Solidarity has attempted, within our own limited resources, to take union work and the building of political campaigns seriously, with modest union work as well as work around the Northern Territory Intervention, refugee rights, climate change and on university campuses. It is primarily through such political interventions that socialist activists learn how to argue their politics and lead struggles in the real world.

Conscious effort and goodwill are necessary to ensure that self-interest does not get in the way of working together to fight around issues of immediate concern to the class. Too often, the left has put differences over their analysis of Cuba or whether or not Stalinist Russia was state-capitalist or a degenerated workers’ state in the way of this.

Having said that, we also recognise that theoretical positions are important in determining such things as an understanding of the trade union bureaucracy, the state, maintaining a consistent anti-imperialist stance, and the potential of the revolutions transforming the Middle East.

Our experience is that, along with practical campaigning, engaging with and intervening in ideological debates both generally and on the left is a crucial part of developing revolutionary socialist activists.

In the past, without practical convergence and an openness to reassessing previously held positions, attempts to unite the existing left groups in Australia have ended badly. It is too easy to see uniting the left as a short cut to size and influence rather than recognising that it is political practice that is key to effective socialist organisation.

A touchstone for a sound basis for regrouping the revolutionary left must be its attitude to the wider task of relating to the crisis of Labor and the task of winning reformist workers.

The Labor Party is increasingly divorced from its working class base, yet it retains the electoral allegiance of

significant sections of the class. Although it remains ambivalent about how much it is an explicitly left party, the Greens have increasingly occupied the political space vacated by the Labor left.

The original Socialist Alliance is one example of a failed unity project. It began in 2001 as an electoral alliance that united virtually the entire far left, including the International Socialist Organisation (ISO) and the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP), as well as at least five smaller socialist groups. It foundered, not least because despite the united organisational form there were markedly different motivations for unity. The DSP, in particular, saw the alliance as the beginning of a multi-tendency party and despite being an ‘alliance’ in name, there was no convergence in political practice. By 2006 all the other participating groups except the DSP had withdrawn from, or ceased to be active in, the Socialist Alliance.

Solidarity hopes that the merger between the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and Socialist Alternative can contribute towards strengthening social movements and campaigns, and lay the basis for a stronger socialist left in Australia.

But there are obviously large obstacles to overcome. Last year, Socialist Alternative attempted to shout down a pro-refugee Labor speaker at a lobby of the Labor Party’s national conference. A slightly larger fused organisation committed to the same sectarian politics that produced that incident is not going to build a more influential left.

Nor is it clear what political reappraisal the two groups have undergone to lead them towards fusing. Prior to the regroupment discussions, the two groups attached great importance to their respective theoretical differences. The RSP thought that Socialist Alternative’s politics on Cuba and Chávez in Venezuela demonstrated “the utter bankruptcy” of Socialist Alternative’s dogmatic “state-capitalist theory.”

Similarly in an exchange with the ISO, in 2003, Socialist Alternative insisted that regroupment with the DSP was impossible, because, “We believe that regroupment is impossible without agreement on fundamental questions of political principle,”² referring to the political heritage of the International Socialist tradition (ie, state capitalism and socialism from below).

Yet Socialist Alternative now proposes that the fused organisation drop any reference to state capitalism in its statement of principles. Some more explanation of how the respective groups’ reassessment of the basis of fusion would greatly assist an understanding of what principles underpin the fusion of the two groups.

For its part, Solidarity will continue to seek, and looks forward to, collaboration with all of the left in the struggles that, collectively, we face ahead. The possibilities of building a more united and effective left will be forged by patient discussion and cooperatively building those struggles.

Solidarity national committee

Notes

1. ‘Why some socialists can’t see revolutions’ *Direct Action* August 2008: www.directaction.org.au/issue3/why_some_socialists_cant_see_revolutions.
2. Letter to the ISO from Socialist Alternative, February 2003: <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/22446/20040815-0000/www.sa.org.au/isoreply.pdf>.



**Hugo Chávez:
split issue?**

What we fight for

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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weekly worker

City of London is organised tax evasion

A system built for playing

The Starbucks tax fiasco tells us much more about Britain than greedy corporations, reckons **Paul Demarty**

The farcical pantomime battle between Starbucks and the taxman gets more ridiculous by the day.

Like any international company with half an ounce of sense, Starbucks funnels the profits it makes to places where it will be taxed as minimally as possible. The American giant, which expanded from Seattle to fill the entire world with disgusting, overpriced coffee, has concocted a typically ingenious wheeze to maximise tax efficiency. It is a ruse that has paid off handsomely, with only £8.6 million going to the exchequer in its 14 years of operations in this country.

It has managed to do this by artificially wiping out its profits. It is technically true: Starbucks's UK arm simply has not made any substantial profit on billions of pounds of sales in that period. Of course, unless the tinny taste of a caramel macchiato is down to the baristas stirring in molten gold, this flies in the face of reality. The UK operation, rather, pays an enormous fee to a Swiss Starbucks subsidiary for the coffee it serves - the kicker being that the Swiss subsidiary does not actually handle the coffee. Genius! Add in a substantial 'royalty payment' to yet another Starbucks tentacle - this time in Holland - and taxable profits sink to close to zero.

Starbucks has become the focus of a more general scandal concerning the UK tax arrangements of multinationals. Google and Amazon have likewise found ways to shuffle profits around their various local operations, to the expense of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. Neither have come under the same level of outrage (let's be honest - there are fewer Google premises for UK Uncut to invade and start jumping up and down inside); and neither are likely to offer the self-parodic peace offering that has come from Starbucks, who have offered to write two £10 million cheques to HMRC over the next two years.

Consumer power

There have been a number of reactions to this, ranging from the credulous to the cynical (more of the latter, thankfully). To start with the credulous: it is said that the about-turn by Starbucks demonstrates the power of consumers to force a change of course from major firms.

Indeed, it is not the possibility (precisely zero) of legal pursuit from HMRC that forced Starbucks to make their £20 million peace offering, but rather the fact that the whole affair became a complete PR fiasco. Ethical consumerists, who are forced to seize on anything of this kind as a victory to distract attention from the broader trends, will no doubt celebrate the success.

The broader picture is as unattractive it has always been. Starbucks is but one of a whole host of companies whose bad behaviour has been exposed. It operates in a *relatively* efficient market, with input prices fixed by global coffee production and several direct competitors on the UK high

street offering similar services (and better coffee). It is simple enough for a yuppie of a conscientious type to go to Costa instead, and so there has been a direct hit in the last week or two to all that profit Starbucks isn't making.

Other tax-dodging companies like Google and Amazon, however, have a far more monopolistic profile, and have significantly shaped the broader business sectors in which they operate. It is a much bigger ask - financially and practically - to use these companies' competitors, which are either far more technically limited (in the case of Google) or more expensive (Amazon).

Add in the comprehensive failure to obtain redress for the £6 billion back-tax bill Vodafone had written off over a friendly meeting with HMRC's then boss, Dave Hartnett, and the consumer-as-tax-crusader looks a far less likely saviour for the exchequer. For all the sound and fury over that, Vodafone certainly has not been spooked into rectifying its behaviour, and - like Starbucks - paid precisely zero corporation tax last year.

Sooner or later, Starbucks will return to its old ways. This is not because - as idiotic MPs frivolously suggest - it is run according to some morally bankrupt corporate governance scheme. It is because Starbucks does not exist to sell bad coffee, but to maximise returns for its shareholders; and tax efficiency is a neat way to do just that. 'Unethical' behaviour is a competitive advantage in the marketplace, which more than offsets the small bloc of self-righteous customers which one thereby loses.

Ethical consumerism was one of the outcomes of the anti-capitalist (more realistically, anti-corporate) movement of the 1990s - and it was actively promoted to serve exactly this purpose. As soon as capitalism exposed its ruthlessness and corruption - whether through environmental despoliation (Coca-Cola), sweatshop labour (Nike) or rampant fraud (Enron), the bourgeoisie would start yammering



Dodgy

about corporate social responsibility, or social entrepreneurship, or some other such guff. It gives a certain layer of the well-meaning a way to imagine that they can 'make a difference'.

Quelle surprise

Fortunately, not everyone is quite as gullible. Starbucks's behaviour in this instance is obviously cynical, but hardly surprising.

Ben Franklin, paraphrasing Daniel Defoe, famously said that nothing is certain in life but death and taxes. The ruling class may not have yet found a way, as in Richard Morgan's science fiction novel *Altered carbon*, to avoid the former. A good portion of taxation has long been essentially voluntary for serious capitalist concerns.

Far from dispelling disgruntlement at this fact, Starbucks's £20 million gift to the exchequer rather underlines it. UK Uncut, to its credit, is not fooled: "Offering to pay some tax if and when it suits you doesn't stop you being a tax dodger," reads a press release.¹ Even

more beautifully, there is absolutely nothing to stop the company taking taxable money out of another country to pay the £20 million, thereby *reducing* its global tax bill. When life gives you lemons ...

Just as well that the public was outraged, because HMRC certainly was not. The taxman has long lost his appetite for dealing with large-scale evasion and avoidance (pursuing plumbers for taking cash-in-hand work is, of course, another matter entirely). HMRC accepted the clearly ridiculous claims of Starbucks, Google and Amazon that they had not made a profit in the UK. It waved through the Vodafone £6 billion write-off without even consulting its lawyers, and cut a number of similar deals with other companies, including the great vampire squid itself, Goldman Sachs.

Yet we should not be too hard on HMRC. What else should we expect them to do? Everything Starbucks and the others have done (perhaps not Vodafone, but I suppose we will never know) is perfectly legal. There is no sense in giving the taxman the finger if you do not have the law on your side; and so Starbucks *et al* pay out enormous sums to accountants and lawyers in order to save still more enormous sums on their tax bills.

More to the point, this is all by design. Some brave capitalist ideologues contributed a comment article to *The Guardian* arguing that tax avoidance is not immoral (917 furious comments at the time of writing),² which pointed out the bleeding obvious fact that countries compete to offer attractive tax regimes to capital: exploiting the loopholes in Britain's tax laws is quite as consistent with the spirit as the letter of those laws.

For Britain, the issue is even more acute. The world is littered with tax havens, of which the City of London is the daddy. While the UK has a headline corporation tax rate broadly comparable to other 'first-world'

countries, the bald fact of the matter is that transactions nominally supposed to have occurred in tax havens proper - the Bahamas, the Channel Islands or whatever - for all practical purposes take place in the City. Our fair nation is the central organiser for the bulk of the world's tax avoidance.

Even better than that, it is an economic model on which we are utterly reliant. The Starbucks controversy nudged George Osborne into blowing hot air about tax dodgers in his autumn statement, promising a pitiful sum to pursue lost revenue. Labour figures - most notably Margaret Hodge, chair of the commons public accounts committee - have likewise huffed and puffed on the matter.

They will do exactly nothing - because what tax they *do* cream off London's status as the centre of offshore finance (often indirectly - the VAT on a Starbucks coffee, say) is needed to help prop up the country as a whole. Osborne's denigration of 'shirkers' on benefits is based on lies, but his arguments about not scaring off capitalists with punitive tax regimes are quite valid.

This is the blind spot afflicting groups like UK Uncut most especially. Underlying their efforts is the naive dream that Osborne is only prevented from screwing the full amount of corporation tax out of Starbucks and the like by his ideological commitments. In fact, the problem is a quite genuinely global one, and has to do with Britain's role in the world state order. Confronting that problem requires a serious strategic attitude to overcoming capitalism, for which harassing Starbucks customers is no substitute ●

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Notes

1. www.ukuncut.org.uk/blog/press-release-starbucks-hollow-promises-wont-stop-public-outrage.
2. www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/dec/07/its-not-wrong-to-avoid-tax.

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