



weekly
worker



Amy Leather and Charlie Kimber - SWP loyalists fall out as opposition fragments

- Left Unity censorship
- Rowhani's rapprochement
- German elections
- Die Linke's space force

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Towards a Communist Party of the European Union

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The shock and awe that wasn't.
Barack Obama
and US decline



LETTERS



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

Get together

Three competing platforms have been drafted and circulated in advance of Left Unity's founding conference, scheduled for November 30. Of particular interest to us in the Socialist Party of Great Britain is the so-called 'Socialist Platform'. Participants of our party's web forum have observed that this platform has many similarities to our own 'Object and declaration of principles', and there has been discussion about whether or not we should officially approach Left Unity to propose a meeting to discuss their statement and ours.

A letter has been drafted which the EC may wish to consider:

"We have read your 'Statement of aims and principles' for the proposed 'Left Unity Party' and have noticed many similarities with our 'Object and declaration of principles' and the positions we have developed and propagated over the years. We have in mind in particular the need for a principled, explicitly socialist party that concentrates on campaigning for socialism, as "capitalism does not and cannot be made to work in the interests of the majority" and which holds that "the socialist transformation of society ... can only be accomplished by the working class itself acting democratically as the majority in society using both parliamentary and extraparliamentary means".

As there can be no point in two socialist parties in one country, we should like to propose a meeting to discuss the principle of a single socialist party, based on sound socialist principles, as opposed to forming yet another leftwing reformist party. It was generally agreed to send a letter to the Socialist Platform. It was suggested that if they turn us down we can send an open letter.

Motion 30: The party sends a letter to Socialist Platform proposing a meeting to discuss the principle of a single socialist party. Carried (5-0-0).
SPGB executive committee
email

Put off

Paul Demarty reports it being argued at the September 14 Socialist Platform national meeting that if journalist Susann Witt-Stahl was allowed in, "then that would have to apply to the comrades outside from the Socialist Party of Great Britain, who were handing out leaflets. As if their presence was somehow intolerable!" ("Politics of prejudice", September 19).

Thanks for speaking up for us, but the ironic thing is that if the three of us had been allowed in and had had a vote (which we didn't want - we only wanted to be there as members of the public at an open meeting, and don't believe in 'entering' other organisations anyway), we would have voted against all the CPGB amendments and they would not have been carried.

The amendments (workers' state, gradual withering away of money and the state, a European army, etc) would have converted the Socialist Platform into a Leninist document when this is the last thing that's needed. That would have put people off - and rightly so.
Adam Buick
SPGB

Get a life

This week's copy of the *Weekly Worker* is only the second I've received since becoming a subscriber. What a contrast between the two! The first contained an excellent article about anthropological evidence supporting Engels' view on the origins of women's oppression, an interesting discussion on the legacy of

Luddism and an amusing take on the 'safe spaces' policy produced by some comrades within Left Unity.

The second, on the other hand has five pages - five pages, comrades - devoted to the CPGB's attempt to amend the Socialist Platform statement at a meeting last Saturday and the debate that subsequently took place. Another page is then taken up with a report of the Stop the War Coalition's annual general meeting that devotes its first two paragraphs to a list of runners and riders involved in the Socialist Workers Party and its offspring, and then goes on to describe the behaviour of the "bureaucratic clique which runs the Stop the War Coalition". So half the paper devoted to spats between the CPGB and others on the left and just the back page on wider domestic politics.

I wonder how many CPGB members know what led to the formation of the Christadelphians in the 19th century, why the Congregationalists and Presbyterians merged in 1972 or how many types of Methodism there are? Before they scream that these questions are irrelevant, they may want to reflect on the fact that more people go to church every week in Britain than attend socialist meetings and the membership of all the above denominations is almost certainly greater than that of the CPGB.

The point, of course, is that the history of Protestantism is irrelevant to the CPGB, and that is fine, but I hope that the analogy might allow them to begin to understand just how irrelevant most of last week's *Weekly Worker* was to me.

And that, when we get right down to it, is the crux of the argument in relation to the Socialist Platform statement. How do socialists get our ideas across to people and convince them to join us? How do we persuade the Left Unity conference in November to support the Socialist Platform, as opposed to any of the others? What sort of language should we use and how should we conduct ourselves in meetings?

Can I be permitted to refer your readers to just one of the CPGB's proposed amendments as a possible aid to answering these important questions. The Socialist Platform statement says: "Under capitalism, production is carried out solely to make a profit for the few." The amendment proposed by the CPGB was to replace the word 'solely' by 'predominantly'.

Members of the CPGB voted as a block in favour of their amendment, though I would argue it is quite simply wrong. Would any person with a life not have something better to do than propose this amendment? I cannot conceive of a circumstance in which I would have bothered to propose the opposite amendment had the original said 'predominantly'.

This amendment, like all the others, was proposed in the name of the Provisional Central Committee of the CPGB, a democratic-centralist organisation. This was not a situation that most of us envisaged when we signed up to Left Unity, or indeed the Socialist Platform, and the CPGB comrades should have understood and been sensitive to how some comrades would feel. It was extremely unfortunate that one comrade left the meeting in protest at these amendments being taken.

I could go on. The front page is a disgrace, frankly, comrades. It is a personal attack on one comrade and not even a polemic against a group or statement. Why not pick on Chris Trafford from the Anti-Capitalist Initiative who actually moved the agenda that you describe as "Nick Wrack's rotten method"?

Enough said. I have a life to be getting on with and the CPGB need to get one.

Colin Piper
email

Simplex

Chris Knight is quite right to espouse an openness to the range of sciences, but, of course, on the other hand, we must be wary of reductionism ('Why is the left so afraid of science?', September 19). Even within evolution studies, 'selfish gene' theory - Chris's current favourite - is not above criticism. After all, science is about debate and testing, not taking the word of one authority.

Fellow science writer Stephen Jay Gould, for one, has criticised Richard Dawkins for reductionism in making the replication of genes the only force in shaping evolution. In emphasising the importance of gene supremacy, in which Dawkins calls real people 'lumbering robots', Gould says Dawkins neglects other mechanisms responsible for the complexity of life. Forces such as the balance of species within a region, the division of one species by separate environments, such as islands, which produces mutation, or change through sudden events in the environment, such as the meteor believed to have destroyed the dinosaurs. In other words, the environment of the gene is important too.

For example, the panda is a species where gene reproduction is actually endangered by evolution. Because of their habitat, pandas have evolved into large, lethargic beasts who have to consume bamboo all day and don't show much interest in breeding, as zoologists and zoos know only too well.

Chris mentions Winston Churchill, whose suggestion in 1910 about how to handle the feeble stock among the working class owes much to that once fashionable gene theory of eugenics. But, of course, Churchill was doing this not out of a drive to replicate his own genes or eliminate those of other peoples, but due to his commitment to that cultural institution, the British empire. He sought better soldiers and was promoting a greater genetic 'hygiene' out of class interest, with which, of course, he identified his own self-interest. Is class interest in our genes?

Let us also stop to consider whether in flirting with biological reductionism - genes, the master - we are not on the cusp of implying that a female urge to replicate must show itself in a genetic passion to care for children to the exclusion of all else.

However, those Darwin admirers, Marx and Engels, didn't discount that, along with class institutions, the world was made of other things, such as land and mineral resources, or psychology, such as a human interest in happiness, including love of others, such as our children.

Let us learn from science - and anthropology - but not take on ideas just like that. We should indeed be afraid of being simplistic or uncritical - of anyone.

Mike Belbin
email

Leave it out

I am pleased that the *Weekly Worker* includes serious articles on science. Socialist ideas, and Marxism in particular, originated at a time, and in a climate, of increasing rational thought and scientific discovery. In his article Chris Knight gives a short but balanced view on *The selfish gene* (that, unfortunately, the left failed to take in the 1970s), but his excellent article is spoiled by the irrational claim that "Richard Dawkins [is] - a brilliant scientist, but a complete idiot when it comes to anything political".

Chris: either back this with evidence, or leave the sentence out. Dawkins' politics are of the centre-left, supporting, as he once said, a Lib-Lab coalition with Robin Cook as leader. Dawkins is strident in opposing 'creation science' and continues to campaign for a secular

society based on scientific rationalism - a goal opposed by the religious dogmatists that many of the so-called left choose to be in bed with!

Simon Worsnop
email

Woman question

I was quite impressed with a lot of good assessments/standpoints in Ben Lewis's 'Rotten politics and rotten terms' (September 19) regarding the (really negative) development of Die Linke. They were indeed better than most of what is articulated by German 'lefties' (especially Trotskyists), who have, or at least spread, illusions in the party.

But I have to correct one decisive point. Katja Kipping should not be considered a leftwing chairwoman. She was - and still is - the representative of the centre-right current, 'Emanzipatorische Linke' and the candidate for chair upon whom the centre-right and the far right of the party could agree. Riexinger, instead, has the same position on the left, but he is a lot weaker than Kipping, because she is an old cadre who developed her politics over many years in the eastern part of Germany - where the right wing of the party is already as social democratic as the SPD. Thus she has a lot of support and credit among the whole right wing.

In particular she uses the 'woman question' to get rid of class struggle politics (which is really a bad thing) and replaces proletarian by petty bourgeois feminism (which is also a bad thing). And she has been supporting the so called 'anti-German' tendencies inside and outside the party over the years (especially the Israel-supporting 'Antifa' in Saxony, where she lived for a long time). Additionally, she and her current (EmaLi) are one of the driving forces behind the 'red-red-green' government project. Perhaps Kipping will be the first female

secretary of state in Germany.

Riexinger, on the other hand, is supported by grassroots trade unionists on the left wing, the Trotskyist currents (in particular Marx 21) and other social movement people (Blockupy, anti-crisis protests) in the party. He was the chair of the party in Baden-Württemberg, a department in the south of Germany, where Die Linke has been really weak - it has not been represented in the departmental parliament for years. He comes from the western part of Germany, his network is not as old as Kippings' and he tends to look for compromises far too often.

Maybe this can help to improve the assessments regarding the 'leading' figures in Die Linke (some are in power and some are only in leading positions but without power - Gysi and Wagenknecht are even more powerful than Riexinger).

Christian
email

On the spot

My union, Unite, currently gives £3 million a year to the Labour Party. This would be better spent in employing 100 organisers in the field (£30,000 a year x 100 = £3 million). At the same time, all Unite officials, including Len McCluskey, should be regularly elected and paid no more than a skilled worker.

The demand for a living wage of £10 an hour for all workers, including part-timers, temps, casual and migrant workers, is a 'wedge' issue. It puts the union leaders and both Ed Miliband and David Cameron on the spot and on the defensive. It is also a great organising tool to recruit workers to the unions, no matter whether they are young or old, black or white, or originate from eastern Europe or Essex.

John Smithee
Cambridgeshire

Fighting fund

Legal settlement

I am delighted to report that the legal action in which we were embroiled after the publication of an article last year (see 'Unreserved apology' *Weekly Worker* February 7) has finally been settled. For too long this whole issue has haunted us.

Anyway, in addition to the £1,000 damages we have already paid Wayne King, we have agreed a settlement with his solicitors, Thompsons. A cheque for the sum of £3,000 has been handed over which will cover their costs.

For a small publication such as ours, a publication that has no wealthy backers, a publication that relies week by week, and month by month, on readers' donations to cover the printers' bills, postage, etc, this is a huge sum. Potentially it could have crippled us financially and forced the closure of the paper. But, doubtless, regular readers will recall earlier this year we launched a financial appeal. After a few months, because the whole dispute was dragging endlessly on and on we decided to, temporarily, close it. Frankly we had little or nothing to report. Nevertheless, you, our readers, raised a grand total of £3,530. A magnificent effort, especially given the paucity of information we have been able to supply. We would like to take this opportunity, once again, to thank everyone who contributed.

However, even though the paper will take a financial hit to the tune of several hundred pounds, we have

decided to close the matter here. We shall not be reopening the legal appeal ... but there is, of course, the monthly fighting fund.

It should also be pointed out that all along we have received valuable legal advice on a pro bono basis. We would like to express our gratitude to the comrade for his generous help - without which we would have been totally at sea legally. Clearly not all lawyers are in it just for the money.

Finally, yes, at last I come to our actual fighting fund. With less than a week to go before the end of the month, we have raised £1,248 towards our £1,500 target (thanks especially this week to RG for his fantastic £75 cheque, to PM for his PayPal donation and to SK for his regular standing order - £342 came in over the last seven days).

I have every hope that from among the many thousands who read us (11,048 via the website over the last week) a good number will ensure we raise not only the extra £252 we need to meet our regular running costs in September, but will take us well over the target and help us make up the shortfall between what we raised in the appeal and the final bill for this legal action (it is £470).

What better time could there be for first-time donors?

Robbie Rix

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

UKIP

Dangers of nationalism

Will Nigel Farage change the face of politics? Eddie Ford looks at the evidence

British politics might be changing and this is worrying some people. Voicing this disquiet was the former secretary of state for Wales, Peter Hain. On September 23 he told a Unite Against Fascism fringe meeting at the Labour Party conference that the UK Independence Party could come first in next year's European elections, having come second to the Tories in 2009 with 16.5% of the vote. Hain warned that the organisation represented a "very dangerous form of populist politics" that "licensed bigotry", saying that a lot of British National Party supporters had found a home in Ukip.

Responding, Ukip leader Nigel Farage said it was the mainstream parties' "contempt" for the "hopes and fears" of ordinary people that fuels "political extremism". After all, he remarked, the Labour Party thinks its own supporters are bigots - a barbed reference, of course, to Gordon Brown's 2010 encounter in Rochdale with that "bigoted woman" Gillian Duffy, a longstanding Labour supporter, who expressed alarm about eastern Europeans "flocking" to the UK. Farage also claimed that Ukip is actively anti-racist and the only party that bans former BNP members from joining.

The above exchange encapsulates the national chauvinist consensus, which combines bourgeois or institutional anti-racism with British nationalism - and in reality is something that Hain and Farage have in common. Both subscribe to the dominant, reconfigured, post-World War II mythology of the plucky British underdog fighting a democratic crusade against fascism/Nazism under the leadership of the greatest ever Briton, Winston Churchill. Both regard the BNP, and fascism in general, as a thoroughly 'unBritish' phenomenon that needs to be eradicated. Both agree that Mr Smith and Mrs Patel must work together for the 'national interest' against all competitors and rivals in the ruthless global race - whether they be Poles, Romanians, Bulgarians, Somalis, Chinese, Afghans, Iranians, etc. We need to protect 'our own' and wave the national flag. A number of British Asians spoke at last week's Ukip party conference and they pepper its youth wing, Young Independence.

There is a certain irony in the fact that Hain addressed his remarks to the Socialist Workers Party-dominated UAF. Yes, not being a moron, he cautioned against the temptation to "label" Ukip as either racist or fascist, because "that's far too simple and straightforward an attack to make" and thus is "easy to dispel on their part". But at heart UAF/SWP's entire political project has been to espouse "simple" and popular-frontist anti-racism, like urging people at elections, "Don't vote Nazi", meaning the BNP. This implied it was fine for workers to vote for Tories and Liberal Democrats. Now, in similar terms, Ukip is being categorised as a racist organisation pure and simple, and hence, like the BNP, beyond the pale.

But the plain fact of the matter is that Ukip's increasingly loud anti-immigrant message, when all is said and done, does not differ in any essential way from *mainstream* national chauvinism - any more than Gillian Duffy's "flocking" comments were that much different from Gordon Brown's own "British jobs for British workers", as he put it in his 2007 address to the GMB union. Which in turn was not that far removed

from Margaret Thatcher's notorious January 1978 *World in action* interview, where she talked about how the British people are "afraid" that the country might be "swamped" by people with a different culture" - thus undercutting electoral support for the then resurgent National Front. Over the years we have witnessed a grotesque Dutch auction of bourgeois politicians outbidding each other in demanding stricter and stricter controls over immigration.

Nor is it the case that Ukip is stuffed full of former BNP members and supporters. For instance, a straw poll of 50 Ukip delegates at the conference found 26 had previously been members of the Conservative Party. However, it would also be incorrect to think that Ukip is only picking up disaffected Tory voters - as Farage argued at the time of the Eastleigh by-election in May, only a third of the Ukip vote actually came from unhappy Tories. Most of the other two-thirds, it seems, came from people who had never bothered voting before and a smaller group of disillusioned old Labour voters.

Another possible irony, though maybe one that Peter Hain will not entirely appreciate, is that Ukip's surge - if that is what it is - could well end up *benefiting Labour*. The reason for this is not exactly hard to work out. Ukip is squeezing the Tory vote in many key marginals. In a substantial and very informative survey of the 40 Conservative seats with the slimmest majorities, billionaire businessman Lord Ashcroft found Ukip support to be in double figures, which more than triples the average 3% share won by Nigel Farage's party in the 2010 election.¹

The effect would be to split the rightwing vote and give Labour a 14-point lead (by 43% to 29%) in the 32 seats where Tory MPs have the smallest majorities over Labour - an advantage that is almost treble Labour's five-point lead in the whole of Britain. If Ashcroft's poll is accurate, this would give Labour a 60-seat majority in the Commons if an election was held tomorrow. Looking at the results, Ashcroft concluded: "If Ukip does as well at the general election as this poll suggests, Ed Miliband could become prime minister with a comfortable majority".

Farage declared in his keynote speech to the Ukip conference on September 21 that his party is "changing the face" of British politics and could cause an "earthquake" by winning the European elections - which he hoped to turn into a "referendum" on Britain's membership of the EU. As evidence, he reminded us that no-one had predicted Ukip's excellent local election results this year, when it picked up 23% of all votes cast - so why can't history repeat itself? He went on to say that Ukip would win "hundreds and hundreds and hundreds" of council seats next year and that party membership in the near future would overtake that of the Lib Dems - the latter now standing on 42,501, with Ukip as of July 31 claiming 30,000 members. Ukip, in other words, would become the third largest party in the country.

In fact, he continued, in the next general election his party would field candidates in *every* constituency, including Northern Ireland, and might even find itself "holding the balance of power" in a hung parliament, although this seems a trifle implausible. Whilst it is quite conceivable that Ukip could win the European elections, it will still have an extremely hard job just to get a single MP, given the first-past-the-post system for Westminster elections

- a very undemocratic democracy. According to Electoral Calculus, Ukip's current 13% standing will not get it *any* MPs.² Even at a support level of 18%, it will "hardly win any" Westminster seats and will only start to gain more than a handful of MPs if its national support goes above 20%.³ Given that Farage has more or less ruled out any form of electoral pact with David Cameron, it is stretching the imagination to see Ukip acting as the power-broker in the next election - except in the negative sense of letting Labour in by splitting the vote.

Psephological speculation aside, the rest of Farage's conference speech was a crude and naked bid for the populist vote - yes, he certainly does want to do well at the next general election. Get the *Daily Mail* on board. Immigration, we were told, was the "biggest single issue facing this country" - even claiming that more people came to the UK in 2010 than "in the thousand years before it"! He further issued dark warnings about an imminent "crime wave" after Romanians and Bulgarians are granted the right to settle in the UK on January 1 - "92% of ATM crime" in Britain is committed by Romanians, he declared.

This revolting display of xenophobia followed the pre-preference Ukip policy statement that only council house applicants whose parents or grandparents were "born locally" should be given priority on waiting lists; and that so-called 'health tourism' should be ended - people should be blocked from entering Britain if they do not have health insurance.

Of course, the Ukip conference was overshadowed to a certain extent by the media-generated scandal surrounding the idiotic Godfrey Bloom, the party's MEP for Yorkshire and the Humber - previous famous for his comments in July about Britain's foreign aid going to countries in "Bongo Bongo land" - absolutely hilarious. This time round he made a joke about women Ukip members being "sluts" because they never cleaned behind their fridges - you had to be there, I suppose. Farage admitted that he was "pretty hacked off" by Bloom's "antics", as it had distracted attention from the party's "core message" - there is a world of difference, after all, between "pushing the boundaries of debate" on issues such as immigration and foreign aid and what Bloom did (who subsequently resigned the Ukip whip and now sits as an independent).

From now on, promised Farage, there would be regime change within Ukip. There will a "very tough" selection process for prospective candidates and in general it is going to be a "more disciplined party".

Though sections of the left may robotically insist that Ukip is a racist party, it is actually part of a broader phenomenon both in Europe and the United States - the emergence of large right-populist parties and movements: the Front National, Vlaams Blok, Geert Wilders's Party for Freedom, Five Star Movement, Tea Party, etc. For all their obvious differences and disagreements on just about anything you care to mention, these parties exist to give vent to *petty bourgeois* prejudices in a primal form - a virulent national chauvinism, combined with a visceral contempt for migrants and the 'politically correct' liberal elite, which it imagines forms the core of the political establishment ●

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Notes

1. *The Sunday Telegraph* September 15.
2. www.electoralcalculus.co.uk/homepage.html.
3. www.electoralcalculus.co.uk/Analysis_UKIP.html.

ACTION

CPGB podcasts

Every Monday we upload a podcast commenting on the current political situation. In addition, the site features voice files of public meetings and other events: <http://cpgb.org.uk/home/podcasts>. Resuming on January 7.

London Communist Forum

Sunday September 29, 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 22: 'National differences of wages'. Organised by CPGB: www.cpgb.org.uk.

Radical Anthropology Group

Introduction to anthropology: the human revolution
Tuesday September 24, 6.15pm: 'Decoding myths: *The sleeping beauty* and other tales. Speaker: Chris Knight. St Martin's Community Centre, 43 Carol Street, London NW1 (Camden Town tube). £10 waged, £5 low waged, £3 unwaged. Discovers for whole term. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: www.radicalanthropologygroup.org.

What will a socialist society look like?

Thursday September 26, 7.30pm: Meeting, Partick Burgh Halls. Speaker: Hillel Ticktin. Organised by Glasgow Left Unity: glasgowleftunity@gmail.com.

Teesside Solidarity Movement

Thursday September 26, 7pm: General assembly, St Mary's Centre, 82-90 Corporation Road, Middlesbrough. Organised by Teesside Solidarity Movement: www.facebook.com/TeessideSolidarityMovement.

War - what is it good for?

Thursday September 26, 7pm: Meeting, Rook Lane Arts Chapel, Bath Street, Frome, Somerset. Speakers include Jeremy Corbyn MP, Sami Ramadani, Dan Glazebrook. Tickets £5 (£3 unwaged). Organised by Stop the War Coalition: www.stopwar.org.uk.

Death of the two-state solution

Friday September 27, 7.30pm: Talk, Friends Meeting House, 43 Saint Giles, Oxford. Speaker: Hamed Qawasmeh. Organised by Oxford PSC and Network of Oxford Women for Justice and Peace: joytoknow@outlook.com.

Gender and Identity

Saturday September 28, 2.30pm: Seminar and discussion, Bishopsgate Institute, 230 Bishopsgate, London EC2. Speaker: Anja Steinbauer (Philosophy for All). Free admission. Organised by Bishopsgate Institute: www.bishopsgate.org.uk.

No to austerity

Sunday September 29, 11.00am: National TUC demonstration at Tory Party conference. Assemble Liverpool Road (M3 4FP) from 11am, for march to rally in Whitworth Park. Organised by Trades Union Congress: www.tuc.org.uk/industrial/tuc-22405-f0.cfm.

Solidarity with Hovis strikers

Sunday September 29, 3pm: Post-demo meeting, Jabez Clegg, 2 Portsmouth Street, Manchester M13. Speaker: Hovis worker Ian Hodson. Organised by Manchester Unite the Resistance: www.uniteresist.org.uk.

Save our public transport

Tuesday October 1, 1pm: Protest, Lower Mosley Street (in front of Water Bridge Hall), Manchester M2. Organised by the Transport Salaried Staffs Association: www.tssa.org.uk.

South Tyneside People's Assembly

Wednesday October 2, 6pm: Introductory meeting, Ocean Road Community Association, Ocean Road, South Shields. Organised by South Tyneside People's Assembly: www.facebook.com/SouthTynesidePA.

Sunderland People's Assembly

Thursday October 3, 7pm: Organising meeting, Age UK, Bradbury Centre, Stockton Road, Sunderland. Organised by Sunderland People's Assembly: www.facebook.com/PeoplesAssemblySunderland.

Teesside People's Assembly

Thursday October 3, 7pm: Planning meeting, Saint Mary's Centre, 82-90 Corporation Road, Middlesbrough. Organised by Teesside People's Assembly: www.TeessidePA.tumblr.com.

No deportations

Saturday October 5, 10.30am to 5pm: National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns AGM, Praxis Community Projects, Pott Street, Bethnal Green, London E2. Organised by NCADC: www.ncadc.org.uk.

No to drones

Monday October 7, 7.30pm: Public meeting, Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, corner Somerset Road and Farquhar Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15. Organised by Ground the Drones: <http://dronecampaignnetwork.wordpress.com>.

Teesside Solidarity Movement

Thursday October 10, 7pm: General assembly, Saint Mary's Centre, 82-90 Corporation Road, Middlesbrough. Organised by Teesside Solidarity Movement: www.facebook.com/TeessideSolidarityMovement.

CPGB wills

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

SWP

Treating the symptoms

Attempting to reform the disputes procedure will not cure the SWP of its bureaucratic centralism. Meanwhile, splits have opened up in both the opposition and loyalist camps, writes **Peter Manson**

"This bulletin is for members of the SWP only and it should not be distributed or forwarded to others." Those are the words of Socialist Workers Party national secretary Charlie Kimber above his introduction to the 2013 *Pre-conference Bulletin* No1.

Some hope! Within hours of its publication I personally had been sent three different copies and it had already been posted on the *Socialist Unity* website (it is also available on the CPGB site¹). Gone are the days when such documents were extremely difficult to come by outside the SWP. A combination of instant access thanks to the internet and the opening up of the organisation, following the devastating crisis of the last 12 months, has ensured that the SWP's success in keeping its internal debates secret is, thankfully, now a thing of the past.

Published on September 23, a few weeks earlier than usual, the circular - usually referred to as the *Internal Bulletin (IB)* - is the first of three that will appear before the SWP's December 13-15 annual conference. Usually the conference takes place in the first week of January, but this time it has been brought forward by three weeks in a vain attempt to cut down the time available to opposition factions.

Of course, comrade Kimber gave a different reason when he announced the central committee's decision to change the date last month: "There are significant issues of politics, perspective and organisation which need to be debated and decided on in the SWP. It is best that we do this sooner rather than later," he wrote.² But the real reason became evident later in the same emailed circular: "... we have to be really clear that if we're to continue to have a real influence in the movement, both in Britain and internationally, the next SWP conference must return the party to its normal functioning. The CC is determined that the next SWP conference will do this and bring an end to permanent factions for good."

Factions are only officially permitted in the three-month pre-conference period and even then all their material must be circulated via the SWP central office in Vauxhall. But since last year's conference the opposition - sparked by the outrage provoked by the dire mishandling of the rape allegations made against a former SWP top leader - has effectively continued to operate more or less openly. So, by bringing forward the conference, the CC holds out forlorn hopes of reimposing a gag on the opposition by the end of the year.

This will present an existential challenge to the Revolutionary Socialist opposition. Though its website has been largely dormant recently, it has, in effect, been operating as a permanent faction. There have certainly been faction meetings and the discussion of tactics. Many opposition comrades, knowing that they cannot beat the CC and its apparatus at conference, have been talking about leaving. For what is not quite clear. Most oppose the idea of a smaller version of the SWP. But looking at the sorry fate of the International Socialist Network, most do not find the broad party swamp attractive (the ISN is, in fact, disintegrating, given the pressures of working in the Left Unity project).

However, it is not only the opposition that is divided. The loyalists are too. Those in the apparatus, especially at a district level, are



When loyalists fall out: Martin Smith, Amy Leather, Charlie Kimber

itching for a wholesale purge of the opposition. Charlie Kimber is viewed as being soft, conciliatory and a ditherer. Rumour has it that he is deeply unhappy about being saddled with the post of national secretary after Martin Smith's sudden resignation. Not being a natural political hard, he has found the last year or two absolute torture. Meanwhile, a swathe of loyalists have been looking to Amy Leather for a lead. She is viewed as having the necessary callousness, moral fibre and nerve necessary to rid the SWP of tiresome opposition voices once and for all. Hundreds of members, including veterans such as Ian Birchall, Neil Davidson and Pat Stack, will be driven out if comrade Leather and her faction gets its way.

Disputes review

This first *IB* carries over 50 contributions spread over 90 A4 pages and so, needless to say, I have been unable to read, let alone comment on, the vast bulk of them in the 36 hours since I received the bulletin.

This article will therefore concentrate on one piece: the report of the "disputes committee review body" elected at the March special conference. This body was set up as a concession to oppositionists in the aftermath of the Delta fiasco, to examine the way the SWP handles complaints and disciplinary action taken against members. 'Delta', a former leader, had been cleared of the rape and sexual harassment of a female comrade by "a jury of his mates" - as the disputes committee which 'acquitted' him (stuffed as it was with former and current CC members) - was labelled.

The DC review body, which, according to its report, "formally met on three occasions", put the document published here before the SWP's national committee earlier this month, but the CC decided to wait for the first *IB* before circulating it within the whole organisation.

The members of the review body were elected by the March special conference, which was supposed to "draw a line" under the ongoing period of factional opposition, which has seen several hundred members abandon the SWP in disgust. Although only one CC member was elected to it, its findings have, rather obviously, been very much influenced by the views of Alex Callinicos on what he calls 'Leninism' and 'democratic centralism'. This is clear from the first section of its report following the introduction, entitled "Discipline in a revolutionary socialist party".

Such a party needs to "combine the fullest discussion and democracy with unified action in practice," states the report. So far, so good. It continues: "Such discussions should take place primarily through the democratic structures and publications of the party.

It is not acceptable for comrades to raise important discussions which involve changing democratically agreed positions outside the party without having done so through appropriate party bodies and processes."

Again, this too is in theory correct. Members of a democratic-centralist organisation should, it is true, *in the first instance* bring up their concerns and differences internally, and it is interesting that this passage seems to imply that subsequently it is quite acceptable for comrades to raise them externally too. That, of course, has not been the practice, which has been one where SWP members may *never* publicly criticise the leadership line, and this seems to be confirmed by the following passage:

"We expect all comrades to do their best to support, defend and implement the democratically agreed decisions of the party. Failure to do this - for example, by voting against party decisions in a union conference or executive, or openly arguing against the party position in a meeting - are serious matters of political discipline which undermine our basic approach."

The problem with this is that it does not differentiate between agreed *actions* - where everyone must be won to pull in the same direction - and a more general "party position". This could relate to the SWP's line on, say, socio-political questions (are bourgeois state bodies 'institutionally racist', for instance?) or on questions of a historical or theoretical nature (was the Soviet Union 'state capitalist'?). For the CC, "openly arguing ... in a meeting" that today the bourgeoisie promotes an *anti-racist* form of national chauvinism or that the USSR was an example of a new form of bureaucratic society would be "serious matters of political discipline", it seems.

Having laid out these parameters, the report makes clear that the DC should remain "a body of last resort". This is because "In most cases disputes or disagreements should be resolved by the appropriate local or fractional unit of the party." However, "Where the complaint against a member or unit of the party is serious and cannot be dealt with locally, or is a matter for the whole party and its reputation, the central committee [not the DC] has the prime responsibility to act."

So the disputes committee's primary role is to hear appeals - although "Cases involving any CC member, or full-time party worker appointed by the CC, clearly must go directly to the DC. And the CC may itself refer cases which cannot be dealt with locally to the DC to undertake the necessary detailed work to resolve the issue."

Sop

We then come to the recommended changes that have clearly arisen from the Delta case. So we read: "... in

cases when CC members themselves are directly the subject of a complaint, we think that CC members should not sit on the DC panel at any hearing, and nor should comrades who have served on the same CC as the individual concerned."

All well and good. But this does not get to the heart of the matter. It is not so much the fact that CC or ex-CC comrades sit on the DC that is the problem. It is the fact that *all* its members are appointed precisely because of their 'reliability' - ie, loyalty to the CC and its bureaucratic-centralist regime. That is why attempting to reform the DC while leaving that regime intact is - well - futile.

The same applies to the "cooption of other SWP members", which, recommends the report, "should be considered more frequently ... to ensure geographical/gender balances and to draw on wider experience ..." Do you think comrades from the opposition will be coopted - particularly if someone is accused of, say, breaking "party discipline" by speaking out publicly against the SWP line?

There are also the highly relevant "Additional guidelines for cases of sexual misconduct". The report lays down advice for a more sensitive approach to those involved, and recommends: "In cases where there are allegations of sexual violence, there should be a presumption that the comrade complained against should be suspended from the party, without prejudice or any presumption of wrongdoing, pending an investigation."

Well, that is an advance. We in the CPGB have pointed out that Delta's membership should have been ended until such a time as he could clear his name. But it ought to be said that this should also apply to senior comrades accused of *all* types of serious misdemeanours, where there is a danger of the organisation being brought into disrepute if, as in the Delta case, the comrade continues with their duties as if nothing has happened.

Talking about suspensions, by the way, the report recommends that if they are "made in advance of a hearing, the DC must then endeavour to hold a hearing promptly, normally within six weeks". You might regard that as common sense, but it seems that in the past suspensions have been allowed to run virtually indefinitely - perhaps in the hope that the comrade concerned will just give up in despair.

Members of the national committee had presumably been given prior sight of the report before their meeting, and a few proposed amendments from individual NC comrades are also published in the *IB*. For example, "Jen (Tower Hamlets)" states: "The current proposals in the DC review do not allow for equal access to information to both parties." The comrade proposes: "In cases involving rape and more serious

abuse it should be insisted upon that the person against whom a complaint has been made must present their evidence in advance of the hearing to allow the person making the complaint the opportunity to process the information and prepare a response."

But the amendments proposed by others are generally inconsequential or trivial.

Clearly this report is intended as a sop to the membership and in a way it is a distraction from the main question - that of the SWP regime itself. Not just free speech, but also free association, is severely restricted within the organisation. Since factions are banned outside the three-month pre-conference period, comrades who simply exchange views about their common opposition to an SWP position, a leader or a section of the leadership can, and will, be accused of 'factionalism' if the CC so chooses.

That is exactly what happened to the 'Facebook Four' at the start of the current crisis a year ago. The comrades were expelled simply for discussing how they should pursue their differences with the CC. In the event they decided against trying to form an officially recognised temporary faction prior to the January 2013 conference and this proved to be their undoing: according to SWP rules, they were clearly operating as an unofficial, and therefore illegitimate, faction simply by virtue of their exchanges on Facebook.

New CC

The outgoing central committee, making use of the self-perpetuating, 'take it or leave it' slate system for the election of the leadership, has recommended that 11 of the current 12 members be re-elected *en bloc*. The one member elected last year who is not on the list is Mark Bergfield - he resigned from the central committee in February over the Delta case (although the *IB* does not tell the membership that).

Those proposing themselves for re-election are Weyman Bennett, Michael Bradley, Alex Callinicos, Joseph Choonara, Charlie Kimber, Amy Leather, Judith Orr, Julie Sherry, Mark Thomas ... plus "Esme C, Walthamstow" and "Jo C, Walthamstow" (last year the full names were provided for two CC comrades with the same first name, neither of whom is exactly unknown).

However, the new CC is to be expanded to 15 comrades, the four newcomers being "Sue C, North London", "Paul McG, East London", "Brian R, East London" and Sally Campbell, author of *A rebel's guide to Rosa Luxemburg*. It does not take a genius to be able to work out who the first three are, provided you have been reading *Socialist Worker* or attending SWP-sponsored events where they have featured on the platform - often under their own name.

But personal circumstances change, including comrades' jobs, so it is understandable that some people may no longer wish their name to be publicised. Nevertheless - and we have made this point before - surely the use of pseudonyms would provide better security? ●

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Notes

1 www.cpgb.org.uk/home/weekly-worker/online-only/swp-september-internal-bulletin.
2 Email to members, August 5.

LEFT UNITY

Conway-Hudson school of censorship

Paul Demarty defends the idea of free speech on the left

A particular news item struck me this week - the Football Association, that blundering gang of fools who pretend to administrate the beautiful game in this country, are once more interfering with the people who indirectly pay their wages by going to games. Tottenham Hotspur fans are expected to stop describing themselves, in songs and chants, as 'Yids'.

Nobody at the club seems to back the idiotic plan to prosecute 'Yid Army' chants, which are in origin a response to endless anti-Semitic abuse directed at a club with historic connections to north London Jews, but is now more or less part of the background noise at White Hart Lane, along with that hardy perennial, "We hate Arsenal". Nobody in the FA hierarchy or the serried ranks of concerned citizens - principally the Zionist Board of Deputies - seems to have considered that subtle philosophical dilemma as to whether it is possible to direct hate speech at oneself, let alone sensible to prosecute on that basis. The word is just unacceptable - any place, any time, any context.

Given its incompetence in all other matters, it is hardly surprising that the FA fails to understand the ambiguous workings of language. It ought at least to understand the ambiguous workings of football support - that fans are rude, brash and loud, but specialise as much in self-ironisation as abuse of the opposing team and fans (lest anyone imagine that only Dalston hipsters, rather than the working class of Seven Sisters, understand irony).

Football is a constant staging ground for a most depressing feature of contemporary capitalist culture - the attempt to impose by means of bureaucratic *diktat* standards of etiquette in contexts where they simply have no relevance or utility whatsoever. The standard of etiquette seems invariably to be derived from that of a certain sort of middle class dinner party, perhaps in Hampstead, where all present are painfully aware of their disconnection from the mass of the population and unsure of how they may speak of the latter. Football, on the other hand, is - like all dramatic genres - predicated on the suspension of disbelief and the 'normal' rules of society. Context matters.

Likewise on the far left. "Revolution," Mao famously quipped, "is not a dinner party ... it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous." Quite. But others have a different view - that the fundamental reason our forces are so small (and so male and so white) is that we are insufficiently 'inclusive', the latter word being defined in accordance with the views of Hackney Council. To be more inclusive, we must exclude all those who do not speak proper; but, rather than the Queen's English and 'received pronunciation', one is expected to abide by the increasingly Byzantine rules of right-on liberal language.

Above all else, it is necessary to be *polite* - that is, not offend anybody, for any reason, except if they are on a predefined list of acceptable victims of offence: Tories, fascists, racists and what have you. (The latter crews are equally capable of playing the poor oppressed victim; certain Anglican reactionaries stand out in this regard for bare-faced cheek.)

'Safe spaces'

Regular readers of this paper will know where I stand on these matters. Not two weeks ago, I published an article critical of a proposed 'safe spaces' policy, submitted humbly for the consideration of Left Unity



Silencing critics

('Playing it safe', September 12). I say 'critical'; it would be more accurate to describe it as irreconcilably hostile, sneering, snarky and sarcastic. It was commissioned as an attack piece, conceived as an attack piece and executed in accordance with the plan.

I am pleased as punch with the result - not least because it has, shall we say, struck a nerve. It was submitted to the Left Unity website for publication - not a website notable for its exacting editorial standards. Alas, poor comrade Demarty's contribution has been quietly dropped, but not before causing some consternation on the editorial team. Apparently, Terry Conway and Kate Hudson think that my piece should be rejected because it is offensive. By saying those responsible for the 'safe spaces' policy should be ashamed of themselves is equated as an attack on the whole Left Unity project.

I have reliably been informed that I am in breach of LU's 'editorial policy.' However, when I asked various LU tops about this I was told that in actual fact the 'editorial policy' does not cover commentary. So am I in breach of LU policy or not? But comrades Conway and Kate Hudson seem unconcerned: whatever they find objectionable will not get published on the LU website. It is almost as if they make up policy on the hoof, as it suits, as they find convenient. Democracy in action!

Hudson is reported to have drafted some kind of bland reply to my submission. A thanks but no thanks missive. But so far nothing has come my way. Obviously the comrades want to say that my 'safe spaces' piece runs counter to some LU resolution. But there is no such resolution (for the moment, thank god). But I do have 'friends'. Simon Hardy, former Workers Power top and now one of the moving

forces in the Anti-Capitalist Initiative has come out on my side. He says that barring an article on vague grounds is a dangerous precedent. Indeed, good for him, he has been demanding that comrades Conway and Hudson produce "specific" objections. Otherwise it will look bad for LU. But, of course, the whole episode does look bad for LU. But comrades Hudson-Conway remain stubbornly unmoved. My 'safe spaces' article is branded from beginning to end as "disrespectful, derogatory and at times offensive."

Supposedly they would like material written in a 'comradely' tone. Perhaps Conway and her cohorts could write a helpful 11-page document defining what she means by comradeliness. I assert that my article *is* comradely; and not in spite, but *because of*, its aggressive, polemical style. There are no rules conveniently etched into tablets of stone for deciding these purposes, but I will suggest we inherit one from Moses - thou shalt not bear false witness. You do not *lie* - not to your class, and not to your comrades.

I do not, to stress the point, believe that the 'safe spaces' document put together by Conway and co (as an aside, she has reportedly complained that my naming her specifically is 'bizarre'; has she forgotten it was she who sent it out to comrades on September 4?) is a brave attempt that is flawed in one or two respects. I believe it is a dreadful whole that is less than the sum of its appalling parts, that adopting it would be a disastrous mistake for Left Unity, that it is a recipe for bureaucratic chaos and - moreover - that the very mindset in which such a document appears to be a good idea is an affliction on the contemporary left, of which it needs to be cured.

How on earth does one say all this politely? Well, one solution would be

to write some vague, Delphic critique that could be read any way you like - to avoid offending anyone. *But that would mean lying.* That would, in fact, be a dereliction of duty to anyone I would call a comrade - Terry Conway included. It would certainly be a dereliction of duty to all those undecided on the issue, and possibly leaning towards the 'safe space' mindset.

Derogatory

I pick on Conway so insistently because she is a Trotskyist, or claims to be (or claimed to be - her organisation, Socialist Resistance, has appended so many ephemeral buzzwords to its self-description that it is rather hard to tell at this point where Lev Davidovich stands in its thinking, through SR remains a member organisation of the Fourth International he founded). Nevertheless, comrade Conway is a veteran with several decades in the Trotskyist movement to her name.

If she is so concerned with avoiding a 'derogatory tone', and so on, we can only ask - when was the last time she read any Trotsky? His writings are peppered with the most abrasive polemics; he is a literary master in the way of cruelty, tearing all political opponents to shreds. "Everybody has the right to be stupid once in a while," he wrote of erstwhile ally Dwight MacDonald, "but comrade MacDonald abuses the privilege." He promised the anarchists: "You will be swept away with a barbed-wire broom!" As for those who considered Heinrich Brüning a 'lesser evil' compared to Hitler in the 1930s - hardly the least superficially reasonable proposition in history - such people are "feeble-minded".

He is not the only one. Rosa Luxemburg was probably a match

for him. Lenin's polemics are not so refined, but no less devastating; and they are all the more pervasive. A brief glance through the collective works reveals nary a branch report from some insignificant Social Democratic committee without some sharply worded score-settling involved. Marx ridiculed his leftwing opponents; Engels mocked "the Bakuninists at work".

The canon of revolutionary Marxism must be the rudest crew ever assembled. The method of Conway and her comrades is directly counterposed to this. SR is generally very keen on everyone being nice to each other, and saving their anger for 'the enemy'; but this inevitably means that opponents of such sham agreement face the most bile of all. I got spiked from the website; a comrade of mine was told in a private email by an SR member that he was "somewhere between a dick and a wanker" (charming!) for daring to raise discussion on 'divisive' insignificances like, er, the Syria crisis.

Older heads in the CPGB remember this kind of skulduggery well; and it is hardly an inheritance of Trotsky, or anyone else who came out of the 20th century with any honour intact. It was formulated, first of all, by Georgi Dimitrov, during the Stalinist reverse ferret into what would become the popular front. We will not attack the social democrats, he told the Comintern's 7th Congress - we will only attack the enemies of unity.

The closer analogue is more recent - Eurocommunism, in many ways the logical outcome of popular frontism in the 'official communist' movement. The Euros were remarkable in their double-faced nature. Their ideology was based on liberty, democracy and the rule of law (all defined essentially in liberal terms); their *internal practice* in the communist parties was, if anything, *more bureaucratic* than that of the Soviet loyalists who preceded their ascendancy.

The Euros too got sucked into fatuous identity politics; and in their hands, equally, it became an instrument of arbitrary exclusion of those to their left who were inconvenient - the latter ranged from our own predecessor paper, *The Leninist*, to the more oppositional of the pro-Soviet factions. Their great historic achievement was Blairism: equally, the most intolerant regime in the Labour Party's history.

The 'safe spaces' ideology is the *most perfect expression* of the colonisation of the left by the bureaucracy. If you want to see what lies at the end of this road, take a look at Blair's party; take a look at the omnivorous bureaucracies of official liberalism, anti-racism, anti-sexism and so on; indeed, have a look at the absurdity of Spurs fans possibly being prosecuted for racial hatred against themselves.

On the other hand, Conway-Hudson could graciously cease deciding on the basis of their own prejudices what constitutes an acceptable level of vituperation, and actually engage in the political debate on this matter. *Defend the damned document, comrades!* At least put it up on the website, so people can leave comments. If you wish to step outside the confines of your website's politeness policies, the pages of the *Weekly Worker* are open to you, wherein you can call me a dick, a wanker, or any combination of the two. Just do not presume to set yourselves up as guardians of public decency; a task from which any leftwinger in their right mind should recoil in horror.

Leave such foolishness to the acknowledged masters - the FA ●

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USA

The shock and a

Jim Creegan analyses the secular decline of the United States as the world hegemon and the failure of Barack

The White House has for the past couple weeks attempted to spin defeat into victory. The tentative US-Russian agreement, so goes the official line, has succeeded in attaining Washington's original objective of forcing Syria to relinquish its chemical weapons without the use of force only because force was threatened in the first place. But it is apparent to all but the most credulous that divesting Bashar al-Assad of his chemical stockpile was never the principal aim of American sabre-rattling against Damascus. The actual purpose - to affirm Washington's ability to deploy military might to reverse the steady decline of its influence in the Middle East - has proved an abject, and indeed a comical, failure, at least for the time being.

Lacking leverage

Attempts to explain US Middle East/South Asia policy in terms of petro-politics is frequently dismissed as vulgar Marxism. And if by that is meant that the US's every political and military manoeuvre in the region is dictated by narrow, oil-monopolising purposes, the criticism is valid. Yet the fact that the area contains the world's biggest oil supply indeed accounts for its centrality to world politics. The US has been concerned historically not only with securing investment opportunities for its energy giants and ensuring access to oil at low prices; its position of global hegemon also depends upon the ability to determine who else in the world can obtain this vital resource, and under what terms. Not merely access to oil, but control of the petroleum spigot, is a key US weapon against 'rogue states' and rivals, actual and potential. Such control in turn demands a high degree of political leverage in the Middle East.

But it is precisely such leverage that Washington increasingly lacks. The unravelling began nearly 35 years ago, when a major pillar of US domination, the Pahlavi monarchy in Iran, fell to the ayatollahs. A further jolt resulted from the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which had the ultimate effect of enhancing the power of that country's Shia majority, and hence expanding Iranian influence. Another blow was delivered in the form of the Arab spring. The turmoil surrounding the recent Egyptian coup revealed that the US has little sway with any major faction in a country that is second only to Israel in terms of US-bestowed foreign aid, and upon which Washington had depended to keep the Arab-Israeli peace and enforce the Gaza blockade. It has also become clear in recent months that, despite western attempts to exert control over Syrian rebels with growing arms shipments, the most powerful factions in the insurgency are dominated by al Qa'eda and its ally, the Al-Nusra front, hardly prepared to do the bidding of the state department or the Quai D'Orsay.

This situation has left the US more dependent than ever on its two remaining regional allies, Saudi Arabia and Israel (Turkey is also an important player here, but its relationship with the US is more complicated than the other two). For its part, the Saudi monarchy is experiencing mounting difficulties, both in Bahrain, with its rebellious Shia majority, and amongst its own population, a significant number of whom are also Shia. A victory for the Shia-aligned Assad regime could therefore augment the influence of the

Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis, spelling deep trouble for the House of Saud and, by extension, the Persian Gulf emirates. The Saudis thus supported a military strike on Syria. But it was the unease of America's most stable and dependable ally, Israel, that, perhaps more than any other single factor, pushed Obama to beat the war drums.

Israel is bent on curbing the power of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria. But the Zionist state fears above all the prospect that Iran will obtain the bomb and break Tel Aviv's regional nuclear monopoly. If, in the thinking of Netanyahu and others, Obama did not stand by the "red line" he had foolishly drawn against Syrian chemical weapons use a year earlier, Tehran might cease to take American-Israeli threats seriously, and proceed apace with its nuclear programme.

Thus Obama's declared intent to "send a shot across the bow" of the Assad regime in the form of a limited aerial strike was borne not of strength, but of a mounting nervousness about US-Israeli inability to control events. Using the 'humanitarian' pretexts that US imperialism has invoked since the Spanish-American war, and putting himself forward as the defender of the Geneva ban on chemical weapons, Obama was in fact determined to show that his country is still the "indispensable power"; that, despite the failures of Afghanistan and Iraq, the US is still able to deliver 'shock and awe'.

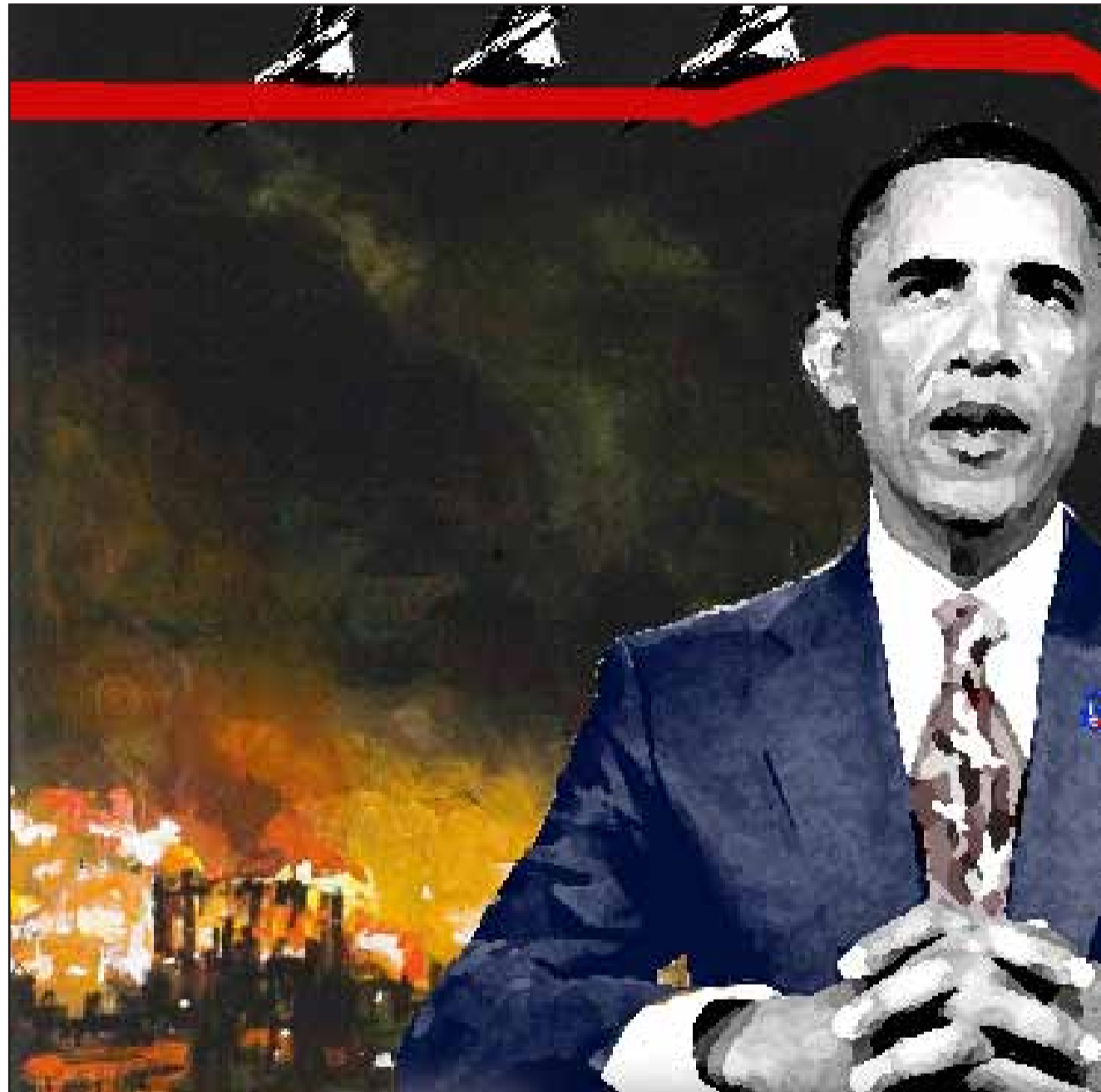
Muddled gambit

Yet, because it was conceived in haste, Obama's gambit was feeble to begin with.

How did the government know it was Assad who unleashed a sarin gas attack that killed at least several hundred in the rebel-infiltrated Damascus suburb of Ghouta? The claim was based on circumstantial arguments that seemed strained and unconvincing. No more compelling, according to some senators and congresspersons permitted to view it, was the 'classified' evidence the administration proffered. It was hardly to Assad's advantage to invite foreign intervention by committing a major war crime at precisely a time when the regime seemed to be gaining the military edge with victories in Qusair and Homs. It was rather the rebels who stood to gain from outside help.

Had not George Bush lied the country into the Iraqi war 10 years ago on the basis of non-existent 'weapons of mass destruction'? Moreover, the projected intervention seemed more like a stitched-together political compromise than part of any thoughtful military strategy: for the neocon hawks in his administration, bombs and cruise missiles over Syria; for those still chastened by Iraq, disavowal of regime change as a goal, fulsome assurances that the operation would consist of strictly time-limited air strikes, with absolutely no "boots on the ground".

But what guarantees were there of any of these things? Many senators, congresspersons, media pundits, a few retired generals and the public at large wanted to know. What if Iran or Hezbollah retaliated in some way? If an American strike was too limited to hasten Assad's downfall, would he not be as willing to use chemical weapons a second time as he supposedly was the first? Would the "red line" still be in effect then? What if air strikes did



Many on the left welcomed Obama's election

weaken Assad and hasten the accession to power of al Qa'eda forces? Too many questions, no persuasive answers - and all the familiar ingredients of another quagmire.

It was questions like these that led to Obama's first major setback, when, contrary to all expectations, the House of Commons defeated David Cameron's motion of support by 13 votes. Also lacking the support of those bodies that have provided cover for overseas operations in the past - the United Nations, Nato and the Arab League - the president had only one place to turn in order to avoid near complete isolation: the US Congress. But there he was to find a reception no friendlier than in the Commons. The leaders of the two parties, as ever, fell in line behind Obama. But most newly elected Tea Party legislators in both houses refused to go along, and even the left-liberal wing of the Democratic Party began to emit uncharacteristically loud noises of demur. After a week or so, it became clear that Obama, even if he managed to get his authorisation for force narrowly through the Senate, would not be able to muster the required votes in the House of Representatives. A defeat for his resolution would do him incomparable political damage for the rest of his term.

Rand Paul, a Tea Party favourite in the Senate, recalled the famous remark of John Kerry when he testified before Congress as a young soldier in opposition to the Vietnam war: who among you, Kerry asked

a Congressional committee 40 years ago, wants to ask the last man to die in Vietnam for a mistake? Why now, Paul asked, is the erstwhile anti-war activist so keen to ask the first man (or woman) to die for a mistake in Syria? By the time Putin and Assad put forward their offer to eliminate Syrian chemical weapons, Obama had little choice but to grasp it with both hands.

Old fixes don't work

Few media commentators seem to appreciate the extraordinary nature of the political moment through which we have just passed. It was as if a physician were attempting to apply a range of standard remedies to what he thought was a familiar disease, only to discover that the patient fails to respond each time.

As if by force of habit, the administration performed all the time-tested tropes to ready the country and the world for military intervention: moral indignation at foreign atrocities, encomiums to America's unique role as world peacekeeper, attempts to lean on trusted allies and international bodies, Congressional resolutions invoking that body's traditional 'bipartisanship' in foreign policy, presidential appeals to loyalty from members of his own party. All fell flat. A Facebook group calling itself Armed Forces Tea Party posted photos of ostensible soldiers and sailors displaying placards that covered their faces reading, "I did not

join to fight for al Qa'eda in a Syrian civil war". And even MoveOn.org, until now abject 'progressive Democratic' apologists for Obama, ran a television advert against intervention.

What Obama had not reckoned with was the growing war-weariness of the American people, who opposed hitting Syria by roughly 55% to 70% in all opinion polls. For this anti-war majority, the question of whether Assad had used chemical weapons was largely beside the point. Though not stirred to the heights of anger provoked by the Vietnam war, people have been demoralised over time by the persistent reflux of coffins, wounded, disabled and mentally disturbed veterans coming back after the multiple tours of duty made necessary by the present volunteer army's small size.

These sacrifices are rendered doubly galling because the protracted wars in whose name they are imposed have ended, and are ending, in failure, and by the persistent unemployment and income decline that hardly make more bearable the prospect of war without end that both parties seem to be offering. The 'Vietnam syndrome', which George Bush senior boasted of having overcome as he launched the first Gulf War in 1991, has now been gradually replaced by an Afghanistan-Iraq syndrome.

Public opinion counted much less with legislators close to the military and foreign policy establishments. But, for those lower down and more exposed to mass sentiment, fear of

awe that wasn't

Obama's Syria gambit



repudiation at the hustings probably added to whatever genuine misgivings they harboured to begin with. And such misgivings were by no means confined to the public at large. Top policymakers were in disarray over any intervention in a war in which the US ruling class had no clear side, whose military objectives were vague and whose outcome would be uncertain, and perhaps calamitous.

Hospitality of enemies

Whether the compromise now being haggled over was the result of John Kerry's supposed London news conference gaffe or had been prearranged at the G20 summit in St Petersburg is immaterial to the outcome: a clear defeat for US imperialism.

That a United States president had to rely on the good graces of a major geopolitical rival, Vladimir Putin, to extricate him from the corner he painted himself into, is humiliating enough. But the agreement also thrusts Vladimir Putin, whom the US has been trying to marginalise, into the centre stage of international diplomacy. It also gives the Assad regime a new legitimacy. The arms-elimination process envisaged in the agreement will require Assad's cooperation well into 2014, and therefore assumes that he will be in power at least till then.

Obama is now attempting to put the best face on his defeat. His liberal apologists are lauding his 'decision' to

choose diplomacy over war, and hope that the president, under pressure of mass anti-war sentiment at home and abroad, will inaugurate a new era of creative peaceful diplomacy in place of the militarism of the past - much as we were told five years ago (by many of the same people) that Obama's election would open new vistas of progressive change. But everyone who has trembled under the rain of US bombs, napalm, agent orange and drone strikes knows that the world's self-proclaimed gendarme relies in the last instance upon force. They also know that the latest attempt to demonstrate its ability to use force has collapsed amid internal discord and irresolution.

But this will not make the guardians of the imperial armoury more reluctant to deploy their hardware in future. They will rather be on the lookout for new opportunities to redeem their humiliation with another of their signature pyrotechnic displays. Already, the US seems to be reneging on its original agreement with Russia by insisting that reference to chapter 7 of the UN Charter, authorising the use of force, be included in any security council resolution on Syria.

In a skilfully crafted op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, Putin capitalised on his new-found prominence by taking Obama to task for a remark in his nationally televised September 10 White House address: "It is extremely dangerous," the Russian president wrote, "to encourage people to see themselves as 'exceptional'..." The

apoplectic rage Putin's remarks called forth from a number of political figures in this country perhaps bespeaks an irrepressible suspicion that Obama's failed Syrian gambit may be remembered as a watershed moment in the undoing of post-World War II *Pax Americana*.

Top cop wounded

The role of global enforcer that the US is now straining to maintain is crucial not only to American capitalism, but to the stability of the capitalist world order as a whole. Just as the national bourgeois state is necessary to enforce laws for regulating the often fierce competition among business interests at home, a set of rules, explicit or implicit, for containing national rivalries is needed to maintain a stable climate for commerce and investment. Without an enforcer, such laws are a dead letter.

When Britain, with her colonial empire, international gold standard and naval supremacy, had lost her leading role by the beginning of the 20th century, a period of economic breakdown and war ensued - a maelstrom so intense that many Marxists quite understandably mistook it for the terminal crisis of the capitalist mode of production. Yet, despite what we can now see was a premature conclusion, the post-war recovery of capitalism was hardly inevitable. The recent memory of the October revolution and the survival (in deteriorated condition) of the

state that issued from it; the existence of a still powerful and, in part, revolutionary workers' movement; and the emerging struggle against western colonialism - all presented strong possibilities for a rupture with the existing order on a world scale. Political misleadership - mainly on the part of social democracy and Stalinism - were probably more responsible than any objective conditions for capitalism's longevity.

Yet one can never step into the same historical crosscurrents twice. If what we are now witnessing in the Middle East and elsewhere are the signs of a second unravelling - this time of American global pre-eminence - the possibilities of a hopeful outcome are far less apparent. With their tendency to see the present in terms of the past, as well as their desire to look for good guys in every fight, many socialists and leftwingers have taken up the cudgels for one side or the other in the Syrian civil war. Some see the rebels, despite al Qa'eda infiltration, as attempting to carry out a democratic revolution against a murderous despot. A few of this persuasion have famously developed a soft spot for the prospect of western intervention. Others see in western support for the rebels a grand design to take over the opposition and overthrow a regime that, despite its brutality, has played an anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist role. Beyond that, it is said that the US and EU are trying to undo what remains of the 'Arab revolution' of half a century ago and recolonise the region.

Both arguments contain elements of truth. Assad - along with Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein before him - has been a thorn in US imperialism's side at various points. For their part, the promoters of the 'Syrian revolution' are right in saying that the civil war did in fact begin as part of the general democratic upsurge known as the Arab spring. But both assessments are fundamentally wrong. Assad - no more than Gaddafi or Saddam - has never been a consistent anti-imperialist or anti-Zionist. He does, in fact, want the Golan Heights back from Israel, but has shown himself more than willing to keep the lid on the Palestinians and Hezbollah - one reason why Tel Aviv has been less than enthusiastic about the prospect of his overthrow. And who can forget Syria's provision of 'black sites' for torturing prisoners as part of George W Bush's 'extraordinary rendition' programme?

While the Syrian insurgents do contain secular-democratic and even leftwing elements, the numerical breakdown of rebel forces recently published in a study by *Jane's Defense Weekly* is hard to argue with. Of 100,000 combatants under arms against the regime, *Jane's* says that roughly 10,000 are jihadists, including foreign fighters. Another 30,000 to 35,000 are hard-line Islamists who see themselves as waging a purely Syrian, as opposed to an international, struggle. A further 30,000 are counted as 'moderate' Islamists. That leaves only about 20,000 who see their cause as secular, and of those a no doubt smaller number consider themselves leftwing in any sense. Not a democratic regime, but one of Sharia law and the religious-sectarian vengefulness prefigured by the floggings, beheadings and the wholesale execution of prisoners featured so graphically on the front page of *The New York Times*, would be the most likely result of a rebel victory.

And if the US and EU are supplying the rebels as part of some scheme to 'recolonise' the Arab world, they are having even less success than Obama did in trying to bomb Syria. Saudi Arabia would no doubt favour a Sunni victory in Syria. But the least unfavourable outcome for the US and Israel would probably be the common ruin of the contending forces and a Balkanisation of the region. It would mean that, even if the imperialists gained no dependable allies as a result of the carnage, they would at least face no new regional adversaries. Better to let the belligerent parties wear each other out.

Principles

And, just as the imperialists have no obvious allies in the Syrian civil war, neither do Marxists or consistent democrats. The war is only the leading example of the morphing of the Arab spring into a winter intercommunal carnage - not irreversible, perhaps, but by no means easily halted once begun.

The decline of American power in the past was viewed by socialists as an unalloyed boon because the major forces ranged against it were socialists (at least self-proclaimed) or revolutionary, third-world nationalists of various descriptions. These forces are not extinct even now, and the weakening of the world's top cop is a precondition for their advance. But secular-democratic-socialist forces are by no means best positioned to fill the growing power void. The religious-sectarian fanatics who now stand to gain the upper hand are a less formidable enemy to socialists only because they are weaker than the imperialists by several orders of magnitude. But, at the current historical pass, imperialist decline does not automatically spell social progress, and, to face reality squarely, the prospects of our progenitors between the world wars were a good deal brighter.

Yet certain principles must be upheld if any headway is to be made at all. Foremost among them in Syria and the rest of the Middle East is the equality of nations and peoples championed by Lenin and the Third International. We must reject, in principle, the humanitarian pretensions of the imperialist powers and oppose all their foreign interventions, regardless of circumstance. We must favour the battlefield success of all and any forces in the Middle East who take up arms to oppose such interventions, for whatever reasons. And, while we abhor nuclear bombs and other instruments of mass killing, we must abhor even more the rank hypocrisy of those who seek to monopolise such weapons for themselves and deny them to others in the name of peace and non-proliferation. Iran and North Korea have as much right to their nuclear weapons as Israel and the US and far stronger existential reasons for having them.

As Marxists, we would vastly prefer that oppressed nations and peoples be guided in their struggles by enlightened theories and advanced political programmes. Marxists, however, will never gain any influence among the oppressed by demanding advanced political consciousness as a precondition for siding with them against the purveyors of shock and awe ●

IRAN

Edging towards a settlement

US sanctions appear to have produced results for imperialism, writes Yassamine Mather



Hassan Rowhani: rapprochement

As Iranian president Hassan Rowhani addressed the UN general assembly on September 25, there seemed to be no end to the charm offensive unleashed by the new government in Tehran. Following a number of conciliatory articles in US papers¹ and a TV interview during which he emphasised Iran's commitment to "peaceful nuclear development", the Iranian president arrived in New York, accompanied by Iran's only Jewish MP - apparently a supporter of the new government.

Two days into the UN's 68th general assembly, Iran's foreign minister had already met William Hague, Rowhani had shaken hands with French president François Hollande and it was announced that Iran will take part in negotiations with the 'five plus one' countries on September 26, along with US foreign secretary John Kerry. The proposed meeting between Kerry and Iran's new foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, will be the highest-level US-Iran contact for more than 30 years and, according to media reports,² the UN was buzzing with rumours that there might be a Rowhani-Obama handshake in the corridors of the United Nations.

The 'accidental' meeting would not have been the first time the US administration had used the general assembly for communicating with moderate Iranians. According to Bruce Riedel, who was a senior director at the National Security Council and adviser to Bill Clinton on Iran, in September 2000 Clinton instructed aides to arrange a face-to-face encounter with Iran's president, Mohammad Khatami. At the secretary general's lunch, the two presidents were supposed to be seated not too far from each other so that an 'accidental' meeting could be arranged. Thirteen years later, the Americans apparently made very similar efforts.

However, there was no handshake. According to the *New York Times*, "After two days of discussions between American and Iranian officials about a potential meeting of the leaders, a senior administration official said the Iranian delegation indicated that it would be 'too complicated' for Mr Rowhani and Mr Obama to bump into each other." Rowhani decided he

could not attend the lunch organised for heads of states "because alcohol was being served". The truth is Rowhani can only test supreme leader Ali Khamenei's tolerance of his 'diplomacy' so far and clearly a handshake with Obama would have been too much. However Rowhani did manage a meeting that was just as important - with an unveiled woman, International Monetary Fund director Christine Lagarde, to discuss "how the partnership with the IMF might be deepened". At the end of the day, after all the hype, Obama and Rowhani both spoke of improved relations and backed the resumption of nuclear talks.

Of course, we have been here before during the Khatami presidency, when similar gestures were hailed as signs of a thaw in US-Iran relations, yet little came out of it. In fact in an editorial *The Guardian* drew attention to this, warning that this time the west must not turn its back on diplomacy: "Failure now to create an atmosphere of trust and meaningful dialogue will only boost extremist forces on all sides. The consequences of such a failure will be not only regional, but global."³

As I wrote last week, Rowhani has less than six months to bring about a resolution of the nuclear issue and an end to sanctions.⁴ After that he will surely lose the supreme leader's support for negotiations. Before Rowhani left Tehran, Khamenei gave his blessing to his president's efforts, speaking of Iran's "heroic flexibility" and "tactical diplomacy". Revolutionary Guard leaders echoed the supreme leader's message.

Clearly sanctions are taking their toll and forcing the Iranian regime to compromise. Ironically, the super-rich clerics who run the country, as well as their immediate families and allies, have been relatively immune from the disastrous consequences of sanctions. However, the majority of Iranians are facing severe hardship caused by food and medical shortages, spiralling prices and the destruction of Iran's economy - no wonder the country's religious leaders fear losing power. So Khamenei and his obedient servants in the Revolutionary Guards have been forced to make a U-turn, be it for a limited period - in the words of former supreme leader Ruhollah Khomeini,

they have accepted that they must "drink the poison" of negotiations.⁵

Defeat

No-one should be under any illusion: the reality is that a superpower, the US, has defeated a 'third world' religious dictatorship by using its economic power. It has stopped Iran's oil exports, paralysed its banking and financial systems, destroyed an important part of its manufacturing and petrochemical industries. Indeed Iran's economy is in a worse situation now than during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war. So, before anyone starts celebrating the prospects of peace, let me remind you that these negotiations, like the conflict that preceded them, are part of a reactionary process. If war is the continuation of politics by other means, the current hype about a rapprochement in US-Iran relations should be recognised for what it is: tortuous negotiations on the nuclear issue while long-term tensions persist.

In their respective speeches to the UN both Obama and Rowhani made clear references to the history of the last three decades. Obama spoke of Iran's hostage-taking, of its labelling of the US as the main enemy and of its threats against Israel. Rowhani gave what could be described as a "third-worldist nationalist" speech, complaining about inequality amongst states, and the misconceptions about the 'civilised' west and 'uncivilised' countries like Iran. So even if nuclear negotiations progress - and that is a big 'if' - the conflict will continue.

Throughout the last three decades both sides have fuelled this confrontation: in the case of Iran for internal reasons; and in the case of the US for global reasons - to prove the power of the hegemon. Now, in desperation, a wrecked Iran and a weakened US are looking for a settlement. It will not lead to 'peace' in the region. Far from it - it might fuel further conflicts between an enraged Israel and an empowered Iran; or between a Sunni alliance and the Shia/Alawi axis of Iran, Syria and Lebanon.

Of course, all this also shows a level of incoherence in the US approach to the Middle East in general. The ousting of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime and the coming to power of a Shia government in Baghdad had the

inevitable consequence of increasing Iran's influence in the region. The US's immediate reaction was to strengthen its allies, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, supporting their interventions in Syria, where Iranian Revolutionary Guards were taking part in the civil war on the side of the Assad regime.

But the Israeli lobby and hawks amongst US Republicans, as well as some Democrats, are very concerned. The joke in Tehran is that Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu is the only person on earth who wishes Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was still Iranian president. According to Benny Avni, writing in the *New York Post*, "Iranian president Hassan Rowhani will undoubtedly play the well-dressed matinee idol in this year's UN annual gabfest, which begins Tuesday. But will Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu be the only one to note that this emperor has no clothes?"⁶ Only hours after Rowhani's UN appearance, Netanyahu described him as making "a cynical speech full of hypocrisy".⁷

Some have argued that the current situation proves 'sanctions' have forced Iran to 'engage in nuclear negotiations'. Nothing could be further from the truth. For all the talk of peace and moderation, Iran's Islamic regime maintains a commitment to pursue nuclear development - so as far as the nuclear issue is concerned, not much has changed. What is different is the new government's willingness to negotiate with the US.

Sanctions against Iran date back to 1979 and, contrary to Obama's claims, they have always been about regime change. In this respect the US has succeeded, in that sanctions forced all candidates in this year's presidential elections in Iran to take a 'moderate' line *vis-à-vis* US relations. This was as true of the more conservative candidates as it was of the centrist, Rowhani. No wonder Iranian royalists, the Mujahedin and others who hoped to be the main beneficiaries of US regime-change policy are furious with the Obama administration. However, as we in Hands Off the People of Iran have said, the US plan A was always about regime change - and that meant a change in policy, not necessarily a change in personnel.

Clearly Iran hopes that improved

relations with the US will result in the lifting of some of the harshest sanctions, allowing the sale of Iranian oil, a gradual reacceptance of Iran's banks and financial institutions into the world economy, and that in turn these measures will improve the rate of exchange for the Iranian currency. Will this improve life for the Iranian working class? Not very likely.

Working class

As the world media pontificates about the significance of this week's events in New York, it is worthwhile listening to the words of Labour activist Ali Nejati, a member of the Haft Tapeh sugar workers' union: "Workers should not be under any illusion that change in the management of the state, within the confines of the existing order and for the purpose of maintaining this order in power, will bring about any change in the economic, political and social situation of the working class, nor does this change represent any move in that direction. It is no secret that our class, despite encompassing the overwhelming majority of the population, plays no role in the country's politics - as far as the government is concerned, our only role is to produce more, accept lower wages and become cannon fodder."⁸

By contrast, Iranian reformists, even when the most radical among them address working class issues (and that in itself is a rare event), consider the class as a minority and they talk of "the necessity of raising the demands of all minorities: women, national minorities and workers".⁹

What they fail to realise is that:

- the majority of the population of Iran are workers of one kind or another;
- this majority, the working class, remains the only force capable not only of freeing itself, but of winning the emancipation of other oppressed sections of the population;
- woman and national minorities are themselves divided into antagonistic classes.

So what can the working class do under difficult economic conditions at a time when repression remains as bad as it was in the worst years of the Ahmadinejad period? The reformist left is telling everyone that now is the time for 'national reconciliation', to give peace a chance, and the nation has to be united!

Labour activists such as Ali Nejati are absolutely right to combat such ideas. On the contrary, this is precisely the time for workers' protests - not just over economic demands, but for political freedom and the end of the dictatorship. In Hopi we will do our utmost to support such demands - as long as the forces putting them forward are not tainted by western or Arab funds for regime change from above ●

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Notes

1. See, for example, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-09-19/opinions/42214900_1_violence-world-leaders-hassan-rouhani.
2. www.nytimes.com/2013/09/25/world/middleeast/obama-and-iranian-leader-miss-each-other-diplomatically.html?_r=0.
3. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/sep/23/iran-west-not-turn-back-diplomacy.
4. 'More than Syria in its sights', September 19.
5. www.nytimes.com/1988/07/21/us/khomeini-accepts-poison-of-ending-the-war-with-iraq-un-sending-mission.html.
6. <http://nypost.com/2013/09/22/will-us-get-suckered-in-by-iran>.
7. www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/premium-1.548957.
8. <http://rahekargar.de/browsf.php?cid=1033&id=487&pgn=>
9. Interview with exiled reformist activist Mostafa Khorravi: www.bbc.co.uk/persian/tv/2011/04/000001_ptv_newshour_gel.shtml.

REVIEW



Armed and dangerous

Painfully detailed origins

John Pickard **Behind the myths: the foundations of Judaism, Christianity and Islam**

AuthorHouseUK, 2013, pp492, £17.99

This is a thoroughly researched and painfully detailed review of the origins of Judean, Christian and Islamic belief, based upon archaeological evidence, historical documentation and comparative histories. It looks at the material conditions, the class and economic forces, drawing out the theological and sociological background to the rise of the respective religions and their keystone myths.

John Pickard demonstrates with utter clarity that the bulk of the texts found in the *Bible*, *Torah* and *Qur'an* are historical nonsense, forgeries or simply invented accounts, as the respective religions developed and adapted to changing social conditions and class pressures. They were set down hundreds of years after the events they purport to describe as conscious attempts to steer the religious authority of their creeds in directions which suited the prevailing demands of the ruling classes and religious elites.

The analysis of the early history of the Jews and the development of their mythology knocks huge holes in the story that forms the underlying basis for current Zionist politics and social justifications. This is particularly true when tracing the origins of the Jews and how in fact, if at all, they differed from other people in the region. It looks at the biblical stories and sets them against independent accounts and histories. For example, the stories of the creation and the flood are legends common to all ancient cultures of the east. There is no evidence whatever of a mass flight of Hebrew slaves under the leadership of Moses, or of 40 years travelling by masses of Hebrews in Sinai. I found John's exposition on the rise of the full-time priesthood particularly amusing and illuminating, as the holy book is bent on supporting the rise of this new level of hierarchy and what payment they received.

Jesus: fact or fiction?

The most dramatic argument offered in this book is that Jesus as a living individual did not in fact exist. There are no references to Jesus in any contemporary sources. Neither are there any references to a real Jesus in the earliest Christian writings, including those of Paul, the founder of what became 'the church'. There

was certainly a Christian movement and its message initially was radical and challenging, but Jesus himself was an amalgam of heroes and legends. The church, as it became an established state religion of the Roman empire, weeded out hundreds of early Christian texts, and either selected small sections of others or rewrote and invented new ones.

John identifies the cult of Joshua as the source of the Jesus story among a communistic, radical movement, which was anti-empire and anti-hierarchy, and for the poor and exploited. It was Jewish in ritual and theology. 'Jesus' was a generic construct based upon legends of the movement and the embodiment of early real leaders. The story of a living, real Jesus was invented hundreds of years after the development of this movement, turning him from a radical, albeit messianistic, embodiment of rebellion into a god. It was laced with real events and legends carried solely in oral tradition for over a hundred years, added to and adapted to new events and the influx of non-Jewish culture and mythology taken from Greek and Roman traditions. There was no story of a biological Jesus until Mark: "It was Mark's composition that gathered together the earlier traditions, used recent history of Jerusalem to set the stage for Jesus's time, crafted the plot, spelt out the motivations and so created the story of Jesus which was to become the gospel truth for Christianity" (p207).

Incidentally, "It is more than likely that the name of the town of Nazareth is also fictitious ... there is no reference to it in ancient sources ..." John argues that the inventor of the name rationalised it as the birthplace of the 'Nazarene' (ie, Jesus), but the way of life of a 'Nazarite' was actually characterised by asceticism and abstinence. John quotes the *Old Testament* reference to Samson as Nazarite. He informs us that the root of the word is linked to the concept of separation, as a religious hermit might stand apart from the majority of people. The *Old Testament* also sees Moses instructed by God to insist that a Nazarite should refuse to partake of anything from the vine (p207). So the word referred to a concept of behaviour, not a place.

The vast bulk of church historical and theological writing was ditched

in favour of just four scriptures - rewriting in the process a new version of Christianity, with all other older and less orthodox versions banned or destroyed. The discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls, and the early heretical gospels of Philip and Judas, among others, despite all efforts to suppress them, tell a different story. The gospels were amended time after time, in accordance with the theological guidelines of the church hierarchy and the class it served.

As the church was led away from its narrow Jewish roots, it had to be made easier for those of non-Jewish cultures to join it, so many local gods were adopted as saints and local religious holidays were transformed into Christian ones. Christmas is a prime example. The birth of Jesus was assigned to the date of the winter solstice in the Julian calendar, when the pagan devotees of Mithras celebrated the birthday of the Invincible Sun. The Christians were to hijack it as the birthday of the son of god.

Following a temporary and relatively small-scale persecution of the Christian faith, the Roman state moved over to its wholesale acceptance as the religion of the empire under Constantine and his successors. This was more to do with politics and pragmatism than theology. As John says, "It was the political and social environment of the church and the needs of the Roman state which created the theology."

Foundations of Islam

John's treatment of the mythologies of Islam are no less thoroughgoing and frank than his treatment of Judaism and Christianity, but they probably require a lot more guts to make. This is true on two levels, the first being that the liberal left has now persuaded itself that any criticism of the beliefs and practices of Islam is 'racist'. The second, more importantly, is that critics of Islam can in some circumstances wind up dead.

Like the story of Jesus, there is no contemporary or archaeological evidence to support any of the story of Mohammed as a prophet of Islam. The *Qur'an* contains little in the way of a narrative which links the character of Mohammed and the events and theology he is alleged to have espoused. The

book now is very largely composed of *hadith*, none of which is written before the 9th and 10th century and is basically added to as they went along to justify whatever law or practice the ruling class wished to implement, as the social system changed. The *Qur'an* by legend is believed to have been memorised word for word by several different people and carried by word of mouth alone for centuries. Given that the book is supposed to be the word of god and Mohammed his prophet, one has to ask, why in a thoroughly literate culture was that so? We all know from Chinese whispers and from folk legend and even from our own memories how quickly real events change in the telling and retelling. Yet still the book is held to be perfect in every way.

Whatever is *not* in the *Qur'an* can be put in by a *hadith*, which is an interpretation of an event which is discovered took place or a saying the prophet is said to have made. These can then be projected forward as judgment on contemporary events. In this sense the *hadith* far outweighs the *Qur'an* itself.

In the same way that many historians take as their starting point the version of events declared in the *Bible*, historians of Islam have often accepted the official accounts, as contained in these *hadith*, even though they are contradictory and were written down centuries later. For example, "Ameer Ali goes on to cite what purports to be a five- or 10-minute speech of Mohammed, word for word. This verbatim speech is only one of many quoted in his book, using sources written 200 years after Mohammed. This reheating of 9th century accounts of 7th century events as history is by no means unusual and is in fact the norm for most historians of Islam" (p299).

The main scientific problem for the traditional account of the life of Mohammed is that there are no contemporary writings, inscriptions or any other evidence to support it. Unlike the Jewish tale, there is no contemporary historian, or personal writer from 1st-century Judea with which to make a comparison or cross-check: "In fact there is no material now in existence that was written prior to the 9th century" (p301); and everything since is based on recycled, rewritten and re-edited earlier material, which may itself have been secondary or tertiary:

"The traditional account, therefore, is not 7th-century history. The best that one could say about it, including the biography of Mohammed, is that it is an account of what 9th-century writers wanted to think was true of the 7th century" (p304).

John also shows quite forcibly the rise of the Arab empire was not the rise of an Islamic empire in accordance with modern myth. At the time of the alleged life of Mohammad in the 7th century, there is no mention of him during the rise and spread of the Arab empire. These stories and the centrality of the *Qur'an* were added hundreds of years after the event and are unsupported or contradicted by archaeological evidence. The book itself has been called a "fantastic reconstruction" made up of fragments of other work, mostly non-Arab, and based upon snatches of other cultures and histories, often badly and inaccurately translated into Arabic. The truth is that the *Qur'an* is pre-Islamic; it was only partially translated into Arabic and was greatly added to with amendments and endless explanations and *hadith* before being canonised as the holy book of the Arab empire. Islam came to define itself as a specifically Arab form of monotheism through a lengthy period of polemic with Christian and Jewish scholars. The new layer of Arab theological scholars was used to consolidate an Arab ruling class and institute a state religion to consolidate the empire.

The entire Muslim tradition about the early history of the text of the *Qur'an* and the life of Mohammad is manufactured. References to Mohammed as the highest authority of Islam and the law only became the norm from the mid-8th or 9th century: "Chains of transmission (*isnads*) that purport to authenticate the words or deeds of Mohammed down the centuries were mostly fabricated" (p355).

Behind the myths is an impressive piece of historical research and enquiry. But I fear that despite the scholarship and insights of this book it will not achieve the widespread publicity it deserves. Too much of the historical myth from the *Torah*, the *Bible* and the *hadith* are now starting points for historical construction and explanation without serious challenge as to their veracity.

Some of my friends and comrades might find a copy of this book in their Xmas stocking ... from Santa, of course ●

David Douglass

GERMANY

Principled opposition, not coalition poker

With Die Linke potentially emerging from last weekend's elections as the biggest opposition party in parliament, big challenges lie ahead, argues **Ben Lewis**

Listening to the first electoral projections on the evening of September 22, it appeared as if the incumbent chancellor, Angela Merkel, had trumped all expectations and won an overall majority for the Christian Democrats, which would have made her only the second chancellor to do so since World War II.

Yet in the end she fell just short, missing out by a handful of seats. While in theory this means that all is still to play for in terms of a future German government, the European media's relief at Merkel's solid showing has been palpable, with fawning praise for the "world's most powerful woman", who is now set to overtake Margaret Thatcher as the longest serving female head of state in Europe.

Indeed, given that Merkel has shown herself time and time again to be a 'safe pair of hands' when it comes to imposing punishing austerity across Europe, it is no surprise that the ruling classes both in Germany and abroad have welcomed Sunday's result. A telling sign of how austerity across the European Union is playing out is that, while in countries like Portugal, Greece and Spain up to 80% of the electorate would like to see the back of Frau Merkel, a significant section of the German population has rallied to her side. Following a rather dull election campaign which focussed more on Merkel herself as a guiding 'mother' figure than any real aspects of policy or controversy, the slight increase in voter turnout (71.5%) on the previous federal elections in 2009 saw her gain the most, winning 311 seats.

However, Merkel took a gamble by not calling for a second-preference vote for her government coalition partner, the FDP, intending this time to go it alone. The upshot is that the FDP was completely wiped out of parliament after losing over *two million* votes to the CDU and failing to clear the 5% hurdle needed to gain representation. Yet, with the FDP now dead, she needs a partner. Interestingly, in terms of the coalition talks that lie ahead, the FDP's fate has done nothing to dispel the view that Merkel's great prestige has always come at the cost of her 'partners' in government - first the social democrats (SPD) in 2009 and now the FDP in 2013. The mood music from some of the FDP's leading members is that this 'small party of big business' will now tack even further to the right, particularly when it comes to 'structural reforms' across Europe.

And, talking of the right, one surprise on Sunday was the showing of the right-populist, Europhobic Alternative for Germany (AfD), which with 4.7% of the vote fell just short of winning seats. It stole its biggest chunk of votes from the FDP and, rather worryingly, 340,000 votes from Die Linke, the left party. While the AfD, which seems to mainly embody the politics of petty bourgeois anxiety, may amount to nothing more than a flash in the pan, the controversial question of Europe will stubbornly refuse to go away in the years ahead. Moreover, while the party may perhaps not fare so well in national and state elections, it will doubtless pull out all the stops at next year's European elections, where such ugly anti-European sentiment may assume various forms in several EU



Gregor Gysi: media

member-states.

But what of Merkel? She is still without a majority and thus in the business of seeking a government partner - 'coalition poker', as it is called, has begun.

Fool me once ...

For all the euphoria around Merkel's "stunning success", a closer look at the election results indicates that her outgoing government actually *lost* the election overall. Not only did her FDP former partner suffer the worst result in its history, if we add up the total seats won by the opposition parties, then the SPD (192), Die Linke (64) and the Greens (63) actually amount to 319 - that is to say, a very narrow majority.

If we also factor in the seven million 'lost' votes that result from the exigencies of Germany's electoral system and its 'anti-totalitarian' (ie, undemocratic) 5% hurdle, then the picture is even more complicated.

While no socialist or democrat will shed a tear for the failure of the FDP or the AfD to win a seat, the fact is that, irrespective of whoever 'wins' and forms the next government, in many respects democracy will be the overall loser, for even a 'grand coalition' between Merkel and the SPD would not reflect a majority of the actual votes cast by those entitled to do so. A 'grand coalition' is what looks most likely though, not least because the leaders of the SPD and the Greens refuse to take seriously Die Linke's 'red-red-green' gestures.

Such is the thoroughly compromised nature of today's Greens that even Merkel has refused to rule out coalition talks with them. Yet after finishing fourth and losing a lot of support, the Greens have their own problems to deal with in the wake of leaders resigning and the subsequent jostling for position between the party's left and right. Even Joschka Fischer, the former 68er turned Natophile, has made noises about returning to the fold, worried that the "leftwing trajectory" (sic) of the party has simply scared too many people away ... Where have we heard that before?

The SPD, it seems, is Merkel's only choice. On Sunday it made some incremental gains, largely taking votes from the Greens and Die Linke. Nonetheless, it was actually SPD's second-worst showing since World War II. The party that was once the envy of the international workers' movement has been reduced to a hollow shell and stands essentially on the same ground as Merkel. The SPD is by no means a homogenous entity, but the right remains totally dominant.

That is not to say that even an essentially Blairite SPD will not find government with Merkel a rather difficult pill to swallow - not because of the parties' different approaches regarding a European banking union and so on, but simply due to the demands of *Realpolitik*: the SPD's worst post-World War II result, after all, came in 2009 after its last 'grand coalition' jolly with the CDU, memories of which have no doubt been revived by the downfall of the FDP last weekend. Fool me once ...

Indeed, the regional party in

Nordrhein-Westfalen, Germany's most populous *Land*, has actually voted against a grand coalition. Leading social democrat Sigmar Gabriel, who on Monday received a phone call from Merkel about coalition talks, said that the SPD was not exactly queuing up after Merkel had just "ruined" the FDP. The SPD will meet this Friday to discuss the matter and Merkel has made it clear that she is happy to wait.

In reality, these noises from Gabriel and others are little more than hot air: a chance to show the media that the party is no easy ride and is attempting to strike a hard bargain. As one SPD activist from Nordrhein-Westfalen told me, "It's good that the regional party has taken a stand, but it won't affect anything". So we should expect to see much by way of horse-trading, policy footsie and party overtures in the media. The SPD will probably go along with Merkel and her European agenda after being thrown the odd domestic 'reform' bone here and there, such as a national minimum wage and other minor modifications to the 'Agenda 2010' programme. Given the SPD's relative weight in regional politics (and with it the second chamber), it is not in a bad bargaining position. But it knows that it has a lot to lose ...

Government matters

Assuming, then, that we are in for another grand coalition, it appears that Die Linke will emerge as Germany's biggest opposition party. While its share of the vote fell by just over 3%, and this in turn was down on its quite remarkable performance in 2009, the party will largely be pleased, particularly in light of its poor showing in German regional elections and polls over the recent period. Moreover, for a party that has been traditionally dominated by the well-rooted and formerly ruling 'official communist' Socialist Unity Party of the old German Democratic Republic, and has been unable to make a real breakthrough in the west, the election of 32 parliamentary representatives from each side of the east-west divide is of symbolic importance. Opposition presents opportunities.

There are, however, several signs from the leadership of Die Linke that these opportunities could be wasted. The leadership insists that the "door must be kept open" for coalition talks with the SPD and the Greens, which is an utterly hopeless perspective for a purportedly 'anti-capitalist' organisation. Even on the basis of a somewhat dubious left-reformist 'keep out Merkel' logic, this 'strategy' is obviously a nonsense: the SPD looks likely to form a government with Merkel and, if the Greens had fared slightly better on Sunday, then they may well have done so as well. So much for alternative policies.

For now it appears that this enthusiasm for forming capitalist governments will not have any ramifications nationally. Yet it could undermine Die Linke's strong opposition role regionally, particularly with upcoming *Land* elections in eastern Germany, traditionally the stronghold of the party's right wing.

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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In West German Hesse, for example, where there was also an election on September 22, Die Linke is a key player, given the choice between a CDU/FDP administration and an SPD/Green one. We could see the sad sight of a red-red-green government or even Die Linke 'tolerating' a red-green minority administration, as it did in 2009 - very little 'opposition' at all. Indeed, Janine Wissler of Marx 21,¹ who has just been re-elected to the Hesse regional parliament for Die Linke, attracted quite a bit of media attention when arguing that she was in favour of talks about such a government in that state.

Providing left cover for regional cuts, where the party already has history, could prove disastrous for Die Linke's support. One thing underlined by this election is that the German system can lead to the rapid rise and fall of smaller or oppositional parties. For example, it is less than two years ago that the Pirate Party was being hailed as the 'next big thing' in politics, but it is not represented now. In the wake of the accident at the Fukushima power plant in Japan in 2011 the Greens appeared to be making great strides. There was even a time in the recent past when the FDP was polling around 15% ...

All the more important, then, that Die Linke should present a consistent, principled and imaginative opposition to the *whole system* and gradually establish itself with a rooted and politically principled base (the fact that

so many Die Linke votes were lost to the AfD, or even to the CDU, should serve as yet another warning here).

Die Linke needs to break with its policy of working alongside pro-capitalist forces on the basis of some utopian dream of real "social democracy", as desired by those like the media-savvy Gregor Gysi. It is likely that this question is not going to go away in the coming period, with the 'realo' and the 'fundi' wings clashing over particularly vague formulations in the party's programme on government regionally. It is all the more important, then, that the left in Die Linke foregrounds the question of government and opposition.

Sectarianism

In this regard it is perhaps revealing that my article last week² has come in for some criticism over its 'sectarianism' towards Die Linke. Members and supporters of Marx 21 have chided me for not seeing the 'political gains' that can be made from exposing the Greens and the SPD by stating something along the lines of 'We will form a government with you if the conditions are right'³.

I do not at all deny the tactical advantage that can be gained by placing conditions on other workers' parties (although I am less convinced about the utility of such an approach when it comes to the petty bourgeois Greens). What I am criticising is the very idea of participating in a capitalist

government. Should any 'anti-capitalist' party worth its salt agree to do so - let alone limit its conditions to the introduction of a minimum wage (which a grand coalition might do anyway), opposition to German combat missions abroad (something that the right of the party, smelling power, is now looking to drop) and opposition to social cuts? Can there really be a 'leftwing' capitalist government' as a step towards socialism? Many people might well think so, but we Marxists surely have a different approach.

One Marx 21 supporter even questioned my right to have a go at Die Linke while spending so much time researching and translating texts the old SPD when it was formally a Marxist party (and, contrary to what the comrade claims, far to the left of today's Die Linke). Yet one of the healthier aspects of the German workers' movement historically was precisely its instance on principled *opposition*: ie, its refusal to take responsibility for government until it was in a position to carry out its full minimum programme. This basic Marxist approach was also that of the Spartacus League of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg (whose names adorn Die Linke's party headquarters and its research institute respectively): "The Spartacus League will never take over governmental power except in response to the clear, unambiguous will of the great majority of the proletarian mass of all of Germany, never except by the proletariat's conscious affirmation

of the Spartacus League's views, aims and methods of struggle."⁴

The ins and outs of 'coalition poker' can be safely left to the parties that are committed to various ways of tinkering with the status quo. Die Linke should not be sitting at the table, but instead mobilising principled opposition to the entire corrupt charade from top to bottom. The fact that it cannot clearly come out and do so as things stand is merely a reflection of the strategic shortcomings built into the very DNA of 'broad workers' party' formations. All the more reason why, when forming political parties, we on the left need to be straight about our principles and strategy from the very outset ●

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Notes

1. I would like to thank supporters of Marx 21 for pointing out that it is not actually an affiliate of the Socialist Workers Party's International Socialist Tendency, as I stated in my last article - although members close to the British SWP are still involved in it.
2. 'Rotten politics and rotten terms', September 19.
3. Marx 21 does not appear to have come out strongly against government participation. In a recent article, Christine Buchholz argues that it is not the government constellation that will decide things, but social power relations, thereby dodging the issue. She mentions that some have spoken of a 'red-red-green' government, but does not address whether such a government would be desirable or not ... (<http://marx21.de/content/view/1986/32>).
4. R Luxemburg, "What does the Spartacus League want?": www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/12/14.htm - translation amended slightly.

DIE LINKE

Safe spaces task force

A word of warning from Maciej Zurowski for those in Left Unity who wish to emulate the German left party



Last week Ally MacGregor graced our letters page with a strange comparison (September 19). According to the comrade, our proposed amendments to the Socialist Platform - intended to clarify and strengthen it and which were opposed by Nick Wrack's drafting group in the name of absent communismophobes - are similar to the efforts of Left Unity's 'safe spaces working group' to impose a bureaucratic code of conduct upon LU.

Actually, the difference between the approaches could not be greater: one puts forward the revolutionary vision of a free, classless and stateless society no longer characterised by oppression of humans by humans. The other argues that special oppressions - as well as a number of behaviours and debating styles that are not to the authors' liking - can and should be kept at bay by bureaucratic decree.

I am not sure of comrade MacGregor's exact position on either communism or 'safe spaces', but, judging from my experience in Left Unity thus far, 'safe spaces' policies and rules on language are advocated most vocally by the right wing, such as the Left Party Platform: ie, comrades who look to European parties such as Die Linke and Syriza as models to follow.

However, such ideas also find support among well-meaning lefts, including some who quit the Socialist Workers Party over the Delta debacle. This is unfortunate - for, as Paul Demarty argued in his recent *Weekly Worker* article, such measures are "never as innocent as they seem" ('Playing it safe', September 12). I would like to use this opportunity to send out a warning.

Die Linke is not only the envy of the Left Party Platform in terms of relative popular success; it may also be described as setting a benchmark for bureaucratically enforced political correctness. What is more, in an organisation led by social democrats very adept at bowing before the demands of the German state, 'safe spaces' measures are chiefly enforced against radicals who fail to stick to the official line. Indeed, the prospect of finding yourself publicly denounced as an 'exterminatory anti-Semite' by BAK Shalom, a pro-Zionist and pro-imperialist task force in the party's youth wing, can make Die Linke appear a very unsafe space for anti-imperialists of all shades.

Of course, the fact that such hatchet jobs - sometimes carried out in the pages of the bourgeois press - are tolerated, if not instigated, by the leadership flows directly from its capital-friendly, 'don't rock the boat' politics, dressed up for easier left consumption in the emancipatory language of anti-racism and anti-fascism.

One may dismiss malicious accusations of anti-Semitism as a specifically German obsession, but Die Linke's right wing has many other ways of containing unwelcome discourse. Ostensibly to protect members from sexual assault, the summer camps and national con-

gresses run by the youth section, Left Youth Solid, are now overseen by so-called 'awareness groups' - a sort of 'safe spaces' Stasi. Aside from keeping a watchful eye over proceedings, these serve as a first point of call not only to victims of actual assault, but to anyone who, for one reason or another, feels 'threatened' by a comrade's vocabulary or demeanour.

The bureaucratic stroke of genius is that the complaining party remains anonymous - a rule which provides the awareness groups with ample opportunity to fabricate complaints against whomever they wish, with the possibility of ejecting them from the site. Add to this the fact that they are prominently staffed by activists from the aforementioned BAK Shalom task force and the slightly more moderate Emancipatory Left network - whose members like to depict themselves as victims of "Stalinist violence" and "Kurdish terror" supposedly raging at the annual Lenin-Liebknecht-Luxemburg demonstrations in Berlin - and you know that you will probably be subject to special observation if you are a communist.

A young German comrade told me an anecdote from this year's Left Youth Solid national congress. She protested during a debate that the women's policy advocated by Left Youth Solid was largely a bourgeois form of feminism. This prompted her opponents to approach the 'awareness group' and complain that the comrade had "adopted male domineering speech patterns", which had greatly upset them. To admit that it was her argument, not the tone of her comments, which had upset them - let alone to say it to her face - was just beyond these

people's bureaucratically deformed imagination.

Reportedly, it can be enough to carry yourself in a 'macho' fashion perceived as 'threatening' by other congress delegates or use vocabulary that offends delicate sensibilities in order to be targeted. Such accusations are commonly directed against the few working class youths that Left Youth Solid manages to attract. Effectively, the awareness groups are utilised by certain members of this nominally socialist organisation to act out their class prejudice.

It is scarcely a coincidence that, the further you look to the right, the more enthusiastic Die Linke and Left Youth Solid functionaries are about 'safe spaces', awareness teams and political correctness. I trust that many Left Unity supporters, including those that currently support the Left Party Platform, are sufficiently together not to allow their prospective party to become a dystopia of Die Linke proportions. The proposed 'safe spaces' document should be rejected - it would be self-defeating to entrust *any* party apparatus with the intrusive, draconian, speech-regulating powers that it implies.

The left is not a sexist, racist, or LGBT-phobic place to be - certainly compared to society at large. Those rare cases of actual abuse must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, and a transparent, democratic party life is the best way to encourage a prefigurative, emancipatory culture. Even the 18th century freemason, Adolph Freiherr Knigge, to whom German popular myth incorrectly ascribes overtly prescriptive 'how to' guides on etiquette, knew that "compulsion kills all noble, freely given commitment" ●

weekly worker

**Reforge
Labour into a
united front of
working class**

Safe for capitalism

Calling Miliband 'Red Ed' is a joke, writes Stan Keable of Labour Party Marxists

Listening to Ed Miliband and Ed Balls dispensing policies from above at party conference tells us all we need to know about the hollowed-out condition of Labour Party democracy. Conference should be the highest authority in the party, where delegates from constituency parties and affiliated organisations decide policy that is binding on representatives, on local councils and in parliament. Instead, we have a media rally, in which delegates are reduced to fawning acolytes of the leader and shadow cabinet members in a disgusting display of undemocracy.

Not only has the straightforward process of members submitting motions for conference through their local party organisation been supplanted by the opaque system of policy commissions, but this perversity itself is kicked aside when the leadership decides to announce a new policy.

And in the face of the ongoing decline and crisis of the capitalist system, what miserable policies they offer. A few crumbs and soundbites, wrapped up in firm promises of continuing cuts and austerity should Labour be elected in 2015.

As Ed Miliband put it, "It is going to be tough. We are going to have to stick to strict spending limits to get the deficit down." Likewise, Ed Balls promised "economic responsibility and fiscal rigour", which is somehow different from the policy of "this out-of-touch, Tory-led government". "Labour will always make different choices. We will combine iron discipline on spending controls with a fairer approach to deficit reduction."

Nevertheless, the rightwing press is already announcing the return of 'Red Ed' because of the policy changes he has announced. In place of Tory tax cuts for 80,000 large businesses, Labour will cut business rates for 1.5 million small businesses. The minimum wage has been falling in value (but so have all our wages!), so Labour will "strengthen" it - ie, restore it to its original magnificent value, and increase fines against employers who pay less - in order to "make work pay for millions in our country". Labour will "reset the market" and "freeze gas and electricity prices until the start of 2017". The bedroom tax will be repealed, and by 2020 "we will be building 200,000 homes a year". To facilitate this, private developers who "just sit on land and refuse to build" will be told, "Either use the land or lose the land". Lastly, voting rights will be extended to 16 and 17-year-olds to "make them part of our democracy".

Ed Balls announced a "compulsory jobs guarantee for young people and the long-term unemployed". Oh, good, you might think - employers will be forced to provide jobs. Unfortunately the "compulsory" applies to the worker, not the employer. "And we will work with employers to make sure there will be a paid job for all young people out of work for more than 12 months and adults out of work for two years or more, which people will have to take up or lose benefits."

In his conference speech, Ed Miliband said not a word about Syria. It was left to Balls to proudly emphasise Labour's imperialist war credentials: "It is the Labour leader," he said, "who on Syria had the courage to stand up and say that

if the case was sound and the United Nations was properly engaged, Labour would support military action ... No Labour government will ever stand aside when terrible atrocities are committed and international law is broken."

Despite the promised crumbs, the 'next Labour government' under the two Eds - if it happens, which is by no means certain - will be a government of British capitalism, not a government of the working class. It will be an anti-working class government because its political programme is to run British capitalism. Like previous Labour governments to date, it will be able to attack the working class 'in the national interest' all the more effectively because it is 'our government'.

Socialist programme

The Labour Representation Committee, which has its annual conference on Saturday November 23,¹ aims to transform the Labour Party into a real workers' party, into an umbrella organisation of all working class and socialist organisations, to fight for working class interests and socialism. It also aims for the election of a Labour government. But it needs to put these two aims in the right order.

As Labour Party Marxists argued in a motion two years ago, "A Labour government which runs capitalism will be counterproductive for the workers' movement." The motion continued: "History shows that Labour governments committed to managing the capitalist system and loyal to the existing constitutional order create disillusionment in the working class." Consequently, "the Labour Party should only consider forming a government when it has the active support of a clear majority of the population and has a realistic prospect of implementing a full socialist programme".²

Getting socialists elected to parliament, from where they can champion the movement, is a good idea. It is running a capitalist government, or joining one, which is counterproductive. The movement can only be re-educated in

socialist politics and rebuilt into a mass movement in struggle against any capitalist government, whatever its political colour, until the working class is capable of sweeping the system away. It cannot be built by sacrificing socialist principles and selling out working class struggles for the electoral success of political careerists.

Seen in this light, the two Eds are clearly part of the problem, not part of the solution. That is why I take issue with comrade John McDonnell's "verdict on Ed Miliband's conference speech" on the website of the Left Economics Advisory Panel, which displays unwarranted hope that a Miliband government might be a stepping stone towards socialism. I have not seen this "strategy" spelled out before, so I will quote it in full. It goes a long way to explain the ambiguity of the LRC's political behaviour:

"Since Ed Miliband became leader, the strategy of the left has been to make issues safe for him by building support within and outside the party issue by issue. Only when it's safe is he confident about moving on an issue. Today's speech demonstrated that we are setting the agenda, but there's so much further to go. A major house-building programme is needed, but it needs to be public housing alongside rent controls to stop landlords profiteering from housing benefits.

"Challenging the scapegoating of unemployed and disabled people needs to be made a reality by scrapping the rigged capability tests associated with Atos and abolishing workfare. Time-limited price controls won't end the rip-offs. A clear commitment to end privatisation is needed, especially in the NHS, and to bring rail, water and energy back into public ownership, plus, if it goes ahead, Royal Mail.

"To tackle low pay, we need to make the minimum wage a living wage by right, re-establish trade union rights and restore a commitment to full employment. People already suspect this is a recovery for the rich and ongoing recession for the rest. This is exactly the time when people want more radical action. Make today's speech

a beginning."³

Such faith in Ed Miliband's socialist potential is quite touching, but I must remind you, John: we are talking class struggle and socialism; Ed Miliband is talking 'one nation' class-collaboration and capitalism - including imperialist war, as Ed Balls made explicit.

Union link

Harriet Harman opened the 'debate' on the interim report by Lord Ray Collins published immediately prior to conference, entitled *Building a one nation Labour Party* - perhaps an appropriate title for a process designed to weaken the Labour-union link and bury the class struggle.

"You could not have anyone better than Ray," she told us, "to listen to everyone's views and to draw them together." And there, in a nutshell, is the method of Labour Party 'democracy' today. You get to express your views, as in an employer's suggestion box. Those above "listen", so you feel grateful and wanted. Then they cherry-pick the ideas they want, and tell you it's what you have collectively chosen.

Lord Collins stressed how proud he was to be a trade unionist and told us not to worry - Labour should "retain the constitutional collective voice of the unions". Ed wanted to "mend the link, not end the link", he claimed. But it has to change, so that it is "open and transparent".

The interim report covers more than the union link, however. It sets out what 'Ed wants' in a renewed relationship with the unions, in which, Ray assures us, collective affiliation will not be touched; the development of standardised constituency development plans (more central control?); primaries, starting with the London mayor contest; and "fairness and transparency" in the selection of candidates. Each section has a series of questions along the lines of 'How shall we fulfil Ed's idea?' Everything will be settled at the special conference in March 2014.

GMB general secretary Paul Kenny, speaking on behalf of all 14 Labour-

affiliated trade unions, organised in the Trade Union and Labour Party Liaison Organisation (TULO), said: "The removal or sale of our collective voice is not on the agenda. We are certainly not going to accept any advice on democracy and transparency from the people who brought us the 'cash for honours' scandals or whose activities are funded by cash from wealthy outsiders who refuse to give to the party, but prefer to lay cuckoos in CLP nests."

He went on: "We think the real debate this week is about jobs, homes, living standards, employment rights, not irrelevant navel-gazing about internal party structures, which frankly the British public do not give a fig about ... Now let us get on with the real business of winning back millions of voters to ensure we bring the hope and social justice the British people deserve."

Erily, this philistine approach of belittling the vital question of the struggle for real democracy - in our movement, as well as in society at large - is common to both the left and the bureaucracies of the trade unions and of the Labour Party. For the working class to liberate itself from capitalism, democracy in our own movement is a precondition. Only through a combination of open discussion and unity in action can we sort out our differences, develop class-consciousness and become capable of leading society out of the abyss of declining and crisis-ridden capitalism.

Transforming the Labour Party into an instrument fit for working class purpose necessarily means democratising the trade unions which form its base. The status quo, with unions dominated by entrenched bureaucracies, makes them ineffective as a means of defence. Democratising the unions to make the bureaucracies into servants instead of masters is "the real debate" - and will make all the difference in the world to the struggle for "jobs, homes, living standards, employment rights" •

Notes

1. See www.l-r-c.org.uk.
2. LRC AGM, January 15 2011. The motion was defeated.
3. <http://leap-lrc.blogspot.co.uk>.

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