

A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity



weekly **worker**



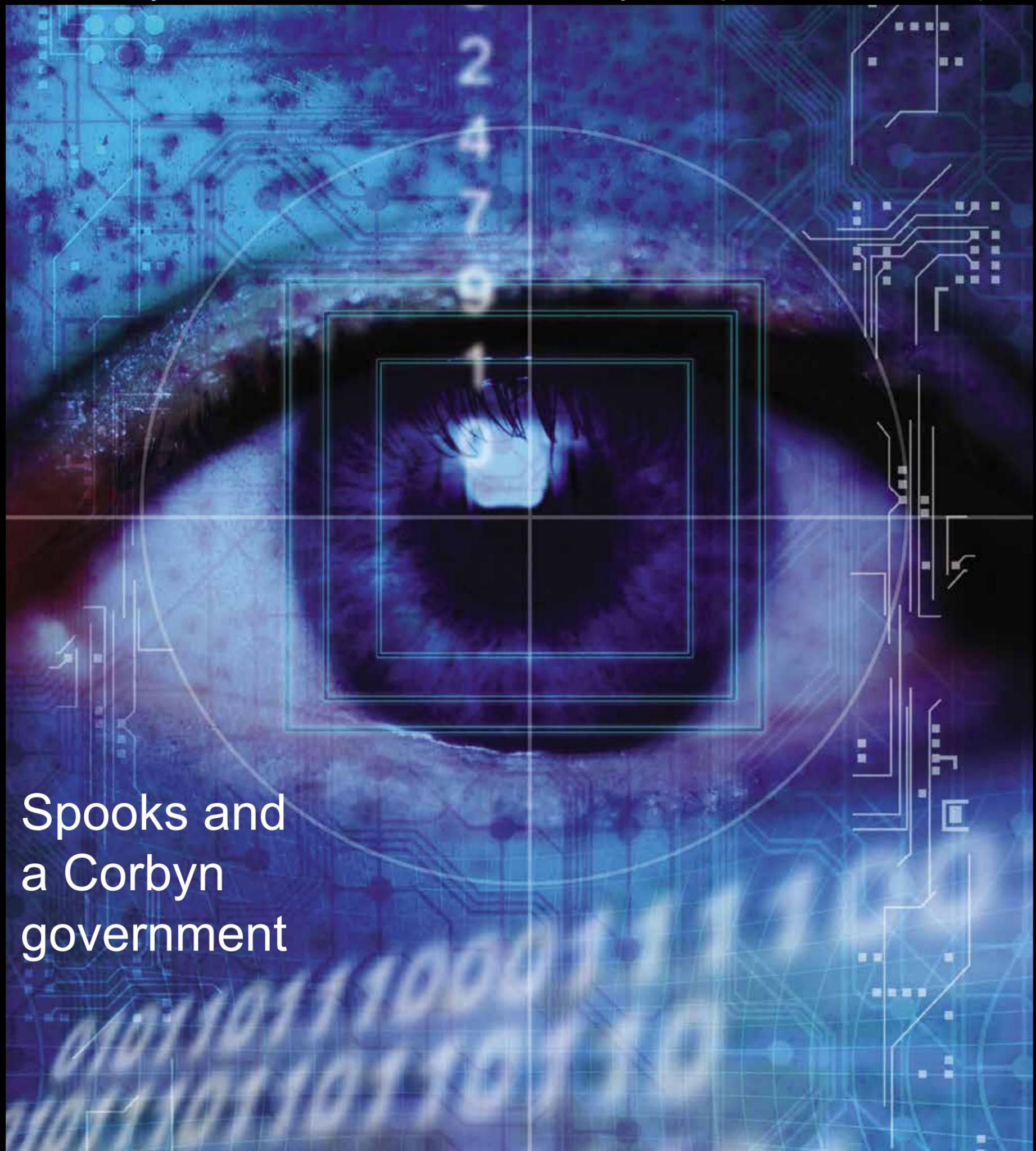
**Supplement: Paul Le Blanc
joins the debate on April
1917 and 'rearming the party'**

- Letters and debate
- Fund boost
- Kill all normies
- Labour witch-hunt

No 1176 Thursday October 26 2017

Towards a Communist Party of the European Union

£1/€1.10



Spooks and
a Corbyn
government

LETTERS



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

Chronic

Stan Keable affects a slightly but unconvincingly anguished and self-righteous tone in his letter (October 5), in which he advises that he has been - and presumably soon other identified members of Labour Party Marxists will be - expelled from the Labour Party.

Stan confirms that the reasons for the expulsions are that the aims and principles of LPM are incompatible with Labour Party membership and that it is a front organisation for the 'Communist Party of Great Britain' - a rival and (and using Labour's own terminology) hostile political party.

But these grounds are surely entirely correct and sound. The *Weekly Worker* group (WWG) - aka the 'CPGB' - is without question a tightly organised political party with its own aims and objectives, which are in straight contradiction to those of Labour and the members of which owe their primary loyalty to the WWG and not the Labour Party.

The WWG has in relatively recent decades 'entered', created disruption, antagonism and hostility, then left, successively, the Socialist Labour Party, Socialist Alliance, Respect and Left Unity. Despite calling itself 'communist', it has continuously used the classic Trotskyist *modus operandi* of chronic enteritis, targeting and entering various larger political formations, ostensibly with the aim of winning the larger group to its political positions, but in reality to create a platform for itself, make a noise and impact somewhat greater than its numbers, and to leave with one or two members more than what it started with.

I personally find the history of Trotskyism, its factionalism and splitting, its enteritis, bile and antagonisms, its opportunism, wild changes in line and tactics, absurd, deeply flawed and unpleasant leading 'personalities', to be sickening and off-putting. The great majority of Labour members and trade unionists may well feel similarly. Faced with the WWG, with its new LPM cover and sheen, now trying to 'enter' it, it is hardly surprising the Labour Party has decided to act against both.

I agree that the Labour Party should admit to individual and affiliated membership those whose politics are Marxist, of various hues and descriptions, that such comrades should be allowed to organise openly within the Labour Party, to develop their views and policies, and to democratically seek to win wider support within the Labour Party and beyond. I further agree that we should aim to persuade the Labour Party to allow a wide range of political, socialist and communist organisations to affiliate to it, and for these and their members to openly and democratically try and win support for their views.

But the key points are to do so openly and democratically, and not as some secret conspiracy to subvert its constitution and democratic basis.

The Labour Party is entitled to ask individual members, affiliated supporters and affiliated organisations to endorse and support its overarching aims, objectives and programme. If they can't do so, they should not seek to join and shouldn't be upset if they join under patently false pretences, get found out and are then removed.

If we regard Labour as the mass electoral party of the organised working class, it is even more important that socialist and communist partisans of the working class show appropriate and genuine respect for the constitution and programme of the Labour Party. They/we should seek to open up and change these bases of the Labour Party

through open and frank political debate and argument, to persuade the various types of membership to carry out such changes through conviction and understanding, so that these will help promote the immediate and longer-term interests of the labour movement and the working class.

I am a communist because I believe fundamentally in the need to replace capitalism by communism, starting with socialism. That this replacement has to be effected through revolutionary means, the overthrow of the capitalist state and its replacement by a transitional state of the working class. And that, in order to progress these aims, one needs a political party committed in theory and practice to carry them out.

So, as an individual I can't and shouldn't try and join the Labour Party. If the Labour Party at some point in the future decides to allow the affiliation of communist and socialist organisations and parties, that would be a great step forward, but the Labour Party itself has to come to those conclusions.

I don't know if it will be possible to transform Labour into a genuine party of the whole working class or, as the *Weekly Worker* terms it, a permanent united front of the working class. If this is a Trotsky phrase, he got one thing right, and one less than the proverbial stopped clock. I certainly would not want as an individual or member of a communist party to 'bet the farm' by joining Labour on the off-chance.

The WWG would in my view far better serve its own aims and objectives by operating openly as a group/party, using the *Weekly Worker* to express its views and analyses, and working openly alongside the Labour Party and others to try and achieve political, practical and organisational unity. Chronic enteritis is actually far more damaging and debilitating to those who live by it than those who periodically have to suffer it.

Andrew Northall
Kettering

Incompatibility

So transforming Labour into a socialist party is incompatible with continued membership, is it?

What does this mean? I can think of two reasons. Firstly, Labour is already a socialist party. Its further transformation is therefore unnecessary. Secondly, Labour has never been a socialist party. The attempt to transform it into something different is therefore unnatural. Put differently, Labour is a pro-capitalist party of modest reform, which aims to manage the national economy more efficiently and fairly.

These apparently opposing positions interpenetrate through a bourgeois understanding of 'socialism'. If 'socialism' means the more efficient form of management of a national economy (through, say, public ownership and a welfare state), then Labour has always been both 'socialist' and pro-capitalist.

In which case, it is the Marxist understanding of socialism that is incompatible with continued membership. 'Socialism' for Marxists means a classless, moneyless, stateless society on a global scale. If Labour were to adopt this understanding, it would contradict its aim to revive growth within a declining and stagnant capitalism and improve the conditions of workers on a national scale. The latter goal is a step on the road to socialism only for committed Stalinists. Otherwise, Labour leaders will characterise the Marxist goal as fanciful, unrealisable and potentially dangerous.

Does this explain why being associated with the *Morning Star* and the Communist Party of Britain is compatible with membership, but any association with *Weekly Worker* and the CPGB is incompatible? If so, then leaders are enforcing discrimination

in favour of Stalinism and renewing Labour's historical antipathy to Marxism,

Paul B Smith
Ormskirk

Opportunists

This will be my last letter in my exchange with Jack Conrad. There seems little point in discussing any longer, as Conrad refuses to engage with the substantive points that I make. Instead he questions both my mental health and my credentials as a political activist. Alongside this goes a style of 'debate' based on blatant distortion of what I say and bald assertions supported, at best, by out-of-context quote-mongering.

I apologise to readers of the *Weekly Worker* for my intemperate tone, but it is impossible to stay civil with this political charlatan, who masquerades as some kind of Marxist theoretician for his followers in the CPGB.

It is simply absurd to say that I "casually dismiss Bolshevik democratic centralism". Conrad and I have a disagreement over what constitutes the appropriate organisational principles for political groups claiming to apply 'democratic centralism'. For my viewpoint, it is Conrad who dismisses the reality of Bolshevik democratic centralism, but where would simply asserting that get me, other than a personal feeling of smug self-satisfaction and superiority (those who know Conrad in real life will know what I am referring to)?

Conrad referred to Lenin's 1906 pithy phrase, "freedom of criticism and unity in action", as summarising what Conrad believes should be the organisational basis for Bolshevik organisation across the ages. In fact, Lenin was referring to a specific organisation - the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party. This was a party which united socialists from across the reformist to revolutionary spectrum. Lenin's advice for the organisational norms of such a party tells us absolutely nothing about the internal norms appropriate for a group of Bolsheviks - not then in 1906 as a faction within the RSDLP; certainly not as a separate party that had integrated the historic betrayal of August 1914 and was to lead the revolution in 1917; and absolutely not for a propaganda grouplet in 2017.

And then back to more unsubstantiated slander, as Conrad describes the organisational framework I think is tactically sensible at this time as "bureaucratic centralism". Let us peel a few layers of that little onion.

The CPGB are only too happy to proudly proclaim their discipline as an organisation, when it comes to political activity they describe as 'actions' such as voting. To slightly change Conrad's lovely turn of phrase back against him, the CPGB has an approach of "Except when granted special permission, members of the sect are required to act like robots and blindly carry out the leadership line."

"Bureaucratic centralism" - if the term is to have any useful meaning rather than just being one of Conrad's throw-away put-downs - refers to an organisation which comes to the decisions about how it decides to act in the world as a group through some kind of undemocratic means. Whatever political faults anyone may think I have, encouraging or facilitating undemocratic decision-making processes in workers' organisations is not one of them. I would challenge Conrad to provide evidence to the contrary, but I hardly expect him to start tothering with providing proof for his accusations at this late stage in our exchange.

The difference between our understandings of the term 'democratic centralism' has nothing to do with bureaucratic versus democratic decision-making. It is whether the content of political arguments we make

to try to convince others in the workers' movement to take particular actions should be subject to democratic decision-making process, as it does to political activity like voting.

The reality is that, like other propaganda grouplets, the main political activity carried out by CPGB members is making political arguments. Bizarrely, they see it as a virtue that their main political activity is not bound by collective democratic decision-making processes. Conrad can rightly harangue me for my ineffectiveness in building a mass revolutionary workers' party - but he should be careful inside his glass house.

I can agree with Conrad that the dominance on the left of bureaucratic centralism, in the true sense of the term, is indeed a hindrance to the development of a revolutionary Marxist party. But I think it is facile to propose a particular set of organisational norms as a secret bullet that can solve that conundrum - be that Conrad's understanding of 'democratic centralism' or my own. I would argue that of far greater importance is the issue of the core political principles of Marxism - what they are and whether they are consistently applied in the day-to-day political programme and actions of individual Marxists and their organisations.

In those terms, the CPGB actually suffer from the same malaise as most of the left - although, uniquely, they have chosen to wear their disjunction between stated principles and concrete programme and actions as a badge of honour rather than trying to hide it like most other opportunists.

I am not going to waste time rehashing old arguments about the context of Marx and his supporters sometimes seeing a role for what they understood to be progressive sections of the bourgeoisie in particular situations in the 1800s, other than to ask, is Conrad really arguing that doing so is still relevant in advanced capitalist countries in the 21st century?

But I have to take exception to Conrad's conflation of these examples from the mid-1800s with Lenin's and Trotsky's tactics towards bourgeois workers' parties in the post-1917 world. I suppose on one level it is instructive to note that in doing this Conrad makes it clear that he sees no difference between outright bourgeois parties and bourgeois workers' parties.

As regards the Trotsky quote, it is hard to get a complete context for it, as Trotsky wrote very little on China before he started actively opposing participation of the Chinese Communist Party in the Kuomintang after 1925. But Conrad is probably right that my position means I think Trotsky was wrong to say this.

Interestingly, I have allies for this in the form of the leadership of the CCP at the time, including those who would go on to become Trotskyists. See for instance the following from 'How Stalin-Bukharin destroyed the Chinese revolution' by Tchen Du Hsiu:

"At that time, all the five members of the central committee of the Chinese CP - Lee-Shu Chang, Chang Teh Li, Tsai Ho Sung, Kan Chiun Yu and I - unanimously opposed the proposal [to join the Kuomintang in 1922]. The chief reason was: To join the Kuo Min Tang was to confuse the class organisations and curb our independent policy."

However, to answer Conrad's direct question, my apparent difference with Trotsky over what the CCP should have done in 1922 is obviously not enough for me to brand Trotsky as an "unrepentant opportunist", as I do with Conrad.

Trotsky's record of concretely fighting for working class political independence against what we now describe as popular fronts shows a clear balance sheet in one direction - as does that of Lenin and Marx, as I understand it.

On the other hand, as I pointed out in my previous letters, Conrad and his CPGB acolytes have made giving

political support to popular frontist blocs a consistent policy, which they wear as a badge of honour. I therefore think that 'unrepentant opportunists' is a completely accurate description.

Alan Gibson
Cork, Ireland

Prostration

Tony Greenstein cannot get his head around our critique of 'third campism' (Letters, October 19). To assist him, we would point to Marx's and Engels' support of the Irish against the UK and the Poles against Russia, although these struggles were mainly led by Catholic reactionaries.

Subsequently, Lenin supported the Rifian leader Abd el-Krim in Morocco against Spain and France in the 1920s. On September 30 1924, the Action Committee of the Youth of France and Spain appealed to French soldiers: "Comrade soldiers, the cause the Moroccans defend is also your cause. You are the enemies of French and Spanish capitalism, just as Abd el-Krim and his followers are. The defeat of Primo de Rivera is welcomed as much by the mutinous soldiers of Malaga and the striking workers of Barcelona as by the victorious Moroccans."

The parties of French imperialism and social democracy flew the French tricolour against Morocco and even within the Parti Communiste Français there were those who branded el-Krim a reactionary who should not be supported by the 'revolutionary party'. Nevertheless, Lenin's stance persuaded Maurice Thorez to send el-Krim a telegram of support and set up an Action Committee against the War in 1925.

The same stance of Trotsky in 1937 is well known: "It is the duty of all the workers' organisations of China to participate actively and in the front lines of the present war against Japan, without abandoning, for a single moment, their own programme and independent activity." And this despite that fact that "Chiang Kai-shek is the executioner of the Chinese workers and peasants". However, "today he is forced, despite himself, to struggle against Japan for the remainder of the independence of China. Tomorrow he may again betray. It is possible. It is probable. It is even inevitable. But today he is struggling. Only cowards, scoundrels or complete imbeciles can refuse to participate in that struggle."

Jim Grant displayed the same confusion last year: "Gerry's anti-imperialism is, needless to say, confused in the extreme. The confusion stems from exactly where Gerry says it does: Leon Trotsky's policy of critical support to anti-imperialist nationalist forces - most notably Haile Selassie in Ethiopia during the Italian invasion - and his argument that, instead of joining the Chinese nationalist Kuomintang in the 1920s, the communists ought to have fought separately but alongside them against the Japanese. This policy ultimately stems from the anti-imperialist united front advocated by the early Comintern" ('Thin end of the wedge', March 17 2016).

This was totally incorrect because "Selassie was a British client; Trotsky's support effectively meant supporting British imperialism against Italian imperialism... As for China, it is difficult to see how the communists could have suffered less except by fighting the KMT and the Japanese, as they ended up doing anyway." But, crucially, not at the same time. Every bourgeois nationalist regime is a client of some imperialist power before war begins, so Jim has given us a formula for refusing all support to semi-colonial countries attacked, either directly or by proxy, by imperialism. Britain was nowhere on the ground in Ethiopia in 1935. We are grateful to him for his honesty in repudiation of the early Comintern, and implicit rejection of the difference between oppressed and oppressor nations - a key tenet of third-campism.

We also take the opportunity to support Jack Conrad's version of democratic centralism against the International Bolshevik Tendency version of Alan Gibson. Despite our close agreement with Alan on the 1917 revolution, and defence of the crucial role played by Lenin's April theses in rearming the party to defeat the 'old Bolshevism' of Kamenev, Zinoviev and Stalin, the thrust of Conrad's argument is correct. We came to that conclusion years ago and it was reinforced by the fact that Gerry Downing's full appeal against expulsion from the Labour Party was reprinted in the *Weekly Worker* in the interests of discussion ('Due process and justice', March 17 2016). No other group anywhere offered us this facility. We also take this opportunity to oppose the expulsions of Moshé Machover and Stan Keable, "whilst continuing to fight to expose their political errors", as Jim Grant put it last year in opposing Gerry Downing's expulsion.

As for Tony's anti-imperialism, it is risible. He supported the "right of the Iraq people to wage armed resistance against the American and British occupiers", but not any actual group fighting. No "support for one or more particular groups".

They're reactionaries who do terrible things like "genocide of the Yazidis and their enslavement and mass rape and sexual slavery of women". So imperialism's wars on the semi-colonial world can be opposed in theory, but never in practice, because it is unlikely that they will come up to Tony's standards. This amounts to shamefaced support for the civilising mission of imperialism against the 'mad mullahs', the 'savage races' of Africa, not to speak of the 'stupid and drunken Irish', etc, nearer home.

In his letter of March 31 2016, Tony set out his views clearly: "I have no doubt that neither Downing nor Donovan are anti-Semitic in a personal sense and that is why I would not support their expulsion. But at a time when the anti-Zionist left is under attack in the Labour Party and I am under threat of expulsion personally, I would want to have nothing to do with any campaign Gerry might mount against his expulsion. His behaviour and his politics are insupportable and have weakened the position of anti-Zionists in the party, myself included." So, we were partially responsible for Tony's suspension from Labour - 'they came for the Trotskyists, but I was not a Trotskyist'.

On April 7 2016, Tony referred to a Zionist bigot respectfully in *Weekly Worker*: "Jonathan Freedland, a senior *Guardian* journalist, set the tone with an article which used the idiocy of one Labour Party member, Vicky Kirby, and the stupidity of Gerry Downing to tar the left in the party as anti-Semitic." But by then he had materially contributed to his own suspension and to the expulsion of Gerry Downing from the Labour Representation Committee for anti-Semitism, subsequently rescinded. He went to Stalinism's *Morning Star* on April 14 to denounce the "idiot Trotskyist", Gerry Downing, by distorting our position: "Yet what is the evidence (of anti-Semitism)? A two-year-old tweet about Jews having large noses and an idiot Trotskyist, Gerry Downing, who believes that there is a cabal of Zionist capitalists who run the foreign policy of Britain and the US."

Norman Finkelstein, the famous Jewish anti-Zionist, debunked the main thrust of this nonsense at Communist University that year and answered some of the distortions against us, as we observed in this paper that year: "Of course, the activities of the Zionist lobby, of Jewish bourgeois, like for instance Sheldon Adelson, were examples of ethnic influence in US bourgeois politics. Of course, 'Jewish lobbies' (the term he [Finkelstein] used) had influence in US politics, and, on matters not fundamental to US imperialist interests, could force adoption of policies that are irrational from the point of view of the interests of US imperialism. Of course, there was

no US interest in associating themselves with the most egregious atrocities of the Israeli right, but they frequently do" (Letters, August 25 2016).

Labour Party Marxists took a principled stance in Gerry Downing's defence when the witch-hunt had claimed some big scalps: "Calls for the immediate lifting of all of the suspensions and expulsions from Labour Party membership in any way connected to the 'anti-Semitism' smear campaign and witch-hunt. That includes Jackie Walker, Ken Livingstone, Tony Greenstein, Gerry Downing and numerous other supporters of the Palestinian cause" ('Banned motion', November 17 2016).

Tony says: "They [Socialist Fight] are right to say that the US ruling class treats Israel as if it were an adjunct of their own state. They are right to say that the relationship of Israel to the United States is different from that of the US to any other state. But it is not right to suggest that this is a product of the Jewish composition of the US ruling class. If anything, the latter is a consequence of the US's relationship with Israel, not its cause."

This seems to mean that the Jewish component of the US ruling class is a product of the founding of Israel. Was this how Jews became up to 48% of the US billionaires, or 51 of the most powerful people in the world, according to the *Jerusalem Post* in 2010, quoting *Vanity Fair*? The Rothschilds are estimated to be the richest family in the world and they arose in Germany in the late 1700s. Is that another anti-Semitic fact? Best call it a trope - the word Zionists use to dismiss factual evidence of their power or excuse slaughter of Palestinians. We recommend again Abram Leon's *On the Jewish question* for a materialist explanation of how this happened.

Gerry Downing and Ian Donovan
Socialist Fight

UK fascism

Trotsky famously wrote that the massed ranks of the fascists are made up of impoverished small businessmen, the peasantry and the long-term unemployed. In Britain today, small businessmen are yet to go bust on a mass scale, the peasantry doesn't exist and unemployment is a revolving door, with people going in and out of work.

I have a relative who works as a maintenance fitter in a food processing factory. He reads the *Daily Mail* and admires Jacob Rees-Mogg and Donald Trump. He also admires Tommy Robinson, former leader of the English Defence League. My relative is pro-Brexit and anti-European Union; he hates Muslims and says that the left is anti-Semitic and anti-democratic.

My relative is obviously being brainwashed by the *Daily Mail*. However, the idea that the left are the anti-Semites and anti-democrats is also used by the far right. For example, earlier this month the Football Lads Alliance had a demonstration of 15,000 in London, where the march was organised on the slogan, 'Against extremism'.

Did Hitler use the lie that it is the fascists who are the democrats and the left the anti-democrats, as part of the rise to power of the Nazi Party in the early 1930s?

John Smithee
Cambridgeshire

Learn from 1917

'Revolution then and revolution now' was the title of the October 21 one-day conference in Liverpool on the significance of the Russian Revolution, organised by supporters of the socialist journal *Critique* and members of the Socialist Study Group on Merseyside. Thirty people took part in discussions throughout the day on topics such as the historical context of 1917, the impact of the revolution on Britain and Ireland in the years 1917-24, and the broader lessons of the revolutionary period for working class militants in the contemporary world.

Whilst all the sessions and opening contributions were designed to deal with different aspects of the revolution, of

necessity during the discussions certain common themes emerged. David Lowes opened the day with an introductory session on 'The revolution in historical context', which looked at the nature of Russian society in 1917 and the impact of World War I on the politics and consciousness of the masses. Drawing on a number of contemporary accounts by British and American observers, such as Arthur Ransome, Louise Bryant, Ernest Poole and Bessie Beatty, Dave gave us a real feel for the drama and scale of the revolution in the years that followed. Both in his talk and the subsequent discussion, the role of the workers and peasants in building a new form of society and the development of revolutionary consciousness were key strands.

Kevin Bean's session on the political effects of the revolution on Britain continued in the same vein. Whilst Kevin outlined what would have been familiar ground for many comrades in his description of British capitalism's hostility to the Bolsheviks and active intervention against the new Soviet state, his contribution stressed how both the British bourgeoisie and the labour movement had to come to terms with a radically new political situation that had been created internationally by 1917.

Focussing on the different contemporary interpretations of the nature of the soviet as both a means of revolutionary struggle and an organ of state power, the discussion went on to look at how events in Russia in the 1920s forced Marxists in Britain to define what they meant by 'revolution' and how they understood the importance of the self-organisation of the working class in transforming society.

The main sessions of the day, however, were introduced by Hillel Ticktin and Raquel Varela. Although speaking on the same topic - 'The significance of the revolution today' - they looked at different aspects of the issue. Hillel considered the impact of the revolution and its legacy for politics internationally in an era of capitalist decline and transition. In a wide-ranging survey of the development of capitalism in the hundred years since 1917, he discussed the contradictory role of war as both an instrument of capitalist policy and an accelerator of revolution. Hillel went on to suggest that the Russian Revolution had lasting consequences for the nature of capitalism itself, given that the bourgeoisie had been forced to make concessions to the working class, such as extending the franchise in Britain in 1918, along with all the other social and economic reforms that followed throughout the 20th century.

Other lasting consequences that emerged in the discussion were the impact of Bolshevik support for national self-determination on the break-up of the European empires and the political trajectory of social democracy as a partner in stabilising capitalist rule. Raquel Varela's contribution took up some of these themes in a comparison between 1917 and the Portuguese revolution (1974-75). Although forms of dual power and soviets emerged in Portugal in this period, she stressed that the key difference between the two events was the lack of a Bolshevik leadership. Not only was there no revolutionary group able to develop further the political consciousness that a failing colonial war and the patterns of economic change had created, but the dominant parties of the working class - the socialists and 'official communists' - acted to contain and neuter the emerging revolutionary forces in Portugal.

In the discussion that followed, comrades debated the nature of revolutionary consciousness, the factors that bring it into being and the revolutionary strategy we should employ in contemporary Britain. This was a truly wide-ranging end to the day and contributions and questions touched on everything from the poisonous legacy of Stalinism through to the significance of Corbynism!

James Harvey
Labour Party Marxists

ACTION

London Communist Forum

Sunday October 29, 5pm: Weekly political report from CPGB Provisional Central Committee, followed by open discussion and reading group: study of August Nimtz's *Lenin's electoral strategy from Marx and Engels through the revolution of 1905*. This meeting: chapter 2, 'Revolutionary continuity' (continued).
Calthorpe Arms, 252 Grays Inn Road, London WC1.
Organised by CPGB: www.cpgb.org.uk; and Labour Party Marxists: www.labourpartymarxists.org.uk.

Radical Anthropology Group

Tuesday October 31, 6.45pm: Series of talks on human origins, Daryl Forde seminar room, Anthropology Building, 14 Taviton Street, off Gordon Square, London WC1. This meeting: 'Between heaven and earth: the skyscapes of Iberian megaliths'. Speaker: Fabio Silva.
Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: <http://radicalanthropologygroup.org>.

Social histories of the Russian Revolution

Thursday October 26, 6.30pm: Discussion meeting, Birkbeck, University of London, 26 Russell Square, London WC1. '1917: a century on' - debate. Speakers include Simon Pirani.
Organised by Social Histories of the Russian Revolution: <https://socialhistories1917.wordpress.com>.

Free speech on Palestine

Thursday October 26, 7pm: Public meeting, Queens Crescent Community Centre, 45 Ashdown Crescent, London NW5. Speakers include Moshé Machover.
Organised by Camden Momentum: www.facebook.com/MomentumCamden.

Labour Assembly Against Austerity

Saturday October 28, 10am to 5pm: Conference, Student Central, Malet Street, London WC1.
Organised by Labour Assembly Against Austerity: <http://labourassemblyagainstausterity.org.uk>.

October revolution: 100 years on

Wednesday November 1, 7.30pm: Political discussion, Partick Burgh Halls, 9 Burgh Hall Street, Glasgow G11. The October Revolution, its legacy and the lessons for socialists today. Speaker: Hillel Ticktin.
Organised by Labour Party Socialist Network: <http://socialistnetwork.org.uk>.

Impact on the Middle East

Thursday November 2, 7.30pm: Play, Marple Methodist Church, Church Lane, Stockport. Performance of *Consequences: the trial of Arthur James Balfour* by Warren Bardsley. The repercussions of the Middle East of Balfour's 67-word document. Free admission.
Recommended by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: www.palestinecampaign.org/events/play-consequences-trial-arthur-james-balfour.

Save NHS together!

Saturday November 4, 11am to 4.30pm: Joint conference of NHS campaigns, Hammersmith Town Hall, 1 Riverside Gardens, London W6.
Organised by Health Campaigns Together: www.healthcampaignstogether.com.

Make it right for Palestine

Saturday November 4, 12 noon: National march and rally. Assemble Speakers Corner, Marble Arch, London W2.
Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: www.palestinecampaign.org.

Kurdish opposition to IS and Assad

Wednesday November 8, 7pm: Public meeting, committee room 6, Council House, Victoria Square, Birmingham B1. Speaker: Chris Paling, Veterans for Peace.
Organised by Stop the War Coalition: www.stopwar.org.uk.

The Bolshevik Revolution

Saturday November 11, 1pm: Discussion, the Red Shed, Vicarage Street, Wakefield. Admission free, including light buffet.
Organised by Wakefield Socialist History Group: www.theredshed.org.uk/SocialHist.html.

For Palestine

Sunday November 26, 2pm to 6pm: Festival, Somers Town Community Centre, 134 Charlton Street, London NW1. With music, readings, speeches.
Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: www.palestinecampaign.org.

Remember John Maclean

Sunday November 26, 1pm: Graveside commemoration, Eastwood Cemetery, Thornliebank Road, Glasgow G4 (near Thornliebank station). Followed by social, St Mary's church hall, 150 Shawhill Road, Glasgow G43.
Organised by Scottish Republican Socialist Movement: <http://scottishrepublicans.myfreeforum.org>.

Labour's support for Zionism

Tuesday November 28, 7pm: Meeting, 1st floor, The Wellington, 37 Bennetts Hill, Birmingham B2. Speaker: Paul Kelemen.
Organised by Birmingham Socialist Discussion Group: 07771 567496.

Britain and the Russian Revolution

Thursday December 7, 7pm: Discussion, Marx Memorial Library, 37A Clerkenwell Green, London EC1. Speaker: Mary Davis.
Organised by Marx Memorial Library: www.marx-memorial-library.org.

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.

LABOUR

Spooks and a Corbyn government

Neither the secret state nor the armed forces have undergone any kind of fundamental change, warns **Jack Conrad**. They remain a clear and present danger



Writing in *The Guardian*, Paul Mason, the “leftwing British commentator”¹ and journalist, defends himself against former MI5 director general Stella Rimington.² Dame Stella told the Cheltenham Literature Festival that those - ie, the “Communist Party of Great Britain and various Trotskyite organisations” - who her spies were “looking at” during the 1980s are now ensconced deep inside the Labour Party.³ In point of fact, Jeremy Corbyn, who was himself targeted by MI5, nowadays not only leads the Labour Party: he is widely seen as the prime minister in waiting.

Mason suggests that he too was probably under surveillance by Dame Stella and MI5 - and he is probably right. “I was on the far left” in the 1980s, says Mason. Indeed he boasts of the fine causes he supported: the steel, miners and print strikes; opposition to the Falklands war and the first Iraq war; the Birmingham Six, Guildford Four and the Stephen Lawrence family.

However, throughout this time MI5 did more than just “find out who” people on the left “were”, as Rimington innocently maintained at Cheltenham. No, declares Mason, the job of MI5 was to bug, burgle and “disrupt the left’s activities”.⁴

However, he fawningly protests that his youthful self had no wish to “destroy the democratic system”. The whole MI5 ethos of “countersubversion” was, he explains, completely misdirected. The idea that he, the left, the miners, environmental protest groups, etc, wanted to “destroy the democratic system” amounts to “pure paranoia”. If it had been true that the left wanted to do that, then the thousands of hours of intelligence work at the time would have led to “arrests and trials”.

Well, thankfully, Paul, that is hardly the case, is it? Wanting to “destroy the democratic system” does not in itself, at least at the moment, count as a criminal offence. Leave aside the left for the moment - take Hizb ut-Tahrir (Britain): it remains a legal political organisation, despite advocating “the Islamic Khilafah (Caliphate)” state.⁵

Obviously, Mason is determined to

paint the 1980s left - crucially himself - in the most acceptable pale pink hues:

Whatever it said in the turgid, theory-laden journals the left published, what we wanted was a left Labour government. We believed it would have to be supported by extra-parliamentary action if sabotaged by the deep state. The politicisation of policing during the miners’ strike reinforced that view.

True, when he was a member of the less-turgid-than-usual Trotskyite group, Workers Power, Mason and his comrades might have called for a left Labour government (though from memory that line was dropped in the early 1990s). But the objective was never a left Labour government as an end in itself. No, the objective was “the destruction of all forms of bourgeois rule, including the democratic form”. Instead of the “parliamentary talking shop”, the comrades posed the necessity of “organisations of proletarian democracy”.⁶ Although a rather crude formulation, the revolutionary spirit is admirable.

Having been a leading member of Workers Power in the 1980s and 90s, till recently Mason espoused a rather eccentric, anarcho-utopian techno-protestism (see his 2015 book, *Postcapitalism: a guide to our future*). Almost every ephemeral city square occupation and street demonstration was very, very, very excitedly equated with the 1871 Paris Commune.

Nowadays though, Mason prefers to describe himself as a “radical social democrat”. However, having completely abandoned any kind of Marxism, he is determined to cover his past footprints and put on display his complete surrender, his grovelling loyalty to the British “democratic system” (read, the existing state, the existing constitutional order and the existing capitalist system of exploitation).

To prove his acceptability Mason presents three arguments.

1. Workers Power was essentially a mere subvariety of left reformism. It supported

**‘The Doughnut’
GCHQ is collecting your data
and mine on a vast scale**

**Stella Rimington and the
spies will not bury the
paranoia despite Paul
Mason’s pleas**

some controversial causes, but certainly intended no threat to the British “democratic system”.

2. There was, though, “a clear national security rationale”, when it came to the old CPGB. It was “logical to ask whether Soviet intelligence was trying to manipulate it”, says Mason. In fact, since its formation in 1920 the old CPGB had direct, fraternal relations with those who ran the Soviet state. It was, therefore, presumably a threat to the “democratic system”. Till maybe the 1968 events in Czechoslovakia the CPGB operated as an arm of Soviet foreign policy. KGB manipulation had nothing to do with it. The King Street apparatus, the *Morning Star* and numerous fronts benefited from generous transfers of ‘Moscow gold’. Despite that, when he was a member of Workers Power, Paul Mason would never have dreamt of excusing MI5 bugging, burglary and disruption.

3. The British state has undergone a fundamental change. The 1980s “world is gone”, announces Mason in the spirit of the true philistine.

Gone?

Obviously, Mason is right: the 1980s have gone. The same goes, however, for the present. Each nanosecond that passes instantly becomes the past. But the past

lives not just in the fleeting present - it floods into the future. The real question here, however, is not philosophical, but political.

Has the British state undergone some fundamental change since the 1980s? Or is there seamless continuity? Mason claims that there has been a break, though he does so in a manner that is so naive that it is impossible to believe that he actually takes seriously what he writes (his stupidity does not stem from any innate stupidity).

With the “Human Rights Act, the creation of a supreme court and the operational policing changes in the aftermath of the Macpherson report”, we are assured by Mason that the “the legal framework around policing and intelligence has tightened”. Touchingly, because of such window-dressing, he tells us that there is “zero chance of an extra-judicial reaction to a leftwing Labour government” - the scenario depicted in Chris Mullin’s novel *A very British coup* (1982). From top to bottom, the UK’s armed forces, security services and police are “acutely aware” of the “constraints on their activities” imposed by the rule of law.

Mason continues in the same thoroughly unradical manner:

The law enforcement culture that allowed undercover cops to perpetrate abuses is, we must assume, gone. Likewise, by implication, the culture that allowed MI5 to “destabilise and sabotage” an entirely legal trade union [that is, the National Union of Mineworkers in 1984-85 - JC] must be assumed to have gone. When a serving army general told the *Sunday Times* in September 2015 that “the army wouldn’t stand for” a Corbyn government, few people took it seriously.

The implication is that it is right to lightly dismiss the threat of an army coup from a serving army general. Yet, having not quite managed to convince even himself, Mason resorts to offering Danegeld. Stepping into John McDonnell’s shoes as the future chancellor, he promises that the “police, armed forces and intelligence



services stand to be better funded and staffed under a Labour government than the present one". So Mason's operative slogan amounts to more money, more personnel, more resources for a state machine that in the 1980s bugged, burgled and disrupted - and surely still bugs, burgles and disrupts.

Attempting to justify this generous offer, today's Paul Mason resorts to bog-standard patriotism: "our country" is under threat: from Islamic State and other terrorist organisations; from Vladimir Putin's Russia, "which is waging hybrid warfare on all western democracies"; from other state actors, "such as with the alleged Iranian cyber-attack on parliament".

For today's Paul Mason the security services "are our first line of defence and they need our support". But, it must be emphasised, they act not only against the enemy without. The security services target the enemy within too. Hence they systematically spied on the Communist Party and "various Trotskyite organisations". The security services did the same with prominent labour movement individuals, such as Tony Benn, Arthur Scargill, Jeremy Corbyn and Diane Abbott. And, of course, the security services famously sought to undermine the Labour government of Harold Wilson, placed the *agent provocateur*, Roger Windsor, in the NUM and assassinated members and supporters of the IRA. That included Pat Finucane, the human rights lawyer killed in 1989 by loyalist paramilitaries, acting in collusion with MI5.

Then there are the police and special forces. For today's Paul Mason they "stand ready to deal with situations such as the London Bridge attack". Yet, as proven by the steel, print and - above all - the miners' Great Strike, they also stand ready to do battle with and blatantly lie about militant trade unionists and their supporters. During the course of 1984-85 around 11,000 miners were arrested - six out of 10 on bogus charges.⁷

What about bugging? We live nowadays in the age of the mass data interception and the mass storage of data. Thanks to Edward Snowden, we know for a fact that MI5, MI6 and GCHQ routinely hoovers up the telephone and internet activity of millions upon millions of people. And, despite strenuous objections, in November 2016, parliament passed the Investigatory Powers Bill into law. The so-called 'snoopers charter' puts the secret state's digital mass surveillance and hacking activities onto a firm legal footing.

As for disruption, it has recently been disclosed that undercover police agents spied upon and used false identities to infiltrate 1,000 political groups and campaigns since 1968.⁸ Do such operations still go on? The Investigatory Powers Tribunal reported that there had been 1,019 complaints about MI5 and undercover police operations between 2011 and 2015.

Despite all such evidence, today's Paul Mason complacently tells us that attempts to smear a Corbyn-led government will be "shrugged off" by the electorate and "easily exposed". Hence his "advice" to Stella Rimington to "stop replaying the 80s, get on with the 21st century and cease trying to manipulate legacy intelligence for political ends".

Nevertheless, contradictorily, the willingness of the secret state to "bury the paranoia" matters - so runs Mason's final argument - because a "new kind of radical social democracy stands on the brink of government". It - ie, the Corbyn-led Labour Party (well, certainly he - ie, Paul Mason) - wants to save British capitalism from "wage stagnation, grotesque inequalities of wealth and the kamikaze mission of a no-deal Brexit".

So what really seems to have gone is not the 1980s MI5 which bugged,

burgled and disrupted. It is the 1980s Paul Mason - he has gone over to "radical social democracy" and the project of saving capitalism from itself.

Monarchs and coups

The possibility of a Corbyn-led Labour Party gaining the biggest bloc of MPs, or even a House of Commons majority, is real. However, in my view, it would be foolish indeed to imagine that this automatically translates into putting Jeremy Corbyn into No10 Downing Street and John McDonnell into No11 Downing Street.

Under the provisions of the royal prerogative it is the monarch who appoints the prime minister. Not the House of Commons and definitely not the membership of this or that party. It might well be a constitutional convention that the monarch calls upon the leader of the biggest party to form a government. It is certainly the case that the new prime minister must be able to command a House of Commons majority and be able to form a cabinet. Yet, when the leadership of a party is in doubt, the role of the monarch becomes decisive.

Some notable examples. When in 1894 William Gladstone stepped down, Queen Victoria passed over what were then widely considered the superior claims of Sir William Harcourt. She invited Lord Rosebery to become prime minister. Similarly, when Conservative prime minister Bonar Law resigned in 1923, George V opted for Stanley Baldwin, not Lord Curzon, who had previously served as deputy prime minister.⁹

More significantly, in terms of relevance to our times, there are the actions of George V in 1931. In the August of that year the Labour cabinet, which held office thanks to Liberal Party support, faced an unprecedented economic crisis. Not only was there the closure of mines, ship yards, factories and steel mills and, consequentially, soaring unemployment: there was a collapse of the pound sterling. The banks, treasury officials and international creditors demanded a programme of savage austerity. Specifically reductions in the pay of government employees, including the military, and cuts to the already meagre dole payments made available to the unemployed.

The Labour cabinet found itself irretrievably split and agreed that the prime minister, Ramsay MacDonald, should tender his resignation to the king. MacDonald duly went to the palace. The general expectation was that the Tories under Baldwin would form a government with Liberal support. However, at the suggestion of the Liberal leader, Sir Herbert Samuel, the king invited MacDonald to continue in office, but now as head of a grand coalition with the Tories and Liberals. The new government would, of course, force through the necessary economies and save the country.

In the Labour cabinet only Philip Snowden and JH Thomas agreed to enter the new government. They and other supporters of MacDonald formed the National Labour Organisation. After initial shilly-shallying the Labour Party itself denounced the whole project, but went on, in the October 1931 general election, to suffer a crushing defeat - the biggest landslide in British history. Parties supporting the national government won 556 seats: a 500 majority. Labour slumped from 287 seats to a mere 52.

The lessons for our times are surely obvious. Under conditions of a possible 'cliff-edge' Brexit crisis, and maybe even another global financial crisis, a 'Minsky moment' is widely predicted - the idea of the British establishment calmly accepting Jeremy Corbyn as prime minister is problematic, to say the least. Given his past serial rebellions against cuts, his leftwing advisors, such as Seamus Milne and Jon Lansman, his support for the Stop the War Coalition,

the Palestinian cause, etc, the monarch would more than likely be advised to choose another candidate for prime minister.

Obviously it all depends on the parliamentary arithmetic. However, it is possible that the monarch would pass over the present leader of the Labour Party and instead seek out a prime minister who can command a majority of Labour MPs.

We all know that today, even after the June 8 general election, Corbyn would be hard pressed to secure the firm support of 40 Labour MPs. On the other hand, a Sir Kier Starmer, or an Emily Thornberry would be much more agreeable as a prime minister to the Parliamentary Labour Party. At the invitation of the monarch, and with some kind of grand coalition, Britain could thereby be saved from the Brexit disaster ... and, worse: Corbyn and his "warmed-up version of socialism in one country".¹⁰

Such an outcome might cause debilitating demoralisation amongst the Labour rank and file, or it might enrage them, motivate them, propel them further to the left. As far as the CPGB is concerned, the heavy question mark that hangs over the prospect of a Corbyn-led government ought to act as a spur for taking up demands for the automatic reselection of Labour MPs and the thoroughgoing democratisation of the Labour Party, its transformation into a permanent united front of all trade unions and all working class organisations. Programmatically, we envisage refounding the Labour Party on the basis of a new, Marxist clause four.

Of course, it is conceivable that Corbyn would be invited to form a government by the monarch and that his government would proceed to act in the horrible tradition of all previous Labour governments. Today that means Trident renewal, continued Nato membership, maintaining the bulk of the Tory anti-trade unions laws ... and endless austerity.

But if Corbyn stays true to his stated beliefs, if he spurns those siren voices calling upon him to save capitalism from itself, if he attempts to implement a "warmed-up version of socialism in one country", then we can be sure that the forces of the deep state would put their already well-rehearsed contingency plans into operation.

Imagine for one moment that, having deselected the vast majority of sitting Labour MPs, having replaced them with good left reformists (and even a few communists), Corbyn wins a resounding general election majority in 2020. Because of the Human Rights Act, the creation of a supreme court and the armed forces and security services being "acutely aware" of the "constraints on their activities" imposed by the rule of law, are we really expected to believe that there is "zero chance of an extra-judicial reaction"?

Any such suggestion amounts to the purest parliamentary cretinism - a disease that infects reformists of every stripe with the debilitating conviction that the main thing in politics is parliamentary votes.

Crisis of expectations

By 2020 a Corbyn-led Labour Party - if Marxists have had any substantive successes - will be fully committed to *immediately* making up for the loss of income caused by the Osborne-Hammond austerity regime, *immediately* sweeping away all the anti-trade union laws, *immediately* renationalising all privatised industries and concerns, *immediately* ending British involvement with Nato, *immediately* decommissioning Trident, *immediately* abolishing the standing army and *immediately* establishing a citizen militia.

Even without such a bold programme of reform, we can certainly imagine a crisis of expectations. Masses of Labour members and voters are already well

to the left of the 2017 general election manifesto. The prospect of a Labour government - certainly the actual election of a Labour government - could quite conceivably, and probably would, set them into motion as a *class* force. Through their own collective efforts they would seek to put into practice what they *think* a Corbyn-led government really stands for.

Defy the hated anti-trade union laws and win substantial pay increases. Withhold rent payments from grasping landlords. Prevent water, electricity and gas companies cutting off supplies to indebted households. Occupy empty properties and solve the housing crisis at a stroke. March into the giant supermarket chains in order to feed the hungry. Arm ourselves with rudimentary weapons to prevent police attempts to stop and charge us.

Any such a scenario would inevitably provoke a frothing reaction. It is not so much that the ruling class cannot tolerate a Corbyn-led government and its *present-day* programme of renationalising the rails when franchises run out, reviewing PFI contracts, introducing some form of rent controls, repealing the latest (2016) round of Tory anti-trade union legislation and establishing a people's investment bank. Tinkering, safe and, in fact, amongst Keynesian economists perfectly reasonable.

No, it is the enthusiastic reception of Marxist ideas, the rejection of capitalism by Labour members, the recently established dominant position of the left in Labour Party branch and constituency organisations, along with the distinct possibility of a yanking further shift to the left and consequent mass self-activity, that causes ruling class fears. And, have no doubt, fearful they are.

Put together failed negotiations with the EU 27, a no-deal Brexit and, consequently, a severe economic downturn ... and a Corbyn-led government. Such is the stuff that bourgeois nightmares are made of. Under such circumstances, we should expect other - illegal or semi-legal - methods to come to the fore. Fake news, artificially generated scandals, a US-organised run on the pound, civil service sabotage, bomb outrages aided and abetted by the secret state - even a coup of some kind.

Say, following the advice of Paul Mason, the Corbyn-led government stupidly decides to leave MI5, MI6, the police and the standing army intact. Frankly, that would present an open door for a British version of general Augusto Pinochet. In Chile thousands of leftwingers were tortured and killed, and who knows how many, including US citizens, disappeared. The September 11 1973 army coup overthrew the Socialist Party/Communist Party-backed Popular Unity reformist government under president Salvador Allende. That, despite its studiously moderate programme and repeated concessions to the right. CIA fingerprints were, of course, all over the Pinochet coup.¹¹

Already, Tony Blair denounces the idea of a Corbyn government as "a dangerous experiment".¹² Sir Richard Dearlove, former head of MI6, condemns Corbyn as a "danger to this nation" who "wouldn't clear the security vetting".¹³ The *Financial Times* ominously warns that Corbyn's leadership damages Britain's "public life".¹⁴ The *Economist* lambasts Corbyn as a member of the "loony left" and "dangerous" to Britain.¹⁵ Sir Nicholas Houghton, outgoing chief of the defence staff, publicly "worried" on BBC1's *Andrew Marr show* about a Corbyn government.¹⁶ There were carefully placed accompanying press rumours of unnamed members of the army high command being prepared to take "direct action".¹⁷

The armed forces are, of course, an agent of counterrevolution, almost by definition. Failure to understand that elementary fact represents an elementary failure to understand the lessons of history. Legally, culturally, structurally, the British army relies on inculcating an "unthinking obedience" amongst the

lower ranks.¹⁸ And it is run and directed, as we all know, by an officer caste which is trained from birth to hand out orders to the state-school grunts.

Of course, the British army no longer has vexatious conscripts to deal with. Instead recruits join voluntarily seeking "travel and adventure" - followed by "pay and benefit, with job security".¹⁹ Yet, because they live on bases, frequently move and stick closely together socially, members of the armed forces are unhealthily cut off from the wider civilian population and the recent growth of progressive and socialist ideas. Indeed far-right views appear to be all too common - eg, see Army Rumour Service comments about that "anti-British, not very educated, ageing, communist agitating, class-war zealot", Jeremy Corbyn.²⁰

Still the best known exponent of deploying the army against internal "subversives" is brigadier Frank Kitson in his *Low intensity operations* (1971). The left, trade unionists and strikers - they are "the enemy", even if their actions are intended to back up an elected government.²¹ Legally, the "perfect vehicle for such an intervention" would be an order in council.²² After consulting the unelected privy council, the monarch would call a state of emergency and invite the army to restore law and order.

Remember army personnel swear an oath that they "will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, her heirs and successors", and that they will "defend Her Majesty ... against all enemies". And as made crystal clear by Michael Clarke, director of the United Services Institute, this is no mere feudal relic. "The armed forces don't belong to the government - they belong to the monarch," he insists:

And they take this very seriously. When [the Tory] Liam Fox was defence secretary a few years ago, for his first couple of weeks he referred to 'my forces' rather than Her Majesty's forces - as a joke, I think. It really ruffled the military behind the scenes. I heard it from senior people in the army. They told me, "We don't work for him. We work for the Queen."²³

If Corbyn actually makes it into Number 10, there is every reason to believe that threats of "direct action" coming from the high command will take material form. That is why we say: put no trust in the thoroughly authoritarian standing army. No, instead, let us put our trust in a "well regulated militia" and the "right of the people to keep and bear arms" (second amendment to the US constitution) ●

Notes

1. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Mason_(journalist).
2. *The Guardian* October 16 2017.
3. *The Times* October 14 2017.
4. It is worth pointing out that, when it came to the CPGB, "finding out who they were" was integrally bound up with regular acts of breaking and entering. Membership records were kept neatly filed at district offices, not the central HQ. MI5's F branch was responsible for spying on the CPGB and running agents in the organisation.
5. H Ahmed and H Stuart *Hizb ut-Tahrir: ideology and strategy* London 2009, p13.
6. League for a Revolutionary Communist International *The Trotskyist manifesto* London 1989, pp52-53.
7. *The Guardian* December 1 2013.
8. sputniknews.com/military/201707271055927911-uk-police-spied-1000.
9. J Harvey and K Hood *The British state* London 1958, p70.
10. Editorial *Financial Times* October 7 2017.
11. See P Kornbluh *The Pinochet file: a declassified dossier on atrocity and accountability* New York 2004.
12. Quoted in *The Guardian* May 20 2016.
13. Quoted in *The Daily Telegraph* June 7 2017.
14. *Financial Times* August 14 2015.
15. Editorial *The Economist* June 3 2017.
16. *The Mirror* November 8 2015.
17. *The Sunday Times* September 20 2015.
18. NF Dixon *On the psychology of military incompetence* London 1976, p244.
19. Lord Ashcroft *The armed forces and society* May 2012.
20. *The Guardian* January 25 2016.
21. F Kitson *Low intensity operations* London 1991, p29.
22. P O'Connor *The constitutional role of the privy council and the prerogative* London 2009, p20.
23. Quoted in *The Guardian* January 25 2016.

The Bolsheviks & socialist revolution

Did Lenin's April theses amount to 'rearming the party'? **Paul Le Blanc** argues that the contributions of Lars T Lih and Eric Blanc do not tell the whole story

Lenin: peace, land, bread ... and socialism



A valuable contribution to scholarship on Lenin, the Bolsheviks, and the Russian Revolution of 1917 has - through iconoclastic overstatement - been transformed into an odd and misleading conceptualisation by two scholars whom I greatly respect and consider to be friends.

Lars T Lih, whose massive contribution *Lenin rediscovered* has rightly enhanced his reputation among Lenin scholars, several years ago initiated the line of thought under consideration here, and he has gone on to develop and argue hard for it. He has been joined recently by an important younger scholar, Eric Blanc, whose most recent contribution - 'Did the Bolsheviks advocate socialist revolution in 1917?'¹ - will be the focal point of the present contribution.²

The controversy they have been initiating will surely go on for some time, with others weighing in. The discipline of history is sometimes moved forward through such confrontations, and a survey of all that would be worthwhile. But it is beyond the scope of the present essay, which is a simple contribution to the process of critical clarification. In what follows, I will let Eric Blanc define the issue at hand, noting a significant difference between his line of argument and that of Lars Lih, and indicate what I think are the positive contributions of these two scholars in this contested terrain. At that point I will turn my attention to what strike me as serious flaws in the article under review.

The dispute may strike many as arcane or 'Talmudic' - irrelevant to the burning issues of our time - and early in his article Blanc argues earnestly against the activist inclination to shrug it all off: "Getting the history right is important not only for the sake of accuracy, but because it helps us better understand the real nature of the Bolshevik Party, the example of which continues to inspire and inform Marxist politics today." While this may be true, however, the focus of the present contribution is simply on "getting the history right," and also getting the historical methodology right. The activist concern for "what must we do" is one that I take seriously, but it falls beyond the narrow purview of what is offered here.

According to Blanc,

one hundred years after the Russian Revolution, much of our understanding of 1917 and the Bolshevik Party remains clouded by accumulated myths and received ideas. Not least of these is the claim that VI Lenin radically overhauled Bolshevik politics in April 1917 by convincing the party to fight for a socialist, instead of bourgeois-democratic, revolution.

He goes on to assure us that "this historiographical consensus is factually inaccurate and has distorted our understanding of Bolshevism in 1917".

Did the Bolsheviks advocate socialist revolution in 1917? No, Blanc seems to be arguing, citing the comments of an unidentified "Bolshevik leader" addressing the Moscow Soviet in the summer of 1917 (after Lenin's so-called re-arming of the party):

When we speak of transferring power to the soviets, this does not mean that the power passes to the proletariat, since the soviets are composed of workers, soldiers and peasants; it does not mean that we are now experiencing a socialist revolution, for the present revolution is bourgeois-democratic.

In other words, the Bolshevik position had not changed since Lenin articulated it in the 1905 polemic *Two tactics of social democracy in the democratic revolution*. The contrary opinion - perhaps argued

most strongly and clearly by Trotsky, starting with his 1924 polemic *Lessons of October* - originated in a distorted account, the perhaps understandable product of inner-party rivalries that cropped up in the 1920s. Through subsequent accounts by Trotsky in years leading up to his death, and in the writings of his followers, the myth has been perpetuated, finding its way, as well, even into the work of more mainstream historians.

But if one sets aside the distorting lens of 1920s polemics in the Russian Communist Party and instead engages with the documents of what was actually said and done in the sweep of history leading up to the 1917 revolution (the primary sources), the myth evaporates and we are left with the reality that - despite inevitable confusions amidst the revolutionary ferment, with pulls and tugs and sometimes partial misunderstandings among personalities - the Bolsheviks were well-guided by the perspectives they had embraced since 1905. There was no need for Lenin to 'rearm' the party, and it simply did not happen. Or so my friends assert.

Common ground

There is much of value in what has been presented by Lars Lih and in what has been elaborated by Eric Blanc in the course of their advocacy of this new interpretation.

Valuable elements struck me powerfully, as I read and responded to Lih's essay from 2011, 'The ironic triumph of old Bolshevism: the debates of April 1917 in context'.³ I offered my response in a presentation made in Australia, later included in my collection *Unfinished Leninism*. I observed that Lih here "takes up the cudgels on behalf of Lev Kamenev, the target of Lenin's critique of a presumably ossified 'old Bolshevism' in 1917". In a subsequent account of the dispute, as Lih put it, "Kamenev seems to think he won the debate with Lenin in April 1917", and Lars suggests that Kamenev was right. In my own 2013 presentation, while dissenting from this conclusion, I emphasised what struck me as the valuable contributions emerging from Lars's account, and a restatement of that judgment is worth reproducing here.⁴

First of all, Lenin did not feel bound by some rigid notion of 'democratic centralism' to refrain from expressing his own views if they happened to be in contradiction to those of the formal leadership of the revolutionary party to which he belonged. For Lenin, revolutionary principles always trump organisational harmony, and this was an element essential to his conception of democratic centralism and revolutionary organisation. Related to this, an open debate between comrades in the pages of the party newspaper was by no means alien to the Leninism of the early Bolsheviks.

In a 1925 history of the Bolshevik Party written by veteran Bolshevik Vladimir Nevsky (a yet-to-be translated source cited by Lars in a different context), it is explained that democratic centralism represented "complete democracy," and that "the organisation of the Bolsheviks lived fully the life of a genuine proletarian democratic organisation", with "free discussion, a lively exchange of opinions" taking place in "the absence of any bureaucratic attitude to getting things done - in a word, the active participation of emphatically all members in the affairs of the organisation".⁵

At the same time, as Lars correctly argued, the "old Bolshevism" that Kamenev defended had been a collectively developed orientation - the common position of Lenin and the Bolshevik comrades with whom he now disagreed. Both the Bolshevik and Menshevik wings of Russian socialism had seen Russia's revolution as 'bourgeois-democratic' - preliminary to the future transition to socialism.

But in 1917, no less than before, the politics of all Bolsheviks was grounded in a militantly class-struggle orientation distinct from the worker-capitalist alliance position of the Mensheviks, projecting an uncompromising worker-peasant alliance.

While disagreeing with what struck me as a distorted minimisation of the debate between Lenin and Kamenev (and other 'old Bolsheviks') upon Lenin's return to Russia, I went on to conclude that this common ground between 'old Bolshevism' and Lenin's April theses, rooted in the collectively developed politics over a period of years, is what made it relatively easy for Lenin to win the debate so quickly in 1917. To understand this collective process - not the blinding revolutionary authority of the Unquestioned Leader - as essential to the Bolshevik triumph provides a better explanation of what actually happened. It was especially important, I argued, to take such Bolsheviks as Kamenev and Zinoviev more seriously than many latter-day scholars and activists have been inclined to do. Understanding that we are dealing with a vibrant revolutionary collectivity can help us (as Eric puts it) "better understand the real nature of the Bolshevik Party", and this in a way that provides insights into the kind of organisation activists of today should be creating.

Blanc's subsequent contribution builds on this strength in Lih's argument, in the process adding valuable insights. This is related to this passage that one finds early in his article:

Unlike most examinations of this topic, the focus here will not be on Lenin's writings. These were undoubtedly important, and as such their content will be outlined, but it is hardly the case that Lenin's approach (which itself was in flux, both strategically and tactically) can be equated with that of the Bolshevik leadership or ranks in 1917. A distinct political portrait arises when we broaden our source base to include other Bolshevik leaders, local and regional party bodies, public speeches and mass leaflets. Similarly, expanding our analytical attention from Petrograd to include the Russian empire's periphery and provinces provides a better sense of what we might call 'ballpark Bolshevism': ie, the core political stances generally shared by all levels of Bolshevik cadres and projected by them to working people across the empire.

Not only does this emphasise the revolutionary collectivity of the Bolshevik phenomenon, but it corresponds to the messy realities of a politics that is composed not simply of ideas, but of diverse personalities (with different temperaments and various levels of experience and understanding) that are combined in the complexity and fluidity of organisations, movements and struggles. Something that Lenin thinks, says and writes will be understood (or misunderstood) and implemented (or not implemented) in a variety of ways by his many different comrades across the expanse of the Russian empire; often these will be blended with what a diverse lot of others think, say, write and do. It makes no sense to focus simply on Lenin's writings - a fact that the most serious students of the Russian Revolution have amply demonstrated over the course of many years.

Contested terrain

While Lih and Blanc share substantial common ground in their valuable stress on the revolutionary collectivity that was Bolshevism, and also in their misleading contention that the notion of 'Lenin rearming the party' was a myth, it should also be recognised that the two do not fully occupy the same interpretive terrain. This is suggested by the way Blanc concludes his recent essay. Those who have read Lars's work and benefited from discussions with

him are clear that he has no personal connection with the Trotskyist tradition and has a critical approach to much of Trotsky's analytical orientation. Eric's entire life, on the other hand, has been entwined with that tradition, and in his concluding paragraph he writes:

Since socialism could not be built within the confines of Russia alone, the sole path to positively resolving the inherent contradictions facing the new Soviet government was through the spread of workers' rule abroad. And, regarding the imminence and necessity of world revolution, the perspectives of all Bolsheviks in 1917 fully converged. The axiom that the Russian Revolution would be defeated if it remained isolated was borne out, though this defeat took the unforeseen form of Stalinist degeneration. In short: Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution was confirmed by the experience of the Russian Revolution, but the same cannot be said of his polemical account of how Lenin 'rearmed' the Bolsheviks.

The line of thought predominant here is incredibly important. But of particular importance for the present controversy is the opening assertion that "socialism could not be built within the confines of Russia alone". The word 'socialism' is among the most misused, misunderstood and abused terms in human history - certainly by its outright enemies, but also by its presumed partisans, and no less by those who seek to understand the world with the most exemplary objectivity.

For many of its enemies, the word 'socialism' is defined as state ownership and control of the economy, while strictly overseeing the labour and life-activity of society's inhabitants, and caring for their basic needs, while controlling what they may or may not do.

For Joseph Stalin and his adherents, it came to mean more or less the same thing, but with a profoundly benevolent gloss, as what they were creating in the Soviet Union, and the promise that at some point - as capitalism disappeared from one country after another - the state would wither away, with a prosperous and self-governing society as the replacement.

For many other would-be partisans, socialism is consistent simply with the proliferation of welfare-state reforms and expanding social services providing very positive systems of health, education, housing, transportation and more for each and every person, although not overturning the control of the economy by capitalist enterprise - which actually creates the framework within which this 'socialism' is able (or not able) to work.

For some objective-minded scholars, there is a tendency to call 'socialist' whatever its would-be partisans claim it to be. Many say that what existed in the Soviet Union was socialism (and some conclude from this that socialism did not work). Others say that there are different forms of socialism - the authoritarian or state socialism associated with the Soviet Union, on the one hand, and the more moderate and democratic form of socialism associated, for example, with certain western European countries, on the other. (Some conclude from this, given the decline of welfare state and social service programmes in recent times, that socialism does not work.)

Not pretending to be a political activist, Lars Lih has not felt a need to be clear about where he stands in relation to any of this. But Eric Blanc - explicit in his Marxist convictions - obviously rejects all of the above. In his emphasis that "socialism could not be built within the confines of Russia alone" he underscores the Marxist conviction that socialism (which most fundamentally means rule by the people over the economy) not only requires democratic functioning, but also - since our economy is global - an international rather than

a national framework in order to be functional. More than this, there is little room for doubt that he accepts Marx's contention, expressed as early as 1845 in *The German ideology*, that modern communism (or socialism - the terms being more or less synonymous for Marx and Engels) requires the level of development generated by the industrial revolution - a "world of wealth and culture, both of which presuppose a great increase in [economic] productive power and a high degree of its development". As Marx explained,

This development of productive forces (which already implied the actual empirical existence of men on a world-historical rather than local scale) is an absolutely necessary practical premise because, without it, want is merely made general, and with destitution the struggle for necessities and all the old muck would necessarily be reproduced...⁶

Given such an understanding of what socialism means - which was accepted by knowledgeable Russian Marxists of all tendencies - it was quite obviously not a practical possibility for the Russia of 1917. And yet here is how Lenin explained the October revolution "to the people of Russia" and the world immediately after the seizure of power:

The workers' and peasants' revolution has definitely triumphed in Petrograd ... The revolution has triumphed in Moscow too ... Daily and hourly reports are coming in from the front and from the villages announcing the support of the overwhelming majority of the soldiers in the trenches and the peasants in the provinces for the new government and its decrees on peace and the immediate transfer of the land to the peasants. The victory of the workers' and peasants' revolution is assured because the majority of the people have already sided with it ...

Comrades, working people! Remember that now you yourselves are at the helm of state. No-one will help you if you yourselves do not unite and take into your hands all affairs of the state. Your soviets are from now on the organs of state authority, legislative bodies with full powers ...

Comrades, workers, soldiers, peasants and all working people! Take all power into the hands of your soviets. Be watchful and guard like the apple of your eye your land, grain, factories, equipment, products, transport - all that from now onwards will be entirely your property, public property. Gradually, with the consent and approval of the majority of the peasants, in keeping with their practical experience and that of the workers, we shall go forward firmly and unswervingly to the victory of socialism - a victory that will be sealed by the advanced workers of the most civilised countries, bring the peoples lasting peace and liberate them from all oppression and exploitation.⁷

This is not, it should be emphasised, simply a statement of Lenin's personal views. It is a formal statement from the leader of the new revolutionary government "to the people of Russia". At this point, in the midst of the revolutionary triumph of 1917, this leader is expressing the perspective of the country's ruling party, the Bolsheviks. Its meaning is aptly explained by Eric Blanc (although sometimes he appears to suspend his own explanation):

October can be justifiably described as a socialist revolution in so far as it established a proletarian-led state power that asserted workers' control over the economy and that actively promoted the international overthrow of capitalism.

Lenin, Trotsky and other prominent

SUPPLEMENT

Bolsheviks were explicit in their insistence that the immediate establishment of a socialist economy was not possible in the newly established Soviet Republic. A workers' and peasants' alliance would bring about soviet power, in which working class political power would, in ongoing partnership with the peasantry, predominate; this would open up a transitional period in which democratic and socialist policies would push against the capitalist framework of what would necessarily be a form of mixed economy; the socialist resolution to this contradictory reality would become possible only with the anticipated expansion of socialist revolution throughout the world, especially in the industrially advanced nations.⁸

In this sense, indeed, Lenin and the Bolsheviks very definitely viewed what they were doing as making a socialist revolution in 1917. And the key piece of documentary evidence indicating just that, reproduced above, is supported by what participants themselves later recalled. For reasons that are not clear to me, Eric seems reluctant to take such reminiscences seriously, a matter to which we will turn shortly.

1917 versus 1905

The 1917 statement "to the people of Russia" represents a significant shift away from what was the primary thrust of the Bolshevik orientation back in 1905. If that is, in fact, the case, then one could expect such a shift could have been brought about only after serious debate between Lenin and some of his comrades. There certainly was such a debate, as we shall see, and Blanc stakes out a somewhat different terrain than Lih in this regard, emphasising that "in my view his [Lih's] stress on the continuity of Bolshevism in 1917 has led him to minimise the importance of this debate".

Given this important difference between Lars and Eric, some of what is argued here can be viewed as providing support for that aspect of Blanc's position. Nor is he necessarily denying (as Lih appears to do) that Lenin did, in fact, change his position between 1905 and 1917. And yet he is also strongly inclined to the view that Trotsky and most historians have been blinded to the reality of Bolshevik continuity, and that Lih is quite right to insist that any 'rearming the party' narrative is quite wrong. So let us follow his argument.

Of course, Lenin typically gravitated toward open-ended formulations involving possible "uninterrupted revolution" in Russia (between democratic and socialist stages) that could be generated by international revolutionary developments. More than this, as Lenin's comrade and companion, Nadezhda Krupskaya, has explained, his thinking (again typically) continued to evolve under the impact of such momentous new developments as World War I - in 1915-17 generating formulations in which revolutionary-democratic struggles would flow into socialist revolution.⁹

Yet in arguing for the theoretical consistency between "the old Bolshevism" and the Lenin of 1917, Blanc writes:

Rejecting the claim that he was aiming to 'skip' the bourgeois-democratic stage, Lenin in April stressed that he was not calling for a 'workers' government' but rather a soviet regime of workers, agricultural labourers, soldiers and peasants. Though Lenin personally saw soviet power as the concretisation of a 'commune state', a 'step towards socialism' and 'the highest form of democracy', for the majority of workers and Bolsheviks throughout 1917 the demand for 'All power to the soviets' meant establishing a government without the bourgeoisie. This was certainly a very radical perspective; but it was a very radical perspective that had been advocated by the Bolsheviks and other revolutionary Marxists in Russia since 1905.

This is not entirely accurate, and the

mistake gets to the heart of the matter.

The term, "a commune state", is a reference to the Paris Commune of 1871. In 1917 Lenin saw this as an appropriate suggestion of what was called for in Russia. Consider the way he discusses the matter in *The state and revolution*: "The Commune is the first attempt by a proletarian revolution to smash the bourgeois state machine; and it is the political form 'at last discovered' by which the smashed state machine can and must be replaced." He adds that "the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, in different circumstances and under different conditions, continue the work of the Commune and confirm Marx's brilliant historical analysis".¹⁰

Worth noting is his projection of this perspective backward to encompass the 1905 revolution. In 'Letters from afar', Lenin makes precisely the same points:

The proletariat ... if it wants to uphold the gains of the present revolution and proceed further, to win peace, bread and freedom, must "smash", to use Marx's expression, this "ready-made" state machine and substitute a new one for it by merging the police force, the army and the bureaucracy with the entire armed people. Following the path indicated by the experience of the Paris Commune of 1871 and the Russian Revolution of 1905, the proletariat must organise and arm all the poor, exploited sections of the population in order that they themselves should take the organs of state power directly into their own hands, in order that they themselves should constitute these organs of state power.¹¹

This represents an explicit break with Lenin's own earlier perspectives. In his 1905 polemic *Two tactics of social democracy in the democratic revolution*, Lenin explicitly asserted that the Paris Commune "was a government such as ours should not be". He criticized it as "a government that was unable to, and could not, at that time, distinguish between the elements of a democratic revolution and a socialist revolution, a government that confused the tasks of fighting for a republic with those of fighting for socialism". He explained:

Marxists are absolutely convinced of the bourgeois character of the Russian Revolution. What does that mean? It means that the democratic reforms in the political system and the social and economic reforms that have become a necessity for Russia do not in themselves imply the undermining of capitalism, the undermining of bourgeois rule; on the contrary, they will, for the first time, really clear the ground for a wide and rapid European, and not Asiatic, development of capitalism; they will, for the first time, make it possible for the bourgeoisie to rule as a class.¹²

With most Marxists of 1905, from the most moderate Menshevik to the most militant Bolshevik, Lenin had believed that Russia must go through further capitalist economic development (which was being hindered by the quasi-feudal residue associated with tsarist autocracy) before the material basis for socialism would exist. He insisted that "the idea of seeking salvation for the working class in anything save the further development of capitalism is reactionary". The overthrow of tsarism and the creation of a bourgeois republic, Lenin (along with most Marxists in 1905) believed, would constitute "a democratic prerequisite of the struggle for socialism".¹³

In notes of March-April 1905, Lenin projected two possible courses for the Russian Revolution: either it could "go on to the complete overthrow of the tsarist government and the establishment of a republic"; or it could "limit itself to a curtailment of tsarist power, to a monarchist constitution". There were only two reasonable options: "are we to have a revolution of the 1879 type or of the 1848 type?" Almost parenthetically, he added: "Some might add here 'or of the 1871

[Paris Commune] type'?" He went on to scoff: "This question must be considered as a probable objection raised against us by many non-social democrats."¹⁴

Both the French Revolution of 1789 and revolutionary events in Europe of 1848 were perceived by Marxists as models of bourgeois-democratic revolution - the first ending in a decisive victory over the remnants of feudalism; the second ending in a compromise with such remnants. Neither had a trajectory that went beyond capitalism (unlike the Paris Commune of 1871). Lenin expressed the hope that the Russian Revolution would be of the 1789 type. This clearly confines the perspective to a bourgeois-democratic framework, as was the case with most of Lenin's formulations.

To the extent that Eric believes Lenin's own position changed between 1905 and 1917, all of this can be seen as vindicating his position. And it is certainly the case that not all Bolsheviks were keeping pace with Lenin's conceptualisations and formulations - which makes the useful notion of 'ballpark Bolshevism' particularly apt.

And yet at times Blanc seems to tilt in a different direction. Early in his article, he asserts that "contrary to what is usually assumed, neither Lenin nor the Bolshevik current in 1917 equated soviet power as such with workers' power". He quotes Lenin as noting: "in these Soviets, as it happens, it is the peasants, the soldiers - ie, petty bourgeoisie - who preponderate". Blanc suggests that "the defining class characteristic of the soviets was not that they were a workers' organisation, but that they were an explicitly and consciously non-bourgeois body".

This could be understood as implying that Lenin, no less than other Bolsheviks, viewed the revolution they were making as bourgeois-democratic rather than proletarian-socialist. It would be a mistake, however, to interpret this conceptualisation of the soviets as being inconsistent with a shift away from the classical Bolshevik orientation of 1905. It is, in fact, perfectly consistent with a convergence toward Trotsky's permanent revolution perspective of the same period. This becomes evident if we examine what Trotsky was actually saying in his 1906 analyses:

So far as its direct and indirect tasks are concerned, the Russian Revolution is a 'bourgeois' revolution because it sets out to liberate bourgeois society from the chains and fetters of absolutism and feudal ownership. But the principal driving force of the Russian Revolution is the proletariat, and that is why, so far as its method is concerned, it is a proletarian revolution.

This working class hegemony in the struggle had a logic, Trotsky insisted, which "leads directly ... to the dictatorship of the proletariat and puts socialist tasks on the order of the day".¹⁵

By 'dictatorship of the proletariat', of course, Marxists have not meant authoritarian rule by an elitist dictatorship, but rather political rule by the working class (often conceived as involving greater actual democracy than one finds in any form of political rule by the capitalist class). Nor did it exclude other (non-proletarian) layers of society. "The dictatorship of the proletariat in no way signifies the dictatorship of the revolutionary organisation over the proletariat," Trotsky insisted, and he went on to quote Marx's description of the Paris Commune as "the true representative of all the healthy elements of French society, and therefore the truly national government". He argued that in Russia "the dictatorship of the proletariat will undoubtedly represent all the progressive, valid interests of the peasantry - and not only the peasantry, but also the petty bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia".¹⁶

The broad social alliance which brought the revolution to victory would, Trotsky believed, probably be reflected in

the composition of the new revolutionary government. Instead of 'dictatorship of the proletariat' he was quite willing to utilise other labels: "workers' democracy" or "dictatorship of the proletariat supported by the peasantry" or "coalition government of the working class and the petty bourgeoisie". But he insisted that the reality must involve the "dominating and leading participation" of the working class, "the rule of the proletariat".¹⁷

By 1917, Lenin's conceptualisations and formulations were converging with those of Trotsky (which would soon draw the author of the theory of permanent revolution into the ranks of the Bolsheviks). Of course, Lenin came to this independently of Trotsky, but a radical shift in his thinking can certainly be traced in the documents available to us.

We have already noted (and Blanc fully agrees) that there was a debate in the wake of this, and it would be helpful to see if Lenin's comrades were inclined to explain it all in the same way that Eric does.

A disappearing trick

In magicians' performances, court rooms and sometimes even in academic settings, inconvenient evidence can somehow be made to disappear. In the present context, if we can simply eliminate all recollections of the actual participants regarding what happened way back when, all we have to go on are the raw documents that the scholar offers, and then the explanations (often involving a new interpretation) provided by the scholar to help us understand the meaning of the documents.

Of course, Trotsky's account is central to the article's purpose, so that is a centre of our attention. But what if there are dozens of reliable witnesses - not just Trotskyists, but others as well - to corroborate at least major aspects of Trotsky's account? There are, in fact, many non-Trotskyists (various Bolsheviks and Mensheviks who presumably were in a position to know what happened) who provided reminiscences. But all are conjured away with three sentences and two end notes. We are informed:

Much of the documentary basis for the 'rearming' narrative comes from Menshevik declarations in April concerning Lenin's arrival. But one has to take these with a large grain of salt, since the Mensheviks consistently exaggerated their rivals' extremism and were always looking to paint the Bolsheviks as puppets in the hands of Lenin. The other major source for the standard account comes from questionable 1920s Bolshevik memoir literature written well after it had become both politically expedient for all wings of the party to emphasise the 'genius' of Lenin's leadership and to claim that the Bolsheviks had from April onwards advocated socialist revolution.

When we turn to the first end note, we find this: "For typical Menshevik claims about Lenin's purported 'anarchism', see Rabinowitch 1968, p40."

The reference is to Alexander Rabinowitch's path-breaking account, *Prelude to revolution*. Several distinctive things can be found if someone actually looks on the page cited. One is that Rabinowitch's account goes in a direction that is the opposite of that mapped out by Blanc and Lih. "Now, when the predominant spirit in both the Bolshevik and Menshevik camps was one of moderation and reconciliation," he writes, "Lenin was baldly presenting these ideas [in the April theses] as a guide for immediate revolutionary action." He then records "a few of the indignant Menshevik reactions" at that moment - which include charges of "anarchism" and worse. But that is all. There is no impugning of later Menshevik accounts by Sukhanov, Dan, Abramovitch, etc.¹⁸

In fairness, Blanc himself is not

asserting otherwise - he refers to "Menshevik declarations in April" - yet this seems to deflect attention away from more serious Menshevik accounts of what was happening - accounts which (as we will see) happen to give credence to what Blanc calls "the rearming narrative".

When we turn to the second end note, we find this:

On the dubious analytical and factual accuracy of some of these memoir accounts, see Longley 1978, pp252, 337-38. On the evolution of early Bolshevik historiography concerning 1917, see White 1985 and the introduction in Corney 2016.

The reference to White will be dealt with separately. References to Longley and Corney are, respectively, to DA Longley's PhD dissertation, *Factional strife and policy-making in the Bolshevik Party, 1912-April 1917*, and Frederick C Corney (ed) *Trotsky's challenge: the 'literary discussion' of 1924 and the fight for the Bolshevik revolution*. On the three pages cited in Longley, we find critical reference to accounts in the late 1920s, in which Trotsky's role in 1917 is minimised and denigrated, an unspecified question regarding how objective Shlyapnikov might be (which is certainly worth asking about any memoirist or historian), and another question about how Lenin might have been able to see certain issues of *Pravda* that presumably annoyed him. Evaluation of the Corney source is difficult, since no page numbers are given for a volume of more than 800 pages (within which Corney's valuable introductory essay consists of 85 pages). A cursory examination does not indicate that Corney is offering more, in regard to critical judgments, than the sort of thing offered by Longley. One should also note that Blanc's own end note is critical only of "some" of the Bolshevik memoirs - with no indication of which ones or why.¹⁹

The reference to James D White's essay, 'Soviet historical interpretations of the Russian Revolution 1918-24', deserves more substantial comment, because it comes closest to saying what Blanc seems to imply his sources should say. Here indeed is an across-the-board assault on the reliability of "1920s Bolshevik memoir literature" - indeed, on all historical literature coming out of the Soviet Republic in the early 1920s (even since 1918).

White's essay begins ominously with a quote from early Bolshevik activist-historian MS Olminsky: "Work for the history of the revolution is work for the revolution itself." Of course, such a quote could be understood, less ominously, as the honest belief of a revolutionary enthusiast - but White quite definitely tilts away from such innocence: "The Soviet regime began to interpret the Russian Revolution in the light of current political considerations immediately after its coming to power." Proof of such subterfuge can be found in one of the earliest accounts, Trotsky's short popularisation of 1918, *The history of the Russian Revolution to Brest-Litovsk*, on which White comments darkly: "Trotsky is emphatic that the Bolshevik Party acquired state power not because it was effective in organising an armed insurrection, but because it enjoyed wide popular support." The fact that John Reed's 1919 classic *Ten days that shook the world* has the same view is no accident - at the time Reed was working (under Trotsky, no less) in the Department of International Revolutionary Propaganda, an arm of the new Soviet Republic's commissariat of foreign affairs: "Political considerations during the first four years of Soviet power ensured that in the history of the 1917 revolution most attention was focused on the acquisition of power by the Bolsheviks in October" and all Bolshevik memoirs and accounts in the historical journal *Proletarskaya Revolyutsiya* were made to conform with "the Leninist interpretation". White concludes that "in the practice of manipulating the

historical record there was a high degree of continuity between the Stalin era and the first years of Soviet rule”.²⁰

The highly problematical nature of this essay is evident if we modestly focus only on the revelation that presumably discredits John Reed's *Ten days that shook the world*. From White's own reference notes, it would not be clear to the unsuspecting reader that Reed's involvement with the Soviet Republic's Department of International Revolutionary Propaganda was openly reported by his two sympathetic English-language biographers of 1936 and 1975, neither of whom felt this would necessarily discredit Reed's account. That the author of *Ten days that shook the world* was an enthusiastic supporter of the Bolshevik revolution is clear from the book itself - Reed notoriously wore his political heart on his sleeve.²¹

Of interest is the judgment of Bertram D Wolfe, who knew Reed and many of the Russian Bolsheviks before becoming a bitterly disillusioned ex-Leninist and anti-communist. At the height of the cold war (while in the employ of the US state department), he edited and introduced to American readers a new edition of Reed's account, with multiple corrective footnotes and a very critical introduction. Wolfe describes Reed as “a good reporter, always in the thick of things; his sense of vivid detail often makes one page refute another”, adding that Reed “was vulnerable to gossip, rumour and conjecture that accorded with his preconceptions, but what he actually saw with his own eyes he did his best to record faithfully”. Wolfe concludes that “as a record of significant detail, as a repository of facts for the historian, his book is crammed with precious material” and that “whether because of or despite the dream which possessed him, as literature Reed's book is the finest piece of eyewitness reporting the revolution has produced”.²²

White's seeming dismissal of *Ten days that shook the world* conveys none of this, nor do his shrugs and insinuations tell us much about the actual nature or value of the variety of early Soviet historical interpretations of the Russian Revolution. It demonstrates little about the analytical and factual accuracy of memoir accounts of the 1920s.

Readers should be aware that I am not intending a broadside dismissal or denigration of all that is offered in the works of Rabinowitch, Longley, Corney or even White. Each is a source well worth examining, each contains something of value, and I happen to think very highly of at least three of them. Nor is it my opinion that Eric Blanc intends to bamboozle us with a dishonest conjuring trick - he is among the most earnest people I have had the pleasure to know, and his intentions strike me as entirely honourable.

At the same time, when we compare the content of Blanc's end notes to the actual sources - from various Mensheviks and Bolsheviks alike - we are forced to conclude that a dismissal of what the actual participants have to tell us is not justified. Not all of the Menshevik accounts are equally exaggerated, and some of them do not conform to the generalisation by which they seem to be characterised. Not all of the Bolshevik accounts are equally questionable, and - here too - some of them do not fully conform to what seems to be a dismissive generalisation.

Upon examination, some of the accounts by Mensheviks and Bolsheviks seem plausible, given what we know of the facts, and some of them more or less appear to corroborate each other. So let us have a look.

What participants tell us

The Russian-born US journalist, Isaac Don Levine - who had a treasure-trove of documents in his possession and important contacts among Russian revolutionaries, particularly in the moderate wing of the movement - was able to report in a 1917

account that, upon returning to Russia, Lenin had “alienated the large following he had as one of the leaders of the Russian Social Democracy”, summing up:

To Lenin, a capitalist was worse than a king. An industrial magnate or leading banker to him was more perilous than a tsar or a kaiser. The working classes, he said, had nothing to lose, whether their rulers were German, French or British. The imperative thing for them to do was to prepare for a social revolution.

Menshevik leader Raphael Abramovitch recalled, similarly, that Lenin argued “world revolution would help Russia overcome her general backwardness ... turn her into a socialist country”, but that “this concept shocked the Russian Marxists in April 1917” and “isolated him even within his own party circle”.²³

Angelica Balabanoff had heard Lenin make similar points just before he left his Swiss exile for Russia: “Unless the Russian Revolution develops into a second and successful Paris Commune,” she remembers him saying, “reaction and war will suffocate it.” She confessed that “I had been trained, like most Marxists, to expect the social revolution to be inaugurated in one of the highly industrialised countries, and at the time Lenin's analysis of the Russian events seemed to me almost utopian.” After her own return to Russia, she concluded that, had those activists who embraced Lenin's analysis failed to convince “the peasants, workers and soldiers of the need for a more far-reaching, socialist revolution in Russia, tsarism or some similar form of autocracy would have been restored”.²⁴

Initially, however, as Levine and Abramovitch note, many had a very different reaction - it all seemed demagogic and out of touch with reality. To an old Bolshevik transitioning to Menshevism, Vladimir Voytinsky, what Lenin had to say was a “diatribe that would become the Sermon on the Mount of a new church”, in which “Lenin mingled Marxian terminology and old clichés with strange new slogans”.²⁵

Menshevik leader Theodore Dan reminisced that

with the astonishing revolutionary flair peculiar to him, Lenin ... removed the slogan of the ‘democratic republic’ completely and made his chief agitational slogan ‘workers’ control’ - among the workers; confiscation of all the big estates - among the peasants; and an immediate peace - among the soldiers.²⁶

Voytinsky summarised:

Why should we wait for a peace concluded by governments? Make peace with your German brothers, regiment by regiment, company by company, through fraternisation! Why should we wait for a Constituent Assembly? Seize power at once through the soviets and write your own laws. The agrarian question? Let the landless peasants and farmhands take land wherever they find it.²⁷

Another Menshevik, NN Sukhanov, offers a similar summary, adding that Lenin's speech “was a bolt from the blue not only for me”, and that “it caused the more literate of his faithful disciples extreme perplexity”, resulting in “his complete isolation not only among Social Democrats in general, but also among his own disciples”. Alexandra Kollontai, a Menshevik-turned-Bolshevik, recalled: “I was in substantial agreement with Lenin and stood closer to him than many of his older followers and friends”, adding that in the meetings recalled by Voytinsky, Sukhanov and Dan, “I was the only one of his party comrades who took the floor to support his theses”.²⁸

Veteran Bolshevik Fyodor Raskolnikov describes the same meetings “The most responsible party workers were represented here, but even

for them what Ilyich said constituted a veritable revelation,” he notes. “It laid down a ‘Rubicon’ between the tactics of yesterday and those of today.” Lenin's position “produced a complete revolution in the thinking of the party's leaders. And underlay all the subsequent work of the Bolsheviks.” Raskolnikov concludes: “It was not without cause that our party's tactics did not follow a straight line, but after Lenin's return took a sharp turn to the left.”²⁹

“Lenin expounded his views as to what had to be done in a number of theses,” his close comrade, Krupskaya, reminisced regarding the April controversy:

The comrades were somewhat taken aback for the moment. Some of them thought that Ilyich was presenting the case in much too blunt a manner, and that it was too early yet to speak of a socialist revolution.

Lenin's April theses were published in *Pravda*, followed by an article by editor Lev Kamenev, “in which he dissociated himself from these theses”. These were, according to Kamenev, “the expression of Lenin's private views, which neither *Pravda* nor the bureau of the central committee shared”. Krupskaya notes: “A struggle started within the Bolshevik organisation. It did not last long.” She adds that “a number of important events took place which showed that Lenin had been right”, that Lenin's point of view won the backing of a decisive majority in the Bolshevik organisation, first in Petrograd, then in the Bolshevik central committee, and finally at an all-Russia conference held near the end of April.³⁰

Eduard Dune, a working class militant in Bolshevism's ranks, described how he and his comrades went on to debate the Mensheviks in the factories once the new line was consolidated. The mass working class upsurge of February - overthrowing the tsar, creating revolutionary-democratic soviets, whose authority rivalled that of the Provisional government, empowering workers in their workplaces - had made factory-wide debates the new normal. The Bolsheviks' opponents - older, experienced workers, quoting Bebel and Lassalle and Marx from memory - argued: “A socialist revolution could occur only when the country was mature economically and culturally, and then the transition from bourgeois-democratic revolution to socialism would be as natural as our revolution had been in February.” Bolshevik partisans, absorbing such texts as Lenin's ‘Letters from afar’, argued differently and more effectively: “Did we need a government composed of representatives of the bourgeoisie and former tsarist officials or should we transfer power into the hands of the representatives of the revolution, the representatives of the working class, the Soviet of Workers' Deputies?”

They drove the argument home: “The Bolsheviks said that the transfer of power to the soviets meant creating what we already had at the factory - a dictatorship of the proletariat.” They elaborated:

We must preserve and strengthen the power we had won during the revolution, not give any of it away to the bourgeoisie. We must not liquidate the soviets as organs of power, but transfer power to them instead, so that there would no longer be dual power, but a single revolutionary government.³¹

The situation varied in different places. Serving as a navy sub-lieutenant in the Finnish borderland, Bolshevik militant AF Ilyin-Genevsky reported sharply contradictory moods within the crowds, and a lack of unity among the Bolsheviks themselves: “In the committee there were two points of view on the political situation: one more moderate, approaching the point of view of Kamenev at that

time; and the other more revolutionary, based on the famous thesis published by Lenin immediately on his arrival from abroad.” Two prominent and articulate comrades in their ranks adhered to one and the other of the two positions, and the Bolshevik committee was preparing for a mass meeting that would be discussing the political situation. “In order to deal with all sides of this important point on the agenda, it was decided to have both points of view advocated, and let these two speakers deal with the question.” The discussion was full and animated, and at its conclusion

the meeting adopted a compromise resolution, in which the Provisional government was recognised to the extent that its actions did not clash with the actions of the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. On the other hand, the resolution exposed the bourgeois character of the Provisional government, and demanded that all power should be handed over to the Workers' and Soldiers' Soviets.³²

Nonetheless, as events of the summer and early autumn unfolded, they were seen by many (as Krupskaya had put it) as having “showed that Lenin had been right”. The Menshevik, Abramovitch, noted:

the balance of forces within the all-important soviets had shifted radically. One soviet after another was slipping out of the control of the Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks and into the hands of the Bolsheviks and their allies, the Left Socialist Revolutionaries.

Particularly “among the workers in Petrograd, the atmosphere was becoming increasingly tense as the second congress of Soviets approached. Bolshevik slogans were winning support in most large factories”. While “the country as a whole ... was not nearly so uniform,” he observed,

nevertheless, the trend in October was unmistakable ... The Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks were aware that the rising tide of political and social discontent was carrying the Bolshevik party toward victory.³³

In combing through these accounts from people who lived through the period culminating in the October revolution, we can find - just as Wolfe noted regarding John Reed's *Ten days that shook the world* - contradictions, as well as “gossip, rumour and conjecture that accorded with preconceptions”, and also slips in memory, slips of the tongue, and other slips away from some of the actual facts. Yet, taken together, one could say (as Wolfe says about Reed's work) that they provide “a record of significant detail, a repository of facts for the historian, ... precious material”, forming a pattern of impressions that help give us a sense of what happened in history.

It is hardly the case that after-the-fact reminiscences somehow trump primary documentary sources emerging from the immediate events. But reminiscences such as these - which come from a variety of sources not flowing from the same fountainhead, and which seem to form a particularly coherent and compelling pattern - should themselves be seen as constituting a unique primary source, and they must be taken seriously, as latter-day historians craft their interpretations of what actually happened. They must be harmonised more carefully with the other primary sources than either Blanc or Lih have done.

The bottom line

The richness that Blanc and Lih have brought to our understanding of the Russian Revolution cannot be denied or minimised - even within contributions

that have been the focus of the present critique. The vast, complex, multi-faceted process that culminated in the revolution of October 1917 was fraught with multiple contradictions, and many of these are fruitfully revealed in the challenges posed, and the research offered, by these iconoclastic scholars.

At the same time, as we sift through the evidence available to us, it does seem that the Bolsheviks believed they were - in a significant way - initiating a socialist revolution in 1917. While rooted in longstanding Bolshevik perspectives of worker-peasant alliance, this was not simply the “old Bolshevism” of 1905. The new element in the Bolshevik orientation was decisively pushed forward by Lenin in April 1917, and it had won mass support by October. To label this “rearming the party” is by no means far-fetched ●

This article was first published at <https://johnriddell.wordpress.com>.

Notes

- <https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2017/10/13/did-the-bolsheviks-advocate-socialist-revolution-in-1917>.
- An early articulation can be found in LT Lih, “The ironic triumph of old Bolshevism: the debates of April 1917 in context” *Russian History* 38, 2011.
- <https://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2015/06/01/lars-lih-the-ironic-triumph-of-old-bolshevism>.
- P Le Blanc *Unfinished Leninism: the rise and return of a revolutionary doctrine* Chicago 2014, pp189-93.
- LT Lih, ‘Democratic centralism: fortunes of a formula’ *Weekly Worker* April 11 2013.
- LD Easton and KH Guddat (eds) *Writings of the young Marx on philosophy and society* New York 1967, p427. Some would translate this final phrase as “The same old shit starts all over again”.
- Reproduced in J Reed *Ten days that shook the world* New York 1926, pp363-64.
- This is elaborated and documented in various works, most recently P Le Blanc *October song: Bolshevik triumph, communist tragedy, 1917-1924* Chicago 2017, pp131-79.
- NK Krupskaya *Reminiscences of Lenin* New York 1979, pp327-33.
- VI Lenin, ‘The state and revolution’ *CW* Vol 25, Moscow 1974, p437.
- VI Lenin, ‘Letters from afar’ *CW* Vol 23, Moscow 1974, pp325-26.
- VI Lenin, ‘Two tactics of social democracy in the democratic revolution’ *CW* Vol 9, Moscow 1972, pp80-81, 48.
- Ibid* pp49, 83.
- VI Lenin, ‘A revolution of the 1789 or the 1848 type?’ *CW* Vol 8, Moscow 1974, p257.
- L Trotsky *1905* Chicago 2016, p42; L Trotsky *The permanent revolution and results and prospects* New York 1978, p132.
- L Trotsky, ‘Thirty-five years after: 1871-1906’ in *Leon Trotsky on the Paris Commune* New York 1970, p24.
- L Trotsky *The permanent revolution and results and prospects* New York 1978, pp69-72.
- A Rabinowitch *Prelude to revolution: the Petrograd Bolsheviks and the July 1917 uprising* Bloomington 1968, p40.
- DA Longley *Factional strife and policy-making in the Bolshevik Party, 1912-April 1917 (with special reference to the Baltic fleet organisations 1903-17)* PhD dissertation, University of Birmingham, 1978, pp251-52, 337-38.
- JD White, ‘Early Soviet historical interpretations of the Russian Revolution 1918-24’ *Soviet Studies* 37, 3, 1985, pp330, 332, 333, 335, 342, 346, 350.
- G Hicks *John Reed: the making of a revolutionary* New York 1936, pp290-91; RA Rosenstone *Romantic revolutionary: a biography of John Reed* New York 1975, p307.
- BD Wolfe, ‘Introduction’ in J Reed *Ten days that shook the world* New York 1960, ppxxxii-xxxiii, xxxv, xxxvi.
- ID Levine *The Russian Revolution* New York 1917, pp275-76; RR Abramovitch *The Soviet revolution 1917-1939* New York 1962, pp30-31.
- A Balabanoff *My life as a rebel* Bloomington 1973, pp143-44.
- VS Voytinsky *Stormy passage: a personal history through two Russian revolutions to democracy and freedom, 1905-1960* New York 1961, pp265-66.
- T Dan *The origins of Bolshevism* New York 1970, p406.
- VS Voytinsky *Stormy passage: a personal history through two Russian revolutions to democracy and freedom, 1905-1960* New York 1961, p266.
- NN Sukhanov *The Russian Revolution 1917: a personal record* Princeton 1984, pp281, 282, 283, 288; A Kollontai *The autobiography of a sexually emancipated communist woman* New York 1975, pp27, 31.
- FF Raskolnikov *Kronstadt and Petrograd in 1917* London 1982, pp76-77.
- NK Krupskaya *Reminiscences of Lenin* New York 1979, pp348-51.
- EM Dune *Notes of a Red Guard* (Chicago 1993, pp48-50).
- AF Ilyin-Genevsky *From the February revolution to the October revolution 1917* New York 1931, pp43-45.
- RR Abramovitch *The Soviet revolution 1917-1939* New York 1962, pp75-77.

REVIEW



Alt-right supporters march through University of Virginia

The negative-sum internet

Angela Nagle *Kill all normies: the online culture wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the alt-right and Trump* Zero Books, 2017, pp120, £9.99

It is a very great understatement to say that the election of Donald Trump challenged a lot of received wisdom.

In fact, outside of the head-banging Republican hard core in the Tea Party and in the modern conspiracy-obsessed equivalents of the old John Birch Society, there is scarcely a constituency in America that is not facing some sort of reckoning, whether or not it can face it squarely (Hillary Clinton's absurd, conceited memoir of the 2016 campaign being an object lesson in how not to do it).

Kill all normies, a short book by the Irish, US-based writer Angela Nagle, is addressed to one particular strand of discussion - what role did the internet play in all this excitement, and where does that leave that vision of the new, non-hierarchical politics of networked youth that was so fulsome a source of substandard punditry in the first few post-crisis years?

Nagle's book attracts interest first of all for the seriousness with which she takes the people at the core of her narrative - the novel far-right subcultures organised principally online, and outside of 'traditional' neo-Nazi haunts like the *Stormfront* web forum. These are the young men notorious for mob-handedly bombarding opponents, or indeed random passers-by, with horrendous abuse - though their targets are diverse, very much their principal enemies

are feminists, and indeed women in general. Nagle has spent more of the last couple of years than is probably conducive to good health lurking on the relevant web forums, principally the link-sharing platform, Reddit, and *4chan's* notorious '/b/' subforum - a feat for which she deserves some kind of medal. There might be nobody alive with a better grasp of the contradictions at work in this subculture - certainly its participants are blind to them.

The second point of interest is her central argument, which has unsurprisingly ruffled a few feathers. For Nagle, it is not merely that Donald's electronic army is a *rebutte* to left techno-utopia: it is instead the latter's twisted offspring - an evil whose gestation within the fold of liberal-left approval passed unnoticed because it shares much of its host's 'conventional wisdom'.

Nagle's narrative begins, for all intents purposes, in 2010-11, a year and a bit that seemed to promise a great deal. The Occupy movement brought serious public protests back to the American streets - or at least public parks - for the first time since the movement against the Iraq war was at its peak. It was even longer since such protests had been directed at all against capitalism, with the 'anti-globalisation' movement around the turn of the millennium. In the global periphery, of course, there was the small matter of the 'Arab spring'. The

role of the internet in these movements was hotly debated; on this point Nagle cites Heather Brooke, who wrote in her book *The revolution will be digitised*: "Technology is breaking down traditional social barriers of status, class, power, wealth and geography, replacing them with an ethos of collaboration and transparency."

Other examples, of course, abound: Nagle returns often to Manuel Castells' *Adbusters* article, 'The disgust becomes a network', and she also mentions Paul 'Nostradamus' Mason's *Why it's kicking off everywhere*. Of course, things did not exactly go to plan:

The Egyptian revolution led to something worse - the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood. Islamists ran riot in the streets and stories of rapes in the very public square that had shortly before held so much hope came to light. Soon the military dictatorship swept back into power. The Occupy Wall Street demonstrators remained literally aimless and were eventually forced out of public property by police, camp by camp.

By the end of 2013, a public square-style movement took place in Ukraine, which started with many of the same scenes of romanticised people power in the public square. However, this time the leaderless network narrative, which was already starting to look a little less convincing, was left aside because the protests

quickly erupted into fascist mob rule (p11).

The great online campaigns started to get a little odd. Nagle credits the faintly self-parodic Kony 2012 campaign - which sought to build a bipartisan campaign for the United States to 'solve' a Ugandan civil war by arresting the ruthless militia leader, Joseph Kony - as an "early significant [moment] of rupture" in the emergence of meme-driven, 'viral' online political activism. A backlash quickly developed and the Ugandan government denounced the campaign as clumsy and insensitive, all of which seems to have driven the maker of the original viral video, Jason Russell, completely mad - a further clip emerged "in which he could be seen outdoors naked and shouting, hitting the ground, masturbating and vandalising cars" (pp3-4).

Underlying all the leftwing boosting of modern technology was a series of assumptions - that the culture around such technology was driven primarily by the young; that the young are typically - if not more *leftwing* - at least more 'liberal' on race, gender and so on. What would then emerge was a new kind of mass political movement, whose instincts would be progressive in the broad sense. Yet even in 2011 that was a slightly peculiar assumption.

Nagle mentions the omnipresence of the Guy Fawkes mask, declaring solidarity with the hacker-activist collective, Anonymous, which - along

with its satellites - became associated with the left. Yet that link is a lot more tenuous than it might appear, for Anonymous emerged ultimately from *4chan's* aforementioned /b/, which it will now be necessary to describe in more detail.

4chan is the most famous example of a particular sort of internet forum: the image board. The mechanics of it are simple - post an image, discuss it. What culture you get rather depends on what sort of images are circulated, and the initial purpose of *4chan* was to circulate especially bizarre and perhaps legally sensitive hentai images (the pornographic side of Japanese manga drawing). Its culture expanded beyond hentai, but after much the same fashion - *4chan* values transgression above all other things, its users typically post anonymously, and of the many subforums, its 'random' one - /b/ - has gained a reputation as a fearsome bear pit, the furious psychopathic ID of the digital age.

The Anonymous collective emerged from a *4chan* campaign of digital sabotage against the Church of Scientology, which irked by virtue of its censorious and litigious streak. Its 'actions' were more usually generically libertarian than leftwing, and thus it united both left-liberal activists ('moralfags', in *chan-speak*) and people whose interests were more nihilistically obsessed with shocking people 'for the lulz'. The latter sort

may have thought of themselves as somehow 'apolitical', but have since become the shock troops of the alt-right, which built itself up as a movement prepared to question the sacred truths of modern liberal society.

Intersectionality

How did this happen? For Nagle, the crucial part of the process actually occurred elsewhere entirely (although still on the internet). As Occupy and its associated leftwing campaigns disintegrated, many of its atoms reformed around the curious doctrines of intersectional feminism. Intersectionality is, in origin, a spin-off of the 'critical race theory' school of thought in American legal academia, and in fact merely one micro-variant of the postmodernist, post-Marxist identity politics that came to prominence especially in the 1980s. Early in this decade, however, intersectionality became adopted as the flag of a new and virulent wave of the same sort of identity politics.

The idea that different forms of oppression 'intersect' and interact in unpredictable ways is, on its own, something of a truism (albeit only because we have the history of the 1960s and 1970s, and the attempts of the far left to organise the oppressed after the fashion of the radical wing of the US civil rights movement, which presented the problems concretely). The distinctive feature of contemporary 'intersectionality' - the thing that for better or worse gives it its cutting edge - is the radical subjectivism of its epistemology. It is argued, or rather assumed, that only the oppressed can speak for themselves, and that for others to speak about their oppression is inherently to talk over and silence them, and that such silencing is dehumanising and basically violent.

If you add these two parts together, the fissile reaction reaches critical mass. For only the oppressed can speak for themselves, and oppressions combine dynamically; the result is what in computer science is called a 'combinatorial explosion' of micro-identities claiming absolute, jealous sovereignty over the discourse on their experience. The internet is already a place for self-creation and recreation, a natural habitat for the identity-fluid. So we get the *reductio ad absurdum* of identity politics, which centred on the microblogging site *Tumblr*. Nagle has some fun quoting *Tumblr*ites on the definition of 'genderale' ("a gender that is hard to describe. Mainly associated with plants, herbs and liquids") and the phenomenon of 'otherkin' - people who identify as somehow non-human.

In 'real life' politics, this mindset has caused most of its controversy on campuses, with a renewed focus on 'no platform' tactics, to be used against racists, sexists, etc. The main flashpoint is on the matter of whether transgendered women are welcome in women-only feminist organisations, and so those second-wave feminists who stick on the chromosomal requirements of the sisterhood - the so-called 'trans-exclusionary radical feminists' or Terfs - are routinely hounded out of universities by the local student left.

Online, it is the combination of witch-hunting self-righteousness and sheer violent meanness of this movement that predominates - as if Torquemada had formed an American high-school clique. Nagle revisits old-favourite anecdotes like the reaction to the late Mark Fisher's anti-intersectional article, 'Exiting the vampire castle' (and gloating reactions to his suicide earlier this year), and throwing in a few that I never knew about - like the contention of one Twitter intersectionalist that the grieving father of an alligator-mauled toddler was indulging in his white privilege (pp75-76).

It is *this* that is the context for the dramatic rightward lurch among the shock-troops of *4chan* and similar.

The religious right was a traditional source of irritation, but compared to the crusading Bush years, it was in retreat. Concurrently, a new and aggressive censorious leftism was on the rise, into which the exultant transgressors of *4chan* could not be expected to fit. Battle was joined; and 'pure' adolescent rebellion against 'political correctness' carries with it the temptation of genuine far-rightism.

Alienation

There is also the matter of who these people are, and again, Nagle is in the almost unique position among liberal lefts of having bothered to investigate how they see themselves. We are all comfortable to sneer at *4chan* types as perpetual virgins and saddos, but there is a lack of empathy here; for it is not enormously fun to be a perpetual virgin or a saddo. The former are called 'incels' in the subculture - 'involuntary celibates' - and there is a real sense in which this violently misogynistic subculture can function as a sort of support group. Nagle quotes from a user on the 'incel' subforum on *Reddit*: "I spent four hours just staring at the wall in my room. What normies call an existential crisis, for the incel is simply... life" (p98).

There is *something like* a coherent world-view for these self-proclaimed beta-males. Premise one: the 'traditional' characterisation of gender roles and propensities is basically accurate. Men have the characteristics that propel them forth from the household to win bread; women are nurturers, more emotion-driven and therefore capricious. Sexual liberation and gender equality in work, etc, is therefore a disaster: women, no longer constrained by the need to pick an economically viable mate, choose sexual partners based purely on mechanical desire, leading to - in the words of one alt-right writer, F Roger Devlin - "promiscuity for the few, loneliness for the majority". If this majority wants to escape its loneliness, it must treat the dating game - and, by implication, relations between the genders in general - like a Hobbesian war of all against all.

As in sexual life, so in the life of nations. White people are supposedly in charge of America - but they are being outbred by immigrants and domestic ethnic minorities, and outmanoeuvred by their advocates, both on the left and the mainstream right. The term 'cuckservative' (a portmanteau of cuckold and conservative) sums it all up nicely - it is applied to the run-of-the-mill Republican congressman whose sole remaining spurious link to the revolutionary party of Lincoln is boilerplate about how America offers opportunities to all, regardless of their race. The nation is in this view the wife, with whom a shadowy interloper is having his wicked way.

Despite its apparent completeness, this world view is, of course, riven with contradictions, to which Nagle is alert. It purports to venerate traditional marriage over modern promiscuity, but in practice encourages its adherents to pursue casual sex with conventionally attractive women of - in the 'traditional' phrase - easy virtue. It despises the 'alpha males' and their unsophistication, but prescribes only that the betas beat the alphas at their own game. It is this that marks it out as little more than an exercise in self-justification for people who, despite being largely middle class males in the Greatest Country On Earth, seem to confront an existence of intense alienation and loneliness:

The sexual revolution that started the decline of lifelong marriage has produced great freedom from the shackles of loveless marriage and selfless duty to the family for both men and women. But this ever-extended adolescence has also brought with it the rise of adult childlessness and a

steep sexual hierarchy. Sexual patterns that have emerged as a result of the decline of monogamy have seen a greater level of sexual choice for an elite of men and a growing celibacy among a large male population at the bottom of the pecking order. Their own anxiety and anger about their low-ranking status in this hierarchy is precisely what has produced their hard-line rhetoric about asserting hierarchy in the world politically, when it comes to women (p97).

In this world, people like Elliot Rodger, the spree-killer, are heroes and martyrs. In the end, they are the exact mirror image of the *Tumblr* identitarians and their "performative vulnerability", as Nagle nicely puts it, albeit 'more so': recent history is hardly littered with the murderous rampages of intersectionalists, unlike the 'beta males' and white nationalists.

Winners and losers

The question remains whether any of this made any difference last November, and more broadly of its importance to wider society. The alt-right, in spite of the poor condition of most of its adherents on closer examination, has been blown up into a vast and unconscionable threat; and indeed some of its marquee names have put in appearances in the White House (principally Steve Bannon and Sebastian Gorka). Yet Trump won last year on the thinnest of margins, and that kind of success certainly has many fathers. Alt-right enthusiasm for Trump - the *bête noire* of the 'cuckservative' mainstream - is one explanation. The lukewarm attitude of Democrat constituencies for Hillary is another. The 'left behind' of the rust belt are one more. On it goes.

Nagle's writing has plenty enough in common with that proceeding from the ex-Revolutionary Communist Party milieu in this country, focused primarily on the website *Spiked*. The latter's decreasingly hinged enthusiasm for Brexit, firm Zionism and hatred of the pro-transgender movement very nearly puts it *within* the alt-right, which is not true of Nagle; yet the vigour with which she presses the case that it is intersectionality which is *causative* of the lunacy catalogued here is characteristically *Spikedish*. In truth, it would be better to say that the two phenomena so resemble each other in a genetic sort of a way - there is a pretty near common ancestor (looks like somebody has been cuckolded ...).

The apparently total victory of

the neoliberal right in the 1980s and especially the 1990s, after the fall of the Stalinist regimes, placed the traditional left on the defensive on economic issues, and pushed it thereby more firmly onto the issues of personal liberty that place it in league with - or in competition with - identity politics. But one does not retreat into a *less* easily defended position than one started from. *Why* should it have found it so easy? Because racial and gender equality had become the *official ideology* of the state core - it was to stand on a position that everyone purported to share. The difference between the terms of that official ideology and the lived reality of a society in which (to take the American context) black people were seeing a lot more of the inside of jails, and a resurgent religious right made inroads against even the modest guarantees of *Roe v Wade*, provided the left with a *raison d'être*.

But it also so provided the alt-right with the same. For their alienated audience faced essentially the same situation in reverse - a sense of entitlement to better than their lot, combined with the apparently united hostility of the left and 'cuckservative' right. The evident, lunatic bigotry of the alt-right unfortunately forms the last moment of the vicious circle - it 'proves' the liberals right about their opponents, and vice versa.

Lost in all this, of course, is the idea represented in the famous statement of Marx that a nation which oppresses another can never itself be free: that oppression does not benefit the oppressors on some particular matter uniformly. In fact, it is almost invariably the case that some of those oppressors are engaged in a *negative sum game* with those in whose oppression they collude. In this remark, Marx referred to the manner in which anti-Irish prejudice disarmed many English workers against their own oppressors; but the degraded and fetishised sexual economy of neoliberal capitalism is another example of something in which most of the winners are also losers.

As for the techno-utopians, their dream was that the relative egalitarianism of the internet should usher in, in and of itself, a more critically minded and astute civil society, no longer so blind to the degradation of its fellows. If *Kill all normies* achieves nothing else, it documents the death of this particular piece of idiocy ●

Paul Demarty

paul.demarty@weeklyworker.co.uk

Fighting fund

Touching distance

I was obviously worrying over nothing earlier in the month. Despite (or perhaps because of!) my fretting a couple of issues ago, the last two weeks have taken us within touching distance of our £1,750 fighting fund target for October. We are on an impressive £1,671 - just £84 needed with six days still to go.

The two biggest benefactors this week were regular donors SK and PM, who stomped up £230 and £100 respectively. Other standing orders came from DC (£12) and PM (£10), while PBS added an extra £40 to his annual £60 subscription, writing a cheque for a nice round number!

On top of that, three out of our 2,610 online readers over the past week did their bit by clicking on the PayPal button - thanks especially to DS for his generous £50, and to KM and VN for their useful tenners. All in all, £462 was added to October's fund, which means

that we should really try to make up for the shortfall accumulated over the first eight months of the year. In September we ate into it a little bit, exceeding the target by £96, which means we could still do with another £538 over and above the monthly £1,750 by the end of the year.

How about getting it all back with two months to spare? There's plenty of time to send a cheque, but much quicker is PayPal or - better still - a bank transfer (no fees for either party). Our account number is 00744310 and our sort code 30-99-64.

Let's make sure we smash right through that £1,750 target this month ●

Robbie Rix

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

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.

The *Weekly Worker* is licensed by November Publications under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International Licence: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/legalcode>. ISSN 1351-0150.

weekly worker

**Tide is turning
against the
witch-hunters**

Corbyn must speak out

David Shearer of Labour Party Marxists reports on the launch of a promising new campaign



Stop looking the other way

Around 25 comrades attended the launch meeting of Labour Against the Witch-hunt (LAW), held in London on October 21. The undoubted stimulus behind it was the expulsion from the Labour Party earlier this month of Moshé Machover for “apparent anti-Semitism” - although within two days this pretext was seemingly withdrawn in favour of an unsubstantiated allegation of “membership” of, or “support” for, the CPGB and/or Labour Party Marxists.

This vindictive and totally unjustified act - undoubtedly orchestrated by Labour’s pro-Zionist right as part of its war against the Jeremy Corbyn leadership - has caused huge outrage throughout the party. Over a thousand people have signed the petition drawn up by the anti-Zionist group, Jewish Voice for Labour, and many dozens of Constituency Labour Parties and branches have demanded comrade Machover’s immediate reinstatement.

As readers will know, what provoked his targeting by the right was the republication in September of his article, ‘Anti-Zionism does not equal anti-Semitism’, in *Labour Party Marxists*, which was distributed to delegates and visitors attending the Labour conference in Brighton. This edition of *LPM* was widely welcomed, with many asking for extra copies to take back to their comrades and friends. A clear majority of delegates were in favour of Palestinian rights and against Israel’s continued policy of colonial expansionism. This was made very clear by the reaction within the hall whenever the question was raised by speakers.

Like Ken Livingstone - still suspended after 18 months for “bringing the party into disrepute” - comrade Machover had the gall to point to the 1930s cooperation between the German Nazis and leading Zionists. This undoubted historical fact is considered such an embarrassment

by today’s Zionists that those who even mention it must be smeared as anti-Semitic - it does not matter that amongst those who do so are Jewish anti-racists and lifelong opponents of anti-Semitism like comrade Machover; or indeed Tony Greenstein, who has also been suspended from Labour since April 2016.

The difference between the Machover and Livingstone cases was that the latter made his remarks in an off-the-cuff radio interview and therefore included one or two minor inaccuracies. So, although the former London mayor is a much more high-profile case than comrade Machover, this had the effect of muddying the waters and reducing the widespread opposition to his suspension.

By contrast, comrade Machover’s clear and concise piece was recognised as a valuable contribution by delegates in Brighton. Undoubtedly those very delegates will have influenced the outcome of the local motions calling for his reinstatement - most being passed by overwhelming majorities.

Labour members have also been struck by the blatant injustice of the expulsion procedure: comrade Machover has been given no opportunity to present his case or appeal against the decision. Such injustice has also featured in other cases where anti-Zionists have

been smeared as ‘anti-Semitic’ in this way, but this one has undoubtedly given fresh impetus to the whole campaign of opposition to the witch-hunt. Members are aware that it is this series of smears and the absence of any democratic process in such disciplinary cases that is bringing the party into disrepute, not the considered reflections of Moshé Machover.

That is why the launch of LAW is so much to be welcomed. Hopefully it will be able to gather momentum and provide a cutting-edge for the whole campaign to democratise Labour - which is very much at the centre of the battle to defeat the right in its attempts to keep it safe for pro-capitalist careerists.

At Saturday’s meeting a steering committee of four was elected, consisting of Pete Firmin, Tony Greenstein, Jackie Walker and Stan Keable. Of the four, only comrade Firmin - a long-time leading figure on the Labour left - is *not* a victim of the witch-hunt. Jackie Walker - who, like comrades Machover and Greenstein, is herself Jewish - was suspended a year ago, this time for a remark she made in a speech to the effect that Holocaust Memorial Day should commemorate other genocides besides those perpetrated by the Nazis. In what way was this ‘anti-Semitic’ or worthy of

disciplinary action?

The reason given for comrade Keable’s summary expulsion is his membership of LPM, of which he is secretary - even though his occupancy of that position has been public knowledge since 2011. As for comrade Greenstein, he too has been accused of anti-Semitism - ‘evidence’ of this included his use of the abbreviation ‘Zio’ for ‘Zionist’ on social media!

LAW will have three basic demands:

- End ‘auto-exclusion’ and reinstate all those thus excluded.
- Abolish the compliance unit. Disciplinary action must be taken only by elected bodies.
- Define anti-Semitism straightforwardly and clearly, along the lines suggested by Brian Klug.

Not just the definition, but the illustrations of anti-Semitism - in particular illustration number seven - put out by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (and in comrade Machover’s case cited for the first time, as far as I know, to back up disciplinary action) is clearly being used to conflate anti-Semitism with anti-Zionism. We are seriously told that it is anti-Semitic to “deny ... the Jewish people their right to self-determination: eg, by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavour.” By contrast, Klug’s

definition is brief and to the point: “Anti-Semitism is a form of hostility to Jews as Jews, where Jews are perceived as something other than what they are.” In my opinion, however, the definition which features on the website of Jewish Voice for Labour (www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk) is better still: “Hostility towards or discrimination against Jews as Jews”.

The new committee will write a letter to Labour’s national executive committee, outlining its aims. It will draw up a leaflet to distribute and consider other means of generating support, such as the production of badges. LAW will lobby a forthcoming NEC meeting and consider picketing disciplinary hearings. It intends to hold a public meeting in London, as the campaign generates momentum, and organise a conference in the new year.

It is essential that Corbyn and John McDonnell begin to speak out against the witch-hunt, rather than maintain that they “do not comment on disciplinary cases”. They know full well what is really happening, but their concern that the pretence of ‘party unity behind the leader’ would be blown apart if they spoke out prevents them from doing so, it seems.

But, as we know, things can change in a very short time ●

Subscribe				Name: _____	
	6m	1yr	Inst.	Address: _____	
UK	£30/€35	£60/€70	£200/€220	_____	
Europe	£43/€50	£86/€100	£240/€264	_____	
Rest of world	£65/€75	£130/€150	£480/€528	_____	
<p>New UK subscribers offer: 3 months for £10</p> <p>UK subscribers: Pay by standing order and save £12 a year. Minimum £12 every 3 months... but please pay more if you can.</p> <p>Send a cheque or postal order payable to ‘Weekly Worker’ at: Weekly Worker, BCM Box 928, London WC1N 3XX</p>				Tel: _____	
				Email: _____	
				Sub: £/€ _____	
				Donation: £/€ _____	
Standing order					
To _____				Bank plc _____	
Branch address _____					
Post code _____		Account name _____			
Sort code _____		Account No _____			
Please pay to Weekly Worker, Lloyds A/C No 00744310 sort code 30-99-64, the sum of _____ every month*/3 months* until further notice, commencing on _____ This replaces any previous order from this account. (*delete)					
Date _____					
Signed _____				Name (PRINT) _____	
Address _____					