

A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity

weekly **worker**



**What sort of party? Not another
confessional sect, broad left
alliance or loose network**

- Letters and debate
- Germany's election
- Kurdistan memories
- Trump's curious cabinet

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Towards a mass Communist Party

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**State and
Secularism**

LETTERS



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

Pogrom?

Readers will have woken not so long ago to the shocking news of a pogrom. Not just a pogrom, but one in Europe - indeed in Amsterdam, the city of Anne Frank (she was not a Zionist). Zionists all over the world were cock-a-hoop, this was perhaps the best news they'd had all year. Netanyahu, Biden, Starmer and loads of good friends of Zionism (like Geert Wilders - another man to the right of decent folk) were celebrating.

Looking online, straightaway there were three articles, including comments in *Jewish News* and nine (!) in the *Jewish Chronicle* - the latter including a piece by Stephen Pollard, which had lines like: "In 2024, in the middle of a European capital city, pogroms are back." And later, "Here in the UK the police do next to nothing, as tens of thousands are allowed their regular Jew hate-fest, marching alongside openly anti-Semitic banners and chanting Jew hate slogans." And, rounding up: "More - and, I am sure, worse - is coming, because it always does when the authorities let it. All of the past year's acceleration in Jew hate has been entirely predictable. As is what comes next." So, serious stuff.

There was a lot online from the left. David Broder had an article on *Jacobin* on November 9. He opened with: "Maccabi Tel Aviv fans rioting in Amsterdam chanted slogans like 'There are no schools in Gaza, as there are no children left'. Far from just extremist provocations, their slogans tell the truth about Israeli war aims." This is not a quote that I've seen in full in the mainstream media.

From the left there has been plenty of description of what went on - timelines, quotes and therefore some straightforward, honest reporting. The Zionists started it, a bunch of football hooligans strutting around town as if they were in Israel, perhaps not realising that they were not necessarily in a majority outside home.

We can believe the accounts from the left (or relative left) - in *Jacobin*, *CounterPunch*, *Mondoweiss*, Gideon Levy in *Ha'aretz* ... to name but a few. One reason that we can believe them is that the mainstream gives much the same account, but with gaps and with facts (but, as they say, the latter are not necessarily in the right order).

A couple of examples: on November 9 *The Guardian* had the headline, "Arrests in Amsterdam follow violent attacks on Israeli football fans". The mayor of Amsterdam then spoke of "an outburst" of anti-Semitism. A little further on in the story the police chief said that there had been "incidents on both sides", starting on Wednesday night when Maccabi fans tore down a Palestine flag ... and shouted, "Fuck you, Palestine". Then they'd vandalised a taxi (always a mistake - taxi drivers tend to help each other out and are in easy mutual communication).

The *Financial Times* on the same day reported: "Attacks on Israeli football fans visiting Amsterdam spark diplomatic incident". They reported a vandalised taxi and a burnt flag, along with "anti-Arab slogans", but, as with *The Guardian*, outrage at 'anti-Semitism' comes first.

The story continues in the mainstream media and online. The MSM that I've seen is mostly about what various people have said about the matter - usually, of course, assorted politicians and other public figures. 'We're giving you the news! This is what they said!' Not an uncommon ploy; this means that mainstream

nonsense can be publicised, while in-depth analysis can be left for another day (or year).

So a few football hooligans get thumped and that's a 'pogrom' - so what is a few thousand children bombed in their tents to be called? Collateral damage? Human shields? Politicians and the media will be aiming to use these events, along with all their other ammo, to try to deter and repress the demonstrations worldwide against genocide. But millions will fight back against this and have yet another layer of contempt for the powers that be.

Jim Nelson
email

RCP approval?

It is disappointing that a member of the Revolutionary Communist Party feels they are being discouraged from reading outside of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky (Letters, November 14). I looked at the reading list on the RCP website and it also suggests *Reform or revolution* by Rosa Luxemburg and *Bolshevism: the road to revolution* by Alan Woods (but surprisingly nothing by Ted Grant, the RCP tendency's founder).

If straying from this narrow bunch is met with 'Best stick to revolutionary thinkers - they are bourgeois academics', as claimed - then it is doubly disappointing. By way of texts by influential writers from a similar era, who are definitely revolutionary thinkers and not mere bourgeois academics, I recommend *The class struggle* by Karl Kautsky, *No compromise, no political trading* by Wilhelm Liebknecht and *Leninism or Marxism* by Rosa Luxemburg.

It should be obvious there are many more modern texts by revolutionary thinkers, and if you prefer modern, then you should be more concerned about drowning in the information overload of irrelevant published material these days than if the RCP approves.

Jon D White
email

Legal abuse

The British state continues to abuse counter-terrorism powers against activists in order to protect the interests of Israel's genocidal campaign.

On November 19, counter-terrorism police raided and arrested 10 more people in relation to an action taken by Palestine Action on August 6 against Elbit's Filton-based research and development hub. Reports of the raids undertaken include family members and room mates being expelled from their own homes by counter-terrorism police for up to three days. The mother and younger brother of one arrested on the day were also cuffed during the initial raid, despite not being accused of any offence.

These arrests were made in relation to the case of the 'Filton 10' - individuals who have been detained since August 6, following an action which cost Elbit Systems, Israel's largest arms company, over £1 million in damages. Despite being arrested under the Terrorism Act, the Filton 10 were all charged with non-terror offences, including aggravated burglary, criminal damage and violent disorder. However, the police have continued to use the Terrorism Act to deploy authoritarian powers against further people in relation to the case.

Amnesty International UK has issued an alarm that British police are using these Terrorism Act powers to "circumvent normal legal protections". The Filton 10 are being held on remand ahead of a trial in November 2025, and are subjected to arbitrary and severe restrictions.

A Palestine Action spokesperson has stated: "The British state are

wielding counter-terrorism powers against those they accuse of being engaged in direct action against Israel's weapons trade. They are acting to protect the interests of a foreign genocidal regime, over the rights and freedoms of its own citizens. The only 'terrorists' here are those assisting and arming Israel's genocide. Palestine Action will not bow to this repression."

Palestine Action
email

Kevin Bean

I was shocked and very upset to hear that Kevin Bean had passed away. I knew he was ill, but did not realise how ill he was. I want to offer my condolences to his family, friends and comrades.

I knew of Kevin for a few years, read his articles and had seen him occasionally at meetings. But I did not get to know him until relatively recently via the educational work we both got involved in through the Labour Left Alliance. Then I got to know Kevin quite well.

He was a real republican, unlike many of the Labour and Marxist left who are indifferent to democratic questions and whose republicanism is at best passive and tokenistic. He saw it as an important political question for today. He had a deep knowledge of republican ideas and a real love of history - and in particular working class history. Of all the comrades I worked with through the LLA, Kevin was the one that I felt the closest affinity with.

More important than this, he was very comradely and friendly, with a generous spirit. I have heard similar comments from some members of his own party who knew him better than I did. It was a great pleasure and indeed an honour to cooperate with him on political education.

At a time like this it is obvious that Kevin's passing is a great loss to his family and friends. But I want to add my voice to those who recognise that our working class movement has lost a very principled comrade, who contributed so much and, sad to say, still had more to give. It is a great loss to all of us.

Steve Freeman
London

Aliens await

Like Jack Conrad in his 'Notes on the war' (November 14), I too think that the present situation is similar to pre-1914. But, unlike Jack, I don't think that the Russia-Ukraine war is what could potentially trigger World War III. The real trigger for World War III may be the Israel-Iran conflict, should it escalate beyond a certain point. Also like Jack, I think the big difference between pre-1914 and now is the existence of nuclear weapons. We now have enough weapons to wipe out humanity several times over.

Unlike Jack, I don't think the real problem is the lack of a viable socialist alternative. In Britain, for instance, a radicalisation of the Labour Party is inevitable when global capitalism falls. But we don't need Leninist totalitarianism (ie, the banning of factions), which collapsed in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. What we need is democratic socialism.

Another difference between Jack and myself is that I consider he may be 100% Marxist, like most of the revolutionary left, whereas I consider myself to be about 80% Marxist. In other words, for me Marxism is about 20% flawed, and this relates to economics, philosophy and politics. Many, if not most, people on the far left regard Marxism as 100% correct.

As a doctrine, in terms of ideology, Marxism is, of course, 100% terrestrial. This was understandable for a doctrine which came from the

19th century. Now that we are in the space age, we can't automatically limit ourselves to a purely terrestrial world view. It is necessary to go off-planet, if the occasion warrants this. In other words, we may need to develop an extra-terrestrial world view. This means we may need to catch up with the Christians, while correcting their interpretation of biblical text.

Christian theology speaks of the end-times. But the end of what exactly? Apparently what they mean is the end of man's rule over the nations. Man's rule is leading to a nuclear armageddon, they argue. Can anyone seriously deny that capitalism, which is the present form taken by man's rule, will lead to nuclear war sooner or later? Putting an end to capitalism today, unlike in Marx's day, is essentially about the survival of the human species.

Bible prophecies tell us of a coming great crisis, which will threaten the very existence of humanity, and that this in turn will lead to an extraterrestrial intervention. For over 2,000 years Christians have presented this possible extraterrestrial (or 'alien') intervention as a religious narrative, under the rubric of the 'second coming'. Christian eschatology may contain a hidden truth in a religious guise. I would like to hear from anyone who thinks that an alien intervention in human affairs is impossible. I am sure that there must be some close-minded people on the left who would never entertain such a possibility. Although this may make me sound like HG Wells in his *War of the worlds*, I think we should keep our minds open, and be prepared for anything.

What communists may need to do is strip away the religious ideology, which could be concealing events that communists are unaware of: a possible alien intervention, presented as a religious narrative by the clergy. This is a "fantastic reality" of a different kind to what Jack meant when he wrote a book by that name.

Tony Clark

For Democratic Socialism

History homily

I have seen some remarks from different socialists which seem to place history and theory in opposition to each other. History, they say, is what really happened: therefore it is superior to theory.

Insofar as the word 'theory' is often (and unfortunately) used to denote any speculative or unsupported opinions, which have no grounding in experience, the proposition is sound. But it follows from such a definition that when these socialists compare history to theory, they are really comparing history to drivel - they compare instructive histories to the worst examples of 'theory': opinions which have little or no relation to experience, and which are therefore of no use to anybody.

This is not a just comparison. It would be more apt to place good history next to good theory, and to place bad history next to bad theory, before making a judgment as to which of the two is superior. But even this method would be misleading, because history and theory amount to the same thing, when they are considered as guides to future action.

If I want to learn from a history, in order to apply my knowledge to future situations, I must have some understanding of causes and effects; and I must be able to abstract from the particular historical circumstances to a more general rule. As soon as the reader of a history applies his intellect to identifying these causal sequences, to guide his future action, he becomes a theorist. The framing of general propositions from experience is precisely the work of theory; and the theory is good insofar as it is supported by the evidence of the past. Hence theory and history are indissolubly connected: we cannot have one without the other.

What, then, is the distinction between history and theory, when considered as guides to our political action? Supposing that we are comparing like with like - good history with good theory - they merely differ in emphasis. A good work of history accumulates evidence, correctly identifies causal sequences and furnishes the material for the production of theories. A good work of theory is founded upon experience - that is, historical evidence - but its object is not to narrate or to explain past events in detail: it is to bring together generalisations, and from these to infer what is likely to happen, and how we should act, given our circumstances.

Talal Hangari
London

Fighting fund

Towards that party

It's been quite a good week for the fighting fund, with a handy £739 coming our way, taking our running total for November up to £1,731.

The monthly target is, of course, £2,250, which means we still need a bit over £500 to get there, with 10 days still remaining, as I write. I'm pretty confident we can do that, but we could really do with drawing in a few hundred pounds extra to help us cope with all those rising costs. So let's not be complacent - please help us go shooting past that target!

Anyway, let me thank all the comrades who have just chipped in. Top of the list, with their fantastic three-figure donations are SK and PM, with an excellent £75 from MM and £50 each from GB and KS. Other standing orders/bank transfers came from TR (£40), CG (£24), DR (£20) and SA (£12). Finally MZ and

GS both came up with a useful £10 via PayPal.

So it's been a good week, but now we need to keep it up. As comrade CF writes, when renewing his subscription, "How could I not do this? Where else am I going to read such fantastic debates about the central issues we face?" Those "central issues", of course, include the kind of party the working class so desperately needs - a mass Communist Party.

To help us further this aim, please chip in to the *Weekly Worker* fighting fund. Click on the link below to see the different ways you can do that ●

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

GERMANY

An unpalatable choice

With a February 23 general election agreed, German society is set to move right, reports Carla Roberts

After the collapse of the ‘traffic light’ coalition government of Social Democrats, Greens and Free Democrat liberals, elections have been called for February 23 - a small and probably final victory for the Social Democratic chancellor Olaf Scholz, who has resisted calls for an earlier election date. The main opposition parties are straining at the leash, particularly the conservative Christian Democrat - CDU/CSU - bloc, which is leading in the polls at 33%, ahead of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) with 19% and the leftwing Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) with around 7%.

The date is, however, too early for smaller parties, who have jointly complained that it will be almost impossible for them to collect the required number of signatures in time - not only because they have to gather signatures from an average of 2,000 supporters in each of the 16 federal states, but also because they have to be checked and approved by the regional governments, a process which can take weeks. Die Linke, incidentally, is now very much part of ‘the others’, polling a measly 3% (more below).

Scholz is hoping that his SPD (languishing at around 15%) might recover enough before February to at least be considered as junior coalition partner. The Greens too (at around 12%) are hoping that the likely new CDU chancellor, Friedrich Merz, will choose them to help manage capitalism, even one so clearly in decline.

The German economy is in dire straits and all the signs are pointing towards a recession. The important car sector alone is heading for a minus of 25% in the next quarter,¹ with Volkswagen currently implementing mass sackings - and that before Donald Trump has imposed any tariffs on European (and Chinese) products. Thanks in large part to the US-organised sabotage of the Nord Stream pipeline, the country is in what has been dubbed ‘Energiepreisschock’: while electricity prices in Germany are now 25% higher than in 2021, the price of gas has risen by almost 75%.² Both are almost 50% higher than in Britain.³

It had been an uneasy government coalition pretty much from the get-go in December 2021. After the worst of Covid was over, the SPD and Greens had hoped to spend the €60 billion (around £50 billion) that the German parliament had previously approved, but which remained unused. In the name of the ‘small state’, however, the FDP insisted on reinstating the famous *Schuldenbremse* debt cap - almost impossible, considering that the government also spent over €40 billion propping up Ukraine, making Germany its second largest financial backer after the US.⁴

With the FDP vetoing pretty much all planned investments, Scholz had no choice but to sack the main nay-sayer, finance minister Christian Lindner. Three other FDP ministers resigned, leaving the government without a majority. The FDP’s calculation was that it could distance itself from the increasingly unpopular government - but it has since transpired that it had been planning the move for many months, thereby purposefully paralysing the government and helping to make it even more unpopular. The FDP will be lucky to scrape back into the Bundestag after that revelation.

The February election will be all about the Ukraine war (and the economic misery largely caused by it) - even if not all the parties will say it openly. Scholz’s much-publicised hour-long telephone conversation



Sarah Wagenknecht: pre-split

with Vladimir Putin is of highly symbolic importance, even without any ‘real’ results. Despite all major parties continuing to claim that they will support Ukraine “no matter how long it takes”, everybody knows that Zelensky has no chance of continuing if the US turns off the taps.

Scholz is positioning the SPD on the slightly less gung-ho wing of the establishment - a sensible move, considering that the war is becoming increasingly unpopular. 51% of the German population is now against further weapons deliveries to Ukraine, with only 36% in favour.⁵ Among supporters of the Green Party, however, the picture is reversed: 74% want more weapons for Ukraine, while only 11% are against it, reflecting the development of the former pacifists into one of the most hawkish parties in Europe.

Last week’s Green congress confirmed that the party wants to continue the Ukraine war until there is a *Freiheitsfrieden* (‘freedom peace’) - “the Orwellian description of a ‘peace through victory’ against Moscow, down to the last Ukrainian and at the expense of the German economy”, as the left German newspaper, *Junge Welt*, comments. The Greens continue to demand the export of Taurus cruise missiles to Ukraine - but there is no chance of that happening now. Even the CDU has just rejected the move.

There is also real political pressure from the AfD and, to a lesser degree, the BSW, both of whom are very outspoken in their opposition to the war. Support for both will only increase, the longer this unwinnable war is dragged out. But the beginning of the end of German support is surely in sight.

This might reduce the popularity of both the AfD and the BSW - or not: after all, they will soon be able to celebrate a ‘told you so’ moment. No such luck for Die Linke, which is very unlikely to cross the 5% threshold required to get (back) into parliament. For a long time, its parliamentary presence has been the key reason why many on the left continued to support it, despite its political shortcomings. Aware that it is close to extinction, it has launched a “big listening drive”, and boasts that it has “already visited 12,000 households”. The motto of this daft exercise says it all: “We are turning your problems into our policies”.⁶

All the while, it continues to try and look ‘respectable’ and lays the blame for the Ukraine war firmly - and exclusively - at the feet of the Russian government, with no mention, let alone criticism, of the role of Nato and the attempt to reboot US global hegemony, touchingly calling for the UN to “organise peace negotiations”.⁷ In 2023, it famously refused to participate in a huge demonstration against the war, called by Sahra

Wagenknecht, because supporters of the AfD were expected to attend - the beginning of the end for Die Linke, which was then led by Janine Wissler (bureaucrat *par excellence* and former member of Linksruck, the German section of the International Socialist Tendency).

Die Linke is similarly ‘conflicted’ over Israel-Palestine and, although the most pro-Zionist wing around its leadership in Berlin just split, the party tries to stay ‘neutral’: “We oppose all forms of anti-Semitism. Our solidarity ends where the massacre of October 7 is celebrated as an act of resistance or the war crimes of the Israeli army are applauded.”⁸ Considering the draconian clampdown on the Palestine solidarity movement by the German state, this position is entirely useless.

The BSW too is very quiet on the issue. It is clearly a one-woman-show and there is no internal democracy to speak of. There certainly is no commitment to allowing political platforms, as in Die Linke. Sahra Wagenknecht calls all the shots and after the BSW did very well in the elections in three federal states in September, she has been very ‘hands on’ in the negotiations over the BSW’s participation in possible government coalitions: She continues to insist that various ‘red lines’ shall not be crossed, including a commitment not to send any more weapons to Ukraine (purely symbolic, seeing as this is not decided by regional governments). It is all very 1999 Die Linke-like and we would imagine that the pressure to ‘deliver reforms’ will get to her sooner rather than later, as it has done with a great number of ‘socialists’ before her, who believed that it is possible, as a junior coalition partner, to manage capitalism on behalf of the working class.

As for the right, the AfD might well come second in the February elections, but there is absolutely no chance that it will be allowed anywhere near government. All bourgeois parties - including the BSW and Die Linke - have put up a so-called *Brandmauer* (fire wall), refusing to cooperate even on a regional or local level. That might well change in the near to medium future, especially with the unstable political times ahead. But, even without being part of any government coalitions, the AfD has already changed the political landscape dramatically - it symbolises a massive shift to the right.

The AfD is absolutely blunt in pinning the economic problems not just on the Ukraine war, but, naturally, on migrants. While all other parties feign outrage over the AfD’s proposals to “remigrate” (ie, deport) hundreds of thousands of foreigners, they have *all* embraced the need for tougher immigration controls. This is also one of the reasons why Sahra Wagenknecht split from Die Linke - it was not populist enough! ●

Notes

1. www.tagesschau.de/wirtschaft/konjunktur/wirtschaftsleistung-prognose-rezession-100.html.
2. www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Wirtschaft/Preise/Erdgas-Strom-Durchschnittspreise/_inhalt.html.
3. In Germany, electricity costs 41 cents (35p) per kilowatt hour, gas is 11 cents (9p), while in Britain prices are currently capped at 24.5p for electricity and 6p for gas.
4. www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/deutschland-hilft-der-ukraine-2160274.
5. de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1454716/umfrage/umfrage-zu-waffenlieferungen-von-deutschland-an-die-ukraine.
6. www.die-linke.de/wahlen/grosse-befragung.
7. www.die-linke.de/themen/frieden/ukraine-krieg.
8. www.die-linke.de/start/presse/detail/zum-austritt-von-klaus-lederer-und-weiteren-genossinnen.

ACTION

Stop all arms sales to Israel

Saturday November 23, 11.30am: National demonstration. Assemble McLennan Arch, Glasgow Green G1. Pressure the Scottish government to implement divestment and end financial support to companies supplying the Israeli war machine. Organised by Stop the War Scotland: x.com/GlasgowStopWar.

How to beat your landlord

Saturday November 23, 2.30pm: Free community training. Copleston Centre, Copleston Road, Peckham, London SE15. Mould and damp? Disrepair? Deposit stolen? Facing eviction? Find out how to fight back. Organised by Acorn: www.acorntheunion.org.uk/swarktraining.

Marxism, imperialism and national liberation

Saturday November 23, 6pm: Onsite and online lecture, Marx Memorial Library, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1. Speaker Ofer Cassif is a member of the Israeli Knesset for Hadash and a lifelong member of the Communist Party of Israel. Registration free. Organised by Marx Memorial Library: www.marx-memorial-library.org.uk/event/489.

The conditions of the working class

Sunday November 24, 2pm: Radical readings, Maxwell Hall, University of Salford, 43 Crescent, Salford M5. Readings capturing the history of working class struggles that shaped our world. Performers include Maxine Peake and Julie Hesmondhalgh. Tickets £16.96. Organised by Working Class Movement Library: wcmf.org.uk/event/radical-readings-the-conditions-of-the-working-class.

What made us human?

Tuesday November 26, 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: ‘Gendered species: a natural history of patriarchy’. Speaker: Tamás Dávid-Barrett. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: www.facebook.com/events/537781228618353.

Rally for rent controls

Wednesday November 27, 6pm: Lobby of MSPs, Scottish Parliament Building, Horse Wynd, Edinburgh EH8. Tenants need rent controls - don’t allow landlords to water down the legislation. Organised by Living Rent: www.livingrent.org/rally_for_rent_controls.

Workplace day of action

Thursday November 28: TUC-backed nationwide actions in support of Palestinian trade unionists. Demand an immediate ceasefire, end arms sales to Israel, support BDS and free Palestine. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: palestinecampaign.org/events.

Save Scotland’s last oil refinery

Thursday November 28, 10am: Demonstration. Assemble Johnston Terrace (top end), Edinburgh EH1. March to Holyrood for rally with Sharon Graham. No ban without a plan - extend, invest, transition. Organised by Unite the Union: unitetheunion.org/campaigns/oil-and-gas-no-ban-without-a-plan.

Is Brics an alternative to US hegemony?

Thursday November 28, 7pm: Online discussion introduced by Yasmine Mather. Registration free. Organised by Why Marx?: www.facebook.com/whymarxism.

A loom for algebra: the analytical engine

Thursday November 28, 7.30pm: Public meeting, Wesley Memorial Church, New Inn Hall Street, Oxford OX1. Speaker: Edmund Griffiths. Organised by Oxford Communist Corresponding Society: oxfordccs@aol.com.

Socialist ideas to change the world

Saturday November 30 to Sunday December 1: Marxism weekend for students and young workers, venue in Peckham, London SE15. Build a fighting left to take on racism, imperialism and the system. Weekend ticket £22.38 (£16.96). Day ticket £11.55. Organised by Socialist Workers Party: x.com/MarxismFestival/status/1839626188588789805.

End Israel’s genocide in Gaza

Saturday November 30, 12 noon: National demonstration. Assemble Park Lane, London W1, march to Whitehall. End Gaza genocide, hands off Lebanon, don’t attack Iran, stop arming Israel. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: palestinecampaign.org/events.

Banks: divest from companies arming Israel!

Tuesday December 3, 7.20am: Protest outside the global banking summit, Convene Sancroft, Paternoster Square, London EC4. Barclays bankrolls Israel’s genocide, and its CEO is speaking at this event. Tell all the banks to stop arming Israel. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: palestinecampaign.org/events/protest-at-the-global-banking-summit.

Strikers! the Vale Rawlings story

Friday December 6, 7.30pm: Drama, Burton Town Hall, King Edward Place, Burton upon Trent DE14. The story of Vale Rawlings, who was jailed in June 1914 for allegedly assaulting a police inspector on a picket line. Tickets £11 (£7). Presented by Vale Rawlings - a forgotten Burton story: www.facebook.com/events/1032746131601034.

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.

IRAN



Fedayeen fighters

From Glasgow to Baghche

Yassamine Mather recalls her time in Kurdistan and the courage and determination, as well as the failings, of the militant Fedai opponents of the Islamic Republic

This article is about the Iranian left in Kurdistan in the early 1980s, based on my memories of the time I spent there.

The background lies in the repression meted out against those sections of the left opposing the Islamic Republic - which started almost immediately after the revolution of 1979. Large sections of the left were forced underground, the Organisation of Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas (Minority) being no exception.¹

After its first congress, held in secret in the spring of 1982, it faced major issues - one of the farms where members used to work and produce their weekly paper was raided by the security forces. Several comrades were killed, while others actually committed suicide, using cyanide tablets, that rather than falling into the hands of the regime. From those who survived a new central committee was reconstituted and some of the cadres were sent to Iranian Kurdistan - mainly as a matter of survival.

In 1979 Kurdish militants initially made territorial gains in Mahabad and temporarily drove regime forces from the region. However, a large-scale offensive in the spring of 1980 by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps reversed the course of the conflict. The start of the Iran-Iraq war in September 1980 saw the Iranian government intensify efforts to suppress the Kurdish rebellion - the only post-1979 uprising that persisted, in part due to the province's proximity to the Iraqi border. By this time, the Fedayeen minority and other smaller groups had moved their armed peshmerga from Kurdish cities to the countryside. We settled in a large village called Baghche, between Mahabad and Baneh.

Country base

Here, in this article, I want to concentrate on several key political questions but also recount some of my general observations. I arrived in Baghche in September 1982. I had travelled from Glasgow, where

I lived at the time, via Turkey and Iraq, returning to Iran as part of my duty to support the organisation. Before the journey, I had spent some time in Zurich getting basic training from German comrades sympathetic to the Fedayeen, who had set up a clandestine radio station.

As we travelled through high, green mountains down to the valleys of Kurdistan, the first thing I noticed was the warm and welcoming attitude of the peasants. Although we were not Kurds, as soon as they saw fighters wearing peshmerga clothes, they gave us food, a place to stay, water to clean ourselves ... We were treated as liberators.

The same was true of the peasants at the base in Baghche. Those who have studied the history of the Iranian left will know that in 1971 in the village of Siahkal, the group of young leftist idealists who waged an armed struggle against the shah's regime were denounced to the local gendarmes by the villagers - hence my surprise at the welcome we received in the Kurdish countryside.

I assume the location of the main base had been chosen after some detailed studies of the area and the organisation had taken over the village school. It was a regional school, not just serving this particular village. The larger rooms functioned as both a meeting place and communal dining area during the day. At night some of the peshmergas slept there. Consequently, the inhabitants of Baghche and its neighbouring villages, whose children attended this school, were affected. Some may have resented us, but no-one spoke out. The villagers accepted the presence of the peshmerga as part of their contribution to the ongoing civil war.

Sleeping quarters were segregated, because the OIPFG, like other left groups, was conscious of the peasants' sensitivities. We were well aware that the Islamic government had sent propaganda about how communists did not respect families and had no moral principles.

Women slept in a separate outbuilding of the school to avoid any allegations of impropriety. A few weeks after my arrival, the women peshmerga were moved to a house in the village. We all wore headscarves (although it looked somewhat bizarre with combat gear!). Before I arrived, there had been some conflict with the peasants about 'cow dung' - a valuable commodity, as it was used for fuel. I never found out exactly what had happened, but the accusation was that some peshmerga had used more than their share, prompting scuffles with the villagers.

In general, the villagers were actually quite proud of the presence of an Iranian organisation. Our organisation included a good contingent of Kurdish fighters, but it was not a nationalist Kurdish organisation. As far as I could see, the locals saw the takeover of their village as part of a contribution to the ongoing civil war.

The village had its mosque, and on occasions when our comrades were killed in battle, the left-leaning mullah allowed us to use the mosque for political ceremonies commemorating their lives. In exchange, he expected our help with his 'technical' problems, such as repairing faulty wiring, connecting the main minaret to the loudspeaker, or fixing his record player. Overall, relations with the peasants were positive, although both sides were aware that, once the regime's forces inevitably recaptured the area, the peasants would likely pay a very heavy price for supporting a Marxist group.

We had medics amongst our forces. They were very popular. The peasants had lost the school, but they had gained a clinic with two fully qualified doctors staying in the base. Every couple of weeks one of our doctors, Mastoureh Ahmadzadeh, took time off from her many duties (including membership of the central committee) to drive to neighbouring villages and provide medical support, including preventive vaccine injections for

children. This was all pre-arranged, and on one occasion when I went with her, there was a long queue of peasants in every village we visited. All waiting to see her.

The rest of us benefited from the popularity of the medics, as their patients often brought small gifts, products of their land, in exchange for medical support. They brought us eggs, cheese, bread, fruit and on rare occasions a chicken. This was important, because we did not have much food.

Another medic, Dr Said, was very popular too - both in Baghche, where he set up the clinic, as he had fewer political responsibilities than Mastoureh and in another base, where I was sent. There he used a nearby house for his medical consultations. The medics also dealt with our own health problems, often caused by malnutrition, freezing cold temperatures and poor hygiene - as well as the wounds of fighters injured in armed confrontations.

Dr Said, who later died in exile in Paris, should be remembered as someone who had a very sceptical view of Kurdish nationalist organisations. He was sharply critical of the misogynistic and feudal attitudes of the Kurdish Democratic Party's leadership. For several months, he stayed at the Fedayeen (Minority) military base near Vardeh, which primarily served as a hub for establishing a radio station. During quieter moments, when there were no patients or injured fighters, he would assist me with technical tasks for the radio, always making it clear that he expected similar cooperation when he was performing a surgical operation! (Unfortunately, my squeamishness made me unfit to help with any medical or surgical procedures.) At the base, he embraced every responsibility - from cleaning (known as 'labourer' duties) to cooking and dishwashing - with enthusiasm and a cheerful attitude.

Before he died in 2015, he documented some of the harrowing events we experienced, including

shootings, deaths and devastating injuries. One particularly poignant story from his memoirs, now accessible on several Farsi websites, highlights the significance we placed on independence from foreign powers. He recounted the arrival of several Rahe Kargar comrades at our base one snowy winter evening. They had lost their way in the mountains, mistaking snow reflections for the lights of a distant village. Tragically, despite their best efforts, two of their group succumbed to hypothermia. The survivors arrived with severe frostbite, their fingers and toes frozen to the point where gangrene was a serious risk.

The doctor urgently required a clean space, which we found in a nearby peasant's house, along with hot water, alcohol, bandages and improvised surgical tools. The injured comrades had previously been advised by French doctors, akin to today's Médecins Sans Frontières, that treatment in Kurdistan was futile. They were told to travel to Iraq and manage the pain with aspirin. However, by the time they reached Darveh, the infections had advanced too far, leaving the doctor no choice but to amputate several fingers and toes to save their lives.

After the operation, he took pride in his work, feeling that the procedure had at least preserved their limbs. In a rare break from protocol, he had a couple of glasses of alcohol and reflected passionately on communist ideals, emphasising our duty to be self-reliant. At the time, he deeply respected the comrades' decision to avoid seeking help in Baghdad and felt gratified that his efforts had prevented even greater loss.

Odd women

After one military operation - a surprise attack on the town of Sagghez - the Fedayin peshmerga returned with two Pasdars (Islamic Revolutionary Guards) prisoners. One of the Pasdars was bragging about how many communists he had tortured and killed. Some were keen that he should

be executed. Others disagreed. A debate took place and arguments for and against the death penalty were heard and the issue was put to a vote. I was pleasantly surprised that most of my comrades voted against the death penalty. The prisoner was later exchanged with a supporter of the organisation held in prison.

We women were a bit of an oddity. There were far fewer of us than the men. We wore Kurdish trousers, tops, battle jackets, and carried huge guns - in my case, an artillery piece that was bigger than me in terms of height. And now and then women from the village would bring us their lovely Kurdish clothes, their long skirts decorated with mirrors, and embroidery. I think they felt sorry for us, and wanted to make sure, as they kept saying, we had 'proper clothes'. We kept having to tell some that the reason we were wearing trousers was because we had a lot of tasks that required more practical clothes.

Most of the women in the base were there temporarily. Nastaran, the comrade responsible for the workers' organisation in Tehran was at the base when I arrived. She was there waiting for the plenum which took place a few weeks later. Another comrade who arrived while I was there was Ashraf Behkish, responsible for *Jukhe haye Razmi*, an armed combat squad that the Fedayeen had decided to set up in Tehran (not exactly a brilliant idea under the circumstances). The day after Ashraf arrived, there was a shooting competition in the base and she won against all competitors. Both Nastaran and Ashraf were competent comrades, but the fact they held such important responsibilities in Tehran was primarily because as women - often covered head to toe under a hijab and long veil (chador) - they could escape security/army check posts and could travel regularly to and from Kurdistan. Ironically the forced hijab, imposed by the Islamic Republic had promoted women in the Fedayeen to higher positions. Both Nastaran and Ashraf were arrested and killed in detention. In the case of Nastaran, she had tried to swallow her cyanide tablet, but the Revolutionary Guards stopped her. She died from injuries incurred during torture in Evin prison.

There were some contradictions between the organisation and the women in the base. One of the regular activities of the base was sending teams of peshmerga to Joleh. A group of 20 to 30 would go to a nearby town, by then under government control, with leaflets and copies of the organisation's paper in Kurdish, *Rigayeh Guel*, distribute them in the town centre, sing some revolutionary songs and, as the Islamic Revolutionary Guards or the army were on their way, they would disperse and go back to the base. Occasionally some were arrested, but, if they succeeded in escaping the security forces, they would return to the base in the early hours of the morning.

Young women peshmergas had asked to be part of these operations and were refused permission. On the whole, if you did not have specific duties, life in the base could be very boring. The routine was repetitive: exercise, breakfast, cell meetings (you were exempt if you had specific tasks - in my case preparations to set up a radio station), duties for organising communal lunch, cleaning up, reading groups, afternoon long walks, supper and general meetings afterwards. Those on shift duty worked nights to guard the base. A couple of women comrades, who had no specific tasks, asked to be included in the Joleh team and indeed other military operations, but for a while the organisation refused this on the basis that, if Revolutionary Guards captured/arrested a communist woman, she would face torture and terrible indignity.

Eventually, the central committee gave way regarding Joleh and at least on a couple of occasions while I was there women peshmerga were allowed to join the team. The fear of women Fedayeen members getting arrested and imprisoned by the regime was a serious matter. We all had cyanide tablets under our tongues in urban areas, in bazaars ... but the fear was that we would be too late using it or the Revolutionary Guards would manage to stop us from taking it and that we would end up as a prisoner of the regime.

Much later, at another base in Kurdistan, I used to go to an open-air bazaar to buy oranges - a true luxury. The bazaar was full of smugglers, who were selling everything from guns and heavy weapons to alcohol and food. On one of the trips I realised the young peshmerga who was sent to 'protect me' had his gun constantly aimed at my head. I knew enough about organisational discipline to realise that this was no accident or mistake. When we got back, I asked the base commander why this was the case and he replied, "The gun is aimed at you, so that if it looks like you will be arrested he will shoot you. Believe me, given what we know happens to women communist prisoners, if this happens, you would be very grateful if he aims correctly and kills you instantly." I never questioned this again.

Speaking of women, I also need to write about Mastoureh. What distinguished her from other members of the central committee was her modesty and humility. She was the only CC member who took her turn in kitchen and cleaning duties. The rest were too busy. Her appearance was also different: while the other members of the central committee took great care of how they looked in their peshmerga clothes, matching colours, etc, she would wear the worst clothes you could ever imagine, walking around with trousers that did not match the top she was wearing. Some of her tops seemed to be torn in parts, but she never seemed to care about that. In Baghche, when the women all slept in a room initially situated in the outer buildings of the school and later in a village house, she always chose (or ended up in) the worst place for sleeping, because she came to bed later than the rest of us after endless CC meetings.

Like other women cadres, Mastoureh regularly travelled to Tehran and in her case, the journey was far more dangerous. She was on a poster showing 'wanted leaders of terrorist organisations' wearing glasses. She travelled back and forth all covered up and wearing contact lenses and, although the rest of us were very concerned about her safety, she never seemed to be worried.

Political disputes

I should also mention the politics within the base, very briefly. Some of the issues below would require much longer articles to go into properly.

Before I travelled to Kurdistan, we heard rumours about a second split with the Fedayeen minority. A pamphlet critical of political decisions at the first congress had been published - no-one had a copy, but when I met Homa Nategh² in Paris, she informed me that she supported this faction - the revolutionary socialist tendency. When I arrived in Kurdistan, all I could find was the central committee's response to the tendency, written by Tavakol (his first name was never used). I sympathised with the tendency and soon realised that I was not alone. However, there was no possibility of discussing or organising around this. An older comrade, Babak, who was later killed in Tehran, warned me that Kurdistan was not the place to discuss such matters.

However, the text written by

Tavakol had one paragraph I could not stand: "Socialism in Iran will be built with the industrial and political support of the USSR and the socialist camp." This was such a flagrant denial of everything the Fedayeen (Minority) had stood for that I used one of the general meetings where we could ask questions to the central committee to explain how this sentence differed from the policy of the 'official communist' Tudeh party and its "non-capitalist road to development". Tavakol's reply was worse than anything I expected. He said: "The problem is just the nature of Tudeh. If we take up the same slogan it will be revolutionary." I never took him seriously after that. I was right to oppose him: Tavakol ended up as an opportunist Stalinist, who played a significant role in the subsequent destruction of the Fedayeen.

In Kurdistan I witnessed national sensitivities and chauvinist attitudes regarding language. In Baghche, in particular, comrades had come from all over Iran and, because local branches encountered security issues, the most active members were sent to Kurdistan. We had Turks, we had Lors (from Lorestan), we had southern Iranians, we had people from Hamadan, and the banter between various peshmergas was about their nationality. So the Kurds used to joke and tell Azaris that they weren't as revolutionary as Kurds because their religious leader was Ayatollah Shariat Madari, who was soft, while "we Kurds follow Sheikh Hussein, the red mullah", who was a radical cleric in Kurdistan! Comrades from Lorestan had a large number of historic martyrs among the founders of the Fedayeen, so they would tell the Kurds: "We've got the history, our comrades were true leaders ..." and so on.

There were occasional arguments about the language of the songs played on the loudspeakers. Farsi speakers complained that too many Kurdish revolutionary songs were played and they wanted more in Farsi. So, as I say, in Baghche there was a lot of nationalist banter, but mainly in reasonably good humour.

The situation was different in the base near Vardeh. Most of the peshmergas were Kurds, except the medic (who was a Lor) and I. That is where, in the absence of other nationalities, we witnessed the contradictions that existed between northern and southern Kurdistan: the debate often took the form of arguments about which city was more revolutionary, which one fell first to the regime's advances ...

In the winter of 1983, the organisation had a plenum in Baghche (a three-week walk from where we were!), and the military commander of our base was called to attend. Before leaving he told me: "There will be no military situation. We are in a safe place, the heavy snow will help, no Paskar (Revolutionary Guard) will venture this far. If any political issues occur, I am sure you can deal with it!"

One night I was asleep, and one of the older peshmergas came to the door of the house, woke me up and informed me that the disagreement between southern and northern Kurds had escalated to the level where there was a real risk that the two sides might open fire on each other. I had no idea what I could do and I was very scared, but I had to go and separate the two groups. This was in the middle of the night and all I could do was recall what I had read in a booklet published by a Maoist French group, led by Alan Badiou, on contradiction: circular contradictions and antagonistic contradictions. I asked everyone to sit down and talk nonsense for about 20-30 minutes and the peshmergas got so bored they put their guns down declaring they had enough and they were going back to sleep. So basically,

I diffused the situation not by any clever means, but by boring them.

It should also be said that in this base alcohol from the bazaar was available. And on that particular occasion, of course, consumption of alcohol, although forbidden, had played its part. However, for me the incident showed the dangers and pitfalls of trying to follow nationalist lines in a multinational country such as Iran. And in an all-Kurdish group the division was between north and south Kurds.

The older peshmerga who woke me up that night was a Yazidi - a Kurdish religious minority, found primarily in northern Iraq, south-eastern Turkey and Iran. He was in charge of the generator and, the first day I arrived in the mountain base, he proudly announced to everyone that he would refuse to operate the generator (an absolute necessity for a radio station) if a woman was in charge. However, over time he changed his position and we ended up having a long conversation about the discrimination Yazidis faced; plus the fact that many of his relatives lived across the border in Iraq and how they were affected by decades of conflict between Iran and Iraq. Although by that time we were in the midst of the full-scale Iraq war, the conflict had a much longer history, going back to the shah's era.

In retrospect, a few months later we came to realise that the time from the summer of 1982 in Baghche to the spring of 1983 in Vardeh were good for us. That winter, the base in Baghche hosted the much-delayed plenum (which also mourned the terrible

death of 12 Fedayeen fighters caught in a trap set by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards).

The Kurdish episode coincided with the start of the worst period in the history of the Fedayeen. Spiralling internal conflict in the absence of open discussion led to one disaster after another. Historians looking at that particular period, where leftwing Iranian opposition groups were caught in a war zone between Iran's Islamic Republic and Iraq's Saddam Hussein, will remark on these organisations' increasing dependence on Iraq - initially simply the right to travel across Iraqi Kurdistan to Iranian Kurdistan, but later financial support and eventually dependence on the Iraqi dictator and his brutal security service.

Iraqi Kurds had a similar relationship with Iran's Islamic Republic! However, the whole concept of financial dependence on a foreign state - a taboo for the founders of the organisation - became the norm. Many of the dozens of splits from the Fedayeen Minority justified the acceptance of funds from dubious forces, including far-right European parties and the National Endowment for Democracy in the US.

No wonder that today none of these groups are capable of taking a basic anti-colonial, anti-imperialist position, when it comes to the war in Gaza ●

Notes

1. The organisation split over the nature of the regime. A majority on central committee believed that the Islamic Republic was somehow progressive. A minority thought otherwise and had majority support amongst the membership.
2. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homa_Nategh.

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<p>Saturday 4pm Israel's warmongering in permanence and how to respond Speakers: Moshé Machover and Yassamine Mather</p>	
<p>Sunday 11am Aukus and the coming war with China Speaker: Marcus Strom</p>	
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LEFT

What sort of party?

Setting up yet another loose network, a broad left alliance or a confessional sect would obviously be pointless. **Mike Macnair** responds to an invitation to discuss what is the main question before us today



Russian Communist Party 1920: sitting (left to right) Yenukidze, Kalinin, Bukharin, Tomsy, Lashevich, Kamenev, Preobrazhensky, Serebryakov, Lenin, and Rykov in front

On October 21, *Prometheus*, the online magazine, issued “a call for articles written by people active across the left in Britain on the question: What do you mean by the party? What are the purposes of such an organisation? What are the functions it needs to cover? And how might it come about?” They say that “By canvassing written contributions from already active collectives and other interested figures, we hope to begin a process where people across the left put forward their understandings and the general level of understanding can be raised.” The deadline for submissions was November 8.¹

This deadline was too short for CPGB to be able to offer a collective submission, or even an agreed submission of its Provisional Central Committee. So this is merely an individual contribution.

Starting point

The starting point has to be what the *point* of a party is. After all, the Labour Party claims by its name and by its trade union affiliates to be the party of the working class as such, and by its rules to be a “democratic socialist party”. The Socialist Party of Great Britain, the Socialist Workers Party, the *Morning Star*’s Communist Party of Britain, the Socialist Party in England and Wales and the Revolutionary Communist Party (cast in order of appearance) and various others, all claim to be parties. Though they play limited useful roles for the workers’ movement, setting up another competing organisation of the same type would be obviously pointless.

Then, we need to look to an important point made by Karl Marx about the need for working class political action:

The political movement of the working class has as its object, of course, the conquest of political power for the working class, and for this it is naturally necessary that a previous organisation of the

working class, itself arising from their economic struggles, should have been developed up to a certain point.

On the other hand, however, every movement in which the working class comes out as a class against the ruling classes and attempts to force them by pressure from without is a political movement. For instance, the attempt in a particular factory or even a particular industry to force a shorter working day out of the capitalists by strikes, etc is a purely economic movement. On the other hand, the movement to force an eight-hour day, etc *law* is a *political* movement. And in this way, out of the separate economic movements of the workers there grows up everywhere a *political* movement: that is to say a movement of the *class*, with the object of achieving its interests in a general form, in a form possessing a general social force of compulsion. If these movements presuppose a certain degree of previous organisation, they are themselves equally a means of the development of this organisation.

Where the working class is not yet far enough advanced in its organisation to undertake a decisive campaign against the collective power - ie, the political power of the ruling classes - it must at any rate be trained for this by continual agitation against and a hostile attitude towards the policy of the ruling classes. Otherwise it will remain a plaything in their hands, as the September revolution in France showed, and as is also proved up to a certain point by the game Messrs Gladstone and co are bringing off in England even up to the present time.²

Subsequent history confirms Marx’s assessment here. The Labour Party has been captured by the capitalist state as an instrument of political control of the workers’ movement. As a result, it remains true to the present day that the

working class remains, in politics, a plaything in the capitalists’ hands.

This is because, in the absence of a workers’ independent political voice, capital can manoeuvre between backing the ‘party of order’ (Louis Bonaparte in 19th century France; the Tory Brexiteers, or the Trump movement, today) as a demagogic opposition to ‘elite’ liberalism, and backing the ‘party of liberty’ (Marx refers to the ‘centrist’ republicanism of Adolphe Thiers in 1871 France, and to Gladstonian liberalism in 19th century England; today the US Democrats; the Labour Party) as an alternative to the petty tyrannies and obvious corruption of the governments of the ‘party of order’.

The party and its press also represents a means by which the workers’ movement can define an independent political line in international affairs. These are, as much as domestic matters, a field in which the capitalist parties make working class political support a plaything - and in some respects more so. The point was already made in the 1864 Inaugural Address of the First International:

If the emancipation of the working classes requires their fraternal concurrence, how are they to fulfil that great mission with a foreign policy in pursuit of criminal designs, playing upon national prejudices, and squandering in piratical wars the people’s blood and treasure? It was not the wisdom of the ruling classes, but the heroic resistance to their criminal folly by the working classes of England, that saved the west of Europe from plunging headlong into an infamous crusade for the perpetuation and propagation of slavery on the other side of the Atlantic.³

The *point* of a party is, then, to engage in working class *political action*. And this does not mean *merely* arguing for the complete overthrow of the capitalist regime and for communism as an alternative (though this is part

of our task). Nor does it mean the common far-left idea of the party as coordinating ‘struggles’, or the less common ideas of the party as the ‘memory’ of the class movement or as a vehicle for ‘theory’.

It means the struggle for an independent *political voice* for the working class, which can offer *choices* alternative to those offered by the ‘party of order’ to represent the working class against ‘woke elites’, and by the ‘party of liberty’ to represent the working class against ‘populism’ or ‘fascism’.

These choices are concerned with the *constitutional order*: that is, the political regime through which capital rules. Conversely, they are concerned with extreme political democracy as the regime through which the working class can rule - as an alternative to both the present constitutional-monarchist state order and the managerialist regime which capital has promoted in the workers’ movement.

Secondly, the choices are concerned with *general legislation* in the interests of the workers’ movement - like repealing anti-union laws and other regulatory schemes for state control of cooperatives, mutuals, political parties and so on; like maximum working hours; like workplace health and safety laws; like pollution rules; like minimum building standards - and so on.

They are not primarily concerned with the (illusory) idea that ‘tax the rich’ budgets can fundamentally alter the class order, or that Keynesian stimulus operations can solve the problems of the economy. The US ‘New Deal’ was a mere antechamber to World War II, and it was the war, not the stimulus package, which overcame the 1930s depression. A ‘green new deal’ on the basis of the existing state order would be similarly mere cover for nationalism and the drive towards war. This is, in fact, already apparent in Biden’s policy, marketed as green, but marching alongside protectionism and military aggression.

Thirdly, the choices are concerned with *international affairs*. A party

which is to defend the independent interests of the working class needs to defend those interests as universal interests - but also to be as disloyal to the states we inhabit as the parliamentary oppositionists who negotiated with the Scots to keep the Scottish invasion in northern England in 1640, or who invited a full-scale Dutch invasion in 1688.

Programme

Political *voice* implies three elements. The first is a *political programme* which can be the basis of a party. The programme poses the idea that the working class could take over and get beyond capitalism, and that it could in the meantime win *legislative* reforms in its own interests (like the Ten Hour Day Act, to which Marx referred, or the legalisation of trade unions).

The second element is publishing an alternative to the capitalists’ advertising-funded media, and especially the national *press*, which drowns out oppositional speech by the amplification of the proprietor’s and his editor’s voices and thereby helps enforce the choice between the ‘party of order’ and the ‘party of liberty’. This point is important.

It is quite widely believed that various forms of pure online publication can do the job of a party press. But in reality, this sort of publication, because it is not fully regular, cannot be *agenda-setting* in the way that the Murdoch and Harnsworth press are agenda-setting on the right. On the left, the *Morning Star*, in spite of the numerical weakness of the CPB, continues to be agenda-setting (as is very visible in the history of Corbynism, but also in the character of the SWP’s ‘united front’ operations).

The absence of advertising subsidy requires *party* backing; the *Morning Star* partly substitutes backing from China, etc in the form of public library subscriptions; the weeklies (*Socialist Worker*, *The Socialist*, *Communist*, *Solidarity*, *Weekly Worker* ...) can only operate with considerable efforts to raise party funds.

The third element is as far as possible using the opportunity of *electoral campaigning* - and if possible actually winning seats in parliament, local government, and so on - to promote these policies.

Suppose we achieved a party, rather than a long list of small competing groups. A party is not a substitute for trade unions, mutuals, tenants' organising, and so on. It *promotes* such activities and organisations. It *defends* them against attacks from legislation, the judiciary, the police, far-right organisations, the advertising-funded media, and so on. But it is not the job of the party to give tactical direction to trade unions or to individual strikes, etc.

The CPGB works on the basis of a *Draft programme*. The text is proposed as a draft for any unified party - 'draft' means that it could be changed, including radically, in a unification process. But *acceptance* of the *Draft programme* as the basis for common action is also the basis of CPGB membership, and shapes the political line expressed in the *Weekly Worker*.

We think that it is necessary for a party programme to have a maximum-minimum character. The maximum element expresses the long-term goal of communism, and thereby why there are grounds for hope in a better future, and the possibility of the working class, by taking over, opening the way to this future. We need to say more about it than socialists needed to say before the disastrous experience of the USSR and its satellites and imitators.

The minimum element is about the overthrow of the capitalist *state order*, the constitution, and creation of the immediate alternative - the radically democratic republic - and also includes a series of demands, consistent with the continued existence of money and markets, which would strengthen the position of the working class both under capitalism, and in the mixed economy under workers' rule. We can

fight for individual demands of the minimum programme under capitalist rule, but it is only its implementation *as a whole* - especially, the democratic-republican demands - that would amount to the overthrow of the state regime.

The converse of this is that we insist that (if we had MPs) we would remain in opposition until it is possible to form a government committed to the implementation of the minimum programme as a whole. That is why it is a *minimum* programme. It is this commitment that can help the left avoid the trap to which Rifondazione Comunista in Italy and Syriza in Greece succumbed in different ways.

Not having a programme at all inevitably means that the basis of membership is loyalty to some individual (alive or, like big Lenin or little Tony Cliff, dead). Serious differences cannot be contained. Of course, an organisation based on a programme may fail to contain differences. But it is *possible* to do so.

Centralism

The party we need to create needs to be democratic-centralist in its organisational methods. Lars T Lih, Ben Lewis and I have explored in print the origins of 'democratic centralism', which actually are strongly connected to the organisational institutions and practice of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) between 1890, when it escaped illegality, and 1914. It is *not* about the "party of professional revolutionaries", nor about Russian specificities.⁴ Indeed, when the Russian Communist Party turned to radical militarist centralism in 1919, the opposition to this turn called themselves ... Democratic Centralists.⁵

Democratic-centralism is not this militarist centralism created in 1919-21 by the imperatives of civil war and reconstruction in a peasant-majority country. It is not something

only needed for the policy of an 'insurrectionary general strike' or extra-parliamentary mass action to overthrow the state. It is, on the contrary, a set of *general* decision-making principles.

The principles involved are, in the first place, that the party should be an organisation which individuals can join and to which they pay dues (like a trade union). Invented by the German 'Lassallean' General Association of German Workers (ADAV), this principle was adopted by the parties of the Second International generally and continued in the Third. The people entitled to vote are those willing to pay dues and actively participate in the decision-making processes. The 'silent majority' get no vote.

The alternative - a loose federation of political clubs and groups - was the organisational form of political parties before the 1860s and remains that of the British Conservative and US Republican and Democrat parties. It is beautifully adapted to the needs of *capitalist* management of politics. 'Networks' and 'horizontalism' are merely rebrandings of the same capitalist principle.

Second, the party needs regular policy-making conferences/congresses and organisations both central (ie, central or national committee) and local (or sectoral, as in party trade union fractions, women's or youth organisations, and so on).

Both the centre *and* the localities and sectors need to have the right to raise their own finance, to elect their own leadership (the central leadership being elected by the regular conference or congress) and to publish.

It is 'centralist' against claims to forms of federalism, and in particular against elected representatives having the right to put their supposed mandate from their constituents above the common policy of the party: in practice this 'mandate' usually means the defence of capitalist interests. The same is true of 'intersectionalist' forms of federalism, in which identity-caucuses are given veto rights.

Federalism in the state order is an instrument of the propertied classes: so cantonalism in Switzerland, so states' rights in the USA, so the confederal structure of the European Union, etc. Federalism in workers' party organisation copies the British Labour Party - and its subordination to the capitalist state.

It was 'democratic' against the 'labour monarchism' of the 1863-75 Lassallean General German Workers Association, which involved the 'centralisation' of the party in the 'single will' of its elected president, Ferdinand Lassalle, and his successor, Johann Baptist von Schweitzer. The modern far left has reinvented this 'labour monarchist' form through the personality cults of Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky, leading in turn to personality cults of a whole range of far-left leaders. But the same underlying capitalist (or Bonapartist) principle of one-man management is reflected in the direct election of party, union, and so on, *individual officials*.

It is 'democratic' also in operating open political debate. The point of the party is political voice: to make it possible for the working class as a class to make political choices, which are precluded by capitalist control of political representation and media. Hence, in the first place, if the party denies knowledge of its internal debates to the larger working class, it is precisely denying the class the right to choose between the options.

Open political debate also implies a commitment against the political method of constructing private diplomatic agreements. Just as much as secrecy of internal debates, these function to deny the broader workers' movement the right to make real choices.

Secondly, capitalist control of political choices works through direct bribery of elected representatives, campaign funding, the advertising-funded media, and so on. Within the organised workers' movement, managerialist controls on communication *lead* to capitalist control. This should be apparent in the use of 'anti-racist' speech controls in the anti-Semitism smear campaign.

The underlying question is: who defines what is 'unacceptable' speech? It is, inevitably, the full-time officials and elected representatives. These, because of the nature of their jobs, naturally come to share the managerial culture of the bureaucracies of the civil service, local government and big corporations. The result is back to what is acceptable to *capital*, through its political, legal and media representatives.

General

I have written here about the *general* nature of the party we need: not about substantive policies in detail. To write about substantive policies in detail would be to repeat what we in the CPGB have already written in our *Draft programme*: we collectively recommend this programme to comrades for discussion and, so far as may be necessary, criticism.⁶

To write about substantive policies in detail would also risk collapsing into the fundamental error of the 'New Left': that is, the idea of the party as an intersectional alliance of oppressed groups and 'social movements'. The price of this method is before our eyes. The left marginalises the question of class, but by doing so hands the dissatisfaction of the working class to the *right* as an instrument: 'Vote Clinton, get Trump' eight years ago, 'Vote Harris, get Trump' this year.

We need to disassociate ourselves from this method. Without breaking from the far left's present false conceptions of what a party is *for* and what it *is*, there is no chance of a unity which would be more than ephemeral ●

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Notes

1. prometheusjournal.org/2024/10/21/what-is-the-party.
2. Marx to Friedrich Bolte in New York (November 23 1871) postscript: www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/letters/71_11_23.htm.
3. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/10/27.htm.
4. Lars T Lih: johndell.com/2013/04/14/fortunes-of-a-formula-from-democratic-centralism-to-democratic-centralism (April 2013); 'Democratic centralism: further fortunes of a formula' *Weekly Worker* July 25 2013 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/972/democratic-centralism-further-fortunes-of-a-formula); Ben Lewis (translator): 'Origins of democratic centralism' *Weekly Worker* November 5 2015 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1081/origins-of-democratic-centralism); Ben Lewis (author) 'Sources, streams and confidence' *Weekly Worker* August 25 2016 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1119/sources-streams-and-confluence); Macnair: 'Reclaiming democratic centralism' *Weekly Worker* May 23 2019 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1252/reclaiming-democratic-centralism); 'Negations of democratic centralism' *Weekly Worker* May 30 2019 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1253/negations-of-democratic-centralism); and various other articles.
5. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Group_of_Democratic_Centralism; Michel Olivier: libcom.org/article/democratic-centralism-workers-opposition-clandestine-opposition-movements-crisis-party.
6. communistparty.co.uk/draft-programme

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Online Communist Forum



Sunday November 24 5pm
Ukraine and the Atacms moment: political report from CPGB's Provisional Central Committee and discussion

Sunday December 1 5pm
Marxism and psychoanalysis: the complex of Freudo-Marxism
Speaker: Ian Spencer and discussion

Use this link to join meeting:
communistparty.co.uk/ocf

Organised by CPGB: communistparty.co.uk and
Labour Party Marxists: www.labourpartymarxists.org.uk
For further information, email Stan Keable at
Secretary@labourpartymarxists.org.uk

A selection of previous Online Communist Forum talks can be viewed at: youtube.com/c/CommunistPartyofGreatBritain

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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Giant tax cuts for filthy rich

Cabinet of curiosities

Warmongers, kleptocrats, sex pests - but above all cronies. Paul Demarty looks ahead to an already fractious Trump front bench that will, in all probability, churn with remarkable speed

There were a couple of moments, towards the end of the US presidential campaign, when various veterans of Donald Trump's first term - some, like general John Kelly, in the open, some anonymously - alleged that he had praised a certain former world leader by the name of Adolf Hitler.

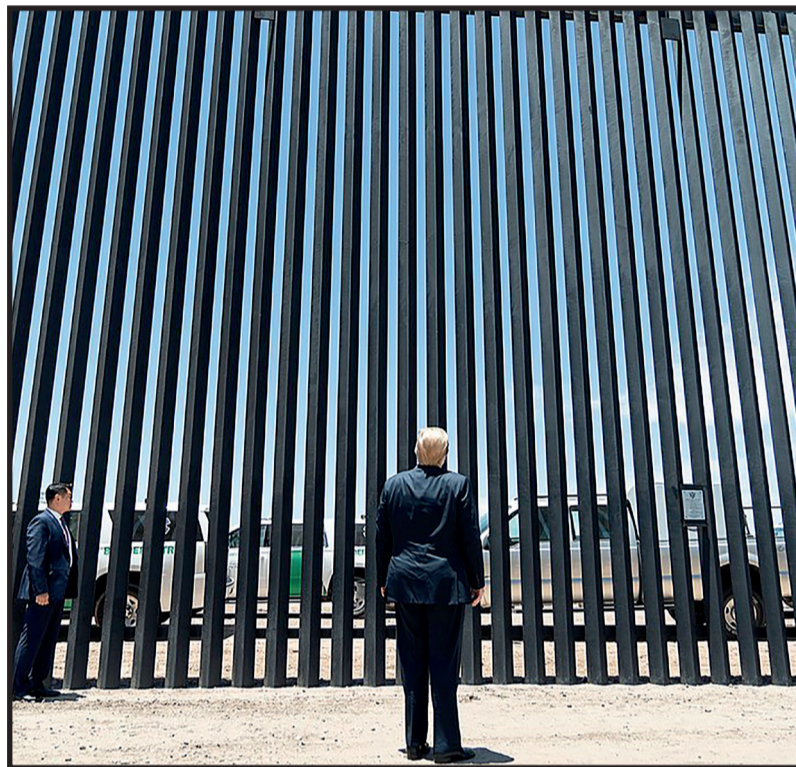
It was, in the end, a futile attempt to get some of the energy of previous campaigns back - that acute fear that a Trump presidency might actually destroy the democratic fig leaf that hides the shame of American oligarchy and empire. There was one telling example cited, however, by *The Atlantic's* Jeffrey Goldberg: "I need the kind of generals that Hitler had," Trump said in a private conversation in the White House, according to two people who heard him say this. "People who were totally loyal to him, that follow orders".¹

It is not necessarily clear that Hitler's generals fitted the bill more than any other set - after all, a bunch of military officers did attempt to assassinate him. But that need for total loyalty - rewarded, invariably, with scandalous disloyalty on his own part - really does seem to be Trump's way of doing business. The activities of his transition team so far bear this out.

Transition

Indeed, the team *itself* bears that out. Biden's transition was overlooked largely by experienced politicians used to the cut and thrust of Democratic infighting. But Trump's is led by Howard Lutnick, an old Wall Street hand with no obvious political background beyond his Trumpism; and Linda McMahon, who filled a minor post in the first Trump administration, but is best known as co-ringmaster of World Wrestling Entertainment with her husband, Vince. She heads a political action committee by the name of America First Action, which edged out the Heritage Foundation for the job of staffing the new administration - largely because the HF people made the mistake of privately boasting that they, not The Donald, would be in charge of the whole show. (Lurking in the background, apparently, is Trump's loyal son-in-law, Jared Kushner.)

So which eager beavers do we expect to see in the White House next year? The announcements so far, it is fair to say, point to quite a crew. On the domestic front, we may as well start with the eccentric tech tycoon, Elon Musk, who - along with hyperactive Silicon Valley creature Vivek Ramaswamy - will head up a new Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE, after a famous and now rather stale internet meme), whose job is to slash and burn the administrative state. Musk should need little introduction at this point; already a little flighty, he seems to have been driven entirely mad by the experience of owning Twitter. Somehow we expect that the "efficiencies" he finds in the state machine will not be in the



Migrants: main target

fantastically bloated department of defense, or Nasa, both of whom he relies on for extravagant contracts.

Ramaswamy's angle in all this is not quite so clear. In spite of his occasional calls to invade Mexico, he is somehow hard to dislike, thanks to his puppy-dog enthusiasm and impromptu rap performances of Eminem's "Lose yourself". We take it he is a representative of the Silicon Valley right - Peter Thiel, Marc Andreessen, David Sacks and friends - who have swung hard behind Trump, as revenge for the more assertive anti-trust regime under Joe Biden and current Federal Trade Commission chair Lina Khan. (Venture capitalists mostly cash out via mergers and acquisitions, which they believe are being held up.) Expect the FTC and Securities and Exchanges Commission to be in the crosshairs of these people. As the cheerful shiba inu dog of the original meme might have said, "Such kleptocracy, wow".

Moving on to those regulatory agencies themselves, the picture is even less rosy. Veteran climate-change denier and fracking enthusiast Lee Zeldin, a New York congressman, gets the nod for the Environmental Protection Agency. Jay Bhattacharya is rumoured to be in the running for the National Institutes of Health, an agency that Bhattacharya as a Covid-sceptical libertarian has frequently lambasted in his career.

Even if it comes through, it will be somehow only the second weirdest health-related appointment, after that of Robert F Kennedy junior, who has defected from the Democratic allegiance of his dynasty and now looks to be health secretary. RFK is a notorious anti-vaxxer and proponent of strange and slightly creepy interventions for drug addicts that look just a little like labour camps. His abortive third-party presidential run took in several bizarre incidents,

from the dumping of a dead bear in New York's Central Park (he protests innocence of the murder itself) to a cybersex affair with Olivia Nuzzi, a prominent political journalist four decades his junior.

More serious allegations have dogged Matt Gaetz, nominated as attorney general, and already notorious as an ultra-Trumpite Florida congressman, whose enthusiasm is only matched by his evident stupidity. In 2020, he faced allegations of sex trafficking and statutory rape for supposedly paying a 17-year-old to cross state lines to do the dirty, though charges were never filed. The House Ethics Committee was in the midst of investigating him for various sex-and-drugs matters when the proposed appointment arrived at just the right time to spring him from the trap. Nothing like hiring a man perpetually in flight from various authorities to head up the department of justice - but then one expects his prime role to be shielding his boss from his own legal difficulties!

No peace

On foreign policy, the appointments so far are a wake-up call for anyone who truly believed Trump's claim to be the peace candidate. Despite the exclusion of neocon big guns like Mike Pompeo and Nikki Haley, we have quite a gang of warmongering fanatics in front of us. At the state department we have senator Marco Rubio, who is a standard-issue Republican on matters of war and peace, and of one mind with Trump on the importance of 'disciplining' China. The department of defense goes to Pete Hegseth - a total political newbie, whose primary qualification for the job seems to be his presence on Trump's favourite TV show, *Fox and friends*, and who also comes with a long train of sex scandals trailing behind him.

Zionist fanatic Elise Stefanik gets to be the ambassador to the United Nations. Other names in a list that might have been ghost-written by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee include Mike Huckabee, to be ambassador to Israel - one of those Christian dispensationalists who believe that defending Israel will hasten the end of days, and think that would be a jolly good thing. The various intelligence agencies are to be handed over to Tulsi Gabbard - an eccentric former Democratic congresswoman, who has recently swung hard towards Trumpism, and in any case had always been virulently pro-Israel.

Most of these people need to be confirmed by Senate hearings, but, given the Republican trifecta, this is unlikely to be a problem, except perhaps in the case of Gaetz, whose legal issues are all a little too fresh in the memory. The fighting spirit of 'never Trump' moderate Republicans is more or less broken today, if it ever amounted to much, and only the most egregious individuals will face any serious scrutiny.

How, then, will this all play out? There are, to be sure, reasons to suppose that, by this time next year, many of these appointees will be yesterday's men and women. Trump, after all, values loyalty above all other things, and relative political heavyweights like Rubio will find it hard to swallow their pride in the quantities likely to be asked of them. Trump also hates to be made to look a fool, which makes the lightweights potentially vulnerable; and in any case, they are easier to get rid of. Nobody much will miss Pete Hegseth if his attempts to square off against senior military commanders see him defeated.

Incoherence

There is also the problem continually faced by Trumpism - its total lack of political coherence. There are the two main themes: China and immigration - on those, we can expect total message discipline. In any case, the US state apparatus itself is on board with great power escalation, and likely comfortable with whatever shows of brutality Trump deems appropriate in his war on migrants. On everything else, there are divisions - between populists and tech billionaires, or extreme social conservatives like vice-president JD Vance and realigning Democratic blow-ins like RFK and Gabbard.

For example - Musk and Ramaswamy represent a section of capital whose whole *raison d'être* is to capture monopolies; but Gaetz, who will have some influence over anti-trust enforcement at the DOJ, is a noted proponent of breaking up tech monopolies, and one of the key 'Khan-servatives' who support the incumbent FTC chair. There is certainly scope for a blow-up on these grounds. The history of the previous Trump administration is of endless such blow-ups - Steve Bannon against

Jared Kushner, Anthony Scaramucci against everyone ...

This is, to an extent, built into the strongman game. Hitler, too, had bickering subordinates, and indeed encouraged their bickering. They competed to provide the *Führer* with his opinion before he had the time to think of it himself. It was more or less how the whole show rattled on, and it allows a modicum of healthy political competition without for a moment impugning the power of the big man himself.

If the last Trump administration is any guide, the people who tend to win his affections over time are not his most obsequious superfans like Gaetz or Hegseth, but his family (notable by their absence in the current slate), four-star generals, and his billionaire friends. His signal achievement in his first term was a giant tax cut for the rich; his most obvious defeat was his failure to get troops out of Afghanistan, despite campaign promises and even negotiating a withdrawal deal, because the generals convinced him it would be too embarrassing (as, indeed, Biden was to discover later).

Things are shaping up, therefore, not for a rapid slide into dictatorship, but a kleptocrat's raid on state coffers and consequent degradation of American state capacity. Infrastructure will continue to rot; indicators like life expectancy will continue to decline. All of this, naturally, will be blamed on 'woke' Democratic governors and mayors, or else the predations of immigrants.

It is really quite extraordinary that one still finds people earnestly hailing Trump as the avatar of a great realignment in American politics, heralding the emergence of a strange mirror-world social democracy - one thinks of Sohrab Ahmari, probably the best-known ideologue of this outlook, who is presently pinning his hopes on the as yet unfilled role of treasury secretary. The man is no idiot - but really now, Sohrab! We both lived through this once already. The sole cabinet survivor for the whole of Trump's first term, to my memory, was treasury secretary Steven Mnuchin - a classic Goldman Sachs clone. Why will it be any different today?

The grain of truth in the 'realigner' creed is that America's two-party system is barely functional as a means of responding to popular discontent; and that discontent is, for now, utterly demobilised beyond occasional protest movements of left and right - which alike prove incapable of meaningfully shaping the governing practice of those two parties. That much is obvious both from Trump's cabinet of curiosities and the sheer rancour of the Democratic reckoning over their catastrophic defeat. It is hard to see how this arrangement can continue much longer in its present form ●

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Notes

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SUPPLEMENT



Church of England: nationalised Catholicism

State and secularism

Justine Welby is going, but we need to see the back of the Church of England as the state religion too. Jack Conrad takes to task SWP opportunism and makes the case for treating everyone - the religious and the non-religious - equally

Yet again, the Church of England is embroiled in a crisis over sex. This time it is not masturbation, premarital birds and bees, divorce, women priests or gay relationships, but the fallout from John Smyth - he horribly abused at least 130 young men and boys from the 1970s at Christian 'Iwerne' camps in England and then in southern Africa till his death in 2018.¹

Iwerne camps - named after the Dorset village - began in 1932 under Eric (Bash) Nash. Most readers will know by now that they were open to young Christians from Britain's 30 top public schools. The idea being to promote a militant evangelicalism by getting 'key boys from key schools' into leading positions in the Church of England: those who attended the Iwerne camps included one Justin Welby.

Iwerne camps encouraged a Spartan pride amongst the elite: pride in privilege, pride in sporting prowess, pride in good looks, pride in faith, pride in willingness to suffer. Smyth berated and savagely beat them in the name of Jesus: "The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from every sin."² A hundred of the best just for wanking. Sadism built character - the kind of character needed to be a reliable member of the ruling class.

Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury and spiritual leader of the 85 million-strong global Anglican Communion, was forced into a reluctant resignation on November 12 over the Smyth scandal. He has, effectively, admitted the sin of omission in a cover-up that, of course, long predates his occupancy of Lambeth Palace.

In part Smyth got away with his crimes simply because he was a QC and therefore could threaten endless legal challenges in any court case and subsequent appeals. But he was too very much part of the rightwing establishment

and its fight against the tidal wave of liberalism, permissiveness and smut engulfing Britain. He acted for the Christian morality campaigner, Mary Whitehouse, against Denis Lemon, editor of *Gay News*, and the National Theatre over its production of Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain*. When Smyth's abuse became impossible to ignore, he was moved, first to Zimbabwe and then South Africa.

There is, however, a deep-seated institutional problem. Welby's resignation came because he had lost the trust of the evangelical wing of the church and the rightwing media. But, it is clear, Smyth was no lone rotten apple. The 2022 report by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse found that deference to ecclesiastical authority, taboos surrounding the discussion of sexuality and a culture that supported perpetrators rather than victims helped make the Church of England "a place where abusers could hide".³ Countless impressionable and often highly vulnerable young people have bled for Jesus.

Here, in other words, is a moment to press home our immediate programmatic demand for the disestablishment of the C of E and once again explain what we mean by secularism.

Origins

The term 'secularism' was first "adopted" in 1851 by George Jacob Holyoake, an Owenite cooperative socialist.⁴ Secularism for him was "a code of duty pertaining to this life, founded on considerations purely human, and intended mainly for those who find theology indefinite, or inadequate, unreliable and unbelievable".⁵ Holyoake urged the abolition of all religious oaths, as required by law, and the disestablishment of the Church of England. His secularism combined a materialist approach,

when it came to studying nature, with an ethical striving for the earthly perfection of humanity - physically, morally and intellectually.

Once he began publishing *The Reasoner*, local secular societies were established throughout Britain. They tended to see religion as the root of all evil. And, though an agnostic, and increasingly craving respectability in later life, Holyoake has the enduring honour of being the last person in England to be officially prosecuted for atheism.⁶ He got six-months.

Obviously, secularism, albeit without the name, has a history that long predates 1851. Of course, we need to be careful about projecting modern concepts onto the distant past. That said, I think we can safely trace secularism all the way back to ancient Greek philosophers such as Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Heraclitus, Theodorus, Epicurus and Democritus in the first millennium BCE. These intellectuals mocked the old gods and their all-too-human attributes and began to explain nature in a materialistic fashion: that is, without reference to mysticism or spirits. Epicurus - a particular hero of Marx's⁷ - taught that the gods, if they existed, made no impact on human affairs. Similar thinkers arose in the Middle East, India and China. Indeed Confucianism and Theravada Buddhism as religions are almost secular in the sense that they show little or no concern for supernatural beings. They are more social *practices* than *belief* systems - devotees strive to do the right thing (either by loyally serving their superiors or achieving individual salvation).

Modern secularism develops out of the Enlightenment and therefore, ironically, in the main out of western Christianity. Long-distance maritime navigation, the discovery of the Americas, machine production, new chemical and metallurgical techniques, the advance of

mercantile, agrarian and industrial capitalism necessitate the rebirth and, following that, the continuous expansion of scientific knowledge. Nature, not the *Bible*, not even the works of Aristotle, thereby becomes the primary source of practical truth. An ever-growing intellectual space encouraged by, and in turn feeding into, social criticism. A rising arc which can be traced under names such as Hugo Grotius, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, Adam Smith and Georg Hegel. Marxism represents both the pinnacle and negation of bourgeois thought.

Modern meanings

Today secularism carries a variety of meanings. In the realm of philosophy it is a rejection of religious ways of seeing the universe - there is no need for god or the supernatural. Secularism is also sometimes associated with the diminishing prestige and power of organised religion and the absence of theological categories in mainstream political discourse. Then there is the growth of scientific knowledge and the so-called consumer society. As a result western European countries are sometimes described as secular. But, when it comes to the state - and that is what primarily concerns us here - things are pretty straightforward. Secularism denotes the separation of religion from the state and abolishing discrimination between religions. People should be free not to believe in god and free to believe and practise the codes of their creed.

Naturally, secularism is flatly rejected by the traditionalists who stand guard over Catholic orthodoxy. Doctrine and history dictate that the Vatican cannot concede that religion can simply be a private affair. Their god is "author and ruler" not only of individuals, but also of society. Nevertheless, though the Catholic church might

SUPPLEMENT

in its madder theological moments still hanker after state formations along the lines of Éamon de Valera's Ireland, the fact of the matter is that there has been a long history of retreat and compromise. When forced, the Catholic church is ready to grant that "a secular education in the public schools may be the only possible one".⁸

Equally to the point, a wide array of religious people say they would be perfectly happy with a secular constitution - it does, after all, promise an end to discrimination by one religion against another. Hence, in the name of mutual toleration, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45), a brave anti-Nazi Lutheran pastor and theologian, founded what has been called secular Christianity. He rejected what he called "cheap grace", which is "sold in the market" and sees "the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner".⁹ In fact, Bonhoeffer took his stand on the cardinal importance of this world, not the next. Other secular Christians can be cited: eg, Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, Joseph Fletcher and John Robinson. There is also the noted Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor. Despite being a committed Catholic, he favours the separation of church and state, because, while secularism allows the growth of what he calls "unreflective unbelief", it also allows religion as a conscious, albeit hard, choice.¹⁰

Most countries are nowadays explicitly secular, according to the terms of their constitutions.¹¹ However, there are shortcomings and rank hypocrisy involved with many of these claims. Three examples will suffice.¹²

■ Germany: special taxes are collected by the federal government on behalf of the Lutheran and Catholic churches - other religious groups have to go to the bother and expense of collecting contributions from their membership without the state's helping hand. Religious lessons are part of the school curriculum, but once again only for the two privileged Christian denominations. In defence of this arrangement Christian Democratic politicians describe the Judeo-Christian heritage as the "lead culture" (*Leitkultur*) in Germany.¹³ Calls for implementing a genuinely secular approach have been "sharply criticised" by both Lutheran and Catholic clerics.

■ India: rightwing Hindu parties and groups - not least the Bharatiya Janata Party - lambaste secularism and the supposed special privileges granted to the large Muslim and Christian minorities by the 1947 constitution. Their aim, already half-realised, is to establish a Hindutva. As a result some write of Indian secularism being "divinely guided".¹⁴ Supposedly a cultural solidarity embracing all Indians, in reality Hindutva is a dangerous "xenological nationalism".¹⁵ Of course, non-Hindus have no special privileges. Within limits, each major religious 'community' regulates 'personal law' - a practice inherited directly from the divide-and-rule British Raj. This multiculturalism freezes horizontal communal divisions and ensures, in particular, the continued oppression of women (with the partial exception of the Sikhs). But the fact of the matter is that today it is Hindus who enjoy a privileged position in India.

■ USA: the writers of the US constitution firmly rejected any reference to god. Hence the US state officially derives its authority not from god, but the people. Then there is the first amendment (1791). It says, in part, that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." In the same amendment, freedom of speech, the press and peaceable assembly are guaranteed. There was, as might be expected, opposition; religious fanatics prophesied divine retribution. Eg, in 1802 the "atheist and infidel", Thomas Jefferson, received a letter from the Danbury Baptist Association asking him why he would not proclaim national days of fasting and thanksgiving like his predecessors, George Washington and John Adams.¹⁶ In his well considered reply, Jefferson spoke of his desire to create "a wall of separation between church and state". However, the supreme court has, over the years, allowed violations. Church and other ecclesiastical property is exempt from taxation; the US currency bears the national motto, "In god we trust"; the pledge of allegiance includes the phrase, "one nation, under god"; US armed forces, congress and many state legislatures employ chaplains; and courts often have a crier or clerk, who opens proceedings with the words, "God save the United States and this honourable court". And, while it has rightly been said that the first six US presidents rarely invoked the blessing of the almighty, that was certainly not the case with Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and George W Bush. As for

Donald J Trump, seeking evangelical votes, he left the Presbyterian church to become "a non-denominational Christian".¹⁷

Anglican constitution

What of the United Kingdom? The constitutionally established religion of the English part of the realm remains in many ways a nationalised form of Catholicism. The Church of England traces itself back less to the 1534 Act of Supremacy and more to the 6th century and St Augustine of Canterbury (and therefore the apostolic succession). Henry VIII's schism and the creation of the *Ecclesia Anglicana* saw virtually no change in ecclesiastical law, administrative structures, theology or liturgy. True, during the reign of Edward VI there was an influx of continental reforms and innovations inspired by Martin Bucer, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin. But, apart from the brief return to Catholicism with Mary and the domination of puritanism under the Commonwealth, Anglicanism was equated with the nation.

The Church of England is Erastian. It operates under the direction of the state and performs loyal, grovelling service. Edmund Burke (1729-97) - widely viewed as the philosophical founder of modern Toryism - unashamedly celebrated this salient fact: "The body of all true religion consists, to be sure, in obedience to the will of the sovereign of the world, in a confidence in his declarations, and in imitation of his perfections."¹⁸ In the late 20th century JCD Clark lamented the loss of certainty. What the jaundiced Tory historian called the "atheist, multi-racial, high-divorce, high-crime society" was nostalgically contrasted with the Anglican ascendancy that saw the aristocratic-gentry oligarchy safely through the convulsions that punctuated the period from the 1660 Stuart restoration to the Reform Act of 1832 (it gave the bourgeoisie the vote and was roundly condemned as un-Christian by Church of England tops).¹⁹

Anglicanism took a middling theological position between the "extremes" of Rome and Geneva, but, unlike them, never taught that there is a right of people to rebel against unjust government.²⁰ The Church of England saw itself as the servant of the monarch and guarantor of the state. The Anglican world view was resolutely hierarchical and unflinching conservative. Rebellion was sinful and ran counter to the natural order and god's divine will. The fabulous wealth of the landed elite went unquestioned. Ditto the poverty of the mass of the population. Starvation was certainly considered a deserving fate for the indolent, the feckless, the profligate.

British state identity and religion has been historically intertwined. It should never be forgotten that official Britain was founded in the early 18th century as a nation-state which was aggressively Christian and aggressively Protestant. Catholic France constituted its defining other. Until the Enlightenment and the French Revolution of 1789, European politics were often fought out using arcane justifications culled from the *Bible*. True, after 1688, the so-called Glorious Revolution, and then the 1832 extension of the franchise, the Church of England's self-conception contracted somewhat. Other denominations had to be recognised - no matter how reluctantly. Yet it was only in the 1960s that the Church of England began seeing itself as a voluntary society of believers and not as the nation at prayer.

Nowadays the Church of England talks about the plural society. Despite that, it remains the established church. True, alongside the Church of England, countless coexisting and semi-incorporated Christian factions are benignly tolerated - Roman Catholicism, Baptism, Methodism, etc. All have been digested into the status quo. And, needless to say, the political class enthusiastically courts Muslim, Hindu and Sikh mosques, temples and gurdwaras.

Nevertheless, state, established church and monarchy together form a single organism. Church and monarchy constitute what Walter Bagehot called the "dignified parts", as opposed to the "efficient parts", of the constitution.²¹ Royal weddings and state funerals are conducted according to high church ritual. And, of course, the monarch, the head of state, is also head of the established church. There is a *quid pro quo*. The men and women of the armed forces are blessed by the Church of England; and its archbishops and bishops, the "lords spiritual", sit by "ancient usage and statute" in parliament.²² As for the 'impartial' BBC, it broadcasts daily Christian prayers and full services every Sunday. All-state schools are meant to teach religion as a subject and around a third of them - some 8,000 in total - have a specific religious designation: 68% are

C of E, 28% Catholic, the remaining 4% being Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Hindu.

So many of our children are taught the miracle stories of the *New Testament* as verity, or at the very least that Jesus was some sort of well-meaning founder of an admirable new religion. And, though Henry VIII helped himself to the wealth of the monasteries, it can hardly be said that today the Church of England shares the lot of the poor. While repeatedly complaining about severe financial shortfalls, it is hugely wealthy. It holds a portfolio of stocks, shares, property and other such assets, which in 2021 had "grown to £10.1 billion", according to the church commissioners report.²³

Not surprisingly, some account for the nose-dive in Church of England attendance with reference to its thoroughly compromising subordination to the state. Former cleric Michael Hampson pleads: "For the sake of the future church it is time to disestablish and dismantle what remains of the ancient Church of England."²⁴

Anti-secular socialists

In terms of the constitution, any idea that Britain is a secular country has been shown to be manifestly false. Nor has religion been entirely removed from political discourse. Top politicians still line up to parade their pro-religious credentials.

At the top of my list here must be George Galloway. Having been a Labour MP for Glasgow Hillhead, he was expelled in 2003 because of opposition to the Iraq war. He then went on to help form Respect, being elected MP for Bethnal Green and Bow in the 2005 general election, then Bradford West in a 2012 by-election and finally he won the Rochdale by-election in 2024. Today, of course, he leads the Workers Party of Britain.

Though a Catholic, Galloway has developed an almost uncanny ability to appeal to Muslim voters - the key to his successes in Bethnal Green, Bradford and Rochdale. He knows how mosques work, he knows the business connections with local communities and he knows how to combine socialist rhetoric, anti-imperialism and social conservatism. Whenever the opportunity arises, he readily pronounces upon his "deeply held" Catholic principles, which, of course, means he opposes abortion and assisted dying. Naturally, therefore, when asked about Muslim schools, he eagerly confirms his support ... on the basis of equality. That means repudiating, of course, the traditional socialist demand for the separation of religion from schools.

My polemical target here, though, is as much the Socialist Workers Party as it is George Galloway. Why? Because between 2003 and 2007 they were glued together in the Respect popular front: it was the SWP and its leftwing outriders such as Alan Thornett, Nick Wrack and Linda Smith, the Muslim Association of Britain, various British-Asian businessmen and, of course, Galloway himself.

So back to Respect's October 30-31 2004 conference, where SWP members were dragged by its then power couple, John Rees and Lindsey German, to vote down one socialist and democratic principle after another. Particular venom was directed against those - ie, the CPGB - who called for Respect to constitute itself a "secular" organisation, "open to those of all faiths and none", and to strive for a society "in which people of all faiths and none are equal". Clear and, one would surely have thought, uncontentious. But not for the SWP. Chris Bambery - then *Socialist Worker* editor and to this day a close ally of the Rees-German Counterfire outfit - was their preprogrammed megaphone.

He would be "concerned at Respect calling itself secular". After all, secularism has been used in France to justify the Islamophobic ban on the hijab in state schools. Therefore, one presumes, secularism is now a bad thing and should be condemned. Exaggeration? No, not at all. During his time in the labour movement in the west of Scotland, Bambery claimed he had never known "a resolution being put, saying we are secular". Hard to believe, especially given the sectarian bigotry that still blights daily life in Glasgow. Anyhow, what he was saying is that socialists would be right to vote against any motion which suggested or demanded that those identifying with the Catholic church and those identifying with the Church of Scotland ought to be treated as equals under a secular constitution. Bambery even depicted secularism as somehow akin to favouring discrimination against religious minorities.

Further plunging into the depths, he rhetorically asked: "Do we have a problem here

with people with extreme religious views?" "No", he boomed. And to rouse his troops into a frenzy he ended with a final flourish. The "real fundamentalists" are Bush and Blair, who are deliberately stoking up Islamophobia.²⁵ Those calling for secularism, he implied, were doing the same thing. He urged and got his vote to kill the motion for secularism.

Bambery put things too crudely - at least, it would seem, for some other SWP high-ups. Despite using deliberately Aesopian language, Alex Callinicos tried to do something of a rescue job in his regular *Socialist Worker* column. Bambery had foolishly thrown the baby out with the bathwater. Therefore Callinicos slyly defined Respect as "an alliance against neoliberalism, racism and war that unites secular socialists and Muslim activists".²⁶ Presumably that formulation was meant to do a twofold job. Firstly, it credits SWPers with being "secular socialists". Secondly, it excuses so-called "secular socialists" voting down secularism. To create his own diversion, Callinicos too launched himself against the left in France, for defending "a secular definition of the state that refuses to acknowledge that millions of the victims of French imperialism now live in France, and are deeply and legitimately attached to their Muslim faith". Unlike a bungling Bambery, however, a cynical Callinicos does at least admit that there are disputed definitions of secularism.

Alex Cowper of the so-called Fourth International and its British section used similar arguments. Secularism should not be rejected by socialists. However - and here is the spoiler - the SWP "correctly opposed" committing Respect to secularism, because it is a "broad-based organisation".²⁷ This shameful construct fails to acknowledge the simple fact that secularism is not something for narrow-based organisations alone. Secularism is the answer for religious people and society at large - surely a very broad-based organisation. Effectively Cowper counterposes secularism and religion and seems to view secularism as being exclusively for the private consumption of consenting members of this or that tiny confessional sect.

Nor was the now near defunct left nationalist Scottish Socialist Party any different back in 2004. Its conference voted down an unexceptional motion demanding the abolition of all faith schools. Alan McCombes - then the SSP's press spokesperson - argued that such a commitment would unleash a reactionary storm. He might be right. As already noted, Scotland has a deep religious fault line.

The Catholic church, in particular, would almost certainly urge its flock to join a fanatical crusade against any move towards secular schools, as it has done in the past over divorce, abortion, homosexuality, etc. That is why any campaign for a secular education system would have to be conducted with the greatest care and sensitivity.

But what McCombes offered was a multiculturalist cop-out. Instead of secularism he recommended religious equality - not equality between religious and non-religious people. That means refusing to challenge the existence of faith schools and in effect condoning the continued indoctrination and segregation of children, and religiously coloured lessons and festivals. McCombes's backsliding won the day with the help of the Socialist Worker platform (which later defected to Tommy Sheridan's dead-end Solidarity). Particular concern was expressed by SW platform speakers for the sensibilities of the Muslim community.²⁸

Amazingly, the SWP's new-found hostility to secularism was also manifested over Palestine. Chris Bambery may have claimed to have never come across a resolution on secularism. The poor little man obviously forgets the countless resolutions on Palestine moved by ... errrr, the SWP. It still routinely demands the immediate abolition of the Israeli-Jewish state and its replacement by a "democratic, secular Palestine".

But back in October 2004 the SWP was in opportunist overdrive. At the Respect conference the SWP fielded its majority to defeat that very position. Moira Nolan - soon to be elevated to its central committee and briefly its industrial organiser, before disappearing into the ether - proposed an amendment deleting an offending paragraph which contained the phrase, "unitary, democratic and secular state". "Personally I agree with a unitary state," claimed Nolan. "But it's about entering into dialogue with people" who "might not join Respect if they disagree" with a one-state solution. "We should be one step ahead of them, not 15."²⁹

On the face of it, her argument seemed to be

pretty much in line with what the SWP had been saying on issues like socialism, republicanism, abortion and open borders: 'ordinary people' are not yet ready to adopt our position, so we must water down or abandon awkward 'shibboleths' in the bid to win their votes. A chemically pure form of opportunism that, sadly, produced no splits, no dissent, no internal debates. The "brilliant" Cliffites who formed today's Revolutionary Socialism in the 21st Century went along with the whole farce.³⁰ This we should never forget, nor should we forgive.

Of course, what the SWP really feared in 2005 was not advocating a single-state solution in Israel-Palestine. It was secularism. In Respect it was "Muslim activists" who set the programmatic limits ... and what they envisage in Palestine is a single *Muslim* state solution - and that under the rule of an Islamic theocracy. The SWP's problem with secularism (along with the unrestricted right of a woman to choose to have an abortion, etc) was that it was seen as endangering the continued presence of Galloway and "Muslim activists" in Respect. Having correctly identified Muslims as a particularly politicised section of the population because of the Bush-Blair 'war on terror', the SWP concluded that Respect must steer well clear of any mention of secularism.

Such is the predictable outcome of popular frontism. At this point in the argument, a necessary aside, therefore. A popular front, typically - that is, with post-1935 'official communism' - refers to an electoral formation in which the working class component, usually the majority, limits itself to achieving an 'anti-fascist', a 'progressive' or a 'peaceful' capitalism. Towards that end, advanced demands are substituted by the lowest common denominator and 'all things to all people' platitudes. Often the liberal bourgeoisie or the trade union bureaucracy set the programmatic limits. Those who dare criticise this shameful approach from the standpoint of Marxism constitute an accusing reminder of principles once held dear and of life before the fall. Left critics are therefore organisationally silenced, surgically removed or, failing that, brutally crushed - the logic of the popular front is counterrevolutionary.

Well known governmental examples being Manuel Azaña in 1936-39 Spain, Léon Blum's in 1930s France and Salvador Allende's in Chile in the early 1970s. The results have not been good. On the contrary, the workers' movement has paid dearly. Many thousands killed, many thousands imprisoned, many thousands driven into exile.

Of course, with the SWP we were not dealing with a popular front which involves mass parties of the working class. Respect was one of those *unpopular* fronts of the type sponsored by the 'official' CPGB in the 1930s - it consisted of the CPGB, plus an ill-assorted collection of pacifists, left reformists, anti-fascists and Christians who had little in common apart from opposition to the Tory-dominated national government's foreign policy.

To state the obvious, it is one thing to march with the MAB against the war and occupation of Iraq. It is quite another to establish a political party specifically designed to incorporate - or, that failing, be acceptable to - Salma Yaqoob, Yvonne Ridley, Anas Altikriti and George Galloway.

A political party objectively serves this or that social class or stratum, and implies a shared world view. By definition a party, no matter how small, entails unity around a common governmental project. That is what resolutions, programmes and manifestoes are all about. They make a claim on the present, but promise government, when it comes to the future. And here's the rub. In the words of the Marx-Engels *Communist manifesto*, we seek to organise workers "into a class" and "consequently into a political party", which is politically independent of other classes and strata.³¹ Or, in the words of Lenin, communists want to organise workers into a "separate workers' party" and not "amalgamate" it with other classes and their political trends.³² And, needless to say, the MAB hardly represents the interests of the working class.

Incidentally, John Rees brilliantly shot himself in the foot over the 1930s popular fronts presided over by Stalin and the little Stalins in every country. In 2003 he stated, rightly, that the "fault" with the popular front "was that it subordinated the radical forces to the political priorities of the most conservative forces in the alliance".³³ Exactly!

Equal rights

Be it Britain, Germany, USA, India, Israel, Iran or Saudi Arabia, any principled democrat must surely favour the complete separation of

religion from the state. There should neither be the domination of religion by the state nor the domination of the state by religion. Hence, the privileged position for one particular cult - whatever it may be - in schools, state institutions and the legal system must be ended.

Of course, to simply endorse the equality of all religions is an elementary mistake. There should be the equality of believers and non-believers. The mere equality of religions involves maintaining difference and therefore disunity. In the last analysis, that serves the interests of capitalism, which, being the rule of a small minority, relies on dividing the majority - ie, nowadays, in most countries, the working class. That is why multiculturalism - and its latest leftwing iteration as intersectionality - should be firmly opposed. Yes, each 'culture' is considered separate, but equal. But the intention is that each separate 'culture' will be a supplicant before the state with material interests to emphasise and exacerbate difference. Logically that leads to Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu and even Black Majority Church schools.

What is objectionable is using the education system as a means to promulgate, normalise and freeze religious divisions amongst children. Parents, of course, ought to be able to take their children to religious ceremonies and celebrations. The same goes for Sunday schools and their various Friday and Saturday equivalents. Such occasions are a private concern and the state should not interfere. But in school there should be no prayers, no hymns, no sermons, no nativity plays, no equal celebrations of Easter, Diwali or Ramadan. In other words, keep religion out of schools.

Religion, like physics, mathematics, geography, history and the English language, ought to be studied as an academic subject. World history has, after all, been unmistakably shaped by religious ideas, and billions still believe. The working class movement here in Britain has its origins with religious dissenters. Certainly modern English is as much a product of the James I *Authorised version of the Bible* as it is of William Shakespeare. In his amusing book, *The God delusion*, Richard Dawkins has a section called 'Religious education as a part of literary culture', in which he lists 129 biblical phrases which any cultivated English speaker will instantly recognise and many use without knowing their source: 'the salt of the earth'; 'go the extra mile'; 'I wash my hands of it'; 'filthy lucre'; 'through a glass darkly'; 'wolf in sheep's clothing'; 'hide your light under a bushel'; 'no peace for the wicked'; 'how are the mighty fallen'.³⁴ A native speaker of English who has never read a word of the King James *Bible* is, he says, verging on the barbarian.

People should be allowed to worship whatever god, spirit or supernatural force they wish and practise their religion as they see fit - with the sole proviso that it does not harm others. By the same measure, people should have the right to deviate from established doctrines without any legal sanction being incurred. So, from the biggest and most traditional church to the smallest and most obscure sect, there must be freedom of religious observance. Once again, by the same measure, there must be freedom for the likes of myself to deny the existence of all gods and argue for the scientific investigation of religion. The secular principle of mutual toleration is thankfully nowadays considered perfectly acceptable by most religious people. Secularism is about equality of all ... including agnostics and atheists.

Advocating secularism goes right to the heart of the UK's rotten, quasi-democratic constitution. Secularism rejects the situation whereby a particular religion and a particular religious institution is privileged by the state. Going back to the London Corresponding Society and the Chartists, the working class left has demanded the disestablishment of the Church of England and the complete separation of religion from the state. In short, a democratic, secular republic.

Does that amount to a declaration of war against religion? Not at all. A secular constitution should guarantee religious freedom, including the freedom of religious expression. Without freedom of religious expression it is self-evident that equality is fake - and, therefore, so too is secularism.

Marxists unwaveringly oppose those who wish to conduct a war on religion. The idea that religion must be repressed or banned because of its harmful effects - eg, wars, hatred, irrationality - is dangerous nonsense. All such attempts are diversionary and martyrdom certainly fertilises religious feelings. Therefore we oppose university prohibitions on religious cults,

government investigations into Scientology and visa bans on "dangerous hate preachers" to stop the "rise in extremism" in Britain.³⁵

Religion, by the way, often preaches crazy mumbo-jumbo and invents social demons both to explain the world and to give a sense of purpose to those who otherwise feel crushed, empty, abandoned and despised. Be that as it may, in no manner, shape or form do Marxists defend or seek to emulate the anti-religious nightmare perpetrated in the name of communism by the Stalinist states. At the most extreme, Albania under Enver Hoxha declared itself to be the world's first "constitutionally atheist state".³⁶ In practice that meant a regime sadly reminiscent of Torquemada's inquisition.

Life itself has certainly shown such pretensions to have been pitifully hollow. It was not Sunni Islam or the Catholic church in Albania, the Orthodox church in Russia, Serbia and Bulgaria, the Catholic church in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Lithuania that collapsed under the weight of their own 'inevitable' decay - leave aside all the oppressive measures (exile, imprisonment, torture, killing) intended to destroy them. It was, on the contrary, bureaucratic socialism which turned to dust almost overnight.

France

Following September 11 2001 - despite the protests of many leftwingers - Muslims have become the butt of increased repression and a divisive, ideological assault aimed at creating a climate of fear and intolerance. In France, of course, this includes the ban on "conspicuous religious symbols" in state schools - yes, a ban carried out in the name of republicanism and secularism. A thin veneer for othering the Muslim minority. Although the law claims to be even-handed in its attitude to different religions, Muslim female garb is the front line of attack.³⁷ Yet, since all religious and political symbols are banned, there is no intention, it is claimed, of singling out Muslims - an oppressed minority, which is overwhelmingly working class, often poor and disproportionately unemployed.

But the French legislation specifies that symbols must not be "conspicuous" - therefore crucifixes are deemed acceptable, provided they are not "of an excessive size". If, for example, a student staggered into school carrying a cross on their back then that would definitely not be permitted. But then Christians do not normally carry crosses of "excessive size" as part of their everyday religious activity and manner of presentation.

Naturally, as secularists, Marxists defend the right to wear the hijab - even in his kilted dotage Chris Bamberg might be surprised that this position is likewise advocated by MAB's Raghad Altikriti. He argued that a "*secular* state should give the individual freedom of religious choice without interfering in that choice".³⁸ By the same logic, however, Marxists would defend the right *not* to wear the hijab: a voluntary discarding of the veil is, of course, something we positively wish to bring about, and that can best be achieved in an atmosphere of working class confidence, democracy and female emancipation. Unfortunately the left in France did adopt a badly mistaken position - instead of opposing the ban on "conspicuous religious symbols", the left either passively sat on the sidelines or actually provided political backing.

With a few honourable exceptions the left in France showed itself to be trapped in the past. The fact of the matter is that the heritage of the First Republic is a mixed one and the French left of today owes more to the statist tradition of Jacobinism than it often cares to admit. Let us see why.

The rising bourgeoisie in France militantly opposed the Catholic church and indeed many of its best thinkers and outstanding actors were deists or even outright atheists. One of the foremost demands during the opening phase of the great French Revolution was for the nationalisation of all ecclesiastical property. Church estates were subsequently sold off in order to meet the revolutionary government's growing budgetary needs. However, a complete separation of church and state was never achieved. Far from it. A state-sponsored constitutional church was established in 1790: its priests were expected to take their cue from Paris, not Rome.

Victory for the Jacobin mountain and their Hébertist and other such allies on the far left brought to power those who were committed anti-clericalists. Many wanted to deChristianise France. Priests certainly faced unremitting hostility from the revolutionary crowd. On November 23 1793 the Paris city commune actually closed all churches. Not that this was

to the liking of Maximilien Robespierre. As a matter of both principle and cold calculation, he stood for religious toleration and feared that atheism and a war on religion would alienate the conservative peasantry and play into the hands of the forces of reaction. "There are," he astutely observed, "people who are superstitious in perfectly good faith ... They are sick people whom we must restore to good health by winning their confidence; a forced cure would drive them to fanaticism."³⁹

Atheism was branded aristocratic. Anti-revolutionary too, because it fostered conditions that would provoke civil war and another Vendée. In short, declaring war on religion was either treachery or childish immaturity. George Rudé - a member of the famous historians group of the CPGB - somewhat generously drew a parallel between Robespierre and Lenin's tactical acumen. Though Robespierre lacked Lenin's theoretical sophistication and political vision, he knew when to "attack or withdraw".⁴⁰

Robespierre was, though, no secularist. He favoured neither the restoration of the Catholic church nor atheist bannings: rather a new state cult of the supreme being, based on the philosophy of Rousseau. This religion dispensed with traditional priests and stipulated that man had a sacred duty to "detest bad faith and despotism", "to punish tyrants and traitors" and "assist the unfortunate". Formally inaugurated on June 8 1794, while the cult ran against the grain as far as the revolutionary atheists were concerned, it was meant to "appeal to the bulk of religious-minded revolutionaries, whether professedly Christian or not".⁴¹ Virtue was to be an end in itself - the cult was also launched to unite the revolutionary movement and the broad mass of the French people. It did not work. Both the deChristiansers and the deist followers of Voltaire saw an attempt to revive Catholicism through the back door. Robespierre was accused of entertaining ambitions of becoming the pontiff of a new religion. Nor were the masses attracted. Most remained stubbornly indifferent.

With Napoleon Bonaparte and then the full-blown, counterrevolutionary restoration of the monarchy, there ensued an extended period of half-hidden, half-open conflict between anticlericalism and clericalism. Things began with a marked religious revival. Church congregations and those signed up to religious orders increased significantly. Bonaparte brought back the Catholic church in 1801, having agreed a concordat with Pius VIII; he tried to effectively reduce the church to being a mere instrument of the state. Under Charles X, religion went onto the offensive. His coronation brought back all the old religious paraphernalia, ceremonies and holy hooey. There seemed the distinct danger that the state was going to become an instrument of the church. Yet, though bishops might have dreamt of a return to the conditions which prevailed under the *ancien régime*, "the terms of the concordat were too favourable to the papacy to abandon".⁴² Anyway, negotiations to revise it came to naught.

Despite that minor hiccup, bishops were in 1821 handed powers to supervise all secondary education. Then a high ecclesiastic was put in charge of the universities and in 1824 it was agreed that all teachers in primary schools were to be appointed by the church - often it chose priests or nuns. Added to that, the church was provided with special legal protection. Anything in the press that caused "outrage" to the church became a criminal offence. And the Sacrilege Law of 1825 made the "profanation of sacred vessels and the Eucharist" an act of blasphemy punishable by public execution.⁴³

In 1832 the Catholic church issued the encyclical *Mirari vos*, which denounced as wicked all progressive ideas - the ending of censorship, separation of church from the state and education, universal suffrage, etc. The 1851-70 regime of Louis Bonaparte saw the church further consolidate its hold, especially over education. Half of boys and nearly all girls attended church primary schools. Even in state schools religious instruction was compulsory. Not that anti-clericalism and rationalism was completely routed. Though thrown back by Bonapartism, anti-clericalism maintained deep roots in French society and throughout the rest of the 19th century a bitter struggle ensued.

Bishops, abbots, priests and monks fought hard to maintain their grip: they bayed against Dreyfus, revived medieval anti-Semitism and in general sought to undermine the Third Republic. The rise of the working class socialist movement, though highly fragmented till 1905, added a new enemy and an extra urgency. French utopian socialists and communists carried on and

