

A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity



weekly
worker 

Chris Knight offers an appreciation of Velimir Khlebnikov, the prophet and poet of the Russian Revolution

- Climate rebels
- CWI about to split
- Lessons of ISO
- Debating strategy

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PROVIDING 'LEFT' COVER FOR THE FAR RIGHT



LETTERS



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

Get stuck in

The perpetual grovelling and apologising in the face of the bogus anti-Semitism smear campaign against Jeremy Corbyn reached new depths last week with the humiliating apology of Richard Burgon MP for stating the blatantly obvious that Zionism is an enemy of peace.

Instead of standing by what was and is an accurate statement, he fell into line and apologised, in step with heroic strategy of appeasement at all costs that our fearless leaders have adopted. As is always the case, apologising makes it look as if you have done something wrong. It gives confidence to the bullies, who have made you apologise for doing or saying nothing that is inaccurate in the first place. It gives the impression that the left is weak and cowardly and consolidates the grip that the right in the Parliamentary Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracies have over Corbyn.

Unless ordinary rank-and-file party members rise up and come to the aid of the leadership, the Corbyn project is destined to end in tears. Whether it is as a result of Jeremy being forced to stand down or a Corbyn-led Labour government being brought down from within before it can implement any meaningful changes is dependent on political developments. What is clear is that, in either inevitable scenario, any progressive reforms - so desperately needed by so many millions of working class people in this country - will be blocked. The aims and objectives of the anti-austerity movement will not have been achieved, and we will be back to square one.

The consequences of black September last year are coming back to haunt us. First there was the unanimous acceptance of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of anti-Semitism, including the 11 examples, at the Labour Party national executive on September 4. Does anyone remember the statement that Jeremy tried to move that he was forced to withdraw? It should not be "regarded as anti-Semitic to describe Israel, its policies or the circumstances around its foundation as racist because of their discriminatory impact, or to support another settlement of the Israel-Palestine conflict". The full impact of the collective political cowardice that totally isolated the democratically elected leader is now being felt.

As are the decisions that were imposed by the misuse of the bloc vote by the trade union bureaucracies at conference a fortnight later. The decision to prevent debate on open selection has meant that unaccountable elements in the PLP remain unaccountable. That has led to increasing attacks on the leadership without the perpetrators having to answer to the membership. The reason for the imposition of a new method of electing a new leader, with more power vested in the trade union bureaucrats, becomes increasingly clear.

As does the suspension, pending a disciplinary investigation, of Chris Williamson MP, on entirely spurious grounds.

The whole 'Corbyn project' is at a critical juncture. The choice is quite simple. The usual suspects in the PLP and their unaccountable counterparts in the trade union bureaucracies take back control and topple Jeremy Corbyn or the mass membership becomes a mass movement and stops them. At the present time only a minority of the membership is in any way active. It is critical that minority becomes the majority.

There are no end of issues to be raised at a branch and constituency level. Resolutions supporting Chris Williamson, condemning the gross exaggeration of the anti-Semitism problem, pointing out the outrageous behaviour of Dame

Margaret Hodge and contrasting it to the treatment of Chris Williamson, arguing the case for natural justice, due process and equal treatment for all. These and many others need to be discussed at local level and carried through to the national conference. And reopening the debate on open selection is of vital importance.

The old left has let the side down badly in its pitiful response to the bogus anti-Semitism smear campaign. The degrading and humiliating strategy of appeasement and apology is a painful embarrassment that is totally counterproductive. Conniving with the right to prevent discussion on open selection has been and is an absolute disaster.

It is time for those new forces on the left, with their self-respect and backbone still intact, to stand up and be counted. The Corbyn project can still be saved, but only if we all get stuck in and help him out.

Steve McKenzie
email

Gender ideology

I read with sorrow Amanda MacLean's article, 'Decoupled from reality' (*Weekly Worker* April 18). Like so many contributors to the 'debate' around transgender rights Amanda quickly moves from an argument ostensibly about unintended consequences that the Gender Recognition Act may have for the rights of cis-woman, to one that presents trans activists as out to get cis-woman and effectively questions trans, non-binary and intersex people's right to exist - or only exist as some sort of second-class woman or man or as a sufferer of a "crippling condition".

A central part of the creation of this narrative is that evocation of the concept of 'genderist' or 'gender ideology' - a theory that Amanda never really defines. She rather loosely alludes to it being "postmodernist" and that it claims that "transwomen are literally women". It becomes a straw doll, with words put in trans activists' mouths, that then can be knocked down.

An example of this is Amanda's critique of scientific research that suggests that sex might be a wider spectrum, which she implies, without evidence, is somehow driven by "gender ideology". She then goes on to dispute this new research with reference to a book written over a half a century ago - JZ Young's *The life of vertebrates* was first published in 1962!

Perhaps more worrying than Amanda's intemperate words and seemingly outdated understanding of biology is her seeming complete lack of awareness of the origin and political use of the phrase 'gender ideology'. Several academics, including Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte, have traced the development of the concept as a response to the advancement of woman's rights within the United Nations and its agencies in the mid-90s. For the first time the UN recognised sexual and reproductive rights, and the term 'gender' was adopted. The Vatican was riled - worried that this would advance access to safe abortions and LGBTQ rights.

They set up a unit that worked closely with Dale O'Leary, an American anti-feminist, in order to study and counter feminist and queer thought. Drawing on and misrepresenting the work of a diversity of feminists and queer theorists, such as Judith Butler, Shulamith Firestone and Simone de Beauvoir - and then blending it with the work of John Money, the controversial sexologist, and a bit of mangled Marxism - they developed the theory.

In an article in *Crisis Magazine*, a reactionary Catholics website, Dale outlines her understanding of 'gender ideology':

"Radical feminists took the idea of gender and combined it with their social constructionist (postmodernist deconstruction) ideology. According

to this theory, biological sex might be a given, but 'gender' - one's perception of self - is a social construct and therefore can be changed.

"Radical feminism applied the Marxist theory of class struggle to the relationship between men and women. According to this theory, women were the first oppressed class and men used the biological sex differences to invent motherhood as the task of women and marriage as a way to secure their power over women. Freedom from this oppression could supposedly be achieved by identifying the ways in which language and culture oppress women and deconstructing the cultural supports for recognition of the differences between men and women.

"This deconstructing of 'gender' is behind the radical feminist war on marriage and motherhood, and their fanatical support for lesbianism and abortion on demand."

Dale O'Leary concludes: "We have to defend patriarchy - which if you think about the word is men imitating the 'Father from whom every fatherhood takes its name'. God was a Father before he made any fathers. We have to defend the natural division of humanity into male and female."

Since around 2012 there have been campaigns against gender mainstreaming, sexual education, LGBTQ+ and reproductive rights that have utilised the concept of 'gender ideology' in Croatia, Germany, Italy, France, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Slovakia and Slovenia. The war on gender has also become a powerful force in the Americas. It is thought to have been decisive in the failure of the peace referendum in Columbia, and in Brazil it aided the election of the fascist president, Jair Bolsonaro. Finally it was utilised by Donald Trump in the run-up to his election as president of the United States. 'Gender ideology' is a straw doll theory utilised by the Christian and far right in order not only to oppress transgendered people, but also lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and cis-woman.

The rationale for this tactic of targeting transgender rights is explained by Meg Kilgannon at the 2017 Values Voter Summit - an annual conference organised by the rightwing Family Research Council in the United States. Kilgannon observed: "For all its recent success, the LGBT alliance is actually fragile and the trans activists need the gay rights movement to help legitimise them." According to Kilgannon, "Trans and gender identity are a tough sell, so focus on gender identity to divide and conquer ... gender identity on its own is just a bridge too far. If we separate the T from the alphabet soup we'll have more success."

An important part of this strategy is to make common cause beyond the Christian right: "The feminists make eloquent arguments that gender identity really is the ultimate misogyny and the erasure of women," argues Kilgannon. "And lesbians in the group are concerned that trans and masculine girls is a form of lesbian eugenics."

It really is time for Amanda MacLean, and other (although thankfully a minority) feminists to recognise that not only is their campaign against transgender rights malevolent, but it undermines all the advances that have been won by LGBT people and all women, whether cis or transgender, over the last 50 years or so. Amanda MacLean may be happy to return to 1962, when the 'natural division of humanity' was taught and policed. When uppity woman, along with those of us who have the "crippling condition" of being trans or queer, were imprisoned or sectioned.

I, for one, don't!

Richard Farnos
email

Brave

I found Amanda Maclean's article on genderist ideology most fascinating.

I've been interested in gender issues and sexuality ever since a comrade (and trades council secretary) told me in 1981 that he would be the third person in Britain to have a sex-change operation. He said that he would soon be in the papers. The *Eastern Daily Press* did a very sympathetic article, whilst *The Sun* had an article on page 3 headlined: "Union brother says call me sister." He also told me that he would have to live as a woman for a year before he could have his operation. This explained his permed hair and his diet, which included eating large quantities of cheese.

Whilst transvestites make up a large percentage of the male population, only a very small percentage feel the need to undergo gender reassignment surgery.

It's a pity that Amanda Maclean did not mention the wide range of male sexuality and fetishes. For example, a lady regularly advertises in the *Wisbech Standard/Cambs Times* her specialist correction and cross-dressing services.

As Amanda says, sex is very important. Sex nearly destroyed the British Socialist Workers Party over its mishandling of the 'Comrade Delta' rape allegation. Sex has recently destroyed the International Socialist Organisation in the USA. But the 'left' is very prudish when it comes to matters of sex. The splits in the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) are over the attitude of its sections towards sexual politics and feminism. Ironically, the CWI is opposed to prostitution in the same way that rightwing Christian fundamentalist are. They don't understand that most women become escorts because escorting pays better than working on a supermarket checkout.

It is therefore very apt and brave that the *Weekly Worker* can publish such a fascinating article by Amanda Maclean on Genderist Ideology. More articles on sexual politics and so-called post-feminism would be of great interest to me, and possibly other readers.

John Smithie
Cambridgeshire

Revenge porn

United Voices of the World, the trade union representing strippers working in clubs across the UK, is appalled by the duplicitous 'sting' operations orchestrated by the Women's Equality Party in Sheffield and Manchester, which are targeting legal clubs, interfering with workers' rights and violating women's right to privacy.

In a misguided, self-appointed, mission to 'save' dancers, the WEP continues to put livelihoods at risk, while ignoring the explicit wishes of the women involved. As a feminist trade union, we are extremely alarmed by this practice, will continue to support our members in clubs across the country and offer solidarity to all dancers affected by this harmful behaviour.

In recent months, the WEP has contracted men to access clubs, undercover, and pay workers for dances. These included two former policemen, who are regular punters at Spearhead Rhino, Sheffield. Unbeknown to dancers, and against rules clearly displayed around all strip clubs, the WEP's contractors used hidden cameras and Google glasses to film dancers fully or partially nude. They then passed on the sensitive footage to their handlers at the WEP and, potentially, others.

Filming people without their explicit and direct consent is not just immoral: sharing footage of naked women, obtained without consent and with the explicit aim to undermine and harm them, constitutes harassment and misuse of private information under UK law. As feminists and trade unionists, we are appalled by the fact that the WEP decided to violate women's rights by using what could amount to revenge porn in order to further their obsession with shutting down legitimate and legal workplaces. United Voices of the World will be seeking legal

remedies for our members. We demand that the WEP and its collaborators destroy immediately all footage obtained illegally inside clubs and apologise to the dancers.

Dancers have made it clear that they don't need rescuing. They need a workplace where they can earn a living to support themselves and their families. Women choose to work in strip clubs for the same reasons people choose a wide variety of jobs: funding university studies, family needs, a disability and a scarcity of other work options. All of them are working because they need to make a living under increasingly difficult conditions - extortionate housing costs, inaccessible and inadequate benefits, lack of childcare and falling wages in other industries.

We demand that the WEP cease its campaign of harassment and intimidation against dancers in Sheffield, Manchester and elsewhere. If the WEP wants to help women, they should campaign against austerity measures and poverty wages - reducing women's job options, as they are attempting to do, is not only unhelpful, but harmful. If they want to help dancers working in clubs, they are welcome to join UVW's unionising efforts, listen to women and support them on their own terms.

We are a members-led trade union, organising low-paid, precarious and, predominantly, migrant and outsourced workers all over the UK. UVW supports members fighting for better pay and conditions and, often, for equality with directly employed workers. UVW became the first union in the country to end outsourcing at a university when it forced the LSE to bring all its cleaners in-house after organising the then largest cleaners' strike in UK history in 2017.

In 2018, UVW members in the sex industry started organising for workers status and recognition of their rights at work, as well as for the full decriminalisation of sex work. Workers are best placed to advocate their own rights and safety at work, and dancers across the UK are working with their trade union to ensure that protections from harassment, intimidation and exploitation are in place. UVW is currently seeking recognition in a number of clubs in order to represent the workers' collective interests.

Shiri Shalmy

United Voices of the World

Feigning leftism

"This was, of course, in the days when Sinn Féin was still socialist ...", explains Dave Douglass (*Letters*, April 18).

Of course, that very much depends on your definition of socialism, Dave. The late Richard Montague - a former activist in the IRA during his younger years, until he came across the Socialist Party of Great Britain - described the Sinn Feigners as simply another party of reformists seeking to run capitalism. And it always has been the case, ever since its foundations and through all the ensuing twists and turns. Any lip service to socialism was ideological milk and honey to sweeten the nationalist poison.

National boundaries may be altered - may even disappear - but such constitutional rearrangements can in no way abolish the misery of the many. The trading arrangement of the UK capitalist class is an irrelevant issue from a socialist point of view. It is a dispute between rival capitalist class interests.

Sinn Feign is a prisoner of dogmas inherited from yesteryear. If their seven Westminster MPs took their seats they would counter the 10 Democratic Unionist Party MPs, but they decline to do so, as they are not prepared to go through the empty formality of swearing allegiance to the crown - even though they are happy enough to extend their handshakes to the royals.

Alan Johnstone
SPGB

CLIMATE



More needed than civil disobedience

Fill the jails?

Extinction Rebellion's fighting spirit is admirable. But a viable strategy and programme is urgently needed, argues **Eddie Ford**

Over 1,000 people were arrested as part of Extinction Rebellion's rolling series of protests in London, which finally ended on April 25. Given the nature of the ecological crisis facing the planet, with a potentially catastrophic climate breakdown, communists can only applaud their determination in blocking roads, obstructing train lines and so on.

On April 23 ER protestors gathered outside parliament to make their three central demands: for politicians to "tell the truth" about the climate and wider ecological emergency; for the UK to unilaterally cut carbon emissions to *net zero* by 2025 and generally reduce consumption levels; and for the formation of a national citizens' assembly to "oversee the changes" as part of creating a "democracy fit for purpose". Since January, when ER held a one-hour occupation of Holyrood's debating chambers, the organisation has raised £365,000 - mostly in small donations of between £10 and £50.

Even though there has been a large number of arrests, police tactics have been relatively 'softly, softly'. After all, almost everyone is pro-green these days. Hence the police have engaged in a form of reverse kettling - ie, not hemming people in, but keeping others from joining them. However, one person who does not appear to be enthusiastic about the protests is the Labour mayor of London, Sadiq Khan - describing them as "counterproductive" to the cause of climate change, as they were "stretching" police resources. What a shame.

In some respects, Khan's stance is at odds with that of the Labour leadership, which is keen to be associated with the environmental cause. Labour does not want to lose people to ER, but rather recruit from that milieu - definitely get their votes. Jon Ashworth, the shadow health secretary, addressed the protestors when they were congregated outside parliament - pledging to make climate change a "central focus" of Labour's policy and expressing his support for a citizens' assembly. Inside the chamber, the shadow international trade minister, Barry Gardiner, said that that, alongside the school strikes, the ER protests were reminiscent of previous memorable struggles and victories "won by citizens uniting against injustice". Readers will recall that about 1.6 million school students worldwide went on strike to protest against climate inaction in another splendid display of militancy - the next school strike is scheduled to take place globally on May 24.

Meanwhile, Jeremy Corbyn and other party leaders (Vince Cable, Ian Blackford, Liz Saville Roberts, Caroline Lucas) met Greta Thunberg -

the Swedish 16-year-old ecologist who has especially enamoured the BBC and been described as a "role model" for worldwide student activism (three members of the Norwegian parliament have nominated her for the Nobel Peace Prize). Symbolically, a place was left at the table for the absent Theresa May.

Tactics

Extinction Rebellion was initially established in May 2018, with about 100 academics signing a "call to action". Its mass arrest tactic is very similar to that deployed by the anti-nuclear 'Committee of 100' in 1961. In April of that year 826 were arrested in a protest in Parliament Square, while in September the figure was 1,314 following a day of demonstrations. In essence, the Committee's plan was to "fill the jails" by means of non-violent mass civil disobedience, or *passive* resistance, in the hope of compelling the government to meet their demands.

Like the more recent Occupy and other such anarchistic formations, it eschewed formal membership and any sort of disciplined, accountable structure, in favour of decentralisation, self-selected "working groups" and all the other trappings of 'consensual democracy'. Yet in the end the Committee's approach ended in failure. The authorities merely imprisoned a few of the most important supporters and ignored the rest, the group eventually folding up in October 1968. In the meantime, the UK further developed its nuclear arsenal.

Given that ER's method is modelled on the Committee of 100, CND, Occupy, etc, it faces a similar problem - and possibly the same fate too - fizzling out after a brief explosion of hyper-activity (or eventually getting thoroughly incorporated into the mainstream establishment). The ER protestors gave themselves up for arrest.

Somewhat predictably, it has to be said, ER cites inspiration from Occupy, Mahatma Gandhi, the suffragettes, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and others involved in the history of civil rights movements - with the obvious emphasis on non-violence and pacifism. But the strong suspicion is that many of those active in ER do not understand the reasons that led to the success of these individuals and movements. Indian independence was secured not by Gandhi's questionable spiritual teachings, but the Indian National Congress - a mass party of many millions that had a definite party-political structure and collective leaders.

For his part, Nelson Mandela, along with the South African Communist

Party, set up Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the African National Congress - designed to "foment violent revolution" in the not inaccurate words of the prosecution at his trial. Martin Luther King's civil rights movements had strong input from various leftwing groups, including the US Communist Party. Rosa Park's famous 1955 bus ride in Montgomery, Alabama, was a meticulously planned and prepared operation - not a spontaneous act of rebellion, as implied in many liberal accounts of the incident.

As for the suffragettes, they used downright *terroristic* methods in pursuit of their aims - arson, letter bombs, intimidation of MPs, and so on. Civil disobedience, yes, but of a completely different type from that advocated by either the Committee of 100 or ER. In this context, the old Chartist formulation still remains as true as ever - 'Peacefully if we can, forcibly if we must'.

Fixated by pacifistic civil disobedience, ER has no political strategy to guide it - it often seems to make things up as it goes along. For instance, on April 18 four ER protestors chained themselves to a fence outside the home of Jeremy Corbyn. What was the point of that, seeing how the Labour leader, in his own way, is a strong supporter of environmentalist politics? Afterwards, one of those who took part in the stunt said: "We are here because we are supporters of Jeremy Corbyn and he is the best hope this country has got to get us out of this." The idea that simply changing the prime minister in Britain could call a halt the ecological damage to the planet is a little bit misguided - to put it mildly.

Then we have Greta Thunberg. She damnably told MPs that the British government's "active support" for fossil fuels and airport expansion is "beyond absurd" - which is clearly true. She went on to castigate world leaders for not listening to the science and singled out the UK for having a "mind-blowing historical carbon debt", a reference to the cumulative emissions since the industrial revolution. Thunberg called for a "general strike" to force leaders to act on climate change.

Obviously, ER does not have an anti-capitalist *programme* or anything remotely like it. Nonetheless, the demand to reduce carbon emissions to net zero by 2025 is *implicitly* anti-capitalist. Capitalism, after all, is based on production for the sake of profit. But to overcome capitalism requires a serious organisation and a serious programme. Civil disobedience alone cannot do it ●

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ACTION

London Communist Forum

Sunday April 28, 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): 'Opportunism and reformism in western Europe'. 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 30, 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: 'Did patriarchy ever exist?' Speaker: Chris Knight. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: <http://radicalanthropologygroup.org>.

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.

Stop arming Saudi, stop bombing Yemen

Sunday April 28, 4.30pm: Public meeting, Ilford Central Library, Clements Road, Ilford IG1. The Saudi-led war has devastated Yemen and killed tens of thousands of people. Ending arms sales to Saudi Arabia is essential and urgent. Speakers include Fabian Hamilton MP. Organised by Ilford Momentum and Redbridge Against the War: www.facebook.com/groups/399177590631425.

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 bookstall. Organised by Marx Memorial Library: www.facebook.com/events/353995138663273.

Why Palestine is still the issue

Thursday May 2, 6.30pm: Public meeting, Hamilton House, Mabledon Place, London WC1. Hold Israel to account and push for an end to the oppression of the Palestinian people. Speakers include Lindsey German and Tariq Ali. Register for free tickets. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign and Stop the War Coalition: www.facebook.com/events/431867197569266.

Labour Against the Witchhunt

Saturday May 4, 1pm: Members' meeting, central London (venue details will be sent to members). Moving the campaign forward and electing additional 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, Assemble Portland Place, London W1, for march to Whitehall. No new nakba! End the siege! Defend the right of return! Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: www.facebook.com/events/260404684903442.

With banners held high

Saturday May 18, 11.30am to 5pm: March and labour movement festival, Assemble Smyth Street, Wakefield WF1. Live speakers, music, poetry and drama. Organised by With Banners Held High: www.facebook.com/events/1159025200917201.

Stop the London arms fair

Events organised by Campaign Against Arms Trade. **Saturday June 15, 12.30pm:** Network organising meeting, St Hilda's East Community Centre, 8 Club Row, London E2. Planning the mobilisation against the global arms trade in London in September. www.facebook.com/events/432514417493720. **Saturday June 22, 11am:** Training session, Bridge 5 Mill, 22a Beswick Street, Manchester M4. Skill up to stop the DSEI arms fair. www.facebook.com/events/591596081307911.

CPGB wills

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

CWI

Taaffe demands a split

Further leaks from the CWI point to a parting of ways, writes Paul Demarty

When we last addressed the ongoing divisions in the Committee for a Workers' International - the international grouping still, barely, headed by the Socialist Party in England and Wales, *née* Militant Tendency - we concluded that things were headed for a split.

Not, of course, that you would know it from a glance at the organisation's website, or - so far as we can tell - any of its international press. This is not surprising, since it is one of many organisations that insists on deluding itself that its affairs can be conducted in secret - already laughable in the age of the photocopier, but beyond parody in the age of the internet. Nonetheless, it does force the rest of us to rely on whatever leaks happen to be forthcoming.

On that front, it seems that our prediction - unfortunately - is holding true, and a split may be along sooner rather than later. A frothing, incoherent document from the London-loyal faction leaked to the Cedar Lounge Revolution blog (which covers Irish politics) all but declares the majority of the CWI's international executive committee (IEC) outside the organisation. Their crime? Daring to call a meeting.

The story so far - in brief - is that tensions have been simmering between SPEW and its Irish sister organisation, the Socialist Party, for years. A crisis point was reached when the leadership of the Irish SP decided that a London-loyal member was preparing a split. Some unspecified countermeasures were adopted, which caused an almighty ruckus, and, though the Irish leadership admitted it had acted wrongly, this seems to have pushed Peter Taaffe - the leader of SPEW and, in effect, the CWI - to pursue a split for real. Such is his luck at the moment that he bodged it disastrously and, in trying to rally the various CWI sections to teach the Irish a lesson, he turned a majority of the IEC against him. In response, he formed a faction with the rather unwieldy name - "In defence of a workers' and Trotskyist CWI" - and the two sides agreed to have a showdown congress next March.

There are many unresolved issues, but the most important from a practical point of view is that the IEC majority is against Taaffe, but the smaller international secretariat (IS), which exercises day-to-day control, is firmly in his grip. An operator as cynical as Taaffe was always likely to treat the IS as factional property, and so it has proven. In our last article, in fact, we advised the IEC faction to "replace [the current IS] with a representative body and, if Taaffe's faction threatens to walk, its bluff should be called".¹ It is in response to an apparent attempt to do exactly that that the new Taaffe-loyalist document has been written. Calling the IEC majority and its supporters the 'non-faction faction', Taaffe and co set out to respond to an open letter circulated by their opponents:

In their statement the NFF rejected the decision of the international secretariat to convene a meeting in November 2019 and appealed for the IS and the openly declared international faction [ie, Taaffe's faction - PD] to reconsider its position and commit to participating in an IEC meeting in August. Now they have taken the decision to convene a meeting of the IEC in August themselves. This action is part of the objective of the NFF to carry through a 'regime change' in the leadership



Two thousand members ... pull the other one

of the CWI. We entirely reject this action, which is the declaration of a split from the CWI.²

This is, to put it mildly, a rather strong claim. We do not have to hand the constitution of the CWI, admittedly, but, if we had, we presumably would discover that the IEC has the right to call a meeting of its members, and that this right devolves to a working majority of its members. What are Taaffe's objections? Firstly, that the NFF comrades are downplaying the political differences, which are very serious:

Some sections of the CWI have buckled to the pressures of 'identity politics'. Others have gone even further and have or are in the process of capitulating to them ... This divergence is reflected by a turn away from systematic trade union work in a number of sections and abandonment of an orientation and emphasis on the centrality of the working class.

The NFF comrades' claims to defend unity are given short shrift: "The failure to debate the political issues and only call for 'revolutionary unity' without political agreement is the receipt [sic] for a split."

Regime change

You may be wondering what this discussion has to do with whether the IEC should meet in August, and frankly so are we. There is little enough in the document about the procedural issues - presumably because Taaffe's faction does not have a leg to stand on. According to Taaffe, the NFF - devious conspirators that they are - deny being out for 'regime change', but several of their members openly raise the demand for a certain "Peter T" to be removed from the IS. Quite a scandal!

Indeed, he is lamely reduced, later on, to acknowledging that "it is comrades' right to propose" regime change of this sort; and indeed that "all comrades have the right to oppose the IS". His only basis for objecting is that they have not been open enough for him about their political differences; but, given that the NFF does not accept

Taaffe's characterisation of those differences, we can only conclude that the aforementioned rights may be exercised only if the IS deems them to be done appropriately, according to its political judgement, and that all polemic must be conducted according to the IS's view of things. In short, it is all very well that comrades should 'propose' changes, but quite out of order for them to come anywhere near winning their proposals.

The idea that differences at the level of programme should be absolutely necessary for a change of leadership is bunkum. It is equivalent to saying that Theresa May should have to have some principled disagreement with Chris Grayling about the Irish border question in order to sack him, rather than his manifest incompetence; or, for that matter, that members of the IEC should need to refer to the detail of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution to get rid of an IS member who had been caught siphoning funds to his personal account.

This, of course, leaves open the question of how wide the differences actually are. Without access to the IEC majority supporters' recent documents, it is still rather hard to tell. Certainly the Irish Socialist Party has made great play of the women's question recently, in a manner that could certainly be fairly described as 'buckling to the pressure of identity politics'. But much the same thing is on offer at Socialism, SPEW's annual school, when someone condescends to talk about it.

You could balk, as Taaffe does, at the suggestion that "the women's movement was detonating the struggles of the working class" - which certainly seems a rather over-rosy assessment of the impact of anti-Trump feminist protests and #MeToo - but Taaffe's cronies routinely assert that nationalist agitation is just such a 'detonation', in Scotland, Spain and elsewhere; and if the one amounts to denying "the centrality of the working class", so does the other. If anything, Taaffe's softness on national separatism is worse, since separatism is plainly a reactionary dead end, whereas it certainly is in the interest of the working class that women should not be sexually harassed as a matter of routine and

should have legal access to abortion. That does not excuse the barely-critical attitude taken by the Irish SP (and, for that matter, Socialist Alternative, the CWI's American section) to bourgeois feminist layers; but Taaffe and his minions are a little short on credibility when they make a big deal out of it.

Worse still, however, is Taaffe's accusation that several sections have made a "turn away from systematic trade union work", indicating a lack of "consistent orientation and intervention to [sic] the working class and its organisations". There can be no greater such abdication than SPEW's disastrous failure to engage with the Labour Party in the last few years, decisively and deliberately turning its backs on a titanic struggle, and diverting militant trade union contingents from that struggle to boot. Again, Taaffe's opponents at least have the excuse for their opportunism that - say - abortion matters in Ireland. No better excuse for SPEW's criminal abstentionism has ever come forth than tedious stories of how some Labour councillor in Nuneaton voted to close a Sure Start centre, *ad infinitum*. It is plain to all observers that the real issue is SPEW's sect-coherence.

The stage is set for the split, then, and we should be very surprised if Peter waits around until August to drive it through. A commenter - one 'Joe' - on the document suggests: "it looks like there'll be two 'internationalists' coming out of this split. With the Irish in one and the English in another." This is possible, but the trouble is that Taaffe is *wrong*, and the supposed 'non-faction faction' does not have a coherent alternative political direction. The paradox is that this may make Taaffe's criticisms 'come true': formal membership of a Trotskyist 'international' *in itself* will have offered countervailing pressure to the wider atmosphere on the left, which is - indeed - utterly dominated by liberal identity politics. There is no reason to suppose that the sections, or fragments of sections, that 'place themselves outside the international' according to the IS should proceed to form a continuity CWI of their own.

Not that we expect the mothership to fare much better. Here we turn to

other details. Taaffe's final reason for refusing to submit to the decisions of the meeting in August is that the IEC is - don't you know - unrepresentative:

Its composition is weighed towards the smaller groups like Cyprus, Poland or Australia, with one full [IEC] member, whose active membership is less than some branches in other sections! Or Russia, with 25 members and two full IEC members and not a single full-timer. Greece, with 302 members, has 4 IEC members - the same as England and Wales, with 2,000 members. Three sections - Cyprus, Australia and Russia - have a total of 66 members and four IEC members!

This is as laughable as the other reasons (OK, Peter, who was it who set up this particular arrangement?), but we want to highlight something else. Remember, at the beginning of this *contretemps*, both sides were very proud of belonging to the "largest Trotskyist international". Look at those numbers (and, as for SPEW having 2,000 members, pull the other one, Peter - it's got bells on). Add in the 100 or so in Ireland. According to Wikipedia, Socialist Alternative has 1,000 members, which may be an exaggeration, but say it is 500. Suddenly it does not seem so grand - and many of those numbers are about to get a lot smaller in short order.

The unembarrassable comrade Taaffe will no doubt motor on regardless, believing as he apparently does in his indispensability for the success of international socialism. But his remaining members will have to face the reality that their Trot international is just like more or less all the others - an oil-slick sect in hock to its founding section.

How many of the "2,000" will stick around for the next chapter of this dismal story? ●

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Notes

1. 'Taaffe goes for the throat', April 4.
2. <https://cedarlounge.wordpress.com/2019/04/19/to-all-cwi-members>. Though the authorship of this document is unknown, we will assume, for brevity's sake, that it is Peter Taaffe. If he wishes to distance himself from it, our letters page is always open.

ISO

Full-timers and 'cadre'

Mike Macnair discusses the managerialist version of 'democratic centralism' revealed by the collapse of yet another sect

On April 4 I wrote about the 'rape cover-up' aspect of the collapse of the US International Socialist Organisation,¹ while a week later Peter Moody wrote more generally about its politics.² This article is concerned with another specific aspect of the collapse: the claim of several participants and online commentators that it is due to 'democratic centralism' or the 'small party model'.

This sort of line has been sharply argued (among others, no doubt) by blogger Louis Proyect, by Brian Chidester from the 2013-14 ISO opposition, by David McNally, the former Canadian co-thinker of the ISO, by the pseudonymous blogger, 'Failed Harvest'; and no doubt by others.³ Meanwhile, other authors have tried to save at least part of the Cliffite inheritance: notably, Paul Le Blanc, Steve Leigh, Helen Scott and Brian Bean.⁴

I think that 'democratic centralism' is a phrase, like the words 'communism' and 'socialism', which needs to be rescued from both misuse and obloquy. And the usual alternatives actually produce more top-down control and 'them-ocracy'.

Peter Moody correctly made the point that sex abuse scandals, and attempts to cover them up, are not unique to 'Leninist' organisations. We can take this further: '#MeToo' started with powerful Hollywood figures, who may be individual entrepreneurs or corporate executives; the power to abuse can inhere directly as market power over potential contractors (as opposed to present employees); 'Pestminster' was about the conduct of individual MPs - here the power came from political seniority.

What underlies all of this is primarily institutionalised inequality, which is secondarily protected by rights of privacy and 'non-disclosure agreements', and behind these, the sale and denial of justice by the legal profession through the 'free market in legal services'.

This is a crisis for the left groups affected by it, not because they do worse than official society, but because they have imagined that they can do better - and finding that they too have exploitative management is then more sharply a betrayal.

I have very limited time to write at the moment, so this already delayed second piece in a series will be followed by two more. This week I look briefly at the organisational forms of the ISO and their origins, and how these forms give ideological cover to unaccountable management. In the next article I will look at the pre-1914 and western origins of democratic centralism as an organisational form, to detach it from the 'Russian' facts and fantasies. A third article will examine the defects of the federalist 'labour movement tradition', network alternatives and 'anti-small-partyism'.

Ideologies

Part of the ISO story is that Ahmed Shawki and his collaborators remained in charge for 35 years; that full-time regional organisers were (as in the British Socialist Workers Party) appointed from above, not elected from below; and, further, that behind the official structure was an independent financial apparatus with a very substantial turnover. This was not financially misappropriated as such, but it did provide an unaccountable

leadership core with job and other patronage possibilities.⁵

Conversely, 'permanent factions' (existing outside the formal pre-conference period) were banned; with the effect that horizontal communication beyond the single local branch, though not formally banned, was liable to be treated as 'factionalism'. And a sharp line was drawn between what could be published (the leadership's line) and dissent, which had to remain internal only.

This is the basic frame of the organisational model of the British SWP. Although the forms vary, it was the common inheritance of the 'International Committee of the Fourth International', created in 1953; and so was also found in the Workers Revolutionary Party in Britain, and the Organisation Communiste Internationaliste/Parti Communiste Internationaliste in France. The idea that the full-time apparatus is the 'cadre' - the indispensable core of the party - was central to James P Cannon of the US SWP, and his British and French co-thinkers, when they organised a split in 1953. They claimed that the (alleged) support of the 'Pabloites' for opposition groupings in the US SWP, the French PCI and British 'Club' amounted to an attack on the 'cadre' and hence to 'liquidationism'.

General bans on factions were common to the 'official' communists and the Maoists. They were the inheritance of the 1921 ban in the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik) and its congeners in the decisions of the Communist International. In practice, however, 'official' communist parties in the 'west' tolerated a great deal of informal factional activity.

The particular grotesqueries of the ban on 'permanent factions' and 'factionalism' were not shared by the International Committee's great rivals in the 'Pabloite' International Secretariat of the Fourth International and its descendants in the European wing of the Unified Secretariat of the Fourth International (now the official Fourth International). But the control of information flows by the party centre remains present in these organisations, and the factions function as in bourgeois political parties: that is, the full-time apparatus usually remains undislodged.

Behind this phenomenon is both a practical problem and an ideology. The practical problem is the equivalent of two prongs of a fork. The first prong is that capital generally offers workers the choice between

overwork, on the one hand, and serious poverty, on the other. The result is that it is hard to do the work required to publish papers, run campaigns, organise meetings, and so on, without full-timers. To the extent that we do do without full-timers, we are generally forced to rely on people who have other advantages under capitalism - with the same risk of inequality as when employing full-timers. The second prong is that capitalists are generally unenthusiastic about employing people whose CVs include periods of full-time work for left organisations (or even trade unions).

Between these two prongs, there is, therefore, a natural pressure of capitalist society on workers' organisations to employ long-service full-timers. The larger the organisation, the more these long-service full-timers are needed, and also the more they are drawn into the common political culture of capitalist-bureaucratic managerialism. This is not a particular problem of far-left groups: the Webbs already noticed it in the British trade unions in their 1894 *History of trade unionism*, and Robert Michels overargued it (as 'natural elites') from observation of the massive Social Democratic Party of Germany, in his 1911 book *Political parties*.

'Zinovievism'

The ideology has two threads to it. The first - and fundamental to the later tradition - is Comintern's 1920 *Theses on the role of the Communist Party in the proletarian revolution* (Second Congress), with the claim that the party as the advanced part has to represent the class, and its 1921 *The organisational structure of the Communist Parties, the methods and content of their work* (Third Congress), which concretised the idea of the leadership as the most advanced part of the party, which 'represents' the whole against the backward 'parts'.⁶ There are many good things in these sets of theses, but they both make a fundamental error. The party may be wrong - as against the working class masses, or even as against a particular group. The leadership may be wrong - as against the party ranks, or even as against a particular branch or fraction.

This error is characterised by several authors in the discussion of the ISO collapse as 'Zinovievism', from Grigory Zinoviev's role in introducing the Second Congress theses and his role in the Fifth Congress and after in 'Bolshevisation'. Indeed, in 2014 Joel Geier of the old ISO leadership devoted a piece in the ISO's *International Socialist Review* to 'Zinovievism and the degeneration of world communism'.⁷

This concept is badly misleading. In the first place, it is personality-cult reasoning: scapegoating Zinoviev for what were in fact

1920-21 decisions, to which Lenin and Trotsky were unequivocally parties, in the hope of finding a 'pure form' of Leninism and preserving 'T is for Trotsky the hero'. Secondly, the 'scapegoat Zinoviev' approach leaves out the reasons for the decisions taken (even if those decisions can be seen in retrospect to have been mistaken).

The original idea that the class has to be 'represented' by its advanced part, the party, flowed from the Bolsheviks' loss of majority support in spring 1918 as a result of the peace of Brest-Litovsk - and as a result, their rigging of soviet elections at the same period, and then the turn of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries to terrorism against the Bolshevik regime, and the Bolshevik response of Red Terror.⁸ They now had to justify what had become a dictatorship over the proletariat.

The drive for 'military' discipline in the party, most clearly expressed in the 1921 theses, flowed from the problem of military insubordination by local leaderships, notably in the Tsaritsyn affair in autumn 1918, and the political struggle round the 'military opposition' at the Eighth Congress of the party in March 1919.⁹

The decision to ban factions, as is well-known, was part of the turn to the New Economic Policy in 1921: the expectation was that economic liberalisation would strengthen the hand of small capital, which would naturally find political expression; in the circumstances, if the proletariat - a small minority in Russia - was to hang on to power until the expected revolution in the west caught up, opposition parties had to be more systematically banned, as did factions within the Communist Party.

With the benefit of hindsight, all of these decisions were mistakes. They were mistakes made under conditions of war, counterrevolutionary foreign intervention and civil war - and in an overwhelmingly peasant-majority country. But it needs to be clear that the Bolsheviks would not have had these problems if they had adapted their party to the needs of civil war in a peasant-majority country before they obtained political power: in that case they would not have built a serious workers' party in the first place, or obtained political power in October 1917.

Cadre

The second thread of the ideology is from 1960s-70s radicals' naive readings of Lenin's 1902 *What is to be done?* Lars T Lih has written at great length, attempting to dispel the standard readings of this book and its relationship to the 1903 split in the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party.¹⁰ But what we are concerned with here is later radicals' reading of the book out of context. And here the core was the idea of 'professional revolutionaries' - understood not as meaning 'revolutionaries who are skilled at the work' (as Lih reads Lenin's argument), but as "full-timers".

There is a link here to the idea of 'cadre' - originally a military term. The cadre of an army or particular military unit consists of the officers, specialists and instructors, who train up the incoming short-service conscripts. The expression was in communist use by 1930 at the latest - presumably having spread from the Red Army, to the cadres (specifically trained and specialist industrial workers, villager leaders, and so on).¹¹ Still not full-timers, though, and way below the 'top leadership' level.

It is James P Cannon who seems to have been responsible for the idea that the 'cadre' of the organisation meant

its full-timers. Already in 1931 Cannon wrote that the Communist League of America's conference should

Begin the actual formation of a cadre of professional revolutionaries, who put themselves entirely at the disposal of the organisation. Select a group out of the younger and foot-loose elements, and train them deliberately for full-time professional work.¹²

I guess that this peculiarity reflects Cannon's pre-Communist Party background as an itinerant organiser for the Industrial Workers of the World - which he himself later saw as a proto-party formation, but which operated through itinerant organisers, with a very low stability of the rank-and-file membership.¹³

Cannon was not himself fully consistent in using this concept in this way. He did, however, use it to justify the split of 1953, which reverberated down the subsequent history of Trotskyism. It also fitted in with the enthusiasm of late 1960s-early 1970s radicals for *What is to be done?*¹⁴

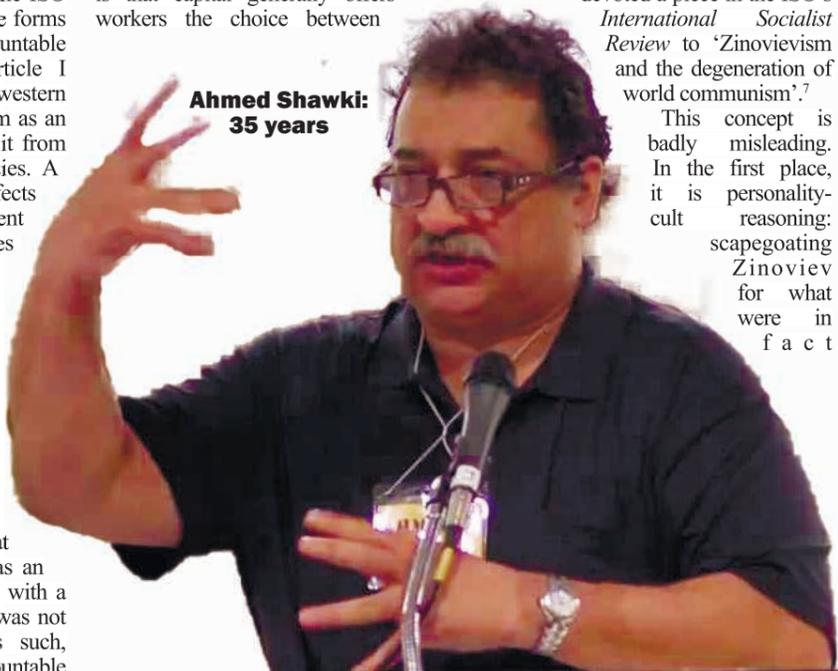
Under clandestinity, going full-time was not merely sacrificing earning potential (as it is to this day for most leftwing full-timers), but also taking on a high risk of arrest, and so on. The same was true for the itinerant IWW organisers of the early 20th century. That does not mean that the clandestine full-timers should control the party - the idea that an actually functioning party could consist only of itinerant organisers, without the local activists who supplied the funds, the safe houses and so on, was illusory. But it did give Cannon's idea a sort of plausibility. The application of an analogy of this sort to the full-timers of a legal leftwing group in the late 20th century was and remains misleading.

Under legality, using 'cadre' to mean the full-timers is merely an ideology of managerialism. And the same is true of the 1920-21 ideology of the party question ●

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Notes

1. 'Transparency and solidarity' *Weekly Worker* April 4.
2. 'Learn the lessons' *Weekly Worker* April 11.
3. Proyect: www.counterpunch.org/2019/04/04/notes-on-the-dissolution-of-the-iso/; Chidester: <https://externalbulletin.org/2014/07/01/le-cadre-du-militant-socialiste/#more-404>; McNally: <https://socialistworker.org/2019/03/22/the-period-the-party-and-the-next-left>; <https://failedharvest.com/blog/socialism.org>.
4. LeBlanc: <https://socialistworker.org/2019/03/27/reflections-on-coherence-and-comradeship>; Leigh: <https://socialistworker.org/2019/03/28/what-models-of-organization-can-guide-us-now>; Scott: <https://socialistworker.org/2019/03/21/separating-whats-good-from-whats-rotten>; Bean: <https://socialistworker.org/2019/03/29/critical-thoughts-about-drapers-micro-sect>.
5. <https://newmilitant.com/the-crisis-and-collapse-of-the-international-socialist-organization>.
6. Both available on Marxists Internet Archive: www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/index.htm, under the pages for the relevant congresses.
7. <https://isreview.org/issue/93/zinovievism-and-degeneration-world-communism>.
8. All this at various points in A Rabinowitch *The Bolsheviks in power* Indiana 2008.
9. Convenient discussion in G Lonergan, 'Where was the conscience of the revolution? The military opposition at the Eighth Party Congress (March 1919)' *Slavic Review* No74, pp832-49 (2015).
10. *Lenin rediscovered* Brill 2005.
11. *Oxford English Dictionary* 'cadre (n)', numbers 2 and 3.
12. www.marxistsfr.org/archive/cannon/works/1931/sep/discussion02.htm.
13. www.marxists.org/archive/cannon/works/1955/iww.htm.
14. Compare also M Elbaum *Revolution in the air* for the US Maoists of the same period.



CULTURE

Prophet and poet of Russian Revolution

Chris Knight looks at the legacy of Velimir Khlebnikov. This is an edited transcript of a talk given to Communist University 2018

Velimir Khlebnikov is almost unknown in the west, but to those Russians who know a little bit about literature and poetry in their own culture he is the greatest Russian poet since Pushkin.

He had an unusual childhood: a tribal upbringing, with ethnic music and wonderful, colourful traditional costumes. He was born into the Kalmyk tribal group (originally Mongolian Buddhists) in 1885 near the Caspian Sea. His father was a tsarist administrator. As a child Khlebnikov grew up with animals in the house and with camels wandering around outside. Nearly all the homes in the village were yurts¹ - his was the only solid building. Kalmyk instruments and dancing had a huge effect on him, and his childhood environment was very relevant to his later life.

As a boy, he was used to ride horseback. He would go to a stable and liberate a horse by riding it away. He considered horses a lot more intelligent than many humans he had met. He once noted:

I have discovered the fundamental laws of time and I believe that now it will be as easy to predict events as to count to three. If people don't want to learn my art of predicting the future, I will teach it to horses.

Here is a typical, innocent, Khlebnikovian poem, 'When horses die':

When horses die, they breathe.
When grasses die, they wither.
When suns die, they go out.
When people die, they sing songs.

Futurism

Anyone who knows a little about the Russian February and October revolutions will know that they were more than just political upheavals. The period was also the culmination of an immense scientific, intellectual and artistic ferment. If you think of cubism, you may think primarily of Picasso and Braque. But in Russia the movement of art into abstraction and modernism went further than anywhere else. You only have to mention Kandinsky,² Prokofiev,³ Shostakovich⁴ or Meyerhold.⁵ These and so many other geniuses propelled a spectacular outpouring of revolutionary, iconoclastic art.

Khlebnikov prophesied the date of the Russian Revolution back in 1912 - he was crazy enough (and he was completely crazy!) to think that he had worked out the laws of time. He used mathematical calculations, dates going back to the age of the dinosaurs, and different periodicities and wave lengths of history, and concluded: 'Ah, it's going to be 1917!' After this, his friends bestowed on him the honorific title, 'The King of Time'. One of the loveliest books in English on Khlebnikov is titled *The King of Time: selected writings of the Russian futurian*.⁶

When the February revolution took place in 1917, Khlebnikov had worked it all out - the whole thing was *his* revolution! The metaphor of a liberated horse came immediately to his mind: "The tsar abdicates. The white mare of freedom. A wild gallop, a breakthrough."

When the Bolshevik revolution broke out a few months later, it was Khlebnikov's wild, anarcho-feministic, cubo-futurist artists, musicians and playwrights who



most enthusiastically rushed to its defence. These artists were the ones who invented the term *agitprop* to describe what they were doing. As the Bolsheviks resorted to art, drama and music to spread the flames of revolution following October, their propaganda was overwhelmingly the work of these futurists. And Khlebnikov was the genius of futurism - they all treated him as their

**Pathfinder:
Velimir Khlebnikov
influenced Roman
Jakobson, who
influenced Noam
Chomsky**

leader.

There was a lot of laughter about it all, because Khlebnikov was not an organiser of any sort. He was painfully shy, to the point of being inarticulate. Because he was socially awkward and strange in his behaviour, he was regarded not only as a genius, but a kind of holy fool. All of the futurists looked up to him as their main inspiration. Nearly all

the other schools of art and literature dithered, taking a long time making up their minds about the revolution. But, for the futurists, it was their revolution right from the start.

With his conservative tastes, Lenin was uncertain about all this, to put it mildly. Trotsky was more progressive - or at least prepared to cope with unexpected novelty. But of all the Bolsheviks it was Lunacharsky who most appreciated the futurists. Of all of them, Mayakovsky⁷ is the most famous. In the early days he would wear a gaudy yellow jacket and paint his face. Whenever the futurists had a poetry recital, there would be a riot and the police would turn up. Their idea of a piano concert was to haul a grand piano up to the ceiling on ropes and, when the audience turned up to listen, they would cut the ropes. You would hear an almighty crash, as the whole thing fell to the ground. That was the recital!

Internationally, there were two wings of futurism: the Italians versus the Russians. The Italians worshipped the machine age, as represented by war, aeroplanes, machine guns, motor cars and electric lighting. Celebrating violence, many of these moved towards the far right and their leader, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti,⁸ was already a fascist by 1914. They ended up supporting Benito Mussolini.

However, in Russia things went in quite the opposite direction. Khlebnikov was a futurist in a very personal way. His motto was something like *Back to the future* - which takes me to his early childhood, with the Kalmyk camel herders. He was sure that the future would mean a return, on a higher-level, to a romantically envisaged Stone Age, to a period before writing. He hated writing, considering it the language of bureaucrats and executioners. He thought all poetry should be sung and spoken aloud, considering it his anti-capitalist mission to lead an army of songs:

Today I will go once again
Into life, into haggling, into the
market,
And lead the army of my songs
To duel against the market tide.

His whole idea was that, thanks to technological progress, the human race was poised to return to our prehistoric roots, taking us to a higher and more collectivist moral, political and spiritual level. Khlebnikov's supersagas are constantly wafting us to some distant period of cosmic time:

The sea. A shoreline spurting
golden fire ...
Three suns burn in the sky ...
Those were the first days of
existence on Earth.
Sea horses playing in the waves.
A solitary naturalist walks by
them carrying a tin can,
studying the dry whale bones ...

In those years, there was huge excitement around the invention of radio. And radio for Khlebnikov was going to get rid of writing. Who wanted writing, when you could have this? Radio would restore the human voice to its ancient centrality. It was in this sense that Khlebnikov and the futurists were 'primitivists'. Picasso and his fellow cubists were equally primitivists, as shown by their enthusiasm for traditional African art, but Khlebnikov took

that idea much further than anyone else. For him, the tragedy was that music, dance, colour, laughter and magic had all become set aside by the rise of patriarchal religions, states, class society and the enlightenment. It all had to come back. If the revolution was not musical and full of laughter - as well as full of science - then it was not their revolution at all.

In my book on Chomsky⁹ I point out that Khlebnikov was a poet who in his creative writing effectively invented modern linguistics. Shortly after World War II, Chomsky took much of his inspiration from Roman Jakobson, who was then recognised as the world's foremost scientific linguist. But everything that Jakobson knew about language had come from Khlebnikov. So, unbeknown to Chomsky, he was in effect Khlebnikov's student.

Khlebnikov was a poet, but he was also a thinker about what language is:

The earth's axis splashed out
another day,
Night's bulk is closing in.
I dreamed I saw a salmon-girl
In the waves of a midnight
waterfall.

Linguistics

In his poetry, Khlebnikov often played with sounds in ways which were quite astonishing. The nearest you can get in English is to think of James Joyce in, say, *Finnegan's wake* or *Ulysses*. He was interested in the intrinsic properties of different vowels and consonants, each with its own voice, as opposed to mere habitual, conventional meanings. But that Joycean modernism was anticipated and taken a lot further by Khlebnikov.

Khlebnikov died in 1922 at the age of only 37, during the post-revolutionary civil war and famine. It was one of the early disasters for the Russian artistic movement. One after the other, the futurists died - they committed suicide, ended up in one of Stalin's concentration camps or got shot for some purported deviation. One of the few to escape was Roman Jakobson, who got out early by becoming an emissary to the Red Cross in the Soviet embassy in Prague.

When Khlebnikov was reciting poems in St Petersburg and Moscow, the teenage schoolboy who was following him around was Roman Jakobson, busily taking notes and storing up ideas for his future as the world's leading theoretical linguist. Jakobson devoted the rest of his life to the task of taking Khlebnikov's crazy, unformulated and unfinished, but brilliant, work and making a science out of it in the shape of modern linguistics. There is lot in Chomsky's linguistics which is equally brilliant. Most of his formalism actually comes via Jakobson from Khlebnikov, and Chomsky's linguistics is an extreme version of formalism.

Khlebnikov's aim was to deploy laughter, animal cries, birdsong, the rustling of forest trees and every other sensory resource in a sustained revolutionary project to re-enchant the world. To understand where he was coming from in all this, we need to know something about the historical and cultural background.

In his classic text, *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, the sociologist Max Weber described how bourgeois ideology emerged out of Protestantism in general and Calvinism in particular.¹⁰ The essence of Calvinism was the desire to disenchant the world, eliminating the last traces of pre-Christian belief in magic. It was as if these gloomy preachers were warning their followers, 'Don't be fooled by the deceptive majesty of a

lake, a waterfall, a forest glade or a spectacular sunset! Don't let nature's wiles seduce you! Unmask her, strip her of her magic! Salvation depends on disenchantment!' The only comfort you're allowed after all this, once the magic in life has been stripped away, is the promise of salvation, through one thing alone: the blood of Jesus.

Elaborating on this idea, Weber writes that disenchantment is also central to the ideology surrounding modern science. Calvinism lives on as the doctrine that to study nature you must take the magic away. Don't fall into that trap. You must somehow strip nature of her own voice, making sure that she behaves the way you want, submitting to your will. You are in charge with your experiments, your torture, your vivisection, your felling of the trees. When Khlebnikov spoke of restoring to nature her own voice, he had all this in mind. His mission was to reverse the entire project of the enlightenment by deliberately re-enchanting the world.

Mikhail Bakhtin¹¹ is another Russian genius from the same revolutionary stable. I want to mention him here because he had many of the same revolutionary instincts concerning the deepest nature of language. You could call Bakhtin the scientist of carnival and laughter. His trenchant criticism of the underlying ideology of bourgeois science was that it started out by silencing nature, depriving it of its own authentic voice. "The entire methodological apparatus of the mathematical and natural sciences," wrote Bakhtin, "is directed toward mastery over mute objects, brute things, that do not reveal themselves in words, that do not comment on themselves."¹² Bakhtin went on to argue that the same approach, depriving others of their voice, has always been the method of the state and its ecclesiastical servants. The meaning of carnival is that it turns all this upside down, empowering the powerless and giving a voice to the silenced.

Bakhtin came to the fore during the Stalinist terror, some years after Khlebnikov's death, but there is a sense in which he continued down a similar path. With his futurist project for a universal language, Khlebnikov pushed back against the whole enlightenment project. He was urging: 'Let's go the other way and be real revolutionaries, back to the prehistoric future - to laughter, the magic of dance, the lost voices of animals, children and trees.' This line in particular haunts me: "And does the land not cry out within us: *Oh, give me a voice! A voice! Give me a voice.*"

But he was not arguing for the rejection of science. He thought you could take the core of science - the mathematical part - and turn it round. All the mathematics that had previously served to disenchant the world would now be placed in the service of a quite different agenda: Khlebnikov's own revolutionary project of cosmic re-enchantment.

Khlebnikov wanted the revolution to be magical and for revolutionaries to be like shamans. He saw himself in those terms. He believed it essential to get everyone laughing. Both ideas are illustrated in this, his best-known poem, 'Incantation by laughter':

O, laugh, laughers!
O, laugh out, laughers!
You who laugh with laughs, you
who laugh it up laughishly
O, laugh out laughingly
O, belaudable laughterhood
- the laughter of laughing
laughers!
O, unlaugh it outlaughingly,
belauding laughists!
Laughily, laughily,
Uplough, enlaugh, laughlings,
laughlings

Laughlets, laughlets.
O, laugh, laughers!
O, laugh out, laughers.

You can see what is happening here. If you take the word 'laughter', it has a strange spelling (not 'larfter!'). The 'augh' is telling us something about the history of the English language. This translation plays around with that. The difference is that a Russian reader cannot recite Khlebnikov's original for more than a few lines, because they will be consumed by laughter before reaching the end.

Borders

Khlebnikov's fundamental political position was that the world should have no borders. That was partly due to his upbringing: the camels and horses in the camp where he grew up were not interested in borders. Throughout his life, he remained committed to the nomadic values of the Kalmyk people.

But, although Khlebnikov hated territorial borders, he loved the idea of borders in time. He did not want fences, customs posts and certainly not trenches (remember this is going on during World War I, when people were fighting for a few yards of squelching, blood-stained mud). But what about borders in time? When people sing together, they must all keep to the same beat and sing each note together. Synchronising the voice means being aware of borders in time. Once the whole planet is singing, the only borders will be in the dimension of time. Natural rhythms, such as human heartbeats, the sun, the moon and the tides, would be used to set up these borders. He considered it vital not to transgress borders in time - they were needed if the world's inhabitants were to get on with one another. By contrast, borders in space were in his eyes just bloodshed and murder.

As well as being an administrator for the Kalmyk people, Khlebnikov's father was a noted ornithologist, studying birdsong in particular. Khlebnikov was inspired by his father and followed him in making careful observations of the notes of birdsong. From his poetry you get the feeling it might possibly be a form of human language, but if so it is on the cusp, like a dawn chorus on the verge of speech - almost articulate, but not quite. Khlebnikov wanted to connect human speech with birdsong and animal cries, using the scientific methods of an ornithologist. In his own words: "Only the development of science has permitted us to discover the full wisdom of language - which is wise because it is itself a part of nature."

Khlebnikov was not by any means a Marxist. His inspiration came from physics, chemistry, mathematics and the natural sciences. And he did not have much of a feel for the laws of history in a sociological sense. Any scientific laws had to be expressed in mathematical form if he was to feel comfortable with them.

For Khlebnikov, the interesting features of language had nothing to do with social agreement, habit or convention. If you were an ornithologist, you would just listen to the sound of a given word and break that sound down. You let the bits of sound speak to you via a meaning intrinsic to each vowel and consonant. In other words, the meaning is inseparable from the form. Roman Jakobson had very similar ideas, passing some of them on years later to Noam Chomsky.

Of course, in real life, once a language has become conventionalised, form and meaning have only an arbitrary link. There is no logical reason why the letters 'd', 'o' and 'g', when combined, should mean the creature that wags its tail and barks at you. That is just

convention.

Well, Chomsky was not interested in that and neither was Khlebnikov, who hated the very idea of convention. Convention means business as usual, more of the same. It is mindless habit. When you think about it, if you are a poet you do not want to get into the habitual use of the words. You want to let the sounds sparkle with their own intrinsic meanings - that is how poetry works. So maybe at a deep level there is just one language - human. Then again, according to both Chomsky and Khlebnikov, this universal language reflects the architecture of the mind itself, which might be captured in a mathematical formula. In Khlebnikov's words: "Beautiful are the sounds of the mind! Beautiful are its clear crystal sounds."

Anything habitual is likely to become boring, and boredom was something that Khlebnikov hated more than anything else. Like Mayakovsky with his outlandish yellow jacket, these iconoclasts all hated what they call in Russian *byt*. This word roughly translates as 'boringness' or 'business as usual'. *Byt* meant more of World War I, more bureaucracy, more issuing of death warrants by some tsarist minion. Khlebnikov wanted to explode the whole thing from the inside out - completely shatter it. So in linguistics we should not be interested in *byt* - the habitual, familiar meanings of words. We should find instead that deeper voice, when the tongue by its own nature is allowed to make its own unexpected sounds.

Every child is a creative genius from birth - that is a Chomskyan idea, but it is also another of Khlebnikov's insights. It is the anarchistic idea that schoolteachers are going to be drilling rubbish into you, when it would be better to build on what you already know. A child understands all kinds of things about laughter, play, jokes, humour and imaginative games. And at school it all gets drummed out of them. If only each child's innate genius were allowed to develop, education would be so much better. The way Chomsky translates that is to say that every child possesses a language organ, which is pre-programmed with language. And so there is no need to learn a language - it is there already. That is a somewhat extreme version of a rather lovely, anarchistic idea which contains much truth.

The shift

Then there is another Russian word - *sdvig* - which is interesting, because it can nowadays be connected with digital computers. On a computer you press a key and the whole screen shifts from one state to another in an instant. It is like switching a light off or on - it does not gradually get lighter or darker. So this word *sdvig* means a shift, sudden transition - or sudden quantum leap, if you like - and it is linked to the idea of a digital system of communication. Almost as if he was anticipating the computer age, Khlebnikov had the idea that language is intrinsically digital. Take consonants and vowels. Deleting just one can suddenly shift a word from one state to a completely different one:

Wind is song
Of whom and of what?
Of the sword's longing
To be the word.

Remove one letter from a word and you get another. So it is not like mixing black and white to get grey. Each switch is a total shift, not a gradual slippage. Khlebnikov considered the Russian Revolution itself to be a massive *sdvig* or shift. Nothing of the recent past should be retained into the future, because that would muddy

the message. Khlebnikov illustrated the same principle by writing a long saga consisting of chapters which followed one after another, without the slightest connection between them.

Khlebnikov was no scientist, although he had studied mathematics at Kazan University, and loved physics and chemistry. For him it was the magic, the aesthetic of science that was so powerful. In fact you could say of the whole futurist movement that it was inspired by an aesthetic of science. They wanted to paint it, draw it, hear it, make music out of it. Science should be the dominant motif in the new culture. Everything we thought we knew about time, space, matter and energy was to be completely revolutionised.

Khlebnikov foresaw not just the Russian Revolution, but also our current situation in facing climate catastrophe. He wrote these strangely prophetic lines just before he died:

Man has taken the surface of Planet Earth away from the wise community of animals and plants and now he is lonely; he has no-one to play tag or hide-and-seek with. In his empty room, surrounded by the darkness of non-being, there are no playmates and no games. Who can he play with? He is surrounded by an empty 'no'. The souls of animals banished from their bodies have invaded him, and the plains of his being are now subject to their law. They built animal cities in his heart.

Man seems to be choking to death on his own carbon.

It was his luck to have a printing press that did not have enough of the many twos and threes needed to print a reckoning. For without these numbers the Beautiful Program could not be written. As animals fell into extinction, each took with him to the grave the private numbers of his species.

Entire entries in the ledger book of fortune vanished like pages torn out of a manuscript. Twilight loomed on the horizon.

But a miracle happened: courageous minds have awakened the sleeping soul of the sacred gray clay that covers the earth in layers, awakened it as bread and meat.

Earth has become edible, and every clay pit has become a table laid for dinner. The beautiful gift of the right to live has been given back to animals and plants.

And once more we are happy: a lion has curled in my lap, asleep, and I sit here smoking my supper of air!¹³

Notes

1. The Kalmyk yurt is a round, portable, self-supporting structure composed of lattice walls, rafters, roof ring, felt covering and tension bands.
2. Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), Russian pioneer of abstract art.
3. Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953), Soviet composer, conductor and pianist.
4. Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975), Soviet composer and pianist.
5. Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940), Soviet theatre director, actor and producer.
6. V Khlebnikov *The King of Time: selected writings of the Russian futurian* Harvard 1990.
7. Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930), Soviet poet, playwright, artist and actor.
8. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944), Italian poet, editor, art theorist and author of the *Futurist manifesto* (1909). He co-authored the *Fascist manifesto* in 1919.
9. C Knight *Decoding Chomsky: science and revolutionary politics* London 2016. See chapter 10: 'Russian formalist roots'.
10. M Weber *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* - originally published in German as a series of essays 1904-05; translated into English in 1930 by American sociologist Talcott Parsons.
11. Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975), Russian philosopher and literary critic. See especially *Rabelais and his world*, translated by H Iswolsky, Indiana 1984.
12. M Bakhtin *The dialogic imagination: four essays* Texas 1982, p35.
13. V Khlebnikov, 'A cliff out of the future', in C Douglas (ed) and P Schmidt (translator) *Collected works of Velimir Khlebnikov* Vol 1, 'Letters and theoretical writings', p399, 1987.

BREXIT

Next step hard right

George Galloway, Claire Fox and Alka Sehgal Cuthbert are providing a 'left' cover for Nigel Farage's Brexit Party, writes **Carla Roberts** of Labour Party Marxists



Brexit Party: Richard Tice, Christina Jordon, James Glancy, Nigel Farage, Matthew Patten, Claire Fox and Lance Forman

Nigel Farage is back. Again. And it looks like his fourth (or is it his fifth?) incarnation might be his most successful one yet. A YouGov poll for the May 23 European Union elections has his Brexit Party on 27% (sharply up from 15% the week before), followed by Labour on 22%, the Tories on 15% and the UK Independence Party on 7%. The Greens are on 10%, the Liberal Democrats on 9% and the saboteurs of the snappily titled 'Change UK' - formerly known as The Independent Group - are languishing at 6%.¹ There was an expectation that Change UK and the Lib Dems would get it together in some kind of 'remain' alliance - perhaps with the Greens, Plaid Cymru and the Scottish Nationalist Party. After all, fighting for a second referendum was officially one of the key reasons for TIG's split from the Labour Party (along with Labour's alleged widespread anti-Semitism, of course).

But, somewhat surprisingly, it is not to be, as Chuka Ummuna explains:

Change UK-TIG has not been formally approached by any of the other pro-EU parties with a view to running one list of candidates. That is because it is impossible to run one list of candidates unless you merge to form one party, which, not unreasonably, none of us are prepared to do.

Various disappointed bourgeois commentators have already pointed out that there were other methods with which pro-'remain' parties could have presented a more effective challenge: for example, by dividing up regions between them.

Overconfident public schoolboy that he is, Ummuna tries to assure them that "there is already a grassroots, 'remain' alliance - Change UK-TIG is it."² But, as they have also bugged up their application to stand in the local elections, these anti-Corbyn rightwingers continue to make headlines only for their ineptness: in the first 24 hours after the launch of its EU election campaign, two of Change UK's European candidates have already been forced to step down for posting racist tweets. The only real 'success' they can claim is the fact that they got the Corbyn leadership to take yet another step

back: in the hope of stopping other MPs from splitting because they fear being deselected by the local membership. Labour HQ has still not published a timetable to implement the reformed trigger ballot system - the only realistic way local Labour members can get rid of their sitting MP.

The undemocratic selection method for Labour's EU candidates underlines the problem: ordinary members had zero input. In a brief email they have been informed - after the fact - that, "sitting MEPs who wished to stand again have been re-selected. Candidates for remaining places on the list have been appointed by joint NEC and regional selections boards following interviews earlier this week." That means 16 out of Labour's 20 sitting MEPs have automatically been reselected. The newcomers include Jeremy Corbyn's right-hand woman, Katy Clarke, and Momentum organiser Laura Parker, who has been heavily promoted by her boss, national executive member Jon Lansman. But overall the selection process has demonstrated yet again that the Corbyn leadership is continuing to try and appease the right in the party - even though this demonstratively does not work.

It seems unlikely that those elected on May 23 will remain MEPs only until October 31; we expect there will be more 'deadlines' and more extensions of Britain's EU membership. And the fact that we are the middle of a huge constitutional crisis clearly makes this an important election. When have candidates for MEP positions ever received so much coverage in the national press?

Only one thing seems clear: unless the Tories get shot of Theresa May pronto - replacing her with somebody who looks like he/she could make Brexit work (a miracle) - they will receive an absolute trashing on May 23. A questionnaire of Tory members for the Conservative Home website found 62% were planning to vote for the Brexit Party, and only 23% intended to vote for their own. And a poll of Conservative councillors for the *Mail on Sunday* found that 40% of them were planning to vote for Nigel Farage's party, and only 52% for the Tories. Sure, a lot can happen in six weeks and these polls are clearly biased - but undoubtedly they are telling a certain truth.

Nigel Farage's latest organisation certainly has a lot of forward

momentum. Former Tory MP Ann Widdecombe is the latest 'celebrity' to join the former Ukip leader. All things being equal, it looks as if the party will do as well as - if not better than - Ukip did at the last European elections in 2014, when it came first with 27.5% of the vote. The Brexit Party already has a sizeable fraction in the European parliament - 14 of the 24 MEPs elected as Ukip members have already switched allegiance since it was launched in January.³

Nigel's former party, Ukip, meanwhile, has Tommy Robinson, Carl Benjamin (he who "wouldn't even rape" Jess Phillips MP) and Mark Meechan, also known as Count Dankula - the man who was fined £800 for teaching his dog to perform a Nazi salute when he shouted things like "Sieg Heil". They seem to be aiming to win the votes of - how to put this? - a particularly narrow and alienated section of the working class, which tends to be male and very white.

Compared to those clowns, the Brexit Party really does look rather sane. Farage is, of course, a Tory at heart, albeit a very rightwing one. He has assured people that he is "sorry to be taking votes from the Conservatives" and that his main target are "disappointed Labour voters in the northern heartlands".

And a certain Claire Fox is supposed to be covering his left flank. Fox was a leading member in the Revolutionary Communist Party and all its transformations since: *Living Marxism*, *Spiked* and the Institute of Ideas, which is now the Academy (!) of Ideas. Her sharp move to the right has been characterised by the belief that capitalism is a really good thing and that the world needs more of it (for example, to end hunger in Africa). For the last decade or so, the output of Fox and other co-thinkers like Frank Furedi and Mick Hume could at best be described as rightwing libertarian.

Another candidate on Farage's list is *Spiked* contributor Alka Sehgal Cuthbert. She unconvincingly explains how she, "as an Indian", can support a party committed to keeping out refugees and foreigners:

The EU is not a haven of social justice - it is a thoroughly racist institution. In order to maintain EU free movement, it has to ensure its borders are kept tightly sealed against non-EU people.

She is obviously aware that Farage

happens to be the guy who during the 2016 referendum campaign unveiled his 'Breaking Point' poster, which depicted threatening masses of Syrian refugees bound for the UK. So she quickly and unconvincingly points out: "That poster, or anything else Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage may have said, pales into insignificance compared with the egregious racism of the EU."⁴ So Farage is not quite as bad as the EU then. Not much of an endorsement.

Claire Fox, on the other hand, overplays her leftie credentials just a little bit when she assures us in an article for the *Daily Mail* that she has been a "leftwing campaigner for 35 years. I've been arrested on picket lines, led anti-imperialist demonstrations and spoken at anti-deportation protests outside police stations."⁵ It's been a while though, hasn't it, Claire?

She leaves out the fact that *Spiked* has been arguing for years that the labels 'left' and 'right' are oh so wrong and old-fashioned, because, don't you know, "We live in a world beyond left and right politics".⁶ In her article, she briefly references this position by claiming that, "the left-right divide has been replaced by democrats vs anti-democrats", before describing herself as a "lefty" a few more times. To top it all, she claims to be acting in the tradition of the "Levellers during the Civil War, the Chartists in the 19th century or the suffragettes in early 20th".

For Claire Fox and her ilk, "sovereignty" is the key, because we "remain shackled to Brussels". She cannot see any problem with standing alongside Farage, because this is a "once-in-a-lifetime" opportunity to save "our democracy" from those evil foes in the EU. Fox has a problem only with the EU version of capitalism, because it is too regulated and *Spiked* very much believes in the free market - free for the capitalists, not for immigrants, obviously. Some "lefty".

Slightly more sad - though not entirely surprising - is George Galloway's support for Farage. On April 17, he declared on Twitter: "Given the nature of Labour's Euro-fanatic candidates list and the crucial juncture we have reached in the fight for the full implementation of the Brexit referendum result and for one time only, I will be supporting Nigel Farage in next month's elections."⁷ Clearly, he has given up hope of ever getting back into the Labour Party.

Galloway seems to agree with Farage on

the need for tougher immigration controls: "Being opposed to mass immigration is not (necessarily) racist," he writes - "only Trotskyites and globalised capitalists really believe in 'open borders'".⁸

This is nothing new, of course. He already outlined his reactionary beliefs in 2005 when he was still allied with the Socialist Workers Party in Respect. The SWP kept schtum when he wrote an infamous article in the *Morning Star*, where he called for "an economic-social-demographic plan for population growth based on a points system and our own needs" (ie, the needs of British capital). He claimed that the scrapping of immigration controls would mean "urging all the most accomplished and determined people to leave the poor countries of the world and come to the richest, [making] the poor countries even poorer and the rich countries richer".⁹

No doubt, Farage will have some success in appealing to Brexit-supporting members of the working class who usually vote Labour and would probably do so in a general election - in fact, we have been rather disturbed to see evidence of that in Corbyn-supporting Facebook groups. Not because of Claire Fox posing unconvincingly as a leftwinger, but because the Labour Party will have to continue to 'sit on the fence' for as long as possible, if it does not want to seriously alienate large sections of its electoral base on either side of the Brexit divide.

In the EU poll (as well as the local elections), we urge our supporters to vote Labour - despite the many, many shortcomings of the Corbyn leadership. There remains a window of opportunity to radically transform the Labour Party into a united front of a special kind ●

Notes

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REVIEW

Israel and the 'new anti-Semitism'

Paul Kelemen *The British left and Zionism - history of a divorce* Manchester University Press, 2012, pp227, £16.99

It is not often that a book can be classed as indispensable to an understanding of Zionism - the ideology of the movement that established the Israeli state - and its relationship to the left and the labour movement. But *The British left and Zionism* is one.

There are many books which have been written about the history of Zionism - most of them tedious and repetitive - whose conclusions were formed before even a word was written. Books under this heading include David Vital's *The origins of Zionism* and *Zionism: the formative years*. By contrast, anyone wanting a comprehensive Marxist analysis of Zionism could not do better than Nathan Weinstock's *Zionism: a false messiah*. Unfortunately Weinstock himself underwent a "personal and political crisis" and became a Zionist!

For an understanding of the origins of the Zionist labour movement, Zeev Sternhell's *The founding myths of Israel* is groundbreaking. Sternhell, a childhood survivor of the Nazis, tells the story of the endemic political and financial corruption of the Histadrut union confederation and its lack of democracy. As Golda Meir noted, Histadrut was not so much a trade union as a "great colonising agency".² However, if you want a history of Zionism and Israel from both a cultural and political perspective, employing the tools of comparative history, then Gabriel Piterberg's *The returns of Zionism* cannot be bettered. Meanwhile, Joseph Gorny's *The British labour movement and Zionism 1917-1948* never once questions the fundamentals of Zionism. It is essentially a functional and descriptive history.

Paul Kelemen's book is the first comprehensive account of the history of the British left and Zionism. It is written from an avowedly anti-Zionist perspective and because of this it provides an essential and unique insight into the twists and turns of the Communist Party, as it had to adapt its understanding of Zionism to the needs of the Soviet Union's foreign policy.

Today, when 'anti-Semitism' is a principal weapon of the right in the Labour Party, this book is essential to understand how the British labour movement came to adopt and support Zionism from August 1917 onwards. This was an essential component of Labour's support for the British empire and the weaponisation of 'anti-Semitism' is nothing more than a rationale for Labour support for British foreign policy in the Middle East.

Jews and Zionism

Kelemen begins by noting that the character of Israel was determined by the circumstances of its birth - at its centre the expulsion of the Palestinians. Its formation as an ethno-nationalist state "carried a strand of the ideological legacy that the state's existence was meant to refute". In other words, the Israeli state was the bastard offspring of European fascism.

Hannah Arendt observed in 1961, when reporting on the Eichmann trial for the *New Yorker*, that there was "something breathtaking in the naivety" with which the prosecutor, Gideon Hausner, had denounced the infamous Nuremberg laws, which had prohibited intermarriage and sexual intercourse between Jews and non-Jews. The better informed among the correspondents noted the "irony", which was that Jews and non-Jews could not get married

in Israel either. Although they could marry abroad, their children would be considered bastards - effectively *Mischlinge*, to use the Nazi term for those of mixed race.

In view of the fabricated 'anti-Semitism' campaign battering the Labour Party today and the allegations that Labour has been 'overrun' by anti-Semitism, it is worth noting the comments of Sydney Webb, a founding Fabian and colonial secretary between 1929 and 1931: "French, German, Russian socialism is Jew-ridden. We, thank heaven, are free." And why? "There's no money in it" (p20).

It is worth noting, in view of the reports that Jeremy Corbyn and 'anti-Semitism' have been responsible for putting Jews off voting Labour,³ that as early as the 1959 general election Jews in Finchley supported the Tories by a ratio of 3:1. In the 1964 general election Jewish voters still preferred the Tories by 2:1. As Kelemen noted, "The Jewish community's *embourgeoisement* would also alter its interaction with Zionist politics." Those who therefore suggest that all was fine with the Jewish community and that the only thing preventing it from supporting the Labour Party, as it had done in the past, was the advent of Jeremy Corbyn are being disingenuous, if not outright dishonest.

The Jewish community today is not that of the 1930s. The East End Jewish working class simply does not exist today. As Jews have moved to the suburbs, so they have moved up the socio-economic ladder, and their politics have also changed. Support for Zionism is part of that political shift to the right: "While Anglo-Jewry's Jewishness was redefined by Zionism, its Englishness was reshaped to mirror the social conservatism of English suburbia" (p71).

On the other hand, Jewish working class residents of Hackney in the late 1970s were found to hold similar racist views of their black neighbours as non-Jewish, white inner-city residents. This is the elephant in the room. Amidst all the nonsense about 'anti-Semitism', what is omitted is the growing Islamophobia and racism amongst a section of the Jewish population (p74). This reflects the finding of Geoffrey Alderman, an academic and *Jewish Chronicle* columnist, that nearly 2% of the Jewish community in 1979 were voting for the National Front.⁴ The *Jewish Chronicle* of March 3 1978 cited a Jewish primary school headteacher in London, who claimed that Jewish parents did not wish to send their children to the same schools as black children (p77).

In his chapter on British communists and Palestine Kelemen began by noting that the Mile End constituency in the East End, which was heavily Jewish, elected England's only Communist MP, Phil Piratin, in 1945. This was a consequence of the leading role that the Communist Party had played in the anti-fascist struggle and that of the Soviet Union in defeating Nazi Germany.

As Zionism, in the wake of the holocaust, began to gain a base among the Jewish working class, the Communist Party had great difficulty in coming to terms with Zionism, which it saw as just another form of nationalism. This problem was compounded by the CPGB's Stalinist politics and the geopolitical

considerations of the Soviet Union - which did a 180-degree turn in 1947 by supporting the creation of the Israeli state. The CPGB was afflicted by what Kelemen terms "Yishuvism" (the Yishuv being the native Jewish community in Palestine before Israel was created).

The CPGB saw the Jewish working class in Palestine as like any other: "The communist movement's Marxism furnished no insight into the specificity of settler colonialism." One leading member of the party's National Jewish Committee went so far as to describe the Jewish working class in Palestine as oppressed. While the CPGB depicted the Yishuv "in crude, instrumentalist terms as a tool of British imperialism" (p93), it failed to see that the Jewish working class was privileged in comparison with Arab workers and that it was Jewish institutions that were spearheading the exclusion and dispossession of the Arabs.

Zionism in Britain made very little impact among Jewish workers or trade unionists. A correspondent in the *Young Zionist* complained that the Jewish working class had no interest in Zionism and preferred to join the Communist Party. It was not until the war years that Poale Zion (forerunner of the Jewish Labour Movement) increased its membership from less than 500 to 1,500. In 1946 Jews made up 10% of the CPGB's membership (p98).

Kelemen described how in 1948 the CPGB supported Israel in its war against the Arab states (p101). The reason for this U-turn lay in Stalin's crude analysis, which saw Britain as the main obstacle to Soviet interests in the Middle East. The Arabs were seen as British pawns and the future Israeli state as being in revolt against imperialism rather than just British imperialism. It was a gross miscalculation, which undermined the position of the Communist Parties in the Arab east. The CPGB's position helped consolidate support for Zionism in the left wing of the Jewish community.

Labour Party

In his chapter on 'Social democracy and Israel' Kelemen noted the attitude of the Labour Party towards the British empire. Far from supporting the movement for colonial independence, Labour leaders rationalised imperialism into 'good' and 'bad'. The party's handbook for speakers stated: "Imperialism is dead, but the empire has been given a new life. Socialist planning is developing it not for personal profit, but the Common-Weal" (p118).

Labour's support for Zionism was at one with its overall support for empire. Whereas the Tories did not bother to hide their belief that the empire was a source of wealth for capital, Labour's imperialists dressed up Britain's role in the language of trusteeship and benevolence. Even so, on August 20 1948 *Tribune's* editorial was headed, 'Let's stay in Africa'. The reason being that "Africa offers huge material resources, which can be exploited for the benefit of Britain and the world" (p122).

In practice what happened was that Africa, etc was superexploited by the Attlee government in order to pay for reforms, such as the creation of the national health service. Thus the British working class was tied into support for imperialism. It was the left as much as the right of the Labour

Party which subscribed to the ideas of Whig historian Thomas Babington Macaulay that colonisation was for the benefit of the colonised. This belief in a 'constructive' imperialism was the basis of the support for Zionism. Between 1917, when the Labour Party first declared its support for a "Jewish home" in the War Aims Memorandum, and 1949 the party conference declared its support for Zionism on 11 occasions.

During the nakba, when three-quarters of a million Palestinians were expelled, the Labour press was full of articles such as that in the *New Statesman* by David Kimche, who described Jewish farmers watching with "tears in their eyes", as the Arabs left Haifa and Jaffa. What Kimche did not mention was that they were leaving because the Zionist militias had bombarded them with mortars (p126).

In the 1960s the few MPs sympathetic to the Palestinians were on the right of the party - Christopher Mayhew, George Brown, David Watkins ... This contrasts with the position today when the Labour right is solidly behind Zionism in all its racist glory. In fact, Kelemen shows how the left of the party was up in arms about Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal in 1956 - prominent among them was Aneurin Bevan.

Kelemen skilfully shows how the growth of anti-Zionism on the left owed nothing to Soviet propaganda - as alleged by Zionist propagandists and its echo chamber, the Alliance for Workers' Liberty. It was a consequence of Vietnam, 1968 and support for third-world national liberation movements.

One of the great myths of labour Zionism was that, regardless of its colonisation, it was internally socialist. It operated the collective *kibbutzim* and owned a major chunk of the Israeli economy. It was a new generation of historians such as Baruch Kimmerling, Zachary Lockman and Zeev Sternhell who demolished this theory. Labor Zionism's colonisation took a collective form, although in the process it gave birth to capitalism. 'Collective colonisation' was simply the most efficient form of colonising Palestine.

The new left, unlike the Communist Party, was not hindered by the foreign policy requirements of the Soviet Union and its crude understanding of Zionism, which shaded into anti-Semitism. Anti-Zionism was never a part of Soviet opposition to Israel. Kelemen describes the first Palestine solidarity march held in Britain in London in 1969, organised by Tariq Ali's *Black Dwarf*, when 500 were expected and 2,000 turned up. In November 1969 there was the first Palestine Solidarity Conference of 300 people, although the organisation seems to have then disappeared (pp159-60).

This was a time of considerable ferment, with the emergence of an Israeli anti-Zionist organisation, Matzpen, and the idea emerged of a democratic, unitary, secular state in the whole of Palestine, although the Communist Party was constrained by its previous support for the Israeli state. In 1972 Ghada Karmi, a Palestinian doctor in London, formed Palestine Action.

Kelemen mentions the *travaux* of *The Guardian*, which employed the first pro-Arab Middle East correspondent, Michael Adams. Adams was the only western

correspondent who was not dazzled by the messianic hysteria that accompanied Israel's conquest of the West Bank. I vividly remember BBC correspondent Michel Elkins⁵ barely containing his joy, as Israel won the 1967 war. *Guardian* editor Alistair Hetherington censored a report of Adams on Israel's destruction of three Palestinian villages, from which their inhabitants were expelled (p161).⁶

Pivotal

A pivotal change in Labour's pro-Israel attitude took place in the wake of the 1973 Yom Kippur war, when Ted Heath froze British arms sales to Israel. In response Harold Wilson put down a motion supporting the supply of arms to Israel, but after a backbench rebellion Labour MPs were given a free vote and 15 voted with the government, while 70 abstained. David Watkins saw this as the end of 50 years of Zionist domination of Labour policy (p163). Unfortunately he was a tad too optimistic!

Until 1982 and the Lebanese war, the Labour left had been overwhelmingly pro-Israel. At that time Tony Benn and Eric Heffer left Labour Friends of Israel, though Ian Mikado never renounced his Zionism. Kelemen states that LFI was launched in the wake of the Suez war with the support of 40 Labour MPs and that it was created by Poale Zion. Kelemen claims that at that time Poale Zion was a Jewish-only organisation, whereas today I estimate that at least two thirds of the JLM are not Jewish.

When Tony Blair took over the Labour leadership, LFI came back into favour. Blair declared that it was "one of the most important organisations in the labour movement" and Gordon Brown declared that LFI had more support among MPs than it had ever had in the 40 years since its formation (p179).

In his concluding chapter on 'A new anti-Semitism?' Kelemen notes that the 2006 report of Dennis MacShane's all-party inquiry into anti-Semitism had recommended that the "the Jewish community itself ... is best qualified to determine what does and does not constitute anti-Semitism". As Kelemen comments, this represented a "considerable slippage" from the Macpherson report, which stated that initial reports were only *prima facie* evidence and not conclusive as to whether a racist incident had occurred.

Indeed the very idea of a 'community', which in reality is a political group determining what constitutes anti-Semitism, is an obvious recipe for a politically inspired definition, such as that of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, which conflates Zionism and anti-Semitism. Kelemen notes that the political context for so-called "new anti-Semitism" was the decline of traditional anti-Semitism and the rise of Islamophobia (p193) ●

Tony Greenstein

Notes

1. www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/meet-the-trotskyist-anti-zionist-who-saw-the-errors-of-his-ways-1.62661.
2. *The Observer* January 24 1971.
3. www.tabletmag.com/scroll/236063/why-just-13-percent-of-british-jews-say-they-will-vote-for-labour-in-the-general-election. See also 'Labour's first Jewish leader is losing the Jewish vote' *The Daily Telegraph* October 30 2014.
4. G Alderman *The Jewish community in British politics* Oxford 1982, pp159, 163-67.
5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Elkins.
6. https://mondoweiss.net/2017/06/picnicking-israelis-palestinian.

POLEMIC**Revolution or the ‘democratic road’?**

Things are changing in the US. The ‘socialist’, Bernie Sanders, gave Hillary Clinton a close run for her money in 2016, leftwing Democrats won congressional seats this year and the Democratic Socialists of America have grown substantially. This has triggered an interesting debate. The *Jacobin* magazine has featured James Muldoon, Charlie Post and Eric Blanc reassessing Karl Kautsky’s political strategy and counterposing “democratic socialism” to what is called Leninist “insurrection”. Here we reprint Donald Parkinson’s rejoinder

The recent debate hosted on John Riddell’s blog¹ (and reprinted on the US website, *Cosmonaut*) between Eric Blanc and Mike Taber is not only an argument about the details of Marxist intellectual history, but one about the correct revolutionary strategy for Marxists today.

To summarise the argument, Blanc argues that from the work of the early Kautsky one can find a strategy for taking power through parliament that is an alternative to the ‘insurrectionism’ of Bolshevism, and that, while Kautsky’s method is no less revolutionary, it offers a “democratic road to socialism” that avoids insurrection.² Taber, in his response, argues that Blanc is raising a spectre when he cites a specific Bolshevik strategy of insurrection, and points out that his own example of the Finnish revolution saw armed conflict between classes.³ Furthermore, there are issues with Kautsky’s own politics even in his early pre-revisionist years, such as his wavering on the question of coalition governments and his lack of clarity on the need to smash the bourgeois state. Taber also points out how the Bolshevik revolution was democratically legitimated and that the Bolsheviks utilised parliamentary elections.

The response from Blanc to Taber goes on to make a more detailed argument against a “dual power/insurrection strategy” that is implicit in Taber’s positive view of the Bolsheviks, claiming that one either supports Blanc’s “democratic road” or has an unrealistic belief in “dual power”, which is represented by the Marxist center organisation.⁴

Poulantzas

The debate is now framed by Blanc as one of dual power/insurrection vs a democratic road to socialism, where a socialist party is elected to parliament. This dichotomy is one established by Nicos Poulantzas in his work *State, power, socialism*. While Blanc does not explicitly mention Poulantzas, his affiliates in *The Call*⁵ promote his work. In *State, power, socialism*, Poulantzas argues that the authoritarianism of Stalinism was incipient in the very idea of dual power as creating a new state, and that the Bolshevik revolution went wrong with the attempt to take the soviets from a form of dual power to the form of the state itself, so as to establish a “class dictatorship” of the proletariat by replacing parliament with the soviets.

For Poulantzas, power from below, like the soviets, must be balanced by power from above exercised in a parliament. He argues that, instead of trying to build a counter-sovereignty that will take the mantle of state power, socialists must struggle within the state by democratising its own institutions. On this view, the state is not controlled or ruled by the dominant class, but is a sort of political expression of all classes in their interactions. For Poulantzas, socialist politics is a struggle within the bourgeois state for the working class to become the dominant power bloc, or at least a significant faction within it. Power from below has an important role in keeping the parliamentary government from being corrupt and in pushing it to more radical ends.

This general strategy has come to be known as the ‘democratic road to socialism’. Kautsky’s own work is a reference point for this project, but it was exactly on the issue of the bourgeois state that Kautsky was weakest. It was therefore necessary for his disciple, Lenin, to reconstruct the Marxist view of the state. For Lenin in *State and revolution*, Kautsky was overly vague about the need to smash the bourgeois state and replace it with a workers’ state. Kautsky, in his early works, certainly saw a socialist revolution as something initiated by the election of a revolutionary party, but was ambiguous on the need to smash the existing order - this alone would transform the nature of the state. Whether there was a real rupture between the bourgeois state and a state based on the organised power of the workers, as Marx argued in *The civil war in France*, was not spelled out by Kautsky.

This is not to say that Karl Kautsky was not a great Marxist with much to teach us, and I do believe that his classic works are essential reading. Kautsky in his prime was certainly a revolutionary, but, unlike Lenin, he never led a successful revolution nor gained, or apparently really attempted to gain, crucial experience as a revolutionary statesman. On the topic of revolutionary strategy, Kautsky issues a good set of basic principles for a party-building strategy (adhering to democratic republican principles and defending Marxism), but the actual nature of revolution and the process of building a revolutionary government are better understood by Lenin.

It is absolutely true that Lenin made mistakes, but Blanc would have us dismiss Lenin’s career as a statesman because “really working class democracy only lasted six months”. It is easy to criticise the Soviet republic as not meeting the ideal of a workers’ state, as outlined in *State and revolution*, but this avoids the question in the first place of why bureaucracy, militarisation and restrictions on democratic rights occurred - the country was thrown into civil war, while already in a period of economic collapse.

Any workers’ movement taking power - even through fully legal means, as in Chile and elsewhere - will have to deal with the problem of civil war, as the Bolsheviks did, and of building a new state. This makes clear the appeal of the ‘democratic road to socialism’: it avoids having to deal with the fact that any revolutionary rupture - be it the US civil war, Bolshevik revolution, Finnish civil war - will have to deal with an element of catastrophe that may require extreme measures. This is perhaps not a great selling point if we want the undecided masses on board, but it would be crippling dishonest to conceal this reality.

The history of the 20th century has shown to what barbaric depths the ruling class’s fear of socialism will throw society if needed. The strength of reaction, the widespread irrational propaganda of conservatism and a nascent number of active rightwing paramilitaries in the United States are among many indicators of this historical continuity. Kautsky,



Standing for parliament not the same as parliamentarianism

although terribly timid in his predictions about the nature of any future revolutionary civil war, recognised in his 1902 book *Social revolution* that:

We have also, as we have already said, no right to apply conclusions drawn from nature directly to social processes. We can go no further upon the ground of such analogies than to conclude: that, as each animal creature must at one time go through a catastrophe in order to reach a higher stage of development (the act of birth or of the breaking of a shell), so society can only be raised to a higher stage of development through a catastrophe.⁶

Blanc, of course, realises that a revolutionary government elected to power will face resistance from capitalism and reactionaries. He vaguely calls for whatever is necessary to defend this government, to be achieved in alliance with a mass popular movement, yet he also clearly rejects insurrection. This indecisive vagueness is what is so disturbing. It is exactly armed conflict and insurrection that would be necessary to defend a government genuinely dedicated to undermining capitalism, and we must be conscious and clear about what this implies for and will

demand from a socialist party.

In a revolutionary situation, the military and police must be splintered and disbanded, the old, corrupt state bureaucracy put under the oversight of the armed and prepared proletariat. The old constitutional order is to be torn down, and representative institutions must be made to embody the mass democracy of the working class. This is what smashing the state entails. This must be clearly articulated and communicated.

If Blanc is merely rejecting putschism or the strategy pursued by the Communist Party of Germany in the March Action of 1921, I have no disagreements. However, stating that insurrection is off the table, while saying you will do whatever is possible to defend a revolutionary government, is contradictory, if not dishonest - or at least a confusion of legitimate insurrection with putschism. The Finnish Red Guards could have simply given power back to the capitalist class, for example, but instead they armed themselves and fought back. They heroically attempted a revolt against the illegitimate authority of the capitalist state: ie, they attempted insurrection.

Any real attempt to make inroads on private property will most definitely find itself coming into armed conflict with the capitalist class, especially in the United States. The working class

has to be prepared for this before taking power, which means that a mass party has to have its own defensive wing. As Alexander Gallus shows in his article on Red Vienna,⁷ defensive and paramilitary organisations, such as the 1923 *Schutzbund* of the Austrian Social Democratic Party, must be successfully organised *before* the appearance of revolutionary situations, at which point a mass party becomes a major social influence and thus subject to police and fascist violence. While the Austrian Social Democrats were committed to a strategy that is very similar to Blanc’s conception of a ‘democratic road to socialism’, they had failed to prepare their party and paramilitary organisation for a successful civil war against fascism precisely *because* they refused to utilise insurrection and hone a militant proletarian defence of democracy.

Outmoded?

The assumption that bourgeois democracy makes insurrection outmoded and thus allows for a democratic road to socialism also greatly exaggerates the extent that bourgeois democracy is tolerant of subversion by the working class. Just recently a Turkish communist was elected to office and was blocked from taking up his post.⁸ This is just one example of such dirty tricks, and it is easy to imagine that, with the ascendance of a mass workers’ movement, the capitalist state will shed much of its democratic facade, as a workers’ party grows and threatens the smooth functioning of capitalism. The hope in a ‘democratic road to socialism’ has too much faith in the permanence of bourgeois democracy, not seeing that this is just one method of bourgeois rule. It almost assumes that the democratic parliamentary state is a *telos* that states head toward - a sort of ideal form. We must not fall for the trap that socialists respecting democracy will necessarily lead to the bourgeoisie respecting a socialist movement.

This is, of course, not a call to abandon participation in elections. Blanc is certainly right that we need to run in elections, and Kautsky tells us much about the correct way to do this. Kautsky, unlike Blanc, did not believe the workers’ party should campaign for bourgeois parties like the Democrats. The important lesson from Kautsky and Marxist Social Democracy is their focus on party-building around a minimum-maximum programme. This type of party must run its own independent candidates under the central discipline of a workers’ party that has a clear revolutionary agenda. Elections are a means of gathering power and mass support, spreading the Marxist message of the party and consolidating its influence in society.

While Mike Taber shows that Kautsky did waver on the issue of coalition governments, Kautsky did, in fact, maintain as a rule that the party should not enter into coalitions with capitalist candidates, nor enter government. The legislative rather than the executive branch was the target of electoral campaigns, so the workers could send representatives to parliament without entering government itself. This is, however, not the strategy of the Democratic Socialists of America or *The Call*, who believe that the current

What we fight for

aim of socialists should be to push debate vaguely 'leftwards', fall behind any candidate who is generally of the left, and campaign for left Democrats.

Running in elections should not be seen as a way to build workers' power 'within' the state. The tendency to see class struggle as an intra-state conflict is a major problem, because a socialist movement needs to actually build a counter-sovereignty to the capitalist state, not become integrated into it. It is important to be explicitly clear and honest about this necessary component of socialist revolution and of 'building a state within a state', as Kautsky states - one that maintains the working class's independence.

Some, of course, let their fear of integration into the state lead to a complete rejection of electoral politics, which is a mistake. Kautsky's own original electoral strategy was meant to avoid a situation where the party was elected to merely be a manager of capitalism. The point of elections was to build the party, not maintain parliamentarism, the party serving as a 'state within the state' that had its own working class alternative culture. In other words, it was what those who advocate base-building call dual power - something Blanc rejects as a strategy. While Blanc does follow Poulantzas in calling for a struggle "from below" to complement the struggle internal to the state, how is such a struggle supposed to be developed without patient base-building, some kind of dual power? Here we fall into the assumption of Rosa Luxemburg's *The mass strike* that the workers' movement will spontaneously throw up such a struggle, which will provide solutions to the problems of the workers' movement. In this sense, there is a strange mix of ultra-left spontaneism in these arguments within the framework of an electoral approach which aims to gradually build workers' power within the state itself without 'smashing' the bourgeois state.

Counterposition

Eric Blanc essentially counterposes a strategy of dual power and insurrection to a strategy of electoralism. Yet it is necessary to struggle in electoral politics, *as well as* to build a counter-sovereignty to the bourgeois state, in the form of a party movement that is willing to defend working class gains by all means - naturally not limited to, but including, insurrection. The idea of base-building is simply that we need to organise institutions in working class communities that serve the needs of workers. There are many ideas on how it fits into a broader strategy, yet base-building has been part of what all successful workers' parties have done in order to build up strength. As Blanc would likely agree, it is through organisation that the working class becomes strong and capable of leading society; but it must be accompanied by the development and eventual leadership of an explicitly Marxist party - one which defends and openly declares our fundamental principles and lessons from history.

Promising a road to socialism without insurrection is a form of wishful thinking - a dangerous hope that we can avoid anything like the catastrophes and difficult situations of revolutionaries in the 20th century. In speaking of a democratic road to socialism, we are only speaking in terms of ideal situations, not actual situations. If a party seeking a 'democratic road to socialism' was elected, what would it do if it attempted to nationalise key industries, only to be faced by a rightwing coup? One could hope they have sufficient friends in the bourgeois military to avert the coup, which Hugo Chávez was able to do with the help of popular mobilisation. Yet then one has to deal with the issues of the military becoming a dominant force in the government, bringing with it all the corruption of

bourgeois society that overtook the Venezuelan government - something no power from below in the communal movement has been able to check.

More likely is that the military would not side with the socialists, and we would end up with a Pinochet or a technocratic military regime. Do the workers simply stand by? Or do they take up arms to defend their party and legitimate government? One could argue that simply acting in self-defence against a rightwing coup is not insurrection, yet at some point, there must be a decision on whether or not to engage in military confrontation with the bourgeoisie. Not engaging with the concrete reality that a revolutionary state in its infancy will likely see conditions of civil war, and that this will necessitate a level of insurrection and militarisation that will conflict with some ideals of democracy, can only create confusion.

The flawed 'democratic road to socialism' endorsed by Blanc also expresses a certain kind of faith in the institutions which make up modern democracy, that violent revolutions can be avoided and are simply a product of revolutions against absolutist states. It is an assumption that politics has been civilised, but the rise of right populism and violence shows this is anything but the case. In fact, the extent to which we actually have functioning democratic processes to work within is severely questionable. As the Harvard Electoral Integrity Project states,⁹ the United States has the most corrupt elections in the entire industrialized world, with the majority of primary and general elections being completely rigged.

On the question of "workers' government" - and this slogan, taken up at the Fourth Congress of the Comintern - Blanc sees a move towards a proper recognition of the need for a democratic road to socialism. Yet the "workers' government" slogan was a confusing addition to the strategy of the united front that generally discredited a legitimate strategic turn. The "workers' government" called for more than joining the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) in joint struggle: it also called for the Communist Party (KPD) to form an electoral alliance with the SPD and even enter government with it. This was to be a sort of halfway-house toward the dictatorship of the proletariat, but in fact only served to create confusion. The KPD and SPD did not have programmatic unity - their politics were inherently at odds at this point and, even if the SPD was part of the labour movement, its politics were the politics of managing capitalism.

To enter government, a workers' party can only go into coalition with those with whom it shares sufficient programmatic unity to fight together for the dismantling of the capitalist state and the formation of an actual workers' republic. This basic level of unity was not shared with the SPD, so a "workers' government" between the KPD and SPD could only be a confused coalition, paralytically standing in contradiction with itself - with this contradiction either resulting in a breakdown of the coalition or the KPD making shifts to the right in order to accommodate its coalition partner. When the KPD attempted this strategy with the SPD in Saxony in 1923, forming a municipal government in partnership with it, the result was the discrediting of the KPD, as it attempted to use the situation as a launching point for taking power. Blanc's attempt to use the makeshift "workers' government" slogan as an example of something good in the Comintern does not match up with history, and rather than a 'return to form' towards orthodox Marxism, the "workers' government" was a predecessor to future failures like the popular front.

Using elections to advance the cause of socialism requires that such efforts are led by a party with an intransigent

adherence to the principles of class independence. It also means being aware of the limitations of elections. The party winning an election to the point of being able to take government does not in itself transfer power to the working class: it is merely a means of provoking a crisis of the bourgeois state and its legitimacy. Transferring power to the working class requires the successful application of a minimum programme that actually leads to a rupture with the existing state institutions. Winning an election can mean the party simply enters into government and manages capitalism - if the party is allowed to enter government at all. Yet winning elections is in fact a tool of great importance, and offers us an unparalleled method of spreading propaganda, while breaking up the smooth running of capitalism.

Government

The ability of elections to create a crisis of legitimacy that allows for a revolution is not to be ignored or undervalued. However, the point is that a socialist party can only enter into government if it is willing and able to carry out its full minimum programme, which lays the basis for a workers' republic. We must not fall into the trap of modern left parties that see getting into government as the only means of accomplishing anything.

The bourgeois state is not broken up overnight either, and a simple parliamentary victory leaves the entire state bureaucracy and military intact. Attempts to engage in even radical democratic reforms will meet resistance from the bourgeoisie and necessitate the decapitation of their armed forces and power. This brings us to the question of the Bolsheviks. While Lenin and the Bolsheviks may not have replaced the bourgeois state with ideal forms (something Lenin would admit), they nonetheless understood that the old state institutions had to go and that relying on 'experts' from the old regime was not desirable. They actually dealt with the concrete issue of trying to oversee a rupture from one form of the state to the other, and how this process itself would at times be one of violent class struggle, as well as of concessions and retreats. While for Blanc the Bolshevik regime was only a "true workers' democracy" for six months and after that was essentially defeated, the Bolsheviks did not even consolidate power and develop some kind of stable regime until 1921.

It is assumed that after the civil war there was no movement within the USSR to extend the gains of the early revolution, or there were no gains of the revolution left in the first place. It is a view of a workers' state as an ideal that is born as a true democracy, and not an achievement of a protracted process of smashing and replacing the bourgeois state with new institutions governed by the working class. In the USSR, this process indeed saw a bureaucracy that would drive the system into capitalism developing and taking hold, but this process was not one that simply began and ended after the Bolsheviks made certain mistakes.

The best of Karl Kautsky can be seen in his general strategy of patiently building a revolutionary, oppositional counter-sovereignty in the form of a mass party. It is not seen in his ambiguity on the transition to socialism or his faith in capitalist democratic institutions. On these questions, Lenin was far clearer than Kautsky. Lenin does not theorise a strategy of insurrection, but revolution in general, where insurrection is simply a means to an end. His strategy is aggressively unoriginal in its faithfulness to Marx and Engels, but visionary in its ability to organise the working class for revolution in difficult circumstances.

On the question of insurrection, Lenin was not a putschist, but simply recognised that the class struggle could, and in some cases would, necessarily take a military form. The more we deny this, the more we set ourselves up for failure ●

Donald Parkinson

This article first appeared at the **Cosmonaut blog**: <https://cosmonaut.blog/2019/04/13/revolution-or-the-democratic-road-to-socialism-a-reply-to-eric-blanc>.

Notes

- <https://johnriddell.wordpress.com>.
- <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/04/karl-kautsky-democratic-socialism-elections-rupture>.
- <https://cosmonaut.blog/2019/04/10/kautsky-lenin-and-the-transition-to-socialism-a-reply-to-eric-blanc>.
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Fighting fund

Not complacent

With just under a week still to go, we are within touching distance of our newly increased fighting fund target for April.

In view of recent increases in postage and printing costs we decided to up that target from £1,750 to £2,000, starting from this month, and we already have £1,993, with six days still to go. I don't think I'm being complacent when I assume that *Weekly Worker* readers will come up with the £7 we still need by April 30!

The monthly standing orders we received over the last seven days amounted to £390 - thank you, comrades TB, PM, SK and PM. Then there was the £20 bank transfer from GB, with the single-word message - "contribution". One that is very much appreciated.

On top of that we received a £25 cheque from RC, who writes: "Thanks for publishing Amanda MacLean's article on 'genderist

ideology' - it made me think." And finally there were two PayPal donations - £10 from KC and £6.20 (!) from TT. Don't ask me what the extra 20p is for!

What gave us a boost this month was, of course, the response of readers to my appeal for extra regular donations, and this week comrade PG has sent us a standing order authority for £20 a quarter. Thanks to him and to others previously mentioned who have committed themselves to making such a regular payment. Mind you, if we don't want this month's success to be one-off, we could do with quite a few more standing orders.

Any offers?●

Robbie Rix

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

■ 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

Silencing the right will be followed by silencing the left

First Iran, then Britain

Yassamine Mather looks behind the social media bans imposed in the name of ‘democracy’

Last week if you tried to access the Instagram accounts that are supposed to belong to top figures of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, you would have seen the message: “Sorry, this page is not available”. This was only a day after Donald Trump labelled the IRGC a “foreign terrorist organisation” and a day before both Instagram and Facebook banned some British far-right groups and individuals.

When the social media outlets were asked about the ban on Iranian groups, the reply was clear: “We work with appropriate government authorities to ensure we meet our legal obligations, including those relating to the recent designation of the IRGC.”

The list of banned pages included those of IRGC commander Mohammad Ali Jafari, major-general Qasem Soleimani (who only a couple of years ago was praised by some in the US media for his role in fighting Islamic State), Iran’s former foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati, as well as the English-language version of the supreme leader’s official website on Instagram. The last three were later reinstated because, as always with White House directives right now, chaos and incompetence lead the way.

Although most Iranian users would not be able to access Facebook and Twitter in any case, both sites are officially banned. However, Instagram is available and it is by far the most popular social media outlet in Iran, with some 24 million users. Many of these have reacted strongly, even though the Revolutionary Guards are not a popular force in Iran. This is not just because of their repressive character, but more importantly because the group’s leaders and their immediate relatives are beneficiaries of neoliberal capitalism and amongst Iran’s rich elites. They own 20%-30% of Iran’s ‘privatised’ capital, and they are hated as employers and exploiters of the working class. However, in the last few weeks lower-ranking members of the guards have been praised by Iranian Instagram users for their involvement in flood relief across the country.

And the Instagram ban has - in Iran, as elsewhere - started a debate about the independence of social media and the west’s claims of upholding freedom of expression. Rightwing pro-censorship forces celebrated the ban with the hard-line paper *Javan* renaming Instagram “Insta-Trump”. But ‘reformist’ bloggers took a different attitude. Information minister Mohammad-Javad Azari Jahromi used his own Instagram account to post a *Game of Thrones* quote criticising Instagram’s decision: “When you tear out a man’s tongue, you aren’t proving him a liar. You’re only telling the world that you fear what he might say.”

Accusations that Instagram is practising double standards and advancing a particular political agenda gained further momentum when the ban targeted non-IRGC figures, among them chief justice Ebrahim Raissi, who lost the 2017 presidential elections to Hassan Rouhani.

Given the fact that many Salafi

groups and their Saudi and United Arab Emirates supporters are allowed to show horrific images on social media and they remain exempt from such bans, many Iranians - who day in day out are told the US is concerned about their ‘human rights’ and democracy - found the whole episode quite disturbing.

All this was followed by the Trump administration’s announcement that all countries importing Iranian oil will be subject to US sanctions. In other words, Donald Trump had decided not to reissue waivers regarding sanctions against countries importing Iranian oil when they expire on May 2. According to the White House, “This decision is intended to bring Iran’s oil exports to zero, denying the regime its principal source of revenue.” Secretary of state Mike Pompeo stated:

How long the exports remain at zero depends solely on the ... Iran’s senior leaders. We have made our demands very clear to the ayatollah and his cronies: end your pursuit of nuclear weapons, stop testing and proliferating ballistic missiles, stop sponsoring and committing terrorism, halt the arbitrary detention of US citizens. Our pressure is aimed at ending these and others and it will continue to accelerate until Iran is willing to address them at the negotiating table.¹

However, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have agreed to “ensure an appropriate supply” in order to make up for the loss of Iranian oil on the global market.

UK bans

It so happened that it was the very next day that Facebook banned a host of far-right individuals and organisations in the UK, accusing them of “spreading hate”. The list included Facebook and Instagram pages associated with the British National Party, the English Defence League, the National Front, Britain First and the militant Christian group, Knights Templar International. Nick Griffin, former leader of the British National Party, and Jack Renshaw, a far-right activist jailed in June for plotting to murder Labour MP Rosie Cooper, were also banned.

Many on the left rushed to celebrate these bans, but clearly such a reaction is ill-considered. Leave aside the fact that many associated with the current US administration have close relations with British and European far-right groups. For instance, Trump’s former advisor,



No longer available

Steve Bannon, has invited Marine Le Pen’s far-right party to join his populist project.² And last year *The Guardian* commented that Bannon was visiting Europe to encourage a “national populist revolt”.³

However, the point is that the UK ban represents a dangerous attack on freedom of expression by the ‘moderators’ of social media groups working with the British government. The fact that at this time it is the right that has been targeted is irrelevant. Jacob Rees-Mogg pointed out that it is not just the far right which has been accused of ‘hate speech’ - what about Momentum and its “anti-Semitism”, he asked.

In fact the government is planning to impose new social media controls on what it calls material deemed to be “harmful, but not necessarily illegal”. The white paper issued by home secretary Sajid Javid and culture and media secretary Jeremy Wright does not make it clear who will decide that a particular item is “harmful” or how such a decision will be made, while its assurances about ‘freedom of expression’ are deliberately vague. The regulations would cover not just social media, but independent websites. In other words, far from celebrating the current restrictions and bans, we should forcefully oppose them.

The Iranian bans and the subsequent additional economic penalties also have sinister aims. As I have pointed out, an embattled US president, facing a Democratic-led Congress continuing to question his conduct after the Mueller report, would be happy to divert attention from his own behaviour through a war in the Middle East: for

example, one that aims to impose regime change in Tehran.

US national security advisor John Bolton has warned: “The Iranian regime should understand that it must change its behaviour now or continue to pay the cost for its destabilising behaviour, which only hurts the Iranian people.”⁴ Here at least there is an admission of sorts: sanctions hurt ordinary Iranians! However, even after the disastrous failures of US policy in Iraq, Libya and Syria, Washington has not learned the dangers of promoting regime change.

President Rouhani’s response to these threats came on April 24, when he summed up the current Iranian government attitude towards negotiations with the US: if a thug wielding a knife invites you to discuss future relations over a coffee, you would be stupid to accept. He added: “The US is not ready to hold negotiations at all and its measures are aimed at breaking up the Iranian nation.”

In this he is right - although, of course, Tehran has been more than willing to negotiate and cooperate with successive US administrations since the establishment of the Shia republic 40 years ago. I am not going to detail the initial contacts that led to the Irangate scandal, but it is worthwhile summarising the history of relations between the IRGC and the United States, as explained in Farsi by Hossein Bastani of BBC Persian.⁵

One of the most important examples of this cooperation was the help provided by the IRGC in 2001 in the US war against the Taliban, who at the time controlled Kabul and most of Afghanistan. A recent BBC documentary showed what

occurred.⁶ In it Ryan Crocker, former US ambassador to Afghanistan, Syria, Kuwait and Lebanon, amongst others, describes secret talks with a representative of the Revolutionary Guards. According to Crocker, the discussion took an unusual turn when he was presented with a map covering all of Afghanistan showing Taliban positions, with recommendations on specific targets. In the end, when Crocker asked if he could take notes about the map, his Iranian counterpart said he could keep the map!

Another BBC documentary recalled meetings between the two sides in New York and Geneva about the invasion of Afghanistan. An IRGC representative showed the US delegation precise Taliban targets in northern Afghanistan and this was used in US air raids attacking Taliban strongholds. In Hossein Bastani’s article there are also references to Iran and Hezbollah supporting Bosnian forces in cooperation with US military plans.

Then there is Iraq. In 2007, when Ryan Crocker was the US ambassador to Iraq, he had talks with Hassan Kazemi Qomi, his Iranian equivalent. This was admitted by supreme leader Ali Khamenei, who at the time said he had “no objection to direct talks with the US in order to avoid chaos in Iraq”. There are many recollections of these talks, which demonstrate how Tehran, eager to support fellow Shias, was cooperating with the US following the invasion of Iraq.

Finally there is the recent cooperation in Iraq and Syria between the Revolutionary Guards and what is loosely called the US coalition against IS. The IRGC hardly comes out of all of this as a radical, anti-US organisation, as the Trump administration is eager to portray it.

In this context we can understand the frustration felt by Tehran. We are not just talking about social media bans and severe sanctions. Plans for ‘regime change from above’ are now well underway ●

Notes

1. www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2019/04/291283.htm.
2. www.ft.com/content/57749590-bb3b-11e8-94b2-17176fb93f5.
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