

# weekly worker



**Nick Wrack: how can we  
supersede the left sects  
and build a mass party?**

- No-platforming the SWP
- Alexandra Kollantai
- Italy's new coalition
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Towards a Communist Party of the European Union

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# A reactionary bigot of the first order



**Five Pounds**

*Winston S. Churchill*  
"I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat"



# LETTERS



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

## Left Unity

The first meeting of all those in Sheffield with an interest in working under the banner of the Left Unity campaign saw 24 people gather in the upstairs of the Red Deer pub. The vast majority were made up of the usual suspects, with 18 of those present self-declaring as revolutionaries or Marxists of one variety or another.

These revolutionaries were a diverse bunch, with a couple of reps each from the Alliance for Workers' Liberty and CPGB, a member of Socialist Resistance, a young Workers Power comrade, a couple of ex-members of the recently deceased Permanent Revolution and a fair number of self-declared "former members of the Socialist Workers Party" - amongst them the former local organiser, Ged Colgan.

There were also six comrades from Sheffield Revolutionary Socialists (RevSoc), the successor group to the local Socialist Worker Student Society, which all but disbanded in the aftermath of the Martin Smith case. Some of the young ex-SWPs are now members of the International Socialist Network and there is a debate going on within RevSoc as to whether it should explicitly become part of ISN or simply remain a 'united front' of leftwing students.

In fact, a few RevSoc comrades have remained members of the SWP. As one recent (longstanding) ex-SWP comrade present told us, this degree of latitude is absolutely unprecedented. Such involvement in a rival organisation would have been an expellable offence in the SWP just a few months ago. Now it seems the leadership is incapable of even dealing with such 'open' rebellion. The obvious conclusion is the one that the former SWP comrade drew when chatting to us in the pub after the meeting: the SWP apparatus remains paralysed, unable to engage in further splits or purges, because the result would weaken the organisation even more. Consequently, they are forced to tolerate the remaining elements of the opposition. The 'enemy within', as it were, is now thinking about splitting itself, according to the comrade. A large number of former members of the In Defence of Our Party faction are said to be very close to leaving the SWP, probably in order to join ISN.

Not surprisingly though, the old method of doing things 'SWP style' is still deeply engrained in the recently departed members. With the support of Phil Ward of Socialist Resistance, the meeting started in a rather mundane fashion, with former SWP members somewhat taking charge of the discussion in order to exclusively focus on organisational matters. The idea was proposed that we elect a secretary and a treasurer, that Left Unity Sheffield ought to focus on "going out into the real world" in order to campaign "in the community" and doing leafleting, as opposed to sitting in "smoke-filled rooms talking to ourselves". Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

There was initially an evasiveness about wanting to confront exactly what Left Unity is for, what the political basis of any activity should be or why previous left unity projects did not succeed. Phil Ward even went so far as to claim that there is no point rummaging through the past. After all, this Sheffield gathering was totally "uncharacteristic" of the "much broader" turnout at Left Unity events elsewhere. "Today's meeting is much narrower than other meetings we hear about. If today's turnout is

replicated nationally, Left Unity will be a failure."

The solution lies "out there", in the millions of people fed up by Labour - and there's a truth to that. But how do we connect with these people? By pretending that we're not overwhelmingly made up of Marxists? By pretending that the answer lies in building another Labour Party? In other words, by repeating the mistakes the left has made in the Socialist Labour Party, the Socialist Alliance, Respect, etc (albeit on a lower and lower political level)?

The discussion was diverted from these apolitical lines by interventions from the AWL's Gemma Short and comrades of the Marxist Discussion Group (in which CPGB members participate). Andrew Smith (ex-PR) made the point that the state of the existing far left is a disaster and that we should be seeking to ask why this is. Given that Left Unity was bringing different parts of the left together, now was the perfect time to discuss politics with each other. He added that "we don't want to have another organisation just for the sake of it. We need to clarify what Left Unity actually is". He proposed that a 'festival of ideas' or some other political event should be the first task for the group in order to begin a process of debate. Michael Copestake (CPGB) echoed this point, stating that we are bound to "constantly repeat our mistakes and failures" if we don't learn from the past.

PCS activist and *Weekly Worker* supporter Lee Rock stated that, far from politics being a threat to 'activity', giving such activity a proper basis by rooting it in our Marxist understanding of politics was in fact the best way to prevent demoralisation. By contrast, those who engage in activism in an apolitical way are more prone to demoralisation when things go wrong, as they cannot place events in a wider political understanding and see that their activity forms part of a coherent strategy. 'Discussion' and 'activity' are mutually complementary, he said.

As a result of these interventions, it was decided that the first public event to be put on by Left Unity should be to openly contest and clarify what exactly Left Unity should be, rather than purely dealing with organisational matters or putting on a day of activism. In tandem with such a launch event, there will be open political debates around contested political issues and the purpose of Left Unity. It was decided that the group is therefore unable to send "delegates" to the May 11 national LU gathering in London, but that ex-SWP member Chris Hill and CPGB member Tina Becker would attend as "volunteers".

The SWP and Socialist Party so far seem to be keeping their distance from Left Unity. Should the organisation take off, this will surely change quickly. While no doubt a fair number of participants in the Red Deer would not welcome such a development, the regroupment of the existing left along principled, democratic and openly Marxist lines would be a highly welcome and necessary move in order to build the alternative we need.

With all these caveats, Left Unity seems to be a forum where Marxists can (currently) push the idea that the left must rethink its decades of failure (of which Left Unity is in fact symptomatic) and regroup on the politics that comrades profess to have: the politics of Marxism.

**Tina Becker and Michael Copestake**  
Sheffield

## Dicey

I would take issue with some of the points Arthur Bough has raised in his letter last week (April 25). Some

of it reminds me of a craps player throwing dice on the board and hoping for the correct pair to show up to give him a win.

The big battle that kept the Japanese to within the borders of Manchuria did not take place in 1941; it took place in 1939. This is where the soon-to-be commander of the Red Army, from the Battle of Moscow to the occupation of Berlin, Georgi Zhukov, made his name after avoiding the grotesque purge of the Red Army but a few years before. Zhukov bloodied the Chinese puppet army of the Japanese colony of 'Manchukuo' and indeed was the largest tank battle *up until that time*. Around 1,500 tanks were involved on the Red Army side, maybe a third as many on the Japanese side.

The battle took place as Molotov sat down with Nazi negotiator Ribbentrop in Moscow to sign the infamous pact that gave far more breathing room to the Germans than to the Russians (an arguable point, but I won't go into that here). But the Japanese got the word that they would not be supported by the Germans in their plan to seize Siberia from the USSR.

Second roll of the dice. Arthur states: "After 1939, Germany, as the world's most advanced military-economic power, had rolled over western Europe and defeated Britain in every encounter. Britain was penned up and probably only survived because Hitler held out hopes of a peace deal with Halifax." Penned up it was, but the use of "probably" means that Arthur needs to hit the books again to read up on this.

Sure, Hitler had no serious plans to actually occupy Britain. He wanted a peace deal, to defeat the Brits militarily, get a few bases, put the Belfast and Clydesdale shipyards to work for the Kriegsmarine. And the hope for a 'peace' on German terms was certainly why he didn't wipe out the British expeditionary forces at Dunkirk. But that was it. The utter failure in the skies over Britain meant that trying to impose a peace settlement on the UK was simply not going to happen. Britain may have been penned up, but more like a wolverine in a cave. No-one in their right mind was going to go in and subdue the animal. The Heer (German army) was incapable of invading the British Isles and thus in effect a stalemate ensued. Plus, the sideshow at the English Channel was a distraction from the Nazi war machine's real intent: to wage war on the Soviets.

Third roll: while we can ascribe the victory of the USSR in World War II to their industrial might, there is lot more to it than that. Most, especially those on the 'workers' state' Trotskyist left, point out that it was the planned economy, or Gosplan, that provided the victory of a socialist, collectivised economy over the capitalist-fascist German state. I think that is only partially true, even if it's the most important part.

Almost the entire left discounts the aid the US sent to the USSR. The USSR itself was most honest during their wartime assessment of this. Their position was: 'We could not have won without the help of the US'. This might sound 'revisionist' coming from a Trotskyist such as myself, but if one really looks at the aid provided, as little as it was, it was also critical to keeping the Red Army both fed and clothed and, in terms of some equipment (21,000 fighter planes, 12,000 Studebaker trucks), was no small eyedropper. (It should be noted that the famous Katusha rockets, directed at the Wehrmacht and

seen on hundreds of newsreels, were being launched from Studebakers!). About half the aid was unloaded in Vladivostok from 120 US-built and unionised crewed ships, but flying under the hammer and sickle flag of the USSR to prevent interception by the Japanese, who always controlled those waters.

The hope for peace with the British empire was simply ended when the Wehrmacht started the embarkation of troops in early November 1940 from occupied France to Poland for Operation Barbarossa to commence the following summer.

**David Walters**  
email

## Happy to concede

Eddie Ford says: "If they wanted to, the British, German and US governments could borrow vast sums of money for next to nothing - unlike you and me or the small business down the road. What prevents this occurring is simple - the naked class-war politics of the bourgeoisie, determined to roll back the post-World War II gains of the working class" ('Austerity myth debunked', April 25).

Really? But, the US *has* been borrowing huge amounts of money, and engaging in significant fiscal stimulus since 2008! It would have been engaging in even more if Obama's and the Democrats' plans had not been frustrated by the Republicans. The significance here is that the Democrats are the representatives of the big multinational, industrial capitalists, whereas the Republicans, like the Tories, are the representatives of the angry petty bourgeoisie, the small, nationally based capitalists, and the historically associated money capitalists.

But also, if this is a policy of class war by the bourgeoisie, then how does Eddie account for the statements of all those representatives of the bourgeoisie, from the credit ratings agencies to the IMF, who are now more openly *opposing* the policies of austerity?

They have been joined by the actual administrators of capital itself in recent weeks. People like Bill Gross who heads up Pimco, the world's largest bond fund, has also come out to say that the policy of austerity in Britain and Europe has to be ditched, and replaced with a policy of fiscal expansion to promote growth. He's not alone: many others like George Soros have made similar statements, and in the last week José Manuel Barroso has said the time for austerity has passed.

The idea that the bourgeoisie would destroy its own capital, undermine its potential for making profits by engaging in a policy of economic suicide, to roll back supposed gains of the working class since World War II is crazy! Firstly, they have had the last 30-odd years to roll back any supposed such gains, so why choose now? Secondly, the only gains that the working class obtained since World War II are gains that capital was happy to concede in the first place, because they were gains that in reality were useful for capital itself!

Marx, quoting Adam Smith, noted that capital only ever goes along with improvements in wages and so on, in so far as it facilitates the accumulation of capital: ie, it can afford to pay higher wages, and the higher wages provide additional demand for the commodities it produces, thereby facilitating the realisation of surplus value. That was the whole basis of Fordism,

upon which the welfare state itself is based.

**Arthur Bough**  
email

## Class organ

Mike Macnair refers, correctly, to the immobility of the left, the inability to develop a response to the rightward drift of politics ('Murdoch's Blairite offensive', April 25). He proposes two objectives that ought to be taken up, the larger one being "to rebuild the workers' movement at the base - trade unions, coops and mutual welfare funds and so on".

I am not clear what he has in mind for coops and mutual welfare funds, but assume he means new formations responding to specific needs, as very little exists at present. As to unions, "rebuild" could mean anything from regeneration of existing unions to new organisations to rival the present ones. Another option is rank-and-file bodies operating within and without the existing structures.

Whichever road is taken - and new movements do not arise just from our wishes - the central question is politics. Unions are political formations, being one limb of the reformist division of labour, whereby unions look after their members' immediate interests, the level of exploitation at the workplace, while longer-term political issues and even socialism was taken care of by a party. That roughly corresponded to the notion of a minimum and maximum programme. In practice the workers are cheated of both. Even at their best, helping to mobilise masses of workers (and that seems a long time ago), they were very much part of the system: schools for war, not war itself.

Marxist should operate with the aim of winning workers to a political perspective - the struggle for power - therefore recognising the limitations of trade unionism. Whether working in an existing union or setting up a rank-and-file body, it is the political perspective. The left, almost to the last man and woman, operate as though the unions can be pressured into leading meaningful struggles against austerity. The SWP, for example, is quite explicit about that, and members of left groups routinely hide under a trade union militant hat. The logic is to end up as political props to the unions. Even to set up rank-and-file bodies a political fight is required. If workers think that the economy can be mended by a little less austerity and some more spending (essentially what Labour has been peddling), they will submit to trade union leadership and meekly wait for Labour to effect a change of course (or not).

It seems to me that, without a clear view on dealing with the unions politically (which the left lacks), the other, 'smaller', of Mike's objectives falls flat. A strategic alternative, a party built through regrouping some or all of the existing left, would evolve into yet another pressure group in the existing labour movement rather than an independent organ of the working class.

**Mike Martin**  
Sheffield

## Talk to EDL

Jack Conrad takes to the letters page to argue of the English Defence League that: "It is fascist in the classic Marxist sense. It is a non-state, street-fighting organisation - anti-Muslim, anti-left and anti-working class" (April 18). I presume that he means 'anti-working class' in a political/ideological sense rather than as a social formation, because the EDL



has many working class supporters. My question to Conrad *et al* is: did it need to end up in this way?

It is worth mentioning that the only substantive attempt to research the EDL is by the Demos think tank, entitled *Inside the EDL* (2011), which indicates the radically unserious nature of the ‘left’ and especially those like the Socialist Workers Party/Unite Against Fascism who appear to perceive the EDL as the main enemy. We don’t need to analyse it: we just know.

As most people will know, the origins of the EDL lie in an attempt by the Islamic terrorist supporters of Al-Muhajiroun and Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah to disrupt a march in Luton in 2009 to commemorate the return home from Afghanistan of the Royal Anglian regiment. This excited the spontaneous anger of a large section of the crowd, who proceeded to give them a good hiding. At this point it would have been tempting to view the whole thing as a fracas between well-wishers of the repressive force of British imperialism and proponents of Islamic terrorism and to have washed one’s hands of it.

However, after this event a grouping termed the United Peoples of Luton was formed, which eventually led to the formation of the EDL, with Tommy Robinson as its best known spokesman.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the ‘left’, to use that term broadly, were flummoxed. After all, new groupings were historically set up under their auspices at Conway Hall in London with Tariq Ali and Tony Benn presiding. And a group with at least some working class leaders - outrageous!

From the start the EDL had three major policies: support for the armed forces; support for the monarchy; and a pro-Israel stance, which made it extremely unattractive to people like myself who are alienated from the ‘left’, actually crass liberals, due to its apologies for Islamic fundamentalism, even to the extent of downplaying or even disavowing women’s rights, abortion as a woman’s right to choose, equality for gays and so on. I personally took the pro-Israel stance as an ‘in your face’ riposte to Islamic fundamentalists.

The Demos report argues: “The most common reason for joining the EDL was opposition to Islam (expressed in various ways) (41%). This reason was particularly common among men - 45% of men compared with 28% of women gave this reason. While some directed abuse at all Muslims, others made more nuanced criticisms, condemning ‘political Islam’ and ‘Muslim extremists’.

“The second most common reason for joining the EDL was related to identity. Respondents referred to a love of England, commitment to preserving traditional national and cultural values, and belief in representing the interests of ‘real’ countrymen (31%). In many cases this amounted to a defence of liberal values from perceived outside forces such as Islam: Islam also needs to be recognised as a threat to our freedoms, also Sharia law isn’t fair play, it isn’t British and has unequal rights and should be outlawed in the UK for these reasons alone.”

My contention, in the light of this information, is that it could have been productive for those on the left who did not identify their reason for existence as being to apologise for Islamic fundamentalism to have engaged in a substantive dialogue with the EDL, difficult as that would have been, considering the overwhelmingly petty bourgeois composition of the ‘left’ and their inability not to sneer at working class people. It may even have been possible - and I have to give the

CPGB credit here as proponents of the battle of ideas - to have won the EDL to a leftist position against Islamic fundamentalism.

However, it was *much* easier for the SWP/UAF axis to simply identify the EDL as fascist and then implement a ‘no platform for fascists’ policy. Loads easier than having to actually think about how to engage a politically chaotic cross-class formation. Anti-communism, which was virtually absent from the initial EDL (most of them would not have known what it meant), is now rampant, thanks to the leftist liberals and their utterly stupid, intellectually dishonest and ultimately completely counterproductive, ‘no platform’ position.

**Ted Hankin**  
Nottingham

## Feminism

I read with interest Anne McShane’s and Ben Lewis’s accounts of Alexandra Kollontai and August Bebel, and their relationship to feminism (April 25).

It is remarkable how many different understandings of the term have been making the rounds in the pages of the *Weekly Worker* recently, and I am confident that we are now moving beyond merely mirroring the left’s lower-case feminism - often a pastiche of post-Stalinist ideologemes, coupled with an aggressive voluntarism - towards a better informed evaluation of the various currents. In an atmosphere where left feminists and their often dubious allies shout down any critical investigation of feminism, it is incumbent on Marxists to insist that it is not the will, but cognition that will lead us to the truth.

With this in mind, more ground needs to be covered, seeing as there is an underdocumented history of feminist intervention on the left, going all the way back to Olympe de Gouges, who defended her text, *The rights of women*, before the Paris Commune, but especially Claire ‘Rose’ Lacombe, who, as a member of the radical-left Enragés during the French Revolution, advocated a feminism that specifically voiced the social concerns of working class women and pushed beyond mere equality before the law. Both women are cited in Bebel’s *Women and socialism*, as are some of their pioneering demands.

As Ben Lewis reports in his review, Clara Zetkin had a hostile attitude to the bourgeois feminism of her time and opposed the idea of women comrades organising separately from the workers’ movement.

Yet it cannot be denied that her women’s groups in the German Social Democratic Party were at least partly inspired by bourgeois feminist groupings such as the German Women’s Association, and that the very concept of organising along gender lines was not uncontroversial among women communists. In Rosa Luxemburg’s view, these groups ultimately served to keep women away from leadership positions. While there was no formal requirement for female comrades to join such a group, there arguably permeated an internal culture in which they were expected to ‘stay in their group’ and worry only about ‘their issues’.

Hal Draper writes in his introduction to the Luxemburg piece, ‘Women’s suffrage and class struggle’: “It is one of the myths of socialist history that Rosa Luxemburg had no interest in the women’s question. The kernel of truth is that Luxemburg certainly rejected the idea that, simply because of her sex, she ‘belonged’ in the socialist women’s movement, rather than in the general leadership. In

rejecting this sexist view of women in the movement, she performed an important service.”

In light of this, Kollontai’s campaigning for women-only caucuses surely deserves a more critical evaluation. As has also been the experience of the 1970s new left, permanent women’s caucuses bring with them the danger of confining female comrades almost exclusively to ‘women’s issues’, while at the same time shielding male comrades from these debates. Personally, I am far more sympathetic to the idea of positive action as regards questions of confidence and potential leadership - even if, according to my humble observations, these issues are not as gendered as is commonly believed on the left.

To conclude, it is safe to say that ‘feminist’ intervention of one sort or another has been a permanent feature since the very dawn of what we would consider the left. These dialectical responses - whether they come in the shape of second-wave feminism, which began as a critique of the existing left, the writings of Raya Dunayeskaya, or the activism of the self-described ‘socialist feminist’, Clara Fraser, a positively heroic working class militant - point back to real contradictions. But that does not mean that any such response automatically points the correct way forward or can be considered beyond criticism.

CPGB comrades have made a good start documenting some of this history, and I hope we will be able to gain more insights, arm ourselves with more knowledge and develop our own analyses on contemporary gender relations in the future.

**Maciej Zurowski**  
London

## Decent parent

Bob Potter makes a valid point that my letter (April 18) underestimated the opposition to the recognition of the need for equality between the sexes in Marx’s and Engels’ lifetimes, but he then confuses Marx’s right to parent his children with the political issue of the recognition of equality (Letters, April 25).

My point is this: socialism has and will always be rejected by the majority of the population as long as we are seen to subordinating issues like parenting to a political line or lifestyle. Karl Marx was right to take an interest in his daughter’s suitors. Any decent parent would today, too.

Marx’s style of parenting may not be Mr Potter’s cup of tea - I suspect he favours a more permissive approach. That would be his privilege (and responsibility). But we socialists should avoid the type of party or state that interferes with our personal lives. This is an area where socialists and communists have a bad reputation. This is the type of party nobody should vote for in a society that values human rights.

The right to a private life, for starters, Mr Potter!

**Henry Mitchell**  
London

## Welcome

Thanks for waiting for us to get back to you. We welcome your commitment to working with us in the future (‘Message to ISN’, April 18). However, as we’re sure you will understand, we are a very new organisation, and we think it would be premature to enter discussions at this point.

While individual International Socialist Network members are free to attend any events they choose, we do not think that as a steering committee we should nominate someone to speak at the Communist University on behalf of the IS Network.

**Steering committee**

International Socialist Network

# 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 May 5, 5pm:** Weekly political report from CPGB Provisional Central Committee, followed by open discussion and *Capital* reading group. Calthorpe Arms, 252 Grays Inn Road, London WC1. This meeting: Vol 1, chapter 15, section 3, ‘The proximate effects of machinery on the workman’.

Organised by CPGB: [www.cpgb.org.uk](http://www.cpgb.org.uk).

## Radical Anthropology Group

Introduction to anthropology

**Tuesday May 7, 6.15pm:** ‘Revolution in Judea: Jesus in anthropological perspective’. Speaker: Chris Knight. St Martin’s Community Centre, 43 Carol Street, London NW1 (Camden Town tube). £10 waged, £5 low waged, £3 unwaged. Discounts for whole term.

Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: [www.radicalanthropologygroup.org](http://www.radicalanthropologygroup.org).

## Solidarity with Turkish journalists

**Thursday May 2, 6pm:** World press freedom day event, National Union of Journalists, Headland House, 308-312 Gray’s Inn Road, London WC1.

Organised by NUJ: [www.nuj.org.uk](http://www.nuj.org.uk).

## Palestine fundraiser

**Thursday May 2, 6pm:** Dinner and social, London Muslim Centre, 46-92 Whitechapel Road, London E1. £10, £100 for table for 12. All proceeds to Palestine Solidarity Campaign.

Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: [www.palestinecampaign.org](http://www.palestinecampaign.org).

## Hands Off Venezuela

**Saturday May 4, 10am to 5pm:** National conference, room 3B, University of London Union, Malet Street, London WC1. Free entrance for HOV members. Join on the day for £7.50 (£5 unwaged). Organised by Hands off Venezuela: [www.handsoffvenezuela.org](http://www.handsoffvenezuela.org).

## Make the rich pay

**Saturday May 4, 10am:** May Day march. Assemble Bexley Square, Salford, for march to rally at Friends Meeting House, 6 Mount Street, Manchester M2, 12.30pm.

Organised by Greater Manchester Association of Trades Union Councils: [stevechik@talktalk.net](mailto:stevechik@talktalk.net).

## Classwar games

**Sunday May 5, 1pm to 6pm:** Political board games, Firebox, 108 Cromer Street, London WC1. Collective playing of *Election*. Free entry.

Organised by Classwar games: [www.classwargames.net](http://www.classwargames.net).

## Save Waltham Forest NHS

**Tuesday May 7, 7pm:** Demonstration, Harmony Hall, 1a Truro Road, Walthamstow, London E17.

Organised by Save Our NHS: [www.saveournhs-el.org.uk](http://www.saveournhs-el.org.uk).

## No to benefit changes

**Wednesday May 8, 5.30pm:** Self-help sessions, 25 Wolsey Mews, Kentish Town, London NW5. How to understand and challenge the bedroom tax and changes to council tax benefit.

Organised by Camden United for Benefit Justice: [camdenunitedforbenefitjustice@yahoo.com](mailto:camdenunitedforbenefitjustice@yahoo.com).

## Migration justice

**Saturday May 11, 10am to 3pm:** Training sessions for activists, the Hub, Turl street, Oxford.

Organised by National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns: [www.ncadc.org.uk](http://www.ncadc.org.uk).

## Defend education

Rallies against government plans.

**Birmingham:** Saturday May 11, 11am, ICC, Broad Street, Birmingham B1.

**Leeds:** Saturday May 11, 11am, The Hilton, Leeds City Hotel, Neville Street, Leeds LS1.

**Cardiff:** Saturday May 18, 11am, Motorpoint Arena, Mary Ann Street, Cardiff CF10.

**Newcastle:** Saturday May 18, 11am, Centre for Life, Times Square, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1.

Organised by NUT: [www.teachers.org.uk](http://www.teachers.org.uk); and NASUWT: [www.nasuwt.org.uk](http://www.nasuwt.org.uk).

## Lewisham Carnival Against Cuts

**Saturday May 11, 11am:** Protest march. Assemble Catford town hall, Rushey Green, London SE6.

Organised by Carnival Against Cuts: [www.carnivalagaincuts.org.uk](http://www.carnivalagaincuts.org.uk).

## Radical books

**Saturday May 11, 10am to 5pm:** Book fair and speakers, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1.

Organised by London Radical Book Fair: [www.londonradicalbookfair.wordpress.com](http://www.londonradicalbookfair.wordpress.com).

## Socialist films

**Sunday May 12, 11am:** Screening, Renoir Cinema, Brunswick Square, London WC1. Stevan Riley’s *Fire in Babylon* (UK, 83 minutes).

Organised by London Socialist Film Co-op: [www.socialistfilm.blogspot.com](http://www.socialistfilm.blogspot.com).

## 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.



## IDEOLOGY

# A reactionary bigot

Thatcher has been compared to Winston Churchill, and quite rightly - both were virulently anti-working class. **Eddie Ford** looks at Churchill's toxic legacy

**M**argaret Thatcher is now an official saint of the right wing of the bourgeoisie. That was made abundantly clear by the Tory media's revoltingly sycophantic coverage of her funeral, which was a state funeral in all but name. Her elevated status is illustrated by the frequent comparisons to Winston Churchill - the latter proclaimed as the country's greatest ever wartime leader and the former designated the greatest ever 'peacetime' prime minister (leaving aside Northern Ireland and the Falklands for now). She saved the country from disaster in the same way that Churchill rescued us from the Nazi menace.

Now we are to get Winston Churchill's image on every £5 banknote, along with his "blood, toil, tears and sweat" quote to a backdrop of parliament (he previously appeared on a 1965 crown coin). He will be replacing Elizabeth Fry, the progressively-minded social reformer and Quaker known as the "angel of prisons", who has been on the note since 2001. Mervyn King, the departing Bank of England governor, even suggested that the new notes might become known as "Winstons" - perhaps destined to become the most popular ever manufactured.

Explaining his decision, King said Churchill "holds a special place in the affections of our nation", for his indefatigable "energy, courage, eloquence, wit and public service are an inspiration to us all". Above all, King claimed, he "remains a hero of the entire free world" - helping to ensure the "survival of those freedoms" that we "continue to enjoy today". He was the ultimate democrat, it seems. A saviour.

Depressingly, though predictably enough, there has not been a squeak of protest against Mervyn King's decision - regarded as entirely unproblematic. A stark contrast to Thatcher's funeral, which divided the country. At least half the population *hated* the woman, not just the 'usual suspects' on the far left. Churchill, on the other hand, is presented - and overwhelmingly accepted - as some sort of unifying figure.

But if the working class had a *collective memory*, which sadly it does not at the moment, not having its own party, it would be strongly objecting to his appearance on the note. Why should we have to look at his damned face every day? He was without doubt the most virulently anti-working class representative of the British high establishment in the 20th century *bar none*. Like Margaret Thatcher he was a class-war warrior to his marrow, never afraid to take on the 'enemy within' - the labour movement and the organised working class. Therefore, in that sense, both Thatcher and Churchill fully deserve to be mentioned in the same breath.

## Force

Say what you will about Winston Churchill, but one thing cannot be denied: he was consistent - that is, *consistently* anti-working class and reactionary. Whether at home or abroad. As home secretary in 1910, he sent in the troops against the miners at Tonypandy (the so-called Tonypandy or Rhondda riots). Though no shots were fired and the police were far more despised - one historian describing them as an "army of occupation" - the presence of the troops prevented the

strike action from ending early in the miners' favour. The troops also helped ensure that strikers and miner leaders would be successfully prosecuted the following year.

Churchill is still hated to this day in many parts of south Wales due to Tonypandy. In 2010 a Welsh local council in the Vale of Glamorgan opposed the renaming of a military base after him because he sent the troops into the Rhondda. Jackie Griffin, clerk of Llanmaes council, stated he was unable to support such an "inappropriate name change" due to the fact that there is "still a strong feeling of animosity" towards Winston Churchill in the community.<sup>1</sup>

When it came to the 1926 general strike, now as chancellor of the exchequer, he wanted to do the same thing - send the troops in. As the enthusiastic editor of the *British Gazette*, which ran for eight editions during the strike, he openly advocated using physical force. Machine guns should be used on the striking miners if required. His reasoning was quite simple and not without logic. For him, the general strike as a quasi-revolutionary venture and he therefore had no interest in a negotiated settlement - it had to be crushed by any means necessary. "Either the country will break the general strike", he declared, "or the general strike will break the country"; he did not agree that the TUC "have as much right as the government to publish their side of the case and to exhort their followers to continue action". They had no right to resist the government of the day. It is also worth noting that Churchill also wanted to turn the BBC into a government propaganda department - to hell with all pretence of 'impartiality'.

Showing exactly what he would do to defend the interests of the British ruling class, Churchill helped create the Black and Tans - which terrorised the Irish people between 1920 and 1922. No-one disputes that the Tans killed and terrorised on a large scale, resorting to ferocious reprisals and 'collective punishment'. When a Tan was killed in Cork, they burnt down more than 300 buildings in the city centre and afterwards proudly pinned pieces of burnt cork to their caps. They were also involved in the notorious 1920 Bloody Sunday massacre, an atrocity which occurred following the spectacular assassinations of over a dozen members of the Cairo Gang, a team of British undercover agents operating from Dublin. In retaliation, the Auxiliary Division of the Royal Irish Constabulary and the Tans opened fire indiscriminately on the crowd at a Gaelic football match in Croke Park, killing 14 supporters.

The Tans' brutality disgusted even members of the British army. General Frank Crozier resigned in 1921 in protest against them being allowed to "murder, rob, loot and burn up the innocent because they could not catch the few guilty on the run". The late Lord Longford wrote of the Tans torturing captured republicans - "cutting out the tongue of one, the nose of another, the heart of another and battering in the skull of a fourth".

Then, of course, there were Churchill's odious social views - notably his support for a particularly foul brand of eugenics. The "improvement of the British breed is my aim in life", he wrote to his cousin, Ivor Guest, on January 19 1899. As a young politician



On the fiver

entering parliament in 1901, Churchill saw the mentally disabled as a threat to the vigour and virility of British society. The stock must not be diluted. Thus as home secretary he was in favour of the confinement, segregation and sterilisation of the "feeble-minded" and others - including "idiots", "imbeciles" and "moral defectives". He proposed in 1910 that 100,000 "degenerate" Britons should be "forcibly sterilised and others put in labour camps to halt the decline of the British race".

As for "tramps and wastrels", he said a year later, there "ought to be proper labour colonies where they could be sent for considerable periods and made to realise their duty to the state". Very liberal. Unsurprisingly, Churchill eagerly endorsed Dr HC Sharp's charming booklet, *The sterilisation of degenerates*.<sup>2</sup> Sharp was a member of the US Indiana Reformatory and issued an apocalyptic warning that "the degenerate class" was reproducing more quickly than the general population and thus threatening the "purity of the race". In 1907 Indiana passed a eugenics law making sterilisation mandatory for those individuals in state custody deemed to be "mentally unfit" - other states followed suit and in the end more than 65,000 individuals were forcibly sterilised (nor were they allowed to marry). Naturally, Churchill was impressed, writing to home office officials asking them to investigate the possibility of introducing the "Indiana law" to Britain. He remained frustrated on this point. The 1913 Mental Deficiency Act rejected compulsory sterilisation in favour of confinement in special institutions. Bloody do-gooders.

With regards to international politics, Churchill was a *fanatical* anti-Bolshevik. Nothing else mattered except the need to prevent the spread of communism and ruthlessly "strangle the Bolshevik baby in its cradle" - whether that meant direct imperialist invasion or the sponsoring of terrorism. Anything goes. Though the Soviet regime survived the imperialist assault, Churchill ultimately succeeded in his mission by *forcing* civil war on the Bolsheviks - traumatising society as a whole and by necessity turning the Bolsheviks/Communist Party into a party-state war machine.

In other words, the Bolsheviks became transmuted - going from a situation where they led a revolution based on the working class to one where the working class had become utterly *declassed*: the fate of the revolution was dependent, as Lenin

ruefully said, on the decision of a few *thousand* communists. By the time JV Stalin amended his *Foundations of Leninism* in 1924 to espouse the idea of socialism in one country - abandoning proletarian internationalism for national socialism - the revolution was indeed being 'strangled'.

## Anti-Semite

Just about the greatest myth peddled about Winston Churchill is that he led a great anti-fascist crusade against the Axis power during World War II - his finest hour. What utter baloney. The man *welcomed* the coming to power of Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler - viewing them as valuable bulwarks against communism. Churchill only became 'anti-fascist' when he felt that the British empire was threatened by the expanding ambitions of these rivals. Defending British imperial interests, not fighting a democratic crusade against fascism, was his aim during World War II.

Previously, Churchill had praised Mussolini to the skies - the man could do no wrong. *Il Duce* had "rendered a service to the whole world" by showing the "way to combat subversive forces". In fact, Churchill thought, Mussolini was the "Roman genius" - the "greatest lawgiver among men". Speaking in Rome in 1927, he told Italy's Fascist Party: "If I had been an Italian, I would have been entirely with you from the beginning to the end of your victorious struggle against the bestial appetites and passions of Leninism."

He heaped similar praise upon Hitler too. After the Nazis came to power, Churchill proclaimed in a 1935 article that if Britain was defeated like Germany had been in 1918, he hoped "we should find a champion as indomitable to restore our courage and lead us back to our place among the nations". While all manner of "formidable transformations" were occurring in Europe, Churchill continued, corporal Hitler was "fighting his long, wearing battle for the German heart" - the story of that struggle "cannot be read without admiration for the courage, the perseverance and the vital force which enabled him to challenge, defy, conciliate or overcome all the authorities or resistances which barred his path". If only things had been different, Britain could have done a deal with fascist Italy and Germany against the common enemy - ie, 'international Bolshevism'.

An associated myth is that Churchill fought the war to save the Jews from Nazi genocide. Total ahistorical nonsense, which is purely an ideological product of the post-World War II bourgeoisie - reinvented as a 'democratic' and 'anti-fascist' class with a deep hatred of racism in any form. Rather, Churchill was an anti-Semite - a prejudice he shared with most members of his class at the time. Yes, he may not have bought into Hitler's mad pseudo-science (although his *penchant* for eugenics took him in that direction), but he certainly distrusted Jews - viewing them as *both* exploiters and resisters to exploitation: parasitical finance capitalists *and* Bolsheviks/communists.

This irrational bigotry shines through in his notorious February 1920 article for the *Illustrated Sunday Herald* - 'Zionism versus Bolshevism: a struggle for the soul of the Jewish

people'.<sup>3</sup> In it, he writes that "we owe to the Jews in the Christian revelation a system of ethics which, even if it were entirely separated from the supernatural, would be incomparably the most precious possession of mankind". But at the same time, he cautions, it "may well be that this same astounding race may at the present time be in the actual process of producing another system of morals and philosophy, as malevolent as Christianity was benevolent" - it "almost seems as if the gospel of Christ and the gospel of Antichrist were destined to originate among the same people".

Whilst lauding "national Jews" - the good Jews "loyal to the land of their adoption" - he denounced the violent schemes of the "international Jews". For Churchill, there was no need to "exaggerate the part played in the creation of Bolshevism and in the actual bringing about of the Russian Revolution by these international and for the most part atheistic Jews". With the "notable exception" of Lenin, he fulminated, the "majority of the leading figures" in the communist movement are Jews. Moreover, even more importantly, the "principal inspiration and driving power comes from the Jewish leaders". Karl Marx, Trotsky, Bela Kun, Rosa Luxemburg, Emma Goldman, etc - all part of "this worldwide conspiracy for the overthrow of civilisation and for the reconstitution of society on the basis of arrested development, of envious malevolence and impossible equality". A hideous disease.

He recommended Zionism as a partial antidote to Bolshevism - observing that "nothing could be more significant than the fury with which Trotsky has attacked the Zionists". The "cruel penetration of his mind", believed Churchill, "leaves [Trotsky] in no doubt that his schemes of a worldwide communist state under Jewish domination are directly thwarted and hindered by this new ideal, which directs the energies and the hopes of Jews in every land towards a simpler, a truer and a far more attainable goal" - a home for Jews in Palestine under the "protection", and watchful eye, of the British crown.

The fact that we have forgotten the *real* Winston Churchill signals the failure of the left. Criminally, the bourgeoisie has almost total freedom to write and rewrite history as it sees fit. It would be dangerously complacent to think that the same thing could not happen to Margaret Thatcher, maybe sooner rather than later. For instance, *The Guardian* conducted a snap poll on who should be on banknotes to come. The favourite was Isambard Kingdom Brunel (20%), followed by Emily Pankhurst (19%) - with Thatcher coming a worrying third on 14% (David Beckham and Tony Blair came joint last on 1%).<sup>4</sup>

Frighteningly, it could happen - your grandchildren may come home one day excitedly waving a Thatcher banknote, telling you teacher said she saved the country from disaster. Organise now, and fight for left unity, to make sure this never happens ●

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## Notes

1. www.bbc.co.uk/news/10294530.
2. http://tinyurl.com/csdjtag.
3. www.fpp.co.uk/bookchapters/WSC/WSCwrote1920.html.
4. *The Guardian* April 26.



# Self-inflicted injury

The annual Marxism festival is running short of big names - but the SWP has encouraged the culture of boycotting problematic people, argues **Paul Demarty**

It is necessary, first of all, to issue a note of caution concerning the premature eulogies for the Socialist Workers Party's annual Marxism festival.

There are those who have cheekily suggested that its attendees will fit into a red London phone booth, such is the tornado of animosity swirling up around Britain's largest, and most beleaguered, leftwing sect. There is a distasteful note of triumphalism to all these mock funeral rites and, in any case, the SWP and its remaining periphery will in all likelihood *still* manage to put on the biggest annual gathering of leftwingers in this country.

Still, there are serious problems facing the unlucky comrades whose job it will be to organise the school and put the bravest face possible on things this summer - it will almost certainly be a smaller, more brittle event than recent years. Of the first eight 'big names' to have been announced as speakers, four have already pulled out. The list - as things stand - is a little short on celebrity.<sup>1</sup>

Gilbert Achcar and Samir Amin may have been influential, but Amin's star in particular has long been on the wane (and both, despite supposedly impeccable anti-imperialist credentials, have been found supporting western adventures in Africa in the last two years). Billy Hayes, general secretary of the Communication Workers Union, is not a nobody - but neither will the masses be queuing around the block for him. The same is true of Alan Freeman and Paul Le Blanc, who are interesting people, but primarily 'niche' draws.

## Diplomatic immunity

The absent names, to some extent, can be put down to an honest shock at the "dark side"<sup>2</sup> of the SWP, which was on full display during the crisis that has engulfed the organisation this year. Others, however, seem to have been cajoled into pulling out by the serried ranks of liberal feminist crusaders, principally through Twitter - the witchfinder general of social media.

John McDonnell, the most leftwing Labour MP (to paraphrase William F Buckley junior, a bit like being the tallest building in Topeka, Kansas), was prodded repeatedly on this matter, until he finally issued a response that was, even by the 140-character yardstick, terse - "I'm not attending".<sup>3</sup> Exactly why he has made this decision thus remains a mystery.

Yet the example of McDonnell is a good one to get to the bottom of the boycotters' thinking as a whole, whether they have jumped or been pushed. Let us imagine a speech that McDonnell *might* have made. "You in the SWP," he could have said, "are serious fighters for the working class, against war and austerity. Yet you are hampered by your misjudgements. You insist on having your own anti-austerity campaign, when there are already too many, and you have no principled reason to do so.

"You abstain from the fight to make Labour into an anti-austerity, pro-working class party. We have pressured," he could claim (as he has before), "Ed Miliband into tacking away from Blairism. This is not nearly enough, of course - but it would be an easier thing to achieve if you were on board.

"And the way you handled the rape allegation and the rebellion in your own ranks was reprehensible and a gift to the right. When I come to talk to comrades on the left, I am wounded to see the same tricks employed by the Labour machine against my own colleagues being used by people who call themselves socialists."

We know, of course, that had he not withdrawn from Marxism, he would have made no such speech. Because comrade McDonnell is a consensus politician. He would have reminded the audience how important it was to get this government out, to support strikes and demonstrations, to oppose military adventures. He would have peppered this uncontroversial spiel with anecdotes about the bastards he has to put up with in the Commons. He would *not* have broached the political differences that have brought him and the SWP to different places on the left landscape today.

As for McDonnell, so for many others, no doubt. The Marxism event is a "festival of resistance", and not a festival of controversy. There is a tacit understanding between the SWP and star speakers (when they are not put up in straight debates with SWP comrades) that the political authority of the organisers will not be challenged. Neither, necessarily, will be the star speakers (I would be very surprised if any audience member mentions Libya to Gilbert Achcar, or Mali to Samir Amin, this year). This is not an iron rule - the superstar philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, has been on the outs with the SWP for years, after increasingly fraught Marxism sessions. But it is certainly the norm.

It is, on the whole, one of the most frustrating features of Marxism, which is traditionally at least a good event *on paper*. The many peculiar ideas on offer from star speakers are simply left more or less unchallenged, and likewise the hallowed IS/SWP tradition is wrapped in cotton wool and unveiled only in sessions specifically on the theory of state capitalism, etc, led off by 'safe' SWP comrades. The truce is enforced by the legendary 'speaker slip' system, through which controversy can be crushed before it arises.

The result is a basically *diplomatic*

arrangement, and diplomacy - as we all know - is about horse trading. The SWP grants the speaker a large and enthusiastic audience in central London. In return, the speaker offers the SWP an *implicit* endorsement of the image it wishes to project: a non-sectarian, unifying force on the radical left, offering up its resources to 'build the movement'.

## Reversal

However, there is an internal limit to diplomacy, which is reached when the trade-off is no longer advantageous to both sides.

In the grubby finaglings of great powers, the result is war. In the pettier marketplace of the socialist summer school season, the result is a boycott. The logic is easy enough to see. Imagine (if you can!) the SWP seriously tarnishing its brand. Suddenly, having your name on all its publicity materials hardly amounts to a free lunch; on the contrary, it may be used against you by whatever rivals and enemies you may have.

Being less cynical about it, a speaker may be quite aware of, but basically untroubled by, the fact that bulking up the Marxism timetable lends some credibility to the SWP. It is an 'endorsement' that many are happy to make out of genuine respect for the comrades, even if they disagree. After a scandal of the order of this one, however, suddenly that no longer seems a conscionable option.

The result in both cases is the same: the star speaker will withdraw. We will be clear - this is the worst of all possible outcomes.

The first reason for this is that it will exacerbate the tendencies in the SWP, as presently constituted, that lead towards its further shrivelling into an insular sect. In the first instance, it will exclude even the *possibility* of using an SWP platform to offer a welcome corrective from the 'reality-based community'. On top of that, it will reinforce the bunker mentality of the pro-central committee crazies, and the suspicion of all those who demur as somehow 'foreign agents' causing damage to 'the party'.

The latest set of resignations from the SWP come from one of its recent strongholds - the Manchester

Socialist Worker Student Society. It is remarkable for two small reasons - firstly, it has rather more in the way of levity and wit than such resignation statements have possessed in recent months (the comrades sign off as "The Marxists formerly known as University of Manchester Socialist Worker Student Society"). More importantly, there is a relatively sober caveat for others who have taken the same path:

"For all those who have left the organisation, we would urge you to consider the political necessity of working with 'CC loyalists' again. There is barely a campaign or trade union one can be active in without coming across SWP members and we are prepared to work alongside any we might encounter. To refuse to work with them out of grudges either personal or political would weaken any future activism on our behalf. This is not to say we will forget our disagreements, but rather continue to fraternally argue that the party has run its course."<sup>4</sup>

An admirable attitude, though their decision to split is still politically frivolous. It takes two to tango, however, and with every high-profile snub, SWP loyalists will be more resistant to 'fraternal argument', and - indeed - less able to play nicely with others in united campaigns.

## Boycott culture

The second reason why the withdrawal of speakers is the worst of all possible outcomes is that it reinforces the culture, widespread on the left, of boycotting ideas, individuals and organisations that one finds distasteful.

At the moment, there is a lot of it about, and it happens to be centred on the SWP. Barely a week goes by without yet another story of people walking out of a room when an SWPer gets up to speak. After all, they are 'rape deniers', or 'rape apologists', or whatever inane shorthand version of anathematisation is dropping off tongues this week.

This whole attitude is profoundly foolish. It encourages not critique, which could at least be productive, but irrational fear and hatred; it is anti-intellectual and in reality elitist (the underlying assumption behind no-

platforming 'rape deniers'/'apologists' is that, firstly, women are so prone to fits of the vapours that they will be put in fear of their physical safety by the presence of such people; and, secondly, that men are so bestial that they will somehow take their presence as a green light to go around raping people). The target of the boycott is no longer ignorant, or just plain wrong; he is diseased, and shunned as one would shun a black rat with plague bacilli in its blood.

Alas, it is difficult to conjure up much sympathy for the SWP in this case, because no organised force on the left has done more to entrench this kind of stupidity in our patterns of political activity. It is the SWP which insists on greeting every passing, ephemeral far-right sect as if they were Hitler risen from the grave. It is the SWP which has thus made the most consistent case for the novel anti-fascist tactic of no-platforming *oneself* by refusing all invitations to speak when a representative of 'the Nazis' has also been invited.

And, while in the recent period, after 'No platform for rape deniers' became the feminist bureaucrat's rallying cry, the SWP has been bizarrely dogmatic in its insistence that *only* fascists should be no-platformed (no satisfactory explanation has ever emerged as to *why* that should be the case), it has not always been so reticent, pushing on some occasions a 'No platform for Zionists' line, for example.

The SWP is locked into this kind of behaviour ultimately because it has no programme, and thus is reduced to repeating progressive-minded people's prejudices back to them, but louder, in order to get such people agitated. There is something strikingly SWPish, meanwhile, about the *tone* of those currently seeking to carve them out of trade unions, student unions and so forth; and, indeed, bureaucratic feminists equally have no programme to speak of, only gag reflexes. For the SWP, the scream of enraged liberalism was a perfectly adequate means of keeping mobilisation at a steady state of hysteria, so long as its own progressive credentials were superficially unimpeachable. Now it is being attacked, if not exactly by a monster of its own making, at least by a monster to which it has given endless sustenance - the anti-rational elitism of boycott culture.

The SWP wants this year's Marxism to be 'business as usual', and present an attractive public face through its flagship event. The more likely outcome is a smaller, more paranoid and insular school, with grudges bubbling under the surface and wounds festering. Any principled Marxist with a cordial invite would *use* the opportunity to make sure it is neither, by breaking both with sterile boycottism and cosy diplomatic speechifying. Alas, principled Marxists are in shorter supply at Marxism than ever ●

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## Notes

1. [www.marxismfestival.org.uk/speakers.htm](http://www.marxismfestival.org.uk/speakers.htm).
2. An expression notoriously used by SWP leader Alex Callinicos in the context of the internet: see *Socialist Review* January 2013.
3. <https://twitter.com/johnmcdonnellMP/status/312659996313808896>.
4. <http://internationalsocialistnetwork.org/index.php/ideas-and-arguments/organisation/swp-crisis/swss-groups/98-manchester-swss-disaffiliation-and-resignation-letter>.



Witch-hunting: tables turned



## PARTY

# How can we supe

This is the contribution of Nick Wrack to the CPGB's April 27 London Communist Forum entitled 'What sort of mass party do we need?'



17th century print cataloguing the religious sects and their "false and dangerous tenants"

This discussion is part of a whole series of debates which are, in my opinion, quite rightly taking place in Britain and beyond. It concerns the question that is facing people who want to confront capitalism and the crisis, people who want to fight for a different kind of society, in which the mass of humanity is emancipated for the first time since the beginning of class society.

The discussion comes under the broad heading, 'How do we get socialism?' What is the vehicle, the method, for achieving this? Of course, this is a question that has confronted the working class for 200 years. It is a question that confronts us profoundly now, particularly when we see before us the nature of capitalism's crisis, when the living and working conditions of generations to come are put at risk, economically, socially and politically. So the debates taking place on the left are of great importance.

And it is a matter of profound dismay for any serious thinker on the left to see the way in which we are compartmentalised into the panoply of organisations of Marxists and socialists, of people who want to fight this system and change it. It is an historical aberration that we have to overcome. Of course, there may well be, in certain circumstances, very good reasons for being in different organisations - when you are fighting for profoundly different things; when your approach is completely different. Possibly. But can there be any such reasons for people who base themselves on the method and the ideas of Marxism? Can there be any real reason why people in that category end up in different political organisations? Separate, split and segregated into smaller and smaller forces, which makes it ever more difficult to respond to the crisis.

In my opinion this legacy is something we have to overcome. Part of that is the belief held by too many people that if there is a difference then it

means that you have to separate. It is a question of the nature of the differences that mean you have to have a separation, and the differences that allow you to stay in the same organisation.

For example, if we go back in history and we look at the differences between, say, Luxemburg and Lenin, as explained in various articles and speeches, and transpose them onto the left organisations of today, people would say that if they had those differences they could not possibly work with the equivalent of Luxemburg or Lenin, and that this would require them to be in different organisations. In my opinion this attitude is completely wrong. What we need to develop on the left is an attitude of healthy debate and discussion, critical appraisal, allowing dissent, so long as it is in the general direction of the struggle to change society.

## Message and messenger

The ideas of socialism, in my opinion, are extremely simple. Most working class people can grasp intuitively, without a theoretical basis, the class nature of society. Most working class people know what class they are in. In a recent poll 60% of people self-identified as working class. They understand the hierarchy in society even if they do not understand specifically and precisely the categories and so on. But they understand that they are at the bottom of the heap; that they work. They understand that nothing happens, nothing is done without them, and the working class produce the wealth in society and, although this may be less clear, that this wealth is taken from them and is enjoyed by a different, separate class: those who rule, who represent capital, who they do not even see in the course of daily events. But they know that they exist and they benefit from the work of ordinary people.

And the idea of turning that society upside-down, of taking that wealth that is created by ordinary people and sharing it among the people who produce it, of allowing a new world to be built out of the surplus that is created by working class people - I think these are ideas that are easily comprehended. They are easily understood by the majority of people.

I think that too often the left, with its scholastic discussions, its scholastic debates, actually makes that simple message too complicated. Why can we not have the theoretical debates within the broad family of Marxism, whilst at the same time putting out the propaganda and the agitation for that strategic task: the inauguration of a new society, the abolition of classes, the end of exploitation? If we were to take those ideas out among the working class we would find a ready audience for them.

But look at the state of the left. I am sure people in this room have had the experience of selling your organisation's paper on the street, when someone walks past and you offer them a copy. They say that they have already got one from someone selling it further up the street. Of course, we know that they are referring to a different group and a different paper and that person does not want to be hassled. The whole thing is complete lunacy.

I am here in a personal capacity only, so I am not speaking for the Independent Socialist Network. But the ISN is a group of socialists who want to see a party come into existence. We do not have any centralised positions; we are simply a space where socialists can come and discuss how they want to achieve socialism. What unifies us is the belief that we need a new socialist party.

At the moment, when we draw into activity new people who do not like what is happening - perhaps they have supported, for example, a Trade Unionist and Socialist

Coalition candidate who is going to fight against the cuts, who is going to fight for local working class people - they soon realise that there are rival left groups. They ask, 'Why aren't you all in the same organisation?' They wonder exactly what the big problem is.

In fact, among the different left groups and the people who are in none, there is a fantastic array of talent, of skills, of education, of learning, of ability. Yet what we have is an utterly unnecessary duplication - the replication of the same tasks being carried out by different groups. Every week you can read the same sort of article on this or that event or subject in several different papers. And you wonder why this duplication of effort is necessary.

Is the theory of state capitalism so fundamentally different from the idea of a deformed or degenerate workers' state, or a society run by a bureaucratised caste, or whatever, that they must lead people to be in different organisations? I think this is something that we really have to try to overcome.

It is extremely important that socialists and Marxists look at the state of the existing organised left. But this is only a small part of it actually. I do not know how many organised Marxists there are in Britain - a couple of thousand? Three thousand? It is a tiny figure. On the other hand, there are probably several tens of thousand of people who would call themselves some sort of Marxist. Probably many times this figure would identify as some kind of socialist. So is there an audience for socialist or Marxist ideas beyond the ranks of the existing far left? I say that there is.

For me the question is twofold. It is not just a question of trying to get the existing left together, because, frankly, I think that is extremely problematic. That will happen out of the process of trying to develop something bigger, to which the existing socialist left can contribute.

That process for me does not involve watering down your ideas. It does not mean arguing for reform rather than fundamental, revolutionary change. Nothing of the sort. It means trying to find a ready audience for the ideas of a break with capitalism. I think that is the task that faces us at the moment.

The crisis is bringing home on a daily basis to millions of working class people that there is something profoundly wrong with capitalism. You cannot go to work, be on benefits, a student or whatever without being affected by the idea that something is profoundly wrong. That gains we have taken for granted are being removed. That things we thought were permanent are not going to be there in the future. That the various safety nets are all being taken away. More and more people are questioning: what is it that is wrong?

Yet the response from the left has been pitiful. Since 2008 we have had five years of financial and economic crisis, including the bailouts that have cost trillions. We are now paying for this through anti-working class measures, whereby the ruling class is using the crisis to advance its assault on working class living standards. They are facing a crisis of profitability. A crisis where their returns are not at the expected level and so they are refusing to invest. Austerity is their strategic attempt to drive down living standards, to cut down the amount of surplus that goes into the state, to cut the social wage, to boost their profits. The intention is to destroy a whole section of outdated capital, preparing the ground for a new period of investment: a new period based on having a bigger reserve army of unemployed, on breaking the ability of the working class to resist through the anti-trade union laws, attacks on civil liberties, on the right to protest. All these things are done to weaken the ability of the working class to resist.

## New layers

But in the process new layers of people are pulled into struggle. Whether it is in the workplace, whether it is unemployed people, those organising around the bedroom tax, the question of workfare, the question of student grants, pensions - all of these things are driving people to question what is wrong with society and what the alternative is.

How do Marxists, how do socialists, respond to this? Now, we can, in our small groups and small networks, keep on producing our papers and producing our arguments - and I do not seek to dismiss that at all. I do not read the *Weekly Worker* assiduously every week, but I do try to keep up with it. And it does perform a service in terms of analysing what is going on, in terms of taking up issues, including the 'archaeological' work, if I can call it that, of digging out past articles and past ideas and applying them in the modern period, I think it is very important. And there is other work done by others on the left that is also very important.

So we need to try and find a way where Marxists can work together, but also a way by which the ideas of Marxism, the ideas of socialism, are taken out to more and more people, not just the existing far left. For me it's not a question of a person being recruited from one far left group to another, which frankly would be



# Supersede the sects?

akin to rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic.

The far left has been in a period of retreat for some time, yet our ideas should be becoming more and more common currency, now we are facing this crisis. But what is significant is the interest being shown in the ideas of Marx; the sales of *Capital*, the number of views of online videos, the blog posts and so on, a lot of which does not come through the organised far left. Actually, much of it can be explained by the fact that people look at the existing far left and are put off. Sometimes it is like walking in on a child's birthday party where there are children screaming, there is cake on the floor and kids throwing things at each other. So I think it is incumbent on all of us to maintain a sense of proportion and a sense of perspective.

We must overcome these internecine squabbles. We have to look at how this crisis is affecting not just our class, but humanity. Whether it is the ecological disaster that could develop on the basis of the unplanned exploitation of the resources of the planet. Whether it is the vast wasteland of humanity, with people having no access to proper healthcare, education and pensions when they are elderly. This crisis should give the Marxists - the people who are meant to be the most serious thinkers - cause for thought.

I do not want to be misunderstood. I think that theory is very important - the clash of ideas generates thought and clarity, and it progresses those ideas. So a debate is absolutely necessary. But I see no need why a socialist party, a Marxist party, cannot share an understanding of class society, the method of Marx and Engels, and then accommodate the clash of ideas within that organisation.

Let us take an example from the realm of economics. There are some Marxists who would argue that the fundamental problem for capitalism is the tendency for the rate of profit to fall. There are other comrades who say it is the anarchy of capitalist production, underconsumption or whatever that causes crisis. I do not see why those arguments cannot be undertaken and developed in the same organisation. A disagreement over such questions is not a reason to split. In fact you could, and should, have within the same party articles expressing all such disagreements and taking up the different ideas. People love a good debate and a good controversy and that could help draw people into the party.

Now, it may be that most people on the left would not disagree with that in principle. But too often what passes for debate on the left is, to put it mildly, simply name-calling. It is not serious. Quite often you hear someone on the left say something perfectly reasonable, but it ends up being opposed - not because of their actual statement, but because of the organisation to which they belong. Supporting the idea may strengthen a rival group. We really do have to overcome such pettiness.

## Fundamentals

The first thing that we can agree on, I think, is that this is not a crisis that can be resolved by going back to a former type of capitalism. It is a fundamental crisis that is inherent in the system itself. We must reject the idea that somehow we can achieve what people want by reforming capitalism. We have to replace it by something completely new.

There are those who talk about the 'crisis of neoliberalism', as if somehow we went back to the period where capitalism was a bit more regulated then things would be different. What we have to get across is that this assault on working class living standards has arisen precisely out of a structural crisis within capitalism. If they could, the capitalists would like to take us back to a time before the post-war settlement and the welfare state. It was not just the social democratic parties that attained that: the ruling class itself was petrified of what would happen if they did not make those concessions. Then there was the post-war economic upswing that came to an end in the 1970s and capitalism has been trying to deal with this ever since.

Many people in Britain have traditionally looked to the Labour Party to defend them from the attacks of the ruling class. Communists, Marxists, socialists would generally have a shared understanding about the Labour Party and its inability to fundamentally resolve crises. In my view the Labour Party has never been a socialist party - it has always been a strange mixture of liberalism and some variants of socialism. Some would call this mix 'Labourism', which upholds constitutionality, a reluctance to endorse activity outside of parliament.

Many people are brought up in the tradition whereby if you are working class then you vote Labour and there is something sensible and something serious in that. Working class people are not stupid: they are very practical. And they know that a Labour government, generally speaking, will be better than a Tory government. So in the next general election I think we are most likely to get a Labour victory. The many leftwing candidates, of the type I have supported in the past, who will stand in elections, will not pick up many votes at this stage, with people wanting to kick out the Tory-Liberal Democrat government and put Labour into power. But at the same time people do not expect things to really change much for the better even once this has happened. This results in a cycle where Labour gets voted out, but then it is: 'Don't rock the boat: we must get Labour back in'.

I know that Marxists are involved in the Labour Party, including, I am sure, people in this room. There is Socialist Appeal and others who would call themselves Marxists. And this is an important debate - where should Marxists be?

I think that we must create a party that is new and is not Labour. I have been involved in several attempts to do this. And these projects have failed for numerous different reasons. I am not arguing that we should attempt to jump over history, to achieve something before it is possible. I do not want to see a party trying to become electable by being popular, if that means watering down what it believes in. As I have said, the ideas of socialism *can* be popular. They strike a chord with working class people who want to see their lives change for the better. I think that socialists have a duty to take these ideas out in a popular form and draw people into discussions as to how society can be changed, how working people can run it themselves, how the product of their labour can benefit all, not just the few.

If socialists, together, organised to produce and popularise the propaganda, to deliver the agitation

in combination with the activity, I believe we could build a significant socialist organisation in Britain, numbering in a very short space of time several thousands of people.

## Left Unity

Now, the latest of these attempts is the call by Ken Loach for a new party of the left. I have read the articles in the *Weekly Worker* about this and I think I preferred Peter Manson's to Paul Demarty's, but my approach is that this is something that socialists should engage with. The Left Unity website has featured many articles written by people putting themselves forwards as points of contact for this project and describing themselves as socialists. There are articles arguing that there should be a new socialist, class-struggle organisation. And so far around 8,000 people have responded. Now, I do not know what is going to happen, but I will be arguing within it that Left Unity should adopt a socialist programme, that it should commit itself to the transformation of society. That is what I think all Marxists, all socialists should do.

Of course, there are all sorts of differences that will arise. What should its attitude to the Labour Party be? How do you relate to the trade unions, to the question of elections? What sort of activity should be organised? And so on. One thing that I am absolutely convinced about is that a new socialist party cannot emerge fully formed and fully armed like Athena from the head of Zeus. Zeus, of course, got a terrible headache, his forehead split open and out sprung Athena. That is not how a new party will emerge.

We have the headache, if you like, of how we construct this new party, and it may be that at the end of the Left Unity process we do not end up where most of us in this room would want to be. But what we can be absolutely certain of is that if those 8,000 people - and I think there are many more - have for one reason or another turned their back on the Labour Party, have not looked to the far left, have not looked to the Greens, then something is *missing* that we Marxists can help to deliver, bringing clarity of thought and ideas, ideas on the construction of a programme. I am not going to say what that programme should or should not contain - that is a question of debate.

There will be a process of debate and discussion over whether there should be a new party, and if so what *sort* of new party it should be. I will be arguing that this new party cannot just be a mildly more leftwing version of the politics that the 8,000 people rejected and I will be putting forward four basic proposals.

1. It should fundamentally be a party that proclaims the need to supersede capitalism with socialism. It should proclaim openly on its banner that it is a socialist organisation.
2. It should be an organisation that fights tooth and nail to defend working class living standards - in the workplace, at home, in all aspects of working class life. All the existing parties accept the logic of the market, of the profit system. By contrast we will have to argue that the root problem we are facing *is* the profit system, which needs to be replaced by socialism, through active class struggle.
3. We should fight wherever possible not only to defend, but to extend, working class rights, working class living standards and working class

conditions. Any improvement under this system can only be obtained through struggle. It is never going to be conceded. Whereas democratic rights are being rolled back, we have to fight to extend them. If you want proportional representation, if you want to repeal the anti-union laws and restore the right to protest, you have to struggle for it.

4. The new party should be democratic. That for me means an individual-membership organisation, with everyone having equal rights and obligations. On disagreement and dissent, I hope the far-left approach is not carried over - whereby closed groups debate policy in secret, resulting in new lines appearing as if from nowhere; even if you are a participant in the debate, you are not allowed to say which side you are on. I do not think that in the tradition we look to this was ever how things worked in the past, but, even if it was, the conditions do not exist to justify such undemocratic practices today. The notion that somehow you can hide your differences is ridiculous. Through Facebook, the social media and so on, these are instantaneously spread around the world. This is a good thing! Thought progresses through the clash of ideas and, so long as they fit within the general line of march of the organisation, differences and dissent are no problem.

## Party and strategy

The far left has become too used to working in isolation - maybe coming together reluctantly at a meeting someone has called and then handing out their separate leaflets. It reminds me of the finches observed by Darwin on the Galapagos islands - they underwent different mutations as a result of their separation on different islands, but they all remained finches. Whilst the idiosyncrasies of the far left may drive us to distraction, a period of working together in the same organisation would remove most of those idiosyncrasies and the rough edges would be smoothed over. Most of the differences that typically lead to splits are not matters of principle. Often they are purely tactical or analytical.

For me a party is needed in order to change society. How does the working class become the ruling class? I think

all Marxists would agree that the emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself - though many only pay lip service to this. It will not be an elite, a bureaucracy or a parliamentary majority acting on its own. It will be the working class through its own activity. I do not know the exact proportion made up by the working class in Britain today, but it must be 70% or 80% of the population. There is also a smaller, petty bourgeois class that looks both ways, and then a tiny ruling class at the top. So for socialism to come about requires a democratic transformation of society - the act of the majority.

So *how* does that majority act to become the ruling class? It has the numbers, so technically it could happen tomorrow. But the working class must become conscious that a fundamental breach with capitalism is necessary. To achieve that, to go from where we are with a myriad of competing sects and atomised individuals with no party, to a mass movement mobilising 30-40 million people is a monumental task. So it is a question of organising those people who agree *now* to become agitators for our ideas and persuade other people, and of those people then constituting a party.

The party exists to change society and the programme of the party outlines the strategy we need to carry through when we gain power. The working class, we need to explain, must become the power in society and implement its programme to begin to change society - beginnings which will lay the basis for a completely different form of society, without exploitation and classes.

I will finish on this point - why is it that the NHS is held by most people in such reverence and affection? I think it is because it encapsulates in a certain way the embryo of the future society, of what it could be. Everyone pays in according to what they earn and then they take out what they need. You may have been on benefits and have paid very little in terms of national insurance, but if you have cancer you get treatment. The NHS exists in the here and now, and people understand that the needs of society are much more important than the profits of the few. The NHS presages, if you like, that society that we define with the well known aphorism: "From each according to their ability; to each according to their needs" ●

## Fighting fund

## Finish the job

**C**ongratulations to our readers and supporters for smashing through the £1,500 barrier to ensure we reached our April fighting fund target. You actually helped us to a final total of £1,614.

Brilliant stuff. But a word of caution: we didn't quite make up for March's £160 deficit, so we should now try to ensure we do so in May by adding the remaining £36 to this month's total.

Particular thanks go to comrades GR and AL, who both sent us a £50 cheque. Then there was JK, who wrote one for £20, and TR who donated £10 by the same method. Comrade MD used PayPal to make his £10 contribution (he was one of 9,150 online readers last week) and there were 10 standing order donors,

who gave £222 altogether.

And, although the new month is only one day old as I write, we already have £183 towards May's total. But don't get too excited - the reason for that is provided by all those standing orders that land in our account on the first of each month. Seventeen of them, mostly for £5 or £10, it has to be said. But it all adds up - especially when you throw in donations like AD's £30 and BP's £25.

Once again, thanks to all who contributed in April. Now let's finish the job in May! ●

**Robbie Rix**

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



## OUR HISTORY

# Emancipation through the Russian Revolution

Alexandra Kollontai kept on fighting for women against overwhelming odds. **Anne McShane** completes her examination of the role of this inspirational Bolshevik leader

**W**hen in February 1917 the women of Petrograd took to the streets against the tsarist government, Alexandra Kollontai was in Norway. She had joined the Bolshevik wing of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party in 1915 and became an important figure in the revolutionary movement. Like other Bolsheviks, including Lenin, Nadia Krupskaya and Inessa Armand, she had been forced to live in exile. Now, along with these other political refugees, she made hurried arrangements to return.

## February and summer

On arrival in Petrograd (St Petersburg) in March 1917, she found a very different mood in the city from the environment of repression and fear she had fled in 1908. Now there was a powerful feeling of change, with a myriad of strikes and demonstrations on a daily basis. She describes her happiness to be back, "standing on the soil of liberated Russia" after nine years in exile. But she was also aware that this "was only the beginning of even more momentous events and difficult social struggles".<sup>1</sup>

The situation for women had changed dramatically. Years of war and mass conscription had led to their mass entry into the labour market and they now made up more than half of the workforce. As well as the textile and service industry, women now worked in metallurgy, mining and timber, and whole towns were populated almost exclusively by women. Conditions of work continued to be appalling, with long hours and no childcare or maternity rights.

A number of strikes had taken place in the lead-up to February 1917. Concessions had been won for maternity leave and the right to strike. But there was a growing awareness and sense of power among working women, who were not satisfied with minor reforms, especially in the face of the terrible impact of the war. There was enormous social tension, particularly in Petrograd, where an observant police officer remarked in December 1916 that the suffering women were "a store of combustible material" enough to generate an inferno.<sup>2</sup>

On International Women's Day working class women streamed out of workplaces and homes, demanding food and an end to the war. They marched through the city calling on others to join them, dispatching delegations to factories demanding solidarity. There were dramatic scenes, as thousands slid down the river banks and walked across the frozen river to avoid the police, who had blocked the bridges to the city centre. The next day they were back again and the situation transformed quickly into a general strike, with mass desertions from the army and male workers joining the struggle, as the crowds marched on the duma (parliament). Under the pressure from below the tsarist regime finally collapsed in March, but the provisional government under the 'socialist', Alexander Kerensky, changed little for the better - the war continued and the food crisis worsened.

The strike movement reignited in summer, spreading to service industry



**Alexandra Kollontai (left): civil war caused regression**

employees. In May 40,000 laundresses went on strike over pay and working conditions, and with a demand for municipal laundries. Kollontai was active in setting up the union involved, and also became a spokesperson for the soldiers' wives, who held demonstrations throughout this period in protest against the harsh conditions of the war and the lack of wages. She, along with other Bolshevik women - Konkordiia Samoilova, Klavdiia Nikolaeva, Nadia Krupskaya, Lyudmila Stal and Inessa Armand, to name but a few - campaigned in the proletarian quarters of Moscow and Petrograd. They became brilliant agitational speakers, addressing huge audiences of soldiers, sailors and factory workers, as well as specifically women workers.

The Bolsheviks relaunched the paper for working women, *Rabotnitsa*, in May 1917 - Lenin's sister, Anna Ulianova, was also involved. The journal had a very systematic approach to distribution and recruitment, and sent its journalists out every day to speak to women directly about their views and experiences. It also set up a women's school to train female political activists. The approach of writers is said to have been more ambitious and critical on the woman question, as the journal "accorded women's emancipation an even higher priority within the revolutionary process" and "was more critical of the sexist behaviour of men".<sup>3</sup>

As the summer wore on, the issue of women's equality became more central to the demands of the various left parties. Kollontai was elected to the central committee of the Bolsheviks in August 1917 and in that position she voted to launch an uprising in October 1917. Mariia Ulianova (Lenin's younger sister), Sofia Smidovich and Anna Artiukhina took part alongside her and countless other women in the discussion, planning and carrying out of the revolution. They "held

important positions in the soviet, the party organisation, the military organisation centre" and the party combat centre.<sup>4</sup>

Although still very much a minority, they were certainly at the centre of the party. For Bolshevik women the revolution held the key to their own emancipation. And in the aftermath of the revolution legal equality was declared as the first step in the process. The real challenge was to make these legal rights a reality.

## After October

The first congress of women workers was held on November 6 1917. It was attended by 500 delegates, representing 80,000 women from soviets, factories, trade unions and youth organisations. Kollontai says the event was organised on her initiative as a central committee member. She proposed a detailed plan to set up an official 'department of mother and child', which was discussed and agreed. These proposals were then adopted by the government. It "was precisely the aspirations expressed at the conference which served as the basis for Soviet legislation in this area".<sup>5</sup>

The event also had a debate on setting up a separate organisation for work among women. A number of leading delegates, including Klavdiia Nikolaeva, argued that "we class-conscious women workers know that we have no special women's interests and that there should be no separate women's organisations".<sup>6</sup> Kollontai, who had advocated a separate organisation since 1905, disagreed and urged working class women to look out for their own interests, suggesting that they should have their own representatives in the constituent assembly.

It is interesting to note that Nikolaeva had been a supporter of Kollontai in 1905, but had subsequently shifted on this issue. It appears that the core

group of women around *Rabotnitsa* wanted to continue to organise around the journal, but thought anything more would be separatism. Kollontai did not win her argument and the 12-day event concluded with a decision just to carry on with *Rabotnitsa*.<sup>7</sup> The delegates also agreed to hold a further congress on International Women's Day. However, the outbreak of civil war meant that *Rabotnitsa* stopped publication in January 1918 due to a shortage of newsprint, and the conference was cancelled because a special party congress was called in March to debate the Brest-Litovsk treaty.

Kollontai had been appointed commissar for welfare in November 1917 and became the first female member of government. However, being in charge of welfare was not a role she relished. She describes how it was very difficult dealing with the "exhausted, hungry and desperate - these poor victims were now bitterly cursing the Bolsheviks and their empty promises".<sup>8</sup> Kollontai introduced maternity provision, mother and baby homes, and welfare payments. She also worked with Yakov Sverdlov, the newly appointed head of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, in drafting the 1918 code on 'Marriage, the family and guardianship'. This ended the religious sanction of marriage and allowed for civil registration and divorce on demand for either partner. It also declared that men and women were legally equal, guaranteed equal pay for equal work and legalised abortion. It equalised the status of children born within and outside of wedlock, set the minimum marriage age at 18 for males and 16 for females, and required the consent of both parties.

Kollontai resigned as commissar for social welfare in 1918 in protest at the Brest-Litovsk treaty, which concluded an unequal peace with Germany - the treaty was unpopular with a number of women activists. Kollontai and Inessa

Armand joined the left communists led by Bukharin, which condemned the peace as opportunist surrender. They believed that the new state was becoming far too centralised and undemocratic. The civil war was painful and demoralising, and policies were being formulated that seemed to go against the principles of the revolution. The conditions of the civil war placed huge burdens on women, who assumed even more responsibility for running industry, as more men joined the Red Army. During this period Kollontai and others were dispatched to agitate for support for the revolutionary government. She was approached by women textile workers in Kineshma in the Volga region, who complained about the continuing difficulties they were experiencing and their disappointment in the Soviet government. She subsequently contacted Armand, Konkordiia Samoilova and Nikolaeva, and they agreed that action was urgently needed. Their discussions culminated in the holding of a further event in November 1918 - an all-Russian congress of women workers and peasants.

In 1918 the feminist organisations of 10 years before had all but disappeared. The movement was now facing the task of making progress within the new society. With the difficulties of the civil war and the harsh Russian winter, the organisers did not expect a big attendance and were shocked when over a thousand delegates appeared. They were a diverse group of women from right across Russia: "a motley array of red-kerchiefed - mostly workers - wearing sheepskins, colourful local costumes or army greatcoats". Lenin attended the congress and "created a sensation". His speech "was little more than a brief and general endorsement of emancipation and an appeal to women to support the regime". However, it was a unique occasion, as "no other head of state had ever said anything like it in the history of the woman question".<sup>9</sup>

The congress showed the determination of these women to set their agenda within the new society. It was agreed that the time had come to set up a separate organisation to fight for an agreed programme. The organisers wanted to make sure that the promises of real equality developed into something concrete. The party could not be entrusted to pursue the liberation of women, especially in the face of competing priorities. There was a debate on the socialisation of domestic labour and childcare provision. It was agreed to draft a strategy to extend these services, freeing women up for full participation in the new society.

A commission set up by the congress began to energetically work on producing a permanent structure. The first branch was formed in Petrograd and proposals were put to Sverdlov, who was also the party's general secretary, to extend the organisation nationally. Although initially reluctant, he was persuaded to help and became a key figure in the setting up of the Zhenotdel (women's department). In her memoirs Kollontai paid tribute to his support, as well as that of Lenin and Trotsky, in these early days. At a party congress in March 1919 she made the case for



permanent structures. She argued that the party and state needed to “conduct a struggle with the conditions that are oppressing the woman, to emancipate her as a housewife, as a mother”. This meant “agitation not only by words, but by deeds”.<sup>10</sup> It included drawing women into “socially useful projects, such as day nurseries, public dining rooms, and maternity homes, which would really serve to liberate women in their everyday lives”. The congress approved the proposals.

## Rebuff

The Zhenotdel was put on a formal footing in September 1919 and Inessa Armand was appointed as its first head. This was surely a rebuff to Kollontai, who had been the most prominent writer on the woman question and the main driving force behind the setting up of the organisation. She also had experience gained through her work with Clara Zetkin in the Frauenbewegung in Germany in the pre-war years.

But it seems that Armand was perceived as a safer option - a far more careful and measured individual, with a tried and tested history of support for Lenin and the party leadership. Kollontai in contrast had been a Menshevik up to 1915 and was a highly controversial individual in both her political and private life. As Louise Bryant remarked, Kollontai was dramatic and “so easily carried away by her enthusiasm that she is unmindful of how easily wings are broken”. Her “political judgement, even from the standpoint of an orthodox communist, is often very bad”, although she had “unlimited courage” in opposing the party leadership, even Lenin.<sup>11</sup>

But Armand was not some unthinking sycophant. She held similar ideas to Kollontai, although she was not so outspoken. Her attempt to write a pamphlet on ‘free love’ in 1914 had come to nothing, partly because of discouragement from Lenin. He saw such ideas as bourgeois and believed ‘free love’ could be interpreted as an advocacy of promiscuity. Armand had intended it to be an examination of the possibility for new and independent relationships between the sexes.

Armand had also developed a concept of a delegate-based structure that would become the main organisational methods of the Zhenotdel for the period of its existence. Delegates were elected from branches for a period of initially three, four or six months and later for a year. They were sent to various unions and government bodies to be educated, particularly in administration. On their return they shared their knowledge and other delegates went forward in their place. The temporary, recallable nature of the delegate bodies was an important principle for Armand. She believed that it ensured the organisation did not become disconnected from the working class. It was most definitely a profoundly democratic and flexible method of organisation. As well as the educational structures, there were also regular delegate meetings where the aims and politics of the organisation would be discussed and agreed.

Initially the main tasks were assisting the civil war effort, and promoting labour conscription and education on a wide range of issues, including literacy, childcare, health and political training. The organisation also set up canteens, communal laundries and creches in order to make real the government commitment to socialisation of domestic labour. A number of academics, including Armand’s biographer, RC Elwood, believe that the organisation was simply a compliant part of the state apparatus. However, this is not borne out by the significant number of initiatives taken which challenged the authority

of state enterprises and trade unions. One was an instruction from the Zhenotdel in 1919 “requiring that every enterprise have at least one woman delegate appointed to the factory inspectorate”.<sup>12</sup> These inspectors would ensure that the state legislation on maternity, working hours, etc would be implemented. They were often unpopular with government departments, factory owners and unions, and seen as a nuisance. At the same time the organisation struggled to make ground.

The theoretical journal *Kommunistka* was launched in 1920, with Krupskaya as editor. It often carried intense and controversial debate on ideas for emancipation. And Zhenotdel sent out propaganda teams to mobilise women in support of the Red Army and the new regime. These teams “threaded their way on agitprop trains and boats through the red areas, stopping at remote villages to regale the population with poster art, song and dance groups, and speeches”. Samoilova, who was an extremely well-liked speaker, “sailed up and down the Volga with a plea for support and a promise of liberation, which she proclaimed from the decks of the ‘Red Star’”.<sup>13</sup>

The intensity of the work took its toll in terms of the health of key activists. Both Samoilova and Armand contracted cholera, while Kollontai had a heart attack in November 1919 and was unable to work for much of 1920. Armand and Samoilova died in 1920, both aged 46, ground down by their efforts to make the legal rights of women a reality. The Zhenotdel had lost two of its most important and popular leaders. The gap would be very hard to fill.

Meanwhile attitudes towards the organisation’s work did not improve. This was despite complaints to the central committee and the issuing of official decrees. Samoilova had argued that many male comrades saw the project as “beneath their dignity” and “exhibited a lot of prejudice towards the Zhenotdel”.<sup>14</sup> Lenin confirmed this problem of prejudice in his interview with Clara Zetkin in 1920, comparing the attitude of many men in the party towards their wives with that of “slave-owners”.<sup>15</sup>

Kollontai had recovered her health by the time of Armand’s death and was appointed in her place. She immediately began to shift the organisation towards a more aggressive stand on women’s liberation. Adamant that “the primary function of the Zhenotdel was not to popularise the general line of the party among women, but to introduce into the building of the new state principles based on the interests of women”, she took on the party leadership. Kollontai’s goal was nothing less than the creation of “unprecedented changes in the nature of sexual relations” and “a revolution in the outlook, emotions and the inner world of working people”.<sup>16</sup> She fought to extend these principles by pushing for the organisation to spread out to the far reaches of the former empire, including central Asia.

Kollontai had written on the question of the family, sexual relations and the creation of a ‘new woman’ in various pamphlets and articles since 1917. Her pre-revolutionary writings had also been reprinted. Her ideas therefore had wide currency among activists in the Zhenotdel and she was very influential. She also had a following among sections of the Komsomol (the party’s youth section), which was at the forefront of the debate on a new sexuality. Kollontai encouraged the ending of old family bonds and argued they had to make way for the development of independent and free relationships between man and women.

She celebrated the appearance of

“a variety of personal relationships - indissoluble marriage with its ‘stable family’, ‘free unions’, ‘secret adultery’, a girl living quite openly with her lover in so-called ‘wild marriage’; pair marriage, marriage in threes and even the complicated marriage of four people - not to talk about the various forms of commercial prostitution”.<sup>17</sup> She argued that in some circumstances it was better for women to live apart from their husband or partner and have their childcare and domestic needs looked after by the state. Only then could they begin to become truly free.

She proposed a radical programme of work to the Zhenotdel and to the 8th Congress of the Soviets in December 1920. This included measures for the promotion of women, the extension of childcare and state canteens, and the promotion of women in the workforce. She had also been campaigning to get prostitutes into employment in factories and state enterprises, and away from what she considered to be an immense social evil. She wanted real political and economic power for women. The programme was agreed, but implementation was never achieved, as both Kollontai and the Zhenotdel became increasingly marginalised in the coming years.

Opposition to the Zhenotdel from within the party continued to be a problem. Activists were often demoralised at the lack of support from local party committees. They also complained of a lack of clear direction from the Zhenotdel centre. But Kollontai was not able or willing to give detailed instructions and believed that the answer was for the party to give the woman question more political priority.

## Demise

With the end of the civil war in 1921 the New Economic Policy was introduced, and tensions intensified. The Zhenotdel found itself in a power struggle with parts of the state. Its branches in unions and factories also faced problems, and Zhenotdel delegates often found themselves isolated or made to do menial tasks instead of being properly trained. The end of the civil war had brought very new and difficult challenges, as men returned from the war and the market was reintroduced under NEP. Male resentment grew against the Zhenotdel, which continued to fight for jobs and equality for women. Many men, including party members, did not want their wives involved in political activities. They wanted a traditional life, with women back in the home. The canteens, which had been so popular in the civil war period, were now closing down. Society was going backwards and with it there was a huge pressure for women to return to traditional roles.

Also the necessity for female labour during the civil war had strengthened women’s bargaining power and the ability of the Zhenotdel to make demands. Now the situation was dramatically reversed and women were being forced out of employment. Kollontai was completely opposed to the liquidation of the gains. But in the teeth of increased opposition within the party it was almost inevitable she would be defeated.

Her role within the Workers Opposition did not help to win her favour with the leadership. She joined the faction in January 1921 and became one of its main spokespersons. The Workers Opposition objected to the NEP and believed that control of production and industry should be handed over to the unions. She threw herself into a speaking tour and took part in a stormy debate in the party congress in 1921. Kollontai’s biographer, Barbara Clements, argues that she was treated in a sexist fashion throughout the debate, with Lenin, Trotsky and Bukharin ranged against

her. The faction lost the debate but carried on its struggle within the Third International, much to the anger of the top leadership. In particular she had flouted a ban on publication of the faction documents. These incidents were to lead to her removal from the leadership of the Zhenotdel.

In 1922 Kollontai was replaced by Sofia Smidovich as head of the organisation. Smidovich was a very different leader - far more conservative in her views on sexuality and more concerned with protecting women than advancing claims for their independence from marriage. Kollontai was sent to Norway as the Soviet diplomatic envoy. There in political exile, she continued her writing, including an article, ‘Make way for winged Eros’, which caused a tremendous stir. She said later that her “sexual and moral views were bitterly fought by many party comrades of both sexes” and a great deal of bile was directed toward her.<sup>19</sup> She was depicted as a woman of loose morals, who would lead the youth of the Soviet Union towards all kinds of depravity. Smidovich was one of those who contributed to the heated debates on Kollontai’s legacy. The new conservative period was reflected in her personality.

Even Smidovich, however, found it very difficult to make progress. She complained bitterly in 1924 that the leadership should put the organisation out of its misery rather than issue fake decrees of support. With Lenin dead and Stalin cementing his control, the noose was tightening on the Zhenotdel. Nikolaeva succeeded Smidovich in 1924, but she too was removed in 1926, when she and other leaders, including Krupskaya, became involved in the Leningrad Opposition under Zinoviev. Her successor, Alexandra Artiukhina, was to become the last leader. The Zhenotdel was closed down by Stalin in 1930, on the basis that the woman question was ‘solved’ in the Soviet Union. With the partial exception of central Asia, women were no longer allowed to organise together.

## Inspirational

It is extremely difficult to summarise the history of the Zhenotdel, or Kollontai’s contribution. It reveals, however, a number of important questions. Not least of these is the dynamic way in which women in the Russian Revolution took up the struggle for their own liberation. Rather than being backward and reticent, they were at the forefront of change. Even in 1930 women delegates loudly protested the closure of their organisation.

The women of the Russian

Revolution believed that they could achieve their own emancipation though socialism. But they faced immense obstacles - not least the belligerence of male comrades, including some on the leadership. It also proved very difficult to break out of the constraints of the old society, especially when the revolution was on the retreat and in an environment of extreme poverty. The decision to create a separate organisation had dramatic consequences in terms of what was achieved in the first year. But the prejudice the women faced hardened and they became ghettoised. Kollontai was an imaginative and courageous leader. But she too became frustrated at the failure to make progress and became a permanent oppositionist.

This is our history - an account of women who fought for their emancipation as part and parcel of that of the working class. They have been forgotten, or remembered for the wrong reasons - as wives and lovers rather than important political leaders in their own right.

I hope this small contribution will help renew interest in those years and the inspirational struggles of Russian women ●

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## Notes

1. www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1926/auto-biography.htm.
2. B Evans Clements *Bolshevik women* Cambridge 1997, p120.
3. *Ibid* p132.
4. R Stites *The women’s liberation movement in Russia* p306.
5. www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1918/steps-motherhood.htm.
6. C Porter *Kollontai: a biography* London 1980, p281.
7. C Eubanks Hayden, ‘The Zhenotdel and the Bolshevik Party’ *Russian History* Vol 3, No2 (1976), p153.
8. C Porter *Kollontai: a biography* London 1980, p279.
9. R Stites *The women’s liberation movement in Russia* Princeton 1978, p330.
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12. C Eubanks Hayden, ‘The Zhenotdel and the Bolshevik Party’ *Russian History* Vol 3, No2 (1976), p159.
13. R Stites *The women’s liberation movement in Russia* Princeton 1978, p332.
14. C Eubanks Hayden, ‘The Zhenotdel and the Bolshevik Party’ *Russian History* Vol 3, No2 (1976), p161.
15. www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1925/lenin/zetkin2.htm.
16. C Eubanks Hayden, ‘The Zhenotdel and the Bolshevik Party’ *Russian History* Vol 3, No2 (1976), p162.
17. www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1921/sex-class-struggle.htm.
18. B Evans Clements, ‘Kollontai’s contribution to the Workers Opposition’ *Russian History* Vol 2, No2 (1975)
19. www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1926/autobiography.htm.

# Appeal from the editor

There were no contributions to our legal appeal this week, so the total raised remains at £3,380. At least I do not think there were any - as Robbie Rix reports elsewhere, there were a good number of donations made to the *Weekly Worker*, but no-one specified that their contribution was for the appeal.

As readers will know, we have agreed a settlement of £1,000 plus costs following the publication of an inaccurate article last year (see ‘Unreserved apology’ *Weekly Worker* February 7). But we are still waiting to hear from the complainant’s solicitors the exact sum they wish to claim from us for their expenses. All we can say is that it will not be a trifling amount.

We have not yet had any returns from comrades taking

our appeal to their union branch or other organisation, so if you have a meeting coming up, why not download the letter and draft motion from our website? It is the fourth item on the revolving carousel near the top of our home page. But make sure you put in the motion in advance.

To make an individual donation, the simplest, cheapest and quickest way of doing so is by bank transfer from your online bank account. Our account number is 00744310 (sort code: 30-99-64). Or you can click on the PayPal ‘Donate’ button on the website, but in either case please do not forget to let us know the purpose of the donation. Finally, send cheques and postal orders, payable to ‘Weekly Worker’, to BCM Box 928, London WC1N 3XX ●

**Peter Manson**



## ITALY

# Grand coalition for austerity

Toby Abse reports on the formation of yet another anti-working class administration in Italy

The April 20 re-election of Giorgio Napolitano to the presidency of the republic has quite predictably led to the formation of a 'grand coalition' government within a week - the very outcome that former Partito Democratico (PD) leader Pierluigi Bersani had obstinately tried to block for nearly two months.

It was obvious from his April 22 inaugural speech, in which he verbally chastised the behaviour of all the politicians since the general election in the manner of a stern father addressing his errant progeny, that Napolitano was absolutely determined that the PD - dominated by former 'official communists' and now universally considered to be centre-left - together with Silvio Berlusconi's Popolo della Libertà (PdL) and Mario Monti's centrist Scelta Civica, should all accept such a government as quickly as possible. This meant firstly choosing a prime minister designate, who would neither cause further splits in the faction-ridden PD nor be unacceptable to the PdL, and, secondly, picking a set of ministers who would not be seen as 'divisive' by either of the two major parties.

Scelta Civica was judged to have very little bargaining power, both because of its poor showing in the February general election - it finished in fourth place, well behind Beppe Grillo's Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) - and because as a centrist formation it was much more ideologically committed to a grand coalition than either the PD or the PdL. Both of the latter parties would have preferred either outright victory or the dominant role in a coalition that excluded the other major contender - the PdL had intermittently flirted with the idea of a second election this year to achieve these ends.

The PD's Enrico Letta was a logical choice as prime minister of such a grand coalition for a variety of reasons. In the first place, Bersani had already resigned as party secretary after his 'triple failure'. He had failed to form what he had called a "government of change" (a minority administration alongside the soft-left Sinistra Ecologia Libertà committed to his eight-point reform programme); he had failed to see through the election of former Christian Democrat Franco Marini as president of the republic on the first ballot, as agreed with Silvio Berlusconi and his PdL; and he had failed to ensure the election of the PD's second, more confrontational, anti-Berlusconi candidate, Romano Prodi, to the same office on the fourth ballot. Although Bersani remains in place as caretaker secretary until a successor is chosen, he no longer has any political credibility either as a party leader or as a potential premier.

Letta, as the vice-secretary - in effect deputy leader - of the PD, was far less directly and personally implicated in any of these disasters, without appearing to have profited from them in the way that other possible PD candidates for the premiership might have done. The choice of either one of the two ex-premiers, Giuliano Amato and Massimo D'Alema, or of Matteo Renzi, the leader of the PD's right wing, would have been far more controversial and deepened the existing factional splits within the party. So, despite the initial forecasts about Amato and Renzi in particular, their chances had receded by the time of Letta's emergence as the front-runner on April 24.

The choice of the 46-year-old Letta, the third youngest post-war



President Giorgio Napolitano (left) and his prime minister, Enrico Letta

Italian premier, could be seen as a generational shift away from elderly veterans like Amato and D'Alema without inflaming all the party's older leading members in a way that the even younger Renzi, with his belligerent talk of "scrapping", might well have done. Moreover, in terms of the politics of a grand coalition, Letta had the advantage of being an ex-Christian Democrat rather than an ex-communist and thus closer to the centre ground. It is also helpful in terms of Italy's relationship with other EU states that Letta has had some experience in the European parliament<sup>1</sup> as well as in Italian domestic politics - Bersani's lack of competence in foreign languages had been seen as a potential drawback in a prime minister at a time when Italy has such an urgent need to negotiate some easing of austerity within the EU.

Last but not least, Letta is the nephew of Berlusconi's longstanding political chief of staff, Gianni Letta, the respectable face of the PdL, who was always called upon to act on Berlusconi's behalf in any delicate negotiations with either the PD or the Vatican. Not only are the two Lettas on good terms in general, but there even seem to have been some occasions over the last week when the uncle gave the nephew some direct assistance in the course of negotiations that eventually allowed a new cabinet to be put together.

## Cabinet

That new cabinet includes a mixture of political and the technocratic ministers, even if the balance is clearly towards the political. Of the 21 ministers, eight are from the PD, five from the PdL, three from Scelta Civica or its Christian Democratic ally, the UdC, and four are technocrats. The remaining one, foreign minister Emma Bonino, is difficult to categorise, since, regardless of formal labels, she is one of the historic leaders of the Partito Radicale, which has on occasions

allied with both Berlusconi and the centre-left, but cannot be categorised as conventionally centrist because of its anti-clerical stance on issues such as abortion, divorce and gay rights.

Although Bonino is 65 and two of the leading technocrats - Anna Maria Cancellieri, the justice minister, and Fabrizio Saccomanni,<sup>2</sup> the economics minister - are 69 and 70 respectively, the bulk of the cabinet are rather younger than most Italian cabinets in recent times. In addition seven of them are women. Two of these - both from the PD, needless to say - are of non-Italian birth: Josefa Idem, the minister for equal opportunities is of German origin, whilst Cecile Kyenge, the minister for integration, the first black minister in Italian history, is of Congolese origin.

Whilst the PD not only has the prime minister, but also a larger proportion of ministers than its rivals, the PdL has secured the ministry of the interior and the role of deputy prime minister for Angelino Alfano, the Sicilian who as Berlusconi's justice minister was responsible for the notorious 'Lodo Alfano', one of Berlusconi's legal attempts to give himself judicial immunity. This means that, although Berlusconi dropped his demands to be given a ministry when the PD agreed that its own former premiers, D'Alema and Amato, would not be given cabinet office either, he does have far more influence over Letta's government than might at first appear from the list of ministers.

The careful choice of cabinet members meant that, despite many threats of abstention - or even in a handful of cases votes against the government - from up to 50 of the more anti-Berlusconi PD parliamentarians, in the event the PD voted solidly for the grand coalition on its first parliamentary vote of confidence. Despite the presence of the banker, Fabrizio Saccomanni, as economics minister, which is clearly designed to reassure the markets, Berlusconi seems to have secured

some of his economic agenda - he is seeking some easing of austerity, but in his own somewhat reckless and demagogic fashion. Letta has agreed not to impose the June instalment of the IMU property tax, which hits all householders - although he has left it rather vague as to whether this tax will be totally abolished in the way Berlusconi demanded during the election campaign. The problem for a 'responsible' government, committed to 'sound governance', is that total abolition of the IMU would necessarily involve either the imposition of some alternative tax to make up for the loss of revenue or further cuts in public spending at a time of deepening recession and rising unemployment.

Because of the long-drawn-out political crisis, there has been some discussion of a proposal for a constitutional convention. If it were held, the PdL would doubtless try and move towards a presidential republic proper - there seems a more general consensus behind the idea of cutting the number of parliamentarians and thus the amount of public money they receive. It is possible that some of the ideas in the report drawn up by Napolitano's '10 wise men', on resolving the stalemate that followed February's election, will be implemented. Electoral reform is self-evidently very much under discussion, but it is not clear whether the PdL will finally accept a revision of the infamous 'Pig Law' introduced in 2005 and agree on some more rational, even if not necessarily more democratic, electoral system.

## Opposition

The main parliamentary opposition will come from Beppe Grillo's M5S, which has, of course, denounced the coalition as the *inciucio* (stitch-up) it had predicted from the beginning. This glosses over the fact that, by refusing to do any real deal with Bersani for two months, M5S itself ensured that the coalitionists within

the PD gained the upper hand - had M5S voted for Prodi on the fourth presidential ballot, all this could in all probability have been averted.

The other political grouping that is clearly opposed to the coalition on an anti-Berlusconi basis is Nichi Vendola's Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà, which joined M5S in voting against the new government in its first vote of confidence. Any immediate prospect of fusion between SEL and the PD has now clearly gone and for the time being SEL will be taking up the role of a left social democratic opposition and, presumably, voting against any obviously anti-working class neoliberal measures, such as privatisations, welfare cuts or labour market 'reforms'.

The chances of any substantial left split from the PD have diminished; the unreliability of the so-called Young Turks, who appeared for some months to advocate a more social democratic line, making at least some concessions to the interests of organised labour, was shown when in the days before Letta's emergence as premier designate, they seemed to be seeking a reconciliation with Renzi on the basis of an apolitical alliance of the younger generation against the old guard within the PD.

The Lega Nord will be opposing the coalition from the right and has already made predictably racist comments about the appointment of integration minister Cecile Kyenge, but it chose to abstain in the vote of confidence. The only rightwing grouping that voted against Letta - or rather against the PD as such, which it still regards as heir to the Partito Comunista Italiano - was Ignazio La Russa's neo-fascist Fratelli d'Italia, which has have now parted company with the rightwing parliamentary alliance headed by Berlusconi.

Whilst it should be stressed that the unemployed building worker who shot at two *carabinieri* on the day the cabinet was sworn in, after vainly trying to get close to one or more leading politicians, was acting alone and had no connections with any terrorist group, such grand coalitions are almost bound, in the absence of an effective mass party of the genuine left, to evoke such reactions. The older politicians and journalists responded to this incident by recalling the kidnapping of former premier Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades, following the installation of the 'National Solidarity' government in 1978.

Whatever criticisms could, and should, be made of M5S, it was obvious that the attempt by various rightwing politicians to hold Grillo indirectly responsible for this incident - claiming his wilder speeches had incited violence against politicians - is an indication of the way such a grand coalition might limit the space for democratic opposition. It is to be hoped that the demonstration called by the metalworkers' union, FIOM, for Saturday May 18 will be the beginning of a more rational mass opposition to austerity ●

## Notes

1. Letta was chairman of the European Young Christian Democrats in 1991-95 and a member of the European parliament in 2004-08 for the Margherita party, which despite its Christian Democratic origins formed part of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe. During his time in the European parliament he sat on its committee on economic and monetary affairs - an experience, which may or may not assist him in Italy's present situation.

2. Saccomanni is director general of the Bank of Italy and has in the past held posts at both the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund.



## SYRIA

# Toxic weapons and revolutionary illusions

Even if it is true that Assad is employing chemical weapons, writes **Peter Manson**, Obama does not want to act in a way that would trigger the total breakdown of the Syrian state

**W**hat is the truth about the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime against opposition forces? Well, obviously, we do not know.

But the allegations are posing big problems for Barack Obama, with his talk of a “red line” that would trigger “international [read ‘imperialist’] intervention”, should Bashar al-Assad employ poison gas against his internal enemies. The US claims to have found traces of the nerve agent, sarin, on hair and blood samples, while the British ministry of defence facility in Porton Down says they are also discernible in soil samples that have come its way.

It is vaguely claimed that sarin was used in four incidents in Damascus, Aleppo and Homs, while, more specifically, the US-based Syrian Support Group, which backs the opposition Free Syrian Army, said that two “chemical-filled” rockets were fired by regime forces in the town of Daraya on April 25. However, it further states that the agent used was not sarin, but a “simulant” called echothiophate, which is not actually defined as a chemical weapon. Although 105 people were affected, according to the SSG, there were no deaths reported.

What everyone appears to agree on is that, if chemical weapons have been used, then it must have been on a “small scale”. But why Assad would want to employ them in a way that would appear to have no military effect is a mystery. There have been attempts to answer that: the very limited use is a “ploy” to “sow confusion” or to “test the west’s commitment”, just to see how far he can go. Personally I do not find that very convincing. Slightly more persuasive is the notion that the “small scale” use of sarin could be enough to cow some of the rebels, but I do not see why they should be more deterred by that than by heavy artillery or air strikes.

Despite the gung-ho approach of Israel and some US Republicans, most pro-imperialist commentators are agreed that, even if the evidence of sarin usage was cast-iron, which it is not, it would still be far from certain that Assad had authorised its use. It might have been a local commander acting independently, or even elements among the opposition.

Of course, unnamed “experts” claim that Syria has “the largest arsenal of chemical weapons in the Middle East”. But Assad has sneakily hidden them all over the country, so they cannot be easily tracked down. I wonder if these are the same “experts” who confidently declared that Iraq was awash with “weapons of mass destruction” before the 2003 US-led invasion.

When the claims first surfaced last week, US secretary of state John Kerry said that the use of chemical weapons “violates every convention of warfare”. By contrast, a single nuclear bomb capable of razing a huge city to the ground and exterminating millions of people in a few seconds is perfectly acceptable, I assume. But the difference is, of course, that, while the US has a nuclear arsenal, Syria does not. While the US may also hold stockpiles of chemical weapons, unlike Syria it is fully capable of winning a



**Chemical weapons: in whose hands?**

conventional war without resorting to them. In fact they are redundant from its point of view. Which leaves it free to point the finger.

Former Republican presidential candidate John McCain initially demanded the imposition of a ‘no-fly zone’ over Syria and the establishment of “safe areas” within the country. However, by the next day he was admitting that the evidence for chemical weapons “may not be airtight”. What caused the change of tune? A little reflection - and elements within the establishment - might have persuaded him that perhaps there was a problem with his call to “provide weapons to people in the resistance who we trust”.

Now who would they be? While there are clearly many different groups involved in the fighting on the ground, for the imperialists Syria has no single “legitimate opposition”.<sup>1</sup> In other words, there are very few “people in the resistance who we trust”. There is, of course, the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is credited, especially amongst exiles, with being the leading force in the Commission for Civilian Protection - an umbrella organisation of local militias which enjoys increasingly close relations with the US state department. However, the US fears a Frankenstein scenario: ie, US weapons falling into the hands of bitter foes.

Amongst such groups is the al Nusra front, which openly avows its connection to al Qa’eda and fights for a religious-dominated greater Syria. Interestingly, the front has been accused by Hossein Amir-Abdollahi, Iran’s deputy foreign minister, of being responsible for the chemical attacks. The US fears that such is the nature of Syria that the fall of the Ba’athist regime will not result in an orderly transition to a MB-dominated government, but a failed state and the fracturing of the country. What would happen then?

councils serve hundreds of thousands of people ... Across the country they represent millions of Syrians.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, according to the Socialist Workers Party, in many areas they are already carrying out the functions of the state. They run the courts and prisons and in some places even the old police force has accepted their authority.

*Socialist Worker* explains that these councils represent an attempt to “coordinate the many currents inside the revolution - secular, nationalist, leftists, traditional Muslim organisations and some jihadist militias”. Of course, there are other Islamist groups that have “a different vision” and these have unfortunately “grown in popularity”: they want “an ‘Islamic state’ without democracy” and, *Socialist Worker* reports with no little degree of understatement, “This has led to tensions inside the revolution.”

But, “Despite this, many see the Islamists as allies” and in some regions “Islamists work alongside other currents”. And what they are all agreed on is that they “firmly reject attempts by outside powers to hijack the revolution”.

Unfortunately, all this seems to be wishful thinking. In contrast to two years ago, the LCCs are now more or less eclipsed by the armed militias and the Islamist groups. Which you might think is surprising, seeing that the councils they have set up “represent millions of Syrians”. Last month, however, they did get a mention from US undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs Tara Sonenshine, when she gave a speech entitled ‘Women in the Arab world: do they matter?’

She told the Brookings Institute in Washington: “In Syria, where challenges are enormous, women are making their presence felt. Despite being underrepresented in the resistance leadership, they have organised the Local Coordinating Committees (LCCs) to mobilise non-violent opposition to the regime. We are providing programmes, training and tools to civil service organisations to help them further, as they advance a democratic, pluralistic, free Syria, and organise responses to community needs.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed it is an open secret that both the US state department and the UK’s foreign and commonwealth office provide funders through the Office of Syrian Opposition Support.

But the truth is that it is the Islamists who are now dominating the movement to overthrow the Syrian regime. That is hardly surprising. In the Arab world, as elsewhere, progressive forces - particularly those of the working class - are pitifully weak. At the moment they are certainly not up to the task of forming and running democratic, quasi-state organisations.

It goes without saying that communists oppose dictatorial, anti-working class reactionaries like Assad’s Ba’athists. But that does not mean we give *carte blanche* to every oppositional force or, worse, claim that they are mostly ‘ours’ ●

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## Notes

1. *The Daily Telegraph* April 26.
2. *Socialist Worker* April 30.
3. *Socialist Worker* April 23.
4. [www.state.gov/r/remar/2013/207084.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/remar/2013/207084.htm).

# 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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# weekly Worker

## Iran: workers celebrate May Day

# Defying the regime

In a week where news from Iran is dominated by speculation about who will or will not stand as a candidate in the country's forthcoming presidential elections and whether the Guardian Council will allow Mohammad Khatami (the last 'reformist' president) or Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei (president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's anointed successor) to participate; in a week where Iran's press and media are consumed by speculation about ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani after he announced he is not ruling himself out as a candidate in the June 14 poll; in a week when a group of pro-US regime change supporters, the newly formed Iran National Council, elected Reza Pahlavi, the son of the former shah, as their spokesperson, the more astute sections of the bourgeois press were drawing attention to a serious player in Iran's economic and political scene: the working class.

The US journal *Foreign Policy* writes: "As Iran's economy continues to deteriorate, the labour movement is a key player to watch because of its ability to pressure the Islamic Republic through protests and strikes ... And thus far, Iranian labourers have not joined the opposition green movement *en masse*. But the economic pains caused by the Iranian regime's mismanagement, corruption and international sanctions have dealt serious blows to worker wages, benefits and job security - enough reason for Iranian labourers to organise and oppose the regime ..."

The journal refers to the role of Ahmadinejad's massive privatisation programme and the ending of subsidies as policies that have "greatly hurt the average Iranian labourer ... The economic decline has resulted in small but widespread strikes and sit-ins. Underground labour groups, ranging from bus drivers to sugar cane workers, have also become more outspoken, staging protests reminiscent of the revolution."

In the same week *The Economist* published an article with the strap: "Though watched and muzzled, independent labour unions are stirring".<sup>2</sup> The journal refers to the fact that Iran does not recognise independent unions and that "Islamic Labour Councils, which must be approved by employers and the security services, ... are in cahoots with the government". Referring to the plight of imprisoned trade unionists, the article points out that leaders like Ali Nejati of the sugarcane workers and Reza Shahabi of the bus drivers' union have been in and out of prison in the last few months and have been accused of "endangering national security".

Of course, Hands Off the People of Iran has been drawing attention to the plight of Iran's workers from the start and very little of what is published in *Foreign Policy* or *The Economist* is news to us. However, it is interesting to note that the Iranian working class, the most persistent and courageous opponent of the Islamic regime, is now recognised as a serious force.

On May Day Iranian workers took



**Oilworkers: power**

part in illegal gatherings and protests throughout the country despite the repression and the presence of military and security forces, once again proving the tenacity of our class. In Tehran and other major cities there were slogans against low pay, unemployment and the non-payment of wages. The largest demonstration was actually outside the Islamic parliament, the Majles.

In such circumstances it is first of all important to congratulate the Iranian working class, who, despite all the odds, at a time of severe economic hardship and in circumstances where religious and political dictatorship leave little room for manoeuvre, managed to organise such actions on May 1.

The Iranian working class is the main victim of sanctions. The oil industry and parts of the manufacturing sector are on the verge of a complete shutdown and as a result tens of thousands of workers have lost their jobs. Others have not been paid any wages for up to two years, yet they continue going to work so that they can keep their jobs. Workers make ends meet by taking up extra part-time work - anything from driving taxis to selling goods on the pavement.

The currency continues to lose value, and the country's oil revenues are dwindling - India and China have stopped purchasing Iranian

oil, fearful of secondary sanctions. In mid-April, Iran's National Oil Company announced that in order to "make sanctions ineffective" it had decided that "bartering oil sales for goods and equipment" would be introduced to ensure oil payments were collected.<sup>3</sup> Yet a few days later the UK government blocked Royal Dutch Shell's attempt to settle a \$2.3 billion debt to Iran through payments in grains or pharmaceuticals.<sup>4</sup>

Our pride in reporting continued workers' militancy should be accompanied by caution. These struggles remain mainly defensive and are often to win payment of wages owing for many months, or against factory closures. They are partially politicised, mainly because the state is incarcerating labour activists. However, the working class has not been able to organise itself as a *political* force and here lies the danger. Nevertheless, regime change forces of the right - both green 'reformists' within the religious state and the US-sponsored 'republican and royalist' champions of regime change from above - have now come to the conclusion that this is a force to be reckoned with.

The danger is that rightwing international union groupings, such as the International Transport Workers

Federation, will masquerade as supporters of the Iranian working class while pursuing international capital's agenda within the bureaucracy in the Iranian labour movement - trying to reduce working class struggles to an appendage of human rights issues or limiting them to economic demands. So far they have had little success. However, it is incumbent on the international workers' movement as a whole to support the struggle of Iran's workers.

### Long live May Day Statement released by the Free Union of Iranian Workers

This year, we Iranian workers are looking forward to May Day, the international workers' day, when in the last days of the previous year, at a time when the basic cost of living for a family of four was declared to be 1,800,000 tomans, the government fixed the minimum wage at 487,000 toman, showing once more that they do not value workers as human beings worthy of a normal life ... Since last year, the cost of living has gone up every month, at times prices increasing several fold.

For us workers, however, there is no expediency higher than sustaining our lives, our honour. Last year we managed to collect signatures for

a petition protesting at the current situation and this was supported throughout the country. We showed that we can no longer tolerate the current situation and that our patience has run out.

Without any doubt, the current situation is one of the harshest times we Iranian workers have faced in the past 30 years. The administration and state authorities should know that we no longer have a single iota of patience to endure the current dire situation any further.

Workers and co-workers across the country, now May Day is with us. This is an important and fateful day for us workers. This is the day to come out onto the streets and protest across the world against injustice and inequality. In Iran too we should have the right to go into the streets like the workers across the world and protest against our dire situation, but this is not allowed.

It is not possible to accept daily increases in the cost of living at a time when the minimum wage is three to four times below the poverty line, forcing us to endure hunger. We will not remain silent. We broke this silence last year with a 30,000-signature petition and by holding protests and rallies, and we are capable of holding widespread protests now to safeguard our lives and honour. May Day this year will be one such day for us Iranian workers, a day to protest against inflation, high costs and a day of protest against the ratified minimum wage and demand for its immediate revision. Long live May Day!

Long live the solidarity and unity of Iranian workers across the country!

### Notes

1. [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/04/22/labor\\_and\\_opposition\\_in\\_iran](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/04/22/labor_and_opposition_in_iran).
2. [www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21576408-though-watched-and-muzzled-independent-labour-unions-are-stirring-aya-toiling](http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21576408-though-watched-and-muzzled-independent-labour-unions-are-stirring-aya-toiling).
3. <http://iranpulse.al-monitor.com/index.php/2013/04/1857/iranian-officials-say-food-for-oil-programs-have-expanded>.
4. [www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/22/shell-iran-debt-idUSL6N0D903E20130422](http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/22/shell-iran-debt-idUSL6N0D903E20130422).

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