

A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity

weekly
worker



Police restrict, threaten and obstruct London's 18th national Palestine solidarity demonstration

- Letters and debate
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Towards a mass Communist Party

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**IT WILL
HAPPEN
AGAIN**



LETTERS



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

Stalinist pedant

Andrew Northall continues his denunciation of Moshé Machover and Tony Greenstein (Letters, September 5). Northall says he wants to see “the Palestinian perspective” in the *Weekly Worker* “from those within the secular, Marxist, communist traditions”. Fair enough, but the Palestinian perspective is indeed represented in the paper (and I haven’t heard that Palestinians have come forward to object to anything).

Northall’s criticisms have no rhyme or reason. It makes no sense that he disparages the important contributions of Machover and Greenstein. He implies that it is of less importance for Jews or non-Palestinians to articulate the plight of a group under attack: ie, the Palestinian Arab people. This is incorrect and, in my opinion, amounts to identity politics.

“It is inappropriate, and indeed pointless, for westerners to be prescribing in detail what should happen,” says Northall. I disagree with this rigid proposition. We all need to be involved; the nature and quality of that involvement is key to the rescue of our sisters and brothers who suffer under the yoke of colonialism and who desperately need our help.

Northall puts forth a litany of pedantic nonsense regarding Machover’s good-faith attempt to call out Judaism and its connection to Zionism. Northall says that Machover counterposes “a region-wide revolution to any efforts by the Palestinian people to liberate themselves”. Machover’s position is far more complex than this simplistic formula would suggest. Northall inhabits a strange black and white world without colours, greys or nuances.

I’m baffled by this exclamation: “GG makes the absurd assertion that I think there are ‘no Marxist, pro-Palestinian’ writers” (in the *Weekly Worker*). Yet he maintains that there is no representation of the Palestinian point of view. He has vigorously argued that Machover and Greenstein are *not* pro-Palestinian. In Greenstein’s case, “most definitely not a Marxist in any shape or form ... no socialist either”. In Machover’s case: He has “too much arrogance in his intellectualism to be a good Marxist or a communist”.

He says he wants to make the *Weekly Worker* “genuinely internationalist”. (I’ve seen no evidence that the *Weekly Worker* is not true to form internationalist.) He said he wants to make it a “better” Marxist paper (conceding that it is a Marxist paper). But he maligns the pro-Palestinian writers, Machover and Greenstein, to the nth degree, and could effectively scandalise the *Weekly Worker*, wittingly or unwittingly, to the point where the newspaper may stop publishing. If he really wants to make it “better”, he might contribute something: ie, recruit writers of his choosing for the Letters section, as a start. There’s no honour in complaining, obstructing and sitting on your hands. The concept of ‘democratic centralism’ (in my mind, like ‘constructive criticism’ in the public domain) is in a sense turned on its head by Andrew Northall, who weaponises his criticism of political opponents; this harkens back to the bureaucratic centralism of the early Soviet Union.

And it gets worse. It’s not enough to impugn the integrity of Machover and Greenstein. He goes after Vladimir Lenin himself, including a castigation of Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev. They were committed

communists and Lenin’s very close, trusted colleagues over the years leading up to 1917. Northall second-guesses Lenin’s decision to forgive them for what I would describe as treacherous conciliationism during 1917. Lenin forgave them apparently because they got behind the October revolution after its successful armed revolt.

I think it’s definitely true that the actions of Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev in the early 1920s to a great extent led to the degeneration of the CPSU and the resultant destruction of communist parties and revolutions around the world. (It’s to their credit that they initially didn’t want to relinquish the idea of proletarian internationalism and adhere to the ‘socialism in one country’ fiasco; Northall has things upside down). Be that as it may, Northall says it’s “inexplicable” that Lenin forgave Zinoviev and Kamenev. I don’t understand why he finds it so complicated. (Lenin also forgave Leon Trotsky for his years of anti-Bolshevik activity, pre-1917, remarking that there was no better Bolshevik than Trotsky after he joined the party in 1917).

Northall completely invalidates the work of Machover and Greenstein: ie, Machover’s exploration of Judaism - which should be encouraged and built upon. Northall says Greenstein “advocates the destruction of the state of Israel” and “the destruction of the Israeli people and nation”, etc. Does anyone believe this? Maybe Northall is a Daniel Lazare clone. I’m sure Tony wants the destruction of the Zionist state - a real communist would totally agree with that. Northall says, “1930s national socialism” is what Tony possibly wants for Israel. What hyperbolic falsification writ large!

Tony Greenstein’s view of Andrew Northall as a Stalinist is persuasive. Northall’s complete politics have yet to be revealed.

GG
USA

Hanging Lazare

It seems to me that Daniel Lazare’s account of events on his own website leave a few absolutely basic matters hanging in the air. For instance, if or when the *Weekly Worker* refers to Hamas as (quote) “heroic” - (ie, as Lazare especially points out), then clearly that is hugely problematic. Individual fighters involved in their self-styled Al Aqsa Flood operation on October 7 were unquestionably *courageous*, but not heroic - where surely heroism implies complete and *unqualified* virtue. Within our Marxian arena, of course, that’s exemplified by a class-based and internationalist ‘righteousness’ - (ie, in terms of historically progressive values, authentically democratic objectives, etc.)

But there’s also this somewhat glaring counterpoint quandary to be acknowledged by everyone concerned. The *Weekly Worker* is more than comfortable to continue to entertain streams of Stalinist weasel words and simple fucking *treachery* from a certain Andrew Northall, but not willing to continue to offer engagement/polemical space to Lazare after his perceived ‘crossing of the line’ - ie, in terms of proletarian interests and/or Communist Party principles.

As I say: some basic matters have been left hanging in the air, maybe with some of the readership/followers of it all left in *extremely* unhappy bewilderment?

Bruno Kretzschmar
email

IDF murder

During the weekly demonstration in Beita, Palestine, on the morning of September 6 the Israeli army intentionally shot and killed an International Solidarity Movement

(ISM) human rights activist named Ayşenur Eygi. The demonstration, which primarily involved men and children praying, was met with force from the Israeli army stationed on a hill. Initially, the army fired a large amount of tear gas and then began using live ammunition. The human rights activist, who we consider a martyr in the struggle, was the 18th demonstrator to be killed in Beita since 2020. She was an American citizen of Turkish descent.

The Israeli forces fired two rounds. One hit a Palestinian man in the leg, injuring him. The other round was fired at international human rights activists who were observing the demonstration, striking one of them in the head. Eygi died shortly after being transported to a local hospital in Nablus.

Fellow ISM volunteer Mariam Dag was on the scene, and witnessed the fatal injury of her comrade. She said: “We were peacefully demonstrating alongside Palestinians against the colonisation of their land, and the illegal settlement of Evyatar. The situation escalated when the Israeli army began to fire teargas and live ammunition, forcing us to retreat. We were standing on the road, about 200 metres from the soldiers, with a sniper clearly visible on the roof. Our fellow volunteer was standing a bit further back, near an olive tree with some other activists. Despite this, the army intentionally shot her in the head.”

“This is just another example of the decades of impunity granted to the Israeli government and army, bolstered by the support of the US and European governments, who are complicit in enabling genocide in Gaza. Palestinians have suffered far too long under the weight of colonisation. We will continue to stand in solidarity and honour the martyrs until Palestine is free.”

A friend of the slain human rights activist and fellow volunteer with the ISM, who does not wish their name released, said: “I don’t know how to say this. There’s no easy way. I wish I could [say] something eloquent, but I can’t through my sobbing tears ... my friend, comrade and travel partner to Palestine was just shot in the head and murdered by the Israeli occupation forces. May she rest in power. She is now one of many martyrs in this struggle.”

Beita is a village in the West Bank, where just weeks ago Amado Sison, another American volunteer, was struck by live ammunition in the back of the leg. Beita has a long history of resistance against Israeli occupation and has been a focal point of violence directed towards Palestinian residents by Israeli forces. Located near several illegal Israeli settlements, the village holds regular demonstrations. Due to escalating aggression by the Israeli forces, residents are currently refraining from marching or chanting, instead gathering together on the land and praying.

In recent years, Beita has seen ongoing demonstrations, particularly against the construction of new illegal Israeli outposts on the lands of the village. For example, Evyatar outpost, on Sabih Mountain, has been established on Palestinian land. In June, the Israeli security cabinet approved the ‘legalisation’ of Evyatar, causing the people of Beita to strengthen their popular resistance.

Residents of Beita recently restarted weekly Friday demonstrations to resist the further theft of their land. While protests had nearly ceased since October 7 2023, due to escalating violence from Israeli occupation forces, there was a renewed push on July 5 this year, when dozens of Palestinians, accompanied by international and

Israeli activists, marched from the adjacent mountain, through the valley and towards the outpost.

In recent months, international activists have experienced a sharp increase in violence from Israeli forces and the occupation must be held accountable for this. The International Solidarity Movement provides protective presence and solidarity in the West Bank. Founded in 2002, the ISM has maintained a steady presence in Palestine ever since, supporting the Palestinian popular struggle against the occupation. Our comrade is added to the 17 Palestinian protestors already slain in Beita.

Some media reports have repeated false claims that ISM activists threw rocks during the peaceful demonstration in Beita. All eye witness accounts refute this claim. Not only was Ayşenur more than 200 metres away from where the Israeli soldiers were, but there were no confrontations there at all in the minutes before she was shot. Neither she nor anyone else could have possibly been perceived as posing any threat from such a distance. She was killed in cold blood.

International Solidarity Movement
Palestine

Dirty war

Excited reports have emerged that the body of Captain Robert Nairac is about to be discovered south of the Irish border. He was given a George Cross medal by Margaret Thatcher after his execution by the IRA in 1977.

Over the years since then gory details have emerged of what he did in his four tours of duty for the M16-M15 in collusion with the Glenanne Gang, who organised assassinations and bombings, including the Dublin/Monaghan bombings (I witnessed the one in South Leinster Street in 1974), the Miami Showband massacre, and many other atrocities.

Ken Livingstone, in his maiden speech in the House of Commons in August 1987, concluded: “There is something rotten at the heart of the British security services, and we will not have a safe democracy until it is exposed in its entirety and dealt with.” Former M15-M16 operatives Fred Holroyd, Colin Wallace and former RUC Special Patrol Group member John Weir concurred, according to the Wikipedia entry on Robert Nairac. A 1993 Yorkshire Television documentary *Hidden hand* told more of the gruesome story.

Former M16 operative Fred Holroyd said Nairac admitted to him involvement in the assassination of IRA member John Francis Green in 1975. Holroyd claimed in a *New Statesman* article written by Duncan Campbell that Nairac had boasted about Green’s death and showed him a colour photograph of his corpse taken directly after his assassination.

Fred Holroyd and John Weir also linked Nairac to the Miami Showband killings. Martin Dillon, however, in his book, *The dirty war*, maintained that Nairac was not involved in either attack. Geoff Knupfer of the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims’ Remains states Nairac was in Derry at the time of the Green killing and in either London or Scotland at the time of the Miami killing. Knupfer might have added Timbuktu to his list.

The account of what happened to Nairac is that he went to a republican pub, the Three Steps in South Armagh, was set upon by Republicans as he was leaving, who overpowered him and took him south of the border and killed him. Details of torture and whether he gave any information during this are contested, but nevertheless the account is that he

was executed and buried in a field, which is now being excavated. No body has yet been found.

I was given an alternative account by local Sinn Féin supporters in Kilburn at the time of the killing, who are sadly no longer with us. Nairac, they said, had begun his career as a state spy around the building industry, working for Irish subcontractors. He was a Catholic, but suspicions began to be voiced until one night he turned up half drunk with one of his M15 handlers, who was recognised. They were taken outside, severely beaten and that finished the Kilburn operation.

He then went to Northern Ireland to assist the British state in its ‘dirty war’, under the name, ‘Danny McErlean’. He worked with community groups connected with the Official IRA - the ‘stickies’, as they were known - to gather information for the assassinations. Word spread from Kilburn on who Danny really was. He did go to the Three Steps in Dromintee, on that fateful night and spotted the IRA at the exit and knew they had come for him. He jumped up on the stage and began belting out the Irish rebel song, ‘The boys of the old brigade’. He got the whole crowd joining in and the IRA men moved off the door. He then made his escape bid, but only made it as far as his car door.

What happened to the body? According to the Sinn Féin account, he was taken to the meat and bone factory in Ardee, Co Louth, near Dundalk, now called APB Foods, his corpse was shredded and the van carrying the remains passed an incoming Garda patrol car, acting on a tip-off that his body was there. Maybe they did dump the remains in the field where they are searching, but their DNA forensic team would have to be very good to find any trace.

Or maybe this is just a good story invented by the local Sinn Féin supporters in Kilburn to have a laugh. Either way, no tears for this M15-M16 organiser of the dirty war - unlike the desperate attempts of the likes of Alister Kerr to sanitise the record of the killer who did his best for Queen and Empire. The British working class will face the same enemy, when it rises in revolution.

Gerry Downing
Socialist Fight

Deep conspiracy

More on the Southport stabbings. It was the revenge against the Labour Party for coming close to wiping out the Conservatives in parliament in the recent general elections by fascist elements in the deep state apparatus mind-control programme. In other words, the Southport killer was a deep state asset. These assets, as experience in the US and elsewhere shows, can be triggered to carry murder and mayhem at will. In the recent case in Britain, what the psychopath controllers weren’t counting on was the mobilisation of the anti-racist movement in response to the racist riots occasioned by the Southport stabbings.

Those involved in deep state mind-controlled activities often target individuals involved in the entertainment industry - that usually means music and acting. So it was no surprise to me when I found out that Axel Mugañwa Rudakubana, the Southport killer, had recently starred in a ‘Dr Who’-themed music video. The general public, most people in the media and most people in politics, including the left, have no idea that these things are going on. We need to pay more attention to individuals who have escaped from mind control and the stories they have to tell.

Tony Clark
For Democratic Socialism

PRISON

Ethos of punishment

Overcrowding is at an all-time high, showing yet again that prison does not work. Eddie Ford argues that we should help damaged people recover, not damage them further

As extensively covered in the media, up to 1,750 prisoners were released early on September 10 under emergency plans to ease the chronic overcrowding crisis in jails. A total of about 5,500 will be released during the next two months, the lucky ones receiving the princely sum of £89 in discharge money. This is in addition to the roughly 1,000 people let out weekly as a matter of routine. If you are looking for a job, the ministry of justice is aiming to recruit 1,000 more probation officers by next spring to help manage the increasing number of ex-offenders in the community.

This is a crisis that has been coming for a long time, of course - prisons have been 99% full since the start of 2023. We need to remember that the latest action follows an early-release scheme that started last year in October and saw more than 10,000 prisoners released up to 70 days early. Therefore, any *Daily Mail* reader who stumbles across this article needs to pause before ranting about Labour being soft on crime, because the current scheme officials are now trying to enact what had already been drawn up by the Conservatives.

Last week prisons reached a record population of more than 88,500, meaning that almost all of them were full - a situation exacerbated by the racist pogroms we saw this summer in almost every part of Britain. Over a thousand were arrested. Where to put them? Under the emergency plans announced in July, offenders serving sentences of less than five years will be released on licence after having spent 40% of their term in jail, rather than the usual 50%. Then on October 22 the scheme will be expanded to include offenders serving fixed sentences of more than five years. They will be subject to restrictions for the rest of their sentence - that may include curfews or bans on entering areas connected to their offences or approaching victims. According to this latest scheme, each prisoner must meet their probation officer on the day of their release to ensure they understand the restrictions.

Addiction

But whether the so-called 'justice system' as a whole has the resources to make all this happen is an entirely different question, of course, as Britain has a longstanding addiction to jailing people for longer and longer periods, with the inevitable consequences we are now seeing. As pointed out by Yvonne Thomas, chief executive of The Clink, a charity that has a long history of training offenders for work, it was absolutely crucial that people leaving prison get a "safe and secure start" to minimise the risk of them reoffending. But what is the chance of that for a service that is criminally underfunded? Up to a fifth of the charity's prisoner trainees could be released early under the scheme, meaning that they would leave jail without finishing industry-recognised qualifications crucial to landing their first job - yet the whole basis of rehabilitation is meant to be rooted in employability.

A key challenge for officials working on the scheme, logically enough, is ensuring that any homeless ex-offender has somewhere to go and there is an actual government scheme aiming to guarantee up to 84 nights' accommodation for anyone in this situation. But, as we all know, in reality some offenders end up on the streets and the "knock-on effect", as Thomas says, is that if resettlement is not properly planned - which is obviously the case - then recalls to prison will start going up. A vicious cycle, with a



Rehabilitation needed

fragile, overcrowded system becoming even more stretched - leading to the increased prevalence of violence and drug use behind bars to escape the hellish environment. Indeed, around half of prisoners are addicted to drugs of some sort - the upshot being that, if you did not have a drug problem before you entered prison, you might develop one whilst banged up inside. Thanks a lot!

Alas, the prison population is expected to rise from around 89,000 to around 100,000 by March 2027 - a completely untenable situation. According to the Prison Officers Association, "mini-riots" are breaking out in prisons approximately once a week and there is the ever-present risk of large-scale disorder - which at some stage could possibly lead to major injuries, even fatalities, of prisoners or prison officers.

Hell hole

Showing the scale of the crisis, there is even talk of transferring prisoners to Estonia. This was an idea first mooted last year at the Conservative Party conference by Alex Chalk, the former justice secretary, with *The Daily Telegraph* reporting last week that Shabana Mahmood, the justice secretary, met with her Estonian counterpart to discuss the issue on the sidelines of a Council of Europe event in Vilnius, Lithuania.¹

Well, Estonia, Rwanda - anywhere far away. Apparently, Estonia's low crime rate has left its prisons half empty, so why not make use of them and in the process deliver a €30 million boost to the country's public finances? However, an MoJ source is widely quoted as saying that, while "all options on capacity are on the table", renting prison spaces from Estonia was "highly unlikely" due to the steep cost implications. If it were ever to happen, what would that mean in terms of visits by relatives? It is not as if the MoJ would charter special flights for them.

Back in reality, we had a recent useful report from the BBC about HMP Pentonville, basically saying it is a chaotic hell hole that is characterised by "violence, overcrowding, self-harm".² In terms of the violence, it is not just directed by prisoners upon prisoners, but also by prisoners upon prison officers, and by prisoner officers upon prisoners. As shown by the report, one prisoner on remand has a tiny cell that has a pungent smell of urine, faeces and rotten food, thanks to an unfixed leaking toilet, whilst another says it is hard to rehabilitate yourself when you have got gang violence, money wars, overstretched staff, and so on. A large proportion of prisoners cannot read or write properly and an equally large number of them come from obviously damaged backgrounds, so locking them up is the very last thing that you should do.

As for the drugs, they manage to flow in by all sorts of ingenious methods, particularly at visiting time. Here you should mention the role played by underpaid officers, who can top up their wages by thousands of pounds by slipping prisoners a parcel of drugs, not to mention the all-important phone - a crucial lifeline to the outside world.

Former home secretary Michael Howard infamously declared that "prison works" at the 1993 Tory Party conference to rapturous applause and unanimous approval from the rightwing press. But, when you look at the enormous reoffending rate and the damage it does to families and individuals, and to society at large, you can only conclude the exact opposite - that prison makes a bad situation far worse.

Norway

As an instructive exercise, look at the situation in Norway. The sentence of life imprisonment under Norwegian law is restricted entirely to the military penal code (ie, for aiding the enemy during a time of war). In other words, if in prison, you will be released. Furthermore, the system is considered to be transparent, and prisoners are represented by an ombudsman appointed to investigate individuals' complaints against public authority. Imagine how the *Daily Mail* would rant about political correctness gone mad to the very idea of having such a system in Britain.

Prisoners in Norway also have the right to vote - something unthinkable in Britain. Indeed, when there was talk of amending the current legislation, David Cameron said the idea of prisoners voting made him feel "physically ill".

In Norway, families also have generous visiting rights - we are not talking about a parched hour here or there. Rather, visits with real privacy, where you can talk to the children, and many prisons in the country allow visitors up to three times per week - they even permit some conjugal visits with spouses in double beds, as there is a strong emphasis placed on relationships, so that incarcerated individuals have a strong support system after their release.

Also, there is greater emphasis on training. In Britain, prison officers get 12 weeks training, but in Norway it is between two and three years. All this amounts to a completely different emphasis to the pepper sprays and truncheons... and the general culture of punitive punishment in Britain - where 40 years of sentence inflation has left prisons "not fit for purpose", according to a paper published last week by senior former judges.

What are the results? In Norway, 63 out of 100,000 of their population is in prison - not the 150 it is in Britain, the highest in Europe. In addition, the reoffending rate in Norway is massively less. In Britain 50% start committing crimes again within one year, ending up back in prison. Yet in Norway it is just 25% returning after five years - one of the lowest recidivism rates in the world. When you contrast Norway and Britain, you certainly get a tale of two countries.

The reason why it is worth highlighting Norway is because if it is amongst the best that can be found under capitalism, think what could be achieved when the working class is influential and preparing to lead the way out of capitalism ●

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Notes

1. telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/09/05/uk-prisoners-jail-estonia-overcrowding.
2. bbc.co.uk/news/articles/clynxgr464co.

ACTION

Peace and Justice international conference

Saturday September 14, 10am: Conference, Blizard Building, Queen Mary University of London, 4 Newark Street, London E1. Politicians, union leaders, academics and activists discuss solutions to global injustice, inequality and conflict. Registration £23 (£11.50) or follow online free. Organised by Peace and Justice Project: thecorbynproject.com/events.

Voices of resilience

Saturday 14 September, 7pm: An evening of testimonies, Cinema 1, Barbican Centre, Silk Street, London EC2. Extracts reflecting upon Palestinian resilience in Gaza. Performers include Nabil Elouahabi and Maxine Peake. Tickets £19.50. Presented by Comma Press: barbian.org.uk/whats-on/2024/event/comma-press-voices-of-resilience.

Women chainmakers festival

Sunday September 15, 11am to 5.30pm: Family festival, Mary McArthur Gardens, Cradley Heath B64. Celebrate the 1910 women chainmakers' victorious 10-week strike against starvation wages. Entrance free. Organised by TUC Midlands: www.womenchainmakers.org.uk/events.

No warmongers in Edinburgh

Monday September 16, 10am: Protest outside SPIE security and defence conference, International Conference Centre, The Exchange, 150 Morrison Street, Edinburgh EH3. Conference sponsor Leonardo arms repressive states around the world. It makes equipment for F-35 fighter jets, used by Israeli forces in the genocide happening in Gaza. Organised by Edinburgh Campaign Against Arms Trade: caat.org.uk/events/no-warmongers-in-our-capital.

Palestine, imperialism and Islamophobia

Monday September 16, 7pm: Public meeting, The Old Print Works, 498-506 Moseley Road, Balsall Heath, Birmingham B12. How can we fight back? Speakers include Shelly Asquith (chair, Stop the War). Organised by Birmingham Stop the War Coalition: www.stopwar.org.uk/events.

The long depression and the tepid 20s

Wednesday September 18, 7pm: Online and onsite lecture, Marx Memorial Library, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1. Speaker Michael Roberts examines the IMF forecast that the major economies are stuck in stagnation. Registration £7 (£4). Organised by Marx Memorial Library: www.marx-memorial-library.org.uk/event/473.

From revolving door to open-plan office

Wednesday September 18, 7pm: Online and onsite report launch, 4th Floor Studios, 255 Commercial Road, Whitechapel, London E1. Exposing the ever-closer union between the UK government and the arms industry. Registration free. Organised by Campaign Against Arms Trade: caat.org.uk/events/report-launch-open-plan-office.

The racket

Wednesday September 18, 7pm: Book event, Housmans Bookshop, 5 Caledonian Road, London N1. Declassified UK journalist Matt Kennard introduces his book, *The racket: a rogue reporter vs the American empire*, followed by Q and A. Tickets £3 (£1). Organised by Housmans Bookshop: housmans.com/events.

Islington council: no to funding genocide

Thursday September 19, 6pm: Rally, Islington Town Hall, Upper Street, London N1. Includes submitting a petition calling on the council to disclose, divest and boycott companies profiting from Israel's genocidal attacks on Palestinians. Organised by Islington Palestine Solidarity Campaign: palestinecampaign.org/events.

1842 general strike

Thursday September 19, 7pm: Online lecture with professor Katrina Navickas. The strikes began in Staffordshire coal mines and spread to factories and mills in Yorkshire and Lancashire, and coal mines in Dundee, south Wales and Cornwall. Registration free. Organised by Working Class Movement Library: www.facebook.com/events/1530302474502102.

Stop Farage - protest Reform UK conference

Friday September 20, 5pm: Protest outside Reform UK conference, NEC, Birmingham B40. Reform MPs give confidence to far-right thugs on the streets by whipping up Islamophobia, racism and anti-migrant rhetoric. Organised by Stand Up to Racism: www.instagram.com/p/C-78NsclfQD.

Labour Party conference Palestine protest

Saturday September 21, 12 noon: Demonstration. Assemble at St George's Plateau, opposite Lime Street station, Liverpool L1. Demand a permanent ceasefire and an end to support for genocide. Organised by Stop the War Coalition: www.stopwar.org.uk/events.

Threads 40th anniversary screening

Monday September 23, 7pm: Film screening, Broomhall Centre, Broomspring Lane, Sheffield S10. Originally aired during cold war, *Threads* imagines nuclear war unfolding. Set in Sheffield, the film shows the devastating impact, and post-apocalyptic aftermath, of a nuclear attack. Tickets £5 (£3). Organised by Sheffield Transformed: www.sheffieldtransformed.org/events.

What made us human?

Tuesday September 24, 6.30pm: Talks on social and biological anthropology, Daryll Forde seminar room, Anthropology Building, 14 Taviton Street, off Gordon Square, London WC1, and online. This meeting: 'Did matriarchy ever exist?' Speaker: Chris Knight. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: www.facebook.com/events/451544957846232.

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.

GRENFELL

It will happen again

Sir Martin Moore-Bick's report spreads blame around lavishly, but downplays the responsibility of government policy and institutional corruption, argues **Mike Macnair**

The report of the second phase of the inquiry under retired judge Sir Martin Moore-Bick into the June 2017 Grenfell Tower fire, in which 72 people died, was published on September 4. The report runs to seven volumes of elaborate detail,¹ but the story it tells is basically simple.

Starting with Michael Heseltine in 1984, building safety was progressively moved from a state-regulation regime to one of self-regulation. One of the last acts of the John Major government was, in March 1997, to privatise the Building Research Establishment that performed tests on the safety of building materials. The conflict of interest and duty that privatisation set up led the BRE to adopt a light-touch approach to testing claims made by its customers - the materials producers and building contractors. It "sacrificed rigorous application of principle to its commercial interests". The British Board of Agrément (BBA) had always been a commercial organisation, described as "incompetent" in the report. This was because it "failed to manage the conflict between the need to act as a commercial organisation in order to attract and retain customers and the need to exercise a high degree of rigour and independence in its investigations". The UK Accreditation Service (UKAS), another private body working for government, accredited the BBA and BRE, who paid fees for accreditation; it "relied too much on the candour and co-operation of the organisations being assessed and too much was left to trust".²

Deregulation progressed further under the Tony Blair government and intensified under David Cameron, with the department of communities and local government under Eric Pickles particularly obsessed.

In this context, the cladding producers - particularly Arconic, Celotex and Kingspan - identified the UK as a regulatory 'soft touch', and proceeded to dishonestly game the self-regulation testing regime, holding out materials that increased fire risk as actually fire-safe according to UK testing rules.

The government department (which has been repeatedly renamed - currently the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government) had been warned of the risks of fire in blocks of flats in 1991, 1999 and 2009, but took no action.

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and its 'tenant management organisation' (TMO) was exclusively concerned with cost-cutting, without regard to tenant complaints, and hence contracted for cheaper (more dangerous) cladding and ignored other complaints about fire risks. The architects, head contractor and subcontractors all assumed that the safety of the cladding was someone else's responsibility.

The number of deaths was increased because the London Fire Brigade gave inappropriate advice to 'stay put' - essentially because they had not updated advice, which was valid before the use of cladding, in the light of the increased fire-spread risk caused by the addition of cladding.

A significant number of individuals are named in the report. For example, Claude Wehrle of Arconic (who refused to give oral evidence, relying on a French statute that prohibits French firms giving evidence for foreign legal proceedings) is said on the basis of the correspondence made



Being covered up by governments, corporations, the judiciary and mainstream media

available to the inquiry to have acted dishonestly. At the department an individual civil servant, Brian Martin, "was allowed too much freedom of action without adequate oversight"; in Kensington and Chelsea's TMO, chief executive Robert Black failed to disclose fire issues to the council, while estate fire assessor Carl Stokes was unqualified for the role. And so on.

The overall effect of this very wide spreading around of blame for the disaster, together with the burial of issues in seven volumes of details and the fact that the inquiry has taken seven years to complete, is to diffuse the blame - and thereby to defuse the potential political implications.

Basics

When we strip the narrative down to its basics, what it comes down to is this. Successive governments since the Thatcher years have set out to make it easier for property developers and construction operators to do business. These changes have created an *appearance* of public regulation of construction, while the supposed 'policemen' of this regulatory regime are actually paid by the 'criminals'.

The conflicts of interest and duty built into this regime had as their *natural and probable consequence* exploitation by firms like Arconic and Kingspan. That the end result would be the use of wholly inappropriate materials to clad housing, leading to a fire that led to many deaths, was also the natural and probable - wholly predictable - consequence of the policy of self-regulation. It is this *government policy*, which has been supported by the advertising-funded media and by the judiciary and legal

profession, which is at the end of the day responsible.

The report attributes responsibility to the TMO, the architect and the head and sub-contractor, for relying on the BBA and BRE certifications of the cladding products; and to the London Fire Brigade for failing to change its stay-put policy in response to the increased risk of fire spread caused by the cladding. But precisely the point of central testing agencies like the BBA and BRE is to avoid the necessity of every contracting party carrying out their own tests on products sold to them; so that all these people (and the tenants) should be *entitled* to rely on these certifications. Attributing blame to all these people would, no doubt, be relevant in a civil action for the tort of negligence. In the context of this report it is a distraction.

I put on one side also the issues of class and race, which might *appear* to be posed by the fact that many of the Grenfell Tower tenants were in social housing and many of them from racial minorities. I put them on one side because, though the Kensington and Chelsea TMO's treatment of the tenants was plainly class-biased and may well have been affected by racism, the inquiry's findings show that the disaster could just have easily happened to a *luxury* high-rise block occupied by very wealthy tenants. It was caused immediately by the frauds of the manufacturers, and secondarily by the government's decisions to privatise a core regulatory function of the state - fire safety in cities - which was a matter of public regulation already in Roman and in medieval English law.³

The report nails the dishonest statements, non-disclosures, and so on, of the firms, Arconic, Celotex

and Kingspan. But there were also many dishonest statements, non-disclosures, and so on, from 1984 to 2024 about the benefits of deregulation and self-regulation in the construction industry, from government ministers, from the Conservative Party, from New Labour leaders and 'Orange Book' Liberal Democrats, and from the advertising-funded media. As I have said, Grenfell Tower (and other less serious losses caused by the use of this cladding) were not merely foreseeable, but the *natural and probable consequences* of the regime of deregulation begun by Heseltine in 1984. They were thus also the natural and probable consequences of media campaigns for deregulation.

Roman law

Jump abruptly into the past, in Roman law some civil liabilities depended on 'culpa' (fault, including 'carelessness'). Others required 'dolus' (intention or bad faith). At the borders of 'dolus' was 'culpa lata': severe fault, or when translated into English law, 'gross negligence' - the standard of criminal liability for unintentional manslaughter. The German jurist, Ulrich Zasius (1461-1535/36), usefully divided 'culpa lata' into two classes. Firstly, 'Crimen versutiae' is *self-serving carelessness*. Its self-serving quality means that we should not believe the party who seeks merely to say, 'Terribly sorry, I made a mistake': this sort of statement is too easy to make. Secondly, 'Crimen ignaviae' is carelessness of a sort that ignores what was so obvious to everyone else that it looked like wilful blindness.

The political leaders are guilty of *crimen versutiae* leading to the deaths at Grenfell and the cladding problem still unsolved, as can be seen from recent fires in Slough and Dagenham. They have indulged the construction industry partly because of its fraudulent promises - that with deregulation they can solve the housing problem, provide more jobs, and so on. In reality, all they do is produce more luxury housing, as well as overpriced and dodgy work for the public sector. They have done so also partly because of party political donations from the sector, and lobbyists paid by it for private access to ministers.

Lying behind this form of corruption is - again - the advertising-funded media. The advertising funding *amplifies* the political voice of the proprietor, so as to drown out competing voices. The result is that the politicians, to get themselves heard, are *forced* to take bribes from large donors. These bribes do not usually work as direct payment for results: instead, 'gift exchange' is at work - the gift produces an expectation of a return gift, and the return gift is decisions favouring the donor.⁴ There will be no end to this form of corruption without an end to the advertising-funding of media.

Libel

Meanwhile, the judiciary and the legal profession also bear an important share of responsibility, wholly unmentioned by the report. Philip Heath of Kingspan emailed in response to criticisms of its cladding product: "Wintech can go f#ck themselves, and if they are not careful we'll sue the a#se of them" (Report, para 22.94). Heath's reference is to the circumstance

that the law of libel, as it at present operates, provides *systematic cover for fraud*, by making it extraordinarily difficult to expose it: hence, if Wintech exposed Kingspan's dishonesty, it would be at risk of the grotesque costs in defamation proceedings.

This is not all. The report is clear that the regulatory regime was structured so as to create incentives on the regulators - BBA, BRE, UKAS - to adopt a 'light touch' approach to their fee-payers, the firms regulated. There *could have been* a counter-incentive to this incentive. That would have been to make the regulators liable in negligence to people who suffered losses in the 'light touch' which led to the regulated firms causing such losses.

However, at the same period as the Thatcher and following governments were pushing for deregulation and privatisation of regulators, the House of Lords in its judicial capacity set its face firmly against liability of the regulators for negligence. This was the meaning of *Caparo Industries v Dickman* (1990) establishing non-liability of accountants for negligent audit to anyone other than the fraudsters themselves; *Murphy v Brentwood District Council* (1991) and following cases establishing non-liability of building inspectors (and the later cases, of builders to subsequent owners when the defects became visible); and of *Marc Rich v Bishop Rock Marine* (1995) establishing non-liability of 'classification societies' for their certification of ships as seaworthy.⁵

The judiciary's efforts to protect the construction industry from any liability other than to its immediate contractors continues to this very day. On July 9 2024 the UK supreme court handed down its decision in *Abbey Healthcare (Mill Hill) Ltd v Augustus 2008 LLP (formerly Simply Construct UK) LLP*.⁶ The decision is on its face on a very technical point. The court's reasoning, however, is utterly tortured, in order to achieve the result that the construction contractor shall be allowed to use 'scorched earth litigation tactics' - reliance on deep pockets to outspend the complainant - to avoid any liability to the end user. *Crimen versutiae* again - here because the interest of the construction companies is identical to the interest of the legal profession as such in 'scorched earth litigation tactics'.

Sir Keir Starmer said in response to the report: "We must make sure that nothing like this can ever happen again". But, as long as there are advertising-funded media, commercial lobbyists and the 'free market in legal services', it is *certain* that things like this will happen again ●

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Notes

1. www.grenfelltowerinquiry.org.uk/phase-2-report.
2. Both these from the report's 'executive summary', at 2.51 and 2.42.
3. RA Klitzke, 'Roman building ordinances relating to fire protection' *American Journal of Legal History* Vol 3, pp173-87; HM Chew and W Kellaway (eds) *London assize of nuisance* London 1973: 'Introduction', ppix-xi.
4. M Mauss *The gift* (1925), translated by WD Halls, Abingdon 2002; cf A Graycar and D Jancsics, 'Gift giving and corruption' *International Journal of Public Administration* Vol 40 (2017), pp1013-23.
5. *Caparo industries v Dickman* [1990] UKHL 2, *Murphy v Brentwood district council* [1991] UKHL 2, *Marc Rich v Bishop Rock Marine* [1995] UKHL 4.
6. [2024] UKSC 23.

PALESTINE

Campaign continues to build

Restrictions on protests, attempts to intimidate activists and suspension of export licences testify to the fact that the establishment is under massive pressure from below, says **Carla Roberts**

Despite the best efforts of the Labour government and the Metropolitan Police to sabotage the latest, the 18th, national demonstration in solidarity with Palestine, 125,000 people (according to the organisers) turned out in London on September 7 to once again demand an immediate ceasefire, the end of the genocide and the banning of all weapons sales to Israel. It was heartening to see many on the march making a beeline to pick up copies of the *Weekly Worker* we were handing out.

Up to about 24 hours before the demonstration, the police had tried to delay the start to 2.30pm and imposed draconian conditions on the organisers, who say that “their bizarre, last-minute demands would have meant essentially kettling people at the assembly time for two and a half hours”, in the words of the Stop the War Coalition.¹ As it was the march set off at 1.30pm and was constantly stopped en route by the police. Understandably, the organisers were furious, not least given a 5pm dispersal order!

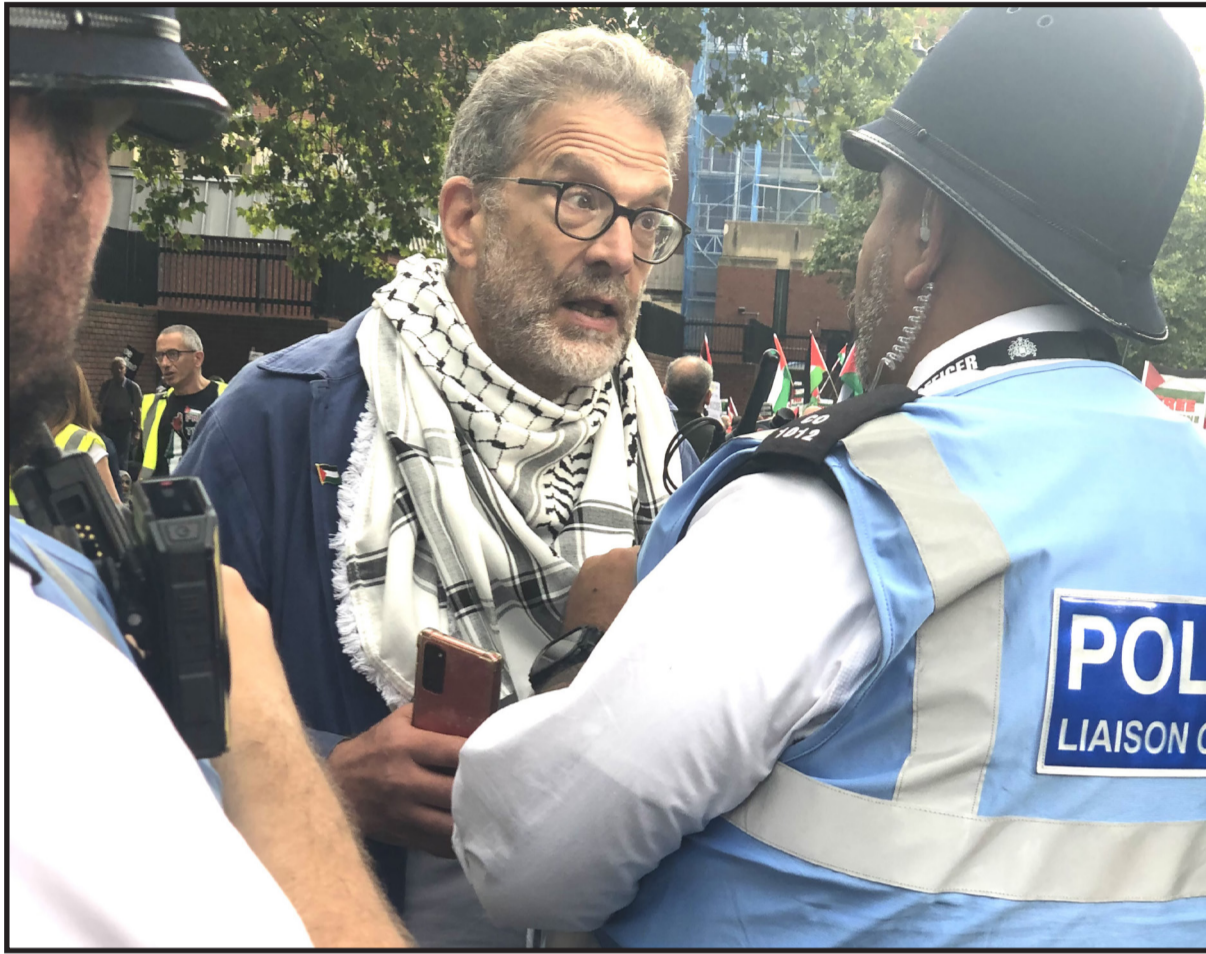
Since October 2023, the demonstrations have been militant but good-natured and almost always entirely peaceful, continues the StWC, “with three times fewer arrests on our marches per capita than at a regular Glastonbury festival, and many less than at an average Premier League football match. Almost all the arrests that have taken place have been for wearing T-shirts, holding placards or singing slogans that the police judge to be illegal.”

Still, most of the bourgeois media continues to dub them ‘hate marches’ and “every single one of them has had control orders imposed, normally without prior notice and always at the last minute”, complains the StWC in its interesting statement, which outlines an array of obstructive behaviour and threats - for example, in the run-up to the November 11 event last year, which then home secretary Suella Braverman tried to have banned altogether.

Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour government not only continues this attack on the right to protest - but is expanding the scope: “We are now moving more quickly to make arrests [at large events]. We are much more focused on identifying reasonable grounds for arrest,” Metropolitan police assistant commissioner Matt Twist just told the rightwing think-tank, Policy Exchange, which combined its report with an “investigation” by Michael Gove, which found that “Palestine-related protests in London have cost the Metropolitan police £42.9 millions.”² We can think of a rather obvious way to save tons of cash: leave the protestors be! But that will not happen, of course. The heavy-handed policing is needed for news management purposes.

As if to underline the point, only eight people were arrested on September 7, most of them because - in another clear provocation - the police allowed a few dozen counter-protestors to gather nearby in Kensington High Street, waving Israeli flags and the Union Jack, and shouting abuse at the marchers. This led to some predictable fisticuffs - though most people on the demonstration did well to ignore these Zionists.

The Palestine Solidarity Campaign has written to all supporters, asking for donations to cover the “added expenses due to the police’s obstacles: this time we are facing a bill of at



Yet another stop: Ben Jamal, director of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign and chief steward on the day, remonstrating with police liaison officer

least £45,000 [for] lawyers’ fees, press conferences, separate stage bookings”. That is just the PSC’s expenses - the demonstrations are organised by a coalition of six groups, including also the StWC, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and Friends of Al Aqsa - all with their own fundraising efforts.

The PSC email also says: “We don’t know why the police continue to frustrate our attempts to campaign for an end to this genocide.” Well, let us help you out. The British government is coming under increasing pressure to stop its political, financial and military support for the Israeli government, which is continuing its “war against Hamas” (in reality, its brutal campaign directed against the entire Palestinian population).

From the Zionist state’s point of view, of course, its actions are entirely rational and designed to, if you will, defuse the demographic time bomb, as Moshé Machover outlined in last week’s *Weekly Worker*: “Large-scale ethnic cleansing of Palestinian Arabs would result in a single state in the entire territory, with a large Jewish majority, which is the ultimate aim of all mainstream Zionist parties.”³

Draconian

But, while many western governments feel the need to continue supporting this campaign of genocide - in exchange for a (relatively) stable ally in the politically unstable Middle East - mass demonstrations put them under increasing pressure. There has also been a palpable increased level of ‘unease’ in some of the mainstream media (we cannot put it stronger than that), with the BBC, for example, markedly and repeatedly asking the question, “Why is there no full weapons ban to Israel?” Much of the media’s criticism is aimed at the expanding illegal settlements and the violence meted out against the Palestinians there rather than the daily bombings and campaign of starvation and disease employed against those trapped in Gaza.

Be that as it may, the pressure has been building up. Foreign secretary David Lammy’s much-reported partial weapons ban might be very partial indeed - the government has suspended only 30 out of around 350 arms export licences. But *The Spectator* is wrong to ask, “What is the point?” The point is politics. Militarily, the decision matters not - which is shown by the fact that licences for the important F-35 and F-16 fighter bombers have not been withdrawn.

But politically, the decision shows that the protests are having a real effect. Lammy might claim that it was merely “legal opinion” that the government has been following, but we all know that such “legal opinion” can be very flexible indeed - and is often stretched to fit the requirements of the governments of the day.

The success of the pressure is also, negatively, shown by the increasingly draconian actions meted out against pro-Palestinian British journalists like Richard Medhurst and Sarah Wilkinson. It is amazing that their arrests, the confiscation of their phones and computers (which they will never get back) and the imposition of ridiculous bail conditions - Wilkinson, for example, is not allowed to write about Palestine, her main area of expertise - are entirely ignored by their fellow journalists in the mainstream press.

We have also seen Richard Barnard, co-founder of Palestine Action, being served with three charges for speeches he gave in the aftermath of October 7, including one charge of “supporting a proscribed organisation” under section 12(1A) of the Terrorism Act, which carries the threat of some very serious prison time.

It might be of little comfort to those comrades, but these horrific charges do show that the protests are working. The increasing popularity of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign has also added to that pressure - again, this does not necessarily mean companies like

Coca Cola, Starbucks or HSBC are in serious financial trouble. But image matters and theirs have been seriously tarnished.

BBC bias

The pro-Zionist bourgeois mainstream is doing its utmost to hold back the tide.

The latest example? The front page of the September 8 edition of *The Sunday Telegraph*, which screams in huge letters about how the “BBC [has] ‘breached guidelines 1,500 times’ over Israel-Hamas war” since October 7 last year, that its “coverage was heavily biased against Israel”, and that the BBC “repeatedly downplayed Hamas terrorism, while presenting Israel as a militaristic and aggressive nation”. The article is padded out with quotes from the Campaign Against Antisemitism and the National Jewish Assembly, and backed up with a commentary by a disgusted Danny Cohen, the former BBC’s director of television, who warns that there was now an “institutional crisis”, which must be urgently investigated by an “independent inquiry”.

Needless to say, the entire press has picked up on the ‘scandal’, repeating word for word the report’s findings of a “deeply worrying pattern of bias” by the Beeb after the authors “analysed four months of the BBC’s output across television, radio, online news, podcasts and social media” using artificial intelligence. The report certainly helps to show up the limitations of AI, if very little else.

The author, Trevor Asserson - more on him later - basically fed the BBC’s output into a computer and cross-referenced it with the words, ‘war crimes’, ‘genocide’, ‘breach of international law’ and ‘crimes against humanity’. And - would you believe it? - “Israel was associated with genocide more than 14 times more than Hamas in the corporation’s coverage of the conflict!” No shit, Sherlock. Perhaps the reason for that is the fact that it is Israel committing genocide and not Hamas? Too obvious?

Even the most ardent supporter of Zionism would find it difficult to claim that Hamas’s (prison break) attack on October 7, during which 1,139 people were killed, can be characterised as a ‘genocide’: 695 Israeli civilians died, as did 71 foreign nationals, and 373 members of the security forces. We will probably never know how many of them died at the hands of Palestinian fighters - and how many because of Israeli bombardment and the ‘Hannibal directive’ (better to kill Israelis than let them fall into Palestinian hands). Nothing Hamas has done before or since October 7 could be called ‘a campaign of genocide’ against the Israeli population - not if you are *actually* trying to be honest.

That is where we need to take another look at the report’s author, about whom the *Torygraph* will only tell us that he is “a British lawyer”. Even a cursory glance at Google, however, shows that he just so happens to be based in Jerusalem, is a self-declared Zionist and has represented the pro-Zionist Campaign Against Antisemitism during the investigation by the misnamed Equality and Human Rights Commission into the “anti-Semitic Labour Party” - which, according to Asserson, was “a hotbed of racism under Jeremy Corbyn”.⁴

Danny Cohen, on the other hand, had signed a pro-Israel letter opposing the cultural boycott of Israel (along with JK Rowling and several MPs who are members of the Conservative Friends of Israel - *The Guardian*, October 22 2015).⁵ While he was director of television at the BBC, we should add. As the *Radio Times* reports, this role has been considered “the second most powerful position at the BBC”.⁶ Not very impartial there was he?

The BBC said it would “carefully consider” the report, which has been submitted to Tim Davie, its director general, and Samir Shah, its chair, as well as all its board members.⁷ A spokesman for the corporation added that it had “serious questions” about the report’s methodology.

In November 2015, the PSC had drawn attention to Cohen’s name on the letter,⁸ and had written to the chair of the BBC Trust to complain and to ask for action to be taken against Cohen. An email from BBC chief complaints advisor Dominic Groves sent in January said: “The BBC agrees that it was inadvisable for him to add his signature, given his then seniority within the BBC as director of television.”

We might add that the corporation might also want to take a “serious look” into the politics of the report’s authors and the ‘experts’ defending it. They are doing exactly what they are accusing the BBC of doing ●

Notes

1. www.stopwar.org.uk/article/why-the-police-wont-stop-us-palestine-protest-public-opinion.
2. *The Guardian* September 9.
3. ‘Gambling on all-out war’, September 5: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1505/gambling-on-all-out-war.
4. asserson.co.uk/2020/11/08/asserson-secures-human-rights-victory-against-anti-semitic-labour-party.
5. www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/22/israel-needs-cultural-bridges-not-boycotts-letter-from-jk-rowling-simon-schama-and-others.
6. See www.radiotimes.com/tv/drama/danny-cohen-successor-as-bbc-director-of-television-set-to-have-a-smaller-role.
7. www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/04/21/the-bbc-is-as-fair-as-it-can-be-in-its-israel-gaza-coverage.
8. See palestinecampaign.org/bbc-bias-take-action.

LITERATURE

Fiction: utopian and scientific

We all have our ways of weighing up the probabilities, of orienting our moral sense. In his intriguing talk to Communist University 2024, Paul Demarty examines the changing face of utopian literature and the role it, and science fiction, can play in Marxist politics

This is a talk about science fiction, and its relationship to the utopian imagination. This is not a new topic in the literature, to put it mildly. Fredric Jameson has been stomping around in it for decades, as well as others before him and many others after him.

But this is not a *Historical Materialism* panel on the subject: we are here at Communist University, after all, and our overall collective job is directly political: to orient the Marxist left, so far as we are able to do so with our modest platform. We have a tradition of doing so beyond direct reference to immediate struggles or political history, by covering mass culture, or paleo-anthropology, or philosophy. This is not the first talk I have given on roughly this subject area.

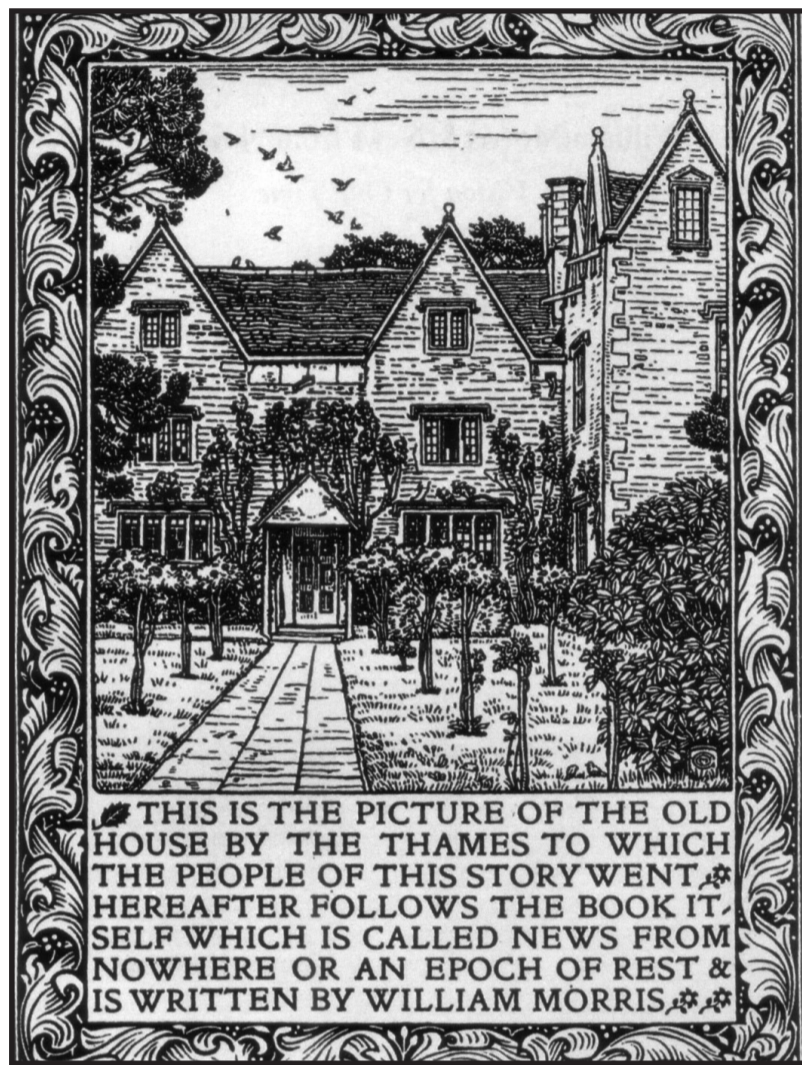
So let us talk about utopianism as we know it, as good, well-catechised Marxists. Throughout the whole period that social scientists and others call, with maddening vagueness, 'modernity', there have been attempts to set up utopian societies (indeed, before that too). They have mucked along for a time, before being destroyed either by internal or external factors. By the time Marx and Engels reached maturity in the 1840s, there were no end of such prescriptions, and attempts to carry them out. They generally failed. Both sides of this influenced Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels - the inexhaustible appetite for such schemes, and the fact that they were apparently doomed.

Their response was twofold: firstly, to unite this socialism with the developing class politics of the proletariat, most especially in the form of Chartism (this I leave to one side), and secondly, to try to put socialism on a scientific footing. Why did these utopias fail, so reliably, in all their diversity - bureaucratic and anarchistic, secular and religious? It was one of Marx's and Engels' greatest ideas to bring, as best they could, the scientific method to such investigations: to subject the condition of the toiling classes to unsparing analysis, and draw out of that the hypothesis that it was the proletariat alone whose specific conditions of life comported in both the short and long term with a new, communist society.

This is a very crude picture, but I draw it only to make a point about the relationship between Marxism and the various utopianisms. It was not simply a rejection. Marx and Engels criticised utopians in the name of the 'real' utopia; but it was in the very nature of a real utopia that it could not be planned out in advance. It depended instead on the action and consciousness of the broad masses. Our job was to sweep things away, to clear a path for later transformations we could only barely outline. But Marx and Engels had learned from the utopians, I think. It is a matter of dialectics: Marxism is not merely non-utopian. It is the negation of the negation that was utopianism. It 'sublates' utopianism, in the Hegelian jargon - both abolishes and in some sense absorbs it.

Modern period

Beyond the historical record of the utopias that people attempted to build - from, in the western context, the communism of consumption attributed to the earliest Christians in the Acts of the Apostles, to the true levellers and Anabaptists of the 17th century, and on to the Owenites and Fourierists of the 19th - there is the literary record. That is, above all, the



Frontispiece of 1890 first edition

strange history of the 'utopian novel'.

The word, utopia, originates in the earliest such text in the modern period, Thomas More's *Utopia*. In it, the narrator meets a stranger, Raphael Hythloday - the surname meaning "peddler of nonsense" - who has returned from an obscure island governed according to a strict and communistic set of laws, which he proceeds to lay out extensively (*Utopia*, likewise, means 'nowhere'). Its rationalistic form of government is somewhat parodic, but is nonetheless contrasted with the England of More's day, of the enclosures and - as Hythloday puts it - "sheep eating men". Marx's chapter in *Capital* on primitive accumulation starts exactly here.

The sheep, of course, continued to eat up men for centuries; by Marx's day, it was the machinery of the factory system with the greater appetite, and it is no surprise that this period saw a great flourishing of utopian literature. Any number of examples could be cited, but I have chosen as an exemplary text William Morris's *News from nowhere*. It is the best account of what a post-Marx utopian novel (or, as the indefatigable antiquarian Morris insists, utopian *romance*) has to offer us.

It begins with the narrator - clearly Morris himself - walking home from a meeting of the Socialist League, a semi-anarchist, socialist sect influenced by Marx and Engels, but not very much approved by them. The meeting has been taken up with directionless discussions of the nature of the future society, sketched with loving mockery by a man who clearly enjoyed such gatherings. He falls asleep in his Hammersmith home in 1890, and wakes up 150 years later. Things, to put it mildly, have changed. London is more picturesque; salmon leap down the Thames. He meets a boatman, and is astonished to discover that he is no mere servile worker, but a

happy man with a rich life. By and by, he is introduced to an old man called Hammond, who spends a great deal of time explaining the rules of this new order, with a long and violent chapter recounting the course of the revolution that brought it about. Morris ends up boating up the Thames with young lovers going to take in the hay harvest in the country - not a chore, but a great pleasure.

The worry that hangs over the whole society is that they might run out of work. After all, by now, they have pulled down all the ugly buildings and rebuilt them to (let's be honest) Morris's aesthetic specifications. Their goods endure: there is no need for relentless replacement. The sexual morality of the age is both strangely Victorian in its worship of delicate femininity and strikingly modern in its insistence on free love and readily available divorce (rather magnanimous of the famously cuckolded Morris, all told).

News from nowhere is atypical of the utopian text of its day in its anarchistic nature, in its insistence that, though the point of all economic activity is the fulfilment of men and women as they are, such fulfilment is ultimately down to the individual. We meet people who stubbornly resist the changes and grumble about the good old days (who are largely treated as harmless eccentrics). It is typical, on the whole, in its form. But for the very long chapter on the course of the revolution, which takes in desperate times and a Gatling gun attack on a Trafalgar Square crowd, it is very reminiscent of other examples of the genre. There is a stranger in town, and people patiently explain the rules of the new world to him. It can be compared quite directly to Edward Bellamy's *Looking backward* - a more 'rational' utopia that Morris despised for its statism, elitism and indifference to aesthetics.

The problem for the utopian novel,

as Jameson among others noticed, is its tendency to be - let's face it - boring. It dresses up as a novel, or a romance in Morris's case, but there is little in the way of narrative tension or conflict. They all tend to devolve to long descriptions of how things ought to be. *News from Nowhere* is not quite the worst offender here, simply because Morris places the 'action' in the English countryside, has his narrator fall in love, and - unsurprisingly for such an incorrigible, capital-R Romantic - is overall keen to stress the beauty of the new world, the faces not prematurely aged by cruel factory labour, the nature renewed by people who dare to care for it, and the care with which all objects of use, from houses to hand tools to meals, are crafted by people in no hurry to appease capital.

There is a rhapsodic effect - a sense that we are with Morris in a happy dream, and we share with him a melancholy feeling that we must eventually leave it for the dark satanic mills and nuclear arsenals of the real world. Still, it is hardly a thrilling page-turner. It reminded me a little of the 'Fellowship of the ring', the most aimlessly bewitching volume of *The lord of the rings*. But, while the 'Fellowship' gloriously fails to get to the point, the aimlessness in *News from nowhere* just is the point: a tour of a world in which labour is life's prime want.

Revisionism

I can find no evidence that Ursula Le Guin was a fan - or a hater - of William Morris. Reading her greatest entry into the canon of utopian literature, *The dispossessed*, directly after *News from nowhere*, produces the distinct impression that she must have been; but the known sources for this book are rather anthropological and - in the field of politics - the ideas of the eco-anarchist, Murray Bookchin. Her novel stands in relation to a Morrisian craft utopia, just as the revisionist western film relates to the heroic cowboy movie of the classical Hollywood era. Those later films were not merely telling different, more morally ambiguous stories in the same setting as the more naive films of the earlier era: in an important respect, by telling those stories, they changed the setting. It was not just the western that was 'revised', but the west itself.

'The dispossessed' is an answer to the question, 'What if you attempted to build Morris's *Nowhere* not in a verdant, temperate England, but a desert?' It takes place across two planets (each of which considers the other "the moon"). One, Urras, corresponds quite closely to the Earth of the cold war period in which she wrote it - large, rich, abundantly habitable and riven with great-power conflict between A-Io, a capitalist and patriarchal society, and Thu, some kind of socialist dictatorship (little is revealed of it in the course of the novel) - quite obvious analogues of the USA and USSR. The other, Anarres, has been gifted to the devotees of a revolutionary movement of anarchists centuries before. It is mineral-rich, but largely arid. It is clearly a dependency of Urras, suffered to exist in return for the export of minerals. Yet, though life is hard, the system just about works. And it is Morris's system, or thereabouts: people choose their own labour, up to a point; they are sexually liberated - now by the standards of the 1970s rather than the 1890s. Neither of these utopias has much use for formal schooling. Neither has any prison.

The story centres on a man from Anarres called Shevek - a scientific prodigy who may be on the brink of a breakthrough in the understanding of time itself. He becomes the first person to leave his planet for that great, verdant moon of Urras - a guest of the quasi-American A-Io, who have uses for his grand ideas. He has to leave, in the end, because Anarres does not have much use for them: they are too metaphysical, too speculative. (Shevek's theory of time seems to me equal parts Einstein, Bergson and Heidegger.) He becomes embroiled in cheap academic politics, and, in order to make use of his theory, has to escape. His escape, however, is to a far more dangerously political world; his faith in the precepts of 'Odonianism', the Anarist creed, is rather reinforced by his contact with class society, especially when he is drawn into a disastrous insurrectionary strike - put down, like Morris's protestors in Trafalgar Square, by machine gun fire.

Le Guin's novel is subtitled "an ambiguous utopia", but you hardly need the hint. Her Anarres is, in some ways, a successful revolutionary society, but one creaking at the edges. Years of famine have dried it out. Its social sanctions against 'egoism' and 'altruism' - the twin evils of self-worship and condescending charity - have hardened into a prickly conservatism. Inspired by one genius, it no longer has room for any others.

So far, so typically dystopian: but then there is Urras itself - a whitened sepulchre of a planet. Shevek is flummoxed by a society which combines a superficial and pervasive eroticism in aesthetics - he is captivated by the sensuous curves of a table - with strict sexual norms and subordination of women. He is agitated by the total absence of the poor from his life, when his own world could not sustain such ruling-class opulence even if it had such a class. It is his progressive alienation from his new surroundings that leads him to the ill-fated revolutionaries - something only possible because even this exile can see the virtues of 'Odonian' social organisation.

It is thus, as advertised, ambiguous. I would characterise the novel as a rebuke to exactly the critique it invites of Anarres, of the 'inevitable' suppression of individual genius, simply by refusing shelter in the comfort blanket of a vague freedom. It is acutely aware of the freedom sacrificed for the enjoyment of elite classes - an enjoyment all too comfortably in the rear-view mirror of Morris's *Nowhere*.

Both have in common that the revolution itself is already accomplished - whether, in Morris, in its home country, or in Le Guin, the colony to which the revolutionaries are exiled. Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars trilogy takes us a step further, and presents that process in the narrative itself. A hundred people - 50 men and 50 women, mostly scientists - are sent off to Mars, to begin a research colony. Most are American or Russian (when Robinson was writing, in the early 1990s, such a division was still roughly plausible). The earth they leave behind teeters on the edge of global war. Many hope to make a new society, without the defects of the old. The story is fundamentally the story of their disagreements: between those who want to terraform, and those who want to preserve this new planet as it was; between those who want to make Ares into an Anarres, and those playing politics with the

bigwigs back home; and finally, the (again) ultraviolet action taken by a collapsing Terran society against the restive Martians.

Robinson's generic apparatus is that of *hard* science fiction. He gives us, as best he can, an unromantic view of building a new world subject to constant sub-Antarctic temperatures, toxic atmospheric conditions and relentless radiation bombardment, which rather makes Anarres sound like Butlins. The question of terraforming agitates the colonists most of all, but combines with more high-political concerns. Some support terraforming to allow a better society than collapsing, capitalist Earth to be constructed - notably the anarchistic Russian socialist, Arkady Bogdanov - clearly a nod to Alexander Bogdanov, best known to this crowd as the target of Lenin's *Materialism and empirio-criticism* and a left factional opponent within the Bolsheviks, but also the author of a utopian novel, *Red star*, about the colonisation of Mars. The opponents of the terraformers, led by the American Ann Clayborne, worry that terraforming will destroy the very thing they are supposed to be there to study: Mars itself, as it was and has been, roughly, for billions of years.

The terraformers and the anti-terraforming 'Reds' - and the different political factions within them - are not to be left alone to sort it out for themselves. The old world creeps back into their affairs, with the mighty transnational corporations of the old world, and their UN proxies, gaining bridgeheads on Mars. The process is rather like the taming of the American west as it really was - not a matter of heroic sheriffs taking on outlaw gangs, but a violent tale of robber barons and Pinkertons. The utopians confront the full power of the state and the private empires that have somewhat superseded it on Earth, in a battle that plays out over centuries and three fat volumes of text.

These three works arrange themselves, as it were, concentrically. Morris's *Nowhere* shows us the accomplished Utopia, triumphantly unassailed by hostile forces, with its fully worked-out morality, its aesthetic sense, its internal enemies mere cranky old men. *The dispossessed* gives us the Utopia poised on the edge of the precipice, its survival constantly threatened by hostile external powers and the threat of scarcity. It depends on the explicit commitment of its people to the social morality - Odonianism is lived out, as Aristotle's ethics would put it, as continence rather than virtue, an effortful achievement rather than a natural habit. This tends to harden that morality into a conformist legalism, which in turn sets the events of the novel on their way. Despite Anarres' dependence on A-Io, the true threat to the Utopia is internal, in the dreaded possibility that it might curdle into some tyranny like Thu.

Robinson's trilogy is a step further back than that. There are vicious internal challenges, in the bitter divisions between the rival factions, most of which are utopian in the sense that they have a clear vision of the overall social good, defined against an unacceptable present. Yet they must all reckon with the attempts of the old to drown the new in blood. It is not a tale told by an old man, like Morris's Hammond, eccentrically attached to a history all but forgotten by the happy folk of Nowhere. Nor is it briefly re-enacted in the present, as in Le Guin's disastrous insurrection. Robinson's characters have their ideals put to the test for real, and are pushed into unlikely alliances, which are then broken at the next upheaval.

Among the internal enemies of Robinson's utopians are those whose ambitions depend on support from the home world. These are all Americans. There is John Boone - already a celebrity for having been

the first man on Mars on an earlier mission, himself aligned with the more socialistic colonists but hoping to get support from governmental institutions like the UN for his project. Phyllis Boyle, a fairly typical Evangelical type, becomes an agent of the corporations. There is finally Frank Chalmers, a Machiavellian evolutionary psychologist, whose schemes ultimately become so complex that he realises that he has no idea what his aims even are, or even if he has a personality at all. Only Phyllis survives the first novel.

These novels are each more ambiguous than the last. The cost of Utopia increases from one to the next. I have also presented them in chronological order of publication. One can hardly generalise from such a small sample, but I think it is nonetheless true that they are each *historically* typical. In the 1890s, as noted, many novels were written as fairly naive expositions of a good life that demanded a revolution in the organisation of social production. Though they hardly disappeared completely - one could name, perhaps, BF Skinner's behaviourist Utopia *Walden two*, from the 1950s, or even Monique Wittig's *Les guerillères* of 1969 - the utopian strand in western literature was decidedly 'ambiguous' at best by the time Le Guin composed *The dispossessed*. Robinson's even grimmer picture sits oddly in the famous optimism of the 1990s, but then that optimism was precisely based on the idea that the dread spectre of utopianism was finally exorcised.

To return rudely to politics, our own *Draft programme* takes influence from the programmes being written more or less contemporaneously with Morris's Utopia; the Erfurt Programme of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, or the founding programme of the French Workers Party. Yet, despite being a small thing compared to some books - particularly Robinson's books! - it is very prolix, compared to those models. We are quite clear about why: the drafters of the Erfurt Programme were writing before the experience of Soviet and eastern European 'socialism'. Those who take up the banner for communism today unavoidably take responsibility for the terrible results of the thing called 'communism' in the last century. We can set ourselves up as stupid tankies and explain that the purges were 'good, actually'. We can try to wish the problem away, as left communists and more naive Trotskyists do - 'Real communism has never been tried'. Or we can accept that 'real communists' failed to build real communism, that on the way they committed monstrous crimes, and learn from the experience, and try to communicate the lessons.

Dystopia

After all, the failure of those societies to become durable and worthy models has given us the inverted mirror image of the Utopia. There are capitalist, and fascist, and even neo-feudal dystopias out there. Yet the socialistic variants predominate - from Zamyatin's *We* to Orwell's *Animal farm* and *1984*, and on and on. This is partly a matter of the prevailing ideological atmosphere in the capitalist world, of course, but partly written into the genre. The dystopia is parasitic upon the Utopia - it is always the Utopia *gone wrong*; the potential bad future of Anarres, where the moralism curdles into political tyranny and the fundamental morality becomes inverted. The classical dystopia does not only give us radical inequality, but gives us it in the clothes of egalitarianism. A morality of liberation becomes an apparatus of control.

Indeed, we have to mention that something like the Marxist taboo on utopianism spread into bourgeois thought, especially in the earlier stages of the cold war. It is no accident: many

of the anti-communist intellectuals of that formative era were at the same time ex-communists or fellow travellers. For such people, Marxism in the end was not distinguished from utopianism; but also it had all too rosy a view of the consequences. The Marxist critique of Utopia, after all, was that - without the perspective of the class struggle - nothing would ultimately be achieved. The anti-communists raised the spectre not of failure, but of degeneration: all attempts to overthrow social hierarchy would invite only a worse tyranny. Dystopia was simply Utopia, 20 years later.

The ambiguous utopias are utopias *after* dystopia. Their concession - that, so to speak, Utopia ain't what it used to be - may seem overly generous. What they buy with that is a meaningful narrative within the utopian frame. There is no more exposition in Le Guin than the average science fiction novel, probably less. What there is, instead, is a strong narrative, like all of them driven by escalating conflict, that does not take the form of the heroic individual against the suffocating society, but between individuals (novels are stories of individuals, after all) within the Utopia, and between the Utopia and its antagonist. The antagonists are clearly products of the social landscape, but intelligibly so: there is something to be fought over within the Utopia and against the pre-Utopia. It is a contested space: the achievement, or the mere possibility, of a new form of society does not exhaust contestation over the meaning or ends of that society.

I would argue that something similar befell fantasy literature starting in the 1990s. The mainline trend of Marxist SF studies - from Darko Suvin to Fredric Jameson - has always been a bit sniffy about fantasy, particularly after it eclipsed SF in commercial terms with the high fantasy boom of the 1980s. Even Jameson must concede, however, that the "world-building" of the fantasy author is at least related to the utopian imagination, perhaps more closely than the technological *novum* of classic SF that forms the core of Suvin's theory.

The pulp, Tolkienesque, high-fantasy novel is typically a *reactionary* Utopia. You could think of, say, Robert Jordan's *Wheel of time* books, with their incredibly detailed gender roles and cyclical battles between eternal principles of good and evil. The end of the cold war changed things, however. George RR Martin published *A game of thrones* and its sequels; the horror tinged 'New Weird' movement arose; and, in their wake, the centre of gravity of the genre shifted. History re-entered the picture: while Tolkien or Jordan produced various kinds of allegories of Christian eschatology, Martin and his epigones produced allegories largely of the bloody birth of capitalist modernity. Just as readers of the ambiguous Utopia could no longer credit cheerfully encyclopaedic accounts of societies of perfect happiness, even minimally sophisticated readers of fantasy no longer believed in the inherent nobility of royal bloodlines and the metaphysical division of the universe into good and evil.

The revisionist or ambiguous Utopia, then, is always unfinished - which is its answer to the anti-Utopians. It is not a new answer: that, after all, was the lesson of Marx's and Engels' critiques in the first place. All societies, liberated or tyrannical, real or fictional, emerge on the stage of human history, at some particular moment. To stretch the metaphor, their appearance immediately upends the set dressing. The stage is no longer as it was; new problems replace the old. The utopian impulse

plays a particular role here: it directs us to what is *out of reach*, for now, to the need for further transformation, further revolution. It is opposed to the mere vulgar 'realism' exemplified by Robinson's Frank Chalmers, which has a plausible but ultimately false 'this-sidedness' to it; addressed 'realistically' to a social reality at war with itself, which is therefore incapable of consistent representation in its own terms, it can terminate only in nihilism. It is precisely these contradictions that make Utopia real, even before it is achieved.

This is quite true whether our Utopia is of the Morrisian stripe - one that sees the liberated future as a return to some more fundamental human nature, no longer disfigured by the ugliness of exploitation - or it is a technological Utopia of idleness and abundance, as in the 'Culture' of Iain M Banks's novels, or for that matter the later *Star trek* series. From my choices of exemplary texts, it should be clear that I am, for what it is worth, on 'team Morris' nowadays. For all the horrors of work under capitalism, I agree with him that it would be bad for a society to run out of useful things for people to actually do. I think there is such a thing as human nature, whether it is to be conceived in narrowly evolutionary or speculative and teleological terms. Others disagree strongly, to the point of arguing for post-human forms of Utopia. The dispute can be elaborated and better framed by argument, but not settled by it: that must wait, in the end, for revolution.

Where, then, does it fit into the Marxist political project proper? I leave aside the aesthetic dimension here, as I more or less have all along. *News from nowhere* is a charming pastoral romance; the Mars books are intimidatingly accomplished works of hard SF that are nonetheless far more readable than the average sample of that genre; *The dispossessed* is one of the great books of 20th century English literature, full stop, and if you take nothing else away from this talk, take my instruction to read it without delay! That is all I have to say on this matter; instead we move, for the last time, to the political.

The struggle for socialism has, as we often crudely put it, objective

and subjective dimensions - the circumstances not of our own making, the 'we' who make our own history within them. The achievement of Marxism is to think these things together, but the distinction is not thereby abolished. The arrangement of class forces, relations of production, political relations of domination frame all human action. But these forces and relations are themselves always contradictory; even if nothing of human life escaped them, there would be freedom in those contradictions.

Utopia is thus a form in which those contradictions are reified. It appears as that over against which the grinding ordinary reality of class society is posed. It may not, in fact, be fully thematised - even a very unconscious, naive struggle at least demands the instinct that things need not be like this, things might be otherwise, even if we have only known them to be like this. Thus reified, Utopia serves as a moral impulse. It forms the subject of struggle; the moral motive for drawing radically egalitarian rather than merely sectional or individual conclusions from the moral bankruptcy of life in class society.

Those conclusions are ultimately verified in practice, in the victories or defeats accumulated over the years by rival approaches - internationalist or nationalist, sexually egalitarian or 'complementarian', and so on. Yet the empirical proof is only circumstantial until we achieve our goal. In practice, our motives for placing ourselves at the service of the objectively necessary are moral, and derive from our refusal to pay the costs of the alternative - of exploitation and oppression of ourselves or others. We do not await proof, but seek to prove it ourselves. In the meantime, we have our ways of weighing up the probabilities, of orienting our moral sense, even if the way to that morality is blocked for the time being.

Which is to say, we have our utopias - may there be many more ●

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POLEMIC

Matters past and present

Historical and theoretical issues are important, but they should not be turned into obstacles. **Steve Bloom** critically defends Fourth International orthodoxy and, despite that, calls for revolutionary unity in the concluding part of his response to Mike Macnair

When assessing developments during the 1920s and 30s, we need to remember that those who founded both the Comintern and the Trotskyist movement believed/understood that they were living through revolutionary times.¹

Mike himself notes, though indirectly, in his book, *Revolutionary strategy*, that the Trotskyist movement was founded on a rejection of his primary thesis - that the revolutionary potential of 1917 was exhausted by 1921, the Russian Revolution decisively defeated and inexorably on the road to capitalist restoration:

Now, if it were true - as Trotsky claimed - that the USSR was a kind of workers' organisation, a "trade union that had seized power", and a strategic gain for the working class in spite of the bad leadership of the Stalinists, then defencism would be broadly justified and it would be equally justified to call its opponents scabs. Soviet-defencism would also clearly be a task of the working class in every country, whether imperialist or colonial and whether at war with the USSR or not". (p74)

Trotsky's appreciation was, simply, that because the times remained revolutionary a revival of the USSR as a revolutionary force could be achieved - by political revolution in the USSR backed by a broader European social revolution. Mike acknowledges that in this context the specific programme Trotsky proposed makes sense.

Readers should be able to understand, therefore, from all that has been said above why I maintain a different balance sheet on Trotskyist history. I agree with Trotsky's assessment of the historical period he was living through post-1917. I do believe that Mike is correct to criticise the Trotskyist movement for its embrace of organisational Cominternism - that is, the over-centralisation of authority in leadership bodies. This 'military chain of command' style was not appropriate, even in revolutionary times. And Mike is still more correct to criticise the post-World War II survivals of Trotskyism for the same weakness. But his overall critique of Trotskyism misses the mark.

By way of illustration let us consider one specific critique:

Trotskyists imagine that partial, trade union, etc struggles can be led into a generalised challenge to the capitalist state, and in the course of that challenge the Trotskyists could guide the movement to the seizure of power in the form of 'All power to the soviets' - in spite of their marginal numbers before the crisis breaks out. (p147)

But that is not at all what the Trotskyists imagine. Trotskyists imagine that, as consciousness changes due to experience - through trade union struggles, etc - the present "marginal number" of Trotskyists can grow into a far larger number well before "the crisis breaks out".

This perspective can, of course, be reasonably critiqued in its own right. Many post-war Trotskyists have carried it to the point of utter absurdity, declaring that groups of a few dozen can self-proclaim as the 'vanguard'. It

remains essential, however, if we are going to critique Trotskyism at any stage of its history, that we first state the Trotskyist viewpoint correctly. This is something Mike seems to have a lot of trouble with - in large part because he fails to place the development of a Trotskyist ideology in its proper historical context: the revolutionary nature of the decades during which Trotskyism originally emerged as a distinct political current.

Comintern

Mike writes:

The peculiarity of this [call for a Fourth International] is the fact that Trotsky denounced the Third International on the basis of events in a single country (Germany)... Trotsky seems to have imagined that the Comintern would be defined forever by the disaster in Germany, as the Second International was defined forever by August 1914.

But 1933 was not comparable to August 1914. By 1935 the Comintern had abandoned the sectarian 'third period' politics that led to the disaster of 1933 and turned to the people's front policy. In spite of a brief return to the 'third period' during the Hitler-Stalin pact in 1939-41, the people's front was to be the main strategic line of 'official communism' permanently (and still is today). The 'third period' and its role in the disaster in Germany has become a matter of interest to historians and Trotskyists.

The 1933 call for a Fourth International was therefore plainly premature. (pp139-40)

And yet the call for the Fourth International was not at all a response solely to events in Germany. Trotsky had been developing a critique of the Third International for many years. His seminal 'The draft programme of the Communist International - a criticism of fundamentals' was first presented in 1928 (later published as a book under the title *The Third International after Lenin*).

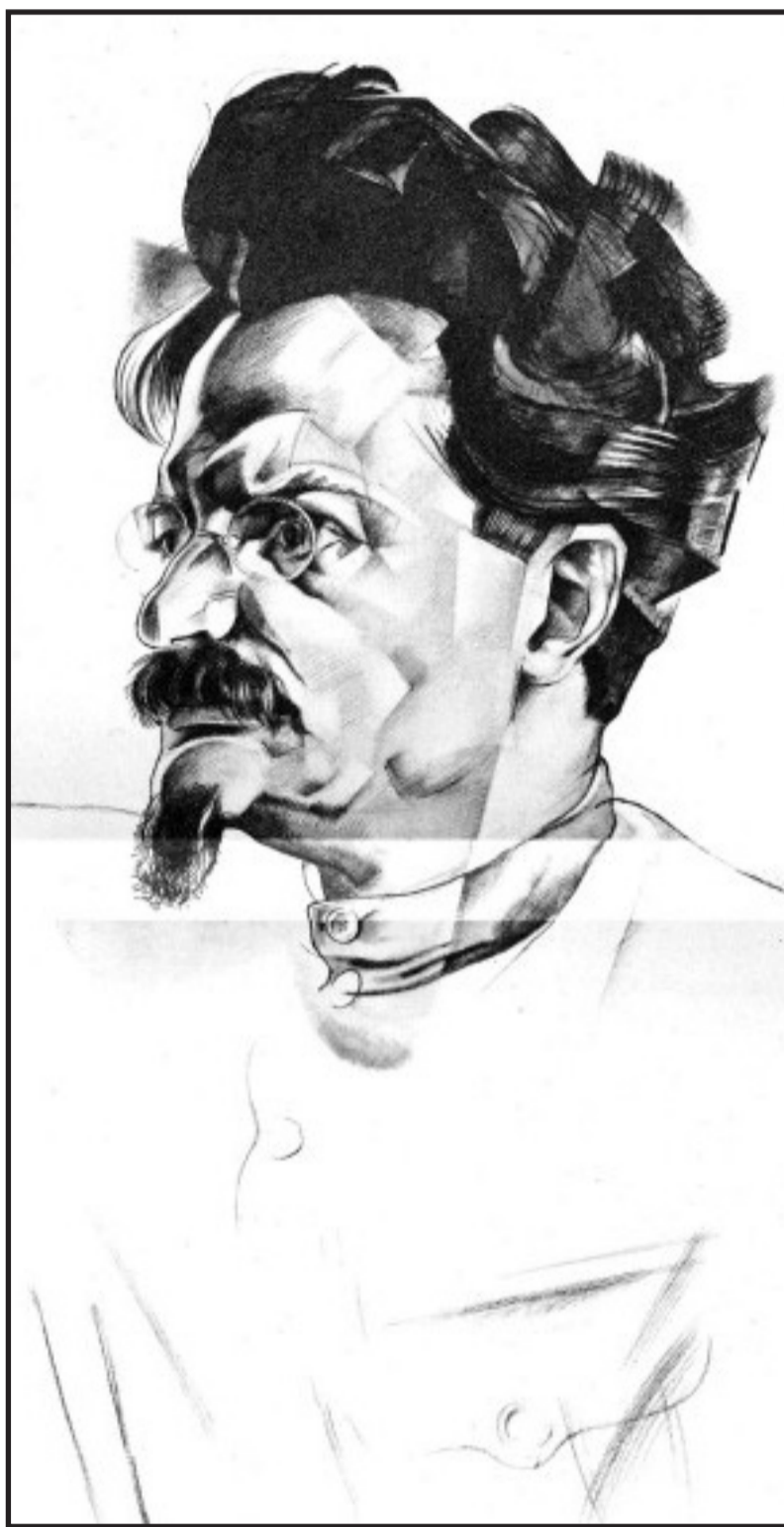
Germany in 1933 was merely the trigger - the event which caused Trotsky to conclude that the Comintern had become hopelessly compromised by Stalinist ideology with no hope that this could be corrected through further debate and experience. The Comintern refused to draw a self-critical balance sheet regarding the responsibility of its own 'third period' ultra-leftism after Hitler took power without active resistance. If this disaster could not provoke a rethinking of the Comintern's trajectory, then nothing would. The book was closed on the Third International and a Fourth was needed.

The subsequent turn to the "peoples' front" is not a negation of this conclusion for two reasons:

(1) It was not the 'third period' itself that was the source of Trotsky's judgment about the Comintern. It was the inability to draw a self-critical balance sheet after the German disaster.

(2) The 'popular front' was not founded on a reconsideration of the 'third period'. It was simply another pragmatic turn by the Stalinist bureaucracy attempting to maintain itself in power.

The 'popular front' was not,



Yury Annenkov 'Trotsky' (1922)

therefore, the opposite of the 'third period' - merely the flipside of the same coin.

It is also essential to remember that in 1938 Trotsky believed the coming war would have the same effect as World War I, triggering revolutionary events in the combatant nations (including in the USSR - the only alternative being the military defeat of the USSR.) That prognosis turned out to be mistaken. But, if we want to assess the decision to found the FI in 1938, we do have to keep in mind that it was Trotsky's prognosis, central to the choice to found the FI at that moment.

Finally on this subject, let us assess one more comment in Mike's book, this time about the post-war Fourth International:

If you asked them what their international was for, the only answer they could give was to be a "centre where the international experiences of the mass movement and of the revolution are progressively assimilated". At the end of the day this is to say no more than the Fourth

International must exist because it must. Their international had become the Mandelites' sectarian shibboleth. (p145)

Personally, had Mike asked me this question after I became a member of the FI in 1968, I would have said that the reason for continuing the Fourth International was to preserve and progressively help to develop a revolutionary Marxist theory and programme (most importantly including the question of class independence) which was otherwise in danger of being lost as a result of the legacy of Stalinism - the 'popular front' legacy in particular.

Revolution

Mike writes:

The need for an international is posed because the working class cannot take power in a single country and wait for the proletariat of other countries to come to its aid. This is the fundamental lesson of the degeneration and collapse of Comintern and the eventual fall of the 'socialist countries'. It

was a lesson that was not learned by the Trotskyists. The strategic task that this lesson poses for an international is an internationally united struggle of the working class for political power. (p145)

And then:

But exactly the same reasons mean that it is impossible to have political power of the working class or the democratic republic - for more than a few months - in a single country. The struggle for workers' power is therefore a struggle for a global democratic republic and immediately for continental democratic republics. There is an important implication of this point: it is strategically necessary - as far as possible - to fight for a majority for working class politics on the international scale before attempting to take the power in any single country: taking the power in any single country, unless the workers' party is on the verge of at least a continental majority, is likely to lead to disaster. (p156)

The length of time a working class in a particular country might hold onto political power - as it not only waits for, but helps to promote the development of, working class power in other nations - is not some predetermined "few months". It depends on a complex of factors and can extend for a considerably longer period, as we have already seen from our examination of the Russian experience. And what can Mike say about the Cuban revolution, where a political form that I would characterise as the dictatorship of the proletariat (I hope Mike agrees) survived for decades after 1959, waiting for the revolution elsewhere in Latin America to come to its aid?

Waiting for the conditions to exist for a continent-wide revolution before taking power in a single country is as impractical as waiting for world revolution. We do not have an on-off switch that controls the timing of revolutionary processes. If we fail to take advantage of the social crisis in country A that creates the potential for revolution, because we insist on waiting for a simultaneous opportunity in countries B, C and D, by the time the possibility is posed in country B the opportunity in country A will have disappeared.

We have no choice, therefore, except to proceed with the "chain of revolutions" approach. Its failure in Europe during the 1920s and 30s cannot properly cause us to conclude that such a development is impossible. Let's now examine the primary reason why that's true.

There is a methodological error in Mike's dismissal of the 'chain of revolutions' approach. His "few months" represents a generalisation based on his understanding that the revolutionary potential of 1917 was exhausted by 1921. This is wrong, as noted above, because his assessment of the years post-1921 is wrong. It is also wrong, however, because, even if Mike's expiration date of 1921 were correct in relation to the Russian experience, a method which generalises a time frame of "a few months" based solely on one historical experience is completely unscientific. Human beings cannot properly generalise from a single data

point. Scientific generalisations can only be developed based on *repeated* tests that result in the same or similar outcomes. No matter how many times Mike asserts that the history post-1917 proves his assessment of this or that phenomenon, any such attempt at proof is fatally compromised by this basic principle of scientific investigation.

Please consider: The length of time the Russian working class could hold onto power in isolation was conditioned primarily by the economic backwardness of Russia in relation to other imperialist nations. This is a condition unique to this one revolutionary experience; it will never be duplicated again. We will, therefore, under no circumstances be building precisely the same bridge for a second time, with precisely the same factors limiting this aspect of the process.

In my last article I raised a question about this paragraph:

There is no way forward from capitalism other than the self-emancipation of the working class. The ideas of a peasant-led revolution, of a long-term strategic alliance of the proletariat and peasantry as equals, of 'advanced social democracy' or of a 'broad democratic alliance' have all been proved false. They have been proved false by the fate of the so-called 'socialist countries' and by the fact that the fall of the USSR, combined with the decay of the US-led world economic order, has led to increasing attacks on the concessions that capital made to social democratic and left nationalist governments elsewhere in order to 'contain communism'. The idea of the 'movement of movements' has proved, with extraordinary rapidity, to lead nowhere. (p151)

Mike and I agree regarding the class character of any revolutionary struggle that is actually going to lead to the emancipation of the peasantry, oppressed nationalities, women, etc. I note, however, that this correct overall understanding has generated a demonstrable historical tendency within the revolutionary workers' movement: to actively subordinate struggles by other oppressed social layers to working class revolution, expecting such struggles to wait until the working class is victorious, or limit demands to those which are deemed compatible with a working class agenda. This is a tendency we must actively repudiate in my judgment. The passage quoted above seems dangerously one-sided from that point of view.

Mike expresses the weakness directly when he writes:

In relation to the national question, I have argued that the positive goal of the workers' party should be the international - continental and eventually global - democratic republic. The implication of this approach is that slogans about national 'self determination' have a secondary tactical character. (p157)

The Trotskyist movement, and the Leninist movement before it, have always had a different appreciation: that our support to self-determination by an oppressed/colonised nation is unconditional, and of a *principled* nature. Mike, however, characterises this as the "muddle of 1937-40":

The muddle of 1937-40 has become a part of Trotskyist orthodoxy. That is, Trotskyists in the imperialist countries must be 'defeatist' in colonial wars in the peculiar sense of being 'defencist' in relation to the colonial country or movement. Trotskyists in the colonial countries

must be 'defencist' in the same sense. To do otherwise is said to be to be 'pro-imperialist'. (p76)

Personally I continue to support the "muddle". The *failure* of socialists in imperialist nations to give *unconditional* support to the struggles of oppressed nations for their own liberation *as a matter of principle* (that is, support for their independence from the colonial power that is not conditioned by who is in the leadership of the struggle or its social programme) is one of the biggest obstacles to a genuine internationalism, today as in the past. The working class of the imperial centres must demonstrate in practice and not just in words that it can be a reliable ally of the oppressed colonial masses. This is a prerequisite to any call for them to join us in a common international struggle.

Method

Let us consider three points, without going into their substance, in order to highlight additional methodological difficulties that run consistently through Mike's analysis: (a) 'For a workers' government': We have talked above about Mike's tendency to counterpose elements that ought to be combined dialectically instead. We return to this question in order to illustrate that we are dealing with a generalised flaw in his method, not just an isolated problem here or there.

Mike objects to the slogan, 'For a workers' government'. Since an appreciation of this shares much with our previous conversation about 'All power to the soviets', we will not go into the substance of the issue again. I would say, in fact, that the two slogans represent precisely the same idea under different social conditions. Where actual soviets already exist and we can identify the *specific form* a new government might take, the slogan is 'All power to the soviets'. In more normal times, when the masses have not yet created a potential new governmental form, the same social content is captured by the more generic call for a 'workers' government'.

Mike writes:

The present task of communists/socialists is therefore not to fight for an alternative government. It is to fight to build an alternative opposition: one which commits itself unambiguously to self-emancipation of the working class through extreme democracy, as opposed to all the loyalist parties. (p121)

And yet the abstract (propaganda) slogan of a 'workers' government' is not suggesting an immediate campaign/"present task". It is merely a slogan, and not, therefore, counterposed to building "an alternative opposition". It is, instead, part of that process. If a workers' government were a "present task", then it would be formulated as the call for 'All power to the soviets'. The objective we have in raising the *propaganda* slogan, when it is *not* an immediate task, is to help educate masses of people that the problems inherent in the present capitalist government flow from its class nature, thus helping to recruit them to our campaign for an alternative opposition, based on an alternative class point of view.

(b) Labour aristocracy: Mike writes:

The theory of the imperialist labour aristocracy is false. In the first place, workers' level of class consciousness does not map inversely onto their relative material advantages. To take a single British example out of many possible ones, in the late 19th century skilled miners and railway workers were on the right wing of

the movement; by the early 20th they were on its left. The theory of the imperialist labour aristocracy is also completely impotent to explain reformism and the labour bureaucracy in the colonial and semi-colonial countries, which has been an all too obvious problem since the 1930s. (p80)

And then: "Working class support for one's own capitalist nation-state is produced by dynamics inherent in the capitalist nation-state system and world market, and there is no grouping within the working class which is presumptively free of it." (p81)

I considered the substance of this question some years ago in the pages of *Against the Current*. Regarding that substance I therefore refer readers to my reply to Charlie Post, who raised an argument similar to Mike's.² But let us briefly consider the question of method.

I will insist that, while the theory of the labor aristocracy does not explain everything, and that it is only a partial explanation for those things it does explain, this is hardly proof that the theory is false. It just lets us know that it is not the only truth.

Consider the theory that hurricanes result in power outages. It would be absurd to declare this false just because not everyone's power is cut off after a hurricane, or because in many cases of power failure there is no hurricane involved at all. The theory that hurricanes result in power outages is true even though all the rest is also true. We simply have to understand that the truth we are discussing has more than one layer. (c) Stalinist Comintern: Can we properly analyse this as an extension of the Leninist Comintern?

Mike writes: "The logic of the idea that a split would purge the workers' movement of opportunism was expressed in the sectarianism of the 'third period'." (p102)

This treats the 'theory' projected by the Comintern *after* its Stalinisation as if this were some legitimate expression/continuation of the theory of Lenin, rather than a distortion of Lenin's theory developed to serve the interests of the Soviet bureaucracy. Stalinist 'theory' did borrow snippets of quotations in order to advance a bureaucratic agenda. But that does not make it a continuation of the theory that was being quoted.

The sectarianism of the third period was a direct product of Stalinism and of Stalinism's distortion of both Marxism and Leninism. It had nothing whatsoever in common with Lenin's pursuit of the 1914 split.

The same difficulty is expressed in the following:

... it was quite clear to the Russian leadership that the proletariat could not hope to hold power in Russia for long - how long was uncertain - unless the western workers' movement came to their aid. October 1917 was thus a gamble on the German revolution. By 1919, with German social democracy in the saddle, this gamble had failed; it was only gradually that the possibility of 'hanging on and waiting for the Germans' for a year or two was transmuted into the idea of a prolonged period of isolation of the Soviet regime, and from there in turn into 'socialism in one country'. (p134)

But the theory of 'socialism in one country' does not belong on the same continuum as the other ideas cited. It is the opposite of these, because it was a conscious rejection of the understanding that the Russian revolution required assistance from

the west at all, positing instead that the USSR in isolation could actually create 'socialism'. This is a direct product of 'theory' in the hands of the Stalinist bureaucracy after it had broken completely with Leninism.

Definitions

(a) 'Minimum programme': Mike uses the term in a way that can generate confusion unless we define things clearly. There are a couple of formulations in his book that suggest a useful understanding:

On p119 he refers to "a core political minimum platform for the participation of communists in a government". On the next page he says:

Without commitment to such a minimum platform, communists should not accept governmental responsibility as a minority. Contrary to Trotsky's argument on Saxony, whether the conditions are 'revolutionary' or not makes no difference to this choice. To accept governmental responsibility as a minority under conditions of revolutionary crisis is, if anything, worse than doing so in 'peaceful times': a crisis demands urgent solutions, and communists can only offer these solutions from opposition.

Mike does make a mistake here, because in revolutionary times there is the possibility of establishing united-front governments that can become transitional to the dictatorship of the proletariat. But it would require a fairly long exposition if we wanted to explore this question, and the present article is already long. So let us focus simply on the idea of a "minimum programme for participation in a government". Used in this way, the idea of a "minimum programme" seems like a clear and useful concept. In the history of the revolutionary movement, however, the same term was first used in a different sense - most clearly by the Bolshevik Party before 1917 - to mean a programme that would limit itself to bourgeois-democratic demands, since that was the expected class character of the coming Russian revolution.

As I was working on the present article, it occurred to me that if I am understanding Mike correctly we might also formulate this as 'the minimum programme for a proletarian dictatorship'. I sent him a note asking whether he agrees that the two formulations are equivalent ('minimum programme for participating in a government' and 'minimum programme for the dictatorship of the proletariat'). He wrote back that, yes, they both express essentially the same social content. This underlines the importance of not confusing any call we might raise for a 'minimum programme' with the pre-1917 use by the Bolsheviks of the same term.

(b) "Kautskyism": Mike writes: "Kautskyism" means the struggle for an independent workers' party, intimately linked to independent workers' media, trade unions, cooperatives and so on, and for - at least symbolic - internationalism." (p149) Personally I can embrace 'Kautskyism' in this form. I only object when this form is counterposed to the idea of insurrection based on a mass strike or other social crisis.

Many have, however, used 'Kautskyism' to describe the capitulation to national defencism in World War I. It is imperative, therefore, that, if we want to use the term to mean something different, we offer our definition clearly and put it up front - also probably note the contrasting definition that we reject.

Blind alleys?

Mike refers only in passing to 'permanent revolution', but his formulation contains a key error that I

think is important for us to talk about:

I have said nothing about the 'permanent revolution' versus 'stages theory'. Again, a principal lesson of the 20th century is that both approaches are blind alleys. In addition, both are strategic approaches to pre-capitalist states and countries under global capitalism. There are a few of these left, but not enough to justify treating the issues as fundamental to strategy. (pp156-57)

And yet 'permanent revolution' was not, actually, about revolutionary struggles in pre-capitalist states. It was initially formulated to deal with the revolutionary struggle in Russia, which was a less-developed imperialist nation ruled by a feudal autocracy, not "pre-capitalist". Later Trotsky theorised permanent revolution further, applying the concept to other countries where the completion of the bourgeois-democratic revolution remained a central task. It did, therefore, also apply to pre-capitalist states. But it was not specifically about them. 'Stages theory' was a contrasting approach to precisely the same set of social conditions.

Permanent revolution asserted that in the 20th century, bourgeois-democratic revolutionary tasks could not be properly resolved without simultaneously engaging the socialist revolution. In my view this remains a key element of revolutionary strategy today, one which clearly revealed its importance as recently as the fall of apartheid in South Africa in 1992.

The belief that the anti-apartheid struggle could be waged strictly around the question of 'democracy' (in the bourgeois sense of that term), is precisely what has led the South African masses into their present impasse. The same dilemma arises every time there is a struggle to liberate a nation from imperial domination. A choice inevitably faces these struggles - the same choice that is answered in contrasting ways by permanent revolution and stages theory: Should the strategy be to promote a native capitalism, in the expectation that this will carve out more favourable relationships with the imperial powers? Or should the struggle pursue a proletarian revolutionary agenda, solving problems related to 'democracy' and national independence in the process?

Two other areas where I disagree with Mike, but that he refers to only in passing in *Revolutionary strategy*, are the transitional method ('transitional programme') and our attitude toward sectoral organising ('identity politics'). We will have to deal with these some other time, since this particular book does not give us easy-to-cite quotations.

In closing let me return to the theme I stressed at the outset, because in the length of this exposition it might have been forgotten:

All these differences about historical and theoretical matters, interesting and important as they may be, should not constitute an obstacle to the formation of a common revolutionary political current based on the convergence Mike and I should, in my judgment, be able to develop regarding questions of revolutionary strategy.

I hope readers walk away after reading all I have said above with that thought foremost in their minds ●

Notes

1. Steve Bloom's first article - 'Historical and methodological differences' *Weekly Worker* August 29: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1504/historical-and-methodological-differences.
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DEBATE



Chernobyl: not a happy ending

Another useful innocent

Nuclear power should be supported because it is conducive to trade union organisation and because it is a way of dealing with all that weapons-grade plutonium. So argues **Leszek Karlik**, a member of Poland's soft-left Razem party

Jack Conrad is certainly right in his assertion that the destruction of the planet is not wrought by any particular technology, but by the M-C-M' cycle, with its imperative for endless exponential growth, which is simply impossible within limited planetary boundaries.¹

Having said that, Emil Jacobs is also right in his assertion that we cannot ignore the nuclear option if we are to save the biosphere from unsustainable level of carbon emissions (within the same exponentially driven capitalist economy some technologies are still much more harmful to the climate than others).²

I am a member of the Polish Razem [Together] party. I would not call myself a 'communist' for many reasons (having been born under the rule of an authoritarian government that called itself 'communist', for one), but I am certainly a fellow traveller. If I had to label myself, it would be 'pro-degrowth eco-socialist' - and yet I am pro-nuclear³. This position is not uncommon on the Polish left.

In 1989 the Polish Round Table Agreement began the process of Poland's transformation from a 'real socialist' economy to a capitalist one. In the process talks on many topics were conducted between the ruling Polish United Workers' Party and the pro-democratic opposition (which was not very pro-capitalist at the time)⁴. One of those topics was nuclear power, because Poland was on course to build a Russian VVER-400 reactor (a much safer design than Chernobyl's RBMK) in Żarnowiec,⁵ and the opposition (which had many representatives of coal mining trade unions), wanted the project stopped. They called it 'Żarnobyl' and they succeeded.

The arguments they used were simple: it is dangerous, and it is expensive, compared to fossil fuels. They wanted Poland to diversify from coal alone - to coal, natural gas and petroleum. And the representatives of the 'communist government' pointed out that using fossil fuels will become a problem, because works were already underway to sign international agreements to combat climate change, and nuclear power would be a tool to reduce Poland's emissions. The answer of the opposition side? "Install filters on smokestacks."⁶

The argument about the risks of coming climate change was ignored.

Some negotiators on the opposition side, who were so ardently pro-fossil fuels during the Round Table talks went on to join the Green Party

and became anti-fossil fuel, while remaining ardently anti-nuclear.

The nuclear power plant in Żarnowiec (four reactors at 440 MW each) was not built. It is possible to calculate the death toll of this decision, because Poland did not transition to renewables then (to be fair, no-one on the opposition side suggested it). We did not even transition to natural gas, the pollution from which kills fewer people than coal. We kept burning coal for decades,⁷ to the satisfaction of multiple well-organised miners' unions - amongst the few unions that kept their power in neoliberal Poland. Unlike coal miners, when nurses' or teachers' unions tried to strike for better pay, they were crushed, but miners were always able to get their way.

The continuous burning of coal that would be replaced by Żarnowiec killed somewhere between 10,000 and 40,000 people (probably towards the high point of those figures, as historically most studies have tended to underestimate the death toll resulting from air pollution). And it released over half a gigaton of CO₂ into the atmosphere - an enormous amount that is going to stay there and overheat the planet for hundreds of years.⁸

Nuclear waste is a problem, but, compared to fossil fuel waste, it is not on the same order of magnitude.

Democratic

We cannot use technology to get us out of a maths problem, and the continuous, exponential growth capitalism needs to maintain the M-C-M' cycle is a maths problem. We need to transition to a steady-state economy, degrowing some parts of it (like, say, advertising, fast fashion, SUV manufacture, gambling and so on), while growing others (socialised housing, free education for everyone, agriculture that is not actually destroying the planet, plant-based meat replacements and so on). Anything else is a pipe dream, because the maths of exponential growth is merciless.

However, opposition to nuclear power as a technology is a harmful relic of past struggles and, as the example of the internet shows, there are no 'inherently democratic' technologies. I remember the hype at the beginnings of the internet. It was 'decentralised'! It would free us from the control of large media corporations. Everybody could become a journalist! Everybody could host their own server! The technology was networked, distributed, and thus

inherently would support democracy, would interpret censorship as damage and route around it.

We all know how it ended up, and now I read the same hype about 'distributed', 'decentralised' and 'democratic' renewables. Fool me once - shame on me. Fool me twice...?

Power industry

The only thing that can remove monopoly power from corporations is not any kind of technology, but politics. Workers' power, state power, elections and trade unions.

And no technology is inherently anti-democratic either. Any power industry is an industry. For example, I am a freelance translator. I have translated technical documentation for wind power plants and coal power plants. The end customer was the same: a large international corporation that also manufactures turbines for nuclear power plants. The gas industry has actually provided a lot of lobbying support for renewables.⁹ Somehow, in a capitalist economy, nobody is bothering to turn off their factories when there is a windless spell of low sun. Instead, we crank up the natural gas plants. A capitalist economy with a high share of wind and solar will have fossil fuel infrastructure locked in, probably slapping some 'green hydrogen ready' stickers on the fossil gas pipelines and fossil gas power plants - a greenwashing exercise the capitalists excel at.¹⁰

This is why Germany with its *Energiewende* and *Atomusstieg* had to rely on "hugely beneficial" (as Jack Conrad calls them) deals for fossil gas from Russia - gas stolen from indigenous people by Russian imperialism, and extremely harmful to the climate. It turns out that there are huge, unreported leaks of methane from rickety Russian gas pipelines,¹¹ built on the quicksand of what we once, in our ignorance, called the 'permafrost'. It turned out not to be so 'perma', when we started overheating the planet!¹²

When we transition to the eco-socialist economy that we envision for our future, there will be no corporations that bend politicians to their will. But before we transition there, we need to build workers' power, as shown by the effectiveness of the miners' unions in Poland in preventing any meaningful transformation for decades.

And nuclear power is much more conducive to unionisation and union power than rooftop solar, just as car factories are hotbeds of unionism,

compared to, say, driving Ubers and delivering food on e-bikes. A highly educated workforce that has to come to the same place day in and day out is something that capitalists prefer to avoid (so for many of them a vision of a renewable-powered future is preferable to one with nuclear power plants), but for nuclear it is absolutely necessary and unavoidable.¹³ Which is why political parties of the left should really support developing nuclear industry - and nationalising it, of course, as a critical part of the infrastructure.

As for the long-lasting legacy of 'nuclear waste', something that Jack Conrad seems to miss is that we can have waste that is highly radioactive and very dangerous, or we can have waste that is extremely long-lasting. We cannot have both, because of hard physics: if something has a long half-life (like Plutonium-239, with its 24,000 years), it means that nuclear decay that produces stray particles (what we call 'radioactivity') occurs rarely. Plutonium-239 is not a radioactive danger to humans, but the short-lived isotopes are (they are usually mixed in with the long-lived isotopes, but can be filtered out in the process of recycling nuclear waste).

What is a significant radioactive danger are the short-lived radioisotopes used in medicine and in non-destructive testing in industry - like the infamous cobalt-60 radiation source,¹⁴ with its 'drop and run' inscription and a half-life of five years. And yet we never see anti-nuclear activists demonstrating in front of oncology wards, to ban 'dangerous nuclear medicine'¹⁵ from our hospitals and stick to chemotherapy only, even though cancer radiotherapy produces nuclear waste (and requires nuclear reactors to create some of the isotopes that we use for medical diagnostics and to fight cancer).

And the hardest and biggest problem of 'radioactive waste' is the weapons-grade material that currently rests inside the Trident missiles and other weapons of mass destruction. It will remain dangerous and weapons-grade, even after global demilitarisation and the decommissioning of the nuclear triad. The only way to get rid of weapons-grade plutonium in the bright future of global peace and prosperity is to transform it into reactor fuel and burn it up in fission reactors to generate electricity - a true 'swords to ploughshares' miracle.

And this is not just a theoretical possibility either: after the fall of the

USSR the Megatons to Megawatts Programme purchased 500 metric tons of old Soviet warhead material (90% enriched uranium-235) and converted it to low enriched uranium (less than 5% U-235), which was then used as fuel in the US nuclear reactor fleet. For two decades, as much as 10% of US electricity was generated from old Soviet nuclear weapons material.¹⁶ The same can be done with all nuclear weapons material in the world, since plutonium can also be used in light-water reactors (mixed with uranium in MOX fuel).

But we can only do this if we keep nuclear as part of the energy mix, and we keep the skills of nuclear engineers, physicists and designers alive. And before we end capitalism we need to build workers' power. Nuclear will help with that ●

Notes

1. 'Nuclear power's useful idiots' *Weekly Worker* August 29: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1504/nuclear-powers-useful-idiots.
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3. www.weplanet.org/post/degrowing-the-global-economy-will-require-accepting-nuclear-power.
4. polishhistory.pl/the-long-route-to-polands-round-table-agreement.
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6. The website with transcripts of the environmental 'sub-table' is gone, but the internet archive still has them: web.archive.org/web/20160405200759/http://okragly-stol.pl/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/1989-02-24_ekologia.pdf; web.archive.org/web/20160406015750/http://okragly-stol.pl/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/1989-03-10_ekologia.pdf.
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15. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goiania_accident.
16. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Megatons_to_Megawatts_Program.

REVIEW

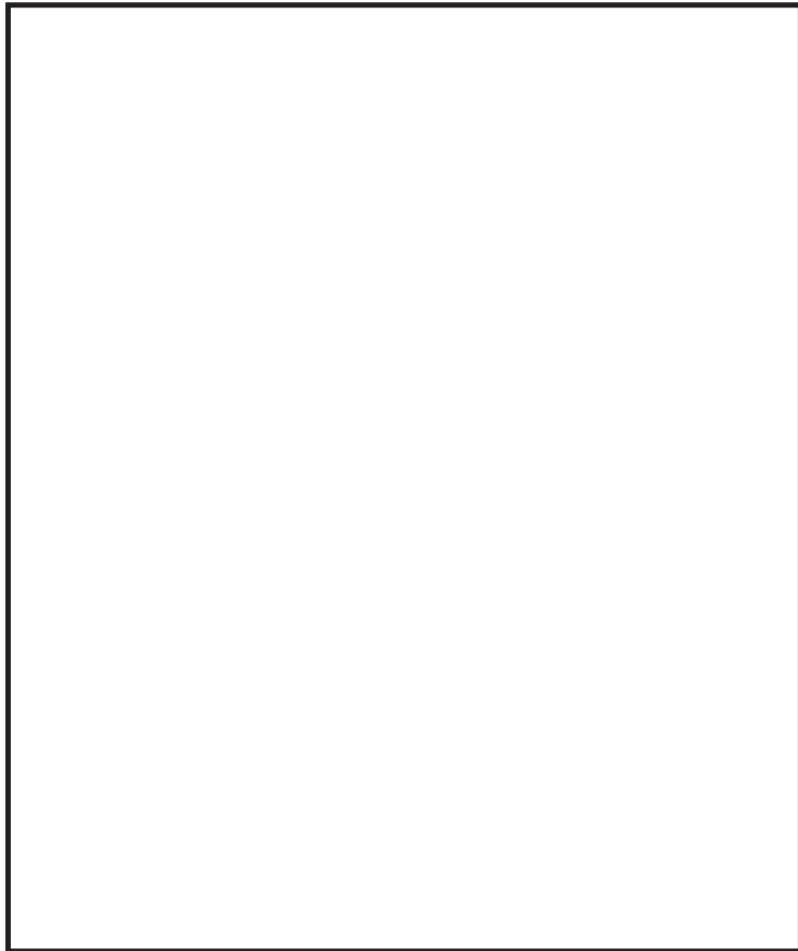
Hip-hoppers with a cause

Rich Peppiatt (director) *Kneecap* 2024, general release

The film *Kneecap* is a biopic on the rise of the Belfast-based Irish-language republican rap group of the same name, consisting of Liam Óg O'Hannaidh, Naoise Ó Cairealláin and JJ Ó Dochairtaigh (better known as Mo Chara, Móglaí Bap and DJ Provaí respectively). The trio each received some acting training and starred as themselves - presumably because this was easier than training actors to rap in Ulster Irish (!) - but their acting ability is never in question. Fionnuala Flaherty, Simone Kirkby, Josie Walker and Michael Fassbender also give excellent performances.

Being someone invested in *Gaeilge* (the Irish language) and in Irish trad music, I am totally biased in the film's favour and probably have too particular an interest to speak to the experience of the average cinema-goer who stumbles into it. But my sense is that *Kneecap* is such a chaotic, exciting, against-the-odds story that viewers need not be intimidated by the apparently niche topic.

In interviews, the *Kneecap* rappers have brought attention to the genocide in Palestine and frequently speak about the impact of British imperialism around the world, not only in Ireland. They want a united Ireland, but do not have any illusions that taking back the Six Counties will automatically be an advance for the working class, asserting that they have more in common with loyalist workers than with



Dialects, bilingualism and radical politics too

bourgeois Irish nationalists. On the *Late late show*, Mo Chara stated, "A workers' revolution is the way forward, rather than one based on a god that might not even exist." So it is tempting to think of them as being 'on our side' and so to

be disappointed that the film does not go further politically - though the funding from the British Film Institute and Northern Ireland Screen presumably imposes significant limits.

For *Kneecap*, as *Gaeilgeoiri* (Irish speakers), Irish and English are both tools at their disposal. Most of their songs swap between the languages as they please, with a liberal use of loanwords. Even if you do not have your *cúpla focal* (speaking just a little Irish), you will win no prizes for guessing the meanings of "Foc mí, ní fhaca mé na bastaird"; "Ag wankáil like foc"; or "Bhi an DUP harrasin' me".

In one scene DJ Provaí/JJ, a music teacher in a *gaelscoil* (Irish language school) and boyfriend to language activist Caitlin, is covering for an Irish lesson. He and the pupils are frustrated by how the supposedly 'updated' textbooks are all about cutting turf, rather than reflecting how the language can be used today. It would be equally silly to want all media in or about Irish to be serious and political, even if it is a persecuted minority language. A language may be 'politicised', but no language is inherently more revolutionary than any other (and it was once very normal for Ulster Protestants to speak Irish, and to take part in Irish traditional music and dance). If a language is really alive, then you should be able to use it for your shopping, for arguing politics, for complaining about the police, and for writing a song or movie about drugs. So Arlene Foster and Jeffrey Donaldson are mentioned by name, as is the golden rule of Irish spelling, as is just about every illicit substance you can think of.

All that is not to say the film is politically empty. Given the group's image, the accusations made against them by unionist politicians, the censorship of their music by RTE radio (courageously opposed by the west Belfast mummies) and the prejudice

many people have about Irish, it is necessary for them to take sectarianism seriously, in their interviews and in this film.

Mo Chara's love interest, Georgia (Jessica Reynolds), hates him for singing "Tiocfaidh ár lá, get the Brits out, lad!" And as a viewer your sympathy is with Georgia, even as Mo Chara tries to explain he means the British state, not individual Brits like her. At the end we have a glimpse of Georgia in an Irish class for adults - presumably a nod to the success of promoting the language in east Belfast. There was hardly any mention of loyalist paramilitaries, whereas the fecklessness and adventurism of dissident republican groups is, however, important to the story, along with the desperate clinging to his long-dead and best forgotten political cause from Naoise's father, Arló.

Another political issue not shied away from is police brutality, and the police and gang violence that results from the criminalisation of drugs. It is humorously explained that this is something that unites the different communities: "Nothing brings people in Belfast together like throwing shite at the peelers."

If you go to an Irish pub session in most cities, you will probably have the occasional rousing song amidst the breakneck jigs and reels. If you are exceptionally lucky, you will have the chance to hear a *sean-nós* (old-style) singer. Along with the harp, this style of singing is venerated, but has become fairly marginal in the traditional music scene. The composer, Seán Ó Riada, described it as the best example of Ireland's 'classical' music: highly developed and ornamented, having more in common with Indian music, owing to its oral rather than notated transmission. There are examples of *sean-nós* singing in the *Kneecap* soundtrack and, very touchingly, from Móglaí Bap's agoraphobic mother. I understood the inclusion of this art form to mean that there is just as much danger in forgetting your traditions and history as there is in not evolving at all.

Kneecap ends hopefully but without triumphalism. The future of Irish is uncertain *gan dabht* ('without a doubt'). It is not the case that things have been on a straightforward upward trend since the Gaelic revival of the 19th century. Schools have been established and rights have been secured in the republic and the north, but there have been many failures and setbacks too: most dialects of Irish have already become extinct and there remain no more monolingual Irish-speakers. There is much more that could still be lost.

Such is the fight for any minoritised language and such is the daily struggle of every working class artist ●

Billy Clark

Fighting fund

Supplement next week

I'm afraid I have to report on what is always the least productive part of the month for the *Weekly Worker* fighting fund - the second week, when we receive the least in terms of regular monthly payments, be they by standing order or PayPal.

And I'm sorry to say that week two in September has so far followed that trend, with just £264 coming our way in the last week, while the monthly target is, of course, £2,250. In other words, a little over a tenth of that target was received in almost a quarter of the time!

But let's not get too worried just yet - I'm sure I'll have much larger sums to report in the next couple of weeks! But how much larger - that's the question!

And how could I forget. Next week we are featuring an eight-page supplement, 'A hundred years of the Lenin cult is enough!', written by none other than the always excellent Lars T Lih. That means an extra four pages in the paper, so it will be an eight-pager plus the supplement. Comrades can order extra copies from the usual address.

Of course, this will cost us a little more when it comes to our printers, but a lot more when it comes to postage (especially with the latest exorbitant price increase). I would, therefore, make a special plea for

financial support - it is always appreciated.

As for this week, the most generous amount received in the last seven days was comrade RL's PayPal donation of £50. He was one of five who used that channel to help us out this week - thanks also to GS (£15), MH (£10), JV (£7) and KA (£5).

Then there were those standing orders and one-off bank transfers. Thanks go to BO (£35), DV and NH (£30 each), GD (£25), RW (£12), plus IS, SM, PM and CC (£10 each). And how could I forget comrade Hassan? Once again, he handed a five-pound note to one of our team!

Well, all that takes our running total up to £705 - definitely a little bit below par with over a third of the month gone, and we still need £1,545. But I know things will start to pick up - so many of our readers respect the invaluable role of the *Weekly Worker* in our consistent fight for genuine, democratic Marxist unity.

Please play your part in making sure we go all the way once again! ●

Robbie Rix

Our bank account details are name: Weekly Worker sort code: 30-99-64 account number: 00744310 To make a donation or set up a regular payment visit weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/donate

What we fight for

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Netanyahu wants war, not peace

No illusions in Histadrut

There is no possibility of a united Jewish-Arab working class politics at this historic juncture. Meanwhile, Netanyahu is using every and any excuse to keep the war in Gaza going, writes **Yassamine Mather**

On September 2 there was an attempt at a general strike in Israel (it was quickly aborted following a court order). This occurred after the death of six Israeli captives held by Hamas. We do not know exactly how they died and the issue remains a matter of dispute (in times of war, one should be very cautious about making assumptions). The Israeli authorities claim the captives were shot by Hamas, which could be true, possibly because Israel had sent a team led by security agency Shin Bet to try to free them. On the other hand, Hamas has its version of the story: the hostages were shot by Israeli forces or died in a bombing raid.

It was these deaths that sparked the call for a general strike by Histadrut, the Israeli union confederation, following protests organised by relatives of the captives. The action was primarily effective in municipalities where the opposition is strong, like Tel Aviv. An Iranian-born, pro-Netanyahu Zionist with whom I was recently debating on a TV programme claimed there were no strikes in northern Israel and reports suggest support for them was much weaker in government sectors, particularly in Jerusalem (and especially east Jerusalem, where the politics lean more towards the settlers and rightwing supporters of the current government).

The day before the general strike, there were reports of large demonstrations, not least in Tel Aviv, with a total of 500,000 taking to the streets throughout the country. That is a significant number, considering the size of the Jewish-Israeli population. But it was not just Histadrut behind the strike: various corporations also encouraged employees to take the day off and join the protests.

Economism

Some elements of the left have commented that this strike was a harbinger of better times or a sign of Arab-Jewish unity. In my opinion this is a serious mistake. For example, a statement from the Socialist Party in England and Wales claimed that, for a brief moment, the general strike exposed where "real power" lies.¹ The main point is that the strike had the support of corporations and bosses, so it hardly demonstrated the "real power" of the working class. Rather, it illustrates the *lack of political independence* of the class, particularly when it is aligned with centrist or mainstream political factions within Zionism.

Successive opinion polls show that over 70% of the Israeli population now favour a deal that can lead to the return of the hostages. However, this does not mean opposition to the current war and genocide in Gaza. According to Dana Mills, writing on the website 972,

Among Israeli Jews, we did see just that: very high and sweeping support for the war ... consistent numbers of people who think the war is justified. But for questions that ask if Israel can achieve



Histadrut demonstration: firmly within the political frame of Zionism

"total victory" we see a decline in confidence, with around two-thirds rejecting Netanyahu's claims that such an outcome is within reach.²

Back in Britain, SPEW also highlighted poverty statistics, noting that 39% of Arab-Israelis and a similar percentage of ultra-Orthodox Jews, 35%, live in poverty. This is supposed to foster hope for a potential alliance between these blocs. However, in reality, most in the ultra-Orthodox population tend to support rightwing, not leftwing politics. Poverty alone does not automatically translate into left-leaning political views - think of the poor whites in the Antebellum South. Of course, a couple of decades ago the same organisation was telling us that the solution to the conflict in Northern Ireland lay in the unity of Protestant and Catholic workers - a typical economistic solution, ignoring the political implications of colonialism and imperialism.

Although some compare Histadrut with the UK's Trade Union Congress, it has historically been a pillar of the Zionist project, working to exclude Arab labour from the Israeli economy by demanding that employers hire only Jewish workers. This makes it quite different from other trade unions worldwide.

Given the political dynamics in Israel and its population, which consists of a 75% Jewish majority and 20% Arab minority, there is a prevailing trend towards rightwing

politics that exacerbates divisions within the working class. According to Dana Mills,

We have also seen the popularisation among Israeli Jews of some very extreme positions regarding the war, including opposing humanitarian aid and complete justification of almost all military actions. Commonly held opinions also include the argument that Israel should strike Hezbollah and Lebanon hard and that Israel should occupy Gaza and rebuild Jewish settlements there.³

That is why simplistic solutions, such as a bourgeois-democratic single state, encompassing the currently recognised state of Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, is not realistic. There is no reason to believe that those sections of the Hebrew working class who do benefit from settler-colonial policies should embrace such a solution. As comrade Moshé Machover keeps reminding us,

Under capitalism there is no way in which this overthrow of the Zionist regime can be expected to be supported by the Israeli Hebrew working class, for the simple reason that this would mean this class exchanging its present position of an exploited class, but with national privileges *vis-à-vis* the Palestinians, for a position of being a class still exploited by

capital, but without the national privileges. This is not a deal that is likely to have support from the main force that can overthrow the Zionist regime.⁴

That is why we should concentrate on the colonial nature of this conflict: its resolution can only be one of decolonisation. And we do need a regional solution based on Arab unification: such a vision would involve the overthrow of oppressive regimes in the region, offering an alternative to the Israeli Jewish majority - a vision of solidarity within the working class across Middle Eastern borders.

Philadephi corridor

Last week we also heard a lot of hype from Netanyahu, claiming that the Philadephi corridor (between Gaza and Egypt) is the main obstacle to the latest peace negotiations. As pointed out by several commentators in Israel, this is a red herring. The Israeli daily, *Haaretz*, fact-checked this Netanyahu claim and it appears it is a total fabrication - an excuse from the Israeli premier, not least given that he is under pressure from captive families and large scale protests. Others have pointed out that the rather childish diagram he displayed on Israeli TV, with arrows showing funds coming from Egypt to Gaza, is also deceptive - it does not show funds released by Qatar, which were sent to Israel and then forwarded to Hamas (before

October 7 2023).

According to reports in several Israeli papers, there was a lot of loudly expressed disagreement at a recent cabinet meeting. Those shouting at Netanyahu included the Mossad head who has been negotiating in Qatar, as well as commanders from the Israel Defence Forces, who disputed Netanyahu's claims about the corridor. Shin Bet's chief told the cabinet that the corridor was a non-issue, as it could be controlled electronically.

The Israeli premier has declared that he aims to capture or kill the Hamas leadership in Gaza, crucially Yahya Sinwar, demonstrating that he is not interested in peace negotiations, but wants to continue the war. Comrade Machover argues that while Netanyahu's immediate reasons for doing that are to stay in power and avoid conviction in court over corruption charges, there is the overriding Zionist goal of incorporating the whole of Palestine, which would, by definition, require large-scale ethnic cleansing to ensure a Jewish majority.

According to *Haaretz* editor Aluf Benn, Israel is now entering the second phase of its military campaign in Gaza, aiming to take full control of the northern Gaza Strip and potentially open the area for Jewish settlement and annexation, depending on international reactions. Palestinian residents in north Gaza could face expulsion, under the guise of "protecting their lives", while the IDF target Hamas militants. Netanyahu will likely regard such territorial expansion as a major victory.

In this phase, Israel has appointed colonel Elad Goren to oversee "humanitarian efforts" in Gaza, positioning him as a *de facto* "governor". Netanyahu has instructed the military to replace international organisations in distributing aid, which would give Israel control over essential resources and allow it to potentially remove the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees. According to this scenario, Hamas is expected to remain in control of the southern region, surrounded by Israeli forces. The Israeli government hopes that the worsening conditions for Palestinians in south Gaza will turn them against Hamas.

Then there is talk of yet another "promising" new proposal by the US and its allies. However, none of these proposals will work when the Israeli government continues its genocidal actions. Every day, every hour that the proposed ceasefire is delayed, more and more Palestinians, including hundreds of children, die - not just in Gaza, but in the West Bank; and not just from military action, but from preventable diseases, poor diet and hunger ●

Notes

1. *The Socialist* September 5-11 2024.
2. www.972mag.com/israeli-public-opinion-war-gaza.
3. *Ibid.*
4. "One-state, two-state illusions *Weekly Worker* May 5: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1489/one-state-two-state-illusions.