

A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity



weekly worker

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brought about by Peter
Taaffe's control-freakery**

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Towards a Communist Party of the European Union

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Consensus
unlikely to
break out

LETTERS



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

Class vote

Having respected Tony Greenstein's knowledge and contribution to the Palestinian cause for at least three decades, I have to say I found his response to my letter on the parliamentary coup against the referendum result unworthy of him (Letters, March 28). His monochrome, cardboard-cut-out, stereotypical image of 'leave' voters is rather pathetic. You can't write off the bulk of the working class as proto-fascists and nationalists.

To say I am in an "unholy alliance" with the Democratic Unionist Party is beyond belief. I want Britain out of Ireland, now and unconditionally - I have stated that many times. Tony clearly doesn't know my political history, to say something as bizarre as that. I don't believe in a border in Ireland - I have fought British imperialism in Ireland all my life - and it shows the base level the discussion has reached with personal attacks like that.

We have all been outraged at the totally unfounded accusations made against many in the Labour and trade union movement of racist anti-Semitism, and the new definition drawn up to allow a more liberal application of this slander. Yet here we have Tony doing the same thing - saying I have joined the racists. Presumably the new definition includes anyone who opposes the European Union superstate project. To say that I and millions of other 'leave' voters are now in the same boat as Rees-Mogg and Johnson or the UK Independence Party is just hysterical, insulting rubbish. In the main these are workers who have always been at the sharp end of class struggle, the bedrock of traditional labour and communist movements.

Tony says because we voted out we believe we have more in common with the British state than the European ruling class. Pardon? We have nothing in common with the so-called 'British state' or the EU state, or either of their ruling classes: we are not choosing states. I hate the UK state, but nobody has given me

a vote on leaving it or seeking some new arrangement. As I stated in a previous letter, I am for Britain out of the EU, Scotland out of the EU and the UK. Nobody - well, none of my workmates or neighbours - identifies with the British ruling class: you're having a laugh. But why would identifying with the European ruling class rather than the British one be more beneficial? I don't need to explain the nature of the EU or its motives and drivers - this was eloquently done by Jack Conrad and Eddie Ford in last week's paper, who also exposed the powers behind the 'second referendum' and 'remain' protests. That's the camp that Tony's standing in, by the way.

The number of liberal leftists who turned out to wag their little tails and cheer at back-stabbing bastards like Chuka Umunna, Thatcher-number-two Soubry and Mandelson, with the support and finance of billionaires, bankers, businessmen and millionaire loveys, shows how shallow their understanding of class politics is. Didn't it dawn on them when they saw placards mocking the working class, or sang "Where's Jeremy Corbyn?", that this was the founding rally of a new Blairite-Thatcherite party?

The reason why the 'Leave Means Leave' march from Sunderland didn't have me and thousands of trade union militants, former industrial workers and the mining communities represented as such was because Farage and Ukip were on it. Led by a bevy of Union Jacks and St George Flags (though not as many as I have burned in my lifetime), I wouldn't have been found dead on such a march - and neither would the bulk of working class socialists who voted out. The mining union and communities have always been great internationalists and still are - our rejection of the EU state is no more an indication of anti-European sentiments than my rejection of the UK state is 'anti-British'.

However, the EU has been waging an incessant war against European coal communities. It was the pro-'remain' Ed Miliband - MP for the constituency with the second-last coal mine in Britain - who drew up the most draconian anti-coal regulations for the EU and who drafted the tripartite agreement that pledged,

whichever government was elected, they would cease coal-fired power generation by next year. Who was it at the head of the industrial genocide of the 1990s? 'Remain' evangelists John Major and Michael Heseltine. Who for 13 years did nothing to invest in carbon capture and storage or other clean-coal technologies, and oversaw the steady social decay of the coalfields? Blair and Brown, champions of 'remain'. When these same people, along with Cameron and the leaders of all the political parties, came advising us that the EU was good for us and they knew best, those communities said 'Bollocks!' It was an entirely class reaction, not a nationalist one.

An "independent capitalist Britain"? For god's sake, Tony, get a grip. World corporations and banks run capitalism internationally, including in Britain, in or out of the EU. It's just they strongly prefer staying in, because it maximises their profits and reduces workers across Europe to the lowest common denominator. Free movement is aimed at breaking labour movement controls and restrictions, and strong union identities. But nobody is arguing immigration will come to an end - of course not: European and world migration here will continue. The only difference is, it will not be aimed at allowing EU workers in unrestricted and keeping most other people out.

Wages, conditions and food standards are political issues - they are features of the class war. In or out, they have to be fought for independently by the working class, regardless of which state we live under.

David Douglass
South Shields

Crap sandwich

Jack Conrad says: "the UK is in the grip of a profound constitutional crisis"; and "the left must reject referendums as a matter of principle" and instead "we need our own programme and our own tactics" ('Time to end the tailism', March 28).

The first and last of these three statements are undoubtedly correct. A "profound constitutional crisis" and the need for "our own programme and our own tactics" go together. But the meaty "principle" in the sandwich is surely infected with mad cow disease. Nice bread, but crap sandwich.

Let us ignore the constitutional crisis and concentrate on programme and tactics by contrasting three examples - Corbyn Labour, Labour Party Marxists and a working class democratic programme and tactics.

The Corbyn Labour Party accepts the 2016 referendum result and is in favour of leaving the EU by securing a customs union and close regulatory alignment. Labour calls for a general election and is prepared to support a second 'remain' referendum. This places Labour in a dangerous position just to the left of the Tories.

Labour Party Marxists seem to support a British (or UKanian) republic, etc. This is like the CPGB programme from 10 or 20 years before Cameron's Brexit referendum. It has little or nothing to say about Brexit except to oppose a second referendum.

A democratic programme supports Northern Ireland and Scotland remaining in the EU, and England and Wales leaving, but not the single market or customs union. Such a democratic exit recognises the 'will of the people', which, despite its obvious flaws, remains valid until working class opinion changes significantly.

A democratic exit is totally opposed to every kind of British exit,

whether Tory or Labour. Of course, no democrat would try to impose a democratic exit on the people. So this includes the democratic demand for a ratification referendum on any deal.

The EU is, as Jack describes, a capitalist semi-state with "anti-union laws" and a "constitutional commitment to the market and neoliberalism", which has imposed "barbaric austerity on Spain, Portugal and Greece" and more. Yet this is not a case for leaving the EU, because outside will be worse. Working class democracy is not neutral between "reactionaries" and "liberals". The future of democracy is in Europe, not outside it. We need an independent, democratic programme which links our democratic future with the future of European democracy.

With Corbyn talking about a deal with May, working class democrats have to make the democratic case that any dodgy deal must be put to working people for ratification in a referendum, whether a Tory or a Labour deal or a Tory-Labour deal. The problem with Jack's 'no referendum' principle is that it is incapable of distinguishing between a ratification referendum, like on the Good Friday agreement, and a second referendum, like Scotland's plans for IndieRef2.

Steve Freeman
London

Clear now?

Maren Clarke asserts that I have the same mistaken understanding of Marx's law of value as Wagner, which "Marx sought fit to correct" (Letters, March 28). She provides no argument nor evidence to back up this claim. As I said some years ago, in a discussion with Paul B Smith, it's difficult to respond succinctly to unsupported assertions without the discussion being a meaningless pantomime of 'Oh yes, it is' and 'Oh no, it isn't'.

She says: "The truth is that value is an historical development - over many centuries ..." At least that's not claiming it sprung into existence fully formed. But she then has to square that with Engels' description of commodities exchanging at their values during a period of 10 millennia, and Marx's analysis that during this period commodities are produced and exchanged by independent commodity producers, and that it is the onset of capitalism - competition between capitals - which results in exchange of commodities not at their values, but at prices of production.

She continues: "The idea that people need to labour to reproduce their conditions of existence is not Marx's theory of value and it should not be misunderstood to be." But it is, which is precisely what Marx says in his letter to Kugelmann, which sets out Marx's understanding of the term 'value', and of the law of value, as I cited in my previous letter.

Those real relationships are those of the exchange of labour-time, which underlies the exchange of commodities, but which is obscured by exchange-value, and creates commodity fetishism. And the fact is that Marx could not be clearer that it is these "real relationships" based upon the law of value that exist across all modes of production. He could not be clearer, than his comment in *Capital* volume 3, chapter 49, which I also cited in my previous letter. Or, indeed, when he writes in *The critique of the Gotha programme*, about these same relationships under communism:

"Here, obviously, the same principle prevails as that which regulates the exchange of commodities, as far as this is exchange of equal values ... the same principle prevails as in the exchange

of commodity equivalents: a given amount of labour in one form is exchanged for an equal amount of labour in another form."

Maren seems dogmatically blind to Marx's and Engels' use of the term 'value' in all of these statements about the "real relations" that exist between real human beings, resulting from the materially determined conditions of their existence, and the need to produce in order to reproduce themselves.

Marx did indeed, Maren says, analyse the underlying mechanisms that underpinned capitalist society, but it's an historical analysis. Its starting point is not capital, but the commodity, which has existed for 10,000 years! As Marx describes, it occurs within the context of a range of modes of production - from the primitive commune and exchange of commodities between nomadic tribes, to slave-owning societies in antiquity, to the Asiatic mode of production, to feudalism, through to capitalism. All, of this pre-history is a necessary historical development, because on the basis of commodity production and exchange, as Marx sets out in *Capital* volume 1, chapter 3, we get the development of the value form and finally the universal equivalent form of value, as one commodity is singled out to be the money commodity, which measures the exchange-value of every other commodity.

Without all that we don't get money - the representation of exchange-value incarnate - which predates capitalism by thousands of years, and without which it is impossible to get money hoarding and, thereby, for it to begin to act as capital.

Maren quotes Marx's comment, in relation to Mill, but misunderstands entirely the point that Marx is making. What Marx is setting out is that the commodity comprises two contradictory components - use value and value. Marx's comment is part of his critique of Say's Law that there can be no overproduction, because supply creates its own demand.

In fact, rather undermining the idea that Marx believes that the category 'value' only exists under capitalism, Marx's analysis in *Theories of surplus value*, chapter 17, explaining the fallacy involved in Say's Law, shows that it only applies under systems of barter, whereby the producers of commodities exchange them, at their value, in return for other commodities, precisely because they require these commodities as use-values for their own consumption. What Marx sets out, in relation to Mill, is not that value comes into existence with exchange - indeed in his later critique of Bailey and others subjectivists, Marx demonstrates the impossibility of that being the case - but that, as soon as exchanges are conducted on the basis of a money economy, the value that resides in the commodity itself takes on an independent existence.

In a money economy - which arises fairly quickly after commodity exchange develops, with commonly traded commodities, such as cattle, being used as money commodities - instead of C-C, we have C-M-C, and now the value existing within the commodity takes on independent existence. A sells 10 litres of wine to B, but, instead of obtaining a bible in exchange, receives, say, a gold coin, of equal value. A does not desire the coin for its use-value, but precisely because it is an independent physical representation of value itself. Value has thereby become alienated from the commodity. Indeed, the use-value of the coin is not that it is a commodity, desired for consumption, but precisely that, as exchange-

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value incarnate, it acts as the general commodity: its use value, as money, is that it can be exchanged for any other commodity of equal value.

Marx is not at all saying that value itself comes into existence as a result of this exchange of commodities. Everything he writes, in this analysis in *Theories of surplus value*, says the opposite: the value inherent within every product, and thereby within every commodity, takes on an independent existence as a result of the process of exchange. But, by definition, it can only take on an independent existence if, prior to this, it already existed, and was not independent: ie, was inseparable from the product/commodity itself.

Maren's last paragraph is a *non-sequitur*. The question of abolishing private property by the establishment of communism has nothing to do with the question of whether the products produced by such a society are values or not - less still, whether, as Marx and Engels did, we choose to label the labour-time required to produce those products their 'values', or anything else we see fit.

Arthur Bough
email

Occupation

Anyone who thinks that college politics is all about student unions 'no platforming' current affairs speakers should check out Goldsmiths College (London University) in New Cross, SE14, where a building has been occupied by students, who wish to open up the whole question of the actual environment a university should provide. The occupation began on March 12 over one issue - racism - but has now brought forth a whole list of demands and a timetable of conferences and events that welcome everybody.

Recently during student union elections, the posters of a candidate for education officer, Hamna Imran, were torn down and defaced with racist graffiti. However, as one student commented, "The more we talked, the more came out about how angry we were about so many different things." These included the treatment of college cleaners and the fact that the frontage of one college building bears four statues identified with colonialism and plantation slavery.

The group then decided to occupy that building and come up with a manifesto of demands to turn the university into a more community-led and anti-oppression environment. The college management tried to end the occupation by making it difficult for others to get into the building. But the students stayed and also began holding events - film shows, workshops, lectures and a conference last Thursday - inviting anyone to come in and participate if they supported the students' demands.

Having visited the occupation last week, I see this as a movement that has come out of the conflict between a new, diverse generation of students and an educational institution which is under state pressure to become more training-oriented. The university senior management team replied on April 1, answering some of the occupy manifesto in their own 10-page document. They did promise that the main union, Unison, would be involved in talks about improved access to college facilities by in-house staff, like cleaners and security workers. However, they also stated that consultation would have to be extensive on the issue of the frontage statues, in recognition of "the shared heritage" of "maritime history in the design of the building". The statues, by the way, include Francis Drake, stealer of slaves from the Spanish, and Horatio Nelson, close supporter of Caribbean planters. The lack of interest in these emblems of colonial slavery speaks of

a complacency that amounts to a vested interest in the status quo.

On the issues of racism and hate crime reporting, they offered mandatory staff training in anti-racism and addressing the practical difficulties of reporting criminal behaviour. I well remember the mission statements in the office of one department when I worked there as a tutor. They were all for equal treatment, but it didn't stop one official telling an African student of mine that "you people think you don't have to pay the fees". When I looked into it, I found office staff very prepared to repel my enquiry. They told me that the student had gone around the place shouting.

In the chamber I visited, there were posters on Israel as an apartheid state, and others reminding us that "Silence is violence", as well as art works and wall sheets dealing with everything from trans rights to a cooking rota. The occupation has opened up the place for events, games sessions and alternative pedagogy.

Anyone who wishes to hold 'teach-outs' (open educational sessions) on any subject can get in touch and offer their services (goldantiracism@gmail.com); those who just want to visit to listen and learn are equally welcome.

Mike Belbin
London

Only capitalism?

Rex Dunn writes tellingly of the 'capitalistocene' (Letters, March 28). Rightly, he highlights the undeniable evidence of climate change and the recent accelerating rate of ecological destruction.

He claims, however, that the jury is still out, when it comes to the contribution made by "man" (sic) to climate change. Surely not. The 'jury' - certainly climatologists, and conservative institutions such as the International Panel on Climate Change - are pretty emphatic: humans are the "major cause" of global warming (Union of Concerned Scientists).

He goes on to say that capitalism "is entirely responsible" for ecological destruction: eg, soil erosion, use of pesticides, plastic waste, urban pollution caused by cars, etc. Hence his call to drop talk of a new *Anthropocene* age. Instead, he says, we should be talking about the *capitalistocene*.

With good reason Rex Dunn mocks the idea of a "green new deal" under

capitalism. Capitalism is predicated on production for the sake of production. As a system it is therefore uniquely destructive. Capitalism certainly bears prime responsibility for global warming and the increasing rate of ecological destruction.

However, we need to have a good look at ourselves. The socialist movement has often championed rapid economic growth as being entirely unproblematic. Indeed the socialist movement has often identified itself with the development of the means of production. Till recent times, the writings of Marx, not least in *Capital*, on healing the metabolic rift with nature, the destruction of the ecosystem and water and air pollution, were widely forgotten.

Nor should we forget the horrendous ecological record of the Soviet Union and other such countries. Lakes were poisoned and depleted, rivers polluted, air made unbreathable and radio active waste criminally discarded all over the place. Towards the end of the system life expectancy, especially for males, went into steep decline.

And it would be foolish to simply put this down to Stalinism. Sadly, Leon Trotsky showed little appreciation of ecology and the necessity of treating nature with respect and sensitivity. Hence he writes:

"The present distribution of mountains and rivers, of fields, of meadows, of steppes, of forests and of seashores cannot be considered final. Man has already made changes in the map of nature that are not few nor insignificant. But they are mere pupils' practice in comparison with what is coming. Faith merely promises to move mountains; but technology, which takes nothing 'on faith', is actually able to cut down mountains and move them. Up to now this was done for industrial purposes (mines) or for railways (tunnels); in the future this will be done on an immeasurably larger scale, according to a general industrial and artistic plan. Man will occupy himself with reregistering mountains and rivers, and will earnestly and repeatedly make improvements in nature. In the end, he will have rebuilt the earth, if not in his own image, at least according to his own taste. We have not the slightest fear that this taste will be bad" (www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_rev/ch08.htm).

Stephanie Just
Canterbury

Fighting fund

Meeting the new target

The last few days of the month saw us creep towards the £2,000 mark for our March fighting fund, but in the end we stopped just short, the total received being £1,914.

Donors included JS, who contributed £15 via PayPal and wrote: "No other labour movement paper has a letters page which encourages so much debate." In fact, in the comrade's opinion, the *Weekly Worker* is "the best paper in the worldwide labour movement". Steady!

Another PayPal donation came from AR (£5), while there were two end-of-the-month standing orders - thanks to DR (£15) and BC (£10). Finally, in a last-minute bid to get us past that £2,000 barrier, comrade PT made a £20 bank transfer on the afternoon of March 31! Great stuff, but not quite enough to get us there.

The reason I'm going on about £2K is, of course, because we've decided to increase our fighting fund to that amount from this month, mainly because of increased

printing and postage costs. The fact that we almost got there in March, even though the target was still £1,750, is encouraging.

And April has got off to a good start, despite the fact that, as I write, only three days have gone so far. That's mainly down to those standing orders that always come our way at the beginning of each month - there were 16 of them, ranging from £5 from DC and PBS to £50 from AC. Also worth a mention are the contributions from SW (£30), DC and II (£20) each. There were also two cheques - from MN (£20) and VL (£10).

All in all, we start April with £260 in the bag after one tenth of the month. So we're on target, but can we keep up the momentum for the rest of the month? ●

Robbie Rix

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

ACTION

London Communist Forum

Sunday April 7, 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 1907 to the October Revolution of 1917*. This meeting: chapter 2 (continued): 'Prelude to the "Great War": "Declaration" and split'. 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 April 9, 6.30pm: Series of talks on social and biological anthropology, Daryll Forde seminar room, Anthropology Building, 14 Taviton Street, off Gordon Square, London WC1. This meeting: 'Myths of the origins of fire'. Speaker: Camilla Power. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: http://radicalanthropologygroup.org.

War or peace in Afghanistan?

Monday April 8, 7.30pm: Meeting, Brent Trades Hall (Apollo Club), 375 High Road, London NW10. Organised by Brent Stop the War: www.facebook.com/BrentStoptheWar.

Youth Strike 4 Climate

Friday April 12, 11am: UK-wide (and global) student and school student demonstrations. Take direct action on the climate crisis and ecological catastrophe - system change, not climate change! Organised by UK Student Climate Network: https://ukscn.org/ys4c-where.

Jewish National Fund not a charity

Friday April 12, 7pm: Public meeting, Mander Hall, Hamilton House, Mableton Place, London WC1. The JNF UK props up ethnic cleansing in Palestine - it should not benefit from charitable status. Speaker: Kholoud al Ajarma from a family ethnically cleansed in 1948. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: www.facebook.com/events/451635232066574.

Rebellion against climate change

Sunday April 14, 1pm: March reception, Hyde Park, London W2. Welcome the Earth Marchers and prepare for a fortnight of international mass civil disobedience. Organised by Extinction Rebellion: www.facebook.com/events/364326324416770.

Why we need an anti-war government

Monday April 15, 6.15pm: Public meeting, NEU conference, room 11C, ACC Liverpool, Kings Dock Street, Liverpool L3. Organised by Stop the War Coalition: www.facebook.com/stophewarcoalition.

Keep the guard on Southern trains

Friday April 26, 12 noon: Demonstration, Evergreen Building North, 160 Euston Road, London NW1. Mark the third anniversary of opposing the extension of driver-only operation on Southern Railway. Organised by RMT: http://bit.ly/2OuA8ve.

March for unity against racism

Saturday April 27, 2pm: Demonstration, Dominion Road, Southall, UB2. 40 years since Blair Peach was fatally attacked by the Metropolitan Police's Special Patrol Group. Organised by Southall Resists 40: www.facebook.com/Southallresists40.

Britain is broken - end austerity now

Sunday April 28, 1.30pm: March and rally, Firstsite, Lewis Gardens, Colchester CO1. Organised by Colchester People's Assembly: www.facebook.com/events/331469450810068.

May Day march

Wednesday May 1, 12 noon: Demonstration, Assemble Clerkenwell Green, London EC1 (nearest tube: Farringdon) for march to Trafalgar Square. Solidarity on International Workers Day. Speakers include John McDonnell MP. Organised by London May Day Organising Committee: www.londonmayday.org.

Marx Memorial Library

Wednesday May 1, 11am: Museum open day, Marx Memorial Library, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1. Free tours, displays and a second-hand book stall. Organised by Marx Memorial Library: www.facebook.com/events/353995138663273.

Labour Against the Witchhunt

Saturday May 4, 1pm: Members' meeting, central London (venue details to follow). Moving the campaign forward and electing members to the steering committee. Organised by Labour Against the Witchhunt: www.facebook.com/events/493682997827672.

Class struggles, the state and film

Films followed by discussion. Organised by Marx Memorial Library, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1. Entrance £5 (£3).

Wednesday May 8, 7pm: Miners, dockers and builders in a period of militancy: www.facebook.com/events/247509756132464.

Wednesday May 15, 7pm: The 'enemy within' - the Thatcher government attacks: www.facebook.com/events/268104377453694.

Wednesday May 22, 7pm: Women's struggle: www.facebook.com/events/392972168163097.

Exist! Resist! Return!

Saturday May 11, 12 noon: National demonstration, Portland Place, London W1. March to Whitehall. No new nakba! End the siege! Defend the right of return! Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: www.facebook.com/events/260404684903442.

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LABOUR



Conference: delegates wanted automatic reselection

Where are our trigger ballots?

Jeremy Corbyn keeps digging his own grave, says Carla Roberts. But we want to bury the right

Snap election or national government, the overwhelming majority of current Labour MPs have certainly made it very clear that they remain deeply hostile to Jeremy Corbyn's leadership.

However, another direct attempt to depose him is improbable - simply because there is no doubt he would win again. But even in the unlikely event of Corbyn getting the keys to No10, this would not stop the ongoing slow coup against him by the right in and outside the Labour Party. The current crop of Labour MPs will continue to sabotage and undermine him at every possible opportunity - he will remain a prisoner locked into a hostile Parliamentary Labour Party. He would be lucky if he could convince these rightwingers to vote for half a dozen of the demands in his *For the many, not the few* manifesto.

More importantly though, what if the US and/or the 'international community' called on their British ally to go to war against the 'terrorists' in Iran or Lebanon? Or back a military coup in Venezuela? Or condemn the desperate protests of Palestinians in Gaza? If Corbyn refused to do any of those things, he could easily be outvoted by his PLP ... which would quite conceivably lead to a no-confidence vote ... which could spell the swift end of prime minister Corbyn.

The PLP remains the key problem for Corbyn, in other words. He cannot achieve anything much if he remains surrounded by these rightwingers. This is why Labour Party members at last year's conference voted overwhelmingly in favour of discussing a motion that would have reintroduced the mandatory reselection of MPs. Mandatory reselection - ie, a full democratic contest between all candidates ahead of each election -

would have been the easiest and the most democratic method to change the PLP to reflect the composition and political will of the membership. The membership, given half a chance, would have long replaced the most ardent rightwing MPs.

But Jeremy Corbyn and his allies bottled it. Yes, in concrete terms it was Len McCluskey who instructed his Unite union delegates to vote with the right against allowing conference to even *hear* the proposal for mandatory reselection (the unions count for 50% of total voting at conference - without their support nothing goes through). But we have no doubt that McCluskey, who came under heavy criticism for this move - was correct when he claimed that he merely acted "on the request of Jeremy Corbyn". Instead, to stop mandatory reselection from being voted through, the national executive committee produced suggestions to slightly reform the trigger ballot, which is currently the only way for members to exercise at least *some* level of control over their MP.

Until last year it was virtually impossible to get rid of a sitting MP. A majority of all local union and Labour branches affiliated to a Constituency Labour Party had to challenge the MP by voting 'no' in the so-called trigger ballot. Each branch and affiliate was counted equally, irrespective of the number of members. A CLP usually has far more union affiliates than Labour branches and, unfortunately, those union reps have tended to vote with the right (just like they do on the NEC).

But last September conference voted to replace the current trigger ballot with two separate ones: one for local affiliated bodies like unions; and one for local party branches. The threshold in both was reduced

from 50% to 33% and it is enough for one of the two sections to vote 'no' to start a full selection process - ie, a democratic contest between the different candidates. It is a small step forward from the status quo (though totally insufficient, when one considers that in the 1980s the party provided for the full, democratic and mandatory reselection of all candidates).

Since Corbyn's election as leader, Constituency Labour Parties up and down the country have voted for motions that showed they have "no confidence" in their MP - but such motions have no official standing in Labour Party rules and do not lead to trigger ballots.

The NEC actually has to issue guidelines and a timetable before local members can attempt to trigger a full selection process. And indeed the January 22 meeting of the NEC's organising committee commissioned general secretary Jennie Formby to "prepare a plan to ensure that CLPs have the opportunity to call a selection process if they so wish, even if Theresa May calls a new 'snap', short-campaign general election" - and to do it quickly: "The NEC 'officers group' expects to meet earlier [than the March meeting of the NEC] to approve Formby's plan when it is ready."¹

It seems that this news was enough to encourage some of the most unpopular rightwing MPs to jump ship - among them Chukka Umunna, Luciana Berger and Angela Smith - who would all have been toast, had the local membership been given the chance to get rid of them. And they knew it. This was then followed by the foundation of Tom Watson's 'Future Britain' group - a clear warning sign to Corbyn that more MPs might quit the Labour whip.

Now, from a Marxist point of view, this was all very good news. With the huge increase in membership following Corbyn's victory, we have a real chance to radically transform Labour into a *real* party of the working class. We do not want Blairites, warmongers and careerists in our party. We are happy to get rid of them democratically, through elections at various levels, but we are just as pleased when they feel the need to jump before they get pushed.

Not so Jeremy Corbyn and his allies. He has bent over backwards time and time again to try and keep the right on board. Considering that after three and a half years of appeasement, the right is as hostile to him as they were on day one, this does not look like a particularly successful tactic to us.

But it continues: at the end of February, *The Guardian* was told: "Labour could delay the start of deselection battles that party sources fear may prompt further resignations." After all, "We don't want to further antagonise."²

And indeed, the March NEC came ... and went. And it did not issue any trigger-ballot guidelines. In fact, it looks as if the issue has been quietly dropped. NEC member Pete Willsman, veteran of the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, does not mention the phrase, 'trigger ballot', in the latest of his regular, long NEC reports.

When asked on Facebook, leftwing NEC member Darren Williams confirms: "The NEC has not yet been presented with any proposals for trigger ballots. The next scheduled meeting is in May." He writes that "there will be a special NEC meeting if a general election is called", which, he "still hopes", would then publish the guidelines

and timetables necessary to organise local trigger ballots. To the comment, "That is all a bit worrying", his answer is: "Yes"³.

The experience of the 2017 snap election certainly serves as a stark warning. Then, the NEC decreed that all sitting MPs would *automatically* become the parliamentary candidates once again. In other words, local members were given no chance to organise trigger ballots. Should the NEC go down this road again, then Labour members would not have had a chance to decide on their parliamentary candidate for a staggering *nine years* (presuming the 2019 crop of MPs remained for a full parliamentary term of five years).

Clearly, this would be extremely undemocratic and in clear contravention of what the vast majority of delegates at last year's conference wanted. From Corbyn's point of view, it is political suicide.

As Labour Against the Witchhunt puts it in the useful petition it has produced on the issue: "Unless the makeup of the Parliamentary Labour Party dramatically changes to more accurately reflect the will and composition of the membership, Jeremy Corbyn could well be held prisoner by a majority of MPs, who are deeply hostile to the Corbyn project."

Almost 1,000 people have signed the petition within the first 24 hours - have you?⁴ ●

Notes

1. <https://skwawkbbox.org/2019/01/25/excl-labour-nec-authorises-formby-to-make-general-election-reselection-plan>.
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BREXIT

Consensus unlikely to break out

Enraging the right, Theresa May has asked Jeremy Corbyn to help break the impasse. But is it a genuine offer or a trap, asks **Eddie Ford**

Sometimes, the Brexit saga has seemed like an endless loop in space-time. There has been debate after debate, with MPs essentially repeating what they had said many times before - perhaps leading you to think that everything that could possibly be said about Brexit has been already. A total impasse.

At least, that is certainly how it felt on March 29, when Theresa May's deal was rejected for a third time by 58 votes (344 to 286) - easily meeting the definition of madness: doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. True, this time round, the vote was 'non-meaningful', in that the prime minister had separated the withdrawal agreement from the political declaration on the UK's future relationship with the European Union - something she had previously said was not possible. But when do you ever expect consistency from Theresa May? This was done mainly to get around the ruling from the speaker, John Bercow, that the government cannot keep presenting the same motion to the House of Commons in the hope that MPs finally submit. The rather desperate line from Downing Street afterwards was that "we are at least going in the right direction", as the margin of defeat was smaller than the 149 earlier this month and the crushing 230-strong defeat in the first 'meaningful vote' in January. In another spin operation, they also pointed out that May's deal had gained more support than any of the eight options considered by MPs on March 27 during indicative voting - the most popular being a second 'confirmatory' referendum that received the backing of 268 MPs.

Nevertheless, the defeat was still considerable - going from an historic loss to a humiliating loss to another humiliating rejection. You would think that there is only so much a person can endure. It is now an open question as to whether Theresa May will try to go for a fourth 'meaningful vote'. But her chances of snatching victory at the very last minute look extremely remote, thanks to the continued obduracy of the Democratic Unionist Party, a solid rump of the misnamed European Research Group and half a dozen Tory 'remainers' - not to mention, of course, the fact that the other parties, including Labour, remain more or less united in opposition to the deal. Only five Labour MPs last week voted for the withdrawal agreement, which must have been a great disappointment to the government. Doubtlessly it will continue to work on the DUP, but the clue is in its name - it is a *unionist* party to its very core, and hence will not look kindly upon any deal that produces a differentiation of any sort between the Northern Ireland statelet and the rest of the UK.

Under the deal agreed by EU leaders in Brussels last month, if May had managed to pass her withdrawal agreement then Brexit would have been delayed until May 22. But now a further humbled prime minister will have to return to Brussels for an emergency European council summit on April 10 - just two days before the UK is formally due to leave, with or without a deal. Naturally, EU leaders want to see any new British proposals well in advance in order to get a chance to mull them over, effectively meaning that May has until the end of the week to come up with something - and it better be good if she wants to be granted a longer extension to article 50. Of course, this would create a political headache all round - both for the UK



Chances of agreement very slim

and the EU - in that a longer delay would require Britain to participate in the May European elections (or so it seems at the moment), which would enrage Brexiteers. Then again, it would give Nigel Farage's new Brexit Party a chance to strut its stuff. However, hoping beyond hope, government aides have said to the press that they still believe they can keep to the May 22 date or deadline - if her deal, or something close to it, is miraculously passed this week.

We had that Groundhog feeling again on April 1 - whether appropriately or not, given the date - when the Commons once more 'indicatively' voted against all four options on the table, surprising and disappointing many people in equal measure. Even the government might not have been too happy with that outcome, as, in one more junkie-like throw of the dice, there appeared to be tentative plans to have a thrilling 'run-off' between May's deal and the winner of the indicative votes.

In the end though everyone was a loser, even if the margins were narrowed. Kenneth Clarke's plan for a customs union came within a whisker of success, only losing by three votes - but it should be remembered that victory by such a small margin is unlikely to be enough on its own, because that large chunk of abstaining Tory MPs and ministers could later decide to vote against (more than likely, in fact). Other defeated motions were for a second referendum (12 votes), an emergency backstop, giving parliament the power to revoke article 50 (101) and Nick Boles's Common Market 2.0/Norway-Plus (21). Bruised by the defeat, Boles admitted he had "failed" and resigned the party whip - later tweeting that he would sit as an "Independent Progressive Conservative". Boles's resignation might not be as noble and principled as it first seems, however, as his local constituency party had a few days earlier passed a motion of no-confidence against him. Better to jump than be pushed.

After she lost the vote again last week, Theresa May said the implications were "grave" and feared

"we are reaching the limits of this process in this house". Many regarded that as a warning that the prime minister was ready to call yet another snap general election on Brexit, assuming she could persuade enough of her MPs to back such a move, seeing how a two-thirds majority is required (or a successful vote of no-confidence in the government).

General election

Frankly, the threat of a general election should not be taken too seriously - though almost anything is possible in such a febrile atmosphere. Now, it is certainly the case that we may get an election way before 2022 - you can safely bet money on it actually - but not by May trying to resolve the Brexit crisis. You only have to ask a few simple questions, like what is the mood amongst the Tory rank and file - are they really gagging for the prime minister's deal or are they closer to the ERG? You know the answer already. And what about the manifesto? Are May and her team going to write it and then expect the entire party to enthusiastically campaign for it on the doorstep? The words 'snowball' and 'hell' come to mind, considering the utterly disastrous nature of the last election run by May, when she brilliantly converted a Commons majority into a minority government. Also, obviously, what sort of candidates will the local parties choose - ERG or Theresa May types? No need to ponder on that too much.

Furthermore, most opinion polls are now showing Labour ahead by around four or five percent - representing a modest advance in fortunes. Yes, that can be temporary - especially if the Tories gets a new leader enjoying a honeymoon period (in other words, anyone *but* May). Nevertheless, if you are a Tory campaign manager you are all too aware that Labour, led by Jeremy Corbyn, could emerge as the biggest party in any election (leave aside for now the improbable notion of the Labour leader persuading the monarch that he could command a majority in parliament). The thought of such a scenario must keep a Tory

fixer awake at night.

Therefore, with an election not a viable proposition and 'no deal' deemed unacceptable (on April 3 Yvette Cooper's bill to rule it out was passed by a majority of one, by 313 votes to 312), and all the various Brexit options or deals so far having been chucked out, it is not entirely surprising that, after a marathon seven-hour cabinet meeting on April 2, May made a brief appeal to Corbyn to help her "break the Brexit logjam". Unity, compromise and consensus in this time of national crisis. To this end, the prime minister met the Labour leader the following day for a two-hour session. Afterwards she described the talks as "constructive", while, for his part, the Corbyn said they were "useful, but inconclusive". In other words, we are still no further forward.

He had said beforehand that he accepted the need to go into the discussions in a spirit of cross-party cooperation, because he recognised "my responsibility to represent the people that supported Labour in the last election and the people who didn't support Labour". Peace in our time?

No, not really. Brexiteers responded with predictable fury to the prime minister's gambit, as any agreement with Corbyn would obviously mean a much softer form of Brexit than even May's flaccid deal. Labour has made it plain it will not back any plan without customs union membership and some sort of close relationship to the single market - a situation where the UK has to obey all the EU rules, yet has no say on its decisions. A pointless Brexit. Boris Johnson accused ministers of "entrusting the final handling of Brexit to Labour", with Brexit itself "becoming soft to the point of disintegration". Jacob Rees-Mogg, chair of the ERG, commented that "getting the support of a known Marxist is not likely to instil confidence in Conservatives" - he reminded the prime minister that "leaders who decide to go with the opposition rather than their own party find their own party doesn't plainly follow". Angered too, Nigel Adams, a government whip, quit his job in protest at May trying to "cook up a deal

with a Marxist" - treachery indeed. Other Eurosceptics and Brexiteers have warned that the prime minister's 'pact' with the Labour leader could tear the Tories apart.

Stewart Jackson, a former Tory MP and Brexit advisor, demanded a change in Tory rules to allow a fresh leadership ballot (currently a Tory no-confidence vote can only be called after 12 months). Andrea Jenkyns MP, a strong supporter of Leave Means Leave, did not rule out voting against the prime minister in any Commons no-confidence motion moved by Labour, saying it would "take a lot of thinking about" - a sentiment repeated by Steve Baker of the ERG, who is so "consumed with a ferocious rage", he wants to "bulldoze" parliament into the river. According to the useless former Brexit secretary and possible leadership contender, David Davis, up to 20 Tories could vote against May in any confidence vote - enough for the prime minister to lose her job, even if the DUP stays on board. He too thinks that a long delay to Brexit "would tear apart" the Conservative Party, resulting almost certainly in a leadership election, where "all bets are off".

On the other hand, last week saw the forming of the One Nation Group - comprising some 40 MPs, including Amber Rudd, David Gauke, Nicky Morgan and Sir Nicholas Soames - to counter what they see as the malign influence of the ERG. The Tories are at war with each other. The ONG is aiming to host hustings in any leadership contest.

Corbyn's fault

If Corbyn is tempted to agree *any* form of compromise with the prime minister that does not include a second referendum tacked onto it, he will face a surge of anger from Labour 'remainers' for facilitating of a "Tory Brexit" - an accusation that has already been hurled at him from various quarters, especially the likes of The Independent Group (aka Change UK). Yet if the talks with the prime minister lead to nothing, or Corbyn refuses to cut a deal with May, the Tories stand more than ready to accuse him of blocking Brexit and forcing a long article 50 extension upon the country. 'It's Corbyn's fault' will be the main line of attack, should we find ourselves facing a general election without Brexit having been delivered.

Without doubt, this is a big call for Team Corbyn, who must be desperate to get bleeding Brexit off the agenda, so they can get back to those good old bread-and-butter issues like defending the NHS and opposing austerity. When all is said and done, it is hard to see the Labour leadership doing anything to help the prime minister out of a hole of her own making. Yet, having said that, if May were to offer a permanent customs union as the price of a compromise, Labour would find itself in a very tricky position - rejecting the very thing they have been arguing for so long would look very odd indeed, if not downright opportunist and unprincipled. Putting petty party interests before the nation again.

Just how long will it be before we see an attempt to form a "government of national unity"? At a stroke, that would both prevent a short-term Brexit (thus opening the way for the UK remaining in the EU) and eliminate any possibility of Jeremy Corbyn leading a 'Marxist' government ●

MIDDLE EAST

New threats in the offing

Yassamine Mather warns that the US administration is more than willing to see the map of the entire region redrawn



In the current debates in the Labour Party and the political discourse in the UK regarding deliberate attempts to equate anti-Zionism (or indeed any criticism of the state of Israel) with anti-Semitism, what is often forgotten is the significance of this debate regarding future wars in the Middle East.

I find it difficult to see any rationale for demonising Jeremy Corbyn on the basis of Labour's economic policies. No-one in their right mind would worry about proposed economic reforms aimed at 'democratising capitalism'. Of course, some of John McDonnell's and Jeremy Corbyn's policies regarding partial nationalisation are not welcomed by the *Financial Times* or the *City*. However, at a time when the world economy is expected to enter a period of recession (according to some, a full-blown economic crisis), when capital is concerned about low consumption and overaccumulation - itself an inevitable consequence of the huge gap between rich and poor - the mild reforms proposed in the 2017 Labour manifesto are not causing panic amongst capitalists.

However, when it comes to foreign policy, the British state, considered as the USA's main ally, cannot ever be headed by an anti-war Labour leader who has long been an opponent of the State of Israel. That is why the current campaign against anti-Zionist Labour activists in reality aims to force the Corbyn leadership to take a softer position towards wars and Israeli occupations

in the region - or else be prepared to be 'exposed' daily as 'anti-Semitic'.

If anyone has any doubt about the seriousness of the current situation in the Middle East, let me remind them of where we are:

- The war in Syria has not ended, and tens of thousands of former Islamic State fighters and their relatives are spread across refugee camps in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon.
- Everyone

Mike Pompeo in talks with Binyamin Netanyahu in Tel Aviv: the US administration is recognising annexations and preparing for new wars and conquests

We have no liking for Lebanon's Hezbollah: but many see them as defenders of national sovereignty

expects escalation of the conflict between the Syrian Kurds and Turkey.

- War and famine have ravaged Yemen.
- Libya's failed state is hosting a variety of displaced jihadis.
- Protests in Algeria, where demonstrators shouted "No to Bouteflika", succeeded in forcing the president to resign.
- In Sudan, the 'Tasqut bas' (Just fall) movement is leading protests against spiralling inflation.

And then, of course, there is the continuing Palestinian-Israeli conflict, not to mention the Trump administration's

determination to impose regime change in Iran.

A number of recent comments and policy announcements made by the US administration regarding the Middle East show the severity of the situation and the impatience of Trump, when it comes to this region. These include new sanctions against Iran, and against Hezbollah in Lebanon, including attempts to force the US's European allies to declare the Lebanese Shia group a terrorist organisation. Then we have the recognition of the 'legitimacy' of Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights. Benjamin Netanyahu and the US hope that this will help pave the way for legitimising the redrawing of the map of Israel, adding all or most of the territory occupied after 1967 war.

No doubt the declaration of the Arab League "summit of solidarity and determination" in Tunisia, which has just ended, is a sign that Arab countries, fearful of outrage amongst their own civilians, have moved away from the positions of the February Middle East conference in Warsaw, which were very much in line with US foreign policy.

According to the summit's declaration, supported by king Salman of Saudi Arabia, the heads of the Arab states affirmed that "the Golan is occupied Syrian territory, according to international law, the decisions of the United Nations and the security council". In another statement regarding the relocation of the US embassy to East Jerusalem, the declaration called Washington's



move “invalid and illegitimate”.

The tone on Iran, too, was much softer than what Trump and secretary of state Mike Pompeo wanted, although the Saudi and Egyptian leaders repeated scare stories about Iranian ‘interference’ in Arab affairs. Yet, as Marwan Bishara reminds us in an article on the *Al Jazeera* website, “Paradoxically, however, it is these two countries that are also rooting for the return of Iran’s greatest Arab ally, Bashar al-Assad, to the Arab League.”¹

Of course, the Arab League declaration of 2019 will remain an irrelevant piece of paper, unlikely to be pursued by those who signed it, even when it comes to voting intentions in the United Nations general assembly. But the difference in policy and tone in comparison with the declarations of the Warsaw conference cannot be understated.

Why the shift in opinion? Some point to the relative decline in the influence of prince Mohammed Bin Salman and Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner - as one reason for the new Saudi position. In addition, it now appears that Arab leaders - maybe even the Saudi king or his senior advisors - are seriously concerned about the prospects of war against Iran and the Trump administration’s plans for regime change from above.

Pompeo

As background to all this we should consider the bizarre comments by Pompeo on his visit to Jerusalem in March. He intimated (invoking the *Old Testament*) that god had sent Trump to “save Israel against Iran”, and apparently this proved the “divine origin” of the 2016 election result as a necessary intervention to “save the Jews”.

Of course there were angry reactions to this provocative statement. Iran’s foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, responded in a tweet:

... the Trump administration is giving voice to Israel’s falsification of the *Torah* to promote Iranophobia. Even the *Torah* is distorted to serve Iranophobia. What it actually says: Persian king saved Jews from captivity in Babylon. Another Persian king saved Jews from genocide. Genocide plotter hailed from Negev, not Persia. Persian king is only foreigner referred to as Messiah.²

Zarif was referring to the story recited, according to Jewish accounts, that the Persian King, Xerxes I, who ruled Iran 2,500 years ago, became aware of a plot by his viceroy, Haman the Agagite, to slaughter Jews. Xerxes executed Haman and stopped the plot.

John Kirby, a former state department spokesman, described Pompeo’s comments as “laughable”:

Secretary Pompeo’s assertion that president Trump may have been sent by god to save Israel would be laughable on its face if it weren’t yet another indication that our secretary of state recklessly crosses the line that should exist between church and state.

However, this was just the beginning. Continuing his Middle East trip, Pompeo arrived in Beirut on March 22 to launch an attack on Hezbollah - his visit was aimed at adding pressure on Iran and its allies, Syria and Hezbollah. Commenting on the Shia group, Pompeo said Hezbollah “puts the Lebanese people at risk, with unilateral and unaccountable decisions on war and peace, and life and death”.

He demanded that “Hezbollah’s destabilising activities”, in the

country and across the region, must end. In his attempt to drum up support for Washington’s line against Iran’s Islamic Republic, Pompeo asked Lebanese leaders to pick a side in what would be a united front against Tehran and its Lebanese ally. However, this message did not go down well with his Lebanese hosts. Standing next to foreign minister Gebran Bassil during a joint news conference, Pompeo claimed that US sanctions on Iran and Hezbollah were working well - he referred to a speech by Hezbollah’s leader, Hassan Nasrallah, a few days earlier, when he asked the group’s supporters for funds, as evidence of the sanctions’ efficacy. The secretary of state added:

Iran gives Hezbollah as much as \$700 million annually ... we believe that our work is already constraining Hezbollah’s activities ...

Lebanon and the Lebanese people face a choice: bravely move forward as an independent and proud nation or allow the dark ambitions of Iran and Hezbollah to dictate your future ...

The US will continue to use all peaceful means, everything at our disposal, to choke off the financing, the smuggling, the criminal network and the misuse of government positions and influence.³

Response

Pompeo’s comments were not welcomed by Lebanese leaders, including the president, parliamentary speaker and foreign minister, all of whom are allies of Hezbollah. They fear that sanctions against Hezbollah might make Lebanon’s economic crisis worse, and there are concerns that any aggression against the Shia group by the US or its allies may disturb the country’s fragile political balance.

Foreign minister Bassil said the group is “a Lebanese party and not a terrorist organisation”. “Its categorisation as a terrorist organisation concerns the state which categorised it, rather than Lebanon.” He added that the sentiment was echoed by the president, Michel Aoun. Aoun, a Christian and a Maronite, told Pompeo that Hezbollah is “a Lebanese party that has a popular base, representing one of the main sects in the country”.⁴ In a separate statement the same day, Aoun made it very clear that sanctions against Hezbollah are “hitting all Lebanese people, as well as Lebanese banks”.

As the secretary of state touched down in the country, the pro-Hezbollah *Al Akhbar* newspaper featured a front-page photograph of Pompeo, the “dirty Yankee”, and labelled those who supported him as “lackeys”. Currently the political wing of Hezbollah and its electoral allies hold more than 70 of the Lebanese parliament’s 128 seats (elections were held last year). This has given the Shia group three of the 30 portfolios in the government formed by the western-backed prime minister, Saad al-Hariri, in January. The posts include the ministry of health - the first time Hezbollah has held a ministry with such a significant budget.

Hezbollah was founded in the early 1980s with the support of Iran, and spent much of its early existence fighting the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. When the country’s devastating civil war ended in 1990 (it lasted 15 years from 1975 to 1990), Hezbollah was the only militia in the country which did not fully disarm. Lebanese political leaders accepted the justification for this, believing it to be a necessary deterrent to another Israeli invasion. Today, Hezbollah is considered to be the most powerful armed group in Lebanon, even compared to the

country’s national army. In recent years, it has played a key role in the Syrian civil war, intervening on the side of president Bashar al-Assad.

My visit to Lebanon a few years ago did nothing to change my opinion of Hezbollah. However, the group has widespread support within the country. Rightly or wrongly, most Lebanese, irrespective of their religious denomination or origin (Maronite Christian, Sunni, Shia, Assyrian, Armenian, Druze), consider Hezbollah as saviours of the nation, not least in keeping out Islamic State. So when Pompeo told the Lebanese government to choose between “independence and Hezbollah”, this came across as very strange. Many remember Hezbollah’s role as the guerrilla force that helped ensure their country’s independence by ending Israeli military occupation of southern Lebanon. The Israelis and their supporters in the South Lebanon Army finally withdrew in May 2000. For most Arabs, this was a historic moment - the only time when anyone has defeated the Israeli army.

Then we have Pompeo’s portrayal of Hezbollah as a typical hard-line Shia group, which is not quite true. The Islamic Republic of Iran’s main ally is far more liberal than its equivalent in Tehran, portraying itself in Beirut as a modern, pro-business party, where women supporters do not even wear a headscarf.

I am not a fan of Hezbollah for exactly the opposite reasons to those given by Pompeo. Of course, the name has negative connotations for most leftwing Iranians: it does remind us of the chain-wielding Iranian Hezbollah, which disrupted workers’ meetings in the early years after the revolution. However, by the late 1990s I was ready to forgive the similarity of the two names, but I remain wary of the Lebanese organisation’s two-sided nature: religious populist in south Lebanon, defending the poor and the ‘disinherited’, while being part and parcel of the neoliberal establishment in Beirut, where its members are very much the representatives of a new middle class, keen to benefit from the privatisation of the economic infrastructure. Hezbollah is a political and economic force that is integral to the Lebanese capitalist economy. No wonder the government is so concerned about further sanctions against it.

Despite slogans about the poor and the disinherited, Hezbollah has never been an ally of the Lebanese working class.

According to Joseph Daher,

... the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers (CGTL) called a general strike to protest rising prices and inflation. The mobilizations paralysed the country. According to ‘Abd al-Amir Najda, president of the Federation of Public Ground Transportation Drivers’ Unions, the political elite pressured the CGTL to end the strike. Workers, however - especially those in the transportation sector - opposed their leadership and called for the strike to continue.

The CGTL leadership eventually withdrew from the strike, which allowed the army to intervene. The government forces opened fire on demonstrators, who were gathered in Hayy al-Sallum, one of the poorer Shi’a neighbourhoods in south Beirut. Five workers were killed, and dozens injured.

The main political parties, including Hezbollah, supported the army, saying that “the army is the red line”...

In addition on several occasions, Hezbollah representatives directly opposed ... strikes. At a

November 2013 meeting of the southern branch of the Public Secondary Schools Teachers League in Lebanon, Hezbollah and Amal representatives argued against a strike that the majority of participants supported.⁵

In south Lebanon their supporters rely on the social service infrastructure provided by the organisation, while the Shia mosque is involved in everything from medical services to schools, to food distribution. In order to ensure its religious base amongst the poorer sections of the Lebanese population remains solid, here Hezbollah women are fully covered, while the call to prayers is part of Hezbollah’s daily routine. In complete contrast, Hezbollah’s supporters and activists in Beirut are often from the professional classes. They have considerable involvement in real estate, tourism and finance. In the capital, unveiled women - dressed in a way that would be considered ‘unIslamic’ and punishable by flogging in Iran - are flag-carriers for the organisation.

Having said that, as I have previously demonstrated, anyone with a minimum knowledge of Lebanon would realise that asking the Beirut government to completely distance itself from Hezbollah is absolutely stupid and surely the US secretary of state is not that stupid? The reality is that the main audience Pompeo was aiming for was not in Lebanon, but in Tel Aviv.

The issue is not so much Hezbollah, but preparations for isolating Iran, should it become necessary to use air raids against the country. For Iran, Hezbollah is an insurance: if the United States or Israel attacks Iran’s nuclear facilities, Hezbollah has the potential capability of inflicting serious damage on Israel. That is why the US wants to reduce the group’s power within the Lebanese state and that is also the reason why Iran tolerates Hezbollah’s un-Shia behaviour in Beirut.

Golan Heights

The same week, as part of the US administration’s Middle East policy, there was a major statement by Donald Trump, who declared that Washington will recognise Israel’s sovereignty over the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. The announcement indicated a major shift in American policy and gave Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu a political boost in the run-up to the Israeli general election (he faces more corruption charges).

As always, Trump’s announcement came in a tweet:

After 52 years it is time for the United States to fully recognize Israel’s sovereignty over the Golan Heights, which is of critical strategic and security importance to the State of Israel and regional stability!

The Golan Heights, which have been under Israeli occupation since 1967, are currently denuded of people. Around 130,000 of the area’s population fled or were forced to leave after the Israeli invasion - the scores of deserted villages are testimony to this. The remaining Syrians - estimated at around 25,000 - are mainly Druze and their opposition to Trump’s announcement was widely reported. In 1968, the Labor government in Tel Aviv started building new Jewish settlements in the area, known for its green plateaus and fruit orchards.

Of course, in some respect the new declaration will not make much of a difference in the short term. United Nations secretary-general António Guterres made it clear that in UN eyes the status of Golan had not

changed. UN spokesman Stéphane Dujarric stated: “The UN’s policy on Golan is reflected in the relevant resolutions of the security council and that policy has not changed.”

However, taken in conjunction with Pompeo’s statement about Trump’s ‘divine role’ to ‘save Israel against Iran’, all this does reflect a new phase in United States Middle East policy. Demonising Iran is no longer just a case of hitting back in response to the Tehran regime’s history of dissing the hegemon power by, for example, taking hostages in the US embassy in 1979 and holding them for over a year. We are now talking about yet another attempt to redraw Israel’s map - maybe in coordination with the much heralded Kushner peace plan. Trump’s son-in-law, who is sometimes referred to as “one of the world’s worst real estate developers”, has been working on a Middle East scheme that will apparently be very detailed and will “address final issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including establishing borders”.⁶

Let me summarise the current situation in the Middle East. The US administration’s recent pressure on Iran and Hezbollah - policies currently supported by the UK and France - are part of a wider plan for further direct intervention in the region, now that the United States has declared Islamic State ‘defeated’ in Iraq and Syria. In Britain the persistent attacks on Corbyn, who has so far tacked, compromised and retreated on almost every controversial, anti-establishment issue, is precisely because the establishment fears he might not toe the line when US-led mayhem is unleashed on the Middle East. The proposed scenario is a simultaneous plan for regime change in Tehran and an extensive redrawing of the map, as far as Israel’s borders are concerned. Those who think the current campaign against ‘anti-Semitism’ in the Labour Party is just about Corbyn’s leadership of the anti-austerity movement or even just about Zionism and Israel, are profoundly mistaken. This is about future wars, about ensuring absolute support for US foreign policy in the Middle East.

In my opinion concentrating on fighting individual cases of suspension and expulsion from Labour is not going to be enough. We have to look at the bigger picture, and be continually vigilant about US plans. We must oppose sanctions against Iran and Lebanon (sanctions against Hezbollah affect the entire Lebanese economy). We must oppose all moves towards war and regime change in Iran. We must defend the Palestinians against Israeli attacks and further expansion.

Eager to be elected in order to ‘solve capitalism’s problems’, the current Labour leadership might not be with us forever, but, irrespective of that, we need to construct a powerful solidarity and anti-war movement. A prerequisite for such a movement is avoiding acting as apologists for the Iranian state and its regional allies - all of them tainted by decades of corruption and adherence to neoliberal capitalism ●

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CWI

Taaffe goes for the throat

It is increasingly obvious that the crisis in the CWI is a lamentable attempt to force a split. **Paul Demarty** wonders who will fall for it, and whether the ‘tradition of the Militant’ is strong enough to survive



As documents continue to leak, the outline of the factional battle in the Committee for a Workers' International is becoming clearer.

But it is still necessary to go further than taking the broadsides at face value. That is clear enough merely from the fact that the two sides seem to disagree almost entirely on what is at stake. The trigger events themselves, moreover, remain shrouded in secrecy. It seems that a senior member of the Irish Socialist Party - the CWI's section - was suspected of some "reprehensible action". The investigation into this matter, however, was not reported outside Ireland, and it seems that people in the international leadership in political alliance with this mystery member were outraged at this "breach of protocol".¹

Unfortunately (but, given the factional intrigue clearly already going on, unsurprisingly), things did not end there - despite the fact that all concerned seem to accept both that the original infraction was unjustifiable and that the handling of the investigation was less than perfect. Here it will be necessary to bring some names into the discussion.

The CWI has two permanent leadership bodies: the international executive committee (IEC), a large body which is elected by occasional congresses and meets infrequently; and the international secretariat (IS), elected by the IEC. The IS is firmly in the grip of the tendency's historic leadership in Britain, most prominently Peter Taaffe; and disagreements have clearly been simmering between comrade Taaffe and the leaders of the Irish section for some time. As the argument over the "reprehensible action" escalated, so the IS majority's criticisms broadened. A long meeting of the IEC, held over several days last autumn, turned into a showdown,

which Taaffe lost. In the wake of that vote, he and his allies formed a faction.

The ostensible political basis for the faction is for the defence of 'Trotskyism', in its particular Taaffite form. The Irish comrades are accused of downplaying the importance of trade union work, and bending in the direction of bourgeois feminism in relation to the struggles over abortion, etc - "a tendency has also developed of some leading Irish comrades seeing all struggles through the prism of the women's movement," Taaffe's faction writes.² Apart from these specific political matters, the Irish section is accused of failing to build itself *as a party*. It is claimed by Taaffe supporter Philip Stott that the SP has

25 full-timers - soon to be 27 - and half of the full-timers are linked to the work in the Dáil, council positions. This means we are dangerously over-reliant on whether we can keep the elected positions to fund the party. Moreover, our subs-paying base is only just over 100 comrades in the south of Ireland.

It is instead in danger of merely remaining an electoral machine, tied umbilically to the Irish political establishment by dint of reliance on the disbursement of its funds.

Method

All of this adds up to a crucial difference of fundamental political

**Organiser of defeats:
Peter Taaffe has led
SPEW and the CWI from
one disaster to another**

**CWI in the US: majority
of national sections
oppose Taaffe's
determination to carry
through a split**

method. For the Irish - and moreover, not only them, but representatives from many sections, particularly Greece and America - the issue is rather different. Taaffe and co have set their minds on a split; the political basis of their faction enormously overstates political differences in order to make it happen.

On the basis of the available evidence, it seems very likely that the IEC majority is more in the right. Many IEC members have reported meetings with Taaffe, in which the latter prepared them for a split with the Irish section in the lead-up to the crunch meeting last year. As per the common run of comrade Taaffe's political judgment, this seems to have backfired spectacularly, and led his once loyal troops to prepare to outflank the split. The IEC defeat mentioned above consisted

in the fate of two very similar motions. One - proposed by the IS and defeated - firmly stated that their were differences of principle and set the date for a special congress to sort them out in July. The other, which passed, condemned the idea of a split, and delayed

congress by a further eight months.³

The picture, then, is certainly of an attempt to drive through a split, which has so far failed. Not so clear is the motive. Ireland is one place where the CWI has enjoyed a decent level of success and influence. The Socialist Party has three members of the Dáil - under the name 'Solidarity' (formerly the Anti-Austerity Alliance). One other TD, Claire Daly, is a former member of the SP. It also has a few councillors. All told, it is a record of electoral success quite unmatched by any other extant CWI section since the high watermark of the Militant in the 1980s.

It is perhaps this that rankles - apart from mere envy, there are reasons why this might make a rush to a split more amenable. If small political differences emerge between the historic leadership of a tendency and a particularly prestigious section of it, the leadership may well fear that it will find itself in a minority on ever more issues, and even replaced altogether. Certainly, as things have panned out, the vulnerability of Taaffe loyalists stands exposed, though Taaffe did not keep control of this organisation by giving up easily. Control, indeed, is the question. If the CWI has a unique contribution to international socialist strategy, as it rather dubiously claims, it is the result of fairly centralised political control in London.

The IEC majority protests, as noted, that the political differences at work are pretty marginal, and in large respects fabricated. All concrete examples relate to the Irish section, they complain; and the 'evidence' against the Irish is tendentious. For example, Taaffe's IS majority claims that the Irish SP feminist front group, 'Rosa',



did not place demands on the trade unions in relation to abortion rights, and therefore is adrift from working class politics; but it is argued in response that Rosa had gone straight to working class communities, judging the exact means of approaching workers as a matter of tactics. So far as the party-building stuff goes, the Irish accept that their organisation is unforgivably top-heavy, but that they have been successful in



recruiting new layers recently; and, while there is a danger of becoming too reliant on Dáil staff allowances, it is hardly a solution to simply refuse them.

There is a more profound sense in which the differences are overblown, however, which is highlighted by a certain prickliness on the part of the Irish comrades so far as Spain goes - excuse me, 'the Spanish state', as it is called as a matter of CWI policy. We detect a distinct undertone of frustration that the SP's dalliances with Sinn Féin are condemned as an adaptation to bourgeois nationalism, whereas the CWI's exultant enthusiasm for the cause of Catalan nationalism goes unremarked (the CWI's Spanish section is loyal to the IS and London in the current fracas).

It is objected that Spain - ahem, the Spanish state - is not Ireland. Indeed it is not, but it is very difficult to see what the great difference of principle is. Catalan nationalism is thoroughly bourgeois in its leadership. Effervescent CWI assertions that the movement was escaping that leadership's control during the referendum crisis at the end of 2017 were firmly contradicted by the victory of the bourgeois separatists in the subsequent regional elections and the squeezing of the radical left-nationalist vote. IS loyalists are left relying on the lame differentiator of there having been some separatist-leaning strikes in the region.

In truth, this is not a matter of subtle political distinctions, but rather differing strata in the fossil record of Taaffeite opportunism. The Irish SP's frosty policy towards the Irish national struggle dates from the Precambrian era of the CWI, when the British section was still the Militant Tendency and led by Ted Grant, whose wholesale adaptation to Labourism led it to some fishy positions where British imperialism was concerned, and thus a hostility to the Provisionals and Sinn Féin. Grant's backward attitude to the gay and women's movements also led to a wholesale sectarianism towards them as 'petty bourgeois' concerns, even as the labour movement began decisively to take the lead on them.

Second time farce?

When Taaffe broke with Ted Grant in the early 1990s, the issue was whether to continue work in the Labour Party. Once the split was completed, however, the Militant Tendency - soon to become Militant Labour - flipped violently into launching initiatives on issues of oppression. It launched a front

for black youth called Panther UK, which succeeded only in converting various Militant members to black nationalism; and the Campaign Against Domestic Violence, which had much the same effect - with second-wave feminism in place of black nationalism.

It was under Taaffe's leadership, meanwhile, that the Scottish part of Militant Labour split off to form Scottish Militant Labour and adopted a position in favour of Scottish nationalism. Initially a matter of tactical appeal to sections of the Scottish working class, it soon became thoroughly internalised. It was only when Scottish Militant Labour slipped beyond the control of the CWI centre, however, that a split was engineered - issues of principle have rather been retrojected onto the dispute. Certainly the CWI has not abandoned its support for separatism (and recently, as I have noted, has generalised it to 'the Spanish state').

In short, most criticisms of the Irish section from Taaffe and the IS majority have the peculiar character of being formally correct, but outrageously hypocritical. If the Irish SP does end up too close to Sinn Féin, especially if the latter ends up as a junior partner in government, the result will indeed be a disaster; but not a worse disaster than was suffered in Scotland, where the end result of opportunist tailing of Scottish separatism was the rise, and rise, and rise of the thoroughly bourgeois Scottish National Party and its success in posing to the left of the labour movement. It is a valid criticism in the cosmic sense, then, but the IEC majority is right - it is not a difference between the two sides, but an excuse for a split. If Taaffe and co persist in trying to split their organisation, however, it is very likely that real political differences will result (and unfortunately, the splits in the movement's history that improve political clarity are greatly outnumbered by the ones that result somehow in greater confusion on both sides).

It is impossible for either side of the 1991 split in Militant to suffer serious misfortune without the other crowing about it, and so it has proven this time around. The International Marxist Tendency, which descends from those parts of the CWI that sided with Grant back then, has published a lengthy open letter on the matter



of the present *contretemps*, which certainly grasps what is going on to some extent:

The declaration of a faction ... is clearly due to the old leadership *de facto* losing control. Rather than accepting the decisions of a body that stands above the IS, they are determined to hold on to control, ride roughshod over the sections of the CWI and impose their will, even if this risks a massive split.⁴

The explanation, according to the IMT statement, is simple:

Taaffe's method has been one of seeking quick, easy results, in a word: short cuts ... He forgot long ago that there is no substitute for building

patiently from the bottom up, with meticulous attention to the theoretical education of the cadres. Without consolidating a solid cadre base, there is not the framework around which a much larger and more influential tendency can be built. Short cuts can give what seem to be quicker results in the short term, but it is like building on sand. As soon as the winds of the class struggle blow on such a structure, it starts to crack and eventually collapse. That is what is happening now to the CWI.

A whistle-stop tour of the post-split history of the CWI ensues, and it is not pretty reading; and readers of this paper will well know where that story ends - with the Socialist Party in England and Wales (and the tiny Scottish rump organisation, which for all we know consists of Philip Stott talking to himself in the mirror - when, that is, he isn't acting as Taaffe's hired goon in Ireland) taking its utterly disastrous sectarian line on the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader, and its treacherous role in obstructing the affiliation to Labour of militant unions in which it has some influence.

The conclusion, of course, is that "the authentic ideas, traditions and policies of the Militant Tendency have been consistently preserved and defended by the IMT". If by



that is meant the abjuration of short-termist flightiness, however - never mind a resistance to the charms of bourgeois ideas - alas, the comrades doth protest too much. It should be said, first of all, that Grant's - and later Alan Woods' - persistence with Labour entry was a highly formal exercise, and certainly by the early 2000s Labour Party work was hardly dominant in the diaries of British IMT members.

I remember talking to a young comrade of theirs, just before the Corbyn election, and he explained to me that the rest of the world had got them all wrong. The Labour Party was really more of a bet about the future - that is, when there was an upsurge in class struggle, people would join the Labour Party rather than little Trot groups. But there was little point picking around in the ruins of the Labour left as it was then, and so Socialist Appeal did not; it continued to focus on other activities.

Those other activities numbered two main ones: firstly, delivering a 'meticulous theoretical education' to interested students (if there is a "Marxist society" on your campus, it's them); secondly, enthusiastically promoting the left-Bonapartist regimes of Latin America, especially the Venezuelan regime of Hugo Chávez. This is not, to put it mildly, the traditional politics of *Militant* (even if the latter was freer with the Trotskyist formulation, 'deformed workers' state', than many other followers of Lev Davidovich). It seems that the 'meticulousness' of that education (which, by the by, is quite real; IMT members really are schooled comprehensively in

an admittedly rather scholastic interpretation of Marxism, and are generally better at offering robust theoretical defence of their positions than CWI members) did not, in fact, prevent a capitulation to left-talking bourgeois nationalism. Whatever one wants to say about the Irish SP, at least it does not claim that Sinn Féin is a revolutionary socialist force, which is more or less what Grant's epigones said about *Bolivarismo*.

But that is not all: the rather



abstract commitment to Labour Party work I had described to me by that comrade could not, in the end, go the distance. It is one of the cruellest ironies of recent far-left history that, on the very eve of Ted Grant's predictions about Labour's *eventual* left shift and locus at the centre of a mass movement coming true, his followers basically abandoned ship. Suddenly readers of *Socialist Appeal* were treated to glowing articles about the Scottish left nationalist, John Maclean, and the opportunities for work in the Green Party. The IMT's Scottish members bizarrely prepared to join the Scottish Socialist Party, which was then - and remains - more or less defunct. To *Socialist Appeal's* credit, it rapidly corrected course when its folly became evident. Yet I can find no honest account of this shift of line, which makes a mockery of its otherwise salutary warning to Taaffe:

an honest leadership ... has no fear of admitting its mistakes, explaining why they were made and correcting their position. If, however, it does not admit and correct its mistakes, then it is destined to make more mistakes and to cover the previous mistakes with even bigger errors.

Where next?

So what is the balance sheet of all this, then? Firstly: there are serious concerns about procedural democracy. There is the officially 'internal only' nature of the dispute, forcing the rest of us to make do with a smattering of leaked documents and Kremlinology, which is an old disfigurement of the Militant/CWI tradition (the Taaffe/Grant split ended up farcically being fought out in the letters pages of *The Guardian*, so as to protect their readers from the merest sniff of internal dissension). Now would be an excellent time for the CWI to start *publishing* its disputes. If it is so sure its line is crucial for the success of the workers' movement and socialism, then it should not exclude the wider movement from its disagreements.

Then we face the fact that Taaffe has claimed the IS - formally accountable to the IEC - as a factional weapon against it. The IEC should replace it with a representative body and, if Taaffe's faction threatens to walk, its bluff should be called. The IEC should not wait a year for this special congress to start confronting Taaffe's cynicism - certainly not if its many assertions of loyalty to democratic political methods are to be taken seriously.

Secondly, when people want

splits, they usually get them. It is clear that both SPEW and the Irish SP are divided in this battle; both will lose members over it. SPEW can hardly afford it, with its prized Public and Commercial Services union fraction in crisis and many of its members - disproportionately those with a firmer grip on reality - voting with their feet to get involved with the mass movement in the Labour Party. More seriously, if the ructions in the Irish organisation should cost it its toehold in the Dáil, it is not at all clear it will be able to undertake the sort of mass work it has done around abortion, water charges and so on. The CWI tradition is one with a genuinely admirable commitment to financial self-sufficiency and members' self-sacrifice; but a hundred members are unlikely to replace the salaries of anything close to 27 people. That is quite apart from the needless sacrifice of the toehold itself: the left does not have so many such assets that it can lightly squander them.

Thus, thirdly, this whole fiasco is yet another indictment of Peter Taaffe's disastrous leadership of SPEW and the CWI. He is just about the only serious competitor for Chris Grayling's coveted status as the least competent operator in British politics. How long can he limp on? More to the point: if, after missing the boat on the decisive event in the British class struggle this century so far, and now threatening the unity of what passes for his international support by declaring war on its most electorally successful part, SPEW members still do not replace him, will they ever do so?

Fourthly, however - and *pace* the IMT - it is not all Taaffe's fault. Though there have been few enough successes to result from Militant's turn away from Labour under Taaffe's leadership, and a great many avoidable disasters, we should remember that the possibility of open Marxist advocacy really was curtailed by Kinnock's purges, and Grant's supporters ended up hunkering down and focusing on other things themselves, before losing patience altogether at the worst possible moment. It seems - if we are to judge by results - that there is no 'path not taken' for the old Militant; there is something in the DNA that causes great exertions in the way of political patience to give way to politically idiotic convulsions.



In the end, this is just the reliance on the Trotskyist doctrine of the 'transitional method', which drives its adherents to narrow trade unionism until - just when life exceeds its limits - it is thrown, disoriented, into the arms of the bourgeoisie on other matters of great importance. Neither of the CWI factions have resisted this course; nor - no matter how 'meticulous' its cadre formation - has the IMT ●

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Notes

1. www.docdroid.net/4EmEdw3/cwi-mb-01.pdf.
2. 'Women's oppression and identity politics - our approach in Ireland and internationally' (www.docdroid.net/bSNjIxe/sa-mb-101.pdf).
3. www.docdroid.net/4EmEdw3/cwi-mb-01.pdf.
4. www.marxist.com/open-letter-to-the-members-and-former-members-of-the-cwi.htm.

ISO

Transparency and solidarity

Mike Macnair looks at the procedural questions that precipitated the collapse of the ISO

The International Socialist Organization in the United States has just decided, by an online voting process ending on March 29, to dissolve itself: "Nearly 500 members, participants in disaffiliated branches and recently resigned members took part in the vote."¹

The background is at least in part a '#MeToo' story. At the ISO's February 2019 convention, its long-standing leadership was overthrown - for reasons which remain unclear in the published texts, save that the new leadership was more than 50% "people of color"/native American.² The new steering committee's March 17 letter to ISO members, which announced the story and seems to have been the immediate trigger of the collapse, listed the following tasks as set by the convention:

1. Establishing both an internal #MeToo commission and starting to plan for organizing an activist #MeToo conference on tasks the SC and other bodies are addressing in the coming weeks.
2. Public perspectives laying out the ISO's goals and areas of work for all to see (this was mandated to appear by the end of March).
3. Developing an affirmative action policy (we are forming a subcommittee to study hiring, resources and more).
4. Public apology from the outgoing and incoming SC to comrades of color (convention mandated 90 days, but we hope to have this published by the end of March).
5. Elections committee to support independent candidates and ballot initiatives, and study how the ISO can relate to socialist campaigns run on Democratic ballot lines. (The SC will appoint this in the next week or two.)
6. Support preparation for a Special ISO Convention in September, focused on electoral strategy and anti-oppression struggles.

Reading between these lines, one would suppose that there had not been a sustained faction fight, through which a clear alternative political strategy or perspectives could be developed, but a very rapidly developed revolt of the base against the old leadership - to a considerable extent animated by 'identity politics' (aka 'intersectionality' ideas), but also (secondarily) by concerns that the ISO had not worked out how to relate to a new left electoral politics and the startling growth of the Democratic Socialists of America to 50,000 members by September 2018.

But external comments make the point that there *had* in fact been a sustained faction fight, running since 2013, uniting some ISO members with some ex-members, who published externally.³ The fight had merely not been conducted in a way which generated political clarity.

While members of the new SC were drafting this letter, they and others were informed that one of the people elected had in 2013 been charged with rape in an internal procedure and convicted by the national disciplinary committee (NDC); but that the old SC had 'leaned on' that committee to retract its decision, and had then sent the case to the appeals committee, which found it not proven. The new SC proceeded to restore the original decision and to suspend and then expel those involved in the 2013 SC intervention.⁴

The 'old guard' leadership resigned from the organisation before the dissolution decision. It is unclear what

their views of the events are. Various bloggers refer to the resignation statement as 'weak' or 'lazy', but it does not seem to be available online.⁵

What is available is a separate resignation letter by old-timer Joel Geier, who was one of the SC members involved in the reversal of the disciplinary decision in 2013. Geier argues *for* the SC and appeals committee's 2013 decisions, on the basis that socialists have to defend rights to elementary due process, and in this case the NDC had refused the accused even a hearing, let alone notice of the case against him.⁶ New York lawyer Don Lash responds to Geier's argument in a March 28 article on the US *Socialist Worker* website, titled 'We can believe survivors and presume innocence'.⁷

Meanwhile, comments both on the *Socialist Worker* site and elsewhere blame the collapse on the model of 'democratic centralism' and the 'party model'; but conversely continue to defend Hal Draper's (and the ISO's, British Socialist Workers Party's, and so on) 'socialism from below'. The ISO has merely dissolved; but the counter-model in proposals for the future made in the collapse phase has been along the lines of 'networks' and suchlike.⁸

I am not going to attempt to 'diagnose' the causes of the ISO's collapse. That task must fall to comrades who have more detailed and up-to-date knowledge of US left politics than I do. I am going to make merely two points. The first is that - no matter what howls of outrage this may provoke - on the issue of rape allegations and the disciplinary or 'disputes' procedures of parties and other voluntary organisations, Geier is more than half-right and Lash is more than half-wrong. That will be the subject of this week's article.

My second point, which I will tackle next week, is that the phobia about 'democratic centralism' rests on two false narratives of the origins of this organisational concept - one about Russian originality, and one about 'Zinovievism'. And the result of this phobia is to poison organisational conceptions in groups which *make no claim to be* 'revolutionary parties'.

Due process?

Geier argues that,

in any given case, we must ensure the most basic rights and protections of revolutionary socialist democracy for all sides. This includes the right to democratic procedures; to fair, impartial judging panels and actual hearings; to the opportunity to present and challenge evidence and testimony; and, if you are the one charged, to know what the charges against you are and be given the opportunity to face and question either the claimant or the claimant's advocate.

He says that the 2013 NDC reversed its decision because it acknowledged that it had violated these principles:

... this hearing has ended in a procedural mistrial. After coming to a unanimous decision, we now rescind our votes, our verdict, and our recommendations ... No hearing was ever convened, the respondent (a) never had the opportunity to address the committee and attempt to convince them of his innocence; and (b) the respondent never had the opportunity to rebut witness

testimony.

This is, then, *not* about the defendant being denied the opportunity to cross-examine in person as a form of humiliating the complainant; nor is it about a 'complainant's prior sexual conduct' defence; or any of the other common abuses in rape trials. It is about very elementary *audi alteram partem* - 'hear the other side'.

Step two was that the appeals committee heard the case *de novo* (as if for the first time) and found insufficient evidence. Geier is a lot less explicit on the basis of this decision; but it seems that it is this which Lash attacks, when he says:

Concepts like the inadmissibility of hearsay evidence, the right to confront all witnesses and the need to prove guilt beyond reasonable doubt all developed in the context of a criminal trial, in order to restrain the power of the state to deprive someone of their liberty. The ISO never had such power.

This is true enough about "reasonable doubt", but simply incorrect about hearsay and confronting witnesses - rules/requirements which go back to Roman times. The rhetorician-advocate Quintilian, writing around the 90s CE, remarked that witnesses who speak to hearsay "are not really witnesses, but are merely reporting the words of unsworn persons". Hadrian (emperor 117-138 CE) ruled that a provincial governor should "believe witnesses, not affidavits [testimonia]" and that "the evidence of witnesses actually present has a different weight to that of affidavits recited in court". The point is in the *Christian Bible* (also reporting Roman law).⁹

The relevance of the history is that secret trials without confrontation, and decisions resting on hearsay, facilitate false claims.

We should not accept the version which was offered in 2013-14 by the ISO leadership, and is now repeated by the Socialist Equality Party: that there is a real risk that this individual case and this collapse is due to a provocation in the style of the FBI's 1960-70s infiltration and provocation operations

against the left.¹⁰ The ISO is, in the present political context, too trivial to attract the attention of such an operation.

Moreover, the ISO's continuing belief in the 'Syrian revolution' in part effectively supported US Middle East policy, while its continuing enthusiasm for Black Lives Matter indirectly supported the Clinton wing of the Democratic Party's use of this to race-bait the Sanders movement. So it would be politically surprising for the FBI to target the ISO for such an operation.

But what we do have going on, right now, is a smear campaign against the Labour left on the basis of wholly unfounded and dishonest allegations of 'anti-Semitism'. Labour's 'improved' *private* disciplinary/disputes procedures, designed to prevent 'victim-blaming' and promote 'believing the victim', have functioned most efficiently to *make this smear campaign work*. We have reported this in this paper at tedious, but necessary length over the past four years. This is not an FBI-style provocation (through there are some *rightist* social media provocateurs pretending to be Corbynistas involved), but it is nonetheless an instrument of class war on the bosses' side.

Not unique, either. 'Modernised' private disciplinary/disputes procedures in the UK group, Left Unity, founded in 2013, produced a backlog of unfounded and unserious allegations; we reported one in particular, against our own comrade, Laurie McCauley, who was suspended from membership for more than a year on spurious charges of 'bullying' motivated by political disagreement.¹¹

There therefore has to be *some* testing of allegations made. It is *not enough* for a disputes committee, or whatever, merely to receive papers (Hadrian's 'testimonia'), discuss them in private and come to a conclusion. Paradoxical as it may seem, this was part of what was wrong with the ISO's 2013 proceedings: the *privacy* (adopted for the sake of complainant and defendant) produces lack of confidence in the proceedings.

There is a step further which comes from this point. Lash says: "The only power the ISO had was to tell one of its members that it chose not to have him associated with its political project, and that it no longer chose to allow him to exercise power at any level over members and contacts."

But in fact this is straightforwardly untrue. Supposing that the respondent in this case *was* guilty of rape, for the ISO *not* to publish the fact would inevitably be to empower him to commit another rape - and to say that it was no longer responsible would be mere hand-washing.

Supposing that the respondent was *not* guilty of rape, the reverse arises: to publish a 'determination' that he was guilty would be defamatory. His public reputation would inevitably suffer: rightly if he was guilty, wrongly if he was not. It does not help to expel him without giving reasons - both because of the rumour mill and because, if he *was* guilty, this would still be empowering him to further offences.

Hence, Lash is wrong to suggest that the issue of guilt can be dodged. It is, of course, true that the civil standard of proof ('balance of probabilities') rather than the criminal standard ('beyond reasonable doubt') can be employed; but what is

precisely at issue is whether a voluntary organisation, like the ISO, SWP, etc, has the power and processing capacity to get to the truth or any sort of approximation of it about whether the respondent is guilty of the offence charged.

I have made the point before that for left groups to attempt to deal with such issues is seriously problematic; first, because we lack the resources for finding the truth. We do not have forensics departments, the power to search without consent or the power to arrest and interrogate under arrest until a confession is forthcoming.¹² Second, by unsatisfactory investigations we will contaminate the evidence, and therefore prevent the complainant obtaining justice before the regular courts. Privacy of proceedings *worsens* these problems.

I previously came to this conclusion, which is worth repeating:

Suppose that the left were to abandon central structures on the basis of the manifestly corrupt and useless character of the existing regimes - but to retain the practices of secrecy/confidentiality, imagining that the underlying problem is sexism or that it is only 'leaderships' or 'bureaucracies' which are to blame. The result would be substantially the same as the present problem with the left organisations trying to handle sexual assault allegations: because the problems of secret trials and individualisation would go unaddressed.

We could do better than these disputes show us doing. But the core of doing better is to create more transparency - and by doing so to enable more solidarity.¹³ ●

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Notes

1. <https://socialistworker.org/2019/04/02/the-iso-vote-to-dissolve-and-what-comes-next>.
2. <https://socialistworker.org/2019/04/03/towards-a-critical-defense-of-identity-politics-introduction>. 'People of color' is a decidedly ambiguous expression currently fashionable in US identity politics, which fuzzes over conflicts between distinct 'non-white' groups as well as those affecting class and gender.
3. <https://louisproject.org/2019/03/20/the-iso-metoo-and-the-need-for-a-fresh-start>; <https://louisproject.org/2019/03/27/a-reply-to-paul-leblanc-on-the-iso-crisis>; <https://thechanelhouse.org/2015/04/01/leaked-iso-internal-bulletins-2015-edition>; Cf also www.wsws.org/en/articles/2019/04/02/inte-a02.html from the other side.
4. <https://socialistworker.org/2019/03/15/letter-to-the-iso-membership>.
5. Eg, <https://failedharvest.com/blog/socialism1.org>.
6. <http://likembe.net/Documents/ISO%20Preconvention%20Bulletins%202019/Joel-With%20Profound%20Regret%203-21-19%20.pdf>.
7. <https://socialistworker.org/2019/03/28/we-can-believe-survivors-and-presume-innocence>.
8. Various material at <https://socialistworker.org>.
9. Quintilian: HE Butler (translator) Institutio Oratoria Harvard 1935, Vol 2, p171. Hadrian: Digest book 22, title 5, 3.3-4. I have varied the translation to replace "depositions" with "affidavits" for reasons of accuracy. Bible: Acts 25.16.
10. ISO leadership in 2014: <https://thechanelhouse.org/2014/02/17/unredacted-rape-controversy-and-internal-strife-within-the-international-socialist-organization-usa-and> <https://thechanelhouse.org/2015/04/01/leaked-iso-internal-bulletins-2015-edition>. SEP: www.wsws.org above n3. COINTELPRO: convenient summary at Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COINTELPRO>.
11. 'A year in limbo' Weekly Worker May 21 2015. Cf also P Demarty, 'Confidentiality is a bosses' tool', June 26 2014; and M Macnair, 'Transparency is a principle' September 25 2014.
12. I Bryan Interrogation and Confession Ashgate 1997, on the importance of confessions to criminal convictions in practice.
13. 'Workers' movement: bureaucratic "justice" and dealing with sex assault cases' *Weekly Worker* April 18 2013. Not just left groups: see 'College clams up on "unfair" disciplinary system' *The Independent* October 20 1993.



REVIEW

Blood, fire, death

Jonas Åkerlund (director) *Lords of chaos* general release

The story of the Norwegian black-metal band, Mayhem, is unusual. Its first long-term vocalist - the aptly nicknamed 'Dead' (Per Yngve Ohlin) - shot himself in the head, putting an end to years of crippling depression and self-harm. Later the band was joined by a bassist called 'Varg' (born Kristian Vikernes), who allegedly initiated a wave of Christian church burnings, earning the early-90s Norwegian black-metal scene international notoriety. Before Mayhem's debut album was even released, Varg stabbed the guitarist and band leader, 'Euronymous' (Øystein Aarseth), to death in what he claims was "self-defence" - he delivered 23 stab wounds, including two to the head. *De Mysteriis Dom Sathanas* (1994) is probably the only album in music history where a murderer and his victim can be heard playing together.

1998 saw the publication of Michael Moynihan's true crime book, *Lords of chaos*, which recounted the Norwegian black-metal scene's rise to infamy - focussing, of course, on the seminal Mayhem. This year's biopic of the same name is an account largely based on the book's interviews with musicians and their contemporaries. By its own admission, the movie is "semi-fictionalised", carrying the by-line, "based on truth, lies and what actually happened". We shall attempt to separate the real-life characters from their movie representations (in an attempt to reduce the number of death threats issued by Varg Vikernes to this paper!).

Lords of chaos was directed and co-scripted by Jonas Åkerlund, who served as a drummer for the early black-metal band, Bathory, from 1983-84. Although it is to some degree a typical biopic with thriller elements, it partially succeeds as a reflection on hypocrisy and the desire to live an authentic life.

In the 1980s-90s, Norway is a wealthy and sedate Christian country with a pastoral self-image, alternately governed by moderate Christian Democrats and milquetoast Social Democrats. Mayhem's band members hail from decidedly middle class backgrounds: Euronymous opens a specialist record store using his parents' money, while Varg's family funds the studio recording of Mayhem's debut album. With the exception of Dead, who apparently suffered horrible bullying as a child, their upbringing was unproblematic. Lacking in hereditary street credibility, then, they seek to carve out a name for themselves through the pursuit of aesthetical extremism, which eventually spills over into actual crime and violence.

The real-life Euronymous claimed to identify as a Stalinist, earnestly posting Mayhem demo recordings to the governments of Romania, Albania and other such "bullshit countries" (as a surviving band colleague would later recall). His choice of ideology was predicated, he said, on the fact that he regarded Marxist-Leninist regimes as more efficiently tyrannical than fascist ones. Having visited Hungary, Czechoslovakia and the People's Republic of Poland, Euronymous briefly joined the youth league of Norway's Red Party, only to discover the comrades were "a bunch of humanists": unlike him, they did not "hate people" or want to "see them rot under a communist dictatorship". Varg, on the other hand, considered himself a Nazi and pagan - although both musicians also claimed to be theistic Satanists.

On the face of it, Mayhem and its milieu were archetypes of what children of a post-conformist society term 'edgelords' nowadays - except they took this a great deal further than most. So



Funded by bank of mum and dad

why do well-bred, middle class boys wallow in nihilism, suffering and death? While only touching on their professed political and religious ideas - swastika flags and pictures of Mao and Erich Honecker decorate the protagonists' respective living room walls - *Lords of chaos* casts Euronymous and Varg as motivated by different objectives.

Euronymous wants Mayhem to succeed in an international market increasingly saturated with extreme metal bands. Every incident of violence, destruction and self-harm is eagerly documented and shared with relevant publications. He takes pictures of the freshly departed Dead and supposedly makes necklaces from pieces of his skull. In what resembles a parody of hard-core punk elitism, Mayhem refuse to go on tour or press too many copies of its debut EP because only a select few 'deserve' to hear the band. But this too merely serves to stir international 'underground' interest in the band. The real Euronymous changed his tune the moment opportunity knocked, quickly thinking up ideological justifications for 'selling out'.

Varg, in contrast, sought authenticity for the sake of authenticity - and, according to *Lords of chaos*, to outdo Euronymous. He, who is initially derided as a 'poser' for wearing a Scorpions band patch, emerges as the driving force behind the scene's radicalisation. Whilst Euronymous is all talk, Varg goes out and torches historical churches, which in his mind symbolise the subjugation of pagans (read Aryans) by 'Judaean-Christian' invaders. "From then on, everything was a competition," recalls the narrator's voice. When challenging Euronymous, Varg - now a rising star on the black-metal scene - outdoes his erstwhile master in every respect.

'Trendy'

What the real Euronymous and Varg shared was contempt for the evolution of extreme metal music, which by the early 90s had gained broader exposure, but had also become open to relatively progressive attitudes. Bands like Napalm Death, crossing over from leftwing hard-core circles, and intelligent death metal albums, such as Death's *Human*, were signs of the rot setting in. In Euronymous's words, metal was becoming "trendy", by which he meant 'liberal'. To use an analogy, Norwegian black metal was a 'conservative revolution' in the spirit of Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, who defined conservatism as "holding on not to what was yesterday, but to that which always applies". Pushing metal to new extremes, bands like Mayhem did break musical ground - aiming, however, to reassert the master morality of traditional 'Satanic' metal beyond its original forms. Euronymous and Varg were determined not to let the meek

inherit their earth.

In *Lords of chaos*, Euronymous's mission is compromised by the fact that it is ultimately all show business to him. The movie's interpretation is confirmed by various contemporaries. "Euronymous ... wanted the glamour and the showbiz," opined 'Faust' of fellow Norwegian band Emperor; "with him, there was a lot of smoke, but not so much fire." More than anything, though, Euronymous was a cultural mover and shaker, who had a good understanding of the metal genre's inner laws. But there was more to him than that. Once, he went on a pilgrimage to West Berlin, talking a former member of electronic music pioneers Tangerine Dream, Conrad Schnitzler, into providing the intro for Mayhem's *Deathcrush* EP. Real-life vignettes like this suggest a more culturally rounded and - well - nerdier personality than Euronymous's bloodthirsty and moronic public persona would imply.

Varg, in contrast, is real - or dumb enough to take black-metal ideology seriously, if you prefer: "I really believed in it", he tells Euronymous in an Oedipal face-off. Unlike with Euronymous, Varg's pre-political rejection of liberal values is more than just aesthetics: it commands him to pursue spiritual rather than material interests, rendering him unwilling to strike a deal with the world. Later in life, when serving 15 years in prison, the real Varg's rightwing anti-materialism assumed firmer political contours.

The real Varg supposedly took Euronymous's life because he had heard rumours that Euronymous was planning to kill him. In the murder sequence - necessarily the most speculative scene in *Lords of chaos* - this is dismissed as empty talk and typical of Euronymous's posturing. The more Euronymous apologises, sobs and protests that he was not serious, the more he provokes Varg's contempt and homicidal rage - he is killed for being a fraud at all levels. As Varg towers over his victim, about to deliver the final deadly blows, the viewer has mixed feelings. The fascist's brutality is repulsive. Yet, at the same time, his act resolves the tension between hypocrisy and sincerity that had been the movie's central theme. There is a troubling sense of justice to Varg's actions.

It is perhaps for similar reasons that people who are not misanthropes or fascists can relate to 'true Norwegian black metal'. Many are familiar with the sense of dissonance and alienation that the contradictions between ideology and the realities of bourgeois society elicit at a very elemental level. Whether we act on this, and what path we choose, is a different matter - yet, surely, the hate-fuelled antagonism to falseness and inauthenticity that runs through original Norwegian black metal is a widely relatable emotion.

For much of its running time, *Lords of chaos* is an unambitious, yet entertaining rock 'n' roll biopic, ticking all the expected boxes with scenes of metalheads partying, indulging in orgies or throwing 'devil horns' while burning churches. As befits the subject matter, it is also very gory and violent: whenever someone cuts themselves or a hapless victim, the camera zooms in like in a Lucio Fulci movie, perhaps in tribute to the 1980s video nasties the protagonists spend a great deal of time watching. Thankfully, the movie also has a sense of humour about its anti-heroes' pompous nihilism without simply ridiculing them.

There are moments of nuance: a homophobic murder, committed in real life by 'Faust' of fellow black-metal band Emperor, is masterfully directed. When a middle-aged cruiser makes sexual advances to a teenage 'Faust' in a park, there is some hesitation and ambiguity in the killer's body language, allowing us to read the murder as a possible response to Faust's own latent homosexuality, yet without hammering this home. Although neither the killer nor his victim are depicted particularly sympathetically, the barbarity and pointlessness of the murder still have a depressing effect.

Although a pioneer, Mayhem was never the greatest Norwegian black-metal band: almost all of its contemporaries, from Emperor to Satyricon, recorded superior and more musically influential albums. As 'edgelords', however, Mayhem truly took things to the next level. Nowadays, the convicted murderer, Varg Vikernes, is a white nationalist blogger and neo-Nazi idol - and indeed, some reviewers have criticised *Lord of chaos* for "downplaying the severity of the scene's truly unsavoury politics".¹

Yet the world Varg once set out to destroy has long embraced black metal without suffering significant damage - apparently, people are quite capable of enjoying problematic art without endorsing its messages. Red and Anarchist Black Metal (RABM) has been doing the rounds for years, although I sometimes hear leftwing kids relish the un-PC stuff just as much. Interestingly, some left-leaning black-metal bands, such as Wolves in the Throne Room, have surpassed the Norwegian originals.

Since 2010 at the latest, when groups such as Deafheaven and Liturgy started recording what detractors unkindly term 'Starbucks black metal', the music style has become acceptable to hipsters and assorted liberals too. Gentrification is probably the wrong term, though: unlike Euronymous and Varg, many of these bands cannot rely on mum and dad to fund their musical exploits ●

Maciej Zurowski

Notes

1. www.slantmagazine.com/film/review-lords-of-chaos-fails-at-trying-to-deromanticize-a-scene.

What we fight for

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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weekly Worker

Erdoğan still has many cards up his sleeve

Expect the unexpected

A combination of working class discontent and Kurdish initiative produced a setback for Erdoğan, writes Esen Uslu. But that is not the end of the matter

Turkey is no longer a dark space, about which the British public occasionally gets scraps of information - it has become a centre of news fed by correspondents and journalists based there. The war in Syria and Iraq - especially the campaign against Islamic State and also the Kurdish freedom movement - has brought the spotlight onto Turkey.

Perhaps because of this new interest, the local election campaign was also followed closely by the British press. So what can I add to the better informed British left on Turkey's local elections? Maybe a few insights obscured by the fast-flowing news, and a couple of thoughts about the struggle ahead.

But, first of all, a reminder about the overall political situation. The dictatorial 'presidential' regime around Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has during the last decade been built not only by his own party, but also by the real 'owners' of the state and 'masters of the nation' - the top military brass and the security apparatus. The current regime was the panacea solution to the never-ending desire to achieve 'stability': a strong executive bordering on one-man rule, without the hindrance of genuine parliamentary scrutiny or restrictions imposed on expenditure and taxation, with a semblance of 'democracy', based on two parties competing in sham elections.

That aim and broad plan have not changed since the time of Kemal Pasha in the early 20th century - maybe even earlier. But, of course, whenever circumstances have allowed a semblance of popular consent, that is seized upon through what passes for 'democracy'. However, such disguises are frequently discarded, and the brazenness of military dictatorship reappears - as has happened at regular intervals of around 10 years since 1960, including the clearest example in 1980 with an outright coup.

Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) have managed to produce that semblance of ever-growing despotism - especially after 2013, the time of the Gezi Park demonstrations. The AKP did well in elections after attempts to resolve the 'Kurdish question' through negotiations were replaced by a sustained expeditionary campaign.

The overall result of the local elections indicates to me that the capability of Erdoğan and the AKP coalition with the far-right MHP (National Movement Party) to obtain popular consent has reached its limits - or at least is coming very close to it in the urban centres. However, the overall result shows that the rural population of the provinces of central and eastern Anatolia, as well as the Black Sea coast, are still under the spell of the glory of Islam, combined with a nationalistic fervour.

But, when it comes to the main cities, Erdoğan has well and truly lost his appeal - especially in 'unruly' working class neighbourhoods, where Alevi and Kurds live together. Here Erdoğan's Teflon has started to peel

off, and he is no longer able to obtain the tacit consent of the population. He could be starting to lose his usability, as far as his masters are concerned.

This outcome was anticipated not only by the left and the Kurdish freedom movement, but also by the top military brass and security apparatus. The 2016 attempted coup was the herald of things to come. At the same time as helping Erdoğan to reshape his own party, the apparatus had been strengthening its hold on the armed forces and the police.

And now the AKP is held in an armlock by the nationalist-Islamist MHP - the remnants of the original 'grey wolves' - in the two-party coalition. As the AKP lost its ability to win any election alone, the coalition has been acting almost as a single political entity. Despite some difficulty in enmeshing their gears initially, things were running quite smoothly until the local elections.

Meanwhile, the loyal opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) was also brought under control through another forced marriage - with a different nationalist-Islamist, rightwing organisation called the İyi Party (Good Party). This was a spin-off from the MHP led by Meral Akşener - an 'iron lady' who used to be minister of the interior during the darkest days of the dirty war in Kurdistan in the early 90s.

Despite the enhanced appetite of the petty bourgeois left - for all its anti-imperialism marred with nationalism - to march together with the CHP against the regime, that party has proved to be a docile opposition to Erdoğan and his government, incapable of threatening the real basis of his power. Because the CHP never dared cooperate with the Kurdish freedom movement, it never had a chance of toppling the government. It remains a puppet opposition, playing to the anti-Sunni prejudices of the Alevi and the anti-clerical aspirations of the secular middle classes.

So, while the loyal opposition remained deaf and blind to the Kurdish freedom movement's appeals, the latter decided to use its vote tactically by adopting a two-pronged policy. The pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) nominated candidates to stand where the regime had summarily dismissed its elected local officials and appointed trustees to run municipalities. Most of the Kurdish towns and cities are under such rule, while many members of the HDP have been jailed - those remaining free to take part in the local



CHP opposition: helped by Kurdish electoral tactics

elections have been regularly detained and otherwise harassed.

But the HDP decided not to run any candidates where the loyal opposition had a chance of winning, especially in the urban centres of western Turkey. It asked its supporters to vote for the CHP-İyi coalition despite the gut feeling of misgiving felt by its voter base - the hatred among Kurds for both İyi and the CHP is palpable, and adopting such a policy despite those feelings required a great trust between the freedom movement and its voters. However, the tactic was very successful and it was a major factor in the toppling of the AKP in a series of principal cities, which had been under Erdoğan's control for such a long time.

This HDP tactic was adopted without asking any support from the CHP, but the İyi Party spitefully stood candidates in cities where both the HDP and MHP were contesting mayoral elections. In retaliation the HDP then stood candidates wherever İyi was standing alone in the mayoral elections. The outcome was not surprising: the HDP won every mayoralty contested against the MHP, and İyi failed to win a single mayoral election.

Expansionism

As the Turkish economy began to show some vibrancy over the last two decades, expansionist and revanchist urges started throbbing again. Turkey's overt and covert involvement in the Syrian war provided ample opportunities - Turkey invaded two Syrian provinces and established several observation posts in a third.

While it was unable to stop the Kurdish freedom movement liberating Syrian Kurdistan, Turkey advertised

its readiness to wage a proxy war on behalf of the USA against IS, provided it stopped supplying the Kurds. But the US and its allies quietly intimated that, while Turkey was unable to deal with its own domestic problems, having such ambitions overseas were beyond its capabilities. Following this, the regime launched a sustained, brutal campaign against the Kurdish population in south-eastern Turkey. City centres were razed to the ground and the population was forcibly moved.

The HDP was suppressed, and its organisation in the western urban centres was put under great pressure too. At the same time a campaign was undertaken by the regime to silence all opposition. Academics, journalists and authors were gagged, and every opposition organisation was suppressed.

Meanwhile, the Turkish grip on the newly acquired lands in Syria has been consolidated by installing a puppet administration, while maintaining a large military presence there. However, the consequences of such suppression and the massive expenditure undertaken to wage war against the Kurds in Turkey, Syria and Iraq has had its impact on the economy and consequently on local elections.

And, with Turkey embroiled in the labyrinth of the Middle East, waging such costly campaigns, friends and foes have started to reconsider their attitude. Turkey's former regional rivals, Russia and Iran, started to play an important role in aiding Turkey's moves in the region.

Its previous forays had brought it closer to Israel and Egypt, but under rapidly changing circumstances Netanyahu's Israel and Sisi's Egypt

suddenly changed their attitude, trying to curb Turkey's involvement in Syria. The recent discovery of natural gas fields south of Cyprus, close to those previously discovered within the Israeli zone of the Mediterranean and the fully operational gas field in the Egyptian zone, has helped create a new alignment. Under the auspices of the US, Cyprus and Greece formed a new grouping with Egypt and Israel in opposition to Turkish claims over the Mediterranean.

Turkey responded by sabre-rattling. It held its largest ever naval exercise, involving almost all of its available ships and aviation. However, while such a show of force may have been influential in terms of domestic popularity, it was no more effective than a damp cloth in the face of rival naval forces operating in the Mediterranean.

The deteriorating relations with the US and Nato became apparent after Turkey decided to purchase an air defence missile system from Russia. It was portrayed domestically as a great achievement for the nation, but the US retaliated by stopping the sale of F35 jets, despite the fact that Turkey had been geared up to supply components for the project from the start. Turkey's military-industrial complex has flourished over recent decades, thanks to vast investments in the production of small arms and ammunition, rockets, armoured vehicles, warships, helicopters and even military planes, with associated radar, optical sensors, communications equipment and other electronics. However, compared to the competition, it is still a dwarf.

As many other powers have learned through bitter experience, the accelerated development of a military-industrial complex tends to ruin the state budget. In Turkey such development, combined with expansionist ambitions, brought things to the verge of insolvency once again.

And at the end of the day, as the old adage goes, nothing but the empty pot in the kitchen topples a government: the crippled economy was the main factor behind the dismal performance of Erdoğan's coalition - and its shadowy masters. However, the regime will not meekly accept this setback. As always in Turkey, we should expect the unexpected (and suspect the unsuspected), because the regime has control over the judiciary as well as the media, and will attempt to thwart the outcome by all manner of means ●

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