



weekly worker

Bordiga, the prophet of 'left' communism. David Broder explores his politics

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MY NAME IS CLIFF, FOUNDER OF THE SWP,
LOOK ON MY MIGHTY ACHIEVEMENTS,
YOU PARTISANS OF THE MARXIST
PROGRAMME, AND DESPAIR!

NOTHING BESIDES REMAINS. ROUND
THE DECAY OF THAT ONCE PROUD WRECK,
BOUNDLESS AND BARE THE LONE AND LEVEL
SANDS STRETCH FAR AWAY



LETTERS



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

Victims

Given that Nelson Mandela is being lauded as a dark-skinned Mother Theresa, we should pay our respects and draw attention to all those South African militants who suffered at the hands of Mbokodo, the internal security organ of Umkhonto we Sizwe, MK (Spear of the Nation), the guerrilla force of the African National Congress, and so in effect of the South African Communist Party. A Xhosa word meaning 'the grinding stone', Mbokodo personnel were trained by the KGB, the Stasi and the Cubans. Their abuses were not mentioned in the two articles in last week's *Weekly Worker* ('Mandela: Creation of a cult' and 'Mandela: He was a bourgeois hero', December 12) but they provide necessary context when evaluating the politics of late 20th century South Africa, both how the ANC has behaved in government and how dissent should be treated.

Paul Trewhele has called the struggle to end apartheid the most successful application of the popular front strategy in human history, and part of achieving this was an internal repression with a faint echo of Spain in the late 1930s. Recent books by him and Stephen Ellis improve our understanding of what the ANC and SACP were all about. Trewhele had first publicised the work of Mbokodo in 1990 in the magazine he co-founded with Baruch Hirson, *Searchlight South Africa* (www.marxists.org/archive/hirson/1990/quadro.htm).

Another important source is Mwezi Twala, an MK instructor, who in 1984 ended up in Quatro, the MK prison outside Luanda, after being a member of the grievances committee of the mutinies in Angola, an uprising during which Chris Hani fired on the rebels. Twala tells us something about Oliver Tambo, Mandela's voice in exile, that grates somewhat with OT's gilded image, shattering it to reveal a reflection of strange fruit:

"Oliver Tambo visited Pango at the height of the terror. The path from the entrance to the admin building was lined - like a scene from 'Spartacus' - with men, bloodied and filthy, hanging from trees. When his entourage arrived at admin, where I was officer on duty, Tambo's chief of staff told us that there would be a meeting at 'the stage' (a clearing in the jungle ... where we held meetings and discussions). Runners were sent out to notify everyone in the vicinity. On his way to the stage [Tambo] again passed the men tied to the trees. Being officer on duty, I could not attend the meeting, but my deputy went. After a while I saw guards come up from the stage, release the prisoners and take them to the meeting. There, my deputy told me, instead of objecting to their treatment, as I had hoped, Tambo berated them for their dissident behaviour and appeared to approve when Andrew Masondo declared that on the president's [Tambo's] next visit they would be in shallow graves behind the stage. The prisoners were returned to their trees ... where the president passed the unfortunate men without a glance on his way out, and they hung there for another three months - followed by three months hard labour" (Mbokodo, p51-2, my interpolations).

And the rationale for all this?

"Mbokodo tried to instil in cadres the belief that the ANC leadership was infallible, and any cadre who refused to voluntarily accept this premise was coerced by threats. Mzwai Piliso [head of Mbokodo] summed up this approach when he said: 'If you as much as point a finger at the ANC leadership, we will chop off your whole arm'" (p52-3, my interpolation).

Mandela was released in February

1990, and in April ex-MK prisoners issued an open letter to him requesting support for an investigation into the abuses by Mbokodo. From what I can tell he never responded directly, nor did he distance himself from the ANC's indiscriminate and persistent painting of ex-prisoners as spies and assassins, an incitement that led to murders and ostracism after they returned home from hell. The following year more spoke to the press, and the pressure mounted. In 1992 the ANC conducted a circumscribed inquiry - into itself (<http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=95>).

It is not without interest to note what often happens to critics of Stalinism. Trotskyists were portrayed as agents of Japan, Nazi Germany and the capitalist class more generally, and it is true that their criticisms of Stalinism were used by the capitalist press to try to discredit the idea of socialism. Likewise Twala's quote came from a website that extols the Boers. The 'left' has a big, big problem in coping with criticism of its leaders, an expression of its stunted conception and enactment of democracy. This is a debilitating force at the heart of any attempt to meliorate capitalism, let alone create the beginnings of a society growing from socialist principles.

Jara Handala
email

No platform

The Republican Socialist Platform was set up to promote the need for a republican socialist party. This must be built on the basis of the unity of the social democratic and communist left in England, working in cooperation with republican socialists in Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

The last point of the platform says: "We need a different kind of party to the traditional 'parties' of the left. Such a party would recognise the central importance of the struggle for democracy in mobilising all oppressed sections of society into a mass movement for radical change, a new democratic constitution and a social republic. This party, drawing on the republican and socialist traditions going back to the Levellers and Diggers and inspired by the militant struggles of the Chartists and Suffragettes, would seek to build and provide leadership for a broad democratic movement, thus becoming a republican socialist party."

The supplementary 'Case for the Republican Socialist Platform' recognises the new political realities of the national question. It says: "The republican left in England has no interest and should have no intention of imposing a social republic on Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. National self-determination and the spirit of 'internationalism from below' must stand for an ever closer voluntary union of the people of these countries".

The Republican Socialist Platform submitted an amendment to clause 2 of the aims of Left Unity to include the demand for a social republic amongst the immediate aims of the party. This amendment was ruled out of order. Although we did not agree that this decision of the standing orders committee was valid, the Platform agreed not to challenge it in the special circumstances of this founding conference.

At the beginning of conference, the Platform had registered 15 supporters. It was decided it would not be possible to win a majority for our platform from this starting point in a new organisation with a majority unlikely to be aware of our views. Too many barriers had to be overcome - the absence of a republican culture in England, the unfamiliarity of a new platform compared to the traditional politics of the left, the impossibility of convincing 400 people of a new political approach in three minutes, the level of support secured before the conference, the ignoring of the platform by the left press and the ruling out of order of our amendment.

The Platform recognised the main task of the conference was to resolve the dispute between the Left Party Platform and the Socialist Platform. Therefore we decided to explain our ideas to conference. In summing up, we would explain why the platform would be even more relevant in 2014 and then withdraw and promise to continue our campaign next year.

It was agreed we would abstain in the voting. Although the remaining platforms contained many points that all socialists could agree with, none offered the necessary strategic direction. We intended to call on all those dissatisfied with the choices on offer - the Left Party Platform, Socialist Platform, Class Struggle Platform and Communist Platform - to abstain in the vote.

The Platform planned to explain our reasons for withdrawing and our call for abstention on voting for the other platforms during the two minutes 'right of reply' to the debate. However, the right of reply was abandoned on the recommendation of the standing orders committee. We appealed to the chair to be allowed 30 seconds to explain our decision but this was denied. We asked the chair to read out a brief written explanation. This was denied.

Our supporters abstained. There were about 20 abstentions on the platform voting.

We would like to end by thanking conference for listening to our views and look forward to advancing our case in 2014 as part of the struggle for Left Unity.

The platform can be contacted at RSPlatform@hotmail.co.uk

Steve Freeman
Republican Socialist Platform

Undistorted

"Why must you distort things?" asks Richard Brenner of Workers Power (Letters, December 12). He was referring to my report of the Left Unity conference, when I mistakenly stated that he had contrasted the "mixed economy" in the agreed 'Aims' with the "democratic, planned economy" envisaged by the Left Party Platform, which conference had also agreed ('Making a safe space for left ideas', December 5).

Although I had admitted my error to him in an email exchange (I know for a fact that I was not the only one to misunderstand this part of his conference speech, by the way), he insisted that his complaint be published as a letter in its original form - complete with the charge of distortion.

Peter Manson
London

No surprise

Last week, the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority recommended an 11% pay rise for MPs, taking their pay to £74,000 per annum, three times the national average wage. This is outrageous. Although party leaders have subsequently opposed it, a number of MPs, mostly Tory, have said they will accept it because IPSA's independence should not be undermined by politicians. But IPSA is not 'independent'. And why have other MPs, including Rugby MP Mark Pawsey, not even given their view? We can only guess.

It is bad enough that MPs are likely to get such a massive pay rise when other workers, on much lower wages, will be lucky to get 1%. What to us is even worse, and makes the recommendation so predictable, is that IPSA, a supposedly independent body, in fact is very much part of the same ruling elite as MPs are. Its members are from similar backgrounds and earn even more from their day jobs than MPs' current salaries. The work they do for IPSA doesn't pay badly either - the chair gets £700 a day, the other members £400 a day. No wonder they think MPs should

get more!

When IPSA was set up in 2009, in answer to the MPs expenses scandal, there were qualifications for membership: at least one of the members must have held high judicial office; at least one must be eligible for appointment as a statutory auditor; one of the members must have previously been a member of the House of Commons; no other person who has been an MP within the previous five years is eligible.

The complete lack of any representation from working people in ordinary jobs was hardly likely to lead to a fair decision about MPs' pay, and a closer analysis of the background of the five present IPSA members bears this out. The Chair, Sir Ian Kennedy, is an academic lawyer who attended University College London. He was dean of the law school at King's College London 1986-96. He is presently emeritus professor of health law, ethics and policy at University College London and a member of numerous committees and inquiries, including the General Medical Council, and a former chair of the Healthcare Commission.

The former holder of high judicial office, Sir Neil Butterfield, has been a barrister since 1966 and a QC since 1985. He was presiding judge of the western circuit 1997-2000. Registered auditor, Anne Whitaker, is an audit partner of Ernst & Young, a multinational professional services firm - the third largest such firm in the world by aggregated revenue in 2012. In 2013, EY agreed to pay federal prosecutors \$123m to settle criminal tax avoidance charges stemming from \$2bn in unpaid taxes. It was ranked the ninth largest private company in the United States in 2010 by *Forbes* magazine.

Former MP, Professor Tony Wright, served as chair of two Commons select committees. He left parliament in 2010 and is now visiting professor in government and public policy at University College London and professorial fellow in politics at Birkbeck College. He was educated at Kettering Grammar, LSE, Harvard and Oxford.

Liz Padmore is a fellow at Green Templeton College, Oxford and attended Oxford University. She was previously a strategy partner at Accenture, the world's largest consulting firm as measured by revenues. In August 2013, the company reported revenues of \$28.6bn with approximately 275,000 employees, serving clients in more than 200 cities in 56 countries.

What this shows is that a small group of highly educated and very well-paid establishment people have been appointed to decide that MPs should get a pay rise which brings them nearer to their own inflated incomes. No surprise there then. The wealthy decide that the nearly wealthy who represent us should earn more. Wow! The fact that 13 million people in Britain live in poverty is irrelevant to them all.

I will have an answer if I am elected to parliament: I will live on the average worker's wage and donate anything above that to our movement.

Pete McLaren
Rugby Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition

Rotate

'Leadership' is not primarily a job title inside a revolutionary organisation. Every member should be capable of leadership: to be an example of militancy and honesty and capable of thoughtful action when a situation is chaotic. Every revolution is chaotic and can easily end up as a riot rather than a revolution.

There are many workers who are spontaneous leaders, but given the nature of bourgeois politics, they may still betray without wanting to. A revolutionary organisation should be teaching and preparing all its members to take leadership in the class struggle and

preparing for betrayals. Of course, it also means that a new leadership will begin to arise to replace the 'historic' leadership, who then, of course, feel threatened. Often these 'historic' leaders think they own their organisations, mirroring capitalist property relations.

We need to question permanent leaders, who in effect own their exalted positions. Their psychology may change over time, forcing their organisations into their framework. It is almost inevitable that these 'historic leaders' become separated from reality - eg, Gerry Healy - and become a menace. We should try to practice rotational leadership where possible.

Earl Gilman
email

Chemical legacy

Few countries in the Middle East have experienced the same level of chemical attacks as the Iraqi people. Starting in the 1920s, which saw the first ever gassing of the Kurds by the British, for nearly 100 years every generation has grown up under the shadow of chemical weapons.

Vivid descriptions have been given by Iraqi and Iranian veterans of their exposure to chemical weapons in the Iran/Iraq war and the various neurological impacts.

Medical experts in the Kurdish village of Halabja are still dealing with the breathing difficulties and disabilities which have arisen among survivors of that fateful day in the late 1980s when planes flew over the village and gassed an estimated 5,000 people.

It was in the first Gulf War of the 1990s, when the Iraqi people once again witnessed the first hand impact of chemicals, that the combination of burning oil fields, depleted uranium, along with a host of other toxins being spewed into the environment, led to it being classified as the most toxic war in modern history.

People involved with Iraq during the 1990s witnessed a dramatic increase in birth defects in the areas most heavily bombed by the UN-sanctioned 'Desert Storm', with rates of cancer soaring beyond pre-war levels and Gulf War illness/syndrome still being the unexplained medical condition amongst western service personnel.

According to Iraqi government statistics, prior to the outbreak of the first Gulf War the rate of cancer cases in Iraq was 40 out of 100,000 people. By 1995, it had increased to 800 out of 100,000 people, and by 2005, it had doubled to at least 1,600 out of 100,000 people. Current estimates show the increasing trend continuing.

John Pilger recalled a 1999 visit to Iraq in which he spoke with paediatrician Dr Ginan Ghalib Hassen, who described the many children she was treating with neuroblastoma: "Before the war, we saw only one case of this unusual tumour in two years. Now we have many cases, mostly with no family history. I have studied what happened in Hiroshima. The sudden increase of such congenital malformations is the same."

After the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the subsequent US/UK occupation, chemical weapons were once again inflicted upon the Iraqi people, which included the use of white phosphorous against civilian populations in areas like Fallujah.

According to acclaimed journalist Dahr Jamil, the US and British military used more than 1,700 tons of depleted uranium in Iraq in the 2003 invasion - on top of the disputed figure of up to 900 tons in the 1991 Gulf War.

In context, the UK Atomic Energy Authority warned the British government in the 1990s that "if 50 tons of the residual dust (from depleted uranium) was left in the region, an estimated half a million excess cancer deaths would result by the year 2000".

The Iraqi section of Al-Qaeda, which

has since rebranded itself the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant for its involvement in the Syria uprising, were also the first branch of Al-Qaeda to start using chemical weapons.

Between October 2006 and June 2007, Iraq experienced 15 chlorine bomb attacks, according to the US defence department, the first documented case being in Ramadi where terrorists detonated a car packed with 12 120mm mortar shells and two 100 pound chlorine tanks.

Chlorine attacks also occurred in Fallujah, Balad and again in Ramadi, with a later attack against Forward Operating Base Warhorse in Diyala where a car bomber detonated two tanks of chlorine and 1,000 pounds of explosives, with the chlorine alone causing an adverse reaction to over 65 US service members.

In June 2013 the Iraqi army shut down three Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant bomb factories and seized chemicals which were designated for chemical attacks, less than one month before its use in neighbouring Syria. Situated close to the borders with Iraq's turbulent neighbour, among the ingredients found in the bomb factories were those for Sarin.

Hussein Al-alak
Manchester

Elves

Saturday December 14 saw local groups across the country staging protests as part of the People's Assembly national day of action against austerity.

In Middlesbrough, members of the Teesside People's Assembly asked shoppers 'Can you afford Christmas?' in a demonstration highlighting the impacts of the Tory-Lib Dem government's cuts programme on the living standards of ordinary people.

Santa, his elves and carol singers accompanied 'Cameron Claws' around Middlesbrough town centre with a bag of presents for hardworking people and another bag of presents for posh people. Hardworking people got treats such as the bedroom tax, energy bill increases, benefit cuts and redundancies, whilst posh people received tax breaks, bankers' bonuses, share options, and so on.

As one of our activists, Barbara Campbell, put it: "This was an elfish protest being done in a fun way, but it made a serious point about a selfish government whose unnecessary austerity cuts are attacking the living standards of hardworking people - the people David Cameron pretends to support."

We will be looking to organise more actions against austerity in 2014. To get involved, email us at TeessidePA@gmail.com, follow our blog at www.TeessidePA.tumblr.com or look us up on Facebook and Twitter.

Steve Cooke

Teesside People's Assembly against Austerity

Smooth

It has been brought to my attention that the current regroupment process of the British post-Trotskyist left seems to involve prospective talks and an exchange of ideas between individual activists from the IS Network and Beyond Europe, a self-defined "anti-authoritarian platform against capitalism" consisting of two Greek groups (Antiauthoritarian Movement and Drasi), Plan C from the UK, and Ums Ganze from Germany and Austria.

Just a few words about the German-Austrian component: Ums Ganze is an 'anti-national' federation of several local groups from the soft 'anti-German' milieu. For them, there is no such thing as human agency under capitalism: it is an impersonal system in which bankers who make a fortune are as much 'victims' as workers who now sleep on park benches in Athens. To misquote

Marx, their position might be summed up as "Men do not make their own history, only circumstances do". From this follows that any activism directed against capitalists and their agents is regressive because it is based on a "personalised critique of capitalism" that can only end in barbarism. Examples of such proto-barbaric acts would include strikes for higher wages.

Unlike the hardline end of the 'anti-German' spectrum, Ums Ganze are made up of activists who - despite their ideology - have participated in popular struggles such as Blockupy Frankfurt, if only as missionaries seeking to enlighten the protesting plebs about their structural anti-Semitism. One might say that Ums Ganze seeks to cleanse the radical left of its 'reductionist critique of capitalism' (read: class struggle) and 'anti-Semitism' (read: anti-imperialism) in a gentler fashion than, say, the shock troop 'AG No Tears for Krauts' that physically attacked and broke up an Iran-themed leftwing meeting in the city of Halle on November 30 (see <http://tinyurl.com/qd5e8wz> for a German language report).

The federation's moderate manners do not preclude friendly relations with some usual suspects. Earlier this month, its local group from the town of Tübingen, LevelUP, hosted a talk on Iran by the hardcore 'anti-German' war monger Stephan Grigat, a key activist of the misnamed 'Stop the Bomb' campaign on whom I wrote at length last year ('Anti-Germans: not part of the left', *Weekly Worker* October 4 2012). According to the LevelUP advertising, Grigat had been invited to answer burning questions such as "Is Iran's new president Rohani a bearer of hope or just the friendly face of terror?" and "How should Israel and the west react to the new situation?" (<http://www.tueinfo.org/cms/node/21561>). During his presentation, he openly admitted his support for neo-conservative positions - a confession that came as a shock to no-one, seeing as he normally prefers to give his talks to right-populist circles these days.

I have been observing the regroupment process in Left Unity, the IS Network *et al*, with scepticism. Nonetheless, I trust and hope that the comrades' 'broad' political eclecticism and 'inclusiveness' will not extend to post-left advocates of Zionism, anti-Muslimism and the War on Terror.

Maciej Zurowski
London

Grumpy

Mark Perryman does seem rather upset with us, doesn't he? (Letters December 12). He seems to be upset because we quoted him in order "to make a point". He doesn't complain that we quote him inaccurately or out of context. He has no point to make about our "point". Apparently, just by referencing him at all - or "[dragging] my name into it", as he dubs it - we have made "this kinda personal".

The bulk of his contribution consists of informing readers that we are a small organisation - something they already know, comrade. We tell them. We have made no quantitative numerical breakthrough in 30-odd years of existence, but that really doesn't explain much when you set it all in context. Our trend emerged in the early 1980s in a party - the CPGB - that was in an advanced state of organisational and political decay, part of the *general* decline and disintegration of 'official' communism that saw behemoths such as the Italian, French and Spanish communist parties either reduced to shadows of their former selves or wink out of existence altogether. The Stalinist regimes in the USSR and eastern Europe imploded in the early 1990s, further discrediting the very notion of social transformation. The Trotskyist left has hardly made hay over that period.

So, if everyone's boat had lifted in the last 30 years while we had

remained firmly glued to the mud flat, perhaps this angle of attack might have had some purchase. But it just ain't so - is it, comrade Perryman?

Numbers aside, we actually believe we have some reasons for optimism and confidence when we survey the three decades of our existence. I could cite the disproportionately high level of influence our paper and publications have, the relatively impressive regular weekly readership and the way our perspectives on the crisis of the left and its potential remedies have been borne out. (Unfortunately in the negative, so far.)

I could, but why bother? Mark Perryman's petulant, apolitical little piece actually reveals a man scalded by the fact that we continue to exist at all.

For, as he himself references, he did indeed rub "unfraternal shoulders" with me and other comrades organised around *The Leninist* journal in the factional battles of the CPGB during the 1980s. My particular battleground was the Young Communist League, in which Perryman was a relatively prominent Eurocommunist. Younger comrades may not be familiar with this wretched trend, but in short the Euros were the most degenerate of a host of opportunist factions in the party, the faction that was over-ripe with the process of a full transition to bourgeois politics. Euro luminaries would even castigate the Labour Party and centrist CPGB trends as "sectarian" for drawing a line against alliances with non-Thatcherite Tories, Liberals, etc. In that spirit, militant youth were ruthlessly excluded from Euro-controlled unemployed marches for having the temerity to chant anti-Tory slogans; and anti-poll tax protesters were deemed the 'unacceptable face' of the left.

The logic of this meant that bourgeois politicians and establishment figures were seditiously courted and given generous access to the party publications the Euros controlled. At the same time, these same party organs were firmly closed to CPGB members on the left. Perryman and his chums shamelessly trampled over even the constricted norms of inner-party democracy to expel opponents and gerrymander congresses. They made Stalinists look like immaculate democrats.

By the way, the comrade foolishly draws attention to the fact that I use a cadre name by putting a pair of scare quotes around 'Mark Fischer'. Of course, part of the reason why many of our comrades used them was precisely to protect their party membership against the likes of Perryman and the foam-flecked packs of Euro-witch hunters he ran with back in the day.

I was expelled from the YCL - I was a member of the leadership at the time - after a shameful 1984 incident in Hackney. In order to exclude 15 young communists (a number of whom were black) from their branch AGM, the Euro minority in the meeting actually called the notoriously racist Hackney and Stoke Newington police.

On the night I vigorously defended the rights of these comrades to participate in a meeting of their organisation - despite being ordered by general secretary Doug Chalmers (thereafter dubbed 'Chalmers of the Yard') to remain silent and acquiesce. For this 'crime', I was expelled. Perryman was a member of the leadership body that expelled me - I assume he voted with the Euro majority.

Of course, the difference between us and the other oppositionists of the time was that we were, and remain, committed to open polemic in the workers' movement. The sordid antics of the Euros were splashed across the pages of *The Leninist* (still available on our site, by the way).

Mark Fischer
London

ACTION

CPGB podcasts

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

London Communist Forum

Sunday January 5, 5pm: Weekly political report from CPGB Provisional Central Committee, followed by open discussion and *Capital* reading group. Calthorpe Arms, 252 Grays Inn Road, London This meeting: Vol 1, chapter 25 'The general law of capitalist accumulation', section 2: 'The relative diminution of the variable part of capital'. Organised by CPGB: www.cpgb.org.uk.

Socialist Theory Study Group

Thursday December 19, 6pm: Marx and Engels on Understanding 1848 - Address of the central committee to the Communist League, 1850. Social centre, Next to Nowhere, Bold Street, Liverpool 1. Organised by Socialist Theory Study Group: teachingandlearning4socialism@gmail.com.

No more deaths in police custody

Friday December 20, 5pm: Vigil and protest, High Wycombe police station, Queen Victoria Road, High Wycombe. In memory of Habib 'Paps' Ullah.

Organised by Justice 4 Paps: <http://justice4paps.wordpress.com>.

Benefits jumble sale

Saturday January 4, 11am start: Fundraiser, The Cowley Club, 12 London Road, Brighton BN1 4JA.

Event page: www.facebook.com/events/662641063787467.

Organised by Brighton Benefits Campaign: www.brightonbenefitscampaign.wordpress.com.

Campaigning against Nato

Wednesday January 8, 6.30pm: Anti-war organising, National Stop the War Coalition Office, 86 Durham Road, London, N7.

Contact email: northlondonstwc@hotmail.co.uk.

Organised by Stop the War Coalition: www.stopwar.org.uk.

Fight arms with music

Saturday January 11, 2pm - 5pm: Musical protest at the arms fair's venue during the wedding and boat show, ExCel Centre: from Custom House DLR Station or Victoria Dock Road E16 3BY, follow the signs to ExCeL. We will be at the end of the walkway just before you get to the entrance to the exhibition centre.

www.caat.org.uk/events/.

WWI imperialist slaughter

Saturday January 11, 1.30pm: Public meeting, Colliton Club (opposite County Hall), Colliton Park, DT1 1XJ.

Organised by Dorset Socialists: www.dorsetsocialists.org.uk.

Energy and the future

Monday January 13, 6.30 pm - 9pm: Public meeting, Packhorse pub function room, Woodhouse Lane, Leeds, LS2.

Organised by North-West People's Assembly: www.facebook.com/groups/672371379444660.

Wigan bedroom tax

Wednesday January 15, 7.30pm: Organising meeting, Sunshine House Community Centre, Bradshawgate, Vauxhall Road, Scholes, WN1 3SN.

'To end all wars'

Friday January 17, 7pm: Discussion of World Wars I with author with Adam Hochschild. Friends House, 173-177 Euston Road, London NW1 (opposite Euston station).

Organised by Stop the War Coalition: www.stopwar.org.uk.

Remember Gaza

Saturday January 18, 12 noon: Protest vigil, five years after the massacre. Opposite Israeli embassy, Kensington High Street, London W8. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: www.palestinecampaign.org.

Remember Israel's massacre

Saturday January 18, 12 noon - 2pm: Protest vigil, Israeli Embassy, 29 Kensington High Street, London.

5 years on from the end of Israel's 2008-9 massacre in Gaza.

Event page: www.palestinecampaign.org/events/protest-5-years-from-the-end-of-israels-20089-massacre-in-gaza.

March on Senate House

Wednesday January 22, 2pm: Student demo, ULU, Malet Street, London, WC1E. 'Cops off Campus' protest.

Event page: www.facebook.com/events/1497678537124111/.

Organised by Occupy Senate House: www.facebook.com/occupySH.

Scottish People's Assembly launch

Saturday January 25, 8am - 5pm: Public meeting, St Stephen's Church, 260 Bath Street, Glasgow, G2.

Facebook event: www.facebook.com/groups/752289384786607.

Organised by The People's Assembly: www.thepeoplesassembly.org.uk.

Hands of the People of Iran conference

Saturday January 25, 10am - 5pm: Anti-imperialist conference, University of London Union, Malet Street, London WC1.

Event page: www.hopoi.org/?p=2666.

Organised by Hands Off the People of Iran

CPGB wills

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

MIDDLE EAST

A region in flux

Yassamine Mather of Hands off the People of Iran examines the failure of political Islam and imperialism's attempts to adjust its alliances



John Kerry: behind scenes maneuvering

Respective of what happens in 2014, the year 2013 will be remembered as a year of historic changes in Iran-US relations. For the first time in 34 years, a US president has spoken to his Iranian equivalent, and the two countries' foreign ministers have held face-to-face negotiations as well as a number of phone conversations. Contrary to what the supporters of the reformist movement in Iran claim, the dramatic changes in Iran-US relations are not simply a consequence of the June 2013 elections and the coming to office of a 'moderate' president in Iran. We now know that secret meetings between US and Iranian officials took place in Oman last year, during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency. According to a senior US official quoted by Associated Press, US foreign secretary John Kerry visited Oman in May 2013, "ostensibly to push a military deal with the sultanate but secretly focused on maintaining that country's key mediation role".

Above all, the initially secret and latterly open meetings that have led to the current negotiations mark a radical change in US policy towards the region. For most of the last three and a half decades, in fact since the coming to power of the Islamic Republic in Iran, US foreign policy

in the Middle East has been to keep its two main allies, Saudi Arabia and Israel, at loggerheads with the Islamic Republic. This post-1979 policy has had one strategic focus: preventing a repetition of Iran's Islamic revolution in another Muslim country. Ironically it was the Arab spring, the rise and subsequent *failure* of political Islam in the Arab world, that alleviated this fear, and the US is now prepared to move towards rapprochement with Iran. In this article I will look at some of the factors that paved the way for these changes, and the possible consequences that might follow.

1. Shia supreme religious leaders in Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei, had promised their people and the world that future revolutions in the region will be Islamic in character and will seek to imitate Iran's 1979 revolution. Indeed, at first glance events in Egypt and Tunisia in 2012-13 seemed to confirm this prediction. Yet even as the Muslim Brotherhood was gaining support in Egypt, and later as it came to power, it became quite apparent that the Shia-Sunni divide meant they were unlikely to be allies of Iran's Islamic Republic. In fact, Tehran's antagonistic attitude towards the pro-Saudi MB government in Cairo was as pronounced as it had been

towards Egypt under Mubarak. US strategists had to accept that even if political Islam came to power in another Middle Eastern country, it was their allies in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf who would control the purse strings and dictate how events unfolded - not Iran. Even if an Islamic revolution succeeded in the Arab world, the Iranian model would not be repeated.

2. The failure of the Muslim Brotherhood to maintain its support and retain power in Egypt, and the workers' strikes and mass demonstrations of summer 2013 proved beyond doubt that in the first quarter of the 21st century - unlike 1979 Iran - the life of Islamic governments will be short. Such regimes misunderstand the political and economic reasons behind the upheavals of 2011-13, underestimate the anger of the youth movement and fail to realise that empty promises of 'equality and social justice' - even buoyed with expensive propaganda paid for by Saudis - might work at election times but can easily become the source of disillusionment once the new government fails to deliver. In Egypt the army had forged a convenient alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood; however, when it became clear that dissatisfaction with

the Morsi government was fuelling the fires of another uprising, the military intervened in order to head off the revolutionary movement. For the US this was yet another awakening: fresh Islamic governments were unlikely to last as long as the Islamic Republic.

3. A decade ago, the US 'war on terror' led to the coming to power of a Shia government in Iraq, ironically making Iran a more powerful force in the region. Since then, Iran and the US have, despite themselves, been forced to work together to prop up the occupation-friendly Shia government in Baghdad. This situation has given Iran unprecedented political influence. For all the hysteria in the US about Iran's clerical regime, the military success in overthrowing Saddam has aided the creation of a 'Shia belt' from the eastern borders of Iran to the Mediterranean, via Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Initially the Arab spring found genuine supporters in Syria (Iran's second main ally in the Arab world) and the protests by students, youth and Kurds against Assad's dictatorship gained momentum. These protests were a genuine expression of the hopes of the Syrian people. But Saudi Arabia and its allies also saw an opportunity to intervene. The aim was to bring about a speedy overthrow of the Alavi regime of Assad and thereby weaken Iran's regional role - and it was a big surprise that Iran actually got involved in the conflict to prop up Assad.

However, the events of last summer, and the brutality of Islamic jihadists in both Syria and Iraq (where they engaged in the systematic use of car bombs in Shia civilian areas), whose methods and ideology began spreading to Libya and elsewhere, became a source of concern for US strategists. Saudi rulers who were financing these 'holy warriors' were incapable of controlling them. For the US this was a turning point in its policy towards Syria, and may have been as significant, if not more so, than the US administration's failure to get international or congressional support for limited military intervention. In addition, as far as the survival of the Iraqi regime was concerned, Iran and the US had more in common than they

had previously envisaged.

4. Last but not least, the US is well aware that sanctions have destroyed Iran's economy. The punitive measures imposed by the US and its allies might have failed to stop the nuclear programme, or make much of a dent in the private wealth of senior clerics, but they were effective enough to ensure Iran was no longer in a position to become a real threat to US strategy in the region.

Though far less significant than the above factors, the election of a 'moderate' president and the supreme leader's 'heroic' retreat on Iran's nuclear programme, also helped increase the chances of further negotiations. Perhaps sometime in the summer of 2013, but probably much earlier, the US came to the conclusion that a change in Middle East policy was necessary; a twin track approach - relying on Iran in addition to Saudi Arabia, while remaining the main ally of Israel - presented a better guarantee for the sort of stability imperialism seeks. As we know from reactions in both Riyadh and Tel Aviv, this new policy has its opponents amongst Zionists and Saudi royals - and, of course, among their lobbyists in Washington.

Although a lessening of sanctions must be welcomed, the omens are not good for the Iranian working class. There may be a few more jobs, and the currency might pick up, but internal repression remains as severe as it was. French, German and UK companies are eagerly waiting to return, now that Baroness Ashton has announced EU sanctions will soon be lifted. They have only one goal in mind: using cheap, but skilled, labour in car plants, petrochemical plants and manufacturing ... for higher profits.

As the British Chambers of Commerce start salivating at the prospect of new investments and new markets, we must organise our solidarity with the Iranian working class. The upcoming day school hosted by Hands Off the People of Iran (see box) will help us understand the complex issues involved.

Yassamine Mather

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HOPI school

Saturday January 25, ULU, Malet Street, WC1

The uneasy agreement between the 5+1 powers and Iran over the country's nuclear programme has provoked controversy and an almost hysterical response from Israel. However, there are some clear facts:

- Sanctions have destroyed Iran's economy, creating intense hardship for the majority of Iranians. Sanctions have done little or nothing to dent their declared targets. The private wealth of senior clerics remains intact.
- The aim of the west was to impoverish ordinary people in order to facilitate regime change from above.

Therefore, the nuclear deal has been a partial but important success for imperialism. It poses new tasks

for the anti-war and solidarity movement. The situation in the Middle East is still full of dangers. That is why Hands Off the People of Iran is organising a day school to discuss and debate the issues.

Draft agenda

Mike Macnair: *Imperialism, nuclear negotiations and US-Iran relations*

Moshé Machover: *Israel and the need for war*

Anahita Hosseini: *Repression - Iran's political prisoners*

Yassamine Mather: *Sanctions, job losses and workers' struggles*

Torab Saleth: *Workers' struggles before and after 1979*

Rahe Kargar speaker: *Iran's national minorities*

<http://hopoi.org>

ECONOMY



Railway infrastructure could still be derailed

Only our class can force change

After exploring the possibilities of capitalism ending the depression, Hillel Ticktin stresses the necessity of working class organisation

In my previous article, I reached the point of asking whether it is possible for the ruling class to introduce a reform of the system in order to take capitalism out of the present depression; and, if it is possible, what that would entail.¹ There are two parts to the question.

Firstly, can there be a temporary solution? In other words, is it possible for there to be sufficient expenditure, increased investment or a limitation of profits for an exceptional period? Could there be a repeat of what was done in the United States in 1933 under president Franklin D Roosevelt, who ameliorated the depression for a time, even though in fact he did not end it? So can there be considerably lower levels of unemployment and a growing standard of living?

Secondly, can capitalism return to what existed after 1945? Can there be a more permanent form of compromise?

Let us first of all note that the period after 1945 remained a period of warfare in the form of the cold war, including actual conflict, such as the Korean war of 1950-53. US expenditure on armaments was considerable, meaning that the world was really still in a stage of *economic warfare* at least.

One of the effects of the cold war was that there was an absorption of surplus product, or surplus value, into the arms sector, which in the US was, of course, enormous - though as a percentage of GDP it went down over time. But it was also true of other developed countries that they maintained an arms sector, though it was nowhere near as important as that of the US, the crucial world economic power.

The cold war performed an ideological role as well, using anti-communism as a means of control. Not only in terms of ideas - many people in the US had actually experienced Stalinism in Europe and rejected it - but also in terms of its use by the state as a means of smashing the resistance of the working class. It was successful in achieving that - not only in the US, but in Britain too.

There are a number of other

aspects of the cold war which are also important, but we can leave those aside here. Crucially though, it is not just the cold war that has ended, but the ideological control that came with it. One can argue that the failure of the Soviet Union can still be used as a stick to beat socialists, but over time the USSR will no longer be regarded as a *socialist* failure: simply as a failure. People will recognise that Stalinism could not survive and that the USSR was not socialist. In an inchoate way that already exists. There is no longer a Soviet Union standing before us: it must be conjured up in the imagination.

Historically - not just in the last hundred years, but over centuries - it has been the role of the state to take control of warfare and consequently it has been accepted that the state must also prepare for a war economy. It is true that today there is outsourcing of military preparations to a degree, but nonetheless it has to be paid for, even if some of it is performed by private enterprise.

Planning?

So is there something else that can take the place of what amounted to a nationalised sector, something which is not military production? If not it is difficult to see how it would be possible to run a modern economy with full employment if profit is the only goal. Would the capitalist class be prepared to see the economy of the world effectively planned by the population, in the interests of the population? Alternatively, would the population be prepared to see the economy planned by the capitalists? I am talking about a deliberate decision to develop the infrastructure to the degree that is needed.

In a number of capitalist countries - the US, Britain, Germany - the infrastructure has been allowed to run down. To put it back up would require large-scale investment, and that would lead to a very significant boost in demand and employment. It is perfectly possible to do that, but it would have to be planned, and it could not simply be organised on the basis of a competitive economy - the inputs required are too

large and there are only a limited number of firms that could actually play a part. While extensive nationalisation would not be necessary for that to take place, it *would* be necessary to place certain sectors under state control, with firms carefully chosen for particular work.

In Britain we have seen a considerable degree of discontent over the way the private energy companies are able to increase the price of electricity, and it is fairly clear that those companies are dealing with the whole issue in a highly inefficient way. How far any economy could allow that to go on is open to question.

What I am posing then is this. Would it be possible for a capitalist economy to be planned in order to increase investment and employment? Could that happen without extensive control over the economy itself? Would it not call into question the profit motive?

In the period after 1945, it was possible to adopt the policies I have previously described - to implement a massive house-building programme, for example. That was in a period when the so-called 'mixed economy' was accepted and there were large-scale nationalisations - in the case of Britain, coal, electricity, gas, transport, etc. Would the bourgeoisie be prepared to go back to that era?

To pose that question is to say that they are not prepared to do it right now - and the point I am making is that it is highly unlikely the capitalist class will accept such a change. Can you imagine a figure like Warren Buffett doing so? Therefore, a return to the period that ended around 1970, even on a very superficial level, does not look very probable. But what about a temporary solution, where *aspects* of such a policy are introduced?

The Conservative government is quite keen on the HS2 high-speed rail scheme, not only running from London to Birmingham but on to Leeds and Manchester. But it is interesting that the government is not proposing to begin it quickly. The idea is to start the project in 2017 and only complete it in 2032. So its impact on the economy will be minimal - and it is, of course, not even

clear whether it will happen at all. None of this is an accident.

Can one imagine a situation where the capitalist class is forced to introduce new industrial firms? Officially the British government is for increased production and, of course, in general terms various other countries are also committed to 'bring back industry'. But they are not doing much about it. While it is quite likely that there will be *some* industrialisation - it is easier for that to happen here than in China, where costs have gone up and there are more controls - that is as far as things are going. Can one imagine a policy which is not *de facto* austerity, where the state ensures that everyone has their own house or flat? Well, obviously not. They are still talking of the private sector doing it.

Can we imagine a Labour government elected that is no longer in favour of austerity and is prepared to nationalise the electricity companies? Labour has already rejected the idea, so what will actually change in respect of those companies? Not very much: they still have to make profits. It may be that their profits are excessive - not just from the point of view of a socialist, but from a consideration of costs, dividends, etc. It would not be hard to create a balance sheet where costs were much lower. However, given the nature of a capitalist economy, that is not going to happen. So it is not very likely that much will change in that regard.

Revival

In that case, can we only see ahead of us a long economic desert? That is the implication. The future is behind us, while in front of us there is a depression. That is what it looks like - unless, of course, a strong working class movement developed, forcing changes in the economy. At first the ruling class might make concessions, but, once the process began and the working class started to win victories, it would go on winning victories and the ruling class would certainly make a stand to try and stop it.

The likelihood is that over time the working class *will* begin to act - that is

the only way forward, in fact. When one says that, one should be very clear that 'the worse is not the better'. That was the viewpoint of Mikhail Bakunin and various anarchists, but it is simply not true. The French revolution took place during an economic upturn, not a downturn. Today it is also more likely for the working class to be prepared to act in an upturn - even one where the depression itself has not yet ended, but where workers begin to feel a degree of confidence, where they are certain that they can act. It is at that point that we will see the building of a working class movement, and it is at that point that the ruling class will realise it will have to concede. But, once it does so, the confidence of the working class will grow and that will feed on itself. No doubt there will be defeats as well as victories, but it is the only way that things can go.

I am not saying that this will happen tomorrow, and it is not possible to forecast the future - what I have described may turn out to be completely misplaced. Resulting from a miracle perhaps (and it would have to be a miracle), the ruling class might suddenly believe that it has to make concessions - and those concessions might, under working class pressure, lead to further concessions.

However, we must try to bring the day forward when the working class *is* prepared to act. The fact that we are in a depression does not mean that capitalism is going to come to an end. Things will not necessarily get worse and worse either. But the fact is, the ruling class does not know its way out of the depression - it *has* no way out that does not lead to a loss of control, and it is not prepared to risk such a situation. On the contrary, the working class has to form itself into a movement, it has to form itself into a party, in order to bring about change ●

This is an edited version of a podcast available on the Critique website: www.critiquejournal.net/audio/current-stage-crisis-2013/3_Is-a-recovery-possible.mp3.

1. 'His side is winning the class struggle' *Weekly Worker* December 5.

OUR HISTORY

Bordiga and the fate of Bordigism

Though he is largely remembered in the context of Lenin's polemic against 'left-wing' communism, Amadeo Bordiga remains a towering figure of the 20th century workers' movement. David Broder explores his ideas and political record

Few on the left are keen to associate themselves with the thought of Amadeo Bordiga, founder of the Communist Party of Italy (PCd'I). While during his 1921-23 period at the helm of the party he was closely aligned with its other historical giants - most notably, Antonio Gramsci (who headed the PCd'I from 1923-27) and Palmiro Togliatti (1938-64) - ultimately the party would viciously repudiate Bordiga, used as the polemical foil for the cult of a caricatured Gramsci. Not even many of the tiny, fractious circles in the dissident tradition of the Italian Communist Left would call themselves 'Bordigists'.

Nonetheless, we can learn a lot from Bordiga: in terms of the *way* in which he clashed with other prominent Marxists like Lenin and Gramsci. By this I do not mean that we ought to imitate Bordiga's positions, or that he deserves the forlorn stamp of 'relevance'. Nor just that it is healthy for the left to study the history of different currents of thinking (which it is), especially significant ones whose work is little read (like Bordiga's). Rather, that trying to understand these clashes from his perspective will allow us better to understand both the common assumptions of post-World War I communists (also including the specific ways in which they are all 'irrelevant') and, indeed, helps free these other figures from those who embalmed their legacies.

The most important questions I will address here include Bordiga's conception of the party and democracy; anti-fascism; and the role of the International.

World War I

Amadeo Bordiga's first political activity was in the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), which he joined in 1912. On the extreme left of the PSI, Bordiga's Karl Marx Circle was part of a tendency whose most prominent exponent was Benito Mussolini, deploring the party's adaptation to bourgeois politics - from its heavy focus on parliamentary activity, to the Freemasonry, patronage and careerism that pervaded its upper ranks.

1912 was also the year that the Basle Congress of the Second International voted to oppose an inter-imperialist war by all means, including an international general strike. In 1914, however, the International collapsed as each of its member parties ignored this decision and instead supported their own governments in World War I - invariably invoking 'national specificities' or the reactionary threat of their own state's opponents.

The exceptions were the Russian and Serb socialists, plus anti-war minorities in other countries. Since Italy was initially not a participant, the PSI divided into interventionists, led by Mussolini (who in never-specific terms argued that war would bring some sort of revolution), and the anti-war majority. Mussolini was expelled, and Bordiga was among his harshest critics. Indeed, after Italy joined the British-French-Russian side in 1915, the socialists took an ambiguous stance of 'neither supporting nor sabotaging' the Italian war effort, whereas Bordiga argued that "We are not neutral. We are for the neutrality of our own state, so as to facilitate the international class war against all the states".

This perspective, only narrowly defeated at the 1917 PSI congress, was somewhat similar to Lenin's revolutionary defeatist 'turn the imperialist war into civil war' approach, though Bordiga did not believe the revolution in Italy would happen at the

end of the conflict.

Russia and *Il Soviet*

The revolution led by Lenin did, of course, have a profound impact on Marxists in Italy as elsewhere. At the end of the war in 1918, Bordiga launched a new paper in Naples called *Il Soviet*. The group based around this publication was central to the creation of the Communist Fraction of the PSI.

Bordiga wanted to split from the reformists and create a Communist Party, and as we shall see, it is very clear from reading *Il Soviet* that it was the partyist aspect of the Soviet experience rather than the Russian workers' *soviety* (councils) themselves, that inspired the paper's thinking. Moreover, in postwar Italy this was no abstract question, as the 1919-20 *biennio rosso* saw a wave of strikes and factory occupations in industrial centres across the country. Antonio Gramsci's Turin *L'Ordine Nuovo* group saw the factory committees at the head of this struggle as the embryos of Italian soviets:

The factory council is the model of the proletarian state. All the problems inherent to the organisation of the proletarian state are inherent to the organisation of the council ... The existence of the council gives the workers direct responsibility for production, leads them to improve their work, establishes a conscious, voluntary discipline and creates the psychology of producers, creators of history.¹

Il Soviet begged to differ, in many ways reflecting the record of leading Bolsheviks. Though after April 1917 Lenin won his comrades to the slogan 'All power to the soviets', the party dropped this call in July and looked for a power base other than the Menshevik-dominated councils - only to return to it on the eve of the insurrection. As it happened, soviet democracy was soon gutted out as central planning agencies like Sovnarkom assumed control. Bordiga saw the soviets in a similarly instrumental light:

Soviets are not in themselves organs of revolutionary struggle. They become revolutionary when the Communist Party wins a majority within them.²

To maintain, after the fashion of the Turin *L'Ordine Nuovo* comrades, that even before the collapse of the bourgeoisie the workers' councils are organs, not only of political struggle, but of technico-economic training in the communist system, can only be seen as a return to socialist gradualism. This latter, whether it is called reformism or syndicalism, is defined by the mistaken belief that the proletariat can achieve emancipation by making advances in economic relations while capitalism still holds political power through the state.³

Indeed, if for Marx the communists "have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole", for Bordiga this meant that the working class's interests lay exclusively within the party. He did not uphold council-communist or libertarian critiques of Leninism and the factory discipline in the Soviet Union, and saw no particular value in workers' control of production, cooperatives and such like. The party embodied the workers' historical mission, and would one day

take power: in the short term, without this party, they would remain formless and undefined:

The party actually is the nucleus without which there would be no reason to consider the whole remaining mass [of workers] as a mobilisation of forces. The class presupposes the party, because to exist and to act in history it must possess a critical doctrine of history and an aim to attain in it.⁴

Communist Party

This view of the absolutely central role of the party was part and parcel of Bordiga's vehement rejection of democracy. While in some pieces Bordiga hedged this question by describing the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat' as a "proletarian democracy" - counterposing this to 'bourgeois democracy' - elsewhere he made clear that he was opposed to democracy *en bloc*. Democracy embodied market principles, the exchange between individual units beholden to a power outside of them. In this sense, fascism and Stalinism were only the most extreme form of democracy - rather than opposed to it - since they meant the active participation of the masses in a system over which they had no control.

Within this perspective, the working class was a formless and easily manipulated mass of individuals, which could only achieve consciousness of itself through a party which frontally clashed with democratic institutions. This included advocating abstention from electoral politics. Indeed, Bordiga's anti-parliamentarism is well-known thanks to the critique of it in Lenin's *'Leftwing' communism: an infantile disorder*, and he has entered history as an incorrigible ultra-left. However, there is a danger of anachronism, here.

Firstly, both of Lenin's references to Bordiga are counterbalanced by favourable comments. This was the period of the Communist International (founded in 1919) seeking to establish sections in each country by splitting the old socialist parties and breaking with reformist opponents of the Russian Revolution. The PSI was characterised by a halfway house majority, led by Giacomo Serrati, who wished to join the Comintern but without adopting the name 'communist' or expelling the reformists. Lenin commented:

Comrade Bordiga and his faction of abstentionist communists are certainly wrong in advocating non-participation in parliament. But on one point, it seems to me, comrade Bordiga is right ... in attacking [the reformist] Turati and his partisans, who remain in a party which has recognised soviet power and the dictatorship of the proletariat, and yet continue their former pernicious and opportunist policy as members of parliament. Of course, in tolerating this, comrade Serrati and the entire Italian Socialist Party are making a mistake which threatens to do as much harm and give rise to the same dangers as it did in Hungary, where the Hungarian Turatis sabotaged both the party and the soviet government from within. Such a mistaken, inconsistent, or spineless attitude towards the opportunist parliamentarians gives rise to 'leftwing' communism, on the one hand, and to a certain extent

justifies its existence, on the other.⁵

Secondly, the leaders of the Communist Fraction in Italy - Bordiga, Gramsci, Togliatti, Longo and others - thought the break with the reformists had taken too long, and indeed paralysed them during the struggles of the *biennio rosso*. Bordiga made clear that the differences among the communists over electoral abstentionism would not divide them organisationally, and it was on this basis that the PCd'I was founded in January 1921.

Indeed, even when Bordiga was undisputed leader of the PCd'I, he was not its dictator. He staunchly believed in abiding by Comintern's discipline, which he viewed as obligatory for all national sections (unlike the example of the Second International in 1914), and as such implemented its decision to participate in electoral campaigning.

United front

The Communist Party in Italy was, however, increasingly at loggerheads with the International. Comintern had been formed at the start of 1919 in the hope of spreading the revolution from its Russian centre, and in its first two years it followed the so-called 'theory of the offensive' - advocated by its president Grigory Zinoviev. Yet by the time of the 1921 March Action in Germany (an abortive and isolated uprising) and the near-simultaneous Kronstadt rebellion in Russia, it was becoming clear that the revolution risked collapsing altogether.

This was the context for introducing the 'united front'. This was a policy that sought to bring about the unity of working-class-based parties from communists to social-democrats (including in the so-called 'workers' government'), a line which came to maturation in 1921-22 during the Comintern's Third and Fourth Congresses. Indeed, though in 1919 Bordiga had been very much in tune with the Comintern mainstream, the PCd'I was born during the last gasp of the 'theory of the offensive'. The result was that the Comintern tried to force the unwilling PCd'I leaders to merge with the socialists from whom they had just broken.

In contrast, Bordiga asserted his fidelity to the Comintern's existing positions. Indeed, he imputed his own views to Zinoviev.⁶ Obeying the new Comintern line in letter if not in spirit, the PCd'I (like the Fischer-Maslow group in Germany's KPD) used the 'workers' government' slogan only as a synonym for a revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat, thus ignoring the united front policy underlying it.

To be clear: Bordiga was not in principle opposed to *all* united fronts. Since he was not against trade unionism (like today's Italian Communist Left), he advocated defensive common fronts on economic questions. In his view, these would not compromise the all-important independent political identity of the Communist Party, which had to stand in sharp counterposition to the world of democracy. He described "the defensive platform of our party: the proletariat's trade union united front, and incessant political opposition toward bourgeois power and all legal parties".⁷

This clearly entailed a rather mechanical division between political and economic activity: in fact most trade unions in this period, and indeed anti-fascist defence guards, were the work of militants of one or another party. And indeed when push came

to shove, Bordiga took a hostile view towards initiatives for workers' self-defence which were not under the PCd'I's control.

Anti-fascism

Bordiga opposed the 'democratic centralism' characteristic of the early Communist Parties in the name of his own 'organic centralism'. This placed priority on a party of well-trained cadres loyal to a fixed programme, as against mass numbers or indeed the twists and turns of democratic decision-making. As Jacques Camatte's work strongly emphasises,⁸ this fitted with Bordiga's strong focus on preserving an already-established correct theory, rather than accepting innovation or adapting theory to contingent situations.

Nonetheless, while this was in later years a model for many a small Left Communist sect, it was a pious wish rather than the real culture in the Bordiga-era PCd'I, which was in fact a turbulent mass of branches inherited from the PSI and older anarchist circles and strongly characterised by local traditions and loyalties. This lack of top-down control was fortunate in many ways, not least as the leadership (and indeed that of the PSI) were opposed to their members' participation in the most important working-class anti-fascist movement: the Arditi del Popolo (AdP). This was an armed movement uniting anarchists, communists and socialists, which fought heroic pitched battles to defend working-class areas and meeting spaces from fascists, with no official party apparatus to help.

Bordiga is often, for this reason, characterised as passive in the face of fascism, insisting that it was nothing new. Indeed, he - along with all the other PCd'I leaders - thought it likely that the Italian bourgeoisie would attempt a social-democratic solution to the crisis of the postwar liberal state, perhaps but not necessarily including the fascists. Indeed, none of the Comintern leaders grasped the mass character or strength-in-depth of fascism before Mussolini was in office, tending to portray it as a reactionary-capitalist combination similar to the Russian Whites or Black Hundreds. Bordiga favoured self-defence against the fascists, but exclusively under the Communist Party's own control. Gramsci was less hostile toward the AdP, but his criticisms of the party's stance were hesitating and voiced in only general terms.

Rejecting any such sophistry, many PCd'I branches took their own initiative, and indeed most AdP militias in any case included communist militants. While this was not enough to stop fascism - and it is far from clear what the working class, defeated in 1919-20, could have done - undoubtedly these militants should have been listened to by the party leadership and their efforts championed rather than simply tolerated.

Indeed, the December 1922 Fourth Congress of Comintern, held just weeks after the fascists' so-called March on Rome⁹ and Mussolini's appointment as prime minister, saw harsh reproaches for the Italians' failure to engage in the AdP. This was also the beginning - if only a beginning - of Gramsci diverging from Bordiga. While both rejected Comintern pressure to remerge with the reformists, Gramsci sought to shift the discussion onto the terrain of what conditions would hypothetically make this acceptable, rather than merely asserting their flat

refusal. This approach was intended to prevent Comintern simply imposing a new leadership from above, one well to the right of the existing one, and thus to preserve its commitment to an imminent, proletarian revolution.

Upon returning from Moscow, Bordiga was arrested by the new fascist regime - never to reclaim his leadership.

Leadership

In his first year of government, Mussolini sought to portray himself as a safe pair of hands. Someone who would keep a check on both the working class and his own blackshirt hoodlums. The king and liberal establishment had raised him to power hoping to tame his movement, which only had 35 MPs and was constrained by a broad coalition. The opposition parties were still legal, though subject to blackshirt attacks which severely constrained the workers' movement.

This all changed after the April 1924 elections. Amidst heavy intimidation and ballot rigging a fascist-backed 'National Bloc' won two thirds of the seats. Giacomo Matteotti, leader of the reformist socialists, spoke out against the fraud, and was murdered by blackshirts. This was disastrous for Mussolini, not only sparking revulsion among the working class but also encouraging elite fears that the fascist leader could not control his plebeian base.

The government was in crisis. The main dailies took a much more critical stance toward Mussolini, the blackshirts were called off the streets, and the opposition parties abandoned parliament in protest: the so-called 'Aventine Secession'.¹⁰

The PCd'I, now headed by Antonio Gramsci, joined this opposition bloc, believing that even if it was the king who sacked Mussolini, this would spark a general crisis in which anything would become possible - including proletarian revolution. This was in effect (though not codified as such) an early version of the popular front idea of 'splitting' the ruling class in order later to defeat a much diminished enemy.

In reality this policy saw the PCd'I hemmed in by its bourgeois allies, who rejected both the communists' general strike call and the (terribly unconstitutional) suggestion that it declare itself the 'legitimate' parliament. While the Aventine Secession did nothing, waiting for the king's intervention, Mussolini's radical lieutenants pressured him to take decisive action - and he did. Imposing new restrictions on the press, the Duce of fascism declared his responsibility for the blackshirts' actions. The opposition MPs' mandates were cancelled and their parties banned.

Bordiga was strongly critical of the PCd'I's role in this episode:

They should have remained in parliament, launched a political attack on the government, and immediately taken up a position opposed to the moral and constitutional prejudices of the Aventine, which would determine the outcome of the crisis in fascism's favour ... The preparation of the masses, which leant towards supporting the Aventine rather than wishing for its collapse, was in any case made worse when the party proposed to the opposition parties that they set up their own anti-parliament. This tactic in any case conflicted with the decisions of the International, which never envisaged proposals being made to parties which were clearly bourgeois; worse still, it lay totally outside the domain of communist principles and tactics, and outside the Marxist conception of history.¹¹

The International

The PCd'I of 1921-26 never definitively broke with the idea of a

big-bang, proletarian and socialist revolution. However, after its crushing by fascism, the exiled party's life - and that of the postwar party - was characterised more than anything else by the search for a system of alliances with other social layers, tailored to Italian national conditions. This is a theme of Gramsci's 1930s *Prison Notebooks*, though in the history of Togliatti's post-World War II Italian Communist Party and the Gramsci-studies industry, the degree to which he was a democrat who broke with the idea of working-class revolution is vastly exaggerated (albeit facilitated by the fragmentary character of these texts, written in jail).

The 1926 congress had to be held in Lyons, France, on account of fascist repression. Here Gramsci and Togliatti's majority theses did make some steps towards engaging with the specific social conditions of Italy - its small and geographically concentrated working class, the underdevelopment of the south, and so on - while also advancing the idea of a republican assembly of workers and peasants. Bordiga's alternative theses opposed any political united front, but were heavily defeated - not without the help of a degree of ballot rigging, with branches unable to attend the exile congress counted as voting for the existing leadership.

While himself from the south, Bordiga was strongly averse to any focus on regional or national peculiarities, which were just part of the narrow corporatism he counterposed to the working class's universal historic mission. Indeed, Bordiga opposed the idea that the national communist parties made up the International, instead seeing them as sections of a single world party which structured them from above.

For this reason, amid the rise of Stalinism, Bordiga did not side with the Russian oppositions as much as counterpose the possible sectional interests of the Soviet state to the Comintern's revolutionary policy. In his intervention at the 1926 Enlarged Executive of Comintern, Bordiga argued that the International ought to be able to exert control over the Soviet Union, since it was just part of a world movement, and its state policy, viewed from a purely Russian foreign-policy perspective, threatened to overwhelm this movement:

The problem of Russian policy cannot be resolved within the narrow limits of the Russian movement alone, the direct collaboration of the whole CI is absolutely essential. Without such collaboration, not only revolutionary strategy in Russia, but also our policies in the capitalist states will be seriously threatened. A tendency may emerge to water down the character and role of the communist parties.¹²

Moreover, Bordiga protested against the 'Bolshevisation' advanced by Zinoviev, which supposedly made the parties of the International more like the Russian one - but that of 1926, not of 1917. The parties would follow Moscow's discipline and achieve organisational hardness through intolerance toward dissent. Indeed, despite Bolshevisation's pretensions to cadre development, Bordiga saw it as going hand-in-hand with the 'conquest of the masses' slogan advanced at the Third Congress, and the united front. It promised to secure unity through disciplinary means rather than political consistency:

If differences of opinion do exist, this will prove that the party is marred by errors; that the party does not have the capacity to radically combat the degenerative tendencies of the working class movement, which normally manifest themselves at certain crucial moments in the general situation. If one is faced

by cases of indiscipline, this is a symptom showing that this fault still exists in the party. Discipline, in fact, is a result, not a point of departure ... [Yet in] recent times, a regime of terror has been established in our parties, a kind of sport, which consists in intervening, punishing, annihilating - and all of this with a special pleasure, as if this were precisely the ideal of party life.¹³

His criticisms also reflected his critique of democracy: rather than the party sticking to its programme, its leaders would use formless and uneducated masses of new members to retreat from its communist positions and settle scores with factional opponents. Despite the strongly unappealing whiff of 'organic centralism', there was an insight here - after all, in the 'Lenin levy' Stalin flooded the party with new members to drown oppositionists. Togliatti achieved something very similar by creating his 'new party' during the World War II resistance. The same ploy was also, of course, at work in the recent SWP conference preparations, though parodied - long-inactive members who hadn't paid subs for years were deployed by the CC faction to outvote the younger members trying to reclaim their organisation.

World War II

This was Bordiga's last great attack on the degeneration of the communist parties, and he was sent into *confino* (forced internal exile) upon his return to Italy. Expelled from the PCd'I 1930 for his refusal to condemn Trotsky, Bordiga dropped out of political activity and became a hate-figure for his former party. Despite the friendly relations between Bordiga and Gramsci, this denigration of Bordiga became a part of the cult around the Sardinian martyr whose death and imprisonment was counterposed to Bordiga's inaction.

A characteristic of the Stalin-era Communist Party was to draw a direct link between Bordiga, Trotsky and fascism. Bordiga was a 'Trotskyist' insofar as he broke party unity, and this served fascism: therefore he must be a paid agent of the latter. This 'analysis' was used to attack almost all left opponents from the 1930s to 1950s, no matter what their connection to Trotskyism (still less to fascism).

During World War II this became particularly acute as the party re-emerged from its clandestine existence with the rise of the resistance. Pierre Broué has noted that while exiled leaders developed popular front (cross-class) conceptions, this approach was totally unknown to the vast majority of party members in Italy, and therefore when they began to reorganise during 1943-45, they were totally bemused:

The history of the Italian Communist Party from 1943 onwards is the history of a Stalinist apparatus brought into Italy from outside, struggling to impose itself from above upon the real party, the true party, the party that had survived fascism and continued to live on in the workers' districts and the villages, to muzzle them and to impose on their 'Bordigist' tradition a Stalinist war policy for which obviously no tradition had prepared them."

By comparison, the French Communists were well-prepared to take a cross-class approach to anti-fascist resistance, having long been schooled in mounting abrupt strategic turns to suit Stalinist foreign policy, as well as expressing their ideas in 'patriotic' terms during the 1934-39 popular front. This was anathema to the veterans of the 1921-26 PCd'I, which had never abandoned a specifically working-class and revolutionary perspective. For this reason, thousands-strong dissident communist formations arose in numerous cities, questioning Togliatti's

popular-front line or even accusing him of betraying Stalin. Togliatti saw the ghost of Bordiga behind these 'ultra-left' positions, and the PCI¹⁴ press carried venomous attacks on them:

Prometeo and *Stella Rossa* and other papers of the kind write 'Today we must not fight the Germans but fight democracy, for the dictatorship of the proletariat and Bolshevism'. Slavish patsies of Hitler! ... In all countries including Italy there is an alliance of parties to chase out the Germans. The attempts of Hitler, Goebbels and their Italian 'Left-Communist' servants to divide this bloc are ridiculous'.¹⁵

Leaders of both groups were murdered by PCI partisans.

In truth, Bordiga was not himself involved, and did not even attempt to mould these often eclectic and multi-tendency groups into a new revolutionary organisation. For Bordiga, the working class was too caught up in democratic ideology (in both the Axis and Allied camps) for revolution to be possible. Exile circles had kept something like Bordiga's ideas alive in the Italian Communist Left (in 1943 forming the Internationalist Communist Party - PCInt). But even their analyses denouncing the imperialist character of the war and seeing all anti-fascist struggle as wholly subordinate to this, had little perspective for how the working class could emerge as a separate revolutionary camp.

And without a revolutionary period, Bordiga saw no value in a revolutionary party. Joining the PCInt in 1949, he attacked the 'voluntarism' of its leadership (which sought to build itself as a new party, including by standing election candidates to make anti-parliamentary propaganda). In 1952 he split, forming *Programma Comunista*. In a (entirely schematically defined) 'period of retreat', what was important was to work on preserving Marxist theory. Indeed, in the 1950s Bordiga developed more substantial critiques of the nature of the Soviet economy, which he defined as state capitalist. Seeing the isolation of the Soviet state as fundamental to this degeneration, Bordiga argued that revolutionary transition was dependent both on a high level of prior economic development, and taking immediate measures to phase out money.¹⁶ Again, the international character of the revolution was more centrally posed than the question of bureaucracy or democratic forms: even the Chinese revolution could be 'saved' by revolution in the west.

Comintern

Bordiga always knew that the Italian communists could not simply follow the Russian example. Perry Anderson notes that "it was not Gramsci but his comrade and antagonist Amadeo Bordiga who was to formulate the true nature of the distinction between east and west, though he never theorized it into any cogent practice".¹⁷ In fact, Bordiga did draw conclusions for practice, but ones opposite to Gramsci's: whereas Bordiga saw the power of democratic ideology in pacifying and dividing the working class and thus sought to oppose it *en bloc*, creating a Communist Party whose strength was its independence from such processes (eg, abstaining from elections), the Sardinian thinker increasingly saw the need for the working class and the party to participate in and overcome these institutions.

Sadly the engagement of these two friends and comrades was cut short by fascist repression. And in their absence the Communist Party was, during the Stalin period, increasingly at the whim of Moscow, and the only freedom it had was to express its policy in 'national' terms. This was central to the development and self-

identity of the PCI, from its role in the resistance to German occupation, to its ultimate break with Moscow in 1970s Eurocommunism, and even to its post-1992 incarnation as a social-democratic party. Alas, Gramsci's thought has been misrepresented and thus 'recruited' to this tradition. Yet from his engagement with Bordiga, and some of the fundamental assumptions they shared, it is quite apparent how alien his revolutionary thought was to the Italian Blairites who today invoke his name.

For Bordiga's part, little is left of his legacy, and even in Italy the Communist Left is microscopic. This milieu is not composed of 'Bordigists' in the fashion of 'Trotskyists', being rooted in exile groups formed after 1928 by figures such as Onorato Damen and Ottorino Perrone, rather than under the leadership of the inactive Bordiga; and moreover, because Bordiga's postwar positions clashed with these others. For this same reason we cannot counterpose Bordigism to Bordiga himself, in the manner that we might question the merits of 'post-Marx' Marxism, 'post-Lenin' Leninism', or 'post-Trotsky' Trotskyism.

Bordiga's thought is of limited 'relevance' today because even he framed it in terms of its specificity to its own time. His own political trajectory was strongly marked by his (essentially one-dimensional) view of the 'objective conditions' that existed, apparently determined in large measure by his personal, biographical situation. Seeing the post-World War I period as the death of social democracy and the opportunity for working-class revolution, Bordiga from 1919 to 1921 stood very much in line with the basic assumptions of Comintern as regards the revolutionary nature of this period, the need for a sharp break defining the communists in opposition to reformists and the leading role of the party. Having in the PCd'I years resisted the Comintern's retreat from such positions, after own his expulsion Bordiga would himself reach an even more gloomy conclusion - the impossibility of building a party in the supposed 'period of retreat' after World War II.

This was just one of the ways in which Bordiga was prone to schematic thinking with ultimatumist and undynamic conclusions. Yet even if we are to draw mainly negative conclusions from Bordiga's experience, it is one that we must study in order to understand the limitations of the early Communist International ●

Notes

1. <http://www.antonioigramsci.com/sindacati.htm>.
2. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1920/abstentionists.htm>
3. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1920/workers-councils.htm>
4. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1921/party-class.htm>
5. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch07.htm>.
6. See <http://marxists.org/italiano/bordiga/1922/1/22-tatti.htm>.
7. *Ibid*.
8. See *Bordiga et la passion du communisme*, free online at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/55210568/Camatte-Bordiga-Et-La-Passion-Du-Communisme-1972>.
9. A piece of theatre: the blackshirts did not seize power, but rather marched to the capital, camped out waiting for instructions and brawled among themselves, before being shooed away again by an embarrassed Mussolini once the king had appointed him.
10. Named after the Roman population decamping to the Aventine mount in 494 BC, demanding citizenship rights.
11. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1926/lyons-theses.htm>.
12. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1926/comintern.htm>.
13. *Ibid*.
14. After the 1943 dissolution of Comintern, the Communist Party of Italy (PCd'I) was renamed the Italian Communist Party (PCI)
15. 'Leftism, the Gestapo's mask' - *La Nostra Lotta*, December 1943.
16. For an interesting piece counterposing this analysis to the twentieth-century projects of communism-as-means of developing backward countries, see <http://home.earthlink.net/~lrgoldner/bordiga.html>.
17. 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', *New Left Review* 1/100, 1976, p52.

SWP

Notes of a delegate

An oppositionist calls for the whole of the left to engage in debate and rethink its politics

Everyone on the left will know that the Socialist Workers Party's annual conference happened last weekend. Against the backdrop of the Martin Smith rape allegations and numerous resignations, this was a contentious event to put it mildly. And for those of us in the Defend the Party faction, it was the 'ultimate showdown'. For a year we have conducted a bitter and painful struggle for a political resolution to the SWP crisis. But last weekend was always going to be the end game. We fought as hard as we could for our principles. However, failure was always on the cards. We now have to accept the political death of the SWP. It is no longer any kind of vehicle for revolutionary politics.

The atmosphere at conference was determined by a number of late developments, including the 'Appeal to comrades' statement circulated by Paul McGarr and Megan Truddell, an alliance statement between the soft elements of the DtP faction and the soft elements of the loyalist majority. It tried to find a middle ground around supporting some DtP demands such as an apology to the two victims. Circulated just 48 hours before conference, it redefined the meaning of 'too little, too late'. However, it soon became clear to us that the result was a foregone conclusion; our faction had just 81 elected delegates, whereas the Central Committee loyalists had around 400.

I will provide a chronology, along with some of the political conclusions that can be drawn. These are, it should be stressed, my initial thoughts.

Opening day

Starting Friday evening, the first session was on Anti-fascism. This was going to be interesting simply because it was led off by Weyman Bennett, one of Martin Smith's closest personal friends and part of Amy Leather's ultra loyalist faction. Unsurprisingly, actual politics was very far down the agenda. Right from the first contribution it became a 3-hour 'defend Weyman' rally. Only two DtP faction members got to speak. They made mild criticisms of UAF's rightward trajectory.

This was met by howls of moral indignation from CC loyalists. Instead of discussing anti-fascist strategy, speaker after speaker argued to the effect that criticising UAF is an attack on Weyman, which is turn an attack on the SWP, etc. One comrade, in a particularly desperate attempt to suck up to the CC told us how he had recently organised a 'multicultural festival' in Harlow and the stress of organising it showed him what a hard life poor old Weyman has.

In his summing up Weyman really came into his element. Shouting for pretty much the whole of it, he roundly denounced oppositionists for using UAF as "factional football".

Most of us came out wondering what our anti-fascist strategy actually is for next year, as little besides the DtP faction was discussed. The overarching political conclusion was that any criticism of a particular strategy or leader will be dismissed as factional, and on that basis they seek to rally comrades as foot soldiers.

Judgement

Saturday was for all the 'controversial' sessions and votes. The CC and faction motions, the



DtP faction: came out despairing

Disputes Committee report and review, the election of the CC slate. It can best be described in

two significant parts: first the DC session, then the motions and CC elections.

The afternoon DC session was a genuinely sober discussion, but nevertheless, the most revealing and

shocking. There had been a panel review of DC procedures that admitted flaws in the first investigation into the allegations against Martin Smith. It recommended changes such as barring CC members from a case against a fellow CC member - to stop the 'trial by mates' situation. Admitting flaws was a climb-down for the CC, and meant they had to say sorry. Their statement read: "Many people have suffered real distress as a result of taking part in or giving evidence to the disputes committee, or due to slurs on the internet and we are sorry to all of them for that." This 'apology' can be extended to Martin Smith, and does not address what and why those involved suffered "real distress". Also it lays blame purely on procedural flaws. The logic of the wording was neatly summed up by Maxine Bowler (on the DC panel and leading comrade in Sheffield) who told conference: "I am prepared to say sorry. I am not going to apologise".

The session revealed splits within the DC over the handling of the second allegation. Three comrades, including Dave Sherry and Candy Udwin, rebelled within the DC when dealing with the second complaint. They were against the hearing being delayed - a cynical manoeuvre and against the wishes of the complainant. However, only one DC member, Pat Stack, had come out against the DC majority findings. This hugely significant moment showed that the DC had trampled over the wishes of the complainant - but no one from the loyalist camp so much as flinched.

The DC report showed that 'comrade X' - the second woman to bring allegations against Martin Smith - had made a separate complaint that her email account had been hacked during the summer to gather evidence against the 'secret' opposition and to delete an incriminating email from the accused to her. Just before Marxism 2013, there was an emergency National Committee meeting at which four comrades were suspended (not to be confused with the Facebook 4) for being signatories to an opposition bank account. The evidence used to 'expose' the four was a set of private emails between oppositionists that Charlie Kimber had somehow got hold of. The only thing all the emails had in common was that 'comrade X' was the only one to have received all of them. Furthermore, the emails were between a small number of leading oppositionists. So a leak is an unlikely explanation. More seriously, however, an email from Martin Smith to her (which she would later use as evidence against him in the main dispute) had been deleted from her inbox and was found in another folder.

Ian A, an IT worker and union rep, looked at the technical side of things and decided hacking almost certainly had happened. He gave evidence to the DC on her behalf, but said the inquiry was hampered by the lack of technical knowledge by DC members and an unwillingness to understand when he explained it to them.

The DC concluded that no hacking had taken place and comrade X issued a statement condemning the findings and asking the unanswered questions. Clearly, hacking an email to delete evidence of sexual harassment is a very serious offence both legally and in terms of revolutionary morality. A DC member said: "hacking may have

taken place but we're sure Charlie K or CC weren't responsible". Kafkaesque, because comrade X had never accused Kimber or other CC members. The lack of reaction from loyalists was shocking. If allegations like these can't make someone think, then what can?

Elections

The day took a nasty turn when the leadership election came up. DtP had proposed an alternative slate that removed both Amy Leather's faction and Kimber and Callinicos - because of their role in the crisis. Softer elements of the CC such as Michael Bradley, Joseph Choonara were left on. Subsequent arguments ranged from vindictive to ridiculous. Callinicos employed both, opening with the hilarious statement that the CC's slate represented "a continuation of our current leadership strategy in relation to the crisis". After the worst crisis and biggest splits in SWP history, hey, more of the same please! He then turned to sneering, 'denouncing' Jonathan Neale saying "you've debased your politics" and ended shouting "You know nothing Jonathan Neale!".

Philistine contribution of the year went to the comrade that said: "Neil Davidson and Joseph Choonara have different views about neoliberalism, how can they be in the same leadership?" I suppose Lenin and Bukharin had the same views about the Brest-Litovsk treaty and Trotsky had the same view as Zinoviev about October - after all, how can you possibly function if your leadership is not a monolithic bloc. The debate gave a real sense that loyalists were genuinely scared of having differences reflected within the leadership. Nevertheless, DtP comrades spoke well; the first contribution from Estelle (Brixton) talked about heterodoxy within organisations and she specifically drew on the real lessons of the Bolshevik experience.

The DtP faction had two main motions, firstly, the demand for an apology to the two female victims, and, secondly, over the implementation of the 2009 democracy commission. There were a few amendments too. Needless to say, we clearly lost all our motions ... the votes were not even counted. Except that is for the CC election: 449 for the CC and 69 for the DtP slate. Loyalists cheered and stamped their feet; we looked at each other and saw the end of the SWP.

A long faction meeting followed, mainly licking our wounds. That night most of us made our decision to leave the SWP.

Last day

We went in on Sunday morning pretty dejected. Some comrades did not bother turn up at all - and most of us arrived late. The first part of the day was something like 'Building the fight back'. Hours of bragging about paper sales during various 'interventions' in the struggle followed - there was no strategy or theory on view. Then came the most peculiar part of conference, the student session. The SWP has lost around 90% of its previously quite large body of student activists over the past year, and this was the first conference to have experienced such a dramatic setback. You might have thought that it would be an issue for discussion. You'd be wrong. Amy Leather controlled the speaking slips and somehow managed to provide a completely one-sided debate - which is unusual even for the SWP.

A tiny handful of students have sided with the CC; somehow they were all delegated to go to conference. They were also, of course, all chosen to speak. So Fran M (Kingston) would

get up and say "it's never been a better time to build", etc. If you did not know what was really going on, you'd think we're on the verge of 1968, that students are on the streets and flooding into the organisations of the left. The fantasy world they've concocted for themselves is so far from reality that it is genuinely unnerving to listen to comrades parroting this crazy nonsense. Many DtP comrades left conference at this point. The spectacle was just too weird.

Charlie Kimber's 15-minute valedictory speech signalled the formal end of conference. Our side was genuinely battered ... and I'm afraid to say deflated.

Calculation

The overarching strategy of Kimber and Callinicos was clearly based on a cynical calculation: the alliance between the loyalist majority and the Leatherites is more important than reconciliation with DtP faction. Their side was certainly not united - the splits on the DC, the crazy Scotland amendments from IDoOM (In Defence of Our Martin) that the CC majority spoke against. But when push came to shove, the one thing did unite them was hatred for the opposition. This can be seen in the new CC: the four new members are divided equally between the majority and Leatherites. In terms of self-preservation this was certainly a smart move. Leather's faction controls a significant section of the apparatus. Besides dominating the biggest districts such as Manchester, Sheffield and Scotland, there is the national committee. However, giving in to Amy's ultra loyalist faction has taken the SWP into the abyss. Almost the entire opposition will go. The Callinicos-Kimber-Leather alliance is a tactical one. Certainly not a principled one.

Did we fight properly

Now that conference is over, let us revisit our strategy - with the benefit of hindsight. The politics of the DtP faction were for a long time laid out by Hannah Dee, Jim Wolfreys and co. They argued for a softer approach aimed at isolating the Leatherites as a kind of transitional

demand. It was they who proposed a slate which included Kimber and Callinicos. The comrades believed this "would force them to justify their alliance with Amy's faction".

Conference proved that strategy hopeless. We all know about the divisions on the CC, but they just deny it and stick together through thick and thin. Singling out the Leatherites actually disarmed us. Nevertheless, towards the end, a more radical approach was adopted. Initiated by Rob Owen and the young comrades around him, they argued for a fight based on radical politics. That's why it was essential not to include Kimber and Callinicos on the slate argued comrade Owen. That approach eventually won the argument within our faction.

Our tactics were also predicated on winning the so-called middle ground. It is true that a layer of comrades were uneasy about the state of things in the SWP. But they couldn't quite stomach joining the opposition, and winning them to our side was a worthwhile goal. However, we made two crucial mistakes. Firstly, we misjudged their size: the middle ground was barely represented at conference. They were certainly not the kingmakers we imagined them to be. Secondly, we were never going to win them by pandering to them. We should have taken the hard arguments to them. Then we might have at least won some ground.

The farce that conference was, the farce that is democracy in the SWP, has meant that most of the faction, including myself, have decided to leave. I have not given up hope in all SWP comrades. But the SWP's sclerotic culture prevents the development of a critical cadre that can come to terms with the period we live in and engage with the rest of the left.

In fact, this crisis is not just the SWP's. It effects the whole of a revolutionary left that continues to fragment at every turn. Taking on that question can only be done from outside the ranks of the SWP. Its sectarian nature means it refuses to deal with other comrades on the left. Clearly the next period must be one of serious political discussion. Being part of this is not optional ●

Fighting fund

A good end to the year

Remember this is the last issue of the paper in 2013. We are back on January 9 2014.

After a rather slow start we have had a rush of donations. Comrade PB handed over a £20 note at the CPGB's Sunday seminar. Standing orders from: JB (£20), DW (£20), SP (£20) and MM (£75). On top of that were the cheques in the post: LT (£50), KT (£20). RN (£25) and TB (£20). Through Paypal and bank transfers: DV (£20), EJ (£25) and JC (£20). Comrade EW wrote saying he was "been very impressed" by Mike Macnair's recent article on imperialism and six-page Left Unity supplement. The comrade sent a £100 cheque for Jack Conrad's *Fantastic reality and Head-to-head in Halle* - the balance going to our funds. By my reckoning all that means our monthly total now stands at £913. And because Robbie Rix is away on his holidays and I do not have access to our bank account details, it is quite possible that we are already approaching our £1,500 target. Your Xmas donations will, hopefully, take us well over

the top. So send what you can to our usual address or pay online (account number 00744310; sort code 30-99-64).

Either way things are going well ... as is our electronic readership. Last week saw another increase - to 13,591.

Comrades will doubtless be interested in how we intend to mark 2014, which is, of course, the hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of World War I. Not only are we going to publish a general overview of what led to the slaughter, but Ben Lewis and Mike Macnair have been commissioned to work on the 'left' social imperialists. This will include a lot of German and French translations and the first English language publication of various significant articles.

Meantime, enjoy the Christmas and New Year festivities ●

Johnny Virgo

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

ASN attack

Hurrah for the autonomists! Hurrah for the comrades bringing revolution to the campuses of Sussex last week, felling the dastardly Socialist Workers Party and purging its bilious propaganda with fire! Also there was some kind of political rally going on ... which was obvious really boring so nobody cares about it..

So goes the story of the December 10 Sussex 5 demo, the third staged in protest against the suspension of five University of Sussex students (the clue is in the name) for the mortal crime of being a mildly annoying pain in the backside for the university authorities. That the suspension was revoked after a public outcry did little to reassure the student body that it was not in fact on the frontline of the creeping clamp-down on universities across the UK and their subsequent slow mutation into white collar dogsbody factories.

There have been three Sussex demonstration in close succession: December 5, 6 and 10. However where the demonstration on December 5 had apparently been fairly relaxed, participants on the second demonstration arrived to find that, much to the chagrin of some, the SWP had decided to show themselves. If that was not bad enough, it was their presence on the smaller demo on December 10 that really took the biscuit. (Just to bring any baffled comrades up to speed, the SWP are not at the height of their popularity.) Painfully aware that many could not conscionably march alongside an organisation that had played host to an alleged rapist, the Sussex Autonomous Students Network decided to speak for the silent majority and forcibly dismantle the SWP's stall and all of their assorted demo paraphernalia. Not content to rest on their laurels, the ASN had an epiphany. The silent majority needed to see the SWP set on fire. Naturally they did the honours there too, sending all those ever-so-readable copies of *Socialist Worker* down to newspaper hell.

When the smoke cleared the ASN realised it was time to call for sombre retrospection, something they did by curiously encouraging a collective gloat. For those of you who don't speak autonomist or can't get on the web, allow me to translate: speeches were boring, got bored of boring speeches, fancied a few yuks, smashed up the dying vestiges of a spent political force, went on an adrenaline rampage, wallowed in the glory. Sanctimonious aggrandisement aside, this certainly seems to be the gist of things to me, comrades. Even more worrying, there appears to be a fairly severe irony drought. I'm just speculating, I'll admit, but then this is the only logical conclusion that can be made about a group which sees no issue with arbitrarily smashing and burning its way towards safe spaces and which responded to the outrage of the SWP 'hijack' by building a bonfire and staging a breakaway march. I must confess that I've never hijacked a protest myself, but burning reading material whilst people shout 'Nazi' at you is a good place to start. Not politically, of course - no time for that politics and debate nonsense - but it can certainly do wonders for your ego. Alas, ex-SWPer Tom Walker's Left Unity front of "revolutionaries, reformists, feminists, greens, anarchists and autonomists" is looking even less feasible now. After all, with friends like these, who even has time for enemies?

Before going further, it is probably worth making clear that I am, shockingly, no fan of the SWP. The organisation was rotten to the core long before it nosedived into the Delta scandal. Its handling of that situation was horrendous, particularly because it was symptomatic of their internal structures, near-permanent estrangement of the rank and file from leading 'comrades' and its general detachment from the world outside their own bubble. The myopic arrogance needed to crown yourselves judge and jury, and then to stamp on any dissent from internal critics, is breathtaking even now. The antipathy towards the organisation's leadership is well earned and long may it last. That student activists of every left stripe are uncomfortable with the presence of the SWP at protests is perhaps understandable, not least because the SWP of recent months has blossomed into a veritable anti-Midas; everything they touch is tainted (which people are fed up with, incidentally). There is a sense in which their inability to keep their own house in order makes us all a target of criticism, and people are - to use that limp turn of phrase - 'very angry'.

But if ever there was a time when words would have spoken louder than actions, it would have been in Brighton on that day. Exposure to a photographed front page of the *Socialist Worker*, regardless of whether it is on fire or not, is still exposure. In fact my general *Socialist Worker* exposure shot up several times higher than normal in the following days - rather jarring for me, as - I'm sure you can imagine - I do tend to try and keep that to a flat zero. The facts are that proper engagement with SWPers - or even cold-shoulder disengagement - would have been a much better use of everyone's time. Who knows, maybe the ASN could have whittled away their membership with well reasoned argument about why they should all abandon ship before it is too late. But no, clearly that was never going to be the order of the day when there was a bit of fun to be had. Never mind that the blows landed by this type of attack are only the most superficial (a few papers and a wallpaper table? There's plenty more where they came from ...). But the ASN stunt is more than likely to have the exact opposite effect to the one intended: hardening embattled SWPers into adopting a siege mentality - it is impossible to talk to leftwing people out there, best to stick with Kimber and Callinicos.

That all said, I must allow myself a certain degree of *schadenfreude* at watching the SWP so gloriously disembowelled by what is characteristically their own sword. The reaction of the ASN represents only the most recent incarnation of a morality culture fostered by groups like the SWP. What we effectively see here is the most facile aspects of Blairism regurgitated as 'socialist' doctrine. The very notion that all the injustice and violence of the world can be willed away with good intentions and a true heart is fanciful to say the least, but lapses into outright narcissism when it expects the terrible realities that infest society at large to not find themselves duplicated within the left itself. Add into this mix an SWP-esque brand of directionless actionism and you end up with Frankenstein politics: at best leading us towards disingenuous 'safe spaces' policies ●

Tom Munday

SWP

Creating a desert waste

For the third time in just over a year, the leadership is ‘drawing a line’. Actually, argues **Ben Lewis**, Charlie Kimber and Alex Callinicos are busily destroying their own organisation



SWP is becoming deserted

Reading the official report of the Socialist Worker Party’s annual conference provides a neat little summary of the disdain with which its leadership treats politics, openness, the truth and the working class more generally. There are breath-taking levels of self-delusion in the special two-page *Socialist Worker* spread (risibly described as a “full report” in *Party Notes*) that occasionally border on the tragic.

This conference, after all, was convened in the midst of the biggest crisis in SWP history. And it was followed by the departure of one of its main thinkers, the biographer of the group’s founder, Ian Birchall. Others, like David Renton and Jonathan Neale followed, as will many more. Not surprisingly, the December conference saw the opposition crushed. Some delegates were visibly reduced to tears in anguish and frustration. The loyalists are, of course, in denial.

National secretary Charlie Kimber at least admits that “It would be foolish to pretend that this has not been a difficult and divisive year for the party”. But he manages to chime an optimistic note by claiming that the SWP has recruited “around 800 people this year” - which seems utterly implausible even by the SWP’s extremely liberal interpretation of what constitutes a “party member”. Leave aside the hundreds who have formally jumped ship, there are thousands of ‘dead souls’ who still inhabit the SWP’s lists, but pay nothing, sell nothing, do nothing.

The fact of the matter is that the December conference had 500 delegates elected by 40 district aggregates. However, there were often fewer people in attendance than there were places to fill. Oppositionists complain that loyalists preferred not to send full delegations rather than include those who might vote the ‘wrong’ way.¹

Have no fear though. Comrade Kimber has good ideas to redress what seems like a terminal crisis: “Structured educationals”, “detailed attention to the nuts and bolts of the organisation” and - wait for it - “increasing the sales of *Socialist Worker*” and thinking about “how every comrade can get one or two more sales” will do the trick. Moreover, the “battle plan” that

will supposedly lead the SWP back from the brink is pushing “for action in the trade unions”, “increasing the resistance” and campaigning against the cuts. Moreover, there will be some work around 2014’s “independence referendum” (ie, left Scottish nationalism); a vague nod towards the party’s intervention in the Euro elections and, of course, the party’s game-changing work in Unite Against Fascism and Unite the Resistance.

This crisis, therefore, will be resolved by business-as-usual activism, getting out there and ceasing to be “inward-looking”. According to this logic, all of the nasty stuff could have been avoided if only party members would stop writing pieces that are critical - however mildly - of the party apparatus and instead crack on with “building the party” that is patently falling apart at the seams. This approach was underlined by Alex Callinicos in a conference speech that has been described as both aggressive and arrogant. He contended that what had prevented the SWP crisis “from being a complete disaster” (I wonder what would constitute a “complete disaster”) “has been the active membership of the SWP ... They have continued to intervene in the struggles and movements of the day.”

Over the last three conferences the leadership has repeated this message, *ad nauseum*. Yet divisions have actually deepened and become more protracted.

Saying sorry

Callinicos’s intelligence and erudition cannot hide his utter hypocrisy in blaming “the faction” for “politicising” the two rape allegations against erstwhile apparatchik, Martin Smith. Even a cursory glance at the history of the dispute shows that, from the very outset, the entrenched leadership, in its own bureaucratic interests (ie, not as a result of “sexism” or “rape denial”, as some claim) was seeking to protect itself. Crucially, the SWP central committee tried to restrict, distort and manipulate information about both cases - what came out was almost entirely due to oppositionist pressure.² Comrade Renton, who as a legal professional worked closely with the second

complainant, often known as “Comrade X”, claims that the party’s Disputes Committee (which had already heard the first case of rape against Smith) was engaged in “shoddy attempts ... to decline to hear the second complainant, and to put off her case until after January 2014 in the hope that she would leave the party”.

Moreover, as to the leadership’s contention that “the faction” is the source of all evil, it is worth remembering that there is more than one “faction” in the SWP. Besides the Rebuilding the Party faction (previously named In Defence of Our Party) which had 69 votes at conference, there is the (highly permanent) *leadership* faction, headed by Callinicos himself, which controls *Socialist Worker*, *Socialist Review* and presides over the party’s resources and contact lists. Then there are the “Leatherites” around the re-elected CC member Amy Leather. Its political outlook was summed up in a collective submission to the SWP’s *Internal Bulletin*. Entitled ‘For our revolutionary party’, it argued for a pre-emptive purge of *anybody* expressing “factional” outrage at the mishandling of the rape allegations, whereupon some dubbed it the “In Defence of Our Martin” faction. The irony of forming a faction against factionalism seems lost on these comrades. Yet the faction is of growing significance in that it now includes figures such as United Against Fascism’s Weyman Bennett, and Judith Orr, editor of *Socialist Worker*.

Further fissures opened up within the apparatus over the handling of allegations by “Comrade X”. Here was the second complaint against Smith, which in law would increase the likelihood of charges being brought against him. Prominent members of the DC - Dave Sherry and Candy Udwin - stuck their heads above the parapet to express their discontent with the process. The two cases should have been taken together.

They did not win, however. The new CC is making much of the “amended disputes procedure”, which strikes me as a paltry sop to a disgruntled membership, like the misnamed ‘Democracy Commission’ in 2009 which was preceded by the Counterfire split around Lindsey German, John

Rees and Chris Nineham. Yet a motion to formally apologise to both female complainants was overwhelmingly defeated. And even though Callinicos was able to say “we are sorry” for the suffering of the two women, this only arose from the “flaws” in procedures and from their cases becoming a “subject of political conflict”. So it was an apology along the lines of: “I am sorry for your suffering caused by others”: an approach pithily summarised in the remarkable words of one leadership loyalist at conference: “I am prepared to say sorry. I am not going to apologise.”

Softly, softly

The heavy defeat endured by the RtP faction at conference should provide occasion for a rethink by those comrades who have already resigned and those - such as the political academic, Mike Gonzalez - who intend to stay and fight another day. The opposition’s submissive approach in the factional struggle played right into the hands of the apparatus.

Opposition numbers are probably four or five times the 69 votes its slate received. From the very moment conference was announced, the leadership pulled out all the stops to ensure that it would be gerrymandered. Delegates would be elected on a winner takes all basis and therefore skewed in favour of the leadership. Having a *representative* political argument had to be avoided at all costs. District aggregates were packed with inactive members - thanks to the tireless telephoning of full time organisers. No less undemocratic was how speaking time was allotted. CC members were given 20 minutes and the chair often totally excluded oppositionists.

Yet the RtP faction proved unwilling, or unable, to confront this fake ‘democratic centralism’ and challenge the legitimacy of conference. Indeed, the RtP has not refuted Charlie Kimber’s assertion that the hugely disproportionate aggregate speaking times were actually *agreed* by the faction.

The RtP’s softness showed itself in its pre-conference statement, which focussed on a *symptom* of the SWP’s regime, “whether or not we have properly applied our politics on women’s

oppression in dealing with this dispute and its fallout”, and not the organisation’s “structural flaws”. This point of departure lent itself to focussing on “re-forming” the disputes procedure - a card that Callinicos and co have been able to play to their advantage. Moreover, the statement implied that there may be a place for Kimber and Callinicos on the alternative leadership *if* they came over to the outlook of RtP - pigs might fly! We are informed that this approach was agreed after much discussion within RtP. Some had wanted to keep Callinicos and Kimber on the slate as a sign of moderation and rationality.

And the RtP faction still wants to play the game according to CC rules. Its website states: “The Rebuilding the Party opposition faction in the SWP decided to dissolve itself at its closing meeting on Sunday 15 December, in line with conference wishes. At that meeting comrades discussed and voted on the future of this website, which was set up by SWP opposition supporters prior to Rebuilding the Party being formed. The faction voted to hand over control of the website to those comrades who had now decided to leave the party. This is a notice to that effect.”³

No halcyon days

It is as of yet unclear where the many comrades leaving the SWP will go, and the extent to which their next moves will be coordinated. A certain gloomy sentiment seems to exist that there is no real choice between sectarian oblivion and the doubtless well-meaning but utterly useless politics of the swamp.

Yet now is not the time for despair. It is time for SWP oppositionists to conduct a forensic analysis of the germs that led to the present horrible state of affairs. Comrade Birchall may have been happy to “die a party member” a year ago,⁴ but I am sorry to say that the SWP project did not suddenly “fall from grace.” Nostalgically looking back to “the party of my youth”, as comrade Renton does, may be understandable when breaking with an organisation one has helped build, but it does not get to the core problem in the SWP - or for that matter, in the left more generally. The SWP rot goes back to the theoretical foundations of the SWP. Its programmophobia has ensured that far-sighted Marxist historical thinking and political strategy is reduced to ‘building the resistance’, marching against the fascists, etc.

We in the CPGB think Marxism, a well founded revolutionary programme and democratic centralism are key to moving forward. As such, we urge dissident SWPers and former dissident SWPers to break with the ‘bunker mentality’ and begin a dialogue with us ●

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Notes

1. <http://livesrunning.wordpress.com/2013/12/17/to-my-comrades-of-any-party-or-none/>
2. This becomes evident from the rejection, under the auspices of “confidentiality”, of comrade Amy Gilligan’s motion to a recent National Council meeting. The motion, which 33 members of the two loyalist factions opposed and which won only eight votes from members of the main opposition faction, read as follows: “Confidentiality is an important part of bringing forward any complaint” ... but it is “crucial that the issue of confidentiality does not take on greater importance than the case itself” and it certainly “must not be used as a gagging clause”. A very telling rejection indeed.
3. <http://revolutionarysocialism.tumblr.com/post/70302020833/about-this-site>
4. From Ian Birchall’s resignation letter: <http://grimanddim.org/political-writings/2013-letter-of-resignation/>

ISN

Unity in the spring?

IS Network is in trouble again. Daniel Harvey looks at the regroupment efforts by the marsh

For those pulling out of the Socialist Worker's Party into an uncertain political future, an unedifying prospect greets them in the shape of the previous split from earlier this year, now calling itself the International Socialist Network. Women's liberation has become a political football in a deep-seated conflict between the right and the left in the organisation, with the regroupment of the marsh invitingly awaiting in the background.

Currently the ISN is shambling towards a merger with Socialist Resistance, a group which has mostly abandoned the pretence of revolutionary or Marxist politics. This has been pushed for by the ISN rightwing under the direction of Richard Seymour after rejecting out of hand offers for talks with other left groups, not least the Communist Party of Great Britain.

The present split emerged just in time for the flagging Anti-capitalist Initiative, the split from Worker's Power led by Simon Hardy and Luke Cooper, which sought to 'unite the left' into a broad network. It liquidated itself at its December 7 conference in Manchester in order to join the ranks of ISN. Or, rather a part of the organisation liquidated itself, the more rightwing London centre led by Simon Hardy and Luke Cooper, but with the larger branches in Manchester and Birmingham containing more autonomists and left-communists dragging their feet.

At the same time, it looks as though Socialist Resistance is putting pressure on the other two groups to drive unification through. Their public letter of December 11 to the ISN stated, "we should continue to aim for a regroupment in the spring of 2014 rather than the longer timescale as proposed by the ACI comrades."¹ On top of this there's a great deal of consternation about the possible involvement of Worker's Power, whose 'orthodox' Trotskyism is seen as a threat, as well as their organisation and obvious intention to continue in any new group as some sort of factional tendency.

In the last couple of weeks it would be fair to say that for the likes of Seymour and Tom Walker, and their allies in the London ACI, there is a new sense of urgency, with a combined political offensive that has moved on a number of fronts in trying to push things along before the "brief window of opportunity" closes. In other words, before Worker's Power can gain too much influence, or the left of the IS Network can gain too much confidence or have time to think seriously about the reformist political trajectory they are being led into.

The left managed to embarrass the Seymourists at the ISN 'politics conference' on October 26-27 by narrowly defeating them on the question of rank-and-file organising and on regroupment, kicking the can further down the road with a motion calling for more talks. The resistance of the more libertarian wing of the ACI can be seen in this light, refusing to be bounced into unity with decaying Trotskyite formations with which they have very little in common.

Anathema

So, Seymour's group has changed tack. Unable to ram things through quickly, now they have no choice but to try to win the argument politically. Their opening salvo, *The Politics of Anathema in the IS Network*, has had mixed results.



Richard Seymour: reformist

The thrust of the article, behind its gnomic, almost cryptic tone, is that a culture of 'personalised anathema' is developing - meaning that individuals are becoming linked to political positions and people are opposing them on a personal basis. This is supposedly replicating the problem in the SWP, which excluded and vilified people seen as deviating from 'the line'. Furthermore, the small and shrinking size of the ISN means personalised politics becomes sharper, and risks turning the group into a 'sect'.

The only specific references are in a footnote where two cases are mentioned obliquely. 'A comrade' is called a sexist for shouting at a meeting; and the use of the word 'trauma' in an ISN bulletin piece about comrades getting over their experiences in the SWP was called 'ableist' and discriminatory towards people unable to get over their traumatic experiences.²

It can be revealed that 'a comrade' was actually Richard Seymour himself, who was challenged on social media after the politics conference for shouting in his contribution after another ISNer made a joke at the expense of Socialist Resistance. He was also attacked for using a phrase about the urgency of the ISN "getting out of the ghetto" of the left. This was considered a *faux pas* - like a white man belittling black experiences of marginalisation in ghettos.

But the real target under fire in this article is the deployment of "enlightening epithets" such as "reformist" or "liberal", which indicate a resort to "denounce[ing] political differences as if they were personality flaws worthy of execration" which "reeks of the politics of the sect." Seymour, who helped draft the article, intended this as a political attack, albeit advocating an apolitical muzzle on the political discourse of his opponents.

A swathe of younger ISNers left the organisation in response, and others resigned their posts on the steering committee because of what they describe as being "patronised and reviled by older members, who can sometimes appear as though they see their views as more developed or more valid."³

There has been a flurry of responses on the ISN website, but the discussion has entirely ignored the real political valence of the original article in favour of an increasingly absurd debate over female comrades' participation in meetings under the rubric of intersectional awareness. Lisa Millbank's advice has been a central point of contention, where she states, in

a list of other helpful tips, that if you're a man you should:

Assume you *don't* have a right to be in the room or to express your opinion. Chances are, many of the women around the circle don't. If you don't either, then you won't be placing yourself above them.⁴

That is, not only are you advised not to raise your voice, but also that "being abrupt, sarcastic, *relaxed*, angry, etc are all modes of power" and "you have easier access to the power modes as a man", so you should "consider not using them" (my emphasis).

This approach has deep roots in the ISN, which, being formed in reaction to the Delta case in the SWP, is prone to some quite bizarre identity politics, including the proposed adoption of a "non-women caucus" with an agenda drawn up by women for the non-women to focus attention on their aberrant behaviour. This was piloted by the student wing of the ISN in Sheffield. You'd be forgiven for wondering where the non-caucuses will end up, if the Sheffield precedent is generalised. But apparently:

The report from Sheffield was received very positively by the group. Maggie pointed out that this was a new innovation which had not been tried in the left before and the IS Network women's caucus should publicly congratulate the Sheffield RevSoc group.⁵

They seemed to have no idea that this politics was played out as early as 1975 by Big Flame and others, and the results were not exactly transformative for the left then either.

Suffice to say that the incompetence of the ISN left, being waist-high in this quagmire of radical guilt, meant it was unable to challenge the right on the need to be able to publicly and loudly challenge their opponents, and call them any appropriate name while doing so. The left lost in this sense, with Seymour and his allies looking quite reasonable in challenging these excesses, whilst also smuggling in the notion that there should be limits on *political* challenges directed at them personally.

And that is a shame, because those politics represent everything that was rotten in the political method of the SWP in the first place.

For those in the left of the ISN, particularly Tim Nelson and some allies who managed to win a commitment to a rank-and-file orientation in October, that explicitly means a break from the culture of useless bureaucratically driven hyper-activism. However, comrade Nelson and others take this insight into the blind-alley of some kind of unity initiative which would include the International Workers of the World (IWW). They had a joint meeting in June in Sheffield, but other than two ISNers joining IWW, this doesn't seem to have gone anywhere.⁶

Left Unity

So there remains the 'broad party' approach advocated in Left Unity by the likes of Socialist Resistance and Richard Seymour - as he explained to me in a personal conversation - to hold back and reflect the general mood (ie, bureaucratic populism) and allow the inevitable failure of this to push people to the orientation that we want later on.

Seymour accepts tacitly that this approach is a direct repetition of John

Rees's in Respect, and now in the People's Assembly with Counterfire. In the former, SWP members were forced under discipline to vote down clauses from the 'what we fight for' column in their own paper in order to keep open 'space' in the organisation for a largely phantom right wing. But even Alex Callinicos and Charlie Kimber of the SWP Central Committee, not exactly known for admitting failure lightly, acknowledged this year that this was "problematic" for the party.⁷ Seymour, however, *still supports* this approach in Left Unity - but on an even lower political level, because the organised political basis for this kind of position will not exist in a formation with Socialist Resistance. In practice it is an all out liquidation into reformism.

There will inevitably be some residual Cliffite solidarity between those leaving the SWP and those in the ISN, given their shared background. But comrades can be forgiven for thinking twice before throwing their weight behind the 'leadership' shown so far in blazing a trail forwards for the left. Comrade Markin, as he dubs himself, in his statement on leaving the SWP, is luke warm, to say the least:

This step is the next crucial one - the ISN contains many lessons, both good and bad, of how to try and build something new. I want us to avoid throwing the baby out with the bath water in terms of our politics but equally I think we need to follow the example of making serious and concrete changes to our method in order to change the culture we have inherited from the SWP. I also want to get my own house in order first before I even think about diving into radical reformist projects and realignment initiatives, of which it's fair to say I have a healthy scepticism.⁸

Others who have spoken to us have been far more damning in private, including one who has written a report in this paper. In public there is mostly silence about it, which speaks volumes.

Will there be unity in the spring? On these terms, we certainly hope not. Defeating this unity initiative with Socialist Resistance has got to be a priority if the ISN left is to play a useful role given the current disintegration of the SWP. If serious regroupment is to take place on the left now, it is going to be based on ditching that whole rotten legacy of decomposing bureaucratic centrism, with the broad fronts and liquidationist splits which it inevitably throws off. What we need, and comrades leaving the SWP need, is a democratic, honest, and consistently revolutionary political organisation. Let us talk ●

Notes

1. <http://socialistresistance.org/5718/regroupment-our-letter-to-the-international-socialist-network>
2. <http://internationalsocialistnetwork.org/index.php/ideas-and-arguments/organisation/293-the-politics-of-anathema-in-the-is-network>
3. <http://internationalsocialistnetwork.org/index.php/ideas-and-arguments/organisation/302-undoing-the-politics-of-anathema>
4. <http://radtransfem.tumblr.com/post/24818439850/first-attempt-at-a-list-of-ways-for-men-to-use>
5. <http://bigflameuk.wordpress.com/2009/10/26/episodes-in-big-flame-history-no-19-sexual-politics-and-life-part-2-men%E2%80%99s-politics/>
6. <http://internationalsocialistnetwork.org/index.php/ideas-and-arguments/organisation/party-and-class/unions/161-report-back-from-a-joint-meeting-of-the-sheffield-is-network-and-the-iww>
7. <http://www.cpgb.org.uk/home/weekly-work-er/981/swp-leader-thirsting-for-a-purge>
8. <http://comrademarkin.blogspot.co.uk/2013/12/on-leaving-swp.html>

What we fight for

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

■ There exists no real Communist Party today. There are many so-called 'parties' on the left. In reality they are confessional sects. Members who disagree with the prescribed 'line' are expected to gag themselves in public. Either that or face expulsion.

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

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

■ Communists are internationalists. Everywhere we strive for the closest unity and agreement of working class and progressive parties of all countries. We oppose every manifestation of national sectionalism. It is an internationalist duty to uphold the principle, 'One state, one party'.

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

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

■ Capitalism in its ceaseless search for profit puts the future of humanity at risk. Capitalism is synonymous with war, pollution, exploitation and crisis. As a global system capitalism can only be superseded globally.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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weekly Worker

North Korea
relies on
outside forces
to survive

A very Kimist purge

The bureaucratic apparatus in North Korea is becoming increasingly dysfunctional, writes Eddie Ford

In an act of calculated brutality, the North Korean regime on December 13 announced that the uncle of ‘supreme leader’, Kim Jong-un, had been executed for “acts of treachery”. Jang Sung-thaek, a four-star general, had held various senior posts in the so-called Workers’ Party of Korea and was vice-chairman of the powerful National Defence Commission, the top military body - a position generally regarded as second only to that of the ‘supreme leader’. Married to general Kim Kyong-hui, daughter of the ‘eternal president’, Kim Il-sung - grandfather of the current despot - he was frequently pictured alongside his nephew and seen by many observers as the power behind the throne.

Even by North Korean standards, the lengthy statement issued by KNCA was unusual for the sheer level of vitriol and the bizarre nature of some of the accusations. Jang was labelled a “traitor for all ages”, “thrice cursed”, “worse than a dog”, “despicable human scum”, and so on in typical Vyshinsky-style. Alluding to the power struggle behind the purge, we are told that Jang was guilty of “abusing” his positions of responsibility and had “formed a faction” that had “desperately worked for years to destabilize and bring down the [Democratic People’s Republic of Korea] and grab the supreme power of the party and state by employing all the most cunning and sinister means and methods”. These “anti-party, counterrevolutionary factional elements”, we discover, took control of the “major economic fields of the country” and “schemed to drive the economy of the country and people’s living into an uncontrollable catastrophe”. Not only that, Jang transformed his department into a “little kingdom” and “persistently worked” to “stretch his tentacles” into every area of the bureaucracy - even attempting to “trigger off discontent” within the army in order to stage a coup.

In classic Stalinist fashion, Jang is being airbrushed from history - or so it seems. Thus in a mad ‘damage limitation’ exercise, or 1984 moment, KNCA has erased almost their entire online archives - hence I am unable to provide a link to the agency’s original statement trashing Jang. All articles from before October 2013 appear to have been removed. There were 35,000 articles dated September 2013 or earlier on KCNA in Korean, making a kill ratio of 98-99%. Translations in English, Spanish, Chinese and Japanese were also deleted. Similarly, another 20,000 articles had vanished from the archives of *Rodong Sinmun*, the WPK’s official newspaper. This wiping out of history is the largest deletion ever carried out by the official news agencies and seems a prelude to the rewriting of history so as to surgically remove Jang, or - if that proves to be a bit too difficult - then to at least massively diminish his importance. Turn him into as near a non-person as possible. A Stalinist purge in other words, but taken to Kimist proportions.

Supremacy

Obviously, the physical elimination of Jang and the Stalinist theatrics that surrounded it was a carefully orchestrated move to demonstrate Kim

Jong-un’s total authority - no rivals will be tolerated. There seems little doubt that Jang’s execution was the most significant since the lethal, high-level purges conducted in the 1950s by Kim Il-Sung, when he ruthlessly eradicated all potential competitors in the ‘domestic’, ‘Yanan’ and ‘Soviet’ factions - leaving his ‘guerilla’ faction supreme. It should not be forgotten that the WPK was the result of a merger in 1949 between the Workers Party of North Korea and the Workers Party of South Korea - which themselves were products of a whole series of mergers and fusions, both parties tracing their origins to the Communist Party of Korea. Once the WPK was created, there was a virtual parity between the four factions, each having four representatives on the politburo with the ‘guerilla’ faction only having three. Kim put an end to all of that. His most well-known victim was probably Pak Hon-yong, leader of the ‘domestic’ faction and one of the founders of the CPK as well as first secretary of the WPSK - sentenced to death in 1955 for being an “American spy”.

Since 1960, however, purged top officials have not usually been killed, and the denunciations of purged figures have not typically been so extreme and public. The fact that Kim Jong-un decided to emulate the violent tactics of his grandfather seems to indicate that there are serious divisions opening up in the upper echelons of the bureaucracy, the ‘supreme leader’ feeling he had no choice but to reassert his ... supremacy. The KNCA statement damning Jang for all eternity is effectively an official admission that there is significant disunity amongst the top levels of the state itself, and that he had a substantial number of followers (ie, “stooges” and “confidants”).

The purge and execution of Jang heavily suggests, therefore, that the party-military-state system in North Korea is becoming increasingly dysfunctional. When you take out someone as prominent as Jang, you are also threatening to take

out scores, if not hundreds, of other people associated with him. It is bound to have a ripple effect.

Kim Jong-un and his ‘hardline’ supporters in the elite seem hostile to any notion of economic reform or change - something strongly associated with the “despicable” Jang. In August 2012 he made a high profile trip to China, where he met the then president, Hu Jintao. The two sides later signed a raft of economic deals, including the development of two special economic zones: Rason, on North Korea’s east coast, and Hwanggumphyong, on the border with China. According to many accounts, Jang developed an admiration for some aspects of Beijing’s pro-market reforms and hoped to import Deng-style policies to North Korea in some shape or form - apparently falling foul of those who advocate a ‘military-first’ policy, like Kim Jong-un.

Quite clearly, uncle Jang has become the official scapegoat for everything that is wrong with North Korean society. Public enemy number one. The way he was cynically done away with by the regime he had served all his life was an example of hideous cruelty, no matter what appalling treatment he may have meted out to ‘anti-party elements’ in the past. As for the idea that Chang was *actively* plotting to overthrow Kim, whether in a military coup or by some other means, this seems quite fanciful (though you could hardly blame him if he was). His real crime was wanting to steer the country in a different direction.

Another feature of the purge is that the ‘divine right’ of Kims to rule appears, if anything, to have been further consolidated. On December 12, the Hong Kong newspaper, *Wen Wei Po*, reported that Lee Yun-keol - chairman of the Seoul-based North Korea Strategy Information Service Centre - said that the seizure of Jang’s had been personally led by Kim Jong-un’s elder half-brother, Kim Jong-chul, who ordered his own ‘Praetorian’ guards to make the arrest. Lee also stated that not even vice marshal Choe

Ryong-hae, politburo member and vice-chairman of the party’s central military commission, would have dared to carry out such an act.

Of course, the bourgeois press delights in North Korea - feeding us near endless stories about its bizarre control freakery and quite literal deification of its leaders. The odious Kim Jong-un is regularly described as a “great person born of heaven”, the “eternally immovable mental mainstay of the Korean people”, the “people’s spiritual pillar and the lighthouse of hope”, etc. All totally revolting, it goes without saying.

But then again, Marxists do not buy into the idea assiduously promulgated by the western media that North Korea is the weirdest place ever to have existed - or, conversely, that the UK is the most normal society on the planet. For the most part, generations of schoolchildren have been told that Britain has a glorious and uninterrupted history going back to at least 1066 and that from medieval times onwards dynastic succession was believed to be divinely sanctioned - all perfectly normal. You might get ‘good’ monarchs and ‘bad’ monarchs, but that is just part of the divine deal. Ours is not to wonder why. Think about our present unelected ruler, Elizabeth II. She is the “defender of faith” and has *two* birthdays. Why is this any less weird than North Korea’s “eternal president”? Face it. The UK is a bizarre, fucked-up, place - as we communists constantly emphasise. When it comes to absurd ritual and mindless dynastic pomp you can never beat the UK. Sorry, Kim.

Rather, as this paper has pointed out a number of times, if you really want to understand North Korea then you need to look more at what is going on *around it* than discover some unique internal dynamic. The foul regime in Pyongyang is not kept in power primarily by its own armed forces or secret police. In reality, it continues to exist mainly thanks to the complicity of its neighbours - especially China -

but also the USA itself. Yes, in an ideal world, the US would love to see the fall of this particular ‘rogue state’ and its replacement by a friendly, united Korean *client* state - thus substantially increasing imperialist influence in the region and beyond. But the US and the ‘international community’ as a whole are fearful of what would happen if the North Korean regime underwent a sudden collapse. A tidal wave of refugees from the north? That would be massively destabilising for the region, if not the world - and rebuilding a shattered North Korean economy would cost an *absolute fortune*. Meaning that the US is perpetually torn between wanting to maintain the status quo and getting rid of the Pyongyang regime once and for all. Similarly, China has no affection for the troublesome Kim dynasty, which rocks the boat far too much - and probably dreams about absolving itself of all responsibilities and obligations towards Pyongyang. Yet Beijing too continues to prop up the North Korean regime out of fear of the alternative. Meanwhile the masses in that benighted country live an utterly wretched life, crushed by desperate poverty and bureaucratic tyranny.

The idea that a system so antithetical to human freedom could be described as *any* form of a workers’ state is to betray everything that Marx and Engels stood for - you can guarantee that they would have regarded the Pyongyang regime with the deepest disgust. Yet some of our Trotskyist friends still insist on doing precisely that, merely because you have a nationalised economy (‘proletarian property forms’) and extreme statification of social life. By this criteria both Pharaonic Egypt and Inca Peru were also workers’ states - an obvious anti-Marxist nonsense. None of these societies, past or present, represent working class socialism or a *positive* supersession of capitalism and the beginning of the transition to global communism ●

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