

A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity

weekly **worker**



Tony Cliff's International Socialist tradition still exhibits an almost pathological fear of a programme

- Letters and debate
- Trump's conspiracy files
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Towards a mass Communist Party

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THEATRE OF CRUELTY

LETTERS



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

Insult culture

As an alien from planet X, I take an interest in communist and leftwing writings - an outstanding feature of which is the seemingly well-established culture of insult, as opposed to normative discussion, intended to influence or describe.

I noted some 27 examples of constructed imprecation in a single article by one of your esteemed correspondents last week: Paul Demarty's 'Rebels without a clue' (February 27). For example, "the weepy Canadian charlatan, Jordan Peterson" and "Douglas Murray, indefatigable peddler of culture war gibberish and dubious 'free speech' warrior".

It would be of passing interest to our planetary intervention, control and exploitation department to note how comfortable and how motivated your target audience is with this mode of expression.

Alien John
email

Phases scheme

Jack Conrad is completely right to defend the immediate adoption - not 'first this, then that' - of a minimum-maximum programme which comrades accept, and the CPGB's programme is certainly a very good "starting point" for discussion ('Programmatic starting point', February 27).

I do take issue with this part of comrade Conrad's article, though: "In other words, there will be a first or lower phase and a second or higher phase of communism. We insist, therefore, that the lower stage is not and cannot be a *mode of production*. Its essence is movement, change, flux. Neither the law of value nor the law of the plan dominate. Rather the lower stage is the rule of the working class *state over capitalism as it is* and which ends with the withering away of the state and the realisation, at last, of a society of freely associated producers. Since the late 19th century

Marxists have called this, the lower stage of communism, the 'socialist commonwealth' or more 'commonly' simply 'socialism' (the last quote coming from Lenin's *State and revolution*)."

I have trouble with this, especially in combination with the comrade's characterisation of 'lower phase' as short and 'higher phase' as long - or eternal, till humanity's exit from the universe's stage - at the Online Communist Forum. The way I understand it, the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat only lasts as long as necessary to institute the democratic republic and secure working class political power against inevitable counterrevolution. If this takes too long, we're in trouble - 'too long' meaning, say, a few months to extend the revolution continentally to the point where the democratic republic can be properly defended, and a few years to really secure the working class's hold on power and remake society.

An aside: after the 20th century I also think that whenever we talk about the inevitably messy and protracted nature of transition, we have to emphasise that this does not involve any period of rule by a technical and managerial intelligentsia, or any kind of bureaucratic or military rule. This would represent a collapse of the democratic republic, the end of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and hence the end of transition in failure. Overcoming this would not be the continuation of the same, original, transition, but beginning transition again in another revolution in no doubt very different circumstances.

Coming into being *alongside* the dictatorship of the proletariat - not as a separate second phase of three total phases - the lower stage of communism is the first phase of the communist mode of production. The base is fundamentally altered: mass politics is now embedded within the base through democratic-republican political forms, and the economy begins its rapid transition from an economy based on money and production for exchange to one based on labour credits and production for need. How many of the goods and services of the economy are

purchased through labour credits and how many are free at the point of use will be determined politically, with a 'communist tax' taken to 'fund' public services. There is no law of value, as production and investment (in research and development, etc) is no longer driven by exchange value, but by human need, and the imperative to improve productivity - meaning labour-hours per item - to reduce the amount of time needed to be spent on work.

Another aside: in a previous article, comrade Conrad said labour credits "could not work until the middle classes have been absorbed into the working class" ('The two phases of communism' August 16 2019). Perhaps an elaboration on this might reveal where we disagree.

The fact that access to the social surplus is still significantly regulated in this way, alongside the continued existence of a semi-state and residual middle classes, is what distinguishes lower- and higher-phase communism. "From each according to their ability, to each according to their need" might not be fully realised for 100 years or more, if truly ever. We will just get as close as we can to it on our dear planet in the time we have. Hopefully there is a quantity-to-quality shift (a phase change!), where the regulation of consumption through labour credits is so reduced and the global hegemony of the communist mode is so secured that for all intents and purposes the 'higher phase' is a reality. But I personally see this 'higher phase' as something the communist mode of production *points towards* by its own laws of motion, but may never truly arrive at.

On planning, 'the plan' does dominate in the communist mode of production and hence also dominates in the lower phase. But 'the plan' here does not mean some piece of paper listing production targets for the next five years, produced in a government office and computed by some linear programming algorithm - though such things could no doubt help inform governmental decision-making - but the planned economy arising from the partially-free association of producers regulated by local, regional, national and international government.

If the lower phase of this new mode of production doesn't come into being in fairly short order, the revolution is doomed to fail. A key component of what makes a mode of production is that it out-competes prior modes. Per hour of labour input, communism will be more productive of real use values than capitalism, producing a greater abundance of things people actually need to satisfy body and mind. A real, ecological growth in wealth for all humanity, not capitalism's ecologically disastrous and utility-blind growth in gross domestic product. For the same amount of goods and services we will be able to work less and less, if we choose to.

This will be assured by a number of things: complete transparency of the economy; the abolition of 'intellectual property' law and the introduction of general cooperation; an end to the stasis in R&D produced by monopolisation; the proper development of regions of the world left behind by the competition of capitalist states or wrecked by imperialism and general instability; an end to planned obsolescence and the production of cheap crap which misleads about how long it will last; an end to time spent on managing the contradictions of capital (eg, jobs which exist mainly to keep workers subordinate or mediate between labour and capital); an organic reduction in goods and services which exist mainly to numb pain or soothe alienation; perhaps the widespread adoption of things like pull-production

(à la Toyota Production System); and so on.

What I do accept is that small business owners will maintain some kind of small private property in the lower phase, but there should be measures in place for ensuring that this ends within a generation or two. For example, not permitting the transfer of private property to children, spouses or whoever upon death, schemes for workers to take over struggling firms and turn them into co-ops ('struggling' under communism does not refer to the need for profit, but just things like crap ownership, leading to unacceptable output), and so on. This doesn't mean granting exception from participating in planning either - they should be brought in by means of carrot and stick. In the end, these remaining small owners and their - presumably loyal - workers will become quirks of the communist economy, objects of curiosity: nothing more.

Scott Evans
Glasgow

Word order

Everything changes, including language. I was reminded of this law of dialectics when reading Jack Conrad's 'Programmatic starting point'.

He insists on using certain key terms as they were used by Marx, Engels and Lenin. But these terms have meantime changed their sense and meaning. Sticking to a form of 'literal Marxism' invites unnecessary misunderstandings and may be politically harmful. Two examples:

■ First, 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. If you use this term, you cannot avoid having to tell the listener/reader: "When we say 'dictatorship' it doesn't mean what you think it does. We use it in a defunct sense borrowed from the ancient Roman republic."

■ Second example: 'democracy'. Jack points out that Marx, Engels and Lenin understood this term as denoting a particular form of state; and communists look forward to a stateless society. Yes, so they did; and so we do. But nowadays this term has a much wider meaning and denotes also a form of organisation and collective decision-making in non-state contexts. We speak, for example, of 'inner-party democracy'. Are we saying that under communism collective decision-making about production, etc will not be democratic?

Is it wise to give hostages to fortune by inviting the accusation that we are advocating a dictatorship and the demise of democracy?

Moshé Machover
London

Transitional road

Might I respond to the letters by Ansell Eade and Andrew Northall (February 27), who were replying to my earlier posts?

Ansell observes that, while I had suggested we need an "appropriate exit strategy" from capitalism, not a transitional period, I had long ago (1987) co-authored a document published by the Guildford branch of the SPGB entitled 'The road to socialism', which proposed precisely such a "transitional stage to socialism". This is quite correct, but there is no contradiction between these two different positions. The Guildford branch document was proposing a transitional strategy within the framework of existing capitalist society, not after we have got rid of capitalism.

When I say there can be "no transitional period", I am referring explicitly to the latter - that is to say, after the capture of political power by a class-conscious socialist majority. That event will be - must be - coterminous with the conversion of the means of production into common

property. Society can no more be a little bit socialist (aka communist) than one can be a little bit pregnant. This is fully consistent with the view expressed in the *Communist manifesto* that the "communist revolution is the most radical rupture with traditional property relations".

Marx's reference to a "political transition period" (note he was not talking about a transitional society) between capitalism and communism - namely, the "dictatorship of the proletariat" - was unfortunate inasmuch as it has given rise to considerable misunderstanding. Apart from anything else, the existence of a proletariat as a class category pertaining to capitalism presupposes the continued existence of capitalism itself. Therefore it cannot be *between* capitalism and communism.

The preconditions for a communist or socialist society are (1) the development of a productive potential sufficient to support the reasonable needs of the population and (2) a clear majority who want such a society and understand what it entails. The SPGB's position is that precondition (1) has been met a long time ago, but we are a long way off from meeting precondition (2). If and when we do have a class-consciousness socialist majority, there is nothing to prevent us from immediately implementing the new society. There is absolutely no reason whatsoever to linger on with one or another form of capitalism a moment longer.

Andrew agrees that we already possess the productive potential to permit a post-capitalist society to materialise, but argues: "... having the potential material productive capacity to meet needs is very different from actually producing the socially necessary goods and services required and to the necessary quantities to meet basic and then higher human needs".

His point is that it will take time for this productive potential to be actualised. This is true enough, but you have to disaggregate this picture and look at different kinds of needs on a case-by-case basis. Some can be met straightaway on a free access basis. The world already produces enough food to feed everyone, but about one third of it is wasted. Similarly housing - there are tens of millions of empty housing units (over 60 million in China alone!). In the case of other products, it will take more time to raise output to the level required. The SPGB is not averse to the idea of some form of rationing in the early stages of a post-capitalist society when it comes to particular shortages, but we do have serious issues with the model of rationing advocated by Marx in the form of labour vouchers.

However, if we are going to talk about a transition period to a post-capitalist society, then, as I have suggested, it makes more sense to say that we are already in such a period right now. Andrew finds this suggestion extraordinary, but I don't see why. After all, the term 'transition' simply denotes a period over which certain quantitative and qualitative changes can be expected to occur, leading up to the point when we are ready to switch over to a post-capitalist society.

It is absurd to imagine that the growth of a socialist movement and spread of socialist ideas could happen without this having significant impacts (of a socio-economic, cultural and political nature) within capitalism itself. That was the basic argument behind the Guildford branch circular - that such impacts would not occur in a vacuum, but would be the direct consequence of the change in the social outlook and the social values held by workers that would prefigure a post-capitalist society itself. For

Fighting fund

One more time!

Would you believe it? We failed to reach our £2,250 fighting fund target for February by exactly £1! But I'm not going to be too upset. After all, with just two days still to go, our running total stood at just £1,796 - in other words, we were £454 short.

But incredibly those last two days saw us better off by £453, thanks to some fantastic last-minute contributions. Particular thanks go to comrades IS and TT for their brilliant three-figure donations, while among other bank transfers there was the £40 from AN, who wrote that this was "to note the fact that I joined the original Communist Party of Great Britain 40 years ago!"

Other bank transfers came from JT (£25), AB and JF (£20 each), SS (£16), IS and MD (£10), and SD (£3), while DB and AC each donated £50 via PayPal, and that well known comrade Hassan, who features regularly in this column, this time contributed a £5 note.

I can't say how pleased I am that we (almost!) got there, in view of the *Weekly Worker's*

soaring costs - which is why both our subscription rates and our fighting fund target will be increased very soon! But, in the meantime, we have now started one more month where the target remains the same, so it's vital that we get there once again!

And after the first five days of March the good news is that we already have £527 in the kitty. Thanks go to AC (£100!), EW (£55), LC (£50), MM (£31), ST, DL and CG (£30 each), RG and RD (£25), DL, MS and MT (£20), BG (£15), RM (£13), MM (£11), AN, JD, DI and CP (£10), not to forget DC and JS (£6). Every one of them were bank transfers.

To find out the different ways you can contribute, please click on the link below - don't forget, we really need to make that £2,250 target one more time!

Robbie Rix

Our bank account details are name: Weekly Worker sort code: 30-99-64 account number: 00744310

To make a donation or set up a regular payment visit weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/donate

instance, the decline in nationalist sentiments everywhere, which a growing socialist movement will bring about, will make it vastly more difficult for capitalist states to engage in wars and use workers as cannon fodder for their capitalist ends.

If nothing else, the notion that we are already in the transitional period towards socialism is a lot more positive and motivational way of looking at the world than envisaging this period to be some far-off-distant point in time that we may never reach. The present is the terrain upon which we contest the future. If you don't actively advocate a non-market, stateless alternative to capitalism now, you will assuredly never reach it - ever.

You might as well reconcile yourself to the thought of perpetual capitalism.

Robin Cox
email

Learn, learn ...

Continuing the series, 'Building a Communist Party: past attempts and future prospects', Marc Mullholland introduced some of the concepts held by Marx and Engels at the 'Why Marx?' Zoom gathering on February 27.

Examining the pre-history of Marxism, Marc identified the politics of early capitalism in Britain as dominated by the Whigs (oligarchy), Tories (squirearchy) and "the crowd". As far back as 1753, Henry Fielding, founder of the Bow Street Runners - Britain's proto-police force - had already identified the primary social actors of the time as "kings, lords and the Commons". At this point there was little by way of independent direction from 'the mob', who tended towards the mobilisation of different forces at different times. Nonetheless the notion of citizen volunteers was identified as providing arms training and organisation, which developed over time.

The threat of invasion during the Napoleonic period accelerated this process and, in Ireland in particular, volunteer organisation persisted beyond the ebb of French intervention, to the point whereby the volunteers kept the weapons issued to them and developed their own logic, discussing issues of the day. The French Revolution itself had opened up the 'politics of the clubs' - ie, partisan gatherings of the urban politically committed, albeit localist

and networked in composition.

The defeat of the French Revolution and the 'politics of (monarchist) restoration' led to a counterrevolutionary alliance of nations focused on wiping out radicalism, wherever it appeared. Positively, however, the early post-Napoleonic period saw the coming into being of coordinations of social-political revolutionaries - variously organised alongside other radicals, nationalists, liberals and working class tendencies.

Building upon this model, Marc identified the rise of the Catholic Association in Ireland, whose project of parliamentary representation gave it the character of a broad civil rights movement, morphing later into Irish nationalism. Its innovations included cheap membership for the poor, building identity and affinity. Flowing out of this developed politics of a mass character and the 'politics of the platform', mass mobilisations and "monster" meetings. It was claimed that one gathering brought together a million people - perhaps showing us that huge numbers on demonstrations is not something unique to today's Palestine mobilisations.

The Catholic Association was described as an interplay between constitutionalism and revolutionary politics, with leaders pleading for reform in order to limit popular desire for revolution. This form of organisation adopted was used as a model for the early workers' movement - not least the development of Chartism, the world's first mass working class political movement.

Fergus O'Connor - an Irish Chartist leader and advocate of the Land Plan, which sought to provide smallholdings for the labouring classes - had himself gone through the Catholic Association. This had an influence on both his practice and Chartism more generally. Whilst Chartism represented the 'politics of the league', friendly societies and early trade unions, other social layers, such as the anti-Corn Laws League, representing the more middling layers, also engaged in mass politics.

Contemporary early socialist forces, such as the followers of Louis Auguste Blanqui, took a slightly different approach, organising on the basis of a putschist technique of revolution. The unsuccessful efforts of the League of the Just to mobilise their 500 largely working class membership

to storm the Paris Hotel de Ville in 1839 actually led to the death of 100 comrades and general repression.

Emerging out of this, the German Workers' Educational Association (Deutscher Arbeiterbildungsverein) was a London-based organisation of radical German political émigrés, established in 1840 by Karl Schapper and his associates. The organisation served during its initial years as the 'above-ground' arm of the underground League of the Just and later as a mass organisation of the Communist League. It continued to exist for more than 75 years, eventually terminating in 1917 due to the internment of Germans in Britain during World War I.

The Communist League itself commissioned Marx and Engels to write the *Communist manifesto*, which went through a series of changes with every draft and helped develop the concept of independent working class politics as Marxists understand it today. Influenced by Chartism, the manifesto sought the liberation and general subsistence of the working class, limits on private property and progressive taxation. Its additional call for education at the expense of the state was described as opening up conceptually the idea of what socialist transition might look like towards a social arrangement coloured by association rather than competition.

There were inevitable gaps in the manifesto, not least in terms of its national focus and ambiguity towards the state. Marc noted that many activists saw the manifesto as an end in itself, whereas communists viewed it as transitional. The opposing dynamics between capitalism on the one hand, often leading towards totalitarianism, and workers on the other, with its focus on developing the proletariat as a class for itself, became clearer.

The discussion following Marc's opening flowed in multiple directions. Tina Becker highlighted the misunderstanding of a particular passage in the manifesto: "In what relation do the Communists stand to the proletarians as a whole? The communists do not form a separate party opposed to the other working class parties. They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement."

Ian Spencer located the ebbing of the mid-19th century revolutionary moment as leading to Marx's concentration on theory. Party and class, theory and practice - all are essential today. In response Marc noted the length of time it took Marx to write *Capital*, stemming from his engagement with émigré Communards, often around mutual aid-type endeavours, aiming in many cases to ensure that comrades did not starve to death.

Peter Kennedy brought up questions of the tensions within large-scale industry and organisation morphing into bureaucracy, not least within the workers' movement itself. Steve Freeman argued for a democratic republic allowing the working class to come to power, whereas the maximum programme of communism requires a world party.

Looking back on the discussion, Marc emphasised developments since the era of Marx and Engels. In a world of trillionaires and oligarchs, the bourgeois organisation of society gives us stark choices. In this sense the 'Why Marx?' series provides a useful adjunct to the current Forging Communist Unity process.

Understanding our past efforts to organise politically can guide us in our struggles today and hopefully the 'Why Marx?' organisers will continue with their useful work in this regard.

Paul Cooper
email

ACTION

Library book sale

Saturday March 8, 11am to 3pm: Annex, Working Class Movement Library, 51 Crescent, Salford M5. Featuring duplicate working class history books, badges, posters and pamphlets. Organised by Working Class Movement Library: wcml.org.uk/event/library-book-sale.

Screen Cuba: films to change the world

Saturday March 8 to Wednesday April 2: Festival of Cuban cinema, various locations. Organised by Cuba Solidarity Campaign: screencuba.uk/programme.

Perspectives on human origins

Tuesday March 11, 6.30pm: Talks on social and biological anthropology, Daryll Forde seminar room, Anthropology Building, 14 Taviton Street, off Gordon Square, London WC1, and online. This meeting: 'On women and jaguars: why perspectivism got it so wrong'. Speaker: Chris Knight. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: www.facebook.com/events/822946473226562.

Parti Ouvrier and the Possibilists

Thursday March 13, 6.30pm: Online discussion in the series, 'Our history'. Speaker: Ian Spencer. Organised by Why Marx?: www.whymarx.com/sessions.

The 21st century: a progress report

Thursday March 13, 7.30pm: Public meeting, Wesley Memorial Church, New Inn Hall Street, Oxford OX1. Organised by Oxford Communist Corresponding Society: x.com/CCSoc.

Freedom for Palestine - no to ethnic cleansing

Friday March 15, 12 noon: National demonstration, central London, venue to be announced. Stop arming Israel. Organised by Stop the War Coalition: www.stopwar.org.uk/events/national-palestine-demonstration.

Stop the racist hate march in Portsmouth

Saturday March 15, 12 noon: Counter-protest. Assemble Guildhall Square, Portsmouth PO1. Ukip leader Nick Tenconi is planning an anti-immigration march calling for mass deportations. Organised by Stand Up to Racism Portsmouth: www.facebook.com/events/1135610431674963.

Censoring Palestine

Monday March 17, 7.15pm: Film screening, Friends Meeting House, Hill Street, Coventry CV1. This new documentary reveals how speaking out on Palestine is being suppressed and criminalised. Admission free. Organised by Coventry Palestine Solidarity Campaign: palestinecampaign.org/events/censoring-palestine-film-showing.

Homes for people, not profit

Wednesday March 19, 6pm: Protest, Southwark council office, 160 Tooley Street, London SE1. Taking the call for urgent action on housing to the full Southwark council meeting. Organised by Southwark Housing and Planning Emergency: www.ayleshamcommunityaction.co.uk/SHAPE.

Free Palestine! defend the right to protest!

Thursday March 20, 6.30pm: Public meeting, Chalkhill Community Centre, 113 Chalkhill Road, Wembley Park HA9. Defend the 70-plus arrested on January 18, defend the right to protest and demand that the repressive Public Order Act is repealed. Organised by Brent and Harrow Stop the War: www.stopwar.org.uk/events.

Ford Dagenham women

Thursday March 20, 7pm: Online lecture with professor Mary Davis. The Ford sewing machinists strike of 1968 was a landmark dispute in the fight for equal pay for women. Registration free. Organised by General Federation of Trade Unions: www.facebook.com/events/501087052496370.

Strengthening the employment rights bill

Saturday March 22, 11am to 3.45pm: Rally, Hamilton House, Mabledon Place, London WC1. Union officials, academics and legal experts will debate improvements to the bill to ensure workers and trade unions are protected. Registration free. Organised by Campaign For Trade Union Freedom: www.tradeunionfreedom.co.uk.

Battle lines

Saturday March 22, 7pm: Banner Theatre performance, Theatre Porto, Whitby Hall, Ellesmere Port CH65. A celebration of the 40th anniversary of the miners' strike and many other working class battles up to today. Tickets £8 (£5 or £3). Organised by West Cheshire Trades Union Council: www.facebook.com/events/1040769624457561.

Stop Farage and Reform UK

Friday March 28, 6pm: Protest, Utilita Arena, Birmingham B1. 7pm: March to rally in Centenary Square. Farage is bringing toxic politics to Birmingham - stand up, speak out and fight back! Organised by Stand Up to Racism Birmingham: www.facebook.com/events/545776201959372.

We demand change

Saturday March 29, 11am to 5.30pm: Rally, central London, venue to be announced. Build a network of activists across campaigns and unions to turn the tide on despair. Registration £11.55 (£6.13). Organised by We Demand Change: wedemandchange.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.

Online Communist Forum



Sunday March 9 5pm

Jack Conrad reports on the politics of the week and Yasmine Mather talks about the 100th anniversary of Reza Khan declaring himself king of Persia

Use this link to register: communistparty.co.uk/ocf

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

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

UKRAINE



Theatre of cruelty

Zelensky's humiliation in the Oval Office was a cynical setup. But for that we should be grateful, says **Eddie Ford**, as it lifted the curtain on what normally happens behind closed doors

Showing that he means to get his way, Donald Trump has suspended military aid to Ukraine after directing officials to draft proposals to lift US sanctions on Russia and restore ties with Moscow. This is a decision that affects intelligence information as well as deliveries of ammunition, vehicles and other equipment, including shipments agreed to when Joe Biden was president and weapons in transit.

Trump's move came after Volodymyr Zelensky told a reporter that the end of the war could be "very, very far away", angering the US president - who posted a link on his Truth Social platform to an Associated Press story outlining the Ukrainian president's comments and declaring that "this is the worst statement that could have been made by Zelensky, and America will not put up with it for much longer!"¹ He went on to repeat his belief that Zelensky does not want to sue for 'peace' with Vladimir Putin, while he has US military backing - which has a kernel of truth - and later said that Zelensky "won't be around very long", unless he succumbed to pressure and made a deal (strictly on US terms, of course). It was left unsaid whether this meant ousting him in elections, which are currently suspended, as is the normal fashion during wartime, or a military coup - or perhaps an Azov march on the Ukrainian capital.

White House efforts to force Zelensky to the negotiating table by one means or another obviously have everything to do with the emerging new global order as envisaged by Trump. Freezing the conflict in Ukraine and getting the Europeans to take front-line responsibility, which has the added bonus of saving the US a lot of money, is an essential part of this reordering. A plan that appears to be working: the European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, almost in a panic, announced proposals at the beginning of the week to strengthen Europe's 'defence' industry and

increase military capabilities by mobilising close to €800 billion, with the European Union holding an emergency summit this week.

Sir Keir Starmer has taken a leading militarist role (to near universal mainstream praise) by promising to increase military spending to 2.5% of GDP from April 2027 - something that requires not only drastically cutting the foreign aid budget but welfare too, as you cannot have guns *and* butter.

In this way, with Europe shouldering more and more of the burden, the US can focus on its real rival, China - the only power that could potentially act as an alternative hegemon to America. Note Xi Jinping's response to US tariffs. Upping the military budget to 7.2% and promising to "fight until the end".

As for Trump he is still set on US continental expansionism. He told the joint session of Congress, that he will take control of Greenland "one way or another" - making out that the US supports the right of the "incredible people" of Greenland "to determine your own future" (especially if they choose wisely, in which case "we welcome you into the United States of America"). He further told his audience that the US will be "reclaiming" the Panama Canal, "and we've already started doing it".

Meanwhile, Canada's foreign minister Mélanie Joly told the BBC she takes Donald Trump's remarks on making Canada the 51st state of his country "very seriously". His 25% tariffs amount to a 'rough wooing'. All he has to do now is find or sponsor a Canadian unity party and lever it into government - a big ask, but not impossible.

Scolded

Of course, the suspension of military aid to Ukraine follows the infamous televised fracas at the Oval Office, when Trump - infuriated over the collapse of a deal that would have given the US access to Ukraine's rare mineral resources - scolded

Zelensky for "gambling" with a third world war and instructed him like an errant schoolboy to do his homework properly and come back "when he is ready for peace". Meanwhile, US vice-president JD Vance repeatedly hectoring: "Have you said 'thank you' once this entire meeting? No."² In other words, make a deal or we are out and might turn off the taps from military GPS systems, Elon Musk's Starlink communications technology or essential spare parts for things like the F-16s, which for every hour in the air require 15 hours of maintenance.

While this produced liberal howls of outrage and sent EU leaders into a tailspin, communists are grateful for the fact that the curtain was parted and we saw what normally happens behind closed doors. This is what *real* power relationships are like in the capitalist world - not the fairy tales of mutual respect. If you dis the US, then you can be disposed of, regardless of whether you have been a loyal puppet or not. Most politicians know that and therefore sing the American tune, whatever they might be thinking privately about the 'special relationship' and what a wonderful president we have got.

Hence the way Starmer proffered himself before the US president the day before with his "unprecedented" royal invitation - now that was doing things right, so maybe Volodymyr should have watched more carefully. But Zelensky knows exactly which side his bread is buttered, with Trump saying in his Congress speech that he has received a letter from the Ukrainian president expressing gratitude, since (pretty please) "we do really value how much America has done to help Ukraine maintain its sovereignty and independence". And his country is "ready to come to the negotiating table as soon as possible to bring lasting peace closer" - not to mention his apparent willingness at last to sign a 'critical' minerals deal with the US, even if he has not received security guarantees in return, as originally demanded. Trump also claimed in the speech that he was in

"serious discussions with Russia" and had "received strong signals that they are ready for peace".

Watching the scene from the Oval Office, it brought to mind the Theatre of Cruelty, as developed by Antonin Artaud, a surrealist who got kicked out of the surrealist movement.³ For Artaud and his followers, cruelty is not about sadism or causing pain, but a violent determination to shatter a false reality - to wake up the audience through shock tactics or spiritual therapeutics that were meant to expose the unacceptable relations between people. Show things as they really are, as opposed to what they pretend to be - a method that any Marxist can appreciate.

Disrespect

Clearly, this bore the unmistakable signs of an ambush or setup. Whatever Zelensky said or did, he was going to be ripped to pieces by Trump and Vance as part of the script, putting him in an impossible position. Take the entirely manufactured row about dress code, with Zelensky wearing what he always does to every meeting - a military-style black sweatshirt adorned with the Ukrainian trident, to symbolise that he is a wartime leader, as doubtlessly advised right at the beginning of the war.

This is hardly unusual: as everyone knows, Winston Churchill during the war wore a 'siren suit' for exactly the same reason - though his characteristic cigar signified that he was not a proletarian. As for Elon Musk, going from the sublime to the ridiculous, he turned up to the White House in a baseball cap, jeans and a T-shirt - but no-one complained about him disrespecting the dignity of office.

Yet in terms of preparation for the Oval meeting, or press conference - as not everyone was entirely sure what it was all about - the White House purportedly sent out instructions saying that it would be advisable to dress appropriately. That is, in a suit and tie. Even *before* the meeting, as Zelensky stepped out of his car at the White House, Trump snarkily

remarked that "you're all dressed up today". Then when the meeting was opened up to questions from reporters, as you can see from the TV coverage, a journalist heckled the Ukrainian president by saying, "Why don't you wear a suit?" - going on to further comment that a "lot of Americans have problems with you not respecting the dignity of this office". An aggressive line of questioning that marked the moment when the friendly conversation with Trump ended and Zelensky started to look tired and irritated, beginning to realise that the meeting was about something other than the expected agenda.

At first appearances, this might not seem particularly important, or even mere happenstance - but that would be mistaken. The journalist in question was Brian Glenn, well known in Maga circles for his work at Right Side Broadcasting Network, which livestreams coverage of Donald Trump's rallies. He is also the chief White House correspondent for Real America's Voice - a network that busily promotes far-right conspiracy theories, including Covid misinformation, 'stop the steal' theories about the 2020 presidential election, and QAnon (the latter believing that there is a cabal of Satanic, cannibalistic, child molesters with links to the Democratic Party and the deep state). But, more significantly still, Glenn is the boyfriend of Marjorie Taylor Greene, the craziest person in Congress - particularly notorious for stating that Jewish "space lasers" may have started the wildfires in California.

Once you know that, it is almost impossible not to suspect that what happened last week at the Oval Office was nothing other than orchestrated - with Trump giving the wink to Glenn to start proceedings and Zelensky never standing a chance ●

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Notes

1. apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-zelensky-starmer-trump-b025877c40ffe0dd2a92adad1715231.
2. youtube.com/watch?v=znqxsO2ER3Y.
3. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre_of_Cruelty.

CONSPIRACY

Searching for the master key

Trump's administration promises to release files on John F Kennedy, Jeffrey Epstein and others - but so far substance is lacking. Paul Demarty delves into the role of pseudo-disclosures in the American mind

On February 27, history was made - or was it?

Several individuals were spotted leaving the White House - mostly rightwing internet celebrities, proffering binders plainly labelled "The Epstein files: phase 1". Among them were alt-right old-timer Mike Cernovich and Chaya Raichik, the Floridian woman who operates the infamous 'Libs of TikTok' rage-bait social media empire.

The Jeffrey Epstein case has bubbled along in the background of American politics for a long time, and especially since 2019, when he was arrested in New York to face fresh charges of child sex trafficking, and later died in custody, apparently by his own hand. Epstein was a billionaire financier, but the origins of his money are obscure. What he spent it on is not: assembling an army of underage sex slaves with the aid of his partner, Ghislaine Maxwell, and cultivating his friendships with the great and the good. The extent of his friends' participation in his extra-curricular activities is contested, most vociferously by their various lawyers. He seems to have had connections with intelligence agencies, including the CIA and Israel's Mossad.

That his friends included so many power-brokers on both sides of the aisle - in America and abroad - has rather tempered the ability of anyone to make political capital out of it. He knew Bill Clinton and Donald Trump; Andrew Windsor and Peter Mandelson. All were names in his famous 'little black book'. Speculation abounds on both the far left and far right as to what we are *not* being told.

Damp squib

One of the less widely trumpeted of Trump's proposals on the campaign trail was to declassify any documents on Epstein, along with those on the assassinations of John F Kennedy, Robert F Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr. (These latter promises were claimed by Robert F Kennedy Jr to be his price for throwing his support behind Trump.) The result, since Trump's second term began, is the formation of a congressional task force on declassification - run by Anna Paulina Luna, a Florida congresswoman of impeccable 'Make America Great Again' credentials and a conspiracy and UFO nut - and now the release of these Epstein files.

Yet it has not been plain sailing. After being stonewalled by attorney general Pam Bondi, Luna resorted to chasing her down on Twitter. That secured this tranche of Epstein documents; but there is as yet no sign of anything related to the Kennedys. Perhaps RFK Jr is too busy giving Texan children measles to pursue these great causes of his life ...

The Epstein files themselves, meanwhile, turned out to be a damp squib. They are largely documents already in the public domain - flight records divulged during the trial of Maxwell, for example - and in some cases so heavily redacted as to be essentially a waste of the paper they are printed on. If we ever see anything connected to the Kennedy assassinations, a similar fate seems likely. It may seem peculiar - what relevance could they possibly have *now*, when almost all purported conspirators are dead, is hard to see. The same could be said of Luther King: if the FBI was involved in



Bill Clinton and Jeffrey Epstein in the White House

his death somehow, it would hardly be the most surprising revelation in history, but this was J Edgar Hoover's FBI. Things, we are endlessly assured, have changed at the agency since then.

At the various three-letter agencies, however, the culture of secrecy runs bone-deep. It is a structural matter, rather than a particular pathology of American culture. The British state still, absurdly, refuses to acknowledge that the IRA double agent codenamed Stakeknife was in fact the Provos' one-time internal security boss, Freddie Scappaticci, even now he is no longer alive. This is not because there is any more embarrassment in waiting for the army and MI5, but simply as a matter of policy: you do not confirm the identities of any assets, living or dead. Secrecy is the foundation of espionage and counter-espionage; one does not allow the habit to drop at any cost.

This is in fact a contradiction at the heart of the secret state. This ostentatiously opaque behaviour does not allay, but rather heightens, the paranoia with which sections of the population view the spooks and feds. Every denial is taken as an admission of guilt; every confession ridiculed as a "limited hangout", designed to direct attention away from the real dirt. This mistrust is, as we noted, one of the few real examples of "horseshoe theory" out there: the radical left and the radical right both have long memories of state infiltration to draw on, after all. JFK conspiracy theories are politically heteroclit in the extreme - was it anti-communist fanatics in the CIA who did it, or communist infiltrators? The mob or George HW Bush?

The same goes for Epstein: sceptics can all agree he was murdered, and bicker over whether it was on the orders of Donald Trump

or John Podesta. The spectre of paedophilia and 'grooming' animates much far-right agitation today - from the deadly-earnest silliness of Pizzagate and QAnon to the malignant stereotypes of transgender people and Muslims presently in circulation. These clearly enough inherit from the 'Satanic ritual abuse' hysteria of the 1980s and 90s. On the other hand, the greatest recent *fictional* presentation of a power elite as a paedophile ring came from a man of the left, in David Peace's 'Red Riding quartet' novels.

Narrative

Whence this mindset? It is probably impossible to extirpate entirely. Sergei Eisenstein drew up plans to adapt Marx's *Capital* for the cinema, but the project exceeded even his bold genius. Films need characters: formulas for the circuit of capital will not do, and nor in the end will the innumerable faceless protagonists of the battle over the working day or the extension of mechanisation. Journalists know that they need some individual life story to animate their investigations. It is not enough, say, to list statistics of opioid overdoses in America to indict the pharmaceutical industry - you must interview the wife or the son of someone who died that way. Ours is a storytelling species; our language deals easily with the proximate and immediately-concrete events of individual human lives, and rises to the abstract and systematic levels required to see the moving parts of the whole only with very great difficulty.

Anyone pushed towards political engagement of any sort other than the most trivial, then, faces a choice - whether or not to undertake that difficult ascent into the systematic, of which Marxism is the greatest modern exemplar, if hardly the only one. This is, in an important respect, a *moral* choice, touching on the

nature of our mutual commitments as a society of human beings. Like all moral choices, it is undertaken in a general atmosphere of confusion and indirection: what Marxists usually call ideology.

Under such circumstances, people are pushed into one or another worldview based *merely* on readily-digestible human-scale narratives, which are then cathected with the general anxieties that led those people to the threshold of politics in the first place. This process takes many forms in modern culture: 'throw away the key' law-and-order politics is not driven by the best of human knowledge about how best to ensure public safety, for example, but largely by gruesome tabloid tales of appalling crimes. The raped and murdered child smiles at us from the front page of *The Sun*; the answer, naturally, is to bring back hanging, or chemical castration. It is certainly not to worry about the fact that the vast majority of child abuse is committed not 'out there', by strangers or by grooming gangs, but in the family home, and therefore to ask what the hell is wrong with the family *as an institution*.

The conspiracy theory is a special case of this general dynamic. Its peculiarity, at least until relatively recently in the west, is its marginality with respect to the ordinary centres of power. UFOlogists and JFK-obsessives wrote in scruffy small-run periodicals and formed correspondence societies and support groups. With the advent of the internet, it became easier for such subcultures to thrive. Their concerns were not *wholly* separate from the general public mind, of course. Oliver Stone could crank out a Hollywood epic based on the 'second shooter' theory of the JFK assassination; he was not the only celebrity to express doubts, and most Americans believe the official

narrative to be false, and have done by greater and lesser majorities since the late 1960s. There is a difference, however, between this passive support and the enthusiasm of the core subculture.

These subcultures have become remarkably like cultural fandoms; or perhaps one should put it the other way around, and note that once benign subcultures obsessed with comic books or science fiction have tended to become more paranoid, chippy and rebarbative. The vast casts of characters supposedly involved in the controlled demolition of the World Trade Center expand until they become somewhat analogous to the baroque constructions of the Marvel Comics intellectual properties. The relentless speculative 'research' of the conspiracy cultures mirrors fan debates over easter eggs in the Marvel films, and the elaborate predictions of future storylines.

Bonapartist

The form of politics that 'naturally' falls out of this mindset is Bonapartist. There are villains abroad - supervillains, even - and therefore the world cries out for a hero. That might be Jim Garrison, the crusading lawyer played by Kevin Costner in Stone's movie; or it might be a demagogue who promises to "drain the swamp", like the current US president. The hero is, after all, going into enemy territory - the very lair of the villain. He must subordinate the surrounding institutional apparatuses to himself, and ordinary citizens must offer their unquestioning loyalty. What would, within a healthy political culture, be a virtue - mistrust of the state and capitalist elite - is inverted into the most shameful credulousness. (It is therefore no surprise, also, to find in conspiracy-world a whole ecosystem of predatory grifters and charlatans.)

Marxists, so far as we gain influence in these milieux, must return people to that original point of decision. Our first duty is, as best as we can, to see things as a whole - not as a contest of hero and villain, but of historical forces working themselves out over generations. That is not to say that it is of *no* concern that, say, Jeffrey Epstein's accomplices have largely escaped justice, or that powerful men with expensive lawyers tend to get away with criminal acts, as opposed to the likes of you or me. It is not even to say that no part of the conspiracy lore is true; for there are, after all, conspiracies (think of Operation Gladio in Italy, which saw CIA-backed fascist terror cells committing false-flag attacks with funding from the Vatican and operational control by a rogue Masonic lodge ...). It is to put things in proper perspective.

We cannot very easily get rid of conspiratorialism from the rightwing mind. Yet we have been altogether too indulgent of this thinking on the left. The anti-war movement in particular has been disfigured and misled by the influence of 9/11 truthers and the like; the influence of these fantasies is an obstacle to *effective* combat against imperialist adventurism, which demands instead political clarity and cold-eyed realism.

There is no ream of documents whose exposure will cause the security state to collapse - and, if there were, Donald Trump would not hand them over to Mike Cernovich! ●

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PROGRAMME

Operating on a hunch

The International Socialist tradition is nowadays characterised by an almost pathological fear of adopting a programme. Yet without a comprehensive, fully worked-out programme there is every chance of falling into opportunist incoherence, argues Jack Conrad

Though communists treat their programme with the utmost seriousness, talk to any SWP loyalist and I guarantee you that they will put on a completely dismissive, even an aggressively hostile, attitude - that is if you dare suggest that it would be a good idea for them to adopt a programme. If, that is, they actually understand what you are talking about in the first place. Even though they tend to be less aggressive, even friendly, you get the same essential response from most members of Counterfire and Revolutionary Socialism in the 21st Century. Either there is rejection or there is dumb incomprehension. All three organisations share, of course, common origins in the ideas of Tony Cliff and his International Socialist tradition.

True, each has an aphoristic, largely banal, confession of faith. In the case of the SWP it is the 'What we stand for' column in *Socialist Worker*, while RS21 has its 'About RS21' and Counterfire an almost microscopic 'Who we are'. But nothing that could remotely be called a programme: that is, a set of defining aims and principles, supported by a strategically realistic guide that can help navigate us from today's pinched, unpromising conditions all the way to the conquest of state power by the working class.

Indeed, we are seriously told that programmes are rigid, inflexible and constricting. Chains, manacles, even straitjackets are routinely mentioned. Therefore, it supposedly follows, a programme is a horrible danger that must be avoided at all costs. To provide themselves with the sanction of 'orthodoxy', the well-versed usually invoke the ghost of Marx and, yes, his "Every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programmes" statement. An all too typical example of contextomy.

Before Cliff

So let us give some background.

Marx wrote the above sentence in a letter sent to Wilhelm Bracke - a friend and a social democratic publisher - on May 5 1875, where he warned that he and Engels would "disassociate" themselves from the "unity programme" of their Eisenach comrades in Germany and the state socialist followers of Ferdinand Lassalle.¹

Influenced by the Marx-Engels team, the Social Democratic Workers Party had been founded in the Thuringian town of Eisenach in 1869. The main leaders were August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht. True, their programme had definite shortcomings: eg, it demanded a "free people's state" and "universal" male suffrage. But there were also calls for the liberation of the working class, abolition of the standing army, establishing a "people's militia" and the "separation of the church from the state." It also constituted the SDWP as "a branch" of the First International - "to the extent that the associational laws permit".² Bebel and Liebknecht, note, both served lengthy prison sentences due to activities associated with the International.

However, contemporaries widely regarded the SDWP as a Marxist party. So everything the SDWP said and did reflected on the reputation of the Marx-Engels team in London. A reputation they were determined to uphold. Eg, Mikhail Bakunin attacked what he called Marxism in his *Statism*



No programme to debate, guide or hold leaders to account with

and anarchy, in no small part by laying hold of the real and imagined failings of the "duumvirate of Bebel and Liebknecht" ... and the "Jewish literati behind or under them".³ A Slavophile, Bakunin hated Germans and Jews with a passion. Marx specifically referred to Bakunin in his letter to Bracke.

Anyhow, put together jointly by Bebel and Liebknecht, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the followers of Lassalle, the unity programme was to be presented to the fusion congress of the two groups meeting in Gotha. After much haggling Marx's comrades agreed a series of compromises. Not only the "iron law of wages", but other Lassallian drivel, such as "state"-financed industry and the claim that "all other classes are only a reactionary body".⁴

Disobeying doctor's orders, Marx took to his desk to compose a furious commentary on the draft (now known to us as the *Critique of the Gotha programme*). He also offered the advice that, unless his alternative formulations - or something very much like them - were adopted, then it would be better, far better, for the SDWP and the Lassallians to remain separate organisations and find issues where they could engage in common action.

However, the draft *Gotha programme* was voted through in May 1875 - albeit with some not insignificant amendments clearly originating with Marx. Undoubtedly, the immediate impact of the fusion congress was hugely positive: within the year a 50% growth in membership and a doubling of the circulation of their press.⁵ By 1890 the organisation, now renamed the Social Democratic Party, had become the largest party in Germany by total votes.

While Liebknecht later said that "what [Marx] said theoretically" against the unity of the Eisenachers and the Lassallians "was correct to the last letter", he insisted that the theoretical concessions were worth making for the sake of uniting the socialist movement of Germany under one banner. In point of fact, he claimed that "Marx also perceived that his fears were ungrounded".⁶

Certainly it is the case that the Marx-Engels team did not publicly denounce the *Gotha programme*. Indeed Marx can be found recommending it, albeit with a couple of caveats, as "the clearest and most concise expression of socialism that

I had seen". This was said during the course of an interview conducted with the intriguingly named 'H' for the *Chicago Tribune*.⁷ It should, however, be mentioned, that Engels continued to disagree with Liebknecht till the end of his days. He upheld Marx's position both theoretically and organisationally: better disunity and maintaining principle than unprincipled unity. But that unity had taken place and there can be no hiding the pride that both Marx and Engels took in the growth of the SDP. But, understandably, Engels wanted a better programme, a programme purged of the Lassallian state socialist concepts and clichés. That is why he urged Karl Kautsky to publish Marx's critical notes in *Die Neue Zeit*. Final vindication came when the *Erfurt programme* was adopted by the SDP in October 1891. It marked a huge improvement.⁸

Either way, the Marx-Engels team believed that a programmatically uncompromised SDWP would have quickly eclipsed an already declining and rapidly fragmenting Lassallian organisation and grown into a mass party by its own efforts. There are some good reasons to believe that this was a correct assessment. Of course, we may never know. History cannot be rerun (except as a counterfactual work of the imagination).

It is doubtless true that a party should be judged primarily by what it does, rather than what its programme says. But a new party will be judged by its programme. And the *Gotha programme* represented a retreat, compared with the *Eisenach programme*. That was the main thrust of Marx's criticism.

And, at a guess, it should be added that what Marx was thinking about when he wrote to Bracke about "Every step of real movement" was probably more on the level of the founding of the Chartist movement in Britain, the formation of the First International, the US civil war against the slave-owning south and revolutions such as 1830, 1848 and 1871 - certainly not the essentially circular routine of economic strikes, street protests and even the occasional election of this or that politically muddled protest candidate.

But, frankly, any group that fields Marx's 1875 words, or other similar such phrases - in these days of fragmentation, confusion and disorganisation - to dismiss, mock or play down the centrality of a

comprehensive programme reveals a complacency that borders on the criminal, not least given that we are faced with a resurgent far right, a real danger of big-power war and a climate crisis that threatens civilisational collapse.

What is for sure though is that the whole *Gotha programme* episode shows beyond a shadow of doubt that Marx treated programmes as a matter of cardinal importance - he also authored a few himself: eg, the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* and the *Demands of the Communist Party in Germany*. Then there was the International Workingman's Association, the First International. Marx was responsible for its rules and fundamental programmatic documents.

Marx was, in fact, a consummate writer of programmes. Take the role he played in drafting the *Programme of the Parti Ouvrier*. Marx dictated the maximum section (the preamble), while the two parts of the minimum section, the immediate political and economic demands, were formulated by himself and Jules Guesde, with help coming from Engels and Paul Lafargue. Their programme was adopted, with a few minor amendments, by the founding congress of the Parti Ouvrier meeting at Le Havre in November 1880.

Early Cliff

Neither the Marx-Engels team nor anyone else standing in the authentic Marxist tradition have ever denied the necessity of a programme. It was the revisionist, Eduard Bernstein, who scorned the maximum programme and tried to theoretically justify his treacherous approach by elevating the organisation of the party into a thing for itself.

Unconsciously this was echoed and turned into dogma by the SWP's Machiavellian founder-leader, Tony Cliff. He routinely warned against adopting a programme. Gaining recruits and petty factional advantage was his sole guide.

Yes, a democratically agreed programme would have created intolerable difficulties for the SWP central committee with its many and sudden about-turns. True, in the early 1950s, when his Socialist Review Group was a mere bacillus worming away in the bowels of the Labour Party, Cliff agreed to a beggarly, 12-point set of "transitional demands", which were meant to attract and

recruit "individual" Labour and trade union activists.⁹

It was Duncan Hallas who wrote and submitted the original "transitional programme" to the SRG. Cliff, however, ensured that even this minimalist mouse was defanged of anything too radical: eg, the "overthrow of the Tory government by all the means available to the working class" and "defence of socialist Britain" against Washington and Moscow.

In terms of 'method' the SRG's approach clearly derives from Leon Trotsky's 1938 *Transitional programme*. Hence, no surprise, democracy both in the workers' movement and society at large, goes completely ignored, along, of course, with any attempt to win over or neutralise the middle classes. The tasks of the workers' movement are thereby reduced to trade union politics. As to the "final aim" of working class rule, socialism and the transition to communism, that is, predictably, left to spontaneity.

Hallas explains the duplicity involved. The "programme of demands" must be "made to appear both necessary and realisable to broad sections of the workers, given their present (reformist) level of understanding, but which in reality pass beyond the framework of bourgeois democracy. Naturally ... [this is] only part (a fairly small part) of what we advocate."¹⁰

With the Cliffite turn away from Labour Party deep entryism in the mid-1960s, economic minimalism was abandoned for a heady brew of eclectic Luxemburgism and the International Socialists. Cliff sought distance from what then, in the aftermath of World War II, passed as Leninism and Trotskyism, because he was at least able to recognise both Stalin's palpable success in creating an empire in eastern Europe and the palpable reality of the long economic boom in the west.

Events had, after all, beached Trotsky's 1938 expectations. Stalinism did not collapse with the Nazi invasion. Nor was capitalism in its "death agony".¹¹ In fact, it was the Trotskyites who were spiralling into crisis. As Cliff wittily put it, guided by the exact words of Trotsky's *Transitional programme*, they were like people trying to navigate the Paris metro using a London tube map.

Cliff readily admitted how "excruciatingly painful" it was to face up to the reality that Trotsky's prognosis had not come true.¹² But come true it had not. Cliff, therefore, reluctantly concluded that the *Transitional programme* had been "belied by life" and that reformism was enjoying a second spring.¹³ In the fourth volume of his Trotsky biography, Cliff argued, surely rightly, that its demands, such as a sliding scale of wages, were adopted in response to a "capitalism in deep slump" and therefore "did not fit a non-revolutionary situation". He concluded:

The basic assumption behind Trotsky's transitional demands was that the economic crisis was so deep that the struggle for even the smallest improvement in workers' conditions would bring conflict with the capitalist system itself. When life disproved the assumption, the ground fell from beneath the programme.¹⁴

In the 1950s at least, Cliff was no fool.

Nonetheless, his blasé attitude towards programmes can be judged by what might appear to be the glaring exception: namely the International Socialists' programme of the early 1970s. Tony Cliff, and industrial organiser Andreas Nagliatti, took the lead by writing an article with this self-explaining title: 'Main features of the programme we need'.¹⁵ Drafts were discussed over several meetings of the IS national committee.

The main motivation behind the programme seems twofold. First, induct the growing body of recruits into the belief system. Second, draw lines of demarcation. The IS had just suffered two jarring faction fights. First with Sean Matgamna's Workers Fight group (now the Alliance for Workers' Liberty), then the Right Opposition (now *Fight Racism, Fight Imperialism* and the far-right online journal *Spiked*). Both factions showed an unwelcome fondness for Trotsky's *Transitional programme*.

As Ian Birchall recounts, the draft programme was mainly the work of Chris Harman and Duncan Hallas, though others made contributions. It ran to some 15,000 words. Submitted to the 1973 IS conference, the draft was remitted to the NC for further consideration. A job then given over to a sub-committee, consisting of comrades Cliff, Hallas and Birchall.

"However, Cliff, without consulting the sub-committee, let alone the NC", passed it on to the (new) industrial organiser, Roger Rosewell, who "turned it into a pamphlet" (*The struggle for workers power 1973*). Incidentally, Rosewell, a rather pathetic figure, dropped out of the IS soon afterwards and quickly gravitated to the right. He joined the short-lived Social Democratic Party, serving on its industrial committee, then worked for the free-market Aims for Industry outfit and wrote occasional leaders for the *Daily Mail*.

Anyhow, showing the importance attached to programme, the September 1974 conference took just 30 minutes to debate and agree the whole thing ... and then nothing more was heard of it! As a result Cliff was effectively free to do and say what he pleased without reference to any map (tube, road or anything else, for that matter). He navigated by hunch.

Imagining that the big breakthrough was within reach, Cliff launched the Socialist Workers Party in 1977. Though supposedly the "smallest mass party in the world", naturally, Cliff's retagged confessional sect was unencumbered by anything resembling a programme.¹⁶ But, of course, the SWP was no party. Cliff simply got carried away by what were - well, at least compared to present circumstances - exciting times.

The late 1960s to early 1970s period saw rapid forward movement. There was Vietnam, student revolts, women's liberation, black power and a huge upsurge in trade union militancy. IS membership shot up from under a hundred to a few thousand. Most recruits were students and young workers. Cliff must have thought he was about to meet his destiny. Then came the April 1974 Portuguese revolution.

We appeared to be winning one thrilling victory after another. That bred courage, determination and a brimming sense of confidence. Obviously, overconfidence too.

With the advantage of hindsight, it is plain to see that Cliff was badly mistaken. But then so was this writer. I too thought that capitalism was facing its final crisis. Not because of the declining rate of profit, but because of the rising tide of working class combativity (well, that and what I called, as a teenager, the success of the socialist countries and the movements for national liberation). It is easy to

scuff. By the late 1970s the capitalist offensive was already in full swing.

Yet the outcome was not predetermined. There were plenty of unrealised moments and strategic possibilities. Not proletarian revolutions in Germany, France or Italy, that has to be said - objective and subjective circumstances precluded any such outcome. But we could have done better. A lot better. However, my purpose in criticising past efforts - and I trust that this is clear - is to learn from them.

Late Cliff

Having spent years denying the need for a programme, towards the end of his life Cliff suddenly decided that the times were ripe to adopt ... yes, a programme. With much fanfare, in September 1998 the SWP's 'Action programme' appeared in *Socialist Worker* (like the 12-point transitional programme of the SRG and the 15,000 word programme of IS, now almost totally forgotten).¹⁷

A glossy brochure and attempts to garner support and finance from local branches of trade unions, trades councils, Labour Party wards, etc followed. Naturally, that belly-flopped. But - and this is important - there was no serious debate within the SWP's ranks, culminating in a national conference vote, before the launch decision was made. In fact, Cliff pre-empted the annual conference by a good three months. Delegates were presented with a *fait accompli*. Cliff's hunch overrode any pretence of democratic norms. Note the fundamental difference between German, French and Russian social democracy and the SWP in 1998. With them conferences and congress were sovereign.

The 'Action programme' consisted of little more than a trite list of left-reformist nostrums: stopping closures and the nationalisation of failed concerns; a 35-hour week with no loss of pay; a £4.61 hourly minimum wage; ending privatisation; repealing the anti-trade union laws; state control over international trade in order to curb speculation; an increase in welfare spending and slashing the arms bill; full employment, so as to boost aggregate economic demand. In other words, a late-1990s version of early-1950s SRG economism.

So still no Cliffite strategy for achieving working class hegemony by fighting for extreme democracy, breaking the hold of the trade union and labour bureaucracy, championing women's and minority rights, winning over, or neutralising, the middle classes - above all, no strategic plan for putting a revolutionary government into power and overthrowing the rule of capital on a global scale.

Chris Harman, John Rees and Alex Callinicos were each tasked with providing 'theoretical' justification. In truth it amounted to intellectual prostitution. They backed the 'Action programme' with extraordinarily tedious stories about rapidly mounting levels of discontent, etc, etc. In any class-divided society, it should be noted, discontent is, of course, a permanent feature of society. And capitalism itself constantly creates new, unsatisfied, wants and therefore discontents, through the advertising industry, celebrity influencers and the life styles of the super rich.

Then there was the 'inventive' fielding of quotes culled from Comintern's 'Theses on tactics' agreed at its 3rd Congress in June 1921 and Trotsky's 1934 'A programme of action for France'.¹⁸ But the boldest claim of all was that the SWP's 'Action programme' was premised on the same conditions which prompted Trotsky's *Transitional programme*. A claim made by Tony Cliff himself.¹⁹

Cliff strongly implied that Britain and other core imperialist powers had entered a deep crisis, which made

revolution imminent: "Capitalism in the advanced countries," he wrote, "is no longer expanding and so the words of the 1938 *Transitional programme* that 'there can be no discussion of systematic social reforms and raising the masses' living standards' fits reality again."²⁰

Despite working class organisation, confidence and self-activity being at an extraordinary low ebb and revolutionary consciousness barely existing at all, Cliff decreed that the pursuit of even the most minimal demands is all that is needed to at last bring capitalism crashing down.

Over a Cliff

The crass opportunism of Tony Cliff provided his chosen heir and successor, John Rees, with his springboard. With the mass movement against the Iraq war in 2002-03, he too thought he was about to meet his destiny. Out went the Socialist Alliance and in came Respect - the Unity Coalition.

The *modus vivendi* of Respect was to unite "secular socialists with Muslim activists" on the basis of whatever it took to get local and national candidates elected.²¹ Suffice to say, it ended in a train crash ... especially for the SWP. Not only did the expected membership take-off fail to happen: the SWP lost members high and low ... Eventually comrade Rees was removed as leader. Along with a tight-knit group of co-thinkers, he walked and soon after formed Counterfire.

Yet, much to the discredit of the post-Rees SWP, it has steadfastly refused to conduct any kind of honest, open or serious autopsy into the Respect popular-front debacle. Yes, there is Joseph Choonara's 'Revolutionaries and elections' *International Socialism* article, but it is apologetics of the worst kind. Nowhere does he question the profoundly unprincipled nature of the Respect lash-up. Though he admits the involvement of "Muslim notables", such as "millionaire restaurateurs and building contractors", he cannot bring himself to utter the damning phrase, 'popular front' (or words to that effect).

As for George Galloway, Respect's leader and front man, today he is pictured as promoting "anti-woke", "patriotic" class politics via his Workers Party of Britain. Back in 2004, however, when Respect was founded, he was "a firebrand MP, one of the most celebrated orators of the anti-war movement and the most prominent figure to be expelled by Labour for opposition to the Iraq War".²²

In reality Galloway has been pretty consistent, when it comes to the reactionary side of his politics. What comrade Choonara is actually attempting to do with his two Galloways - and, as it happens, not very convincingly - is to cover up for the fact that within Respect the SWP voted down motions, moved by CPGB comrades, supporting abortion, gay rights, open borders, MPs taking only an average skilled workers' wage, republicanism ... even international socialism.

Interestingly, when discussing the future, Choonara says that, when standing in parliamentary elections in "non-revolutionary times", revolutionaries "should be open with workers about their politics". Presumably opaque criticism of the SWP's role in Respect. However, he goes on to say that "this does not entail that those voting for them must accept the full revolutionary programme of the party". Daft, especially given that the SWP eschews the very idea of a programme. Double daft, because people do little more than pick up a pencil to draw a cross on the ballot paper when they vote. They are not required to "accept" anything, when it comes to their chosen candidate ...

even if they opt for an SWP comrade.

But what Choonara was actually doing is excusing SWP candidates standing, once again, on a what he calls a "minimum programme": ie, advocating mass workers' struggle to "achieve far-reaching reforms that begin to push against the logic of the capitalist system". He further explains that, as the "struggle advances, so this programme would increase in radicalism". However, such a programme "should clearly not include support for measures with which revolutionaries could not possibly agree, such as the imposition of immigration controls".

So more aesopian criticism of the SWP's role in Respect under the John Rees-Lindsey German leadership. Again, though, it begs a few obvious questions about the SWP's "minimum programme". Where was it debated? When was it agreed? Where can we read it? The short answer is, of course, that there are no answers, because it does not exist. In fact, comrade Choonara was pinning his flag to the thoroughly opportunist 'transitional method' that excuses 'revolutionaries' standing in parliamentary elections with the sort of famished, vacuous, tailist, politics which the "community activist and independent socialist", Maxine Bowler, stood on in the July 2024 general election in Sheffield's Brightside and Hillsborough constituency: renationalisation of public services, supporting strikes and Palestine, Palestine, Palestine.²³

By the by, standing as a "community activist and independent socialist" could well be excusable if the SWP was illegal. But it is not. As to her "minimum programme", what leaps out is the complete absence of core democratic demands ... along with *Socialist Worker's* 'What we stand for' few maximum aims, such as "a socialist state" and "a workers' state based upon councils of workers' delegates and a workers' militia".²⁴

Where comrade Choonara's "minimum programme" ends up can be seen over the other side of the Irish Sea with People Before Profit ... its leader, Richard Boyd Barrett, a member of the Socialist Workers Network, desperately wants to serve as a junior minister in a Sinn Féin coalition government that would, of course, safeguard capitalism, all the while, perhaps, saying the opposite. Millerandism redux or rightwing communism as a senile disorder. Call it what you will.

Bottom of a Cliff

When it comes to Respect post-mortems, what goes for the SWP goes for Counterfire *in extremis*. My search of its website produced no results.²⁵ RS21 is better - but not by much.²⁶ While there is nothing collectively, nothing from an All-Members Assembly, there is an individual contribution written by David Renton, the barrister, historian and author of over 20 books ... including *Labour's antisemitism crisis* (2022).²⁷

A health warning, when it comes to 'comrade' Renton. He took for granted the presence of "tens of thousands" of anti-Semites in Corbyn's Labour Party in his *Labour's antisemitism crisis*.²⁸ He also fielded the 'no smoke without fire' argument. The national media could not go on and on about Labour's supposed anti-Semitism if there was not a real problem. Really! Ken Livingstone and Jackie Walker are attacked. Jon Lansman praised and Luciana Berger defended. No wonder his book received such a fulsome "welcome" from the AWL.²⁹

Both he and the AWL played the role of useful idiots in the establishment's frighteningly successful 'anti-Zionism equals anti-Semitism' big-lie campaign to oust Jeremy Corbyn and purge the Labour left.³⁰ Revealingly too, 'comrade' Renton appeared on the list of 'left' social-imperialist

signatures supporting Sadiq Khan's 'London for Ukraine' demonstration in 2022.³¹ In short, Renton is a scab!

Not surprisingly then, while Renton instances the unforced concessions in Respect by the Rees-German SWP leadership, he cannot locate the fundamental problem: its popular frontism.

So take it that Renton is on the hard right of RS21 ... ie, someone RS21's hard left ought to be openly combating through eviscerating criticisms and polemics. That would be an example of what we call 'good political culture'. Keeping quiet, making excuses is 'bad political culture', that is for sure ●

Notes

1. K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 24, London 1989, p78. The letter to Wilhelm Bracke is always attached as a kind of foreword to Marx's 'Marginal notes on the programme of the German Workers' Party' - now commonly known to us as the *Critique of the Gotha programme*.
2. ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub document.cfm?document_id=688.
3. libcom.org/files/statismandanarchy.pdf.
4. archive.org/stream/GothaProgramme/726_socWrksParty_gothaProgramme_231_djvu.txt.
5. See RH Dominick *Wilhelm Liebknecht and the Founding of the German Social Democratic Party* Chapel Hill NC 1982.
6. W Liebknecht, 'Exposition of the Erfurt programme', October 1891: marxists.org/archive/liebknecht-w/socialism/erfurt.html.
7. K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 24, London 1989, pp568-79. See www.marxists.org/archive/marx/bio/media/marx/79_01_05.htm.
8. For a "synoptic overview" of the various drafts of the Erfurt programme, see B Lewis (trans) *Karl Kautsky on democracy and republicanism* Leiden 2020, pp306-28.
9. *Socialist Review* Vol 1, No1, February-March 1953.
10. grimanddim.org/tony-cliff-biography/duncan-hallas-and-the-1952-programme-for-action.
11. L Trotsky *The transitional programme* New York NY 1997, p111.
12. T Cliff *Trotskyism after Trotsky* London 1999, p14.
13. T Cliff *Neither Washington nor Moscow* London 1982, p117.
14. T Cliff *Trotsky Vol 4*, London 1993, pp299-300.
15. Internal Bulletin, January 1973. In those far-off days this publication came out all year round. It was not confined to the two months prior to the annual conference. Incidentally, my information here comes from a short article authored by Ian Birchall - 'The programme of the International Socialists 1972-1974' (May 2013).
16. I Birchall *The smallest mass party in the world* London 1981.
17. *Socialist Worker* September 12 1998.
18. See A Callinicos *International Socialism* No81, winter 1998; and J Rees *Socialist Review* January 1999.
19. See T Cliff *Trotskyism after Trotsky* London 1999, p82.
20. *Ibid* pp81-82.
21. *Socialist Worker* November 20 2004.
22. J Choonara, 'Revolutionaries and elections' *International Socialism* No179, July 2023.
23. *Socialist Worker* May 31 2024.
24. The demand for a people's militia featured in the minimum (ie, immediate) section of the programmes of classical social democracy (including the 1900 Labour Party). For the half-educated workers' militia appears more radical: however, it is worth noting that, for Lenin, in the summer of 1917, the Red Guards - ie, a workers' militia - were a step in the direction towards realising the Bolshevik programmatic aim of introducing the "universal arming of the people" as a basic democratic measure. Still, the fact that the SWP even mentions the 'militia' word is a step forward - a step forward for which we can claim not a little credit.
25. If any reader knows otherwise, I would be grateful to be informed.
26. RS21 originates in the SWP's 2013 'comrade Delta' rape crisis which saw a whole series of ructions, splits and recriminations that stripped it of most of its students and most of its talents (China Miéville, Richard Seymour, Michael Rosen, Ian Birchall, Mark Steel, Neil Davidson, Mike Gonzalez, etc).
27. For his RS21 contribution see D Renton, 'The Socialist Alliance, George Galloway and Respect: left electoralism the last time around' (revsoc21.uk/2024/03/18/the-socialist-alliance-george-galloway-and-respect-left-electoralism-the-last-time-around).
28. D Renton *Labour's antisemitism crisis: what the left got wrong and how to learn from it* Abingdon 2022, p9.
29. D Randell, 'A welcome contribution to a necessary debate' *Solidarity* January 19 2022.
30. For a useful take-down of Renton's disgraceful *Labour's antisemitism crisis* see Paul Field's JVL review: www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/article/review-of-david-rentons-labours-antisemitism-crisis.
31. anticapitalistresistance.org/what-sort-of-antiwar-movement-do-we-need-today.

REVIEW

Very essence of Marxism

Bruno Leipold **Citizen Marx: republicanism and the formation of Karl Marx's social and political thought** Princeton University Press, 2024, pp418, £32



One of the first articles I wrote for this paper, in May 2003, was a review of Iseult Honohan's 2002 textbook, *Civic republicanism*.¹ Part of my argument in that article was that the left misunderstood Marx by virtue of reading his works through the assumptions of liberal political theory (whether for or against them). In contrast, Marx's and Engels' writings could be understood as influenced by the political tradition of republican political theory that was still current when they were writing, but lost towards the end of the 19th century. I concluded:

This is not exactly an argument for taking the academic civic republicans seriously. But it is an argument for taking seriously the republican heritage of our own movement: for using an

improved understanding of the republican tradition - into which the academics (and particularly the historians) provide an imperfect route - as part of the necessary process of renewing Marxism in the aftermath of Stalinism.

Quite rapidly after I wrote that article, it became apparent to me that I had merely dipped into the edges of a wider discussion - not only of republicanism (which I already knew), but also of people reading Marx and Engels, and the 19th century radical, workers' and socialist movements, in their relationship to the republicanism of their times. This discussion has been ongoing; I give merely for an example Alex Gourevitch's 2015 book, *From slavery to the cooperative commonwealth* on the

David Levi Elkan 'Die Trierer' (1836). Students gather outside the White Horse: amongst them the sharp-eyed will spot a certain Karl Marx

ideas current in the 19th century US labour movement. Gourevitch says that he started out aiming to produce a Marxist critique of "labour republican" ideas (p10), but wound up finding a lot of overlap of ideas (pp185-88).

Now we have available to us Bruno Leipold's brilliant systematic study of Marx's relationship to republicanism as a form of radical politics in his lifetime, and the heavy influence on Marx's ideas of the republican conception of freedom. This republican conception sees freedom not as the absence of *interference* (as the liberals would have it), but as the absence of *domination* by others: of their arbitrary power over you.

Comrade Leipold's book has been published at quite affordable prices: £32.20 in hardback or £22.75 on Kindle from Amazon.

It *ought* to be very widely read, because, although it is an academic book, it is extremely clearly written. And because, like Hal Draper's multi-volume *Karl Marx's theory of revolution*, it places Marx's and Engels' arguments in the context of their actual engagement in the politics and the left politics of their times, it *should be* comprehensible and useful to activists in the organised (and disorganised) left.

That said, I am sorry to say that it is actually likely that the left either will *not* read Leipold's book, or will seek to 'read it down' in one way or another. The reason for this is that the spinal core of Leipold's argument is that Marx and Engels, starting with a purely political democratic republicanism, were persuaded in favour of a communism that was initially anti-political (as were the communisms of the 'utopian

socialists'), but then moved to a new form, which placed *democratic political revolution* first - not as the end point, but as the necessary first step towards communism. And at the same time Marx and Engels grounded this possibility on the struggle for political power of the proletariat as a class: that is, the propertyless wage-workers.

The modern left, though it calls itself Marxist, largely consists of *opponents* of this policy, and supporters of the ideas of those who in Marx's and Engels' times were opponents of Marx and of 'Marxism' (used in a derogatory sense).

Firstly, the former Eurocommunists who have not altogether gone over to the right, and other 'opponents of class reductionism', reject altogether Marx's conception of the centrality of the movement of the proletariat to the project of general human emancipation, in favour of the creation of broad alliances of the oppressed - as did Giuseppe Mazzini and other republicans who rejected class-talk and socialist-talk around 1850.²

Secondly, the modern, 'mass-strikist' far left follow, without knowing it, the line of Mikhail Bakunin's 1870 argument, that "All the German socialists believe that the political revolution must precede the social revolution. This is a fatal error. For any revolution made before a social revolution will necessarily be a bourgeois revolution..."³

Thirdly, the modern, broad-frontist and 'transitional method'-ist left follow, without knowing it, the arguments of ex-Bakuninist 'Possibilist' (capital P) Paul Brousse against the minimum programme, and in particular its inclusion of constitutional proposals, in the 1880 *Programme of the Parti Ouvrier*.⁴

Parts

While urging comrades to read the actual book, let us give an outline summary of *Citizen Marx*. After a general introduction, the book is divided into three parts, the first two containing three chapters each, and the third one. The treatment is approximately, but not rigidly, chronological. Part I, 'The democratic republic', begins with a chapter on Marx's early republican journalism (1842-43). Leipold places this against the background of the Prussian politics of the 1830s-40s, and draws out the extent to which Marx's critique of the Prussian regime in these pieces is republican in the sense of political theory - that is, focussed on how the regime creates domination and arbitrary power.

Chapter 2, 'True democracy: Marx's critique of the modern state, 1843', is addressed primarily through Marx's critique of Hegel on the state (*not* the more abstract 'Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of right*: introduction') and Marx's collaboration with left-republican Arnold Ruge. The preponderant theme is the arbitrary character of the state bureaucracy; Prussian in their immediate target, the arguments are applicable with equal force to the modern British or other state bureaucracies - or to those of the former Communist Party of the Soviet Union or of the Socialist Workers Party in today's Britain.

Chapter 3 deals with Marx's transition to communism in 1843-45 and his political break with Ruge. Leipold sees Marx, and more sharply Engels, at this period temporarily moving into the "critique of politics" ideas of the socialists of the time, for whom the struggle for democracy/republicanism was to

be altogether rejected in favour of a focus on economic alternatives to capitalism. Leipold argues that even in this period, in the *Economic-philosophical manuscripts* of 1844, Marx's objections to alienated labour remain republican - shaped by its character as subjecting the worker to domination.

Part II, 'The bourgeois republic', begins with chapter 4, 'The red flag and the tricolor: republican communism and the bourgeois republic, 1848-52'. As is apparent, this is mainly about Marx's and Engels' ideas in the revolutions of 1848; and, in particular, the idea that the bourgeois republic "was an *insufficient but necessary* step for the emancipation of the proletariat" (p190). Comrade Leipold stresses the novelty of this idea, beginning with the "antipolitics" elements in the socialisms of Henri Saint-Simon, Robert Owen and Charles Fourier. Marx and Engels broke with this approach in the unpublished drafts that were stuck together and printed in the 1920s as *The German ideology*, and in the *Communist manifesto* - particularly the polemic against "true socialism". This turn was also reflected in their political action in Germany, and in Marx's writings in *The class struggles in France* and *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

Leipold makes the point that Marx offered very specific criticisms of the constitutional order of the French second republic (1848-52), which have been "perhaps the most neglected aspect of Marx's critique" (p231): criticisms of the directly elected presidency, of the ideas of "separation of powers" and "checks and balances", and of the "balancing" of rights by vague "public order" limitations, which in practice meant *selectivity* that denied the rights to the proletariat. Nonetheless, the bourgeois republic did provide openings for the proletariat - in particular freedom of the press and manhood suffrage (insufficient, but necessary).

Chapter 5, 'People, property, proletariat: Marxian communism and radical republicanism, 1848-52', focusses on polemics between Marx and Engels and the radical republicans, Karl Heinzen and William James Linton. Leipold is concerned to explain what Heinzen and Linton's positive policy proposals were, and why these implied sharp differences with the communism of Marx and Engels: in particular, they sought a return to or protection of small-scale private production as the foundation of republicanism, and hence opposed both the idea of the socialisation of large industry, and the wager on the propertyless proletariat.

Chapter 6, 'Chains and invisible threads: liberty and domination in Marx's critique of capitalism, 1867', may seem to leap from the early 1850s to 1867. It does not really do so, because, though the *centre* of the discussion is *Capital*, volume 1 (including the French edition serialised in 1872-75, to which Marx made substantial changes, not adopted in Engels' later editions), the materials used go back as far as the *Economic-philosophical manuscripts* of 1844, and there is a considerable amount of contextualisation of the argument from the competing perspectives on offer in the First International (Proudhonist, left-Ricardian, Comtean positivist, and so on). The narrative is largely one very familiar to Marxists - the way in which the capitalist market produces the radical subordination of the wage-worker. Leipold's account, however, brings to the fore the prominence of standard republican arguments

about freedom and domination in Marx's arguments.

Part 3, 'The social republic', consists of a single chapter: chapter 7, 'A communal constitution', on the Paris Commune and Marx's response to it in *The civil war in France*. This is again a text extensively read by Marxists. Leipold strongly contextualises Marx's discussion in relation to the conflicting views of the Commune held by republicans (notably the opposition of Mazzini). He points out that both Marx and Engels believed the Commune meant that correction to the approach to the state in the *Communist manifesto* was required (pp358-59). Further, a good deal of what Marx wrote was traditional democratic republican positions (militia, sovereign elected body, and so on), and in addition Marx to some extent 'spun' what the Commune actually did in the direction of what was desirable.

A second theme of the chapter is Marx's insistence on the Commune as a form of *self-government*. This involved a radical opposition to bureaucracy that went back to his 1843 critique of Hegel. And it involved a trust in the ability of the working class masses to actually run affairs that was shared by radical republicans - but not, for example, by the Comtists in the First International (pp370-71).

The final element of the chapter is a discussion of whether Marx foresaw "an end to politics" in full communist society (pp385-403). Leipold argues that, contrary to common academic (and leftist) views, this is not the case: the "withering away of the state" is of its structure as a bureaucratic-coercive apparatus and the return of public power to the public. This is coupled, however, with the hostility of Marx (and Engels) to providing detailed blueprints for the form of communism of the sort that had been offered by the utopian socialists. This hostility has been misread, he argues, as a belief in anti-politics for the communist future.

The brief 'Postface' begins with the introductory part of the 1880 programme of the Parti Ouvrier Français as a summary of Marx's argument, and as showing the continued necessity to argue against both ideas of a property-owning democracy, and anti-political and anti-democratic socialisms. The point, he argues, is still fundamental: "Social transformation requires a constitutional setup that provides 'the Republic with the basis of really democratic institutions'" (p408).⁵

Questions

As I have already indicated, I think this is a great book and one which should be very widely read. I have a couple of small issues with the argument, concerned with the absences of the *English* constitution⁶ before the 19th century Reform Acts (1832, 1867...). These, in turn, pose questions in relation to issues comrade Leipold (rightly) raises in chapter 7 about how far Marx's constitutional ideas are relevant to present politics.

The 'English question' begins with Marx on Hegel on 'corporations' and representation. Leipold here in passing presents the British constitution as showing "a more modern, individual form of representation" by constituencies, in contrast to Hegel's representation by "corporations" (p96, note 130). But this retrojects onto the 18-teens, when Hegel was writing the *Philosophy of right [law]*, the post-Reform Acts constitutional order; before the Reform Acts, England's urban population was precisely represented by "corporations"; the more modern form of geographical

constituencies designed to equalise their sizes is a product of the French revolution.⁷

The other side of this coin is Leipold's queries in chapter 7 about how far the level of self-government and "de-professionalisation" of the state proposed in *The civil war in France* is actually feasible - or, at least, how far all the current levels of civil service and local government could practically be elected. He suggests that increased use of "sortition" (random choice of officials or representatives; as used in ancient Athens) might help (pp383-85).

Here, again, the English constitution before the early-mid 19th century could add something: the use of trial by jury (selected by sortition), which was much more extensive than today; the conscript militia, and conscription (by sortition) of police constables and analogous local officers; the strong constitutional convention against interference with local government; the House of Lords, including the non-lawyer peers, as the ultimate court of appeal; the use of *parliamentary* enquiries (not lawyerised 'kick it into the long grass' enquiries) to deal with scandals. These were all systems that involved the self-government of the *property-owning classes*. The Reform Acts, gradually letting the *hoi polloi* into voting and juries, required the *reduction* of the democratic/republican elements of the constitution, beginning at the same period.⁸

The relevance of this material is that the 'unreformed' English constitution organised a country that was more economically 'modern', and a state that was more militarily effective, than the French absolutist regime celebrated as a necessary stage on the road to 'modernity' by Weberians and similar writers. And *aspects* of this regime of local self-government have persisted in the USA down to recent times - again, in connection with a more modern economy and a more militarily effective state than is produced by the cult of bureaucratic professionalism.⁹

Superseded?

The conception of the democratic republic as the necessary first step to communism was, in fact, Marx's conception: comrade Leipold has, I think, shown this beyond rebuttal. But it is still possible to argue that Marx was *wrong* on this question, as many theorists of 'coalitions of the oppressed' argue openly. And it is also possible to argue that Marx's and Engels' conception of the road to socialism is *superseded* by 20th century developments.

I put on one side the argument for the 'coalitions of the oppressed' approach. It handed the issue of class to the *right wing*, producing 'vote Harris: get Trump' and analogous results across the world and, as a result, far worse consequences for the oppressed than the old conception of prioritising the working class. And I put on one side the argument that the Russian Revolution proves the case for mass-strikism (false as a narrative of the Russian Revolution, it has been useless as a strategy).

It is nonetheless arguable that the more advanced stage of the spread of capitalism across the whole globe, and its decline at its core, means that we should focus more on socialisation: the immediate need to move beyond markets and privately-owned concentrations of capital as the means of coordinating human productive activities. It is certainly true that capital has created giant oligopolistic firms, which are 'private' and 'competitive' only in name; that the *de-nationalisation*

of publicly owned infrastructure in the 'Counter-Reformation' of the 1980s has merely produced decay; and that human-induced climate change requires global *planned* action to respond to it. In this sense socialisation is more immediately posed than it was in the later 19th century.

There are two problems with this line of argument. The first is the Soviet case. Although the restoration of capitalism in the USSR has proved disastrous, it is nonetheless the case that Soviet 'planning' systematically failed, and this failure underlay the decision of the bureaucratic tops to collapse their own regime in 1989-91. It failed because the Soviet bureaucracy and managerial class proved to have all the vices that Marx identified in 1843 in the Prussian bureaucracy and Hegel's Prussian-imagined bureaucracy as expressing the 'general interest'. On the contrary, bureaucrats and managers pursue their individual *turf* interests, and the result is 'planning irrationalities'. Democratic republicanism is essential to effective economic planning; and, because it is essential to effective economic planning, it is also essential to believable socialism/communism.

The second and more immediate problem is that, at a low level, capital rules through the support of the managerialist labour bureaucracy - from its right wing in the "AFL-CIA"¹⁰ to its left wing in the full-time apparatus of the Trotskyist left.¹¹ It is a common and correct idea that we need to overcome this managerialist labour bureaucracy in order to actually challenge capital. There are other outworks of the capitalist state's layers of fortifications, but this element is the furthest out. It is, however, illusory to imagine that it is possible to fight for "workers' democracy" against the bureaucracy, without simultaneously proposing a constitutional alternative to the regime of the capitalist state as such. Without challenging the capitalist constitutional order, it is impossible to render transparent the dictatorship of the labour bureaucracy in workers' organisations.

Marx's republicanism, then, remains essential to any socialism/communism that is to go beyond the endless 'gerbil on a wheel' repetitions of the far-left groups and the short-lived broad-left and people's front attempts. Hence the extraordinary value of Bruno Leipold's recovery of Marx's ideas ●

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Notes

1. 'Republicanism and Marxism' *Weekly Worker* May 28 2003: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/482/republicanism-and-marxism.
2. Leipold pp273-79. See also S Mastellone *Mazzini and Marx* Westport CT 2003.
3. libcom.org/article/critique-german-social-democratic-program-mikhail-bakunin.
4. Some outline discussion is available at 'Blind leading the blind' *Weekly Worker* July 27 2023 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1453/blind-leading-the-blind).
5. The internal quotation is from K Marx and F Engels *The civil war in France* (www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/civil_war_france.pdf).
6. 'English' because the Scots constitution was and remains separate from the English, while both Wales and Ireland were subject to special forms of colonial regulation.
7. I made this point about Hegel in 'Law and state as holes in Marxist theory' *Critique* Vol 34, pp211-36 (2006).
8. I refer to relevant literature in 'On reducing undue trust in judges' *King's Law Journal* Vol 31, pp41-58 (2020).
9. There is more extensive discussion and references in my series, 'Constitutions ancient and modern', and the following articles (*Weekly Worker* September 2-30 2021).
10. J Schuhrke *Blue collar empire* London 2024.
11. See, for example, M Macnair, 'Full-timers and cadre' *Weekly Worker* April 25 2019: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1248/full-timers-and-cadre.

POLEMIC

A very English possibilist

Steve Freeman of the Republican Labour Education Forum dismisses the idea of a mass Communist Party as utterly utopian. Instead he proposes a Commonwealth Party

The article by Mike Macnair, 'Going beyond strikism' (February 6), identifies four contributions to *Prometheus*'s discussion on the party question. These were from the Socialist Party of Great Britain, Ansell Eade (One Big Party), Chris Nineham and myself. Mike makes an argument that the SPGB has an ultra-left position and comrades Eade, Nineham and myself are opportunists, lacking communist principles.

He conducts his argument through a 19th century debate between those labelled 'impossibilists' and 'possibilists'. He says: "Why this history is relevant is that, while the SPGB are 'impossibilists', comrades Ansell Eade, Steve Freeman and Chris Nineham - and, it must be added, the large majority of the British far left - are 'possibilists' - though they would never admit to it." Implicit in Mike's view is the CPGB defending the true communism against the heretics to their left and right.

Framing the present as a fight between 'impossibilists' and 'possibilists' may suit the CPGB, but not the working class. The movement has to have a necessary discussion about what is or is not possible now. If bourgeois politics is the art of the possible, Marxist politics is the *science* of the possible. What is possible and impossible are not fixed categories. Impossible today may *become* possible. At the heart of this debate is whether it is possible or not to build a mass Communist Party in England in 2025.

Realism

All talk about doing that now is empty rhetoric. Unless we rule this out, we cannot make real progress. Realism is not a betrayal of communism. Yes, a million-strong Communist Party would be a huge step forward, but there are not a million communists ready to join it, but left communist fantasies are not going to be put off by facts. Is it possible to make realistic steps forward? We start from the actual consciousness of the working class and the current level of struggle and not how we hope it could be.

My proposal is both *possible* and *achievable* in the present, no matter how unlikely it may seem, given the history of the British left. Mike alleges that, because I am a 'possibilist', I believe "Marxist politics may be relevant at some point in the future; but, for the present, advocating Marxist politics is an obstacle to what needs to be done, which is to focus on 'the possible'."

I have never said Marxist politics "may be relevant at some point in the future". On the contrary, the argument for a commonwealth party and communist party is an "application of historical materialism" to the present conditions and state of the class struggle in England, the rest of the UK and the wider world. Mike speaks only about "advocating Marxist politics".

There is a significant difference between making Marxist propaganda for a mass Communist Party and *applying Marxism* to solve the actual problems facing the working class. Applying science to the evidence leads to the obvious conclusion - a mass working class party is possible in present conditions and a mass Communist Party is not. This may be harsh and disappointing, but it is based on reality, not fantasy. Mike is not interested in applying Marxism to the present, but merely making



Mass Palestine 'party' very much in evidence

propaganda for it.

Chris Nineham's 'A party mood?', as quoted by Mike, is connected to observable facts. Chris says: "There is a big left in this country, whatever its weaknesses. It formed the activist base for Corbynism, it coalesced again around the short-lived 2022 strike wave, and it has been at the heart of today's unprecedented Palestine movement." I agree in general with this assessment of the situation. In attending these demonstrations I saw a mass Palestinian 'party' with Palestinian flags, but no evidence of a mass Communist Party.

The first thing to note about comrades Eade, Nineham and myself is that, while comrade Eade has a single-party model, comrade Nineham and myself are speaking about *two parties*. He identifies the first united front as a "new anti-neoliberal and anti-war party" and second for "a revolutionary organisation". Two is not an opinion, it is just counting. Similarly I argued for two 'parties' - a commonwealth party and communist party. For the sake of greater precision I am going to use the term, 'left populist party' (LPP), and an 'international republican communist tendency' (IRCT).

The two-party model comes from a division of working consciousness between a social democratic majority and a republican-communist minority. Marx had to deal with a similar problem. He supported the Communist League, the Chartist party and the First International. The *Communist manifesto* says that "the communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working class parties". Whether you agree with Marx and Engels here, they are dealing with more than one working class party.

The First International was not a Communist Party. Marx did not stand around until it had been formed, so he could join as a pure communist, unsullied by the compromise deals needed to set it up. He got stuck in and drafted a compromise platform that could unite the disparate working class forces. It should be noted: "When [Marx] drafted the declaration of principles for the International, he was careful to avoid all demands and formulations which might offend any one of the disparate tendencies represented in the new organisation. Consequently we do not find, either in the 'inaugural address' or in the rules, any statement calling for the nationalisation of the means of

production, a demand which would have been unacceptable to the Proudhonists" ('The principles and statutes of the First International').

Did Marx abandon Marxism for 'possibilism' or did he *apply* Marxism instead of talking about how great Marxism was? Was he making a scientific assessment of the state of working class politics to find how to take the movement forward? Even though the First International failed (as inevitable as the collapse of the Socialist Alliance), it took the working class movement forward. Marx did not abandon communism, but took steps towards it through the First International.

In *'Leftwing' communism* Lenin deals with the complex relationship between two working class parties - the Labour Party and the newly emerging Communist Party. He condemned those who try to deduce tactics from principles. He criticised the left communist idea that "The Communist Party must keep its doctrine pure, and its independence of reformism inviolate; its mission is to lead the way, without stopping or turning, by the direct road to communist revolution". He says this leftist method "will inevitably fall into error" (*Selected works* volume 3, Moscow 1976, p351).

Lenin goes on to explain that these 'left communist' principles "are merely a repetition of the mistake made by French Blanquist Communards, who in 1874 'repudiated' all compromises and all intermediate stages". According to left communists like the SPGB, "intermediate stages" are nothing but 'possibilism'. Yet for communists they are at the heart of any serious discussion.

Let me reformulate the case for many left parties to become two parties - a left populist party (LPP) and an international republican communist tendency (IRCT), standing in comparison with Nineham's two - "a new anti-neoliberal and anti-war party" and "a revolutionary organisation".

A mass Communist Party in England and the rest of the UK is simply not possible in the current period. Our task is to unite republican communists as an independent tendency that can challenge and overcome Stalinism and Trotskyism. There is no basis for a mass international republican Communist Party. The majority of Marxists in the UK - Stalinists and Trotskyists - are opposed to it. The

present priority is not for disparate republican communists to declare themselves a mass party: it is to fight for the unity of republican communists in a third organised tendency. This new tendency must aim to become the majority of Marxists. Mike rightly says that "it is not possible to go round the larger organised groups of the far left". So, if the current members of the CPGB, Talking About Socialism, *Prometheus* and RS21 organised into one tendency, that could drive through Stalinism and Trotskyism rather than try to skirt round them.

By contrast, there are those who are in favour of something like comrade Eade's 'one big party'. Mike says: "What he proposes is - pretty explicitly - a return to the Socialist Alliance(s) of 1998-2003". Mike takes us back to the failures of the past, but he draws the wrong conclusions. He seems to think they failed because they were too broad, contained too many people and did not accept the leadership of a Communist Party. The responsibility for failure has to be *with the communists*, who did not fight against the social-monarchist programmes of all these groups. Instead of fighting to win them to the demand for a democratic republic, they capitulated and then surrendered. The communists were only interested in demanding full communism and calling for a Communist Party, which made them appear to non-communist workers as a bunch of sectarians.

Broadness

The central CPGB thesis is that these organisations failed because they were 'broad' rather than because of their strategies and programmes. These organisations and the Corbyn Labour Party stood for a left 'social-monarchist' programme. They failed for many reasons, but fundamentally because their politics was out of date and out of time. No broad party can succeed if it is built on the rotting foundations of the 1945 social monarchy. Comrade Eade's attempt to pretend that the Socialist Alliance or any of the other failures had anything serious to do with democratic republicanism is laughable.

Many of Mike's criticisms are valid, but misplaced. The CPGB played an important part in these failures, starting with the Socialist Labour Party. The CPGB became one of the principal six organisations of the Socialist Alliance. I think it supported the launch of Respect and became involved in Left Unity. In my mind the aim of the CPGB in all these interventions was to try to turn these organisations into the Communist Party of Great Britain. This was never going to work.

Let us now turn to Martin Greenfield (Letters, February 13), who we will assume was a member of the CPGB in 2001. There was a rapprochement process back then and at first it involved the CPGB and the Revolutionary Democratic Group. The issue was the same facing the unity initiative today. Would the RDG simply join the CPGB or would we create a new organisation? Today the equivalent outcome would be the CPGB joining RS21.

Clearly Martin saw the whole matter in terms of whether individual RDG members would join the CPGB. He seems to think I led the CPGB on a merry dance and then did not join. He still feels irked by that, which he explains as my cowardice. He asks: "And why did communist

rapprochement between the CPGB and RDG fail? I think Steve needs to buy a mirror to answer that question. Like a nervous horse at the Grand National, he approached every hurdle and asked for it to be moved a little bit further away before organisational unity was possible."

Martin considers only the narrow aspect of who did and did not join the CPGB. Whilst there were many cynics in the CPGB who looked at the process simply as a means of increasing their membership, I don't think Jack Conrad was one of them.

The fact is that there was a process, which went beyond the question of RDG members joining the CPGB. The CPGB, the RDG, Communist Tendency and Trotskyist Unity Group, along with some ex-CPGB members, did form an organisation called the Republican Communist Network. It produced six issues of a magazine called *Republican Communist*, which contained articles by Jack Conrad, myself and many others.

The RCN was a "network of groups and individuals united under the slogans, 'Republicanism', 'Revolutionary democracy and culture', 'Workers power', 'International socialist revolution' and 'World communism'". I would be interested to know which of these slogans are supported by RS21, *Prometheus* or TAS. Of course, these points are not a programme, but a set of parameters within which one could be developed (today I would probably seek one improvement). All this was established before September 11 2001 and did not survive long after. The RCN never created a programme. It would have been the next step to a unified organisation, but it split along national lines and collapsed in England.

The Republican Communist Network was the highest achievement of communist unity at the beginning of the 21st century in the UK. This might seem an outrageous claim, so I stand to be corrected, if anybody has a better example. And to those whose only interest was recruiting members to the CPGB, the RCN was not a barrier - more likely, it had succeeded, then failed. It failed, but it set a benchmark for *Republican Communist*, which is already stronger today than 20 years ago.

It is easy to speak about learning the lessons of the failures of the broad-left parties and ignore what went on in our own backyard. The RCN did not intervene in the new Socialist Alliance, because in practice its components went in different directions - in contrast to the RCN (Scotland) that was active in the Scottish Socialist Party. Consequently republicanism has far greater purchase on the Scottish left, compared to its absence in England.

The issues are similar today. Is this new fusion merely a means of persuading Nick Wrack and Cat Rylance to join the CPGB or is something stronger than the RCN going to emerge without retreating from its principles? Martin is optimistic. He says: "In stark contrast, I commend Nick Wrack's serious and mature attitude in the [Why Marx?] meeting, where he said that sometimes you lose a vote." Martin sees this as a signal that Nick is getting his mind ready to join the CPGB.

The CPGB big fish may eat the smaller ones but the biggest fish is RS21. I cannot see them being swallowed up by the CPGB, although they might be split up by this process ●

DISCUSSION

Struggles in the cathedral

Overproduction in the knowledge economy, zero-hour contracts and a funding crisis. Peter Kennedy puts his faith in 'transitional demands' and breaking the labour movement from the chimerical aim of 'advancing human capital'

Tertiary education (the further and higher education sector) is caught in the headlights of a funding crisis, which threatens to curb decades of rapid expansion.

Doped on a financial concoction of state grants, home student loans, extortionate fees extracted from international students and banking debt - in order to meet the needs of a mythical 'knowledge economy', requiring masses of specialist-knowledge workers - the sector became based on an ideological mission to 'enhance human capital' and increase 'employability', transforming education into a commodity and instilling a work ethic.

It goes without saying that the 'usual suspects' - students and workers - are expected to pay the price, with unions struggling to resist, and students piling up debt, as the sector pushes through redundancies, freezes fixed capital investments and closes whole departments. A perpetual round of systemic sackings - euphemistically termed, 'voluntary terminations', 'mutual redundancy packages', 'compulsory severances and 'shrinking staff' - is underway to ensure the 'resizing of programmes' and 're-engineering of departments' (ie, shutting some down).

The terminology used is testimony to the corporate business mindset enconced in tertiary education. Those wielding the axe care little about disciplinary boundaries (engineering, architecture, mathematics, arts, social sciences, medicine and ad-lib training are all subject to attack) or about the consequences for educational quality. In good old-fashioned, hard-nosed business terms, bureaucrats of knowledge point to the cold economics of the situation: an over-production of graduates relative to what the capitalist labour market can bear.

Organised tertiary-sector workers have engaged in periodic strikes and work-to-rules, to reverse and defend against further cuts and reduce the gap in real wages after years of below-inflation wage settlements. Yet the cuts continue to prevail - as do the exploitative, part-time, fixed-term and zero-hour contracts that have become normalised. Their focus has rarely broadened out to defend the broader purpose and meaning of education for its own sake. As such there is little scope for workers to mobilise around protecting and indeed expanding education for human fulfilment *per se*. Defence and resistance are only framed within the limits of education as a function of the requirements and limits of capital expansion: ie, education as human capital, limited by the requirements of the labour market, and shaped by capitalist demand for graduate labour. Caught within this capitalist yoke, trade unions in the sector are losing their own struggle as exploited workers, as well as the struggle to break with this one-dimensional rationale for education.

In order to break with this one-dimensionality, workers must tackle and break free from the worst kept secret in tertiary education: the real mismatch between the propensity for the capitalist economy to deskill and degrade the status of jobs across the board, while at the same time building cathedrals of education, churning out an expanding supply of graduate labour (the real reason for the capitalist state's unwillingness to bear the costs of expanding tertiary education).



King's College, Cambridge

Of course, new jobs in AI-related sectors have and will continue to arise. One particularly rose-tinted speculation, published by the World Economic Forum, claims that "by 2025, 85 million jobs may be displaced by a shift in the division of labour between humans and machines, while 97 million new roles may emerge that are more adapted to the new division of labour between humans, machines and algorithms".¹ New jobs in health, scientific and technical services and education; less in manufacturing, transport and storage, and public administration. Yet we also know full well two rapacious compulsions inherent to capital: (1) that applying science and technology and redesigning jobs is written into the 'DNA' of capital accumulation, with labour-displacing consequences; and (2) the brave new world populated by (as yet unknown) jobs will be quickly fragmented and broken down into tasks, under the sway of capital. Inherent to capital's DNA is abstract labour as a reality that insinuates production relations as well as market relations of exchange.

Indeed, this labour-displacing DNA is manifesting in debates about the so-called 'hollowing out of the labour market', with, at one end, a relative minority of highly prized jobs (higher professional, managerial and technical) and, at the other end, an increasing preponderance of low-status, low-skilled and relatively insecure jobs. In which case, the mass expansion of tertiary education on such a scale *appears* irrational. And yet the state has poured money into accelerating this expansion for decades, resulting in an increasing proportion of graduates competing with non-graduate workers for non-graduate jobs. It does not seem to make sense.

The question begs, is there another underlying rationale? The answer is yes, for the following reasons. The army of student-workers are placed at the disposal of an expanding service-sector capitalism, keeping it afloat on manipulable labour - working at those fast-food chains, bars, hotels and leisure complexes for minimal wages.

Moreover, student labour has helped anchor wages and conditions across the range of occupations that make up the preponderance of low-status, low-skilled, insecure jobs, fostering competition between graduates and non-graduate labour. In other words, the dual identity of student/worker has certainly helped to *underpin profits* in this labour-intensive sector.

Then there is the ideological role performed by an expanding tertiary sector, for both students and staff caught in its web. The way funding is organised facilitates the commodification of the meaning and purpose of education, drawing on market moralities and instilling the work ethic.

Home students are enmeshed in

market transactional relationships with the state, imparting a consumer value-for-money mentality. Degree-level students 'pay' the course fees with funding received from the government, then repay it with interest - via the government quango, the Student Loans Company.

The underlying rationale is that the universities and colleges merge as 'Education plc': enterprising businesses; corporations, complete with producers (tutors) and consumers (students) of a commodity (education). And, as with all commodities, value is in exchange rather than use - the circulation of certificates promising access to a graduate career. The development of the corporate infrastructure of education follows suit: libraries transformed into communication malls; classrooms into workshops; knowledge rearranged by units of time spent on modulated packages of discrete learning, aligned to click-and-collect assessment proforma, with a certificate of one shade or another awaiting at the end of the production line.

Nevertheless, the underlying commodification and internalisation of the work ethic cannot be ignored either. They derive from capitalist relations of production, premised on commodity fetishism as the essential form of control over workers. Hence, there is an argument to be made that the superstructure of this expanding realm of tertiary education is bolstering a failing commodity fetishism characteristic of 'late capitalism', and this is due in no small way to the *systemic problem of what to do with surplus labour*.

Marx noted that the relative displacement of labour for capital functions as surplus labour, in the form of a reserve army that allows for economic expansion and contraction in periods of boom and slump, while also acting as a disciplinary mechanism over working class wages and conditions of employment. Surplus labour also serves the vital function of redistributing labour from old to new industries, entering new jobs. However, he also noted that this functionality of surplus labour simply cannot go on forever: the point is reached when labour displacement creates surplus labour way beyond these functional requirements of capital.

The explosion of interest in AI, notwithstanding the hype, indicates society has been and is increasingly at such a threshold. Well-heeled consultancy companies, hired prize-fighters of capital, warn their paymasters about the profound labour-displacing capacities of new technologies now and in the not so distant future, across mental and manual labour, from the lower-skilled to the higher professional.

But where, one might ask, is this mass surplus/idle labour today? Where is the mass unemployment problem? We can say this too is one of those worst-kept secrets the capitalist

class is forced to manage rather than allow large-scale unemployment to surface, for three reasons:

- The capitalist state would need to increase taxes on profits, and/or accumulate increased borrowing/debt to manage the burgeoning costs of unemployment benefits.

- Large-scale unemployment would lead to large-scale resistance and calls for more radical solutions (from the perspective of capitalists) such as universal incomes of one sort or another that weaken the ties forcing workers to sell their labour-power.

- Large-scale unemployment would drastically reduce the capacity to consume the expanding realm of commodities to the point of crisis and stagnation.

Far better (for capital) if the available work is stretched by transforming contracts into more part-time, casual, impermanent, insecure jobs, which workers compete for and compete to escape from into the 'promised land' of more secure, higher-status work.

Hiding surplus labour in this way has been the focal point of state policy since the 1980s - facilitated by anti-trade union laws, privatisation, restructuring (breaking) public-sector institutions into an atomised internal market competing for resources, the deregulation of employment contracts and - last, but not least - the revolving door of strictly means-tested workfare benefits.

Stretching labour to hide the reality of large swathes of unemployment has also gone hand-in-glove with the management of capital displacement (which now may itself be breached re AI). The most crucial issue has been how to square the impact on workers' capacity to consume all this precarity, and this has been mostly 'resolved' (in the short term at least) by the mountains of debt made available to maintain consumption now, with the promise it can be paid for in the future.

Trade unions are certainly fighting a valiant rearguard action against cuts to the system - but these fall far short of the radical change required. A significant number of those at the 'coalface' - students and academics - will be aware of the limits of the education system and open to more radical change. Socialists should, as a minimum, resist cutbacks and closures, but with awareness that the real defence of education must be directed towards *education for the pursuit of knowledge and creative potential per se*. A transitional demand would be to break links the labour movement may have with the chimerical aim of 'advancing human capital', push for free universal education and a universal wage for all.

All this in a world of surplus labour that is already banging on a door labelled 'freedom from necessity' ●

Notes

1. www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025.

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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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Abdullah Öcalan
invited to
parliament by
far right

Ending armed resistance

There is a new phase opening up along with new challenges. Esen Uslu explains the call for the PKK to lay down arms and dissolve itself in favour of 'normal' political activity

Since last autumn, there has been a buzz about Turkey's policy towards Kurds. Devlet Bahçeli, of all people, the leader of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP, the infamous Grey Wolves), suddenly changed his rabid anti-Kurdish stance by extending his hand to MPs of the pro-Kurdish People's Equality and Democracy Party (DEM) at the opening of the Grand National Assembly. Just a few weeks before that he had been demanding the banning of DEM - or at least the immediate secession of state support given to it as a parliamentary party. Bahçeli had been prime partner in president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's coalition and initially Erdoğan stood aloof from his move.

But in mid-October 2024 Bahçeli upped the ante: in a speech to his party's parliamentary group, Bahçeli said that Abdullah Öcalan, leader of the Kurdish freedom movement, who has been imprisoned and kept on the İmralı prison island in the middle of the Marmara Sea since 1999, should be allowed to come to parliament and speak to DEM. That is, if he is willing to dissolve the banned Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) once and for all.

Such sudden schizophrenic policy shifts are quite rare in Turkish politics and, when they do occur, they are normally the other way round: demonising legal political parties and declaring them front organisations of a 'terrorist' organisation; banning them and imprisoning their leaders on trumped-up charges.

It was apparent that something was cooking, as happened 12 years ago. Most observers believe that behind-the-scenes negotiations are underway, possibly leading to a new peace process with the Kurds. However, it is not clear who is involved and what is the extent of the negotiations. At the same time the Erdoğan government and its judiciary have been turning the screws on Kurdish mayors and councillors elected for DEM in Kurdish municipalities, as well as those elected for the opposition People's Republican Party (CHP) in areas of cities such as Istanbul under the so-called 'city consensus' collaboration between the two parties. Also, the remnants of independent press and journalists who dared show some independence, were being put under pressure by the judicial arm of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP). For a while all kinds of confusion reigned in the media and political circles.

Then DEM asked for permission to send a delegation to İmralı to have talks with Öcalan, and this was graciously granted. The lead figure was to be Sırrı Süreyya Önder - currently one of the deputy speakers of the Grand National Assembly, who had been one of the members of negotiation team in 2013 too.

During the last decade, Önder's life has been quite indicative.



Öcalan supporters in London, April 2003

In 2015 he took part in the preparatory process of the so-called 'Dolmabahçe Accords' negotiated with Kurdish MPs, and was ready to sign when Erdoğan at the last moment abandoned the negotiation table, plunging Turkey into yet another dark and dirty war. In revenge, Önder was sentenced to 48 months imprisonment on the pretext of a speech he had made in 2013. He was jailed again in 2018 and spent almost a year behind bars before being released when the Constitutional Court quashed the sentence on the grounds of freedom of speech. Later, in 2023, he was elected as an Istanbul MP.

Önder and Pervin Buldan, the former co-chair of the People's Democratic Party (HDP, which

in 2023 was incorporated into DEM), went to İmralı for talks with Öcalan in December 2024. On their return they announced, at a press conference, Öcalan's willingness to take part in the initiative and his desire for "peace and democracy".

The PKK leadership in the Qandil mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan declared its support and stated that there is nothing for Erdoğan to be afraid of, since neither Öcalan nor the Kurds have any intention of dividing Turkey and toppling the state. They also issued a statement from Öcalan, calling for a new process of transformation and restructuring, involving all parties in the conflict.

During this time, we learned that Öcalan had sent letters to European

organisations, as well as the PKK leadership, and received positive replies. The co-chairs of DEM visited İmralı on February 27, and on their return held a press conference in Istanbul, where they distributed a photograph of Abdullah Öcalan showing him reading his statement at a table, surrounded by the DEM delegation. They also distributed photos of his hand-written statement, to avoid any doubts.

Öcalan's 'Call for peace and a democratic society' urges the PKK to convene a congress to end the armed struggle and dissolve itself (see the full text below). An important proviso on what is to be expected from the regime was verbally stated by Önder at the end of the press conference: "In putting forward this perspective, there is no doubt that in practice it requires the laying down of arms and the PKK's self-dissolution, democratic politics and the recognition of the legal dimension."

It was greeted, as expected, from within Kurdish circles with enthusiasm, and in a couple of days the PKK leadership issued a statement fully endorsing Öcalan's call and declared an immediate ceasefire. European affiliates of the Kurdish freedom movement also supported Öcalan's call enthusiastically. They demanded the ending of Öcalan's isolation, so that he could lead the organisation of a congress, etc. They also emphasised that this would not be the end of the struggle, but the beginning of a new phase.

The road forward is full of pitfalls, and it is obvious that there are some circles within the Kurdish freedom movement as well as within the state security apparatus that are not happy with the latest developments.

What is important is that Öcalan's call came within a new international situation, where the US and Russia seemed to have tacitly agreed to settle the ongoing wars in the Middle East as well as in Ukraine. The first consequence of this new setting was the downfall of the Assad regime in Syria and the abandoning of the Palestinian cause, while fully supporting Israel. The other aspect is the Oval Office's trashing of yesterday's ally. The Turkish regime, note, is about to have a face-off with Israel, as it enlarges its occupation deeper into Syria.

The Syrian Defence Forces - which in essence is made up of the Kurdish freedom movement's forces, supported by the USA - still control a large swathe of the country, including important oil and gas fields. Are they part of Öcalan's call? The leader of the SDF, Mazlum Abdi, was trained by Öcalan and has a strong loyalty to him. However, he stated that the call is related to the Kurdish movement in Turkey, and had nothing to do with the SDF. The latter is negotiating with the new Syrian regime to reintegrate the country, while continuing to repulse the Turkish supported militia, the Syrian National Army.

The Turkish regime is also at loggerheads with its Iranian counterpart, and the diplomatic shenanigans between them are increasing. The never-ending Turkish occupation of northern Iraq and the Kurdish region is draining Turkey's resources, while achieving nothing apart from 'body count' propaganda. Every day Kurds are killed by Turkish artillery, with military statements announcing 'success', as the number of 'neutralised terrorists' increases - while in reality nothing has changed in the occupied territory.

Then there are the diminishing fortunes of the Erdoğan government because of the hardships imposed by its 'Islamist economics', with rampant inflation eating into the minimum wage and pension increases. No wonder he is looking for some kind of 'success story' - and maybe the 'peace process', disguised as a success in the 'war against terror', may improve Erdoğan's electoral chances in the next presidential elections.

At this historical juncture any chance of replacing military action with internal political activity could present an important opportunity. It seems that left organisations have in general accepted that reality and would support Öcalan's line, despite their objections to the theoretical justification and rhetoric praising Erdoğan and Bahçeli. They are almost ready to accept those as tactical moves and are looking to the end result.

Both Turkey's politics and those of the region may have a new phase in front of them if things proceed smoothly. However, here in Turkey, such smooth processes are very rare! ●

Abdullah Öcalan's statement

The PKK was born in the 20th century - the century of the most intense violence in history, two world wars, real socialism and the cold war environment around the world, the denial of the Kurdish reality and the prohibitions on freedoms, especially expression.

In theory, programme, strategy and tactics, it was heavily influenced by the reality of the real-socialist system of the century. The collapse of real socialism in the 1990s due to internal reasons, the dissolution of identity denial in the country and the developments in freedom of expression led to the PKK losing its reasoning and falling into excessive repetition. Therefore, it completed its lifespan like its peers, necessitating its dissolution.

Kurdish-Turkish relations: for more than a thousand years, Turks and Kurds have always considered it necessary to remain in a voluntary alliance in order to sustain their existence and survive against hegemonic powers.

The last 200 years of capitalist

modernity have made it their main goal to break up this alliance. The affected forces, along with their class base, have been committed to serving this. This process accelerated with the uniformist interpretations of the republic. The main task now is to reorganise the historical relationship, which has become very fragile today, in a spirit of brotherhood, without ignoring beliefs.

The need for a democratic society is inevitable. The PKK, which is the longest and most comprehensive insurgency and violent movement in the history of the Republic, gained strength and a base because the channels of democratic politics were closed.

Separate nation-state, federation, administrative autonomy and culturalist solutions, which are a necessary consequence of its extreme nationalist drift, cannot respond to the historical sociology of society.

Respect for identities, their free expression and democratic organisation, and the socio-economic and political structures that all

segments of society take as a basis for themselves are only possible with the existence of a democratic society and political space.

The second century of the republic can only have a permanent and fraternal continuity when it is crowned with democracy. There is no path other than democracy for system searches and realisations - there cannot be. Democratic reconciliation is the basic method.

The language of the period of peace and democratic society must be developed in line with reality. In this climate created by the call made by Mr Devlet Bahçeli, the will of Mr President and the positive approach of other political parties towards this call, I call for laying down arms and I assume the historical responsibility of this call.

Convene your congress and decide to integrate with the state and society, as any modern society and party that has not been forced out of existence would do voluntarily. All groups must lay down their arms and the PKK must dissolve itself ●