

A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity

weekly **worker**



Fall of the House of Assad: a defeat for Iran and Russia, a victory for Israel and the US ... in the short term

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Towards a mass Communist Party

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LETTERS



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

Our own choice

Although Paul Demarty is, of course, wise to point to possible difficulties with any new law that deals with matters of life and death, I strongly believe he is wrong in his arguments against the legalisation of assisted suicide ('Slope really is slippery' November 28). I speak as an older, partially disabled, person who is in pain every day of her life. I am not about to commit suicide - well, not yet anyway - but I do want that choice, that possibility.

He prefers the phrase, "euthanasia", with a subtype of "assisted suicide". The National Health Service defines euthanasia as "the act of deliberately ending a person's life to relieve suffering". It gives as an example a doctor deliberately giving a patient with a terminal illness a drug they do not otherwise need ... with the sole aim of ending their life. It does not specify if the patient has asked for, or is even aware of, the doctor's actions.

Assisted suicide, however, is defined as "deliberately assisting another person to kill themselves". The two are not the same, or even a subset of one another, and even the possible penalties are different.

I certainly agree that healthcare and end-of-life care should be excellent, and palliative care available to anyone who needs or wants it. Both of my grandmothers died in their late 90s, needing (and getting) a great deal of care in the (privatised) healthcare system in the US. My step-grandmother, however, committed suicide, because she could not bear the idea of the pain preceding her impending death.

This was her choice. She did not consult anyone, nor was she helped by her doctor. My step-grandmother chose her manner of so doing. Was she afraid of dying in an undignified manner and as a burden to her family? Possibly. But, as she did not discuss it with anyone, we never knew. And this I believe: although, of course, in a better society the pain would be taken care of and the death dignified, I doubt very much that even this would stop people from committing suicide.

Paul Demarty ends his piece with the view that assisted suicide shows that "society considers the meeting of certain needs either beyond its capacity or not worth the bother". But in the cases I know of people who have committed suicide (and I personally have known four) it is a choice they, individually, have made.

The same argument of a slippery slope, those of us old enough to remember, was made both originally in the legalisation of contraceptives and, latterly, of abortion. Legalising contraceptives would lead to out-of-wedlock babies, because women (not men, of course) would no longer be afraid of sex outside of marriage. Legalising abortion would lead to women being promiscuous, because they knew they could get rid of any result of promiscuity - a slippery slope where babies would be murdered in the womb or after birth, etc.

The arguments made for both

freely available contraception and abortion were those of autonomy - a woman's right to decide what should happen to her body (let's leave aside any discussion of male autonomy here). Yes, limits were placed on when abortion could happen, and how and when young people should have access to contraceptives. Those debates are still ongoing in many places, but in most western countries the idea that women should have that choice has been made legal.

Whatever other countries have done or are doing might be interesting, in my view, but is not necessarily important in the discussion of what is happening here. Britain outlawed hanging before many other countries did so. Should we have continued it, because giving convicted criminals parole means they are going to commit the same crimes again? Texas certainly thinks so.

And, once assisted suicide is made legal, the numbers deciding to commit suicide will increase - when it is illegal, many are afraid of legal consequences if they are not successful. I have not noticed, however, in the past that people deciding to commit suicide have been stopped by it being illegal. We, after all, even have examples of Marxists so doing.

As I understand the new law, two doctors and a judge will have to agree to anyone wishing to avail themselves of assisted suicide. Again as I understand it, this is the most restrictive law by any country so far. We do not know, of course, what will happen after the law has been through committee, the Lords, etc, but we do know that many in Britain want the same choice that I want: to be able to make an informed and unafraid choice, when and if I feel enough is enough.

Gaby Rubin
London

Final goodbye?

Comrade Jack Conrad's response (Letters, November 14) to my questioning of some of the formulations in his article, 'Searching for solutions' (July 4), leaves much unanswered.

He denies the subsumption of Palestinian national identity within a broader Arab one. He writes: "We recognise Egyptian, Syrian, Palestinian, etc identities, but we also recognise the wider Arab nation ...". All well and good, but, while we have witnessed a flare in the Syrian civil war, only the Palestinian members of this "wider Arab nation" are subjected to a genocidal, colonial-settler crusade to expel them from their homeland.

Comrade Conrad goes on to suggest a pan-Arab socialist republic should "offer the Israeli-Jewish working class some sort of federal arrangement". A federal arrangement requires borders, but he leaves it to the future to decide where these might be drawn. Nonetheless, he does make two contradictory proposals.

He suggests that "an Israeli socialist republic would include areas where there is a clear Hebrew majority". Given the rate at which Israel is settling in the West Bank, this would suggest the whole of mandate Palestine minus a rump Gaza Strip (if this has not been ethnically cleansed of Palestinians prior to the putative Arab revolution). And where does this leave the longstanding demand for a Palestinian right of return? When will these

'majorities' be calculated? Before the revolution? After the revolution? Before Palestinians have exercised their right to return or after?

However, as an immediate demand, comrade Conrad would call for Israel to "cease seeding the West Bank with colonists and withdraw from all occupied territories". Worthy and wholly supportable demands. However, the chances the existing Zionist state will do so are vanishingly small.

Further, putting to one side the fact that the creation of the state of Israel required the occupation of swathes of Palestinian territory, the original division of mandate Palestine created a fractured patchwork of isolated territories with no geographical coherence. Withdrawing from "all [post-1967] occupied territories" would reproduce the territorial incoherence of the 1948 settlement. Am I to take it from this that Conrad supports the creation of an Israeli-Palestinian socialist canton republic along the lines proposed by Steve Freeman?

It may well be that there is no solution to Israel/Palestine other than the maximum demand of socialism. If that is true, then it would seem inevitable that the Palestinians are doomed to be permanently expelled from their homeland. The socialist Arab republic's offer of a "federal arrangement" to the Israeli-Jewish working class will be the final *coup de grâce* of Palestinian nationhood.

Andy Hannah
email

Action blockade

Palestine Action have returned to the Edinburgh premises of Leonardo - using vans to blockade the weapons factory and halt its contributions to genocide. At the time of writing Scottish activists were secured to each other on top of the vehicles, closing both entry gates to the plant and preventing the manufacture of parts for Israel's F-35 fighter jets.

The Italian-owned company, Leonardo, is one of the world's biggest arms manufacturers, with extensive ties to the Israeli state. Since 2015, the Edinburgh plant has manufactured the laser-targeting systems for F-35s - the model used by Israel to drop 2,000-pound bombs on the Palestinian population of Gaza. Additionally, Leonardo makes parts for Israel's Apache helicopters, while also maintaining deep partnership with Elbit Systems, Israel's largest weapons company, for the purposes of supplying its airforce.

Between 2016 and 2020, Leonardo received £7 million from the Scottish government, rendering it complicit in Israel's mass murder of Palestinians. In closing down the Leonardo factory, Palestine Action has sent a clear message to the British and Scottish governments - we will not stand idly by, as the war industry of Britain fuels and profits from Israel's atrocities.

Palestine Action have struck at the Edinburgh Leonardo plant on numerous occasions since October 2023, including through occupations, blockades and acts of sabotage. A spokesperson said: "While the British and Scottish governments continue to support the Israeli war industry, Palestine Action refuse to permit complicity. By shutting down Leonardo in

Edinburgh, these activists are preventing the production of Palestinian slaughter."

Palestine Action
email

Out of steam

In November 2023 Socialist Appeal announced its highest ever membership total (1,101), as it began preparations for its transformation into the Revolutionary Communist Party the following year. A month later leader Rob Sewell declared the party was "determined to double the size of our organisation by the end of 2024. We need 2,000 well-trained communists - or more."

In early May the founding congress of the RCP reported a modest increase in membership to 1,150, yet boldly declared its next milestone was "10,000 members". Just a few days ago (December 5), the RCP gave its latest membership total as 1,210, making a net increase of just 109 in a year marked *inter alia* by frequent and large pro-Palestinian demonstrations, a UK general election, the continuation of war in Ukraine and the rise of the populist and far right across the world.

The discrepancy between the RCP's increasingly frenetic claims about world politics and its astonishingly modest achievements is stark in the extreme.

John Kelly
email

Digital flower

Mike Macnair's continual claims that online publications can't be agenda-setting are beginning to become tedious, to the point at which I'm beginning to think he has shares in a Finnish paper mill ('What sort of partyism?' December 5). In this context, I'm talking about online publications, *not* social media.

Part of the issue here, alongside a more general fetish of the print form, is that the comrade, like most of his group and many older leftists, have zero understanding of how the bourgeois media now works and there is an assumption (tailored to suit factions who want to 'carry on regardless' with the old routine) that print is still the core focus of established (or establishment) organisations.

Bourgeois media organisations that continue with print have gone through a number of iterations; an earlier one represented a bifurcation, where either print and online became different publications (as with the famous example of the *Mail*) or print production processes were split from online ones and, in the latter, it was thought that a 'light touch' and letting reporters sub their own work would be fine (oh, how we sub-editors laughed).

As bourgeois organisations started putting online content behind paywalls, it became immediately apparent that the quality of that content had to match the higher production standards of print. This led many London media hubs to start rebuilding production teams and I found (much to my surprise) that my subbing skills were suddenly in high demand. And, as publications began competing for online subscribers, the scramble thus started to compete with one another to set the online news agenda (these days by the minute). Waiting for the paper to come out the next day would be an act of commercial suicide, given the decline in print sales and subscribers, and the millions of

pounds of online subscriptions.

Therefore, where I work, lead stories (or 'splashes') are platform-neutral and gestate online; print will be an iteration of the online splash - sometimes with an alternative, more telegraphic, headline. Online goes first, always, and the paper is used to distil, amplify and condense key messages from the earlier bout of online agenda-setting. There are situations where the paper can do things better than online (ie, a double-page picture spread of royal pageantry or a tactical diagram of a football game), but those instances are rare. So, commercially, print still has a role to play, but it is heavily mediated by online demands, and agenda-setting in the bourgeois media is done online. Think, for example, of the recent scandal around TV presenter Gregg Wallace, which has been thoroughly led online, given that's where celebrity news largely happens these days. Online production teams rely on the same sense of collectivity as the old print subs and can form highly effective 'scaffolds'.

Of course, nothing happens much in far-left sect cocoons for most of the time, so you might still be able to get away with a once-a-week dump of this and that online. It's hardly a hotbed and sects move at glacial pace. However, say that there was a communist group like the early CPGB with around 5,000 members with some scope to have an impact on the labour movement as a whole. The whole idea that comrade Macnair *appears* to be promoting - that we can rely on something that merely replicates the current singular production set-up of the *Weekly Worker* (lord, save us) to set agendas in the future - is a virulent sect fantasy.

Future communist media will be dealing with audiences shaped by our online world (a world in which print still has a very precise and useful function) and imparting rationality and longer-form arguments to save comrades from the current hurricane of spontaneous drivell that currently pollutes much online far-left discourse. A huge chunk of that work will need to be done through a rich diversity of online publications, whether older comrades like it or not. Let a thousand digital flowers bloom.

Lawrence Parker
London

Anti-migrant

If I were to vote in the German general elections, currently scheduled for February 2025, I would strongly consider voting for the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance, if for no other reason than that a strong showing for her group would throw a spanner in the works of western imperialism's geopolitical aims.

However, considering her anti-migrant chauvinism, I question whether I could reconcile such a vote with my conscience. Wagenknecht is quoted as saying in an interview with the German news magazine *Stern*: "I expect the Syrians in our country who celebrate the Islamist takeover to return to their homeland as soon as possible."

I see little difference between her attitude and the chauvinism of German liberals, for whom refugees are 'welcome' as long as they don't hold the wrong views on Israel.

Marek Kowalski
Turin

SYRIA

Changing balance of forces

The new regime in Damascus is being widely celebrated, but continued internal power struggles and regional rivalries are likely to unleash yet more conflict and suffering, says Esen Uslu

Bashar al-Assad's regime finally crumbled to dust before our disbelieving eyes. It was all over in just a couple of days. Propped up by the Russians and Iranians since 2011 through the thick and thin of a bloody civil war, it was rotten to the core. When circumstances forced its backers to withdraw support, Assad simply scuttled off to Moscow without even addressing the Syrian people, let alone consulting his Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party colleagues. Nobody - that is, apart from the determinedly deluded - is weeping: 'Good riddance to the bureaucratic dictatorship!' is the cry.

However, what has happened in Syria is an indicator of the changing balance of forces both in the region and globally. Russia and Iran are the apparent losers, Israel and USA the winners. Behind the scenes, Russia and the US had cut a deal where Russia saved face by allowing a relatively 'bloodless' toppling of the regime, and promises to keep its naval and airforce bases on the Mediterranean coast unmolested - for the time being.

It is possible that there is a Ukrainian element in the deal, which may be presented to the world by the triumphant Trump after taking over the presidency. If eventually Russia loses its bases in Syria, it would disappear as a power in the Mediterranean, and its influence in Africa would be limited to the Sahel region, where it has been replacing the ousted France.

Israel and the US have been determined to pursue a joint plan to demolish Hamas and Gaza, as well as destroying Hezbollah in Lebanon. By directly attacking Iran, as well as selected targets in Syria and Yemen, they have put a stop to Iranian expansionism, or its ambition to create an area of influence in the eastern Mediterranean by utilising forces linked to the Shia population. Eventually the US, Nato and Israel have emerged in a situation where no meaningful forces stand against them.

The US war on Iraq created opportunities for Iran, as the ascendance of Iraqi Shias helped opening direct routes towards Syria. Now all of those supply lines have been cut off and Iranian options have shrunk. Having seen what was coming, Iran may also have been involved in cutting a deal with the US-Israeli axis in regard to leaving the Assad regime to its fate. (There are several indicators to that effect, but it is too early to draw firm conclusions.)

While the US-led sanctions imposed against Syria crippled its economy, the regime had been unable to control a large part of the country for years. The oil-rich region from the eastern bank of Euphrates to the Iraqi border has been under the control of the Kurdish-led Syrian Defence Forces (SDF) and US troops. The area surrounding Al-Tanf base close to the Jordanian and Iraqi border was under the control of US forces. That is the area where US-trained units of the Free Syrian Army took part in the offensive against Damascus, together with Druze and other militia.

In the north, Idlib province was under the control of the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which had emerged victorious from a bloody internal war of domination among the Sunni Islamist militias. At the same time, on the instigation of the US, Turkey has helped make them more acceptable

to the 'international community'. They formed a civilian government aiming to improve the life of internally displaced people now sheltering. Meanwhile they managed to forge a trained and equipped army. However, they maintained a rather distant relationship with Turkey.

Contrary to the HTS, the Syrian National Army (SNA), based in the Azez and Afrin areas, was developing a much closer relationship with Turkey and remained dependent on it. They were also trained and equipped by the Turkish military, yet remained comparatively small among the northern opposition forces.

When the HTS started its campaign to cut the road connecting Damascus to Aleppo, the Turkish-led SNA moved towards the east to capture the Tel Rifaat-Manbij area - previously under the control of the SDF, and a constant headache for Turkey on the western bank of the Euphrates (Turkey's several previous attempts to capture the area had failed because of the intervention of Russia and the US).

However, the SNA was not able to oust the Kurdish-led SDF forces. Turkey joined the fray by providing long-range artillery support, as well as launching drone and airforce attacks. After the bloodiest clashes in recent days, the SDF has been forced to retreat. The advance of the SNA/Turkey has been checked by the deals between the US, Russia and Israel. Interestingly the HTS does not seem very keen to give any support to any SNA attacks.

Major player?

Most international observers think that Turkey is the major player and winner in the latest episode in Syria, but that may not be the case. Before hostilities started, Turkey had been manoeuvring to find an accommodation with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Even the leader of the minor partner of the coalition supporting Erdoğan's government, the MHP (Nationalist Action Party of the infamous Grey Wolves), has openly called for Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned former PKK leader, to be released from solitary confinement and for negotiations to be opened that may lead to the PKK declaring an end to guerrilla activity.

Turkey seems to have been wrong-footed, unless all this is part of the deal that was negotiated between the major powers - which is quite possible, taking into account the relationship between Turkey, the US and Israel. However, when things were going differently, Turkey had tried to maximise its gains against Kurds by using whatever cards it was holding. So, while the HTS was advancing towards Damascus, supported by the Southern Operations Room coalition of various Syrian opposition groups, Turkey and its cronies were trying to move eastwards. Meanwhile president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan put an end to attempts to find a peaceful solution by declaring that the SDF would not be allowed to take part in negotiations on the future of Syria.

If I have read things correctly, the Kurds of Syria will emerge from these struggles in a better position. According to unconfirmed reports, the military leader of the SDF was invited to Trump's inauguration ceremony. If this turns out to be true, US support for the Kurds maintaining a semi-independent structure within Syria becomes quite

possible. That would require putting considerable pressure on Turkey to check its aggression, but eventually Turkey would have to acquiesce.

The Biden administration has already started to apply pressure on Turkey: US defence secretary Lloyd Austin, secretary of state Antony Blinken, CIA director William Burns and national security advisor Jake Sullivan are all said to have contacted their counterparts in Turkey, asking them to stop military actions against the Kurds.

Yet another indication of the current state of affairs has come from Lindsey Graham, a senator close to Trump, who said in a social media post:

If Turkey takes military action against Kurdish forces in Syria, it will jeopardize America's interests dramatically. In the past I have drafted sanctions targeting Turkey if they engage in military operations against the Kurdish forces who helped president Trump destroy Isis. I stand ready to do this again in a bipartisan way.¹

Israel also speaks positively about the SDF, and asks Turkey to halt any military action against the Kurds, while SDF leaders have stated that they appreciate Israel's stance.

Meanwhile, the Alawi population, mainly concentrated on the Tartus-Latakia coast, has opened negotiations with the HTS, and sheiks calling themselves the 'Council of Alevi and Ulama' have issued a declaration asking the HTS to declare an amnesty for all military personnel of the Assad regime, thus disarming all groups apart from the 'legitimate' security forces and opening a new page for the future of Syria. Practically this stance means that Alevi, who stood alongside Assad's army, should go unmolested in return for tacit support for the HTS-led regime.

HTS leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani had talks with the former prime minister and vice-president in Damascus and then appointed his prime minister of Idlib's regional government as interim prime minister until March 2025. He has been tasked with forming a transition government that should draft a democratic constitution guaranteeing the rights of minorities. However, his regional government's justice minister, who is most likely to be appointed in that post for the transitional government, has said that Sharia law would be implemented across Syria. Considering the al Qa'eda and Islamic State background of the HTS, such a fundamentalist approach had been expected (and dreaded). However, if that line of thought gains ascendancy, the past experiences of chaotic and bloody civil wars in Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan and Yemen will be repeated yet again in an already fragmented Syria.

In the meantime, Israel has sought to extend its gains. The IDF has established a buffer zone on the eastern slopes of the Golan Heights. Meanwhile, its warplanes hit hundreds of targets, including army and naval bases.

All this means that the quick and relatively easy toppling of the Assad regime may be the harbinger of a prolonged bloody conflict ●

Notes

1. x.com/LindseyGrahamSC/status/1865938078101320167.

ACTION

Cut the rent

Saturday December 14, 11.30am: Demonstration. Assemble Cavendish Square, London W1. High rents destroy communities - demand rent controls and public housing. Organised by London Renters Union: www.facebook.com/LondonRentersUnion.

London rally for Palestine

Saturday December 14, 2.45pm: Rally, Parliament Square, London SW1. End the genocide, remember those killed. Bring flowers or a toy for the commemorative action after the rally. Organised by Stop the War Coalition: www.stopwar.org.uk/events/rally-for-palestine-london.

No other land

Saturday December 14, 4pm: Film screening, Hebden Bridge Picture House, New Road, Hebden Bridge HX7. *No other land* follows Basel Adra, a Palestinian activist, who films his community of Masafer Yatta being destroyed by Israel's occupation, as he builds an unlikely alliance with Yuval, an Israeli journalist who joins his struggle. Tickets £8.50 (£7.50). hebdenbridgepicturehouse.co.uk/movies/no-other-land.

Strikes: solidarity and lessons

Tuesday December 17, 7pm: Online meeting to hear from strikers in current disputes. Discuss how to build solidarity and what can be learnt from the latest round of struggle. Registration free. Organised by Troublemakers At Work: troublemakersat.work/event/strikes-solidarity-and-lessons.

Jesus, the revolutionary

Thursday December 19, 7pm: Communist culture club online discussion, introduced by Jack Conrad. Registration free. Organised by Why Marx?: www.facebook.com/whymarxism.

Haunting Europe: the vision of Dr Fu-Manchu

Thursday December 19, 7.30pm: Public meeting, Quaker Meeting House, 43 St Giles, Oxford OX1. Organised by Oxford Communist Corresponding Society: x.com/CCSoc/status/1864014547297632717.

Poetry for the many

Sunday December 22, 2pm: Book signings by Jeremy Corbyn, Housmans Bookshop, 5 Caledonian Road, London N1. *Poetry for the many* is an anthology selected by Jeremy Corbyn and Len McCluskey. Advance order required: £11.99 (includes book). Organised by Housmans Bookshop: housmans.com/events.

Citizen Marx

Tuesday January 14, 7pm: Book launch, Pelican House, 144 Cambridge Heath Road, London E1. Bruno Leibold introduces his new book, *Citizen Marx: republicanism and the formation of Karl Marx's social and political thought*, in discussion with Barnaby Raine. Registration free. Organised by Prometheus journal: eventbrite.co.uk/e/citizen-marx-book-launch-tickets-1098666905289.

Introducing Marx and Marxism

Tuesday January 14, 7pm: Online session for those wanting to know more about Marxism. Registration free. Organised by Marx Memorial Library: www.marx-memorial-library.org.uk/event/490.

US spy drones out of Fairford

Wednesday January 15, 7pm: Online public meeting. Oppose flights of US Global Hawk and Reaper spy drones from RAF Fairford military base in Gloucestershire. These drones will use the base for secretive US surveillance missions. Registration free. Organised by Drone Wars UK and CND: cnduk.org/events/us-spy-drones-out-of-fairford-online-event.

General strike 1926

Thursday January 16, 7pm: Online lecture. Speaker John Foster was privileged to take part in the 1966 recordings of general strike veterans and to hear their memories at first hand. Registration free. Organised by General Federation of Trade Unions and Marx Memorial Library: www.facebook.com/events/822897429911441.

End the genocide, stop arming Israel

Saturday January 18, 12 noon: National demonstration. Assemble BBC, Portland Place, London W1. End Gaza genocide, hands off Lebanon, don't attack Iran, stop arming Israel. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: palestinecampaign.org/events.

Palestine Solidarity Campaign

Saturday February 1, 9.30am to 4.30pm: AGM, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London, WC1. Hear leading campaigners in Palestine and Britain. Members vote to set policies and priorities and elect the leadership for the year ahead. Registration £10 (£8). Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: palestinecampaign.org/events/psc-agm-2025.

Latin America conference ¡Adelante!

Saturday February 8, 10am to 5pm: Hamilton House, Mabledon Place, London WC1. Learn and take inspiration from the mass movements across the region. Show solidarity with struggles for sovereignty, against neoliberalism and US domination. Over 20 seminars plus stalls and films. Tickets £10 (£8). Organised by Latin America conference 2025: latinamericainconference.co.uk.

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.

SYRIA

Deserted by friends of convenience

Iran and the Axis of Resistance have suffered yet another defeat. **Yassamine Mather** looks at the background and assesses the likely consequences of the fall of the House of Assad

When Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father, Hafez, in 2000, it initially raised hopes for reform in Syria, but in 2011 he violently repressed peaceful protests, triggering a civil war. With critical support from Russia and Iran, Assad has previously managed to crush rebel forces. Not this time.

The collapse of his regime is seen as a blow to Iran, which had relied on Syria as a key link in its regional influence - the only Arab government that has been its ally since 1979. Hezbollah, already weakened by the current conflict with Israel, now faces an uncertain future, while Iran's Axis of Resistance, which includes militias in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen and Hamas in Gaza, has been significantly weakened. However, relations between Tehran and Assad were in turmoil long before last week.

Although fighting had stalled for four years, western sanctions weakened the Syrian state. It is alleged that to offset its financial woes, the Damascus government turned to large-scale drug trafficking. However, meaningful reconstruction seemed possible only with Gulf petrodollars and political pressure on western powers. This is what drove the United Arab Emirates to reopen its embassy in Damascus in 2018 after a seven-year hiatus, with Abu Dhabi also facilitating Syria's re-engagement with former adversaries, including Saudi Arabia.

The dynamics shifted after the October 7 2023 attack on Israel, which prompted Hezbollah to open a 'support front' against Israel. UAE reportedly pressed Assad to stay out of the conflict. Soon after, Syria shut down the diplomatic mission of Yemen's Ansarullah (the Houthis) in Damascus - part of efforts to strengthen ties with Saudi Arabia. The move was notable, since the Houthis had become a key player in the Axis of Resistance, attacking Israeli shipping and disrupting global trade via the Red Sea.

Assad's priorities

As Israel escalated attacks on Iranian targets in Syria - hitting Quds Force command centres and even the Iranian diplomatic compound - Damascus remained largely silent. Similarly, Assad's muted response to Israel's killing of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah reflected a broader strategy. Despite Syria's position within the Axis of Resistance, Assad appeared to prioritise diplomatic rehabilitation with Arab states over active resistance against Israel.

Some Iranian officials have also claimed that Assad refused Iran's request to use those parts of the Golan Heights still under Syrian control, at the time when Hezbollah was being attacked. So contrary to reports in the western media, Syria under Assad was not a serious contributor to the Axis of Resistance.

By the middle of last week, it became clear that Iran had changed its position regarding Assad's future. The first signs were obvious when bizarre articles appeared in the Iranian press - especially those sections that are close to the supreme leader and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The newspaper *Ham-Mihan* reported the advances by the rebels in a very positive light - in the past Iran had referred to them as jihadists, Salafists and *takfiris* (an Arabic term that refers to a Muslim who accuses another of being an apostate) as enemies of



Happy times: Assad and Putin in December 2017

the Syrian people. This change in tone was picked up by the rest of the media inside Iran. No accident: the official line had changed. In the same papers, we also had pictures of the rebels along with the slogan, "On the road to Damascus". There was considerable speculation about what was called "Iran's *sham* enigma" (*Sham* is the Arabic word for Syria).

The Iranian government moved its embassy and military staff out of Syria at least 36 hours before the collapse. No doubt Iran's military capabilities were reduced after Israeli bombings and it did not want to waste any more missiles or drones defending Assad.

The phrase, "Syria was traded", reflects the sentiment of one Iranian-linked fighter stationed at the shrine of Ruqayya (daughter of Imam Hussein) in central Damascus. In a widely circulated social media video, he tearfully explains that Iranian forces have withdrawn from Damascus, paving the way for Assad's overthrow.

There is, however, an apparent lack of coordination in Syria. Soheil Karimi, a journalist close to Iran's Quds force, criticised the lack of Iranian military intervention to support Assad, calling out foreign affairs minister Abbas Araghchi for failing to confront "terrorism at its source". Karimi expressed hope that Iranian leaders would not abandon Syria, warning that the collapse of the Assad regime would have profound negative consequences for Iran's influence in the region.

Amid this turmoil, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), urged Iran to end its support for Assad and engage with the Syrian people. His comments appeared to suggest that Iran can build relations with a post-Assad Syria if it wants to maintain any influence there.

Iran damage

Economically, Iran faces potential financial losses. Over the years, Tehran has invested heavily in Syria. With the regime change, these may have to be written off. But the main problem for Iran is strategic.

The collapse of the Assad regime severs Iran's 'land bridge' to Hezbollah in Lebanon. This coincides with the deaths of key figures in the Axis of Resistance, including Qasem Soleimani, and setbacks faced by Palestinian factions like Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

We should remember that Iran's intervention in Syria stemmed from a pragmatic partnership. Alawites are not Shia and a secular Assad (and in particular his unveiled wife) would have faced arrest in Iran. However, relations between the Assad family and Iran's Islamic Republic began

with Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father. He strengthened ties with Iran, supporting it even as other Arab nations sided with Iraq during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war. This 'brotherhood' continued under Bashar, especially after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. The Arab Spring in 2011 marked a critical point, with Iran intervening militarily to support Assad against growing opposition. Backing intensified, as jihadist groups gained strength, transforming Syria into a fragmented battleground for rival regional and global powers.

There are also indications that Russia was frustrated by Assad's refusal to negotiate with opponents. Russia, Turkey and Iran were involved in talks trying to find a deal between HTS in Idlib and the Assad regime. Iranians always complain that Russia has been much more active in supporting Syria than Iran. This is to a certain extent because the jihadists, in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere, are not just a danger in the Middle East: quite a lot are Chechens or Turkish-speaking from the southern borders of Russia, and Putin sees wars in Syria as revenge for Chechen attacks on Russian territory.

While Assad's removal is celebrated, there is widespread concern about what follows. HTS, with roots in al-Qa'eda, has attempted to rebrand itself as a nationalist movement, but its social roots and ideological outlook raise fears of further instability, even chaos in Syria. Its leader, Abu Mohammed Al-Jolani, is now a 'responsible military leader'.

In the last few days, we have heard many contradictory messages from Jolani and other senior HTS commanders. Last week, addressing Iran, he was telling the leaders of the Islamic Republic that they should reconsider support for Assad, adding: "We have nothing against you. We can be as friendly to you as Assad." However, another commander from the same group was quoted by the Israeli press as telling the Zionist state: "We are your friends. Our only enemies were Iran and Hezbollah, and it was Assad. And now he's gone."

Unlike Hamas's leaders we should not believe anything that this political group says. It is therefore difficult to predict what road it will pursue in post-Assad Syria. So far the interim government is entirely Islamist. There are many contenders for power, including the Syrian National Army - a coalition of Turkish-backed forces primarily intent on fighting the Kurds. On December 11, HTS forces took full control of the eastern city of Deir ez-Zor, after clashes with Kurdish-led forces who briefly held it after pro-Assad soldiers fled. Signs that the partial autonomy of the Kurds during

Assad's rule is under serious threat.

Soon after the fall of Assad, we heard Netanyahu's triumphant speech telling everyone that this would not have happened if Israel had not weakened Hezbollah and Iran. And that is true - the rebels would not have considered extending their reach if Iran and Hezbollah had not suffered so many military setbacks.

Israel supported armed groups like Islamic State and al-Qa'eda during the Syrian conflict, providing medical aid to wounded fighters in field hospitals within the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. However, after these groups succeeded in ousting Bashar al-Assad, Israel shifted its strategy. It began targeting residential areas, government sites and supply depots around Damascus. Initially expanding its control near the Golan Heights under the pretext of creating a 'buffer zone', Israel eventually launched a full-scale invasion into Syrian territory.

Air strikes

On December 10 Israel attacked Syria's naval fleet as part of what it calls "efforts to neutralise military assets in the country after the fall of the Assad regime". The IDF said it had targeted ports where 15 vessels were docked. According to the BBC, by December 11 the Zionist state had carried out "350 air strikes on targets across Syria, while moving ground forces into the demilitarised buffer zone between Syria and the occupied Golan Heights". Some say that Israeli tanks are just 20 miles from Damascus. The IDF is now telling the world that there are dangerous weapons in some of these bases and they might fall into the hands of jihadists. Concluding from this, some Israeli papers have asked the question: "So was Assad less of an enemy than the jihadists?"

Israel has taken over parts of the Golan Heights that were under Syrian control, with its military warning residents in five Syrian villages to remain indoors. Netanyahu stated that this move was necessary to protect Israel. In other

words what was originally taken as a 'buffer zone', now needs its own 'buffer zone'.

Israel initially captured part of the Golan Heights during the 1967 Six Day war and later annexed it - a move recognised only by the US. But on December 8 Israeli tanks established positions well into Syria. Meanwhile, a unit of Israeli commandos seized observation posts atop Jabal al-Shaykh, the highest peak in the Hermon range. There are also reports of 58 US air attacks in Syria. Again we have to ask, what were their targets and why does the US consider them more of a danger, now that Assad has fallen?

Clearly we cannot ignore the long-term involvement of the US. The resurfacing of the White Helmets 'humanitarian group', with its well-documented connections to UK and US security forces, suggests that there is probably some sort of special forces' operations underway.

It is possible that Joe Biden, in his last weeks in office, is seeking to create a real legacy in 'remaking the Middle East'. Of course, he is not doing so with boots on the ground, or even through US bombs, but through letting the Israelis do what they want - not only in Gaza, but also about Lebanon, Syria and, of course, the main target: Iran. Biden's legacy could be helping Israel 'establish secure borders' by expanding its reach - first knocking out Syria as any kind of state and then actually attacking Iran before Trump gets in. All that, and establishing a military base in Somaliland, would make Israel into a sub-imperialist power.

Contrary to what sections of the 'soft' pro-Nato Iranian left keep saying, we are witnessing the redrawing of the map of the Middle East. The target is not just the regime in Tehran, but Iran itself. One plan is to divide the country into four or five separate states - a trigger for all manner of civil wars, which would see Iran joining the other failed states of the region. Those who ignore such an obvious danger are either ignorant or are paid agents of the US/Israel ●

Fighting fund

See you in 2025

Just a reminder that this edition of the *Weekly Worker* is the last one of 2024. We look forward to publishing the next issue on January 9 2025 - let's hope all our readers have a good break over the new year!

In the meantime, let me give you an update on the state of play concerning the fighting fund. Over the last week £349 came our way - thank you, comrades TT (£52), AG (£50), BO (£35), GD (£25), DV and NH (£30 each), plus IS, SM, PM and CC, who each contributed £10. All the above came in the shape of standing orders or bank transfers.

There were also some handy PayPal donations - thanks go to comrades RL (£50), MH (£10), JV (£7), AH and KA (£5 each), while comrades Hassan and JH each handed a fiver to one of our team. Add all that to the £492 we already had in the December fighting fund kitty and we're now looking at £841 towards that £2,250 monthly target.

The problem now, of course, is that you won't have me to nag you for the rest of the year to try and make sure we get there! So why not play your part as soon as you read this? With the Christmas postal break looming, the two best ways now are by bank transfer or PayPal - that way, we'll definitely get your contribution before the end of the year. Please go to the web address below to see how you can help ensure we get the £1,409 we still need.

Let's make sure the *Weekly Worker* can continue to play its key role in campaigning for the Marxist Party our class so urgently needs in 2025. You can do it! ●

Robbie Rix

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BRIAN THOMPSON

Organisation, not assassination

Killing of UnitedHealth boss has been the cause of widespread celebration. However, Australian communist **Martin Greenfield** argues that CEOs should be made to fear not the bullet, but working class collective power

“Deny”, “Defend”, “Depose”. These three words - reportedly on the casings of bullets used to shoot dead US health insurance chief executive officer Brian Thompson - are a chilling message that seem to refer to methods used by the industry to refuse to pay claims.

While a motive for the killing is yet to be formally established, it does appear that, for one armed American, the inhumane nature of the US health system drove him to extreme measures. On December 9, 26-year-old Luigi Mangione was charged with the murder of Thompson after being caught by police in possession of a 3D-printed ‘ghost gun’ and a short document that reportedly included the phrase “these parasites had it coming”.

The December 4 killing has unleashed a “torrent of anger”, as *The New York Times* reported it, which had long been bubbling under the surface, at the depravity of the private health insurance system in the US.¹ For many others, there has also been a “morbid glee” in response to the murder.

Such a response should come as no surprise, given the large numbers of Americans denied payments or coverage at all from a highly profitable insurance system. Some estimate that more than 60,000 people a year die due to denied claims.² In recent weeks, one insurance company announced it would limit the cover for anaesthetic procedures - meaning that if your operation went over a scheduled time you would be out of pocket. An outcry has forced the insurer, Anthem Blue Cross Shield, to delay the plans, which were due to roll out in Connecticut, New York and Missouri.³ Examples like this litter the US health system.

In July, demonstrators gathered at the Minnesota headquarters of Thompson’s company, UnitedHealth, to protest at its pattern of coverage denials - 11 were arrested. *The Boston Globe* reported that UnitedHealth denied more claims - up to a third of all lodged - than any other medical insurer.⁴ The system average is that 16% of claims are denied, according to data from ValuePenguin, a consumer research group. In 2023, Thompson ‘earned’ \$10.2 million. Since his killing, the company’s share price has dropped by 10%.

The US medical system is clearly in crisis - one that neither the Democrats nor Republicans want to remedy. *Per capita* health spending in the US is 1.5 times that of the next highest in OECD member-states (Switzerland) - and is 2.5 times the OECD average.⁵ Yet it is the only country where there is no last-resort medical safety net.

And life expectancy in the US is 77.4 years - going backwards from 78.8 years in 2019, just before Covid hit. For black Americans it is about 73 - even lower for black men. This means life expectancy in the world’s wealthiest country is far behind other advanced capitalist nations, with more than 25 having life expectancies above 80, including the United Kingdom.

The New York Times reported that Mangione’s short manifesto noted that UnitedHealth’s profits had grown while US life expectancy had not. The private health insurance system knows it is deeply unpopular. The estranged wife of the slain CEO said that Thompson



Moment of death caught on video

had received threats in the past, while personal security companies, like vultures, have started talking up their services in reaction to the killing.

Thompson himself posted on LinkedIn a year ago: “We work every day to find ways to make healthcare more affordable, including reducing the cost of life-saving prescription drugs.”⁶ The responses were damning. Andrea Huspeni replied: “UnitedHealth Group is failing my mother by not providing her the

basic care to get better and back her life. You continue to delay any decision-making and authorisations, which is compromising her health even more ...”

Nicholas Kalman, a car sales manager, said: “The only thing this company is good for is screwing their customers”, while Jessica Grennan, campaign director at Colorado Reproductive Health added: “You are doing a great job cutting your costs. Not having a single anaesthesiologist in network

in the entire state of Montana is a great policy to save you money.”

There were dozens more. Mangione himself is reported to have suffered a back injury that was refused cover by his medical insurance.

That someone seems to have been driven to such a drastic and hopeless act as gunning down a corporate CEO is a terrible indictment on the US medical system - but also the lack of power that people feel in being able to challenge a system that

benefits the wealthy and screws over the average working class person. Communists, of course, oppose individual acts of terror and violence like this killing, but we recognise they are often desperate acts born of helplessness. Social media is full of memes reflecting gleeful *Schadenfreude* at the murder. Such banality ultimately reflects a deep alienation from human life.

While the murder has sent a shock ripple through US society and illustrated the crisis of its healthcare system, certainly on its own it cannot change anything. As pathetic as Obamacare was, it is clearly over and, with Trump back, it will become ancient history.

The working class has no interest in private health schemes, but in a completely socialised health system that removes private insurance altogether. This will not be achieved by the murder of insurance executives. It would be concerning for the ‘progressive’ movements - either environmental or anti-capitalist - to see these individual acts as a path forward. While they might grab momentary sympathy and be seen as some sort of ‘Robin Hood moment’, they are in fact dangerous and reactionary dead-ends for the workers’ movement ●

Notes

1. www.nytimes.com/2024/12/05/nyregion/social-media-insurance-industry-brian-thompson.html.
2. x.com/anthonyzenkus/status/1864415627844178087.
3. www.npr.org/2024/12/05/nx-s1-5217617/blue-cross-blue-shield-anesthesia-anthem.
4. www.healthleadersmedia.com/payer/unitedhealthcare-denies-most-claims-any-major-health-insurer-data-show.
5. www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/7a7afb35-en/1/3/7/2/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/7a7afb35-en&esp=6cf33e24b6584414b81774026d82a571.
6. www.linkedin.com/posts/brian-thompson-98065165_helping-make-health-care-more-affordable-activity-7041441763009466368-VLXj.

Victorian socialist laughs out loud

Marxists have a long record of opposing individual terrorism

You would think this obvious for socialists, so it was shocking to see a prominent activist here in Australia - the lead Senate candidate for Victorian Socialists - effectively glorifying the killing. Jordan van den Lamb posted a stream of memes doing just that.

One read: “Make capitalists afraid again” on top of a blurry image of the alleged shooter holding a gun, while another was headed “CEO blasted” across a photo of Brian Thompson. Then there was: “Let me get this straight: you think that killing ‘a health insurance CEO’ is funny? ... I do. And I’m tired of pretending it’s not.”

Of course, the killing of a capitalist CEO in an isolated act of terror is, in fact, not funny. At best it is a misguided action of a deranged person. At worst, it opens the door to state repression against the left. Fundamentally, it is alien to the politics of working class liberation. It should not be given any credence by the socialist left.

We do not want CEOs to fear they will be taken out by terrorists or lone shooters; we want them to fear the collective power of the working class and our ability to overthrow their system of kleptocracy.

It is one thing for ‘idiots on the internet’ to post memes, but for them to be shared by someone meant to be taking the Marxist programme to an election campaign is beyond childish. It is moronic and displays the complete lack of seriousness that Victorian Socialists represent. Yet this has been the act of its lead Senate candidate for the 2025 federal election.

The election project, dominated by the ‘post-Cliffite’ Socialist Alternative group, did reasonably well for a small outfit at the recent local elections, getting an average of 10.8% of the votes where it stood in 78 council wards. Its sole councillor, Jorge Joquera (formerly of the Democratic Socialist Party, now Socialist Alliance), failed to get re-elected, but the Vic Socialists did win a seat in the regional town of Bendigo, where 40.7% of first preferences elected Owen Cosgriff. A significant result, even if there was no Labor or Green candidate in the ward - effectively leaving the field open to the only ‘progressive’ candidate.

However, Victorian Socialists did not take a Marxist programme to the electorate - rather warmed-over social democracy. You would not know that councillor Cosgriff was a socialist from his blurb on the

Bendigo Council website.¹ There he says he is interested “in planning and where people will live”. He also wants the council to ensure that “everyone feels welcome and has access to the services they need, and wants to explore ways Council can support the development of more affordable homes in Greater Bendigo”. Storming the gates of heaven he is not.

The political platform of the Victorian Socialists is the reformist gruel of the type we are used to seeing from lowest-common-denominator unity projects. The platform is largely indistinguishable from the petty bourgeois reformist platform of the Green Party.

Vic Socialists’ platform was for “real action on housing costs”, “councils that put people before profit”, “local and global solidarity and justice” (solidarity with Gaza, opposing racism and supporting the LGBTQ+ community), “no more sell-offs of council services” and “transparency and accountability” in council decision-making.² Meanwhile, the middle-class Green Party stood for “social justice”, “climate action”, “housing affordability and cost of living action”, “greener communities”, “improved public transport” and “accessibility, diversity and

inclusion”. Spot the difference.

For Socialist Alternative, Victorian Socialists seems to be another incarnation of a ‘united front of a special kind’ - like Respect in Britain was meant to be for the Socialist Workers Party under John Rees. In reality, this means an amorphous sub-reformist election outlet designed to give the inner sect access to a wider circle, from which to recruit.

The fledgling Revolutionary Communist Organisation in Australia is set to join the Victorian Socialists, to campaign for what is really needed - not a sub-reformist group in a single Australian state, but a united communist party organised nationally around a republican-democratic programme: a weapon for the working class to win power.

They will have their work cut out to overcome what is a decidedly childish political culture, if the response to the killing of Brian Thompson from the lead Vic Socialists candidate is anything to go by ●

Notes

1. www.bendigo.vic.gov.au/staff/cr-owen-cosgriff.
2. victoriansocialists.org.au/campaigns/council.

POLEMIC

What sort of Partyism?

Ideas that party building can be skipped, that programmatic differences ought to be avoided, that there should be bureaucratic restrictions on polemics - all are roads to nowhere. In the second part of his discussion **Mike Macnair** focuses on a group of RS21 members and Joe Todd's recent contributions

It is worth beginning with brief observations about the contributions discussed last week. In essence, SocAlt proposes a new and more leftwing version of the Labour Party: a federal party based on the trade unions. This character is expressed in the idea that Labour has decisively lost its connection to the working class, so that a new Labour Party is possible; that any new party needs "organic links" with the trade union movement; that it must be "rooted in the workers' movement"; their standard 'New Left Trotskyist' narrative of the origins of the Labour Party, which prettifies early Labour and sees it arising *only* from radicalisation in their trade unions; and their defence of the Socialist Party in England and Wales's line in relation to left regroupment projects between the 1990s and 2015: in particular SPEW's decision to split the Socialist Alliance in defence of organisational federalism. This is not, then, a new proposal, but merely a proposal for a new Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition without Peter Taaffe, Hannah Sell and Clive Heemskerk. It is *less* likely to work than the existing Tusc.

The AWL's proposal is not totally transparent, because it defends its own history of non-transparency in dealing with the rest of the left. But its reprint of what the AWL argued in 1988 makes it clear that, like the 19th century French 'Legitimist' monarchists, it has 'forgotten nothing and learned nothing'. What it is proposing is a broad-left bloc that is capable of including the AWL, on the road to acceptance of the AWL's project. That is, that a 'coherent' left is needed (meaning, another sect grounded on theory - in this case Max Shachtman's theory as interpreted by Sean Matgamna and Martin Thomas). But this Matgamnaite project would be committed to unity with the Labour right around support for US and British foreign policy and wars. It differentiates itself from the Labour right merely around economic issues, where it proposes the delusional idea of "Tax the rich" in Britain (but the rich are only *in* Britain because the country is a tax haven). The commitment to unity with the Labour right on foreign policy would make economic leftism delusional for the exact same reason as the Corbyn movement.

Anticapitalist Resistance *has* learned something - but what it has learned is merely to move right. Its proposal is a broad-front "class struggle party" *without the supposedly disruptive far left*, and in consequence, with sharp limitations on its internal democracy. This is merely to repeat the errors the Mandeliste Fourth International committed in the Brazilian Workers Party, in Italy in Rifondazione Comunista, in Spain in Podemos, and so on; that the 'Fourth International Supporters Caucus' committed in the Socialist Labour Party, and that the precursors of ACR itself committed in Respect and Respect Renewal. The only difference is to abandon the early hope of a democratic unity that all these projects (except Respect) at first offered, and enter

**No quick road to our October**

immediately into the phase of bureaucratic controls, which leads to demoralisation of the ranks and failure.

Gang of four

Revolutionary Socialism in the 21st Century is the larger part of the 2013 split from the Socialist Workers' Party over the Martin Smith rape allegations. The comrades who have contributed on the 'party question' say that it "has attempted to thread the needle between bureaucratic narrow groups and the network model of many groups".¹ Comrade Woodrow in his *Prometheus* contribution says rather more about the group:

RS21 is not perfect, does not claim to be perfect, does not claim to have a blueprint for what leftist political organisations should look like, and certainly does not claim to be *the* party (it doesn't even claim to be a party). RS21's *political basis document*,² adopted in 2024, states that "We are committed to working with others to create a mass revolutionary party rooted in the working class", but there is no worked out consensus within RS21 about what such a party should look like, or about what RS21 (or anyone else) should be doing to help bring about the creation of such a party.

I think this lack of clarity or strategic direction is typical of RS21's main limitations (besides its small size). I think RS21 is a brilliant organisation and I'm glad to be a member, but it isn't an organisation with a particularly clear sense of direction or active purpose. We agree about our long-term aims, and there's some agreement on the kinds of activity members should be engaged

The first two sentences are Trotskyist; the remaining two are Eurocommunist or 'New Left' in character.

It is just worth observing that at the time of the 2013 split, the CPGB approached RS21 for discussions and were told that our publication of internal materials from the debate in the SWP made any *discussions* (not merely actual unity) unacceptable. Some discussions took place between RS21 and Socialist Resistance (now Anticapitalist Resistance); it is not at all obvious from the two sites what the obstacle to unity was (or is).

The RS21 contribution on the party discussion is a document which, we are told, was solicited from RS21 participants by the organisers of the 'Party Time' discussions at Pelican House, Bethnal Green. Four RS21ers - Tomi A, Harry H, Lotta S and Taisie T - have then contributed a short document on the issue. The basic orientation they offer is that:

For us, the 'party' is not just an electoral initiative, akin to the Labour or Green parties - it should not just be about election activities. Nor is the party just a case of getting enough members and declaring ourselves 'the party'.

For us, the party must be a democratic coming together of sufficient socialist forces, capable of coordinating across spheres of activity (electoral, industrial, liberation movements, etc), and facilitating strategic debate and deliberation across those spheres. This must be rooted in the struggles of the working classes across Britain.

Not "just" an electoral initiative - but it is far from clear from this formulation why the party should be concerned with electoral initiatives at all.

What follows is a series of questions. In the first place, they ask: "How do we ensure the membership sets the policy of the organisation, and that any elected figures are accountable to those decisions?" - a real question, but with no real suggestion how to overcome it. The next point requires quotation for clarity:

Opposing the British state: Opposition to the state's support for the genocide in Palestine, to its police murders and violence, to the expansion of the border regime, to its violence against trans people - all these struggles, which have inspired us all, share a desire for real freedom against the British state and our ruling classes. If we are serious about an organisation which reflects and builds these struggles, we should be preparing for the British media and state system to turn on the organisation hard - to attempt to win over the most rightward element of our base and membership to soft loyalty to the British state. How can we work together to ensure the organisation is steadfast in these struggles against the British state?

This formulation addresses state *violence*, but does not address the

state *form* (the constitutional order), or the international alliance systems of which the British state is a part.

There is a very curious claim about political geography: "*The uneven development of the left*: Different areas of Britain will need different types of political activity and focuses of struggle. It won't be electoral work everywhere, nor should it be" - but then, what *should* it be? What are the *concrete* differences?

The comrades claim that "*Liberation movements are class politics*: Anti-racist organising, feminist and queer movements are part of class struggle, and there is no chance of a socialist future without them." They end this paragraph with the sort of counterweight that "It will be crucial to work against any separation between organised socialists and workers in unions, and that will require ground-level involvement in workplace struggles around the country." The problem here is that "equality and diversity" politics in human resources departments, etc are *not* class politics, but equivalents of what Marxists before the era of the people's front policy called "bourgeois feminism". The coloration of leftism that movements of the oppressed took on in the 1960s-70s was a side-effect of the politics of the cold war.

Trinity politics

It does not solve the problem to posit the trade unions as the counterweight representation of class politics; Lenin's characterisation of *trade unionism* (transcribing the English word to refer to the apolitical 'trade unionism' of early 20th century Britain and the US) as "bourgeois politics of the working class", was plainly enough true, and the paragraph reads desperately like the old CPUSA's 'trinity' of race (black nationalists and similar figures), gender (liberal feminists) and class (Rooseveltian Democrat trade unionists).³

It is a strength of the document that it insists on an *opposition* project, "*Being an opposition organisation*", rather than the immediate pursuit of an alternative *government*. But then the comrades go on to spoil the point by arguing:

A year into the genocide, as the murderer of Chris Kaba is acquitted, and Tommy Robinson attempts to organise off the back of racist riots, with ecological breakdown in view - we can't just be patiently building the infrastructure for a small electoral opposition. This is why we would need to incorporate militant activists from extra-parliamentary movements within the membership, ensure we are rooted in wider mass struggle, and be capable of mobilising when moments of crisis emerge.

This argument is too similar to the title of the old International Marxist Group's 1971 Perspectives Document: "No, we haven't got all the time in the world". The result of this argument from the urgency of the conjuncture to impatient politics was the waste of the time which, in fact, *was* available: 53 years later revolutionary crisis has not yet broken out, and the organised far left has repeatedly falsely predicted its imminence.

CHRISTMAS

Slave to the gift economy

What is the meaning of Christmas? Who is Father Christmas? What is the political economy of his Christmas operation? **Jack Conrad** provides some answers, but, above all, welcomes elvish resistance

All roads lead to the peak Christmas period for UK retailers. With inflation down, but interest rates still high, they are “cautiously optimistic” that 2024 will be their best year for many years.¹ Consumer confidence is inching up. The well-heeled are expected to splash out on top-end brands in top-end shops. Forecasters expect purchases to reach £88.29 billion. Revealingly, the average Christmas outlay varies from £980 per person in London to £700 in the north-east - about a quarter of annual personal expenditure and up 1.4% in real terms. Elsewhere in western Europe a contraction is predicted.²

While spending on holidays is set to rise by 6.4%, presents remain by far the biggest spending category. For children aged 7-12 the average cost of their trove is set to rise to £596 (not that the average child is so lucky).³ A small fortune, mainly accounted for by the better off buying the latest iPhones, tablets, PlayStations and other such tech for their little darlings.

Because it is such a money-spinner Christmas begins early. For retailers, especially in the Anglosphere, the season starts in earnest with the onset of October.⁴ They send out catalogues and emails. Adverts and marketing strategies are finalised. The Christmas lights get switched on in mid-November and sales steadily rise till that final orgy of bargain-hunting: the winter sales.

Christmas is also peak charity. Christian Aid, Oxfam, Unicef, Crisis, the Red Cross, Shelter, etc make an almost military push to secure donations, a good portion of which goes to pay for the costs of the staff needed (chief executive salaries of £175k+ being an industry norm⁵).

Those who want to “rediscover the true meaning of Christmas” respond in their millions. After all, ’tis the season of “peace and good will to all men”.⁶ According to the Charities Aid Foundation, some 40% of the adult population in Britain are more likely to make a donation in December ... with a monthly £2.03 average increasing to £2.41.⁷ That little uptick does, however, when totalled, add up to millions of pounds.

Christmas is peak church too. Turnout for C of E services reached nearly two million in 2023 - a long way ahead of the 693,000 Sunday average and even Easter.⁸ While not quite being on a par in *religious terms* with Easter, Christmas comes a close second - Jesus rising from the dead being rated over having been born of a virgin.

Census and state

True, as revealed by the 2021 census, the number of self-proclaimed Christians has fallen to less than a half the population in England and Wales. We, the godless, have risen to 37.2% - 22 million up from the 14.8% in 2011. A cause of much rightwing hand-wringing and xenophobic anguish. The country has lost its identity. Well, theirs maybe, not mine. Yet, despite the welcome rise in atheism, the irrefutable fact of the matter is that the UK remains *constitutionally* Christian.

Charles Windsor is head of the Church of England - a Catholic-Protestant state hybrid. Bishops sit by right in the upper house of parliament - there are the lords temporal *and* the lords spiritual. Every Christmas, state personifications, not least the (feudal) green king, do pulpit readings, say prayers begging for the



Say it in lights

forgiveness of their sins and loudly sing hymns and carols, ancient and modern.

Who knows what Sir Keir Starmer will be doing this Christmas? It will be mildly interesting to see. He is, after all, a self-declared atheist, while his wife, Lady Victoria, is Jewish. Anyway, we shall certainly have official Britain parading its commitment to the ‘Christmas spirit’ and Charles III reiterating his “particular relationship” with and “commitment to the Church of England”.⁹

This reference to the sovereign’s “particular relationship” regarding the C of E relates, of course, to his role as “Supreme Governor of the Church of England” - a title dating back to the 16th century reformation and Henry VIII, which is meant to confer special responsibilities upon the monarch to supervise those who run the state church, both in terms of its “administration and its pastoral care”.¹⁰ Like every other House of Windsor monarch - from George V to Elizabeth II - Charles III is committed to the 39 articles of faith, in word, if not deed - he is, after all, a divorcee and an admitted adulterer.

Not that Charles III suffered the fate of Edward VIII. He wanted to marry the twice-divorced Wallis Simpson. Both Stanley Baldwin’s Tory government and the Church of England were implacably opposed. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Cosmo Lang, declared that he would find it impossible to administer the coronation oath on Edward, unless he accepted the indissolubility of marriage. In his own words, Lang said that he - that is the king - pursued personal happiness “in a manner inconsistent with the Christian principles of marriage”.¹¹ The uncrowned Edward VIII abdicated in December 1936.

Clearly, Justin Welby suffered no such scruples. However, there are, of course, good reasons to believe that establishment objections to Edward Windsor owed rather more to his openly proclaimed sympathies for Nazi Germany than religious doctrine over marriage vows. In the mid-1930s, with both countries gearing up for war, he was talked about by Adolf Hitler himself as England’s potential collaborator king.¹²

Traditional Jesus

The traditional Christmas nativity - meaning ‘birth’, from the Latin *nātivitas* - relies on the New Testament. Accordingly, Mary and Joseph, the ‘parents’ of Jesus, are pictured travelling from their native Nazareth, in the northern province of

Galilee, to Judea and Bethlehem (the royal seat of the semi-mythical king David). The New Testament gets them making this arduous journey because of an entirely fictitious Roman census - a census that requires people to go to their place of birth. An impractical and entirely ridiculous notion.

We also have the parents of Jesus not being able to find a room at the inn, the stable and the manger, adoring shepherds, the three wise men, the magi, following a wondrous star, travelling from the east bearing gifts for the new born King of the Jews, Herod ordering the slaughter of all first-born male children under two, and an angel urging Joseph to flee to Egypt with his wife and baby. All unmistakable fabrication.

However, the Hebrew prophet, Micah, had written of the coming messiah (the redeemer, the liberator) being born in Bethlehem. Though the New Testament Jesus is supposed to have been conceived by the Holy Spirit, not Joseph, two of the testaments, Matthew and Luke, trace his family tree back from Joseph to David, and finally to the first man, Adam himself. In other words, Jesus and his party propagandists were claiming that he was of royal blood - the legitimate king of Israel. Unlike the upstart Herodians. Not that this is made explicit by the New Testament redactors. No, on the contrary, Jesus, the apocalyptic revolutionary, the leader of a popular revolt, is stripped of his Jewish identity, his real history and made into a Greek-style man-god. The kingdom of this Jesus is not here on earth, but in the misty realms of heaven.

During the 1st and 2nd centuries Palestine was a hotbed of revolutionary activity in the Roman empire. The aristocratic Jewish writer, Flavius Josephus, mentions numerous urban and rural uprisings. Riots erupted in Jerusalem with almost every great festival. In the countryside guerrilla foci found themselves gaining enough adherents to allow regular military units to be formed. Their leaders sometimes had themselves crowned kings on the messianic model. Among them was Simon, a former slave of Herod and Athronges, who was once a shepherd. However, the most successful liberation fighter was Judas, whose father, Ezechias, was a well known “bandit” who was executed in 47 BCE. Josephus fumes that Judas “tried to stir the natives to revolt” by encouraging them not to pay taxes to the Romans. Judas “was a rabbi” (teacher), says Josephus, “with a sect of his own, and was quite

unlike the others”.¹³ His message was republican, not monarchist: ‘The people should have no master except god’.

What Josephus calls the fourth philosophy had many names, including ‘sicarii’ and ‘zealot’. Its various components and factions dominated popular politics throughout the 66-70 Jewish revolution and the final heroic stand at the desert fortress of Masada in 74 - rather than surrender to the Romans the 960 rebels preferred mass suicide. Despite being a member of the establishment, and someone seeking to ingratiate himself with the Romans, Josephus has to admit that these “bandits” and “false prophets” inspired the masses “to bold deeds”. Their “madness infected the entire people”, he writes sorrowfully.

Strange Jesus

Set against this nationalist-religious background, the New Testament Jesus is a very strange person, to say the least. Nowhere does he challenge or even question Roman occupation of Judea and indirect rule of Galilee (at the time of Jesus it was ruled by a pro-Roman Jewish satrap - Herod Antipas). Instead he appears to positively love the Roman tyrant. There is, for example, the centurion of Capernaum. Jesus not only cures his servant with one of his miracles. He marvels at the centurion’s religious conviction: “Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith”.¹⁴ Jesus even urges the Jewish masses to dutifully pay Roman taxes: “Render unto Caesar ...”.¹⁵ Something akin to Tommy Sheridan telling the people of Glasgow the rightness of paying the poll tax under Margaret Thatcher. And yet incongruously Jesus manages to gain an enthusiastic mass following among the rural and urban poor.

This writer takes it, note, that Jesus was an actual living, breathing, feeling human being - that despite the fact that we have no genuine, authentic, contemporary accounts of him. The New Testament was finalised long after his death by redactors who obviously had little knowledge of early 1st century Judaism. Then there are the passages in the *Jewish antiquities* (supposedly written by Josephus) glorifying him: ie, calling him the “Christ” - universally regarded by serious-minded scholars as crude forgeries.

Of course, there have been countless claims by this, that or the other two-a-penny pundit to have discovered the *real* Jesus. Mostly, however, it amounts to “looking back” through some two thousand

years of Christian darkness and finding their own conservative, liberal or leftwing reflection staring back at them from the “bottom of a deep well”.¹⁶

We can, though, using historical materialism to provide a reliable framework, and a lot of textual deduction and inference, reveal a *probable* Jesus. As a first step, what is demonstrably untrue can safely be put aside; what chimes with the events, the class struggles and the ideological outlook of his fourth-philosophy contemporaries and immediate successors can be retained, albeit with due caution.

Hence, the probable Jesus would not have disowned his family ... four of his brothers are listed amongst his core disciples in the gospels. Nor would the probable Jesus have preached collaboration with the Romans, he would, on the contrary, have urged people to resist them and withhold their taxes. Exactly, the crime that the “chief priests and officers” charged him with before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate: “We have found this man perverting our nation, and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar”.¹⁷ Certainly Jesus would not have said: “Do not resist one who is evil.”¹⁸ The idea is a monstrosity, fit only for despairing appeasers. Jewish scripture is packed full of worthy men and women, above all prophets, fighting what they saw as evil - not least foreign oppressors.

After the execution of John the Baptist, Jesus reveals himself to be not simply a prophetic ‘preparer of the way’, but the messiah. An extraordinary claim, but one fully within the Jewish thought-world. In biblical tradition there had been prophet-rulers (Moses and Samuel). Jesus was claiming to be the messiah-king: ie, the final king. In Jesus the spiritual and secular would be joined. A bold idea, which must have “aroused tremendous enthusiasm in his followers, and great hope in the country generally”.¹⁹ Perhaps this explains why after he died on a Roman cross the Jesus party refused to believe he was really dead. His claimed status put him on a par with Elijah: he would return at the appointed hour to lead the Jewish people to victory.

New Testament (re)writers are at pains to play down or deny Jesus’ assumed royal title. Claiming to be King of the Jews was to openly rebel against Rome. Instead they concentrate on terms like ‘messiah’, which they present as being other-worldly. The Jews, including the 12 leading disciples, are shown as not understanding this concept, though it existed in many of their sacred texts, which they had, surely, studied and fully internalised.

Evidently, Jesus showed no interest in military strategy or tactics. Rome would be beaten without recourse either to conventional or guerrilla war. Nevertheless, though Jesus did not organise his followers into military units, at least five of his inner circle clearly came from the ranks of the revolutionary ‘bandits’ and proudly retained their guerrilla nicknames (ie, Peter Barjonah - ‘outlaw’, Simon - the zealot; James and John - ‘sons of thunder’, and Judas Iscariot - the ‘dagger man’).

This is hardly surprising. Jesus was no pacifist: “I come not to send peace, but a sword!”²⁰ However, liberation would not depend on rousing the masses to stage a general uprising, but

CHRISTMAS

The festive utopia

A collision of two worlds: on the one side, the dingy, foggy London in cold midwinter, and on the other, a fantastical world peopled by spirits. Paul Demarty, in an unusually cheerful mood, revisits Charles Dickens' *A Christmas carol*

In 1843, Charles Dickens found himself unexpectedly in a tight spot. His first six novels, mostly printed in the new serialised format that began to dominate popular literature in England, had been robustly successful and made his name. His seventh, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, however, failed to catch on. By the end of the year, he was in a financial hole, and needed a hit.

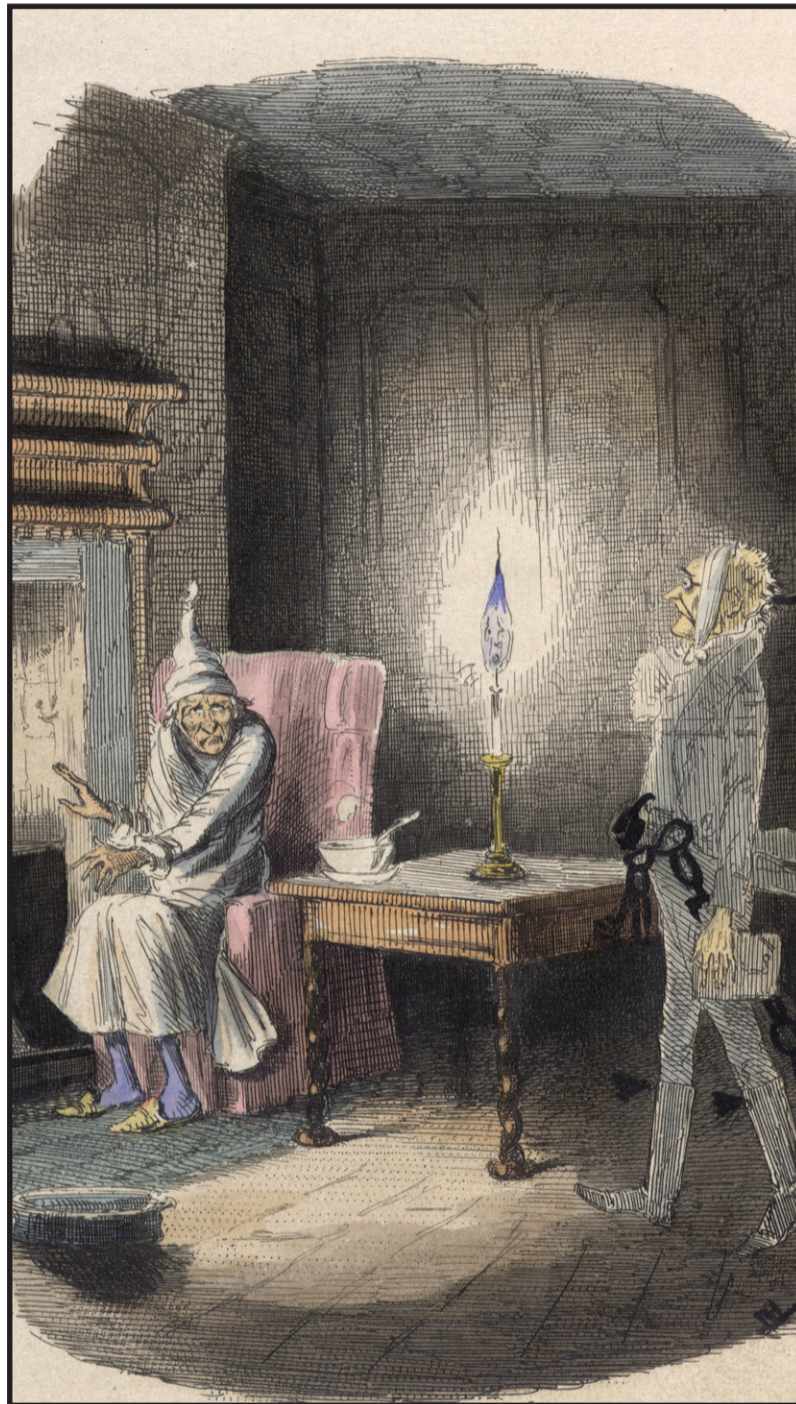
It was these circumstances that led him to write *A Christmas carol* at a fearsome pace, completing it just in time for the holiday itself. It was, indeed, a hit - the first print selling out in a few days - and remains so. Perhaps nothing else he ever wrote has been so consistently popular in the intervening years, whether in written form or in innumerable adaptations - or indeed merely by the entry of 'Scrooge' and 'the ghost of (something) past' into the vernacular.

Dickens was arguably the first truly mass-market novelist, carried on a historical wave that massively expanded the size of the reading public and the means of reaching them. His genius was supremely suited to this new era of literary production - his ready familiarity with the lives of the working poor tempered by a humorous, genial style. He was unafraid to pile on the sentimentality - a trait that led to a certain suspicion of him among the more culturally sophisticated; a suspicion eventually worn away by his settlement in the official canon of English literature. In any case, it was foolish - to criticise Dickens for being a mere popular novelist would be like criticising JRR Tolkien as a mere writer of mass-market high fantasy. Their achievements were in large part the very *creation* of these cultural forms.

A Christmas carol is an extremely concentrated burst of pure Dickens. Unlike the serialised works, which tended to stretch out (that being the way one made money from them), it comes in at a lean 100 or so pages in a modern edition (usually anthologised with some of his other festive novellas, *The chimes*, *The cricket on the hearth* and *The haunted man* - generally considered minor works). The effect of that typical Dickensian voice - omniscient narration, eloquent in structure, but also chummy and extemporaneous - is heightened by the fairytale aspect of the material; reading it feels somehow like being read to. The satire is here, in the absurd malice and brittle self-assurance of Scrooge; and so is the treachery (Tiny Tim).

Two worlds

The novel appears as the collision of two worlds: on the one side, the dingy, foggy London in cold midwinter, with the poor herded into noisome slums or worse (above all, the world of Scrooge himself, and the ceaseless usurious activity of his counting house); and on the other, a fantastical world peopled by spirits - the ghosts of the dead and the more enigmatic figures that guide Scrooge through the past, present and future. It seems like Scrooge's world is the real one, in which everything must be assessed by the grim logic of profit and loss.



John Leech 'Marley's ghost' (1843)

He sarcastically dismisses two fundraisers for the poor:

"Are there no prisons?" asked Scrooge.

"Plenty of prisons," said the gentleman, laying down the pen again.

"And the Union workhouses?" demanded Scrooge. "Are they still in operation?"

"They are. Still," returned the gentleman,

"I wish I could say they were not."

"The Treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigour, then?" said Scrooge.

"Both very busy, sir."

"Oh! I was afraid, from what you said at first, that something had occurred to stop them in their useful course," said Scrooge. "I'm very glad to hear it." ...

"Many can't go there [to the workhouse]; and many would rather die."

"If they would rather die," said Scrooge, "they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."

From this world - the 'real' world of calculation and utility, and

of sub-Malthusian contempt for the poor, where everyone must "understand his own business, and not ... interfere with other people's" - Scrooge is rudely hurled into the spirit world, when he is visited first of all by his old partner in avarice, Jacob Marley, dragging around a chain made of "cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds and heavy purses wrought in steel" - "the chain I forged in life", Marley warns. Scrooge clings for one moment more to 'reality', explaining the apparition by way of a quack theory of the unreliable senses: "A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato." Yet he must in the end yield to his senses: and his senses show him suddenly a London heaving with mournful spirits, dragging effigies of their sins behind them.

From there, Scrooge must receive the three spirits of Christmas - 'Past', 'Present' and 'Future'. I think it is the book's argument (if you can accuse a popular novel of having such a thing) that the world of the spirits is in fact the real one, and the world of Scrooge a phantasmatic

inversion, of a sort that ought to be familiar to readers of Marx. Though Marx had nothing much at all to say about Dickens, we nonetheless meet Scrooge - after a fashion - early in *Capital*, in the remark:

This boundless greed after riches, this passionate chase after exchange-value, is common to the capitalist and the miser; but, while the miser is merely a capitalist gone mad, the capitalist is a rational miser. The never-ending augmentation of exchange-value, which the miser strives after, by seeking to save his money from circulation, is attained by the more acute capitalist, by constantly throwing it afresh into circulation.¹

The figure of the miser himself thus fundamentally misapprehends not only the world in front of him, but even his own interests. He does not, *pace* Scrooge, "understand his own business".

The spirits, of course, do not come to make Scrooge into a more efficient capitalist. 'Past' - a figure perhaps a child, or perhaps withered and ancient - comes to return Scrooge to his youth, and remind him of the stages by which his life slowly bled out of him. He first meets himself as a boy, captivated as many middle class children were (including Dickens) by the *Arabian nights*. Ali Baba appears outside the schoolhouse window - another spirit, let's say - along with other characters from that and other great romances. In stages, the solitary but joyful child is given over to his avarice, until he finally and indifferently allows his betrothal to lapse. The old bachelor Scrooge slowly becomes more despondent as the show goes on.

'Present' is the youngest of many brothers - "more than eighteen hundred" (one, we suppose, for every Christmas since the first). His little tour describes the world that Scrooge refuses - the food of the feasts ("ruddy, brown-faced, broad-girthed Spanish onions, shining in the fatness of their growth like Spanish friars", "the pudding, like a speckled cannon-ball, so hard and firm, blazing in half of half a quarter of ignited brandy"), the games, the unruly children, the gifts ... It begins with people to whom Scrooge has been cruel - his clerk, Bob Cratchit, and his family - but then Present takes him to a mining village (Dickens, at the time, was indignant at the conditions in Cornish tin mines he had visited), and out to sea, to lighthouse keepers sharing a can of grog and sailors unconsciously singing together. Finally, back on land, they meet Scrooge's nephew, who has also caught the rough side of his tongue on Christmas Eve. As they travel, Present dispenses fairy-dust from his torch, lubricating the festivities.

This, then, is the real world - the stubborn refusal of even the poor to be miserable and alone even in the depths of winter, the prodigality in celebration without thought of being thrown into the workhouse, or finding oneself cast into the trash-heap of the "surplus population". His one and only day's work done,

Present duly dies.

It is then the turn of 'Future' - terrifying, veiled, mute, communicating only via an outstretched hand. (Future is the only one of these spectres that really feels like a *ghost*.) He has little enough to show Scrooge, since Scrooge seems not to have that much of a future. By the next Christmas, he will be dead and unmourned; his servants will laughingly pick over his possessions. Worst of all, Bob Cratchit's beloved, sickly son, Tiny Tim, will also be in the grave - a loss that, notably, does not prevent the grieving Cratchits from finding some Christmas cheer from somewhere. Having been shown these things, Scrooge's conversion is complete; thus begins his frantic Christmas day, his dispatching of a prize turkey - so huge that "he never could have stood upon his own legs" - to the Cratchits, his reconciliation with his nephew, and his keeping of a merry Christmas for the rest of his days.

Time and space

This presentation of the two worlds - the world of the grinding poverty and invincible avarice of London in the throes of industrialisation, and the world of Christmas, reappearing fleetingly once a year under the benevolent guidance of its spirits - has something of the utopian to it. It is a utopia parcelled off in time rather than space, but, like the more classical examples, a critique simply by its contrast to the dourness and cruelty of capitalist life. In a sense, the utopia too is proposed as the real world - the sense of Hegel's "what is rational is real". It is the world of actual human fulfilment, of the abolition of the apologetics and ideologies that accustom us to exploitation and oppression.

Indeed, I am hardly the first person to notice this. In the early 20th century, GK Chesterton compared Dickens' Christmas novellas to the utopias of, among others, William Morris, whom he treats with great, but critical, respect. He wanted to make a contrast. The utopians had failed, in the end, to really portray happiness *per se*. He offered three points of difference - firstly, "happiness is not a state; it is a crisis". It unfolds as a drama, an event. "In romantic literature", such as that of Dickens, "the hero and heroine must indeed be happy, but they must be unexpectedly happy".² Utopian literature, rather, portrays the world in which happiness would be expected, and thus ends up strangely melancholy.

Secondly, happiness comes as a result of struggle and difficulty. Christmas is so happy, he reckons, *because* it is a winter festival, coming at a time when comfort and pleasure is hardest to come by; it is famously not all that different from other, pagan winter festivals, after all. "It is this contradiction and mystical defiance which gives a quality of manliness and reality to the old winter feasts which is not characteristic of the sunny felicities of the Earthly Paradise [of Morris]."³

Finally, happiness is not beautiful, but rather grotesque and vulgar. "A man in Morris's *Earthly*

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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paradise cannot really be enjoying himself; he is too decorative," Chesterton writes, a little cattishly. "Dickens understood that happiness is best expressed by ugly figures." In *A Christmas carol*,

Everybody is happy because nobody is dignified. We have a feeling somehow that Scrooge looked even uglier when he was kind than he had looked when he was cruel. The turkey that Scrooge bought was so fat, says Dickens, that it could never have stood upright. That top-heavy and monstrous bird is a good symbol of the top-heavy happiness of the [novel].⁴

Religion

Oddly, not noted here as a contrast between the utopia and the winter festival is the small matter of how they come about. Morris's *News from nowhere*, after all, includes a lengthy description of the revolution that brings about his rustic anarchism. For his part, Chesterton places a great deal of weight on the coming down of Christmas as a tradition - it is the occasion, even, of his famous quip that "... tradition is the most democratic of all things, for tradition is merely a democracy of the dead as well as the living."⁵

Which is a roundabout way of getting to the point that *A Christmas carol* expresses its social content as a religious story. It is, after all, about Christmas; and follows from what was then a relatively recent revival of a fuller, more 'festive' observance of the day. Carols had fallen out of use in the 17th and 18th centuries, but revived. The decorated tree

came over from Germany along with prince Albert. For the Puritans, it became a solemn occasion; for the Victorians, as for the medievals, it was a grand old party. What it was not was a quasi-secular occasion, as it is in today's Britain.

The revolutionary agents, in Dickens's Christmas utopia, are the spirits - pagan in presentation, but for practical purposes interchangeable with angels. Scrooge's story is a Christian conversion narrative very much by the book: of the redemption of a sinful man, drawn to repentance by unmerited grace.⁶ The grieving Cratchits console themselves with a reading from the gospel of Mark, about the closeness of children to heaven. The scene of the servants taking hold of the dead Scrooge's possessions is an ironic recapitulation of Roman soldiers casting lots for the crucified Jesus's garment. We could go on.

All this is present in small hints, of course, though hints that would be more readily accessible to readers of Dickens' own day than ours. It is not a tediously instructional text for Sunday-school children. Yet the conversion narrative structure, and the supernatural content, at least allows Scrooge's progress a measure of plausibility. We could contrast it with the case of Noddy Boffin in *Our mutual friend*, Dickens's late masterpiece: the genial dustman is corrupted by his inheritance of a vast sum of money. In earlier conceptions of the novel, he was to remain corrupted until the end; but Dickens lost his nerve, and a preposterous plot twist reveals him to have merely pretended to turn into a miser, so as to better propel the inheritance on its rightful course. It is scarcely

believable, and the one significant wart on a great novel.

In Marx's famous sketch of religion from the *Critique of Hegel's philosophy of right*, he writes that "religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions".⁷ (I note, merely for the poetry of the thing, that Marx wrote this at almost exactly the same time that Dickens was writing *A Christmas carol*.) Dickens's portrayal of the joy of Christmas celebration gives a certain illustration of this idea. In the grip of the festival, people are more alive: they dance like dervishes; they flirt behind the curtains in a game of blind man's buff. Interestingly, even the food is alive. Those brown Spanish onions again: "shining in the fatness of their growth like Spanish friars, and winking from their shelves in wanton slyness at the girls as they went by, and glanced demurely at the hung-up mistletoe."⁸

That, of course, in turn recalls Marx's most famous inversion of all - the fetishism of the commodity, in which the social relation of value becomes reified as the property of a thing, and consequently those things appear as godlike foreign powers over us. In Marx, this is all pretty terrifying - like Dickens, Marx loved a ghost - but Dickens gives us something of the seductiveness of the view - the heart rather than the heartlessness. A feast day in Victorian England turns into a great dance of people, ghosts, angels, onions, roasted birds and boiled fruit puddings. The heart, indeed, overcomes the heartlessness with the conversion of Scrooge.

Commodification

Dickens really did intend all this not only as a call to individual repentance on the part of the rich, but as a social broadside to expose the dismal conditions he observed in those tin mines, reformatory schools and other such institutions - he thought his Christmas story would be a greater "sledgehammer blow" for the poor than a hundred polemics in liberal journals.

He was, of course, no Marxist - Marxism did not quite yet exist in any case - but again, in this respect, a utopian, like Robert Owen and others before him attempting to reform society by worrying at the conscience of the bourgeoisie. The picture he has in mind is of the feast Scrooge attends as a young apprentice put on by his kindly master, complete with country dancing and individual blessings at the end - a nostalgic reversion to a certain romantic-medievalist model of hospitality that would later also be mobilised by Morris in his art and writings.

What happened, in the event, is something different. The settlement of the social question became a matter between the bourgeoisie and state, on the one hand, and the organisations of the working class, on the other. Christmas, for its part, became an object lesson in the adaptability of bourgeois society, as indeed it already was then, having been transformed from a grey Puritan thing into a carnival; in time, with the growth of consumer society, the carnival became principally a commercial rather than religious affair. It remained a matter of abundance, at least for those with spare cash to throw around, but the abundance was that of the market - not only its food, but also its vast array of disposable gadgets and toys. The miser indeed was "rationalised" into the capitalist, as expected by Marx, rather than revived as the medieval squire, conscientious of his *noblesse oblige*.

So it is today. Retailers live and die on the sales they make in the run-up. Onions still wink at us, but now from a Marks and Spencer advert. The machinery of the world market has, once more, rendered the plight of the working poor, whose job is to grow the food and assemble the gewgaws, more or less invisible.

This process repeats itself fractally - think of the 'progress' from the naff Christmas jumper knitted by your nan, to the first ironic Christmas jumper office parties, to the fact that today every high street clothes shop currently has racks of ironic Christmas jumpers for sale. More or less all of them are manufactured by super-exploited labour in the global south, with the profits pocketed largely by institutionalised finance capital - a global mega-Scrooge, which has finally succeeded in ridding itself of all trappings of humanity. (What ghost could put a scare into Blackrock?) It is not an analysis without problems, but Theodor Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's critique of the culture industry hits on something important, when it characterises that industry as the progressive commodification of time away from work as 'leisure'.⁸

I offer this not as a criticism of *A Christmas carol* as such, as if it could anticipate every future development and simultaneously offer a critique, but to place it in a wider history - itself a relatively early example of commodified mass culture, of course, that nonetheless earnestly constructs a picture of what in humanity can never be fully commodified: love, friendship, solidarity and above all pure, idiotic, drunken revelry (the flaw in the culture industry analysis is precisely that it seems to suppose that such commodification *is*, indeed, complete).

The ruse of reason ensures that this particular picture has largely been commodified in the interim; but even in its current form, Christmas - celebrated in religious terms by Christians or secular terms by others - and for that matter the other great religious and secular feasts, still are occasions for some or all of these things, and they remain tokens of a less heartless world waiting to be born. We are not utopians, but - as I argued earlier this year⁹ - we still need our 'utopias' ●

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Notes

1. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch04.htm.
2. GK Chesterton *Appreciations and criticisms of the works of Charles Dickens* London 1911, p80.
3. *Ibid* p81.
4. *Ibid* pp81-82.
5. *Ibid* p78.
6. As Chesterton puts it, a conversion "as sudden as the conversion of a man at a Salvation Army meeting", though "it is true that the man at the Salvation Army meeting would probably be converted from the punch bowl; whereas Scrooge was converted to it" (p82).
7. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm.
8. T Adorno and M Horkheimer *Dialectic of enlightenment* London 2007, pp124-27.
9. 'Fiction: utopian and scientific' *Weekly Worker* September 12: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1506/fiction-utopian-and-scientific.

Friday January 17 to Sunday January 19 Online Communist University Winter 2025



2025 winter War and peace

Friday 5pm
War is the continuation of politics/policy by other means
Speaker: Mike Macnair



Saturday 11am
Workers' militia, people's militia, weapons of peace
Speaker: Jack Conrad



Saturday 4pm
Israel's warmongering and how to respond
Speakers: Moshé Machover and Yasmine Mather



Sunday 11am
Aukus and the coming war with China
Speaker: Marcus Strom



Sunday 4pm
Revolutionary defeatism
Speaker: Lars T Lih



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Blowing in the wind

One poll has Reform UK ahead of Labour, writes **Eddie Ford**, with talk of Elon Musk giving \$100 million to the party in a bid to make Nigel Farage Britain's Trump

For the first time Reform UK has overtaken Labour in a national poll. Published on December 4 by Find Out Now, it reveals that Nigel Farage's party is on 24%, one point ahead of Labour, with the Tories ahead on 26%, the Liberal Democrats at 11% and the Greens 9%.¹ This meant that Labour was down two points, compared to last week, with their level of support almost a third lower than in the general election, while Reform was up by two points.

If you are a Reform supporter, it might be a bit premature to crack open the fizz and start measuring the curtains for No10, though that did not stop Zia Yusuf, Reform's multi-millionaire chair, declaring that it would win the next general election. This poll was an outlier, because it uses a different methodology than most polling companies. It explicitly asks about people's *likelihood to vote* before which party they plan to vote for, which is then factored into the final calculation. Polls in recent weeks by BMG, JL Partners, More in Common and others, have shown Labour leading Reform by several points, though generally they show increasing support for Reform, with Labour down a point or two - perhaps vindicating the approach taken by Farage, who has said he is now more focused on winning over voters who currently support Labour, or are not inclined to vote at all, than converting more Tory supporters. In the general election, Reform came second to Labour in 98 constituencies, including many so-called Red Wall seats and in next year's county council elections it aims to win more than 100 councillors to pose a "credible challenge".

Sir Keir

Of course, we should not be surprised that soon after Labour gets into government its popularity falls. After all, Keir Starmer is hardly the most dynamic or charismatic of politicians. Then we have just had the mind-numbingly boring relaunch of the party that hardly anyone noticed (but don't call it a 'reset!'). Sir Keir merely trotted out a bunch of inane pledges or 'milestones', which you could have heard from almost any mainstream politician going back decades - more bobbies on the beat, higher living standards, limiting NHS waiting times, improving early education, etc. etc. Laughably, Starmer said his pledges were "ambitious" and would land with a "thud" on the desks of civil servants - apparently demonstrating that his was a "mission-led government" that will deliver. No wonder people are looking elsewhere only months after Labour's landslide victory.

However, there is another possible explanation for Reform's rising popularity at Labour's



Nigel Farage: will need more than money

expense. Namely, Keir Starmer's various speeches about solving the 'problem' of mass migration, when everyone knows that he will fail to do so, just as Rishi Sunak failed to stop the small boats despite his foolish promises. Therefore you could argue that we had Starmer denouncing the Tories *from the right* for running an "open border experiment" that "happened by design, not accident" and demanding the British people are "owed an explanation" for this liberal immigration policy (revised figures from the Office for National Statistics showed that net migration for the year to June 2023 reached 906,000 - a big jump on what was previously thought and four times higher than pre-Brexit figures in 2019²).

For Starmer, the Tories "refused to do the hard yards" and plug the UK's skills gap. But, of course, he will be different and "turn the page" on the issue - promising "graft, not gimmicks" and vowing to crackdown on immigration, both legal and illegal, in order to get the numbers down. But such populist-tinted rhetoric runs the risk of feeding into Reform and further increasing its appeal - they will not let you down, unlike the lying mainstream parties.

Nigel Farage has other reasons to be optimistic. Next month, of course, his best mate, Donald Trump, will be in the White House - opening up near endless possibilities for expansion - and there is talk that his more recent bestie friend, Elon Musk, wants to donate \$100 million (£80 million) to Reform in a bid to make Nigel Britain's Donald.

Now, Musk might have to become a British citizen if he wants to make such a donation - though there is speculation that the multi-billionaire may be able to sidestep overseas donation laws by using

the UK branch of Twitter/X. Leaving that aside for the lawyers, he is already a citizen of South Africa, Canada and the US - truly an internationalist! But he has enough family connections and money to buy his way into British citizenship. Speaking on GB News, the dull rightwing propaganda TV channel (unless you enjoy listening to monomaniacs) his father, Errol Musk, pointed out that he was eligible for British citizenship as well.

UnEnglish

Almost touchingly, Errol mused: "If the thing that's stopping Farage from moving ahead is money", then "he should get money, so that he can move ahead" - nothing fairer than that. Not so touching, he commented that what has happened in Britain under the Starmer government is "just totally unEnglish", when you consider England's historical role as a "parent nation" to many countries around the world.

There are a range of entertaining theories as to why Elon Musk is eager to intervene in British politics, including the notion that he has come to view the country as the centre of what he has described as the "woke mind virus", which he blames for the gender transition of his estranged daughter and the 'takeover of universities by neo-Marxists', where it is a situation of "full-on communism". We should not forget that during the racist riots this year in various towns and cities, Musk claimed that "civil war is inevitable" - so why not give it a nudge in the right direction? - and labelled the British prime minister as "two-tier Keir" in an echo of the argument promulgated by the likes of Suella Braverman, the former Tory home secretary, that the police were treating white far-right

"protestors" more harshly than minority groups.

Anyway, Nigel Farage has denied all knowledge of Musk's millions - telling the BBC that he has not solicited a donation from him and one has never been offered. When pressed on whether he would accept such a donation, Farage said, "Of course I would accept money", but pointed out - though not with any great relevancy - that James Goldsmith's Referendum Party spent £25 million on the 1997 election, yet only "got 3%" of the vote, sagely adding, "Money isn't everything".

Given that in a British general election the parties spend no more £20 million, it is a bit hard to know what Reform would do with £80 million. The danger is that the government would simply legislate and outlaw such sizeable donations either way.

But, whether Reform gets the donation from Musk or not, it is hoping to rake in the money anyway. The party's new treasurer, billionaire property developer and former staunch Tory Nick Candy - the latest billionaire to join the 'party of the people' - wants to raise more than £40 million, after having previously donated £1 million. He told GB news that on that very morning he had taken calls from people who had never donated before to a political party, but were now offering millions of pounds. However, he said, "it's not just about getting rich donors and billionaire people or millionaire people" - today "we need the guys that have got £1, £5, £10, £25 to be a member of Reform". He said the party would overtake the Conservative Party in terms of membership over the next six months (something also boasted about by Nigel Farage) and that would be a "gamechanger". Reform has 100,000 members now, he explained, and the Tories currently have 130,000 - though ageing and mainly on paper, so that number will rapidly decline through a process of 'natural wastage' (ie, death).

Candy also revealed that he spoke to Elon Musk immediately after his appointment as treasurer on December 10, but remained tight-lipped about what they discussed, except for joking: "If people offer us money legally, we'll take it."

A string

Bringing more good news for Nigel Farage, there have been a string of defections to Reform recently and more are expected. In a surprise move to many, Tim Montgomerie, frequent guest on the mainstream media and the founder of Conservative Home (influential among Tory circles and conservative thinking in general) switched to Reform after 33 years as a loyal Tory member.

Then again, that should not have been too much of a surprise.

In June, he said that if he lived in certain constituencies, such as Clacton or Boston and Skegness, he would have voted for the Reform candidate there. The final straw for him was the revised immigration figures - like many on the right, he is fed up with hearing the Tories say they were "controlling" immigration. What is particularly significant about Montgomerie was that after the general election he spoke about building a "unite-the-right movement". Philosophically, he will be at home in Reform, believing that in the 20th century what we saw was "far from an overwhelming victory for the right", because, "though revolutionary Marxism died, its fellow traveller - cultural Marxism - prospered". That will doubtlessly endear him to Elon Musk.

This move by Montgomerie followed the defection of former Tory MP Andrea Jenkyns, at the end of November. It has to be said that she does have a turbulent history with what is now her party, having previously engaged in a bitter public row with Reform after claiming she was wooed by a pro-Brexit businessman who she said had offered her various jobs to defect. In July she accused the deputy leader of Reform, Richard Tice (yet another multi-millionaire), of trying to bribe her Reform general election rival in the constituency of Leeds South West and Morley. They appear to have kissed and made up. According to gossip in the rightwing media, there are eight other Tory MPs contemplating jumping the ship to Reform including Victoria Atkins, Alex Burghart and the obnoxious Mark Francois.

We can see from all this that Reform is becoming a viable fighting force that has the potential to make serious inroads into the political process - especially as it seems to be slowly transitioning into a more acceptable mainstream party. Nigel Farage has said that he wants to "relinquish" control of Reform UK by giving up his majority shareholder position. Reform is a private limited company, unlike other political parties, that had previously registered as the Brexit Party from 2018-21 - with Farage effectively acting as dictator over the organisation with no democratic structures or input from below.³

Now, it is groping towards some sort of organisation based on individual membership and a degree of formal accountability ●

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Notes

- [1. findoutnow.co.uk/blog/voting-intention-4th-dec-2024](https://findoutnow.co.uk/blog/voting-intention-4th-dec-2024).
- [2. news.sky.com/story/keir-starmer-blames-tories-for-uks-open-borders-as-stats-show-record-high-13262389](https://news.sky.com/story/keir-starmer-blames-tories-for-uks-open-borders-as-stats-show-record-high-13262389).
- [3. independent.co.uk/news/uk/nigel-farage-reform-uk-richard-tice-ben-habib-mps-b2615656.html](https://independent.co.uk/news/uk/nigel-farage-reform-uk-richard-tice-ben-habib-mps-b2615656.html).