

A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity

# weekly worker

**Gilbert Achcar pulls no punches in taking SWP leadership to task**

- Letters and debate
- Marxism 2013
- ISN's eclecticism
- Silvio Berlusconi's setback

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HOW  
DID THIS  
BLOODY  
MESS  
COME TO  
PASS?





# LETTERS



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

## Straw man

Paul Demarty quibbles over nothing when he notes that the *Grundrisse*, not *Capital*, is where Marx wrote that the law of the tendential fall in the rate of profit is “in every respect the most important law of modern political economy” (“Rudeness and revolution”, July 4).

In *Capital*, Marx wrote the same thing in slightly different words: “Given the great importance that this law has for capitalist production, one might well say that it forms the mystery around whose solution the whole of political economy since Adam Smith revolves.”

Demarty’s comment that “there is no one theory of capitalist crisis in Marx” is misleading for several reasons, among them the fact that Marx did not counterpose the law of the tendential fall in the rate of profit to the financial causes of crisis, but included the latter within the former. And, given that it’s been more than six years since the latest capitalist crisis erupted, Demarty’s comment is far too abstract. The important questions, which he avoids, are what are the actual causes of this crisis and how does Marx’s work help us to understand them?

Demarty also attacks a straw man when he criticises the notion that “underconsumptionism necessarily equals reformism”. Who has ever said anything like that? My own view is that a “proponent of underconsumptionist theory may happen to have a revolutionary perspective, but not because it comes organically from his/her theory”, since underconsumptionist theory implies that capitalism’s “interests and [working people’s] interests go hand in hand” (*The failure of capitalist production* London 2012, pp198-99). If Demarty thinks the latter clause is incorrect, he should explain

why.

Instead, he treats us to a completely illogical counterargument. Since one proponent of the law of the tendential fall in the rate of profit, David Yaffe, “was driven not towards sound revolutionary Marxism as a result, but shrill, Castroite stupidity”, the theoretical implications of the underconsumptionist theory of crisis are therefore not reformist, according to Demarty. This is the logical equivalent of ‘One person got wet by dumping a bucket of water over his head, so it’s not true that you’ll get wet if you stand in the rain’. But Yaffe and underconsumptionists can both be all wet because the law of the tendential fall in the rate of profit is a necessary condition, but not a sufficient condition, for “sound revolutionary Marxism” and because individuals’ politics are frequently inconsistent. This latter consideration indicates that we shouldn’t focus on the vagaries of individuals, as Demarty does, but on the implications of ideas, about which his article has absolutely nothing to say.

Demarty writes: “It is extremely difficult to demonstrate that the rate of profit [was] falling sharply in the run-up to the crisis, primarily because of capital’s inherently global nature as a social formation and the difficulty in aggregating statistics from wildly different sources.” This statement is correct insofar as the global (worldwide) rate of profit is concerned, but the global rate of profit is a red herring. I have shown that US corporations’ rate of profit (rate of return on accumulated fixed-asset investment) failed to recover in a sustained manner “under neoliberalism”. And since the US was the epicentre of the great recession - it spread elsewhere after, and because, it erupted first in the US - it is not the global rate of profit, but the persistent fall in US corporations’ rate of profit and its many indirect effects that we need to focus on to explain why the great recession occurred, in the US and therefore throughout (much of)

the globe.

Demarty also claims that “Kliman adheres to the US Marxist Humanists, who are ‘unorthodox Trotskyist’ in origin, but were also in substance an obedience cult around Raya Dunayevskaya.” However, I have absolutely no connection to the ‘US Marxist Humanists’ organisation, which is only four years old and thus could not be “an obedience cult around Raya Dunayevskaya”, who died in 1987, and who (the record shows) did not run an obedience cult during her lifetime. I don’t think the US Marxist Humanists organisation is a cult, but it has in practice required ‘obedience’ - to its leaders, not Dunayevskaya - which is why I have no connection to it (see [www.marxisthumanistinitiative.org/philosophyorganization/why-a-new-organization/](http://www.marxisthumanistinitiative.org/philosophyorganization/why-a-new-organization/), especially paragraphs 8 and 9).

I work politically with Marxist-Humanist Initiative. It is grounded in the ideas of Marx and Dunayevskaya, and that is the underlying issue. If a group is a “cult” merely because it is grounded in a body of ideas, then these terms apply to any group grounded in Marx’s ideas, not just one that is also grounded in Dunayevskaya’s further development of them. Misology (hatred of ideas) is thus the real sentiment that Demarty and others express, yet conceal, when they throw around vile allegations like “cult” and “sect”. And what alternatives do the misologists have to offer, I may ask? Nothing but mindless activism, opportunism and unprincipled eclecticism.

**Andrew Kliman**

New York City

## Mangling Marx

Poor Karl Marx and Frederick Engels! They collaborate for over half a century on a project to arm the working class with the most advanced understanding of how capitalism works and what its likely future is.

But their revolutionary successors, far from establishing any kind of intellectual hegemony in society and developing the science bequeathed to them, cannot get to first base in agreeing the significance of what Marx and Engels plainly wrote. In particular, every academic Marxist feels obliged to write their own version of Marxist political economy and to defend that version (and their academic careers) against allcomers. Confusion, fragmentation and a thousand fragile egos abound.

Now Paul Demarty joins in the fun. Marx’s law of the tendential fall in the rate of profit is to be kicked into the long grass of abstractions that have little bearing on real economic events. At least he does not go so far as Michael Heinrich (discussed by Mike Macnair in a couple of articles in the *Weekly Worker* in May) who, on the basis of supposedly privileged access to the later notebooks of Marx, declares that the latter planned in the last year or two of his life to completely rewrite *Capital*. Shame the old man died. But let’s not worry too much. No doubt Heinrich will oblige with yet another take on Karl’s political economy.

Marx proposed many explanations of economic crisis, Demarty protests. The fall in the rate of profit is just one of them - and, since we can’t measure it, we might as well ignore it. Not true. Crises break out in the sphere of circulation. Money, by separating the acts of selling and buying, creates the possibility of crisis. Financial speculation can serve as the immediate cause of a crash.

But the underlying causes of the regular occurrence of crisis in the epoch of the rule of capital must be sought in the specificity of capitalist production. Marx explicitly rejected underconsumptionism. ‘Marxist’ underconsumptionists today choose to point to a handful of isolated and ambiguous passages. Yet none of Marx’s laws of motion support it. Indeed, Marx’s reproduction schemes

serve the purpose of demonstrating that ‘expanded reproduction’ on the basis of reinvesting surplus value to create more value is possible, whatever the rate of exploitation of the working class. It is “revolutions in value” that regulate the cycles of capitalist economic life: ‘moral depreciation’ (the loss of value of existing investments of fixed capital as a result of productivity changes), as well as falls in the rate of profit as a result of changes in the organic composition of capital.

Demarty attempts to dismiss Andrew Kliman’s work - probably the most significant contribution to analyses of the current crisis - with a lazy (and inaccurate) attack on his political affiliation. Demarty needs to do that because Kliman has demonstrated precisely that it is possible to put in the work and measure the rate of profit - on a multitude of theoretical bases. True, he is using United States statistics. But the rate of profit in the US is hardly irrelevant to the dynamics of global capitalism - or the current crisis. And, what is more, Kliman has disaggregated the rates of profit earned by US corporations in different countries overseas from those earned domestically. So the US statistics can provide pointers - for those diligent enough - to global trends.

Kliman, by the way, does not reckon that there was a fall in the rate of profit immediately prior to the crash of 2008. His explanation is built on lowered profit rates since the 1980s.

Then Arthur Bough throws his two-pennies-worth into the mix (Letters, July 11). Marx made a “huge mistake” in not predicting the shift from unskilled to skilled labour, which, according to Bough, means workers today are simply producing more value than in the past. So yah, boo, sucks to any fall in the rate of profit. I rather suspect that the average worker of the past was more skilled than today’s workers, but, putting that to one side, Bough makes an elementary mistake. An average hour of socially necessary labour in any given year (or reproduction cycle) is as productive of value as an average hour of socially necessary labour in any other year - regardless of whether the comparison is 2013 with 2012 or 2013 with 1850. That is the point of Marx’s law of value. The value produced by complex, skilled labour is not measurable in any absolute sense, but only as a ratio of the average. That average is socially determined and in fact, for most purposes, you might as well just work on the basis of the average - especially since it is very difficult to disentangle the contributions made by individual workers in a complex production process.

Apple and Microsoft may employ a disproportionate number of researchers and programmers in the US. However, they employ a good number of manufacturing workers in China and other parts of Asia. Even research and development is subject to the same pressure towards uniformity (basically deskilling) as other lines of work - capitalism has a tendency to turn abstract labour into a reality. For instance, computer programming today is all about putting in long, tedious hours slotting together pre-written software components - not so very different from factory work.

As for the productivity of David Beckham’s labour, the fact that he can still earn a fortune now that he has hung up his football boots is a strong indication that his earning power was at least as strongly linked to his brand as his footballing skills. That is better analysed as a form of differential rent - ie, a variety of monopoly that enables ‘brand Beckham’ to grab a slice of surplus value produced elsewhere. Next, Bough will be telling

# Communist University 2013

## A week of debate, controversy and comradeship

### Monday August 12

**2.00pm** Fighting for a mass party  
Nick Wrack (Independent Socialist Network - personal capacity), Jack Conrad (CPGB)  
**4.45pm** The Middle East after the Iranian elections  
Moshé Machover (Israeli socialist), Yassamine Mather (Hopi)

### Tuesday August 13

**10.00am** The new social media and the revolutionary claims made for them  
James Turley (CPGB)  
**2.00pm** Imperialism  
Mike Macnair (CPGB)  
**4.45pm** Will women lead the revolution?  
Yassamine Mather, Camilla Power (Radical Anthropology Group)

### Wednesday August 14

**10.00am** Technology, the ‘productive forces’ and socialism  
Gabriel Levy  
**2.00pm** Class revolution versus people’s revolution: left debates since the 1790s  
Marc Mulholland  
**4.45pm** Capitalist crises and their causes  
Hillel Ticktin (*Critique*)

### Thursday August 15

**10.00am** Why is the left so scared of science?  
Chris Knight (Radical Anthropology Group)  
**2.00pm** Political economy of the Gulf and the Muslim Brotherhood  
Adam Hanieh  
**4.45pm** Capitalism: terminal crisis or long-term

decline?  
Hillel Ticktin (*Critique*)

### Friday August 16

**10.00am** Why getting the Soviet Union right still matters  
Jack Conrad (CPGB)  
**2.00pm** The SWP crisis: causes and consequences  
Paris Thompson (International Socialist Network)  
**4.45pm** Lukács, Korsch, et al: philosophers of Leninism or ultra-left?  
Mike Macnair (CPGB)

### Saturday August 17

**10.00am** Marxism and ‘broad parties’  
Ben Lewis (CPGB), Tim Nelson (International Socialist Network)  
**2.00pm** Socialism or barbarism  
Hillel Ticktin (*Critique*)  
**4.45pm** The singularity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict  
Moshé Machover

### Sunday August 18

**10.00am** The min-max programme from Marx to the present  
Ben Lewis  
**1.30pm** Revolution and counterrevolution in the politics of the everyday: what the anthropology of human nature tells us about the struggle for left unity  
Lionel Sims (Radical Anthropology Group)  
**4.00pm** Evaluation of school



## Where, how much and what’s available

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Full week, no accommodation: £60 (£30)  
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us that corporate CEOs are the most productive workers in any enterprise.  
**Nick Rogers**  
Tottenham

## Golden age

Again Chris Knight insists we must believe in a prehistoric golden age of woman rule, this time with Engels purportedly onside (‘Genetic evidence is richer than the stale party line’, July 11).

Engels’ innovation in the *Origin of the family, private property and the state* was to link changing reproductive arrangements to different epochs of production, though not mechanically. This ground-breaking study of the family covered early forms, such as group marriage with ‘sexual promiscuity’, as well as pairing bonds within a small clan group.

However, Engels showed his attitude to golden ages when he wrote in the *Origin*: “Monogamy was a great historical advance, but at the same time it inaugurated, along with slavery and private wealth, that epoch, lasting until today, in which every advance is likewise a relative regression ...”

If an archaic society of woman-dominance can be proved to exist, let those who would promote it in the present say how it is a guide to the making of a new global society. Should we isolate women from men in revolutionary organisations? Should women always be in command (or is that only women who agree with the Radical Anthropology Group hypothesis)? What technology from the “interval” of the last several thousand years should be rejected as patriarchal? Which “modern” techniques like solar time should be replaced by archaic ones like lunar time? (Well, Chris?) Marx and Engels promoted a politics of the present, in which the condition of the productive forces (and consciousness of human ability) meant a better future could be made rather than a glorious past asserted.  
**Mike Belbin**  
email

## Slovenly

I am long inured to the intellectually slovenly deployment of personal abuse in polemics from the sectarian left. Consequently, to be described as a “domesticated leftist”, a “renegade” and a “poseur” in Jack Conrad’s critique of the Socialist Workers Party’s internal democratic life, with reference to the (varying) versions of democratic centralism advocated by the Bolsheviks, came as no surprise (‘Laughable history produces laughable results’, July 11).

Neither did his total lack of any supporting evidence for these charges. But perhaps Conrad was discomfited by the fact that some of the criticisms he makes of the SWP internal regime are only repeat points I have made repeatedly over the years since the mid-1970s split within what was then the International Socialists. If he wants, he can hear many of these deployed in recent debates ([www.soundcloud.com/talking-shop/talking-shop-may-15](http://www.soundcloud.com/talking-shop/talking-shop-may-15) and [www.workersliberty.org/story/2013/06/23/tradition-debate-ideas-freedom-2013](http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2013/06/23/tradition-debate-ideas-freedom-2013)). I made the point that the Mensheviks adopted ‘democratic centralism’ before the Bolsheviks. I also underlined the influence which Zinoviev’s authoritarian centralism exercised on the Trotskyist movement’s stance on democratic centralism, including the SWP. Indeed the IS Opposition forecast many of the more disturbing developments in the SWP decades ago (see Jim Higgins at [www.marxists.org/archive/higgins/1997/locust](http://www.marxists.org/archive/higgins/1997/locust) and the work of related oppositionists such as Michael Kidron, Richard Kuper and Peter Sedgwick) at a time when the antecedents of the current CPGB were foot soldiers in the British road to Stalinism.

So how to explain the vitriol? I suspect it might be due to Conrad’s unease with some of the issues raised by the changing nature of class in modern capitalism - or more precisely the radical decline of *class-consciousness*. This phenomenon, of course, is to be understood as a consequence of several distinct but interrelated developments: massive defeats of organised workers in recent decades, the wholesale restructuring of employment, the atrophy of many working class economic, social, cultural and mutualist institutions, and the emergence of a new working class reflecting the atomised and profoundly insecure nature of work and employment today.

Class differences have, of course, become far more, not less, profound, with the obscene widening of the gulf between the super-rich and the rest of society. But mere recital of traditional formulae about class and class conflict no longer captures the period we are in and certainly shows little sign of capturing the attention of workers themselves. Perhaps there is an analogy to be drawn between the radical transformation of the economy and the nature of the labour force today and the profound transition from the artisanal working class (and its political and social traditions) to the new industrial proletariat in the mid-19th century. Some of the best of the old Chartist radicals at that time found great difficulty in recognising these changes and remained enmeshed in outmoded ideas. But those who recognise Marxism as a method and not a doctrine will try to understand current changes and to relate political action to them - as Marx and Engels did 150 years ago.

**John Palmer**  
email

## Gratuitous

Jack Conrad has written a good, thoughtful article about organisation. Regrettably, in a pointless preamble he engages in gratuitous name-calling - “domesticated leftist ... has-been ... renegade ... poseur” - directed at a miscellaneous list of individuals, lumping together a notorious Islamophobic supporter of imperialist intervention with a veteran socialist comrade, John Palmer, who is one of the earliest victims of exactly the kind of bureaucratic-centralist purges comrade Conrad is denouncing, and who has never left the left. Ironically, the views that comrade Palmer has been advocating on the issue of organisation are not all that far from those argued for by comrade Conrad in this very article.

And anyway, what possible purpose is served by such irrelevant personal attacks? They add no persuasive power to comrade Conrad’s argument.

**Moshé Machover**  
email

## Nasty things

What a good read the *Weekly Worker* is when it arrives on a Saturday. I read a page or two with a coffee. Informative? Yes. I’m not antagonistic to *WW*, but some contributions tend to amuse me. The spread of interest over the globe, Turkey, Syria, etc. Lots of column inches about internecine/sectarian differences with various comrades. Letters about “the tendency of the rate of profit to fall”. Wonderful! I can sense excitement over the upcoming Communist University. What a feeling!

But I don’t feel as hopeful about mass unemployment, a privatised NHS, cuts to universal benefits, the abolition of public services, the coming redundancy of 144,000 public-sector workers, the growing racism and xenophobia in Britain today. Homelessness and now would-be tenants in the private housing sector are being hugely ‘taxed’ by property managements, the bedroom tax, the possible break-up of the UK. I don’t believe that people can wait for

a suitable leadership to take them to a better world.

**Kath Redmond**  
email

## Nazis

One can only wonder if recent comments made in parliament by Lib Dem MP Sir Bob Russell are a desperate and cynical attempt by the party to try and gain some extra votes at the next general election. This feeble drum-beating of holocaust parallels to the Israeli/Palestinian situation is completely outdated and stinks of desperation, to possibly detract attention away from parliament’s own domestic and foreign policies.

While there are indeed problems in the Middle East, references to Israel and Nazism could easily be turned around to comparisons with parliament’s own behaviour, which, for millions of people, has actually resembled various elements of European Nazi rule. Parliament’s own participation in the extermination of 5,000 children per month while Iraq was under sanctions was once described, by journalist Felicity Arbuthnot, as having turned the country from a “concentration camp into a death camp”. The Fire Brigades Union were also so angered by what was taking place that they called their 1998 conference on Iraq ‘The silent holocaust’.

**Hussein Al-alak**  
Manchester

## Labour not

The Labour Party membership unit has informed me that I will have to wait a year, starting from November 2012, before I can re-apply to rejoin the Labour Party.

However, I have thought, do I really want to be a member of the Labour Party? It was the last Labour government which introduced employment and support allowance medicals carried out by Atos as its replacement for incapacity benefit. So far, these medicals have led to more than 20 suicides. It also introduced personal independence payment medicals as its replacement for disability living allowance.

It was Liam Byrne, Labour shadow minister for work and pensions, who first used the term, ‘Strivers, not shirkers’, at the 2011 Labour Party conference, as a way of dividing people in work from people like me who have to claim benefits. Since Mr Byrne said this, *The Sun*, *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* have implied that all people in receipt of benefits are scroungers.

The Labour Party is controlled by supporters of the Progress organisation, which is being bankrolled by Lord Sainsbury. I have concluded that Ed Miliband, and the group of Tony Blair supporters who surround him, will never let unions such as Unite have any success in getting working class people selected as Labour candidates in safe Labour seats.

**John Smithee**  
Cambridgeshire

## Echo

This weekend marked the formation of a Syriza-Unitary Social Front. Instead of a coalition organising solidarity network services and not based on trade unions, what emerged was a unitary party on the same basis, overcoming anti-party, pro-‘coalition’, pro-status quo opposition claiming to be from the ‘left’.

Also, it should be noticed that the new unitary party has a leadership structure similar to that of the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, topped not by a colourless secretary or by a power-hungry chairman, but instead by a president, echoing the early history of the German worker-class movement.

Meanwhile, the Eurosceptic Left Platform secured 30% of the central committee seats.

**Jacob Richter**  
email

# 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 July 21, 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 11: ‘Rate and mass of surplus value’. Organised by CPGB: [www.cpgb.org.uk](http://www.cpgb.org.uk).

### No to bedroom tax

**Thursday July 18, 6.30pm:** Lobby of council, the Guildhall, Canterbury. Organised by the Canterbury and Whitstable Bedroom Tax Campaign: [www.facebook.com/groups/122387521280559](http://www.facebook.com/groups/122387521280559).

### Save London fire stations

**Thursday July 18, 11.30am:** Demonstration, The Monument, Fish Street Hill, London EC3. Organised by Fire Brigades Union: [www.london.fbu.org.uk](http://www.london.fbu.org.uk).

### Don’t deport Rose

**Thursday July 18, 12.30pm:** Vigil for asylum-seeker Rose Akhalu, Immigration and Asylum Chamber, Field House, 15 Breams Buildings, London EC4. Organised by No Deportations: [www.no-deportations.org.uk](http://www.no-deportations.org.uk).

### Socialist Theory Study Group

**Thursday July 18, 6pm:** Study of Marx’s introduction to the *Grundrisse* (1857). Social centre, Next to Nowhere, Bold Street, Liverpool 1. Organised by Socialist Theory Study Group: [teachingandlearning4socialism@gmail.com](mailto:teachingandlearning4socialism@gmail.com).

### Defend the union link

**Thursday July 18, Friday July 19, 7.30pm:** Meetings, Lord Nelson pub, Trafalgar Street, Brighton. Organised by Labour Representation Committee: [www.sussexlrc.com](http://www.sussexlrc.com).

### Remember Dora and Jasmine

**Friday July 19, 3pm:** Protest against murders of sex workers Dora and Jasmine: Swedish embassy, 11 Montagu Place, London W1; and Turkish consulate, Rutland Gardens, London SW7. Organised by ICRSE: [www.sexworkeurope.org](http://www.sexworkeurope.org).

### Tolpuddle festival

**Friday July 19-Sunday July 21:** Annual labour movement festival, Tolpuddle. Organised by the Tolpuddle Martyrs Museum: [www.tolpuddlemartyrs.org.uk](http://www.tolpuddlemartyrs.org.uk).

### Defend Newcastle 14

**Saturday July 20, 2pm:** Protest against arrest of 14 anti-racist protestors in May. Assemble Haymarket Metro station for march to rally outside Market Street police station. Organised by the Newcastle Defence Campaign: [www.defencecampaign.wordpress.com](http://www.defencecampaign.wordpress.com).

### Palestine solidarity

**Sunday July 21, 7pm:** Social with music and food, Well at Willen, Newport Road, Willen, Milton Keynes. Free entry. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: [www.palestinecampaign.org](http://www.palestinecampaign.org).

### Stop the cuts

**Saturday July 27, 1pm:** March and rally, Assembly Stanley Road, Bootle (near Falstaff Street) for march to Liverpool city centre. Speakers include Bob Crow. Organised by Stand Up In Bootle: [www.standupinbootle.com](http://www.standupinbootle.com).

### People’s Assembly

Saturday July 27, 1pm: Public meeting, Central Hall, Oldham Street, Manchester M1. Speakers include Owen Jones. Organised by People’s Assembly: [manchesterpaaa@gmail.com](mailto:manchesterpaaa@gmail.com).

### Keep legal aid

**Tuesday July 30, 4.30pm:** Rally, Old Bailey, London EC4. **Tuesday July 30, 5pm:** Rally, Manchester crown court, Crown Square Manchester M3. Organised by Save Legal Aid: [www.savelegalaid.co.uk/justicealliance](http://www.savelegalaid.co.uk/justicealliance).

### Remember the Roma genocide

**Friday August 2, 5pm:** Second annual remembrance event. Assemble Holocaust Memorial Stone, Hyde Park, for march to French embassy, 58 Knightsbridge, London SW1. Organised by 8 April Movement: [dale.farm@btinternet](mailto:dale.farm@btinternet).

### Call for a general strike

**Sunday September 8, 12.30pm:** Lobby of TUC conference, Hardy suite, Hermitage Hotel, Exeter Road, Bournemouth. email [info@shopstewards.net](mailto:info@shopstewards.net) Organised by National Shop Stewards Network: [www.shopstewards.net](http://www.shopstewards.net).

### Unite the Resistance

**Saturday October 19, 12 noon to 5pm:** Conference, Bloomsbury Baptist Church, 235 Shaftsbury Avenue, London WC2. Organised by Unite the Resistance: <http://uniteresist.org>.

### 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.



## MARXISM 2013

# How did this bloody mess come to pass?

Marxism, the annual school of the SWP, saw a revamped opposition, reports **Mark Fischer**

**T**he aftermath of this year's Marxism will pose a conundrum for the Socialist Workers Party's deeply discredited leadership. Despite attempts to "draw a line" under the Delta crisis and move on, a new, revamped opposition successfully used the event to challenge the apparatus and cohere itself. The opposition has many differing opinions, but seems determined to fight it out at the January 2014 conference. As one CPGB comrade commented afterwards, the opposition "went into Marxism with a blog and came out of it with a caucus".

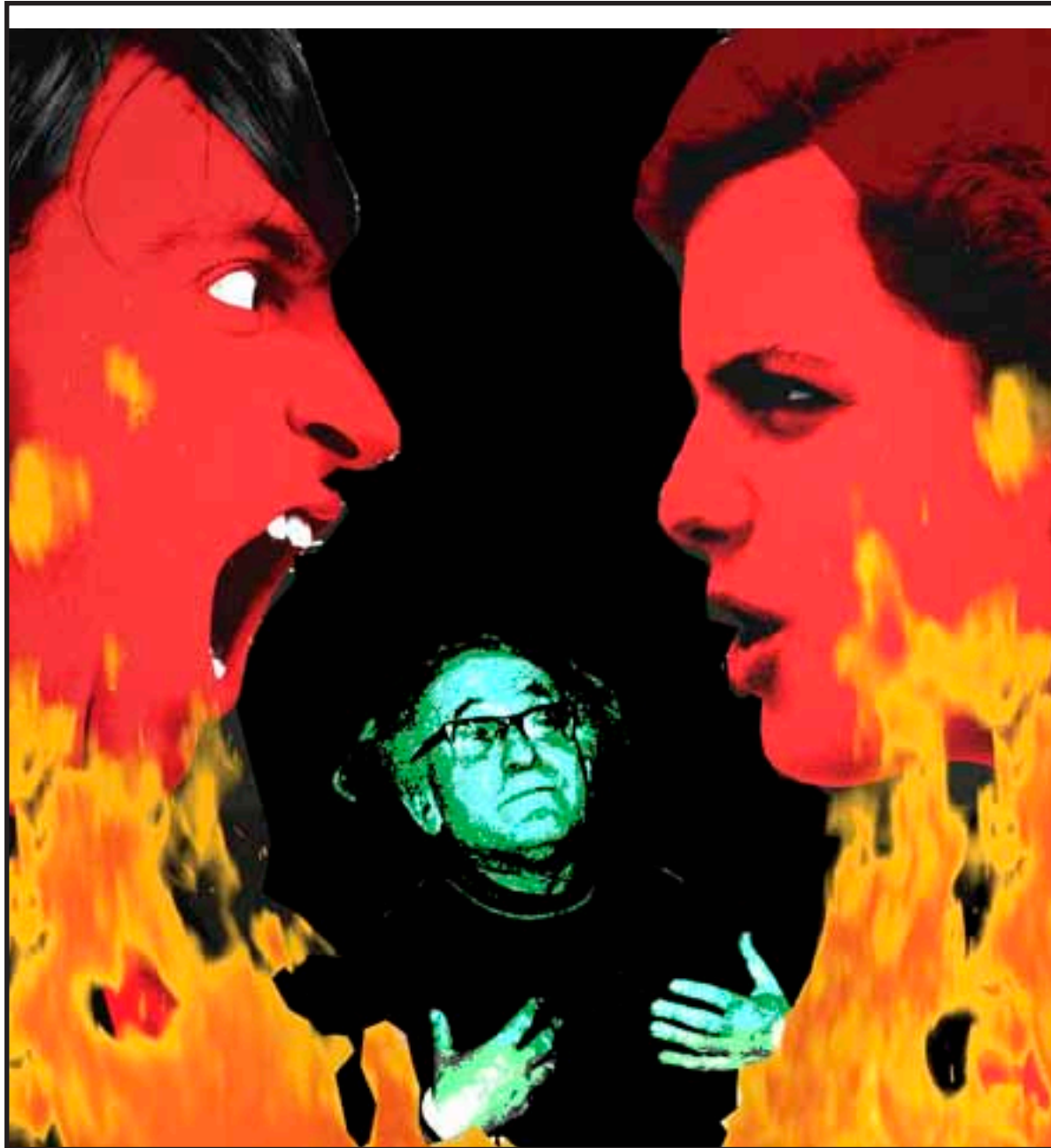
Tony Cliff, the organisation's founder-leader must be spinning in his grave. Membership down to a thousand amidst splits, divisions and accusations of rape. John Rees - gone. Lindsey German - gone. Chris Bambery - gone. Martin Smith - in disgrace. And, worryingly, for his surviving prodigies ensconced in the Vauxhall HQ, the revamped opposition includes those who have been classified by Alex Callinicos as part of the SWP's wider political leadership. 'How did this bloody mess come to pass?' Cliff would be asking.

There are signs that the Revolutionary Socialism Opposition is actually more committed to what it understands by 'Leninism' than the comrades who so easily decanted to form the International Socialist Network (they currently seem determined to wade into the swamp hand in hand with Socialist Resistance and the Anti-Capitalist Initiative). The defiant stance of comrades such as Ian Birchall, Neil Davidson and Rob Owen certainly emboldened critically minded SWPers at Marxism. And outside support for them came in the form of Paul Le Blanc and Gilbert Achcar, particularly in the July 14 session on 'How socialists should organise', where Achcar tore into the disgraceful bureaucratic behaviour of the leadership. Whatever our other disagreements with him, the stance Achcar took at Marxism was spot on.

Prior to Marxism, we reported on a campaign conducted by various leftists and feminists to persuade the luminaries of the left to boycott the event. We even presumed to draft a critical speech that John McDonnell - one of the comrades who buckled to this pressure - might/should have made if he had taken up the challenge and used an SWP platform to thrash out the politics.

As our report of the session shows (see p8), comrade Achcar did precisely this and it is a shame that more invited speakers did not follow his example to give solidarity and some ballast to the critical voices in the organisation. Apparently Achcar himself was repeatedly lobbied in an attempt to get him to join the list of non-attendees. He faced these critics down openly and observed, quite correctly, that their approach "[revealed] the regrettable persistence of a certain mindset on the left, a mindset the origin of which is known all too well and for which anathemas and excommunication are substitutes for political fight".<sup>1</sup>

There were also more oblique critical references from the likes of Eamonn McCann ("We fight any manifestation of sexism... particularly in our own organisations") and Jerry Hicks (who made light-hearted references to the CC's unpopularity in his rambling, but amusing contribution to the opening rally), as well as others. It is clear that the tactic of boycotting Marxism was totally wrong-headed. The left in general needs to connect with the crisis in the SWP, not keep its distance for the sake of its supposed



**Tony Cliff: turning in his grave**

moral 'purity'. This is not a matter of either intruding on private grief or getting 'dirty' by association. The SWP is an important organisation in our movement and the comrades forming its opposition need to be critically supported.

As it was, the ongoing existence of an internal faction was established as an *accepted fact*; whatever the bureaucratic rules prescribe, it exists. For example, there were open references to it by comrade Callinicos in his stormy 'Leninism in the 21st century' session; and in Ian Birchall's contribution to the 'Lessons of the German revolution'. Comrades should not take sides on which German faction might have deserved their support in the early party of the 20th century, he told us, given that they now had their own "factional struggles" to occupy them right here in the 21st.

### Hit

You have to assume that the SWP leadership knew it would take a hit at this year's Marxism. Even the more dullard elements on the central committee must have seen it coming, given the scale of the crisis. After all, at least half the active membership has either rebelled or, unfortunately, walked.

So bitter exchanges were unavoidable; attendance would be down (in the event numbers were around half of those seen in recent years) and the embarrassing boycott by many high-profile speakers would be damaging in the soft-left intellectual milieu the SWP habitually courts to lend its events prestige.

Best to let the storm blow itself out, was probably the calculation.

Accordingly, the contributions from leading members were largely moderate in tone when they addressed the differences within the SWP's ranks. It was perfectly natural to have an open debate, was the repeated claim - not only by CCers, but rank-and-file loyalists in conversations with other leftwingers on the stalls, etc. The mantra was almost off pat; divisions need to be healed, the organisation must return to the serious tasks that confront it, etc.

With this narrative in place, mild-mannered national secretary Charlie Kimber - with his rather gentle, self-deprecating sense of humour - was judged an ideal envoy from the central committee to address the closing rally. He spoke of the "privilege" of attending Marxism this year. Of course, any revolutionary organisation had to be engaged in a process of "continual discussion and debate" and the critical exchanges that had characterised Marxism "must continue". But a "united party" was needed in the light of the "big responsibility" that rested on the collective shoulders of the SWP.

The danger was that these clashes might settle into "fixed divisions" and distract from the big battles that lay ahead: the September 29 march on the Tory Party conference, the Unite the Resistance conference on October 19, the struggle against the bedroom tax, building People's Assemblies, the "crucial work" of Unite Against Fascism following the Woolwich murder - comrades will be familiar with the tune, even if the lyrics are continually tweaked.<sup>2</sup>

Marxism was therefore a bit of a 'grit your teeth and get through it' experience for the CC and its supporters. You heard plenty of

these comrades mouth the familiar platitudes about this year's "fantastic" Marxism. However, the little clusters of comrades between sessions gave a more accurate picture of the mindset of the loyalists. There the talk was of "disgraceful", "not very good", "leaving a bitter taste", "shocking" and "getting rid of traitors".

In fact, this was an interesting Marxism. There were genuine, open debates between members of the SWP - even if the standard, time-pinched format of the sessions was totally inadequate to bring out the differences in sharp relief. Understandably, intra-SWP relations were sometimes fraught and very angry. Despite that, comrades did not in the main retreat into bunkers. Apart from a few unreconstructed lardheads, I found that even CC supporters were prepared to engage. Myself and other CPGB comrades had a number of relatively honest, quite extended conversations with SWP loyalists, comrades who - while hurt and understandably defensive - were clearly chastened by the tsunami of criticism that has swept over them.

### What is to be done?

The leadership clearly attempted to polarise the debate with the opposition around 'Leninism in the 21st century', a theme that ran throughout the school. A point made repeatedly by loyalists was that it was dangerous to think of the party as prefiguring the socialist society itself in some form. The message was pretty clear - socialism will be lovely, humane and democratic. But the party that wins it will be semi-military, with an all-powerful central apparatus ever ready for Cliff's favourite dance

move, 'sharp turns'. Or, to put it in the idiom of 'Leninism' SWP style - 'shut your gobbs, grab that bundle of *Socialist Worker* and let's get busy'.

An opportunity therefore presents itself to the SWP opposition to rehabilitate not simply the SWP in the eyes of the movement, but to strike a blow for the reconstitution of the Marxist left in the UK on a qualitatively higher, more principled basis. To strike a blow for *partyism*, in other words.

The factional struggles of 2012-13 should suggest some obvious lessons in this regard:

1. The mistakes of the first opposition wave must be avoided. Comrades should prepare themselves for an uncompromising factional *war* with people who have forfeited any right to be trusted. This means there should be no more talk of "red lines"; of developments that would spark instant resignation - eg, the rehabilitation of Martin Smith or a wave of expulsions.
2. Similarly, this time round there must be no suspension of relentless *public* criticism of the positions of the central committee. To agree to this would be to accept that the battle will be fought exclusively on the ground of the leadership, in arenas which are conducive to its bureaucratic manipulation and apparatus gerrymandering. The pre-conference discussion period has *de facto* started, as comrade Ian Birchall declared in the July 13 'Leninism in the 21st century' session. This ought to be conducted openly with a view to drawing the wider revolutionary left into an *active*, partisan engagement. It is not simply a matter of winning over the so-called "reluctant loyalists" in the middle ground, as some comrades have suggested. Again, a narrow, internal approach like this will concede the initiative to the apparatus and will more or less guarantee defeat.
3. If this central committee again succeeds in gerrymandering the next SWP conference there can be no question of accepting its legitimacy - it was a grave error to do so in relation to the March special conference. That helped spread the mood of despair that saw several hundred comrades simply quit. The opposition must demand representation on any body that purports to speak in the name of the SWP in proportion to its actual support. The same must apply to the election of conference delegates. If the leadership refuses, then the conference should be branded as nothing more than a factional gathering with no right whatsoever to speak for the SWP as a whole.
4. If it becomes clear that the leadership is set on a repeat of March and another rigged gathering, it would be legitimate for the opposition to convene an emergency SWP conference, with the aim of replacing a palpably bankrupt leadership, so clearly intent on maintain control over the SWP as if it were a piece of private property. Such a conference could urge those who have left the SWP to come back and take the initiative of calling upon other Marxist organisations to unite with the aim of fighting for a mass Communist Party ●

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### Notes

1. Statement, May 8 2013: <http://permalink.gmane.org/gmane.politics.marxism.marx-mail/168543>.

2. The politically selective hearing of sections of the SWP opposition is rather worrying. A July 17 posting on the *Revolutionary Socialist* blog quotes Kimber's puff about continuing debate, but omits his more pointed comments on a united party now moving forward with practical intervention. There is such as thing as wilful naivety, comrades ...



## SWP DEBATE



# The genie and the bottle

If you can loosen SWP restrictions on free debate on one occasion, asks **Peter Manson**, why not do so permanently?

As reported elsewhere in this edition of the paper, several debates between the Socialist Workers Party leadership and oppositionists took place at Marxism in line with central committee promises. It is a huge advance that the leadership was forced to publicly recognise the SWP's internal differences and allow them to be aired at its annual summer school.

But the actual disputed questions were not the subject of the sessions. There was no *specific* debate on SWP democracy (or lack of it), which was raised over and over again by oppositionists during the weekend; and, as for the SWP's practice in relation to women's rights - no chance. There were, of course, sessions on women's oppression, women and austerity, 'raunch culture', pornography and so on, but there was no time given over to deal with specific accusations of alleged 'SWP sexism' following the Delta case. Once again, the question was raised on numerous occasions, albeit in a totally unorganised and incoherent way.

In every case, the usual Marxism format was adhered to - a 35-minute 'lecture' from the main speaker, followed by around 10 three-minute contributions from the floor (in a few sessions, speakers were alternated - one loyalist, one oppositionist and so on), followed by a five-minute response from the 'lecturer'. The result was that it was very difficult for a clear case to be put - especially as the platform speakers tended to cover the given subject in an abstract way, usually without referring concretely to the specific areas in dispute.

As I say, it was most certainly an advance that these debates took place at all - for the first time those outside the organisation witnessed first-hand the impassioned arguments between members on the central question of the

nature of the revolutionary party and how the SWP matches up to what is necessary. But it would clearly have been better to ditch the usual lecture format and aim for a full and genuinely open debate, with oppositionist speakers given equal time to present their case from the platform, and with the session time at least doubled from the normal hour and a quarter. It would also have helped to openly address the points of contention in the name of the session, rather than attempting to disguise them as a study in 'Leninism'.

There were a number of sessions where the internal arguments were facilitated in this manner, beginning with 'What is the real International Socialist tradition?', opened by former 'loyal oppositionist turned loyal loyalist' John Molyneux on the Friday, and ending with Paul Le Blanc's 'History and future of Leninism' on the Sunday evening.

Other reports in this paper cover what was said in several such debates, so I will concentrate here on comrade Le Blanc's session. He is, of course, an author and member of the US International Socialist Organization, and it was unclear whether he expected his opening to be used as a staging post for one of the debates between the rival SWP factions. The 'history and future of Leninism' is a rather broad topic and, as comrade Le Blanc himself admitted, there was "a lot of stuff packed in here".

Without referring directly to the SWP's problems, he dealt with subjects as wide-ranging as the Bolsheviks' internal regime and the party's preparedness for revolution. There were several points that *might* have been directed at the SWP - for example, the fact that the so-called "Leninism of closed, fixed dogmas was incompatible with Lenin's actual thought" or his "principled

flexibility". Similarly, he noted that "emergency measures that became permanent", such as the Bolsheviks' 'temporary' ban on factions in 1921, had found their reflection even in anti-Stalinist organisations, some of which are characterised by "practices that cut across revolutionary democracy".

He noted that the open ideological struggle within the Bolshevik Party up to 1920 had resulted in "mutual ideological influence" and he did mention his own opposition to "organisational rigidity in the Socialist Workers Party" - but he was at pains to reassure comrades that it was the US SWP of the 1980s he was talking about.

The first speaker from the floor, like just about everyone who followed, did not attempt to engage in any way with what comrade Le Blanc had just said. He wanted to talk about the SWP crisis. It was untrue, he said, that oppositionists like himself just wanted to sit around talking; nor did they want to see a split. But if the second complaint against 'comrade Delta' is not dealt with satisfactorily, "people will leave". He ended by urging: "Open the blog. Open the pre-conference season."

For the central committee Joseph Choonara found the previous speaker's comments lacking in concrete criticism: what exactly ought to be changed? In this he was not wrong. He claimed the leadership was for a "serious, honest and open argument" and for a "highly democratic" party. Contrary to the claims of oppositionists, the CC did not believe that a mass, revolutionary party could be built incrementally, simply by recruiting to the SWP. He did not say how he thought such a party could be brought into being, but if "the SWP became a mass revolutionary party it would be absolutely transformed". Again he did not say in what way its

internal practice would be different.

The next, rather tearful comrade found it all just too much. While she found points to agree with in the arguments of both leadership and opposition, "People on both sides seem intent on making this party implode." She put it all down to a lack of trust: "Why should non-members trust us when we don't trust ourselves?"

Loyalist Paul McGarr reaffirmed that he, like the CC, was "not interested in shutting down debate" - "long may the argument continue", he added. But he was against the "blogs and forums", since they result in only a section of the membership having their say. Instead we need to talk about making the debate "accessible to all members".

This truly is a pathetic argument. What on earth is 'inaccessible' about public blogs? What is preventing anyone who wants from joining in the debate? For that matter, what is preventing the leadership itself from organising a permanent debate forum incorporating the entire membership? The reality is, of course, that the CC wants to avoid such debate as far as possible - it wants a free hand to run things as it sees fit, with criticism kept under wraps, carefully controlled and confined to the annual three-month pre-conference period.

Comrade McGarr was followed by Campbell McGregor, who condemned the CC for practising "anti-Leninism" - he implored: "I want us to start *being* a Leninist party." He weighed into the CC for preventing the election of oppositionists as conference delegates wherever it could instead of trying to ensure the argument was heard at the March special conference. As for the current system of electing the CC, comrade McGregor slammed the "single-tendency slate" for making it impossible to hold individual CC members to account. Ignoring the pre-conference vote-rigging, the

next speaker simply reiterated that people had proposed changes in the system of election, but they "lost the debate". He, for one, was "proud of our democracy".

Ahmed Shawki, an ISO comrade who is prepared to say openly what he thinks, pointed to the dishonesty of the CC in "turning things into a debate on Leninism" - the implication was that those who dared to challenge the CC's line were just not Leninists, he argued passionately.

Comrade Le Blanc himself, ever the conciliator, chose his words more carefully. Ironically noting that one or two contributors had actually referred to his opening in their speeches, he was obliged to address some of the points made. He had great respect for the SWP, he said, and feared we were looking at a "devastating split in the making". However, he proposed no concrete measures to avert such a split, instead reminding everyone that in Lenin's time, "Comrades in Russia diverged, then got back together." His criticisms remained implicit - "Democracy is central," he said (so perhaps it was lacking in the SWP?).

It was the kind of speech the CC would have approved of - people on both sides of the divide could applaud and even the tearful comrade might have felt a little better.

Observing this and other sessions, I could not help wondering how these semi-debates at Marxism - together with the publication of (politely worded) contending viewpoints in *Socialist Review* - fitted in with the CC's insistence that all discussion within 'the party' must be restricted to the pre-conference period and kept internal. Surely the genie has been let out of the bottle - if you can depart from that 'Leninist' practice on one occasion, why not do so permanently? ●

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## LENINISM

# Alex in wonderland

Attempts by the leadership to portray the SWP as the only ‘Leninist’ organisation in town are totally at odds with reality, argues Ben Lewis

**M**y abiding memory of Marxism 2013 is a moment at the end of Saturday evening’s main event: namely Alex Callinicos’s presentation, ‘Leninism in the 21st century’. Dutifully following the script, the session’s chair reminded the 800 or so comrades who were there to buy a copy of two new SWP books before they left. Upon mentioning the first author, Ian Birchall, a good number in the audience spontaneously erupted into cheers. The comrade had just eloquently spoken on behalf of the opposition in the debate that followed the opening by comrade Callinicos. The chair then mentioned the second book, authored by Callinicos himself. This provoked a rather pained and cringeworthy attempt on the part of the loyalists to display similar enthusiasm.

It was a highly fitting and indeed richly symbolic moment that concisely captured the current stand-off. While the leadership wishes to carry on as normal and keep singing from the same old hymn sheet, life itself spoils such plans - the bubbling opposition could not be ignored or silenced. It soon became clear from the reaction to various speeches that around a third of the audience were to one degree or another supporters of the opposition.

This was certainly like no other session I have attended at Marxism. Notwithstanding some of the more ridiculous pronouncements from certain CC loyalists, we really did see something approximating a real debate - even a “festival of ideas”, as Marxism has often been billed in the past. Far fewer uncritical, pre-prepared interventions echoing the main speaker and much more passion and engagement all round. Requests from audience members to speak were sifted through by leading CC comrades Jo Cardwell and Esme Choonara, ensuring that the debate was so constructed that an opposition speaker would immediately be followed by a speaker loyal to the leadership, in what at times felt more like an SWP conference session.

Contrary to a rather odd report from comrade Anindya Bhattacharyya from the SWP opposition, I did not get the impression that “many comrades listening” found the debate “confusing and demoralising”. I got the opposite impression - as we made our way out there was a real buzz, with people really engaged by what they had just heard.

## Back foot

Not that there was much that was particularly new in comrade Callinicos’s presentation. He gave a standard outline of SWP-style ‘democratic centralism’, as it had evolved over the last few decades on the basis of a “particular model developed from a broad understanding of Leninism”. In general the presentation very much gave the impression of a man who was on the back foot: not daring and audacious, but somewhat laboured and beleaguered.

Comrade Callinicos cautioned that we should be rather “suspicious” of an all-embracing term, ‘Leninism’, since there was a cult of Lenin established in the factional heat of the 1920s, leading to a dogmatic approach. Nonetheless, Callinicos was more than happy to repeat the idea presented by the Hungarian Marxist, Georg Lukács, in that period: Lenin was the first Marxist to think about organisation



Alex Callinicos: deeper in a hole of his own making

theoretically, he said. Of course, Lenin’s particular *contribution* to the debate on organisation was extremely rich and far-sighted, but the notion that he was the *first* thinker to do so in theoretical terms is somewhat bizarre. After all, what about the role of Marx and Engels in the Communist League and the drafting of its programme/manifesto, their battles in the International Working Men’s Association, their fierce polemics and strident interventions on the programmes and outlooks of the parties that would form the Second International? Apparently, so Callinicos claimed, Marx and Engels thought that the gradual attainment of political consciousness within the working class would be a “natural, more organic process”, leading one to wonder why both of them were so at pains to develop the strategy and programme of the “political economy of the working class” throughout their careers.

Comrade Callinicos also stressed that there was “no such thing as a Leninist organisation”, pointing out that things would look rather different in Britain to how they would in Egypt, for example. Again, as a general statement, fair enough. Yet what kind of organisations should we be aspiring to build under the best conditions?

His arguments will probably be familiar to readers: the SWP’s take on democratic centralism sees a period of “concentrated debate” - concentrated both in a “political and temporal sense” - with “critical reflection on failure and success”. He also mentioned that there was an emphasis on a “particularly important role of the elected CC” (which is a fluffy way of saying that it appoints all full-timers and local organisers), and then the implementation of policies agreed upon at conference.

It is worth pausing here. Imagine what it would mean if such standards were to apply to the (thoroughly rotten and undemocratic, as *Socialist Worker* will tell you) major parties on the British political scene. It simply would not work. Is it really possible to

seriously intervene in the real world on the basis of three months of debate per year and no genuine public discussion of different strategic and tactical issues for the next nine months? Yes, any living party must decide on particular actions constantly, but what is so thoroughly unconscionable about criticising, say, an obviously incorrect decision in retrospect? If mainstream politicians and thinkers can air their differences in the bourgeois press, then why cannot we do so in ours?

And just what all this has to do with “Leninism in the 21st century” is beyond me. This ‘Leninism’ is not just a watery image of ‘Leninism under Lenin’, as it were, but one that is often so far removed from, so much at odds with, the historical experience of Bolshevism that it does not warrant the name ‘Leninism’ at all.

## Left reformism

At several occasions in his presentation, Callinicos sought to juxtapose the SWP, this ‘Leninist party’, to the currents of “left reformism” (like Syriza) and “movementism” (Occupy). Quite correctly, he noted how the latter forms of struggle invariably fudge the question of state power. He also had a dig at the main motivators behind the Left Unity project for holding illusions in *The spirit of ‘45* and the post-war Labour government. Yet in the absence of any meaningful programme that could avoid fudging such a question, it can hardly be said that the SWP has always had a principled and unwavering take on the question of state power in recent years (as illustrated by the Respect disaster). Such reformist illusions do not seem to be wholly consigned to the past, either. In his summing up, comrade Callinicos even stated that he “would be delighted” if “Left Unity became a left-reformist party”, despite lecturing us about reformist evils! This is presumably so that the SWP might, if the project gets off the ground in any serious way, be able to act as the “best fighters” and “true revolutionaries” within that project

and thus pick off ones or twos. In other words, the very same failed method of the ‘broad party that points towards the revolutionary party’ of some in LU.

Callinicos lamented the fact that some comrades had unearthed what he deemed “disingenuous” Lenin quotes from 1906 about the need for the autonomy of party branches. Fully in line with cold war historiography (of both a Stalinist and bourgeois hue), he argued that Lenin’s thought was “situational” and thus “bent towards a particular problem”, meaning that often when stressing more democracy and autonomy he was actually seeking to “maintain room for manoeuvre” against the Mensheviks and so on - not that Lenin was a “cynical manipulator”, comrade Callinicos quickly added ...<sup>2</sup>

He finished by claiming that the SWP had achieved much in its history and that this should not be “jeopardised” - yet what comrade Callinicos exactly had in mind by this only became clear during the course of the discussion and his response.

And what a discussion it was. Not that you would know much about it if you happened to be an SWP member who could not attend Marxism, let alone a militant worker catching up in *Socialist Worker*. One of the most interesting exchanges I have ever seen at Marxism warrants just a couple of lines: “Leading SWP member Alex Callinicos ... on Lenin saw a lively debate on how revolutionaries should organise”.<sup>3</sup> You’re telling me ...<sup>4</sup> But what “debates” exactly? What were the different positions put forward? And what does this reveal about the nature of the crisis in the organisation that the paper presumably wants you, its readership, to join? What utter contempt for ordinary people and the truth - an insult to our movement. Just what is the SWP leadership scared of?

The first contribution from the floor, by a certain Adam Cochran, reminded us that Owen Jones said that the SWP “punches above its weight”.

The reason for this, so comrade Cochran’s flawless logic went, was that - you guessed it - “we are not a debating society”. The comrade also wanted to mention something that Callinicos had forgotten (quickly adding, rather cravenly, “although I’m not criticising him”): namely that permanent factions are bad because people concentrate more on the faction than anything else - “we were proved right”, he added to loyalist cheers.

Things got more interesting when Rob Owen spoke for the opposition. He said that the party faced this debate because of flaws in its understanding. He urged comrades to look at the state of the SWP, rightly pointing out that it is absurd to regard the SWP as the “finished article”, something always implied in Callinicos’s presentation. He said that SWP members have to clear their organisation’s name and, very interestingly, “fight for the party”. What was needed was not more *diktat*, but humility and discussion. Given that he then made the call for a “mass Communist Party”, I was somewhat surprised at the level of enthusiasm and applause he received from the floor. Rob was followed by loyalist Paul McGarr, who urged moderation in the arguments and said that the SWP cannot pretend to have a “monopoly over the truth”. He also wanted discussion. However, this should not come at the cost of something that “Rob did not mention”: namely “unity in action”. I seriously doubt whether comrade Owen would oppose such a thing, however.

The next speaker to properly address the discussion at hand was Dan Swain, who also pointed out that the SWP cannot assume that it is right all the time and must account for why it had “failed to integrate a generation of activists”. CC member Esme Choonara came next. She underlined the need for a “combat organisation” to “move struggles along”. Did we not know that “Karl Marx broke with idealism”, for example? You see, “you analyse the world in order to change it”, which is presumably why we on the left must organise in a dreadfully



bureaucratic fashion and make ourselves look ridiculous.

Her example of good leadership and a fine balance of debate and unity? How the party worked with Unite Against Fascism (a front group) against Islamophobia. Talk about “breaking with idealism” - I never cease to be astounded at how so many clever and articulate comrades end up spouting the most dubious nonsense in the name of CC expediency.

## Loyal loyalists

A good example of such a case is John Molyneux, who has recently flipped from ‘loyal oppositionist’ to ‘loyal loyalist’, as evidenced by his contribution. Showing that his relationship with reality is tenuous, he claimed that the unfolding debate actually had nothing to do with a disputes commission (its first mention, from memory) or democracy, but was a reflection of reformist ideas infiltrating the party. He spat at so-called “new” ideas, asking just what these ideas are supposed to be.

Molyneux’s decision to end with an analogy of a surgeon performing some kind of operation probably did not do much other than help to wind up a Scottish comrade, Willie Black, who was up next. In a forceful speech, he thundered against the notion that the differences in the SWP somehow revolved around “those who did not think but did everything” and “those who thought but did nothing”. Much to my appreciation, he pointed out that a revolutionary party *is* a debating society in one crucial respect: it constantly debates, assesses and reassesses. He said that he was an opponent of permanent factions, but wanted to see radical change at leadership level: presumably the removal of the slate system. About a third of the room cheered.

Yunus Bakhsh was certainly louder than comrade Black, but no more coherent for it. He reminded us that “revolution is not a parlour game”, arguing that once everybody votes one way then they all have to pull together. Fine, as far as it goes. But does that mean that issues cannot be revisited when they refuse to go away? By this logic, would SWP members writing on the recent rape allegations in *The Guardian* actually be scabbing on the organisation and its vote?

It was Ian Birchall, the octogenarian SWP historian, who stole the show. While it may have taken him a little longer to get to the podium than the others, in delivering his speech he was far more composed and confident than comrade Callinicos. He said that Callinicos had spoken at such a level of abstraction and generalisation that he could agree with 95% of what he had said, which probably also reflected the many years they had spent in the SWP together. Picking up on something comrade Callinicos had written on the need for a “confident leadership with authority”, comrade Birchall was damning. A confident leadership, he said, would allow proper time for a full debate, not 25 minutes for the leadership and six minutes for the opposition (as in the local aggregates to elect delegates to the special conference). It would also be able to change tack when it gets things wrong. Comrade Birchall mentioned the authority of Lenin and the Bolshevik leadership: could the current CC really claim such authority after all that has happened of late? “I would be happy to wait until the pre-conference period”, claimed Birchall, but he then pointed out that the actions of the CC (such as the recent round of suspensions and their subsequent lifting) mean that the “pre-conference period has started now”. He wanted to see real changes in the leadership.

While one could criticise comrade Birchall for not arguing against the whole concept of a “pre-conference period” (which certainly has nothing

to do with ‘Leninism’), the speech was extremely effective and very well received. A moral victory for the opposition, which was underscored by the final speaker, who rather strangely accused those raising internal criticisms of the party as somehow seeking “an internalised short cut of the perfection of the party” when very important things were going on in the world ...

## Put up or shut up

Replying, Callinicos moved from the abstract to the concrete: his ‘democratic centralism’ actually means laying down an ultimatum to those with the temerity to disagree with him and the CC. He spoke of “the faction”, upon which a section of the audience replied: “Which faction?” After all, there is the small matter of the leadership faction that has immediate access to *Socialist Worker*, *Party Notes* and other outlets whenever it wishes to respond to ongoing events. The opposition, of course, can only have recourse to *internal* bulletins for a very short period of time.

His message to the opposition was clear: “You will fail. You could kick me out, but I don’t think you will convince the majority of comrades”. So “What are you doing to do?” He implored the opposition to “carry on working as revolutionaries” - ie, to be good old, disciplined ‘Leninists’ and shut up about their differences for nine months a year. “You can’t continue to argue if you have the lost the vote,” he insisted. Bureaucratic centralism for the 21st century encapsulated.

He accused Rob Owen of the “purest opportunism” in his attempts to “form a specific thing into a general condemnation of our party”. Ian Birchall, “an intellectual”, should be “ashamed” for arguing against abstraction, Callinicos added. He then proceeded to list the party’s successes, which will presumably be indelibly inscribed in the pages of history: ie, the SWP intervention at the People’s Assembly, its response to the Woolwich murder and work in the bedroom tax campaign. His argument went something like this: our relationship may be terrible, but do you think you can do better than me? Look around!

Comrade Callinicos really has no ability to see beyond the *sect* outlook of the SWP. He dismissed revolutionary regroupment with the “sects”, arguing that they are “more interested in talking to each other than the real world.” Yet mainstream media outlets seem to be interested in covering the ongoing scandals within the SWP. Not that *Socialist Worker* or any other SWP publication has anything to say on this subject that will deeply concern established allies and friends in workplaces, trade unions and campuses.

One might, then, justifiably ask comrade Callinicos who he thinks he is. Indeed, while the ‘official’ Communist Party and its tens of thousands of members in the 1970s could have dismissed the Trotskyist left as small and irrelevant “sects”, given their relative sizes, it would still have been delusional to think that the CPGB was “the party” that could facilitate working class power. Dreadful politics aside, it was also *tiny*. But the SWP today pales into insignificance in comparison.

“It is very easy to be a sect. We have a holy programme - to hell with them,” he said. Well, one can also be a sect *without* a programme, comrade - holy or otherwise. In fact, the absence of a programme provides a real lifeline for sect leaderships in particular: there are no codified and easily digestible outlines of principles to which these leaderships can be held accountable when, say, it is engulfed by movementism or popular-frontist adventures with the British section of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The SWP combines its

bureaucratic centralism with a kind of semi-syndicalist approach. This became evident when Callinicos blasted former SWP leader John Rees’s “political and intellectual degeneration”, supposedly evinced by the latter’s recent claim that strikes are just one of many weapons in the class struggle. “Strikes,” Callinicos declared, “are more important than anything else because they are where the workers express themselves”. It is, of course, true that comrade Rees is providing “left cover” for the trade union bureaucracy. Yet on hearing such garbage, comrade Rees may be forgiven for thinking that this alleged “political and intellectual degeneration” may actually be found a little closer to the inner sanctum of the SWP in Vauxhall.

Such an approach may go some way to explaining why it does not even appear to cross comrade Callinicos’s mind that a project like Left Unity can and should be transformed into a party armed with revolutionary politics. The SWP *is* the revolutionary party, you see.

## Cliffite DNA

Comrade Callinicos claimed that the SWP “focuses on power and brings that to every struggle”. Quite how it focuses on power in the absence of any programme mapping out the strategic road ahead is beyond me.

Callinicos was willing to admit that the SWP had made mistakes in attempting to integrate a new generation of students into the party. Why? We had “flattered” them he said, presumably increasing their expectations. How many times did we see SWP speakers comparing the student demonstrations of 2010-11 to May 1968? Who can remember the famous student placard, “What parliament does the streets can undo”, following the decision to increase fees? Where is the discussion in *Socialist Worker* on how such slogans only create false dawns and rapid disillusionment?

Yet there is a sense in which over-exciting, miseducating and eventually burning out new cadre is built into the very DNA of Cliffite socialism. Every strike, every demonstration has to be exaggerated and played up at the cost of long-term strategic thinking, meaning that the SWP simply tails one ‘movement’ after another.

With increasingly worrying levels of absurd behaviour, this leadership is in fact discrediting revolutionary Leninist politics. For all Callinicos’s talk of the opposition engaged in the “logic of destruction”, it is evidently the CC that is currently driving the SWP to the brink.

One thing is clear: without some kind of concerted, daring and creative fightback, the SWP leadership will drag the organisation further along the road to sectarian irrelevance - that would mean another defeat for the left as a whole ●

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## Notes

1. [http://revolutionarysocialism.tumblr.com/post/55515965612/m2013-alex-callinicos-on-leninism#disqus\\_thread](http://revolutionarysocialism.tumblr.com/post/55515965612/m2013-alex-callinicos-on-leninism#disqus_thread).
2. This notwithstanding, Callinicos was at pains to emphasise that one of the great merits of Cliff’s take on Lenin and the SWP’s understanding of him was to undermine “Stalinist constructions” about the overarching “coherence” of Lenin’s thought and practice. Yet as a historical claim this is simply delusional, dismissing as Stalinist those who, instead of a whole number of sharp, contradictory strategic turns (Cliff’s Lenin, as well as the Lenin of those like Neil Harding) see an underlying strategic consistency and vision. Moreover, as historian Lars T Lih and others have convincingly shown, Lenin’s so-called ‘epistemological break’ is actually deeply rooted in Stalinist thought.
3. Significantly, perhaps, Gilbert Achcar does not get a mention - see comrade Sarah McDonald’s report on p8.
4. There is a good spoof of this ‘business as usual’, vague and apolitical reporting of ‘Marxism’ written by a leftist blogger: <http://bloggingiblogs1917.wordpress.com/2013/07/11/marxism-2013/>. Funny because it is true.

# On the fringe



**Bureaucratic conformity: alien to Marxism**

The CPGB and Hands Off the People of Iran were among organisations hosting fringe meetings at this year’s Marxism. The CPGB fringe was on the subject of the hot topic of the moment: that is, the debates around democratic centralism, what it means and how the SWP’s interpretation of it is both a historical distortion of Bolshevik history and a failure in practice.

Comrade Jack Conrad in his introduction noted that democratic centralism has, on some parts of the left, become a scare phrase. For some it represents the notion of a monolith that cannot be challenged, a dogmatic and one-dimensional cudgel, which is in reality the negation of democracy. But what they are talking about is actually an SWP-type regime: ie, *bureaucratic* centralism.

Referring to Jo Freeman’s *Tyranny of structurelessness*, comrade Conrad said that the alternatives of horizontalism and anarchism can never produce a workable alternative model for coherent democratic organisation: ‘consensus’-based groups typically end up with an invisible leadership stitching things up behind the scenes.

It seemed to comrade Conrad that the SWP’s ‘democratic centralism’ was very much in the post-1921 Bolshevik mould - but at least the Bolsheviks could point to imperialist invasion and social collapse. As a result they saw no alternative to undermining their own democracy through the introduction of emergency - supposedly temporary - measures such as the ban on factions. Why should this be the starting point in 21st century Britain?

Against this the comrade contrasted the Leninism of *What is to be done?* Even in 1902, under conditions where Marxist agitators were regularly sent off to Siberia, the aim for Lenin was nonetheless to create a party with as much democracy as concrete conditions allowed. Contrasting Lenin’s paper, *Iskra*, with the SWP’s publications, the comrade said, highlights two very different approaches. *Iskra* was a paper full of sharp polemic amongst and against the left, which took for granted that the advanced workers already knew that the tsar and the bosses were bad, and instead sought to bring out and clarify the key political and strategic differences on the left.

In the debate that followed one comrade pointed out that these differing approaches to the organisation of the party actually reflect different attitudes to the class itself. The first assumes that the future ruling class demands openness and democracy in order to acquire the necessary knowledge and experience, while the second in reality believes that a passive working class must be manipulated by a party elite. It is clear to the CPGB which is the authentic Leninism.

Following the military coup in Egypt against a Muslim Brotherhood government, the Hands Off the People of Iran fringe meeting on political Islam benefited as always from the presence of Hopi chair Yassamine Mather and Israeli socialist and mathematician Moshé Machover.

Providing a quick survey of the state of the Middle Eastern region, comrade Mather concluded that the various Islamic parties were under substantial pressure. In Iran anger was growing against the regime, as a result of the continued and dramatic economic decline and the consequent suffering of the people. In Turkey there were now protests against the ruling Islamic AKP party. In Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood government had provoked mass dissatisfaction until its overthrow by the military. The common theme, the comrade observed, was continued and growing inequality, poverty and the inability of governments to resolve the underlying economic crisis.

In addition, the behaviour of the Islamic parties in government has proved so markedly divergent from what they appeared to many to represent when in opposition that this too has contributed to the disillusionment of their supporters. In contrast to the talk of social justice and toleration, the reality is of economic liberalisation and, in Egypt and Turkey, the pursuit of previously unheralded programmes to transform society on a religious basis, to the chagrin of wide swathes of the poor, the workers and, of course, the secularists.

Comrade Machover focused on the role of Israel in the region and its relation to the social turmoil in the surrounding states. He began by pointing out that amongst all the news emanating from the Middle East, Israel was largely absent - something the Israeli state was likely happy about, as it could pursue its aims without unwanted attention being drawn, for example, to the ongoing removal of thousands of settled Bedouins from their land.

Israel is happy whoever is in government in Egypt, said comrade Machover, so long as it is the army that is really in control - Tel Aviv has an understanding with the Egyptian military about the continuing siege of Gaza and the closure of its Egyptian border.

The comrade was also at pains to stress that Israel should not be characterised one-sidedly as the puppet of the US - there are emerging differences over their perceived interests in, for example, Syria, where the US is increasingly gung-ho in wanting the removal of an Assad regime which Israel could at least tolerate; and in Iran, with whom Israel fears that the US may cut some kind of deal.

**Michael Copestake**



## DOGMA

# Oppression and opportunism



**Whites in South Africa: no benefits?**

As writers for this paper have frequently pointed out, the Socialist Workers Party's bureaucratic-centralist practice is closely linked to its opportunism. The central committee must be free to embrace, and if need be to ditch, any passing cause, any populist sentiment, without fear of challenge from within its own ranks. However, while a section of the membership is starting to confidently assert its opposition to bureaucratic centralism, it appears unable to see the connection with SWP political methodology.

Take, for example, the question of oppression and, in particular, racism. Because the SWP wants to appear, for the benefit of the membership and possible recruits, the most militant, most uncompromising and most revolutionary opponent of racial oppression, it claims racism is constantly and continuously being promoted by the ruling class - and it falls to the 'revolutionary party' to expose this at every opportunity. But it has not yet dawned on the opposition that this is a sham: the ruling class has, quite evidently, largely abandoned attempts to divide the working class on the basis of ethnicity.

Ken Olende, in the session 'Where does racism come from?', reminded us of racism's origins in slavery - before the 18th century the concept was virtually unthinkable. But, despite the fact that slavery is long since gone as a mode of production, "racism is not a thing of the past", he said, because it is so "useful to divide us". For the SWP, racism is virtually identical with anti-immigrant discrimination and propaganda. So, for example, Nigel Farage is a racist because he opposes immigration - end of story. And every SWPer, oppositionist or not, appears to go along with this. So there were statements from the floor such as "the ruling class are trying to push racism as far as they can".

In my own contribution, I wondered why, if it is true that racism is such a unique and powerful device for dividing the lower orders, pre-capitalist ruling classes had not

thought of employing it. And if it had originated in order to justify slavery, how does it work in slavery's absence? Of course, these points are - or ought to be - academic, since it is clear to anyone who is able to look around them without dogmatic spectacles that the bourgeoisie is *not* "trying to push racism as far as they can". Quite the opposite. The dominant ruling class ideology is clearly *national chauvinism* - and actually of a non-racist, indeed *anti-racist*, variety. I gave the example of the black BBC newsreader who just before the Wimbledon final told viewers at the end of the bulletin, "Let's hope Andy Murray does it!" Yes, all of us, black and white, are with the Brit fighting for the country's prestige - in fact that sentiment is such common currency that its expression is not held to be out of place on a 'neutral' 'news' bulletin.

The audience seemed genuinely shocked at my heresy. A young woman loudly admonished me for not realising that black deaths in custody occur far more frequently per head of population than those of other sections. A black comrade related the story of how her young daughter was shown three head-and-shoulder photographs at school and asked to guess which one was the criminal. Unhesitatingly she pointed to the black face. Apparently that is because photos of black suspects and black criminals are always being shown on TV news bulletins.

Comrade Olende did not feel the need to add anything to these 'rebuttals' - "The idea that racism is not a problem today [not quite what I said, Ken] - people have answered that".

I was also able to intervene in Charlie Kimber's session, 'Immigration: the myths they use to divide us'. The SWP national secretary predicted that the 2015 general election would see an "orgy of reaction over immigration", with politicians vying with each other to blame "immigrants, asylum-seekers and the black or brown person on your street" for all our problems.

I pointed out that *no* mainstream

politician today attempts to blame the "black or brown person on your street". If anyone were to act in such an overtly racist manner, they would immediately be sacked or demoted. The SWP, like just about the rest of the left, has failed to recognise the change in ruling class ideology, even though that change began to take place more than half a century ago. Whereas before the 1960s national chauvinism had been inextricably mixed with racism, following the end of British colonialism racism no longer fitted the bill.

What the ruling class now needed was an ideology that could incorporate the millions of Britons with dark skins - attempting to scapegoat such a large minority would provoke huge unrest. Today the establishment tries - with a good deal of success - to win both blacks and whites to the notion that we must all work together in Britain's national interest, which is defined in opposition, to a greater or lesser degree, to the interests of other nations.

It is not even a question of trying to divide us along the lines of "those who were born here and those who weren't", as comrade Kimber claimed. What does he make of the official adulation of Olympic champion Mo Farah, who arrived in Britain from Somalia, unable to speak English, just over two decades ago? Does comrade Kimber think the ruling class is using this black athlete as a *negative* example for white youth?

Comrade Kimber seemed genuinely uncertain of the main point I was making - "I *think* he was saying that the ruling class has abandoned racism," he remarked. You got it in one, Charlie! Describing this as "nonsense", he asked: "Why is it that blacks and Asians get stopped and searched so much more than whites? Why is unemployment for blacks and Asians so much worse? We still live in a society of arrant racism."

So does comrade Kimber think this appalling reality is deliberately driven by ruling class ideology? For example, are police officers *instructed* to target blacks disproportionately for

stops and searches? If so, they must be doing so surreptitiously, as their official documents seem to show an attempt to do the opposite. Surely it is more a question of individual racist acts, combined with socioeconomic factors - blacks are disproportionately poor and working class, and these groups are more likely to be on the receiving end of police oppression.

You might ask, what does it matter if we use the wrong word? If we call anti-immigrant national chauvinism 'racism'? It matters because it allows the ruling class to easily dismiss our opposition to their attempts to divide us. It is a straightforward matter to demonstrate that their actions are not racist. Why do they promote blacks and Asians to senior positions in their parties and throughout society? Why do they virtually unanimously advocate *anti-racism*? Not a very effective way of fomenting racial scapegoating, is it?

## Myths

As I say, oppositionists have not even begun to expose and oppose SWP dogma on such questions - it was impossible to distinguish between the two camps in these sessions. And the poverty of SWP theory affecting both sides struck me particularly sharply in a session similar to that of comrade Kimber: 'Who are the British?', presented by Maxine Bowler.

Comrade Bowler set out to debunk the many myths about Britishness and 'what makes us special': the British cup of tea came from China, fish and chips was originally Jewish, the royal family are a load of foreigners ... But, strangely enough, racism did not get a mention. An oversight?

The result of this was that speakers from the floor appeared at a loss. No-one was able to come in with the usual well-rehearsed anecdotes to back up the official line, and contributions were truly abysmal. A Scottish comrade objected to the whole presentation on the grounds that it should have been called 'Who are the English?' - didn't comrade Bowler know that "we are not British"? He obviously prefers Scottish myths to

British ones. And to think that she had finished her opening with the remark, "Our culture is the international culture of the working class."

The question of racism also featured in another session with a linked theme: 'Privilege theory: who benefits from oppression?' Esme Choonara did a good job of rubbing the claims of the 'privilege theorists', who allege that oppression always operates to the advantage of the non-oppressed - there is an extreme version that claims all white people are somehow oppressors, or even racists, just by virtue of their skin colour; that all men knowingly gain from the inferior status of women. That in turn means that the non-oppressed can never unite with the oppressed - after all, they benefit from that oppression.

But the SWP's line is to turn this on its head and, equally absurdly, declare that the exact opposite is the case. In the words of comrade Choonara, "White people don't benefit in any way from black oppression. Men don't benefit from women's oppression. Absolutely not." The "racist values" that are "constantly pumped out by sections of the ruling class" mean that white workers lose out too, because "solidarity is broken". That is all there is to it - individual whites and individual men never gain any advantage.

What about the thousands of skilled European workers who emigrated to South Africa at the instigation of the apartheid regime? Instead of struggling to pay the mortgage, they swapped their house for one twice as big in Cape Town or Durban, where black servants served them with cold drinks next to the swimming pool. What about the male worker who puts his feet up in front of the telly, while his wife rushes home from work to cook him his supper and do a bit of cleaning after a hard day in the factory?

How can someone so talented and capable as comrade Choonara come out with such garbage? It was a bit like comrade Kimber's categorical statement in the earlier session, to the effect that immigration does not drive down wages. This was effectively answered by SWP member Jenny Sutton, who pointed out that any excess of labour-power, from whatever source, produces competition for jobs, which weakens workers' opposition to downward pressure on their wages.

Comrade Kimber was forced to accept this, but he insisted that *in general* immigration does not drive down wages. In fact the net effect of migration to Britain has been to marginally increase pay, he claimed (he did not explain the mechanism allowing this to happen). Even if we accept that this is accurate, surely it is foolish to argue that rapid, mass migration can have no adverse repercussions for workers.

To say that is not to imply support for border controls (even of the 'non-racist' variety advocated by the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain). The answer must be workers' solidarity - as all SWP comrades know. But continually denying obvious truths - white workers never gain from racism, male workers never benefit from women's oppression, immigration never drives down wages - is totally counterproductive. The case for solidarity is strong, but SWP falsehoods make it appear feeble.

Here is one aspect of the "International Socialist tradition" that oppositionists ought to start calling into question ●

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## DEMOCRACY

# Not taking into account the specific conditions



**Gilbert Achcar: lecturing SWP from a Left Unity viewpoint**

There were certain sessions at Marxism 2013 where the Socialist Workers Party's internal crisis was likely to rise to the surface. The discerning attendee needed only look for the sessions under 'Leninism in the 21st century' to infer 'SWP leadership versus opposition'.

The panel debate between Paul Le Blanc, SWP central committee member Esme Choonara and social-imperialist Gilbert Achcar on 'How should socialists organise?' was no exception. The 600-700 comrades shuffling into the packed hall in the oppressive heat would have had an inkling that things were only going to get hotter (except for the poor woman next to me, who had planned to go to a 'How to fight the fash while defending the NHS' type session, but had accidentally ended up in the wrong meeting).

First to speak was comrade Le Blanc, who meandered around the subject in his 12 minutes. Interestingly, he did not shy away from commenting on the SWP's crisis, though his criticisms were characteristically of a very diplomatic nature. He commented that he does not regard any current organisation on the left as 'the revolutionary party', or even the revolutionary party in embryo. Comrade Le Blanc seems to feel that the SWP's behaviour in acting as though it were the party might have contributed to the current crisis. He also mentioned the need for programme - as this is something the SWP notoriously does not have, it could be inferred that he thinks this is a problem, allowing it to flip unaccountably from opportunist position to opportunist position.

He ended a lot more candidly, commenting that the working class is now clearly different from how it was at the beginning of the 20th century, so we have to think about how we apply Leninism today. We still need democratic centralism - and that means facilitating debate within our organisations. The concern is now that, instead of revolutionary organisations coming together, we have a situation

where they are coming apart.

Esme Choonara chose to mostly ignore what everyone else was thinking about for her 12 minutes. We got the usual 'uprisings, Egypt and austerity' that we have come to expect from the SWP when confronted by its internal crisis. Then she talked about Left Unity as a radical, left-reformist organisation that is nonetheless welcome in raising people's consciousness - it is not the answer though, because the SWP obviously is, as the revolutionary party in waiting. She questioned the idea posed by comrade Le Blanc, that the party does not exist, even in embryonic form, but only with the comment: "I think we're a pretty lively bunch of people" (if only the membership would stick to being lively in areas where the CC instructs them to be and stop this pesky internet nonsense).

Comrade Choonara ended with a defence of SWP-style democratic centralism. Permanent factions stop the party from being effective, as comrades will always be loyal to their faction over and above 'the party'. In her closing remarks she cited the Scottish Socialist Party (incidentally, not a democratic-centralist organisation) as a prime example of this. One could easily make the counter-argument by referencing the Bolshevik Party. And Gilbert Achcar did.

Achcar did not pull his punches. He said that "the need for unity in action" was a false debate and that no-one on the panel would dispute this. He viewed Left Unity (a project he is currently involved with) as a place where revolutionaries can work and to present it as "left reformist" is sectarian. I agree with comrade Choonara on this point: LU's politics are clearly left-reformist, with their odd, sepia-coloured nostalgia for the post-war era, but it does provide a site in which comrades can at least get together - something that has been missing on the left in Britain in any meaningful way for several years now.

Achcar correctly noted that the destruction of the SWP would represent

a major setback and that it needs to act to avoid self-destruction. He argued that the SWP reduces Leninism to democratic centralism (in fact it misunderstands democratic centralism and imposes its own *bureaucratic* centralism). He commented that the current SWP was less democratic than the pre-1917 Bolsheviks, who were operating under considerably more difficult circumstances. In this country, at this time, the left can go about its business legally, without fear of being sent to Siberia, yet in the absence of such conditions the Bolsheviks had open factions and expressed sharp disagreements in public. By contrast, the SWP had suspended four of its members for publishing a blog (or was it the heinous crime of opening a bank account?). Achcar asked, "Are you in civil war here?" He said, nodding in the direction of Alex Callinicos, who was sitting in the front row, that he had predicted the current crisis to the comrade years ago and now it is here. Achcar is right: we are not operating in civil war conditions, but there is a civil war being fought out in the SWP.

I managed to get in as the first speaker from the floor, and hopefully my contribution helped stop SWP loyalists from avoiding the argument and talking instead about Egypt, Greece or the bedroom tax (well, for the most part, at least). I argued that the SWP must adopt genuine democratic centralism if it is to come out of this crisis without destroying itself. That it does not mean "democracy for three months, centralism for nine". That instead it must allow permanent factions to operate within its ranks, to organise, to publish independently in print and online and that room should be made within its publications for opposing views to be debated. After all, surely as Marxists we believe that the working class is the class tasked with the liberation of humanity. That the working class must emancipate itself and that if we as Marxists are the most conscious part of that class, it is not our job to lie to or patronise. Debates should be had openly and

honestly in front of the class, rather than remain hidden away for fear that it would be 'confusing' or irrelevant to 'ordinary workers'. The same 'ordinary workers' could read

about the SWP's internal crisis in the *Daily Mail*, *The Guardian* or on the BBC website, but not in *Socialist Worker*. In terms of the impact upon the SWP's own members, I argued that, rather than debate being a distraction from going out and fighting the class struggle, to argue out your politics openly and sometimes very sharply with your own comrades makes for better, more hardened, more articulate, more intelligent cadre.

During the course of the debate the SWP leadership's treatment of its opposition was the main theme. While mostly loyalists spoke, oppositionists too came in on the discussion. The crisis facing not just the organisation, but individual members, was all too evident. As was true of this year's Marxism in general, there was a lot of pent-up emotion, with comrades on both sides clearly suffering from the experience. Understandably given that comrades put so much of their lives into politics and their organisations, no-one should take what is happening lightly or with any sense of *Schadenfreude*.

Alex Callinicos got the last word in from the floor. He said that if he has learned anything from this it is that he is more opposed to permanent factions now than he was a year ago. In which case, evidently, he has learned nothing.

**Sarah McDonald**

## Summer Offensive Make or break

We hope comrades appreciate the coverage in this week's issue of the Socialist Workers Party's annual school. The SWP's recent travails meant that Marxism was a much smaller event than last year and this was reflected in the reduced income taken at our stall.

Despite torrential rain a year ago, we raised a useful £300 in 2012. But in 2013, despite brilliant sunshine, we only managed a rather more slender £100. However, I hope comrades get a sense from the reports that this year's event carries far more significance for us in our day-to-day work - as well as for our annual fund drive - than any previous Marxisms, where we raised more cash. In fact, we mostly gave our papers away this year - hundreds of them. The politics of the time demanded it.

The central project of the *Weekly Worker* is nothing less than a cultural revolution on the Marxist left. The content of our paper is consistent with this campaign and - as best we can - we seek to accurately reflect the true state of affairs on the left as it currently exists. This will provide the most solid basis for affecting change: telling ourselves or our readers comforting lies would be worse than useless (by the way, there were 12,369 web readers last week).

We are bound to have made mistakes in our coverage of Marxism. It is inevitable that we

misreported this or that comrade's words or misinterpreted the meaning of some intervention. Our pages are open to correction, criticism and comment. The opposition in the SWP is entering a make-or-break time for it and we will offer critical support and report its fight as accurately as we possibly can.

Now, doesn't that deserve some financial backing?

We added a useful £1,883 to our running total this week, taking us to just a shade under £10k at £9,780. Not bad, but still only a third of the way towards our £30,000 target by August 18 - halfway through and still two thirds of our total to find, comrades! Can you help us pick up the pace?

Many thanks this week to comrades MM (£75), BP (£200), AS (£400), PM (£250), AN (£60) and LR (£50), the proud father of a new-born baby girl. More modest, but still greatly appreciated and important to the momentum of the campaign are comrades such as LA (£30), AG (£20) and FP (£15).

Pleasing also was the news that we had sold £42.66 of books via the print-on-demand page for November Publications. Visit [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com) if you would like to order some of our titles.

**Mark Fischer**

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



# Entropy, therapy and eclecticism

The International Socialist Network is still trapped by SWP politics, argues **Harley Filben**

Given all the excitement at Marxism this year, it was almost easy to miss the presence of the direct product of the Socialist Workers Party's last bout of internal upheaval - the International Socialist Network, which split off after the 'conference of a special type' in March.

As a faction, the Democratic Renewal Platform, the core of today's ISN, was characterised by relative hardness. The faction was launched off the back of scathing public criticism from Richard Seymour and others; they were the oppositionists who indulged least of all the fantasy of a sensible, unity-saving compromise with the leadership (although they ultimately capitulated to the strictures of fighting alongside the 'softer' opposition too).

Hardness is not their most obvious attribute now that the comrades have emerged into the harsh light of the outside world, however. The ISN's appearance at Marxism gave the rest of us an opportunity to see how the new organisation is shaping up, and it is proving to be pretty amorphous.

First of all, it is worth noting that the comrades might have decided not to come at all. Such was the judgement of the *first* leadership meeting several months ago - an indicative vote decided against showing up at Marxism, only to be overturned at the next (along with one or two other decisions). Behind this lie different opinions on how much the new organisation owes the old, and their erstwhile comrades in opposition in particular. Is the ISN inside the 'International Socialist tradition' or out of it? Is it Leninist or 'libertarian'? It really depends on who you ask.

The ISN held two fringe meetings. The first was on 'Feminism and the left', and lined up a series of people - including a couple of current SWP members, ISN members and the unavoidable Laurie Penny - to argue that the left has an underbelly of terrible sexism and for the adoption of feminism *tout court*. One speaker, Aamna Mohdin, expressed herself in the form of a kind of prose poem, a series of statements starting with the phrase "Rape culture is ..." (and unfortunately not ending with '... an unhelpful conceptual framework for understanding the causes and consequences of violence against women'). This was met with wild whooping from Laurie Penny and cheering from the 40 or so people crammed into the shoebox-sized, swelteringly hot Jeremy Bentham pub and about the same number listening via a speaker on the forecourt outside.

Less physically gruelling was the following day's meeting, taking place on the lawn outside Birkbeck College. It was a more or less informal discussion of the potential for left realignment and regroupment, with probably 40 to 50 comrades present at one time or another - apart from the ISN, there were four members and supporters of the CPGB, half a dozen from Workers Power and a smattering of others. Ahmed Shawki and Paul Le Blanc of the American International Socialist Organization were also present, mostly observing from a distance.

Among these others were Simon Hardy and Luke Cooper of the Anti-Capitalist Initiative and Liam Mac Uaid of Socialist Resistance, and the discussion was in a sense an extension of fraternal talks between SR, the ACI and the ISN, which have been taking place recently. Again, ISN members present seemed to have very different ideas about what regroupment means - for Paris Thompson, one of the infamous Facebook Four expelled by the SWP for *not* forming a pre-conference faction late last year, it was the first step on the road to "a mass Communist Party



**Young but very muddled**

with a Marxist programme", an aim we obviously share.

A young comrade from Bristol, Sam, seemed much less enthusiastic. He feared that the talks would lead to SR hegemony, since the latter has an "apparatus" unlike the ISN or ACI - instead, we should aim for a "confederation" in which diverse groups, from anarchists to Trotskyists, to anyone else, could unite around non-specific activities.

Most contributions from younger ISN comrades (ie, that part of their membership that came out of the recent split) veered between these poles, often in the same speech. Comrade Hannah from Sussex was quite clear that the split was not made necessary by the 'comrade Delta' rape charge in itself - after all, there would always be more rapists, and we did not want to end up spending all our time as "detectives". If the SWP had opened up and started producing a monthly discussion bulletin, say, she would have stayed in. On the other hand, not being caught up in the SWP machine left her freer to contribute to activities that she joined the SWP to do, such as the recent Sussex University occupation, and now she would not join a 'party' organisation again.

CPGB comrades - as well as some of our more hidebound Trotskyist comrades in WP and the International Bolshevik Tendency - did our level best to cut against the anti-partyism on display, but what was remarkable was how *resistant* ISN and ACI types were to actually responding to these arguments; taken together, we added up

to a significant minority of the meeting, and most of us spoke. The tone was consensual rather than discursive, and I suppose we were all left to conclude we would have a jolly good time together building Left Unity (enthusiasm for Kate Hudson's and Andrew Burgin's latest wheeze seems to be almost the only point of commonality among the ISN).

This was frustrating, and may have been especially so for Workers Power comrades. WP has been invited to the regroupment discussions by the ISN, and is keen on wider participation from different revolutionary groups, but SR is blocking that. The wildly different levels of enthusiasm for this little initiative within the ISN does not augur well for WP - after all, given the previous levels of consistency, it may find its invitation to participate rescinded at the next leadership meeting, depending on who bothers to turn up.

Some older ISN heads - previous generations of SWP expellees, mostly - also piped up, but often talked like slightly more grounded SWPers of the standard type. Ben Watson had attended the opening rally at Marxism, and liked the cut of Jerry Hicks's jib. Keith Fisher was sceptical of grandiose programmatic proclamations - like Tony Cliff before him, and Alex Callinicos today. An older comrade, John, spoke of how traumatised he was to be expelled from the American ISO, and how cathartic it was to have found the ISN - there was a slightly 'group therapy' feel to some of these activities (the collective elation at the 'Rape culture is ...' speech being a case in point).

The ISN has the real problem - which, alas, many of its members consider a virtue - of having almost no coherence whatsoever. This is a problem which inevitably follows from the circumstances that gave it birth: the spectacular implosion of a comically bureaucratic group. Factional struggles tend to cohere around what dissidents oppose, rather than what they support - all the more so, when internal polemic is circumscribed in the parent organisation. The question 'What now?' hangs over the comrades.

Asking that question is a liberating experience for especially the younger comrades, who have always had sensible elders like Weyman Bennett to answer it on their behalf. It can quickly come to feel like an albatross, however.

This situation is, again, inevitable - it is not inevitable that it should end in dissipation and a drift back into mainstream society. It is difficult, however, not to see the centrifugal forces at work here, not least due to the fact that the comrades are asking that question - 'What now?' - in the wrong way. What looms largest for them is the entirely natural instinct of any radical to get stuck in and make an impact on society. This is an instinct that a serious Marxist organisation would *temper* by emphasising the need for long-term planning, strategic thinking and (hardest of all) a sobering look at the balance of forces before plunging into the fray; with theoretical education and the patient transformation of members into *leaders*. The SWP is not such an organisation, and has encouraged

instead a breathless desire for constant mobilisation. Untempered steel shatters at the first heavy blow.

So the biggest weakness of the ISN is not that it is not clear what it stands for just yet, but that its comrades are unwilling to take the time out to give that some serious thought, and work out what - if anything - unites them beyond having once been members of the SWP. They have scurried into Left Unity, but hardly act as a coherent bloc within it.

They may have entered into 'regroupment talks' with SR and the ACI, but it is patently obvious that the level of enthusiasm for such talks varies wildly. The biggest obstacle to such regroupment is that the ISN has not yet regrouped with itself; the ACI, equally, is divided on the question (and the semi-presence of WP further complicates the matter). If things continue as they are going, the net result will be, at best, a slightly bigger SR. Yes, after all, it has an apparatus - and, more importantly, *some* kind of historically constituted political coherence.

In this situation, the negative criticisms of the SWP become positive political proposals via the line of least resistance. The manifold failures around the Delta case are to be dealt with by opening up to 'feminism', and specifically to the 'loudest' form of feminism, the presently fashionable, but intellectually moribund 'rape culture' ideology. If we are sufficiently disgusted by rape culture, then that amounts to - as more recent oppositionists in the SWP put it - "putting our politics on women's oppression into practice".

Yet the Delta case is almost the worst possible lens through which to observe the SWP's failings on the women's question. That disputes committee would have 'acquitted' the comrade of anything: from murder down to embezzling £50 for a gram of cocaine. It tells you nothing about the SWP's supposed 'sexism'. On the other hand, the SWP advocated, not long ago, a vote for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood - a call enthusiastically defended by ISN leading light Richard Seymour when it was made. If I were a mischief-maker, I would suggest the following proposition to his comrade, Aamna Mohdin: rape culture is calling for a vote for organisations that legitimise marital rape and domestic violence, purely because it happens to be politically convenient at the time ...

Hatred of the SWP's bureaucratic internal norms becomes advocacy of horizontalism, networkism and liquidationism. The heritage of Bolshevism can be rejected either on the spurious basis that it is inherently undemocratic, or on a superficial analysis that it is 'outdated' in the age of Twitter and the precariat. Both notions are easier to arrive at than a genuine historical analysis of the revolutionary movement, which offers no quick, clean solutions and takes time. It requires, in fact, time *out* of head-banging activism, and a willingness to re-examine the exaltation of that activism by the likes of the SWP.

The conclusion is simple - having broken acrimoniously with the SWP, the ISN is still completely trapped in the broader headspace of SWP politics. Behind the latter's bureaucratic regime of hyper-mobilisation and the priestly liturgy of state-capitalism/permanent arms economy/deflected permanent revolution, there has always been a void filled with basically liberal moral outrage at the obscenity of capitalist life. Now that the ISN comrades have taken themselves outside the regime, there is a good deal less separating them from their outrage. It will lead only to further fragmentation ●



## ITALY



Is his political end in sight?

# Judgement day looms

Toby Abse reports on an unexpected setback for Silvio Berlusconi

**T**he long and complex saga of Silvio Berlusconi's trials seems to be moving towards a much more rapid conclusion than either he or the entire Italian political class had believed possible. There is now a real chance of a definitive guilty verdict and a five-year ban on the holding of public office by the end of this month.

The Cassazione (supreme court) decided on July 9 that Berlusconi's final appeal in his tax fraud case (over Italian TV rights for American films bought by his company, Mediaset) should be heard on July 30 rather than some time in the autumn or winter, as had been almost universally expected by those familiar with the long Italian legal summer holidays and the snail's pace at which most of the Italian judicial system operates - even in cases not disrupted by Berlusconi's infinite variety of delaying manoeuvres.

The problem in the Mediaset case was that, as a result of a law passed by Berlusconi's government in December 2005, one part of the tax fraud offence for which he had been convicted would have been 'timed out' by the statute of limitations. By mid-September, the earliest date for a normal sitting of the Cassazione, the €4.9 million tax fraud committed in 2002 would no longer attract a criminal conviction. Therefore, only the €2.4 million fraud of 2003 would still stand. Since the appeal court judgement did not make it clear how much of the nominal four-year prison sentence was a punishment for the crime committed in 2003, as opposed to that of 2002, the Cassazione would in all probability have had to send the case back to the appeal court for a recalculation of the sentence. If, as was quite possible, the whole process took around 12 months - and one would have expected Berlusconi's skilled legal team to do their utmost to ensure this - the remaining penalty, and thus the offence as a whole, would have been timed out. As with a number of previous offences, the former prime minister would have escaped without a legal penalty - not because of an acquittal, but on a purely technical issue concerning the date of the offence.

If any reader feels this scenario is a bit melodramatic, it is worth rehearsing the earlier history of the TV rights case. Berlusconi was originally charged in relation to this tax fraud in April 2005. At that stage the most serious aspect concerned a \$368 million fraud in 1995-98. Within a few months, Berlusconi's own government had passed a law altering the statute of limitations to ensure that a number of offences got timed out more rapidly than had been the case in the past - this piece of legislation is frequently cited as an example of Berlusconi's *ad personam* legislation. By the time of his initial conviction in October 2012, the judges in the lower court had to acknowledge that even the €6.6 million fraud committed in 2001 was timed out, so that they could only find Berlusconi guilty in relation to 2002 and 2003 - even though the wording of the judgement emphasised the long-term and continuous nature of this very systematic fraud.

Knowing that the case might effectively collapse because of timing, the Cassazione therefore decided that Berlusconi's appeal would be held before a tribunal that deals with urgent matters during the summer legal holidays. Whilst Berlusconi and his supporters have expressed outrage, reviving their usual shrill claims about two decades of judicial persecution, there is, as the *Corriere della Sera* pointed out, a 1969 law which instructs judges to speed up cases that are at risk of lapsing because of the statute of limitations.

Berlusconi's principal concern in relation to this case is not the nominal jail sentence, which, given his age and lack of any previous convictions (despite his numerous trials for criminal offences), would in practice be transmuted into some form of house arrest. No, it is the five-year ban on public office holding. Although, as the example of Beppe Grillo and his Movimento Cinque Stelle (Five Star Movement - M5S) has recently demonstrated, it is perfectly possible to have almost total control over an Italian political movement without holding a parliamentary seat, exclusion from parliament would weaken Berlusconi's negotiating

position *vis-à-vis* other political forces and the loss of parliamentary immunity would leave him much more exposed in the 'Ruby case', in which he has an appeal pending against a seven-year jail sentence for sex with an underage prostitute.

Berlusconi's Popolo della Libertà (PdL) has rallied behind him. Internal divisions, whether about the degree of support to give the 'grand coalition' (which includes some PdL ministers, but is unpopular with PdL hardliners), the merits of precipitating an early general election or the likely reversion from the failing PdL to the old, more successful brand of Forza Italia in the autumn, have been largely forgotten. As one leading female PdL figure memorably phrased it, "There are no hawks or doves: only hyenas".

On July 10, the PdL paralysed parliament. Its original plan was to halt all parliamentary business for three days as a protest against the allegedly politically motivated decision of the Cassazione. This was clearly intended as a means of putting pressure on the judges and could indeed be construed as outright intimidation, not just public contempt both for the workings of the judicial process and for notions of the separation of powers enshrined in the Italian constitution. In the event parliament was suspended for three hours, not three days.

However, the most significant aspect of this whole episode was the collusion of most of the ex-'official communist'-dominated Partito Democratico (PD), whose members voted for a suspension of parliamentary business. This performance by the PD was a total and utter disgrace, and M5S parliamentarians were absolutely justified in shouting "Slaves, serfs, buffoons!" at them. A minority of about 30 PD deputies either registered an abstention or walked out of the chamber before the vote. Whatever their private motivations, their refusal to endorse the parliamentary suspension was the honourable course of action; indeed it would have been even better if they had joined M5S and the soft-left Sinistra Ecologia Libertà in voting against it rather than merely abstaining. It was particularly

regrettable that some figures on the PD's left - the so-called Young Turks - have been so eager to associate themselves with this collusion with Berlusconi.

The ultimate test for the PD will, of course, be how it responds to any future Cassazione decision to deprive Berlusconi of public office. Such a ban would have to be ratified by the Senate, of which Berlusconi is currently a member, and the ballot would be secret. After the episode in which 101 traitors from the PD failed to vote for Romano Prodi in a secret presidential ballot, it is hard to be certain whether the PD senators would maintain party discipline if massive financial incentives were secretly offered to individuals who broke it - although not to do so would be collective suicide for a party whose rank-and-file members and voters would show no mercy if parliament protected Berlusconi from the first serious judicial punishment he has ever received.

Whilst Berlusconi has attempted in various ways to secure a last-minute delay in the hearing, all indications at the moment of writing are that July 30 will indeed be the day of judgement and Franco Coppi, Berlusconi's lawyer, is urging him to show as much public restraint as he can in the period leading up to the verdict, to avoid antagonising the panel unnecessarily. Since *Libero*, one of the daily papers under Berlusconi's effective control, has already branded the judges of Cassazione "state bandits", as well as irritating president Giorgio Napolitano by raising the possibility of a presidential pardon for Berlusconi on its front page, Coppi's sage advice seems to have come rather too late in the day.

Nonetheless, as anybody familiar with the Cassazione's record over the years in cases involving neo-fascist bombers and leading Mafiosi, about whose guilt lower courts had not a scintilla of doubt, knows, it can hand down some very strange verdicts. Unfortunately Berlusconi's extremely enigmatic statements some months ago about having a friendly judge in Berlin may yet prove to have some foundation ●

## 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

## MPs should be on average skilled wage

## Crocodile tears over salary recommendation

Eddie Ford thinks MPs should be accountable, recallable and live on a wage close to those they represent

Last week the subject of MPs' pay was revisited. After the expenses scandal broke out in 2009, MPs outsourced the entire thorny question to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (Ipsa) - which became tasked with monitoring and controlling all aspects of MPs' salaries and expenses. Problem solved, many optimistically thought. MPs could no longer be charged with voting themselves substantial pay rises, whilst public-sector workers' pay was being cut in real terms.

Alas, Ipsa seems to have only made things worse. Far from cracking down on MPs' pay, its main recommendation in a consultation published on July 11 was that from 2015 their salary should increase from £66,396 to £74,000, representing a rise of 9.26%, and be indexed to average earnings. A stark contrast to the 1% pay cap imposed on public-sector workers until 2015-16. Ipsa actually thought MPs might deserve as much as £83,430, but decided to recommend the lower amount because of the "current difficult circumstances" - something that will undoubtedly bring joy to the hearts of ordinary public-sector workers struggling to get by.

Ipsa also recommended that MPs' pensions should be on a par with public-service employees; "resettlement payments" (and "golden goodbyes") worth tens of thousands of pounds should be replaced with a more modest package; and there should be a tighter regime of business costs and expenses - ending, for instance, the provision for things such as evening meals and taxis after late parliamentary sittings.

Needless to say, Ipsa's recommendations went down like a lead balloon. Party leaders, who are on double what ordinary MPs get, lined up to denounce the plans. David Cameron said the idea of such a generous pay rise was "unthinkable" - though he has so far refused to say whether he would personally accept any pay rise. Nick Clegg declared it was "about the worst time" imaginable to advocate a near double-digit pay increase for MPs and confirmed he would not take any increase. Sentiments naturally echoed by Ed Miliband, who challenged the prime minister to openly forego any pay rise too. As for the education secretary, Michael 'Gradgrind' Gove, he had no time for the "silly" Ipsa, which could "stick" its proposals. What a man of the people.

Ipsa refuses to budge, however. The organisation's chairman, Sir Ian Kennedy, said that MPs should be treated like "modern professionals" and argued that his recommendations were "fair" because MPs' pay had "fallen back" over the years. They needed to be "properly rewarded" for the job they did, he maintained - further adding that the expenses scandal had been the result of "too much" pay restraint. Presumably the poor things, being chronically underpaid, had no choice but to claim expenses for moats, porn-channel subscriptions, empty flats, second homes, chocolate bars, dog food, garden furniture, swimming pools, media trainers, etc.<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that Kennedy himself is paid £700 a day and works on average two

days a week - equivalent to a salary of over £70,000.

### Top 5%

There are some backbench Tory MPs who support Ipsa's recommendations. Typical was Andrew Bridgen, who believes that politics will struggle to attract "high-calibre" people unless MPs are "remunerated sufficiently" or 'incentivised'. Whilst accepting that he and his colleagues are never going to earn the sort of money they could make in the private sector - quite a sacrifice - he pointed out that MPs are paid about the same as a junior-school headteacher, meaning that "some balance" has to be restored. After all, he remarked, nobody wants parliament to be only for people of "independent wealth", who treat an MP's salary as mere "pocket money". Similarly, the MP for the Cities of London and Westminster, Mark Field, said MPs should "bite the bullet" of unpopularity and take the rise offered by Ipsa.

People like Bridgen and Field seemed to be in a tiny minority, with hardly anyone speaking up for a pay rise. But a survey of 100 MPs conducted by YouGov for Ipsa in January showed a different picture. Safely protected by anonymity, 69% thought they were underpaid.<sup>2</sup> On average, Tory MPs proposed a salary of £96,740, the Lib Dems £78,361 and Labour £77,322. A fifth suggested that they should be paid £95,000 or more. And more than a third thought they should keep their final-salary pensions. They clearly think MPs' pay has "fallen back", as suggested by Kennedy.

However, the reality is that MPs have never had it so good. When David Lloyd George first introduced salaries for members of parliament in 1911, so that official politics was no longer just a hobby for the privileged elite, MPs were awarded £400 a year - which in today's money is the equivalent of just under £40,000. By 1979, when Margaret Thatcher came into office, an MP was earning £9,450, which was still equivalent in real terms to £40,490 - very close in fact to the original pre-World War I salary. But today MPs



Crying all the way to the ...

are paid £66,396 a year, representing a sixfold increase in cash over 34 years and a real-terms rise of more than 50%. Which puts them in the top 5% of earners, the median full-time salary being just £26,500.

Of course, compared to other top-earners, MPs' pay is very modest indeed. For example, the boss of Royal Mail, Moya Greene, is reported to be getting £1.5 million, including bonuses. The managers of Network Rail have each received 17% bonuses this year, despite missing their targets, and their chief, Sir David Higgins, received £677,000. Even the hapless Care Quality Commission gave its head £440,000 last year. If truth be told, most top executives would not bother getting out of bed for anything under a six-figure salary. And MPs in the UK are paid significantly less than many of their counterparts in other countries. In the United States the salary is £111,251, in Italy £112,898, in Australia £120,875 and top of the tree is Japan on £167,784. Maybe Bridgen and Field should relocate.

Anyhow, Ipsa's review is now in its "public consultation phase" and, depending on the response to the

proposals - overwhelmingly negative, of course - Ipsa has the rest of this year to change any of its recommendations.

### Worker's wage

The communist position on this matter is unequivocal. An MP's job should not be a lucrative career option. What of the idea that you need high wages to attract "high-calibre" people? Quite the reverse: anyone who wants to be an MP purely for the money is by definition the sort of person you want to keep out of the House of Commons. MPs should live on a wage close to the people they are supposedly representing, receiving the average wage of a skilled worker, plus any legitimate expenses. A communist MP would unilaterally do that, irrespective of what Ipsa finally decided. He or she would take only such an average, handing over the excess to the party.

Interestingly the BBC has recently provided us with an example of how to operate as a workers' MP in the shape of Dave Nellist, the former Coventry MP and supporter of the Militant Tendency, then the Socialist Party in England and Wales. From his election in 1983 to his deselection in 1992, comrade Nellist only accepted the average wage of a skilled factory worker in Coventry, which constituted 46% of his salary - equivalent to about £28,000-£29,000 nowadays. The remaining 54% was donated to the labour movement in order to "help the families of miners in the 80s, community groups, pensioners" - not to charities, as implied by the BBC coverage.<sup>3</sup>

Quite correctly, comrade Nellist believes public representatives should "share the pain and the gain". That is, be affected just like anyone else by the decisions taken in parliamentary and council chambers - not live on a salary that insulates them from day-to-day problems like high food and fuel prices, for instance. Writing in *The Socialist*, comrade Nellist warned that "much of the protocols of an MP's life, and the privileges lavished on them, are designed to suck them into defence of the system, so that (whether consciously

or not) they feel more in common with the rulers than the ruled".<sup>4</sup>

Fundamentally, this is a deeply democratic question. From the time of the Paris Commune onwards, working class organisations have demanded that elected representatives be paid no more than a skilled worker's wage. This is not a modern-day SPEW or CPGB obsession. Not because we want them to live in poverty like medieval monks from a mendicant order, but simply because those representing working class voters in particular need to be continually reminded of how their constituents live and what their interests are - and, of course, the same principle applies to trade union representatives.

Just as importantly, MPs should be instantly recallable. As things stand now, there is no recall mechanism by which the masses can boot out individual MPs or for that matter bring a failed parliament to account. The result is only too well-known - we get to pick our MP once every four to five years and they get to do whatever they want in the intervening period.

However, we are confronted by the obvious deep-seated problem that parliamentarians and union officials have come to expect relative enrichment as their right and proper due. Hardly surprising though when they are receiving incomes and expenses commensurate with managers and small-scale owners of capital. Almost inevitably, working class MPs and union bureaucrats start to see themselves as above and beyond the reach of those who elected them - in this insidious way we see the "transformation of the state and the organs of the state from servants of society into masters of society".<sup>5</sup>

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### Notes

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