

weekly **worker**



**Peter Taaffe's significant silence:
why does SPEW studiously ignore
the crisis in the SWP?**

- Iran cracks
- Programmes and Marx
- Riddell's united front
- Lincoln and slavery

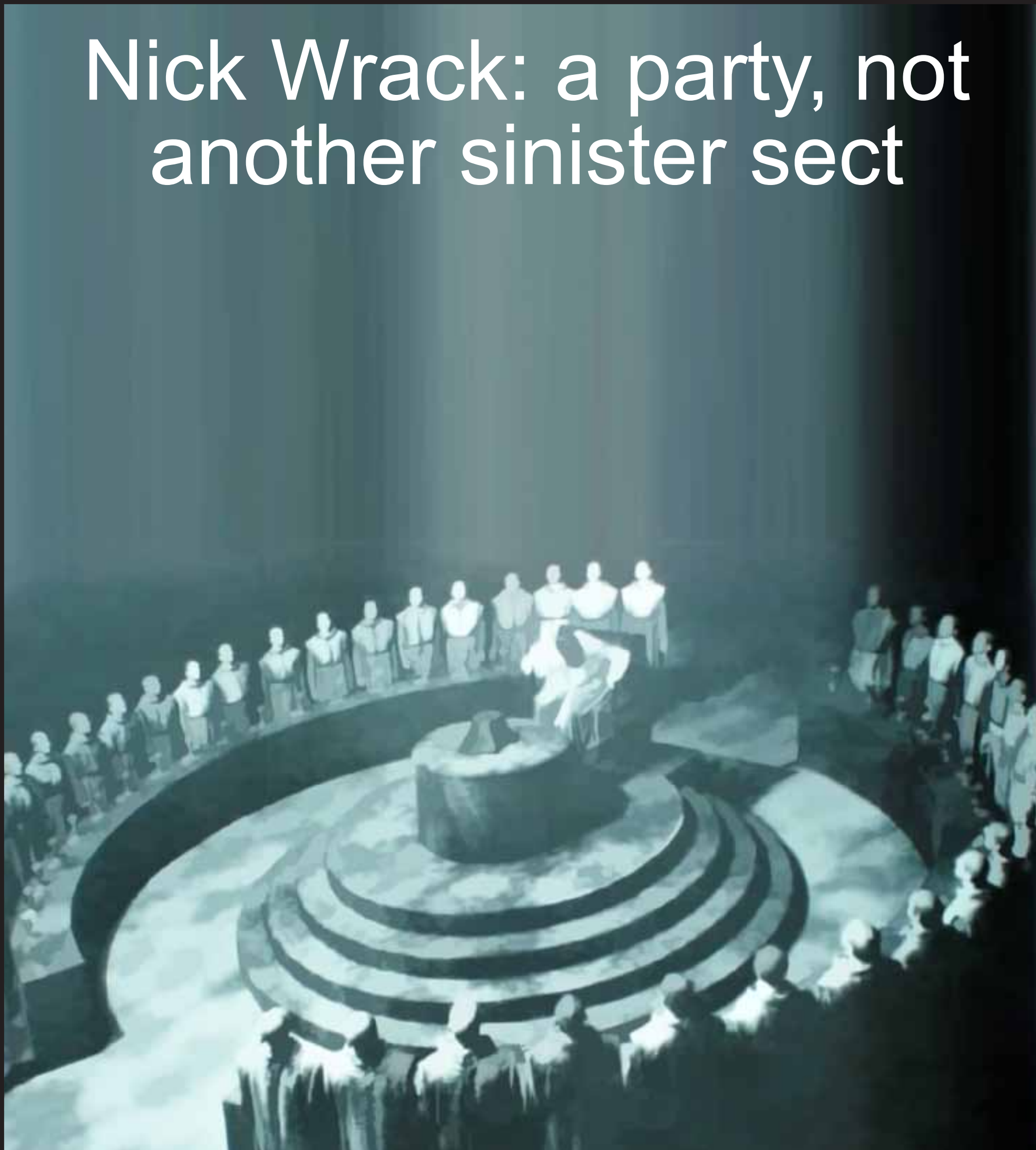
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Towards a Communist Party of the European Union

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Nick Wrack: a party, not another sinister sect



LETTERS



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

Two parties

Though the SWP remains, and may remain, a single organisation, recent events have made it clear that there are in reality two parties: the party of the central committee and an emerging democratic, Marxist current. Those 500 comrades who have put their names to the list of CC supporters have identified themselves as the worst, most decayed elements in the SWP.

They are 500 people who see no problem with the disputes committee and the case of Martin 'Delta' Smith; 500 people who blame those who refused to cover up for it for generating the crisis in the SWP; 500 people who endorse the lies and smears of the CC; 500 people who endorse Alex Callinicos's flat-out lies regarding Bolshevik history, his use of smears and amalgam propaganda against the opposition, merging them in the mind of his flock with the terrifying visage of the *Daily Mail*, Owen Jones, Andy Newman, Laurie Penny and anyone else who happens to be passing by.

They are 500 people who endorse expulsion for conversations on Facebook; 500 people who support a CC which has refused on multiple occasions to circulate legitimate factional material and which prefaces such material it does circulate with Charlie Kimber's own unique personal opinions; 500 people who support the rhetoric of "lynch mobs" and who have refused to expose or condemn the bullying of oppositionists that the whole left knows has taken place; 500 people who enjoy being told what to do and get a kick from being vicariously associated with the power of the leadership, a power they themselves will never have; 500 people who will shred their own dignity and principles for a return to peace and quiet and business as usual at any cost. None will think of themselves in these terms.

Such people cannot exist forever in the same organisations as Marxists and those who believe in democracy. This is not to advocate a split for a second - though, depending on the results of the upcoming special conference and the behaviour of the CC, we may see one. The point is that now those in the SWP who do not renounce their dignity and principles have planted a flag in the most unprecedented and open fashion and that the present faction struggle will leave a permanent mark in the SWP, win or lose in the short

term. Though on the surface 'order' and the rights of the CC to dispose of its property, the SWP itself, as it sees fit may continue, underneath things will continue to bubble away.

Many who support the CC in the present may find themselves in the opposition of the future. After all, is the SWP going to abandon those practices that caused this present crisis in the first place? The bureaucratic centralism, the use of members as simple 'activity' fodder, the failed perspectives, the failure to grow, the lack of a programme? All will remain, and when the crisis returns it will return all the more strongly for it. Unless all the 'troublemakers' are got rid of first...

Many of those who back the CC now will one day have to confront the consequences of the current SWP model themselves. Already we see that that opposition in the SWP is younger, more intellectually open and more flexible in comparison to Callinicos and his CC. Time is quite literally on their side, but hopefully we will not have to wait too long for the necessary change to be won.

Michael Copestake
email

Crude

Adam Buick correctly points out that 'workers' state' is a political rather than economic designation (Letters, February 14). But he is quite wrong to attribute to me the statement that following 1928 "workers in Russia were reduced from being wage slaves to being industrial serfs" and the implication that "what emerged there in 1928 was worse than capitalism". I did not use or imply such crude comparisons (Letters, February 7).

First, the forms of extraction of surplus product from serfs under European feudalism and from industrial workers in the USSR were quite different. Second, the comparison, "worse than capitalism", is meaningless. Worse than capitalism when and where? 19th century England? 1930s India? 1970s USA? 1990s Russia? And for whom was it "worse"?

All one can say is that, for industrial workers, conditions in the USSR were in some respects worse than contemporary conditions in some advanced capitalist countries, and better in other respects - for example, security of employment and minimal living standards, free healthcare and high-quality education - than in most of those countries (as well as in present-day Russia). We do agree that it was not socialism of any kind, but this

conclusion does not depend on crude comparisons with capitalism.

Moshé Machover
email

Sticky labels

Adam Buick denies that the Soviet Union was ever a workers' state. He suggests the Soviet Union was worse than imperialism. Somehow that leads him back in time to Max Shachtman, who drew the same conclusion.

I do not think the role of Marxists is to go around the world with a labelling machine, looking at each country. That method may work in obvious cases, where capitalism is firmly in control. But capitalism is not firmly in control everywhere: the class struggle often has not been decided, enabling us to stick a label on a country.

The Soviet Union certainly had state-capitalist aspects, but at the same time retained egalitarian traditions based on the Russian Revolution, which Stalin could not wipe out. The Stalinist bureaucracy was relatively impoverished compared to the new capitalists now in Russia, some of them former Stalinists. While Stalin did everything possible to destroy the workers' state, the new state he built combined the contradictions of capitalism with the contradictions of all militarised structures, which are inherently inefficient. That is, state capitalism is itself a contradiction in terms, as bureaucrats themselves can become capitalists only if they have private property.

Yes, empirically, the Soviet Union did seem to be state-capitalist, but, dialectically, the historical process led to the Yeltsins and Putins and capitalist restoration, which was the inevitable result of Stalin.

Earl Gilman
email

Dummy

Chris Cutrone exemplifies the rather odd approach his Platypus organisation has to its anointed theoretical forebears (Letters, January 31).

I do not recognise the depiction of myself as some kind of "Lacanian-Heideggerian", but that is by the by. More importantly, I do not recognise his brief presentation of Lukács. "Lukács was addressing," apparently, "how it was precisely in the struggle for proletarian socialism, in the era of the high point of Second International Marxism, that the problem of 'reification' manifested itself. For Lukács, 'reification' meant Bebel's and Kautsky's SPD, in theory and practice."

The problem is that this is flatly inconsistent with the entire line of argument of *History and class consciousness*. There is a clue, in fact, in the title - if Lukács said the things attributed to him by Cutrone, then he would have been better off calling it *The Second International and class consciousness*, or some such title. In any case, this is a text in which Kautsky barely appears at all, and Bebel only as the recipient of a letter from Engels at the tail end of the critique of Rosa Luxemburg's text on the Russian Revolution. Where the International appears at all, it is simply to be the subject of an utterly run-of-the-mill, mass-action left critique (as in certain footnotes in the final chapter on organisation).

Reification, in Lukács, is not 'official Marxism'. It is the *entire structure of consciousness of bourgeois society*, as lived through the "pure" categories of capital. This is not buried in some obscure footnote. It is laid out in a 200-page essay that constitutes the book's beating heart. I cited all the relevant passages in my original piece, so I will not repeat my shameless quote-mongering on this occasion.

So how is Cutrone able to turn Lukács into this peculiar kind of

ventriloquist's dummy? I suppose the 'sting in the tail' of the above-cited passage is the phrase, "the *problem* of reification manifested itself". It would be possible to put Cutrone's words into Lukács's mouth by taking it literally, and using *History and class consciousness* as a meta-commentary on itself. Viz the *theory* of reification is itself a product of reification's 'highest stage', rather than the fundamental categories of capital, and an expression of the self-consciousness of society circa 1918-22.

I may, of course, be making a ventriloquist's dummy out of Cutrone himself here, but that seems to be the implication of some of his other statements: "What makes Lukács's early 1920s works so difficult to read today is that we lack Lukács's object of critique. So his arguments become objectless and seem 'speculative' in the worst sense." This would seem to imply that Lukács is only comprehensible in the specific headspace he occupied in 1918-22, from which we are all irrevocably cut off.

If this is Cutrone's argument, however, then the necessary consequence is a radicalised subjectivism, in which no individual or collective from any given historical situation can fully comprehend the product of any other historical situation. Cutrone himself must stop bellyaching about the New Left, for he was not yet born when it emerged. And this whole exchange is equally pointless, for neither of us have any grounds to justify our assertions concerning Lukács's significance. (And it's *me* who's supposedly some kind of postmodernist!)

More to the point, we have no way of assessing Lukács's relevance as a critique of his own time, either. To put it in a very bald way, Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is a product of the same historical context (the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire, the disaster of World War I, the failure of the German revolution ...). Why should Hitler's 'critique' of Second International Marxism be treated with any less respect than Lukács's? After all, we lack his 'object of critique' too - and so surely we are equally doomed to misinterpret the poor man.

If he does not want to uphold some absurd historical relativism, then Cutrone is back to square one. He must evaluate Lukács's work according to the logical validity and empirical-historical accuracy of the claims *he actually makes* in his *actual books*. He must evaluate my critique, equally, according to the claims I actually make. (For that matter, he must evaluate Lukács's 1967 self-critique according to the same calculus, not vulgarly dismiss it - in the most worn-out New Leftist manner - as a straightforward expression of his capitulation to Stalinism.)

Personally, I would make the exact opposite claim to the comrade - the subsequent 90 years of history, along with countless theoretical arguments concerning history, class-consciousness and *History and class consciousness*, make evaluating Lukács's work *easier*. Forcing him into the procrustean bed

of the Platypus tradition - which chops and stretches everyone from Adorno to the pseudo-Trotskyist shrieking of the Spartacist League into the same mutilated shape - presents, on the other hand, a serious obstacle to doing so.

James Turley
London

Truth monopoly

I agree with Andrew Northall and his compliments on the *Weekly Worker* articles he mentions (Letters, February 14). I thought Lionel Sim's article, 'Reclaiming the dragon' (January 24), was brilliant.

I am, like Andrew, far from qualified to assess the validity of either Lionel or indeed Chris Knight. However, the serious attempt to understand developments from 'primitive communism' to early class society, or a stage of development from proto-humans towards socially developed, more fully human society, is very welcome. This is an area that I am now very interested in and Chris Knight's book, *Blood relations*, is a great read.

What does interest me about *Blood relations* is the apparent rejection of his very well argued ideas by the Socialist Workers Party. He mentioned this at a talk he gave at the Communist University and this has been confirmed by a friend of mine, who is now an ex-member of the SWP. She told me that, at the Marxism event shortly after the publication of Chris's book, there was a session where (I think this is right) the book was attacked by the SWP leadership in a women-only session. If this is incorrect, then at least the book was thoroughly rejected by them. This begs the question, why?

I have read nothing in any of their literature that argues an alternative view. Do they believe that human development and brain development of the frontal cortex, along with social development, just happened? Are they content to neglect the area and just agree with Engels, but not know why they agree? This surely isn't good enough for the leadership or their comrades. Is it (and this one worries me the most) because they believe that they have a monopoly on the truth and no other left groups or individuals could possibly be right?

Finally, I think that Lionel is an SWP member. Are the exciting ideas that he wrote about in the *Weekly Worker* aired in front of their large Marxism event?

Steve White
London

Careless

Seeing as Amanda Mc Shane ('No to the theocratic state', February 14) gets wrong the first names of the husband of former president McAleese, who is the author of Ireland's state-sponsored report into the Magdalene laundries (it's Martin, not Patrick) and the minister for public expenditure and reform (it's Brendan, not Brian), perhaps I should see the omission in her report of any acknowledgment of Sinn Féin's championing of the cause of the Magdalene women as carelessness rather than political prejudice.

John Hedges
Dublin

Fighting fund

Deliberate?

Internet readers will have noticed that over the last few days our website has been down quite frequently. We believe this may have resulted from a 'denial of service' attack, where our site has been deliberately targeted.

Despite the voicing of suspicions by some, it is unlikely that this is connected to the current content of the *Weekly Worker*. Nevertheless, for the first time in a long while the number of online readers topped 20,000 last week - and that certainly is down to our content, not least our coverage of the crisis in the Socialist Workers Party. Comrades know that up-to-date documents are readily available on the website in addition to the articles featured in the paper.

Of those 20,408 internet

readers, just two gave us a donation via PayPal - thank you, GD (£25) and TR (£20). But we also received £355 in standing orders over the last seven days - for this we are grateful to DW, SP, JD, MKS, MM and SK.

So the £400 that came in last week takes our total for February to £1,034, with exactly a week to go to raise the £1,500 we need to cover our running costs. And, of course, we need to take steps to ensure that our website cannot be successfully attacked. Please help us get the £466 we need by February 28 ●

Robbie Rix

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

Ten wasted years? The anti-war movement since Iraq

CPGB public meeting, Calthorpe Arms,
252 Grays Inn Road, London WC1

Saturday March 9, 12 noon to 5pm

Speakers: **Moshé Machover**
(founder member of Israeli socialist organisation Matzpen);
Mike Macnair (CPGB)

Organised by CPGB: www.cpgb.org.uk

IRAN

Towards barbarism

Given the severity of the political and economic crises threatening the very existence of the clerical state, one would have thought the Iranian regime has enough to worry about. Yet clearly intervention in Syria and Lebanon remains at the heart of the Iranian government's foreign policy.

On Sunday February 17 the Lebanese *Daily Star* reported that three Hezbollah fighters and 12 Syrian rebels were killed in battles for control of three Syrian villages near the Lebanese border. The Syrian opposition claimed five Lebanese Hezbollah fighters, 12 Syrian rebels and seven Sunni civilians had been killed.

Hezbollah's adventure in Syria has been linked to news of the death of an "elite Iranian general" in that country. It is not known whether general Hassan Shateri, a senior commander in the Islamic Guards, was killed in Syria or in Lebanon, while returning from Syria. Hezbollah and pro-Assad forces claim that Shateri, head of the Iranian Committee for the Reconstruction of Lebanon, was shot in Lebanon, while the Syrian opposition claim he was "executed" inside Syria's borders, where he was studying reconstruction plans. However, some reports say he was responsible for the transfer of heavy weapons from the Syrian army to Hezbollah and was actually killed in an Israeli attack on a Syrian military compound in late January. Whatever the truth, Iran is now blaming Israel for the killing of one its most senior military officials.

Syrian rebels have often accused Iran's Revolutionary Guard of giving security advice and military support to the Assad regime. Although the Iranian government officially denies such support, the following statement by Mehdi Taeb of the Ammar Strategic Base, dedicated to combat regime change and soft war against the Islamic Republic, speaks volumes: "Syria is the 35th province [of Iran] ... If the enemy attacks us and wants to take either Syria or Khuzestan [south-western Iran], the priority for us is to keep Syria ... if we lose Syria, we cannot keep Tehran."¹ This undoubtedly reflects the opinions of Iran's supreme leader, ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and explains recent Iranian and Hezbollah involvement in the Syrian conflict.

Hezbollah's close association with the Islamic Republic is no secret, but events in Syria have divided opinion within it. Some leading Hezbollahis have urged maintaining support for Tehran to strengthen the Shia regional axis, while others, including one of the party's main leaders, Hassan Nasrallah, were of the opinion that Hezbollah might endanger its influence in the coalition government in Beirut, should it get embroiled in the Syrian civil war. If accusations of Hezbollah's military operations in Syria are correct, it appears that the party has made up its mind in favour of the 'regional' strategy.

Although an imperialist attack on Iran is not currently on the agenda, the escalation of conflict in Syria and the potential involvement of a party in the Lebanese coalition government threatens to inflame the situation rapidly. It reinforces the longstanding position of the US pro-Israeli lobby: ie, Iran is the main threat and 'should be dealt with'.

Meanwhile, according to Ramin Mehmanparast of the Iranian foreign ministry, the west is making new demands in relation to Iran's nuclear facilities: "Western powers ... have said, 'Shut down Fordow, stop enrichment [and] we will allow gold transactions.'"²

This refers to the fact that Iran has

been trying to circumvent sanctions by trading in gold, but the US government has now stepped in to plug this last loophole in the sanctions programme by threatening Turkey and India. It is alleged that they were paying in Turkish lira for the import of Iranian gas (sanctions prevent payments in dollars or euros) and Iran used the lira to buy gold bullions. The bullions were then sent to Dubai, where they were exchanged for dollars or other foreign currencies.³

There is no doubt that sanctions are hitting hard and a recent poll showed 70% of Iranians blamed the US, Israel, the European Union and the United Nations. This could be misleading, of course - perhaps Iranians are too scared of their government to express their true feelings, even when they respond to anonymous polls. But, whatever the case, the results have certainly given Khamenei a boost. In a defiant response to the latest US offer of 'negotiations' the supreme leader said: "The Americans point the gun at Iran and say, either negotiations or we pull the trigger! You should know that pressure and negotiations don't go together, and the Iranian nation will not be intimidated by such things." Borrowing a phrase from the left, Khamenei also commented on the USA's decline as a world power.⁴

Of course, there are those on the left who still defend the first 'anti-imperialist' Islamic state and even encourage voting for similar forces in the Arab world. However, for millions of Iranians who have to suffer in the hell on earth created by Shia clerics, Islamic capitalism has nothing to commend it.

As Iranians try to get by with their valueless currency, expensive food and shortage of medicine, they are adopting desperate measures in order to survive. It is no longer just prescription drugs and kidneys that are for sale: adverts are appearing from "healthy" young Iranians offering any part of their anatomy for sale, while unscrupulous Islamist bazaaris, those staunch supporters of Islamic fundamentalism, have found new ways of making a profit - through buying and selling human organs.

According to police commander Ismael Ahmadi Moghadam, while officially the Islamic Republic has over two million drug addicts and 200,000 alcoholics, the real figure for both types of addiction is much higher. In the absence of a revolutionary alternative, the near collapse of the capitalist Islamic order is edging Iran nearer to barbarism.

Corruption

As the majority of the Iranian population gets poorer, those in power are generating huge wealth through cronyism and corruption. I have previously reported an incident in the Islamic parliament when president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad accused the influential Larijani brothers, close allies of the supreme leader, of blatant corruption.⁵ Despite a video showing Fazel Larijani offering a bribe to the head of the Social Services Office, Khamenei has come out unambiguously in defence of the brothers, dubbed 'Iran's Kennedys'.

When it comes to mediating between factions of the regime, our supreme leader is famous for being even-handed, but on this occasion he seems to be taking sides. Speaking at a public meeting, Khamenei said: "The head of one of the branches in the government accused the head of the other two branches based on unproven evidence that hasn't been brought up in court ... This was bad and inappropriate ... it was against



Ahmadinejad: regime cracks

Sharia law and morality."⁶

Now, I am not a fan of Ahmadinejad, and he owed his presidency and his political survival until recently to Khamenei, but here is Allah's Shia representative on earth blaming the messenger when proof is offered of corruption amongst the supreme leader's most loyal supporters. After 34 years of the Islamic republic, we all know that taking bribes is very much part of Islamist practice and presumably exposing it is against Sharia "morality". But I am sure I am not the only one to wonder what is immoral or illegal about exposing widespread corruption. Of course, it could be that our supreme leader is so used to the multi-million-dollar scams that he considers the relatively paltry sums involved in this particular family affair insignificant.

Like all other Islamic contenders for power in the Middle East and north Africa, the Iranian clergy promised to clean up the country's political and economic life, ban interest rates and end banking profits. Yet on the anniversary of the Iranian revolution, the supreme Islamic court in Iran has been dealing with a high-profile corruption case involving the former governor of the main state bank, Bank Melli. According to the indictment, he received a huge bribe from an investment company to help it secure loans worth \$2.6 billion.

A recent *Financial Times* headline read: "Pressure builds in Iran nuclear stand-off. Diplomatic dance cannot go on for ever. Something has to give" (February 17). However, while it is difficult to imagine either Iran or the US/Israel backing down from their current positions, the bitter infighting between the factions of the Iranian regime and the volatile situation in Syria and Lebanon are likely to play a crucial role in the near future. The end of the "diplomatic dance" between the two sides is unlikely to bring any respite for the majority of Iranians ●

Yassamine Mather

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Notes

1. www.worldaffairsjournal.org/blogs/michael-j-totten.
2. www.jpost.com/IranianThreat/News/Article.aspx?id=303646.
3. http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/02/15/266436.html.
4. Iran will not enter into talks with US on unequal footing: MP: http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/02/13/288695/iran-wont-enter-unequal-talks-with-us/
5. 'Corruption, repression, fightback' *Weekly Worker* February 7.
6. www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-02-17/khamenei-condemns-iran-leadership-quarrels.html.

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 February 24, 5pm: Weekly political report from CPGB Provisional Central Committee, followed by discussion and *Capital* reading group. Calthorpe Arms, 252 Grays Inn Road, London WC1. This meeting: chapter 12: 'The concept of relative surplus value'. Organised by CPGB: www.cpgb.org.uk.

Radical Anthropology Group

Introduction to anthropology: an intensive study of mythology
Tuesday February 26, 6.15pm: 'The hunter Monmanéki and his wives (South America, Tucuna)'. Speaker: Chris Knight. St Martin's Community Centre, 43 Carol Street, London NW1 (Camden Town tube). £10 waged, £5 low waged, £3 unwaged. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: www.radicalanthropologygroup.org.

Socialist Theory Study Group

Thursday February 21, 6pm: Study of Marx's *On the Jewish question* (1843). Social centre, Next to Nowhere, Bold Street, Liverpool 1.

Organised by Socialist Theory Study Group: teachingandlearning4socialism@gmail.com.

Stop asylum destitution

Friday February 22, 12 noon: Awareness event, Zion Community Resource Centre, 339 Stretford Road, Manchester M15. Free entry. Organised by Asylum Support Housing Advice:

www.sites.google.com/site/ashamanchester.

Campaign for Labour Party Democracy

Saturday February 23, 11.30am to 4.30pm: AGM, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1.

Organised by Campaign for Labour Party Democracy: www.clpd.org.uk.

Economic crisis and reformism

Saturday February 23, 10 am to 5pm: Conference, St Clements Building, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London WC2. Speakers: Hillel Ticktin, Michael Cox, Savas Matzas, Yassamine Mather.

Organised by *Critique*: critique@eng.gla.ac.uk.

X-press yourself

Ends Monday February 25: LGBT art exhibition by Francisco Gomez De Villaboa, Marble Hall, TUC Congress House, Great Russell Street, London WC1.

Organised by Sertuc LGBT: www.facebook.com/pages/Sertuc-LGBT-network/160878317343520.

Apartheid and Palestine

Monday February 25, 7pm: Public meeting, Friends Meeting House, 173-177 Euston Road, London NW1.

Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: www.palestinecampaign.org.

Five broken cameras

Tuesday February 26, 7pm: Film Screening and discussion, Passing Clouds, 1 Richmond Road, Dalston, London E8.

Organised by Hackney PSC: www.hackneypsc.wordpress.com.

LGBT film

Tuesday February 26, 7.30pm: Screenings for LGBT history month, Horse Hospital, the Colonnade, London WC1.

Organised by London Underground Film Festival: www.facebook.com/groups/114607241900250.

Voices from Palestine

Wednesday February 27, 6.30pm: Public meeting, University of London Union, Malet Street, London WC1.

Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: www.palestinecampaign.org.

Israel: what comes next?

Wednesday February 27, 7pm: Post-election discussion, Mosaic Rooms, Tower House, 226 Cromwell Road, London SW5.

Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: www.palestinecampaign.org.

Challenging the Gaza blockade

Wednesday February 27, 7pm: Public meeting, Whitechapel Idea Store, 321 Whitechapel Road, London E1.

Organised by Jews for Justice for Palestinians: www.jjfjp.com.

Free all anti-imperialist prisoners

Thursday February 28, 7pm: Meeting, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Speakers include: Republican Sinn Féin, Basque POWs, Labour Representation Committee, Counihan-Sanchez Homeless Campaign, Sri Lanka Frontline Socialist Party.

Organised by Irish Republican Prisoners Support Group and Brent Labour Representation Committee: www.scribd.com/doc/124133460/Irish-Republican-Prisoners-Support-Group-Public-meeting.

What next after Leveson?

Thursday February 28, 6.30pm: Discussion, NUJ headquarters, 308-312 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1.

Organised by NUJ: freelanceoffice@nuj.org.uk.

Unite Against Fascism

Saturday March 2, 10am to 4.30pm: Annual conference, TUC Congress House, Great Russell Street, London WC1.

Organised by Unite Against Fascism: www.uaf.org.uk.

CPGB wills

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

SWP

Lynch mobs and lèse-majesté

The Socialist Workers Party leadership is fighting a dirty war. Unfortunately, writes **Paul Demarty**, nobody seems to have told the opposition

On Sunday February 17, the In Defence of Our Party (IDOP) faction of the Socialist Workers Party held its first internal caucus. It was, primarily, a 'business meeting', at which documents were agreed and a committee elected.

Naturally, the central committee had other plans. On the evening of February 15, Charlie Kimber had this to say in an email to the SWP membership: "It has always been the party's practice that faction meetings should be open to all SWP members (and only to SWP members). It is, however, reasonable that part of a faction meeting can be closed to comrades who are not members of the faction in order to have a caucus. We are one party, not two. It is unacceptable to have wholly closed meetings, and factions should feel able to argue their political perspective with other party members."

Obviously, then, the leadership clique was up to something. That 'something' turned out to be a particularly crass stunt. The evening after the caucus, one Anna Gluckstein - daughter of the late Ygaël himself - took to 'the dark side of the internet' (that is, Facebook) to complain: "As you know I never do Facebook," she begins, "but today I feel compelled to. Today there was a faction meeting in central London. I went along with a couple of comrades and others and we were barred from entry! This was not only me: this was two CC members and two of our journalists. I had invited my mum [ie, Chanie Rosenberg, widow of the International Socialists/SWP founder, Tony Cliff] to the meeting and then I had to tell her she wasn't allowed to come."

If you wanted a glimpse into the bizarre life-world of SWP loyalism, here it is. From their perspective, it is the perfect stunt! Wheel out two members of the Cliff clan - the two who, to my knowledge, have remained silent throughout this affair (although Donny Gluckstein has been behind several unhinged and foam-flecked interventions). If the faction lets you in, Chanie and Anna can serve as a meat shield to deflect criticism of the CC's conduct - which, inside an opposition faction meeting, would undoubtedly be foul and disruptive.

On the other hand, if you are refused entry, there is a whole other 'crime' with which to smear the opposition - *lèse-majesté*, or insulting behaviour towards royalty. Either way, you 'win' - but only on the basis that one or another section of the membership will be dazzled by the aura of royalty that envelops Cliff's family. This is a bizarre attitude for a revolutionary socialist organisation, one would have thought, but there is an advantage to building a cult of the dead. The living, after all, tend to have feet of clay - a lesson amply demonstrated by the CC's recent conduct.

Soft response

IDOP, to its credit, sent these miserable, manipulative would-be wreckers packing. On the other hand, the overall tenor of the policy agreed during the day leaves a lot to be desired.¹

The approach of the majority of IDOP comrades appears to be a very soft one. They seek some kind of reasonable compromise with the CC, in order to put this farrago behind them. They offer a number of 'helpful' tweaks to the disputes committee process, for example (as if that was



Alex Callinicos: unleash the lynch mob

the problem - motion 5). They reaffirm the SWP's "exceptional" record on women's liberation (motion 4 - so vast is the evidence to the contrary that it is difficult to fathom the universal agreement to this hypothesis).

A piece by Rob Owen, agreed so far as I know, lays out "our strategy" (motion 12), which is broadly of this character: "We intend to focus on the key proposals which we think could help rebuild party unity, so that the broader questions can be addressed adequately over time," he writes. There are consequences for the opposition. Motion 9, concerning the internet, notes that: "The party has adopted a conservative and undertheorised attitude towards the internet for many years; in consequence our internet presence leaves much to be desired ... But we cannot begin to address these issues properly until the current crisis is dealt with." Accordingly, "all criticisms of the leadership between now and conference [should] be channelled through party structures, such as faction meetings, aggregates and *IB* [*Internal Bulletin*] contributions. In particular the *IS* blog [the *International Socialism* website run by Richard Seymour, China Miéville and co] should be put on ice."

This, indeed, is a peculiar argument. It is pretty self-defeating, for a start. The *IB*s and aggregates, for example, are quite clearly in 'enemy hands'. There are usually three *IB*s, officially titled *Pre-conference Bulletins*, published before the SWP's annual conference, but now that the CC has been forced to concede a special, or recall, conference, to be held on March 10, it has decreed that there will be but one such *IB*. How can it be a forum for any kind of exchange of views? Aggregates - according to the SWP constitution - are by definition led by members of the CC. Factional meetings, meanwhile, are curiously assimilated to the category, "party structures"; but they are *not* part of those structures.

To argue that is to accept, *in principle*, Charlie Kimber's last-minute demand to be able to send spies and wreckers to the IDOP meeting. After all, the CC *is* the organisation between conferences. On what basis did the comrades turn the hacks away? On the basis that they - *as a faction* - decided that this meeting, *their* meeting, was closed to non-members of the *faction*. If you call this a 'party structure', in fact, you may as well call the *IS* blog a 'party organ'.

In a sense, however, using this kind of technical argument is ridiculous. The fundamental misapprehension behind this soft approach is in a little phrase of comrade Owen's that we have already quoted. He aims to "help rebuild party unity". Very good, comrade. But Charlie Kimber does not. He, Alex Callinicos and the rest of the leadership clique are plainly driving towards a *split*.

Here it is the time to bring in the hallowed 'IS tradition', but perhaps not in the way that the IDOP comrades would like. This is generally summarised as 'socialism from below', plus Cliff's state-capitalist theory of the USSR, plus the theories of the permanent arms economy and 'deflected permanent revolution'. The things at work here stem from, if you'll forgive me, the 'dark side' of the IS tradition: the enthusiasm Cliff and his successors have consistently shown for radical surgery. Cliff was quite happy to lose half his organisation in a wrenching turn, provided that those who were left were the 'best' (read: the most loyal) elements.

That Kimber and Callinicos are attempting the same move *should* be transparently obvious. The Chanie Rosenberg stunt is one thing. The ratification of the expulsions of the 'Facebook Four' - Paris Thompson, Tim Nelson, Charlotte Bence and Adam Marks - is a further sign that compromise is not on the agenda. The appeals of the four were rejected the day before the IDOP meeting - the disputes committee upheld the decision of the CC to summarily expel them by email for "secret factionalising": ie, exchanging views on Facebook about the possibility of setting up an official faction a couple of weeks before the January 4-6 annual conference.

More bizarre, and disturbing, is a leaked report of an editorial board meeting of the SWP's quarterly journal, *International Socialism*. This report really needs to be read in full.² Callinicos does not come over well, putting in a twitchy and paranoid performance. He seems to regard criticism of the SWP as a kind of conspiracy of Richard Seymour, the *Historical Materialism* editorial board and the US International Socialist Organization in order to force SWP members to read Bob Jessop.

As for the 'special conference', he repeats the line already put out by the CC - "it will be an opportunity to reaffirm the decisions taken at the

January conference. Whatever comes out of it will have to be accepted by everyone. Anyone who doesn't accept 'will attract the righteous anger of the bulk of party members'." A naive comrade, Adrian Budd, suggests to him: "That's surely the wrong way to go about it - to present it as a way of rubber-stamping decisions already taken. Surely it should be about airing the points of contention fully."

"To this," writes the anonymous reporter, "Alex barked a surly 'That's what you think!'" And when this rubber-stamping exercise is complete? "If party members refuse to accept the legitimacy of the decisions taken at the special conference, 'lynch mobs' (his words) will be formed." There are no doubt many things on comrade Callinicos's mind at present. 'Party unity' is pretty far down the list.

In the name of 'unity', however, the IDOP comrades wish to divide themselves. Their caucus disowned, until some indeterminate point in the future, the Facebook Four - after all, there is no 'party structure' remaining for them to appeal to, now that the DC has thrown their appeal out.

An incensed SWP comrade has described to me Rob Owen's performance in the run-up to the January conference as "conducting a factional battle like an intervention at NUS conference". There is certainly something of the Socialist Worker Student Society in IDOP's approach to the discussion on the expelled comrades: "A motion to include the reinstatement of the four comrades as a demand in the faction statement was voted down by the meeting. Speakers for and against the motion said that they *personally opposed the expulsions* and would support challenging them at national conference when the disputes committee report is formally heard" (emphasis added).³ In other words, it is not about what *we* think, comrades, but what the people out there think!

The more IDOP insists on routing its intervention through "party structures", the more it hands the advantage to the CC. Given that the CC would like to drive through a split, behaving in this way actually makes a split more likely. Softness, in this context, is suicide.

Harden up

The one advantage the opposition has had until now is openness, which piled pressure onto the leadership by making sure the wider movement, and indeed the world at large, knew what it was up to.

It is the *open* struggle through the *IS* blog of those now grouped in the Democratic Renewal platform that helped make sure there is still anything to fight for at this stage. The IDOP majority is a sequel of sorts to the 'Democratic Centralist' pre-conference faction, which immediately and politely dissolved itself after it was battered by the SWP leadership.

Its reappearance, it is certainly true, came just in time to circumvent a purge; but all the matters which have driven these comrades to reform the faction would have slipped off the agenda entirely but for the *IS* blog/DR platform. In short, if the DR comrades had not blown the gaff on what was going on and kept doing so (and if, for example, Tom Walker had not gone out with his resignation letter), these 'reasonable' comrades would have kept shtum. They would have accepted the CC's authority, and

become *accomplices*.

DR is a small minority, IDOP a far more substantial one. That the former's intransigence and *insistence* on openly expressing its dissent *created* the latter faction and succeeded, at the last second, in forcing the CC to revisit these matters at a conference should say something about the power its strategy had. The CC is bureaucratically strong and politically weak. Open struggle exposed and exploited that weakness. That is why it is very much to be regretted that the DR comrades, having joined forces with IDOP, appear to have agreed to the call to effectively shut up shop - the *IS* blog was last updated on February 12.⁴

Yet accepting open debate as a legitimate tactic would put the faction on the right side of history. A DR document, voted down at the IDOP caucus, goes out under the title, '*Under no circumstances should this text be posted on the internet!*'⁵ It reads in part: "The above, or some close variant, is a new default header and/or footer to documents produced by SWP members writing in response to the crisis we're in." The authors correctly observe: "Of course, within a few days at most, every single one of these pieces is posted on the internet."

The SWP leadership's approach to the internet, on the other hand, is dire: Facebook and blogs are "hostile territory", the DR comrades note. "It is telling, for example, that the CC, who for years responded to suggestions that we take the internet more seriously by poooh-pooing blogs and such like as vaguely distasteful silliness and a refuge from 'The Real World', are now blaming those blogs - rather than their own actions - for the party's crisis. The internet - especially its now notorious 'Dark Side' - has gone from having no, to having dreadful, power. The CC have lurched from Luddism to technological determinism without passing through strategy."

On the positive side, IDOP talks a fairly good game as far as going through the "party structures" goes. The faction expects its members to recruit, to ring round, to caucus and to get motions passed through branches. (Alas, it does not even occur to IDOP to demand space in the weekly *Party Notes* or *Socialist Worker*.) Perhaps it really can beat the bureaucracy at its own game.

We doubt it. The apparatus mobilises for war; the opposition expects a comradely debate. They will need to harden up if they do not want 'a line drawn under the matter' - to repeat the CC phrase used to dismiss the concerns of comrades who are still fuming about the gross mishandling of allegations of rape made against 'comrade Delta'. No doubt a line will then also be drawn under scores of membership cards - and any remaining potential the SWP may have for the revolutionary project ●

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Notes

1. All documents from the caucus can be found here: www.cpgb.org.uk/home/weekly-worker/online-only/idoop-faction-caucus-agenda-and-documents.
2. www.cpgb.org.uk/home/weekly-worker/online-only/callinicos-threatens-lynch-mobs.
3. www.cpgb.org.uk/home/weekly-worker/online-only/in-defence-of-our-party-timidty-in-the-face-of-the-cc.
4. <http://internationalsocialismuk.blogspot.co.uk>.
5. <http://cpgb.org.uk/assets/files/idoopfactiondocs/11.+Under+No+Circumstances+Should+this+Text+be+Posted+on+the+Internet.doc>.

SPEW

Taaffe's significant silence

The Socialist Party in England and Wales appears to have decided to effectively ignore the SWP crisis. But why? Ben Lewis investigates

When it comes to the crisis engulfing the SWP, there has been an almost deafening silence coming from its Socialist Party in England and Wales rival. Let us be clear: this is no storm in an SWP sectarian teacup. We are not dealing with tittle-tattle and gossip. The outcome of this factional struggle, a fight over the very existence of the SWP, will have palpable effects on our side's strength. Perhaps sensing this, certain sections of the bourgeois press have obviously smelled blood, and sought to exploit this crisis to *smear the left as a whole*. Step up the gut-wrenching Nick Cohen and the *Daily Mail* ...

The SWP crisis merely confirms, in the minds of such people, the rotten and warped outlook of revolutionaries who wish to overthrow capitalism. That we are fundamentally driven by a lust for power. That we need to take lessons on women's liberation from liberal feminism and so on. Utter sanctimonious garbage - particularly from Nick Cohen, who cheered on the invasion of Afghanistan under the pretext of 'women's rights'. That worked out well, didn't it?

We on the left, then, have to show some basic solidarity with SWP comrades here: neither the Marxist left nor the SWP is replete with sexists, would-be rapists, macho head honchos and apologists for the oppression of women - and certainly not when compared with class society, for which Cohen and his cronies are craven apologists.

As such, during times like this, it is nigh on *criminal* to remain silent on some of the basic questions thrown up by the crisis around 'comrade Delta' and the shitstorm whipped up by the rightwing media. But why are some sections refusing to comment? Why the silence from the *Morning Star*, a publication that (rather risibly) claims to be the "daily newspaper of the left"? And what of SPEW? Are comrades in that organisation simply too busy, too overwhelmed by the demands of the class struggle to write an article? Or does their failure to comment reflect something significant?

'Political capital'

SPEW, like the SWP, has a good number of solid trade union activists, hard-working student organisers and dedicated agitators who put in the hard yards at a local level. Personally speaking, while I - perhaps invariably! - have had the odd run-in with this or that district full-timer in my time, I find that many of SPEW's activists are approachable, friendly and often willing to have a chat. This, it should be stressed, is in positive contrast to my experience of activists in some other groups. Though, I note, many of the friendlier, more interactive and more human members of the SWP have, for the most part, joined the ranks of the opposition.

Yet SPEW's lack of response to the SWP crisis reveals much about the current problems of the left: conservative, uninspired and sectish. It would appear that SPEW has actually taken a formal decision *not* to comment on the SWP's factional war. I gleaned this not from reading a report in the pages of the oh-so-dull and uninspiring *The Socialist*. I am only aware of it through the weird and wonderful Facebook-based internet grouping, Socialist Meme Caucus,¹ which is in the main staffed by SPEW members.

The SMC group publishes satirical

web memes that mock leftwing groups and leaders and comment on mainstream political figures and events. One such meme compares Counterfire *numero uno* John Rees to the fictional British comedy figure, Alan Partridge. Another features a picture of a handsome young Stalin alongside text such as: "With looks like this: who needs Marxist theory?" For the most part it is all good-humoured and light-hearted stuff, and a welcome initiative. After all, if there is one thing that bureaucracy fears, then it is humour ...

And talking of bureaucracy, in recent times Alex 'Stalinicos' has certainly come in for his fair share of 'memeing', particularly when it comes to his "dark side of the internet" comments. These occasioned the wonderful 'Darth Alex' image, used as a *Weekly Worker* front cover.²

When the CPGB website ran the leaked report of comrade Callinicos threatening "lynch mobs", the web team decided to illustrate it with a meme superimposing Callinicos's head onto the hit man played by Samuel L Jackson in the cult film, *Pulp fiction*. In response, a SPEW comrade admin for Socialist Meme Caucus posted up the image with the following strapline: "The *Weekly Worker*'s morbid fixation with the SWP - one more pathological than SMC's - means it no longer functions as any kind of working class organisation. It is, however, progressive that they have taken up the tactic of memeing in order to communicate political ideas." Ha ha, comrade. When I pointed out that SPEW's silence may just - perhaps - have something to do with the obvious fact that it is hardly unaffected by similar questions, I got the following response:

"The SP have taken the position that releasing statements on the crisis in the SWP would be seen as attempting to make political capital out of it. I wish the opposition the best of luck in changing the environment in the SWP, and I'm sure that's the same for most other members of the SP." Solidarity forever, comrade!

Now, of course, we will assume that this "the *Weekly Worker* is no longer part of the workers' movement" line is, in all likelihood, not some kind of official SPEW policy, but more an off-the-cuff posting from a slightly narked internet warrior. Nonetheless, both the reasoning he provides for the *Weekly Worker*'s alleged defection to the camp of the bourgeoisie *and* the fact that SPEW has not said anything about the SWP crisis - at least in public - reveals that there is something rotten in the kingdom of Peter Taaffe.

'Seizing the corners'

As Paul Demarty recently put it, "Silence, in this context, is worse than a crime - it is a mistake. It is a mistake made possible by the ingrained sectarianism in leftwing culture ... This awkward reluctance speaks to a distinctly proprietorial, bourgeois culture among left organisations ... Underlying all these symptoms is the idea that the given group has a unique existence, apart from all the others. It is a fantasy. We are all swimming in the same pond, and claiming that a particular six cubic feet of the

pond is 'your' water is ridiculous."³

This emphasis on *proprietorial* culture is absolutely correct. After all, left strategy today seems to consist of one small group increasing its 'market share' at the expense of others. As with the various drug gangs fighting over the street 'corners' of Baltimore in the hit television series, *The wire*, this can take the form of means foul and fair. Hell, sometimes these gang leaders even get together in dark rooms to discuss some kind of 'unity' initiative, only then to unceremoniously break the stitched-up 'peace' and go back to normal.

This mentality explains some of the language deployed in the brief exchange I had with SPEW comrades, such as "political capital" and even "unique selling point" - some fad political position to make you stand out from your competitors!⁴ What a mockery of revolutionary politics.

We could perhaps express some doubts about the actual *sincerity* of SPEW's claim not to seek so-called political capital out of this crisis. After all, not only are SPEW and the SWP comparative in terms of size. In terms of their day-to-day work of 'building the party', they will be coming across, and fighting to recruit, similar layers of activists and militants.

Surely those currently out and about recruiting students and trade unionists will contrast SPEW's 'healthy' regime to that of the 'cult' regime of the SWP? That is certainly how things have played out historically, where the Militant forerunner of SPEW would often delight in the mishaps and misfortunes of the SWP and vice versa.

SPEW's decision to 'not seek undue advantage' is also cast in doubt by the fact that only last month we suddenly found online a rare critique of the SWP. The document was written by general secretary Taaffe back in 2009, when there were also factional rumblings in the SWP. But, perhaps this was one of those strange coincidences in politics, comrades?⁵

Small sects

So the comrades in SPEW who dismiss the *Weekly Worker*'s coverage of the SWP as "sectarian" might wish to think again, and look a little closer to home. Not only does such a standpoint rather nicely dovetail with the *SWP leadership's* 'navel-gazing' understanding of 'sectarianism' (any loyalist seller of *Socialist Worker* will tell you that 'sects' are groups that talk about other groups instead of appealing to 'the movement'). But playing the game of market share and political

capital really *is* sectarianism, comrades. Looking to overthrow that narrow approach and move towards a serious party organisation is not.

The 'sects and us' view currently prevalent in SPEW is straight out of the Militant songbook. It also affects the outlook of the 'other half' of the Militant split around Alan Woods and *Socialist Appeal*, who have not deigned to mention the SWP crisis either.

For both sides of the ex-Militant divide, the world is astonishingly simple. There are the 'mass organisations' and your own important group ... and then a swathe of irrelevant sects. The latter are more often than not described as 'small' (whereas everybody knows that this is not the case with SPEW or its Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, don't they?). While from time to time rivals may be glibly dismissed ('the sects' think this, 'the sects' did that), particular groups are rarely named. That would presumably be too complex for those poor 'ordinary workers'.

Given the impending revolutionary crisis, the so-called 'sects' will be swept aside by the force of events, so why bother with them? But our own group - in this case SPEW - will be catapulted into prominence by the rising masses. The Militant take on *Waiting for Godot* - and a reflection of SPEW's criminal neglect of the need to unite all revolutionaries into a serious revolutionary party in the here and now.

As comrade Taaffe himself has stated on several occasions,⁶ left unity can wait. What can be done in the here and now, of course, is to look to expand the influence of his own group by flattering trade union bureaucrats (sorry, 'leaders') into forming a bigger party, which can act as some kind of 'transmission belt' from a *broad party* of Labourite reformism into the tightly-knit, truly revolutionary, truly Marxist party that is SPEW.

Callinicos and Taaffe

For reasons of space, I will deal with comrade Peter Taaffe's views on 'democratic centralism' in a future article. For now, let me simply note the following: comrades Taaffe and Callinicos share *all* the essential bureaucratic centralist traits, not least a horror of permanent factions and a revulsion against their members publicly expressing dissenting political views in the party press.

Of course, Taaffe and Callinicos are not unique. There is a very large rogues' gallery of those claiming the mantle of Bolshevism who insist that disputes have to be had out 'internally' (if at all!). For such comrades, the masses have no right to know about differences of opinion within the 'vanguard'. Yet such things are fairly essential if our class is to become capable of ruling, *of liberating itself*.

Grasping this basic commonality between Taaffe and Callinicos perhaps gets us closer to understanding the significance of SPEW's silence. Raising questions about the SWP's regime would necessarily raise questions about bureaucratic centralism closer to home.

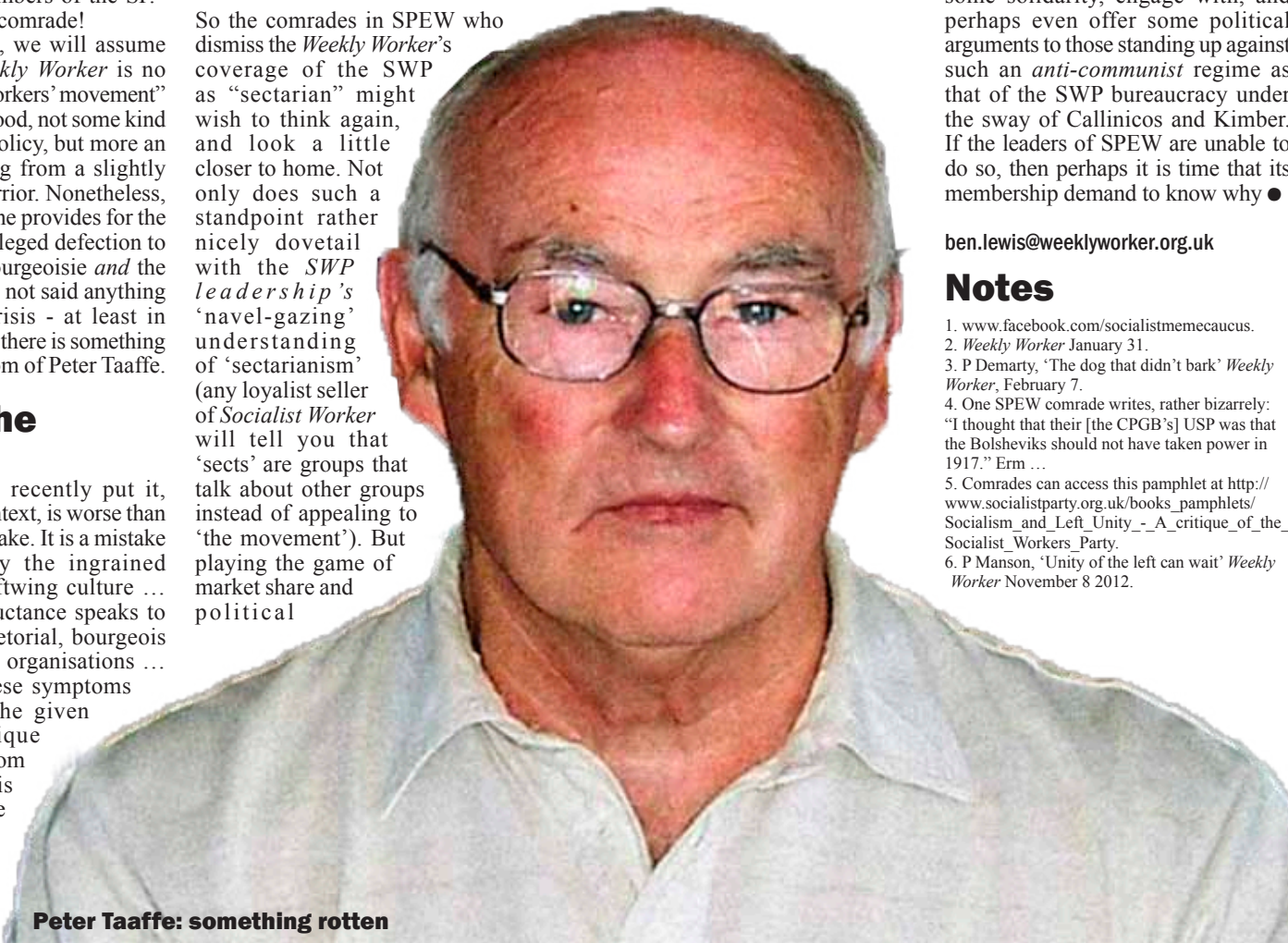
Openly fighting this rotten culture and positively overcoming it at all levels of our movement are preconditions for the organisation of our class on a serious scale once again. Remaining silent when that culture is at least being *questioned* in some way, however inadequately, by the SWP opposition, is actually equivalent to *excusing* the bureaucratic regime in the SWP. After all, SPEW's forerunners rightly protested against anti-democratic witch-hunters in the Labour Party, so why not do the same when it comes to the SWP?

That is why it is vital that the membership of SPEW, and of the left at large, follow the lead of the *Weekly Worker* on this question. The rearticulation of Marxist politics and the reorganisation of our class presuppose that we are able to show some solidarity, engage with, and perhaps even offer some political arguments to those standing up against such an *anti-communist* regime as that of the SWP bureaucracy under the sway of Callinicos and Kimber. If the leaders of SPEW are unable to do so, then perhaps it is time that its membership demand to know why ●

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Notes

1. www.facebook.com/socialistmemecaucus.
2. *Weekly Worker* January 31.
3. P Demarty, 'The dog that didn't bark' *Weekly Worker*, February 7.
4. One SPEW comrade writes, rather bizarrely: "I thought that their [the CPGB's] USP was that the Bolsheviks should not have taken power in 1917." Erm ...
5. Comrades can access this pamphlet at http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/books_pamphlets/Socialism_and_Left_Unity_-_A_critique_of_the_Socialist_Workers_Party.
6. P Manson, 'Unity of the left can wait' *Weekly Worker* November 8 2012.



Peter Taaffe: something rotten

PROGRAMME

Broad bad, mass good

Opportunists require mushy politics and meaningless phrases when they set out to deceive. **Jack Conrad** argues in favour of a mass working class party and the kind of principles and politics outlined in the *Communist manifesto*, the *Erfurt programme* and the programme of the Parti Ouvrier

Almost without exception the left pays fulsome tribute to the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, aka the 1848 *Communist manifesto* authored by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. Revealingly, though not surprisingly, Chris Harman (1942-2009), editor of *Socialist Worker* for over 20 years, wrote glowingly about the *Communist manifesto* in his introduction to the 2003 Bookmarks edition - but revealingly he could not bring himself to admit that this “pamphlet” - as he consistently, guiltily, called it - was actually a programme.¹

Of course, the Socialist Workers Party is programmophobic - at least when it comes to the programmes of classical Marxism. For a rank-and-file member to advocate that the SWP debate and agree a Marxist programme is to court expulsion. And without a programme to commit them to basic Marxist principles, Alex Callinicos, Charlie Kimber and Martin Smith have been free to pursue every leftist whim, every rightist fancy.

For example, in the 2010 general election that saw them standing candidates under the rightist umbrella of the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition. The stated goal of Tusc’s main sponsor - the Socialist Party in England and Wales - is to gain the support of the NUT, PCS, FBU, RMT, POA, UCU and other trade unions. Naturally towards that end “the trade union leaders that are involved in Tusc have a veto over what’s decided ... in other words, they have ownership of Tusc”.² An imitation Labour Party on a Lilliputian scale, which in the last analysis amounts to reconciliation with the bourgeois state, because the trade union bureaucracy sets the political agenda.

Before that, along with John Rees and Lindsey German, the same SWP tops stood candidates for Respect on a platform of crass populism, unfulfillable Keynesian nonsense and wretched fudge. Disregarding the ABCs of Marxism, the dark professor defined Respect as uniting “secular socialists and Muslim activists”.³ A minuscule popular front party designed to band together the SWP, George Galloway, the Muslim Association of Britain and a layer of Asian businessmen. And towards that end comrade German made her infamous “shibboleth” speech on gay rights to the Marxism 2003 event.⁴ Protests there were. But not from SWP loyalists. A defining moment. Clearly the rightwing ‘shadow’ once again exercised a veto: secularism, international socialism, republicanism and a women’s right to choose to have an abortion were all excluded from Respect’s political platform.

Unfortunately, the SWP and SPEW are far from alone. Frustrated by their inability to break into the ‘big time’, too many organisations on the left seek to put together a *broad party* which the chosen sect can direct, manipulate and feed off. Socialist Resistance, Workers Power, Anti-Capitalist Initiative, Independent Socialist Network, etc all adhere to the same method. Hence, depending on the particular sponsor, the broad party is designed to net one or another non-working class ideological current: Scottish nationalism, Islamism, anarchism, occupy direct-actionism, Labour reformism, pacifism,

Maoism, ‘official communism’, etc. Of necessity, the platforms, or programmes, of these various broad parties are dictated by the needs of diplomatic unity-mongering: therefore they reek of equivocation, economism and compromise.

By contrast communists aim not for a broad party, but a *mass party*. A mass workers’ party built around an internationalist programme whose principles and strategy not only map out the road to class unity, state power and human liberation. The principles and strategy of the programme also combine together to set the limits when it comes to the party’s membership: ie, by default Scottish nationalists, Islamists, anarchists, occupypists, Labour reformists, pacifists, Maoists, ‘official communists’, trade union bureaucrats, etc are locked out, transformed or removed.

1848

The *Communist manifesto* can be described as a minimum-maximum programme. Fulfilling the minimum programme under capitalism creates the conditions for the *practical* beginning of the maximum programme (though some minimum demands might well be fulfilled only after the socialist revolution, so there is a certain blurring). In the *Communist manifesto* we read that “Communists fight for the attainment of immediate aims, for the enforcement of the momentary interests of the working class; but in the movement of the present, they also represent and take care of the future of that movement.”⁵ Being a global programme, or at least a Euro-American programme - ie, for those countries where modern capitalism and the working class had taken root - the *Communist manifesto* outlined both the goal of a communist society and the goals communists fight for under capitalism. That includes, of course, high politics.

Hence, in Germany, Marx’s comrades are for the overthrow of the monarchs and petty princes and a fight against the “petty bourgeois”, all in alliance with the bourgeoisie. That would be “but the prelude to an immediately following proletarian revolution”.⁶

Interestingly, a necessary addition soon came. With the *Demands of the Communist Party in Germany* (1848), Marx and Engels supplemented the *Communist manifesto* with a series of minimum demands and certainly, when it came to their attitude towards the bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeoisie and small peasants, corrected it. The *Demands* do not present the bourgeoisie as an ally against the forces of reaction. Instead the “proletariat, the petty bourgeoisie and the small peasants” are urged to support “with all possible energy” the 17 minimum demands outlined by the communists.⁷

Amongst those demands are universal suffrage (demand 2); “universal arming of the people” (demand 4); aid for the peasantry (demands 6-9); a “state bank” to replace all private banks (demand 10); nationalisation of the means of transport (demand 11); “complete separation of church and state” (demand 13); “universal free education” (demand 17). Beginning, but also capping them all, is the demand that the “whole of Germany

shall be declared a single and indivisible republic”: ie, a big Germany, including Austria (demand 1). Only the democratic republic can ensure and safeguard the minimum programme.

Erfurt

There is also much to be learnt from the programme adopted by the Social Democratic Party of Germany at its Erfurt congress in 1891. Here, however, unlike with the *Communist manifesto*, most contemporary lefts almost automatically dismiss the *Erfurt programme* as having relevance only for semi-autocratic kaiser Germany and the period of class peace. Either that or it is held up as a terrible warning, because in 1914 SDPers in the Reichstag *unanimously* voted for war credits (by convention the fraction always acted as a bloc).

Clearly there was an opportunist drift away from the programme to the point where there was, yes, on August 4 1914, a qualitative break. But not by the whole party. There was always strong and vocal opposition. And a big split occurred in April 1917 with the formation of the Independent SDP - which included Karl Kautsky. By 1919 the ISDP boasted 750,000 members (the Spartacist League of Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Clara Zetkin, Franz Mehring and Leo Jogiches constituted themselves an open faction till the formation of the Communist Party of Germany). Note, the right wing was accused of having “violated” the class and internationalist principles of the *Erfurt programme*.⁸ At the founding congress in Gotha the increasingly marginalised Kautsky declared that the ‘government socialists’ had “betrayed” the programme and its mission (the renegade obviously dreamt of recementing unity on the basis of the *Erfurt programme*). But, this position, comments Pierre Broué, “was no doubt the real feeling of most delegates”.⁹

Not that the *Erfurt programme* is above criticism. Especially with hindsight, one can find the germs of August 1914. Rather than risk being made illegal once again, the SDP leadership preferred to avoid awkward issues: ie, the democratic republic. What was *omitted* therefore has great significance. But the germs of a cancer are not the same as a cancer. To reject organising our programme into maximum and minimum sections on the basis of August 1914 is certainly to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

The *Erfurt programme* was initially drafted by August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht, leading members of the SDP’s executive, who asked Engels, in a “strictly confidential” communiqué, for his comments. Engels generously did as requested in the document we now know as *Critique of the Erfurt programme* (though what he actually criticised was the first draft). Most of his suggestions were incorporated into the final draft written by Karl Kautsky. The version agreed by the Erfurt congress meeting over October 14-21 1891.

Having looked over the first draft, Engels remarked that it “differs very favourably from the former programme”: that is, the *Gotha programme* of 1875, of which Marx had so thoroughly disapproved because of its unprincipled and unnecessary compromises with

Lassalleism.¹⁰

Not surprisingly then, Engels greeted the Erfurt congress as a victory. Vital lines of demarcation had been successfully introduced. This is Engels writing to Adolph Sorge in America:

We have had the satisfaction of seeing Marx’s critique win all along the line. Even the last traces of Lassalleism have been eliminated. With the exception of a few poorly written bits (though it’s only the way they’re put that is feeble and commonplace), there is nothing to complain of in the programme - or not, at any rate, at first reading.¹¹

The Erfurt programme is organised into two parts. The first part outlines the fundamental principles of socialism - what goals Marxists aim for - while the second enumerates the “demands which the social democracy makes of present-day society” - the hows.¹²

The programme opens with a brief analysis of capitalism and its development. Monopoly concentrates production and increases the number of workers. The middle classes are being squeezed and there is a general growth of insecurity. The programme calls for the social ownership of the means of production and includes the forthright statement that only the working class can bring about the liberation of humanity. Other classes are tied to “existing society”.

However - and this is of some considerable importance - the *Erfurt programme* is emphatic: the working class cannot rely on mere trade unionism.

The struggle of the working class against capitalistic exploitation is of necessity a political struggle. The working class cannot carry on its economic contests, and cannot develop its economic organisation, without political rights. It cannot bring about the transference of the means of production into the possession of the community without having obtained political power.¹³

Giving the struggle of the working class “a conscious and unified form, and to show it its necessary goal” are the tasks of the SDP.¹⁴ The *Erfurt programme* is also quite emphatic that there is no national road to the supersession of capitalism:

The interests of the working classes are the same in all countries with a capitalistic mode of production. With the extension of the world’s commerce, and of production for the world market, the position of the worker in every country grows ever more dependent on the position of the worker in other countries. The liberation of the working class, accordingly, is a work in which the workmen of all civilised countries are equally involved. In recognition of this, the SDP of Germany feels and declares itself to be one with the class-conscious workmen of all other countries.¹⁵

The SDP is not fighting for new class privileges and class rights, but for the abolition of class rule and of “classes themselves” (a formulation

suggested by Engels), for equal rights and “equal duties of all,” without distinction of sex or descent (another Engels suggestion - he wanted to rid the programme of the specifically bourgeois meaning of equality).

After this, the maximum section, the programme logically proceeds to the minimum section and how the SDP will combat “within existing society” not only the exploitation and oppression of wage-earners, but “every kind of exploitation and oppression, whether directed against a class, a party, a sex or a race”.¹⁶

The programme proposes “to begin with” 10 key political demands. Engels had argued for a different, surely more militant, formulation: “social democracy fights for all demands which help it approach this goal” of a classless society.¹⁷

The 10 demands can be summarised as follows: “universal, equal and direct suffrage”; proportional representation, biennial parliaments and pay for elected representatives (demand 1); “self-determination and self-government of the people in realm, state, province and parish”, election of magistrates and annual voting of taxes (demand 2); education on the right of “all to bear arms”, a militia in “place of the standing army”, questions of war and peace to be decided by elected representatives and settlement of “all international disputes by arbitration” (demand 3); abolition of all laws which limit or suppress the “right of meeting and coalition” (demand 4); abolition of all laws which “place women, whether in a public or a private capacity, at a disadvantage as compared with men” (demand 5); “declaration that religion is a private affair” (a formulation criticised by Marx back in 1875 because for the party religion is not a private matter), the end of public funding “upon ecclesiastical and religious objects”, and ecclesiastical and religious bodies to be regarded as private associations, which regulate their affairs entirely independently (demand 6); “secularisation of schools” (demand 7); “free administration of justice” and election of judges (demand 8); free health service (demand 9); graduated income and property tax for “defraying all public expenses”, and abolition of all indirect taxes (demand 10).¹⁸

Then come five minimum economic demands designed to protect and improve the lot of the working class, such as an eight-hour day, prohibition of child labour under 14, inspection of workplaces, and a national insurance system administered in the main by representatives of the workers.

Kautsky wrote a semi-official commentary on the *Erfurt programme*, a short book called *The class struggle* (1892). This explained in popular form the theories of Marx and Engels, not least Marx’s analysis of capitalism presented in *Capital*. *The class struggle* was widely read in Europe and the US between its first publication and 1914. A sort of Marxist bible. Translated into 16 languages, it certainly influenced Marxists in Russia, not least Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (Lenin).

Rightly, the reasoning behind the *Erfurt programme* lay in the conviction that the Marxist party had to win for itself a mass membership and a clear majority in society. After the repeal of the anti-socialist laws in 1890, the SDP had indeed experienced rapid growth and sank deep roots.

Membership was to grow to a million, the number of Reichstag deputies seemed to be set to inexorably increase with each election and powerful trade unions were built. However, under such benign circumstances the spread of opportunism was inevitable (a tendency articulated most honestly and ably by Eduard Bernstein in his *Evolutionary socialism* - it is in fact an exceedingly bad book).

Engels was well aware of the opportunism within the SDP. There were those who imagined that they could simply lay hold of the kaiser state and peaceably reform Germany all the way to socialism. While being prepared to admit the possibility of a peaceful revolution in countries such as Britain and the US, Engels insisted that such a road was closed for Germany. To suggest otherwise was to act as a cover for absolutism.

Though it had a material basis in the Reichstag fraction, in trade union officialdom and in the SDP apparatus, the rightist trend remained a minority in the SDP, or at least a largely hidden one, till August 1914. Only then did it burst out into the open in full force, and in the disorientating panic and crazy confusion that accompanied the outbreak of World War I it managed to secure the silence, or sullen cooperation, of the majority of members. Most would have thought that the war would soon be over, perhaps by Christmas, and that the jingoistic madness would cure itself.

But neither creeping opportunism nor full-blown social-imperialism can be blamed on the programme. There is no direct correlation. Indeed the right, at least in the form of Bernstein, opened the “first serious theoretical attack” against the Marxist foundations of the programme.¹⁹ Others were not so bold. Instead they paid lip service. Eg, the leading right opportunists projected the maximum section of the programme - the prospect of socialism and universal human liberation - to a further and further distant horizon. Like the SWP, SPEW, Socialist Resistance *et al*, the right opportunists came to regard socialism as just an empty phrase - but one which earned them applause at rallies and meetings.

Meanwhile, they treated the minimum section of the programme more and more as maximum demands. Secularism, arming the people and the election of judges were talked of as being too advanced for the existing consciousness of the workers and therefore not to be agitated for in election campaigns, on May Day demonstrations or anywhere else. What really mattered to the right was maintaining the party’s finances, winning votes in Reichstag elections and securing better pay and conditions for trade union members. That was supposedly the real labour movement.

Engels

It surely incumbent on all genuine Marxists to treat with the greatest seriousness both the praise heaped upon the *Erfurt programme* by Engels ... and his criticism. Some good Trotskyite comrades - for example, Mark Hoskisson of Permanent Revolution - have it that Engels saw the “danger of democratism obliterating revolutionary socialism, through an over-emphasis on minimal political demands”.²⁰ In fact, the exact opposite is true. The *Erfurt programme* is lacking in ... democratism.

Engels writes to the SDP executive that: “The political demands of the draft have one great fault. It lacks precisely what should have been said. If all the demands [outlined above - JC] were granted, we should indeed have more diverse means of achieving our main political aim, but the aim itself would in no wise have been achieved.”²¹

Germany was in 1891 still ruled under an extension of the anti-

democratic Prussian constitution of 1850. A constitution which concentrated power in the hands of the monarch and the governmental bureaucracy, not the people. Engels calls the Reichstag a “fig leaf” for absolutism - an absolutism that was always prepared to turn to openly counterrevolutionary means. Famously, the conservative deputy, Elard von Oldenburg, told the assembled Reichstag, to ringing applause: the German emperor “must be able at any moment to say to a lieutenant: Take 10 men and shut the Reichstag”.²²

Hence, Engels reiterates the demand for a democratic republic. A single and indivisible republic: ie, the abolition of the Prussian kaiser and the system of petty states within the German empire like the minuscule Thuringia (analogous to the Isle of Man, the Channel Islands, etc). This owes nothing to a desire to finish the “incomplete bourgeois revolution”.²³ Engels is insistent: “our party and the working class can only come to power under the form of the democratic republic. This is even the specific form of the dictatorship of the proletariat.”²⁴ He repeats the point a few lines down: “In my view, the proletariat can only use the form of the one and indivisible republic.” And here, as with so much else, Engels was, of course, perfectly in tune with Marx. He too viewed the democratic republic as the form of the rule of the working class.

Engels is well aware of the difficulties of bluntly stating this in the *Erfurt programme*. The anti-socialist laws still loom threateningly over the SDP. They could easily be reintroduced and the party forced underground once more. Yet he says there must be some subtle phrase that would get around the legal problem: he recommends “the concentration of all political power in the hands of the people’s representatives” - that would serve for the “time being”.²⁵ A formulation *not* included in the *Erfurt programme*, however. A major flaw.

Engels warns that “forgetting of the great, the principal considerations” - specifically he had in mind the democratic republic - for what he calls the “momentary interests of the day” is a “sacrifice of the future movement” for its “present”. This, Engels says, may be “honestly” meant, but it is and remains opportunism - and “honest” opportunism is “perhaps the most dangerous of all”.²⁶ Bernstein, of course, honestly espoused the opportunist maxim that the movement was everything, the final goal nothing. And Kautsky opposed Bernsteinism, conducting an orthodox defence of the minimum-maximum programme, as did Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Bernsteinism was officially condemned at the SDP’s Dresden congress and in its turn by the Second International. Bernstein’s revisionism was part of an attempt to replace the policy of the conquest of power through victory by “a policy which accommodates itself with the existing order”.²⁷ Given what happened later, it would assuredly have been correct to have gone one better and expel him then and there - even though he was thought of as an isolated individual at the time, the fact of the matter was that opportunism was insidiously gaining strength and confidence.

Of course, what often passes for Trotskyism takes passages in Kautsky’s *The class struggle* - and similar articles and books - which advocate an extension of popular power through the Reichstag as an unMarxist vacillation “towards a reformist application of the programme”.²⁸ Eg, “A genuine parliamentary regime can be as much an instrument of the dictatorship of the proletariat as an instrument of the bourgeoisie.” But

this is just as much the view of Marx and Engels as it is of Kautsky. It is certainly not Bernsteinism. After all, a genuine parliamentary regime would necessitate the overthrow of the kaiser constitution - as it would the overthrow of the UK’s constitutional monarchy system, which contains all manner of devious checks and balances against democracy.

Programme of Parti Ouvrier

This minimum-maximum programme was drawn up in May 1880, when Jules Guesde, a leading French socialist, met Marx in Engels’ front room in Primrose Hill (not that we should forget the assistance provided by Engels and Marx’s son-in-law, Paul Lafargue - who, along with Guesde, became a leading figure in the Marxist wing of French socialism). Anyway, the preamble, which amounts to the maximum section of the programme, was dictated by Marx himself - “word for word”, according to Engels.²⁹ It reads as follows:

Considering that the emancipation of the productive class is that of all human beings without distinction of sex or race; that the producers can be free only when they are in possession of the means of production; that there are only two forms under which the means of production can belong to them: the individual form which has never existed in a general state and which is increasingly eliminated by industrial progress; the collective form, the material and intellectual elements of which are constituted by the very development of capitalist society; considering that this collective appropriation can arise only from the revolutionary action of the productive class - or proletariat - organised in a distinct political party; that such an organisation must be pursued by all the means the proletariat has at its disposal, including universal suffrage, which will thus be transformed from the instrument of deception that it has been until now into an instrument of emancipation; the French socialist workers, in adopting as the aim of their efforts the political and economic expropriation of the capitalist class and the return to community of all the means of production, have decided, as a means of organisation and struggle, to enter the elections with the following immediate demands.³⁰

The programme then moves on to political demands for the abolition of all laws over the press, meetings and associations and for women’s equality “in relation to man”; removal of subsidies to religious orders and the return to the nation of the “‘goods said to be mortmain, movable and immovable’ (decree by the Commune of April 2 1871), including all the industrial and commercial annexes of these corporations”; suppression of the public debt; “abolition of standing armies and the general arming of the people”; communes “to be master of its administration and its police”.

The economic section calls for the eight-hour day, a ban on child labour under 14 and between that age and 16 the “reduction of the working day from eight to six hours”; protective supervision of apprentices by the workers’ organisations; a legal minimum wage, determined each year according to the local price of food, by a workers’ statistical commission; legal prohibition of bosses employing foreign workers at a wage less than that of French workers; equal pay for equal work, for workers of both sexes; scientific and professional instruction of all children, “with

their maintenance the responsibility of society, represented by the state and the commune”; responsibility of society for the old and the disabled; prohibition of all interference by employers in the administration of “workers’ friendly societies, provident societies, etc, which are returned to the exclusive control of the workers”; responsibility of the bosses in the matter of accidents, guaranteed by security paid by the employer into the workers’ funds, and in proportion to the number of workers employed and the danger that the industry presents; intervention by the workers in the special regulations of the various workshops; an end to the right usurped by the bosses to “impose any penalty on their workers in the form of fines or withholding of wages” (decree by the Commune of April 27 1871); annulment of all the contracts that have alienated public property (banks, railways, mines, etc), and the exploitation of all state-owned workshops to be entrusted to the workers who work there; abolition of all indirect taxes and transformation of all direct taxes into a progressive tax on incomes over 3,000 francs; suppression of all inheritance on “all direct inheritance over 20,000 francs”.

So here we have another example of the hand of Marx (and Engels) in formulating a minimum-maximum programme. It was adopted, with a few amendments, by the founding congress of the Parti Ouvrier, meeting at Le Havre in November 1880. Laconically, Marx said of this programme that “this very brief document in its economic section consists solely of demands that actually have spontaneously arisen out of the labour movement itself. There is in addition an introductory passage where the communist goal is defined in a few lines.”³¹ However, Engels glowingly described the first, maximum, section as “a masterpiece of cogent argumentation rarely encountered, clearly and succinctly written for the masses; I myself was astonished by this concise formulation”.³²

Yet for right-moving lefts the programme of the Parti Ouvrier appears to be exactly the kind of “broad platform” that could serve as a model for what is needed to “bring together a broad organisation” in today’s Britain.³³ An obvious case of misreading both the programme and history. The fact of the matter is that the Parti Ouvrier was not a “broad organisation” and its programme, of course, was at least partially designed to draw lines of demarcation.

Proudhonists, Blanquists, anti-political syndicalists and anarchists either stayed clear or were kept away by the programme’s commitment to transform universal suffrage from an “instrument of deception” into an “instrument of emancipation.” There naive vision of socialism relied upon cooperatives, the revolutionary coup, the general strike or the exemplary action. The anarchists, for example, “formed their own group”.³⁴ Many turned to the propaganda of the deed.

Not that the Parti Ouvrier should be viewed as any kind of model *organisationally*. As Guesde and his close followers tried to impose centralised party structures through dictat, a bitter dispute broke out between them and possibilists grouped around Paul Brousse and Benoît Malon. Possibilists because they claimed to be committed to “realise the greatest sum of communism possible”.³⁵

Brousse had founded the monthly journal *Le Travail* in March 1880, which was open to all “schools” of socialism, not least the anarchists, an ideology with which he retained an enduring sympathy. His conception of the party was therefore federalist and, yes, broad to the point of being

little more than a loose network. As for Malon, he was determined to keep the door of the Parti Ouvrier open to “social Radicals, who still had the allegiance of the working class, thus creating a broad-based party stretching from anarchists on the left to Radicals on the right”.³⁶ To “bring together” their “broad based organisation” the possibilists launched an “attack on the minimum programme”.³⁷ Correctly, Brousse and Malon saw the minimum programme as an obstacle to the unity they desired.

The whole thing culminated in a congress held in Saint-Étienne in 1882 and a messy split. The Guesdist minority walked out and held their own rival congress in Roanne. Marx was unfairly accused of engineering the split from London and Marxism was roundly cursed and bitterly denounced. The possibilists went on to abandon the minimum programme in the name of unity and the formation of trade congresses, which were supposed to serve as basic units of the future socialist order.

In 1883 the Broussists opened the doors to all “workers struggling against their exploiters without distinction of school”. As a “broad party” they adopted the title Socialist Federation of Socialist Workers of France. Suffice to say, the masses did not flock in. Nor did the rival sects. Brousse himself dejectedly evolved in the direction of municipal socialism, piecemeal reformism and a permanent alliance with the Radicals.

There is surely a repeating pattern involved here, especially when we consider the Socialist Labour Party, Socialist Alliance, Scottish Socialist Party, Respect and the equal failure of much more serious “broad party” projects in Europe, such as Rifondazione Comunista and the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste. A repeating pattern that we need to stop repeating ●

Notes

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3. *Socialist Worker* November 20 2004.
4. See *Weekly Worker* July 10 2003.
5. K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 6, New York 1976, p518.
6. *Ibid* p519.
7. K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 7, Moscow 1977, p4.
8. M Desai *Marx’s revenge* London 2004, p106.
9. P Broué *German revolution, 1917-23* Chicago 2006, p83.
10. K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 27, London 1990, p219.
11. K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 49, New York 2001, p266.
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13. www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1891erfurt.html.
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19. P Broué *German revolution, 1917-23* Chicago IL 2006, p17.
20. www.permanentrevolution.net/?view=entry&entry=450.
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23. P Broué *German revolution, 1917-23* Chicago IL 2006, p3.
24. K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 27, London 1990, p227.
25. *Ibid*.
26. *Ibid*.
27. Quoted in P Broué *German revolution, 1917-23* Chicago IL 2006, p18.
28. www.permanentrevolution.net/?view=entry&entry=450.
29. K Marx and F Engels *Selected correspondence* Moscow 1975, p344.
30. www.revolutionary-history.co.uk/otherdodox/Whatnext/POprog.html.
31. K Marx and F Engels *Selected correspondence* Moscow 1975, p332.
32. *Ibid* p344.
33. <http://anticapitalists.org/2013/02/08/the-road-to-a-united-left>.
34. HB Moss *The origins of the French labor movement* Berkeley CA 1980, p108.
35. *Ibid* p112.
36. *Ibid* pp108-09.
37. *Ibid*.

REVIEW

Not a school of strategy

John Riddell (ed) *Toward the united front: proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International 1922* Brill, 2012, pp1310, €200 (paperback also available from Haymarket Books, £39.99)

Last September John Riddell, on his blog, discussing the question of government as it (apparently) faced Syriza in Greece, characterised the Communist International as a “school of socialist strategy”.¹ This would be a pretty good reason for socialists shelling out for the Haymarket edition of *Toward the united front* and ploughing through its 1,300 pages. The book is an excellent one and study of it is valuable. But the idea that the early Comintern is a “school of socialist strategy” is a mistake.

We have to start by recognising that the left needs to understand its own history in order to orient itself for the future. Comrade Riddell’s book is highly valuable to Anglophone readers for this purpose. But what is involved is *not*, contrary to Trotsky’s view in *The Third International after Lenin* and later, a matter of simply picking up the threads where they were dropped after the Fourth Congress of the Comintern (or after Lenin’s death) and carrying on. The situation facing Comintern in the early 1920s was not what the participants – Trotsky included – thought it was; and some of the remedies they adopted were apt to aggravate rather than to cure the problems they faced.

The story of the first four congresses of Comintern is *partly* a story of achievements, and of efforts to tackle problems which still face the left. But it is also a story of fragments of debates which had begun in the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and the Second International before 1914, and in which the ‘great divide’ of 1917-19 led, in the ‘Comintern fragment’ of the debates, to lack of reference to earlier stages of the debate and as a result to some seriously misleading appearances.

And in some respects most importantly, it is also a story of wrong decisions which help to explain the mess the left is in today.

Live issues

This is most clearly a live issue in relation to the present crisis of the Socialist Workers Party. It appears in the efforts of Alex Callinicos to portray the SWP leadership as defenders of ‘Leninism’,² in the false idea of some critics that this ‘Leninism’ can all be blamed on Grigory Zinoviev,³ and in the equally false idea of other critics that the problems addressed by ‘Leninism’ are merely out of date – when their own ideas about the organisation problem are largely reworkings of Eduard Bernstein from before 1914 (‘broad parties’) or of Mikhail Bakunin from around 1870 (‘networks’).⁴ The process of ‘Bolshevisation’ certainly began in the period of the second to fourth congresses of Comintern, and the phenomenon (and some of its causes) can be better understood through reading comrade Riddell’s book, his similar *Workers of the world and oppressed peoples, unite! – proceedings and documents of the second congress, 1920* (1991), and other communist writings of the period.

This is not the only presently live issue involved. Comintern’s policy on the ‘eastern question’ or ‘national and colonial question’, adopted at the second congress and restated at the fourth, is certainly morally superior to what Richard Seymour has



Lenin (front) at Comintern’s First Congress

called *The liberal defence of murder* (2008). But it has proved disastrous for the workers’ movement in many subordinated countries now over 90 years, and in the light of the course of events since 2001, can also now be seen to be a real obstacle to building a long-term serious movement to oppose imperialist war in the imperialist countries.

The slogan of the “workers’ government”, or “workers’ and farmers’ government” adopted at the Fourth Congress was ill-thought-through. Subsequent lefts have been unable to make sense of it under the conditions for which it was intended – of serious crisis of capitalist states. What was missing was a minimum programme which would provide the basis for defining conditions under which communists would be prepared to participate in, or support, governments. Government participation wrecked Rifondazione Comunista in Italy in 2006. The Danish Enhedslisten seems to be on the road to discrediting itself by support for the austerity budget of a ‘social-liberal’ government.⁵ The question (in the event, illusory) of a Syriza-led coalition government in 2012 has been debated within the SWP and among others, for example in comrade Riddell’s blog post cited above.

The idea of ‘transitional demands’, though it originated with the Germans,⁶ was at the Fourth Congress a fudge to deal with Bukharin and his co-thinkers’ opposition to the need for Comintern to adopt a minimum programme.⁷ It has since been licensed among Trotskyists, the only communist trend to adopt it, both a regression to the ‘left economism’ of Ryazanov and (independently) Trotsky in 1904,⁸ and a variety of *sub-minimum* programmes severely politically weaker than the old 1891 Erfurt programme of the SPD.

United front

Comrade Riddell is right to title the volume *Toward the united front*, because this policy turn – begun between the Third and Fourth Congresses – was in a sense the major positive contribution of the Fourth Congress to socialist strategy. But the *interpretation* of the united front policy in post-war Trotskyism, as well as ‘official communism’ and Maoism, has been that of Georgi Dimitrov at the *Seventh Congress* of Comintern,⁹ in which the united front involves *diplomatic* unity with a partial or complete suspension of sharp criticism of coalition partners.¹⁰

This issue relates back to ‘Bolshevisation’: if communist *party*

unity involves the absence of *public* criticism, it becomes impossible to justify to socialist or Labourite workers why *united-front* unity is possible in the presence of sharp criticisms of their leaders.

If, in the face of this problem, the right to criticise and therefore to split is prioritised, the result is ‘third period’ sectarianism; if unity is prioritised over the right to criticise, the result is to make the communists merely bag-carriers for the ‘official lefts’ or whoever else is the target of the unity policy.

In the Respect episode, the SWP displayed both sides of this false choice. A period of public toadying to George Galloway and to ‘radicalising Muslims’ was followed by an abrupt sectarian organisational split, whose public political motivation was obviously complete fiction.

It might be imagined that going back to the early Comintern debates would enable at least the Trotskyists to break with the Dimitrov line. But it was already clear long ago that the Dimitrov/Pierre Frank-Ernest Mandel/Tony Cliff version of the united front was a break from the tactic as envisaged by the early Comintern, from Trotsky’s *First five years of the Communist International* and *Third International after Lenin*, as well as from the *Theses, resolutions and manifestos of the first four congresses of the Communist International* (1980), which are now available on the Marxists Internet Archive.¹¹ So it is unlikely that a new and more detailed dose of the same medicine provided by comrade Riddell will cure this particular sickness.

Difficult

Reviewing editions of primary historical sources is always difficult: a bit like trying to do a book review of a dictionary or encyclopaedia. *Toward the united front* is particularly problematic, because almost ‘all human life is here’. The major discussions included the executive committee report; five years of the Russian Revolution; the capitalist offensive; fascism; the idea of a Comintern programme; trade unions; the ‘eastern question’ and the agrarian question. Among subject discussions, less time was given to youth; blacks; the cooperative movement; women; educational work; the Versailles treaty; workers’ aid; and the reorganisation of the executive. Countries and individual communist parties formally on the agenda included Austria, Yugoslavia, Egypt, France, Spain, Denmark, Italy, Czechoslovakia, Norway; speeches in the subject debates added a good deal

about Germany, and shorter reference to many other countries. Where to begin a review? What to cover and what not?

Comrade Riddell has made available to Anglophone readers an important source for the history of our movement. In addition to the translation, he has provided a useful introduction (pp1-59), valuable explanatory footnotes, a brief chronology, a glossary, biographical notes on participants and individuals referred to in the debates (some of them pretty obscure) and a full bibliography – as well as a highly detailed index of names and subjects. The only possible technical criticism is that, given that the footnotes reference the bibliography Harvard-style (by author and date alone), the fact that the bibliography is subdivided into categories (other editions; related Comintern documents; and so on), rather than simply listed by author and date, sometimes makes it troublesome to chase down the source in the footnote.

Reference libraries should be pressed to buy the Brill hardback. Historians of the workers’ movement should certainly have the Haymarket paperback on their bookshelves as a reference source. That said, a good sense of the politics of the early Comintern for the level of understanding of the history that activists generally need can be obtained from the materials available on MIA. The added details available in *Toward the united front* alter nuances. The nuances and details may be worth pursuing, as comrade Riddell has done in articles on the origins of the united front¹² and on the workers’ government discussion.¹³ But they do not *overthrow* anything fundamental from the understanding of the early Comintern which can be obtained from the more limited materials on MIA.

One gain which undoubtedly can be obtained for activists either from reading through the book from beginning to end, or simply from dipping into individual debates, is the clarity that the Comintern’s congresses were not, at this date, tame, stage-managed affairs, but featured lively and fractious debates. This was, of course, already clear from comrade Riddell’s earlier set of proceedings of the Second Congress.

At some level, we could already have known this from Trotsky’s attacks on the process of bureaucratisation of the Russian party and Comintern. But one might hope that it would come as a bit of a shock to readers used to the highly controlled proceedings of a ‘normal’ SWP conference (or a conference of many other left groups) to read what debate in the early Comintern was actually like. For many SWP cadres, however, I would guess that the response would be the *superiority* of their normal bureaucratically controlled methods to those of the early Comintern. There is a slight hint of this in Ian Birchall’s slightly evasive warning in his review in *International Socialism* that “I remain sceptical as to whether detailed formulations from 1922 can be applied to the world of the 21st century”¹⁴: at one level correct, at another level it slides around the need to make judgments one way or another about the divergences between modern practice and that of the Comintern.

Everything that I have said at the beginning of this article is a body of reasons for reading the book. But not for reading it either on the basis that the Comintern is a guide to socialist strategy, or on the basis that it is merely interesting past experience, albeit at a high level (*à la* comrade Birchall) but for reading it *critically* as part of understanding our history, including aspects where we have gone wrong and still go wrong by clinging onto Comintern decisions.

Even to discuss all the live issues I have raised above (which themselves are no more than examples) *critically* would take more space and time than I have for this article. I select one: the problem of ‘Bolshevisation’ and its relation to the problem of class unity.

Class-political unity

Comrade Riddell’s article on the origins of the united front policy could not begin with the December 1921 Comintern executive committee *Theses* on the united front,¹⁵ but started – in fact – with the First International. But to attach Comintern’s limited united front tactic to the First International is to silently misinterpret both the evolution of Marxist policy on unity before 1914, and the united front tactic itself.

We have to begin in the same place, or rather even earlier: with the famous statement in section 1 of the *Communist manifesto*:

In what relation do the communists stand to the proletarians as a whole? The communists do not form a separate party opposed to the other working class parties [meaning by ‘other working class parties’, as is clarified in section 4, only the Chartists in Britain and their sister organisation, the National Reformers in the US] ... The immediate aim of the communists is the same as that of all other proletarian parties: formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat.

The meaning of “formation of the proletariat into a class” is given, as an objective process, towards the end of section 1: “organisation of the proletarians into a class, and, consequently, into a political party”.¹⁶

In other words, the immediate aim of the communists in the *Communist manifesto* – shared with the [left] Chartists and the National Reformers – is the formation of a *single political party of the proletariat* with the aim of the proletariat taking political power.

This aim of a single *political* organisation of the proletariat – more than just unity in action, but unity in *forming political policy* – was shared by the 1864 *Inaugural address* written by Marx for the First International:

To conquer political power has, therefore, become the great duty of the working classes. They seem to have comprehended this, for in England, Germany, Italy and France there have taken place simultaneous revivals, and simultaneous efforts are being made at the political organisation of the workmen’s party.

One element of success they

possess - numbers; but numbers weigh in the balance only if united by combination and led by knowledge. Past experience has shown how disregard of that bond of brotherhood which ought to exist between the workmen of different countries, and incite them to stand firmly by each other in all their struggles for emancipation, will be chastised by the common discomfiture of their incoherent efforts. This thought prompted the workingmen of different countries assembled on September 28 1864, in public meeting at St Martin's Hall, to found the International Association.

Another conviction swayed that meeting.

If the emancipation of the working classes requires their fraternal concurrence, how are they to fulfil that great mission with a foreign policy in pursuit of criminal designs, playing upon national prejudices, and squandering in piratical wars the people's blood and treasure? It was not the wisdom of the ruling classes, but the heroic resistance to their criminal folly by the working classes of England, that saved the west of Europe from plunging headlong into an infamous crusade for the perpetuation and propagation of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic ...¹⁷

The First International, of course, ended in failure. The Paris Commune and the general council's response drafted by Marx, *The civil war in France*, gave rise to a witch-hunt across Europe; with the Communards, the French component of the International was crushed by repression. The British trade unionists pulled back in response both to this witch-hunt, and to the Reform Act 1867 extending the franchise and the Trade Union Act 1871, which showed that the bourgeois parliamentary parties could offer at least some reforms.

The remaining International was split between the 'Marxists' who moved in 1871-72 to advocate independent working class *electoral* action, and the Bakuninist advocates of *direct* action to - in Mao's much later phrase - be the "spark that lights the prairie fire" for a revolution leading to immediate *abolition* of the state. The direct action initiatives were to be coordinated by a secret network, in Bakunin's phrase the "invisible dictatorship". The 'Marxists' transferred the seat of the general council to New York in the (failed) hope of catching an upswing of the workers' movement in the US. The Bakuninists took the name of the International for their European organisation, but proved to be as unable to maintain it as the 'Marxists'.

Germany

Meanwhile in Germany, the General German Workers' Association (ADAV) was launched in May 1863, with Ferdinand Lassalle as its first president. Its single immediate aim was universal male suffrage, with the ulterior aim of winning state-supported worker cooperatives: the ADAV initially counterposed this policy to support for trade unions.¹⁸ It was, nonetheless, an *independent political party of the working class*, and Marx and Engels celebrated it as such in spite of their criticisms of Lassalle and his politics.

Lassalle was a 'labour monarchist' in two senses. The first was that he thought the working class could cooperate with the conservative statist, Bismarck, against the liberals, as opposed to the line of the Communist League in 1848-50 of cooperating, partially, with the liberals against the monarchical regimes in Germany.

The second was that the constitution of the ADAV provided for 'democratic centralism', in the sense

that its congress elected (democratic) a single president, who had full dictatorial powers between congresses (centralism). This constitutional form was inherited after Lassalle's death in 1864 by his successors as president, including Johann Baptiste von Schweitzer. When the ADAV under Schweitzer began in 1868 to organise trade unions, it replicated this structure in union constitutions: Schweitzer was the general president of the ADAV unions.

Wilhelm Liebknecht supported 1848-style cooperation with the liberals. Nonetheless he joined the ADAV in October 1863, and fought against its Bismarckian orientation with some success until, in June 1865, Bismarck had him deported from Prussia. He moved to Leipzig and was active in workers' organisations founded by liberals together with August Bebel. The result was the Social Democratic Workers Party (SDAP) founded at Eisenach in 1869. In 1870 Liebknecht's and Bebel's refusal to vote for war credits in the Franco-Prussian war gave the SDAP added credibility as uncompromising opponents of the regime: the ADAV backed the war.

In 1875 the SDAP and ADAV fused at Gotha to form the Socialist Workers Party of Germany (SAP). The Gotha unification is today primarily remembered on the left for Marx's *Critique of the Gotha programme*. But its immediate impact was very different. It fused two small organisations - 15,322 mandates from the ADAV and 9,121 from the SDAP - on a compromise political platform, but on the SDAP's conceptions of party organisation and relations with the trade unions: not a single central dictator, but an elaborate scheme of sovereign annual conference, central executive with limited powers, and wide local autonomy; not party-controlled, but organisationally independent trade unions. The unification produced 'take-off', with SAP membership and press circulation doubling in a year and continuing to grow afterwards, and votes growing even under illegality between 1878 and 1890. The SAP was on the road to the mass workers' party that the SPD became.

The SPD and Second International down to 1914 were built on these two lessons of Gotha. The first: that unification, even on an imperfect and imperfectly agreed programme, could produce take-off into a mass party; that 'unity is strength' for socialist political parties as well as for trade unions. The second: that unification and take-off was *possible* by abandoning the centralist organisational conceptions of Lassalle and Schweitzer, and thereby permitting lively and free-ranging debate both within the party and in its public press.

This 'Gotha' model persisted after the publication of the *Critique of the Gotha programme* in 1891 and after the SPD programme was made more 'Marxist' at Erfurt in the same year. It profoundly influenced unifications of the socialists elsewhere in Europe. The slightly modified 'Erfurt' version was the *actual* model on which the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party (RSDWP) and its majorityite (Bolshevik) faction operated down to and beyond October 1917.

It is for this reason that the RSDWP was *not* a general workers' party with no political preconditions, a Labour Party - which the 'liquidators' sought to create in 1908 and after. Like the SPD, it was founded on a short general political programme. But equally, like the SPD, it was characterised by promoting independent trade unions, by wide practical autonomy of the local organisations, and by public internal debate.

Abandonment

The split in the international workers'

movement which resulted from World War I need not, in pure logic, have led to the abandonment of the 'SPD model' of workers' class party unity and party democracy. But in practice it unavoidably did, for a series of reasons.

First, the *German party and trade union right* broke with the model. The 'revisionists' had in a sense already abandoned the idea of an independent workers' party, shared by the Eisenachers and Lassalleans, in favour of that of broader 'left' coalitions. The collapse of the majority of the party left and centre in Germany left them in control. From the beginning of the war they collaborated with the state to enforce the *Burgfrieden* or anti-strike policy, resulting in increasing controls on local organisations. By late 1916 they were unwilling to tolerate growing internal opposition and in January 1917 expelled the group which formed the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD).

Second, *Lenin and Zinoviev* from the outbreak of the war argued for a full split with the right - though the Bolsheviks were not won over to the idea until after autumn 1917. Their conception was clearly not originally of a break-up of the united workers' parties, but rather of clearing out a small group of scabs who had obtained control of the party apparatuses, leaving the 'real' socialists in control of mass parties and the scabs as marginal groups; but it *tended towards* the idea of a smaller, but purer, party.¹⁹

Third, while the Bolsheviks continued to operate with the old model of party unity and democracy down to the civil war, *Russian conditions* in the civil war and after tended to undermine it. The rigging of Soviet elections in order to get the Brest-Litovsk peace through, and effective if incomplete suppression of opposition *parties* from autumn 1918, meant that the Bolsheviks were ruling as a minority. The 1918 'Tsaritsyn affair' and the 'military opposition' in 1919 showed serious practical problems with the traditional local autonomy under war conditions. *Economic* localism and sectionalism had equally disastrous potential. The debate on Trotsky's proposals for the militarisation of labour in 1920-21 threatened to split the party.

Alongside major *economic* concessions to the peasantry, petty bourgeoisie and small capital in the New Economic Policy, the 10th party congress in March 1921 banned factions and adopted the policy of purging party membership, in theory with a view to preventing the *politics* of the petty bourgeoisie finding expression in the party.

Both decisions were carried across to the Comintern in the theses on *The organisational structure of the communist parties* adopted at the Third Congress of Comintern in July 1921.²⁰ It is pretty clear that at this stage what was in question was primarily Russian experience (Lenin commented at the Fourth Congress that the Third Congress text was "too Russian" - p304). For Germany, in spite of the expulsion of Paul Levi for his public attack on the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) and its 1921 'March action' attempt to trigger an insurrection, which the Comintern leadership characterised as scabbing, the leadership was attempting to *win back* both Levi and his supporters through submission to discipline, and similarly to win back the leftist Communist Workers Party of Germany (KAPD).

Western problems

Fourthly, *the problems of the European communist parties* drove towards the abandonment of the old model and toward 'Bolshevisation'. It is this fourth element which is most on view in *Toward the united front* - appearing in passing in a whole series

of references to individual parties rather than in a concentrated form, so that I shall not list all or even many of the relevant page references, though the French case was particularly problematic (pp963-1,017). It is also the element which is commonly ignored by critics of the SWP leadership and which is a live problem in today's workers' movement.

In much of Europe, the new communist parties faced *existing capitalist states with parliamentary regimes*, whether great powers, small clients or dependencies - unlike the old tsarist state and the only 'half-modernised' German Reich and Austro-Hungarian empire, or the *new* and unstable capitalist states which had been created from the overthrow of the last two. Neither pre-1914 Marxist writing on the state nor *State and revolution* equipped them to deal with such regimes.

The capitalist class rules in parliamentary regimes with broad suffrage through a number of mechanisms. Particularly important in day-to-day politics are the duopoly of parties of corrupt 'professional politicians', who can pose radical while out of office but govern in the interests of capital when elected, and the corrupt character of the advertising-funded press and other media.

In the pre-war period, the deputies (MPs), officials and journalists of labour and socialist parties which had been able to obtain significant mass support and electoral representation had already begun to be drawn into this world of corruption; especially the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), which at first adhered to Comintern (down to the split in January 1921) and in France the Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (SFIO), the majority of which voted to join Comintern at the Tours congress in December 1920.

The consequence was that Comintern started out with adherent parties which included significant numbers of people who were either (a) opposed to the split and to the revolutionary perspective, but had remained in the party; or (b) 'celebrity' politicians or journalists or both, entangled in the capitalist class's mechanisms of political corruption, who expected to use their practical autonomy from the party to *continue their relations with various capitals*. The *Twenty-one conditions* of affiliation to Comintern adopted at the Second Congress in 1920 were intended to clear out the first category. They did not do so entirely, and they certainly did not clear out the second category.

'Bolshevisation', as it came to be called later, was an attempt to deal with this problem: an effort to create parties in which the elected representatives, officials and journalists were clearly subordinated to the workers rather than to parliamentary or capitalist cronies. It can already be seen in development in the Fourth Congress discussions of various parties in *Toward the united front*, with precisely this aim. The issue was plainly an urgent one: while the Italian communists could be criticised for sectarianism in relation to the anti-fascist struggle, it is quite clear that the primary responsibility for Mussolini's victory rests on the *refusal* of the 'maximalist' leadership of the PSI, due to its parliamentarism, even to offer to fight in the one-sided civil war the fascists started.

'Bolshevisation' failed to achieve its aim, just as the ban on factions and membership purges spectacularly failed to deal with the problems of petty bourgeois influence, patronage and corruption (*blat*) in the Russian communist party. The bureaucracy which had to enforce these measures turned out to be, if anything, *more* prone to corruption and patronage than the majority of those purged; and

the ban on factions worked *against* accountability of these bureaucrats and of the elected representatives. In effect, it constituted a return to the labour monarchism of Lassalle: expressed in the personality cults of party leaders.

Modern problems

It should be plain that, of the four reasons I have given for the abandonment of party democracy, only two - the idea of the purifying split, and the conditions of the Russian civil war - are irrelevant to the modern far left. The other two - the commitment of the *right* wing of the workers' movement to bureaucratic control, and the problems of capitalist corruption and freelancing by MPs, journalists and officials - are *even greater* problems today than they were in 1922.

However, on these problems it is clear from the subsequent history that Comintern simply got the answer wrong. It does not help to attempt to cast the mantle of 1917 over this mistake, as Alex Callinicos does; or to blame Grigory Zinoviev for wrong decisions to which Lenin and Trotsky were parties, as several authors do; or to suggest that we start again on a Bakuninist ('network') or Bernsteinist ('broad party') basis. Bakuninism has failed over the last 140 years as repeatedly as 'Leninism'; the 'broad party' idea rests on the illusion that the official labour bureaucrats who (for example) purged Socialist Party militants in Unison, are somehow *more* democratic than the leaders of far-left sects. Our starting point - necessarily, not our finishing point - has to be the partyism which Bolshevism, *before* 'Bolshevisation' and 'Leninism', inherited from the SPD ●

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Notes

1. <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2012/09/03/the-comintern-as-a-school-of-socialist-strategy>.
2. A Callinicos, 'Is Leninism finished?' *Socialist Review* January 2013.
3. <http://international-socialismuk.blogspot.co.uk/2013/01/is-zinovievism-finished-reply-to-alex.html>.
4. Refreshed Bernsteinism: see Owen Jones in *The Independent* January 20, criticised by Stan Keable in *Weekly Worker* February 7. Refreshed Bakuninism: eg, Pham Binh, "'Leninism' meets the 21st century", www.thenorthstar.info/?p=4691.
5. M Voss, 'A major mistake by the Red-Green Alliance': www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2820.
6. For Thalheimer's contributions in the programme debate see p511ff.
7. In *Toward the united front*, see introduction pp33-36; debate at 479-527; statement of the Russian delegation and resolution at pp631-32; Lenin's draft, *CW* Vol 42, pp427-28.
8. Ryazanov: discussed in R Larsson *Theories of revolution* (1970). Trotsky: *Our political tasks* (1904): www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1904/tasks/ch03.htm.
9. www.marxists.org/reference/archive/dimitrov/works/1935/08_02.htm#s7.
10. Or, put another way, that of Raymond Molinier, Pierre Frank and others, who opposed Trotsky on this issue in the 1930s.
11. L. Trotsky *First five years of the Communist International*: www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/fyici-1/index.htm; A Adler (ed) *Theses, resolutions ...* London 1980, available in this or other texts at www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/index.htm. Cf also Lenin's speech at the 2nd Congress on affiliation to the Labour Party: www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jul/x03.htm#fw6.
12. J Riddell, 'The origins of the united front policy' *Socialist Review* April 2011.
13. <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2011/08/14/the-comintern%E2%80%99s-unknown-decision-on-workers%E2%80%99-governments/>; <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2012/01/01/a-workers-government-as-a-step-toward-socialism>.
14. I Birchall, 'Grappling with the united front' *Socialist Review* June 2012.
15. *Toward the united front*, pp1164-1173.
16. Section references are to www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/index.htm.
17. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/10/27.htm.
18. What follows uses mainly - in a very simplified form - RH Dominick III *Wilhelm Liebknecht and the founding of the German Social Democratic Party* Chapel Hill 1982.
19. M Macnair *Revolutionary strategy* London 2008, chapter 6.
20. www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/3rd-congress/organisation/index.htm.

THE LEFT

Not another sinister sect

The way the left organises is a nonsense, argues Nick Wrack. This is an edited version of his speech at the February 9 'Socialist Organisation and Democracy' event in Manchester

The nature of this onslaught against ordinary working class people, in this country and beyond, is forcing families, individuals, groups of friends - whether it is in the pub, the kitchen or around the TV when the news is on - to consider what they can do about the avalanche of attacks that is eroding everything they had come to expect in their life.

I think that is the starting point for the left, whatever tradition we come from, whether it is Marxist, socialist, anarchist, autonomist - we have a shared goal and a shared objective and that is to try and forge some kind of united response to the crisis we are facing and give people a glimpse of confidence, of hope, about how we can resist.

I work as a barrister and over the last year or so I have been lucky enough to represent students who were arrested and prosecuted for their participation in the anti-fees demonstrations of 2010. Those young people took to the streets to protest against the trebling of the fees. It reminds me of when I was a student. Having left school in Salford at the age of 18, I went to university and I got a full grant to do my undergraduate and postgraduate degrees and then to see me through my professional qualifications. Five years' tuition all paid for.

That was what my generation came to expect. And, right through the 1970s and beyond, most people thought that their children would grow up in a society where they would be better off than their parents had been; that they would not have to go through the hell, the drudgery, the hardship that their grandparents had in order to get the basic things of life.

But what we have seen over the last five or six years in particular is a situation where everything that people came to expect is being smashed up. The welfare state in this country and in all other advanced capitalist countries is being dismantled. Why? Because we are facing a crisis not just of neoliberalism, not just of the latest particular brand or variant of capitalism, but a profound crisis of the system itself. In a way the ridiculous debate between David Cameron and Ed Miliband about who is going to make capitalism more humane, more decent, more responsible, is a response to the questioning of that system.

Take the meat crisis - could there be a better encapsulation of what capitalism is about? They are prepared to disguise what they sell us. Personally, if I know I am buying 100% horse meat without harmful or veterinary drugs, then I am prepared to eat it. But I want to be in control of what I eat. Yet actually the adulteration of food has been at the heart of capitalism since its inception. Go back and read Upton Sinclair's fantastic book, *The jungle*. Read Lenin. He wrote an article on the adulteration of the meat trade in Russia before World War I - meat that had been condemned was being passed off as fit to eat. It happens again and again because the people who run this society are not interested in the health, well-being and living standard of ordinary people, but instead with lining their own pockets and making profit.

Now for most people that is a very simple concept to comprehend. The idea that there are those who exist to make a profit and they do so at our expense is easy to grasp. According to a recent opinion poll, 60% of the



Secret sects: no use to a working class under attack

population of Britain identify as working class. That is quite significant.

Huge gap

But what has been the response from the left, from working class organisations, to this crisis? There is a huge gap between the reality and the necessity. Why is it so difficult for the left, for the organised workers' movement, to respond and to pose an alternative? That surely is the issue we are facing.

I do not particularly want to discuss the crisis in the Socialist Workers Party, or the particular ways of organising preferred by the various left groups. I think it is better to start with what we would expect - and by all means use historical examples to inform, help or guide us. That does not mean regarding such examples as some kind of biblical text, or engaging in scholastic arguments about what Lenin really meant on this or that question.

However, I have read Lars T Lih and I think he has put the correct gloss on what Lenin and the Bolsheviks really did and what they were really trying to achieve. What they were trying to achieve was a replication in Russia of what they saw in Germany with the Social Democratic Party, which was a mass party of the working class, as the Bolsheviks were themselves to become. Many of the errors of the far left arise from a complete misconception of what the Bolsheviks were, how they organised, what they achieved. It is necessary to understand the real Bolshevik programme and, more fundamentally, bring it up to date, because we are not living in Russia in 1917 and we do not have a mass peasantry, feudal remnants and so on.

We are living in an advanced capitalist society, where people have access to Twitter, to Facebook, to all sorts of social media, where they are used to having discussions in the open. The idea that you can suppress debate and discussion, hide it, pretend it is not going on - 'Don't tell the children: they won't be able to understand it; only the central committee can cope with it' - is just complete nonsense. It never happened in the past and it should not be happening now. And it results from a false concept of how we have to change society.

So let us pose that question: who is going to change society? Is it going to be an organisation of 1,000 or 2,000 people led by a central committee? No. Is it going to be a tightly-knit party regime - what the revolutionary left generally calls 'democratic centralism'

(although in reality it is *bureaucratic centralism*) - devoted to protecting its own programme and theoretical ideas from deviations, in order to justify this tight, disciplined organisation that is kept small, but pure? And then, when a revolutionary situation arises with the rising tide of working class struggle, this organisation (which may even have 10,000 members by this point) will ride the surf onto the beach, with the central committee at the front of the surfboard. Yes, it is complete nonsense!

In order to affect the changes in society that we want, first of all we will have to win the argument with working class people. We will have to persuade them that society is profoundly broken, it cannot be made to work in their interests, it can only work in the interests of a tiny minority. I think that is an argument which is easily made, but socialist ideas, for all sorts of reasons, have been pushed back. The reformist, social democratic organisations of the working class have abandoned even the most tenuous links to the ideas of a socialist society. That is why the left finds itself marginalised, fractured, atomised. We need to find a way of overcoming that.

But who is going to change society? It is not going to be an elite, a bureaucracy or a minority of people elected into parliament. The change in society that we need has to be carried out by the majority. The majority, who collectively say, 'We are not going to put up with the situation where our meat is adulterated, and our children are poisoned, and our kids are deprived of an education, and pensioners cannot get a decent standard of living. We're not going to put up with any of it.' And they understand the necessity of changing root and branch the whole way that society is organised, and that the only way this can be achieved is if they themselves actively carry out that change.

Mass party

So in my opinion the concept that seems to proliferate on the left of a minority party using the development of struggle to somehow ride to the front is completely misconceived. What we need, in my opinion, is a *mass party*. A mass party of the working class.

What does that mean? We need to persuade, let us say, 30 million people in Britain that an alternative to capitalism is necessary; that the alternative is socialism - the common ownership of the means of production, production for need,

not for profit. We need to persuade 30 million people that they have the collective power to do that, that it cannot be achieved overnight and that it cannot be achieved on the basis of small revolutionary sects, even if they call themselves parties. Surely it has to be an organisation that penetrates every single aspect of working class life - politics, culture, media, football, chess ... Those ideas have to become common currency for the bulk of people in our society, who must then be organised. Now that does not mean 'discipline' in the sense of 'You must do this, you must do that'. But people as self-thinking socialists who organise collectively to change society, to take power.

So how do we go from today, where the left is atomised, fragmented, split, to even the beginnings of the possibility of influencing people? We need a massive army of persuaders - or advocates, as I would be described in court. In the English civil war in the 17th century the revolutionary army elected agitators who went and spoke on behalf of the ordinary soldiers about what kind of society they wanted. Cromwell said he wanted a society where only the owners of land could vote, and the agitators said they wanted a society where everyone can vote. We need agitators, persuaders, activists, organising together to win other people to build that army.

The question of how you organise should flow from that. The left is obsessed with what they falsely call 'democratic centralism'. Is that what someone who joins an organisation that aims to change the world should expect? Surely the party should *anticipate* that new world. The new world that we are struggling for surely is going to be democratic. It must be a democratic party, where you have the right to speak, the right to dissent, the right to publicise your own views and so on. Now, of course, we must organise around a programme, around common activity. But that does not mean that debate and discussion must be stifled, that people cannot write articles, cannot get together and discuss in the pub or on Facebook on pain of expulsion.

Whenever you open your newspaper you read about someone in one of the rotten, rightwing,

establishment parties dissenting from their leadership. When Maria Hutchings, the Tory candidate for the February 28 Eastleigh by-election, was asked on television what she thought of David Cameron's position on Europe, she said, "I disagree with it." What does she think of David Cameron on gay marriage? "I disagree with him." So the *Tories* can select a representative who openly disagrees with the party leader and prime minister, but the revolutionary left tries to win people in the working class with, 'Join us, but you'd better not say anything the leadership disagrees with'. You cannot get past the first step if you organise on that basis.

Probably most of us in the Independent Socialist Network are Marxists, but we are not in any of the organised groups precisely because we previously were in such groups and do not want to experience that again. But I still work closely with people in the SWP, people in the Socialist Party, people in the Communist Party of Great Britain, people in all the other groups. I have no problem with working with those groups, so long as you can have a debate and act together. But we need a project to bring people together in an organised way around a common programme - obviously that cannot be achieved overnight: it has to be based on serious, determined discussion.

I am sure I am not the only one who has been told, 'You talk about a communist society, where everyone collaborates and organises together. But it's not going to happen, is it? What about human nature?' My answer to that is that human nature is socially and historically determined and can change over time. But then they say, 'You communists can't even work together in the here and now, so why is it going to happen in the future?'

That is why we have to demonstrate through our own activity and our own work that we have a sense of proportion, a sense of perspective. It is not going to happen overnight; rather it is a long-term project. But we must begin the task now ●

Nick Wrack's speech can be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=uJ5j6zPcEuU.

Appeal from the editor

As we stated in last week's paper, this publication never knowingly publishes falsehoods, and in the event of inaccuracies our open letters pages are available - in particular to activists involved in the working class movement - for immediate rebuttal and/or retraction.

As the reader will doubtless be aware, on February 7 we carried a carefully worded apology for an article we published back in January 2012. Though negotiations are ongoing, we will certainly have to pay substantial costs. Besides that we have agreed to pay £1,000 in damages. Legal costs in such cases, even when they do not go to court, are exceptionally high and will almost certainly be around £10,000 (though the final figure has not yet been determined).

So we are urgently appealing

to readers to help us out of this huge crisis for us. I am pleased to say that this has already met with a very generous response - no less than £970 has already been received, thanks to just six comrades: YM (£500), TB (£200), EO and PM (£100 each), MM (£50) and CH (£20).

We are not expecting everybody to come up with large sums, but, as they say, every little helps. Please send your contributions, marked 'Legal appeal', to *Weekly Worker*, BCM Box 928, London WC1N 3XX. Alternatively, transfer your donation directly to our account (sort code: 30-99-64; account: 00744310) or via our website using PayPal. Please ensure you inform us of the purpose of the transfer ●

Peter Manson

FILM

Abolition and emancipation

Steven Spielberg (director) **Lincoln**

Quentin Tarantino (director) **Django unchained**

Here are two films set at the time of slavery in American history. How do they speak to us about that heritage? Which should we recommend: the one with the 'fastest gun in the south' superhero, who whips and shoots and blows up his opponents, white and black, or the one with the political elite working patiently but resolutely for the emancipation of a people?

Lincoln, directed by Steven Spielberg, is a biopic which covers only a small part of the president's life: the passing of the 13th amendment to the US constitution, banning slavery and "involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime". This concentration on the passing of the amendment, even as the war between the states continues, means that much of the film's early dialogue is taken up with exposition - mostly by Abraham Lincoln (Daniel Day-Lewis) about how he got to this point, often speaking uninterruptedly. In this way, we are left in no doubt as to his commitment to getting the thing done. This does though make for scenes without much tension, while we try to sort who is who in a forest of names.

Concentrating on an episode, though an important one to say the least, means other nuances are lost. We lose Lincoln, the compromiser with the confederacy early in his presidency, and the war leader set on conserving the union. The film therefore becomes effectively the portrait of one man, this single idea, what he said to his allies and how he handled his opponents - mainly within dark rooms against the sombre tones of a war long fought and not yet over.

The script by Tony Kushner gives us a president wearied by the struggle, but full of humour and committed to seeing it through, while Sally Field's Mary Lincoln personalises things with her worries that their eldest son will die in the war before the job is done. This is not then the Abraham Lincoln who denied the confederate states the right to leave the union, while being willing to permit slavery in those states alone; who suspended *habeas corpus*, but freed the slaves when the war was being lost - so officially inventing 'total war', where every white southerner could be the enemy. In fact recent research shows that even during the famous destructive march of union general William Sherman, only two percent of slaves in Georgia and South Carolina were freed from the land.

Then again, even after Lincoln's assassination - alluded to here - efforts were made to involve black people in southern politics. But 'reconstruction', as it was called, was short-lived and gave rise to a fear of black supremacy among most whites and the formation of the Ku Klux Klan. The north and the 'feds', meanwhile, left those states to their own

devices and concentrated on building capitalism with the 'free labour' of the urban poor and old-world immigrants.

All the characters so far mentioned are of course white. In *Lincoln*, black characters merely wait. They work as servants and wait, they wait in union uniform, they wait in the gallery of the House of Representatives while the vote is being taken.

This is historically accurate as far as it goes - no-one of colour in Congress then. There is not time though even to mention black activists, like Frederick Douglass, who was involved in abolitionism and the author of a mind-expanding narrative of his own slavery and escape. Of course, this invisibility or inactivity of black characters is very much in keeping with the tradition of US fiction, as pointed out by writers like Toni Morrison, where black people hardly do anything off their own backs. They exhibit a lack of human initiative you could call slavish.

In Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), the book from "all modern American literature comes", according to Ernest Hemingway, Jim is a slave who is imprisoned after doing a runner. His young white friends, Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, devise an elaborate scheme to free him, one inspired by European adventure books. Because of Tom's interest in grand gestures and daring literary rescues, Jim suffers all kinds of unnecessary humiliations and delays. Eventually though, he is freed. Twain may well be sending up European books, but Jim is a character who goes along with the complications because, as narrator Huck says, "he allowed we was white folks and knowed better than him" (chapter 36).

(Twain later redeemed himself by producing in 1894 an anti-racist novel, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, also set in the same pre-civil war period as *Huckleberry Finn*.)

In *Lincoln*, the 'escape' - the session when the vote is taken - is undoubtedly the best sequence, full of suspense after the ponderous manoeuvring of the build-up. Spielberg uses all his skill in close-up and climax to persuade us of the centrality of this question: which way will particular white men finally vote?

Day-Lewis gives Lincoln a firm but weary human presence, portraying a slow, moving dignity, but he can still play the Spielberg-approved father and occupy the time waiting for the

vote with his younger son. The president also pulls strings, commands his subordinates to press on and tells them a big lie to reach the goal. He continues the war in order to win time for the amendment to pass.

The whole film may indeed be an attempt to show current Republicans that a president from their party can effect changes that improve people's lives. But what if the Tea Party faction is not impressed by 'big government' under anyone's control? The filmmakers may also have thought that they could be giving advice to the current president. But what message would Barack Obama take from it? To stand firm in continuing a war until a principle is vindicated? How does that apply to ongoing interventions? Where is the movie that says Washington should not be sending soldiers to fight those classed as evil-doers?

Above all, perhaps the message is do things calmly, patiently. Obama himself has been told never to seem angry - the fear of black initiative is still there.

Individual emancipation

Django unchained is a different picture of history - not fact, but a challenging fiction; and not about anger either, but about purpose. Director-writer Quentin Tarantino is known for his fan-interest in all kinds of movies, and here, in its imagery and narrative, his latest work manages to contest many past views of race relations, especially as presented in the western.

To start with, Django (Jamie Foxx) is a shivering, back-scarred slave on his way to being sold in the deep south. He encounters a German bounty-hunter, Dr King Schultz (Christoph Waltz), who needs Django for his ability to identify particular

quarry. They join up, like Huck and Jim, and in the course of a winter (buffaloes in the snow, courtesy of John Ford's *The searchers*), Django helps Schultz in his business, while Schultz teaches the slave to be a confident shot. Humour and irony are everywhere. When Django rides into a small town with Schulz, the townsfolk are appalled: an American of African heritage on a horse. They would not have been more hostile if he had just made a heavy rap record.

In time, Schultz finds himself moved by Django's story of a wife still being held in slavery. She (Kerry Washington) turns out to have a German name, Broomhilda, and speaks the language too. Schultz agrees to assist Django in emancipating Broomhilda from the plantation. Of course, democratic Germans must stick together against American bigots! No doubt the echoes are deliberate of Wagner's *Ring* opera cycle, where the gods set over us are destroyed. The Brünnhilde in that, though, had a bigger role in the reckoning than here. Though the sun continues to beat down, the tone becomes grimmer. The plantation, with all its horrors, keeps the film from seeming over-long.

Unlike westerns such as *The wild bunch*, the shootout is not relentless. Django even has to surrender at one point. When it begins again, you can query the excess - it is Tarantino, after all - but not the guilt of those who get shot. There is other violent imagery in the film. At one point Django is hung upside down naked and threatened with castration.

Tarantino gives us pictures rarely if ever seen in America film. When Schultz and Django arrive at the centre of the plantation, they face a large white mansion with porticos and field hands all around. So far, so *Gone with the wind*. But on the lawn there is a cast-iron door in the ground, under which is a 'hot box' reserved for runaways. This is where Broomhilda is first seen, also naked. Django puts his hand on his gun, but pauses: he is not one to jump rashly into action. He and Schultz have an alliance and a plan.

Django unchained is Tarantino's most considered and pointed film so far. Schulz, the German, uses intelligence and the law as well as a gun, and Django is a gunslinger who is not defending a town, but destroying a hellhole.

Not all Germans-speakers are evil, or white; not all Americans are role-models or outlaws. This is the writer-director's first film about a *society*, not just a

shootout ●
Mike Belbin

What we fight for

■ Without organisation the working class is nothing; with the highest form of organisation it is everything.

■ 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 should 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'.

■ 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.

■ The capitalist class will never willingly allow their wealth and power to be taken away by a parliamentary vote.

■ 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.

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Lincoln active, slaves passive

weekly worker

**Jesus was
a Jewish
Spartacus, not
first Christian**

Keeping up with modern world

Whoever gets the top job in the Vatican, Eddie Ford strongly suspects that he will not be in any way progressive

Taking almost everyone by surprise, on February 11 pope Benedict XVI (aka Joseph Ratzinger) announced that he was resigning with effect from February 28. He has become the first pope to do so since Gregory XII in 1415.

Fairly inevitably, the news has disturbed some. The more superstitiously inclined attributed great significance to the fact that a lightning bolt struck the top of St Peter's Basilica just hours after the surprise news. Of course, given that the Vatican bureaucracy is a "palace of gossiping eunuchs", as one papal historian described it, there have been mutterings of disapproval in some quarters about the nature of Ratzinger's departure. He should have soldiered on to the bitter end, just like his predecessor and co-thinker, John Paul II (aka Karol Józef Wojtyła).

Given the unprecedented nature of Ratzinger's move, at least in modern times, no-one appears to know at the moment what his exact post-papacy honorific should be - there are no canon law provisions regarding the statute, prerogatives or titles for a retired pope. In the meantime, Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi has said he expects a new pope to be in place by March 31 - although no date has yet been set for the secret conclave to elect a new leader of the world's 1.3 billion Catholics.

Secret elections

Papal elections are highly competitive. The prospective candidates have about two weeks to forge alliances and do deals, and senior cardinals who themselves have little chance of winning may still be able to exert enough influence or prestige to get their favoured man in the papal chair - and a man it always is and always will be, god willing. The bizarre, arcane and secretive rituals (even if we now know about most or all of them) that attend the election are like something straight out of Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast*.

Popes are chosen by the college of cardinals, the church's most senior officials - who in turn are appointed by the pope and usually ordained bishops (a bit like the way the Socialist Workers Party's central committee is elected). So 67 of the current cardinal-electors were appointed by Benedict XVI, and 50 by John Paul II. During the conclave, cardinals must reside within the walls of the Vatican and are not permitted any contact with the outside world - or so the theory goes. However, it is not entirely impossible that today's cardinals - though doubtlessly guided by the holy spirit in all their deliberations - may have access to more modern forms of communication. The dreadful encroachment of the secular world.

The cardinals, as it so happens, do not have to choose one of their own number for pope. Notionally, any baptised male Catholic can be elected - even you reading this. But don't get your hopes up. Anyone can become pope in the same way that anyone can become US president - it just happens

every time to be a very wealthy and/or extremely well-connected individual. Official church tradition, and more importantly *Realpolitik*, dictates that they will give the job to a senior cardinal - anarchy and mayhem, if not ecclesiastical revolution, would certainly ensue if anything else was allowed to happen.

Before the voting begins in the Sistine Chapel, the entire area is checked by security experts to ensure there are no hidden microphones or cameras. Furthermore, all the staff and officials have to swear an oath promising to observe perpetual secrecy and undertake not to use sound or video recording equipment. Just about the most dreadful form of punishment conceivable hangs over the heads of anyone tempted to break this silence - ie, *excommunication*. Again, this writer is reminded of the SWP.

The entire election process can sometimes go on for weeks or months - it has not been unknown for cardinals to die during a conclave. Therefore two doctors are allowed in, as well as priests, who are able to hear confessions in various languages from the cardinals and housekeeping staff. If after three days of intense balloting and politicking nobody has gained the required two-thirds majority, voting is suspended for a maximum of one day to allow a much needed pause for prayer, informal discussion and a "brief spiritual exhortation" by the senior cardinal in the order of deacons - pull your finger out, guys.

Eventually, deaths aside, a scrutineer calls out the names of those cardinals who have received votes and pierces each paper with a needle - placing all the ballots on a single thread. The ballot papers are then burned, which traditionally produces the smoke visible to onlookers outside announcing the completion of the election. Damp straw was once added to the stove to turn the smoke black, but this was found to be very unreliable, so now a dye is used to

avoid any confusion. Keeping up with the modern world.

Naturally, there are numerous runners and riders for the papal vacancy. Possible bookies' favourite is cardinal Angelo Scola, aged 71, the most prominent Italian candidate and a conservative who has been close to the last two popes, personally and theologically. Then again, his intimate ideological proximity to Ratzinger might in the end actually count against him - especially bearing in mind his unwise remarks in 2010 at the height of sex abuse allegations against the church, when he called the media's attacks on the pope an "iniquitous humiliation". Foot in mouth disease.

Then there is Odilo Scherer, 63, the archbishop of Sao Paulo - making him head of the largest diocese in the world's largest Catholic country, Brazil. Not a nobody then. Many see him as a compromise candidate who could satisfy both European and Latin American congregations, though admittedly he does have a black mark for failing to reverse the seemingly inexorable decline of Catholicism in Latin America.

As for Peter Turkson from Ghana, he is the most talked about candidate for obvious reasons. The 64-year-old, a whippersnapper by Vatican standards, is the 'relator', or general secretary, of the Synod for Africa. He has also served as head of the Vatican's council for justice and peace, which in 2011 released a document denouncing the "idolatry of the market" and "neoliberal thinking". Instead, like good sheep, we are presumably meant to return to the fold of the only proper authority - the supernatural creator of the universe and the institution on this sinful mortal coil that reflects his divine wishes, the Catholic church.

Nevertheless, there is the possibility that we will shortly have a black pope as well as a black US president. A development that would bring joy for some, whilst leaving others aghast.

Legacy

When John Paul II died in 2005 to near universal mourning, the brainless Bono rhapsodised about him being the "first funky pope". Well, he was not and neither was Ratzinger - the former head of the congregation of the doctrine of the faith: ie, boss of the inquisition.

Rather, Ratzinger represented a *continuation* of John Paul II and his noxious legacy - the Joseph and Karol double act. John Paul II doggedly pursued a reactionary, counterrevolutionary, pro-American and pro-imperialist agenda. Prior to his reign, particularly with Vatican II (1962-65), sections of the church hierarchy had decided that peaceful coexistence with the 'socialist world' was the only option - after all, the Soviet Union was clearly here to stay. No need to rock the boat. But, hailing from 'socialist Poland', John Paul II knew better than most that bureaucratic socialism was doomed. Hence he played his part in the downfall of 'official communism' - channelling CIA money into Solidarność, going on the ideological offensive, and so on. In that way, he was god's cold-war warrior, and played his hand well.

Such theological and ideological nimbleness fits into a general pattern. Communists are the first to acknowledge that the Catholic church - contrary to what some might think - is an exceedingly canny institution, albeit in a totally reactionary way. How else has it managed to survive so long? It is very aware of history and knows when to change. After the collapse of the western Roman empire it successfully adapted to feudalism. Then with the rise of capitalism, to which it was initially resistant - if not downright hostile - it could see when it had to change horses. The church even knew how to respond to the emerging working class movement, with its promotion from the 1870s onwards of social Catholicism as an explicit alternative to social democracy.

Even if under radically different circumstances, Ratzinger was a cold-war warrior too. His encyclical letter issued in 1984 made that crystal-clear. It was primarily targeted at liberation theologians in Latin America, even if many of them took a while to realise that. They preached that oppression is sinful, that wealth should be distributed to the masses, etc. Ratzinger was having none of this, so brought the whole weight of the Catholic hierarchy down on the heads of these turbulent theologians with this edict. Various bishops were sacked or purged. Threats were made. No more books on liberation theology, no more community-level organisations or people's churches. Let alone doing a Camilo Torres, who attempted to reconcile Marxism and Catholicism by joining leftwing guerrillas, eventually being made into an 'official' martyr by the Colombian National Liberation Army.

In the same encyclical, Ratzinger wrote a passage that all but summed up the grotesquely reactionary nature of the Catholic church. For the departing pope, Christianity "did not bring a message of social revolution like that of the ill-fated Spartacus, whose struggle led to so much bloodshed". "Jesus was not Spartacus," Ratzinger continued - he was "not engaged in a fight for political liberation".

It would be the height of obscenity to posit any sort of line of continuity between the apocalyptic communism of the revolutionary Jewish Galilean, Jesus, and the wretched anti-revolutionism espoused by Joseph Ratzinger. And we have no reason to think that his successor will be fundamentally different. In reality, official Christianity itself stands in direct antithesis to everything Jesus and his early followers struggled and fought for - to forcefully overthrow a brutal, oppressive occupation and turn the world upside-down ●

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